Veritas Aequitas

by Inked11

Summary

AU. Ali Krieger is an out-of-work lawyer who has taken up podcasting to find the truth in unusual legal circumstances. Ashlyn Harris is a former police captain serving a life sentence for a love triangle murder. What happens when their worlds collide?

Notes

Well, I'm back! This is not a sequel to Ruck Me, but is something completely different in fact. This one is a pretty detailed and drawn out slow burn. So, if patience is not your thing, you might not want to start. If you're on-board, then hold on tight! I have some of this written and have decided to start posting it to keep myself motivated to continue writing. So, while updates may be quicker at first, they may slow down eventually. Enjoy and make sure to give me your feedback along the way; I love hearing from you!

****Disclaimer: I've tried to keep this as accurate as possible, but I have taken creative license on some of the legal aspects of this story. While it is all technically possible, some of it is very unlikely. Still, try to enjoy it for what it is.****
Beige

Ali Krieger smooths the skirt of her pinstriped suit as she waits patiently, taking in the bland room around her. She’s no stranger to her surroundings, but she’s still surprised at how much it always feels like she’s on a movie set. It’s all so typical. The windowless room with the colorless walls, bland beige taking over everything. The desk stationed at the entrance with the large disgruntled guard behind it keeping a close watch. The row of cubicle-like spaces with a clear plexi-glass window separating them from an identical room on the other side. Each cubicle made to provide some kind of privacy, but really offering none at all.

Ali sits in one such space in the right corner of the room and waits, staring through the plexi-glass in front of her and watching the door in the opposite room. If she’s being honest, she’s a bit antsy. It’s odd. She’s done this many times before in the course of her career, but for some reason this feels different. She starts to question if she should be here at all.

“Maybe I should go.” Ali whispers to herself, smoothing her skirt suit one more time. She didn’t have to dress up, it’s not like she was here working professionally per say. She was doing this on her own time, but she put on the suit anyway hoping to look serious and competent even though she wasn’t exactly sure why she needed to present herself as either.

Another minute ticks by and Ali seriously considers leaving, unsure of what she will say and what she will find. Deep down she knows though. Ali has always prided herself on her ability to read people. She just knows in her gut what she will see when she finally talks to the woman, and she needs the confirmation: Innocence. Or at least some doubt of guilt. If she’s right, it will dictate the rest of the conversation or so she hopes. Another minute gone and she’s still willing herself to just go, but she’s rooted to the chair by a promise she made, eyes still glued to the door in the opposite room. It finally opens and her heart rate picks up a bit, knowing it’s too late to back down now.

She’s taller and broader than Ali figured. She looks stronger and more fit than in the pictures and media videos Ali has seen, but also more worn down and weary. Prison tends to do that to people as Ali has come to learn over the years of her career. Still, she’s beautiful in a way Ali hadn’t quite anticipated. Ali’s eyes take in the rest of the details as the female guard leads the woman towards her. The drab beige prison jumpsuit, the short-sleeves of which allow an elaborate full-sleeve tattoo on her left arm to peak out. Long, bleach blonde hair that falls naturally and a bit wild over her shoulders, yet somehow looks perfectly stylish like she just stepped out of a surfing magazine. A defined jawline set in abject determination. Finally, piercing hazel eyes looking back at her as the woman is seated in front of her on the other side of the plexi-glass.

Ali finds herself staring, a bit taken aback by it all. The woman in front her of having an undeniable presence that she didn’t quite expect. She’s broken out of her daze by a tap on the glass, the blonde motioning to the red phone beside Ali as she holds up her own on the other side and shakes her head a bit.

“Right.” Ali mumbles to herself, feeling a bit foolish. She holds the phone to her ear and musters up all the confidence she came here with, willing her voice to come out steady. “Ms. Harris, I’m…”

“Ali Krieger.” The blonde quickly cuts her off, dropping the ‘r’ in the pronunciation of her name with her Boston accent. “I know who you are. I know all about you.”

“Um, ok.” Ali replies, unsure of what else to say at the moment and not able to read into the statement one way or the other.
“What can I say, I have lots of free time to catch up on podcasts these days. Particularly those of a fellow Bostonian.” The blonde smirks a bit.

Ali is about to speak again, but the blonde beats her to it.

“So, tell me Ms. Krieger. What are you here for exactly? Fame, money, fun?” The blonde questions with a hard stare.

“Truth.” Ali answers confidently. It may sound cliché, but it’s honest. She watches the blonde’s jaw set again, the penetrating stare still there.

“People always think they want the truth until they actually hear it. The truth is complex and elusive. What makes you think you’re worthy of it?” The blonde questions with an oddly calm intensity and a mocking smirk.

“The lies that hide the truth are complex, but the truth itself is simple. I wouldn’t call myself worthy, but at least truth is all I ever ask for and the only thing I’m ever after. If you know me as you say you do, then you know that. Truth and justice aren’t elusive for honorable people, which I believe you to be, Ms. Harris. Tell me I’m wrong and I’ll drop it and leave.” Ali challenges. “If not, then give me a chance and you can decide for yourself if I’m worthy of it.”

The blonde looks contemplatively at Ali for a minute, sizing up the brunette in front of her before deciding to take up the challenge, smirking and speaking again. “Well, I guess I have nothing but time Ms. Krieger. Call me Ashlyn. Ms. Harris is something only a dork in a suit would call me.” She finishes with a playful wink at the brunette.

Ali ignores the insult about her suit and lets out her own curt smile, feeling a bit relieved. “Let’s try this again then. Hi Ashlyn. I’m Ali.”
One Month Earlier…

Ali sat across the counter from her brother, Kyle, in the kitchen of her home. He had joined her for a morning workout and stayed to have coffee afterwards.

“So, Alex, tell me. What’s the next case?” Kyle asked curiously, assuming his sister must already have something on her radar.

“I honestly have no idea. Not sure how I top the last one, you know?” Ali sighed. “I didn’t exactly expect this whole thing to blow up so fast. It was just supposed to be a hobby that kept me busy while I found another job. Now it sort of is my job and the pressure is just insane.” Her thoughts drifted back to a year ago when she had been laid off.

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Ali had been working at a high profile Boston law firm as a corporate defense attorney. She had gone to law school with goal of being a public interest lawyer, a servant of the people. It had always been her dream to help the people in her community who couldn’t help themselves. Sure, it didn’t pay much, but it was a respectful job. As she approached her final year in law school, she felt the pull of the high-powered law firms trying to recruit her based on her grades. A hard look at the school loans she owed and her financial outlook as a public interest attorney had made her reconsider. She went through the recruitment and interview process, landing a coveted position in one of Boston’s best firms, promising herself that it was only temporary. Her plan was to be there 2 years tops, making enough money to pay off her loans before pursuing the career she really wanted.

Six years later, she was still at the same firm, helping to make rich men richer by ensuring that their corporations never fell prey to hefty lawsuits, allegations, or federal investigations. She had also been called upon to defend clients from charges of fraud and unfair business practices. Despite the long hours, the heavy workload, and constantly being surrounded by sleazy and self-entitled men, she liked her job. She was good at it and it paid really well. She had quickly earned a reputation as one of the best deposition and defense lawyers in the business, making even the most obstinate and powerful individuals crumble under her scrutiny. Everyone knew that Ali Krieger walked into every trial and deposition completely prepared and collected. No matter how deeply it was buried, she always got down to the truth. It was perfect in the corporate world where she mostly dealt with lawsuits stemming from the baseless accusations of disgruntled employees and customers. Still, her corporate clients knew not to call on her when they knew the fault was truly their own. Ali wouldn’t hesitate to bury her own client in the act of seeking the truth of the situation. It was the only way she knew how to maintain her self-respect and dignity in the environment she worked in.

She had considered leaving the firm many times, but as she had been warned by her law school mentor before she even started, she had gotten caught up in the lifestyle of it all. Once you got used to making over $400,000 a year, living in a beautiful home in one of Boston’s ritziest areas, and never hurting for disposable income, it was hard to go back. Plus the firm gave her the opportunity to take on pro bono cases for the local community when time permitted, so she could still get in her public interest work. There was no real incentive for her to leave outside of having a less intense job and quieter lifestyle. At the age of 32, sure she wanted to have more time to focus on her dating life and a future family, but she didn’t feel overly pressured just yet.

Unfortunately, the economic environment changed and big firms were suddenly sinking right along with their big corporate clients. Ali’s firm was no exception. After six solid years, she had been
called into her boss’ office on a Friday afternoon and laid off just like that. She started a job search right away, confident that her experience and reputation would land her a new position in no time. As weeks turned into months, it became abundantly clear that finding a legal job was difficult. There were too many lawyers and not enough law jobs out there. Even though she hadn’t been overly extravagant and had saved enough money to be comfortable for a while, Ali needed to do something. She was getting depressed just sitting at home and wallowing in self-pity over her career failure.

Kyle had jokingly suggested one day that she start her own podcast seeing as how she listened to so many of them these days. Ali had just laughed and smacked him on the arm, but later that night she couldn’t stop thinking about it. Why not? If she was going to sit around doing nothing and making no money, she might as well make no money doing something fun. It had only taken her a week after that to come up with the idea of turning her legal skills into something people might want to listen to. Ali loved to find the truth and people were always interested in potentially wrongful convictions.

She named her podcast Veritas Aequitas and eventually put out eight episodes regarding a local homicide case that had left the community reeling a little over a year before. It was a dispute over customers and price gouging that had started between two well-known restaurant owners in Boston’s famous North End and it had ended with one of them dead and the other convicted of his murder; both famous restaurants now closed permanently. Anyone who knew Paul DiRusso, the convicted man, would swear that no matter how much he disliked his adversary (Danny Sorrento), he wasn’t a murderer.

Ali had remembered reading about the case in the newspaper as it all unfolded and thinking that the whole thing seemed fishy. She started by talking with Paul’s friends and family and then Paul himself behind bars. She then spoke to Danny’s family, friends, and associates, making sure to listen to each side without bias. That had led to intense interviews with witnesses, law enforcement and legal parties involved in the case. She had audio recorded every minute of every interview and narrated every step she took in the process and her thoughts, releasing all of it on her podcast unfiltered. With all her investigating, Ali had uncovered instances of fraud and gross mishandling of evidence in the case. A careful exploration of the facts had pointed to Danny’s own son, Anthony, as his father’s likely murderer. While she hadn’t been successful in getting Paul’s conviction overturned or Anthony prosecuted as of yet, she had exposed enough doubt to win Paul an appeal and for the prosecutor to take greater interest in Anthony’s role.

It had set everything in motion for Ali with many local and even some national news outlets praising her ‘leave no stone unturned’ approach. Her original handful of podcast followers (who had mainly been friends and family) had grown into a couple thousand overnight. This had allowed Ali to place a few advertisements on her podcast that made her at least a small income. She was giving herself a bit of a breather from podcasting and reevaluating her job options again when she was approached by one of her own neighbors.

Sue and John Hamilton lived just 3 blocks away from Ali in Newton, MA. John was the owner of a major insurance company and Sue was an orthopedic surgeon at the most prestigious hospital in Boston. They had two sons, Eli age 12 and Thomas age 16, and they had been living every parent’s worst nightmare. Thomas had been missing for the last 6 years, vanished without a trace. After listening to Ali’s podcast, Sue had reached out to her in desperation.

Although they had a nanny for their boys, Thomas was old enough at age 10 that Sue and John had agreed he could ride his bike to and from school which was only one block away. In October 2009, the nanny had gone to pick up Eli from kindergarten, expecting Thomas to meet them at home as usual. Hours passed and Thomas never arrived at home. Local and state police did everything to find the boy, but they came up empty. The only clue they had to go on was the vague description of a
man in a blue pickup truck that Eli had seen Thomas talking to after school before he disappeared. Eli had been questioned over and over again to no avail, his memory of the incident growing foggy as time passed. Sue and John spent a fortune on flyers, ads, commercials and a hefty reward for information, hoping it would help them find their son. Six years later and nothing had come of it; it was now a cold case sitting on the desk of an overworked police detective. Their son was presumed kidnapped and likely dead. Sue refused to believe it, still holding on to the hope that Thomas was out there somewhere. Seeing the complete despair in Sue’s eyes, Ali had agreed to help, having no idea what exactly she’d be able to help with.

Just like in her previous podcast, Ali documented every interview. She talked to the Hamilton family, their neighbors, friends, school officials, the nanny, police officers and people involved in the search. She had come up empty-handed and unsure of what else to do. She was browsing the website that the Hamiltons had set up dedicated to Thomas’ story to see if there was anyone else she was missing when she came across something that struck her as odd. People had left well wishes and comments on a discussion board on the website, but one brief comment posted 2 years earlier had stuck out to Ali. It said “Are you ever going to stop looking for your son? – John P.” Most people would chalk it up to some spammer or troll being a jerk on the discussion board, but Ali couldn’t stop thinking about it.

She spent three days with various hired tech gurus trying to see if there was a way to track down a physical address from the IP address of the commenter. Finally, one tech had handed her an address and Ali drove an hour to nearby Worcester not knowing what exactly she would do once she got there. She pulled up to a small shabby looking house in a rundown neighborhood. A teenage boy rode a skateboard in front yard. He had green hair and several piercings. She approached the boy asking him if he knew a John P.? The boy responded he was John Parker and questioned her as to why she was asking. Ali explained that she was curious about what he posted on the message board and the boy got uneasy, saying he didn’t remember it and had to go as he went back inside the house.

Ali thought it was all very bizarre. She spent the next day asking the neighbors about the boy. None of them seemed to know much other than the boy and his father (Bill) had moved there a few years back. They were quiet and kept to themselves. The boy appeared to be home schooled and didn’t interact with the neighborhood kids. Ali could see something was off here, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. She did an extensive background check on Bill Parker, finding that he worked at a local grocery store but didn’t appear to have any marital history or anything that linked him to John Parker. Still, Ali shrugged it off thinking that perhaps the neighbors had been wrong and Bill wasn’t John’s father. Especially since no one really seemed to know much about them. However, as she dug into it further and came across a deeply buried child molestation charge from 10 years back that Bill was never convicted for, the red flags went up. She went back to the house the next day, finding John skateboarding in the yard again. She kept her distance, but took a closer look at the teenager, noting that if you took away the green hair and piercings, he kind of looked like an older Thomas. But why wouldn’t he have asked for help or told someone who he was? It didn’t make any sense.

Ali went back to the Hamiltons and the case detective with the information and a picture of the boy she had snapped on her phone. Sue was sure it was Thomas and the detective was willing to entertain the idea. After a bit more investigating and a late night raid on the home, it turned out that John Parker was in fact the kidnapped Thomas Hamilton. He had been practically brainwashed and threatened with the death of his family in order to make him stay, suffering years of abuse at the hands of Bill Parker. Bill Parker received a life sentence with no possibility of parole and Thomas was finally back with his family, a long road of recovery ahead of him. Ali Krieger and Veritas Aequitas had become a global sensation. The podcast had picked up several lucrative big-name sponsors, including the Hamiltons.
After all the press and appearances had finally settled down, Ali found herself trying to figure out where the podcast would go next. After what had just happened, the pressure was over the top. Sure, there were so many cold cases out there, but could she really achieve the same kind of results? The expectations on her made her uneasy, but she had to admit she felt like she was cut out for this and maybe up to the task.

“Hello! Earth to Alex!!” Kyle snapped his fingers in her face.

“Oh, uh, sorry. What?” Ali asked, realizing she had just completely zoned out.

“Well before you went off on your little daydream, I said, what about the Liam Gorham case?” Kyle repeated a bit annoyed.

“The South Boston millionaire who got killed by the police captain he was cheating on his wife with?” Ali questioned. The high profile case had wrapped up just over two years ago and had been followed closely by national news outlets. It had shocked the South Boston community when one of their own highly regarded officers had confessed to the murder.

“You got it.” Kyle replied simply.

“She confessed to killing him, Kyle. Not exactly a cold case or a wrongful conviction. That’s my thing, remember?” Ali retorted.

“Yeah, well, I think she lied. No way she killed that guy, but I’m not sure why she’d confess to it.” Kyle said seriously, ignoring Ali’s sass.

“And what exactly are you basing this on? How would you know?” Ali eyed him skeptically. “Let me guess, you watched the 60 minutes episode on it and now you’re an expert, right? Like that time you watched ‘Pimp my Ride’ on MTV and decided you would rebuild your car. How did that work out for you?” Ali laughed and teased him, thinking about how she had to help Kyle get his car towed to the junkyard.

“Shut up!” Kyle stuck his tongue out at her. Then he got serious. “No. I, uh, I know her. I pretty much owe her my life if we get technical about it.” Kyle replied solemnly. “I tried to contact her in jail, but she never replied.” His voice trailed off a bit.

“Woah. Wait. Hold up! What? Captain Ashlyn Harris is THE ‘Harris’?” Ali’s eyes were wide at having made the connection, realizing how little she knew about the ‘Harris’ that had saved Kyle from a life of drugs and addiction. This whole time she thought Harris was a guy. Kyle had never talked too much about the person, just that ‘Harris’ had been his mentor and inspiration. Ali had never been so thankful for anyone in her life, especially someone she knew nothing about. Still, she had respected Kyle’s privacy on the matter and just supported him however she could, ecstatic to have her brother back.

“The one and only.” Kyle sighed.

“You’re serious? Kyle, geez, I’m really sorry. I had no idea.” Ali said remorsefully, feeling bad at having given him a sassy attitude.

“Yeah. I just, I don’t get it. None of it makes sense. I mean, I knew her really well. She would never kill anyone, I swear it. She was one of the good ones, ask anyone. Plus, I don’t even think she would sleep with a guy if you know what I mean.” Kyle smirked. “I mean, my gaydar is usually on point.”
Ali rolled her eyes playfully, but stayed quiet.

“None of it adds up. She was never involved with high power people, so how would she even know Gorham? It was all really weird. And then the confession comes out of nowhere. Don’t you think it’s weird?” Kyle finished his rant pleadingly.

“I never thought about it. Innocent people don’t usually confess, so it didn’t seem controversial enough to think about.” Ali explained. “You really think she lied?”

“I’m sure of it.” Kyle replied confidently.

“Hmmm.” Ali thought it over.

Kyle eyed her for a minute, taking a sip of his coffee before speaking again. “Ignoring my 4 year drug fueled rampage, have I ever led you astray?”

“No.” Ali replied easily.

“Then do me the favor of looking into it. If there’s nothing there, then it is what it is. I just have to know.” Kyle pleaded in a quiet fraught voice.

Ali reached out and squeezed his hand. “Hey. I’m on it. Promise I’ll figure something out.” She reassured him. There was no harm in poking around a bit. She’d just have to be careful. This had been such a high profile case in the media and with her newfound celebrity status, she didn’t want it to get out that she was delving into this case before there was really anything to talk about. For all she knew, nothing would come of it.

“You’re the best, Alex. Seriously, love you.” Kyle went around the counter to hug her before heading out.

With nothing better to do, she went right to work reading up on the case that she had paid little attention to in the media as it happened. It didn’t take her long to have the same intuition about it that Kyle did… something was definitely strange about it.

“Shit.” She whispered to herself as she closed her laptop and finally went to bed for the night. This was going to be a big undertaking and she wondered how long she could go without opening a huge can of worms and attracting too much unwanted attention.

Kyle was everything to her, the closest and most meaningful person in her life. If Ashlyn Harris was the reason he was here, then she owed Ashlyn Harris a huge debt and it was time to try and settle it.

“Veritas Aequitas. Truth and Justice.” Ali said out loud to no one. “Come on Harris, be the person Kyle believes you to be.”
Life Story

The blonde looks contemplatively at Ali for a minute, sizing up the brunette in front of her before deciding to take up the challenge, smirking and speaking again. “Well, I guess I have nothing but time Ms. Krieger. Call me Ashlyn. Ms. Harris is something only a dork in a suit would call me.” She finishes with a playful wink at the brunette.

Ali ignores the insult about her suit and lets out her own curt smile, feeling a bit relieved. “Let’s try this again then. Hi Ashlyn. I’m Ali.”

Ashlyn looks over the brunette one more time. Being a model prisoner in a medium security facility had earned Ashlyn supervised internet access. She had started listening to podcasts to pass the time, coming across Ali Krieger’s Veritas Aequitas a few months ago. The podcast had drawn her in like it had so many other people. Ashlyn found herself intrigued by the woman who worked so hard to get justice for people she didn’t really know with no real benefit to herself. It was all very superhero, very Robin Hood. And, if she was being honest, she’d grown to love Ali’s voice; it was a calming presence in a place where so little peace existed. Imagine her surprise when she received a visitor request from Ali Krieger herself just last week. The whole thing baffled her and Ashlyn found herself accepting the request, the first visitor she had accepted since she had stepped foot in this place. She didn’t know exactly why Ali was here outside of the obvious, but she was going to play it cool until she found out.

Ali feels a bit flustered under the blonde’s stare. The woman is a walking contradiction. She’s athletic and muscular with hard features, but still feminine. Her voice is steady and clear, but still soft. Her eyes are piercing, but still warm. It’s like nothing she has ever experienced before; it’s beautiful, a human paradox. ‘Pull yourself together,’ she mentally chides herself as she tries hard to keep her face neutral.

“Hi Ali. Why don’t you tell me the story of your life. We do have 2 hours and 51 minutes to kill, assuming you stay for the entire allotted visiting time.” The confident smirk is back on Ashlyn’s face as she looks at the clock on the wall behind her.

Ali lets out a slightly impatient sigh. “Well, I was hoping we’d spend some time talking about you. I get it though. If I want you to trust me, I better give you a reason.” She replies steadily, putting a polite smile on her face.

“You’re as smart as you sound on your show.” Ashlyn says with a satisfied grin. She’s listened to Ali’s podcast, she’s pretty sure she knows what the brunette is after, and she’s not giving her a damn thing if she can help it. She has no plans to become the star of the next podcast, but she has to admit she’s curious. Ali does seem to be persistent and sharp and Ashlyn wants to see how far this will go. “So, what exactly is Ali short for?”


“I like that, such a strong historical name. Can I call you Alex though?” Ashlyn asks almost teasingly, testing the situation a bit.

Although only Kyle calls her that, Ali finds herself curtly saying “You can call me whatever you want, Ashlyn.”
“Alex it is.” Ashlyn smiles genuinely this time, knowing she’s been giving the brunette a harder time than she planned to. “So, Alex. Tell me about yourself and how you ended up here in front of me.”

Ali gets drawn in by the blonde’s sweet smile, a single dimple appearing on the left side of her face. ‘She is pretty,’ Ali thinks to herself before taking a deep breath and starting to answer the question. She gets through talking about growing up near the Beacon Hill area of Boston, going to Penn State for undergraduate before starting law school right away at Boston College, and working at the firm before Ashlyn interrupts her.

“So let me get this straight. You grew up in a nice Boston neighborhood, went to two really great schools, and landed a job at a really prestigious law firm that I’m sure paid you a boatload. What the hell got you doing podcasts? Decided the high life was too boring for you?” Ashlyn goads her.

“I got laid off.” Ali answers simply, ignoring the blonde’s teasing tone.

“Alright. So, why turn to podcasting for no major financial gain when you could be at another firm making big bucks?” Ashlyn tries to understand, but she’s lost.

“The lawyer job market sucks in case you didn’t notice. I couldn’t find another job and was getting really down about it, so I tried podcasting for fun. I don’t know, it was still in the spirit of public interest work, so I thought I’d give it a go. Tried to take on local case that seemed like it needed more investigating. I never expected it to get popular enough to bring me any financial gain, until it did.” Ali replies shrugging her shoulders a bit.

“Public interest work?” Ashlyn asks since this is the first time Ali has mentioned it.

“Yeah. I went to law school thinking I’d go into public interest law, help the community. It’s what I always wanted to do. My mother was a public interest lawyer before she was appointed to be a judge and I wanted to follow in her footsteps. She was so respected, one of the good ones. Anyway, I took the firm job to pay off loans and get a good financial start, but I got caught up in it and was there a lot longer than I thought.” Ali replies evenly.

“Was? You talked about your mother in the past tense.” Ashlyn asks respectfully.

“She died 5 years ago of a heart attack.” Ali says quietly.

“I’m really sorry. And your father?” Ashlyn questions.

“He left when I was 10 and hasn’t really been in my life since then.” Ali answers, her voice somewhat terse.

“Double sorry.” Ashlyn says solemnly. “I lost both of mine to drug addiction and substance abuse, sucks to lose your parents.”

Ali nods empathetically, the statement sheds a little light on Ashlyn’s motives when it came to Kyle. She’s about to ask Ashlyn more about her parents, but the blonde speaks up quickly not giving her the chance.

“So, you start podcasting for fun…” Ashlyn prompts Ali to continue.

Ali explains picking the local North End restaurant dispute murder case just because it was the most recent one she thought seemed like a wrongful conviction. She tells Ashlyn how after that she was approached by Sue Hamilton to help with her kidnapped son. “And here I am.” Ali ends.

“Hmmm. Yeah. Here you are.” Ashlyn muses, still trying to figure the brunette out. “And what
exactly are you doing here? Why on earth have you come to see me? Pretty sure I’m not one of those wrongful convictions you love so much.” She winks at Ali with a slight grin.

Ali sighs getting annoyed at the blonde’s mocking tone. She figures she might as well lay it all out there.

“Because you’re single-handedly responsible for saving the most important person in my life, Ashlyn. I owe you everything. My brother Kyle means the world to me, he’s all I have left. And you mean the world to him. He thinks you’re innocent, and frankly, so do I. I’m here to help if you’ll ever agree to take it, not because of my podcast. That doesn’t have to be a part of it.” Ali gets it all out before looking back up at the blonde.

Ashlyn’s eyes have gone wide and for the first time since they started talking, she’s the one who seems edgy and no longer in control. “Kyle.” She smiles fondly. “I didn’t know Kyle had a sister. I honestly didn’t even know his real last name.”


Ashlyn looks down a bit sadly. “Yeah I know. I just… I couldn’t.”

Ali levels with her again. “He believes in you the way you believed in him. I trust him and, like you said, I did my homework, Ashlyn. I’m right there with him. I owe you more than you know. Please, let me try to help. That’s all I’m asking.”

Ashlyn is at a loss for words, her calm cool demeanor gone for the moment. “I… I don’t think so, Alex. It’s fuckin’ complicated.”

Ali catches the blonde’s eyes. “I told you, Ashlyn. The truth is actually pretty simple. Tell me how a stand-up police captain with an impeccable service record and a history of taking desperate people and charity cases under her wing ends up involved with a sleazy millionaire that shouldn’t even be on her radar?”

Ashlyn just stares back and then opens her mouth, but the question never gets answered as the prison guard draws their attention with a loud “Time’s up, ladies.”

“Apply for the prison visitor background check and we’ll talk again without the plexi-glass.” Ashlyn says quickly. “I want to hear about how Kyle is doing. Please. Tell him I said hi.” Her voice is soft and kind. She pauses for a second before adding. “I’ll think about what you said… but, prepare to be disappointed. I just… can’t.”

“I’ll tell him. Think really hard Ashlyn, I’m not giving up on you that easily.” Ali says before giving Ashlyn her own smirk. “You’ve heard my podcast, I can be a really pesky bitch.”

“Bye, Alex.” Ashlyn hangs up the phone grinning and shaking her head at Ali before she’s led back through the door she originally came from.

Ali sits back with a deep breath and closes her eyes for a second. She’s always prided herself on being able to read people. Ashlyn Harris is going to be a tough, but after all her research, she found exactly what she thought she would find today. Her intuition is the same as Kyle’s, Ashlyn is a good person who is either innocent or was in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was all spelled out in those kind hazel eyes that seemed to mesmerize her right from the start. There just has to be more to the story.

“And now to figure out how the fuck I get through to her,” Ali whispers to no one with a groan. She fills out a background check form with the prison guard at the entrance and heads off to figure out
her next move.
Ali walks into her kitchen and drops her bag on the counter, catching the silhouette of a man sitting at the dining room table to her right. She doesn’t even startle in the slightest, knowing already who it is without even looking.

“Geez, Kyle. Can’t you just call like a normal person instead of sitting here in the dark like fucking Hannibal Lector at my kitchen table?” She shakes her head.

Kyle ignores her outburst for the time being. “So, how was it?” He asks with the desperation of an eight year old trying to guess what’s in a gift box.

“Hello to you too.” Ali says dryly.

“Come on. You know I’ve been waiting for this meeting to happen. Seriously, just tell me. How is she?” He pleads with her.

“She’s ok, I think. I mean, she looks kind of worn down a bit, but physically really fit. Pretty typical of someone who’s been in for a while. And I’m going to go out on a limb and say that her wit and confidence haven’t changed much.” Ali says a bit sarcastically.

“Ha! I knew it! Did she hand your ass to you? She’s such a badass.” Kyle replies wistfully as he thinks of his dear friend. He already knew Harris wasn’t going to love his nosey sister poking around. He just hoped Ali could get through to her, she was good at that. If someone told his sister that something was like finding a needle in a haystack, Ali would rip apart the haystack piece by piece just to prove she could find it. Harris would be the one to make her rip the haystack apart to prove there was a needle in it. This was going to be a battle.

“I wouldn’t say she handed my ass to me exactly, but she was certainly direct for lack of a better word.” Ali recounts. “You know, the only time she softened was when I told her you were my brother. She’s clearly really fond of you, proud even. She wanted to hear all about how you are, but we ran out of time. I swear that’s the only reason she wants me to visit again.”

Kyle smiles. “That’s Harris. Stuck in the depths of hell and worried about someone else instead of herself. So, she agreed to see you again? That’s good!”

“I think so. She told me to apply for the visitor background check so we could talk in one of the more private rooms. We’ll see if she holds true to that and actually lets me visit again, but I’m hoping it’s a good sign.” Ali holds up a crossed set of fingers.

They sit silently for a couple minutes before Ali speaks again. “She’s not exactly what I expected. I’m not really sure what I expected, but that wasn’t it. I get what you mean now though… there’s no
way Ashlyn was involved with that sleazebag, it just doesn’t fit. Even I can see that and I just met her.”

“Ooooh, Ashlyn huh? On a first name basis now, are we?” Kyle teases in a sing-song voice.

“That’s what she told me to call her, Kyle. Relax.” Ali shoots him a glare. “Seriously though, if I have any chance at making this work, I need to know more about her. Whatever you’re willing to tell me.” She sits across from Kyle and reaches to squeeze his hand lightly.

Kyle nods knowing this talk would happen eventually and that now is as good a time as any. He takes solace in the fact that he’s been sober for 4 years and that both he and Ali know that he is in control now and that the dark past is just that, the past.

“To put it bluntly,” he begins, “Harris found me when I was practically two feet in the grave. When I started drinking, I never could have imagined how bad it would get. Even when I knew I was an alcoholic and a drug addict, I never thought I’d end up quite like that.”

Kyle entwines his fingers with Ali’s before continuing. “I started drinking shortly after Dad left. I guess I blamed myself a lot for him leaving. Like if I could have been better, been worth it, it would have been reason for him to stay. I snuck alcohol from Mom’s stash and when that wasn’t possible, I snuck into local college parties. I knew I had you and Mom, but I felt alone and inadequate. Drinking was a way for me to feel numb, to ease the pain, even if just for a little while. And even though I drank more and more alcohol over time and I started to get into light drugs to help it along, it seemed to work for a while. And then Mom died, and I lost it completely.” Kyle’s voice breaks off a bit. Ali squeezes his hand tightly.

“I got into some really heavy stuff, Alex. Pretty much anything I could get my hands on. Cocaine, crystal meth, ecstasy and party drugs I didn’t even know existed before. And the thing is, I felt like I was still in control for a while. I kept telling myself that I could stop any time I wanted to, but I needed the escape so badly that I just didn’t want to. Then I got kicked out of school and I lost my job. That’s when I knew I was in too deep, but I just didn’t care anymore. All I cared about was the next drink and the next high.” Kyle looks down and shakes his head before continuing. Ali sits and listens quietly, not wanting to break the dreadful story she knows she needs to hear.

“I ran out of money and then it was all about finding access to it all. I ended up at sex parties practically prostituting myself for drugs and alcohol. Alex, I… I repeatedly put myself in situations where I was raped and sometimes badly hurt just to score some fucking smack. And to survive that mentally and physically, I needed even more to forget. No matter what I did, I always told myself that as long as I didn’t get into heroine, I was ok.” Kyle pauses. “And then I started to do heroine.”

“It got really really bad. I was such a mess I wasn’t even invited to parties anymore. I owed really scary people a lot of money. One night I was out with this guy I had met who was dealing cocaine. We went to a bar and got drunk, did a couple lines of cocaine in the bathroom. And the next thing I know, he and I are getting pulled out into an alley by these huge guys that we both owed money to. They fucking killed him, Alex. Like right there.” Tears stream down Kyle’s face and Ali gets up, grabbing his face and kneeling in front of him.

“Hey, Kyle. It’s ok. It’s the past and you’re ok and safe now.” Ali tries to reassure him.

“I know, but it’s not ok. They killed him right in front of me, slit his throat. I watched him gurgle and bleed out and did nothing, terrified because I knew I was next. But I couldn’t will myself to move, to fight, I was too messed up. And part of me just accepted that I was about to die too. I watched one of the guys grab the bloody knife and then he grabbed my head and forced me to my knees. I closed my eyes and just waited for the pain… it felt like forever. And then I heard the sweetest voice I had ever
heard, ‘Back away from him.’ There was this awful pain in my shoulder and neck and I heard scrambling and yelling. That part is still fuzzy for me. I just remember opening my eyes and looking into these gorgeous hazel eyes, this blonde angel looking back at me. It was Harris. And she kept repeating ‘Stay with me. Breathe. Stay with me.’” Kyle takes a deep breath.

“I didn’t understand why she kept saying that, but I felt so tired. I looked down to see blood all over me, her hand was pressed to my neck, and then I just knew I was going to die. It was finally real and I was so scared. All I could think about was you and how I was leaving you all alone, Alex. How fucking dumb I’d been to throw my time with you away like I did. I just kept asking Harris not to leave me, not to let me die. And she didn’t.” Kyle smiles for the first time since this whole conversation started. Ali scoots forwards on her knees and hugs him tight before he pulls back and finishes his story.

“She carried me a block to an ambulance that she called so that I could be in it as soon as possible. Turns out I was slashed and my artery was nicked, she kept me from bleeding out. She actually put her fingers into my neck and pinched my artery to hold it closed. A complete stranger to her, I’ll never understand why she helped me like that.” Kyle pulls the collar of his shirt aside slightly, revealing the five inch scar. Ali had seen it many times before, never knowing where it had come from or what it signified. “I found all that stuff out after the fact. That she had ridden in the ambulance with me, stayed by my hospital bed until I woke up. That’s the part I remember, waking up to her again, wondering how on earth I had survived. All I could do was look at her and say ‘Thank you.’” Kyle smiles again.

“I’ll never forget this part. She said ‘Don’t thank me. Just tell me, are you ready to change? I mean really ready to leave all that shit behind and be yourself again?’ I told her I was. I just wanted to get back to you, Alex. Then Harris got really serious and said ‘I mean it. I’ll give you all the help you need, but you have to want it and be open to it. My way or the highway, you in?’ I said yes and here I am.” Kyle looks up at Ali. “She took me into her home, fed me, clothed me, got me a therapist and into a hardcore rehab program. She even exercised with me and got me a job. And I’ll tell you, Alex… I was no peach to deal with while I recovered. She was always patient with me. As long I was committed to getting better, she was committed to helping me. Harris was like finding home again. She was caring and kind, but also tough when I needed her to be. She never got too personal, but was the best friend I’d ever had. And to this day, I still couldn’t tell you why she did it or even all that much about her. I just know that I’m forever grateful and in her debt.”

“Yeah. Me too.” Ali says quietly, finally wiping a few tears from her cheeks and taking it all in.

“So, you’re going to help her?” Kyle asks.

“I’m going to do all I can. Well, what she’ll let me do anyway. She certainly seems quite obstinate. Then again, I like a challenge.” Ali smirks confidently.

“Well then get your ass to work already!” Kyle lightens the mood with his typical sass, gives Ali a quick hug and makes his way out the door just like that.

Ali sighs, plops herself down in front of her computer and sets to work trying to pull up all of the Liam Gorham murder case files and details that she can.
“11…12…13” Ashlyn breathes out in the small and empty prison weight room as she bench presses. The women’s weight room is usually empty, something that Ashlyn never would have guessed given all the portrayals of muscled jail characters on TV. Over the two plus years she’s been here, she’s found that most of her expectations about prison have been wrong, which is amusing to her given that she was once a police officer and probably should have known more about the realities of it. The room is dim and smells musty, but the solitude is oddly comforting. Afternoons would usually find her in the prison library at the computer listening to a podcast or reading about world history (something she realized she knew so little about and became fascinated with behind bars), but not this week.

She’s spent the last couple of weeks listening to Ali’s podcast episodes over again and searching the internet for information about her, trying to get an angle on the woman she finds so intriguing. It’s been over 3 weeks now though and Ashlyn hasn’t heard a single thing from Ali since that first visit. It’s not surprising. They don’t know each other and Ali owes her nothing. Plus, Ashlyn knows she wasn’t exactly nice and pretty much shut Ali down. It makes sense that Ali didn’t come back. Still, she can’t help but feel a bit disappointed. She really did want to hear about Kyle and how he was doing. And, if she’s being honest, she was hoping to learn more about Ali. Ashlyn has chalked it up to Ali looking a lot like Kyle, but something about the brunette seemed so comfortable and familiar while simultaneously mysterious. The inconsistency of it all has made her a bit obsessed over the last couple weeks, going over their conversation repeatedly in her head. But, it’s now been over 3 weeks and Ali isn’t coming back. It’s time to stop fixating and get back to the bleak and isolated reality that will be the rest of her life.

“Easy Harris. You’re gonna pop a vein in your head.” She hears as the weight room door creaks open.

Ashlyn smirks as she lifts the weight bar back into place and remains laying on the bench for a few seconds before sitting up to address the prison guard in front of her. “Hey Tim. How was vacation? Cozumel this time, right?”

“Well, no one got a stomach virus this time. So, already a million times better than the last vacation!” Tim laughs in response, referring to his wife and two kids.

“Really though, it was a beautiful place. Anyway. Sooo, finally took my advice and lawyered up, huh? Smart girl.” He gives Ashlyn a thumbs up.

“What? No. What are you talking about?” Ashlyn asks confused.

“Pretty sure that was THE Ali Krieger I saw in here visiting you before I left. You know, she’s like a big deal around Boston these days, figures out crazy cases. I just assumed. Never mind. So, then, you dating her? Even smarter.” Tim replies with an eye waggle.

“Huh? No. What the hell, Tim…Did you leave your brain in Mexico?” Ashlyn gives him a hard stare.

“Well, excuuuuse me!” Tim puts his hands up and mocks being offended. “The first person you ever have visit you in this dump and it’s a hotshot lawyer who also happens to be hot. I figured it had to be one or the other. But, apparently, I’m all sorts of wrong. I’m still nosey though. So, what exactly
“It’s nothing. She’s just the sister of an old friend that I helped out once. Nothing else.” Ashlyn replies casually.


“Tim.” Ashlyn sighs audibly.

She and Tim Rosemund had been through police academy together, becoming friends right away. Tim wasn’t quite cut out to be a police officer, opting instead to be a prison guard while Ashlyn excelled at academy and unsurprisingly quickly worked her way up the ranks. Neither of them ever expected the day where Tim would be guarding Ashlyn as a prisoner. He refused to believe her story, something that Ashlyn was both grateful for and burdened by. The truth flat out sucked and she wished he would just accept things at face value. Despite that, it was good to have a familiar face around even if he often pretended there was no connection between the two of them unless they were one-on-one. Tim was a good guy like that, he did his job right and Ashlyn respected that.

“Yeah. Ok.” Tim replies a bit defeated. He knows better than to push it anymore.

Ashlyn gives him a curt nod and a polite smile before wiping the sweat from her arms and neck with a small towel and holding her hands out to get cuffed so Tim can escort her back to her cell. He never cuffs her too tightly, a small courtesy that means the world to her in such an uncaring and unforgiving place.

They don’t speak as they navigate the drab hallways, stopping minutes later in front of Ashlyn’s cell. Tim uncuffs her and opens the door.

“Since it’s nothing, I guess you probably don’t care much about this then.” Tim says cockily as he pulls an envelope out of the back pocket of his navy uniform pants.

“What’s that?” Ashlyn inquires coolly.

“Oh NOTHING. Just a background check approval and a visit request from Ali Krieger that came in for you this morning. Nothing really.” Tim tries hard not to smirk as he watches Ashlyn’s eyes go wide.

Ashlyn has to stop herself from snatching the envelope out of his hand. She tries hard to remain unaffected. “Hmmm. Ok. Thanks.”

Tim hands the envelope to her, looking around a bit before casually leaning in and whispering “Don’t be a fucking idiot, Harris. Do something. Anything.”

Before Ashlyn can respond, another guard comes down the hallway and Tim slips back into professional mode. “The warden will need that visitor acceptance paperwork signed by Friday if you want your visit approved for next week, inmate.” He states evenly.

Ashlyn simply takes the envelope and nods before turning around and walking into her cell. She watches Tim walk away after the lock clicks into place, falling into step and carrying on a conversation with the other guard.

She closes her eyes and grips the envelope tightly between her fingers. Her heart feels like it’s in her throat and her obsessive mind has begun to run rampantly again.
Ali pulls into the Framingham Correctional Facility parking lot and flips down the visor to check her make-up in the mirror one last time. It looks a bit thickly slathered on, but it will have to do. Last time she was here, she fussied over trying to look impressive and competent. This time she’s dressed casually in skinny jeans and a long-sleeve black shirt, her hair loosely draped over her shoulders. She wouldn’t have bothered to double-check her makeup at all if it wasn’t for the fact that she hasn’t slept all that much over the last few weeks and is starting to look a bit rough. Although she’s much less concerned with her appearance this time around, she doesn’t want to look like a complete disaster either. This time it’s different. She’s not nervous antsy, just excited antsy. Antsy the way she always gets when she feels confident. This time she’s prepared.

She checks in with the guard at the front desk area, where her belongings are searched and x-rayed thoroughly, and is then led by another guard through the same area of plexi-glass cubicles that she was in last time. This time they walk right through that room and into a hallway with several doors. The guard leads Ali through one such door: a smallish white-walled room with nothing but a table and two chairs in the center of it. On the back wall there is a small plexi-glass window with a door beside it, clearly an area for a guard to observe the visit while still providing some privacy since it’s only visual monitoring. The guard points to the table and chairs, telling Ali to have a seat as he disappears behind the door and seats himself at a desk behind the plexi-glass window to keep watch.

Ali sits down at one of the chairs and gets comfortable, at least as comfortable as one can get on a cheap metal folding chair. She pulls out a Coke, Sprite, and two bags of chips she got in the lobby vending machine from her purse as well as a manila folder with her documents and notes. About five minutes has gone by and she’s starting to fiddle with the edge of the folder when she hears the door to the room open. She looks up to see Ashlyn being escorted in by a guard who leads her to the seat across from Ali, the blonde giving her a small nod and smile as she’s seated and her cuffs are removed.

For the second time, Ali finds herself a bit mesmerized by Ashlyn even though she knew what to expect this time. The blonde’s hair is a bit damp today, adding to her overall surfer look; her sleeve tattoo prominently displayed like last time given the short sleeves of the beige prison garb. There really is just a natural beauty to the woman, Ali can’t deny that and she doesn’t try to. She allows herself a second to take it in, knowing that this time she has to be less astonished by it all and more confident. She needs to be a presence equal to Ashlyn’s.

The guard leaves and finally it’s just the two of them, save for other the guard watching from behind the window.

Ali is about to say something, but Ashlyn unsurprisingly starts before she has the chance.

“Hi Alex. Been awhile, so I didn’t think I’d actually see you back in here. You look nice, maybe a little tired, but I like the more casual look compared to that type A ensemble you were rocking last time. So, how’s it going?” Ashlyn grins, a single dimple appearing near the corner of her mouth as
her eyes look right into Ali’s.

Ali just shakes her head a bit with a smile before giving it right back to her. “Hi Ashlyn. It took almost a month for this place to get through my background check and approve me, so sorry for the delay. I told you I’d be back; I’m pesky, remember? I look tired because I’ve been staying busy, but I figured I’d go with my more natural relaxed self today instead of the ‘Type A’ side that makes me a pretty dull girl. You’re looking clean and fresh, that beige does wonders for your complexion. How have you been?” She grins right back at the blonde.

“Yeah sorry, I ended up in the afternoon shower block since I spent the morning shower block in the weight room. Just working off some energy.” Ashlyn says referencing her wet hair. She likes this sassy side of Ali. Something about the brunette makes her feel light inside.


“I’ll never admit it.” Ashlyn jokes back.

“Fair enough.” Ali replies and then points to the chips and drinks on the table. “I brought some snacks, take your pick.”

“You’re the best!” Ashlyn says excitedly, grabbing the Coke and a bag of Doritos. “The food in here sucks. I’d kill for a good cup of coffee.”

The irony of that last statement isn’t lost on Ali, but she chooses to just table it for now rather than draw attention to it, taking note. “I bet. So really, how have you been?”

“Been fine.” Ashlyn replies with no further elaboration, before changing the subject completely. “Tell me about Kyle.”

Ali knew this would probably happen given that Ashlyn was so guarded last time. She decides to appease the blonde for now and spends the next half hour telling her about Kyle’s very successful hair salon on Newbury Street, his Instagram popularity (which she had to fully explain to Ashlyn since she had no idea about Instagram), his dog Luna, his online dating obsession, and a couple of funny stories from their recent weekly dinner dates.

Ashlyn has been thoroughly engaged in the conversation, clearly very excited to hear all about Kyle as she smiles genuinely. Ali can’t help but be touched by it. A brief silence passes between them as Ali wraps up the last story. This time she doesn’t wait for Ashlyn to break it.

“So, I’ve told you my life story. And now Kyle’s. The only one missing is yours.” Ali looks at Ashlyn expectantly.

“I’m not interesting.” Ashlyn says shutting Ali down quickly, the playful smirk back on her face.

“Hmmm. Well, that’s not true. There is all sorts of interesting stuff about you.” Ali replies with her own cocky smirk.

“You think so?” Ashlyn plays back.

“Oh, I know so.” Ali points to the folder in front of her. “Since you refuse to tell me about yourself, I did some homework. But, it’d be nicer to hear it all from you.”

“Nah. It’ll be much more fun seeing what you know about me. So, let’s go, Alex… tell me.” Ashlyn challenges.
Ali smiles slightly knowing the blonde has no idea what’s coming, but trying not to get ahead of herself. “Well, for starters I found out you are pretty holy, but we’ll get to that in a little bit. I’ll start from the beginning.”

Ashlyn stifles a laugh, knowing that for Ali to think she was holy, the brunette must have pulled up some information about the South Boston Reverend Ashley Harris. It wouldn’t be the first time someone has confused them, but Ashlyn isn’t about to correct her. “Go on. I’m listening.” Ashlyn exaggerates her posture to look at Ali with mock rapt attention and the smug demeanor of someone who has no idea her world is about to be rocked.
Ali opens the manila folder in front of her to glance at her notes. She really has no need to even so much as look at them, she has it memorized. Still, given the importance of the moment, she wants to make sure it all comes out the way she intends it. Particularly since it’s clear Ashlyn has no intention of taking it seriously. That’s the point of contention, she needs Ashlyn to take it seriously. She needs Ashlyn to know that she’s invested and trustworthy, that she believes in her. She doesn’t want to be insensitive, but if she’s going to get through to the blonde, she has to be blunt.

Ali clears her throat as she gets ready to speak, but once again there has been a silent moment that Ashlyn feels the need to break.

“Any day now Alex, some of us have a cell to get back to.” Ashlyn jests with the now typical smug look on her face.

Ali doesn’t acknowledge it before looking straight up into Ashlyn’s eyes and starting.

“Ashlyn Michelle Harris, born in Billerica, MA on October 19, 1985. Daughter of Tammye and Michael Harris, both deceased in 2001.” Ali chooses not to mention the fact that Tammye overdosed in February of that year and Michael was killed when he drunkenly drove his car into a river a few months later that July. Instead she just moves right along. “One older brother, Christopher. Both under the care of paternal grandparents, Eunice and Curtis Harris of Ipswich, while minors. You graduated Ipswich High School in 2003 with a 4.0 GPA and acceptances to both M.I.T. and Tufts University, but chose to go to West Point military academy.” Ali pauses for a second. “You want to pick it up from here?” She gives Ashlyn the chance to jump in and tell her the rest of what she already knows.

Ashlyn has to admit, Ali did some decent digging to get that information. Still, it’s nothing that can’t be found in public records and internet searching. She figures Ali can’t get much deeper than that, so she might as well let the brunette finish. “Oh no, please, continue telling me how interesting I am.” Ashlyn deadpans in the most sarcastic voice she can.

Ali continues unfazed. “You were the first woman to graduate as an Army Ranger from West Point. And at the top of the class no less. No bullshit, Ashlyn. That is seriously impressive. I mean, they open the program to women for the first time in history while making sure that it remained as hard as it always has for men, if not harder to discourage women from doing it. And you go in there against all odds and crush it. Pardon my language, but that’s fucking amazing.”

Ashlyn just shrugs. “I like a challenge.”

Ali quickly jots down a note before looking back up at Ashlyn.

“What did you write?” Ashlyn questions, not able to read Ali’s handwriting upside down.

“Modest to a fault.” Ali winks at her and Ashlyn shakes her head. “Anyway. Moving on. You
served two active duty tours in Iraq, which ended in two Purple Heart medals and a bronze star. During the first you were shot during an attack on your patrol, bullet wounds to the right outer thigh and right hip, which didn’t stop you from carrying a fellow soldier almost a mile to safety. After two months of recovery you rejoined your unit to finish out your tour. You spent 3 months home after that before being sent out on a second tour. This time the Humvee you were riding in hit an IED, leaving you with severe shrapnel wounds in your right shoulder. After determining that you would not be able to hold the weight of a standard issue military weapon for long periods of time, you were officially honorably and medically discharged from the U.S. Army in 2010.” Ali pauses again. “Told you… you’re very holey. Get it? Holey, lots of holes from the injuries.” She tries hard to lighten the conversation, knowing that maybe it isn’t easy for Ashlyn to talk or think about her history in the army. Still, she is starting to wonder if maybe she crossed a line with that comment when she hears Ashlyn laugh a bit.

Ashlyn rolls her eyes, but can’t help chuckling at Ali. “You’re so lame, Alex.” She tries to hide her increasing anxiety at the information Ali is spouting at her. Again, all things that could be found out in public records, but it would still take a lot of dedicated work to find it all. The fact that Ali put that much time into finding out about her, it makes her nervous now. She forces her face to relax and motions for Ali to continue.

“Alright, if you’re not gonna jump in.” Ali keeps on going. “After fully recovering from your shoulder injury, you enrolled in the Boston Police Academy. While stand-out soldiers like you would get a free pass after some minor training, you had to prove you could handle the job physically after the injuries you sustained in the army. And, of course, you crushed it and quickly worked your way up the ranks of the South Boston Police Department, making Captain in just 4 years. Pretty much unheard of, let alone for a woman. Then again, I won’t even get into the 2 page long list of merits, awards, and medals you achieved in that time.” Ali says lifting up two printed pages that list all of Ashlyn’s achievements as a police officer. Ashlyn doesn’t even bother to look at it.

“Rumor also has it you that were being groomed to replace the Department Chief who was your mentor.” Ali adds. “And if that wasn’t enough, you still managed to help some pretty desperate people, like my brother, get themselves healthy and back on their feet.”

Ashlyn just gives Ali a slight nod and another small shoulder shrug. “Not a big deal.” She practically whispers.

Ali just gives the blonde a small smile. “So, that’s the extent of what I know for complete certain. Let me sum it up real quick: You’re intelligent, honorable, strong, decorated, accomplished, kind, charitable, and on top of all that, clearly modest and humble. I’d say that’s not just interesting, Ashlyn Harris, but downright heroic.” Ali says, genuinely amazed by the woman in front of her.

“I’m no hero, Alex. Just a person like everyone else.” Ashlyn replies seriously.

“Uh huh. I’ll be the judge of that.” Ali says almost teasingly, trying to lighten the mood again before she gets into the next part of the conversation.

“Well, I’ll give you props for finding all that stuff about me. Pretty good investigating skills, Alex. You must be a lawyer.” Ashlyn jokes, doing her best to shake off the anxiousness she feels about how much Ali learned about her so quickly.

“Oh, I’m not done.” Ali quips back immediately, not letting Ashlyn gain control over the conversation like the blonde is seemingly trying to do. “That is just the stuff I know for certain. There are a few other things that I have pieced together with a few educated guesses and assumptions. Feel like jumping in yet? Last chance.”
“Well, sorry. Didn’t mean to stop your mojo there, Alex. By all means, continue.” Ashlyn feels a bit caught off guard, but she puts a smug look back on her face so she doesn’t let on. What else could Ali possibly have to tell her.

“Alright. Can’t say I didn’t give you the chance. Here goes, just hear me out to the end. Then tell me how close I am, ok?” Ali says with a hint of sass before continuing on.

Ashlyn just listens.

“So, you finally make Captain after a lot of hard work. You’re proud of it and you’re ready to work even harder when you find out that your mentor, Chief Robert Dugan, is planning to try and make you his replacement when he retires in the next five or so years. The guy has probably been like a father to you and you want to make him proud.” Ali waits for some kind of reaction from the blonde, but Ashlyn is now just looking down at the table with no real discernable expression.

“You hang closely to him and he trusts you. He brings you into his world and pretty soon you figure out that Bobby is not quite the guy you thought he was. No, Bobby is involved in side deals with shady businessmen and drug dealers; taking huge money bribes in exchange for him looking the other way and letting these scumbags do all kinds of illegal things on the streets of Boston.” Ali pauses again, but Ashlyn remains silent, her expression unchanged from what Ali can see.

“You panic a bit. You can’t possibly do nothing and let it go, but you know it will be next to impossible to bring him down. Plus, the guy has been like family to you, so it’s complicated. Bobby is smart and sly about his deals, and he has quite the excellent reputation as Chief. I mean, who is going to believe you, right? Still, you have to do something. So, you start compiling evidence on your own against him while remaining tight lipped and as friendly to him as ever. He trusts you, so it gets easier and easier to get information on what he is up to. He just figures you’re learning so you can eventually do what he does. It’s the South Boston Police Department, everyone knows corruption runs rampant in there, it’s not shocking.” Still nothing from Ashlyn, so Ali keeps going.

“Over time, you compile a pretty hefty file on Bobby Dugan and what he is up to. His biggest transactions are with Liam Gorham. I mean Gorham is involved in all sorts of lucrative illegal crap so he has serious money to throw around. So, when Bobby asks you to come to Liam’s office one night, you think nothing of it. Just another deal you’ll be privy to; another addition to the dossier you’re composing on him. You’re so close to busting him and exposing it all.” Ali notices Ashlyn fingers nervously tapping the table and feels even more emboldened to continue.

“Not what you expected though when you showed up though, was it? Liam is dead with a bullet in his head and Bobby’s got a gun on you the minute you walk through the door. Good Ol’ Bobby the Chief takes your gun and shoots Liam a few more times to make it look the way he wants it to. Then he blackmails you into confessing that you killed Liam over jealousy that he wasn’t going to leave his wife for you like he said he would.” Ali just keeps going, knowing she has to just lay it all out like this.

“And that’s laughable to me. Because seriously, when was the last time you probably even thought of a guy… I’m going to guess you probably had sex with a guy once after prom and it was so bad that you swore off men after that? Am I right?” Ali asks rhetorically.

Ashlyn shifts a bit in her chair, shell-shocked by what Ali is saying; in disbelief that the brunette has somehow even figured out how she lost her virginity and her sexual enlightenment after that experience.

Ali sees the blonde’s slight shift. “It’s ok, Ashlyn. Nothing to be ashamed of, I get it… that’s exactly how it was for me too. It’s been all women for me ever since then and I couldn’t be happier about
that. I’m getting off track though.” She keeps going.

“So, ignoring the fact that I’m sure most people know you aren’t into men and this whole thing already seems like total bull crap. I have to ask myself what on earth Bobby Dugan possibly has over you that honest, admirable, respected, and very gay Captain Ashlyn Harris confesses to a love triangle murder she didn’t commit and covers for the very jackass she was trying to bust?” Ali asks yet another question that she doesn’t even so much as pause to hear the answer to.

“He certainly can’t have dirt on you, because there is none of that. So, what do you have to protect Ashlyn? Not your job; it can’t mean that much to you. Not Bobby; you already knew he was unworthy scum. It’s the only thing you have left to protect isn’t it… Christopher Ryan Harris, your brother. The only family you have left.” Ali sees Ashlyn’s fists clench and she gets the rest out quickly.

“He’s a good guy who’s doing really well for himself. Has his own collection of rehab facilities for addicts. He has a wife and two kids and a good life. You’re proud of him. Wasn’t always like that though, huh? He was once in the depths of addiction hell, just like Kyle. He was involved with really bad people for a long time; dealing, drug running, and all kinds of other ugly stuff just to pay the debts he owed people. And now, when he’s clean, happy, and healthy… I’m guessing Bobby Dugan could ruin it all pretty easily with whatever information he has. And you can’t let that happen, so here you are serving a life sentence in his place for a murder that Bobby Dugan committed.” Ali pauses for just a second before adding. “So, Ashlyn, tell me. How close am I to the truth? Cause I feel like I’m pretty close.”
I See You

Chapter Notes

So let's see what Ashlyn thinks, shall we?

Ali pauses for just a second before adding. “So, Ashlyn, tell me. How close am I to the truth? Cause I feel like I’m pretty close.”

When Ali had laid out the same facts and theory for Kyle earlier in the week in this very same manner, he had been stunned. His exact response had been “I fucking knew Harris didn’t do it! You’re a genius, Alex! Seriously, how did you come up with all this?” Ali had calmed him down by saying she wasn’t going to get into it any further until she had talked to Ashlyn and heard what she had to say. To which Kyle had dramatically replied “Psssh, good luck!”

So, when she finally finishes and is staring at Ashlyn intently as she waits for the blonde to look up and react to everything she has just said, she expects a similar reaction to Kyle’s. She expects some shock and surprise, maybe a bit of anger or awkwardness given all of the seemingly private things she’s put out in the open. Yet when the blonde’s piercing hazel eyes finally look up and meet her own, Ali sees something she never anticipated. Ashlyn simply looks broken, there is no other word for it. Ali’s heart jumps into her throat. Gone is the confident and smug blonde that she’s come to know so far and Ali feels like she might be seeing the real, raw Ashlyn for the very first time. It’s a painful sight, Ashlyn looks almost wounded.

Ashlyn can’t believe everything she just heard. Her heart is racing as she realizes that Ali Krieger has just single-handedly dismantled every last metaphorical wall that she has worked so hard to build and put up over the past couple of years. She feels vulnerable and shell-shocked. Even worse, she feels hopeful. If Ali could start out knowing nothing about her and still come up with something as close to the truth as it can get without Ashlyn actually telling her, then maybe other people could figure it out too. Maybe there is a way out of this. Ashlyn lets that flicker of hope set in for a minute, but it’s too dangerous. Hope is dangerous. The number of things that would have to go right is just astounding, the odds completely stacked against her. And then there’s Chris. The whole point of this is to keep him safe. She can’t save herself and expect to save him too, Bobby Dugan would make sure of that. Ashlyn quickly extinguishes the flicker of hope inside and looks up to meet Ali’s whiskey colored eyes. The genuine care and concern she sees in those eyes just break her. She’s sure for the moment that no one has ever looked at her like that, at least that she can remember right now as her mind races. Ashlyn opens her mouth to try and say something meaningful, but all that comes out is “How?”

It’s not quite the reaction Ali was expecting, but she recovers quickly. “It doesn’t matter how at the moment. It only matters that I’m right, doesn’t it?” Ali asks, getting an almost imperceptible nod from
the blonde that confirms her theory is as close to the truth as she thought it was. “I’m good at what I do. You know that.” Ali adds playfully hoping to reassure the blonde, but Ashlyn is still looking lost and broken.

Ali’s heart can’t take that haunting look anymore and her body reacts before she can stop herself. She reaches across the table and takes Ashlyn’s hand in her own, squeezing it lightly.

Ashlyn feels Ali’s hand on hers and her eyes dart right over to the plexi-glass of the observation window, expecting the guard to admonish them. There’s no significant touching allowed during these visits and this definitely qualifies as rule-breaking. What she sees instead is Jordan Willis, a good friend of Tim’s and the only other guard in here who treats her well, quickly averting his eyes down to a magazine that he suddenly and conveniently looks very engrossed in. She’s both angry and thankful at Jordan’s purposeful ignorance. In a place where everything is cold and harsh, Ali’s touch is warm and gentle. It’s like fire on her skin, sending heat radiating through her body. It’s soothing and beautiful, a touch that stands out when she hasn’t been touched so kindly like this for so long. It’s a touch she feels so undeserving of. And like hope, the touch is dangerous and it shakes her to the very core. Ashlyn is about to pull her hand away when she feels Ali’s thumb running small circles on the top of her hand, just below the edge of the black designs inked into her skin. A new wave of heat washes over her as she hears the brunette’s voice again.

“Hey, Ash.” Ali says carefully, pulling the blonde’s attention away from the plexi-glass window.

Ashlyn eyes rake over their joined hands before settling back on Ali’s compassionate eyes. She doesn’t miss the nickname Ali has just called her by. It’s overwhelming and she closes her eyes.

Ali sees the mix of confusion and fear in Ashlyn’s face, watching the blonde close her eyes. She knows this is the time, so she speaks from the heart. “Ashlyn, look at me.”

Ashlyn feels Ali give her hand a quick squeeze as she continues to stroke it lightly with her thumb. She opens her eyes to look at the brunette, waiting for whatever comes next.

“I may not truly know you Ashlyn Harris, but I want to know you. And even though I don’t fully know you, I do see you. I see you, Ashlyn. And I know enough and see enough to believe in you. I’m asking that you believe in me.” Ali pleads as she uses her free hand to slide some paperwork in front of Ashlyn. “Sign me on as your lawyer. Let me at least lay out the case and my game plan for you. If you aren’t comfortable or sure about it, we don’t have to pursue it. In which case, I’ll just be your friend. But, please, just give me the chance to show you. Let me try. I promise to be private and quiet about it unless you tell me otherwise. I promise to protect you.” Ali gets out in a steady yet soft voice.

Ashlyn wants to let her, she does. She just knows in her gut that Ali won’t harm her, that she is trustworthy. But she can’t do it. It’s hope, it’s warmth, it’s optimism and it’s all lost in a treacherous abyss she can’t see the end of. She’s terrified of it all. Ashlyn looks down because she knows she can’t bear to see the look of disappointment she’s about to put on Ali’s face and she opens her mouth to utter “I can’t.” Before she can get the words out though, she feels Ali take her other hand too, both of her hands now entwined in the brunette’s comforting grip. Tingling shoots through her body as she hears Ali whisper “Let me take care of you, Ashlyn. Give me the chance.” She looks up to find warm amber eyes filled with nothing but care, courage, and confidence looking back into her own.

All of Ashlyn’s resolve leaves her and she finds herself so easily whispering a barely audible “Ok, Alex” as she reluctantly frees one hand to sign the lawyer retainer contract in front of her.
Ali grabs and squeezes Ashlyn’s hands tightly in hers one last time and gives the blonde a nose-crinkling smile.

It’s a smile that makes Ashlyn believe in something again. The blonde is petrified of what lies ahead. She doesn’t believe in the simplicity of truth and justice anymore. She doesn’t even really believe in herself, but she does find herself believing in Ali Krieger. And for now, that’s just enough to keep her world from crumbling.
Better than Sex

Chapter Notes

Wow, so many great comments on that last chapter! Since you're all enjoying it so much, here's another one for you. Luckily I have some chapters written already, but at this rate you'll catch up to me in no time and then have to wait a while for updates!

It’s been four days since Ali’s visit and Ashlyn hasn’t been able to sit still, let alone sleep or even eat much. Given that she spends the majority of her day in a 6 by 8 foot cell, most of which is taken up by a bed, desk and toilet/sink combo, pacing around is not a good thing. She’s already bruised her leg twice from walking into the desk chair absentmindedly. When she really can’t take it anymore, she’s relinquished herself to doing pushups until her body is so physically spent that she has no energy left but to lay down. Of course, then her mind starts going.

Why did she let her curiosity get the best of her? Why did she let Ali visit in the first place? Why did she let her come back? And why the hell had she agreed to retain her as a lawyer and even attempt to get into this mess that is her life?

Ashlyn keeps asking herself these questions over and over again as if she doesn’t know the answers, but deep down, she knows. She knows that her biggest fear is that Bobby Dugan will go back on his word and go after Chris just to spite her. What could she do about it behind bars if he did? Nothing.

The only way she’ll ever feel safe is to go after Bobby herself, just like she’d planned to. Take him down and put him away for life where he could never touch her or her family again. The spark for that flame went out a long time ago, the day she realized she’d be stuck in this cell for life with no way out. But now, with Ali, the damn spark is flickering again. Ashlyn knows she shouldn’t let it, but her stupid brain won’t let it rest. It’s like having a beautiful dream that you know isn’t real and would never happen, naturally you want to stay in it forever.

Then there’s the burden, the heaviness of carrying such a big secret. One that has ruined her reputation, taken away her freedom, and made her feel as lonely as she ever has in her entire life.

Turns out when you confess to murdering someone, the people in your life don’t know what to do with that. They don’t want to believe it; they know you, don’t they? But then why would you confess if you didn’t do it? So they try and figure out what they should think and say as they battle to try and decide if you’re really the person they thought you were.

Ashlyn had decided early on to take that pressure away from any friends or family she had; never reading/replying to a single letter she received and never accepting a visit request. Well, until Ali Krieger. And in her gut, Ashlyn knows that Ali might be the best outlet for lightening the load a bit. Someone she can at least share the secret with and not drown alone in the darkness of it all like she has been. It’s not so hard now that Ali has pretty much figured most of it out anyhow.

That’s the compromise Ashlyn settles on before Ali comes to visit again the next day: take Ali’s offer of friendship and finally tell someone the truth of what happened and forget about the rest. There’s no point in trying to get herself out of a situation that she’s clearly stuck in for the rest of her life, she has her brother to protect. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to lighten some of the heaviness on her shoulders. Having a friend again after over two years of blocking everyone out seems like a gift right now, and
Ali Krieger has all the makings of a good friend from what Ashlyn has seen so far. She can only hope that Ali will understand that she just wants a friend and not a lawyer who is going to promise her unrealistic outcomes.

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After pulling up to the prison and parking, Ali checks her makeup in the car mirror like she always does. Like last time, the makeup is a bit heavy to hide the continued sleepless nights, but she looks presentable enough she thinks. This time she opted for a pair of black dress pants and a white button up shirt; not a suit, but not too casual either. She knows she needs to look somewhat official as Ashlyn’s lawyer. She’s spent the last few days pouring over evidence, case files, and possible scenarios over and over again. All the while letting the words “Ashlyn Harris’ lawyer” run through her head. She can’t believe Ashlyn actually agreed to this, but she’s going full steam ahead no matter how unbelievable it is. She made both Kyle and Ashlyn a promise and she intends to keep it: she will take care of Ashlyn no matter what it takes. She owes her at least that.

After the usual process of getting through prison security, Ali finds herself seated once again in the drab conference room with the plexi-glass observation window. She notices it’s the same guard behind it as last time and watches as he flips through a car magazine while she waits for Ashlyn. It only takes a couple minutes before the blonde is being escorted into the room and Ali immediately notices the slight bags under her eyes. It makes her a bit nervous that maybe it means Ashlyn has been overthinking things and is going to change her mind. Before she can muse on it any further, Ashlyn’s eyes catch her own and the blonde gives her a dimpled smile as she is uncuffed and seated. It sets Ali at ease a bit.

“Good morning, Ashlyn. You look tired, you ok?” Ali smiles kindly, knowing the bags under her own eyes are probably just as prominent.

“Hey, Alex. Yeah, I’m…” Ashlyn starts, but stops right in the middle of her thought as her eyes drift to the two large cups of coffee and bag of donuts sitting on the table next to Ali. Her eyes go wide as she excitedly squeaks out “Oh my god, is that…”

Ali finishes the sentence for her. “Starbucks coffee and some donuts from Dunkin’? Yep! I had no idea how you like your coffee, so there’s cream and sugar in the donut bag too.”

Ashlyn can’t believe it. Coffee is one of her favorite things in the world and she had finally resigned herself to the fact that she’d have to deal with terrible prison coffee forever. “This…how did…” she can’t even get the words to come out right.

“Perks of being your lawyer now.” Ali answers, finding the childlike expression on Ashlyn’s face endearing as the blonde stares at the coffee cup with her mouth slightly open in wonder. “Lawyers get more leeway in what we can bring into visits and how often and long we can visit for. Apparently, we’re more trustworthy.” She laughs a bit and waits for Ashlyn to make a lawyer joke, but it never comes. Ashlyn is too busy smiling at the coffee cup.

“Geez. Go on and drink it, don’t have eye sex with it.” Ali can’t help but tease a little. “Promise I’ll always bring more when I visit and I’ll even get your favorite next time if you tell me what you want.”

Ashlyn turns a bit red realizing how ridiculous she must look right now getting almost emotional over a cup of coffee. “Sorry, I just… you’re the fucking best, Alex. Seriously, thank you.” She says quietly, meeting Ali’s eyes as she fixes her coffee with one packet of sugar and a splash of cream.

“You bet. Told you I’ll take care of you.” Ali says matter-of-factly. “Speaking of which, any chance
you want to go easy on me today and maybe give me your version of things rather than make me report on all this investigating I’ve been up to?”

Ashlyn ponders Ali’s question for a second as she selects a chocolate frosted donut out of the bag on the table and takes a bite of it, following it up with a big sip of her coffee. She lets the flavor roll over her tongue and then lets out a long contented sigh; she can’t remember the last time she had anything so good. “Mmmm, better than sex.” She mumbles before she can stop herself.

“All right then.” Ali giggles wide-eyed. “Either the coffee in here really is that bad or you just don’t remember what a good lay feels like.”

Ashlyn laughs awkwardly as she realizes she actually voiced her thoughts out loud. “Sorry, that slipped out. For the record though, the coffee in here is beyond awful and after a couple years in this dump, you pretty much forget what your last good lay even felt like.” Ashlyn winks, trying to gain her confidence back.

“Noted. Well, I’ll keep bringing the ‘better than sex’ coffee and then we’ll work on finding you a solution to the ‘good lay’ problem when we get you out of here.” Ali replies with sass, using air quotes to punctuate her statement before trying to get back to the more meaningful conversation. “Anyway, that doesn’t answer my question. You telling me a story or am I telling you one?”

Ashlyn starts to laugh a bit at Ali’s teasing, but then the full weight of the brunette’s statement hits her like a ton of bricks. Her chest constricts a bit as she realizes that Ali is serious about pursuing this case and trying to get her acquitted. She had intended to tell Ali right away that she just wanted a friend, not a lawyer, but she got distracted by the coffee. She takes another quick sip of coffee to buy herself a couple more seconds before Ali can see the change in her demeanor. The delicious toasted favor rolls over her tongue and all she can think about is Ali’s simple gesture of kindness in bringing her this coffee. She realizes she doesn’t have it in her at the moment to deflate Ali’s plans. She was going to tell her the true story anyway, so she figures she might as well go ahead and worry about how to tell Ali she doesn’t want to pursue the case later on in the visit.

“Well after this amazing coffee, I don’t think I can deny you anything. Story time it is.” Ashlyn says smoothly while internally mustering up the courage to finally speak the truth out loud.

“Phew!” Ali sighs dramatically with a smirk. “You know, when you first walked in, I thought for sure you were going to back out on me. I’m all ears, you have my undivided attention, Harris.” She jokes a bit, but looks at Ashlyn with warmth and sincerity, knowing this is hard for the blonde.

Ashlyn ignores the guilt she feels about Ali’s ‘backing out’ statement and puts on a confident face before starting. “That’s just the way I like it, Krieger. Hold on to your hat…”
Ashlyn takes one more sip of her coffee, a final reminder to herself of Ali’s kind nature and trustworthiness as she starts to explain.

“So, I don’t really have to get into what Bobby was doing because you already pretty much have an idea. He was good at extortion and taking bribes to turn a blind eye to things. He had his own drug operation going too with his own guys that couldn’t be traced back to him. I’m sure he still does. I spent over a year documenting it all, pictures, recordings, even video when I could sneak it. He didn’t have any idea, just saw me as his trusty sidekick. I honestly still don’t think he has the slightest clue that I have all that stuff.” Ashlyn starts in as steady a voice she can manage before Ali pipes up.

“Woah, hold up. So, this whole Liam Gorham thing wasn’t a way to stop you from busting him? He never knew you had all that info?” Ali asks wide-eyed and confused.

“No. He had no idea about it. Relax there Alex, I’ll get into it all.” Ashlyn responds a bit smugly, feeling an odd sense of pride that Ali hadn’t completely figured it all out.


“So over a year of compiling all that stuff and I’m feeling good about being able to pull it off because I feel solid about the fact that he sees me as a complete confidant, a little mini-me for him to train and feel proud of. Such a pompous asshole. Anyway, he stops by my place one night on the pretense of having a beer, which is not unusual. We’re just having normal conversation when he decides to tell me that one thing I really need to learn from him is how to always have enough information about the people I deal with to be able to hold it over their heads and extort them.” Ashlyn shakes her head a chuckles a bit before continuing.

“He actually said ‘You gotta have a file on people you deal with of all the crap they’re afraid of going public or that will bring them to their knees’. And here I am practically laughing inside because I’m doing that to him right under his nose. And then he says ‘Even the clean ones, you can always find something. Let me show you what I mean’.” Ashlyn pauses and lets out a long breath and takes another sip of coffee like it’s liquid courage.

“Then he pretty much pulled the rug out from under me. He tells me I’m just about the most stand-up person he knows, so he knows he can trust me. Again, ridiculous to me because if he thinks I’m really that ‘stand-up’ then he should know I’d never really roll with him. He goes on to tell me that everyone has a weakness and then notes how important my brother is to me. Then he pulls out this really thick file and tells me to have a look. It was practically a fucking detailed book of horrible illegal shit my brother did before he got rehabbed and pulled his life together. Stuff I had no idea about. The bastard could put my brother away for life at the snap of his fingers if he wanted to. Just when Chris finally has his life together…he’s clean, has his own business, a great wife and two amazing kids. And just like that an asshole like Bobby could rip it all away.” Ashlyn nervously runs her hands through her hair and lets her eyes meet Ali’s for a second checking for her reaction.
Ali nods sympathetically, knowing she had made the correct assumption that Ashlyn was protecting her brother from whatever information Bobby had on him. She tries to reassure the blonde. “It’s ok Ashlyn. Breathe for second, we have plenty of time and I’m here to help remember.”

Ashlyn nods and let’s Ali’s voice calm her a bit, just like it does when she listens to her podcasts. There’s something about the even, steady, confident, but gentle tone of the brunette that relaxes her. She lets her eyes fall back down to the table and continues on.

“Internally, I’m freaking out. I figure he has to know now that I’ve been collecting dirt on him and that’s why he’s telling me all this. I think maybe I can get out of it by denying it, so I put on the biggest poker face I have and act completely unaffected and just confused. So, I ask him what Chris has to do with anything. And he says ‘Absolutely nothing. Chris is fine and he’ll always be fine. I’m just trying to give you a lesson, kid. Even the people closest to you, always keep tabs. That’s all I’m trying to teach you. I want you to be good at what you do’. And then he goes back to normal conversation just like that. So, then I’m panicked that he has all that information, but at least I’m feeling more relieved that it wasn’t a specific threat because he got wise to what I was doing. Just made me realize I need to get my shit together even faster and take Bobby down before he does find out what I’m up to.” Ashlyn looks up again and just finds Ali listening intently, so she keeps going.

“Two weeks later, he calls me one evening and tells me I need to meet him at Liam Gorham’s private office. I’m thinking a major deal is about to go down because Liam is his biggest money associate and we’re meeting at his quiet private office rather than his highly guarded mansion. They’re in deep together with a huge Ponzi scheme, a Guatemalan drug trade, and an offshore bank account with literally millions upon millions in it. No guards means no extra ears in the room, so I know it has to be huge. I rush over there, hoping to get enough information to really nail Bobby’s coffin shut.”

Ashlyn’s voice starts to shake a bit as she plays the memory over in her head. “It wasn’t…I didn’t…” She starts, but stops and takes a deep breath.

Ali can see that little beads of sweat have formed on Ashlyn’s forehead along her hairline. It definitely feels like the room has gotten a bit stuffy. “Take your time.” Ali tries to calm the blonde a bit and give her time to collect her thoughts. She’s feeling the heat of the room herself, so she rolls up of the sleeves of her button-up as she waits for Ashlyn to speak again, but it doesn’t take long before the blonde pulls herself together.

“It was nothing I could have anticipated. I got there and it was already a fucking bloody mess.”

Ali is hanging on Ashlyn’s story, waiting to hear the most important part of it when she sees the blonde’s eyes widen and stare at her left forearm as she finishes rolling up her sleeve. “Yep.” She says simply, willing the blonde to continue her story. No such luck.

“Hmmpf, you don’t strike me as the type to get tatted.” Ashlyn muses, carefully looking over the loopy scripted word inked in black on the brunettes forearm. “It’s really nice ink, looks sharp. What does it mean?”

Ali can’t believe this is happening right now at the very moment she was about to hear the most important part of Ashlyn’s story. She tries to be patient, but she’s having a hard time. “Seriously? You’re stopping there and we’re gonna talk about my tattoo now?”

“Sorry, but heck yeah we are.” The confident smirk is back on Ashlyn’s face. “Tattoos are important to me and I want to know.”

Ali rolls her eyes a bit, but knows she has to do this Ashlyn’s way. “It’s Liebe. German for love. I studied abroad there in college and, well, I guess I felt like I really found myself there. I was at my
most reflective there and found peace within myself about who I am. This was my way of honoring that and my heritage.” Ali explains.

“I really like that. It’s deep and personal, the way a tattoo should be.” Ashlyn smiles at Ali genuinely, knowing her own tattoos have profound meaning. “Any others?” She eyes Ali inquisitively.

“Nope, sorry Harris, no more stalling. I’ll answer that question when you finish telling me your story.” Ali says in a simultaneously serious but playful tone, hoping she can get the blonde to get back on track. “I promise you’ll like the answer.” She teases a bit further to get what she wants.

“Ugh.” Ashlyn lets out a displeased grunt with a smirk on her face. “Ok, ok. Fine.” She mumbles, and just like that her confidence is gone again as she goes back to thinking about that night. “So, um, yeah… I got there… it… fucking mess.” Her voice comes out raspy and quiet, a string of broken words.

Ashlyn feels Ali’s fingertips lightly brush over the top of her left hand. The touch is very quick, just meant to be reassuring, but the warmth that shoots up her arm and into her chest is enough to make the rest of the words come out more steadily.

“I text Bobby that I’m there once I get there and I can see both of their cars in the driveway. He texts me to come in and meet them in Gorham’s office like usual. I’m expecting the same style of meeting we always have when one of these big private deals is about to go down. The first thing I notice when I walk in is that Liam is behind the desk, slumped in his chair a bit. It only took me a couple more seconds to realize the bottom half of his left jaw is missing, tiny bloody pieces of it clinging to his fancy dark blue dress shirt. His desk is sprayed in blood. And I froze…” Ashlyn pauses to look up at Ali again, finding the brunette’s eyes wide with her fingers nervously scratching the back of her neck.

“I saw so much awful crap during my army tours and I never froze, but I did this time. I just never could have anticipated it. Bobby was scum for sure, but he wasn’t a guy who would do this, or so I thought. Before I could even process what the heck was happening, I’m on the ground in pain with blood pouring out of my leg.” Ashlyn continues speaking as she replays it all in her head.

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“Get the fuck up, Harris.” She hears Bobby beside her, his gun pointed at her head, the silencer tip still hot from the bullet that just ripped through her leg. “Give me your gun and give me your phone.” He demands.

“Bobby, fucking hell. What the fuck?” Ashlyn gets out shakily, her leg throbbing with the unmistakable burning pain that she’s already way too familiar with. “You fucking shot me?!” She yells in shock, seated on the floor and not able to get up at the moment as she clutches her lower right thigh near her knee.

“Gun and phone, Harris. Now.” Bobby says louder, his voice like ice, his gun pressing into her temple now.

“Bobby, what... I thought...” Ashlyn tries to make sense of it.

“That’s the problem, Harris. Stop thinking and just act. Gun and phone before I make you look like Gorham, I’m serious.” To make his point he presses the silencer so hard into her head that she already feels bruised.

“Alright, alright. Here.” She unsheathes her gun slowly and hands it to him before handing over her
phone too. “You gonna tell me what the hell this is?” She asks carefully after he partially lowers his gun and starts doing something on her phone and then his own phone rings. She watches him answer his phone without uttering a word and puts it in his pocket again. He doesn’t say anything, just raises her gun in his hand and shoots an already dead Liam Gorham 6 more times in the chest.

The sound is deafening and Ashlyn covers her ears in surprise, completely confused and trembling now as she continues to bleed. “Fuck, Bobby!” She screams.

He walks around behind her and pulls her hands behind her back roughly. She feels him cuff her hands behind her. He hasn’t said a word, but the cold look in his eyes is telling her all she needs to know right now.

“One peep out of you and your dead.” Bobby warns her and picks up his phone again, making a call.

“Lieutenant McNally, it’s Chief, I got a huge problem. Captain Harris just killed Liam Gorham, I need back up fast at his office. 3 Acre Drive, you know it. He was dead when I got here. I have her detained. She’s got a gunshot wound to the leg. I don’t see a gun on Gorham, I think she took a ricochet so I need EMT with you.” Ashlyn sits stunned at what she is hearing. His voice is the perfect mix of panicked and professional, it’s an Oscar worthy performance. “Shit. Shit. I don’t know McNally, she called me in a panic. This is a fucking mess, I think they were having an affair. I know, just get our guys here ASAP. And McNally, as subtle as we can ok? No media if we can avoid it for now. We take care of our own, you know that.” He finishes with a sad voice and hangs up.

Ashlyn’s mouth is slightly agape, trying to process it all. All she can get out is “Bobby…”

“Sorry Harris, but it’s me or you, and I pick you. He was gonna rat me out and cut me loose, so I cut him loose first.” Bobby explains nonchalantly with a slight shrug. “You know how it goes.”

Ashlyn finally puts it all together. “Come on, Bobby. No one is going to believe I killed him. This scene is a goddamn mess.”

“Oh they’re gonna believe you, Harris. Cause if they don’t, you’re brother is going down and you’re dead. I can take down Chris no matter where I am. He’ll die in a jail cell, I’ll make damn sure of it. You know damn well I’ll put him away for life with no problem. Then when he’s in there and can’t do a damn thing, I’ll cut down his wife and kids just to make it hell. I’ll have him hanging himself in that cell in no time.” Bobby’s eyes are so dark and his voice is so cold that Ashlyn knows he means it. She knows he has the power to do it. And she now knows that he is evil enough to follow through.

“Bobby, you won’t… come on…we’ll figure this out.” Ashlyn pleads with him, but her mind is spinning from the situation in front of her and the pain in her leg.

“Don’t fucking test me. You know better.” He spits at her. “Let me tell you what just happened and how this is going to go. We have about 15 minutes before our squad walks through that door, so listen carefully cause I’m only saying it once and you better get it right.”

Ashlyn can only shake her head. She’s done and she knows it. Bobby Dugan has the upper hand. It’s the only way she can protect the only family she has left, so she just listens and follows instructions.

Bobby lays it out very clearly for her. The story isn’t the cleanest, but it’s good enough to accomplish what he wants. “You’ve been fucking around with Liam behind his wife’s back for 5 months. He said many times he was leaving her for you and he never has. You got impatient, you confronted him
today and he flat out told you he wasn’t going to leave his wife. You lost your mind and in a fit of rage you shot him over and over again, putting one last one in his brain to make sure no one could have him. One of those shots ricocheted into your leg. You freaked out and called me. And now you’re going to confess to the whole thing and go through the process as quietly as you possibly can because you’re completely ashamed. Got it, Harris? Full fucking confession and you serve whatever time you get quietly. One fucking word gets out about what actually happened here and you can kiss the Harris family goodbye. I’ll even make sure you see it all go down and let you suffer until I decide to take pity on you and kill yourself and frame it as a ‘tragic suicide’. You got it?” Bobby asks venomously.


“I’m a man of my word, Harris.” Bobby smirks at her. “You hold up your end, I’ll hold up mine. Buck up, jail isn’t that bad. Plus, consider it a payback plan for all the help I’ve given you along the way.”

“You’re such a fucking asshole. I knew you were a fucking piece of shit.” She gets out as sirens sound in the distance.

“Yeah well, doesn’t matter now, does it?” Bobby teases her, grabbing a hand full of her hair and roughly pulling her face close to his. “Better make it fucking believable, Harris.” He gives her one last warning with a swift kick to her wounded leg that makes her grunt in pain and her eyes tear up. “Yeah, let’s see some tears. Now that’s award worthy.” He mocks her before putting on a somber face and going to open the door for the swarm of police that is about to descend on the place.

“I did what he said and it happened pretty quickly. They treated my leg at hospital and I was signing a confession shortly after. It went before a judge three days after that and I got sentenced to a life term just like that. I never realized how fast this shit could happen with so few questions asked.” Ashlyn finishes quietly, her voice melancholy.

She’s emotionally exhausted now that she’s put it all out there for the first time ever. She steals herself for the barrage of questions that Ali is sure to start asking now that she’s heard the truth. Instead she’s met with quiet and finally looks up to see nothing but Ali’s usual warm brown eyes looking back at her almost sadly.

It doesn’t even strike Ali to ask a question right now. She can only marvel at the strength of the woman in front of her and be overcome by how awful the situation is. Ali simply clutches both of Ashlyn’s hands in hers and lets her heart speak. “I am so sorry, Ashlyn. So sorry. This whole this is just unfathomable. I’m here though and I’m always going to be.”

Ashlyn can only smile a bit and squeeze Ali’s hands tightly. It’s the last thing she ever expected to hear, but also exactly what she needed. The most important, thoughtful, and genuine thing anyone has said to her to this point. “Thanks, Alex.” She whispers out a bit emotionally as she feels a slight sense of relief, her hands letting go of Ali’s before they earn a warning from Jordan who’s behind the observation window.

There’s a comfortable silence between them for a few minutes as Ashlyn prepares herself to start talking through some of the details with Ali. She knows the lawyer side of the brunette is dying to break free and get into the situation more. On cue, it’s Ali who finally breaks the silence, but what comes out is again not what Ashlyn was expecting.
“There are two others.” Ali says with a small sweet smile.

“Two other what?” Ashlyn asks completely confused.

“Two other tattoos. Unfortunately, I can’t show you without getting kicked out of here. So, you’ll have to settle for a description.” Ali winks at the blonde who can’t help but let a small chuckle escape her lips.
Ashlyn raises her eyebrows in surprise. “I seriously tell you all that stuff and you’re switching the topic back to tattoos now? What did you do with the real Ali Krieger?” She looks around the room dramatically.

Ali laughs a bit before answering. “Oh, she’s alive and well. Trust me, there’s plenty going on upstairs.” She points to her head. “But, honestly, there are a few reasons I don’t think we should get into anymore today.” She pauses and gets a bit more serious.

“Ok.” Ashlyn nods a bit, waiting for Ali to continue.

“First, I know that was a lot for you to get out. It was hard for me to hear despite already having a pretty good sense of what happened, so I can only imagine what it was like for you to say it and relive it. I can’t tell you how much it means to me that you trusted me enough to tell me.” She gives Ashlyn a genuine smile and gets a small smile in acknowledgement from the blonde.

“Second, while I did already map out a lot of what happened on my own, some of it is new to me. And while I do have a game plan in mind, I want to make sure I really think it through before I walk you through it. Like I promised you before, unless I’m very sure that I can make something work, I’m not going to do it. The first priority is always keeping you and your family safe. And of course, I won’t do anything you don’t want me to. Even if my plan is brilliant, which it will be.” Ali says with an exaggerated cocky smile hoping to make Ashlyn laugh a bit. It works. “Anyway, I want the time to properly think through everything very carefully before I get any further.”

“And third, I’m your lawyer, but I’m also your friend. Well, your friend that has only known you for like no time at all and really doesn’t know you very well.” Ali says in perfect sarcastic humor, gaining another chuckle from the blonde. “Really though. Despite everything, I think we can be great friends. I want to get to know you properly. Plus, I’d be a terrible friend if I let these visits end on a negative vibe. So, I hope we can spend time at the end of our visits just talking and learning about each other. We have about an hour left, so, you up for it buddy?”

The whole statement makes Ashlyn feel both comforted and alive inside. Ali is exactly what she needs right now, a friend. She knows that there are other motives there, but right now they just don’t seem to matter. Ali said it herself, she can say no to anything she wants to at any time. She sure as hell isn’t about to ruin the next hour shutting down a legal plan that Ali hasn’t even presented her with yet. So, the whole tirade she planned to give Ali about wanting a friend and not a lawyer goes completely out the window as she hurries to latch onto to the olive branch that the brunette has so kindly extended to her like it’s a lifeline.

“So, there are two other tattoos…” Ashlyn smirks, reminding Ali where they were headed.

“It wouldn’t be any fun if I just told you. Any guesses on location?” Ali tries to get the playful side of Ashlyn to come out.
“Alright. Alright, I’m game. Let’s see.” Ashlyn looks Ali up and down a bit, her hand under her chin for effect. “You’re such a girly girl, I mean, look at that perfect mascara and eyeliner! And with maybe a rebellious streak a little bit. I’m going to say lower back and hip.”

“Nope. Sorry to inform you that you struck out on that one! Tramp stamp, really?!” Ali gives the blonde a glare. “What kind of girl do you think I am?! Girly, sure… but, I don’t know many lesbians with a tramp stamp. Do you?”

“Oooh, riiight! Not gonna lie, I forgot about that little revelation.” Ashlyn admits, feeling a bit foolish that she forgot. “Can I get a second guess then?”

“Ok. Go for it.” Ali eggs her on.

“Factoring in the lady loving, now I’m gonna go with right above your breast.” Ashlyn smiles smugly.

“Strike two! And that’s all you get!” Ali shakes her head.

“How about you just tell me.” Ashlyn lets her curiosity finally get the best of her.

“Well for a girl that didn’t strike you as someone who would get tatted, I’ll have you know that I have a large black script tattoo covering my entire left ribcage and then some.” Ali reports and waits for Ashlyn’s reaction.

“To steal your words…wow, curveball! That is a big tattoo. Yep, I would never peg you as having such a big piece like that.” Ashlyn says genuinely impressed. “You said it’s a script. What does it say?”

“It’s in German, like my arm. I got both of these tattoos there. Anyway, it’s a quote from the book The Little Prince. It was the first book I read when I was learning the language. ‘Man sieht nur mit dem Herzen gut, das Wesentliche ist für die Augen unsichtbar’. Loosely translated it means that one sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.” Ali answers.

“You know, you’re a lot more philosophical and deep than I expected.” Ashlyn states truthfully.

“Um, thanks… I think. Glad I’m not the air head you expected me to be.” Ali jokes.

“Stop. You know what I mean.” The blonde plays back, rolling her eyes. “So, two German tattoos. What’s on your hip, the Volkswagen symbol?” Ashlyn laughs at her own joke. “That’s a pretty private spot.” She adds.

Funny, Harris.” Ali shakes her head at the bad joke. “That tattoo is small and it’s just really personal to me, so that’s why that spot. It’s there just for me and for whoever I decide to let in, you know?” Ali replies more seriously.

“Makes sense, I totally get it.” Ashlyn responds.

“It’s the Penn State lion with the number 22 above it. It was my mother’s soccer number when she played at Penn State, part of the reason I chose to go there. I played growing up and through college as number 11, exactly half of her number, my way of honoring her.” Ali explains solemnly.
“That’s touching.” Ashlyn nods sympathetically, but tries not to let the conversation go into the serious direction it’s starting to. “I should have known though. That ‘take em’ down’ mentality of yours and those thighs… totally a defender. Am I right?”

“Um, yeah actually. Ok. Wow. How on earth could you know that?” Ali is a bit stunned.

“Please. I spent plenty of time watching go-getter defenders like you and barking directions at them. Well, and checking out their asses.” Ashlyn grins.

“Fucking Goalkeeper! Of course! I should have known with that smug, cocky ass attitude of yours!” Ali gives it right back to her, laughing hard now. “When did you play?”

“Mostly as a kid and then in high school. I played some for Army too at West Point, but that was very short-lived.” Ashlyn answers.


“I was too busy becoming the first female ranger, remember? That shit was no joke. No time for anything else. It was a bit of a bummer.” The blonde replies truthfully. “Why did you stop playing or do you still?”

“Broke my leg my senior year at Penn. I had surgery to repair it and then ended up with blood clots afterwards and a pulmonary embolism that almost killed me. I never really came back from that. I still love to watch the game though.” Ali says evenly.

“Damn. That’s rough.” Ashlyn muses. “You know something, Alex. You’re one tough cookie. I mean, I kind of expected it from what I heard on your podcast. Still, it’s more prevailing than I anticipated, but yet you’re still so gentle and kind under it all. It’s refreshing, I like it.”

Ali tries not blush at the blonde’s blunt statement, instead choosing to take the upper hand. “You hitting on me, Ashlyn?”

“Maybe.” Ashlyn waggles her eyebrows at the brunette in jest. “I mean, you did just remind me that you like the ladies.” She doesn’t let the statement linger long. “Which reminds me. I have to ask. I know you’re a great lawyer and investigator, yadda, yadda, yadda…but seriously, how in the hell did you figure out my whole prom night virginity fiasco? I mean, anyone who isn’t blind could guess I’m a lesbian. But the prom thing, that was just uncanny.”

Ali smiles proudly. “Really just an educated and lucky guess. I didn’t delve much into your life before college because it wasn’t all that relevant, but I came across this picture in the Ipswich Chronicle newspaper of you and your prom date. And well, you looked just like I did in those days… all glammed up and girly in a perfect prom dress with a good looking guy on your arm. Since that was how things went for me on prom night, I just sort of made that statement for effect in making my point. Just luck that I ended up being right.” Ali shrugs.

“Yeah, it was definitely shitty to say the least. But, I try to remember the fact that it was the start of a great realization about myself.” Ali agrees before lightening the conversation again. “Plus, people say you can’t knock it until you try it… well, now I can knock it!”

Ashlyn laughs and nods in agreement. “Mmmhmm, got that right!”
“Although, I think not having that realization until the end of high school made me a bit, um, easy in college.” Ali giggles. “I was way too excited to finally be myself and date women. Plus, I’ve always been really girly, so women almost never hit on me unless I was completely blatant. So, when they did hit on me, let’s just say I was very ready to hop onboard!”

“Wow, ok then. Maybe you should have gotten a tramp stamp after all.” Ashlyn teases, earning a light smack on the hand from Ali. “Rewinding back to your prior question… I now change my answer to yes…I was definitely hitting on you. I mean, after that confession, I’d be a fool not to.” Ashlyn smirks stifling a laugh.

“Hey, hey, hey! I said college! I’m not that girl anymore!” Ali protests.

“Bummer.” Ashlyn deadpans, earning a playful eye roll from the brunette.

“Oh come on. Are you telling me you never dated with reckless abandon? Look at you, I bet women were just lining up and throwing themselves at you.” Ali prods.

“Ha!” Ashlyn chuckles loudly. “Not quite there, Alex. Lest we forget that I went to a military academy and served during the heyday of ‘Don’t Ask. Don’t Tell.’ Not only did I have zero time for all that, but it wasn’t exactly safe to be out.”

“Oh, right. Crap. Sorry, I didn’t think about that.” Ali cringes a bit. “That must have seriously sucked. So, did you not date at all in college or while you served?”

“Nah, I did. I’ve always had a hard time letting people in though, I guess with all my family crap and all. Then trying to be inconspicuous about it on top of that. So, rather than dating around and a string of wild nights, I just had three kinda sorta serious relationships. The break-ups were all really crappy, but I guess I wouldn’t trade that. I learned a lot about myself with each of those people.” Ashlyn answers honestly. “I guess maybe now, I’m pretty damn sure about exactly what I want in a person. Not that it matters much given where I am right now.”

“I wish I’d gone that route.” Ali muses, ignoring the end of the blonde’s statement because she wants to believe she’ll get Ashlyn out of here and it will most certainly matter for her again. “I was always so busy with my career that I never put much effort into relationships beyond a few dates with people, nothing ever serious. I just figured I’d have plenty of time to settle. Now I want to settle in with someone and I feel like there’s so much pressure because just about all I know is what I don’t want in a person. No idea what I’m doing really.”

“Well, knowing what you don’t want works too.” Ashlyn encourages her.

“I guess.” Ali replies a bit sadly. “Ugh, I don’t even know what it means to settle, but I still want it. Kinda weird.”

“Not weird at all. I get what you’re saying.” Ashlyn tries to console the brunette a bit and get back to their light banter again. “Relax, Alex. You’re not exactly an old spinster here. Far from it. You have plenty of time to find someone great that can give you everything you’re looking for. And you will. I mean, geez, put those damn investigative skills to use, woman!”

“Hmmm, thought I was.” Ali puts the blatantly flirtatious statement out there just to see the blonde’s reaction.

“You hitting on me now, Alex?” Ashlyn asks with a smirk.

“Maybe. Is it working?” Ali plays back. “I mean, apparently, you are a tough nut to crack and I’m just easy.”
Ashlyn laughs heartily. “You make me laugh, Krieger. Trust me, you wouldn’t have to work that hard to get my attention.”

“Oh really?” Ali goads the blonde.

“But, I’m a jail bird, so I guess you’ll never know.” Ashlyn says with a grin.

“Hmm, well, maybe I’d be willing to put the effort into getting your attention.” Ali says in joking contemplation.

“Oh really?” Ashlyn parrots the brunette.

“But, I’m your lawyer, so I guess you’ll never find out.” Ali plays back.

“5 minutes!” Jordan opens the door of the observation window and calls out to them, startling them both a bit since they got wrapped up in conversation and forgot he was there.

“That went fast.” Ashlyn notes.

Ali nods in agreement and makes sure to get down to a little business. “Right. So, I’ll see you in three days and I hope to have a solid game plan for you by then.”

“Ok.” Ashlyn says noncommittally, a little guilt creeping in because she knows that there’s very little chance she’s going to let Ali go forward with any kind of scenario.

Ali sees the change in demeanor and doesn’t press it further. “Alright, so, let’s really end with a bang… what’s your favorite color?” She smiles widely.

“Black.” Ashlyn answers with a smile of her own.

“Hmm, well that’s depressing.” Ali replies.

“I just like it.” Ashlyn shrugs. “What’s yours?”


“How fierce, such a go-getter!” Ashlyn jokes, adding a little roar for effect.

“Very funny.” Ali gives her a playful glare. “Ok, last one. Favorite food?”

“Mac & cheese for sure.” Ashlyn says. “What about you?”


Ashlyn laughs out loud. “Well aren’t you a wildcard!”

They share a laugh for moment, followed by a brief silence that Ashlyn finally breaks as she stands up and pushes in her chair.

“Hey, Alex. Thanks for the coffee, and listening, and, well… the whole last hour really.” She pauses for a moment trying to find the right words. “It meant… I just really really needed that. Thank you.” It comes out as heartfelt as she intended.

Ali feels warm inside at genuine look of appreciation in the blonde’s eyes. “Anytime, Ashlyn. You know… I actually think I needed that too.” She stands up and reaches over the table to give Ashlyn a quick hug, immediately noting the strong muscular feel of the arms enveloping her.
Ashlyn let’s herself melt into the very brief contact, the smell of Ali’s shampoo clouding her mind a bit as it stands out in such contrast to the flat, sterile environment around her. She hears Jordan’s throat clear behind them. “See you soon.” She says as she steps back.

“Count on it.” Ali replies, her face dropping a bit as she watches Ashlyn get cuffed and led out the door. She collects her things and heads out the door determined to come back with a fool proof plan to get the blonde out of here.

“Well you two looked cozy.” Jordan teases Ashlyn as he escorts her back to her cell.

“First, pretty sure we couldn’t have been that cozy seeing as how your job is to stop it.” She gives him a look, knowing he’s purposely been sticking his nose in his magazine anytime Ali touches her. “Second, she’s my lawyer.”

“First, I do my job just fine thanks. I don’t get paid enough to do more than catch up on my Car & Driver when I get the chance.” Jordan laughs. “Second, right, and my wife is my therapist.” He winks at her.

Ashlyn shakes her head dramatically, inwardly thankful for Tim and Jordan in this crappy place. “Whatever. Thanks, man.” She replies as he opens the door to her cell.

“Anytime, Capt.” He says very quietly, referring respectfully to her police rank as he locks her in.

Even after all this time, the click of the lock always makes her skin jump a bit. Not today. Today she feels calm. Today marks the first time in just over two years that she has entered her cell with a smile. A smile that belongs solely to the efforts of Ali Krieger.
Ali is so glued to her computer screen she doesn’t even hear Kyle let himself into her house. She’s not even coming up with anything new at this point, just staring at her notes on the screen as she internally debates with herself on how far she should go. Papers are scattered all over her kitchen table in what would look like a mess to anyone else, but are actually organized in a way only she can understand. She only looks up when she sees a fresh cup of coffee placed down in front of her. Kyle plops down right across from her with a small, knowing smile.

“How many more nights of sleep have youforgone?” Kyle asks. He spent all of last week trying to pepper her with questions about Ashlyn and what the blonde has told her or what she knows, but Ali wouldn’t bite. She refused to tell him what she had found out other than saying Ashlyn had retained her as a lawyer. Kyle had been shocked, asking a million more questions, but Ali would only say that she thought it looked promising and that when Ashlyn allowed her to, she would share more. He’s now bitten his tongue and watched her work tirelessly for days. He knows something major must have happened after this last visit between the two, Ali looks like a woman possessed the last couple days. Her focus as intense as he’s ever seen it. He’s tried to leave her alone and just check in on her, but now she’s looking exhausted and he intervenes.

“I can’t remember the last time I left this table other than to pee.” Ali says taking a sip of her coffee a bit distractedly, still staring at her computer. “Thanks for this,” she adds warmly.

“Yeah, I could smell you from outside.” Kyle teases. “Pretty sure if you don’t shower, Harris won’t let you visit again…ever.” He laughs a bit holding his nose.

Ali finally makes eye contact with him and sticks her tongue out.

“Oh, so that gets your attention finally?! Strike one! You totally have a crush on her!” Kyle prods.

“I do not!” Ali protests. “She’s my client!”

“Oh huh.” Kyle replies calmly. “That overreaction just confirms it, strike two! But I’ll be nice and drop it for now.”

“You’re so not helping.” Ali pouts a bit. “Ugh, I just want to get her out of there, but it’s not as clean cut as I want it to be.” She spits out in frustration.

Kyle can see she’s overtired and ready to break, so he stops teasing her and let’s his genuine concern take over. “Hey Alex, talk to me. What’s going on? Did you really find a way out for her?”

“Yes.” Ali concedes quietly as she watches his eyes widen and his mouth drop open and wonders how much she should tell him. “Oh don’t look so surprised!” She throws a paperclip at him.

“I just… wow, really? Like really?” Kyle asks, still a bit shocked. He knows he shouldn’t be surprised given how intelligent and relentless his sister is. Still, he’s watched her struggle for days on end and just assumed this was a lost cause. His heart is racing at the knowledge that Ali might
actually have found a way to do this.

“Yeah.” Ali says still looking perturbed. “The case against her is complete bullshit and the path to get her acquitted is pretty clear. I’m confident I could get the right people in place to prove it with the evidence and get her cleared.”

“So, what the hell are you moping around for? I’m so lost here! Why aren’t you like jumping up and down?!” Kyle belts out completely bewildered.

“I made her a promise, Kyle.” Ali explains. “I said I wouldn’t do anything that either wouldn’t work or would put her family in danger.” She doesn’t want to get into details with him because she promised Ashlyn it would stay between them, but she also knows she needs to release some of her frustration right now. “I’m 99% sure I can get her cleared, but I’m also 99% sure it puts her brother and his family in danger and probably her and us too.” Her voice is low and melancholy. “She’s never going to agree to let me do it.”

“Oh.” Kyle responds in a glum whisper, his elbows on the table with his hands supporting his chin. “Can I ask what the issue is? I mean, you still look so intent and like you’re debating something. Does that mean it’s not a lost cause?”

Ali plays with her coffee cup for a minute as she carefully words her answer. “It’s not a lost cause. The truth is that I know how to protect her family until this is all over and it’s safe. The problem is that her brother would need to agree to it and it’s a major sacrifice. So much so that I don’t think Ashlyn will go along with it.” Ali sighs deeply. “It’s not even worth telling her this whole plan unless I know her brother would be willing to go through with being hidden like that. None of it would work unless he agreed. I just, I feel like it’s overstepping to talk to him without asking her.” She finally lets out the conflict that’s been eating at her night and day.

“Hmmm.” Kyle lets it all sink in. “Well, do you have to tell him everything or could you just ask him if he’d be willing without divulging too much information?”

“No, I guess I could be vague and just get a sense of what he would be willing to do in a given scenario. But, you don’t think that’s breaking her trust to talk to him without asking her?” Ali questions.

“As long as you don’t tell him anything she wouldn’t want you to, I don’t think so. I know Harris pretty well in that regard. I really don’t think she’ll be upset at you.” Kyle says honestly. “Look, just call him and find out. If he says no, then fuck it, you go to Ashlyn and tell her it’s too dangerous. That’s probably what she is expecting anyway. If he says yes, then you give it to her straight and let her decide. I think that’s the best you can do and I’m pretty sure she won’t be mad at you for that.”

He looks at Ali’s furrowed brow before continuing. “You know, if this was anyone else, you would’ve called already. I can already tell you found his number and are just fighting yourself now. So, why are you so hesitant when you’re always so sure of yourself?”

“I don’t know. There’s just something about her that I can’t shake. She let me in and she trusts me in a way she hasn’t even done with her own family and friends since she got locked up. I just don’t want to lose that. Whether I get her out of there or not, we’re friends now and I made a promise that I would take care of her no matter what, that I wouldn’t just disappear.” Ali tries to explain why this seems to mean so much more than any case she’s ever worked on. “I just couldn’t bear it if she shut me out too. She’s so alone in there. She really needs a friend and I want to be that person.”

“Strike three!” Kyle says in a sing-song voice, earning a death glare from Ali as she throws an empty cracker box at him that sails past his head. “I’m kidding! Geez!”
Ali ignores his teasing. “You really think I should just call him?”

“Yes, Alex. I do. She won’t be mad. She might be surprised and annoyed at first, but I think she’ll hear you out and be okay with it. Call him, find out, and then go in to see her tomorrow knowing the full game plan.” Kyle says with conviction.

Ali nods, her stomach now in knots at the next step. “Ok, well, I guess I need some privacy then.”

Kyle nods back at her and gets up to leave, but not before yelling “And take a damn shower, you’re attracting wildlife!” as he ducks out the door before she can throw anything else at him.

Ali does just that. She takes a hot shower to steady her nerves and dials the number, hearing the deep voice of Chris Harris on the other end after only two rings. The call lasts only 13 minutes and at the end she hangs up feeling like her heart is in her stomach. She only has enough energy left to drop into her bed after taking three Tylenol PM in hopes that it will get rid of her throbbing headache and help her sleep.
Ashlyn gets led into the visitor room entrance by a gray-haired, potbellied guard named Alan or Albert or Alfred, she can’t remember. She doesn’t know him that well because he’s only been there for a couple of months. He holds a firm grip on her bicep as he leads her through the door and turns her around to uncuff her before settling himself behind the observation window. His grip was firm enough that she can still almost feel the tightness around her arm even though he had let go at least 30 seconds ago. She dwells on it for about half a second before turning around to see Ali sitting at the table in the middle of the room, two coffees in front of her and a bag probably filled with something Ashlyn can’t wait to devour. She can’t help the instant grin that takes over her face as she walks over and sits down across from the brunette.

“Good morning, Alex.” Ashlyn greets her, the smile on her face growing impossibly wider. As much as she knows what is about to happen today, somehow she’s not as worried about it as she expected to be. Ali seems to have a calming effect on her she can’t explain and doesn’t care to think about right now. She’s just rolling with it because one day at a time is all she can manage these days. She just hopes that by the end of this visit, she hasn’t disappointed Ali so much that she doesn’t come back. She fully expects to disappoint the brunette, but hopefully not enough that they can’t still be friends.

“Hey, Ash, good morning.” Ali tries to relax and let the sweet smile on Ashlyn’s face influence her, but she’s on edge.

Ashlyn immediately notices the unusual tight lipped smile from the brunette, her posture rigid and her eyes looking weary. “Wow, Alex. You look like a cat that just got scared by its own shadow. A sleepy cat at that. What gives? What happened to my lawyer, Ms. Perfectly Poised?” She tries to lighten the mood a bit.

“Sorry. I’m just a little tired.” Ali forces herself to smile as she makes excuses for herself.

Ashlyn just gives her a skeptical look; one that makes Ali realize that the whole reason this new friendship between them seems to work is because it’s based on honesty, on truth. She immediately feels guilty. “Fuck it. Truth is that I’m nervous, Ashlyn. I don’t really get nervous. I think the last time I was this nervous was before the bar exam. And if I do happen to get nervous, I certainly never admit it.” Ali blurts out before she can think on it further.

“Well, I appreciate the honesty.” Ashlyn says warmly, a bit surprised by the frank revelation. She hasn’t seen Ali look so unhinged in their visits before, not even the first one. She tries to bring some levity to the situation. “Why so nervous? Your plan not as brilliant as you thought it would be?” Ashlyn gives her a purposefully cocky grin before getting serious. “Really, Alex. It’s ok. I know the mess I’m in and I have never expected anyone to clean it up for me. Not even the one and only Ali Krieger. Listen, I’m more appreciative than you’ll ever know that you’ve tried so hard. But really, I’m even more appreciative to just have you here to visit. You’re a good friend and I hope it stays
that way.” She lays it all out there hoping to bring Ali’s anxiety level down.

Ali lets a smirk play over her lips, her eyes going up to meet Ashlyn’s. “First, let me assure you that this…” she points between the two of them, “will always stay this way as long as you want it to. That much I can promise.”

Ashlyn nods with a smile, but let’s Ali continue.

“Second, my plan is in fact brilliant, Captain Harris. Don’t ever doubt the one and only Ali Krieger. Got it?” Ali quips at the blonde playfully.

“Alright. Alright.” Ashlyn throws her hands up in mock defense. “So, if we’re friends no matter what and you have a ‘brilliant plan’… then why exactly is the one and only Ali Krieger such a nervous Nelly today? Is it my impossibly good looks or my cunning wit that has you so unglued?” Ashlyn teases her.

“Careful, Ashlyn. This room isn’t that big and if your head gets any bigger, we may have to vacate.” Ali gives it right back to her.

Ashlyn lets out a loud chuckle and then composes herself. “Seriously, Alex. Tell me what’s up.”

Ali takes a deep breath knowing it’s time to put it all on the table. “The truth is that while my plan is solid, it’s well… it’s asking a lot of you and your family to make it work. I can pretty much assume that you’re not going to move forward with it.” She sighs, pausing before looking into Ashlyn’s eyes and saying the next part. “Right now, I can feel good knowing I have a way to get you out of here. I guess once I tell you, and you don’t give me the chance to attempt it, then it’s all gone. It makes me nervous to know that I’ll likely walk out of here knowing that I’ll just be coming right back here to visit you for a very very long time instead of meeting you over coffee in an actual coffee shop one day.”

Ashlyn feels the guilt wash over her as she sees not just genuine compassion in Ali’s eyes, but genuine sadness too. From day one she knew she wasn’t going to let herself become part of Ali Krieger’s growing dossier of solved cases. Yet, she’s strung the brunette along with her this whole time. Maybe because she was bored, maybe because she really needed a friend, she’s not sure why exactly. Now that she knows Ali Krieger, now that she trusts her, now that she’s let her in…it’s not so simple anymore. There are feelings she can’t sort out as her mind spins and her stomach churns anxiously. If the plan is actually solid, why shouldn’t she let Ali help? The once easy answer is suddenly anything but. Another quick glance into Ali’s eyes and she vows to at least give the whole thing a serious, open-minded chance.

Ashlyn takes in a very deep breath to pull herself together before lowering her eyes to the table and swallowing her own apprehension so she can reassure the nervous brunette in front of her. “In the spirit of the honesty thing we have going between us… I truly have always planned to turn down your offer no matter what you came up with.” She looks up at Ali a bit sheepishly, who is nodding knowingly and looking even more deflated than she did a few seconds ago.

“But…” Ashlyn continues quickly, “That was before I got to know you, became your friend, and realized I could trust you. I promise you Alex, I will listen to every word you have to say with an open-mind and seriously consider it before I make any decisions. Which means… it’s not an automatic no. Okay? That’s the best I can do right now, but it’s better than where we started, right?”

Ali feels her heart rate pick up, a small smile on her face as a slight sense of relief spreads over her. That’s all she needs, just a little hope. She can run with that. She meets Ashlyn’s eyes. “Okay. Thank you, Ash. That’s all I need, a fair chance. I’m not letting you down.”
Ashlyn can’t help but feel a bit giddy at the nickname, only the second time Ali has used it, but she holds herself in check knowing what’s coming next. And just like it always does when she’s nervous, her overt, smug, brazen attitude takes back over. “Okay, Krieger. Let’s hear this brilliant plan of yours. Lay it on me.” She winks at Ali for good measure.

“You’re on, Harris. Hold on to those socks because they’ll be knocked off in no time!” Ali replies with sass before adding, “But first, coffee….and bagels.” She slides a large cup of coffee in front of Ashlyn and hands her the bag she brought.

Ashlyn can’t help but grin widely as she enjoys a quick sip of delicious coffee prepared just how she likes it. “There’s my lawyer! You’re the best.”

“You don’t even know.” Ali says with confident smile. “But you will.”
Ali has a plan, but will Ashlyn go along with it?

This is the only chapter I'll be able to get out today, so read slowly! Luckily, it's a longer one!

“First thing is to file for and win you an appeal. Easy peasy!” Ali states with upbeat confidence.

“Why is that ‘easy peasy’?” Ashlyn asks, already not following what she figures will only get more complicated.

“Because cops are idiots.” Ali says matter-of-factly.

“Uh, ok, gee thanks. Should I be offended? Because I feel like I should be offended.” Ashlyn gives her a playful hard look.

“Well, not all the time.” Ali quickly covers. “It’s just… well… okay, so you lovely officers work your asses off trying to bust criminals and trouble-makers every day. Often pulling long hours working cases or even staking things out for months just to make a simple arrest, right?”

“Yeah, so…” Ashlyn replies, not sure where Ali is going with this.

“So, after all that hard work, you bust the scumbag in question and you put that sucker behind bars as fast as you can.” Ali says with a hint of contempt.

“Still not seeing the problem.” Ashlyn says, feeling really lost now.

“The problem, Ashlyn, is that most of the time officers are so eager to bust the bad guys that they ignore the procedure. We lawyers… we are by the book, law is procedure.” Ashlyn is still looking at her quizzically, so she just continues. “Cops go through all that hard work, but then fail at the paperwork and the legal procedure, leaving an open door for all those scumbags to be back on the streets in no time. So, you see? Idiots.”

“Ok. Two things then…” Ashlyn lets herself smirk a bit. “First, doesn’t that just make lawyers who get these scumbags out of jail on technicalities a bunch of assholes? And, second, what on earth does this have to do with me other than you kind of calling me an idiot and me kind of calling you an asshole?”

Ali laughs loudly. “Touché. However, the point of all this is that this asshole…” Ali points to herself, “is about to win this idiot…” she points to Ashlyn, “an appeal.”

“Keep talking.” Ashlyn says with rapt attention now.

“Lucky for you, not only is Bobby Dugan an idiot, but so is John McNally.” Ali explains. “Obviously, Bobby wanted this all wrapped up quick, so he must have pressured McNally to get your confession and conviction taken care of fast in the name of saving the face of the department. McNally fucked up huge.”
“Alright, if you say so. What did he fuck up? I willingly signed a confession, what else is there?” Ashlyn asks.

“For starters, they had you sign a confession 3 hours after being released from the hospital for a gunshot wound. Your medical records clearly show that you were given a heavy dose of morphine not too long before release. Which means it was still in your system at the time of the confession and makes you technically not ‘sound of mind’ enough to have signed it; and arguably under psychological duress. Second, there was no legal witness to the confession.” Ali lays it out.

“Ok, I get the first part. The second though, I declined legal counsel and McNally witnessed the signed confession.” Ashlyn tells the brunette.

“Doesn’t matter. Again, you weren’t sound of mind enough to decline legal counsel, but even if you were… you still have to have a legal witness to the confession. It can’t just be McNally. It has to be another legal representative party, which means another lawyer, judge, or police officer. Would have been easy enough, but they rushed it clearly thinking it would never be checked or come back to bite them. So, McNally signed as the arresting officer and the witness to the confession. Not legal. So, idiots.” Ali slides a copy of the confession document in front of Ashlyn so she can see for herself. “So, the appeal is already won without question, just have to file for it.”

Ashlyn looks over the document, remembering the very night she signed it and shutters a bit upon seeing her signature. “I appreciate your attention to detail, asshole.” She teases Ali as she tries hard not to get overwhelmed with everything. “Ok, so appeal in the bag. Then what? Is the rest of your plan ‘easy peasy’?”

“Oh, you wish, idiot.” Ali winks at the blonde, keeping as much lightness as she can for the moment because this is where it all gets much more complicated.

Ashlyn chuckles back, steeling herself for the rest despite the fact that she already feels on edge. “Alright, well, continue on, asshole.”

Ali gives a slight smile and nod before getting serious. “No bullshit, Ashlyn. What I’m about to talk you through is majorly complicated, but completely do-able. It’s going to take big sacrifices from everyone involved, myself included. In the end though, I’m 90% sure the outcome is that you’re out of this hell hole, your brother is safe, and Bobby Dugan is rotting in jail.”

“90%? You’re that sure?” Ashlyn looks deeply into the brunette’s eyes. “And the other 10%?”

“Yes, I’m that sure or I wouldn’t have said it. I’m good at what I do, remember?” Ali doesn’t break the eye contact. “As for the 10%, I’ll walk you through those scenarios too, promise.” She watches Ashlyn’s eyes drop down to the table as the blonde let’s out a barely audible sigh.

Ali reaches out and hooks her pinky on Ashlyn’s discreetly. “Hey, look at me.” Ashlyn looks up as Ali gives her an encouraging smile. “You know me enough by now. 100% truth the whole way and you’re in control, always. Now breathe and listen.”

Ashlyn takes comfort in the brief contact as Ali pulls her hand away and gives the brunette a simple nod to signal that she’s ready.

“Winning the appeal doesn’t mean you’re anywhere near out of the woods. It just means that you now get a sort of trial since we’re going to recant your confession in the appeal and you didn’t get a trial to begin with. There’s no jury here though, just the judge. So, a lot of how we play this depends on who gets assigned to the case. The difficulty is that you originally confessed and we can’t bring any new evidence into the trial, just what was already collected, processed or mentioned in the
paperwork. It’s almost more of a case review than a true trial. To put it plainly, you’re in deep here.” Ali explains the process and the situation at hand. “However, there is some leeway and some loopholes that I plan to use to my full advantage. “

“Ok.” Ashlyn says just so Ali knows she’s paying attention and trying to follow along.

Ali presses on. “I’ve looked over every single possible piece of evidence in this case and I know I can shine enough reasonable doubt on things that your conviction gets overturned no matter which judge I have to deal with.” She pauses for a second and bites her lip before saying the next part. “And, I’m pretty sure that I can question Bobby Dugan as a witness and well, frankly, bury him.” 

Ashlyn takes a few quiet seconds trying to take in what Ali just said. “Wow, you’re serious? This sounds like some movie plot shit, Alex. It can’t be that simple.”

“No, it’s not simple. The idea is simple, the execution is the majorly complicated part.” Ali replies honestly. “Look, to make this work. I need to ask a lot of you.”

“Like what?” Ashlyn asks quietly, waiting for the hammer to drop.

“The most important thing here, Ashlyn, is keeping everyone safe and alive while it all goes down. That’s my top priority, no matter what the outcome.” Ali watches the blonde’s eyes widen and feels her own stomach drop a bit as things get real. “I think we can both agree that Bobby feels safe and snug right now while you’re in jail without giving you a second thought. I’m sure he’s not paying any attention to you at the moment, meaning we can file the appeal quietly. But, once we win it… it’s gonna be big news, no getting around it. He’s going to know and he’s going to act.”

“Fuck.” Ashlyn mumbles out, knowing the hammer just dropped.

“I won’t lie to you. He’s the biggest concern here. But, I have it covered.” Ali says confidently, causing Ashlyn to look at her skeptically. “He’s not going to come after you in here because he knows better. It will look too suspicious. So, naturally, he’s going to go after your brother just like he promised.”

“Yeah, exactly. So how the hell do you have that covered, Alex? I don’t even have that covered.” Ashlyn asks almost angrily.

“Hey, easy. Just listen, ok?” Ali tries to calm the blonde down.

“Sorry.” Ashlyn whispers half-heartedly.

“Look…remember when I told you what I did before this whole podcast thing?” Ali asks rhetorically, but gets a nod from the blonde. “I spent my whole career finding legal ways to make paper trails and the people behind financial exchanges legally disappear so big businesses could get richer.”

“I remember, but how is any of that relevant?” Ashlyn asks impatiently.

“Because, Ashlyn. It means I can make Christopher Ryan Harris and his family completely invisible. Better hidden than any witness protection program could ever claim.” Ashlyn looks confused and disbeliefing, so Ali doesn’t hesitate to keep going. “The primary way you can track down a person is by way of financial transactions. The other way is demographic documents and information. The demographic stuff… name, address, contact information, it’s all easy to change and hide. The financial stuff is hard because it involves bank records, taxes, property and personal assets that make up day-to-day life. If you can’t touch your money, you can’t live. Witness protection programs work because the legal system can deal with the demographic information and then give the witness a protected stipend to live off of instead of their own personal finances. The problem is that people on
the inside, like Bobby, would be able to find out where that stipend is going. So we’d do it my way, better than witness protection.”

“Hold up. Your way?” Ashlyn can’t even comprehend what the brunette is suggesting here.

“Yep. We move Chris and his family somewhere new, change names, make contact info private. Then I setup a private trust that handles all his finances. His property dealings, the rehabilitation clinics that he owns, his day-to-day personal accounts… all of it comes and goes from one large private trust that can’t be traced back to him. So, he can operate completely normally other than the new identity, which hopefully, would be temporary.” Ali explains it as simply as she can.

“And you can do all that yourself?” Ashlyn questions.


“But… Chris operates month-to-month for the most part with just a little reserve. I mean, he’s just getting his rehab clinic business off the ground really. He doesn’t have the money to start a trust like that.” Ashlyn pokes holes in Ali’s plans.


Ashlyn can’t even try to hide the stunned look on her face. “And you’d do that? For me? Put your own money in a trust for my brother, who you don’t even know?”

“In a heartbeat.” Ali doesn’t even flinch. “I told you. I’m getting you out. Sacrifices, remember? Besides, it’s not like I spend it on anything good. Handbags, makeup, toys for Kyle’s dog… seriously, I’m better off investing in you. At least you don’t slobber on me…well, yet.” She tries to joke a bit.

Ashlyn doesn’t bite. “I don’t think I could let you do that. And Chris, how could I ask that of him? To hide away his whole life and his kids and his wife, for who knows how long. I don’t even know if he’d agree to that to begin with.” Her voice is quaking a bit, everything getting too overwhelming.

Ali let’s out a deep sigh. “Ok, please don’t hate me for what I’m about to tell you.”

“Why would I hate you?” Ashlyn asks in confusion.

“I knew that this whole thing hinged on Chris even being willing, so… I… I talked to him yesterday.” Ali says meekly.

“You what?” Ashlyn doesn’t even know what else to say.

“I didn’t give him any details or even tell him that anything was going to happen. I just asked him hypothetically, if the situation presented itself, would he do it? I promise you, that’s all that was said.” Ali puts it out there and waits for the backlash.

Ashlyn just shakes her head. Part of her wants to be mad, but she just can’t be. How can she be mad at someone who is so selflessly trying to help her? “I don’t hate you. I don’t like it, but I’m not mad. Can I just… what did he say?” She gets out a bit brokenly, trying incredibly hard to keep all her emotions under control.

“I think you know the answer to that, Ashlyn. He said he would do absolutely anything for you no matter what. And he said, and I quote, ‘Stop being a bitch and fucking call me and let me visit, shitface.’” Ali giggles.
Ashlyn guffaws loudly, drawing a look from the guard behind the window. “Some things never change.” She muses before getting back to the serious conversation. “Ok, so let’s table the Chris thing for now. Assuming that all works the way you want it to, what else is involved?”

“Well, just you undergoing surgery and trusting me enough to give me whatever you have on Bobby… no biggie.” Ali says with clenched teeth.

“Surgery?! What? I am so fucking lost here, Krieger.” Ashlyn looks at Ali incredulously as she practically chokes on her coffee.

“It’s not just about getting you out of here, Ashlyn. It’s also about taking Bobby down in the process and ensuring that you and Chris are always safe after this is all over. I need enough evidence to get you cleared and enough to bust his ass too.” Ali prepares to put the final piece on the table.

“I’m listening.” Ashlyn replies.

“They left that bullet in your leg, right? At least that’s what it says in your medical records.” Ali inquires even though she’s pretty sure about it.

“Yeah, so? Would’ve been more trouble to take it out than leave it in. People don’t realize how often doctors just leave bullets where they are if they’re not causing damage. I already had one in that upper leg anyway, so one more wasn’t gonna hurt.” Ashlyn answers.

“Well, we need that bullet. It’s mentioned and catalogued in the case files despite still being in your body, so it’s not considered a new piece of evidence. I have just the forensic analyst in mind to run the ballistic tests that will prove it wasn’t shot out of your gun. And I have a medical examiner than can show that Liam’s gunshot wounds from your gun happened after he was dead. I love modern science!” Ali says cheerily before adding, “And turns out a full sweep of the scene found no other weapons. Which means the shots that didn’t come from your gun had to come from Bobby’s.”

“Wow. Damn. That’s good.” Ashlyn can’t help but be impressed.

Ali jokingly takes a small bow. “Told you not to question my competence, Harris.”

“Yeah yeah, ok. What else?” Ashlyn brings them right back to the heavy conversation without letting up.

“Well, while cell tower records aren’t all that reliable… the call you supposedly placed to Bobby that night only lasted 2 seconds, not enough time for you to have told him you killed Liam. And it shows he called McNally 4 minutes later, so not enough time for him to have driven to Liam’s and arrested you in that time. Circumstantial, but put together with the rest, it’s solid.” Ali states with a sense of sureness. “The rest…well…it depends on what you have access to and how much you trust me.” Ali shrugs. “If I’m going to nail Bobby in front of that judge, I need to have sufficient evidence against him.”

“But you can’t bring in new evidence? How does that work?” Ashlyn asks, trying to figure it all out.
“Therein lies the loophole, young grasshopper.” Ali smiles. “After casting all that reasonable doubt with the existing evidence, I will petition to question Bobby in front of that judge as a crime scene witness for clarification. And while Bobby could always refuse and seek legal counsel, my bet is that he’s too proud and sure of himself to do it. He feels far too comfortable with his position. Plus, he’ll know that if I accuse him of anything and have nothing to show for it… well, my ass will undoubtedly go to jail for a false accusation against a high ranking official. He won’t pass up the chance to put me away, that’ll be his revenge on me for all of this. In his mind, probably just more to make you squirm. Especially when he realizes he can’t find Chris. If he can’t get you and he can’t get Chris, you can bet his sights are on me.”

“Oh, Alex. No. No. No. That’s not okay. You’re not taking that chance.” Ashlyn says resolutely. She’s baffled by the fact that Ali is even remotely willing to risk her career and essentially her life to help her. She just can’t let her do it.

“That’s where you’re going to have to trust me, Ashlyn. Trust that I know what I’m doing. And well, I’m not going to do it if I don’t have anything to go on. Which leads me to my ultimate request…” Ali pauses a bit and takes a breath. “You said you had a whole heap of evidence against Bobby that he doesn’t know about. One, do you still have it? Two, do you trust me with it?” That’s it, she’s put it all out there now and can only wait for Ashlyn’s response.

“Geez, Alex. I…I don’t even…” Ashlyn’s voice fails her and she feels like throwing up, her body starting to slightly shake as she feels hot all of a sudden. “It’s too much. The money trust thing for Chris and the risks you’re taking here. I can’t let you do it, Alex.” The brunette has laid the path so carefully out for her and she has to admit that it’s a long, hard road, but not an impossible one. She can understand Ali’s confidence now, but it isn’t a game, these are people’s lives. People she deeply cares about.

Ali tries to reassure the blonde again. “I told you. 90% that it turns out exactly the way we want it to. Those are incredible odds, Ashlyn.”

“But the 10%, I can’t even fathom.” Ashlyn whispers out.

“The absolute worst that happens with that 10% is that you’re still stuck in here, Bobby is still out there being a prick, Chris and his family assume their new identity and have to rely on the trust permanently, and you end up with the best jail buddy there is… me!” Ali uses her thumb to point to herself in jest, trying to get Ashlyn to relax a little. The blonde says nothing but just let’s out a raspy sounding sigh.

Ali gets serious and right down to it, one final push. “If I knew I only had a 1% chance to get you out of here, Ashlyn. I’d do it without hesitation, without question, and without regret. So, 90% is looking pretty damn good right now. I can’t make you trust me though, you either do or you don’t. And I’ll have to just be okay with whichever it is. Friends no matter what.”

Ashlyn sits looking down at her lap and taking deep breaths for what seems like hours, but really is only a few minutes. “Fucking hell, Alex. I do. I trust you. This… this is just a lot.”

Ali let’s out a breath she didn’t even realize she was holding, letting her shoulders relax a bit as she tries to understand what exactly Ashlyn is trying to say. “I know.” She mutters.

“Ok. Ok. Just listen to me carefully and then take your time with it. It has to be exactly what you need if there is even going to be a shred of a chance that I even think about agreeing, ok? I mean it.” Ashlyn blurts out in a fluster.

Ali can only sit back and listen with rapt attention as Ashlyn rattles off a series of very specific
instructions that sound completely bizarre to say the least. By the time the blonde is done, Ali can see she's trembling and sweaty. She reaches out and gently runs her hand up Ashlyn’s tattooed forearm, tracing her fingers back down over the inked designs and then leaving them lightly resting on top of the blonde’s hand. “Tell me about these.” She just wants Ashlyn to calm down right now, the rest be damned.

“Wh…what?” Ashlyn questions shakily as she feels the warmth of Ali’s skin on hers, tingling running up and down her arm.

“I don’t need an answer or a decision on all this today. Breathe, Ash. Tell me about these.” Ali repeats again, motioning to the tattoos.

“Ok.” Ashlyn replies and then jumps as a loud knock on the window behind them fills the room.

“No prolonged touching of the inmate, Ms. Krieger. You should know the rules.” The guard warns them before sitting back down as Ali retracts her hand. Ashlyn inwardly cringes at the broken moment, wishing Jordan or Tim had been back there instead. Ali having called her ‘Ash’ again making her feel warm inside.

Ali smiles sincerely as Ashlyn explains the intricate myriad of greek mythology tattoos adorning her arm that are dedicated to her relationship with her parents. Athena representing herself, Zeus for her father, a princess in front of a broken mirror to symbolize the complicated relationship with her mother, and a dream catcher breaking off into flying birds to remind her that having let the resentful feelings about these relationships go is what had set her free and made her see the beauty of them. Ali now coming to understand the inked designs as a beautiful struggle and triumph mapped out on her arm.

“Wow. That’s deep, and meaningful, and beautiful.” Ali remarks in true awe.

“Thank you.” Ashlyn replies sweetly, feeling a lot calmer now. “And then on my shoulders…” She’s cut off by Ali putting her hands on over her ears and yelling “No no no!”

Ali takes her hands away from her ears when Ashlyn stops talking and is staring at her like she’s nuts. “Don’t tell me!!”

“Why not?” Ashlyn asks confused.

“Listen, Captain. I don’t want to know what other ink is hiding under that beige frock you’re wearing because I’m pretty sure there’s more, and you are going to be showing me over a beer in the near future. Got it?” Ali states evenly. “A girl’s gotta have motivation, right?”

“Right. There’s definitely a lot more.” Ashlyn manages to laugh a bit, before getting serious again. “How are you so sure of yourself? Of me? Of all of this?”


Before Ashlyn can even think of a reply, Alan, Albert, Alfred whatever his name is, yells out “Five minutes!” from behind the window.

“So, just think about everything I said today and we can talk more in a few days, ok?” Ali says gently, making it clear that she isn’t going to push Ashlyn anymore and will just accept her decision.

The gentle tone is all it takes to remind Ashlyn of Ali’s compassion, her good heart, her trustworthiness. She catches the brunette’s eyes and finds herself saying something she never could have imagined before today. “Draw up the paperwork for the appeal.”
“Wh…what?” Now it’s Ali’s turn to stutter in shock.

“I… I need to talk to Chris first, but… I trust you, Alex. I trust you.” Ashlyn pauses to let it all sink in. “See what you think of what you obtain and we’ll work on it next time. Draw up the paperwork.” She repeats to be clear.

Ali can only nod slowly, a smile overtaking her face.

Ashlyn watches the beaming smile unfold, watching the brunette’s nose crinkle up, her tongue slightly poking through her teeth. It’s the most beautiful thing she’s ever seen and she internally vows to make sure it happens as much as she possibly can in her lifetime. She gets up, hearing the guard start to make his way out behind her. “Now get some sleep, Krieger. You look like a zombie.” Ashlyn teases with a smug smile.

Ali laughs, getting up to give Ashlyn a brief but tight hug over the table, both of them relaxing into it before quickly letting go so they don’t get warned again. “I wouldn’t talk, Harris. You need plenty of beauty rest yourself. Those bags under your eyes probably weight 10lbs each.” She plays back as she watches Ashlyn get cuffed. “Night night, idiot.”

Ashlyn chuckles and turns back over her shoulder to look at Ali one more time as she’s led out. “Sweet dreams, asshole.”
Chapter Notes

Thank you for all your comments, I really do love hearing what you think along the way and what you like/don't like. Keep 'em coming! Laying a little groundwork here...

Ashlyn listens to the static that is supposed to be some type of elevator music as she waits for her call to connect. She presses the phone a little harder to her ear, awaiting the voice to come through the other side. She knows the prison voice system is probably announcing to the person on the other side that an inmate from Framingham Correctional Institution is calling them and asking them whether they will accept the call.

She hears a small click on the line and before she can even prepare herself, a deep booming voice fills her left ear.

“It’s about fucking time you ass hat!” Chris bellows at his sister.

Ashlyn can only chuckle a bit at the greeting. “Wow, Chris. Ever the polite gentleman. I’ve missed you, ding bat.”

“Yeah, well you wouldn’t have to miss me if you called me once in a while… or you know, even once in like two fucking years!” Chris says mockingly.

Ashlyn can hear the hurt behind his joking tone. That’s how Chris has always coped, with humor. They have that in common. She decides to just address it head on. “I know, Chris. It’s the only way I’ve been able to deal with this. To know that I can just let everyone else go about their lives and not burden them. I feel like it’s the one thing I have control over, you know? I’m sorry, I know that it’s not as simple as that for you. I think about you and the kiddos every single day if that makes you feel any better.”

“As much as I hate it, and let me assure you I fucking hate it, I get it. I know deep down that I’d do the same thing. Why do we have to be so fucking similar? Damn Harris genes! And yes, it makes me feel much better that I occupy the space in your mind. I just hope that the mental picture is of me being all bad ass on my motorcycle and not of me with like a dunce cap on or something.” He jokes, clearly choosing to go forward with humor.

“Actually, it’s of you in a giant yellow chicken suit. Sorry bro, but you look great in it.” Ashlyn deadpans.

Chris’ deep guffawing laugh is so loud that Ashlyn has to pull the phone away from her ear a bit. It’s like no time has passed at all. “Fuck, I’ve missed you, baby sis. No one gets me like you do.” He laments. “Well, how the hell are you? Tell me honestly, is it awful?”

“I’m okay, promise. Truthfully, it’s so lonely. That’s my own fault too though, blocking people out and all.” Ashlyn admits. “The rest. I don’t know, guess I’ve just gotten used to it. It’s like having all the time in the world, but no purpose. It’s demeaning. That’s the best I can explain it.”

“Hmph, guess that makes sense.” Chris replies. He can sense her emptiness and knows the best thing
is to stay the course with their go-to humor. “The real question is, have you dropped the soap yet?”

“You’re the worst.” Ashlyn snickers. “Well being a cop and all, they keep me separated from everyone else to protect me. So, no real backlash even if I do drop the soap. Luckily, no weird cellmates to deal with either. Some of these women were pretty aggressive towards me at the beginning, yelling things at me and stuff, and one actually lunged at me even with the guard there, but I took care of it.

“Oh boy, can’t wait to hear this! What did you do?” Chris asks with enthusiasm, knowing his sister could take on men twice her size.

“The guard was caught by surprise and she had her hand around my throat really quickly. So, I took one solid swing at her. She didn’t wake up for 18 hours. Word got around and that was that, no one so much as looks at me anymore.” Ashlyn tells him matter-of-factly.

“Ha! I knew you’d hold your own in there! Bridget watches this female prison series called ‘Orange is the New Black’ all the time, so her imagination runs wild and she’s always worried about you. I try to explain to my dear wife that my sister is beast. Can’t wait to tell her that story!” Chris replies animatedly.

“How is Bridget? And my tiny partners in crime?” Ashlyn pauses for a second at her own statement. “Hmmm, I guess that has taken on a different meaning now, probably shouldn’t say it anymore. Anyway, I can’t even explain to you how much I miss those kiddos, it physically hurts.” Ashlyn says in quiet sorrowful tone.

“Bri is amazing, as always. You know how I feel about that woman… she will always be far too good for me and I’ll never understand how I got so lucky.” He replies happily.

“Yeah, dude, if you ever mess that up… I’ll take you down myself.” Ashlyn warns him playfully.

“Please, if I ever mess it up, I’ll take myself down!” He chuckles. “And the kids… oh man… they are growing so fast, it’s insane. Curtis just started 1st grade and currently looks like a weird jack-o-lantern with all the baby teeth he’s losing. Elsie started pre-school and loves it. She’s still a complete princess just like Bri and already smarter than me.” Chris tells her, the pride in his voice evident.

“They ask about you all the time.”

Ashlyn nods her head a bit sadly, knowing Chris can’t see her. “Can I ask what you told them? Why I’m not around anymore?” It’s something she’s often wondered, especially since she used to see them almost every day from the moment each of them was born.

“It was Bri’s idea… we told them you got assigned to a very important mission in another country. That you are busy keeping other kids safe just like you always looked out for them. They make little drawings for you all the time and we tell them that we mail them to you.” Chris explains.

The heaviness in Ashlyn’s heart is almost soul crushing, but she also can’t help but admire her brother. How far he has come and how he is now the solid, protective center of this beautiful family where he was once a broken man. It makes her realize just how strong he is and how much she needs to finally relent and start trusting his strength and the decisions he makes for himself and his family. That while she will always protect him at any cost, he’s more than capable of protecting himself now.

“Thanks for doing that. I can’t really put words to what it means to me. I love them more than anything. Will you tell them that for me?” Her voice quakes slightly with emotion.
“I will, Ashlyn. Promise. They know how much they mean to their Auntie Ashwyn. And yeah, they still say it like that.” Chris laughs, feeling relieved when Ashlyn laughs too. “So, when are we going to talk about the fact that THE Ali Krieger called me? Is it time for that now? Cause I want talk about that!”

“Yes, ding bat, we can talk about that. I think you probably know by now that her whole plan is why I finally called you.” Ashlyn tries to start the conversation on her terms, knowing that Chris is just going to pepper her with questions if she doesn’t give him the background. “Long story, but she’s Kyle’s sister. You remember Kyle, we helped him out a while back?”

“No kidding! Yeah, I guess I can see that, I mean they look alike. She’s like a big fucking deal these days after she solved this crazy kidnapping case.” Chris says excitedly.

“Yeah, I know. I’ve listened to her podcasts in the library here.” Ashlyn replies.

“Still such a nerd.” He teases her. “So, she’s Kyle sister and she just decided one day to come visit you? Or did you tell Kyle to hook you up, cause girl is fiiiine!”

“What? No! Kyle asked her to come see me as a favor to him. And I mostly let her visit out of curiosity because I had no idea she was Kyle’s sister at that point. Anyway, long story short, we talked a lot and I grew to trust her, and then I told her everything there was to know. And, well, somehow she’s convinced me that maybe there is a decent chance I can fix this whole mess with her help.” She answers him honestly.

“Uhh YEAH! Could anyone say no to that woman? All she did was call me and I was like ‘Yep, sign me up to be hidden!’ … and I’m married!” Chris belts out comically.

“Oh my god, stop it!” Ashlyn warns him.

“Please, you can’t tell me you don’t think she’s hot!” He presses back. “And don’t even think of lying, cause I know your type…and she is totally your type!”

Ashlyn lets out a deep sigh. “Yes, she’s beautiful…but, that’s not the point.”


“Of course, I like her. She’s my friend, ding bat. And I can admit she’s good looking. It’s not like I don’t have other good looking friends.” Ashlyn says, keeping her voice flat in hopes that he’ll let it go.

“Sure. Sure. I’ll just go right ahead and pretend that you say that about all of your friends and that you trust all of your friends with the biggest secret of your life, which I don’t even fully know by the way!” Chris replies pointedly.

“Annnyway!” Ashlyn says quickly, hoping to drop this part of the conversation and get to the real point of all this. “Look, Chris, the reason I called you…”

“Ashlyn. We’re doing it. I don’t care what it takes, I’m in. That’s it and that’s all. Got it?” He quickly cuts her off.

“Chris, how can I ask you to do all this? Do you realize the extent of it? Seriously, this could be permanent. And to bring Bridget and the kids into it. It’s a crazy risk. I don’t feel right about it.” Ashlyn tries to reason it out with him.
“What fucking part of ‘I’m in. That’s it and that’s all’ did you not understand? Bridget and I talked. We’re doing this. Now stop being a damn wuss ass, get it together, and let Ali Krieger do her thing. Whatever the plan is, I’m sure it’s good. I just know this is going to work, I believe it. From what I know of her and have heard, she’s as smart as she is relentless. We’re in.” Chris says adamantly.

Ashlyn gets teary at her brother’s words, his willingness to do anything for her bringing out her emotions. “You’re sure?” She asks quietly.

“Never been more sure. We got this.” He assures her resolutely.

“Ok, then, one condition.” Ashlyn has one more thing she needs.

“What’s that?” Chris inquires.

“Will you mail me some pictures of the kids, and their drawings? And then after that… promise me, no more contact with me at all until this is all over and we know what the outcome is.” She lays out her terms. “I mean, I know we just got reconnected, but I just need to know that once you’re hidden that nothing can be traced back to you. I need to know that you’re safe.”

Chris doesn’t hesitate. He knows how his sister is, her protective nature. “Ok. I can promise you that. So, we’re good to go?”

Ashlyn lets out a deep breath that feels oddly relieving at the moment. “Yeah, I guess we are.”

Even though there is still at least five minutes of time left on the call, the siblings both know each other well enough to know that there isn’t much more to say.

“I love you, baby sis. Stay strong.” Chris says sweetly.

“I love you too, bro. Stay smart and stay safe. Give my babies hugs and kisses from me, ok? Bridget too.” She replies warmly.


“Bye, ding bat!” Ashlyn laughs and shakes her head as she hears the click on the line that signals the end of the call. She hangs up the phone and leans her head against the cool cement wall for a second to collect herself.

Ali pulls into the Ipswich Savings Bank parking lot sure that she is about to do one of the strangest things she’s ever done. Still, she fully intends to see it through to the end. She figures that worst case scenario, she will pretend to be mentally unstable and confused before quickly making her way out.

She opens the door to the bank and walks into the lobby. “Here goes.” She mutters to herself before walking up to the first available teller. The middle-aged woman behind the counter greets her with a big smile. “How can I help you?”

“I was hoping to speak with Edith Harper.” Ali says sweetly.

“Certainly. I’ll check to see if she’s in her office and free.” The woman replies with a nod and leaves to check.

Ali waits just a couple of minutes before she sees the woman come back into the lobby and wave her
“Come on back, she’s in her office and can meet with you.” She points Ali down a hallway and says “last office on the left.”

Ali smiles and says “thank you” before walking past the woman and taking one last deep breath as she walks through the office door. She is a little surprised to see that the woman behind the desk must be at least 80 years old. She has cottony white short hair, light blue eyes, small wire rim glasses, and a sweet smile. If she wasn’t so thin, the woman would be what Ali imagined Mrs. Claus to look like.

“Please have a seat.” The older woman gestures towards the chair.

Ali sits down, the name plate on the desk in front of her reading ‘Edith Harper’.

“How can I help you, dear? Are you here for a mortgage?” She asks before Ali can say anything.

“Oh, um… no,” Ali answers, the hesitation in her voice is obvious.

“A loan then?” The older woman asks, trying to understand the hesitant tone of the younger woman sitting in front of her.

Ali just shakes her head no and goes for it. “You know, that flower box in the outside entrance is just beautiful.” Ali says as she glances out the office window towards the flower box. She watches Edith’s eyebrows raise just a bit before the older woman smiles politely again. It wouldn’t have even been noticeable if Ali wasn’t specifically looking for any change in the woman’s demeanor.

“I actually planted it myself. I just love flowers. I think it came out particularly nice this year and it really filled in.” Edith says with pride.

“I’m impressed! It’s gorgeous.” Ali compliments her before pushing forward again with her game plan. “Those Ruby Red Pentas are attracting some amazing butterflies.” She watches Edith’s eyebrows raise again, more obviously this time, and Ali knows she’s said the right thing.

“Oh, do you like butterflies, dear?” Edith asks warmly, but with purpose.

Ali can see that it’s working and that the conversation is like a test now. Luckily, she knows the right answers. “I absolutely love them.” She says confidently.

“Me too.” Edit replies before her eyes meet Ali’s inquisitively. “What’s your favorite?”

Ali doesn’t even pause to think about it. “The Pipevine Swallowtail, definitely.”

“Good choice.” Edith smiles a bit. “Any particular reason why?”

“It’s the way the iridescent blue sort of shimmers in the sunlight. Reminds me of the ocean during sunrise, the way the water sparkles. I love the ocean.” Ali says with ease.

“I know exactly what you mean.” Edith is smiling widely and warmly at Ali now. “It’s been a long time since I’ve heard someone describe it like that.”

Ali watches as the older woman unlocks her desk drawer and pulls out a metal box. Edith then pulls her necklace out of her shirt, revealing an oddly shaped key which she inserts into the metal box. She takes yet another unique key out of the box and hands it to Ali. “I can take you over to the safe deposit box that it belongs to if you wish.” Edith says discreetly.

“That would be great, thank you.” Ali replies with a relieved smile, glad this went the way it was
supposed to. Before she can get up though, Edith addresses her again.

“Would you mind if I asked how you know Ashlyn, Miss…” Edith asks a bit shyly, trailing off when she realizes she doesn’t know Ali’s name.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I never told you my name! I’m Alexandra Krieger, you can call me Ali.” Ali says kindly as she reaches her hand out to shake Edith’s hand.

“Sorry, Ali. I don’t mean to be nosey,” Edith says as she takes Ali’s hand, “I just never expected anyone besides Ashlyn herself to come get this key. So, I’m just curious.”

Ali laughs a bit. “It’s ok. I’m sure Ashlyn never expected that anyone else would come get this key either. I’m her lawyer.”

“Oh, well that makes sense.” Edith smiles. “I have to say that I’m really happy to hear she has a lawyer. Wait, are you the same Ali that has that cold case radio show?”

“The one and only.” Ali smiles back.

“My first celebrity meeting, how exciting!” Edith says animatedly. “Although I have to be honest and say I haven’t listened to it and just read about you in the news.”

Ali blushes a bit. “I’m no celebrity. Just trying to help where I can.”

“If you say so, dear. Well, now I’m even happier that I know Ashlyn has a really excellent lawyer!” Edith says happily, really taking in Ali’s appearance now. “May I speak freely?”

“Of course.” Ali replies, a bit confused at the question.

“Ashlyn’s grandmother was my best friend. I’ve changed that little girl’s diaper and watched her grow into a truly remarkable woman.” Edith pauses and Ali nods with a slight smile. “Knowing Ashlyn so well, I have to say…if you’re here in her place, you must be much more to her than just a lawyer.”

Ali doesn’t expect the comment and isn’t sure exactly what Edith is getting at, but she recovers quickly. “Oh, well, we’re also friends. She once helped out my brother who grew very close to her and he sort of introduced us.”

“Well, I’m happy Ashlyn has you. I worry about her a lot. And let me just say, you’re very lovely, Ali. Really beautiful, dear.” Edith smiles genuinely.

“That’s sweet of you to say, thank you.” Ali says as she takes in the smile on Edith’s face and wonders what the woman’s statement has to do with anything. Before she can think on it any further, Edith gets up and motions for her to follow. She leads Ali to an area behind a locked, steel-barred door that contains a wall of safe deposit boxes. Edith points Ali to a box and has her insert the key as she also inserts a master key from the bank, finally sliding the box out. She then leads Ali to a private room where she can open the box.

“Thank you for all your help, Edith.” Ali says, patting the older woman on the shoulder gently.

“She’s trusted me to guard whatever is in there for the past few years. I just hope that whatever it is will bring our girl back home to us and out of that awful place that she doesn’t belong in. It looks to me like she’s in very capable hands.” Edith says before adding, “Ali, please tell her I love her and that I’m always thinking about her.”
“I’ll tell her. And I promise to take care of her.” Ali replies warmly, getting a final nod from Edith before the older woman leaves the room.

**** Two hours later****

Ali had been surprised to find only a USB flash drive in the safe deposit box and nothing more. She had quickly gone to the local office supply store to buy her own flash drive, made a copy of it for herself and promptly returned it to the safe deposit box. She’s now sitting in front of her computer at home looking over almost 150 different files that the drive contained. It’s loaded with pictures, documents, video and audio recordings of Bobby Dugan’s dealings. Ali can only imagine the amount of time, effort, and caution Ashlyn took to compile this amount of evidence. How the blonde didn’t get caught compiling all this is beyond her comprehension. She thought she’d have some decent evidence to work with, but now she’s just floored at how much is in front of her.

“You are really something, Ashlyn Harris.” Ali whispers out loud to no one.
Conditions...Of You

Chapter Notes

Hmmm, looks like many of you think "Bobby Douchepatrol" (as one of you so nicely put it) is lurking and ready to lower the boom. Things are definitely heating up and building here, but likely not quite the way you're thinking. Remember, the appeal hasn't been filed so far...so, Bobby isn't quite an issue... yet ;) 
I'm loving all your comments by the way, you keep me motivated and you crack me up! Keep it coming!

Ali tries hard to keep a straight face when Ashlyn hobbles into the prison visitor room on crutches with a knee brace on, her hands cuffed to a longer chain around her waist so that she can actually use the crutches. ‘Good girl’ she thinks to herself, admittedly relieved that it seems Ashlyn has committed to the plan. She catches the blonde smirking a bit while the guard fumbles around awkwardly to get the cuffs and chain off, almost tripping himself on her crutches.

“What’s up with the knee?” Ali asks casually and fairly loudly as the guard starts to make his way out and Ashlyn sits down. She slides a coffee in front of the blonde.

Ashlyn shoots her a quick smile. “Just having some pain from an old bullet injury, pretty sure it’s something going on with the bullet still in there.” She shrugs nonchalantly and watches as the guard finally walks out of the room, turning her attention back to Ali. “Well, that, and I may have punched it really hard a few times until it started swelling.” She whispers to Ali with a wink.

Ali finally loses her composure and lets out a laugh. “You are too much!”

“Yes well, it hurt like a bitch and now it’s swollen, but somebody said we needed this sucker out, sooo…” Ashlyn gives Ali a jokingly pointed look. “It worked though. The doctor freaked that I might have an infection in there and surgery is scheduled for Monday of next week. I’ll take my Oscar now.” She deadpans.

“Damn, you don’t fuck around.” Ali makes no effort to hide her slight shock. “You ok though? Seriously, that sounds painful and that wasn’t exactly what I was aiming for.”

“I’ve been through much worse, trust me. Although, it does suck to be watched more closely because crutches can be used as weapons…really I’m fine. And I never hedge on my commitments.” The blonde replies matter-of-factly trying to ignore the somewhat anxious feeling she gets when Ali looks at her with such concern and caring.

“Ok, just be careful and take care of yourself.” Ali reminds her, feeling a bit bad that this is all so intense. “Speaking of commitments, I have the appeal paperwork all ready to file. So, maybe let’s start with that. Really all I need is your signature in a few places, but maybe you want to go over things again before we…”

“Woah, slow your roll there, Alex.” Ashlyn interrupts her and takes a long sip of coffee.

Ali feels her heart rate pick up as she wonders why Ashlyn has stopped her. Did she change her mind about all this? Is she going to back out now even despite this whole leg surgery thing? Since
when has anyone ever had the ability to make her feel so nervous and yet so comfortable at the same time?

Before she has any more time to let her thoughts run wild, she’s broken out of it when she feels Ashlyn nudge her forearm.

“Geez, calm down. I can practically see the wheels turning in your brain. What is going on up there?” The blonde asks in a pointed, but calm voice.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to be so obviously unhinged. I just… well, I thought maybe you changed you mind.” Ali admits.

Ashlyn just shakes her head with a small laugh. “Did I not just say that I never hedge on my commitments?”

“Well, yeah, but people change their minds. Plus, it’s not exactly like you officially committed.” Ali defends herself with jest.

“Details. Details.” Ashlyn plays back before getting serious. “I talked to Chris and I’m committed. Done and done. So you can relax, it’s happening.” She lets a smirk creep back on her face and adds “Well, don’t relax too much. I still need to you be my competent, pesky ass lawyer.”

“One pesky ass lawyer coming right up.” Ali replies cheerfully. “So, if we’re going to do this, why did you tell me to ‘slow my roll’?” Ali questions. “And you’ve clearly been in here too long when you start using slang like that. Lesson one: Don’t do that in court.”

Ashlyn lets out a chuckle. “One day in here is too long, but, duly noted.”

“Actually, scratch that. Don’t do anything in court, just let me do all the talking.” Ali winks.

“Right. Annyway. So, the reason I stopped you before…I have one condition first.” Ashlyn says evenly.

“Oh, she has conditions now.” Ali teases a bit, mostly to keep herself from getting worried again.

“Just one.” Ashlyn replies calmly.

“Well, I think it’s pretty clear I’ll do anything… like walk into a bank and randomly start talking to an old lady about butterflies. So, name it.” Ali sasses.

“Yeah, sorry. That was the plan I came up with for Edith to help me protect that information. She didn’t know what it was, but she knew that if I or anyone else came in there talking about another type of butterfly, then I was being coerced into it and wasn’t safe. That she should call Chris for help. I never actually expected to send anyone in my place, so I can imagine that was awkward.” Ashlyn explains.

“Eh, wasn’t so bad once I got the ball rolling. Edith was really sweet, I was expecting someone younger I guess. She told me to tell you she loves you and that she’s always thinking of you.” Ali says.

“She was my grandma’s best friend and really like a second grandma to me.” Ashlyn elaborates a bit.

“Yeah, she mentioned that. And that she changed your diapers.” Ali laughs lightly. “I was going to ask for some embarrassing childhood stories, but I figured that was overstepping.”
“Ha! Edith would never betray me like that.” Ashlyn replies with a confident smile.

“I don’t know. She was sure to tell me I was ‘lovely’ and ‘capable’ and ‘beautiful’, so I’m sure I could’ve charmed something out of her.” Ali replies back with her own confident smile plastered on her face.

“Oh, you are all of those things, Krieger. No doubt.” Ashlyn replies without even thinking, watching the blush spread across Ali’s cheeks. “Buuut, that doesn’t necessarily make you charming.” She quickly adds to smooth it over.

Ali’s face feels hot as she tries not to react to Ashlyn’s direct compliment and focuses instead on the banter part of it. “Uh huh, whatever you say, Harris. I’ll have you know that I’m a master charmer.” She plays back before bringing the conversation back around. “So, you said something about a condition?”

“I did.” Ashlyn replies, getting down to the final piece of business on her mind. “I assume you probably always carry some kind of digital recording device with you?”

“Yeah, just a habit now from my podcasting, why?” Ali asks with curiosity.

“Take it out.” Ashlyn demands politely.

“Ok.” Ali complies, taking it out of her purse and setting it on the table.

“Now turn it on.” Ashlyn tells her.

“Why?” Ali is confused by the request.

“That’s my condition.” Ashlyn explains evenly. “From now on, you record every conversation that pertains to the case. And, when the time comes, you release all of it as part of your podcast series.”

Ali feels her own jaw drop a bit at what Ashlyn has just said. “I’m sorry, what? Hey, you know this isn’t at all about my podcast, right? I’m not here for that and I don’t ever plan to release any information about this.” She’s really worried that Ashlyn has misinterpreted her intentions.

“I know. I trust you and believed you about that from the beginning.” Ashlyn reassures the brunette. “I’m choosing to make it a part of this. That’s my one condition. If you’re going to risk everything for me, then I don’t feel right doing this unless it has potential to be a good thing for you.”

Ali feels even more uneasy and awkward. “You getting out of here is the only motivation I need; you should know that. I don’t need some kind of profit here.”

“I know. You’re a good person like that.” Ashlyn tries to level with her. “Look, Alex, the media is going to be all over this whole damn thing. So much crap is going to get thrown around and when it’s all over, I want someone I trust to put the truth out there and set the record straight. And, hell yeah, I want you to profit and benefit from it too! I want this because I truly trust you, and if you’re going to take care of me, then I want to take care of you in some way too. So, we’re only doing this if we record it and release it. Ok?”

Ali can see the absolute determination in Ashlyn’s eyes, the blonde is not going to back down. She lets out a small sigh and gives in. “Ok. But know you can change your mind at any time and you’ll have the final say on all of it and what is released…that’s my condition. Ok?”

Ashlyn gives her a quick nod and smile. “Ok. Now turn the damn recorder on and let’s go already! You’re wasting time, Krieger.”
Ali can only shake her head and smirk as she clicks the recorder on. “Alright, so, paperwork now?”

“Bring it on.” Ashlyn says in dry sarcasm.

They spend the next hour going over the plan again with Ali explaining how she thinks the new information about Bobby might fit into the overall picture. In the course of the conversation, she’s sure to tell Ashlyn several times how amazing she is for gathering so much on that bastard. Of course, as usual, the blonde just humbly shrugs it off every time like it was no big deal. Ali diligently makes sure Ashlyn understands all of the appeal paperwork and exactly what she is signing and, with the final signature in place, she closes her folder. “Ok, so, I’ll file the appeal with the court on Monday morning.” She says with a sense of accomplishment, clicking off the recorder.

Ashlyn lets herself smile a bit and feels a sense of calm wash over her as she watches Ali click off the recorder, knowing they’ve reached the ‘personal time’ aspect of the their visits where they don’t talk about the case at all. The anxious feelings she’s been harboring inside as they went over the plan and paperwork start to dissipate as she focuses on just Ali. “Yep, so Monday. Does it take long to file it?” She asks.

“Nope. Pretty fast, just drop it off with the clerk really.” Ali replies.

“Oh ok. That’s good.” Ashlyn answers a bit quietly. She really wants to ask Ali to do her a favor, if it’s even possible, but for some reason she feels too ashamed to at the moment.

“And, when I’m done filing this thing, I’m headed straight to the hospital to visit my favorite and newly bullet-free jailbird!” Ali shoots Ashlyn a playful smile.

Ashlyn can only grin like a fool for a few seconds, completely in awe. In total disbelief that Ali just about read her mind. That’s exactly what she had wanted to ask. “Really? You’re allowed to do that?” Her voice squeaks a bit.

“I told you, lawyers have way more leeway. The prison pretty much has to always allow for confidential legal visits as long as it’s within reason and falls within their ability to keep both of us safe. The only real exception to that is if they were to suspect and prove that the lawyer was aiding criminal activity in some way. So, yes, I can visit you there.” Ali explains. “Besides, I would never pass up the opportunity to see you all loopy and maybe get some dirt.” She adds with a slight laugh.

“Pretty sure you already know all the important dirt” Ashlyn gives her a lighthearted glare. “And, I’ve been told they’ll give me the lowest strength of painkillers they can while still keeping me comfortable by law. Given that I have a high pain tolerance, I’m sure I won’t be loopy that long.”

“Bummer, I was hoping for some solid ex-girlfriend stories. Now that is the kind of dirt I’m looking for!” Ali continues to tease.

“Ha! I’m not even sure that qualifies as dirt, but if you want to hear the details, I’ll be sure to regale you when you visit.” Ashlyn promises.

“Well, then I promise to reciprocate. And, I can assure you, mine probably qualify as dirt.” Ali giggles a bit.

“Deal.” Ashlyn replies, trying to hide how positively light she feels inside at the fact that Ali is going to visit her after surgery. And just as soon as she lets that good feeling wash over her, her mind starts to wander to being in the hospital. She hates everything about them. They have always meant pain and heartache in her life. And the thought of being medicated even a little bit makes her nervous, having always been careful to avoid it because of her family history. Some of her worst days were
spent in military hospitals recovering from pretty severe injuries and enduring awful pain just to make
sure she didn’t fall prey to reliance on any kind of medicine. Her greatest promise to herself is that
she will never be like her parents and that she will never let herself go through the hell that Chris
went through.

Ali senses an immediate shift in Ashlyn. The blonde has gone quiet for a few seconds and looks to
be in deep thought as she looks almost beyond Ali’s shoulder, the smile slowly dropping off her face.

Ashlyn is broken from her thoughts by Ali’s voice. “You ok there?”

“Yeah, sorry. I was just…” She trails off and lets out a small sigh. “I really hate hospitals.”

Ali can feel the heaviness pouring off of Ashlyn at the moment. She’s feeling so many things herself
about the blonde’s admission. She feels guilty for making Ashlyn go through this for that damn
bullet, she feels empathetic and understanding of how hospitals have probably been such a negative
aspect of the blonde’s life, she feels glad that Ashlyn has been so open with her just now, and above
all she feels the overwhelming urge to wrap her arms around her tightly. She settles her emotions
with the knowledge that she’ll at least be there for a while in the hospital to keep her company.

“Sorry, Ash. I know it’s probably really hard for you. I can promise that I’ll be there as soon as
possible and won’t leave until they have to kick me out because of hospital visiting hours.” Ali
promises sweetly. “I’ll be there.” She reiterates.

Ashlyn let’s Ali’s use of her nickname ease her. “Thanks. It really means a lot.” She says honestly
before adding exactly what else is on her mind right now. “You know, I really like when you call me
‘Ash’.”

“Yeah?” Ali asks a bit shyly.

“Yeah.” Ashlyn confirms. “I dunno, just makes me feel like we’re really connected somehow.
Maybe that’s weird. Is that weird?”

“Well if this whole situation doesn’t qualify as being connected, then I don’t know what does, Ash.”
Ali emphasizes the nickname with a smile, watching Ashlyn’s mood lift and her lips curl into a smile.
“This whole thing is probably weird…but, I love weird.”

“Oh reeeally?” Ashlyn raises an eyebrow playfully.

Ali laughs loudly. “Yeah, no. You’d have to get several drinks in me before you get any dirt in that
arena! And I’m not that much of a drinker.”

“Bummer.” Ashlyn says with a fake pout. “I’m not much of a drinker either, by the way.”

“Having alcoholics in the family really changes one’s perspective on things, doesn’t it?” Ali states
more than questions, knowing that she doesn’t drink much anymore mostly because of Kyle.

“It really does.” Ashlyn agrees.

There’s a comfortable, contemplative silence between them for a minute before Ashlyn decides to
break it.

“Do you have a lot of friends?” Ashlyn asks curiously.

Ali thinks about it for a second. “Eh, not really. I mean, I have a couple of friends that I suppose I’m
close to, but that’s about it these days. I used to be better about having people around me a lot, but
then I got really busy with working at the firm and for a while I mostly only socialized for work purposes. And my focus really went to Kyle and then this whole podcast thing, so all of those people just kind of fell out of my life. Only the ones that really mattered stayed I guess. Why do you ask?"

“Just curious really. You seem like a person who makes friends easily and has lots of friends.” Ashlyn replies.

“Nah. I think I’m too high maintenance to be the girl with tons of friends.” Ali shrugs.

“Fair enough.” Ashlyn says as she ponders Ali’s answer.

Ali notices the pensive look on the blonde’s face. “What?”

“Nothing. I just think it’s funny that I have never, and I mean never, made friends easily my entire life. Most people are or were just good acquaintances, but good friends? I could count them on one hand. And that includes Edith, my brother, and your brother. I love being around people, but I guess I’m just bad at it. Like, I’m too closed off a lot of the time to let people get close enough. I hate to admit it, but I definitely need people to put in serious time with me before I even think of letting down my walls.” Ashlyn admits.

Ali isn’t sure where the blonde is going with this. “That’s understandable. Why is that funny?”

“Because, you come in here and in no time at all you’re one of my closest friends already. A few conversations and I find myself willing to tell you anything. My whole life I haven’t done that and now… well, it’s just bizarre. Kind of chalked it up to you just being one of those magnetic people who makes friends easily.” Ashlyn shrugs her shoulders.

Ali is a bit flabbergasted by the weight of what Ashlyn has just said, but she feels like she can’t let the conversation get too intense. She doesn’t want to break the moment by making it overly serious. “Told you I was a charmer.” Ali winks. “So, you’re willing to tell me anything, huh?”

“Oh boy, got myself in trouble didn’t I?” Ashlyn laughs a bit. “Krieger wants the dirt! Alright… alright, do your worst.”

“Oh stop. It’s not like I’d ask you anything dirty or inappropriate!” Ali clarifies. “I was more going for deep.”

“Well, I’m waiting.” Ashlyn challenges.

“Ok.” Ali thinks for a minute. “What do you think about before you fall asleep at night?”

Ashlyn just raises an eyebrow at her and gives her a jokingly pointed look.

“Oh my god! That’s not what I was talking about!” Ali yells out, not realizing her question could technically be answered sexually. Her cheeks are bright red as she realizes. “So not what I meant!”

“Uh huh. Sure, Krieger.” Ashlyn teases her. “I’m just kidding. I know what you meant. Besides, if you recall one of our earlier conversations, I don’t even remember what a good lay feels like. So, I wasn’t going there anyway.” She laughs at the brunette who still looks completely flushed.

“Annnyway!” Ashlyn starts. “To answer your question. I often think about my grandma. She was everything that I aspire to be in life. I usually think about things she said and did, and sometimes what she would have done in a given situation. It makes me feel closer to her and like I can be strong. And it reminds me to be kind, and patient, and humble, and thankful for what I have at the end of the day no matter what life has thrown at me. All things she instilled in me.”
Ali smiles warmly. “I know what you mean. Sometimes, I think of my mother for a lot of those same reasons. Guess we’re lucky to have had such remarkable women in our lives.” She muses. “I wish I spent more time on those thoughts, but I really do let a lot of other things rule my mind at night. I always worry about Kyle even though I know he’s more than capable of taking care of himself. And I think about my work too. A certain case of mine really has me up and thinking a lot these days.” Ali finishes with an insinuating smile on her lips. Really she finds herself thinking about Ashlyn lately, not just before bed, but all the time. The blonde just has this hold on her. She’s still such a mystery in so many ways, an enigma that Ali is working hard to uncover. Saying that the case is on her mind is as close as she’ll allow herself to admitting it out loud though.

“Yeah, it’s not always good thoughts for me either.” Ashlyn commiserates, trying not to read into Ali’s last statement too much. “I did struggle a bit with PTSD after my tours. I got a lot of help and recovered well from it and all. Still though, sometimes a noise in the room or a smell will make me think about it. It’s not like I have a flashbacks or anything like that now, but it just brings my mind there and makes it hard to sleep.” She finishes, almost surprising herself at her admission.

“I can’t even imagine.” Ali says sincerely, marveling at Ashlyn’s strength yet again. She opens her mouth to tell the blonde how much she adores her strength, but she’s cut-off by the guard announcing that they have 5 minutes.

“Alright, lightening round!” Ashlyn says, changing the conversation. “Favorite movie?”

“Cinderella.” Ali quickly answers.

Ashlyn can’t help but chuckle. “Really?”

“Yes, really! Get over it. What’s yours?” Ali returns the question.

“Jaws.” Ashlyn replies and watches Ali give her a playful eye roll. “What?! I like all things shark and ocean!”

“Somehow that doesn’t surprise me that much.” Ali comments.

“What’s your favorite holiday movie?” Ashlyn asks.

“Oooh, tough one. Hmmm… it used to be A Christmas Story, but now I really like Elf.” Ali answers after a few moments.

“I love both of those movies!” Ashlyn says approvingly.


“Jaws.” Ashlyn replies with a cocky grin.

Ali can only shake her head in mock disdain and laugh.

“What can I say, I’m committed.” The blonde supplies.

They hear the guard open the door of the observation room, signaling that he’ll be out in no time to get Ashlyn. The blonde stands up slowly, being careful with her knee and Ali follows suit.

Ashlyn sighs, knowing she has one more thing she wants to say despite being apprehensive. The determination to be honest with Ali far outweighs her apprehension and her mouth is moving before she can think to stop it. “Hey, Alex. There’s one more thing I think about a lot lately before bed.”
“What’s that?” Ali asks curiously as she watches Ashlyn shift her weight slightly.

“I uh… I think about you. Because, well… you calm me and then I can sleep.” Ashlyn just puts it out there in plain and simple truth.

Ali is a bit stunned by the candidness. She’s still trying to process it when she sees the guard come out of the room, her attention going briefly in that direction before her eyes land back on Ashlyn. The blonde’s expression is clearly one of concern as she searches Ali’s face for a reaction. Still at a loss for words, she leans over and gives Ashlyn a quick hug, feeling some tension leave the blonde’s body. The strong feeling arms around her are enough to snap her out of it as they pull back from the brief contact. She feels her own truth at her lips as she watches the guard start to work on cuffing Ashlyn.

“Ash, when I said I think about the case…” She pauses, trying to think of a way to say it discretely in front of the guard, but Ashlyn cuts her off.

“I know, Alex. I could see it on your face.” Ashlyn gives Ali a knowing smile and watches the brunette smile shyly back. “So, see you Monday?”

“Count on it. I’ll be there.” Ali promises as the guard clicks the last cuff into place and makes sure Ashlyn can use her crutches. “Sleep well.” Ali says coyly and a bit giddy.

“I will. You too, Alex.” Ashlyn shoots her a dimpled smile as she hobbles outs the door.
It has been 5 days since her last visit with Ashlyn and Ali has been busier than ever. While she told Ashlyn that the appeal was ‘easy peasy’, it is much more complicated than that in actuality. Having been around the Massachusetts court system for quite some time, Ali knows that she just has to go through the motions to win the appeal, so technically she didn’t lie. It’s just that getting there means a lot of effort and paperwork, some of which requires her to put together a very convincing argument.

She starts by filing a motion for the court to make an exception regarding not having filed the appeal within 30 days of Ashlyn’s sentencing (the usual requirement), citing serious and previously unknown procedural issues with the confession. Knowing the court will appreciate already having all the paperwork if they choose to accept the appeal, she also puts together the appeal itself and a 20 page brief which outlines the issues in the case to go along with it. Ali is confident that the court will hear the appeal given that it’s fairly high profile and that the MA court system is fastidious about proper legal procedure, particularly when it comes to Miranda rights. It can take up to 6 months for the court to decide on the appeal, but Ali also motioned to expedite the appeal on the grounds that just over two years of Ashlyn’s sentence has already been served despite illegal procedure. So, she’s hoping it will be somewhere within the next 30 to 60 days that they hear from the court.

After going over the paperwork meticulously a few times, she’s satisfied with the final product and seals it in an envelope to officially file with the court on Monday. She knows that she wants to be properly rested to spend Monday with Ashlyn, so she takes Sunday to completely relax and refresh herself. First and foremost, that means sleeping in late on Sunday morning and then meeting Kyle for brunch.

Ali catches up on her social media while she sits outside of her favorite brunch spot waiting for Kyle. The early September air is warm, but still crisp, typical of a late summer day in New England. This is her favorite time of year as the summer transitions into early fall and the nights get cooler. Soon the days will cool down a bit as well, and the leaves will start changing into beautiful autumn colors that seem to soothe her soul. These next couple of months are the whole reason she loves living in New England and doesn’t think she’d ever be able to part with it. She only manages to like about 10 pictures on her Facebook feed before Kyle comes around the corner in dramatic fashion as usual.

“Alex! Babes, you look marvelous! Muah!” He shrieks out and leans down to kiss her cheek. “Get up and do a little turn for me.” He lifts her up off the bench by the hand and helps her twirl as he rests his hand under his chin for effect. “Those jeans fit you like a glove and that blouse is just perfection!”

Ali giggles at his antics. “Thanks, Ky! It’s amazing what good sleep and a long shower will do for you!”

“Yeah no kidding. You actually look more rested than I’ve seen you in over a month. What’s the occasion?” He replies in cheerily.
“I’m starving, so we’ll continue this inside after I get my coffee and food. Let’s go!” She practically drags him inside where they are seated at a booth right away.

The waitress quickly brings over coffee as they look over the menu. They each order omelets with toast and bacon, adding a sweet strawberry and cream filled French toast to split.

“Ok, now that food is on the way, are you going to tell me what I can attribute this good mood of yours to?” Kyle asks, before sassily adding “Oooh, did you go on a ‘date’?” He makes air quotations with his hands as he says ‘date’, making it clear that he’s asking whether she got laid.


“Well, excuuuuse me! You have a slight glow, just saying!” Kyle defends himself.

“There’s no real reason. I just finally finished up the appeal for Ashlyn, ready to file it Monday. So, I got some good sleep last night and am just feeling good about it.” Ali explains casually.

“That’s great! I’m excited that you’re finally going to file it.” Kyle replies happily. “I know it’s probably a really long road ahead, but it feels relieving to be at the start of it somehow.” He thinks on it. “I can’t tell you what it means to me.”

“I know what you mean. I’m just as invested as you are at this point.” Ali admits honestly, she’s always been honest with Kyle.

Kyle chooses to table it for now. “So, how is our girl doing? I haven’t gotten an update in over a week since you’ve been living like a hermit.”

“She’s good. She looks and sounds a lot better than when I first started visiting. We’ve come a long way I guess. I don’t know, she looks like maybe she’s actually hopeful a little bit. I feel like I get to understand her better every time we meet.” Ali tries to convey it to him as best she can. “And wow is she one committed woman. You weren’t kidding when you said she was a badass. I told her like two weeks ago that we needed the bullet that is still in her leg as evidence, and she already put on some crazy performance and is scheduled to have surgery to remove it tomorrow!” Ali recounts incredulously.

“Whew, that is fast. She really doesn’t mess around.” Kyle agrees. “You know, one of the first things I learned about Harris is that she hates hospitals. Made it all the more meaningful that she stayed by my side until I could get discharged. I’m sure this won’t be easy for her. I really wish she didn’t have to go it alone.” Kyle expresses with concern.

“I actually just learned that myself. She told me when we were talking about the surgery.” Ali replies. “You can relax a bit though, she’s not going it completely alone. I’m allowed to visit her as her lawyer and promised I’d there for all the visiting hour time until she gets to leave. So, I’m on it!”

“You really are the best, you know that?” Kyle gives her a big smile and pauses for a moment. “You’re really taken with her, aren’t you?” He finally goes in for the kill and just puts it out there bluntly.

Ali is saved from the moment by the arrival of their food as the waitress sets down their plates and refills their coffees. “This looks so good!” She remarks, grateful for the distraction.

Kyle doesn’t speak though. He just folds arms a bit and makes it obvious that he’s waiting for a reply.

Ali knows she won’t get away without answering, so as usual, she goes for truth. “Well, she’s
probably the most interesting person I’ve ever met. Something about her just draws me in.”

“And…” Kyle prompts, knowing there is more as he watches his sister clearly thinking about what to say next with a contemplative look on her face.

Ali sighs. “And… are there feelings of some kind there? Honestly, maybe yes.” She watches Kyle give her a little smirk, but quickly speaks up before he can say anything. “But, this whole situation is complicated and they are feelings that I really can’t disentangle right now and that I won’t even think of disentangling. I’m her lawyer and I have a job to do. A fucking hard one at that. So, there’s no room for anything else or any thinking beyond that. I’m her lawyer and her friend, that’s the only thing there is room for until this whole thing is over. And who knows when that will be or how exactly this will turn out. Only so much of this is in my hands.” She states with finality.

Kyle nods in understanding. He has known for weeks that something has been going on with his sister; her level of commitment to this case and the way she talks about Harris is different than he’s ever experienced with her. He knows she’s right though, now is not the time to delve into it. “Well, Alex, I’m just going to say that she’s in the best hands out there. I’m proud of you and, like I said before, so thankful. Harris means the world to me.”

“Me too.” Ali gives him one last bit of honesty before getting away from the subject. “Now let’s eat already!”

Ali feels light and happy as she leaves the clerk’s office, having filed the appeal on Monday morning as planned. She quickly stops home to change out of her suit, knowing she wants to be as comfortable as possible for the long day at the hospital. She chooses some black leggings, a casual cream-colored long-sleeve blouse and some high top sneakers. Her hair is loose over her shoulders and she’s looking comfortable but stylish. It’s only 9am and Ashlyn likely won’t be out of surgery until sometime around 10am, but Ali rushes over to the hospital anyway, wanting to be there as soon as possible like she promised. She knows she won’t get to see her until she’s assigned a room with a prison guard in place. So, she grabs a coffee and chooses a seat right by the nursing station, asking to be informed immediately when Ashlyn has a room and can have visitors. She figures she’ll be sitting there until at least 11am, but is surprised when a nurse comes over at 10:15am to tell her that Ashlyn is ready for visitors.

“They assigned Ms. Harris a room with guard for recovery, so she’s not actually awake yet. But she is able to have a visitor now if you’d like to go in.” The nurse explains. “I believe the procedure is that your bag and person will be searched before entry and any time you leave and re-enter.”

“Yes, I’ll go in.” Ali answers immediately. “I’m her lawyer, so I’m familiar with the procedure.”

The nurse nods and leads Ali through several long hallways before finally pointing to the correct room, which couldn’t be more obvious with the guard posted outside the door. There’s a couple nurses sitting at a station near the room, but otherwise it’s very quiet.

Ali approaches the guard sitting on a chair outside of the closed hospital room door. She notices right away that the door has no window and is a bit surprised that it isn’t open or that the guard isn’t sitting just inside the door. Then again, Ashlyn is only a medium security prisoner with a good behavior record, so she attributes it to a combination of that and the guard’s likely laziness as the guy sits there reading a book.
“Um, hi. I’m Ali Krieger, Ashlyn Harris’ lawyer.” Ali announces herself and watches the guard scramble to close his book and stand up. He takes a folded piece of paper out of his front pocket and looks at it quickly.

“Oh, well, looks like you’re the only approved visitor on this list. So, easy day for me.” He winks at Ali almost sleazily and it takes everything in her not to give him a dirty look. “I’ll just need your license for identification and to look into your purse real quick. And, doesn’t look like you’re hiding anything in those tights, so no need for the pat-down.” He remarks like he’s doing her a favor. Ali is a bit surprised the idiot didn’t pat her down just to feel her up, but she gives him a polite smile. “Plus, you’re the lawyer, so I don’t have to worry about you.” He adds with a smirk.

Ali always internally laughs at these comments. It’s amusing to her that people give lawyers such a bad rap all the time, but in important situations, they get a lot of trust. She watches him quickly look through her purse and give it back to her once he’s satisfied with his search. “All set Ms. Krieger. You’re good to go.” He motions to the door.

“Thank you.” She replies quickly and makes her way through the door, closing it behind her softly. Ali had been feeling excited at the thought that she’d be spending the day with Ashlyn. The flutter of anticipation rushes through her as she walks into the room, but it’s quickly tempered as soon as her eyes fall upon the blonde in the hospital bed. She’d forgotten to prepare herself for the reality of the situation. Ashlyn’s eyes are closed and she is a bit pale, oxygen tubes run under her nose, an IV and a couple other monitor wires are attached to her. Ali feels a little guilt creep up, knowing she is responsible for the blonde’s current state. Still, she takes in Ashlyn’s face, her chiseled-but-soft features and lets herself get caught up in the natural beauty of the woman.

“Hi there.” A voice across the room startles Ali a bit, breaking her out of her thoughts. She looks up to see a nurse standing and typing at a computer station in the corner of the room.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t see you there.” Ali replies with a slight wave, feeling a bit foolish.

“Don’t worry about it!” The woman says cheerily. “I’m Diane, the nurse on call for the next 6 hours. So, if you need anything, I’m the one to call on.”

Ali nods in response as Diane continues on. “She should be awake and coming out of the sedation any time now. I’m just hanging in here for a little bit until then to keep track of her vitals and try to get her to eat some plain toast. We’ll give her some pain medicine and she should be good for a while.”

“Great, thank you so much.” Ali says appreciatively, feeling like the woman was treating her as if she was the family member of any regular patient and not the lawyer of a prison inmate.

The nurse goes back to typing and Ali finally approaches the bed, reaching down to stroke Ashlyn’s tattooed forearm lightly. Her eyes follow the patterns of ink up her arm, stopping when she notices a little bit of black ink on the top of the blonde’s left shoulder peeking out of the hospital gown. She smirks when she realizes Ashlyn was trying to tell her about this tattoo when she stopped her. She just manages to make out that it’s a word when she hears Ashlyn’s voice.

“Alex. You’re here.” Ashlyn gets out in a raspy mumble.

Ali’s eyes dart to the blonde’s face, meeting her glassy but stunning hazel eyes. “Sure am. How are you, Ash?”

Ashlyn just gives her a big smile as the nurse across the room announces “Ah, there she is!”
Ali watches Ashlyn’s eyes close again as the nurse takes a round of vitals. “She might be kinda out of it for a just a little bit, but it’ll pass pretty quickly.” Diane warns her.

“You’re a sight for a sore knee.” Ashlyn is looking at Ali again and slightly laughing at her own bad joke.

Ali snorts a bit as she laughs. “So lame, Harris.”

“Well you are.” Ashlyn protests. “You look nice. Sporty and classy, good combo.” She gets out before her eyes flutter closed again.

“I swear they put truth serum in the anesthesia.” Diane laughs along.

“Well, at least she said I look good!” Ali replies jokingly. She watches Ashlyn’s eyes until she sees them open again. This time the blonde is looking back at her with a warm intensity.

“I love you, Alex.” Ashlyn says in a quiet sweet voice.

Ali’s eyes go wide and her heart practically beats out of her chest as she tries to compose herself. Out of the corner of her eye she sees Diane’s eyes go wide too as the woman politely retreats back to the corner of the room. It gives Ali just enough time to recover and come back to the reality of the situation.

“Easy there, Casanova. That’s the drugs talking.” Ali keeps her response light, in complete contrast to the rush she’s feeling inside right now.


Ali is at a complete loss for words. All she can do is look into Ashlyn’s sincere eyes. Even though the blonde’s statement has been tempered by the explanation, it’s the way she’s looking at Ali that seems to mean so much more. She’s pretty sure no one has ever rendered her this speechless before. Luckily, Diane comes to her rescue.

“The podcast Ali Krieger?” The nurse asks from across the room.

“That’s me.” Ali nods.

“Well, she’s right then. You are amazing!” Diane says kindly.

“Oh, um, thank you. That’s nice of you to say.” Ali blushes, feeling a little bit embarrassed now.

“Told you.” Ashlyn smiles tiredly.


“Never.” Ashlyn says resolutely.

Diane makes her way back over to them now that the potentially awkward moment has been diffused. “How’s your pain, Ashlyn?”

“Actually. It’s hurting a lot.” Ashlyn answers, a bit embarrassed for not being tougher in front of Ali.

“That’s typical. You’re coming down from the sedative. I’m going to get you some toast to eat so you don’t get nauseated with the pain medication I’m about to give you.” The nurse replies. “You should feel a bit better after that.” She adds as she leaves the room.
Ashlyn winces as her hand searches for Ali’s, finally finding it and giving the brunette’s hand a squeeze. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

Ali watches Ashlyn squeeze her hand, her heart rate picking up again as she squeezes back. “Wouldn’t be anywhere else, Ash.” She says genuinely before pointing towards the window, “Besides, that view is amaazing.”

Ashlyn lifts her head a bit, looking at the Charles River with the Museum of Science situated right across the water. “Whew, yeah, that is a solid view. Only the best inmates get that!” Ashlyn winks. “I told them my lawyer was a big deal and needed top quality accommodations if she was expected to visit me here.”

Ali rolls her eyes playfully as she watches Ashlyn’s eyes close again.

Diane comes back in just a couple minutes later, waking Ashlyn up and adjusting the bed so she can sit up a bit. She hands the blonde the toast, which she devours in seconds. “Woah there. Hungry?” The nurse jokes.

“Yeah, well, if you saw what they pass off as bread in prison, you’d wolf that down too!” Ashlyn replies.

Diane and Ali both laugh. “Alright, in that case, I’m gonna have food service bring you up a sandwich or something.” Diane shakes her head. “Guess hospital food isn’t the worse after all.” She makes them all laugh as she gives Ashlyn pain medication via the IV line. “This might make you groggy for the first hour or two, but you’ll feel a lot better.” She explains. “Looks like you’ll be good for a while in here, so just press the button if you need me and I’ll be back to check in off and on.”

“Thank you.” Ashlyn says as Ali also says “Thanks, Diane.”

“Alone at last!” Ashlyn proclaims as the door closes.

“Settle down there, Harris. You already professed your love for me in front of the nurse, what more is there?” Ali sasses back while trying to keep a straight face for effect.

“Hmmmph.” Ashlyn pretends to think about it. “Well, for starters, I’m not wearing any underwear under this sexy hospital-issued negligee.” She says waggling her eyebrows.

Ali can’t hold it in and laughs so hard that she audibly snorts. She has gotten to know the blonde’s sarcastic wit pretty well during their visits, but this loopy and lighter humor is new to her and she can’t help but find it endearing. It makes her wonder what else she’s going to discover today with plenty of time to kill and an arguably less patronizing environment.

“Ali Krieger thinks I’m funny!” Ashlyn declares with the excitement of a five year old as she fist pumps.

“Yeah, you’re funny. And cocky. But I’ll take it.” Ali replies still laughing a bit.

They settle into a quiet moment as their laughter dies down and Ali can see that Ashlyn’s eyelids are really heavy. “Hey, you.” She says quietly leaning on the bed rail just a bit. “How about resting a little so that medicine can do its thing.”

“Oh come on, Alex. We’re supposed to be spilling dirt, remember?” Ashlyn whines even though she feels completely drained.

“We have over 8 hours and also tomorrow. I can assure you, there will be plenty of time for dirt.
Sleep, Ash…. don’t make me call Diane back in here to lay down the law.” Ali threatens.

“Ok, fine. But you have to relax too then.” Ashlyn motions with her head to the comfortable looking chair right beside her bed.

“Deal!” Ali replies as she plops into the chair.

“Well now I can’t really see you.” Ashlyn complains as she realizes the bed rail is mostly obscuring her view of the Brunette.

Ali just sighs jokingly and pushes the button to get the rail to come down. “You don’t need to see me if you’re sleeping, but, better?”

“Better.” Ashlyn replies with a yawn.

“Nighty night!” Ali says cheerily.

Ashlyn smirks and shakes her head a bit, but can’t fight her eyes closing any longer. A couple minutes pass and she’s trying to relax and give into the heavy weariness, but with the sudden lack of conversation she’s become aware of all the other sounds in the room. The low beep of the heart monitor, the barely audible tap of the IV drip, the muffled voices of nurses in the hallway through the closed door, even the almost imperceptible buzz of the overhead fluorescent light. The background noise that most people wouldn’t even notice is suddenly deafening to her as she feels herself tense up, a slight panic setting in.

Ali hears Ashlyn let out a couple deep breaths and notices the blonde’s furrowed brow. “You ok, Ash?” she asks as she lightly touches the blonde’s hand. The quickness with which Ashlyn’s hand reaches to grab hers almost startles her a bit.

“Yeah… just… don’t let go?” Ashlyn begs in a desperate whisper that practically breaks Ali’s heart.

The brunette quickly entwines their fingers, using her thumb to stroke Ashlyn’s hand soothingly. “Promise. It’s ok, I’m here. Just rest.”

Ashlyn let’s out one more deep breath and focuses on nothing but the gentle pressure of Ali’s thumb rubbing slow rhythmic circles on the top of her hand, feeling herself slowly calm down.

Ali watches her thumb move over the blonde’s hand as she studies the woman’s neatly trimmed nails, slightly freckled knuckles, and smooth skin. She’s broken out of it a couple minutes later when she hears a soft snore escape Ashlyn’s mouth. She leans her head back into the chair and smiles a bit. She had planned to catch up on social media and emails and maybe text Kyle a bit while Ashlyn slept. Instead, her phone forgotten on her lap, she just watches Ashlyn sleep.
Regale Me

Chapter Notes

This hospital stay is a very unique situation for Ali and Ashlyn in that they won't find time like this again before this whole legal process goes down. Things are heating up in this story in more ways than one, but I'm choosing to flesh out the connection between them for a little bit here. So... I hope you like hospitals, we're gonna be here for a couple chapters :) 

Ashlyn opens her eyes slowly, her head feeling a little foggy as she looks around a bit remembering where she is. Her hand feels warm and she looks down to see fingers entwined with her own, a baby blue polish on the nails. Her eyes travel up the arm belonging to the hand and settle on Ali Krieger with eyes closed, mouth slightly agape, head tilted back against the chair in a peaceful slumber. Ashlyn’s heart jumps a bit and that jittery feeling settles deep in her stomach again. She looks back down at their gripped hands, feeling the warm static-like energy where they are connected. Ali is like a magnet and she’s like a piece of iron, her skin practically jumping to meet the brunette’s touch with an energy running between them to stay pressed together like it was a law of physics. That’s the best way she can describe what it has been like since the very first touch.

Ashlyn’s eyes move to study Ali’s face again, taking in the little lines near the corners of her eyes and mouth. The same lines that crinkle up when the brunette smiles, lighting up the room. This has to be the most beautiful woman she has ever laid eyes on, but it’s so much deeper than that. She lets out a soft sigh and drops her head back onto the pillow lightly, looking up at the white drop-ceiling tiles. This woman makes her feel things, so many things. Some of which she’s never quite felt before. Ali brings out her playful side, her blunt honest side, her carefree side, her vulnerable side, her can’t possibly keep a secret from her side, and her romantic side that wants to take her on a perfect date where she wraps her up in her arms at the end of the night and never lets go. She feels like she’s been fumbling around in the dark for a long time and suddenly Ali comes along and turns on a switch just like that. A bright light flooding in that, right now, can only mean one thing…she’s is trouble, so much fucking trouble. She has never had this much trouble holding her feelings and emotions in check before. “Ali is your friend. Be cool, this is good.” She reminds herself in her head before squeezing the brunette’s hand in hopes of waking her up.

Ali feels her hand being squeezed and wakes up in a bit of startle, worried that Ashlyn is in pain or something else. She didn’t intend to fall asleep, but found herself drifting off watching the blonde rest. “Ash! You ok?” She says a bit anxiously, standing up quickly and leaning over the bed a bit as she studies the blonde’s face.

“Woah, calm down. I’m good, just wanted your company.” Ashlyn shoots Ali a dimpled grin.

“Where’s the fire, Krieger?”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to fall asleep on you and then I woke up in a frenzy.” Ali smiles back shyly, feeling a little foolish.

“Well, relax. I’m glad you got to rest, cause now you have to entertain me!” Ashlyn says matter-of-factly.

Ali laughs a bit, still in awe of how this woman can make her go from nervous to relaxed in mere
moments. “Right. How about you eat that sandwich they dropped off for you before we start the endless rounds of tic-tac-toe?” She says watching the blonde’s eyes light up at the word sandwich.

“Sandwich, hell yes. Tic-tac-toe, nope!” Ashlyn replies, reaching for the sandwich that Ali is already handing to her and quickly taking a bite. “Soo good.” She mumbles with her mouth full. “I believe we agreed to spilling the relationship dirt up in here, so, regale me Alex!” She demands after she swallows the first bite.

“Pretty sure we agreed that you would spill the dirt first and I would reciprocate. I’m a lawyer. I remember the important details.” Ali sasses pointedly.

“Yeah, but I just had surgery.” Ashlyn whines convincingly with a pout, the sandwich almost gone already.

“Alright, alright. No pouting!” Ali says as she sits back down in the chair and turns it to face Ashlyn’s bed more. As pathetic as it is, she can’t stand to see sadness on the blonde’s face even if it’s just in jest. “So, you want the serious intense stuff or the fun stuff?”

Ashlyn smirks for a second as she realizes how easily she got her way and then contemplates Ali’s question. “Oh I want it all. I guess maybe the serious stuff first so we can end in a good place?”

“Makes sense to me.” Ali shrugs, already in disbelief at what she knows she’s about to reveal and how she doesn’t feel that nervous about it like she always thought she’d be.

Ashlyn turns her body as much on its side as her immobilized leg will allow and stuffs a pillow under her back to help keep her in that position so she can face Ali properly. Ali follows suit and leans in a bit so there is a comfortable, but appropriately intimate space between them given the nature of the conversation.

“I started dating my first and only boyfriend, Brian, my junior year in high school.” Ali dives right in. “He was that all-American looking guy with brown hair, blue eyes, and a good body. I mean, picture the guys you’d probably find in like Seventeen magazine back then and that was Brian. He was on the swim team and really popular. I can’t say I was super popular in high school, but with soccer, I was pretty well known and had friends in different circles. Anyway, our friends kind of forced us together and I wasn’t all that sure about it, but eventually gave in and started going out with him. At the time, I guess I really didn’t have interest in dating like my friends did. I felt pressure though, so I just went with it.” She pauses to see that Ashlyn is listening intently.

“He was sweet and doting and all that stuff you want a boyfriend to be. I wanted to be into him, I really did. I just wasn’t though. It never felt right. I would have to remind myself over and over again in my head that I should like kissing him and being close to him. I mean, I played the part of being a good girlfriend just fine I thought. He was happy and on the surface we seemed like the perfect couple. It was more internally that I felt like I was playing this role. And, it went on through my senior year of high school. It got harder and harder as he pushed more and more for us to physically get further, and I would just maintain this boundary and push him away. He wasn’t an ass about it or anything and was usually respectful, he just always tried to push things a bit and made it clear what he wanted.”

Ashlyn feels herself internally cringing at where this might be going and is starting to regret asking for the serious stuff. She gives Ali a soft smile and stays silent so the brunette can continue.

“I let it slip to a couple of my close friends one night that I still hadn’t slept with him and they kind of went ballistic. They couldn’t fathom how I could be with this perfect good looking guy and not want to have sex with him. So, then I felt so dumb and upset that there was something wrong with me
because I didn’t want to. I felt pressured again and convinced myself that I was just nervous about it and that I needed to just rip the proverbial band-aid off. So, prom night rolls around and I promise myself that no matter what, this is the night I go for it. We end up in the backseat of Brian’s parents’ Land Rover in the parking lot of a friend’s house where the after-party was.” Ali let’s out a sigh, still feeling stupid about it after all these years.

“You don’t have to tell me.” Ashlyn speaks up seeing the sadness creeping into the brunette’s eyes. It’s practically killing her to maintain eye contact, but she is going to give Ali her undivided attention no matter what.

“No, I want to. Feels good to finally tell someone.” Ali replies quietly.

“Wait, you’ve never told anyone? Like at all?” Ashlyn asks, feeling surprised, sad, and also incredibly special.

Ali just shakes her head no and continues. “Actually, I need to back track a bit. So, about 5 months into dating Brian, we were at this party where everyone was drinking and playing spin the bottle. So fucking typical really. Long story short, this girl Haylie from my soccer team spins and it lands on me. It was the first girl-girl spin that night and I figured we’d just hug or whatever like had happened at prior parties. But then the guys start cheering ‘kiss, kiss, kiss!’ and Haylie just shrugs at me like she’s entertaining the idea. And, Ash, I get this complete rush at the thought of it because it hits me right then and there how attractive this girl is. Like a damn epiphany. So, completely unlike me, I don’t even waste another second before I just lean over and kiss the hell out of her. She matched the intensity right back and it was that thrill that I had been waiting for. We get snapped out of it by the guys all cheering, Brian included, and I can’t even tell you how scared and embarrassed I felt in that moment. And as good as it was, I just chalked it up to being tipsy and blocked it all out and forced myself to forget it.”

Ashlyn nods in understanding when Ali looks up at her to make sure the brunette knows she’s listening.

“So, back to the Land Rover on prom night. It was just all wrong. I mean, I’m sure all first times hurt a bit and are fumbling and awkward, but it was so much more than that. His face was prickly, and his hands were rough, and he felt so heavy. Don’t get me wrong, he was trying to be sweet and gentle and romantic and all of that. I wanted to feel that euphoria that everyone was talking about, but all I felt was dirty, and wrong, and disgusted with myself. And when it was all over and I’m lying there just wanting to jump out of my skin, Brian says ‘You hated that, didn’t you?’ I just start crying because I don’t know what else to say when he hits me with ‘I knew you would, but I just had to see for myself. I just had to try. I knew it the day you kissed Haylie at that party and the way your eyes always linger on the girls we’re hanging with. I’ve known all along that you like girls, but I hoped that tonight would fix it. Guess not. I think we’re done here.’ He just got dressed and left me there crying in the car.”

Ashlyn quickly reaches out to squeeze Ali’s forearm that is resting on the bed. “I don’t even know what to say. I am so sorry, Alex. That is one of the most horrible things I’ve ever heard.” She says gently, genuinely upset that this would happen to anyone, let alone Ali. “Now I just want to go find that guy and cut his dick off.”

Ali let’s out a small laugh. “No thanks, Harris. I’d rather not have to get you off of yet another criminal charge, thank you very much.”

“Fair enough. But just say the word…” Ashlyn replies to keep things as light as they can be.

Ali smiles and continues. “Needless to say, that fucked me up for a while. It wasn’t even the sex
thing. I mean, I knew what I was getting into with that even if it was a bad experience. It was someone seeing and knowing this part of me that I didn’t know about or realize yet. And then using it to try and change me and hurt me on top of it all...it was too much. After finally pulling myself together, which took months, I worked hard at being more attuned to what I was feeling inside. I swore that I would never let someone know me better than I knew myself ever again. And while maybe that doesn’t sound so bad... so far, it’s led me to a bunch of short and superficial relationships because I am always afraid of letting someone get close enough to see things in me that I don’t. I always blame it on my career and being busy, but that’s just a cover.” She finishes with such blunt truth that she even shocks herself as she hears the words out loud.

Ashlyn is trying to find the right words to console a somber-looking Ali when Diane walks in and interrupts them. “How’s the patient?” She asks cheerily. “I see you made quick work of that sandwich. Want me to get you something else to eat?”

“I’m feeling ok pain wise. I actually kinda have to pee. And I’m in no position to turn down food!” Ashlyn quickly answers, making Ali chuckle.

“Ok then! Let me get that heart monitor disconnected since you don’t need that now. Then we’ll get you up to pee. And here’s the menu for today so you can tell me what you want to eat.” The nurse explains as she hands Ashlyn a piece of paper.

Diane starts to move Ashlyn’s hospital gown down her shoulders a bit and Ali finds herself watching it get lower and lower on the blonde’s chest. She finally snaps out of it as the skin gets paler and less freckled as the very top of her breasts are revealed. “Oh, I uh… I’ll just step out for a minute.” She says shyly.

Ashlyn just smirks a bit smugly. “Chill out, you can stay. Nothing in here that we all haven’t seen before, right?”

“Or see like a million times a day!” Diane adds with a laugh.

Ali just sits there awkwardly and averts her eyes wishing she had the guts not to as Diane finishes disconnecting the monitor and pulls the gown back up.

‘Such a baby.’ Ashlyn mouths silently and rolls her eyes at Ali once they make eye contact again, making the brunette smile and relax a bit.

“I’m going with the grilled cheese, tomato soup, caesar salad and a ginger ale.” Ashlyn says handing the menu back to Diane.

“You got it!” The nurse replies and then explains to Ashlyn that they’ll use a walker with her support to get her into the bathroom. She’s allowed to put a little weight on her leg, but it just might be sore. Diane gets Ashlyn up pretty quickly and with only one wince from the blonde. Ali is half relieved that Diane quickly holds the back of Ashlyn’s gown closed before she can get an eyeful of the blonde’s ass. It’s not long before Ashlyn is covered back up in bed again.

“Ok, I’m going to go put in that food order and I’ll check in again at some point.” Diane announces and leaves.

Ashlyn turns right to Ali. “Who knew Alex was so bashful?!”

“I am not!” Ali protests. “I was being respectful!”

“Uh huh.” Ashlyn says with a wink. “Now if I could just get a burger, I’d be in heaven!” She adds, thinking about that grilled cheese. “Anyway, seriously, back to our conversation. I can understand
where you’re coming from. That experience was awful and it’s not surprising that it changed you and made you more careful.”

“And yet, easy.” Ali chuckles with a devious smile. “Ready for the college years?”

“I’m all ears!” Ashlyn replies rubbing her hands together jokingly and adjusting to face Ali as much as she can just like before.

“So after a summer of soul searching, I get to Penn State and I am all about trying new things and just being open so that I get to know myself more honestly if that makes sense. I start to entertain the possibility of being with a girl and it’s a big step that’s exciting but really scary to me. The whole thing with Brian was still on my mind though, so I really just tried to stay away from all things relationship for a little while. I focused on school, soccer and making new friends. And then there was Hadley.” Ali pauses with a little smirk on her face.

“Ooooh, Haaadley.” Ashlyn teases in a sing-song voice.

Ali crinkles her face a bit and shakes her head. “Ugh, you are never going to let me live this one down. Hadley was, um… the senior goalkeeper on my soccer team that year.” Ali mumbles quietly.

“HA!” Ashlyn can’t help but laugh emphatically. “Of course!”

“Annnnyway! She was attractive and cocky about it. She was confident and flirted with me relentlessly for months. I guess that’s what I needed at the time. Someone strong and confident enough to make up for my shyness and uncertainty about everything. I dated her for two months and she was the first woman I had sex with. While I’m sure I was a fumbling idiot at first, she didn’t seem to mind and she was patient with me. It was everything opposite of how it was with Brian. Hadley was proud to show me off and she knew how to make me feel good about myself. A really eye-opening experience and a great person to help me break out of my shell.” Ali finishes.

“Sounds like a great first year in college. Can I ask why you guys broke up?” Ashlyn says curiously.

“Well she was about to graduate and head back home to Michigan. While we were really attracted to each other and had a whole lot of fun together, there wasn’t much more to it than that. It just wasn’t something that either of us could see keeping up with. So, we just ended it mutually.” Ali replies.

“Cool. If you’re gonna have a break-up, I guess that’s about as drama-free as it gets.” Ashlyn says, watching Ali agree with a head nod. “I wouldn’t exactly call a two month relationship being ‘easy’ though.” She gives the brunette a mocking look.

“Oh, I was getting to that. I really came out of my shell after Hadley. Like I told you before, I would pretty much be all up on any girl that would hit on me. There was a Shirley, a Pam, a Courtney, an Erica, a Georgia, a Krystal, two Emilys, and one girl that I embarrassingly admit I never got a name for… all one nighters. Well, spread over 4 years, but still.” Ali cringes a bit after admitting it out loud.

“Well ok then. Damn, Alex, coming out of your shell indeed.” Ashlyn teasingly raises an eyebrow and Ali buries her face in her hands. “Relax, I totally messing you and honestly not judging, promise.” She reassures the brunette.

“Well college definitely got it out of my system. I felt like I finally figured myself out and things have been a lot quieter on that front. I’ve had like 4 or 5 dates with three people since then. This girl Stacey in law school. A barista from Starbucks named Lily and, most recently, an accountant friend of Kyle’s named Jackie. That was like 4 months ago. They’ve all been great dates, just I don’t
know…I couldn’t see myself getting anywhere with any of them. I guess I don’t see much point in dragging things out if you know it’s not going anywhere. I think it’s also been hard for people to understand how much I’ve always put into my career.” Ali looks up to find Ashlyn listening intently.

“You call that dirt, Krieger?” Ashlyn raises an eyebrow. “Gotta say I was expecting more scandal.” She jokes.

“Well, it feels scandalous enough for me!” Ali plays back.

Ashlyn chuckles a bit and then gets serious. “Really though, thanks for sharing all that with me. I know some of it was probably really hard for you to talk about.” She reaches out and runs her hand up Ali’s forearm lightly.

Ali can feel the goosebumps forming on her skin at the blonde’s touch. “Funny thing, it wasn’t nearly as hard to talk about as I thought it might be. I find you really easy to talk to.”

“Well, just the same, thank you.” Ashlyn repeats sincerely. “I find it really easy to talk to you too.”

Ali gives the blonde a devilish grin. “That’s perfect! Cause you owe me a whole lot of dirt after all that.” She pulls her legs up onto the chair, crossing them and leaning forward to place both of her arms on the bed before finally resting her chin on her hands as she lightly bats her eyelashes for effect. “I’m waiting, Harris.”
Maternity Burgers

Chapter Notes

I have a pretty busy weekend, so I'm leaving you with this until Monday. However, it's like three chapters worth! And on that note, let's blow the doors off this thing a bit...

Ashlyn can’t help but laugh as Ali bats her eyelashes dramatically. “Alright, alright, you definitely earned the dirt.” She lays her head on the pillow and gets comfortable, still turned to face Ali as much as possible. “The high school guy was Phil, but he wasn’t my boyfriend or anything. I was popular because of soccer and he was popular because of basketball, so people pretty much knew we’d be prom king and queen. I really didn’t even know him that well and I hadn’t dated any guys before him. Anyway, he asked me out on a date figuring we would probably go to prom together and he wanted to ‘get to know me’. We went out twice before prom night and he kissed me a few times, but we were never anything official. I can’t say I really felt anything for him and deep down I think I sort of knew I was harboring a little crush on this female co-worker at the movie theater I worked at.”


“Yep, three time gold star usher of the month!” Ashlyn says sarcastically, making Ali giggle and give a little whoop.

“I knew damn well what Phil was expecting on prom night if we went together. I guess, like you, I was tired of not understanding what people were going so crazy about. And, if I’m being brutally honest, I have some really dark moments sometimes. That was one of those times. I really didn’t value myself enough to think I deserved anything or anyone special, so I didn’t have much reason to wait. So, I ended up letting myself getting fucked in a crappy Holiday Inn by a guy who just saw me as another notch in his belt. It hurt like hell and it made me even more depressed and confused.”

Ashlyn shrugs. “I guess there isn’t much to say about it beyond that.”

Ali reaches out and starts softly playing with the blonde’s fingers. “Sorry, Ash. You were right when you said no one should have to go through something like that. I guess the bright side is that we can empathize with each other and understand.”

“Agreed.” Ashlyn says squeakily as she clears her throat, completely losing her focus at Ali’s touch and trying to gain some composure. “Good thing about West Point was that it was so brutal right away that I didn’t have time to dwell on it or be so trapped in my own mind anymore. That’s what happens when you get pushed so hard physically you feel like you’re gonna die.” She chuckles a bit.

“Hmmm, I’d say that I should have gone the military route, but that sounds pretty awful actually.” Ali considers it.

“Eh, you get used to the physicality of it pretty fast and then it gets easier. So, moving on, my first year at West Point I met Oakley.” Ashlyn recounts. “She was my first female relationship.”

“Oakley huh? Sounds kind of exotic. Like one of those people that’s automatically hot just because of their name.” Ali teases a bit.
“She was pretty damn hot.” Ashlyn agrees with a smirk. “Oakley was her last name though, that’s just what she went by. It’s not all that uncommon in the military. Her real name was Beth, but I never called her that.”

“So, were you in like the same unit or something? Bonded over push-ups perhaps?” Ali probes lightly.

“Uh, not exactly.” Ashlyn says a bit shyly. “She was uh, well, she was technically my CO.”

“CO?” Ali asks, not exactly sure what it stands for.

“Commanding Officer.” Ashlyn answers quickly with a slight eyebrow raise.

It takes Ali a second to process. “Your commanding officer? Oh…Oooooh! Oh wow! Holy crap!” She blurts out, her mouth open wide in shock.

“Yeeeeeeeah.” Ashlyn says with playful wide eyes. “Probably not the best idea.”

“Scandal!” Ali jests with a grin. “How the hell did that happen?”

“Well, for like the first couple months she pretty much pushed me harder than anyone else and treated me like crap kinda. Then one day she calls me into her office and says she sees a lot of potential in me as a soldier because of how I never back down or quit. She says I should apply to be the first female in the Ranger training program because she thinks I have what it takes to make it. And she offered to help me by putting me through some of the workout programs she thought I’d need.” Ashlyn explains. “Of course I took her up on it. I felt so accomplished for just about the first time ever; that I had pushed myself to be good enough on my own, I don’t know.” She pauses to see Ali listening attentively, the corners of the brunette’s mouth curled up into the slightest start of a smile.

“So we worked out together for a few weeks, usually after dinner when there was a free block for me. I really grew to like her a lot, the way she knew when and how to push me. One night it was pouring rain and we were out in an obstacle course. We were so covered in mud by the time we were done that we went to the nearest shower, which was a small locker room type building near the course that the men used during the day. We each jump in a shower and to make a long story short… next thing I know, she’s in my shower kissing me like nothing I had ever experienced. Well, and then some, cause we sure as hell didn’t stop there. Talk about putting the pieces together quickly and realizing what the hell you’ve been missing.” Ashlyn reminisces on it a bit.

“That’s one hell of a first time with a woman!” Ali says, still a bit shocked by it. “Actually sounds spicy enough to be the plot of a lesbian romance novel.”

“Definitely ended like a romance novel gone wrong.” Ashlyn says laughing slightly while shaking her head.

“Oh no, what happened? I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be insensitive about it.” Ali says quickly, feeling bad about her comment.

“Relax, you’re fine.” Ashlyn reassures her. “We pretty much snuck around for my whole first year and I did end up signing up for the Ranger program that started with pre-training my second year. It was hot, heavy, and exciting with us pretty much all the time. Probably because we knew we shouldn’t be doing it. I came back home to live with my grandparents the summer after my first year and we ended up talking on the phone a lot. That’s when I felt like I really got to know her on a deeper level than all the physical stuff for once. Anyway, I get back for my sophomore year and we
go right back to it. Except this time she’s not my CO anymore since I’m in the new program. Plus, I have a bit more freedom in terms of my free time and my ability to leave campus because of my rank. So, I start pushing a bit for more between us. I was starting to really feel like I wanted something more with her. Like I wanted to be with her off campus and actually go out on dates. And every damn time she managed to deflect it and turn things physical to distract me. That should have been a huge red flag.” Ashlyn explains.

“I’d say so.” Ali affirms.

“Of course, I decide to push it and surprise her one night. Totally cheesy, but I was a dating novice, sooo… I get a bouquet of flowers, borrow a senior’s car, and show up at her off-campus house to take her on a date.” Ashlyn pauses for a few seconds.

“What happened?” Ali can’t wait to find out.

“She didn’t answer the door.” Ashlyn says, before quietly adding, “but her husband did, with their two year old son in his arms. She was just behind them looking horrified. It was pretty much spelled out all over her face.”

Ali covers her mouth with her hands. “OH. MY. GOSH. I didn’t see that coming!”

“Neither did I.” Ashlyn admits.

“What did you do?” Ali questions.

“I just pretended I had the wrong house and left. Then we just completely avoided each other after that, which wasn’t that hard given that I had no reason to see her very much.” She replies.

“Geez, sorry Ash. That’s quite a mess to be in, but you officially win for best dirt!” Ali tries to joke a bit.

“I damn well better after that one!” Ashlyn exclaims. “Luckily the other two aren’t so dramatic.”

“Good, not sure I could handle too much more lesbian drama in one day.” Ali pretends to fan herself.

“Funny, Krieger.” Ashlyn rolls her eyes playfully before moving on. “I didn’t date anymore at West Point. Mostly because of Ranger training and the focus it required. After graduation and making it through the three month official Ranger school, I got stationed at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina for about a year. I went into this off-base coffee shop one day and it was so crowded that there weren’t many seats. So, I asked this girl if I could sit next to her and we started talking for a while, which ended in me asking her on a date. Her name was Leigh and we dated for about 7 months. Things were great when we were by ourselves, but it didn’t take me all that long to realize that she was hiding me from her family and friends. She would barely touch me or be affectionate at all in public. I mean, I get that we were in North Carolina and I was in the army. I understand being discrete but, I was clearly her dirty little secret. We got in big fight after her mom surprisingly showed up at her apartment one day and she introduced me as the maintenance worker for the building.”

“Ouch.” Ali cringes.

“You’re telling me. She really couldn’t commit to making any progress with it and I knew I deserved better, so that was that.” Ashlyn says nonchalantly and moves right along. “Then I got deployed overseas and didn’t date again for a couple years. It was such a lonely time for me and just so hard with all the injuries and physical and mental recovery I had to deal with. Part of me always wished I had someone to fight for or come home to like so many other soldiers did, but I also really liked that I
wasn’t burdening anyone who would be missing me.”

Ali frowns a bit imagining how hard it must have been for Ashlyn to have gone through so many horrific things all by herself. She reaches out and runs her hand up and down the blonde’s tattooed arm sweetly. She swears she feels Ashlyn quiver a bit at her touch, but ignores it. “You know, Ash. You don’t have to shoulder everything by yourself all the time.”

Ashlyn gives her a small smile. “I know. I’m getting better at it…slowly.” She half smiles and continues. “Last person I dated was Riley like 4 years ago. I helped changed her flat tire while I was on police patrol duty one night in Boston and she asked me out on a date.”

“Ooooh, knight in shining armor!” Ali says mockingly.

Ashlyn rolls her eyes and laughs. “We were together for just over a year and she had moved in with me at about 5 months into it.”

“Oh wow, so pretty serious then?” Ali asks.

“I guess. Ugh, this one makes me feel like such an ass. Riley was so sweet and I could see that she was head over heels for me. She was a great person and things were so good with us physically. And I wanted so badly to feel about her the way she did about me, she deserved that. I just… I don’t know… I guess I never felt like she really got me. She never understood my protective side and she hated how I was always the first to put myself in dangerous situations at work. It was my fault too that I never let her in beyond a certain point. If I was in a bad place, I hid it from her. I was just so sure she’d judge me or see me differently, that I never told her. Worst of all… this is bad… when she would be so emotional with me and tell me she loved me, I would just reciprocate because I felt like that’s what she wanted to hear. I shouldn’t have done that when I wasn’t feeling it. In trying not to hurt her, I’m sure I hurt her even worse.” Ashlyn says sadly. “I didn’t mean to do that. I just didn’t realize fast enough what I was feeling before it was too late and a complete mess.”

“Hey.” Ali says, meeting the blonde’s hazel eyes. “We all make mistakes and hurt people even when we don’t mean to. The fact that you still care so much that you hurt her says everything about your character.”

“Thanks, Alex.” Ashlyn replies with a little bit of relief from the remorse she feels at recounting the story. “When I finally realized, I was honest with her and told her that I didn’t feel quite the same way. She didn’t take it very well and moved out the next day. She’s married now and happy, which makes me happy for her. She definitely deserved the world. We’ve run into each other a couple times and it has been cordial at least.” She shrugs and adds “The end!”

“Whew, that just all sounds so emotionally draining.” Ali says as she takes it all in. “I always feel bad about not having any serious relationships, but that all seems like so much heartbreak.”

“Yeah, it definitely has its negatives. But, like I said before, I learned a lot about myself and what I want in a relationship.” Ashlyn responds thoughtfully.

“And what’s that?” Ali asks curiously.

“Well, I want someone who’s always completely honest with me and who I feel like I can be completely honest and open with too. I want someone who understands me or at least tries to. Who I can be myself with and who won’t judge me for who I am and what I struggle with. I want someone who knows when to push me on things and when to let me be. And, I want someone who is proud of me and who will love me loudly and openly without holding back…that people will take one look at us and just know.” Ashlyn states confidently.
“That’s a tall order, Harris.” Ali says quickly after she realizes she’s been quiet for a few seconds because she’s mentally checking the list off in her head when it comes to their interactions with each other. “But, completely reasonable.” She adds with a smile. “Better than me. All I know is that I don’t want to connect with anyone physically anymore before I can connect with them emotionally. Pathetic. I know.”

“Eh, doesn’t matter much for me anyway. Don’t think I’ll ever be attracting anyone in the sexy beige jumpsuit I’ve been rocking for a while now.” Ashlyn jokes.

“That’s true. But that light blue hospital gown really brings out your eyes.” Ali replies, only half joking because it’s actually true. It makes her wonder what Ashlyn must look like in normal clothes. Even in the beige prison jumpsuit, the blonde is really attractive. Ali can’t even imagine the level of attraction if she was dressed up. She’s broken out of her thoughts by Ashlyn’s loud laugh.

“If you’re gonna flirt with me, Alex… you might want to go for something less cliché than ‘nice eyes’.” Ashlyn goads her.

“Oh, so now I’m flirting huh?” Ali plays along for a second. “You wish, Harris.” She’s about to let herself laugh when she sees the smoldering look on Ashlyn’s face as the blonde’s eyes stare longingly right into her own. It makes her heart flutter and her mouth go dry.

Before Ashlyn even knows what is going through her mind, the words are out of her mouth in an almost whisper. “Actually, I really do wish.”

Ali should be taken aback, but for some reason she’s not. Instead she feels emboldened, something igniting inside her that she can’t put words to. “Really?” She asks boldly and seriously.

Even though Ashlyn can’t believe or quite figure out just how they got to this point, she certainly isn’t going to hold back now. Not that she even feels like she can with Ali, this woman has a way of making her every thought just spill out of her mouth. She goes to open her mouth to reply, but they’re interrupted by the food service staff bringing in her food order. Ashlyn groans internally as Ali gets up to help her with the food, the conversation forgotten for the time being.

Ashlyn leans back and pats her stomach after finishing her food. “Yep, I could eat like 5 more of those sandwiches.”


“I’m always hungry.” Ashlyn answers with a shrug.

“Alright, well I can get you something when I run down to the cafeteria to get some dinner for myself in a little while.” Ali offers, realizing it’s already past 4pm and she hasn’t eaten since breakfast.

“Pretty sure that would be AMAZING!” Ashlyn replies dramatically, making Ali laugh.

“You should probably get some more rest too, you must be exhausted from all that pain medication.” Ali says after noticing the blonde’s eyes looking a little bit tired.

“Nah, I have all night to sleep. Not gonna waste any more time doing that when I have such good company and so many things to learn still.” She replies with a devious smile.

Ali settles back into the chair. “I’m going to regret this, but… what do you want to know, Harris?”
Ashlyn strokes her chin, pretending to seriously think about. “Hmmm, let’s see. Guilty pleasure song?”


Ashlyn tries so hard no to laugh, but a loud belly laugh comes out before she can stop herself. She puts up her hands defensively. “Sorry, sorry. I’m not judging, I swear! Just would never have guessed that.”

Ali just buries her face in her hands in embarrassment.

“Straight up now tell me, are you gonna love me forever, oh, oh, oh…” Ashlyn starts singing to make Ali laugh. The brunette looks up with a smile and joins in for a verse before the two of them are giggling so much they can’t sing it anymore.

“Ok hot shot. What’s yours?” Ali questions.

“Danger Zone, Kenny Loggins.” Ashlyn answers.

“Ok, I have to ask why. Do you have a Top Gun obsession?” Ali asks, a bit puzzled.

“First of all, doesn’t everyone have a bit of a Top Gun obsession?” Ashlyn says rhetorically with a raised eyebrow. “It was the first movie I saw in a theater. It was playing at this local theater that would show older movies; the same theater I got that job at later on. My Grandpa took me and Chris to see it. That song got me all pumped up for some reason. I was big into skateboarding when I was a kid and I would bring my radio down to the skate park and blast that song when I was practicing tricks. It made me feel completely invincible.” Ashlyn explains.

“Ok, ok, I’ll give you that. It’s definitely a get pumped song.” Ali agrees.

“Do you have any nicknames besides ‘Ali’?” Ashlyn launches right into another question.

“Not really, no.” Ali answers. “Most people have always just called me Ali or Alexandra. Kyle and my mom have been the only ones to use Alex. Well, and now you too.”

“Oh, um, I’m really sorry. I was just being an asshole that first day and giving you a hard time. Geez, I didn’t mean to call you by such a personal name. I can stop and just go by Ali.” Ashlyn guiltily apologizes.

“No way. While a small part of me might have wanted to smack you that first day…” Ali pauses to give Ashlyn a feisty look, “I really like that you call me that now. It feels right. You’re on the level, Harris, relax.”

“Thank god for that plexi-glass the first day.” Ashlyn jokes. “At least now I understand the magnitude of what it means to call you Alex and I won’t take that for granted.” She says seriously. “Besides, Alex fits you perfectly. Did you know it means defender of mankind? Doesn’t get more fitting than that.”

“I had no idea.” Ali replies. “I just knew that Krieger meant warrior in German.”

“Defender and warrior. How perfect is that to describe you?!” Ashlyn says in disbelief. “Your mom knew what she was doing when she named you.” She watches Ali smile widely, watching how her nose crinkles and her tongue pokes out a bit through her teeth. The brunette couldn’t be any more captivating if she tried.
“What about you?” Ali inquires.

Ashlyn shakes her head a bit. “Most people stuck to Ashlyn when I was growing up. Except for my grandma who used to call me Crash because I was just about always scraped up from something or other, and probably because I could be a real handful too. Given my career, I’ve gotten used to just being called Harris all the time. So, like I told you before, I really like that you call me Ash.” She explains.

“Good. I like calling you that.” Ali admits.

There’s another knock at the door and it’s Diane coming to check in on Ashlyn one more time and give her the next round of medicine before her shift ends. Ashlyn tells Diane she needs to pee again and Ali takes the opportunity to use that time to go get some dinner.

As Ali walks out of the room, she notices there’s a new guard in place. She shoots him a quick smile when she realizes it’s the same guard that was in the observation room during a couple of her early meetings with Ashlyn. The very same one that had given them a lot of privacy by purposely staying engrossed in his magazine during those visits. She shoots Kyle a quick text as she navigates the long hallways and heads to the lobby to wait for him like they had planned out yesterday. She laughs to herself as she remembers Ashlyn’s earlier food request and how somehow they have managed to be on the same page without even trying.

Twenty minutes later, Ali gets a text from Kyle and walks outside to meet him as he pulls up to the hospital entrance in his Mercedes G-Class. “How’s she doing?” He asks eagerly as he gets out of the car.

“Hi to you too.” Ali sasses him. “She’s doing pretty well actually!” She says, thinking about how the afternoon has gone pretty well.

Kyle narrows his eyes at her a bit, noticing that she seems a little too enthusiastic. “Soooo, want to tell me what exactly is going on in there that your smile is practically blinding me?” Kyle pretends to shade his eyes.

Ali shoots him a glare and smacks his arm. “Nothing is going on, as we’ve previously discussed. There has been some sleeping and some more getting to know each other conversation. That’s it, Kyle.”

“Uh huh. Sure, sure. I’m not going to keep you any longer, but we are so talking about this tomorrow!” Kyle says pointing at her playfully and handing her two bags of food and a tray of drinks.

“You’re the best, thanks!” Ali says appreciatively.

“We’re both the best! Make sure you tell her hi and that I love her.” He reminds her.

“Promise!” Ali says, kissing him on the cheek and heading back into the hospital.

She runs into Diane on the way back to the room. “I just got her all set for the night and I’m about to head out. I’m sure Susan, the nurse on duty overnight, will check in at some point.” She says to Ali.

“Thanks, Diane, for everything. I um, I guess I didn’t expect such kind treatment in there today. It means a whole lot.” Ali puts it out there bluntly.

Diane gives her a small nod and gets closer. “Between you and me, that woman in there is Boston’s finest. She doesn’t know it, but she talked my son down from jumping off the Zakim Bridge about 6
years ago. I don’t care what Captain Harris did or didn’t do, I know her heart and that’s all that matters. And I’ve made damn sure that any nurse who goes into to that room while she’s here will treat her like gold too.” Diane tells her getting a little choked up.

Ali gives the woman a quick hug, knowing there aren’t really words to say right now. “Thank you so much, Diane. Goodnight.” She takes a deep breath, wondering how anyone could possibly believe that Ashlyn Harris killed someone. There isn’t a single thing she’s learned about the blonde that doesn’t scream hero and role model. She’s a bit lost in that thought and before she knows it, she’s right back in front of Ashlyn’s room door.

She expects the guard to stand up and get ready to check her purse like the other guard did, but he doesn’t look like he’s moving. “Ali Krieger, I’m Ashlyn Harris’ lawyer.” She announces herself to him.

“Jordan Willis. Ashlyn’s Harris’ guard until 8am.” He gives her a friendly smile to go along with his joke. “I know who you are. You’re all set to go in, Ms. Krieger.”

Ali laughs a bit, glad she had read this guy right. She holds a bag of food out toward him. “I thought you might be hungry. There’s a burger and some fries in there and here’s a coke for you too. I hope you’re not a vegetarian.” She says hopefully. “And you can call me Ali.”

“Wow. Thank you! That’s really very nice of you. No wonder Captain Stoic in there lets you visit all the time.” He says motioning toward the door of the room. “Nice to properly meet you, Ali. I’ll wish you goodnight now in case I don’t catch you before I leave.”

Ali finds that last statement a bit odd and just assumes she didn’t hear it right. “Yeah, I’ll make sure to check out with you when I leave at 8pm.”

“Oh, I thought you’d be staying overnight.” Jordan says, clearly feigning innocence.

Ali is beyond confused. “I thought the rule was visiting hours only, from 8am to 8pm?”

“It is.” Jordan replies, confusing Ali even more. Before the brunette can get any more lost, he comes to her rescue. “The hospital visiting hours are officially 8am to 8pm. However, it turns out that we are in the empty overflow section of the maternity ward. And according to that sign right there…” he points to a sign on the wall, “there are no official visiting hours in this ward, just discretionary quiet hours from 12pm to 2pm.” He gives Ali a knowing smirk. “So, as far as I’m concerned, I’m going by the rules of the ward that I’m assigned to guard.”

Ali smiles back at him widely, hoping her thankfulness is reflected on her face. “I didn’t know that. Thank you, Jordan. I’ll make sure to say hello when I go get my coffee in the morning then.”

“No problem.” Jordan says, obviously thrilled he got his message across like he planned. He leans closer to Ali and whispers “Tell her I said hi and get well.”

“I will.” Ali assures him, still a bit shocked by the whole interaction. “Goodnight.” She walks past him feeling positively giddy at the turn of events as she walks back into the room. “I’m baaaack!” She announces loudly as she enters, watching Ashlyn’s face light up.

“Thank god, I’m starving!” Ashlyn says dramatically. “What’d you get me?”

“Actually, I didn’t get you anything from the cafeteria. It looked gross.” Ali says coyly, shielding the food bags in her hands from Ashlyn a bit.

“No worries.” Ashlyn says quickly, not wanting Ali to feel bad. “I can order dinner from here.”
“Easy, Harris. All I said was that I didn’t get you something from the cafeteria.” She says playfully. “I figured I’d do a little better than that.” Ali proudly holds up the food bag and drinks from Shake Shack.

“NO FUCKING WAY!!!” Ashlyn yells excitedly as her eyes bug out of her head. “Come on, how the hell did you pull that off? There’s no way you drove to New York in the last half hour?!”

Ali can only giggle. “Well duh! Hate to break it to you, but since you’ve been locked up, Shake Shack opened like 3 locations in the Boston area. I had planned with Kyle yesterday for him to bring some over for dinner for us. Luckily for me, you had a burger on the brain!”

“Alex, seriously. I am so excited, I don’t even know what to say. Thank you.” Ashlyn is so beyond touched at how Ali is doing everything she can for her. “Make sure you thank Kyle for me too.”

“I will. He says hi and that he loves you by the way.” Ali mentions before she forgets, earning a smiling nod from Ashlyn. “And, you don’t have to say anything… just stuff your mouth with burger for a while and enjoy it! There’s four of them in this bag and I’ll only eat one, so eat up! Oh, fries and a shake too… strawberry or vanilla? I like both, so your choice.”

“Oh my gosh, a strawberry shake too?! Uhhh, you are doing things to me woman!” Ashlyn exclaims, making Ali blush a bit.

Ali quickly composes herself. “Well, gee, Ash. If all I had to do was buy you a burger…” She trails off flirtatiously.

“The way to my heart is definitely through my stomach.” Ashlyn replies with a wink.

“Noted.” Ali leaves the flirty banter there and hands the food bag to Ashlyn before it gets too cold. She eats her own burger and fries, watching Ashlyn eat two burgers, fries, and drink the shake before finally laying back a bit more and patting her stomach to signal that she’s full.

“That was sooo damn good. I’m eating that last burger as soon as I have room, cold or not!” The blonde announces as Ali just shakes her head. “You’re the best.”

“Well, that was just dinner. What would dinner be without a movie?” Ali says pulling her iPad out of her purse.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re perfect?” Ashlyn asks earnestly.

“Actually, no. Just you this morning.” Ali says lightly.

“Well, you are. So, so, perfect. I mean it.” The blonde says genuinely.

Ashlyn’s words are so heartfelt that Ali feels her own heart thumping, the blood rushing through her body as warmth spreads through her. “I’m not perfect, trust me,” is all she can manage to reply at the moment. She pulls up Netflix and leans herself over in the chair so they can both see the screen.

“No, you are. Come sit with me?” Ashlyn asks shyly, scooting a bit and patting the left side of the bed.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Ash. Otherwise I would.” Ali says regretfully.

“I’ve been shot multiple times in the dessert, practically blown up in a Humvee, and then shot in the leg by my own Chief for good measure. Trust me, you’re not gonna hurt me, Alex. Get your ass over here before I pick you up and put you here myself!” Ashlyn demands.
“Fine.” Ali pretend huffs, giving in pretty easily as she makes her way around the bed. She points her finger at Ashlyn in warning before she sits down. “I swear, Harris, if you get even the slightest bit uncomfortable or in pain, you better tell me.”

“Promise. Now sit.” Ashlyn smiles, feeling Ali settle in the bed beside her. The brunette wastes no time putting the iPad in a good position on their laps and immediately wraps both her arms around the blonde’s left one, snuggling into her a bit. It feels so good Ashlyn thinks she might pass out and tries hard to calm her breathing and heart rate before Ali notices. She’s broken out of her trance by the opening music of Jaws.

“You picked Jaws?” Ashlyn says almost emotionally. “So fucking perfect.” She repeats again in a whisper.

Ali doesn’t reply, she just smiles and snuggles in even closer to the blonde. She’s always been touchy feely and cuddly with her close friends, so it doesn’t dawn on her not to be with Ashlyn.

As they watch the movie, Ashlyn can’t remember the last time she felt anything like this or even whether she ever has. She feels so relaxed and yet jittery with excitement at feeling Ali nestled into her side, squeezing her arm a bit every time the movie gets gory or scary. It’s like being an unexperienced teenager again. She sits there wishing that the movie will never end and finds herself getting sadder as it approaches the finale.

As the credits start rolling, Ali rests her head on Ashlyn’s shoulder and looks up to the see the blonde looking melancholy. She sits up a bit and takes a better look at her. “Oh my god, you’re actually upset that they kill the shark at the end, aren’t you?!"

“What? No!” Ashlyn defends herself. “Well, ok, I’ll admit that I used to be. I’ve watched this movie like 100 times though, I’m over them killing the shark now.”


“I’m fine. A little tired, but mostly just sad that you have to leave in like 20 minutes.” Ashlyn confesses.

Ali just smiles a bit. “Yeah, about that. Tell me about Jordan Willis.”


“Just tell me.” Ali insists, wanting to really figure the whole thing out before telling Ashlyn the news.

Ashlyn just shrugs and tells Ali all about her friendship with Tim Rosemund and how is he a guard at the prison. She eventually ends with the fact that Jordan is one of Tim’s best friends and tends to treat her really well because of that. “Now will you tell me why you want to know?”

Ali finally gives in. “Because Jordan so nicely informed me when I came back with dinner that technically we are in the unused area of the maternity ward, which apparently, has no limit on visiting hours. So, unless you kick me out, Harris…” She lets the statement hang in the air and watches Ashlyn put it all together as a huge grin comes over her face.

“Really? You can stay?” Ashlyn asks with the voice of a small child.

“Yep. Not going anywhere unless you want me to.” Ali reaffirms. “Oh and Jordan says hi and get well.”

“Sorry, Krieger, but I’m officially making you stay here instead of letting you go sleep in your own
“comfy bed tonight.” Ashlyn smiles a bit shyly before cheerily yelling, “Sleepover!”

Ali reaches over to put the iPad on the small table near the bed and snuggles back into the blonde as close as she can, loving how it makes her feel to be so close to her. A rush from the novelty of it combined with the comfort of feeling like they’ve done this a million times. “Now will you rest? You look so tired, Ash.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m feeling pretty tired.” She finally admits. “Just one more thing,” she says and then bellows “You’re the man, Jordan!” as loudly as she can.

They both hear the door creak open a bit and hear Jordan’s voice quietly say “Night, night Capt,” before the door closes again. Ali feels a lot more relieved knowing that Ashlyn has a couple great allies inside the prison.

Ali watches Ashlyn hit the buttons to dim the light and adjust the bed back a bit, and then close her eyes. She feels a bit tired herself. “Make sure you tell me if you get uncomfortable and need space, ok? I can sleep in the chair.” Ali reminds her.

“I will, Alex, I swear. Don’t go anywhere, ok? This feels really nice.” Ashlyn says groggily.

“I won’t.” Ali reassures her, wondering just how bizarre this is going to look if and when the night nurse comes to check in. Then again, between knowing Jordan is at the door all night and that Diane has clearly talked to the staff, she’s not all that worried about it. She rests her cheek on the blonde’s shoulder and lets her own eyes close when she hears Ashlyn speak up again.

“You know what I’m most scared of?” Ashlyn says quietly, her eyes still closed.

“Tell me.” Ali whispers back, not opening her eyes either.

“That when this is all over, even if it turns out exactly like we want it to, that I’ll have nothing. No job, no purpose, no direction, and I’ll just be alone. That’s my biggest fear in life, being alone.”

Ashlyn admits for the first time ever out loud. “Pretty messed up for someone who has pushed everyone away for the last couple years, huh?”

Ashlyn’s voice sounds so tiny that it practically breaks Ali’s heart. She squeezes Ashlyn’s left arm which is wrapped up in her own arms, letting her thumb rub light circles on the blonde’s bicep. “I’m not ever going to pretend that I know what you’re going through or might go through in the future when it comes to all of this. I promise I’ll always listen so I can understand though and do anything I can to help. You’ll never be alone.”

“How can you always be so sure of things?” Ashlyn says, always wondering where Ali gets all her confidence from. She’s admired it from day one.

“I’m not always so sure, but I put stock into the things I know for sure if that makes sense.” Ali replies. “You’ve got Chris and Kyle, they’re not going anywhere no matter what. And you always have me.”

“Do you mean that?” Ashlyn asks in a whisper.

“Of course I do. I promise I’m not going to keep Chris so hidden that he never comes back!” Ali replies with a slight laugh. “And Kyle loves you so much, he’s always going to be there for you.”

“No, I meant the part about you.” Ashlyn says softly.

“Oh Ash, that I can promise you. You’ll always have me. That’s something that I am completely
sure about.” Ali assures her. “And even though I really don’t know when it happened exactly, you’ve become a best friend.”

Ashlyn nods contently, her heart feeling full but her mind lingering over the word ‘friend’. Just like every other time today, she can’t keep her mouth shut. “Alex, can I tell you something else at the risk of fucking everything up?”

“You can tell me anything. Nothing you say will fuck anything up, relax.” Ali replies easily.

“Yeah, well, you haven’t heard it yet, but…” Ashlyn let’s out a deep breath to compose herself and pauses for a couple seconds. “If we were in just about any other situation, I would have asked you out on a date by now.” She puts it out there unfiltered, her heart racing anxiously as she feels herself start to sweat a bit.

“Really?” Ali asks being taken off-guard, her voice jumping up an octave. She can feel Ashlyn’s heart pounding against her arm and hers is in a race to match it now.

“Yeah. You’ve taken everything I know about myself and relationships and completely spun it on its head. I’d be a damn fool not to try and find out why. And it doesn’t hurt that you’re truly the most captivating person I’ve ever met, inside and out.” Ashlyn doesn’t hold back a single bit.

Ali lifts her head and scoots up a bit to look at the blonde, prompting Ashlyn’s eyes to open and look back right into hers. If Ashlyn isn’t going to hold back, then neither is she. Truth has bound them together from day one and it will always be her anchor. “My answer would be yes, without question.”

“Really?” Ashlyn’s eyes widen and now it’s her turn to be at a loss for words.

“Really. I’ve never admired and been so intrigued by someone in my entire life the way I am with you. You are the most beautiful person I’ve ever known, and I don’t just mean the outer packaging. Your very soul is inspiring and nothing you could ever tell me or do would make me believe otherwise. I love who I am around you. I feel practically naked and yet comfortable in my own skin. I don’t know how else describe it. So, you’re damn right the answer would be yes.” Ali gets out confidently, her eyes never leaving the hazel ones looking into her own.

Ashlyn goes to speak, but Ali puts her finger to the blonde’s lips. “No, wait, don’t say anything else yet.” She sees Ashlyn nod and pulls her finger away. “Look, Ash, I’m thrilled we can be open like this, but I also need you to understand my position right now. There is nothing more important to me than keeping you safe and getting you out of this mess. For me to able to do that, I need to be in a place where I’m not so blindly tied to the outcome that I can’t be brave enough to be fearless. Right now, I’m your lawyer. I need to be able to think like one, compartmentalize my emotions, and do my job advocating for you. I can’t do that if this goes beyond where it is at the moment, it’s already hard enough and I know my limits. I want us to always be honest with each other like this, but I also need us to just hold onto our friendship right now without floating too far. Can you understand?”

Ashlyn nods again and her mouth opens to speak only to be met with Ali’s finger one more time. “Wait, I’m not done.” Ali says and gets just a little bit closer, where they are practically breathing the same air. Her eyes are a warm amber color right now and Ashlyn is completely lost in them.

“No matter what the outcome of all of this, I promise you that when it’s all over, my answer will always be yes if you want that date. Even if I have to do it in my very own prison jumpsuit and it’s behind bars, I will go on that date with you Ashlyn Harris.” Ali vows, dropping her forehead down the Ashlyn’s for a moment before pulling back. “Ok?”
Ashlyn swallows hard and closes her eyes, bringing her right hand up to cup Ali’s face. She’s never wanted to kiss someone so badly in her life, but she completely understands why she can’t. “Ok, Alex. Thanks for being honest, I do understand. For the record though, there is no situation in which I won’t want that date. I’m holding you to that yes.” She lets her hand drop and let’s a dimpled grin spread over her face.

“You better.” Ali smiles and lays her head back down, pressing her forehead to the blonde’s cheek, her arms still wrapped snugly around Ashlyn’s left arm.

They just listen to each other breathe in a comfortable silence for a few minutes. Ashlyn replays Ali’s words in her head, she so tired from all the medicine and feels herself getting extra sentimental.

“Alex?” She whispers.

“Yeah?” Ali whispers back.

“No one has ever called me beautiful before, ever.” Ashlyn utters in a murmur, a single tear running down her cheek. She’s been called hot, sexy, attractive, strong, and even studly once, but never beautiful. The way Ali said it so simply and easily in frank conversation, it has touched her down to the core of her soul.

Ali feels the wetness against her cheek and reaches up to wipe the tear from the blonde’s face, letting her hand drop back down to entwine their fingers together. “Well you truly are, Ash, and anyone who thinks differently is dumb and blind. You know what though? I kinda like being the first.”

Ashlyn feels Ali smile into her cheek and can only smile herself. “Now go to sleep. I’ll be right here when you wake up.” She hears Ali mumble and let’s herself relax into the brunette’s warmth.

Ali waits until she hears Ashlyn’s breathing completely even out, her body relaxed and sleeping peacefully. She lifts her head and takes in the blonde’s features for a minute before leaning in and pressing a very quick soft kiss to her lips. “Sweet dreams, beautiful. You’ll always have me, you had me right from the beginning.” She drops her head back down to Ashlyn’s shoulder contently and lets her eyes close.
Ali wakes up to low mumbling voices and lifts her head to look around. It takes her a second to remember where she is, but the warmth emanating from the blonde beside her is enough to quickly jog her memory. She’s still tucked into Ashlyn’s shoulder, her hand having drifted to the blonde’s stomach while they slept. She moves her hand away slowly, reluctantly at the feel of the taut stomach muscles she feels through the thin hospital gown. She lets herself imagine for just a second what this sculpted body must look like under that gown, but quickly pushes the thought out of her mind before she lets herself get into dangerous territory. She grabs her phone from the small table beside the bed, seeing that it’s 2:03am.

The voices are getting a bit louder now and seem to be just outside the door. She quickly slips out of the hospital bed making sure not to wake Ashlyn. She plops herself in the chair just about a minute before the door opens to reveal a nurse and a doctor.

“Hi, I’m Susan the nurse on duty overnight. This is Dr. Lance Weber, the surgeon who performed the procedure earlier today.” The nurse makes introductions in a quiet voice. She’s pretty young looking and Ali figures she can’t be more than 25 years old.


The doctor barely acknowledges her as he quickly flips through the chart hanging off the end of the bed. He’s a middle-aged, clean-cut guy with all gray hair. “I meant to make my rounds sooner, but I ended up in an emergency trauma surgery this afternoon that went well into the night.” He explains as he starts to move around the bed. “I’m going to try and have a look at the incision.” He suddenly lifts the blanket, causing Ashlyn to startle immediately and look around defensively.

“Woah. Sorry, Ms. Harris.” He stops what he’s doing, getting a bit startled by Ashlyn’s sudden movement himself.

Ali is a bit annoyed by his lack of sensitivity, but focuses on Ashlyn instead. “It’s ok, it’s just the surgeon trying to have a look at your knee.” She reassures Ashlyn and lightly touches her arm.

Ashlyn calms at Ali’s voice and takes stock of the other two people in the room. “Oh, uh, ok. Sorry.” She says sleepily and nods, signaling for the doctor to continue.

The doctor makes quick work of removing the immobilizer and gently unwraps the bandaging as the nurse turns on all the lights so he can see properly. Ali immediately takes in the tattoos covering most of Ashlyn’s lower leg as they are exposed. A skull wearing a headdress and an amazing likeness of the Statue of Liberty, the two designs tied together near the ankle area with a single rose; the ink all black other than a few red details on the headdress. The intricacy and shading of the designs are just as remarkable as on the blonde’s arm sleeve.

Ali is broken from her admiration of the body art as the doctor begins to lightly palpate and check the
knee area. It’s a fairly straight and neat five inch incision just off to the outer side of the blonde’s upper right knee. She darts her eyes to Ashlyn’s face, watching her wince a bit, her eyes still squinted from adjusting to the bright lights.

“I was hoping to just do this all via a laparoscopic surgery, but the position of the bullet and the fact that it was a bit lodged in the lateral patellar tendon indicated a more standard approach to avoid further complications. I repaired the damaged area of tendon and expect that it will heal well. I’m a bit surprised this hasn’t caused you issues prior to this given the location.” Dr. Weber explains. “I’m happy with the results, but you’ll want to be very careful with weight-bearing for the first two weeks and gradually work your way up to normal weight-bearing and walking. Susan will administer your last round of narcotic pain medication soon and then we’ll move to all Ibuprofen after that. Which means, you’ll be able to go home tomorrow.” He pauses. “Well, um, if you can call prison home that is.”

He is far too uncouth with that statement for Ali’s liking and she fights the urge to just smack him. “I’m sure most people don’t think of prison as ‘home’.” She snaps at him, the best she can do to hold back her anger. Ashlyn just bites her lip, trying not to smile.

“Oh, um, I didn’t mean to…” He starts to recover, but Ali cuts him off harshly. “You were saying about her knee…”

Dr. Weber is taken aback by the lawyer’s attitude, but continues on. “Right. The prison hospital will be able to provide the proper incision care and physical therapy for recovery. They’ll collaborate with us as needed. Any other questions?”

“No. Thank you.” Ashlyn quickly answers before Ali can say anything else, watching the doctor excuse himself and leave the room.

“Don’t worry about him, he’s typically a pompous ass. Probably to compensate for the fact that he’s 48 and lives with his mother.” Susan shrugs with a devious smile and begins working on re-bandaging Ashlyn’s knee.

They all laugh lightly at the comment and the nurse explains how she will administer the next pain medication via the IV and how discharge will work tomorrow afternoon. Ali tries to listen, but she’s distracted by what looks like the tail of a fish inked in black being revealed on Ashlyn’s lower right thigh as the gown rides up a bit. The blonde wasn’t kidding when she said she had more tattoos. She hears Ashlyn’s throat clear a bit and she looks up shyly, knowing she’s been caught staring. Ashlyn just gives her a knowing smile.

It takes Susan a few more minutes to finish up with Ashlyn’s knee, administer the medicine, and check to make sure they don’t need anything else before she finally excuses herself and leaves the room.

Ashlyn turns to Ali immediately. “So, I’m thinking Alex definitely has a thing for tattoos?”

“Guilty.” Ali admits, putting her hands in the air and shaking her head.

“Well, do you want to see them now or do you still need motivation?” Ashlyn teases her a bit. “I mean you already saw a lot of it.”

“Oh fuck it, just show me.” Ali replies almost giddily, she’s always loved and admired tattoos.

“Well you saw the work on my lower leg, it’s mostly covered up now with this leg brace thing.” Ashlyn lifts the blanket a bit. “I got the skull to honor the Native American heritage on my Dad’s
side, and paired with the Liberty, it’s a way for me to honor the country I’ve served. I wanted something a bit different than the standard military tattoos. The red in the headdress and cracks in the skull symbolize battle and struggle.” She explains thoughtfully as she starts lifting the hospital gown up her thigh.

Ali sees the tail of the fish again, now partly obscured by the knee brace, and watches the gown get higher and higher up the blonde’s thigh as the tattoo is revealed. She can see that it’s a mermaid now, but her focus is on the fact that Ashlyn keeps pulling the gown up higher and the ink isn’t fully uncovered yet. Just when she starts to internally panic that the blonde is about to flash some butt cheek, Ashlyn stops, the full tattoo on display.

“Wow, that’s gorgeous. I didn’t expect it to be so big.” Ali comments, studying the design and noting that it takes up the entire length of Ashlyn’s thigh. She also doesn’t miss the three bullet wound scars that she should have been prepared for given what she knew of Ashlyn’s army injuries. One is above the mermaid’s head near Ashlyn’s outer hip line, the second is below it just under the mermaid’s arm, and the third one sits on the inner thigh just beside the mid-point of the mermaid’s tail. The tattoo artist had worked around them perfectly. Ali’s mind can’t help but think about just how close these scars are to the middle of the thigh where a bullet could easily have severed an artery and likely left the blonde dead in minutes. “Really striking.” She adds, shaking off her thoughts.

“Thanks.” Ashlyn replies, appreciating the way Ali is taking in her ink so reverently. “The ocean is pretty much my favorite thing in the world. It’s beautiful and serene, alluring, yet powerful and frightening too. It’s something that I both admire and fear, something that I respect. The mermaid symbolizes those contrasting, yet complementary, feelings.” She elaborates.

Ali is beyond impressed by the thought that has gone into Ashlyn’s tattoos. “I’m blown away by how much meaning is in these.” She says with genuine regard.

Ashlyn just nods appreciatively and continues. “My shoulders are pretty self-explanatory.” She says pulling the gown to show the tops of her shoulders, one saying ‘knowledge speaks’ the other ‘wisdom listens’.

“Jimi Hendrix.” Ali says while reading the words, seeing the edge of yet another scar on the front of her right shoulder.

“Yep.” Ashlyn confirms, impressed that Ali knew the quote.

“You really weren’t kidding when you said there was more ink!” Ali comments.

“And I’m still not done!” Ashlyn chuckles. “One more to go.” She unties the upper tie on the back of her gown and pulls her left arm out of it, using her right hand to hold the fabric over her chest as she works the rest of it down to show her left ribcage.

Ali gets distracted by the side edge of Ashlyn’s breast that is just barely showing and she swallows hard before forcibly turning her attention to the colorful ink all along Ashlyn’s right side. Her eyes rake over bright flowers, a blue butterfly, a swallow with a pink ribbon in its beak, and a crucifix all tied together in an intricate design that spans from the top of her hip to the near the underside of her breast where the name ‘Christopher Ryan’ appears in black. The color is such a contrast to the rest of her black tattoos. Ali’s eyes fixate on the blue butterfly, remembering the conversation at the bank with Edith. “Tell me about the butterfly.” She asks.

“So, this tattoo is mostly for my grandma. She was pretty religious and loved nature… birds, flowers, butterflies. The Pipevine Swallowtail butterfly was her favorite because the shiny blue reminded her of the ocean. She battled breast cancer three different times before it finally got the best of her in the
end. She and Edith used to plant flowers to attract butterflies and she used to have pictures of them hanging all over the house. She said it kept her heart light and her mind at peace to think of the way they fluttered so freely and gracefully. She always used to say that she hoped she’d just float up to heaven that way. She passed away very peacefully in her sleep and I like to think that she got her wish.” Ashlyn tells her wistfully.

Ali nods with a little smile, understanding her conversation with Edith a bit better now.

“I stick to black tattoos in general, but my grandma was the most animated, warm, and colorful person I ever knew. The black ink just wouldn’t have done her justice, hence the vibrant color.” Ashlyn finishes explaining and stops to watch Ali study her tattoo.

“It’s truly stunning and magnificent.” Ali remarks, her eyes wandering from the tattoo to behold the blonde’s exposed skin. It looks soft and she can see the clear muscle definition of Ashlyn’s oblique which creates a v-line that disappears into the gown. It’s taking everything in her not to reach out and run her hand along the blonde’s side. She’s pulled out of her thoughts by Ashlyn’s voice.

“That concludes my show and tell. Your turn.” Ashlyn pulls up her gown and the blankets, looking at Ali with a resolute grin.

“Oh, um, yeah… ok.” Ali is a bit caught off guard, but knows it’s only fair. As much as Ashlyn seems to think she’s bashful, she’s really not. She quickly pulls her top up over her head and gets closer to the bed, turning her inked side to the blonde before pulling the side of her bra up really high so it doesn’t obstruct the design. She just barely hears Ashlyn’s quick intake of breath and smirks to herself a bit.

Ashlyn’s breath hitches, she didn’t expect Ali to just take her shirt off so unceremoniously. The brunette is standing there practically topless in a white lace demi-bra less than a foot from the bed. She figured Ali had a great body, but this is far beyond what she imagined. The brunette’s stomach is well defined, her arm muscles toned, her skin perfectly tanned. “Woah.” The whisper is out of her mouth with no thought.

“Are we talking about the tattoo or…” Ali trails off playfully. She knows she shouldn’t flirt, but she can’t help herself this time.

“Uh…” Ashlyn stutters and starts to examine the angled black script that covers most of Ali’s side. Not one to shy away from her confidence, she quickly pulls herself together. “Well, everything to be honest.” She answers candidly. “You have an incredible body. That tattoo is pretty amazing too.”

“Thanks.” Ali replies timidly not sure what else to say, a blush creeping into her cheeks now. She gets her bra back into the right place and slips her shirt back on. She’s about to lower the waistband of her pants when she pauses. “Hmmm, I’ve actually never shown anyone Nittany without being naked. This might be tricky.” She says, knowing how close the inner hipbone tattoo is to her crotch and pondering how to reveal it without giving Ashlyn an eyeful.

“Nittany?” Ashlyn questions. “Oh my god, it has a name?!” She laughs heartily.


“Ah, makes sense.” Ashlyn replies. “So, exactly how many people have seen this tattoo?”

“Just a couple of the people I’ve slept with. Not all of them because usually the room was dark or we never got full on naked. My childhood best friend and Kyle.” Ali answers.
“It should surprise me that your brother has seen this tattoo while you were naked, but it doesn’t. Do you also have an agenda against wearing pants like he does?” Ashlyn jokes. “I seriously never thought I would ever have a grown man wandering around my house in his underwear all the time… and then your brother came along. That took some getting used to.” She adds.

Ali chuckles loudly. “We’re definitely comfortable around each other, but I don’t have quite the same passion for walking around with no clothes like he does.” She gets close to the bed and works her hands under the waistband of her pants. “Alright, you might have to lean over a bit and I’ll do my best not to flash you.” She uses her left hand to cover the top of her crotch and pulls her pants and underwear down a bit with her right hand and until the tattoo is revealed.

Ashlyn leans over, laughing to herself a bit at the fact that she’s now looking down into Ali’s pants. She should be focused on the tattoo, but suddenly all she can think about is what it would be like to ghost her lips over the brunette’s hipbone. She mentally slaps herself for acting like a teenage boy and pulls herself together, taking in the details of the small inked design. “That’s actually really well done. The detail on small tattoos usually doesn’t come through that well. Your ink is really sharp though.” She recovers quickly before Ali notices.

“Allright, well, that didn’t happen over beers like I had hoped for. But, I think at like 3am in a hospital room is a good story too.” Ali remarks as she adjusts her pants back into place. “And on that note, I should probably wash my hands seeing as how they were just down my pants.”

Ashlyn lets out a loud chortle and nods in agreement. “Right, we wouldn’t want any contamination to hinder my recovery!”

Ali rolls her eyes as she makes her way over to the sink and washes her hands. “Speaking of recovery, you should probably get back to sleep.”

“I’m sure this pain medicine crap will knock me out soon enough, but I’m pretty awake at the moment.” Ashlyn says.

Ali hesitates to get into anything too serious, but she does have something on her mind and now is as good a time as any. “Would you be up for me asking you some questions to help me figure out something case-related?”

“Yeah, of course.” Ashlyn replies quickly. “Just, uh… would you come sit with me again?” She asks tapping the bed beside her. Ashlyn watches Ali just smile and nod, coming right over and settling back into the bed just like they were when they were watching the movie. She feels silly for asking, but she has no idea when, if ever, she’ll get to do this again. It truly astonishes her how quickly she’s gotten used to Ali’s presence beside her in just a matter of hours and how hesitant she is to let go of it. “Sorry. I don’t mean to be immature or make you uncomfortable at all. I’ve been really alone and in my own mind for quite a while now. Being close to you, it feels really comforting in a way I’m not sure I can explain.” She admits sheepishly.

Ali turns her body a bit and then gently grabs the blonde’s chin, forcing Ashlyn to look at her. “First, you’re not immature. Second, I’m not uncomfortable at all. Third, I like the way it feels too. So, stop apologizing and just chill, ok?”

“Ok.” Ashlyn agrees and let’s herself relax a bit. “So, what did you want to ask?”

“I filed the appeal yesterday morning like I said I was going to and I expect to hear about it in the next 30 to 60 days.” Ali starts directly. “I play everything on the safe side, so I have everything setup for Chris already even though we still have plenty of time. The goal is to have him all set and in place by next week.”
“Wow, that is fast. Do you ever sleep?” Ashlyn can’t even fathom how it’s possible for Ali to completely get her brother hidden and settled so quickly.

Ali just lightly elbows Ashlyn playfully and continues. “Anyway, so I asked him if he had preferences or any requests or needs for his family. He really left it all up to me and said anything would be just fine. I get the sense that he just doesn’t want to burden me. So, I really just did my best to find a place for them that is as similar to where they are now as possible. The great thing about knowing so much about how witness protection works and how cops think when they’re hiding people is that I can do what Bobby will least expect. Which is to keep your brother just far enough away, but really not so far at all. Pretty much the opposite of hiding them in some random tiny town in a distant state. Anyway, I don’t want to put you at risk at all, so I won’t say more on that. It would just be helpful if you could tell me about him a little bit and about his wife and kids, things they like to do, etc. That way I can make sure I accounted for everything and it will help me get the house all ready for them when they arrive so it feels as much like home as possible.”

Ashlyn is so overcome with what she is feeling right now that she’s having a hard time forming words. The fact that someone like Ali Krieger exists is unbelievable enough, but that she is here and on her side is enough to make her feel like she’s dreaming or in some alternate reality. “I don’t even know what to say right now, Alex.” She manages after a long pause.

Ali can hear the emotion in the blonde’s voice and she knows what she must be thinking. She’d admittedly be thinking the same thing if this was Kyle and the roles were reversed. “You don’t have to say anything in the way of gratitude. I told you Ashlyn, I’m taking care of you. I’ve never half-assed anything in my life and I’m not starting now. So, breathe, and tell me about your brother and his family.” She says sweetly, reaching down to hold Ashlyn’s hand.

Ashlyn gives herself a moment to let her emotions ease up and collect herself and then spends the next half hour telling Ali as much as she can about Chris and his family.

Ali listens carefully to every word, watching the blonde light up when she talks about her niece and nephew like they were her own children. She can hear the pride Ashlyn has for Chris in her voice as she recounts even simple things about him. She learns that the little family likes to hike together for fun and that the kids are really outdoorsy and active. Over the last couple of years, Chris has been trying to teach Curtis to skateboard. Bridget is apparently a total foodie and loves to cook. Elsie is a tiny princess who loves all things girly and pink. Listening to it all, Ali feels more confident in the area she picked to settle them. She makes a mental note to get bikes, skateboards, and a backyard playset for the kids, fully stock the kitchen with food and updated gadgets for Bridget, make sure one of the rooms gets painted pink for Elsie, and find the nearest skate park and hiking paths for Chris.

Ashlyn sees the contemplative look on Ali’s face as she finishes up. “What are you thinking about?” She asks.

“Oh, sorry. I was just making a mental checklist for a few final things.” Ali explains, telling Ashlyn about the list she was making in her head.

“You’re too much. Are you always this perfect?” Ashlyn asks sweetly, doing a better job of keeping her emotions under control this time.

“Absolutely not. Do I need to remind you about the pesky bitch thing yet again?” Ali laughs a bit.

“You don’t have to do all that, you know. You really don’t.” Ashlyn says feeling bad that Ali is going through so much trouble for her and her family. “It means the world to me that you thought to and wanted to though.”
“This is how I do things, Harris. You’re gonna have to learn to just roll with it.” Ali mock warns her.

Ashlyn shifts herself a bit and lifts her arm so that it’s around Ali’s shoulders, pulling the brunette in closer to her. “My very own paladin.” She whispers.

Ali tilts her head up to look at Ashlyn as best she can. “Paladin?”

“Yeah, paladin.” She replies in an almost dreamy voice. “The thing about going to a military academy is that you learn a whole lot of military history. The Paladins were the twelve warrior knights that sat on Charlemagne’s court and were considered his peers. They were known for being protective, chivalrous, dedicated and loyal champions of justice and good. Much of how they are portrayed is considered legend, but they did actually exist. Anyway, legend or not, it always stuck with me. I’ve spent my whole career trying to stand by those ideals and always trying to be a modern day paladin. Never have I had one in my own life though or ever thought I would.”

Ashlyn pauses to look down at Ali warmly. “You take care of me, defend me, and stand up for me even though we’ve known each other for such a relatively short time. I mean even with that stupid surgeon just now, you’re on my side. You’re my loyal protector and my champion of good. You’re my paladin, Alex… and I couldn’t be more grateful for that and lucky that you walked into my life.”

It takes every ounce of restraint Ali has not to just lean up and kiss this amazing woman that just seems to keep surprising her in the best way possible. The thought that she’s still getting to know her makes her feel alive inside, that there are still so many things to learn. Things that Ali has no doubt will delight her, intrigue her, surprise her, and probably even scare her a little sometimes, but that will only make her admire Ashlyn more. Still, the blonde’s words are a stark reminder of why she needs to keep her emotions in check and keep her head clear, it’s the only way she can protect and fight for Ashlyn properly.

Ali squeezes Ashlyn’s hand tightly in hers. “Thank you for saying that. Before I even knew who you were or met you, you were my hero for having saved my brother. And everything I’ve learned about you so far… you are more incredible than I ever could have imagined. You have single-handedly restored my faith in humanity. You’re more so my hero now than you were even before… and I’m honored to be your paladin. I’ll always be.” She tells her sincerely and feels Ashlyn pull her in a bit tighter.

There is a comfortable silence between them for a few minutes and Ali decides to bring things back to a lighter place. “Besides, ‘paladin’ sounds so much more eloquent than ‘asshole’.”

Ashlyn lets out a cackling laugh. “Yeah, and hero is definitely better than idiot!”

Their giggling eventually dies down as Ashlyn yawns loudly, the medicine really going to work on her now.

Ali drops her head to Ashlyn’s shoulder and whispers “Goodnight hero.”

“Night paladin.” Ashlyn whispers back, keeping her arm firmly around Ali’s shoulders. She closes her eyes and fights to remain cognizant just a few minutes longer so she can memorize everything about this moment: how warm Ali feels against her, the brunette’s light lavender, vanilla and baby powder scent, the gentle pulsing of Ali’s heartbeat against her arm, her soft rhythmic breaths, and the way her heart feels so unburdened right now with Ali beside her. There is always the possibility that she will never get a moment with Ali like this again and she never wants to forget it. In a few short hours, it will all be gone and for the first time in her life she’ll be sad to leave a hospital.
Cold, gray, inert. Those are the first words that come to mind to describe the eyes Ashlyn sees looking back at her in the tiny mirror above the sink in her cell. She splashes some water on her face and rubs her eyes a bit, looking up one more time to search for any life in them. The reflection doesn’t change. Why should it? They echo how she feels, they always have.

She sits at her desk for a few minutes, but the chair she often spends hours in just seems to dig into her back right now and the angle of her leg isn’t comfortable either. She relents and lays down in her bed instead. A shiver runs through her body and she pulls the blanket up. Is it normally this frigid in here? Not that she can remember. The blanket doesn’t seem to be helping much. Her leg is throbbing, but that feels oddly good right now because it’s something tangible.

She takes a couple of deep breaths. “Get out of your fucking head, Harris.” She mentally chides herself. The loneliness, the nothingness, the silence right now is so loud and encompassing that it’s all she can pay attention to. She tries hard to drown it out, her thoughts drifting to yesterday.

Ashlyn wakes up to Ali pressed close into her side. It’s still early, the sun is barely coming up outside the window of the hospital room. Her heart drops knowing there are a few more hours at best before she gets discharged. She desperately takes in everything she can about Ali’s face, watching her sleep for a few minutes and trying not to let the dread inside win out. She lays her head back on the pillow for a moment and unconsciously grips Ali tighter. The movement is enough to wake the brunette.

“Hey. Good morning you.” Ali says sleepily, sitting up a bit and looking at Ashlyn. It takes about five seconds for her to see something is off. “You ok?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Ashlyn answers vaguely. “Just kind of dreading going back to reality in a little while.”

Ali just nods. As much as she wants to tell Ashlyn it’s ok, she understands that it’s not ok for the blonde and no good can come from trying to get her to mask how she’s feeling. Instead, she just whispers “I know” and pulls her into a hug as best she can, gently playing with her blonde hair a bit. She notices some darker roots for the first time and decides to go for some minimal distraction.

“Is your hair dyed?” Ali asks.

Ashlyn pulls back to look at Ali and laughs a bit. “Duh. Bleach blonde hair this light isn’t normally
natural.” She replies with light sarcasm.
“Hmmm, yeah that’s true. Just didn’t stop to think about it. And I hate to admit that my inclination
would be to assume that people don’t bother with things like that in prison.” Ali confesses a bit
ashamed, but knowing she can be honest with Ashlyn.
“I’ve had it dyed like this forever and it was just one of those things I didn’t want to give up about
myself. One last piece of identity to hold onto I suppose. Plus, we do have a full service salon with
only the best peroxide products.” Ashlyn says with an eye roll. “The scalp burn every time I get it
done makes me wonder why I bother. I swear it’s straight up peroxide with nothing to help protect
your skin.”
“That makes my head itch and sting just thinking about it.” Ali cringes. “So what’s your normal
hair color?”
“Brown. Lighter than your hair, but definitely brunette.” Ashlyn answers. “My eyebrows are pretty
much my hair color.”
Ali takes a good look at her eyebrows. “Yeah, that’s a pretty light brown.”
Ashlyn nods and they don’t say anything else for a long time. They just stay close in a comfortable
silence. The fact that Ali implicitly knows and understands that no words can do anything to alter the
mood in the room right now says so much to her. Ali is just there and present and soothing…it’s
everything.
Eventually the nurse comes in to get Ashlyn disconnected from the IV and start her on ibuprofen. Ali
takes that time to go grab them coffee and some breakfast sandwiches. They eat and sip their coffee
together slowly, sitting in chairs that Ali pulled over to the window so they can look out over the
beautiful Boston view. The conversation is sparse and light, each of them recounting amusing
childhood stories about Chris and Kyle.
The morning passes quickly and it isn’t long before a hospital security official comes in to let them
know that the prison escort will be arriving in an hour and Ali will need to leave in 30 minutes.
“I’ll be out of town the next few days taking care of settling your family. I’ll come see you as soon as
I possibly can, which is Monday.” Ali explains once the guy leaves the room and it’s just the two of
them again.
That’s 6 days away and it feels like an eternity, but Ashlyn couldn’t be more grateful for the reason
it’ll be that long. “Thank you so much, Alex. Thank you seems so lame, but I don’t have better
words.”
“You don’t have to thank me. Just take care of yourself in the meantime, ok?” Ali pleads, concerned
by how miserable Ashlyn looks at the moment.
“Ok.” Ashlyn says as convincingly as she can.
A few more quiet moments between them and then it’s time to go. Ashlyn gets herself up out of the
chair with Ali’s help, intent on hugging the brunette. Ali being a bit shorter is helpful, allowing
Ashlyn to put her arms around the brunette’s shoulders and keep most of the weight off her leg. She
feels Ali’s arms encircle her waist and hold her tight, the brunette’s hand sneaking just inside the
back of the tied hospital gown to rub the small of her back lightly. She closes her eyes and again
tries hard to memorize everything she can right now. She’s not sure how long they stay like that, but
she feels lips press to her cheek and then Ali is gone.


Numbness set in for her once Ali left that hospital room and Ashlyn can’t remember much of what happened afterwards, most of it just a haze. That is until the click of the lock as she got back into her cell, the sound hitting her like a sledgehammer and making her wish the numbness had stayed. She’s overcome with a solitude that feels bottomless with an underlying sense of panic. She’s been through some dark days in this cell, but nothing quite like this before.

The single most important thing she learned as an army ranger was the ability to control her emotions, her senses, her every reaction. That was the only way to survive the brutal training when you had been kept awake for three days in soaked clothing and were practically hypothermic, pushed to the physical limit and then still asked to carry the weight of a fellow soldier on your back without so much as flinching. You only made it through if you could find a way to systematically shut down your pain and fear. This has been the single most useful skill she’s carried with her all these years through her tours, her career, and now prison.

She knew exactly what to do the first night in this very cell, the only thing she has ever done in challenging situations. She feels the raw emotions deep in her gut and works through them carefully, using all her energy to manipulate them so that by the time they rise to the surface she’s in complete control of her reactions. The isolation that comes with protective custody has practically forced her to live inside herself and there have been some very rough days over the last couple of years; days where she has felt the gloom creep up on her. Still, she has always held herself together, combating the dark with every good thought she can scour her memory for. Somehow she’s suddenly lost that ability since she left the hospital.

It hadn’t helped that the first thing she found waiting for her on her desk was an envelope filled with drawings from and pictures of Curtis and Elsie. She carefully looked over each one, feeling the full weight of exactly what she has been missing out on over the last couple years. The longing for her niece and nephew hitting her harder than ever before. And knowing that Chris is now out of reach is a bizarre sense of both relief and terror for her. She can physically feel her hollowness right now, the disconnected despondency of her own body.

She shifts in the bed again trying to get comfortable and screws her eyes shut, forcing her mind back to Ali and trying in vain to calm herself. And that’s when it finally hits her… Ali. She’s let herself actually feel. For the first time since she became a ranger, her emotions, her senses, her reactions have been uncontrolled and unfiltered. Everything with Ali has been in its raw natural state. She’s not sure whether to be happy that it happened or scared at the despair she’s feeling right now with the brunette not here. Her entire being is in battle with itself, the good letting the bad slink right in along with it.

“Breathe, Ashlyn. Slow down, come on, Harris.” She whispers desperately trying to find some mental ground to hold onto right now. Her hands rub her face vigorously and come away wet. She hadn’t even realized she was crying.

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Ali leaves the hospital with resolute determination to completely focus on two tasks. First, she needs to file a request for discovery to get access to the bullet that will leave the hospital on Wednesday morning to get catalogued as evidence after the 48 hour holding period. Second, she needs to get Chris and his family settled into their new home over the next few days. These are just about the only things left to do while she’s in the holding pattern of waiting for the appeal to go through. She’s counting on the fact that Bobby is very likely looking the other way right now and doesn’t have any reason to be focused on Ashlyn at the moment. Even if he is looking, she figures she’ll still have the
upper hand as he scrambles to pull together an arsenal and a game plan.

She’s already prepared for filing the discovery request, the paperwork sitting completed in her work bag in the car and just missing the date at the top. She changes into her suit in the restroom of the hospital lobby and heads right over to the clerk’s office to file the request; going over to the South Boston Police Department right afterwards to file a copy there too. The district attorney’s office shouldn’t have the case on their radar until the appeal is approved by the court. So, she assumes she won’t be fighting with anyone for first access to the bullet. If all works the way it is legally supposed to, the forensics department will run their usual protocol tests on it and hand it right over to Wayne Henning, the ballistics expert Ali hired. There’s always the chance that the request gets majorly delayed because the forensics department decides to run extensive tests or that the bullet gets damaged in that process, but there is nothing Ali can do about it if goes that way. She can only hope that neither of those things happen.

As for Ashlyn’s family, she already took care of the personal information changes, setting up the trust, and finding them a place to live, but there are just a few lingering loose ends. She has quite a bit more to do now after talking to Ashlyn about making the new place more like home. She opts to quickly stop at her house after the filings for some extra clothes and toiletries, changing back into her comfy clothes from the hospital to save herself the added time of picking out a whole new outfit. She then immediately makes the two hour drive to Portland, Maine.

The quaint Victorian-style three-bedroom house she picked to rent for the Harris clan is on a fairly quiet side street in Portland’s west end. The area is rich with history and sits right near the ocean much like Boston, giving it a similar feel. It’s already after 3pm by the time she arrives and she figures she’ll spend the evening arranging the furniture that got delivered yesterday and making sure the house is clean. She’ll worry about going to the store for the rest of the purchases tomorrow. She remembers to lock her personal credit cards in the glove box of her car so she doesn’t accidentally use them. She’ll have to use only the credit card tied to the private trust account for anything she needs while she’s here so she doesn’t leave any trace of herself. The family will arrive in two days by way of a private car service she arranged. Ali will help them go over everything and make sure they’re all set before leaving them to live their new lives.

She’s thrilled to see a black pickup truck for Chris and a silver Honda CR-V for Bridget sitting in the driveway. The dealer had said they’d deliver by the end of the week, but clearly they were ahead of schedule. The name “Decker” has been put on the mailbox just like Ali asked the real estate agent to do once the rental contract was signed. Chris and Bridget Harris will soon be Thomas and Kayla Decker with their two children Parker and Daisy. The name changes and new environment will likely be most confusing for the kids, but Ali has gone so far as to hire the best private teacher to home school them in order to make the transition easier. The less people they have to deal with right now while they adjust, the better. Since he was already a bit acquainted with Chris, Kyle helped him sell his car and found a friend who was willing to rent out their home and take care of it for a while. All in all, Ali is pretty pleased with herself at how things have turned out.

The first thing she notices when she walks into the house is that the new couch is pretty much exactly where she would have wanted it in the living room. She feels relieved that she won’t have to move it much and plops down onto it, suddenly feeling completely exhausted. Something is definitely off and she silently hopes she isn’t getting sick. Normally she loves long drives and uses them to take in the scenery and sing along to music in the car. She only noticed that the radio had been off the whole drive when she arrived in Portland. She had zoned out the whole way here and doesn’t even remember what she had been thinking about for those two hours.

She runs her hand through her hair and realizes how greasy it feels. She hasn’t showered since yesterday morning and now is as good a time as any to quickly refresh before she gets to work. She
heads to the master bathroom upstairs, lugging her two bags up with her. She turns on the shower and takes a quick glance in the mirror, the reflection confirming that she looks as wiped out as she feels. She lets out a sigh and pulls her shirt over her head. As she does, she catches a faint scent that almost knocks her off her feet…the mild, innocuous smell of prison soap.

Her heart flutters for a second and it dawns on her what’s wrong, she misses Ashlyn. Her mind briefly replays the hospital stay, the reality of just how much they shared with each other finally surfacing in her conscious. It was an outpouring of emotional intimacy and vulnerability that has left her feeling a bit untethered now that they’re not in proximity to each other. The two of them had opted to open up Schrodinger’s box with each other and had found the cat to be very much alive. The problem is now they have a metaphorical cat running around in the midst of everything. “Get it together. You need to step back and focus.” She coaches herself as she steps into the hot streaming water of the shower. It only takes about two more minutes of letting her thoughts wander freely for her to completely panic.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” She steps out of the shower and paces the bathroom, water dripping everywhere. “Think. Come on.” Ali can’t believe it even took her this long to realize. If she suddenly feels so uprooted like this in Ashlyn’s absence, she can only imagine what the blonde is going through in that damn prison cell all alone with nothing to do but get lost in the labyrinth of her mind. She’s sure it will only get worse as the days pass. She tries to come up with a workable solution to go visit, but comes up empty-handed, knowing she’s stuck in Portland until at least Saturday morning. “Uuuuugh” She grunts out in frustration and lightly hits her head against the wall.

And then she hears Ashlyn’s voice in her head. “I think about you. Because, well… you calm me and then I can sleep.” A smile finally comes to her face. “Help her find an escape!” She announces loudly to nobody, her voice echoing off the walls of bathroom.

Ali quickly throws on some clothes and runs out to the car to get her laptop. She pulls up the Framingham Correctional Facility website and reads it carefully to make sure this will work. She then calls every electronics store in the Boston area until she finally finds a hipster vintage music store that has what she wants in stock.

She’s on the phone with Kyle in no time, making him cancel his last hair appointment of the day so he can get to the store, her house, and then the post office before it closes. Once she’s sure he can follow her instructions to the letter, she lets herself relax a bit and finally takes that shower. All she can do now is hope the timing of it all doesn’t take too long and that it works. That and trust that Ashlyn knows how to take care of herself even when things are hard.

Kyle calls back two hours later confirming that he got it done just like she asked.

“Alex, are you ok?” His voice is beyond concerned. He could tell she was frantic earlier and that he just needed to do what she asked without question, but now he feels like he can prod.

“Yeah. I promise.” Ali reassures him. “I can tell you more later, but there was a lot that got shared in that hospital visit. It just hit me how much emotional vulnerability it was and I can’t imagine having to go back to solitude and sit with it. I just had to find a way to be there for her when I can’t physically be there, you know?”

It may not make sense to most people, but Kyle knows exactly what she’s saying. He now completely understands the whole package he just put together for her and mailed. “You’re brilliant. And your heart, Alex… it’s gold. I love you, get some rest and don’t overdo the next few days.”

Ali couldn’t feel more grateful to have a brother who knows her so well. “Love you too. I’ve got this! Night, night.” She replies and hangs up, ready to actually focus on the tasks at hand now.
It feels like she just closed her eyes when she hears the cell lock click open.

“Harris, you have a package.” Paulette, the usual Thursday morning guard announces and enters holding a medium sized boxed. That’s the easiest way for Ashlyn to keep track of the days sometimes, by who the guards on duty are. “It’s been cleared, you’re all set. Also, you start physical therapy at 3pm this afternoon, inmate.” She drops the box on the bed next to Ashlyn and leaves, the lock click filling the room again before the silence takes back over.

Ashlyn rubs her eyes a bit, sitting up and looking down at the already open box beside her. It strikes her for the first time that prison doesn’t even afford her the pleasure of opening her own mail anymore.

She reaches into the box and pulls out a clear encased Sony CD Walkman, a set of wireless headphones, a Bluetooth adaptor to make the headphones work and three different sets of extra batteries to power all of these things. She inspects it all carefully and notes how much care was taken to make sure this would all pass prison security regulations. It’s not all that different from the small clear-case radio she was able to purchase from the prison commissary when she first got here. It’s considered one of the most ‘valuable’ items you can have in here. For most inmates, it’s the only thing that connects them to the outside world. Ashlyn doesn’t use hers much. The voices of radio personalities seem too surreal and superficial sometimes and often make her feel oddly more disconnected.

She puts aside the electronics and reaches back into the box, pulling out a case of CDs labeled 1 through 10. Finally, at the bottom is a note:

**Hero,**

*At the very beginning I told you that I see you. Today, I find myself feeling you too. I'm here, I'm always here and I've got you. Take care of yourself.*

- Your Paladin

The smile that she feels growing on her face almost feels like an out of body experience at this point. It takes her about 5 minutes of fumbling to get the CD player and headphones working properly. She quickly pops in CD number 1, her mind racing as to what could be on it.

Her heart jumps instantly at the sound of Ali’s voice…

“Mr. and Mrs. Dursley of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much.”

Ashlyn immediately recognizes the opening lines of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone. She had been reading the series to Curtis and Elsie before shit hit the fan. It’s one of her absolute favorites. Ali’s voice is like a salve for her soul, her mood lifting by the second. She wonders for a brief moment why Ali has a set of CDs of herself reading Harry Potter, but figures she’ll find out eventually. She leans her head back on her pillow and listens for a while, letting herself get led through the fantasy world by Ali and getting lost in it until she feels her emotions even out a bit.

After about an hour, she pauses the CD and sits up, finally thinking clearly for the first time in a couple of days. She muses for a little while about everything that has happened and eventually settles on a bit of a revelation.
Ali Krieger showed up out of nowhere, quickly dismantling the crude fortress walls that she had worked so hard to build around herself brick by brick. And she had let her, watching in awe as Ali took them all down and left her more vulnerable than she has ever been. What she didn’t realize until now was that Ali gently set aside every single brick with care. And now…now the brunette is using them to build something beautiful. Ashlyn may have supplied all those sturdy bricks, but Ali is the one with the mortar that will hold them together and the vision of what they can become. She just has to be patient and believe that whatever the end product is, it will be worth the work and the wait. She can do that, she can believe in Ali and trust that these complex feelings are the start of something amazing.

She lays back down and starts the CD again, Ali’s voice bringing her peace of mind.

She lets out a long contented sigh. “Build me a castle, Alex. Build me a castle.”

Chapter End Notes

In the spirit of getting to understand these characters, I wanted to get into what Ashlyn has been dealing with as a protective custody prisoner in more depth. I hope I’ve conveyed how demeaning, isolating, and shattering the solitude can be for someone who was once so distinguished. I hope this chapter wasn’t too much of a mood killer...I mean, Ali did kinda save the day in the end :)
 Holy Shit

Chapter Notes

Ok, managed to get this update out pretty fast, woot!! Of course, I’m not sure you’ll be thanking me by the end of it...buuut, I did warn you to buckle up. So, let me know what you think and any theories you have! ::::posts chapter and runs away:::

A persistent loud buzzing noise rouses Ali from what was a really deep sleep. She opens her eyes groggily and sits up a bit, looking around for the source of the commotion. It’s none other than her cellphone vibrating against an empty glass on the coffee table next to her. Chris and his family had gotten to the house yesterday afternoon and after a long day of starting to settle in, Ali had insisted that she sleep on the couch so everyone could begin getting used to their new rooms right away.

She finally grabs the phone and looks at the caller ID on the screen. Her heart drops into her stomach immediately. She hadn’t expected him to call this soon. She shuts her eyes tightly and braces herself for whatever it is before answering as professionally as she can. “Hello, this is Ali Krieger.”

She listens carefully with clenched teeth as the man on the other end explains the situation, throwing in a few ‘okay’ and ‘alright’ comments to convey that she is following along. Once he has finished his brief explanation, she finally speaks.

“Ok. Please do everything you possibly can, there’s no reason we need to rush things now.” Ali directs him before adding “Thank you, Dr. Henning, for calling me and letting me know.”

She presses the end call button and lets her head fall back onto the couch. With her eyes closed, she breathes out a really long sigh. The Harris family is safely asleep upstairs and the bullet once lodged in Ashlyn’s leg is now safely at the lab of her ballistics expert after only two short days. She feels like the weight of the world has just been lifted off of her shoulders.

Ali had expected that the police department forensics lab would take some time examining and testing the bullet before cataloging it. Although she was hopeful she’d get access to it shortly after that, it was a toss-up as to whether enough time would’ve elapse that the district attorney might become aware of the appeal and take interest in the evidence before she could get her hands on it. Her expectation had been somewhat wrong. Wayne Henning had just explained to her that the forensics lab merely photographed and preserved the bullet properly before quickly cataloguing it with little fanfare and fulfilling the discovery request. He had surmised that they didn’t see much point in putting in any extra work for a piece of evidence stemming from a case closed by way of confession over two years ago. Whatever the reason, Ali couldn’t be more grateful for the turn of events. If nothing else goes her way besides these two things, she feels confident she can find a way to meet her end goal.

It’s still pretty early on Friday morning and she’s here with the Harris family until tomorrow afternoon. She knows it will be a long day of dealing with any leftover formalities, getting a couple more chores done, and introducing the private teacher to the kids. Feeling relaxed right now and knowing that she probably has another hour or so before the family is up, she closes her eyes and let’s herself sleep just a little bit longer.
Meeting Chris Harris had been quite a fascinating experience so far. There were a few things about him that easily reminded her of Ashlyn… namely, the hazel eyes, the single dimple, the sarcastic humor, and the protective personality that came out right away when he refused to let Bridget or Ali carry anything heavy into the house. Other than that, he was broad, brawny and a totally typical guy. It was a sharp contrast to Kyle who had always been very in touch and outwardly demonstrative with his feminine side. Still, she got the same vibe from Chris as she did from Ashlyn: hardened by past circumstances, yet still caring and warm despite it all.

When they arrived on Thursday, there had been little time for Ali to do more than just begin to get acquainted with them. They had spent the first couple hours moving their things into the house. Then they all enjoyed a dinner of Chinese take-out that Ali had picked up and made small talk over their meal. Ali had completely fallen in love with Curtis and Elsie, playing a quick game of hide and seek with them around the house before dinner. They had even requested that she read them a story before bed, which she happily obliged them with a dramatic reading of Where the Wild Things Are. After that, she spent a little time with Chris and Bridget going over the financial game plan and explaining how the trust would work and how they would access it for day-to-day expenses. Everyone had agreed to go to bed after that and start fresh in the morning. Nothing had been said about Ashlyn, but Ali had expected that given that the kids had been around them most of the day.

Ali is roused the second time by a few flicks to her ear and little giggling sounds. She pretends to be fast asleep and then quickly jumps up, surprising Curtis and Elsie who both let out a scream. She hears Chris’ deep laugh from the kitchen.

“Holy shit, that was great!” Chris guffaws as Bridget yells “Language, Daddy!” at him.

“Right, sorry…but, you guys totally deserved that! I told you to leave her alone.” He says still chuckling. “Nicely done, Ali!”

She gets up and jokingly bows, stopping to ruffle Curtis’ hair on her way into the kitchen. She high-fives the hand that Chris is holding up for her as she walks by and makes her way over to the coffee pot. Bridget has already poured her a mug and it strikes Ali how much this already feels comfortable and like family. It’s also a harsh reminder that Ashlyn isn’t here and she works hard to ignore the pang she feels inside at that thought.

“Ok kiddos, head upstairs and get yourselves dressed!” Bridget calls out. Curtis and Elsie rush up the stairs obediently.

Ali takes a couple sips of coffee and goes to grab a bagel, but Elsie comes running back into the kitchen. “Mom, can Ali help me get dressed?” She asks with literal puppy eyes.

“Why don’t I go up and help you, Els.” Bridget deflects and Elsie starts to pout.

“I really don’t mind.” Ali assures her and grabs Elsie’s hand, watching Bridget mouth ‘thank you’ from across the kitchen.

It turns out Elsie needs pretty much no help at all and is more self-sufficient than any 4-year old that Ali has ever seen. She starts combing the girl’s hair just to feel useful, even though she feels like
Elsie probably had that covered too. She just finishes getting it into a ponytail when Elsie turns around to look at her. She too has those Harris hazel eyes.

“Ali, are you going to make sure auntie Ashwyn can find us here?” Elsie asks.

Ali can’t help but smile at the fact that Elsie pronounces her name just fine, but replaces the ‘l’ in Ashlyn’s name with a ‘w’. She’s a bit unprepared for the question and is trying to come up with a response when the little girl starts to speak again.

“Daddy said a bad man is angry cause auntie is protecting kids at her job and we got to pretend not to know her and move houses so we can be safe and she can come back. Are you going to help her get here?” Elsie questions so innocently that it practically breaks Ali’s heart. This girl is so beyond intelligent for her age.

“Don’t you worry little princess. Your auntie is smart and strong and a really special person. She’ll get home and when she does, I promise you I’ll make sure she finds you right away. I’ll do everything to get her to you, ok?” Ali promises her earnestly.

“Ok. My hair looks nice.” Elsie gives Ali a hug and then goes to grab her shoes.

“Come on, I’m sure there’s a bowl of cereal downstairs with your name on it.” Ali says after the little girl puts on her shoes.

“Gross, Ali! Cereal is for babies! I eat scrambled eggs and bacon. Duh.” Elsie immediately corrects her and starts down the stairs.

Ali laughs so hard her sides hurt. “Scrambled eggs it is then.”

The day goes by fast, but is really productive. The meeting with the private teacher goes really well and the kids take to her quickly, much to Ali’s relief. In the afternoon, Ali and Chris build the backyard playset while Bridget unpacks and puts things away in the house with help from the kids. Bridget cooks them all an amazing stuffed baked-chicken dinner which they eat on the back deck of the house given the unusually warm October evening. During dinner Ali tells them as much as she can about the area and some of the fun things to do, some of which Curtis and Elsie seem really excited about. They also spend the evening using their new names and trying to get used to them.

Once the kids go to bed, Ali goes over some of the more minute details with Chris and Bridget. It includes getting a complete list of all the usernames and passwords for every email address, financial, and social media account they have. They are well aware that they can’t ever log into any of these existing accounts until this case is over. Ali has agreed to change all the passwords for them once she gets home to ensure that it doesn’t happen even accidentally. From now on, they won’t be able to contact any family or friends using even new email and social media accounts. Their close family and friends have been made aware that they are being hidden from a dangerous situation and have been told to say that the couple said they were traveling Europe for the next year if they are ever asked. If they need to get in touch with anyone, they will have to do it through Ali by way of the private email account from the trust. That email address will also be used for business related purposes and no personal names will ever be used on it. It’s a whole lot to take in and deal with, but Chris and Bridget seem to handle it all like champs.

By the time they realize, it’s 10pm and Bridget excuses herself to go to bed. Chris opts to stay up a bit longer and Ali joins him, both of them sipping their iced teas on the deck in a comfortable silence.
“I know you probably don’t want to hear anything along the lines of thank you, but I’m going to say it anyway. This… everything you have done here, it’s so far beyond belief and expectation. This family certainly isn’t used to being treated so well. You are a remarkable person, Ali. Truly. I can’t thank you enough or explain how much this means.” Chris breaks the silence with his sincere diatribe.

“You’re welcome. This is how I do things. I’m here for you guys and I’ll do anything I can to help you.” Ali replies simply and genuinely.

Chris nods and there’s another brief silence before he speaks again. “You know, my sister is a really special person. She’s complex in many ways…fiercely loyal and protective, but also very private. She has the biggest heart of anyone I’ve ever known. A heart that people have broken over and over again because they just don’t understand her very well. Ashlyn is… well… she's the person that runs into the fire without hesitation to save lives even if it looks hopeless to anyone else. And she’ll make you promise to stay outside and assure you that she has the situation handled even if she knows she’s gonna burn in there.” He pauses for a second before continuing. “I’ve watched her go through life like this, always knowing that what she really needs is that one person who knows exactly when to go in after her. God knows I’ve tried to be that person sometimes and totally failed.” He shakes his head. “She needs someone that won’t hold her back from trying, but won’t hesitate to run in and help her without hurting her pride. I’m just waiting for the day that she finds that person.”

Ali nods in understanding, everything she’s come to learn about Ashlyn matching up with what Chris just said. She doesn’t get the chance to respond at all before he continues.

“I’m not even going to pretend that I know what is or what isn’t going on between you and my sister. And I’m not going to ask. I just want to say that, from what I can tell Ali, you seem like a woman who isn’t afraid of a little fire… or even a big one.” He finishes.

Ali downs the last few sips of her iced tea in a gulp and stands up, walking over to Chris and placing her hand on his shoulder before leaning down closer to him. “You’re right about that. I’m not afraid of fire. In fact, I’ve been known to play with matches.” She gives him a knowing smile and a light tap on the shoulder before making her way inside and calling back with a wink “Goodnight, Thomas.”

By the time Ali gets home Saturday evening, she’s so wiped out that all she does is text Kyle to confirm lunch plans for tomorrow before she plops into bed and falls asleep quickly; not even staying awake long enough this time to worry and obsess about how Ashlyn is doing like she has the last few nights.

When she sits down across from Kyle the next day at their local Panera, she feels more refreshed than she has in days.

“So, be honest. Are you doing ok?” Kyle asks as they start digging into their salads.

“I’m anxious to see how Ash is tomorrow, but I’m feeling pretty good about things otherwise… for now.” Ali replies honestly like he asked.

“Ash?” Kyle raises an eyebrow. “Moved onto pet names have we?”

Ali shoots him a glare, but can’t help the little smile that comes to her face. “Alright, alright, let me just say what I have to say and then no more asking about it, ok?”
Kyle just nods.

“There were some really honest admissions about feelings during the time I was in the hospital with her, and some cuddling and being really close too. We shared every single tattoo, relationship histories, and a lot of jokes to lighten the mood.” She watches Kyle’s eyebrows raise higher and higher on his forehead with each part of what she has just said. “But… nothing else happened and we both agreed that we needed to keep boundaries on things so we can get through this. And that’s what we’re going to do. We’ll get through this and then explore what’s there after.” Ali says resolutely.


“Don’t finish that sentence.” Ali warns him. “We have a long road to navigate.”

“I know. I know.” He admits. “So, things went ok this week?” He asks.

“Yeah, pretty perfect actually. They’re safe and doing well. And get this, the bullet is already at Wayne Henning’s lab in perfect condition. Couldn’t even believe my luck on that.” Ali tells him with a slight smile.

Kyle jokingly throws his hands up like he’s thanking the heavens before getting serious. “This is getting kind of intense already and it hasn’t even really started.”

Ali just nods in agreement.

“Are you scared about how it’s going to go at all?” Kyle asks her quietly. Despite all his faith in his sister, he feels nervous and scared.

“I can’t be. If I do that, I’ll never be able to handle it all. I’m going to take it one day at a time and control everything that I can. What I can’t control and the things that don’t go my way, I’ll find a way to deal with them. Just like I always have.” Ali replies truthfully.

Kyle feels reassured by her bravery. “So, what now? Do we just wait around?”

“Pretty much. At least until the court accepts the appeal. Once that happens, people’s eyes will be open and on the case. Bobby will make his move at some point. I just have to wait and see what that is and learn from it what I can. I need to keep him off the trail as long as possible.” Ali explains.

“Yeah. That guy… I don’t know how to feel about going up against that.” Kyle says frankly. He had met Bobby a few times when he was living with Ashlyn. The guy had always rubbed him the wrong way.

“Me either. But it’s gonna happen whether we like it or not. Just have to stay sharp and smart about it.” Ali replies.

Kyle sighs. “You’ll remember our promise to each other, right?” He looks at her intently.

“I promise. Us before her. If it comes to it, you before me and then me before her.” Ali reiterates the deal they made when she first told Kyle that Ashlyn had agreed to move forward with the appeal… when it had hit both of them just how dangerous this could get for everyone involved.

“Yeah, that. We owe her that much. And I owe her even more than that.” He confesses quietly.

Ali reaches over to squeeze his hand tightly in hers, both of them acknowledging the moment before
getting back to their lunch and choosing to spend the rest of it with their usual light banter.

Ali is up really early Monday morning both too anxious and too excited to sleep. She’s off to visit with Ashlyn at noon, but there’s still at least 5 hours to kill. She ends up going out for a long run, figuring she might as well enjoy it while she can because it won’t be that long before it’s too cold outside. Six miles later she’s back at her front door and ready to spend the next hour or so showering and getting herself put together. She knows it probably hasn’t been the easiest few days for Ashlyn and she wants to make sure she looks extra nice today in hopes that it helps somehow.

She’s in the midst of applying her eyeliner when her phone vibrates loudly on the bathroom counter, making her jump and streak an errant black line across her eyelid.

“Mother fucker!” She yells out in annoyance and looks down to see who is calling. Her annoyance leaves her immediately when she sees that it’s Wayne Henning.

“Hi Dr. Henning. Give it to me straight, what are we looking at? Is it good?” She answers the phone with a barrage of questions, dying to know what he found.

“No Ali, it’s not good.” Dr. Henning answers her in an even tone. Ali’s heart drops and she’s starting to panic when he continues. “It’s actually fucking great!”

Ali’s eyebrows raise and she swears she stops breathing for a second. This man is a distinguished forensics expert and a former physicist that lives in her neighborhood, she’s never heard him swear before. “I’m sorry, what?” She asks in clarification.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to rattle you with my dramatic language!” He says apologetically once he hears her confusion. “Anyway, listen to this. I’ve run every test I can and I’ve found some amazing things. First, based on the bullet caliber and barrel markings on it, I can identify 100% that it was shot from a 9mm Glock 22. That’s a standard police issue weapon for the Boston PD. Even better, it also has a clear set of unique markings on it that all fired bullets do, a gun’s signature that it leaves on the bullet if you will. Those markings are inconsistent with the gun seized as evidence from the scene and belonging to Captain Ashlyn Harris. So, I can confirm with absolute certainty that this bullet was not fired from that gun.”

“Ahhh, that’s incredible!” Ali yells into the phone excitedly. “You’re the best, Dr. Henning!”

“Oh, I’m not done.” He says quickly. “The shape and condition of the bullet suggest that it was clearly fired straight into the body. It did not ricochet off of anything as the case files indicate. The bullet would show some kind of damage or irregularity if that was the case, and its condition doesn’t show that. And one more extremely interesting thing…I can tell you that it traveled through a silencer. What’s odd to me is that it was an old model silencer. Modern day silencers use gases in the canisters to muffle the sound, so nothing in the silencer touches or leaves a mark on the bullet. However, older silencers once used various materials that would act as wipes to muffle the sound. I believe this model of silencer must have used some kind of rubber or plastic inner wipes because it left distinct brush-like scuffs on the bullet. Anyway, no doubt it was a silencer. So, my conclusion here is that there was another gun fired at the scene. Specifically, another 9mm Glock 22 with a silencer on it. If I had my hands on it, I could perfectly match the bullet to the exact gun it was fired from. I know your theory is that another officer at the scene is the one who fired it, but I don’t have a good explanation as to why an officer would be using such an outdated silencer.” He finishes.

Ali hasn’t specified to Dr. Henning who she believes fired the gun in question, just that she’s guessing it may have been another cop at the scene. She wants his focus to be specifically on what
Ashlyn’s gun did or didn’t do so that there is no bias in his work.

“Wow, just wow. You just made my year. I don’t even know how to thank you.” Ali is at a loss for words, feeling so happy she could cry.

Dr. Henning laughs on the other end. “No need, you’re certainly paying me enough. My kids thank you profusely for their spring break trips to Europe!”

Ali laughs along with him. “Well, it’s well worth it! So, you can testify and stand behind your work in court if I need you to?” She confirms.

“Absolutely.” Dr. Henning answers confidently. “Are you okay with me delivering the bullet back to forensics now? I’ve photographed and saved backup proof of all my work as well as 3D renderings of the bullet itself if we need to re-examine anything.”

“Perfect! Send it back. The less time it’s in our hands, the less they’ll suspect we got any useful information from it.” Ali replies.

“You really are a pretty incredibly lawyer, Ali. You think of everything.” Dr. Henning compliments her.

“Please, you’re the one who just blew the roof off this thing. You’re really the best Dr. Henning, seriously!” Ali flatters him right back. “We’ll be in touch. Thank you again!”

“You bet. Have a great day!” Dr. Henning replies as they hang up.

“Holy shit!” Ali says looking into the mirror and trying to fully process everything she just heard. If she was excited to see Ashlyn before, this just took it to a whole new level.

The two minutes Ali waits for Ashlyn to be escorted into the room feel like an eternity. Her face lights up as the blonde enters, only to drop a bit after seeing that she looks so rough, for lack of a better word. Her eyes look tired and bloodshot, her hair is a bit flat compared to the wavy vibrancy it usually has, and even her shoulders look a bit droopy. Still, Ali sees Ashlyn’s face break out into a huge smile when they finally make eye contact and the blonde suddenly looks a bit less burdened.

Ali watches the guard uncuff the blonde and head into the observation room. She was hoping for Jordan, but she’s never seen this guard before. She’s about to slide Ashlyn’s coffee in front of her when she feels Ashlyn’s hands grab hers and pull her up onto her feet. The blonde wraps her in a tight hug over the small table and buries her face into Ali’s hair, “Alex” coming out of her mouth in a barely audible whisper.

Ali lets herself get lost in the hug until she feels Ashlyn pull-back after a minute. She immediately looks over at the observation window only to see the guard just smirking.

“Say hi to Tim.” Ashlyn smiles and points her thumb in the direction of the plexi-glass window as an informal introduction because he can’t hear her.

Ali laughs a bit and waves at the guy, getting a little wave back from him as the two of them finally sit down.

“So, miss me?” Ali teases.

“Not at all.” Ashlyn deadpans.
“Missed you too, asshole.” Ali shoots her a playful glare.

“What happened to ‘hero’?” Ashlyn pretends to be offended.

“Gotta earn it, Harris.” Ali winks. “Seriously, you ok?”

“I’m not gonna lie. I had a few tough days. I’m much much better now though.” Ashlyn purposefully smiles. “You look incredible by the way.” She adds, taking in Ali’s tight black jeans and form-fitting gray blouse capped off by perfect hair and make-up.

“Thank you.” Ali replies with a nose-crinkling smile before following Ashlyn’s lead. “I’m not gonna lie either, you look kinda like hell.” She pauses briefly for effect, before sweetly adding “But, you’re still a sight to behold.” She watches Ashlyn smile a bit shyly.

“I bet you say that to all the girls.” Ashlyn jests.

“Only the ones in beige jumpsuits and cuffs.” Ali plays right back, trying to maintain a seductive look on her face but failing, both of them laughing really hard.

“You sure know how to lift a girl’s mood, Alex.” Ashlyn muses as the laughter dies down a bit. “Speaking of which, I’m dying to know why you have recordings of yourself reading Harry Potter at your disposal?”

“I promise I will get to the answer of that question, but first, I have some really important news.” Ali says pulling out her digital recorder and putting it out on the table to signal that it pertains to the case. Ashlyn nods and Ali turns on the recorder. “So, what’s up?” The blonde inquires.

Ali explains very vaguely and quickly that her family is settled, safe, and doing well, but giving no other specifics. She then launches right into the information Dr. Henning gave her about the bullet. She looks up at Ashlyn when she’s finished to find the blonde looking astounded.

“Holy Shit. That is… uh, wow. It’s been like a week, how is it even possible that you managed all this?” Ashlyn asks completely baffled. She doesn’t even give Ali a chance to answer before adding, “You know what, never mind. You’re Ali Krieger and you’re magical, obviously. Just… holy shit! I can’t believe you got all that from the bullet.”

“Me either.” Ali admits. “I had nothing to do with making it all happen like this, so your magic theory is probably just as good of a guess as my luck theory on how all this worked out. I’m not even going to question the good vibes though.”

“Agreed. Let’s just ride the good karma wave as long as possible.” Ashlyn replies.

“Well, that’s it for now and probably it for a while. Now it’s all about waiting.” Ali says, turning off the recorder.

“Ok, so Harry Potter?” Ashlyn jumps right back to her original question.

“So persistent, Harris.” Ali teases before getting into it. “Alright, so I used to actually be pretty bad about enunciating my words properly and everyone would tell me that I mumbled a lot. I never noticed and no one ever said anything to me about it professionally when it came to having to speak in court or depositions. Although, I guess I often got asked to repeat myself and just never realized.” Ali hears Ashlyn whisper something, but can’t make out what she said. “What was that?” She asks.

“Nothing. Just that you do actually mumble a bit when you’re nervous. Like when you’re trying to
tell a girl that you’d accept her date invitation.” Ashlyn smirks and earns a playful glare from Ali.
“Just saying.” She adds with a shrug.

“Jerk.” Ali purposely mumbles and continues on. “Anyway! When I came up with the plan for
podcasting, Kyle suggested I work on making sure my voice was clear and that I practice appropriate
voice tone for what I would be saying. So, I started reading books out loud so I could listen to myself
and figure out what I needed to work on. I did the whole Harry Potter series before I felt comfortable
enough to stop. Let’s just say my speech and inflection has gotten a lot better.”

“You are one dedicated woman, Alex.” Ashlyn tells her, ever in awe of how hard she works at
everything. “Those CDs literally saved my sanity the last few days. And that you thought to send
them to me… and that note. You’re a gift, Alex… and, well, just perfect. I’ll leave it at that.”

Ali smiles widely, her heart rate picking up at the blonde’s sweet and sincere words. “Glad you liked
it, because the CDs for books 2 and 3 are currently being reviewed in the security office for content.
So, I’m sure they’ll give them to you soon. I’m gonna have to dig into my storage closet at home to
find the rest of the books, but I’ll bring you those too.” She promises.

Ashlyn wants to tell her she’s perfect again, but she figures Ali is probably getting a bit sick of her
doing that. So she simply reaches to grab Ali’s hand and lifts it to her mouth, placing a soft kiss in the
open palm and then pressing the brunette’s hand to the middle of her chest so Ali can feel her
heartbeat.

Ali closes her eyes and does the only thing that feels right. She grabs Ashlyn’s hand and holds it to
her own chest, both of their eyes opening to meet each other with smiles that acknowledge the
moment before dropping each other’s hands gently.

There’s a silence while each of them try to find their words, but the sound of the observation room
door opening and Tim’s voice break it for them. “So, when is the wedding and I am invited?” He
calls out teasingly from the observation room, no longer able to hold it in.

Ali turns a bit red and Ashlyn jokingly shoots him the middle finger as she rolls her eyes and says
“Not anymore you aren’t!”

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It’s been 24 days since the appeal was filed and the passing time has been both tedious and relaxing
for Ali and Ashlyn. Ali has been visiting every 3 days, which has really seemed to lift Ashlyn’s
mood. Things have been quiet and there has been nothing to really talk about in terms of the case, so
they try not to get too anxious about the impending appeal decision and use their visits to learn more
about each other.

Ali learns that the blonde once dreamed of being a pro-surfer until she realized she couldn’t surf that
well, won a state hot dog eating contest at age 12, is obsessed with fashion, knows how to tie at least
7 different tie knots, loves to camp solely because she loves campfires, can drive a motorboat and a
sailboat, hates broccoli, can rap every word of Rapper’s Delight, will watch a documentary about
literally anything, and could eat her weight in funfetti cake.

Ashlyn discovers that Ali always wears mascara even to bed, juggles a soccer ball when she’s trying
to think through the facts of a case, loves live theater, hates her feet, still sleeps with her childhood
blankie under her pillow, binge watches repeat episodes of the TV show Bones, has a soft spot for
oldies and 80s music because that’s what her mom listened to, eats frosting right out of the can, and
refuses to eat anything but ice cream cake on her birthday.
They’re both aware that once the appeal goes through, this kind of personal time might be more limited and more focused on the case. So, they’ve been making the best of it while they have it.

Ali is running a little on the early side this morning because she got up to go on a run with Kyle. She’s feeling a little tired from staying up late watching TV, so she stops for a coffee at her favorite local shop to drink on the drive to see Ashlyn. She figures by the time she drinks her second cup with Ashlyn, she’ll be fully energized.

She orders her usual latte from Paul, her favorite barista, and then stands off to the side to wait for it. She looks around to check out at all the hand turkey pictures made by local school children hung up on the walls of the café for Thanksgiving. As she does, she knows with absolute certainty that the court is going to approve the appeal within a matter of days. She knows because Bobby Dugan is sitting at a table in her favorite coffee shop and looking right at her.

“Holy shit.” She whispers to herself discretely as she wracks her brain for a plan.
Ali doesn’t dare look in Bobby’s direction again until she can come up with a game plan. She pretends to casually play with her phone as she waits for her coffee and works the logic out in her head.

She personally knows every single judge that sits on the appeals court. These people were her mother’s friends, people that once sat in their home and shared dinner at one point or another. She’s certain that none of them are involved with Bobby. They are like her mother was, dedicated to what they do and there because they’ve worked hard for it. It’s not that often that judges corrupt because morality is at the center of who they are. In her estimation, there’s no way Bobby got a tip-off from an appeals judge. And a clerk is usually a fresh out of law school lawyer looking to distinguish themselves in a one year clerkship before moving on to something bigger; there’s no way Bobby would even bother with that.

The district attorney, however, is a whole other story. The Boston DA’s office is notorious for numerous corruption scandals that have been revealed over the years. She knows the court will often alert the DA’s office before accepting an appeal to allow them to prepare an argument to block it. Ali doesn’t care about that, she’s sure the DA has no standing to block this appeal since it’s based on procedural failures. What she’s sure about now though…Bobby has the DA in his back pocket. The DA must have contacted him after finding out about the appeal. And here he is, likely after learning who represented Ashlyn in the appeal filing.

In her peripheral vision, she can see he’s still watching her. She reasons that if he was planning to intimidate her, he would have come over already or made himself known. No, he’s just sitting back and watching. Based on that, she’s assuming that he just wants to gauge her reaction to him being there. He’s probably expecting her to do one of two things: completely not notice him and act normally or notice him and anxiously walk out of there immediately.

She’s broken out of her thoughts by Paul the barista.

“Here you go, Ali. Piping hot, be careful.” Paul warns her as he hands her the coffee.

“Thanks, Paul, you’re the best!” Ali says as cheerily as she can. “Hey, um, do you have any of that chocolate powder to sprinkle on top? I need a chocolate fix this morning.” She asks him knowing that she just needs to buy herself a little more time to think, she could care less about the chocolate.

“Sure do. Let me grab it.” He drops down behind the counter to get it and hands it to her.

“Thanks again!” Ali repeats.

“Anytime. Have a good one, Ali!” He gives her a small wave.

“You too!” She smiles at him before making her way to the small counter to sprinkle the chocolate.
and pretend to fix her coffee.

She glances at her phone and sees that it’s 9:25am. That gives her 35 minutes to get to Ashlyn on time; 25 minutes of travel time and 10 minutes to spare. She knows that if she’s more than 30 minutes late, she forfeits the visit completely. She’s now sprinkled way too much chocolate powder on her coffee while internally debating which of the reactions Bobby is expecting that she wants to go with. Does she acknowledge him before she leaves or not?

If she doesn’t acknowledge him at all, he’ll think she doesn’t know who he is and that she doesn’t know anything about his involvement in the case. The problem is that then he’ll probably go on a mission to prevent her from finding out anything; likely messing with evidence or, worse, finding a way to intimidate Ashlyn so that he’s sure she doesn’t say anything.

If she does look at him and walk away, he’ll think she’s scared. And she’d only be scared if she knew something bad about him. The last thing she wants to do is let on that she knows too much… nothing good could come from that. She internally groans at her options. And then she realizes that she’s only debating these two options because her visit with Ashlyn is weighing too heavily on her ability to act in any other way right now. Those are the only options that will allow her to get to Ashlyn on time.

She stirs her coffee to buy a few more seconds. This is exactly what she told herself she wouldn’t do. Right now, she has to forget about Ashlyn’s feelings and do her job as her lawyer and protector. She thinks about her conversation with Chris as she finally finds her confidence. ‘She can handle the fire as long as you go in after her.’ Ali mentally reassures herself as she snaps the lid on her coffee.

“Fuck you, asshole. I never do anything anyone expects.” She whispers to herself as she turns around and stares Bobby right in the eye. She gives him a purposeful look and walks right over to his table, watching the confusion grow on his face.

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“Chief Dugan?” She says a bit hesitantly, acting like she’s not 100% sure it’s him.

Bobby nods, looking a bit like a deer in the headlights.

“Ali Krieger. You probably don’t remember me, but we were at the same awards dinner last year. I was one of the SPARK Impact Award winners and you were one of the presenters.” Ali extends her hand to him and watches him shake it, fighting her urge to pull it away and pour copious amounts of hand sanitizer on it.

“Oh, um, yes. Ms. Krieger. Forgive an old man, I didn’t recognize you… but I know who you are. I think everyone in Boston knows who you are.” He replies in his heavy South Boston accent, clearly playing it aloof like she isn’t the very reason he’s sitting there.

‘Dick.’ Ali thinks in her head while giving him a polite smile as she looks him over. Old man is right, he looks older up close and in person than he does in pictures and on TV. His hair is a silvery gray, his cheeks and nose are red and ruddy, and there are deep lines on his forehead, around his eyes and mouth. He looks like an Irish grandpa, only more sinister. “Do you mind if I sit?” She points to the chair.

“Oh, um, yes. Ms. Krieger. Forgive an old man, I didn’t recognize you… but I know who you are. I think everyone in Boston knows who you are.” He replies in his heavy South Boston accent, clearly playing it aloof like she isn’t the very reason he’s sitting there.

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“Uh, not at all.” He tells her and motions to the seat, trying to play it cool even though Ali can see he’s surprised by the request. “Anything I can help you with?”

“Actually, yes. I assume you know about my podcast and some of the legal work I do?” She
“Yup. Some people might call it sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong, but I really admire your tenacity and the important work you do, Ms. Krieger. I’m sure the Newton police were thrilled to have that kidnapping case off their desk.” Bobby replies in a far too fake a voice, clearly not being able to resist taking a dig at her.

“You’re gonna pay for that one, dick.” Ali thinks as she grits her teeth and manages to make herself lightly laugh. “Well, I only stick my nose where my clients ask me to.” She says with a hint of sass. “Which actually leads me to why I came over here. I am working on a new case and really don’t have much yet. I was hoping to track you down over the next week or so, and poof, you appear in my favorite coffee shop as luck would have it.” She shoots him a shit-eating grin.

“Well, I hope you’re not looking for investigative help or security support, our department is far too busy for that.” Bobby replies, not sure where the lawyer is going with this conversation but still wanting to make sure he sounds imposing.

“No, no, nothing like that.” Ali assures him quickly. “No, this is in more of a personal capacity that I was hoping to speak with you.”

“Ok, well in that case, go ahead.” He says evenly.

Ali pulls out her digital recorder. “Would you mind if I record our conversation? You know with the podcast and all, this is how I document all my casework. To be honest, I really don’t think this case is going to make the cut, but just in case.”

Bobby looks completely unsettled, but he pretty much knows he can’t say no. Ali knows it too, which is exactly why she asked.

“You can tell me to turn it off at any point.” Ali tries to convince him further.

“Sure, sure. I understand. Gotta pay the bills, right?” He replies.

“Yep.” Ali fights the urge to roll her eyes as she turns on the recorder. “Chief Bobby Dugan, for legal purposes would you just verbally confirm for me that you are aware this conversation is being recorded and may be used in a court of law?”

“Sure. Yes, I am aware that the conversation is being recorded.” He acknowledges out loud.

“Great, thanks.” Ali proceeds. “So, I’m working on a case for a friend. She’s serving a life sentence for a murder confession and I filed an appeal on her behalf to try and get her sentence reduced.” Ali begins her carefully worded background explanation to him. “Anyway, I don’t need to tell you all the details because you know her. It’s for Ashlyn Harris. From what I understand, you were actually close to her professionally? And, based on what I’ve seen of the case files, one of the first officers on the scene the night of the murder? Do I have that right?”

“Yes, Ms. Krieger, you do. It’s a very unfortunate circumstance.” He puts on a solemn voice. “We were actually very close, she was like a daughter to me. I didn’t know you were friends, she never mentioned you.” He challenges.

“Well, I use the term ‘friend’ loosely. She is close to my brother and he introduced me to her more recently. I took this on as a favor to him because she wanted a lawyer to file the appeal.” Ali explains and watches his face contort to try and mask his confusion.

“Is your brother a police officer?” He questions, unsure of who Ali could be referring to.
Ali let’s out a small laugh for effect. “Nope, kind of the opposite of that. Recovering drug addict.”

“Kyle Christopher?” Bobby asks after a brief silence, thinking back to the guy that had been living with Ashlyn while he was in rehab. He always told the blonde she was a fool for taking in people like that, they always came back begging for more.

“The one and only.” Ali replies. “He was still a bit sore back then about our father leaving us and chose to use my mother’s maiden name. I think he’s finally over it now.”

Bobby just nods and Ali can tell he has no idea what to make of this conversation. It’s exactly what she’s going for.

“So, back to Ashlyn Harris. Like I said before, I helped her file an appeal for a sentence reduction and I’m hoping to hear about it very soon. I’m expecting an approval given all the paperwork irregularities with the arrest and confession procedures. Beyond that though, I really haven’t found much to work with and Ashlyn really hasn’t been that helpful either. I just don’t think paperwork irregularities are going to do more than get her a case review. A sentence reduction… that’s going to take some kind of additional defense, you know? She doesn’t really seem to get that.” Ali divulges to him casually, trying to gain just an inch of his trust.

“So, she had you file the appeal but hasn’t pushed harder to delve into her case?” Bobby inquires, trying to understand what is going on.

“Exactly. Even though I’ve tried to explain, she’s stuck on the idea of the paperwork problems being enough to get some time knocked off her sentence. She doesn’t want to pursue anything else.” Ali lies through her teeth. “To be honest, this isn’t all that uncommon with confession convictions. A lot of times people just think that confessing is going to get them some leniency, but then they get life and it kind of shocks them. They get desperate once they’ve been locked up a couple years. By the time they get through the appeal, it doesn’t matter if they still have a 50 year sentence ahead of them, just as long as it’s not life anymore, they’re happy. I think maybe it gives them some hope of finally being out one day, I don’t know.”

“Never really thought about it that way, but I suppose it makes sense in theory.” Bobby replies with a shrug.

“I’ve poured over her case files and whatever evidence there was. I even had a forensics guy check out the bullet that came out of her leg a few weeks ago when it got infected.” She pauses for a second checking for his reaction and sees the slight widening of his eyes. Yep, he definitely doesn’t know about the bullet yet. “The guy just tells me it was shot out of a 9mm Glock 22 police gun, so no surprise there and not helpful. Pair all that with that fact that Ashlyn doesn’t remember much other than the confession, and I just don’t feel comfortable that I can do very much to reduce the sentence.” Ali explains with as much of a desperate tone as she can. “That doesn’t help her and it sure doesn’t help me pay my bills either.” Ali adds, motioning towards the recorder with a smirk.

“Yeah, you’re going to need a bit more excitement for that show of yours. A failed appeal probably doesn’t qualify.” Bobby mocks her.

“Well, speaking of drama… from what I’ve read, seems like Ashlyn was under a lot of psychological stress with the whole situation. So, I thought maybe I’d pitch a temporary insanity defense to her given the nature of it all, but I want to understand the circumstances better before I do that. That’s where talking to you comes in.” Ali looks at him pointedly.

“The whole thing was probably as much of a shock to me as it was for her, Ms. Krieger. I’m not sure I can help you that much.” He tries to shut her down.
“Well, anything you can tell me about her mood or how she acted around the time before it happened would be great. Did you know she was seeing Liam Gorham?” Ali prods him.

“That’s why I say it was so shocking. She was completely normal leading up to it. Not a single thing different about her at all. She was performing well at work, doing all the usual activities she always did. She never once mentioned anything about Gorham, so I had no idea. I never saw her with him.” Bobby says nonchalantly.

‘Thanks for giving me a statement that shows she had no idea what was about to happen and was never seen with Gorham. Such a fucktard.’ Ali tries to hide her smile. “Hmmm, that’s actually helpful. Kind of shows that she probably didn’t premeditate anything. What about Gorham? Anything about him that seemed off at all?” Ali questions very casually.

Bobby jumps on the question way too quickly. “I didn’t know Gorham at all, so I couldn’t tell you.”

“Oh, sorry. I just assumed given his high-life status and you being the chief of police and all. I figured he was probably in contact with you for security and events, stuff of that sort. I guess I watch too many TV shows where all the important people know each other.” Ali gives him an apologetic cringing face while simultaneously trying to flatter him. “So, you didn’t have any associations with him at all?”

“Sorry to crush your TV fantasy, but no. Never had any personal or professional associations with Liam Gorham at all. We were in the same room for events a couple times, but I hadn’t even been so much as introduced to him.” Bobby replies coolly, but Ali can hear the defensiveness in his voice.

‘Big mistake. Got you now, prick.’ Ali can’t believe her luck at the fact that he just completely denied so much as even being acquainted with Liam Gorham. “Alright, what about when you arrived at the scene that night… anything unusual at all or notable, about Ashlyn or Liam or anything really?” She keeps up her façade.

“You know, Ms. Krieger, the entire thing was very disturbing and unsettling for me. To see my own protégé and fellow officer in that state… it’s all really such a haze now. It’s a night I prefer to forget about.” He gives her nothing.

‘About time you made a smart decision here.’ Ali mentally mocks the man in her head. “Well, so much for my groundbreaking lead!” Ali laughs a bit. “Back to the drawing board. I’m really sorry to have intruded on your coffee time for this, Chief. I’m here most mornings and I’ve never seen you in here before, so I thought it was my lucky day!” She can’t help but stick it to him just a little bit more.

“Not a problem. I’m sorry to disappoint. I actually just found this place, but I think I might just have to come back more often.” Bobby tries harder to make his presence felt.

Ali’s not giving him a single ounce of attention on that front and just shrugs him off to annoy him. “In that case, come in during the 7am to 10am window. That’s when Paul is here and he makes the best lattes.” She says as she points over to Paul behind the counter.

“Thanks for the tip.” Bobby says coldly. This woman hasn’t seemed affected by any of his insinuations and now he’s just annoyed that he’s wasted his time on someone who doesn’t seem to matter. Still, he knows what she’s capable of and he’s not quite done testing the situation just yet. “Maybe I can give you a tip too… try and get in touch with Chris Harris, her brother. He might have more insight than me.”

‘Oh ok, we’re gonna go there. No problem.’ Ali has just convinced this douchebag that it’s safe to bungee jump. Now it’s time to take away his safety net and push him off the platform while she snips
the cord for good measure. “Well, thanks, but I tried that. Turns out he’s off traveling Europe with his family for like the next year or something…completely unreachable.” She shakes her head in disappointment very compellingly. She watches Bobby clasp his hands tightly, his knuckles almost white. She can practically see him coming unglued.

Bobby is fuming internally. Ali Krieger is just pissing him off now with her naïve and unknowing exposure of his recent passivity. He expected more given her hotshot celebrity lawyer status, but clearly it’s just luck and hype. Just a useless bitch. “Well, I have a meeting to be at shortly.” He starts to excuse himself. “Remember what I said about sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong, be careful out there Ms. Krieger, wouldn’t want to ever see you pop up in my case files.” He gives her a warning that he’s sure she can’t miss this time.

Ali clicks off the recorder and gives him the sweetest smile she can manage. “Don’t worry, I can take care of myself. Besides, the truth is always worth it. It’s either sets you free…” She pauses just for a second, giving him a hard, pointed look “or it completely buries you alive.”

Bobby isn’t even sure what to make of that last statement and needs to leave before he says anything he regrets. This whole conversation has been beyond unexpected. “Have a good day, Ms. Krieger.” He says as he throws out his coffee cup and heads out the door.

‘Sleep well you piece of shit. By the time you wake up, I’ll have ripped the sheets out from under you.’ Ali thinks as she just simply plasters a smile on her face and gives him a little wave. She lets out a long sigh when he’s gone, relieved that the conversation couldn’t have gone any better if she had meticulously planned it out. Bobby Dugan just gave her everything she needs and she just set him on out a trail that he wasn’t even expecting to be on. A trail that she blazed herself.

She glances at her phone as she throws away her now cold latte. She groans loudly seeing that it’s 10:25am and there’s no way she can make it to the prison in 5 minutes. She’s officially missed her visit with Ashlyn. “Fucking hate that asshole.” She mutters to herself, rushing to her car so she can drive to the prison and request unofficial visiting hours for first thing tomorrow morning. With Bobby out of the way for now, all she can think about is how Ashlyn is going to handle her missing this visit with no warning. She can practically envision the blonde engulfed in an inferno of despair and terror. The mere thought of it nauseates her.

Ashlyn watches the tiny battery-operated clock on her desk hit 10am. Her heart rate starts to pick up and mood elevates like it always does just before she visits with Ali. She’s not sure what exactly she was living for before, but she’s sure that she’s living for these visits now. She paces around her cell with anxious excitement, waiting to hear the guard’s footsteps in the hallway which signal that Ali is here waiting for her.

She watches 10:05am pass, and then 10:10am, and then 10:15am…still no guard, still no Ali. She starts to get a little unsettled, but reasons that Ali is just running a little late or more likely the prison has messed up the visiting room schedule or something because Ali has never been late.

When 10:31am hits, she’s beyond consolable. Ali isn’t coming. Something is so very wrong, the brunette must be in trouble. She crouches to the ground in panic and holds her head in her hands, her body trembling. She manages to crawl over to the toilet, barely making it there before she empties her breakfast into the tin pot.

She struggles to pull herself together so she can figure out what to do. The best she can come up with is to request phone time. Then it hits her that she doesn’t know who to call. She doesn’t know Ali’s number. She tries desperately to recall what Kyle’s number was a couple years ago, but she can’t
remember. And why would she, it was once merely stored on her cellphone with no need to
memorize it. The only number she knows by heart is Chris’ cell phone, but it’s now useless to her,
her own brother unreachable. This…this is the moment… she has never felt this alone and helpless in
her entire life, not even at her worst. She hits the door of her cell as hard as she can in frustration,
letting out a guttural yell before she stumbles her way back to the toilet to throw up again.

She’s been shaking on the cold floor of the cell with her face practically in the toilet for what seems
like hours. She hears the door of her cell click open, but it doesn’t really register.

“Harris, time for your last PT.” She hears the familiar voice that sounds very distant right now.

“Harris? Shit. You ok?” She feels arms pick her up a bit. Her body responds somewhat, muscles
working just enough to help herself get led to her bed. “Talk to me, Ashlyn.” The voice demands
desperately as she feels the welcome softness of the mattress under her butt cheeks. “Come on, snap
out of it! Harris!” Her eyes focus on the face in front of her.


“She missed your visit?” Tim tries to make sense of what she’s saying.

Ashlyn just nods slightly.

“Ok, look…I’ll find a way to figure out what happened, ok? But you have to calm down, Ashlyn. I
have no way to help you if you end up in the psych unit today, ok? Please calm down.” He
practically begs her, not sure of what to do right now. He’s never seen her like this.

“Ok, ok, ok, ok.” Ashlyn repeats in a whispered mantra.

“Come on, Ashlyn. Pull it together, soldier.” Tim tries something more authoritative to get her
attention and pulls her to her feet, putting his hands on her shoulders. “Hey, let’s go! Come on,
Harris. You need to be strong and together for me. You hear me, soldier?” He’s trying to get through
to her subconscious.

Ashlyn takes a deep breath, hearing the directions and feeling herself focus a bit.

Tim can see the slight change in her face. “There we go. That’s it. You with me, Harris?”

Ashlyn nods, realizing she’s standing up. “Yeah. I’m here. I’m here. You have to help her, Tim.”

“Ok, I’m on it. You have to give me a little time though. Can I trust you to be ok in here? You need
to hold it together.” He implores her. “Just chill, ok? I’m sure she’s just fine and there’s a good
reason she missed the visit. You can’t panic until we know something.” He tries to reassure her.


“Alright. Lay down on your bed and just close your eyes and try to calm down. I’m going to cancel
your PT and see what I can find out. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Stay calm, Ashlyn. Stay calm.”
Tim keeps reminding her as helps her lay back on the bed and heads out of the cell.

Tim walks into the records office to see if he can find a phone number for Ali. He sees that Jeremy,
another guard on shift, is in there doing paperwork duty. “Hey Jer, I’m really dragging this today.
Can you take my rounds for me while I grab a quick coffee in here? I’ll do some of this paperwork
for you.” He requests and yawns for good measure.

“Sure man.” Jeremy agrees and makes his way out, probably thrilled to avoid paperwork duty.
Tim rifles through the file cabinet, but doesn’t see Ali’s file. He finally checks the desk and finds it sitting in a pile there. He quickly locates her phone number on the background check documents and inputs it into his cellphone. A yellow sheet of paper catches his eye and he sees that it’s a non-routine visit request, the time-stamp on it is for 11:10am this morning and Ali’s name is signed and printed at the bottom. He missed her by 45 minutes.

Tim radios the newest guard on staff. “Luke, please report to records.” While he waits, he calls the medical wing to tell them that Ashlyn was throwing up and they’ll need to reschedule her physical therapy session. Usually they’d give him a hard time about it, but it’s her last session, so they don’t seem to care. By the time he hangs up, Luke is at the door.

“I need you on paperwork duty.” Tim tells him, watching the guy’s face drop a bit. “Sorry, just part of the job sometimes.” He shrugs.

“No, totally okay. I get it.” Luke reassures him and tries to look eager about it as he settles in at the desk.

Tim gives him a thumbs up and rushes back over to Ashlyn’s cell, seeing that she’s lying down like he told her too and seemingly holding herself together. The second he unlocks the door though, she bolts right up with wide eyes.

“Relax, Harris. She’s just fine. She was just here less than an hour ago and filed a visit request for tomorrow morning. I’m sure you’ll get a notification soon when it gets approved. She’s fine. Probably just had car trouble or got stuck in crazy traffic or something. She’ll be here tomorrow.” He says to her and watches her blow out a long breath. “You alright now?”

“Yeah. I’m really sorry, I just… I panicked.” She tries to explain, but isn’t sure what to say.

“Look, buddy. I get it. She’s working on this shady ass case of yours and I’m sure you’re nervous she’s gonna get herself in trouble or something.” Tim pauses for a second. “But, Ashlyn dude, you gotta give her more credit. I mean, you know what she does. That woman is fierce and smart…this isn’t her first rodeo, you know? I’m thinking she knows how to take care of herself.”

Ashlyn can only nod, what Tim is saying is true.

“And I know there’s more going on with you two…a fucking blind person could see that. You can’t let that shit get in the way of your case though or you’re never gonna get out of here.” He gives it to her straight.

“Yeah. I know.” She concedes. “She pretty much said that too.”

Tim laughs a little. “Told you she’s smart.”

“Duh, ass. Obviously, I know that.” Ash shoots him a look. “Just hard to remember sometimes with everything else going on up here.” She points to her head. “And in here too.” She points to the middle of her chest.

“Someday you’re gonna tell me the secret of your ways.” Tim jokes with her.

“My ways?” Ashlyn asks confused.

“Yeah! How the fuck did you just land one of the hottest and most desired people in Boston, who is a lawyer mind you… all while you’re in prison for fuck’s sake?!” He says incredulously.

“First of all, I didn’t ‘land’ her. We’re friends and just getting to know each other.” Ashlyn corrects.
“Whatever. I’m just gonna say it again…I’m not blind.” He reiterates. “Listen, I gotta go pick up the rest of my rounds from Jeremy. I have Ali’s number now, I’ll call her as soon as I get the chance and try to find out what happened, ok? Will you be alright in the meantime?” He asks.

“Yeah. Think I’m too exhausted now to freak out anymore anyway.” She promises him. “Thanks, Tim. I mean it.”

Tim just gives her a small nod as he walks out. “Take it easy in here, Capt. I’ll check in later.

Ashlyn jumps a bit at the lock click and then falls back onto her bed, emotionally exhausted and still a little bit worried about Ali. Her emotional reaction to this morning’s events also have her worried. She needs to be better at controlling her feelings. This is exactly what Ali was talking about. They have to trust in each other and trust in the process if they’re ever going to come out of this on top. She feels a bit silly now that she jumped to the worst conclusion over a missed visit, for which Ali probably has a very good reason and is likely something very simple like traffic.

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After leaving the prison, Ali is frustrated and tired. Now that her day is all screwed up and she feels like there’s a rock in her stomach at the thought of abandoning Ashlyn, she just wants to go home and curl up on the couch for the rest of the afternoon in her pajamas.

She huffs impatiently at the third stoplight in a row she’s now hit since getting off the highway and uses the time to text Kyle. She’s hoping he’ll come over for dinner, she could really use the reassurance that Ashlyn can handle her missing a visit. Ali is really worried about the blonde, especially knowing how far she spiraled after the hospital stay. She’s spent the drive reminding herself that she’ll see Ashlyn in the morning and make things right.

She gets stuck yet again at the next red light and decides to just stop at the Starbucks on the corner to get herself some tea. She has a bit of a chill she can’t shake and tea sounds like a really good way to relax a bit right now. As she parks the car her phone starts ringing. She checks the caller ID and sees that it’s the Framingham Correctional Facility.

“Perfect!” She says out loud, assuming that they’re calling to tell her the visit for tomorrow has been approved.

She goes to answer the call, but never manages to press the button. Her windshield shatters around her loudly, and she lets out a startled scream.

“What the fuck!” She tries to yell out, but her voice just comes out in a raspy whisper. She feels like there’s a two ton weight on her chest. She looks down at herself, trying to assess if she’s having a heart attack from being startled when she sees it… a blood stain growing ever larger on chest, the deep red such a contrast to the bright white of her button-up shirt. Her phone falls out of her hand as she pulls her shirt open, finding a ragged hole on her inner left breast, blood seeping out of it faster than she can comprehend.

She clamps her hand over it, only then noticing that she’s shaking uncontrollably. It’s getting really hard to breathe and she feels lightheaded. She’s cold and tired and not sure what to do. Everything feels heavy and fuzzy. ‘Just close your eyes and rest for a minute.’ She mentally tells herself, letting her eyes shut. The first thing she sees when she closes her eyes is an image of Ashlyn’s face… the
beautiful hazel eyes, the angular but soft features. “Ash…” she whispers out before she stops feeling anything at all.

Chapter End Notes

And just when you were excited for an update...yikes!
I'll work to get the next one written as quickly as I can and humbly accept your harsh comments in the meantime. Just remember that I'm not one to really break hearts, soooo...
Oh ye of little faith! You know I'm not much of a heart breaker, so why would I literally break Ali's heart?! Let's continue, shall we...

‘Just close your eyes and rest for a minute.’ She mentally tells herself, letting her eyes shut. The first thing she sees when she closes her eyes is an image of Ashlyn’s face... the beautiful hazel eyes, the angular but soft features. “Ash…” she whispers out before she stops feeling anything at all.

“Alex!” Ashlyn jolts up from her bed with a deep intake of breath, her chest heaving and her body covered in sweat. She swears can feel the impact on her body almost like the very day it happened. She pulls down her beige jumpsuit as much as she can and looks down her shirt, seeing the quarter sized scar on her inner left breast. It marks where a wingnut from IED shrapnel had once pierced through her Kevlar vest and missed her heart by only a centimeter before puncturing her lung.

She can still remember rolling herself out of the overturned Humvee as best she could, not being able to really breathe. A fellow solider had eventually reached her, pulling off her vest and pulling her shirt open. Watching the jagged hole in her own chest bleed steadily is still such a vivid memory, laying there wondering if she couldn’t breathe because her heart was stopping. Her shoulder had been mangled at the time and turned out be the more concerning injury, but all she can remember from that day is the deafening explosion, the hole near her heart and the heaviness she felt on her chest.

The panic attack from this morning left her physically and emotionally exhausted. After learning that Ali was okay, she’s been trying her best to just sleep away the afternoon so that tomorrow morning will come faster, but she’s now had this same nightmare twice. Both times she’s experienced as if she was in Ali’s body, feeling and seeing everything from the brunette’s perspective. That is, right up until the very end where she’s suddenly on the outside looking in, watching Ali gasp for breath and whisper out her name while clutching her chest to try and stop the bleeding. It’s some bizarre combination of her combat injury memories and her fears about Ali getting hurt, it’s driving her crazy.

“She’s fine. She’s fine.” Ashlyn reminds herself, seeing on her clock that it’s 5:14pm and hoping that Tim will come back soon with more news. She pulls back her bed sheets and spreads them out so they can air dry a bit since she’s been sweating in them. She then goes over to her pile of prison-issued clothes and pulls out a fresh jumpsuit to change into, using the sink and a small washcloth to freshen up a bit.

The dinner tray being slipped through the slot in the cell door is a welcome sound for once. Usually the sound tends to trigger a feeling of nausea given how bad the food is, but today she welcomes the distraction of eating. Anything to pass the time right now.

She unlatches the tray from the door slot and brings it over to her desk, scanning the contents. Mashed potatoes with a pat of butter, carrots, two slices of white bread, a carton of milk, a carton of...
apple juice, a pre-packaged brownie, and a meat patty of some sort that is probably supposed to be meatloaf. It’s certainly not the worst she’s seen. She quickly eats the potatoes, carrots, and bread while downing the apple juice. The blonde then pushes the meat patty around for a while before deciding there’s no way she’s attempting it, the thing will probably give her even more nightmares. She sets the brownie and milk aside for when she’s maybe hungry or bored later and then returns the tray to the door slot.

With nothing else to do and her mind still unsettled, she pulls out her CD Walkman and listens to Ali describe the action of the first Triwizard Tournament event from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire. The brunette’s voice never fails to lull her into feeling secure and moored to something solid.

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Ali settles onto her couch with a big carton of Pad Thai, taking a long sip from her bottle of Coke. “So good.” She says with a contented sigh.

“Seriously.” Kyle agrees, reaching over to clink his glass bottle of Coke with hers before they both dig into their food.

Ali had come straight home from the prison after filing a request for a visit tomorrow morning. She was worn down and anxious, her worry about Ashlyn dominating her thoughts even though the conversation with Bobby should have been the more prominent thing on her mind. Her adrenaline had really kicked in during that coffee shop exchange and now she was feeling the after effects of coming down from it.

She had just changed into a pair of sweat pants when her phone vibrated with a text message from Kyle asking if she wanted to meet him for dinner. She had quickly replied that she was looking forward to chilling out by herself tonight, knowing that all she wanted to do was veg out on the couch and work through her thoughts on her own.

Not being able to sit idle for too long, she quickly turned to transcribing the recorded conversation with Bobby on her laptop. Listening to it again, she still felt satisfied. She knows she made the right decision today despite the awful feeling at having abandoned Ashlyn. She did the right thing. She was just saving the word file when her phone vibrated again, the caller ID showing the Framingham Correctional Facility.

“Perfect!” She says before hitting the answer call button, assuming that this is the call about the visit being approved for tomorrow. “Hello?”

“May I please speak with Ali Krieger?” The voice on the other ends asks.

“This is she.” Ali replies.

“This is Tim Rosemund calling from the Framingham Correctional Facility. I am calling in regards to your visitor request for tomorrow morning. I see that your routine visits tend to fall on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Since tomorrow is a Tuesday, I just wanted to confirm that this paperwork is correct and not an error on our part before I give it to the warden to sign.” He asks.

Ali knows it is no coincidence that Tim has called her. “Yeah, it’s correct. Does that mean everything is ok?” She asks a bit desperately, realizing quickly that if Tim didn’t blurt anything out already there was a good reason.

“Ok, thank you. Everything on our end is good.” He emphasizes as best he can, knowing these calls
are recorded but trying hard to insinuate that Ashlyn is ok.

“Perfect. Thank you for calling and checking.” Ali says feeling a slight sense of relief.

“Of course, Ms. Krieger. I’ll give this right to the warden now. You can assume that your visit has been approved unless you hear otherwise from us in the next hour or so.” He adds, hoping that she’ll be keeping an eye on her phone. He can’t use his cellphone until he’s on a break and his break isn’t until at least an hour from now.

“Great. Thanks again.” Ali says kindly.

“Sure. Have a good evening.” Tim replies professionally and hangs up.

Feeling a little better, Ali decides to take a quick shower before she figures out what to eat for dinner. With the hot water feeling really good on her muscles, it ends up turning into a really long shower. When she finally throws on a fresh pair of sweats and combs through her hair, she notices she has a text from an unknown number.

Unknown: This is Tim. Sorry, had to wait for a break to use my personal phone. Ashlyn is doing ok. She had a bit of a panic attack this morning, but I saw you had been here and told her you were fine. She’s really ok now though, just wondering what happened. Are you ok?

Ali lets out a sigh. Her heart clenches at the fact that Ashlyn panicked like that, but she totally gets it. She couldn’t be more thankful for Tim right now.

AK: Tim thank you so much for this. I’ve been really worried about her. I ran into someone I didn’t expect this morning and had to deal with that, so I missed the visit. Please tell her that I’m perfectly ok and that I’m so sorry…that I’ll see her in the morning no matter what. And please take care of her.

Unknown: I will, I promise. She’s strong and she’ll be just fine. Check in with me anytime, ok?

AK: I’m saving your number in my phone right now. And you do the same, contact me anytime.

Unknown: Great. Have a goodnight, I’m sure she’ll be thrilled to see that you’re ok for herself tomorrow.

AK: Goodnight, Tim. You’re a life saver.

Ali quickly saves his contact information in her phone under ‘Timmy’ figuring it won’t be that obvious who he is if anyone happens to see it. She also deletes the text conversation just in case.

Kyle had shown up unexpectedly at her door a little while later with a bag of Thai food and a few bottles of soda. She couldn’t have been happier that he didn’t listen to her earlier and showed up anyway. He has always had an uncanny sense of knowing when she could use some company.

They sit on the couch eating and sipping soda, a real treat since they both tend to eat healthily and never drink soda. It tastes extra good right now after the day that Ali has had. Kyle does a good job of just enjoying dinner with her, not asking her questions even though he knows something is up.

Finally, Ali can’t hold it in anymore. She’s dying to tell someone and get some reassurance. She gives him a brief rundown of the day and pulls out the recorder so Kyle can listen to the conversation she had with Bobby.
“Holy Fuckballs, Alex! You vivacious little bitch! Listen to you schooling his ass!” Kyle says admiringly once it’s over.

“Holy Fuckballs?” Ali says giving him a look. “Gross, who are you?”

“Fine… Holy Tits, is that better?” Kyle sass her back.

Ali shrugs. “Actually, yes.” She gives him a satisfied smile. “Anyway, so you think I handled it the right way?”

“Totally. I mean, on the surface it seems like you gave him a lot of information…I see what you did there though. Give him the information you choose to give him and spin it in the best way to make him think you’re not up to anything important. Hopefully, it’ll work for a while.” He replies. “Thanks for making me sound like a bit of a rehab drama queen by the way.” He adds with a playful glare.

“Sorry, you know that was just me trying to make you sound harmless.” She reassures him. “And yes, spinning things my way was what I was going for.” Ali confirms and lets the silence hang between them for a minute before asking what’s really on her mind. “You think I did the right thing with Ashlyn?”

Kyle lets out a breath and tries to compose his thoughts. “Look, I think we both know that you made the decision you would have made if Ashlyn was any normal client of yours. And, as you’ve pointed out yourself, that is exactly what you need to do. If you don’t act professionally and protect her best interest, there’s no way you’re going to successfully navigate this process. You did what you had to do today, and I’m proud of you.” He pauses to see her nod, but he can tell she’s still not convinced so he keeps going.

“Obviously, there’s much more at stake here than just get your client out of jail. I’m sure it was awful to have left her hanging like that today, for both of you really. Not because you feel guilty or because she feels abandoned, but because at the root of it you’re both worried about each other and just want the other to be okay. You’re on the same page… frankly, you’re like one unit together. Both of you have to understand that and realize that you’ll operate just fine if you trust in each other to do the best that each of you can. Because both of your bests come from a place of good intentions and genuine caring. It’s like putting two remarkable people together and creating a super-human.” Kyle finishes, not even sure he understands what he just said. “Does that even make any sense? I feel like I was babbling there.”

“You were definitely a bit of a blathering Betty, but I’m taking the soda sugar high into account.” Ali rolls her eyes and teases him. “I actually get what you’re saying though. Thanks, I needed to hear that. And also… can a girl just get a hug?” She asks him with puppy eyes.

“Um YEAH! Of course! What good is an effeminate brother if you can’t get long girly hugs out of him?” He reaches over and pulls her into him in a tight, protective hug that soon turns into sibling cuddle time while they watch Project Runway reruns together.

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Ashlyn hears footsteps and the lock click open on her cell door. She jumps up from her bed happy to see that it’s Tim.

“Did you talk to her?” She quickly questions him.

“Oh hey, Ashlyn. How are you feeling? How was dinner?” He jibes her for not even saying hello
“Don’t make me put you in a choke hold, Timothy James!” Ashlyn warns him playfully. “I don’t need any more time added to my life sentence for choking the guard. Hi. I’m fine. Dinner sucked. Now just tell me.”

“Just when you think you have it good because you get assigned to guard the women’s unit, you have to guard the one chick that could actually rip your head off if she wanted to.” Tim shakes his head while laughing. “I talked to Ali a while ago and she’s just fine. Sorry I got delayed in getting back in here, we had a little mess hall incident in general pop.” He explains.

“Did she say anything about what happened today?” Ashlyn asks knowing that Ali will tell her tomorrow, but she’s still curious.

“She was pretty vague about it, but said she ran into someone she didn’t expect to and had to deal with it. She also said to tell you that she’s really sorry.” Tim recounts. “And she seemed incredibly worried about you. I told her you had a tough morning, but promised her you were ok now.”

Ashlyn feels her chest tighten up. She doesn’t know for complete certain, but she’d bet her life that Ali ran into Bobby today. And by ‘ran into’ she can assume Bobby put himself in Ali’s way. That’s always been his signature first move…make his presence felt and watch to see what the person does. Ali said she dealt with it and Ashlyn can only wonder what the hell that means. She’s ok though, Ali is ok. Whatever happened, Ali handled it somehow and she has to remember that.

“You’re off your game.” Tim waves his hand near her face.

“Oh, sorry….zoned out there.” Ashlyn apologizes.

“Yeah, just a little.” Tim smiles at her. “You ok now?”

“I am. I’m not even sure what I say to you other than thank you. You’ve risked so much to help me today…and well, Ali too. Thank you so much.” Ashlyn says genuinely.

“I’ll never forget the way you stood up for me and behind me in police academy…despite the fact that I totally sucked at it.” Tim laughs at himself. “Consider this a very long overdue repayment plan. And before you even open your mouth with some humble crap that makes the rest of us look bad…let’s leave it at that.” He points at her in mock warning.

“Okay, okay. We leave it there.” Ashlyn smiles at him. “Gotta say, I’m really happy now that you sucked at police academy and ended up here.”

“Funny, Harris.” Tim shakes his head. “I really gotta get back to work, but listen…I gave Ali my number and I have hers. So, if anything comes up…” He doesn’t finish the sentence.

“Thanks, Timbo.” Ashlyn gives a small fist bump and watches him walk out the door.

“Night, Capt.” He nods before clicking the lock on the door.

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When Ashlyn hears the footsteps come down the hallway, she practically jumps out of her skin in excitement. She looks at her clock, seeing that it’s 8:55am... Ali is here, and a bit early too. She’s already been up and ready for 3 hours, too fired up to sleep or even relax despite her best efforts to do both.
Her face drops when she sees that it’s Alton that has come to get her. She finally learned his real name a few weeks ago and realized it kind of fit him seeing as how it’s an even douchier name than Alan, or Albert, or Alfred. He wasn’t completely awful, he just took his job too seriously and was a pompous ass about it. Given that Tim was now off duty, she was really hoping for Jordan, knowing that all she wanted to do right now was wrap her arms around Ali for a while. Unfortunately, that’s not going to happen today.

Still, even Alton can’t temper her good mood right now and she eagerly holds her hands out to get cuffed so she can get to Ali as soon as possible. The walk down the various corridors seems endless, but finally she’s being led into the visiting room and her eyes fall on Ali. Warm and concerned whiskey colored eyes look up at her, their owner looking flawless as usual, and Ashlyn can’t help the huge smile that overtakes her face. ‘Hi’ she mouths to the brunette as she gets uncuffed and watches Ali give her a small wave with that signature nose-crinkling grin.

Alton makes his way to the observation room and Ashlyn quickly leans in to give Ali the briefest of hugs, quick and tight. “Ash” she hears Ali whisper in her ear as soon as her arms are around the brunette and her heart practically stops, the way Ali called out to her in her nightmare rushing back to her. She breathes in deeply and lets Ali’s comforting and familiar scent bring her back to the reality that she is here and safe in her arms. She reluctantly pulls back before Alton comes back out to warn them.

“Ash, I am so so sorry about yesterday.” Ali says with tears forming at the corner of her eyes. “You know I wouldn’t miss a visit with you unless I absolutely had to, right?”

“Hey, Alex…it’s ok. I understand, I really do.” Ashlyn replies soothingly. “I wasn’t mad at you, just freaking out that something bad happened to you. Luckily, I had Tim to set me right. I promise, I’m fine and I completely get it. Are you ok?”

“I’m fine, I promise you.” Ali tells her, she desperately wants to hold Ashlyn’s hand right now and is bummed that she can’t. “I’ve just been worried about you and what you must have been thinking when I didn’t show up.”

“Honestly, I thought the worst. That something bad happened to you at the hands of Bobby or one of his cronies. Even I can see that I overreacted a bit.” Ashlyn admits. “Although, it sounds like maybe I wasn’t so far off. He showed up, didn’t he? Where?”

Ali nods to confirm it. “I was running early and feeling a little tired, so I went to grab a quick coffee at my favorite place for the drive here… he was sitting in there, clearly waiting for me.” She watches Ashlyn’s head drop a bit. “Look, Ash, it was fine and I’m more than fine. You can trust me that I’m not going to do anything reckless and that I’ll take care of myself, for both of us. I came up with a game plan on the fly and I handled it.”

Ali knows she’s going to have to get into the details and she just wants to be connected with the blonde before she does. She needs Ashlyn to know that she’s here and nothing is going to take her away. Alton be damned…she discretely slips off her shoe under the table and runs her bare foot up Ashlyn’s pant leg, watching the blonde smile and close her eyes for a second.

Ashlyn feels Ali’s foot against her lower calf, the usual electricity between them sparking immediately and giving her all the comfort she needs right now. She looks up to see the eyes that never falter and never fail her.

“I do trust you, Alex. Completely. You know that.” Ashlyn reminds her. “You know, when I figured out what happened, I couldn’t stop wondering how you handled Bobby. After coming to my senses, I realized that I was asking the wrong question.” She gives Ali a dimpled grin. “The more accurate
question is, how did Bobby handle you?”

Ali can’t help but laugh, knowing that’s her queue. “You know me too well, Ash. Tell you what, you can listen for yourself…” She pulls out the recorder and lays it out on the table.

“No way. You recorded it?!” Ashlyn asks dumbfounded.


“Nope. Just the peskiest, smartest, toughest, sweetest, and most beautiful bitch on the planet.” Ashlyn plays right back.

“And don’t you forget it, charmer.” Ali gives her a coy smile while lightly digging her toes into her calf.

“Now press play already!” Ashlyn demands and Ali complies. She hears Ali’s voice right away, followed by the voice of the devil himself.

“Chief Bobby Dugan, for legal purposes would you just verbally confirm for me that you are aware this conversation is being recorded and may be used in a court of law?"

“Sure. Yes, I am aware that the conversation is being recorded.”

Ashlyn just shakes her head in disbelief that Bobby Dugan would ever willing let himself be recorded and allow it to be used in court, especially in this particular situation. She doesn’t know what was said prior to this, but she knows for sure that Ali must have forced him into it somehow.

“Seriously, Alex, where did you come from? You’re just…I don’t have words…”


“Right. Maybe a little arrogant?” Ashlyn jokes back with a wink.

Ali sticks her tongue out at the blonde. “Damn right and for good reason! Now shut up and listen, Harris…it hasn’t even gotten good yet.”

Chapter End Notes

Has your faith in me been restored yet? Of course, I can never promise a smooth ride...just that I'll get you to the final destination in one piece ;)}
Chapter Notes

An update for you just in time for the weekend! As you'll see in this one, things are speeding up now and you'll see some time jumps as well as a bit more narrative than dialogue at times to move the story along. Keep those comments coming, I love to hear what you're thinking. Especially now that the action is heating up. Any thoughts/theories on what will go down?

Once the recorded conversation is over, Ali clicks off the recorder and looks up at Ashlyn to see the blonde looking pensive with her mouth hanging open a bit. “So?” She prods.

“Damn, Alex. You just owned it. I mean, I can believe it because I just heard it…but, I also just can’t believe it either. I have never heard that man sound so confused before. It’s like he thought he knew what was happening and now he doesn’t. I don’t know.” Ashlyn sits back trying to work through her thoughts out loud. “You gave him all this information, but then again, you didn’t. Maybe I’m as lost as he is.” She finally admits.

“When I first saw him sitting there, I sort of panicked a bit and it took me a minute to figure out what I should do. I figured if I pretended not to notice him or noticed him and left, that he’d be expecting me to do one of those things and then have some menacing game plan in mind. I just went for the unexpected and chose to do things my way, which was confront him and manipulate the situation.” Ali says.

Ashlyn nods. “Yeah, this thing of showing up and waiting to see the person’s reaction is standard for him. I really should have realized and told you to expect it, but honestly, I really didn’t think he’d go that route this time given the nature of all this. I thought he’d be more cautious. Guess he still thinks he’s invincible.” She replies. “And from what I’ve seen in the past, no one has EVER come up to him like that. He most definitely was shocked. You were right, most people run away or don’t even realize he’s there. Both result in him then finding a way to terrorize the person.”

“I figured. So, I tried to seem like I was being open with him and asking for his help. I want him to think that while I’m pushing for this appeal, that I’m not going after him or have anything to hide. Plus, I have everything I need already, so it’s not like he’s going to catch me trying to investigate or sniff around. I want him to think that you’re holding up your end of the deal by not ratting him out and that this whole thing is outside of his involvement.” Ali explains.

“Well you played it perfectly. I don’t think he knows what to make of the situation now. I have no idea if he’ll hang back or be more aggressive to be honest. That worries me.” Ashlyn puts her concern out in the open.

“I promise you, Ash. I’m ready either way. Ideally, I want him to have no idea I’m coming until his ass is sitting on the stand and he has no way out. I’m not sure that’s realistic because I think he’ll get suspicious at some point, but I’m ready.” Ali assures her. “You can trust me to be smart and stay sharp.”

Ashlyn briefly hooks her pinky on Ali’s. “I know I can.”
Ali acknowledges the statement with a smile. “Well, I think we can safely assume that this appeal will be approved any day now. We should get a court hearing date when they notify us. The average time between the approval and the court date is anywhere from a month to six months. I checked on the current appeals court case queue, not busy at all right now so I think we’ll be running closer to a month hopefully. Media attention will keep them from dragging it out too.”

“Good, the less time the better. Not just for me being in here, but also less time for Bobby to go poking around. Chris being gone is going to make him the most suspicious.” Ashlyn notes.

“Agreed.” Ali says knowing that Chris’ disappearance will likely keep Bobby on high alert. “Since we’re officially headed into the court aspect of the appeals process, do you want to go over any of it again?”

Ashlyn shakes her head no. “I’m good, I remember everything you told me and know what to expect. I’m just going to trust you… and I’ll remember to keep my mouth shut.” She gives Ali a purposeful mocking look.

“My best client yet.” Ali jokes back. “Alright, so then, what are we covering today? Favorite lunch meat? Apple versus Android? Bra size?” She asks, referring to their usual get to know each other conversations.

“Ham. Apple. 34B.” Ashlyn answers with a wink before getting serious. “I actually want to tell you about a nightmare of mine if that’s ok?”

“Turkey. Also Apple. 32A. Of course, you can tell me anything.” Ali replies sweetly.

Ashlyn breathes out a small sigh. She wants to tell Ali about her nightmare not just because it involves the brunette and gets to the root of her current fears, but because it’s the most vivid combat memory she has. It’s the thing from her past battles with PTSD that still rattles her and comes back into her conscious most often. It’s not a flashback anymore, but it’s still present sometimes. She’s not sure exactly why, maybe because in that moment she thought she was dying and she wasn’t ready to. The pressure on her chest, the taste and smell of her own blood, the loud ringing sound in her ears that drowned out everything else, the pain and the cold sweat…she can still feel it all when the memory comes back to her. She’s never shared it with anyone outside of her old army therapist, and for the first time she wants to. Who better than the brunette that she trusts unconditionally and who unknowingly just shared the experience with her in the most recent version of the nightmare.

Ashlyn recounts every last detail to Ali, who listens quietly and attentively. When she’s done, she searches Ali’s face for a reaction, finding only the usual warmth in the brunette’s eyes. “You can ask anything you want. I don’t mind talking about it.” Ashlyn tells her.

Ali nods, asking only one question. “Where exactly did you get hit?”

Ashlyn knows she mentioned it generally in her telling of the story, but she can tell Ali is asking specifically. She points to the exact spot on her chest.

Ali doesn’t say anything right away. She recognizes that her presence in the nightmare represents the deep feelings running between them and the fear of losing it all before they even get to chance to understand them. She knows because she has the very same fear. She pushes that aspect of it aside for now though, there is nothing either of them can say that is going to make that fear go away. Instead, she focuses on Ashlyn…strong, kind, wonderful Ashlyn and what she has battled and survived to be sitting here in front of her. Ali knows Alton is watching them closely and she can’t do what she really wants to right now. So, she just discretely kisses the tip of her own thumb and reaches over to quickly and gently press it to the spot Ashlyn just pointed to, following her action up
with “I’m so proud to know you, Ashlyn Harris. And even happier that you’re here with me and that you’ve given me the chance to know you. Thank you.”

Ashlyn feels like she could melt into a puddle right now. With her simple gestures and perfectly chosen words, Ali so easily makes her feel completely unburdened. It’s almost scary, but in the best way possible. All she can do right now is smile and say what she is thinking. “I stand by one of my earlier statements…you are magic.”

Of course, Alton is there to break the moment for them with a ten minute warning on their visiting time. The only good thing being that it’s Tuesday and Ali will be back as part of her routinely scheduled visits tomorrow.

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Wednesday, November 28

Just as expected, Ali receives notification from the appeals court that the appeal has been formally accepted. The initial court hearing date has been scheduled for January 3rd. Ali was hoping for a bit sooner, but with the holiday season it’s not surprising that the date is just a little over a month away and after the new year.

Ashlyn is satisfied with the news, though as it sinks in more over the next week it does hit her a bit hard that she’ll spend yet another Christmas locked up. It has always been a complicated holiday for her, one that had only bad memories associated with it until she started living with her grandparents. They had tried very hard to bring some tradition to it, cooking up a feast, buying gifts, and putting out the typical decorations. Even then, those better Christmases were usually overshadowed by the constant disappointment and worry about Chris who would promise to be there every year and never show up.

More recently, the memories had gotten better when Ashlyn started spending Christmas with Chris, Bridget and the kids. Still, as good as they were, they never quite lived up to the image she created in her head of what the perfect Christmas would look like and feel like. The first few minutes when she wakes up on Christmas morning have always been the most perfect… a quiet anticipation of the joy and excitement this special day might bring before reality has a chance to tear it down.

Her first Christmas in prison, she had let herself get excited for the holiday like she always did leading up to it. Of course, the reality of where she was and would be for life had hit her like a Mack truck on Christmas morning. Last year, she didn’t let herself get excited about or acknowledge the day at all, it was easier that way. She’s planning to do this same thing this year, but she’s pretty sure it won’t work, at least not if how Ali treated her birthday and Thanksgiving is any indication. Ali had been pretty upset when she had let Ashlyn’s birthday pass without even realizing it until she was going over some paperwork and saw the date. She had come in the very next visit with a cupcake that had a fake candle in it. That was the moment it dawned on Ashlyn that Ali never let things go and that she would never let her be forgotten… her best birthday gift yet.

The brunette had shown up last week on Thanksgiving Day with two large Tupperware containers of all the traditional meal favorites that she and Kyle had cooked themselves that morning. The prison actually had a pretty lame annual dinner event for Thanksgiving put on by the prisoners themselves, but Ashlyn had never been able to partake because of protective custody. For the last two years, that has meant eating some poor excuse for turkey and sweet potatoes all alone in her cell. This year though, she stuffed herself with delicious food and enjoyed simple meaningful conversation with the individual who has swiftly become her favorite person in the world. She hardly
expects that Ali will let Christmas pass without something similar.

The beginning of December passes fairly quietly. The media has picked up on the appeal and has run a few stories about it already, most of which just rehash the original sentencing and confession details. There have been a few interview requests for both Ali and Ashlyn, but they have turned them all down so far in an effort to curb the attention. It’s generally working, but Ali knows that the media hype won’t really get going until the appeal hearing happens. Not surprisingly, Ali has suddenly picked up some new and lucrative podcast sponsors who are clearly betting on the fact that she’ll release the details of this case at some point even though she’s has been completely mum about it.

In the meantime, the two of them have been continuing on with what has now become the routine, visits three times a week filled with deep conversations. They are both increasingly uneasy that Bobby has been so quiet and nonexistent since his initial interaction with Ali, but they try to remain hopeful that maybe Ali’s misdirection has done its job.

“Tell me about your grandparents.” Ali requests after Ashlyn finishes telling her about how her grandma made her prom dress.

“Well, Gram was a southern belle. And by that I mean she cooked with lard and butter!” Ashlyn jokes, watching Ali laugh. “She loved to cook, knit, sew, garden and do all things housewife. She was born and raised in central Florida. My grandpa was once a navy midshipman and they met while he was stationed in Florida. He grew up on the North Shore and always vowed to return to Massachusetts when the navy was done making him travel the world. Anyway, classic love story of that era where Gram was swept off her feet by the cute naval officer in his uniform.” Ashlyn giggles a bit. “They were madly in love to the very end, you could see in just the way they looked at and treated each other. I guess that’s why I’ve always wanted that for myself.”

Ali nods, remembering what the blonde said in the hospital about people just taking one look and seeing the love. “I think we all want that.” Ali agrees.

“They went through so much together, some good, some bad, but the love between them came from such a pure place.” Ashlyn continues. “Have you seen the movie Saving Private Ryan?”

“Of course, even though I did close my eyes a lot.” Ali admits. With Matt Damon as one of the headlining actors, just about all of Boston had seen the movie when it came out, despite the fact that it was as gory and realistic of a war movie as had been released to up to that point.

“Well, that WW2 beach invasion scene in the beginning…my grandpa was there in real life. He drove a Higgins Boat into Omaha Beach. When his boat got practically blown up, he managed to swim to another one and drove that one too. So many soldiers died that day, it was a massacre, but somehow he made it unscathed. I don’t know how my grandma ever survived that. I guess news didn’t travel as fast back then, but the fear she must have felt not knowing…I just don’t think I could ever have done it.” Ashlyn explains.

“Wow. That’s incredible.” Ali says taking it all in.

“Anyway, when he was done with the navy he kept true to his word and they bought a house in Ipswich and lived there ever since. My grandma was always a homemaker and my grandpa bought his own fishing boat and operated a really successful private charter out of Gloucester up until shortly before he died.” Ashlyn says. “I used to go out with him a lot.”
“Can I ask what happened to your grandpa?” Ali cautiously asks, knowing that he died before her grandma who Ashlyn had previously told her died of breast cancer.

“Fluke thing really. He had an accident where a pole hook went into his hand during a fishing charter tour. He got it treated and it wasn’t that big of a deal, but he was a diabetic and it never quite healed. It got infected a few times over the course of a couple months and then out of nowhere he went into sepsis and passed away shortly after.” She answers solemnly. “Happened my senior year at West Point.”

“So sorry, Ash. I bet he was so proud of you being at West Point.” Ali says warmly.

“He was. They both were. They were my real parents in my mind.” She finishes with a reminiscent smile before asking Ali something she has been wondering. “You talk about your mom so much I feel like I almost know her. She sounded like an amazing woman. Can I ask what happened with your dad? It’s ok if you don’t want to talk about it though.”

“To be honest, there isn’t much to say. He was a top financial advisor at Goldman Sachs and just a typical dad. He was everything you’d want a father to be, loving, involved, always there, and completely devoted to my mother. And then he wasn’t. He just up and left one day when I was 10. No explanation, no anything. He moved on and created this whole other life for himself…new wife, new kids. He never contacted us again beyond getting through divorce papers and alimony. None of us saw it coming…I think maybe that still bothers me the most. He just left us like we were nothing, just like that, with no warning. And that’s what I felt like for a very long time because of him…like a nothing, a nobody. I just handled it a lot differently than Kyle did. I poured myself into school and trying to be someone great.” Ali says sadly before adding “And luckily, I had a pretty incredible mother to look up to who was so strong in doing everything she could to fill that void for me. I think I work so hard because I want to be as great as she was.”

“You don’t have to try so hard you know…you’re already amazing just the way you are, Alex.” Ashlyn says genuinely.

“You’re sweet.” Ali gives the blonde a smile before breaking the moment with some much needed humor. “And you sound like Mr. Rogers.” The two of them falling into a fit of laughter as Ashlyn starts singing ‘It’s a beautiful day in this neighborhood…”

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“Proctor, you better be calling me with something because I’m fucking sick of your excuses. Do you have anything or not?” Bobby spits out angrily as he answers his phone. It’s been over two weeks and he still doesn’t have an angle on what is going on with this appeals case.

“Yeah, boss. I finally hacked my way into bank records, some phone logs and social media. All of it just suddenly stopped being used in the first week of October.” The man on the line explains.

Chris Harris disappeared right around the time of the appeal. There’s no way that’s a coincidence, Bobby thinks to himself and grits his teeth. “And what else?” He asks as calmly as he can.

“That’s all I could come up with on Chris Harris. There’s nothing else there, no traces. Whoever did this knew what they were doing. Not much else to go on either. Everything is now linked to a private trust, no way to access it at all. That lawyer woman pulled all the case files in September, spent some time on the phone logs and medical records for Ashlyn Harris. She requested to examine a bullet after that, but it only spent a couple days at the forensic lab of some scientist in her neighborhood. She hasn’t touched or pulled any information since then. Uh, that’s it.” Proctor answers.
“That’s it?! That’s the fucking best you got?! I swear to god, Proctor…don’t cross my path. Take the fucking money I paid you for this worthless shit and use it to get far, far away from me before I take you out myself.” Bobby says venomously and practically throws his phone down. He has more questions than answers and it’s grating on his last nerve. He’s now hired three different people and each one has come back with something similar. He’s tired of wasting his money on this bullshit.

This damn Krieger woman is a fucking menace, but does she actually know something? Everything she told him is consistent with her actions. But then why would Chris Harris up and leave town for no reason and conveniently around the time of the appeal? What kind of fucking game is Ashlyn Harris playing? Is she just scared that he’ll go back on his word because of the appeal? Is it more than that?

He’s sat back long enough and he still can’t figure it out, the questions only growing. It’s time he makes some moves even if it means that he triggers Krieger’s curiosity. It’s high time he took control of this situation.

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Monday, December 12

Ali can’t say she’s all that surprised when she sees Bobby once again sitting in her favorite coffee shop on this cold mid-December morning. She knew the quiet wouldn’t last forever, she could only be so lucky. This time she doesn’t have to try and act calm though because she already is, she’s been expecting him to pop up for the last couple of weeks to no avail. She actually feels better now that he is here, the not knowing what he was up to was definitely more nerve-wracking.

Her goal now is to give him absolutely nothing to go on. So, she just orders her coffee as usual, chats with Paul for a minute, and then makes sure to shoot Bobby a quick smile and a wave before she heads out of the café. He merely nods his head at her, clearly annoyed that she seems unfazed by him.

Ashlyn isn’t surprised by it either when Ali tells her about Bobby’s sudden reappearance.

“I’ve seen him do this a few times. He’s going to show up and make his presence felt. He wants to intimidate you, but the second you show that you’re intimidated, he’ll pounce on you. It’s a pretty fucked up game of cat and mouse with him. So, you’ve gotta walk the line carefully.” Ashlyn warns her.

“That’s it? I’m impressed, Harris. I was expecting you to try and lock me up in a steel-barred safe house.” Ali teases a bit at Ashlyn’s composed demeanor about Bobby.

Ashlyn laughs lightly and Ali follows suite. Despite the dangerous circumstances, there’s a peace between them now that stems from believing that they’ll get through this together and trusting each other to be careful in doing so.

“See, told you I was getting better at this!” Ashlyn affirms. “Buuut, I’m still going to add that he’s going to have you followed, if he hasn’t already. You can count on him keeping tabs. If he gets desperate enough, it’ll include tapping phone lines and trying to hack into your email. I really don’t think he’s at that point yet though, and we need to try to keep him from getting there.”

“Not that there is anything interesting for him in there anyway, but he’ll never get into my email no matter who he hires. Trust me, when you become a deposition lawyer and realize that your personal
emails can be so easily sequestered by the court at any time in a legal matter, you learn to encrypt and secure everything to the max.” Ali says with a smirk. “I’ll just have to be careful about my phone conversations and texts just in case. We have just over three weeks to go until the hearing, just have to keep it all status quo until then.”

“You’re like a boy scout, Krieger.” Ashlyn jests even though she couldn’t be more impressed by Ali’s level of preparedness.

Ali laughs and holds up the three fingers on her right hand to symbolize scout’s honor. “I prefer to be called a girl scout by the way!”

“Right, of course.” Ashlyn jokes by opening and closing her hands near her eyes with her fingers spread out and wiggling to mimic long eyelashes, making fun of Ali’s mascara obsession.

“Not funny, Harris. You haven’t seen me without mascara. Trust me, it’s a necessity.” Ali says lightheartedly.

“Well, maybe someday I will… and then I’ll be the judge of that.” Ashlyn flirts a bit, knowing damn well that Ali goes to bed with mascara on and any chance of seeing her without it would mean either waking up next to her after a bedtime activity that would most certainly rub it off or being there the moment Ali gets out of the shower.

“Maybe.” Ali gives the blonde a very devious grin and leaves it at that.

Ashlyn was absolutely right. Ali notices a silver Honda Civic with tinted windows staying about three cars behind her ever since she left the prison. When it parks on the street about two houses down from her own, she knows for sure that Bobby is having her followed. Seeing as how she isn’t doing anything that would tip him off to anything right now, she isn’t worried about it. She just has to keep going about her normal routine and watch for any signs that they are getting more aggressive about pursuing her.

Kyle, however, doesn’t share in her lack of anxiety when she fills him in on the new developments that evening.

“Um ok, and why are we so calm about some sketchy ass, likely criminals following you around? Cause I’ll tell you how I feel about it and, let me tell you, it’s far from tranquil!” He throws his arms up dramatically, his salad fork accidentally falling out of his hand and hitting his dinner plate.

“Settle down, diva! You’re gonna break my dishes.” Ali tries to get him to relax. “This isn’t some mob movie where they’re just biding their time until they can put me in ‘cement booties and make me sleep with the fishes’.”

“How do you know that?! And screw you…now I’m worried they’re gonna put us in cement booties and throw us into the harbor! You’re not helping my mental state, Alex!” He protests.

“Kyle, seriously, ease up a bit. I’ve looked into it… they’re just a couple of random guys he hired to report back to him on what I’m doing, no one special. Chill out.” Ali says, choosing her words very carefully because she ran the license plate of the car following her and found out it belongs to a guy who was once busted for drug trafficking and later got paroled. She’s sure these are just a couple of guys that owe Bobby a favor, but she doesn’t want to get into the drug thing with Kyle right now given his current mood.
“Alright, alright.” He relents a bit, knowing how good Ali is at doing her homework and being prepared for everything. “But, I’m staying here until they stop following you and/or this case is over.” He says pointedly, before adding with a wink “Or unless I have a hot date that night.”

Ali knows he’s not going to back down on it and she does like having him over, the house is just so much livelier when he’s around. She rolls her eyes at the last part of his statement. “Glad you have your priorities straight.”

“Please, if I am getting thrown into the harbor, you’re damn right I’m going to make sure I get laid first!” He replies sassily, finally sounding like at least he can have a sense of humor about everything despite his apprehension.

“Right. Finish your salad, diva. The lasagna will be done in a minute.” Ali says as she heads into the kitchen to pull the lasagna out of the oven. “By the way, if you’re staying here, I’m making you cook dinners!” She calls from the kitchen.

“Deal!” He yells back.

When she comes back into the dining room and finishes serving them each a piece of lasagna, Kyle can’t help but get back into it.

“So, seriously, you think it’ll be ok? You’re not scared?” He questions.

“I can’t guarantee nothing bad will happen if that’s what you’re asking.” She tells him frankly, but keeps going before he can butt in. “But, I’m confident that we can maintain enough control over this that we keep Bobby guessing and never knowing anything concrete. If he doesn’t see any specific threats, I don’t think he’ll do more than keep a close eye on things and be intimidating so we don’t try and cross him. I intend to go down that road with him and hopefully just take a sharp turn off at the very end when he doesn’t see it coming and it’s too late.”

“Ok. I can roll with that.” Kyle replies, just about ready to let it go, but not before pointing a finger at his sister and adding, “But, I swear, if I end up at the bottom of the harbor and all drowning victim bloated at my own funeral…”

“Shut up, Kyle.” Ali shakes her head and throws a dinner roll at him for good measure.

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Monday, December 19

Ali stays cautious, but the first week of being followed goes pretty much the same as the first day. Bobby’s goons follow her everywhere she goes, maintaining a safe distance at all times and clearly thinking she has no idea about them. Lately she’s been purposely driving on congested roads during traffic hours when she can just to piss them off. If they can maintain a visual on her from their car, they stay parked somewhere close by. If not, they casually follow her in anywhere she goes that is publically accessible if we don’t stick out obviously. There are two of them, both average looking guys that are mostly non-descript, the only discerning feature is that one of them has a small teardrop tattoo near his left eye. One of them always stays in the car.

Bobby is at the local coffee shop every morning, like clockwork. Ali continues to acknowledge him with a smile and a wave, always making sure to look completely comfortable about him being there. She’s been keeping Ashlyn updated on everything during their visits, but not much has changed over the last few days. The only thing she started noticing towards the end of the last week is that Bobby’s
demeanor seems increasingly agitated. He’s stopped acknowledging her with his usual head nod and instead merely keeps his lips pursed while staring at her intensely. By the weekend, he was looking downright menacing.

“He looked really pissed off this morning.” Ali describes Bobby’s behavior to Ashlyn.

“He’s probably frustrated that he’s not getting to you and not learning anything useful.” Ashlyn replies. “I’m thinking he’s probably at the point of trying to step it up a bit… I’d say it’s time to be careful with your calls and be extra aware of what’s going on around you. Don’t put yourself in any situation where you’re alone if you can void it.”

“Agreed. No worries, Kyle has been staying with me at home. So, I’m pretty much never alone these days.” Ali replies. “Two weeks to go. We got this.”

“We do.” Ashlyn affirms, the two of them feeling bolder and more confident with each passing day. Unfortunately, Bobby Dugan is getting bolder with each passing day as well.

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Tuesday, December 20

Ali goes to grab a mug from the cabinet to pour herself some coffee, finding it empty. She groans seeing that every single one of them is dirty in the dishwasher, which Kyle obviously forgot to run last night like he said he would.

“How fucking hard is it to run the dishwasher?!” She mutters out loud in the silent kitchen. Lucky for Kyle, he had an early client at his salon and was already gone, so he’s saved from her wrath for the time being.

She begins to hand wash one of the dirty mugs when she hears her phone ringing on the counter. She quickly dries her hands on the kitchen towel and grabs the phone, seeing Tim’s number on the caller id. Her stomach does a flip as she answers. “Hello?”

“Ali, it’s…” he starts, but Ali cuts him off quickly.

“No names!” Ali blurts out before Tim can announce himself. “I know who it is.” She says in a more gentle tone.

“Gotcha.” Tim replies, surprising Ali at how quickly he realizes.

“What’s going on? Did something happen to…” Ali purposely lets the statement hang, feeling like she’s going to throw up.

“No! No!” Tim answers quickly, hearing Ali let out an audible sigh of relief. “Everything is fine there. Just, I have something important I need to talk to you about.”

“Ok. Are you busy right now?” Ali asks, trying to figure out if he’s on duty or not.

“No. I’m free today.” Tim replies simply.

“Alright. Meet me inside the Victoria’s Secret at the Natick Collection Mall in an hour. Go all the way to the back, right by the angel bra section. If you can’t find it, just ask one of the employees and act like you’re shopping for your wife.” Ali instructs him.
“Uh, ok.” Tim says a bit awkwardly.

“Sorry, I know that’s weird… but, trust me, there’s a really good reason why.” Ali says apologetically.

“Ok, I’ll be there.” He confirms.

“Great, see you in an hour.” Ali says and hangs up, rushing upstairs to quickly get ready.

An hour later, Ali pulls into a parking spot near Macy’s and heads into the mall. She notes that the guy with the tear tattoo is the one who followed her in this time. She pretends to do a little browsing in the perfume section before making her way towards Victoria’s Secret. While getting her Christmas shopping done over the last week, she noticed that Bobby’s goons will only follow her into bigger stores and ones where they won’t attract attention. They didn’t follow her into the makeup store last week nor Victoria’s Secret when she was buying new underwear. Instead the one who followed her had just waited outside near the store and picked up his surveillance once she left. She’s counting on the same behavior holding true for today’s meeting with Tim.

As soon as she approaches Victoria’s Secret and makes it clear that’s where she’s heading, she sees the guy back off a bit in her peripheral vision and plop down onto the couch not too far from the entrance. She smiles to herself and heads right to the back of the store, finding Tim awkwardly pretending to shop for bras with a saleswoman hovering nearby.

“Hey honey, sorry I’m late. I hope I didn’t keep you waiting for me too long.” Ali says as she walks up to Tim and runs her hand up his forearm, trying to help him save face and get rid of the hovering saleswoman at the same time.

Luckily he seems to pick up on what’s she doing. “That’s ok. Just starting shopping without you, babe.” Tim shoots her a smile and Ali tries hard not to laugh at the situation they’re in right now. The saleswoman gives them a polite smile and heads back to the cash register.

“I’m so sorry. I’m being followed and watched, so this was the best I could think of to keep this meeting private.” Ali explains to Tim once the lady is out of earshot.

“I figured as much. Is this to do with the case?” He asks. “To be honest, I don’t know anything beyond the fact that I always had a feeling this whole confession thing was bullshit. So, I’m not aware of any specifics, but I’m thinking something major is going on and this upcoming appeal thing is maybe more intense than I realized?”

“Yeah, that’s one way to put it.” Ali admits. “Look, I don’t want to put you in danger so I won’t fill you in, but let’s just say your instincts are dead on.”

“Oh, um, yeah ok. Although, I’m not sure what my status is on the danger thing. I’m just sort of realizing how big this all probably is and how deep it goes.” Tim says cryptically.

“Wait, Tim, what’s going on?” Ali asks, trying to get down to the reason he wanted to talk to her.

“I got fired yesterday.” Tim answers simply.

“Apparently, I failed a random drug test from last week.” Tim supplies. “Ali, my best friend overdosed and died my freshman year in college… I haven’t even so much as thought about any kind of drug since then. Legit, nothing. Nor have I eaten anything, used products, or taken any medication that could show up on a drug screen as positive…I checked the list thoroughly. Plus, I asked around and I was the only person ‘randomly’ tested that day. That never happens. To top that off, in the past they have let people re-test to clear themselves if they failed. I didn’t get that option, they just fired me with no chance to dispute it.”

“I’m so sorry, Tim.” Ali says, a bit beside herself at the news.

“The people who work at the prison don’t know Ashlyn personally, so they don’t know I have any connection to her unless they were to look up police academy records. But, anyone who knows or knew Ashlyn personally would know us as friends from before she got arrested.” Tim continues. “I just... when I really thought about it and realized the court date is coming up… it has to be related. Someone knows I’m her ally in there and they don’t want me to be.”

“I think you’re right. And I know exactly who that someone is… same someone who is having me followed.” Ali replies. She feels sick over the fact that Ashlyn isn’t going to have Tim anymore, sick that Tim lost his job with a family to support, and sick that Bobby is now making more aggressive moves. “Does Ashlyn know?”

“I highly doubt it. I got escorted out immediately, so I couldn’t tell her. News like this usually takes at least a couple days to travel down to the inmates and it just happened late yesterday. That’s why I called you, to warn you about it and so you could tell her.” He explains.

“Thanks, Tim. I’ll tell her in the morning.” Ali let’s out a deep breathe. “I can’t believe this happened and you got caught up in it.” She says ruefully.

“Don’t worry. Just keep it up and win that case. Take care of Ashlyn, that’s all that matters now. I’ll be just fine.” Tim reassures her. “You should probably go, we’ve been in here a while.”

As Tim is talking it dawns on Ali that maybe they can help each other now that he’s been involuntarily involved thanks to Bobby.

“Do you have any job prospects lined up?” Ali asks.

“Not yet, but I’m sure I’ll find something.” He tells her as confidently as he can manage, trying to stay positive.

“Think you could handle private security?” Ali inquires.

“Sure. Not all that different than what I’m trained for, why?” He asks, not sure where Ali is going with this.

“Good. I’ll double the salary you made at the prison plus prime benefits, and you’ll work for me. Can you start tomorrow?” Ali gets right to the point.

“Uh…” Tim gets out a bit dumbfounded as his mind tries to process what Ali is saying. “You’re hiring me?”

“Yes, if you’re willing.” She clarifies. “Can’t hurt to have a little back-up with these jerks following me around. Plus with all the media that is about to descend on this case…”

“Ok. I’m in.” Tim says, not needing to think about it any further given how frantic his wife had been about their financial outlook last night.
“Perfect. See you tomorrow at 9am.” Ali hands him her business card that has her home address on it, picking out a bra in her size to buy so it looks believable that she was shopping. “Thanks, Tim.”

“No, thank you, Ali.” Tim gives her one last appreciative smile before heading out.

Ali buys the bra and makes her way out a few minutes after Tim, stopping in one more store to try and make her shopping outing look credible. She tries looking through a few racks of clothes at Nordstrom, but she’s distracted. She feels like she has a rock in her stomach knowing that she has to tell Ashlyn about Tim tomorrow. It’s going to be like taking away the blonde’s security blanket. Not able to take the stuffiness of the mall anymore, she gives up her shopping façade and heads home, keeping an eye on the silver Honda Civic that has been a constant presence in her rearview mirror.

The rock in her stomach turns into a boulder when she arrives home to find Kyle’s car in the driveway. He had a day filled with back-to-back clients and she knows there is no way he would cancel all his appointments like that unless something major was up. She hurries into the house, silently hoping that maybe Kyle just felt sick and came home. But after what just happened with Tim, the feeling of dread in her gut is telling her that it’s much more than that…
F*ck it, it's Christmas

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, I had hoped to get this out a bit sooner, but it turned out to be longer than I expected. Alas, here it is! I'll try my best to see if I can get another chapter in before I get busy with the holidays and family visiting. In the meantime, enjoy the fluffy holiday update because after that we're headed to court!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tuesday, December 20 continued…

“Kyle?” Ali calls out a bit frantically as she makes her way into the house. She hears the TV and quickly rounds the corner into her living room, but there is no one in there. Her heart rate is picking up by the second as she makes her way into the kitchen, but it’s empty as well. She suddenly sees the refrigerator door close in her peripheral vision and jumps a mile, letting out a small yelp.

“Hey, sorry, didn’t hear you come in!” Kyle says realizing he surprised her.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Ali unintentionally yells at him, a reaction to the adrenaline that was just pumping through her system. Kyle is standing there in his underwear holding a plate with a sandwich on it, he’s clearly fine.

“What are you doing? You ok there?”

“Uh, making a sandwich?” Kyle says a bit quizzically, trying to figure out what is up with his sister.

“What are you doing? You ok there?”

“Yeah, sorry. I’m sorry. I just… I saw your car in the driveway and knew you had appointments all day. I thought something bad happened. Once I explain my morning, I think you’ll understand why I jumped to that.” Ali explains apologetically, trying to calm herself down.

“Well, something did happen…but nothing earth shattering, so don’t go getting your panties in a twist. Relax, Alex, you look pale…just sit for a sec. You want this sandwich?” Kyle says, practically forcing her into a stool at the kitchen counter and rubbing her shoulders.

“No, I don’t want your sandwich! What happened?” Ali asks anxiously.

“I got fired.” Kyle says with a dramatic shrug and an eye roll.

“You own your salon…how did you get fired?” Ali is beyond confused.

“Well, not really. I was just being metaphorically funny about it.” He explains.

“Kyle, seriously, can you stop being your drama queen self for like five seconds and just tell me what the hell actually happened?” Ali snaps at him impatiently.

“Alright, geez! The Boston Fire Chief came in today for some random fire code inspection and then shut down the building because he said all of the electric wiring in the place didn’t have the proper insulation to be up to code. Obviously, I just rent the space and don’t own the building, so I had no damn clue what he was talking about. The owner came eventually and had a huge fight with the guy because he’s sure the building is up to code, especially given that it was inspected a few months ago
and was deemed perfectly fine at that point. Fire Chief didn’t budge though and won’t allow the owner to operate any business there unless the wiring is all replaced. Apparently that could take over a month to do.” Kyle explains.

“Shit. What are you going to do? Are you ok?” Ali questions with concern.

“No skin off my back really. I just put up a sign and sent out an email blast that said the salon is undergoing unforeseen renovations until further notice.” Kyle starts to elaborate, but can see that Ali is looking worried. “Look, Alex. My dedicated and regular clients rarely ever come to the salon to do more than just socialize. That place is really just a hang out most of the time. I do all my important work right out of my own condo, you pretty much know that. These people have money and they want to be primped and made pretty on a whim, which means taking appointments at home A LOT! Plus, people don’t realistically come to me for the great fade, they come because I give them a great fade while shirtless and flirting with them. I don’t need the salon for that! So, relax, I’ll just operate out of my condo for a while. I’m not worried about it.” He finishes.

“Ok…so you’re ok?” Ali is just trying to take in everything Kyle just said.

“I’m totally fine. The salon thing is nothing to worry about. What I am worried about, however, is that it seems pretty clear that the Fire Chief and Police Chief are in cahoots and my poor landlord is getting crapped on because of someone trying to send a message. Bobby clearly thought this would cripple me financially. That is what worries me.” He says frankly.

“Yeah me too. Bobby is tightening the belt and you’re not the only one.” Ali let’s out a sigh. “I just came from meeting Tim Rosemund. He got fired last night after he failed a ‘random’ drug test that sounds a whole lot like your ‘random’ fire inspection. I have to tell Ash tomorrow and I don’t even know how to break it to her.”

“Fuck.” Kyle blurts out in surprise.

“Yeah, fuck is right.” Ali agrees. “On the bright side, I have a new private security guard and Tim has a new, better paying job.”

Kyle gets what she means right away. “I’ll probably never admit this again, so you better enjoy it now… you’re definitely the smarter Krieger.” He gives her a high five and watches her crack a tiny smile. He can tell she’s trying hard not to worry and overthink things.

“Come on.” Kyle says, taking Ali’s hand and pulling her off the stool.

“Where are we going?” Ali questions as she gets pulled through the kitchen.

“We are going to have a sibling spa day and de-stress the hell out of ourselves! We’re going to get you all relaxed and refreshed so that you can tackle tomorrow head on with a clear mind. And in the morning, I am going to give you the Kyle Krieger full hair and make-up treatment. The least I can do is send you over to Harris looking all hot… that ought to soften the blow of the news a bit.” He says sassily as he leads a now smirking Ali up the stairs. “But first, I’m gonna need some pants!”

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**Wednesday, December 21**
Kyle definitely didn’t disappoint. Ali feels like a million bucks by the time she leaves the house in the morning. She’s has on her favorite gray-wash jeans with a form-fitting black blouse that hugs her just right. Her make-up looks flawless, her hair is soft and shiny, flowing loosely over her shoulders. She feels well rested and ready to break the news to Ashlyn.

She stops into the local coffee shop before heading over to the prison, not because she really needs the caffeine but because she’s running a bit early and figures sipping something warm on the drive will help her keep the calm vibe she has going at the moment.

She’s been so focused on this morning’s visit with Ashlyn that it doesn’t even dawn on her that she’ll come face-to-face with Bobby. Her stomach drops the second she sees his brooding face sitting there at the usual table as he immediately shoots her a menacing smirk. That feeling doesn’t last very long though, it’s quickly replaced with a sudden rage that makes her want to literally rip that smirk right off of his face with her bare hands.

Ali pushes the intensity of her feelings aside and focuses on how she wants to play this. There is no way she’s leaving this café without giving this prick a piece of her mind, but she has to be careful. She quickly orders her latte, thinking about her plan of attack when she’s realizes she’s overthinking. ‘Be smart and trust your gut.’ She tells herself as her name is called by the barista.

Ali grabs her latte and sits right down at one of the tables. She pulls out her phone and grabs a small notebook out of her purse, ripping a blank page from it and starting to write. In her peripheral vision she can see Bobby is watching her intently, probably wondering what she is up to since she usually just leaves. She finishes writing after about 5 minutes, gets up and walks right over to Bobby with a confident stride.

“Good morning, Chief.” She says with bite, practically throwing the piece of paper at him.

“What’s this?” Bobby asks a bit taken aback.

“My schedule for the next week. I figure it would be a lot easier for your guys to follow me if they knew where I was going to be. Plus, I’m getting sick of seeing the same crappy Honda weaving in and out of traffic in my rear view mirror every day.” Ali says in the bitchiest tone she can manage without raising her voice.

Bobby just looks at her, his face stoic. Ali can tell he’s actually gritting his teeth at the moment.

“What, did you think I didn’t know?” She laughs lightly and puts on the sweetest voice she can as she leans in closer to him. “You know what’s really funny though… when the guys that are following you don’t realize they’re being followed themselves. Fucking hilarious actually.” She lies with a huge grin on her face.

Ali watches Bobby’s eyebrows raise a bit and chooses to just press on. “If you think a girl with my status is walking around without her own private security… you didn’t do your homework very well.”

“I’m not sure what you’re referring to Ms. Krieger.” Bobby mutters out, his lips tight and his face almost contorting as he fights hard to remain composed.

“Right, of course. And I’m not sure what the fuck your problem is, Chief.” Ali spits out at him. “Look, let me be clear here… I’m not doing anything that Ashlyn Harris doesn’t want me to do. I don’t know what your deal is in trying to protect her or what exactly you think you’re protecting her from, but try to remember that she’s a family friend to me. I’m not going to use her for some stupid financial gain that I don’t even need. I’m going after this appeal exactly the way she asked me to,
nothing more. So, feel free to back the fuck off and let me do my job.” Ali says with the perfect blend of ignorant conviction that she hopes will throw him completely for a loop.

Bobby looks like he is about to open his mouth, but Ali isn’t sticking around for his response. “Before I forget… thanks by the way. My new head of security, Tim, is working out perfectly. And I’m already enjoying the extra quality time with my brother at home.” She gives him the most sugary sweet smile she can just to piss him off. “Have a great day, Chief. I have a client to visit and a case to work on.” Ali waves slightly and walks straight out the door, leaving Bobby to figure out what the hell just happened.

About forty minutes later, Ali strolls into the prison still riding the adrenaline rush of telling Bobby off. She’s a bit nervous about having to tell Ashlyn about Tim, but something about the way she handled things this morning is making her feel stronger than ever.

She doesn’t even have a chance to sit down before Ashlyn is being led through the door of the visiting room by a female guard named Paulette that has only observed their visit a couple of times. Given the potential for the visit to get emotional, Ali is bummed out that it isn’t Jordan today, but Paulette has been perfectly cordial and nowhere near as strict as Alton, so she’ll take what she can get. Ashlyn immediately gives her a huge smile, the blonde’s mouth hanging a little bit open. Paulette heads into the visiting room and Ali is trying to figure out the odd expression on Ashlyn’s face when she feels the blonde’s arms wrap around her in a quick hug.

“Wow, Alex… you look… you’re just… enchanting.” Ashlyn says as she steps back to look at Ali, choosing her words carefully so she doesn’t get carried away even though she’s completely mesmerized at the moment.

“Oh, yeah, thanks!” Ali says, her cheeks a little flushed now. “You can thank Kyle for that, he gave me the full diva treatment this morning.”

“Whew, yeah he did. Please pass along my gratitude.” Ashlyn replies with a light laugh, still taking it all in. She doesn’t let herself get too caught up because Ali eyes, though beautifully outlined in eyeliner and mascara, are telling her all she needs to know. She speaks up again before Ali can say anything. “However… if you think it’s hiding the worried look in your eyes from me, it’s not. What happened, Alex?”

“Wasn’t trying to hide anything, I promise.” Ali assures her as she sits. “A lot has happened in the last twenty-four hours. As usual, all truth and no bullshit, ok?” She gets right into it.

“Ok.” Ashlyn acknowledges and sits down to ready herself for whatever is coming.

“The first thing is really hard because there is no easy way to tell you, so I’m just going to say it.” Ali pauses for just a second to see the small nod from Ashlyn. “Ash, Tim called me and we met up. He got fired the night before last.” She watches Ashlyn’s lips form a tight, straight line before they part a bit to let out a breath. The blonde reaches up to run her fingers across her forehead and Ali can see that she’s trying to pull together her thoughts.

Ali reaches out briefly to gently brush the top of the blonde’s hand soothingly. “I’m so so sorry.”

Ashlyn nods her head a bit before finding her words. “Do you know why he got fired? Was it because he was so lax with us or did someone find out he knew me personally?”
“Sort of, but it’s deeper than that. He supposedly failed a random drug test.” Ali tries to explain.
“Ash, it wasn’t really a random drug test, nor has Tim done anything that would cause him to fail it. Do you understand what I’m getting at?”

“Bobby. Mother fucker.” Ashlyn whispers out in a quiet anger.

“Exactly.” Ali replies simply. “It’s clear that he chose to send a more direct warning. And he didn’t stop with just Tim. Kyle’s salon business got shut down yesterday when the Fire Chief did a surprise random inspection on the building and deemed it unsafe. He made up some crap about all the wiring having to get redone even though somehow the building passed inspection just a few months ago and every year prior to that.”

“Piece of shit. He knows… he knows the way to get to me is to rip down the people around me.” Ashlyn says with an angered desperation in her voice, her fists clenched on the table. “Is Kyle ok? What is he going to do?”

“Actually, he’s more than fine and so is Tim.” Ali says and quickly reaches over to grab both of Ashlyn’s hands, forcing the blonde to unclench them as she gently pries them open and rests them on the table. “Try to relax just a little, ok? Let me finish.”

Ali makes sure to explain how the whole thing is pretty inconsequential for Kyle given that he doesn’t need the actual salon to operate his business. She then recounts how she hired Tim as her permanent private security, down to the fact that he is sitting just outside in the parking lot across from the prison right now to keep an eye on the guys that are following her. She watches Ashlyn’s face lighten and wishes she could stop there. She isn’t sure what the blonde is going to think about her aggressive interaction with Bobby this morning. Ali finally takes a deep breath and tells her about her confrontation with Bobby. When she finishes, she’s completely surprised by something she least expected… Ashlyn is laughing uncontrollably.

Ali watches the blonde laugh until she almost can’t breathe, finally getting herself under control enough to properly look up at the brunette with a smile.

“Uh, are you ok? What is so funny?” Ali asks, a bit bewildered.

“Yeah. Alex… seriously, where on earth did you come from?” Ashlyn asks rhetorically. “I just can’t believe you exist sometimes. You take what should be a grave situation and somehow fix it to be perfectly okay. I mean, this fucker thinks he’s sticking it to us…but really he’s accomplished nothing at all. And to top that off, you manage to nail his ass to the wall, intimidate him when he was trying to intimidate you, and actually make him believe you are still naïve enough to think he’s doing it to protect me.” She pauses before adding, “Honestly, I’m going to miss Tim and having that connection in here, but I can’t find it in my heart to be sad. His life just got immeasurably better and I’m so happy and thankful for that.”

Ali feels a wave of tingling warmth run through her, completely entranced by the selfless woman in front of her. Ashlyn is losing her best friend in this awful place, one of the only lights she has to combat the dark… and yet, she can only be happy for him and not upset for herself. She tries to reel in the thought a bit and move on, knowing that Ashlyn won’t want her to draw attention to it. “What do you think Bobby will do now?”

“Honestly, I have no idea. But you know… whatever it is, I trust that your gut reaction will always be the right one. You’ve managed to turn even the evilest intention into good… you’re everything that is good, Alex. That’s something I couldn’t be surer of.” Ashlyn says frankly, just barely ghosting the very tips of her fingers across Ali’s.
Ali closes her eyes for a second and just let’s herself feel the moment. This case officially starts in 13 days and she knows for certain that she has all that she needs and all that she ever needed… Ashlyn’s faith in her.

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Sunday, December 25

Ali is rushing around the house trying to finish getting ready when Kyle pokes his head in to her bedroom. “Hey, I packed the bag of food and stuff for you. You have 15 minutes before you need to be out of here!” He reminds her, looking her over with a grin. She has on a pair of tight black leggings, a pair of low-heeled boots and one of the ugliest Christmas sweaters he’s ever seen. It actually has pom-pom buttons and a string of sparkly garland on it. “I can’t believe you’re wearing that.”

“Wouldn’t be Christmas without an ugly sweater!” Ali shrugs as she starts working on her hair now that her make-up is done.

“True, but that one redefines ‘ugly’!” Kyle teases before walking over and taking the brush out of her hand. “Sit. Let the master do his thing.” He directs her and motions to the small stool in the bathroom.

When he’s finished about 10 minutes later, he looks over his work. “You look divine. Well, except for the sweater.” He can’t help but throw one more insult in.

“Thanks, ass!” Ali says grabbing a washcloth off the bathroom counter and throwing it at him before rushing out the door.

“Tell her I said Merry Christmas!” Ali hears him holler as she grabs the bags and heads to her car, yelling back “I will!”

Just a few minutes into the trip and Ali realizes that she’s now checked her rearview mirror at least a dozen times already. She can thank Bobby and his goons for that new compulsive habit. There is no Honda Civic following this time though. Bobby and the goons have been completely absent for the last three days. Her antagonistic bitch style confrontation with him must have worked because he’s backed off completely since then. Ali just assumes that he realized he was arousing her suspicion by being so aggressive. She turns up the Christmas music on the radio and shoves all thoughts of Bobby out of her head. It’s Christmas morning and she’s going to focus on only the good things today.

Ashlyn is awake but leaves her eyes closed for a few more minutes as she lays in bed. These are the minutes, the few precious minutes where it’s Christmas morning and everything is still perfect. She lets the childlike excitement radiant through her, knowing that when she opens her eyes it will vanish immediately. A distant clink of keys in the corridor breaks the silence, and just like that her eyes are open and the moment is gone. Another lost Christmas, another year squandered. She feels the disappointment settle in and reminds herself that it’s ok. Yes, she’s in prison… but this year, Ali will be here and that alone makes it better than at least 80% of the Christmases in her life.

She takes a little time to freshen up, knowing that Ali will be here soon. By the time she’s done brushing her teeth and combing through her hair a bit, she hears footsteps in the corridor. She turns around at the sound of the locking clicking open to find a smiling Jordan in a Santa hat. Christmas
suddenly feels a little bit better already.

“Aren’t you supposed to be home pampering your pregnant wife with Christmas breakfast?” Ashlyn asks him.

Jordan lets out a laugh as he starts to put the cuffs on her. “Please, my in-laws are visiting, so they can pamper her all she wants. No better time to get in some holiday pay hours and avoid my crazy in-laws. Besides, I pamper that woman every day of the year and will resume my duties this evening.”

“Alright, alright.” Ashlyn says, not buying it at all. With Tim gone, Jordan has been extra diligent in making sure he gets shifts that allow him to work protective custody duty. “At least pass along my apologies to her for being the reason you’re not home this morning.”

“I will. Now, let’s go, someone’s waiting.” Jordan winks and motions to the door.

As usual, Ali is sitting there waiting for her when Ashlyn is led into the visitor room. She watches the brunette stand and smile at her before seeing Jordan and letting her smile get even wider. Ashlyn can see that Ali has some elaborate setup on the table, but she can’t take her eyes off of Ali’s face long enough to look at it properly. She feels like an excited puppy waiting to be let off the chain and the second Jordan finishes uncuffing her, she’s already in front of Ali pulling the brunette into her arms and lifting her off the floor a bit. Her face is buried in Ali’s hair, her arms wrapped tightly around the brunette’s waist as she just holds on silently and immerses herself in the moment; feeling Ali’s face pressed into the crook of her neck and her arms snugly around her shoulders. They give themselves a solid minute like that before pulling back, not wanting to risk getting Jordan in any trouble.

“Hey you, Merry Christmas!” Ali is the first to break the silence as they pull apart and look at each other.

“Merry Christmas, Alex!” Ashlyn smiles, finally getting a really good look at Ali. “What the hell are you wearing?” She asks with a chuckle.

“Oh, don’t even laugh, Harris…I have one for you to wear too.” Ali says deviously, as she pulls a sweater out of her bag and tosses it to the blonde.

Ashlyn can only laugh at the ridiculous green sweater that Ali just handed her, the front covered with three kittens playing with a ball of yarn. “You’re serious?” She asks even though she’s already slipping it over her head.

“I don’t play about ugly sweaters on Christmas morning! All part of the fun. I just wish you were actually allowed to keep it and wear it for the rest of the day, or every day!” Ali says cheerily.

“I think this might actually get me killed in here.” Ashlyn jokes. As ugly as the sweater is, it smells like Ali and she truly wishes she never had to take it off. “Wow, look at all this! You’re too much!” She remarks as they sit and she looks over the table. Ali has made a little 3D Christmas tree out of construction paper that has detailed little paper ornaments and a star at the top. There are two containers of food that appear to be ham, grilled pineapple, potatoes, and roasted brussel sprouts. Next to that is a tray of perfectly iced gingerbread cookies that look like they came out of a Martha Stewart magazine. There is even sparkling cider.

“It’s Christmas, it’s supposed to be too much!” Ali replies. “Hope you don’t mind Christmas dinner for breakfast.”
“Not at all, this is amazing! Is this all homemade? I mean, look at those cookies! I thought you said you didn’t cook!” Ashlyn inquires graciously, still trying to wrap her head around the over-the-top spread.

“I definitely suck at cooking. You can thank Kyle for this deliciousness dinner.” Ali explains. “But, I’ll have you know that I am a master baker and I take all the credit for those cookies!”

“Seriously, I’m so impressed.” Ashlyn compliments. “You probably shouldn’t ever call yourself master baker again though.”

“Why not?” Ali questions with a furrowed brow.

“Just say it three times fast in your head and you’ll understand.” Ashlyn smirks, watching the concentration on Ali’s face.

“Oh, oooh!” Ali turns a bit red. “Got it! Such a dirty mind, Harris! Santa just put you on the naughty list.”

“Pretty sure I was already there. I got my lump of coal this morning.” The blonde jokes back.

“Well, come on, let’s eat while this is still a little bit warm.” Ali says motioning to the food.

They dig into the food, engaging in easy conversation for a while. Ashlyn asks what Ali will do the rest of the day and the brunette goes over her plans of hanging out with Kyle all day and watching holiday movies while they eat too much food. That segues into Ali talking about what Christmases were like growing up and how her mom always made sure that Christmas was huge and over-the-top. Ashlyn listens intently, smiling at Ali’s memories and stories while she enjoys the delicious food.

“You’re too quiet over there. Tell me about your Christmases.” Ali requests, as they finish the main meal and start to move on to the cookies.

“Oh, um…” Ashlyn struggles with how to answer the question for a few seconds.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry into something you don’t want to talk about. Really, you don’t have to answer that.” Ali jumps in right away, noticing that Ashlyn looks a little frazzled.

“No, no. It’s totally ok. I want to. I’m just trying to find the right words I guess.” Ashlyn reassures her. “Christmas and I have a real love hate relationship. Other than Halloween, it’s the holiday I love the most, but it’s also the one I hate the most too.” She tries to explain it to the brunette. “Every Christmas growing up sucked. There’s no other way around it. As far back as I can remember, it was me and Chris at home by ourselves while my parents did god knows what. There were always some presents, but we never even had a tree. We’d open our gifts and then order a pizza with the $20 that was left on the table next to the gifts, and just hang out doing nothing all day. Then, when my parents died and we lived with my grandparents… they always made a big deal out of it. The big lunch, a ton of gifts, the huge tree and so much Christmas décor that you’d think a seasonal store display exploded in their house. But all I remember about those Christmases was waiting for Chris to come home. He’d promise he was going to come and then never show up because he was out drugged or drunk somewhere. And I’d just cry myself to sleep and worry about him.”

Ali cringes a bit at that last part, knowing that exact feeling when it came to Kyle. She feels awful that she asked, but also grateful that Ashlyn is opening up to her.

“Let’s see… I spent three Christmases in the desert and one in the hospital, so I don’t have to tell you how crappy those were.” Ashlyn continues. “The best ones have been the few I’ve been able to spend with Chris and his family more recently, mostly because of the kids. And this will be the third
one in here. So, for a holiday I want to love so much, it hasn’t exactly worked out so well.”

Even though Ashlyn has stopped talking, Ali can tell she isn’t done. She just reaches over to entwine her fingers with the blonde’s and stays silent.

“I just… I don’t know how to explain it exactly, but I’ll try.” Ashlyn starts again. “There’s this moment for me every Christmas morning when I’m just waking up… it’s this perfect intangible moment because it’s Christmas and it’s magical. I guess in my head I have this sort of undefined and unrealistic expectation that I can only compare to something like a Hallmark commercial. That there’s this potential for this amazing and joyous day. And that feeling and excitement that I have in that moment on Christmas morning, it’s one of the most perfect moments in my memory. But then the actuality and reality hits shortly after and that crushing disappointment is among some of my very worst moments. I guess that’s the best I can describe it.” She finishes.

As much as Ali wants to reassure Ashlyn that someday she’ll have that perfect Christmas, the fact is that she doesn’t know that. Instead, she goes with the truth of what she is thinking right now. “You know what I find remarkable, Ash… that you haven’t had a single great Christmas in your entire life, and yet, you let yourself hope and get excited for it every year without fail despite the looming disappointment. That is strength beyond measure and I couldn’t admire you more for it.”

“Thanks, Alex.” Ashlyn says with genuine appreciation that Ali always listens to her not so that she can respond, but so that she can understand.

“Alright, we don’t have all that much longer, so let’s not be Debbie downers! I got you a present!” Ali tries to lift the mood.

“Yeah?” Ashlyn grins a bit.

“Duh, it’s Christmas! Here…” Ali replies, as she hands Ashlyn two flat, square wrapped presents from her bag. “You’re not allowed to have much in here, so I had to get a little creative.”

Ashlyn opens the first present and finds a hardcover copy of the book ‘The Little Prince’. She remembers Ali saying it was her favorite and lets a smile grow over her face as she starts flipping the pages. “This is really sweet, thank you.” She says warmly, before noticing the writing. “Wait, is this in German?”

“Yep. It’s a special bilingual edition with the German and English translation on each page.” Ali explains. “Open the next one.”

Ashlyn opens the second gift to find a CD and just looks up at Ali for an explanation.

“That is me reading it for you in both languages, so you know how the words are pronounced.” The brunette tells her.

“This is so amazing. I absolutely love it.” Ashlyn says genuinely and a bit emotionally. “So, you want me to learn German, huh?”

Ali bites her lip for a second, debating what to say. She knows exactly what she was thinking as she decided on this gift for Ashlyn. Her mind and heart are in a battle at the moment, but her heart wins out.

“Ok, I’m going to preface this with the fact that in the spirit of keeping boundaries, I know I really shouldn’t say it… but, fuck it, it’s Christmas.” Ali blurts out quickly before taking a quick breath to slow down. Ashlyn is looking her right in the eye with anticipation. “When I got you this, all I could picture was you running your hand over this tattoo…” she points to her left ribcage, “and reading the
inked words over and over again in my ear.”

Ashlyn feels her heart flutter in her chest, her mind envisioning what Ali just described. She can see that Ali is flushed and a bit flustered, so she keeps her response simple. “I’ll learn every single word, Alex.”

Ali replies only with a nose crinkling grin as her cheeks get even redder.

“I actually got you something too.” Ashlyn breaks the moment and waves her hand to get Jordan’s attention. He comes out of the room quickly and hands Ashlyn the folder that she asked him to hold this morning when he went to get her. “Here.” She hands it to Ali.

Ali opens it to find an incredibly detailed pencil sketch of herself. “Ashlyn…you made this?” She whispers out in complete awe. “I didn’t even know you could draw.”

“Yeah. Just something I like to do as a hobby I guess. Do you like it?” Ashlyn asks shyly.

“Like it? I love it.” Ali replies, her voice cracking a bit emotionally because as she looks at the sketch of herself…she’s never looked as beautiful as she does on this piece of paper. And what’s more, it dawns on her that this is how Ashlyn sees her. “I don’t know what else to say… I adore it.” She says as she holds it up a bit, noticing as the light shines through the page that there is some writing on the back. She quickly flips it over to see a series of lines written in Ashlyn’s handwriting:

Brave are the flowers

that bloom from darkness.

Fighting to emerge into the sunlight,

daring to flourish with vivid color,

among all things black and gray.

Brave is the heart of the gardener

that cultivates them.

With the vision to see the seeds

nestled in the gloomy recesses of the mind.

With the care to ensure their roots

implant deeply into the bone.

With the patience to watch them

slowly blossom from the skull.

Brave is the soul of the owner

that holds them.
With the openness to allow the
gardener to nurture her mind.

With the strength to let the
flowers to emerge for all to observe.

With the courage to recognize the
way they might inspire.

Brave are the eyes
of those who behold them.

Understanding that the most
beautiful things,
grow from the darkest places.

Ali reads each line carefully, trying to absorb the meaning of each word. “This is so so beautiful. Where is it from?” She asks when she is done.

“I…uh… I wrote that.” Ashlyn admits, quietly adding “About you.”

Ali takes the time to read it again, this time truly understanding. “This is amazing. You’re so talented, Ash. I’m so in awe of you right now.” Ali says warmly, her heart feeling so full and touched. She meets Ashlyn’s gorgeous hazel eyes before asking her question. “So, I am the gardener?”

Ashlyn gives her a sweet smile and confirms. “You are the gardener, Alex.”

Ali is sure her heart couldn’t possibly be beating any harder at the moment. She puts her hands on Ashlyn’s face, and pulls the blonde forward so that their foreheads are touching as she runs her thumbs gently over Ashlyn’s cheeks. “I’m not so sure that I’m all that brave, but you… you are the bravest person I know, Ash. Thank you for this. It means more to me than I can put into words.”

Ashlyn responds with just a simple smile, her hands going to cover Ali’s hands that are still on her face, just letting the silence speak for itself.

“I’m really sorry ladies, but time was up like two minutes ago.” Jordan says regretfully as they pull apart.

“It’s ok. Thanks, Jordan.” Ashlyn says getting up and taking off the sweater, which she reluctantly hands back to Ali before hugging the brunette tightly for a few seconds. “Do you need to check these?” She asks Jordan, pointing to the book and CD that Ali gave her.

“Nah. I’m good.” Jordan answers.

Ashlyn nods and grasps the items in one of her hands before putting them behind her back to get cuffed and then turning to face Ali. “Thank you for all this, it was truly magnificent.”
“Of course. I hope it was better than that lump of coal.” Ali tries to keep it light.

“Way better.” Ashlyn plays back.

Ali watches as Jordan finishes cuffing Ashlyn and then reaches up to dangle something above the blonde’s head from behind with a devilish smile and a shrug. Ali starts to giggle and shake her head as she notices that it’s mistletoe.

“What?” Ashlyn asks, wondering why Ali is laughing at her.

“Nothing.” Ali replies moving herself right in front of the blonde whose eyebrows are raised in slight confusion now.

Ali knows the limit of what she’s capable of handling. She already proved it to herself at the hospital that night with Ashlyn. Of course, the blonde wasn’t awake for that and who knows how she’ll react…’fuck it, it’s Christmas’ Ali reasons with herself. When there’s only about an inch left between them, Ali uses her index finger to motion for Ashlyn to look up.

Ashlyn tilts her head up, her eyes following to see mistletoe dangling above her head. She smiles at the joke and by the time she looks back down, Ali’s lips are quickly and chastely pressed against her own. She closes her eyes and just as fast as the soft lips touched hers, they are already gone leaving only a tingly warmth in their wake. It was barely even a kiss, but she feels like the whole earth has just moved under her feet. “Merry Christmas, Ash.” She hears Ali whisper in her ear, sending warm shivers through her as the brunette’s hand slightly squeezes her own before pulling away.

“Merry Christmas, Alex.” Ashlyn whispers back before she has to go.

“Merry Christmas, Jordan!” Ali calls out as they two head out the door.

“You too!” Jordan yells back.

“I simultaneously love you and kinda want to slap you right now. Merry Christmas, smartass.” Ashlyn says to Jordan once they are out of earshot.

“Uh huh. Merry Christmas to you too, Capt.” He winks at her smugly as he leads her back to her cell.

Ashlyn spends a lot of the afternoon just laying on her bed thinking about her morning with Ali. That kiss etched in her mind as if time stood still in that moment. She laughs at herself at how ridiculous she’s being over such a simple little peck, but all she can think about is what it will feel like when it’s more than that. It doesn’t escape her that she keeps thinking ‘when’ and not ‘if’… it’s the most hopeful she’s felt about any future for herself in a very very long time.

After choking down some terrible prison cranberry- turkey casserole for dinner, she lays back on her bed again and starts slowly reading through ‘The Little Prince’. As she’s reading along, she smiles when she notices that Ali has highlighted the specific quote from her tattoo.

*Man sieht nur mit dem Herzen gut, das Wesentliche ist für die Augen unsichtbar.*

*One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.*

Underneath it is a little note in Ali’s handwriting…
Saturday, December 31

Since the prison overstaffs to make it possible for visitors to come on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, visiting time is cut back during the week following Christmas and there are no visitors on New Year’s Eve and Day. Ali had snuck in a quick visit on Wednesday. With Bobby still silent, the two of them went about their usual comfortable conversation which was mostly taken up by Ali going over some necessary court procedures that Ashlyn should be aware of.

“I had Kyle pick out some suit options for you. He pretty much knew your size, factoring in the weight you’ve lost working out in here. They are in the warden’s security office and will be given to you the morning of the appeal hearing.” Ali explains.

“Thank you, but...what, no dress?” Ashlyn teases.

“I dunno, Harris, those legs haven’t seen any sun in a while.” Ali jokes back. “Besides, the skirt suit is my power play. Can’t have you stealing my thunder!”

“Thunder? Please, Krieger...you’re more like a Category 5 hurricane.” Ashlyn grins before adding, “Thankfully, I’m safely absconded in the bunker.”

“That you are.” Ali laughs back.

Ashlyn watches the small clock on her desk tick down the minutes until 2017, seeing there is only about 5 minutes to go. She lays in bed and puts her headphones in, letting Ali’s voice consume her. People say that you should spend the last few moments of the year doing what you want to be doing in the new year. She has no idea what will happen in the next few days or what 2017 will bring, but she knows that this is what she wants. To hear Ali in her mind, in her heart, and in her soul… hopefully right beside her.

“3...2...1... Happy New Year!” Kyle shouts jumping up from the couch and kissing Ali on the cheek as he wraps her in a tight hug.

“Happy New Year!” Ali says back cheerily as she watches him pour two glasses of sparkling cider for them.

The two of them plop back on the couch, watching the ball glow on the TV screen as confetti flies and people celebrate in Times Square.

Kyle looks over to see Ali looking pensive. “What are you thinking about?” He prods her.

“You know what I’m thinking about.” She shoots him a look.

“Yeah, I know. Just kinda wanted to hear you say it.” He sasses.

“Jerk.” Ali elbows him and lets out a sigh. “You know, for once, I actually know exactly what I want.”
“Oh yeah? What’s that?” Kyle questions.

A couple on the TV screen are locked in such a powerful kiss that they don’t even seem to notice the people around them that are jumping up and down screaming. They have confetti stuck to their faces and they look freezing, but they're completely oblivious to it all as if nothing exists but the two of them. “I want that.” Ali points to the screen, pausing for a second and adding “…with her.”

Kyle smiles widely and nods. “Well, then go get it.”

“I will.” Ali replies with a purposeful smile and all the determination she needs to follow through.

Monday, January 2

“So, tomorrow…” Ali says watching Ashlyn’s face closely as they have their quick pre-court briefing visit.

“Tomorrow.” Ashlyn repeats.

“The case was assigned to Judge Henry Burns. I know him very well, he wrote one of my law school application recommendation letters. He’s very by the book, but he’ll give you lots of leeway if you can show him the legal precedent for it. Lucky for me, I’m a pro at finding legal precedent.” Ali says confidently.

“What are you not a pro at?” Ashlyn says jokingly rolling her eyes.

“Trust me, so many things. I’d list them all, but we don’t have the time for that today.” Ali replies. “So, how do you feel?” She asks gently, wondering where Ashlyn’s head is right now.

“Strange actually.” Ashlyn answers thoughtfully. “I thought I’d be so nervous and terrified. I’m not though. I just feel oddly calm and ready… so ready.”

Ali smiles in relief, feeling like it’s exactly what she needed to hear to be ready herself.

“What about you? How do you feel?” Ashly inquires.

“Right now… invincible.” Ali responds confidently and watches the blonde nod with a smile. “No matter what, we always have this.” Ali reaches to give Ashlyn’s hand a quick squeeze.

Ashlyn gives her a dimpled grin. “Yep. And no matter what, I still want that date.”

Ali lets out a little laugh. “Right. And no matter what, you’ll get it.”

Chapter End Notes

Are you all ready for some court action?
Ok here is the last update before the holidays! I'll be back with another one ASAP. I'm trying not to constantly leave you on a cliffhanger, but at the moment there is no good stopping point in this story that isn't a bit of a cliffhanger. So, I apologize and promise I'm not trying to purposely drive you crazy :)
I hope you all have wonderful holidays! Now, enjoy a little court drama... we're just getting warmed up...

Tuesday, January 3

Ali settles herself at the table to the left of the judge’s bench. Her files are carefully arranged in front her, a selection of pens sitting next to them. The courtroom is a little busier than she anticipated. Kyle and Tim sit together two benches behind her. Off on the right side, she recognizes Liam Gorham’s wife right in the front row. She can’t say she expected any of his family members to show up, but it makes sense that the wife probably wants a good look at woman she believes slept with and killed her husband. The rest of the benches are spottily filled in with newspaper and media reporters, all prepared with notebooks since there is no video or audio recording inside the courtroom.

That’s the only time she allows herself to look around the room, her mind now completely focused and her gaze straight ahead. She is running her prepared argument over in her head, thinking about the adjustments she will make depending on the judges that make up the rest of the hearing panel. She has been informed that there will be three of them reviewing the case, but has only been given the name of the ruling judge, Henry Burns.

She sees the bailiff leave his spot at the door to the right of the judge’s bench and approach a door on the middle right wall of the courtroom. A few seconds later, the door opens as Ashlyn is led in by two court officers and Ali stands up so that she can greet her, but completely loses her ability to even breathe.

Ashlyn is dressed in a navy blue suit that hugs her body closely, but is not at all tight. A baby blue collared shirt and wine colored tie underneath the jacket provide a perfect contrast to the navy. Her hair is in a tight, neat bun and she looks simultaneously beautiful and handsome. Ali can’t take her eyes off of the blonde being led towards her, her heart pounding away and her mind completely blank.

The door opens in front of her and Ashlyn immediately takes in the large courtroom, feeling a few butterflies in her stomach that have managed to sneak their way in now that the moment has arrived. The first person she sees is staring daggers at her, Gorham’s wife, and who could blame her. The room seems to be overwhelming filled with people holding tiny notebooks who she can only assume are there to expose her life to anyone who will fuel their ratings. She finds Tim and Kyle sitting together, happy to see some allies in the midst of strangers. The room completely disappears when she finally sets her eyes on Ali. She’d be rooted to the spot if it wasn’t for the two court officers pulling her along.
Ali is a vision, there is no other way to describe it. The brunette is in an all-black suit, the skirt of which falls at her lower thigh but still well above her knee. Her dark brown hair is pulled into a perfectly high bun and her makeup is just enough to highlight her face, a slight red on her lip. She looks poised and confident. It makes everything inside of Ashlyn settle down as if Ali was a tranquilizer. She feels almost like she’s gliding and before she knows it, she’s right beside the brunette, the two of them settling into their side by side chairs but never losing eye contact.

It’s Ali who pulls herself together first and leans in close to Ashlyn so they can’t be overheard. “Hey Hero, you look so sharp. You ready?”

Ashlyn gives herself one more second to lose herself in Ali’s eyes before answering. “Hi. You’re the most stunning pesky bitch I’ve ever seen, Paladin. I’m ready.” She lets her hand fall down to rub her own leg, knowing that she’s close enough that her fingers just brush Ali’s bare knee.

Ali feels the quick contact and lets a tight smile form on her lips, only noticeable to Ashlyn who returns it. She turns around to shoot Kyle a quick look that clearly conveys both her approval and her want to strangle him over his perfect suit choice for the blonde. He gets the message, shrugging a bit and smiling like a proud father.

The bailiff moves back to the door to the right of the judge’s bench, making it clear that it won’t be much longer before things get underway.

“He’s not here?” Ashlyn leans in and whispers to Ali.

Ali shakes her head no in confirmation that Bobby is not is the courtroom, a little smile on her lips. This has played out exactly as they hoped it would. If he’s not here, then he has believed that this case is a simple appeal. He has no idea what is coming.

“Please rise.” The bailiff loudly instructs the room. Ali gives Ashlyn one last reassuring look as the man continues to speak. “The honorable Judge Henry Burns presiding, with Judge Cole Grayson and Judge Anne Werthers on the bench.”

Ali watches Judge Burns take the center spot on the bench and address the room. “Good morning. You may be seated. In the matter of Captain Ashlyn Harris versus the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, I ask that her representative legal party please rise and state his or her name at this time.”

Ali feels the familiar energy rush run through her as she stands up. “Attorney Alexandra Krieger as Captain Ashlyn Harris’ legal representative, your honor.”

“Thank you, Attorney Krieger, you may be seated.” Judge Burns acknowledges before continuing. “The state will hear the oral appeal argument in the matter of Captain Ashlyn Harris versus the Commonwealth of Massachusetts this morning. If necessary, there may be up to a one day continuance. This is a three arbiter panel consisting of myself and judges Grayson and Werthers. Once the arguments are concluded, we will immediately conduct a review and provide our ruling. If there are no other matters for discussion, I ask Attorney Krieger to come forward and present the defensive appeal argument.”

Ali grabs the legal pad with her notes and stands back up. She purposely runs her hand over Ashlyn’s shoulder to show faith in her client before making her way to the podium in the center of the room that is directly in front of the judge’s bench. She puts the legal pad down on the podium, makes a quick adjustment to the small microphone, and begins.

“Your honors,” she addresses the three judges, “this appeal has been filed on the grounds of
improper legal procedure and the use of coercive means to obtain a signed confession from Captain Harris. If it please the court, I would like to structure the argument in two parts. The first part will outline the illegalities of the criminal procedure used to process Captain Harris. The second part will illustrate the inconsistencies between Captain Harris’ confession statement and the collected evidence in presenting that the statement was obtained by coercive means and is a false confession.” She pauses to let the judge weigh in on her order of presentation.

“Your structure is acceptable, please proceed.” Judge Burns affirms.

“At the time of her arrest, my client, Captain Ashlyn Harris, had sustained a bullet wound to the upper right knee and was treated by paramedics onsite who determined that she needed immediate hospital treatment. She was properly read her second amendment Miranda rights enroute to the emergency room and this is not a point of contention in this appeal.” Ali clarifies what she is accepting as accurate and proper procedure before continuing.

“The medical records show that Captain Harris was formally admitted to the hospital at 7:08pm, and after determining there was no need for surgery and treating her injury, she was released back into police custody at 12:48am. The medical report also indicates that she was given a normal dose of morphine at 12:15am, just prior to hospital release. I have a copy of the medical report here for the court if requested.” Ali holds up the report.

“The court has received and holds your written brief of argument, Attorney Krieger. If nothing has changed in the reports or paperwork contained in the initial appeal filing, we do not need any additional copies.” Judge Burns answers her.

Ali nods and continues. “I would like to now point out that Captain Harris’ confession was signed, dated, and stamped as complete at 2:24am that same morning. Given the emotional nature of the crime scene, the of lack of sleep given that she clocked in for her routine police shift at 5am the prior morning, and being under the influence of a schedule II narcotic, my client met neither the state nor federal requirements of being mentally competent or ‘sound of mind’ to give an admissible and valid confession at the time she provided it. Further, United States Federal Law and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts both require that there be a legal representative to witness and sign the confession. The law clearly states that this party cannot partake in the procedure as both a witness and the processing officer, but that these entities must be separate individuals. The court should note that Lieutenant Jonathan McNally’s signature appears on the signed confession twice: once as the legal witness and the second as the arresting officer. It is on these grounds that I petition the court to find that improper and illegal procedure was used to obtain Captain Harris’ confession, rendering it invalid and inadmissible for sentencing.” Ali wraps up the first part of her argument.

Ashlyn can only sit back and watch in awe, trying hard to not let her mouth hang open. She has seen so many sides of Ali, but this is like watching them all come together into this completely captivating and inspiring individual. She is confident, smart, and commands the room, but yet there is this genuine, unassuming goodness that underlies her demeanor. She’s so striking… Ashlyn can’t take her eyes off of her, hanging on every word that comes out of Ali’s mouth.

Ali knows that the improper legal procedure argument is all she needs to win the appeal, but she needs to show that she’s done her due diligence. So, in the second part of her argument she focuses on presenting two major points. The first is that the phone records of calls made to and from Ashlyn’s cellphone do not add up to the timeline that was stated in her confession. The second is that the medical examiner’s report clearly indicates that the six bullet wounds Liam Gorham sustained from Ashlyn’s gun were deemed to have occurred after the lethal shot to the head. The report states that these six wounds did not actively bleed, meaning the heart had already stopped beating and was not pumping blood. Ali points out to the court that the bullet from Gorham’s fatal head shot is
considered missing evidence and cannot be officially linked to Ashlyn’s gun as the other bullets were. She keeps the rest of what she knows in her back pocket and doesn’t present anything further to the panel, knowing that she has already introduced enough reasonable doubt to make her case.

“In summation, your honors, Captain Ashlyn Harris was not only not ‘sound of mind’ enough to sign a confession at the time she was asked to do so, but the confession itself is legally invalid due to the lack of a proper legal witness. Further, major inconsistencies between Captain Harris’ confession and the timing and circumstances of the crime point to a false confession that was obtained by coercive means. It is on these grounds that my client has filed to appeal her sentence and recant her confession in the matter of Captain Ashlyn Harris versus the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. That concludes the defense’s oral argument for this appeal.” Ali finishes strongly.

“Thank you, Attorney Krieger. The judges’ panel will now take a one hour recess to review the argument. We will reconvene as soon as we have agreed upon the ruling and will have the bailiff alert you if more than the one hour is required.” Judge Burns indicates and firmly hits his gavel.

“All rise!” The bailiff announces as the judges make their way out of the courtroom.

Ali doesn’t even think twice about spending the hour long recess with Ashlyn. She immediately heads back to the holding area where she checks in with a court officer before being let into the room that Ashlyn is waiting in.

It’s a fairly small room, not all that different than the visiting room at the prison. There is no direct observation area and no guards in the room, but it’s clear from a camera in the upper right corner that there is some recorded video feed. Ali knows that any audio recording is against the law, so they won’t have to censor their conversation, but they’ll definitely need to be very careful not to touch each other in any way that might raise eyebrows.

“Hey!” Ashlyn says excitedly upon seeing Ali enter the room. “I didn’t know you could come back here with me.”

“Lawyers can do anything.” Ali winks at her. The fact that Ashlyn didn’t stand up to try and hug her means that the blonde also clearly saw the video camera and understands the situation.

“Yeah, well, you should be out getting coffee and breakfast with Kyle and Tim. God only knows what trouble those two might get into if you leave them alone too long.” Ashlyn jokes a bit, thankful to have Ali with her.

“Please, and miss out on even a second of you in that suit? Hell no.” Ali says while waggling her eyebrows. “Geez Ash, you clean up nice. And that is the understatement of the year!”

Ali laughs a bit. “Your brother is a wizard with this stuff, it fits perfectly. And like you’re one to talk… I’m not even going to make a comment about how you look because I’ll just get myself in trouble.” She says with a smoldering gaze that she knows Ali notices because the brunette’s face gets a little red. They both smile at each other for a second before Ashlyn gets serious. “Alex…wow. You were just so incredible in that courtroom, I’m still not over it. I’ve listened to your podcast and I’ve read all these articles about how great you are, so I sort of knew. But there is just nothing like seeing it in person. You were really something…just completely mesmerizing.”

Ali can only smile shyly for a few moments. The way Ashlyn is talking about her with such reverence in her voice makes her feel completely lit up inside. She respects and admires Ashlyn so much, and to hear the blonde talk about her with such mutual emotion is meaningful in a way that
Ali isn’t even sure she fully understands yet. Ashlyn’s belief in her means everything. “Well, you sure know how to make a girl feel special.” Ali replies, trying to keep her emotions under control.

“You don’t need me for that, you are amazing all on your own.” Ashlyn cheeses a bit.

“Easy Harris, don’t want to let me get too cocky before I have the chance to win this case.” Ali says lightly.

“Speaking of. How did you think it went out there?” Ashlyn gets into it. “Seemed like it went ok, but I am terrible at reading judges.”

“What do you mean?” Ali inquires.

“Oh, well, when I was a rookie cop I spent a lot of time in court because you had to be there to represent yourself for any DUI arrests you did or any traffic ticket appeals. Anyway, I swear, every time I thought the judge was going to throw the book at the person, they’d wind up getting off easy. And vice versa… if I thought the person was going to get off easy, they’d end up getting the maximum penalty. I was wrong like 90% of the time. So, I suck at understanding judges and I’m leaving that all up to you.” Ashlyn answers, shaking her head at her own incompetence.

“Well, good thing one of us is good at this.” Ali teases a bit. “I honestly felt like it went exactly as I expected it to. I have no doubt they will come back with a ruling of overturning your sentence. Not sure how they’ll react to the rest, but I think my level of preparation will be well received and too solid to not be accepted.” She says confidently.

Ashlyn nods and asks one more thing she can’t help asking. “And what if the next part doesn’t go as planned? What if they reject it?”

Ali gives the blonde the warmest and most reassuring look she can muster. “Then I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it. I’m in this all the way and if I don’t get my first option to work, then I’ll figure out a second one, and a third or fourth one if need be. I’m not abandoning this, Ash, no matter what.” She answers assuredly. “I’m not giving myself anything but option one though and I refuse to back down from that. I don’t give myself the option to fail. That’s just how I work.”

“Thanks, Alex. I’m just so grateful for you.” Ashlyn replies genuinely before changing the conversation to her surprise at the number of reporters in the courtroom.

It’s not long at all before the bailiff comes in to alert them that the judges are ready to make their ruling at the one hour mark. About ten minutes later they are back in their side-by-side seats waiting for the judges to re-enter the courtroom.

“All rise.” The bailiff instructs the room as the judges re-enter and take their positions on the bench.

“In the matter of Captain Ashlyn Harris versus the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the judges’ appeal panel has a reached a unanimous decision. I ask the defendant to please rise.” Judge Burns addresses the courtroom.

Ali and Ashlyn stand up after giving each other a quick look.

“It is the opinion of this court that proper legal procedure was not followed in obtaining a signed confession from Captain Ashlyn Harris. As such, the court finds that the confession is invalid and inadmissible.” Judge Burns explains.

Ashlyn closes her eyes in relief for a second as the judge continues his ruling.
“Further, the panel has ruled that there is enough reasonable doubt regarding the coercive nature of the obtained confession such that it did not abide by the Due Process clause under the 14th amendment. Therein, the court accepts the full recanting of defendant’s confession.” Judge Burns outlines before giving the final ruling. “In the matter of Captain Ashlyn Harris versus the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the court hereby declares the sentence to be overturned and that the defendant be released within 90 days.”

The murmurs throughout the courtroom start to buzz as reporters write furiously and begin whispering to each other, everyone waiting for the ‘case closed’ type statement from the judge. Usually this is the moment that the defendant gets excited and usually shares a handshake or hug with their lawyer in triumph. The reporters all start looking to Ashlyn and Ali, but the two haven’t moved. For them, this is nothing more than a key to the next locked door.

As Ali had explained it to Ashlyn, the overturned sentence and 90 day release requirement meant nothing more than giving the state prosecutor the time to appeal the decision, file new charges, and force Ashlyn to undergo a proper trial. With all the evidence at their disposal in Ashlyn’s favor, it would be an easy trial win even with an unpredictable jury. The problem is that Bobby Dugan would never let Ashlyn or Ali live long enough to get to that point. They have one shot to take care of this before Bobby has the chance to take out one or both of them.

Ali takes a single deep breath and speaks up loudly before the judge can officially close the case. “Your honors, I would like to motion for the hearing of witness testimony.”

The murmur of the courtroom gets louder and the judges look at each other in confusion before Judge Burns speaks. “Attorney Krieger, you do understand that the court has ruled on this matter? You have met the burden of proof requirement for an overturned sentence and release of the defendant pending the opportunity for the state prosecutor to appeal and request a new trial.”

Ali answers immediately. “I do, your honor. However, I am formally petitioning the court to hear witness testimony for a full dismissal of the case.”


“In Roberts versus the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the court was petitioned to hear witness testimony due to reasonable doubt related to the evidence. The court ruled that under the 14th amendment, the defendant has the right to be heard in requesting a full dismissal of the charges and case sentencing in lieu of a new trial in the appeals court in which the initial ruling was made. It is on these grounds that I make my motion.” Ali lays out the legal precedent for her request, watching the judges turn to each other and confer for a few minutes.

“Attorney Krieger, will you please approach the bench.” Judge Burns directs her and Ali complies, going to stand before them.

“Attorney Krieger, you do understand the full weight of what you are requesting? You would be permanently relying on a final decision from this appeals court panel and permanently giving up the right to any full trial outside of that ruling?” Judge Burns implores her in an almost personal plea.

“Yes your honor, I do understand that.” Ali answers confidently.

“And you further understand the risks you assume in questioning your chosen witnesses in this manner? As well as the possibility that a witness may chose legal representation and may refuse to answer questions to avoid any incrimination of themselves?” He beseeches her again.

“Yes your honor.” Ali repeats.
“Very well. You may return to your seat.” Judge Burns instructs her and then briefly confers with the other two judges before they rule.

“In the matter of Captain Ashlyn Harris versus the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the court hereby accepts the defendant’s motion to hear witness testimony for a full dismissal of the case in lieu of a trial or outright release. Attorney Krieger, you will provide a list of your witnesses to the court within the hour and they will be notified of their requirement to be present. The witness testimony hearing is hereby set for Thursday, January 5th at 9:00am. This court is now adjourned.” Judge Burns hits the gavel and the bailiff instructs the courtroom to stand as the judges leave.

“Whew, holy crap.” Ashlyn whispers to Ali quietly once the judges are gone, knowing she only has a minute or two before the court officers come to escort her away.

“Thursday. That’s our day. We’re doing this.” Ali replies with rock solid confidence, knowing that in just over 36 hours they will know their future.

“He’ll find out by tonight?” Ashlyn questions, knowing that Bobby is about to get called as a witness.

“Yes. Doesn’t leave him much time to figure out what is going on, just the way we wanted it.” Ali replies in a satisfied tone.

Ashlyn doesn’t get a chance to reply before the court officers are there to escort her. “Alex…” she gets Ali’s attention one more time. “You’re incredible.” She says with a warm, dimpled smile.

Ali gives her a big smile back. “So are you. Rest up, hero. I’ll see you Thursday… and then every morning after that for coffee in my kitchen.” She winks.

Ashlyn lets out a soft breath as she gets led away. Ali Krieger knows exactly how to lift the weight and make her feel like she’s floating.

Before going to find Tim and Kyle to go home, Ali heads to the clerk’s office to give notice of her witnesses. The list contains only three names: Dr. Wayne Henning, Captain Jonathan McNally, and Chief Robert Dugan.

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“You were supposed to make her look presentable, not make her lawyer lose her focus!” Ali slaps her brother in the back of the head as she gets into the back of Tim’s car just behind Kyle, who is sitting shotgun.

“First of all, it’s not my fault that Harris could probably make a trash bag look good and that I happen to have good taste! You’d have thought she looked good no matter what.” Kyle defends himself. “And second, puh-lease! You know you secretly love me and want to thank me…I’m waiting!”


Kyle high-fives a chuckling Tim, who drives away from the courthouse. “So, that sounded like it all went the way you wanted it to?” Kyle questions.

“Yeah, that was the best outcome we could have gotten today. I can only hope that the rest of it goes that well, but it’s really unpredictable from here on out and I just have to roll with it as it happens. You can’t really script witness testimony.” Ali replies.
“You think he’ll show up?” Tim jumps in.

“Oh yeah, I know he will. You need a really compelling argument to not show up when you’re called as a witness. Plus, he’s the police chief, so he pretty much has no choice but to show up.” Ali explains. “Problem is that he could show up and refuse to answer any questions. He’d be smart if he did that. I’m really counting on the fact that he’s full of himself, thinks he’s untouchable, and would do anything to screw me over because he doesn’t like me. I’m putting my bets on him showing up with no formal legal representation and doing his best to get me to falsely accuse him of something so that I wind up losing my legal license and get some jail time.” She elaborates.

“You should really sell the movie rights to this… so much draaama!” Kyle interjects and lightens the mood by making them all laugh a bit.

“Well, I could use a drama-free afternoon. Either of you boys up for shopping?” Ali tries to entice them, knowing it’s best if she keeps herself occupied with something other than the case today.

“You don’t even have to ask me. I’m always in!” Kyle replies quickly and looks over at Tim.

“Eh, why not? My wife’s birthday is the same week as Valentine’s Day and I better get started shopping for both. I have a feeling you two are going to help me work wonders in that department.” Tim answers with a playful shrug.

“Challenge accepted!” Ali says excitedly.

The day provides her with just the distraction she needs to relax her mind. Tim drops Ali and Kyle off at Ali’s house around 7pm before heading home himself. Despite the cold night, the siblings opt to walk to Newton center for a late dinner together. Ali falls into bed at 10:30pm and is relieved that she feels exhausted enough to fall asleep without letting her thoughts keep her awake. She knows that tomorrow night she’ll likely have an active mind that won’t stop going over possible court scenarios, so she welcomes any sleep she can get right now.

Wednesday, January 4

Ali stretches out her body as she feels the sun hitting her face. It doesn’t happen that often that she’s in bed late enough for the sun to be coming through her bedroom windows with such force. She turns over and sees 9:42am in red numbers on her alarm clock and lets out a yawn. She feels rested and glad that she managed to get some good sleep last night. She lets herself lay in bed for a few more minutes before deciding she’s going to start her morning with a quick jog even if it’s cold outside and she’ll likely regret her frozen face and aching lungs later. She brushes her teeth, pulls her hair back and applies a fresh layer of mascara before throwing on some warm running clothes and heading downstairs.

“Hey lazy daisy! I was wondering when your ass was gonna get up!” Kyle calls at her once she gets into the kitchen. He’s sitting at the counter in just a pair of sweatpants sipping from a mug of coffee while he reads the Boston Globe newspaper.

“Figured I’d sleep in a little.” Ali shrugs and goes to grab a water bottle out of the fridge. “You want to join me on a run?”

“I would, but after two coffees and an omelet, I’d better not.” He says patting his stomach. “You want an omelet when you get back, I can make you one?” He offers.

“Awww, yes! Thanks babe, you’re the best!” Ali says appreciatively as she reaches over to pinch his
“And don’t you forget it!” He smiles before handing her the newspaper. “Might want to read up when you get back, you’re hot news this morning.”

“Ugh, wonderful.” Ali says with contempt even though she knew the media attention would only grow as the case went on. “Anything bad?”

“No, actually. Mostly just a lot of speculation about what is going on given the request you made in court. Plus with the argument you gave, there’s definitely some questioning of whether Harris made up the confession or not. Typical media stuff really, but nothing bad.” He tells her.

“Well in that case, time to run!” Ali announces before making her way out the door and into the cold air of the late morning. The cool air feels great for a while, but at around mile three her lungs are aching and her nose feels like it’s going to fall off. Realizing she still has a mile to go before she can get home, she groans and wishes she planned a smaller loop. The sound of squeaking brakes pulls her from her thoughts.

“Hey, you look freezing. Who knew you were one of those crazies that jogs in 20 degree weather?! Want a lift home or are you going to insist on running the rest of the way despite the hypothermia risk?” Tim teases her a bit.

“You’re a lifesaver!” Ali says, quickly getting in the car. “I forgot you would be around this morning.”

“Well, when your boss pays you so well to keep an eye on her safety… you make sure she doesn’t turn into a popsicle.” He jokes again. “Just doing my job.”

“You’re definitely in the running for employee of the month.” Ali jokes back and laughs when she sees Tim fist pump.

They’re back at Ali’s house in no time and she makes her way out of the car, stomach already grumbling for that omelet. “I appreciate your dedication, but seriously, go home Tim. I’m just going to stay here and hang with Kyle all day. If I need you or I go anywhere, I’ll call you.” Ali tells him.

“Go hang with your kiddos and relax. Tomorrow could go all kinds of ways and who knows how busy I’ll keep you after that!” She says lightly despite the weighted truth of the statement.

“You’re sure? And you’ll definitely call if you need me?” Tim questions.

“I’m positive and I promise to call. Now go!” Ali assures him.

“Ok. Thanks, Ali. I’ll see you in the morning!” Tim waves and drives away once he sees Ali head into the house.

True to his word, Kyle has made her a pretty amazing omelet which she devours in no time before taking a long shower. Ali spends some time helping Kyle re-work a budget spreadsheet for the salon before the two of them decide to bake cookies for dessert later. They’re about to settle on the couch to watch trashy afternoon TV when Kyle’s phone rings.

“I’m only taking private appointments at home right now since the salon is closed for renovations.” Ali hears Kyle explain and listens to the rest of the conversation.

“How many people are we talking?” He asks. “Ok, that’s manageable. I can be ready in an hour, cut and color would take about two hours.” He pauses to listen. “Alright, deal. I’ll see you 3pm then.” He hangs up and turns to Ali.
“Ok, don’t kill me, but I need to run over to my condo for an emergency appointment.” He cringes slightly.

Ali shakes her head and teases him a bit. “Totally fine, really. I get that you’re like a hair god for all those divas out there.”

“Stop it! Don’t stop it!” Kyle says cheekily as he revels in the compliment. “This is a new client too, which is why I don’t want to turn it down. I guess the stylist for some fashion show tonight bailed and they need someone to do cuts and colors for some of the models. I’m going to handle two of them. Can’t hurt for them to showcase my work on the runway!” He adds excitedly.

“Better get going then before you’re late. You have like 30 minutes to get home and traffic always starts building around now.” Ali says.

“You sure you’re cool if I go? I’ll be back by 6pm and I’ll bring pizza for dinner, ok? Kyle asks, feeling bad he’s leaving her by herself when he knows she’ll just obsess about the case.

“I’m a big girl, I’ll be just fine binge watching TV until you get back with loads of carbs for our movie night.” Ali says, noting the still guilty look on Kyle’s face. “Seriously, go go go, I’m good!”

“You’re the best!” Kyle shouts as he heads up the stairs to get ready.

“Don’t you forget it!” Ali shouts back sassily.

Ali distracts herself for the next couple hours by re-doing the nail polish on her fingers and toenails while she watches TV. It hasn’t provided all that much of a distraction though, her mind running through possible dialogues that might happen tomorrow with Bobby even as she tries to pay attention to the TV. She’s about halfway to the kitchen to grab a drink when the doorbell rings.

Kyle has his own key, but he refuses to bother when he has his hands full with take-out or groceries. Ali looks at the hallway clock, seeing that it’s 4:48pm. “You’re done early! Thank god, I was starv…” She says pulling open the front door, but doesn’t finish the statement. She meets Kyle’s deep brown eyes, but the face they belong to are not Kyle’s.

It’s a face that she sees glimpses of in her mirror every morning, a face she hasn’t seen in over 20 years. “What the hell are you doing here, Ken?” She spits out venomously, her heart racing and blood boiling as she looks at her father standing there on her front steps.
I'm so Sorry

Good news... I'm getting this update posted before 2017! But... I'm not sure you're going to be very happy about it. On the bright side, I can leave all this bad stuff right here in 2016! I hope that you all had great holidays and that all those lingering warm fuzzy feelings will see you through this chapter. Here we go...

Wednesday, January 4

*She meets Kyle’s deep brown eyes, but the face they belong to are not Kyle’s.*

*It’s a face that she sees glimpses of in her mirror every morning, a face she hasn’t seen in over 20 years. “What the hell are you doing here, Ken?” She spits out venomously, her heart racing and blood boiling as she looks at her father standing there on her front steps.*

“Hello, Alex. I know it’s been a long time.” Ken says cordially and a bit timidly as if he knows he could set her off at any moment.

“Not long enough.” Ali practically snarls at him. “And don’t call me that, you lost the right to that 22 years ago.”

“Ok, what would you like me to call you then?” He asks as politely as he can.

“I prefer you not call me at all, but Ali is fine. What do you want?” Ali says dismissively, hoping he’ll take the hint and leave.

“Ali, look, I know I’m the last person you expected to see or want to see and I completely understand. I really do.” Ken tries to level with her. “I know that nothing I could ever do would even come close to fixing this. But, I really need to talk to you. Would you please give me just a few minutes?” He implores her sincerely.

“There is nothing you could possibly have to say that I want to hear.” Ali shoots him down.

“Maybe not.” Ken willingly admits. “I just… I want to explain some things and talk to you while I still have the chance. I’m begging you, please, just give me ten minutes of your time and then I’ll go.”

Ali looks over his desperate demeanor. She had long ago gotten over ever wanting to know what went through his head when he left their family the way he did. Still, he looks so pale and defeated right now and she starts to question that maybe he is dying or something like that. For some reason, this makes her soften a bit; knowing she will feel guilty if she doesn’t comply with a potentially dying wish. “You have five minutes. I’m listening.” She relents and crosses her arms as she looks at him expectantly.
“Thank you, Ali. I really appreciate you listening.” Ken says with a bit of relief before noticing that she’s just waiting for him to start. “Oh um, is there any way we could do this, well… not on your front steps?” He asks gently.

“Fine, but don’t get comfortable.” Ali huffs a bit and motions into the house, closing the door behind them as Ken makes his way in. She points to the dining room and watches as Ken takes a seat at the table.

“Nice place. You’ve done really well for yourself.” Ken muses as he takes in his surroundings.

“Get to the point.” Ali reminds him sharply.

“Ok. Look Ali, I just need you to know why I left the way I did.” Ken starts, watching Ali sit down across from him. He can see that she is tense, steeling herself for whatever explanation he has. “I screwed up with the wrong people and the only way to protect you, your mom, and Kyle was for me to leave.”

“That’s a really lame and shitty way to protect someone.” Ali snaps at him.

“I know, I know. I was desperate and I didn’t have a lot of time, so I did what I thought would be the best thing.” Ken tries to defend himself a bit. “I advised one of the biggest businessmen in Boston for a long time and when I thought he was making a really bad financial decision by partnering with someone new, I gave him the honest opinion that I thought it was a bad move and wouldn’t be a part of it. I didn’t know that the two of them had actually partnered on different deals for years and that giving that opinion might cost me my life when I declined to help them.”

“Oh boo hoo, Ken. You had a financial deal go bad because you pissed off some businessmen. I pissed off a lot more of them than that in my career and I didn’t leave my family over it. This is your fucking pathetic excuse?” Ali says with disgust.

“You’re not getting it. They crippled me financially and threatened me. I could deal with that. But once they went after my assets, they weren’t just going after me. It was clear that they were coming for my family and the only way I could protect you guys was to act like you didn’t matter to me. If you didn’t matter, they wouldn’t bother coming after you. It was the only thing I knew how to do.” Ken explains as best he can.

“Oh, so you didn’t know how to call the police or get some type of help from private security? Leaving the people you loved was the best you could do?! And for what, to start a life with a whole new family so you can then not protect them either.” Ali retorts, still not buying his excuses.

“I know, it’s no excuse.” Ken concedes and gets up, moving towards the dining room door behind Ali. She doesn’t even bother to turn around and look at him. “I’m so sorry, Ali. There just wasn’t any other option and there still isn’t. Bobby Dugan isn’t a man that forgives and forgets. I hope you’ll remember that now that you’re involved in his business.”

Ali feels the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Her mind is racing as she hears her father say Bobby’s name, having no idea this whole thing was so close to home her entire life. Her brain finally catches up to the words spoken in the room, realizing that this visit is no coincidence. Her father couldn’t possibly know that she was about to take down Bobby, unless…

“I love you and I always will. I’m so sorry, Ali…” Ali hears behind her and starts to turn around when she feels a sharp pinch on her neck. She goes to grab for whatever caused the pain, but a rag is over her face in seconds and the rooms goes fuzzy and black.
Ali comes to slowly, noticing first that it is dark and she is really cold. She goes to hug her body to warm herself, but she can’t really move much at all. She starts to panic a bit and realizes she can’t really lift her head either. Her eyes dart around and come into better focus. She sees that she’s sitting in the bottom of her empty outdoor hot tub. She can’t feel her arms or legs very well and they tingle. Seeing that she’s just wearing some leggings and a thin long-sleeve shirt, she wonders if maybe she has frostbite from the freezing January night. Her throat feels dry and constricted and she tries to turn her head a bit, feeling a burning sensation on the skin of her neck when she does.

“Ow.” She croaks out in a shivering whisper, finally realizing that there is a thin rope wrapped tightly around her throat and anchored to the hook at the bottom on the hot tub that was once helping the winter cover stay on. She can move herself further down into the tub to loosen the rope, she just can’t lift herself higher than a certain point or it tightens. She slumps a bit as best she can to release the tension on her neck, but her body feels so numb and heavy that she can’t move it much. She is willing her hands and fingers to move to untie the rope, but she isn’t able to move them much at all. Her mind is racing to understand what is going on when she feels an even colder sensation on her legs as freezing water from the large outdoor hose begins filling the tub.

“Oh Ali, I’m so sorry baby girl.” She hears from above, her eyes moving to see Ken peering over the edge of the hot tub.

“Fuck you.” Ali gets out in a raspy croak. She doesn’t care that his eyes are teary and he looks scared.

“I have no choice. He’s going to kill Kyle and the rest of my family if I don’t do this.” Ken says desperately. “You’ve always been the fighter Alexandra, the brave one, the one who never backed down. I’m so proud of you for that. And no matter how much you hate me, just know how much I really do love you.” He leans in as far as he can to get close to her. “I’m counting on you to be that fighter…to survive so that we all can. I’m so sorry, sweetheart.” He tries to kiss her head, but Ali defiantly moves it to head butt him as best she can. And then he is gone.

“Did you do it?” Bobby asks a visibly shaken Ken as the man gets into the backseat of the rental car which is parked in an abandoned Rite Aid lot a block away from Ali’s house. He doesn’t have to ask, he just watched it all happen on the live security feed from Ali’s house that he had paid handsomely to hack into a couple weeks ago. He regretted that there was no sound because he wanted to hear the bitch scream as she squirmed, but the visual had been good enough to see that Ken had followed through brilliantly. He wasn’t sure the dorky guy had it in him, but that’s what happens when you tell a man he can trade his daughter’s life to save that of his own and the rest of his family.

“Yes. Please let me go home.” Ken says emotionlessly.

“How about we watch just a little longer and then we can go.” Bobby replies, tilting the screen on the tablet in his lap so Ken can see the feed of Ali tied by the neck to the bottom of her hot tub, the cold water up past her hips already. He smirks as he looks in the rearview mirror to see Ken’s eyes wide and terrified.
Numbness and excruciating pain at the same time. Ali has never felt anything like this is her life. Her limbs are too heavy and numb to control and her skin almost feels like it’s burning despite the fact that her teeth are chattering because she’s so cold. The water is moving around her chest now and she wonders what will come first, hypothermia or drowning. Her head is starting to feel a bit fuzzy and she closes her eyes, her thoughts going to Kyle and to Ashlyn. Will they meet the same fate now that she’s failed them?

Failed. She’s never failed at anything in her life that was under her control. The thought makes her angry as she pictures Bobby’s smug smile. She can’t let him win, not like this. She has to protect Kyle and Ashlyn. Ali moves her head around as much as she can, trying to loosen rope to no avail, merely rubbing away at the skin on her neck instead. “No, come on!” She wills herself in the croaking whisper that is now her voice. The water is starting to collect around her neck, the cold feeling soothing on the skin she just rubbed raw. Ali tries once again to move her arms and legs, but she can only shift her body around uselessly.

She closes her eyes yet again, trying to relax. Fighting and thrashing around is only making the water splash higher near her face. As she feels the cold liquid start to cover her mouth, she can’t help but wish that the hypothermia had set in first. Her body is floating up in the water a bit, but the ever tightening rope around her neck is holding her head down in the rising water level. She takes a few more deep breaths and fights hard to keep her head angled and her nose out of the water.

The water is tickling her nostrils and Ali takes one last clear intake of breath before they are covered. As she fights to hold her breath as long as she possibly can, all she can see is hazel eyes and a dimpled smile. ‘I’m so sorry, Ashlyn’ is the last thought in her head as she loses the ability to hold on any longer. Piercing cold fills her sinuses like a horrible brain freeze and her lungs feel as if they are about to explode. Just when she feels like her chest is literally ripping open, there is nothing but black and silence.

“Oh come on, Kenny!” Bobby goads as he turns off his tablet and snickers at the man in his backseat who is shaking in sobs now that Ali’s head has gone under the water. “It was a good show!” Ken doesn’t reply, just burying his head in his hands.

“Well, when you pull yourself together. Take this car back to the rental place on Main Street by tomorrow and we’ll consider your debt paid.” Bobby says casually as he gets out of the car and walks away.

Kyle rings the doorbell for the third time. It’s only been like 30 seconds, but Ali knows he hates trying to find his keys when his hands are full and usually comes to the door quickly. He figures she must be upstairs or showering since he’s home early after his clients bailed on him. He stands there impatiently for another few seconds before balancing the pizza box and bag with salads in one hand as he digs into his pocket for the keys.

“Honey, I’m home!” Kyle yells loudly as he steps into the house. He expects to hear Ali call down to him from upstairs, but the house is quiet. Her car was in the yard, so he knows she’s home. “Alex?” He calls out again. He makes his way into the dining room to drop the food on the table when he sees the knocked over chair. “ALEX?” He screams more desperately, making his way into the kitchen where the patio door is slightly open and the rug is out of place.
“Fuck, fuck!” He spins in circles in the kitchen as he tries to figure out what to do, his mind immediately thinking the worst. She must have been taken by someone out the back door. He grabs his phone from his pocket to dial 911 as he approaches the patio door, seeing the outdoor light is on and hearing the sound of running water. “What the fuck?” He grunts out in confusion, making his way out the patio door with his phone in his hand. Everything out there is quiet and normal except that the big filling hose is in the hot tub and running. He peers over into the tub and his eyes go wide at the two feet poking out of the surface of the water, the light pink nail polish he applied two days ago accentuating the blueish looking toes.

“Oh my god!” He yells desperately as he jumps into the hot tub, the freezing water shocking him a bit and sending him into more of a frenzy over the situation. He tries to pull Ali out, but she’s stuck to something. He reaches down to her hands and finds them freely floating. His hands run up to her shoulders and head, when he feels the rope around her neck. “Oh god, oh god, please, please…” He repeats over and over again, trying desperately to untie the knot, his freezing fingers fumbling clumsily. After a few seconds that feel like an eternity, he feels the knot release as Ali’s body comes up to the water’s surface. He is startled for a second by a loud bang sound, looking around frantically as he lifts Ali, seeing nothing and realizing it must have just been a stupid firecracker or something.

Her body is completely limp as he pulls her out and puts her down on the deck, checking and finding no pulse and that she’s not breathing. He quickly lies her flat and calls 911, putting his phone on speaker and placing on the ground.

“Please work.” He pleads as he begins thrusting his hands firmly into the middle of her chest to perform CPR, a skill he learned so long ago during a short-lived lifeguard job. He’s not sure he’s doing it right and is doubting himself when he hears the voice on his phone. “911 what’s your emergency?”

“I need medical help fast at 177 Forest Ave in Newton. Drowning victim in back yard, no pulse and not breathing. I’m doing CPR, can’t talk. Just come fast.” Kyle gets out as fast as he can, his breathing labored now as he works hard to keep the chest thrusts going.

He pauses to give Ali a couple of breaths as he pinches her nose, feeling slightly more hopeful that he’s doing this right as he sees her chest rise up as he does it. “Come on, Alex. Come on!” He screams at her, but she’s not responding.

“Sir, I’m going to stay on the line with you. Help is on the way and will be there very soon. Can you tell me your name? Do you know how to perform CPR?” The woman on the phone speaker asks him.

He’s too winded to reply, his arms getting increasingly tired as he keeps working on Ali. Panic is setting in as the minutes tick by and there has been no response to his efforts. “Please, Alex, please, please, please… I need you…I need you…” He whispers through heavy breaths and tears, willing his sister to hear him.
He turns the key to start the car and the sound is deafening as the blast rips through the air, the car exploding into a ball of flames.
Wednesday, January 4 continued…

Kyle’s arm muscles are burning from exhaustion as he fights hard to keep the proper technique for the chest thrusts he is giving Ali. He hears the distant sirens and it renews his strength a bit, knowing he’ll have help if he can just hang on another couple of minutes. “Please, Alex, fight, fight, please…” he grunts frantically as he works on her. He pauses again to give her another couple of breaths and watches in hopeful desperation as a stream of water trickles out of her nose when he stops pinching it closed. He quickly restarts the chest thrusts and is four thrusts in when water comes out of Ali’s mouth so forcefully that it startles him, making him jump back a bit.

“Yes, yes, yes, come on Alex, come on…” He cheers her on, pressing his fingers to the artery of her neck and feeling a pulse. “Yes!!! Alex, I’m here, I’m here, come on!” He yells in an emotional squeak as he watches a scary amount of foamy water continue to pour out of her mouth and nose.

“Sir, has she been revived? Is she breathing? Do you have a pulse?” The 911 operator’s voice sounds from Kyle’s phone.

“I think so!” Kyle replies breathlessly, but doesn’t say anymore as he leans his face close to Ali’s as she lets out a wet cough and gasps for air. “That’s it, that’s it! Breathe baby! You’re ok, you’re ok…” He coaxes her as her strokes her cheeks with his hands.

“Cooold, coo...cold, cold, Ash… Ash, cooold.” Ali starts repeating in a barely audible raspy whisper through chattering teeth, eyes closed and water still slowly dripping out of her nose.

“Shhhh, Ash is ok. Just breathe, just relax and breathe, Alex.” Kyle instructs her gently, trying to keep his body close to hers to warm her a bit, but he’s just as soaked as she is. He’s contemplating running into the house to get blankets when two EMTs rush into the yard, pulling him back a bit and asking questions as they tend to Ali. A third EMT arrives with a stretcher and quickly wraps a blanket around him and asks if he is ok. Kyle nods yes, not realizing just how cold and shaky he is until he feels the warmth of the thick blanket.

He’s swiftly ushered into the ambulance alongside Ali and doesn’t understand much of the medical terminology being tossed around as they ride to the hospital, but it seems generally positive. Ali’s eyes are still closed and she’s not saying anything likely because of the oxygen mask over her face, but he’s holding her hand and the grip she is squeezing with gives him all the comfort he needs right now.
Ashlyn slips on the second suit option that Kyle picked out for her as she gets ready for court. This one fits just as well as the first; it’s gray with a black button-up shirt to go under it and a black tie to match. Something about it makes her feel powerful and she’s glad she saved it for today. She needs all the confidence she can get. She had been feeling so calm about everything up until last night when she started feeling shaken by everything and just generally off. She barely slept and had an extra hard time choking down some breakfast this morning. She feels so comfortable with everything being in Ali’s hands today and knows that the brunette is going to fight with everything she has, so she reasons that it’s all the unknown factors that are making her a bit nervous.

Ashlyn arrives by escort at the courthouse earlier than last time with half an hour to go before the hearing session starts. She’s placed in the holding area for about 10 minutes before a court officer guides her into the courtroom. The scene looks exactly the same as before, only this time every seat is filled. Liam Gorham’s wife is now accompanied by an older woman, who Ashlyn guesses is Liam’s mother based on the facial features. The rest of the room is once again filled in with reporters. This time though, as she looks across the room to find a familiar face, there is no Ali sitting at the table. She looks around to see that Tim and Kyle are not there yet either as she is seated at the table. The hearing doesn’t start for another 17 minutes and she was brought in much closer to the start last time, so she thinks nothing of it.

She keeps her eyes straight ahead like Ali told her to do and tries hard to ignore the room. Last time Ali was there to distract her, but now she can practically feel people boring holes into the back of her head as they stare at her. It’s 8:52am now, another 10 minutes passed and still no Ali with 8 minutes to go. Ashlyn feels her stomach churning with anxiety, but tries to calm herself. Ali will be here.

At 8:59am, the bailiff approaches Ashlyn who is wringing her sweaty hands together and ready to throw up.

“Ms. Harris, is your attorney present?” He asks gently.

“No.” Ashlyn shakes her head a bit.

“Okay. I’m going to alert the judges and we’ll give it another 10 minutes. Don’t worry, it happens sometimes.” He reassures her.

Ashlyn nods appreciatively as best she can as she watches the clock strike 9am. Ali is late. Ali has never been late except when something was wrong. There is no doubt in her mind now, something is very wrong. Ali would never be late to this hearing. Ashlyn does exactly what she promised herself she wouldn’t do, turning around to look at the room and finding the person she is looking for.

Bobby Dugan is sitting two rows back on the right side of the room besides John McNally. He is staring her right in the eye with a satisfied smile, like he had been waiting for her to look at him this whole time. Her stomach drops instantly and she feels dizzy. She knows that look. He’s gotten to Ali.

She’s irrational now and not thinking clearly, getting ready to get up and try to launch herself at him when the courtroom door swings open drawing everyone’s attention.

Ali holds onto Kyle’s arm tightly to steady herself with Tim just behind them in case she needs extra help. She looks up and finds the hazel eyes she is looking for, a small and relieved looking smile gracing Ashlyn’s face, and she knows that the only thing that would have kept her from being here right now is death itself.
As they arrive at the hospital, Kyle is asked a lot of questions about what happened by an intake nurse and then told he’ll have to wait outside for a while as they assess Ali. Another nurse quickly takes him into a room and makes sure he is doing alright. He feels shaken and tired, but otherwise okay. She gives him a dry set of hospital scrubs and a new blanket so that he can get out of his wet clothes and get warm. Once he is changed and comfortably seated in a small waiting area she brings him a hot coffee as well. He couldn’t be more thankful for the woman’s kindness as he anxiously awaits news about Ali.

Two long hours pass before a nurse comes to get him.

“Mr. Krieger, you can come on back and be with your sister now. She’s stable and awake and doing okay.” She tells him and leads the way. “The doctor will come in soon and give you more details.”

“Thank you.” He replies and rushes right into the room and beside Ali’s bed. “Alex, you’re ok? You’re ok?” He repeats, stroking her forehead and watching her nod yes as a couple tears roll down her cheeks, the oxygen mask over her mouth and nose preventing her from talking. He rests his forehead against hers and just breathes for a minute. “I love you.” He tells her and feels her reach up and squeeze his arm tightly in reply. They’re interrupted by the doctor coming into the room.

“Hello, I’m Dr. Kate Billings, you must be Alexandra’s brother?” She introduces herself.

“Yes, I’m Kyle.” Kyle replies and reaches to shake the woman’s hand.

“Okay, so let me give you the full rundown. Stop me if you have any questions.” She starts. “We did a whole battery of diagnostic tests and the prognosis is excellent given what happened and the length of time she was unresponsive. The most important thing is that her brain CT scan came back normal and she passed all of the neurological tests, so we don’t believe there is any neurological damage. She is alert and able to move and speak normally, and seems to remember the event, so those are all great things. She was hypothermic upon arrival and we’ve been working to get that under control, but I believe it actually may have saved her from major trauma.”

Kyle nods to signal that he is following.

“When the body is cold like that, oxygen and blood flow needs are slowed and reduced. So, when oxygen is cut-off, the damage is less impactful in a hypothermic state. The hypothermia level is not severe and we expect that she’ll be back to normal temperature in the next two to three hours. Her chest x-ray, on the other hand, was not quite as positive. There is some pulmonary edema. This is not at all uncommon in a near-drowning situation and the body will expel it eventually. I have gone ahead and started her on a diuretic medication to help speed that process up a bit. The oxygen will be in place for another few hours to help her breathe more easily as well. Her EKG also shows a minor cardiac arrhythmia, again, not uncommon after a resuscitation like this. I have her on a beta-blocker medication that will help correct it over time, but I’m not concerned that it is problematic. Any questions so far?” Dr. Billings asks.

“No, I’m good so far.” Kyle replies.

“So, some of the more minor things. You’ll see that her neck has some bruising and lacerations from whatever was around it. We’ve applied antibiotic ointment to protect the area, but it’s best to just leave it open and let it heal naturally with no dressings. The constriction on her throat has caused a
little bit of inflammation on her vocal chords which is making her hoarse, but that will pass within
the next couple of days. Her chest x-ray also revealed two small rib fractures closer to the sternum,
one on the right 4th rib and one of the left 5th rib. This resulted from the repeated resuscitation
thrusts to her chest.” She explains.

Kyle looks down at the floor a bit and feels the doctor reach out and touch his shoulder.

“Hey, it’s completely normal for that to happen. It means you did it right. You’re the reason she’s
here, so don’t be upset.” She reassures him. “Besides, I’m sure Alexandra would take a couple
broken ribs over a funeral any day, right?” She looks at Ali who nods vigorously to try and cheer
Kyle up.

Kyle smiles a bit at Ali’s enthusiasm.

“We’ll help manage the pain with some medication, but they’ll heal up just fine in about three to six
weeks without much restricted movement. Her blood work is good and her oxygen level is great
right now. So, I anticipate a full recovery.” Dr. Billings smiles at the two of them. “I do want to talk
about one other thing with you both. The bloodwork panel detected chloroform and succinylcholine
in her system. The dosage of succinylcholine was significant enough to constrain movement of limbs
and had it not been for the cold, may have put her into cardiac arrest as it affects the body by
paralyzing muscles which includes the heart. It has naturally worn off for the most part, but I
administered a shot of adrenaline to fully counteract it just to be safe. Given the usage of those drugs
and the neck markings, I have to assume that this was an attempt on your life, Ms. Krieger?” Dr.
Billings inquires seriously.

Ali and Kyle look at each other and then nod to confirm.

“Well, I want you to be aware that I have to disclose this in your medical records, but I am not
required to file any reports with law enforcement. I would, however, encourage you to do that and
the hospital staff can help facilitate that. Please be safe.” She says kindly and leaves it there. “We’ll
keep Alexandra for at least two days to monitor everything.”

Ali immediately shifts and lifts the mask off of her face. “No!” She croaks out as best as she can
even though it makes her throat hurt. She looks over at Kyle. “Ash, court this morning, I can’t.”

“Yeah, but Alex, can it be moved? I don’t think…” He starts but is cut off by Ali.


“Ms. Krieger, I can’t discharge you like this.” Dr. Billings jumps in.

“I know the law, you can’t hold me against my will. Just bring me the paperwork I need to sign. I
need to leave for the morning and then I’ll come back.” Ali asserts herself.

“Can she physically withstand this? It is technically safe for her to leave and come back?” Kyle
questions before anyone can say anything else.

“Yes, it’s really about whatever she can manage at this point. But, it goes against my
recommendations and requirements for recovery.” Dr. Billings answers straight-forwardly.
“However, I will bring the paperwork if that is your decision.”

“Bring it.” Ali tells the doctor, who nods and leaves the room. Nothing can stop her from being in
court in the morning.

“Alex, are you sure you can do this? Can you really face that guy after what he just did to you?”
Kyle gets close to her again and reaches to hold her hand.

“Kyle, he sent Ken. Dad did this.” She tells him as more tears slip out.

“What?” Kyle asks somewhere between confusion and disbelief.

By the time she finishes explaining, taking time to rest her throat a few times, Kyle can’t even stand up anymore. He’s sitting in the chair beside her bed in complete shock, the ache and tiredness in his body finally hitting him. “I can’t believe it. That fucker… both of them.” That’s all he can say right now.

The discharge nurse comes in at 6:00am with the proper paperwork. Ali signs page after page, a bit shocked at just how much there is for her to get through. She finds it excessive even despite understanding the need for the hospital to legally cover themselves. For the first time ever, she isn’t even reading what she is signing. She could be giving away her life and not even know it, but she just needs to hurry up and get out of here. She has three hours to get discharged and ready to make it to court.

“Call Tim. Tell him to go to the house and get us clothes for court and meet us here. We have to hurry.” Ali instructs Kyle.

By the time Tim arrives and they get changed, it’s already 8:40am because it was excruciatingly painful for Ali to get herself ready any faster. They fight through Boston traffic in a slight panic as the hearing time draws near, but make it with a couple minutes to spare. Unfortunately it takes Ali quite some time to walk to the courtroom with Kyle’s help. She has never felt so horrible in her life, her body is fighting her every step of the way.

She enters the courtroom hoping the judges have given her some leeway on the time and looking immediately for the only face she wants to see. Ashlyn. The blonde looks frantic despite her relieved smile, but it doesn’t matter. Those hazel eyes are all the motivation and strength Ali needs today. She takes a breath and uses every ounce of energy she has to let go of Kyle and walk towards the front of courtroom on her own.

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Ashlyn lets out a sigh of relief as she sees Ali come through the door, their eyes meeting each other. She watches the brunette let go of her grip on Kyle and walk down the main aisle of the room. She notices right away that Ali seems a bit off somehow, her stride not as confident and posture not as strong as usual. As Ali gets closer, Ashlyn’s heart drops as she sees it.

The skin on Ali’s neck is a combination of broken skin and deep purplish bruising. Her eyes are a bit red and her skin is pale. Ashlyn knows there must be even more she can’t see based on how gingerly Ali seems to be walking. She feels both rage and panic coursing through her, not sure which one is stronger at the moment. She seeks out Bobby again, hoping that the look she gives him will be enough to kill him. Bobby is so focused on Ali with a stunned look on his face that he doesn’t even acknowledge the blonde’s stare. He’s not the only one, the whole courtroom is buzzing with whispers as Ali walks the aisle.

“Alex…” Ashlyn whispers in concern and goes to get up as Ali gets near the table.

“No, sit, Ash. Just sit.” Ali quickly instructs her in a rough raspy voice that catches Ashlyn off guard.

Ashlyn settles herself in the chair again, not sure what to think right now.
“I’m sorry. I just need to get through this. I’ll be ok. And we’ll be ok. Just hang in with me.” Ali leans in a bit whisper to the blonde.

“Ok, Alex. I’m here. No matter what.” Ashlyn reaches under the table to squeeze Ali’s hand quickly, not really caring if anyone happens to see right now despite trying to be discrete.

“No matter what.” Ali confirms, the touch giving her the boost she needs as the bailiff moves to open the door.

“All rise. Court is in session. The honorable Judge Henry Burns presiding, with Judge Cole Grayson and Judge Anne Werthers on the bench.” The bailiff instructs the room as the judges take their places on the bench.

“Good morning. You may be seated. The court will resume with the hearing of witness testimony in the matter of Captain Ashlyn Harris versus the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in the request for a full dismissal of the case.” Judge Burns addresses the court. “Attorney Krieger, are your witnesses present and are you ready to begin?”

“Yes, your honor.” Ali answers after standing up slowly.

Judge Burns eyes her a bit. “Attorney Krieger, will you please approach the bench?”

Ali does as instructed, making her way to the front of the room as best she can.

“Are you okay to continue? You don’t look well, Ms. Krieger.” Judge Burns asks with concern as he takes in her appearance and obvious injury.

“I’m fine and ready.” Ali confidently assures him.

“Ok then. You may begin with any opening statements you have and call your first witness.” He instructs her.

Ali makes her way back to the table to grab her notepad and folders before going back to the podium. She refuses to look at anyone in the room except for Ashlyn and the judges. She can only imagine the expression on Bobby’s stupid face right now, but she doesn’t want to meet his eyes just yet. She wants the very first look she gives him to petrify him.

She clears her throat so she can make her voice come out as clearly as possible.

“Your honors, through witness testimony this morning I intend to show beyond a reasonable doubt that Captain Ashlyn Harris did not commit this crime. Pending the success of my efforts, I will ask the court to consider the testimony and rule to completely dismiss the case and all potential future appeals of the ruling.” Ali makes a quick opening statement and steadies herself against the podium a bit. Sharp pain radiates through her chest with each intake of breath, her neck burns and throbs, and she has an awful headache on top of being exhausted. She gives herself a couple more seconds to shut the pain out of her mind and then continues.

“Your honors, I would like to call my first witness, Captain Jonathan McNally of the South Boston Police Department…”
Happy New Year to all of you! This is a long, detailed update, so I hope you all love court room drama. And on that note, let's start 2017 with a real bang...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Thursday, January 5 continued...

“You honors, I would like to call my first witness, Captain Jonathan McNally of the South Boston Police Department…”

John McNally makes his way to the witness stand as Ali looks down at her notes for a minute, mostly just giving herself the chance to breathe through the horrible aching in her chest.

“Captain Jonathan McNally, you are called to give sworn witness testimony in the matter of Captain Ashlyn Harris versus the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Please raise your right hand.” Judge Burns directs him. “Do you solemnly swear that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, under the pains and penalties of perjury, so help you God?”

“I do.” McNally answers before sitting down and looking up at Ali.

“You may begin your questioning, Attorney Krieger.” Judge Burns signals.

Despite it giving her something to steady herself on, Ali opts to leave the podium in order to stand in front of McNally, leaving only a few feet of comfortable conversational distance between them. McNally was just a lieutenant following orders and doing his job when Ashlyn was arrested and sentenced. Ali has no intention of going after him, but just the opposite. She needs to make him an ally.

“Captain McNally, would you please state what your police rank and official duties were on the date of Captain Ashlyn Harris’ arrest for the murder of Liam Gorham?” Ali starts her questioning.

“Certainly. I was a lieutenant of the South Boston Police Department and was on duty as an intake and processing officer that day as I had sustained a minor injury that kept me out of any active patrols.” McNally answers.

“Thank you. You received a phone call on your office phone from Chief Robert Dugan that evening, is that correct?” Ali asks.

“Yes, correct.” McNally replies.

“Would you be able to tell me what was said in that conversation and what Chief Dugan’s state of mind sounded like to the best of your abilities? I know it may be difficult to recall all the details.” Ali says kindly.

“Sure. Chief sounded kind of frantic for sure. He called and told me that Captain Harris had called him after killing Liam Gorham and that he had arrived at the scene to find Gorham shot dead with Harris in a state of panic. He told me that he had her detained and to send back-up and EMT because...
Harris had a bullet injury from a ricochet.” McNally states.

“Did the Chief make any mention of why Captain Harris may have killed Mr. Gorham?” Ali inquires.

“Uh, yeah. Chief said something about how Harris had been having an affair with Gorham and they had had some kind of disagreement.” McNally recalls.

“And what was your reaction to this news?” Ali asks.

“Oh, I was shocked for sure. Harris had always been pretty straight-edge and, honestly, I always thought she was a lesbian.” McNally says with a little smile.

“That is a statement of conjecture and the judges will disregard it in their ruling.” Judge Burns interrupts. “Proceed.”

Ali nods and continues. She could counter that the witness’ opinion is considered valid under the law, but she doesn’t want to push the judge just yet, knowing she might need some leeway later. “Captain McNally, as an experienced lieutenant assuming the duties of intake and processing, I assume you were aware of the proper legal procedure for obtaining a signed confession?”

“Yes, ma’am.” McNally nods.

“Can you explain then, Captain McNally, why in taking Captain Harris’ confession you disregarded said procedure and signed as both the arresting officer and the legal witness?” Ali prods him seriously.

“Oh, uh, I’m not sure. I guess I should have known better.” McNally answers shakily.

Ali can see that he is nervous now, exactly as she wants him to be. McNally has just recently been promoted to captain and is poised to take over for Bobby when the Chief is set to retire in two years. He’s in exactly the same spot Ashlyn was before this whole mess. Given the huge pay upgrade and high profile ranking, she knows there is no way he wants to mess it up or have any marks on his record between now and then. This type of slip up could cost him down the line when the city’s board reviews his eligibility for Chief. All Ali has to do is give him an out.

“Well, based on your prior statement, sir…you did know better.” Ali says directly and watches him fidget before coming to his rescue. “Captain McNally, it has not been unheard of in the history of cases involving the convictions of fellow officers that a department feels a strong responsibility to protect that officer in any way they can. Would you say that this was the case here with Captain Harris? That you were perhaps rushed or felt pressure to be discrete about the situation, maybe leading to some procedural oversights as a result?”

“Yes, that is accurate as I recall it. Chief Dugan directed me to keep control of the situation and move it along expeditiously in doing our best to protect Captain Harris. In doing that, I may have unintentionally made a mistake in my procedural processing.” McNally answers with relief, using Ali’s statement to buy himself a reasonable excuse and put most of the blame on Bobby.

“And Chief Dugan was the one who specifically directed you to accelerate the process in trying to protect Captain Harris?” Ali clarifies.

“Yes, ma’am.” McNally affirms.

“Final question, Captain McNally. How would you describe Captain Harris’ demeanor that night?” Ali asks.
“She seemed…well…just sort of resigned to her fate. That’s the best I can explain it. I expected her to be more rattled or upset, but she just seemed defeated.” McNally replies.

“Thank you, Captain McNally. I have no further questions.” Ali gives him a polite smile.

“You may step down, Captain McNally.” Judge Burns instructs. “Attorney Krieger, please call your next witness when you are ready.”

Ali steps back behind the podium, glad to have something to lean on a bit. All of her energy is going towards ignoring the pain and staying composed. Knowing what’s coming next, she needs to be able to focus that energy elsewhere. “Your Honor, I call Chief Robert Dugan.”

Ali looks down at her notes, refusing to look up as Bobby is sworn in under oath until she hears Judge Burns. “You may begin your questioning, Attorney Krieger.”

She lifts her head and looks him right in the eye, knowing her stare is penetrating and cold. She waits almost a full minute before saying anything, her eyes unblinking. Bobby stares back unwavering, but looking increasingly unsettled as the silence continues. Ali knows she’s about to get a prompt from the judge, so she starts.

“Chief Robert Dugan, can you corroborate the testimony of Captain McNally? Did you in fact direct him to take haste in the processing of Captain Harris in an effort to protect her?” Ali asks him.

“Yes, I did. We take our camaraderie in the department very seriously and I wouldn’t hesitate to do it again in the name of protecting any officer to the best of my ability. However, I do wish to be clear that I never directed Captain McNally or anyone else to willfully neglect the proper legal procedure.” Bobby says confidently.

“Understandable. And let me clarify that it was not my intention to suggest that you did so with my line of questioning, Chief. This is merely a way of understanding the context of the situation.” Ali says respectfully, trying to earn brownie points with the judges right now. “Chief Dugan, will you recount the events that occurred that day as you remember them?”

Ali sits back and listens patiently over the next five minutes as Bobby gives his account of what happened. It fits the story outlined in Ashlyn’s confession perfectly and is exactly what Ali was expecting.

“Thank you, Chief. Since you were the first on the scene that day after receiving a call from Captain Harris, my next line of questioning pertains to your relationship with her and any connection you had to the victim, Liam Gorham. Rather than subject you to questions you have already answered for me, would you be willing to allow the court to hear the recorded conversation you consented to a couple of months ago?” Ali asks him, referring to the recording of their first interaction at the coffee house.

“Yes, I consent to that.” Bobby answers feeling a bit hesitant, but knowing he has no reason to deny the request.

“Your honor, as precedes in several cases in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Court of Appeals, evidence which is considered to be public information or knowledge may be presented during witness testimony. Hence, I wish to submit as evidence a publicly recorded audio conversation between myself and Chief Dugan on November 26, 2016 which he legally consented to. Would you like to hear the case history in precedent?” Ali requests, addressing Judge Burns.

Judge Burns quickly confers with the other two judges before replying. “We are aware of the precedent and will allow it. You may proceed.”
Ali nods and sets the recorder she brought to the podium with her on the loudest setting before playing it. She pauses after the part where Bobby consents to being recorded to make sure everyone is able to hear it clearly before continuing to let it play to the end.

“Chief Dugan, would you agree that everything in that recorded conversation was accurate?” Ali asks.

“That is correct.” Bobby confirms.

“And there is no aspect of it that you wish to change or recant?” Ali checks.

“No, it’s accurate as is.” Bobby repeats.

“And, as you stated in the recording, you had no connection with Liam Gorham in any way? No business associations or personal relationship?” Ali prods.

“Correct. I had never even been introduced to him. We had simultaneously been at the same events, but never spoke to or had any interaction with each other.” Bobby answers.

“You did note your close and mentoring relationship to Captain Harris. Were you aware of any relationship or association between her and Mr. Gorham?” Ali inquires.

“Honestly, no. She never mentioned it, so I was really surprised to get that call from her that day. But, she was never one to talk much about her personal or intimate relationships, so I suppose I wouldn’t have expected any different when it came to Liam Gorham.” Bobby replies.

“Chief Dugan, while your statement of the events matches with the timeline initially provided by Captain Harris…can you explain the discrepancy in the cellphone call logs? You’ll note in the log provided to the court that the time between her call to you and the time at which you placed a call to Captain McNally only shows a couple minutes passed. It’s near impossible for you to have traveled to Liam Gorham’s office and dealt with detaining Captain Harris in that time frame.” Ali says pointedly, but purposely throwing Bobby a lob of a question so that he feels a confidence boost.

“No, I can’t explain it. However, it’s well known that cellphone towers are sometimes horribly inaccurate and not the best indicators of actual timestamps. I stand by my timeline.” Bobby answers with a smirk.

Ali holds in her own smirk, knowing she set him up to think he was smart to come up with that reply. Anyone with half a brain would know to say that, but she wants him to feel in control right now. “About 20 minutes prior to her call to you, the phone log shows that you placed a call to Captain Harris. Is that accurate and if so, what was the conversation about?” Ali questions.

“That is correct. I called her to make plans for dinner the following night, we often had dinner outside of work.” Bobby answers.

“And she made no mention of Gorham at that time or where she was going?” Ali continues.

“No.” Bobby states simply.

“And how did she sound during that call? Did anything draw your attention or seem off?” Ali delves deeper.

“No, she seemed completely normal to me.” Bobby answers.

“Upon arriving at the scene, you said you noted that Captain Harris had a bullet wound. You have
also stated that at the time you believed it to be from a ricocheted bullet?” Ali asks her next question.

“Yes that is correct.” Bobby says with no follow-up.

“And why did you believe that to be the case? Did Captain Harris tell you it was a ricochet from her gun?” Ali inquires with a furrowed brow for effect.

“No. I just assumed because I didn’t see any other weapon besides hers at the scene.” Bobby replies.

“The case files show a complete sweep of the scene and of Liam Gorham’s office, finding no other weapons on the premises beside Captain Harris’ police-issued gun. Further, a complete sweep of Captain Harris’ home and personal belongings showed that she did not possess any other weapon other than her police-issued 9mm Glock 22 handgun. Is that information accurate to your knowledge?” Ali asks.

“Yes.” Bobby answers.

“So, the only weapons at the scene when the police back-up arrived were Captain Harris’ weapon and your own. Correct?” Ali clarifies.

“Yes, correct.” Bobby supplies.

“Just a couple more questions. Chief Dugan, you have been profiled in several Boston news outlets as a collector of handguns and handgun memorabilia. Is this correct?” Ali asks, catching Bobby a bit off guard with her random question.

“Attorney Krieger, I fail to see the relevance of your question as it pertains to this case.” Judge Burns interjects.

“It has relevance in the questioning of my expert witness and I ask the court for a little bit of latitude.” Ali addresses the judges politely.

“Very little, Attorney Krieger, so I suggest you get to the point quickly. You may proceed, though I will remind Chief Dugan that he may choose not answer any of these questions.” Judge Burns issues in warning.

Ali nods. “Chief Dugan?”

“I don’t mind answering. Yes, I collect handguns and handgun related memorabilia from the 1950s to 1980s.” Bobby asserts proudly.

Ali tries not to roll her eyes, knowing he’d answer these questions because he’s been openly proud of his collector status for years. “Have you ever sold any of your collectibles?”

“Yes, twice. Both in charity auctions. One was about 10 years ago, the other was just this December to benefit Mothers Against Drunk Driving.” Bobby answers with an air of self-importance.

“Have you ever personally sold a police-issued handgun or know anyone who has in your experience as a collector?” Ali inquires.

“No.” Bobby says seriously. “That is against the law, Ms. Krieger. Specifically, police-issued handguns are either destroyed or re-purposed once they are relinquished.”

“So, it’s highly unlikely that someone would come into possession of another officer’s handgun?” Ali makes a completely useless point just to please the judges, all she really needed was for Bobby to
admit that he collected and sold handgun memorabilia.

“In my estimation as an officer and a collector, yes.” Bobby replies a bit unsure of what Ali is trying to point out.

“Thank you, Chief Dugan. I have no other questions.” Ali says and watches a confused Bobby step down from the stand once the judge directs him to do so.

She turns around to give Ashlyn a quick small smile because they’re the only two in the room that completely understand that last line of questioning. Ashlyn returns the smile not even bothering to hide it.

Tuesday, December 6

Ali’s cellphone rings as she’s trying to put a case of bottled water into her shopping cart. She sees Dr. Wayne Henning on the caller ID unexpectedly. “Hello?” She answers quickly, wondering why he’d be calling her when she already got all the information she expected from him.

“Hi Ali, this is Dr. Henning. I was calling to tell you about something you might find interesting and may be worth pursuing.” Dr. Henning says with some excitement to his voice.

“Ok, go ahead.” Ali replies.

“As a ballistics and gun expert, I tend to follow as much of the local collectibles market as I can. Not sure if you know this, but Chief Robert Dugan is a huge collector and pretty notable for it locally. Anyway, he has just put up a pretty sizeable collection of older model handguns and accessories for a charity auction being held at Boston City Hall tomorrow. When I looked through the listing of items, I noted two older model silencers among the list, which are pretty unusual items for collectors. I know he has some connection to your case and with the evidence I presented to you before…well, I thought maybe you might want to get your hands on it. Might be nothing, but…” he trails off.

“Wow, Dr. Henning, you’re incredible! I’m all over it! Thank you so much for telling me. Are you available to look at it if I can get my hands on the collection?” Ali asks excitedly, making a mental note to pay this guy a whole lot more if this turns out the way she hopes.

“Of course! I love this stuff!” Dr. Henning replies enthusiastically.

“Excellent! I’ll be in touch.” Ali replies before hanging up.

“The court will break for a one hour recess and resume testimony at 1:00pm.” Judge Burns announces and hits his gavel, prompting the bailiff to direct the court to stand as the judges leave.

Ali lets out a small relieved sigh. She’s exhausted and in pain and could really use the break. Out of the corner of her eye, she can see Bobby eyeing her from his seat. It’s exactly as she wants it… he believes he’s off the hook and completely confused as to why. This break in the proceedings is perfect, it’ll allow him time to think about it and convince himself that she must be scared of him and backing down. She makes her way over to Ashlyn before the court officers come to escort the blonde back to the holding area.

“Hey, we’re doing good. I’ll see you back in here after lunch, ok?” Ali says sweetly, letting down her blinders for a minute and checking in on the blonde.
“Yeah. Are you ok, Alex?” Ashlyn asks, the extreme concern in her eyes evident. It’s taking a lot for her not to breakdown and say and ask everything she wants to.

“I feel as rough as I look, but I’ll be ok and I got this. Promise.” Ali honestly reassures her. “Pesky bitches are tough.” She adds a little humor and lets her shoulder just brush Ashlyn’s as she leans in.

“Pesky bitches are also un-fucking-believably amazing out there. God, Alex, you’re just…wow.” Ashlyn says in genuine awe of how incredible the brunette is at commanding and controlling the courtroom.

“Yeah, well, if I’m performing half as good as you look right now… this case is in the bag, Harris.” Ali gives her a smile as the court officers approach them.

Ashlyn reddens a bit at Ali’s compliment. “Almost there.” She says softly as the officers start to escort her away.

“Almost there.” Ali repeats in confirmation and watches Ashlyn get led out of the room.

Ali immediately heads over to Kyle and Tim who help her out of the courtroom slowly. She spends the lunch hour reclined in the front seat of Tim’s car while he and Kyle make sure she takes some more pain medication and eats some soup along with a cold smoothie in hopes that the hot and cold combination will help soothe her throat. None of them talk much as the goal is to let Ali rest. It’s exactly the break she needs to refresh and focus on end of this case.

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Ali settles back into the chair besides Ashlyn as they wait for the judges to re-enter the courtroom.

“You look just a smidge better.” Ashlyn whispers, still concerned but glad to see a little more color in Ali’s cheeks compared to the complete paleness of before.

“ Took a little nap and ate something, it helped.” Ali tells her. “You ready for this?”

Ashlyn nods. “Yeah, I’m ready. Just… promise me you won’t do anything dumb.”


“Pushing so far as to get very your own beige jumpsuit.” Ashlyn smirks. “Really though, if it’s not there, don’t go for it. Please?” She requests seriously.

“It’s gonna work. I’ll make it work.” Ali says resolutely.

“But, Alex, if it doesn’t…” Ashlyn starts but is cut off.

“Not an option, Harris.” Ali ends the conversation, briefly entwining their hands under the table and squeezing as the bailiff announces the judges.

After re-opening the court session, Judge Burns directs Ali to call her next witness.

“Your honor, I call Dr. Wayne Henning.”

Ali gives Dr. Henning a small smile as he approaches the witness stand and is sworn in.
“Good afternoon, Dr. Henning. You are here to give expert testimony as a highly regarded ballistics and weaponry analyst. Would you please state your credentials for the court?” Ali begins.

“Sure. I have a doctorate in physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with master degrees in chemistry and forensic science from the same place. I have over 10 years of experience in ballistic analysis which includes approximately 4000 hours of time logged actively examining bullets and weapons.” Dr. Henning answers.

“Thank you. Your honors, a couple of months ago, a bullet was removed from Captain Harris’ leg over concerns of infection. That bullet is the very same one that was identified as being the source of Captain Harris’ injury on the night of Liam Gorham’s murder in both medical records and case files. Once removed, it was catalogued as evidence in this case by the South Boston Police Department and shortly after examined by Dr. Henning. As such, I would like to formally admit the bullet into evidence for this case and testimony.” Ali requests.

“We accept the admission of this evidence.” Judge Burns responds.

“Dr. Henning, can you describe the condition of the bullet as it was delivered to your lab?” Ali asks.

“It was in as perfect of condition as any forensic analyst could hope for. It was clear that it had only been photographed and preserved with no other testing.” Dr. Henning replies.

“Will you please present the full procedure and results of your analysis for the court?” Ali requests.

Dr. Henning spends the next 20 minutes going over every detail he had previously discussed with Ali, making sure to explain every step he took to get his results.

“So, to sum up your findings Dr. Henning: This particular bullet was without a doubt fired from a 9mm Glock handgun, but not Captain Ashlyn Harris’ handgun. The bullet showed no evidence of having ricocheted off of anything and was conclusively fired directly into the leg. And finally, the bullet shows markings consistent with having been fired from an older model silencer with an inner-wipe style mechanism.” Ali gives a final synopsis.

“Correct.” Dr. Henning affirms.

“On December 7, 2016 a collection of varied older model guns, silencers, and ammunition clips belonging to Chief Robert Dugan went up for auction and was purchased by the charitable organization Matty’s House with proceeds going entirely to Mothers Against Drunk Driving. I would like to disclose that Matty’s House is my own personal non-profit association for rehabbing substance users, which I co-own with my brother, Kyle Krieger.” Ali walks to the table to grab a copy of the transaction to present the judges if needed, purposely looking at Bobby who is sitting there a bit slack-jawed. There is a whispered buzz in the court room among the reporters.

“Your honors, given the testimony of Dr. Henning and the presence of Chief Dugan at the scene prior to police arrival, I would like to submit the two silencers contained in this collection into evidence.” Ali makes the motion and watches the judges confer on it for at least a full minute.

“On the grounds of specific relation to the bullet analysis, the court will allow the admission of this evidence.” Judge Burns announces. “Please proceed.”

“Dr. Henning, would you please present your methods and results regarding the analysis you performed on these two silencers in relation to the bullet in question.” Ali asks.

“Yes. Using residue and microscopic analysis, I determined that both silencers had been used. Thus, I examined both of them. One contained a rubber-wipe mechanism inside, the other a plastic-wipe
mechanism and both were manufactured in the 1960s. Two separate 9mm bullets matching the exact make of the bullet in question were fired through each of the silencers using a 9mm Glock handgun. The bullets were then examined for any patterns or markings. The rubber-wipe silencer left only a very thin black residue on the bullet that would have naturally been deteriorated by bodily fluids, leaving no other markings. However, the plastic-wipe silencer left a series of microscopic brush markings on the bullet. These markings are consistent with those found on the bullet in question.” Dr. Henning finishes, showing the court a photographic comparison of bullets side-by-side to underscore the sameness of the pattern.

“Dr. Henning, in your expert opinion, do your findings in any way corroborate the events of crime as filed in Captain Harris’ confession or as explained by Chief Dugan and Captain McNally?” Ali inquires.

“No, they do not. It is my finding that the bullet in Captain Harris’ leg was not fired from her gun, but another 9mm Glock handgun with an attached silencer. Hence, the science is not in agreement with the presented statements of the prior parties.” Dr. Henning answers confidently.

“Thank you, Dr. Henning. I have no further questions.” Ali says and listens to the judge tell Dr. Henning that he may step down.

“Attorney Krieger, do you have any closing statements before the court recesses for the ruling?” Judge Burns asks.

“Your honors, in light of the findings of the expert testimony and new evidence submitted, I motion to recall Chief Robert Dugan to the stand.” Ali puts forth.

“This is unorthodox, Attorney Krieger.” Judge Burns states hesitantly.

Ali is about to make a further argument when Judge Werthers speaks up. “Judge Burns and Judge Grayson, while this may not be a standard motion, my knowledge of the preceding case law in this court of appeals includes a well-documented history of allowing the recall of witnesses as a consequence of substantial changes or additions to prior evidentiary support. I am of the decision to allow it.”

With no objections from Judge Grayson on Judge Werthers’ statement, Judge Burns makes the decision. “Chief Robert Dugan, you are hereby recalled for witness testimony.”

“You do remember that you are still under oath, Chief Dugan?” Judge Burns reminds him.

“Yes, your honor.” Bobby replies before sitting down.

Ali takes a glance at Ashlyn, who gives her a reassuring nod, letting out a small breathe before turning around to look Bobby in the eye. ‘You just have to get him to bite, just once.’ She mentally reminds herself as she opts to stand directly in front of him rather than behind the podium.

“Chief Dugan, after hearing Dr. Henning’s testimony that a bullet fired from a 9mm Glock handgun not belonging to Captain Harris was removed from her leg and shows evidence of being fired directly into her leg through an older model silencer like the one contained in your personal collection… as the only other person on the scene with a police-issued handgun, what is your reaction to this testimony?” Ali asks pointedly.

Bobby remains calm. “I must admit that I am surprised as it does not match up to what Captain Harris told me, but I stand-by my account of the events.”

Ali bites her tongue, knowing now that he’s not going get flustered and stumble over this like she’d
hoped. “Do you have any explanation as to where another 9mm Glock handgun came from at the crime scene?”

“You do not have to answer that, Chief Dugan.” Judge Burns interjects and gives Ali a warning glare.

“I’ll answer. I do not have any explanation other than to suggest that there may have been another individual who fled the crime scene prior to my arrival. Captain Harris’ confession has already been deemed as likely false, so it’s possible she wasn’t telling the truth from the beginning. Further, I believe you previously noted that the bullets identified as fired by Captain Harris were fired post-mortem. That suggests to me that she may have fired them to cover up for another party, but I can’t comment intelligently on that as it has not been investigated.” Bobby says evenly, taking away Ali’s next piece of ammunition against him. “As for the silencer, there are many older model silencers like the one in my collection that would have left similar markings on a bullet. In my own cursory knowledge of the weaponry, they do not leave unique markings identifiable to a specific silencer.” Bobby adds smugly.

“The first part of the answer is conjecture and will be disregarded by the judges in their ruling. Please retain only the information regarding the silencer.” Judge Burns says with a hint of impatience.

“Chief Dugan, can you explain how an officer goes about investigating criminal activity with immunity for themselves in the case that they may become involved in illegal activity through their investigation?” Ali continues her questioning, her heart rate picking up a bit as she tries a different angle but knows she’s walking a fine line now.

“It’s fairly simple. An officer must open a formal investigation that is approved by either a Captain or Chief stating their involvement in the investigation?” Ali continues her questioning, her heart rate picking up a bit as she tries a different angle but knows she’s walking a fine line now.

“And can an officer approve their own investigation?” Ali prods further.

“Yes, if they hold the appropriate ranking to do so.” Bobby answers simply.

“Chief Dugan, among the open investigations for the Boston Police Department, there is one filed for both you and Liam Gorham as approved by Captain Harris in 2012 with herself named as the investigator. Were you aware of this and do you have any explanation as to why Captain Harris might have opened that investigation?” Ali asks evenly. She watches Bobby’s face twitch a bit as she hears the judges whisper to each other.

Before Bobby can say anything, Judge Burns speaks up, his voice clearly annoyed. “Do not answer that question, Chief Dugan. Attorney Krieger, you are setting a dangerous precedent in this courtroom that we will not allow. If you have a formal accusation, then I suggest you make it knowing the full legal consequences of your actions. If not, then proceed with the understanding that you are questioning a public official with a clean service record. Consider this your only warning.”

“Yes, your honor.” Ali acknowledges in defeat. Bobby is not going to bite and she’s one-step away from a false accusation charge against her, so she has to use the only card she has left and hope that the judges will be patient enough to allow her to submit the evidence she needs to make it possible.

“Your honors, I have one final line of questioning for Chief Dugan for which I formally request to submit four public record documents into evidence. As stated prior, items of public record can be submitted into evidence if they are accessible to the general public. The four items I wish to submit are easily accessible by any party via internet search.” Ali requests and holds her breath as the judges confer.
“As we have already allowed such evidence to be submitted in the witness testimony for this case, we will allow your evidence to be submitted. Please bring forth a copy of your documents.” Judge Burns states.

Ali breathes a small sigh of relief and presents the judges with a copy of the documents.

“Chief Dugan, in this Google Maps image of Liam Gorham’s private residence, you will clearly see a black BMW X6 with the Massachusetts license plate 450-HGT parked in his driveway. Can you explained why a vehicle registered to you is parked in Mr. Gorham’s driveway with no other vehicles?” Ali asks, hoping this will fluster Bobby a bit.

“While there are no date stamps on when Google images are taken, Ms. Krieger…I am sure that it was after Mr. Gorham’s unfortunate passing when I visited his home on several occasions to meet with his family regarding the case. I have never been to that residence otherwise.” Bobby replies with a smirk.

Bobby isn’t flustered at all, but Ali doesn’t necessarily need him to be for her next question. She was just hoping to get him a little riled up before she lowers the hammer on him and hopes he gets crushed under it.

“Chief Dugan, you have previously stated and confirmed the statement that you and Mr. Gorham had no business associations or personal connection. In light of that, I have to ask you why Mr. Gorham would purchase three separate real estate properties between 2002 and 2004 with someone he wasn’t even so much as acquainted with?” Ali asks with an intense stare.

“Your honor, I decline to answer the question.” Bobby gets out nervously.

“I’m sorry, Chief Dugan, but you have willingly chosen to abandon your right to decline by answering all questions to this point of your own accord and you are hereby directed by this court to answer the attorney’s question.” Judge Burns instructs and awaits the answer.

‘Got you now, asshole.’ Ali thinks, trying hard not to smile as she watches Bobby squirm.

“Uh… I’m sorry? I don’t understand the question.” Bobby stutters a bit, looking confused.

Ali smiles a bit. She had spent over 60 hours poring over online land and property records in all of Boston and greater Boston, having to do so city by city, just on the off chance she might find an old transaction linking Gorham and Dugan. Her dedication had paid off handsomely when she came up with three such instances.

Ali walks to the witness stand and hands Bobby a copy of three documents. “Chief Dugan, these are public property purchase records for Dorchester, Mattapan, and Hingham. The properties in Dorchester and Mattapan are documented as business warehouse spaces and the Hingham property is documented as a lot with boat dock-slip. You’ll see that the records list the bill of sale to co-buyers therein named as Liam Gorham and Robert Dugan, signatures are consistent with other public signatures on file for each of you. So, I ask you again, why would Mr. Gorham buy joint property with a person he was not acquainted with?” Ali asks sternly.

“Your honor, I decline to answer the question.” Bobby gets out nervously.

“I’m sorry, Chief Dugan, but you have willingly chosen to abandon your right to decline by answering all questions to this point of your own accord and you are hereby directed by this court to answer the attorney’s question.” Judge Burns instructs and awaits the answer.

‘Got you now, asshole.’ Ali thinks, trying hard not to smile as she watches Bobby squirm.

“Uh, well, my financial advisor suggested some business ventures for me several years ago which included Mr. Gorham. Our interaction was minimal to none.” He answers trying to weasel his way out of it.

“Chief Dugan, you have repeatedly and clearly stated to this court under oath that you had no business associations or personal connection to Liam Gorham. Would you like me to have your
statements read back to you?” Ali asks calmly even though her heart is racing.

“No, I know what I said. I guess I just misunderstood the extent of what you were asking.” Bobby practically yells in frustration, losing his cool.

“Your honor, I motion to have the witness read his rights…” Ali starts, but doesn’t get to finish the statement before Judge Burns hits the gavel and interrupts her.

“Chief Robert Dugan, you are hereby charged with two counts of perjury by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Court of Appeals.” Judge Burns states as he motions for the court officers.

“What the fuck is this?! I didn’t perjure anything! That bitch used obscure language!” Bobby yells heatedly and stands up pointing at Ali.

“Officers, please take the Chief into custody.” Judge Burns commands with greater haste as Bobby appears threatening. “Chief Dugan, please be seated before you are held in contempt of court as well. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights I have just read to you?” Judge Burns recites Bobby’s Miranda Rights to him.

“You fucking bitch!” He screams at Ali, trying to launch himself at her as he is held back by the two court officers. “You fucked with the wrong guy! You can bet I’ll make sure you’re dead next time around! And you!” He points at Ashlyn, his eyes bugging out in anger. “I should’ve shot you in the fucking head like fucking Gorham when I had the chance, but you can count on it now! You’re whole fucking family is gonna die, bitch!”

Ali is so shocked, she has to hold onto the podium as Bobby is finally cuffed and led away. The court room is an uproar of conversation as Judge Burns tries desperately to restore order by banging his gavel loudly.

“Order, order in the court please!” The judge bellows in a shout until things finally quiet.

“Attorney Krieger, do you rest your case?” He asks, imploring her with his eyes to just answer yes.

“Yes, your honor.” Ali replies quickly and makes her way back to sit with Ashlyn, who is sitting there wide-eyed and stunned.

Ali reaches under the table and threads their hands together, squeezing tightly and feeling Ashlyn grip just as tightly in return. The judges are leaned in close together and whispering inaudibly. Normally, they would take a recess now, but given what just happened Ali isn’t sure what they will do.

A few minutes pass before Judge Burns rights himself in his seat. “I ask the defendant to please rise.”

Ali let’s go of Ashlyn’s hand and stands up alongside the blonde to await the judge’s statement.

“In light of the testimony and evidence presented today and the statements made by Chief Robert Dugan, the judges on this panel are in unanimous agreement. Under the power of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Court of Appeals and in the matter of Captain Ashlyn Harris versus the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, we hereby rule to fully dismiss the case and prior charges, reversing the sentencing with no allowance further appeals pertaining thereto. Captain Ashlyn Harris is ordered to be released immediately pending proper processing. This matter is now closed and this court is hereby adjourned.” Judge Burns announces the decision which is immediately followed by loud chatter in the courtroom and clapping that Ali knows must be from
Kyle or Tim, or both.

Ali collapses back into the chair, relief and happiness overtaking her, but also pain. The adrenaline rush is wearing off quickly with all of her energy completely zapped, the throbbing pain in her chest and throat becoming almost unbearable.

Ashlyn stands stock-still taking everything in. Of all the outcomes she could have thought of or predicted, this was not even close to one of them. Her head is buzzing a bit and she feels almost immobile until she sees Ali flop back into the chair, her complete attention going to the brunette despite everyone else’s attention in the room being on her.

“Alex, you ok? Talk to me.” Ashlyn asks a bit panicked as she kneels down next to Ali and looks her over, resting a hand on Ali’s thigh.

“Yeah, I’m just wiped and in pain. I think I need to get back to the hospital.” Ali says honestly, meeting Ashlyn’s eyes and feeling her heart jump as she gets lost in them.

“Okay. Kyle and Tim will take you there right now, ok?” Ashlyn assures her. “Please, please take care of yourself. I’ll be by your side as soon as I can.” Ashlyn promises, the full weight and meaning of what she just said suddenly hitting her. “Oh my god, Alex… did that just happen?”

“Yeah, Ash. Yeah it did.” Ali replies with a smile, earning one back from Ashlyn. “But, slow your roll, Harris. It can take a couple weeks to process your release, so just hang in ok? I’ll visit as soon as I can and we’ll figure out everything else. For right now, just let yourself relax a bit into the euphoria of it all.”

“Just shut up, be patient and happy, got it.” Ashlyn jokes. “And you, go rest and get better. We have a lot to talk about.”

“We do. There’s plenty of time for that… like after I spend like a week in bed.” Ali plays back as the court officers finally start to make their way over to Ashlyn.

“I wish I had better words, but you are the most amazing, wonderful and completely miraculous person I’ve ever met, Alex.” Ashlyn gets out quickly.

“Glad you think so…cause you’re all mine now, Hero.” Ali shoots Ashlyn a wink, getting a huge dimpled grin from the blonde that she swears is enough to completely heal her right now.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, how are we feeling now?
Another long update that will fill in quite a few lingering details since there is still so much going on. Keep the comments coming, I love to hear what you think :)

Ali feels the cold water cover her face and holds her breath until she physically can’t anymore, the freezing burn ripping through her chest. She startles awake gasping for air, her eyes searching the unfamiliar room as the sweat drips down her forehead. She sees Kyle asleep in the chair in the corner of the hospital room and feels herself calm a bit. “Ugh.” She grunts and lets her head fall back on the pillow.

It’s the second day since the court hearing and she can’t wait until she can get out of here. All she wants to do is talk to Ashlyn, it’s all she can think about. Every time she closes her eyes, she has the same nightmare. The water, the cold, the pain of asphyxiation. Kyle is definitely starting to suspect given the state she’s constantly waking up in, but she hasn’t said anything to him about it and he hasn’t asked. She’s pulled out of her thoughts by someone walking into the room.

“Hello, Alexandra. I’m very happy to see that you actually came back.” Dr. Billings says while looking over her chart.

“Trust me, it was my pleasure.” Ali jokes a bit.

Dr. Billings gives her a smile. “Well, I tried to warn you. You’d be surprised how fluid in the lungs and a horribly inflamed throat can make you feel like you’re drowning again when you’re just trying to breathe normally.”

“Sounds exactly right. I felt like death when I got back here.” Ali shrugs. “I’m actually shocked at how much better I feel right now. Like night and day.”

“You really needed to rest and spend significant time on oxygen to let your lungs clear. Looks like you’re doing great though.” Dr. Billings says looking at Ali’s vitals and the follow-up chest x-ray report from this morning. She makes her way over to have a look at Ali’s neck. “This is healing nicely too. If you make sure to keep it moisturized and let the scabbing just fall off naturally, I’m pretty sure it won’t leave any scarring. I’m going to suggest we keep you one more night just to make sure you’re doing okay and then you can go home in the morning if things are the same.”

“Perfect. Thank you. I promise to follow your orders this time.” Ali says with a smile.

“Good to know.” Dr. Billings laughs a bit. “Though I can’t fathom what would make anyone rush out of the hospital in the state you were in before. I know you said something about court, too many traffic tickets?” Dr. Billings asks jokingly.

“Not quite. Just a smidge more important.” Ali replies casually.

“Well, I promise I’m not crying. Just joking a bit.” Dr. Billings quickly says, making sure Ali knows she’s not asking her to divulge anything.

“Oh, it’s ok, really. I’m surprised you don’t already know. I guess you must not be much of a news
watcher.” Ali remarks, having spent the last two days inundated with media requests and seeing the story get spun a plethora of ways on TV newscasts and newspapers.

“No, I definitely pay attention to the news. So, what am I missing?” Dr. Billings asks a bit confused.

“Have you heard about the Ashlyn Harris case the last couple days?” Ali asks.

“Of course, who hasn’t?! That is some insanity right there. That poor woman. Such a good cop getting blackmailed by that crooked son of a bitch, pardon my language. Can we really be surprised though? I mean, is anyone in a position of power in South Boston not crooked? Anyway, the way he flipped out in court like that is unreal. I hope he gets what’s coming to him!” Dr. Billings says animatedly.

“Yes, it was pretty intense.” Ali agrees.

“So, you left to go there then?” Dr. Billings asks trying to see the connection.

“I’m Ashlyn Harris’ lawyer.” Ali says simply, trying to hide her proud smile.

“Oh…oh wow. I didn’t put it together until… wait, you’re the one who defended her and made that guy crumble like that?” Dr. Billings says wide-eyed. “You left here… in that state… to go do that?”

Ali nods. “Told you I had a good reason.”

“And you’re the podcast Ali Krieger! I can’t believe I didn’t figure that out until now! I need more sleep.” Dr. Billings says shaking her head a bit. “I’m just in disbelief right now that you went and did that in the condition you were in. That is just, more tenacity that I have ever witnessed. I’m beyond impressed right now. I can’t wait to tell my wife!” Dr. Billings says excitedly, giving more personal information just then than she ever reveals to patients.

Ali smiles at the doctor’s statement and blushes a bit at the attention. “Well, Ashlyn is a very close friend and I couldn’t let her down.”

“Well, she must be some friend then.” Dr. Billings gives Ali a knowing look.

“She is.” Ali admits with a goofy smile.

“Right.” Kyle pipes up from the corner of the room. “Friend.” He says using his figures for air quotes.

Ali shoots him a glare.

Dr. Billings lets out a small laugh. “And that’s my cue to get out of here and finish my rounds. Glad to see you’re doing better and, well, congratulations on the case!”

Ali gives Kyle a dirty look. “You’re the worst.”

“What, did I lie?” He teases her. “I thought you were all about the truth.”

“Shut up.” Ali sticks her tongue out, enjoying the light moment between them as Kyle comes over to gently hug her as best he can.

“Kyle?” Ali gets his attention.

“Yeah?” Kyle replies.
“You stink.” She giggles. “Go home and shower. And while you’re at it, bring us something good to eat.”

“Such a diva!” Kyle laughs. She’s right though, he hasn’t left the hospital since they returned after court. “You sure?”

“Positive. I’m hungry, so hurry!” She says pushing him a bit with her arms. “Go, go, go!”

She watches Kyle put on his coat and make his way out, stopping to place a kiss on her forehead. She shifts into a comfortable position on the bed, her mind going right to Ashlyn of course. She wonders how the blonde is doing, what she is thinking about, how this whole thing is affecting her. Not being able to see and talk to her right now is torture.

Ashlyn clicks on a few more news articles, reading carefully to see if there is any new information she missed. That’s what she’s occupied her time with over the last two days even though she knows she shouldn’t get caught up in it like this. She’s desperate to find out how Ali is doing and what happened to the brunette, so she’s stooped to the level of reading any and all media coverage of the case. Of course, much to her disappointment, there is nothing about Ali beyond her actions in court and some background information about her podcast popularity. Ali has clearly declined any interviews, probably because she’s recovering. So, much of what is out there is just speculation.

Still, Ashlyn has spent the overwhelming majority of her time since the ruling in the prison library immersed in any reporting on the case so she can understand what is going on. She had assumed that she’d be ignored and left in her cell since she would be getting out soon and no one had to worry about her anymore as a prisoner. It was just the opposite. Other than the fact that she had to be guarded under protective custody at all times, they pretty much let her do whatever she requested as long as it was safe and there was a guard available to cover her. It means being able to spend a lot of time on the internet without anyone looking over her shoulder, a mixed blessing since it’s only led to more questions.

So far she’s been more confused than anything else. She’s learned that Bobby has been charged with contempt of court, two counts of perjury, two counts of threatening bodily harm, first degree murder, and two counts of attempted murder. She understands all of it except for the two counts of attempted murder, knowing that Ali must be one of them, but having no clue about the other. She wonders if Bobby had tried to kill Kyle too. Kyle looked okay in court, but she hadn’t gotten that good of a look at him. It makes her brain spin and her heart ache that Bobby had hurt them and that she was helpless to stop it, and worse, the reason it happened in the first place.

Ashlyn’s mind can’t stop wandering to the way the brunette’s neck looked. Every time she closes her eyes, all she can see is Bobby trying to strangle Ali. How did Ali survive it? The way Bobby looked so shocked when Ali walked in and how smug he was before that, he totally thought she was dead. How on earth had Ali managed it? The questions and emotions swirling around in her head are driving Ashlyn crazy.

Worrying about Ali isn’t the only thing making her feel out of whack. She’s light and happy inside that she’s going to be released from prison after all this time, and with everyone now knowing that she didn’t do anything wrong. The problem is that she’s also terrified. Being in this place, she hasn’t had to really think about the outside world much. What does she do when she gets out? Does she go back to her job, to her South Boston condo like nothing happened? How does she deal with all the people she’s pushed away for a couple years now and does she even want to deal with them? She’ll need a new car to get around because Chris sold hers shortly after she got sentenced. He’s been up-
keeping her condo, but she has no idea to what extent. Will she even have heat and electricity when she walks in? How much money is in her bank account, she doesn’t even know. Does her cell phone that she gave up when she was arrested even work anymore? Will her clothes still fit? The questions are endless and she wonders how people who have been in longer than her before their release deal with these things.

Despite all the uncertainty, the one thing she’s sure of is Ali. Above all else right now, she just needs to see and talk to her. Everything else will fall into place. So she hopes.

About two hours after he left, Kyle comes waltzing back into the hospital room with some bags of food and a small duffle bag with some fresh clothes for Ali assuming she gets to leave tomorrow.

“ Took you long enough!” Ali sasses him, seeing that he looks fresh and more clean-cut than he did when he left. “Oh my god, did you stop to give yourself a beard and hair trim?! Seriously?”

“What?! I was looking shaggy, so I gave myself a quick lil clean-up. Took like 10 minutes, geez!” He defends himself.

“Now who’s the diva?” Ali teases him.

“Well, a Doctor McDreamy might come in here at any minute to whisk me away. Gotta be prepared! Besides, I’m getting crap from the girl wearing mascara in her hospital bed?” Kyle says with a smirk as Ali rolls her eyes.

“Anyway, what’s for dinner?” Ali asks.

“Just an assortment from our favorite Thai place!” Kyle announces proudly as he sets the food out and they dig in.

They make some small talk, but Ali notices right away that Kyle is pretty quiet during dinner. He’s seemingly engaged, nodding or smiling at the appropriate times, but his mind appears to be elsewhere. When they finally finish eating, Ali sees her chance to ask him what’s going on.

“Hey.” She reaches out to touch his forearm that is resting on her bed. “You seem really distant. What’s up?”

Kyle lets out a small sigh. He has to have this conversation sometime tonight and it’s not like there is really going to be a good time. “I have something I need to talk to you about. And, it’s not easy.”

“You can tell me anything, you know that.” Ali reassures him, her mind racing as to what it could be that she doesn’t already know.

“I’m just going to put it all out there, ok?” Kyle warns her. “Just remember we’re in this together and we’ll figure it out.”

“Ok. Just tell me already.” Ali says quietly, feeling anxious at Kyle’s furrowed brow and serious face.

“When I went home a little while ago, I got a call from Ken’s lawyer.” Kyle says, pausing to see Ali’s eyes widen in anger.

“What the fuck does he want from us?! I swear to god I’m going to have his ass jailed and no one is
going to stop me!” Ali yells out before Kyle can say anything else.

Kyle moves to quickly sit next to her on the bed. “Hey, Alex. It’s not like that. Just listen to what I have to say, ok?”

“Oh.” Ali relents.

“Bobby put an explosive in the car Ken was driving the night he hurt you. He never even made it out of the neighborhood.” Kyle explains to her quietly, knowing his reaction was one of shock as he thought back to that loud boom he heard when he was trying to revive Ali; the one he chalked up to being a firecracker.

“Oh.” Ali whispers, not sure how she feels other than like she just got punched in the gut.

“Look, he’s alive… but barely. He’s on life support with severe burns over 80% of his body and if he makes it, he’ll have permanent brain damage. He listed the two of us as the decision-makers and powers of attorney on his healthcare proxy documents. His wife isn’t listed and they need us to make a decision.” Kyle gets to the point.

Ali’s head is spinning. “Why…why would he do that? It has to be old.”

“It’s not. It was signed just two years ago. I don’t understand it myself.” Kyle admits. “We need to meet with the lawyer tomorrow. He said he could meet us anywhere.” He adds.

“It makes no sense. I don’t know what to say.” Ali says, all kinds of questions running through her mind.

“Me either. We have to make a decision though. What do we do?” Kyle asks, feeling overwhelmed by the whole thing.

“We’re going to call the lawyer and ask him to bring Ken’s wife tomorrow. We’re going to do whatever she wants to do. He deserves everything he got, but I refuse to hurt anyone else in this fucked up mess. She should be the one to make the decision.” Ali suggests. “Is that ok with you?”

“Yeah, I think it’s the best plan.” Kyle agrees. “Should I go call the lawyer back?”

“Unless there’s something else to talk about, yes.” Ali says quietly as Kyle nods and makes his way out of the room. She settles back into the bed and feels a few tears roll down her cheeks. She quickly wipes them and promises herself there will be no more tears, she’s already cried far too many of them over her father for one lifetime.

Ali has just taken a real shower and gotten dressed when the doorbell rings. She feels more like herself than she has in days and she has only just gotten home from the hospital this morning. She was hesitant about going home and how she would feel seeing things out of place as they were the night she was attacked. Everything is in perfect order when she arrives with Kyle though and she knows that Tim was clearly here. She couldn’t be more thankful for that.

The good feelings leave at the sound of the doorbell, her stomach dropping a bit as she hears Kyle answer it and greet their visitors. She wills herself to be strong and go downstairs to join him. As she makes it down the stairs and into the living room, she immediately sees more people than the two she expects. The lawyer and Ken’s wife are there, but so are the two sons.
“Alex, this is John Paulsen, Ken’s lawyer. This is his wife Rebecca and their sons, Josh and Jameson.” Kyle introduces everyone in an effort to make things less awkward. Ali shakes everyone’s hand before sitting down.

The lawyer gets right to the point, showing Kyle and Ali the paperwork and letting them know what the medical situation is. He then asks them to make a decision on whether to maintain the life-support or not.

“We know that we can’t relinquish our role because he legally named us in the documents. However, we will make our decisions solely based on Rebecca wants and thinks is right. So, we’d like to formally request that she proxies for us in all decision-making.” Ali says, handing the lawyer the legal paperwork that she drew up just this morning, both her and Kyle’s signatures on it. She sees Rebecca smile and tear up a bit.

“Oh, ok. Well I guess that was easy.” The lawyer remarks, ready to wrap it up and get out of there.

“Is it possible to have a private minute with you, Ali?” Rebecca pipes up.

“Sure.” Ali agrees and leads Rebecca into the kitchen where they settle on opposite sides of the counter on tall stools.

“Ali, I just want you to know that I’m so very sorry. I can’t take back what Ken did to you nor can I forgive it and let it go. But I also can’t let him go. I love him and he’s been so good to me and our boys. I owe it to him and what we have to give him time to try and recover and take care of him. I don’t know how to reconcile this all, but I want to do what my heart tells me to do. It probably doesn’t mean much, but you should know that he’s never stopped talking about you and your brother. He’s so proud of you and he loves you, he always has. I can’t begin to fathom what he was thinking and what you went through, not just the other night, but your whole life. You are as remarkable a woman as he has always described you. I just want you to know, that no matter what decisions I make, I am so thankful for your kindness and respect.” Rebecca says compassionately.

Ali wants to hate the woman, she really does. This is the woman who her father so easily replaced her mother with and with whom he built a new family, moving on as if it was as simple as changing the sheets on a bed. But as she listens to what Rebecca says, she feels exactly the opposite. She feels sympathetic and understanding of how hard this must be for her too. Rebecca is kind and genuine, she’s pretty and approachable, and she isn’t afraid to say what’s on her mind. She’s someone Ali would normally be great friends with.

“Thank you for saying all of that.” Ali reciprocates. She knows deep inside she can never truly forgive her father, but she doesn’t have to let what happened change who she is. “I have a lot to come to peace with at the moment and I know it’s going to take me a while, but please know that I don’t blame you or hold anything against you.”

Rebecca nods and they sit in a silence for a few minutes that should be awkward, but somehow is comfortable. Ali is the first to break it. “How about you guys stay for some lunch and we can get to know each other better?”

“I’d like that.” Rebecca smiles.

When they return to the living room, it’s empty. The lawyer has left, having everything he needs at the moment. They find Kyle outside kicking a soccer ball around with the two boys.

Ali smiles as they watch from the window. “They play soccer?”
“Yes. Ken got them into it. He always told them stories about how good you were.” Rebecca replies. “You might want to get out there. I’m sure they’re dying to test you.”

Ali smiles a bit and heads outside. She knows she can’t really join given her condition, but it doesn’t keep her from giving them some pointers while they make Kyle look like an uncoordinated fool. She takes to the boys as quickly as she did to Rebecca. Josh is 8 and Jameson is 11. They’re very sweet and polite, really smart, and typical in that they ask a lot of questions about anything and everything.

The whole morning is not at all what Ali expected and she can’t quite explain why, especially given the circumstances, but something about this feels good inside. As she sits at the lunch table eating pizza and watching the surreal scene in front of her unfold, everyone enjoying food and easy conversation like they have done this many times before, she can only think of Ashlyn’s poem: *The most beautiful things, grow from the darkest places.*

It has been four long days since the ruling and Ashlyn is pacing around her cell excitedly as she waits for a guard to come get her for Ali’s visit. She practically jumps up and down when she hears footsteps approaching in the hallway, Jordan finally coming into view.

“Harris, your princess awaits!” He jokes and bows slightly.

“What are you doing here on a Monday?” Ashlyn asks, knowing Jordan is rarely around Monday mornings.

“Please, I’ve been in touch with Tim. Guards hate observation duty, so not that hard to get people to switch with me. Did you really think I was going to let Alton or anyone else handle this visit?” He gives her a playful look.

“Yeah, what the hell is that guy’s problem?” Ashlyn says shaking her head as she thinks about all the times Alton has given her warnings for just about anything and everything.

“Stick up his ass? I don’t know, he’s just generally a total douche. He thinks being a prison guard is some high position of power.” Jordan shrugs as he cuffs Ashlyn really loosely.

Ashlyn laughs. “Well, whatever floats his boat. Seriously, thanks for being here and doing this, you have no idea how much I appreciate it.”

“Awww, shucks Capt…you’re gonna make me blush.” Jordan winks as he leads her to the visiting room.

As they approach the door, he stops and starts removing her cuffs. “Yeah, so I’m just gonna uncuff you out here and just send you in there. I’ll be here outside the door.” He explains to Ashlyn.

“Aren’t you going to get in trouble?” Ashlyn questions him seriously.

“Harris, you’re an innocent cop who is just waiting to be released. Trust me, nobody cares.” Jordan assures her. “Now, go get her.” He says and gently pushes her towards the door.

Ashlyn opens the door and just walks in, surprising Ali who wasn’t expecting her to walk in on her own like that. She watches the confused expression on Ali’s face turn into a beaming smile as she closes the distance between them and puts her arms around the brunette. Ali is squeezing Ashlyn tightly, her arms around the blonde’s waist and her head buried into the crook of her neck. Ashlyn has one arm gently wrapped around Ali’s shoulder and her other hand lightly stroking the brunette’s
hair, afraid to hold her too tightly.

“I’m so happy you’re here, Alex.” Ashlyn whispers, her face burying into the top of Ali’s head a bit, her words having deeper meaning than the current moment. “You ok?” She asks, finally pulling back a bit to have a good look at her. Ali’s neck has several still angry looking red scabs surrounded by yellowish purple bruising. She looks tired, but much better than she did in court.

“I’m so happy to see you. I’m feeling a lot better, promise.” Ali replies looking up into the taller blonde’s eyes before pulling Ashlyn tightly against her once more, just needing to feel that safety and comfort for a few more moments. “Hi.” She says softly, as she finally lets go of her grip but stays close.

“Hey.” Ashlyn smiles and lightly runs her hands up and down Ali’s arms. “Come on, let’s sit you down.” She suggests, worried about how Ali is feeling. She walks Ali the short distance to the chair and helps lower her into it.

“You’re sweet, but really, I’m going to be fine and am doing ok.” Ali says seeing how gentle Ashlyn is being with her. “We have a lot to talk about, huh? I don’t even know where to start.” She adds as she watches Ashlyn take the seat across from her.

“I know it’s probably going to be hard, but maybe we can talk about what happened to you early on so I know the truth and can deal with it rather than inventing like a million awful scenarios in my head like I have been.” Ashlyn suggests as lightly as she can.

“Of course I’m going to tell you, Ash. Any chance we could just get the Bobby talk out of the way completely first and then maybe get into this,” Ali says pointing to her neck. “So then we can completely not talk about him for the rest of the visit after that?”

“Definitely.” Ashlyn agrees wholeheartedly.

“I’m not sure what you know. Do you know about the charges he was brought up on?” Ali asks.

“Yeah, I’ve been killing time reading all the news about it and trying to figure it all out.” Ashlyn admits.

“Given the seriousness of the charges, he wasn’t given bail and has an initial hearing on the 19th to determine whether he will get bail and whether there will be anymore charges. So, we know he’s in custody for sure until then, which gives us until late next week.” Ali explains.

“You’re still worried about him?” Ashlyn asks softly at hearing Ali’s slightly anxious tone. Of course Ali is still worried about him, the guy tried to kill her and just openly threatened to do it again.

Ali nods. “I mean, he’s in custody, but who knows who he’s in contact with.”

“Oh Alex, I promise you, you can stop worrying. He’s all done now.” Ashlyn tries to comfort the brunette. “That’s one thing I’m positive about and maybe I should have found a way to tell you sooner so you weren’t nervous this whole time.”

“I’m not sure I understand. Why are you so sure he’s not going to do anything?” Ali asks a bit confused.

“I was that guy’s shadow for years, Alex. I know how he does things and the type of people he has under his thumb. The only power he ever had just got completely ripped away. He’s not the Chief of Police anymore, he has nothing over anyone to get them to do his bidding. I know that for a fact. People only caved to him because of his position and the harm he could do to them or because they
wanted him to help them with illegal things. That’s all he ever had going for him and now he doesn’t have any of it. He’s done.” Ashlyn explains.

“But what if he gets out and tries to do something himself without anyone else’s help?” Ali asks, understanding what Ashlyn is saying, but still a little bit nervous.

“That’s true, I suppose he could. But I highly doubt he will come anywhere near us with all the attention on us and him. And that would only be if he got out on bail. The chances of that are slim to none from what I’ve been reading about these charges, right?” Ashlyn reassures her.

“Yeah, you’re right about that. I just… I want to make damn sure he doesn’t have a chance at all. I’m thinking of going to see McNally this week and giving him all the evidence you compiled against Bobby. Some of that stuff includes federal racketeering and drug trafficking, he’ll never get bail on that. I mean, we have a back-up of all the evidence and there’s a ton of attention on the case, so I think McNally will handle it properly. What do you think? Can we trust him and are you ok with doing this?” Ali lays out her next plan of attack.

“I think we can definitely trust him, especially under the circumstances. He was never involved with Bobby’s crap to my knowledge and he’s a decent guy. And a guy who really wants to be Chief, so I think we’re good. It’s a good idea if you don’t mind doing it, I’m sure it’s a lot to deal with.” Ashlyn replies, giving Ali an easy out if the brunette isn’t up for it.

“I’m seeing this all the way to the end. Damn right I’m doing it. Pesky bitch for the win!” Ali jokes a bit.

“You’re incredible, you know that? There will never be a point in my life where I am not in complete admiration of you.” Ashlyn says sweetly. “And in complete gratitude… I still don’t know what to say.”

“Well, the most important things aren’t said, Ash. They’re felt. And I feel you plenty.” Ali says with an enchanted smile, reaching over the table to hold Ashlyn’s hand like she should have been doing this whole time.

“Ditto.” Ashlyn says smiling back and unconsciously starting to play with Ali’s fingers a bit.

“So, I haven’t been in touch with Chris and Bridget yet because I wanted to talk to you first. I’m pretty sure they’ve heard because the media coverage on this has been national and they’re still in New England on top of that. You seem to feel like the danger part is over and I trust that you’re right about it. So, should I call him and start the process of getting them back to their lives?” Ali gets back to the conversation.

Ashlyn lets out a small laugh. “He must be going nuts right now reading all this crap and wanting to know what is really going on. I can assure you that he’s driving Bridget crazy with his nutty theories. I think it’s safe to at least get in touch with him now and explain everything. Bobby would never be smart enough to know how to find them on his own and all he has is himself now. Maybe we can see what happens with Bobby next week though before we commit to bringing them back locally. I’d rather play it extra safe with the kids.” Ashlyn answers thoughtfully. “If you give me the number to reach him, I can call him.”

“Sounds good. I’ll give you the cellphone number he has right now before I go.” Ali agrees and lets a few quiet second pass between them. “There’s no update on your release date yet, I checked before I came in today. It’ll definitely be by the end of the month though. So, I guess that’s officially all the logistic stuff.”
“Guess so.” Ashlyn reiterates, wanting to let Ali lead the next part of the conversation.

“Are you ready to talk about…” Ali trails off pointing at the marks on her neck.

“Ready when you are.” Ashlyn replies and takes Ali’s other hand, holding them both in a comforting grip.

Ali takes a deep breath and then the words just pour out. She starts right from the beginning…Kyle leaving for a last minute appointment, her father at door and everything that ensued from there. She doesn’t spare a single detail or feeling because Ashlyn has never held back with her when recounting her own horrible experiences. She watches the blonde’s eyes carefully, watching them go from baffled to stormy and sad. The blonde listens quietly and attentively as Ali retells it all from her perspective up until the moment she can’t and it switches to Kyle’s account of that night. That’s when the hazel eyes start leaking tears.

“Hey. I’m here…I’m still here.” Ali pauses and says softly.

Ashlyn nods and moves her head to wipe her eyes on her shirt sleeves, refusing to let go of Ali’s hands. She stays quiet listening to Ali tell her about what happened over the last couple of days and the meeting with her father’s wife and kids. The charges against Bobby finally making sense to her as she realizes that Ali’s dad was the second murder attempt and not Kyle.

When she’s done, Ali waits for Ashlyn to say something.

Ashlyn can’t even find her words. “God, Alex… your dad? Your own fucking father did this?” It makes her heart hurt in ways she didn’t know it could. Her own father had been no angel, but this, this is beyond comprehension. “You died, you actually died at your own father’s hands… for me.”

Ali just shakes her head yes as a few of her own tears slip out. It looks like Ashlyn wants to say something else, so Ali just waits silently.

“Do you mind if I put your coat on the floor?” Ashlyn asks.

Ali is a bit thrown off by the random question. “Uh, yeah, sure.” She says, taking her puffy winter coat off the back of her chair and handing it to Ashlyn. She watches as the blonde gets up and moves towards the nearest wall. Ashlyn sits down on the floor with her back against the wall and lays the coat out between her open legs.

“Come here.” Ashlyn says, motioning for Ali to come over.

Ali makes her way over and the blonde helps her get settled on the floor on top of her coat with Ashlyn’s legs surrounding her. She’s turned to her side a bit with her left shoulder resting against Ashlyn’s chest, her cheek falling on the blonde’s collarbone as Ashlyn’s arms wrap around her tenderly.

“I just really needed to hold you. Are you comfortable enough?” Ashlyn asks.

“Completely.” Ali says in a whispered voice, feeling totally calm even though her heart is beating a mile a minute. She feels Ashlyn’s head rest on top of hers and she closes her eyes, her right hand going up to rest on the blonde’s bicep as she presses herself in just a little bit closer. All notion of time seems to vanish as they sit there silently, but it feels like it’s been a while before she hears Ashlyn’s voice.

“How bad are the nightmares?” Ashlyn asks.
Ali cranes her head up to look at the blonde as best as she can. “How did you…” She starts to ask, but Ashlyn doesn’t let her finish.

“Because I’ve been there and I know plenty of others who have too. In my experience, you don’t almost die and then just walk away without your mind being permanently altered.”

Ali presses her cheek into Ashlyn’s collarbone again before answering. Of course she knew all about the blonde’s experiences and struggles, but it didn’t dawn on her until right now just how much Ashlyn would understand what she was feeling. “They’re pretty bad.” She replies honestly.

Ashlyn moves her hand to stroke Ali’s cheek and stays silent, knowing Ali has more to say and just letting the brunette go at her own pace.

“I just…” Ali starts trying to find the words, the tears already rolling down freely again. “I hate it… I hate it so much. The whole time we went through all of this, the possibility of Bobby coming after me or Kyle was always on my mind. I was prepared for it as much as I could be, you know? But I always expected Bobby or some other random hired gun. And now, I close my eyes and I feel the cold water and not being able to breathe or move, that pain… and every time I’m expecting to see Bobby or some other villain in my nightmares. I don’t though, what I see is my own father’s face… leaving me to die. And I honestly don’t know how to feel or process it.”

“I’m so sorry, Alex.” Ashlyn says softly, pressing a kiss to the top of Ali’s head and pulling her in even closer as gently as possible.

Ali doesn’t say anything, she just lets herself melt into Ashlyn’s arms for a while until she feels the blonde pull back a bit to look at her. She cranes her head up to look at her as best she can as Ashlyn’s hand goes back to her cheek.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, ok?” Ashlyn prefaces her next statement, getting a nod from Ali before she continues. “You should really think about talking to someone professionally. I was so against it for a long time and thought it was pointless. I let myself struggle for far too long until I finally caved and tried it. It really changed everything. I’m not saying I don’t still have bad moments, but they’re tolerable now and I can actually manage them. Just… think about it.”

“I will, Ash. I’ll go see someone as soon as I can.” Ali promises her, feeling so cared for right now.

“Good.” Ashlyn replies back in relief, pulling Ali back into her and feeling the brunette curl right back into her arms.

They’re quiet for a very long time, letting the feel of each other soothe them. Ali feels more protected and safe right now than she ever has in her entire life. She didn’t know how much she needed this until right now… how much she needed to talk, how much she needed to feel sheltered, how much she needed Ashlyn.

“This is my favorite place in the world.” Ali says just loud enough for Ashlyn to hear her.

“The prison?” Ashlyn asks, not understanding the statement.

“No…you.” Ali replies, placing a small kiss on the bottom of Ashlyn’s chin as she feels the blonde’s heart pounding away against her shoulder.
“Ali Krieger. I’m here to see Captain McNally.” Ali tells the officer behind the entrance desk at the South Boston Police Department. She’s there the very next morning after visiting with Ashlyn, wanting to get this taken care of immediately.

“Certainly, Ms. Krieger. I’ll go see if he’s available. He should be.” The woman tells her as she gives Ali a smile. It makes Ali wonder what people here think of her, was Bobby as manipulative of his own police officers as he was with everyone else. She can hear people chatting casually in the background and while she doesn’t know what the environment was like in here before, this definitely doesn’t seem like an atmosphere where a beloved leader was just imprisoned on major charges.

She doesn’t have much more time to think on it before the female officer is back and pointing her in the direction of McNally’s office.

“Ms. Krieger, I’m glad you’re here. I needed to speak with you and was going to call you this morning, but things have been a bit crazy. So this works out perfectly.” McNally says, shaking her hand and motioning for her to sit.

“Oh ok, good. I actually have some important things to talk to you about too. That’s why I came, but you can start.” Ali replies.

“First and foremost, I just want to say something personal. I am so very sorry, Ms. Krieger for everything that happened. If I had any idea of what was going on, I promise you…I would have done something no matter what power the Chief held. I was aware that he sometimes turned a blind eye to things or let people he knew slide on stuff, but I had no idea of the extent of it. And that’s on me for not probing. We get really busy sometimes and we don’t take time to go beyond our own workload to see what other officers are doing and what investigations are open besides our own. Had I done that, I would have seen Harris’ investigation on him and I would have helped. It doesn’t change what happened, but I am doing everything I can to right it from here forward by changing our protocol and how we handle things. I’m not going to let this happen again on my watch. I’ll talk to Harris too when I can, but I just wanted to apologize to you. You’ve saved this department in many ways and I’m grateful for that.” McNally puts it all out there.

“Thank you for that. I really appreciate your honesty.” Ali replies kindly and waits for him to continue.

“I also wanted to talk to you a bit about the attack on you. I want to confirm the statements I already have and add any others that you would like so I can complete that file.” He explains.

Ali jumps in. “Ok. Well, what I have for you is related to the charges too. Captain Harris did actually compile a hefty amount of evidence in her time investigating Chief Dugan. There are over a hundred documents and recordings that detail all kinds of offenses from federal racketeering to drug trafficking and Ponzi schemes. I have a full copy of those files for you and would like to add them to the investigation so that the proper charges can be filed at the hearing.” She finishes.

McNally nods. “Thank you, I will definitely take it all for proper processing and filing.” McNally stands up and closes his office door before sitting back down. “There’s something that you need to know Ms. Krieger and I’m not technically allowed to tell you yet, but you’ll know soon enough anyhow.” He pauses for a moment. “We’re collecting any final information at this point so that we can close the case permanently.”

“What?! Why?! That’s not possible!” Ali says loudly, infuriated and incredulous at Bobby having found a way to weasel out of the charges somehow, her heart racing.

“No, no, it’s not what you think. Please, it’s ok.” McNally tries to calm her and quickly get to his
point before she loses it. “Chief Dugan was found dead in his cell very early this morning. He was hanging by his bedsheet and we’re on the scene right now trying to iron out all the details, but it looks like suicide. Especially given that he was in protective custody and alone in his cell away from the general population. We’re hoping to keep it quiet for as long as we can, but I anticipate it will get out by tonight or tomorrow morning at the latest given the attention on the case. Still, I’d appreciate your discretion.”

Ali’s eyes are wide, her heart still racing. “Yes, of course. I’m really sorry, I didn’t mean to…” she trails off.

“It’s ok, I completely understand. The emotions on this are high, as they should be given all that has happened. We don’t have to talk about the statement I need from you today. I’ll call you about it soon, there’s no real rush at this point.” McNally says sympathetically.


“I’m not sure what your leeway on visitation is, but if you can, might be good for you to tell Harris before she hears it elsewhere.” McNally suggests.

“Yes, definitely.” Ali agrees having already had the same thought. “I’m going to head over there now and hopefully it’s early enough in the day that they’ll let me schedule something for the afternoon.”

McNally nods. “Just let me know if I can help you in any way as this all plays out, ok?”

“I will. Thank you.” Ali replies with a polite smile.

“Anytime. Good luck today with Harris and please tell her hello and that we’ll talk soon.” He says as he walks Ali out.

Ali leaves the police department in a daze just trying to focus on getting to the prison as soon as she can. Her emotions are all over the place. She feels mostly relieved that Bobby is gone, but also angry at his cowardice… that he won’t have to face his crimes even though justice was still served. And there’s sadness too, for the number of people who lives were brought into this mess and who will never fully have closure. Despite all that, there is a lightness, a release of burden. They are safe now and that changes everything.
Chapter Summary

Sorry for the delay with this update! As you know, I tend to be big on details and there is still a lot going on in this story, so these longer chapters take a while to write (and I warn you, it's a pretty long one).

A few quick things...

1. A few of you have asked how close we are to the end of this story. There are definitely quite a few more chapters to go and once the story unfolds I'll reassess to give you a sense of when I'll wrap it up. In the meantime, fear not, we still have a ways to go!

2. I have created so much ruckus in this story that many of you don't trust it when something good happens... my bad (sorry not sorry though). So, first let me say that while there is still some drama ahead, it's not the action-packed intensity that has been present so far. It's more drama than ruckus now, but as usual, I promise not to break any hearts in the long run.

3. In relation to point number 2, let me take a line from the Wizard of Oz and completely assure you that Bobby is... morally, ethically, spiritually, physically, positively, absolutely, undeniably and reliably DEAD!

So, with that I say... enjoy the journey!

After dealing with a pretty disgruntled front desk guard and surviving her fair share of dirty looks for actually making the woman have to do something, Ali is told she can visit with Ashlyn in an hour. She opts to use the hour to go grab a couple of coffees and sandwiches for them from one of the cafes not too far from the prison. By the time she makes it back, she only has a couple of minutes to kill before the visit.

Ashlyn gets led into the room by the guard named Paulette and Ali can immediately tell that she is happy to see her, but also worried. Ali smiles widely to reassure the blonde that everything is fine as she watches her get uncuffed.

“Alex, is everything ok?” Ashlyn quickly asks as Paulette makes her way to the observation room.

“It’s fine. Everything is fine, promise.” Ali goes in for a very quick hug, smiling when Ashlyn hugs her back very gently.

“So, you invented an emergency just to see me, huh? Are you normally this insatiable, Krieger? Ashlyn jokes with a purposely smug smirk on her face.

“No, Harris. Usually I’m worse.” Ali deadpans with a wink before losing her composure and laughing when she sees Ashlyn’s eyebrows raise.

“So, really, what’s up?” Ashlyn asks curiously.
“Well, I got some news this morning that I wanted to tell you before you heard it anywhere else.” Ali says, watching Ashlyn’s brow furrow in uncertainty. “Personally, I think it’s good news. But I’m not going to pretend for a second to know how you’ll feel about it.” She adds.

“Well…” Ashlyn says expectantly as she wait for Ali to just tell her.

“I went over to see McNally today and when I went to give him the evidence files, he told me that they were just collecting information now so that they could close the case.” Ali starts to explain before Ashlyn cuts her off.

“What the fuck?” Ashlyn blurs out in a confused irate tone.

“Hold on, I’m not done.” Ali tries to calm her. “Ash, they found Bobby hanging by a bedsheet in his cell in the early hours of the morning. McNally says it’s very likely just suicide, but that they were still on the scene. He’s dead.”

Ashlyn’s eyes practically bug out of her head and her mouth hangs open slightly in shock. “He’s dead… dead, dead?”

“Yeah.” Ali nods, trying to read the blonde’s expression beyond the obvious surprise.

“Wow.” Ashlyn whispers.

“You ok?” Ali asks.

“Yeah, I just… I think I just need a minute.” Ashlyn says quietly, still seemingly stunned.

Paulette doesn’t seem to be paying any attention to them, so Ali doesn’t hesitate to break the rules. She reaches over and holds Ashlyn’s left hand between both of her own, gently stroking her fingers as she sits there silently comforting the blonde and giving her time to work through her thoughts.

After a few quiet minutes, Ashlyn finally speaks up. “You know, I think maybe I should’ve seen this coming.”

“Why is that?” Ali asks.

“I guess because he thought so highly of himself. He’d never be able to face a fall from grace like this, especially so publicly. I think death would always be the better option for him in his mind.” Ashlyn explains. “I feel all over the place. I mean, I’m upset that he won’t have to face everything he did and the punishment for it… that he won’t suffer even though he made so many other people suffer. I also feel like everything I did and sacrificed to get all that evidence on him was worthless. But then I also feel happy and relieved that this is really over now. That somehow we all survived it and we’re safe. Even though he really did help me in so many ways early on in my career and as a mentor, I just… I’m not sad even one bit. Does that make me a bad person?” She muses.

“Of course not. Ash, you have the biggest and kindest heart of anyone I know. The fact that you’re even feeling bad about not feeling sad for someone who blackmailed you and almost killed you is proof enough that you’re an amazing individual.” Ali assures her. “Honestly, I’m beyond relieved about it myself and actually happy that this is over.”

“Geez, so this is really it. It’s over.” Ashlyn remarks still in a state of disbelief.

“I think maybe there are aspects of this that will probably never be over for us, but yeah, it’s over.” Ali confirms.
Ashlyn let’s herself smile just slightly and nods in understanding as they sit silently for a couple more minutes.

Ali knows there’s really nothing more to say about the situation right now, so she tries to get them back to a place of comfort and familiarity between them. “Sooo, want your sandwich? Ham and cheese, your favorite.”

“You know I do.” Ashlyn pipes up right away. “If you think you’re insatiable…” she trails off waggling her eyebrows.

Ali giggles at the insinuation and hands the blonde her food, both of them digging into their sandwiches.

“So, I guess this changes my call with Chris today. I’m going to give him the full update and everything he needs to know, but then maybe you can get in touch with him now and work on getting him back to his life again?” Ashlyn asks.

“Absolutely! I’ll have him and the family back to their routine in no time and before you get out of here too… we all have a lot to celebrate together.” Ali says animatedly.

“We sure as hell do, Alex.” Ashlyn says, her lips curling into a smile as her mind wanders to the now imminent day she can once again spend endless time with the people she loves without worries.

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“Holy fucking shit, Ali Krieger, you are a goddamn wizard!” Chris is about to pull her into a tight hug when Ali quickly stops him with wide-eyes and hands up. “Broken ribs!”

“Christopher Harris, little ears!” Bridget simultaneously yells at him because the kids are right there, but smiles anyway because she totally gets it. She’s as excited as he is.

“Alright, geez!” Chris laughs as he gently pulls Ali close with his big arms.

“So happy you guys are back home.” Ali says as Chris lets go.

“Us too. I can’t believe it.” Bridget gives Ali a light hug with Curtis and Elsie following suit and wrapping themselves around Ali’s legs. “Easy with her, you guys!” She warns as Ali smiles to signal she’s fine.

It’s been a little over a week since the news broke about Bobby’s death and they are standing in the driveway of Chris and Bridget’s home, getting ready to move them back in now that Kyle’s friend who was temporarily renting the place has vacated. Ashlyn’s release date has been set for January 25th, so they have about a week left to settle back in before she’s out.

“I’m just in such awe of you, Ali. Seriously, the whole thing is just unreal. You are such a boss, such a damn genius. I want to hear everything! Ashlyn just gave me the highlights.” Chris says, standing back and looking at Ali like she’s some sort of royalty.

“Oh stop, I was just doing a thorough job and everything I could to help. I got lucky enough to have a lot of things go my way.” Ali replies humbly and earns playful eye rolls from both Chris and Bridget. “But, yes, I’ll give you all the details after we finish up and have some dinner tonight.”

“Yo ho! Are we moving back in or are we just going to become front yard ornaments?” Kyle jokes
loudly as he pulls up and gets out of his car, noting that Chris and Bridget’s cars are in the driveway looking still completely packed full of stuff. He gives Chris a quick fist bump and literally skips his way over to grab a box out of the back of the pick-up truck to encourage everyone else to do the same.

Ali shakes her head at Kyle’s antics, but follows him and grabs a very light box as well.

“Okay! Little kiddos… go grab those really heavy boxes and Daddy will carry the stuffed animals.” Chris bellows and earns himself an elbow from Bridget who hands Curtis and Elsie each of their small backpacks instead.

About four hours later when everything is in the house and mostly unpacked, everyone enjoys a quick dinner of Chinese take-out together where Elsie takes up residence on Kyle’s lap and Curtis tells Ali he’s going to marry her.

“You already have one Harris in front of you, buddy. Gotta get in line!” Chris tells Curtis with a chuckle and Ali blushes deep red before Bridget comes to the rescue by passing out the fortune cookies.

Curtis is sitting there with a little pout on his face when Ali leans into his ear. “I’m not getting married anytime soon, but I’m pretty sure that when I do, you’ll be at the wedding right beside your auntie.” She whispers so only he can hear, his face lighting up in a smile not quite understanding it all, but happy that he’ll be at Ali’s wedding.

“What did you just say to him?” Kyle asks giving her a curious look as Chris does the same.

“That’s between me and my bestie over here. Super secret. Right, C?” Ali says winking at Curtis who nods enthusiastically and pretends to zip his lip.

It’s not too much longer before the kids are off to bed and Ali finally gives Chris and Bridget the whole story of the case and everything leading up to it. She spares no details, even getting into being attacked. Kyle holds her hand tightly as she describes it all to a completely shocked Chris and Bridget, who look positively horrified by the time she’s finished.

Ali is glad that she is able to talk about the incident with someone other than Ashlyn and Kyle. This is her first time doing it and Chris and Bridget were the perfect first audience for it. She feels comfortable around them and not judged in any way. Still, the embarrassment and humiliation she felt inside as she told them that her own father had tried to kill her made her realize that it’s high time she took Ashlyn’s advice and sought out a therapist. Her feelings are very much all over the place and the nightmares continue. She really needs to start sorting it out before it gets the best of her. She’s quietly thinking about it all when Bridget excuses herself to head upstairs and check on the kids, giving Kyle and Ali each a quick hug goodnight.

“Well, that’s my cue too.” Kyle says with a yawn. “Skateboard Expo Friday night?” He looks at Chris.

“Um, YES!” Chris confirms excitedly.

“Perfect!” Kyle replies. “I’ll see you in a little bit at home, Alex?” He asks, purposely heading out earlier to give Chris and Ali a little time.

Ali nods in reply and watches him walk out the door. “So, you’ll help me with getting everything ready for when she gets out?” Ali asks Chris, referring to a conversation they had earlier in the day.

“Absolutely. Anything you think we need to do, I’m on it.” Chris affirms.
“Thanks. I just think the easier we can make it, the better for her to settle back in.” Ali explains.

“Agreed. She’ll be ok though, she’s pretty resilient.” Chris says, stating the obvious to ease the slightly anxious tone Ali has.

“Alright. I better go so Kyle doesn’t worry.” Ali says, pulling her keys out of her purse.

“We’re so lucky to have you Ali, every single one of us. I don’t really know what to say.” Chris says reverently as he gently hugs the brunette goodnight.

“Like I told, Ash… don’t say anything. You just keep giving out these great hugs and we’re good.” Ali smiles as they pull apart.


“I’ll be in touch in the next couple days. Goodnight and welcome home.” Ali says as she makes her way out the door.

“So, either you’ve gotten rid of some stuff for her or Ashlyn is a minimalist?” Ali says to Chris as she stands in the middle of the living room and takes in the condo.

“The later. It’s the military thing, she’s never owned all that much…just the things she needs.” Chris replies with a shrug.

Ali nods and continues to look around. It’s a pretty great space, not huge, but an open layout condo with two bedrooms and two bathrooms. The main area has a really nice modern stainless-steel kitchen with white cabinets that opens up right into the living room where a small dining area is set-up off to the side by a bay window. Gorgeous dark hardwood floors run throughout the place except for the bathrooms, which are both tiled in light gray. There isn’t much furniture, just the dining table and chairs, a couch, a comfy looking armchair, a coffee table, and a TV console that has both a PlayStation and an old record player on it along with the TV. All of it is rustic looking but clean to eye. A couple of art pieces hang on the wall of the living room that appear to be abstract ocean paintings.

After turning the heat up, Chris heads into the small basement to flip on the circuit breakers that he turned off to save money. He’s kept the heat and electricity on, but left everything working as minimally as possible just to upkeep the place.

Ali continues to look around, eventually making her way into Ashlyn’s bedroom. She can’t help but feel like she’s intruding on the blonde’s privacy just being in there, but her curiosity gets the best of her. Much like the rest of the house, the furniture and décor is minimal: a queen-sized bed, two bedside tables and a medium sized dresser. A walk-in closet is located right beside the master-bathroom which features a double-sink granite counter and a good-sized clear glass shower. Everything is perfectly neat with the bed tightly made and clothes hung up and arranged by type, size, and color in the closet. Ali notes several police uniforms and some military ones as well. Even Ashlyn’s shoes are neatly arranged by type and color. There are three framed pictures in the room. The first sits on the dresser and is of Ashlyn and Chris with their grandparents; they’re on the beach and Ashlyn looks pretty young and not quite grown into herself yet. The second one is on her bedside table and it’s a picture of Ashlyn holding Curtis in her lap while he holds a newborn Elsie in his arms with her help; Ali practically feels her heart melt just looking at it. The last picture is hanging on the wall above the dresser and features Ashlyn and three other guys in full camouflage gear in front of a Humvee in the desert; the blonde is smiling, but her eyes are so vacant that Ali
figures it had to be from well into her first deployment or during her second one.

She takes one last glance at the master bedroom and makes her way across the hall into the second bedroom. This room is just as simple as the others with a file cabinet in one corner and a little office desk set-up in the other corner, an older Mac laptop sitting on top of it. The other side of the room has a nice looking pull-out couch that clearly serves as a guestroom option.

“So, what do you think?” Chris asks as he finds her wandering the place.

“It’s really nice. I didn’t realize these older South Boston condos were so updated inside.” Ali remarks, genuinely impressed by the space and Ashlyn’s simple, but modern style.

“They’re not. Ashlyn is pretty handy, she remodeled a lot of it herself. Floors, cabinets, and all.” Chris tells her with pride in his voice.

“Should have known. Is there anything she doesn’t do well?” Ali replies completely impressed, though she supposes it makes sense given the blonde’s artistic side.

“Other than not knowing how to properly relax sometimes and really sucking at golf and bowling, not really.” Chris says with a grin. “So, what do you think we should do in here? Anything? It’s pretty much like she left it.”

Ali takes one more look around the living room. “Well, for starters, some hardcore dusting and vacuuming and just wiping everything down. I’m thinking maybe wash all her clothes so it’s fresh and Kyle will help me buy some new outfits as well because I think she might be a different size now. We’ll wash and change the bedsheets and towels too. Update the cable and internet subscription so it’s all hooked up when she gets here. If you could help me grocery shop for things she likes to eat, that would be great. Oh, and I am so getting a new laptop… that thing in there is already a dinosaur by today’s standards. That should do it, I think.”

“Damn, Ali, you think of everything.” Chris says as he stands back looking at her with his eyebrows raised. “Seriously don’t think I would have thought of even half of that stuff.”

“One more thing too… maybe you could go with me to the Apple store and we can figure out how to get her a new cellphone with the same number she used to have.” Ali suggests.

“Sounds good to me!” Chris replies eagerly, happy to have Ali’s help.

In between her visits with Ashlyn and with help from Chris, Kyle, and Bridget, Ali accomplishes every single one of the things on her list over the next week, plus one more important one.

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Ali feels a complete sense of relief as Ashlyn walks into the visiting room, knowing it will be the very last time. Tomorrow the blonde will finally be free and far away from this awful place that she’s spent much too long in. Of course, Alton is the one observing the visit today. One last sucker punch before Ashlyn gets released, Ali thinks to herself. She gives the blonde a very quick hug and settles into her seat, watching Ashlyn do the same.

“You excited?” Ali asks with a huge smile.

“Of course I am!” Ashlyn replies back with her own dimpled grin, ignoring the clench in her stomach. It’s not that she isn’t excited, she’s thrilled. Still, she’s really nervous about it too. She feels completely overwhelmed by the thought of reintegrating herself back into her normal life. She can’t wait to be free, but she’s also scared of the freedom; an internal battle she hasn’t figured out how to
deal with yet. She’s hoping that just taking it all one day at a time will settle her down.

“Good.” Ali says noting the way the blonde’s smile doesn’t quite reach her eyes like it normally does. “You nervous too?” She prods a bit.

“How did you…” Ashlyn starts, but thinks better of it. “Never mind, you always seem to know…I should know better by now.” She says a little relieved that she doesn’t have to hold back. “I really am happy and excited to be leaving here, I promise.” She assures Ali before letting out a small sigh, looking down at the table and continuing. “I just feel overwhelmed by it all too. How do I go about readjusting to everything? I feel like I don’t even know how to deal with real life stuff anymore. I don’t even know what is in my bank account, it’s pathetic.”

“Hey… look at me, Ash.” Ali says gently, watching the blonde’s eyes look up to meet hers. “You’re not going this alone. You have your brother, you have Kyle, and you will always, always have me. We’ll be with you every step of the way and we’ll figure it all out together. I know you’re probably not used to that… but, you better get used to it because we’re not going anywhere. If anything, you’ll be annoyed by the level of help you get.” Ali jokes a bit to try and soothe Ashlyn.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I guess I’m just used to doing it all by myself.” Ashlyn admits, feeling a little better with Ali’s reassurance.

“Fat chance of that happening, Harris.” Ali shoots the blonde a wink and finally earns a genuine smile in return. “First, don’t ever apologize for how you feel. Second, how about we tackle the bank account thing right now.”

“Alex, I don’t even remember my account numbers or passwords. We have no way of checking until I actually go there.” Ashlyn replies, feeling a bit dumb.

“Doesn’t matter. I can tell you right now that you have at least $500,000 in your bank account.” Ali says matter-of-factly.

Ashlyn laughs. “I have never had $500,000 or anywhere even remotely close to that, except maybe in a dream once. What exactly did you smoke before you came in here today, Krieger?”

“A victory cigar.” Ali plays back mysteriously. Ashlyn is looking at her like she’s crazy, so she just pulls the envelope out of her purse and hands it to the blonde. “I was going to wait until tomorrow, but…open it.”

Ashlyn eyes Ali quizzically as she opens the envelope to find a check inside for $500,000 addressed to her. She’s about to vehemently protest that she’s not taking Ali’s money when she notices that it’s from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. “Is this real? What is this?” She asks in confusion.

“I took the liberty of filing a wrongful conviction compensation complaint with the state on your behalf. Most people don’t realize we have a law for that. I thought it would take much longer than this because the required burden of proof for innocence is much higher than in the appeals court. I guess given what happened and the attention on the case, they settled it really quickly with no additional requests. It’s quite a bit less than what you would have made in the last two and half years based on your salary and average detail overtime pay, but they gave you the maximum amount allowable under the law. We’ll make sure to go to the bank tomorrow and get it deposited. So, you see? You have at least $500,000 in your bank account. Voila!” Ali sits back a bit with a satisfied smile.

Ashlyn is stunned, relieved, and completely overcome with emotion. “I give up.” She says evenly.
“Give up what?” Ali asks curiously, trying to read the blonde’s expression.

“I officially give up trying to figure out what on earth I ever did in this life or a past one to deserve someone like you. I’m speechless.” Ashlyn gets out a bit emotionally.

“But are you more excited now?” Ali asks trying to hold in the blush that is likely already creeping into her cheeks. “Because I am so damn excited about tomorrow!” She practically squeaks.

“Yeah, Alex….I’m really excited!” Ashlyn says, finally letting herself get lost in the exhilaration without all the worry for the time being. Tomorrow is the start of a whole new life.

Ashlyn spends about an hour of the morning with the discharge officer whose job it is to make sure she’ll be able to readapt to life outside of the prison. The woman is thorough with her questions, making sure that Ashlyn has a support system and a place to live before finally handing her $100 in cash of ‘gate money’ and a comprehensive list of resources. The woman also hands her a bag of her personal items that were seized when she was arrested. Ashlyn opens the bag to find her wallet which still has $53 in it, her digital Casio watch with a now dead battery, her iPhone which is also long dead, a pair of black diamond stud earrings, a leather strap bracelet, and her keys. All of the clothes she was wearing is missing.

“All of your clothes upon arrest was bagged and catalogued as case evidence according to your intake file. You’re welcome to wear the prison issue clothes out, but your lawyer also dropped off some clothes for you this morning.” The woman says reading her face and handing her another bag with the clothes in it. “Feel free to change in here and then I can walk you out to the entrance area.”

“Thank you.” Ashlyn says politely and waits until the woman leaves to start changing. She looks inside the bag to find a pair of light-wash fitted jeans, a white collared button-up, a dark gray knit sweater, black All Saints boots, and a black Armani men’s peacoat. There is even a pair of boxer briefs with sharks on them, socks, and a sports bra. This outfit has Kyle written all over it. She puts it all on, looking down to check herself out as best as possible and wishing there was a mirror in the room. Everything seems to fit perfectly, not surprising given Kyle’s totally gift for this kind of thing.

Ashlyn runs her hand through her hair one last time and walks out the door so that the discharge officer can lead her out. ‘This is it, it’s finally happening.’ She thinks as she walks down the last corridor, her heart racing.

The door to the entrance opens and the first thing she sees, the only thing she wants to see, is Ali rushing towards her. She gently wraps her arms around the brunette and feels Ali wrap her arms tightly around her waist.

“I’m much much better, you won’t break me, Ash.” Ali whispers to the blonde when she feels the loose grip. She immediately feels Ashlyn hold her tighter and can actually sense the blonde smiling into the top of her head. “Freedom looks good on you, Ash. So. Damn. Good.” She mumbles into Ashlyn’s shoulder, still trying to recover from how incredible Ashlyn looks in this outfit.

Ashlyn is about to reply when she hears Kyle’s voice.

“Can a guy get a little sugar around here? I mean, I expected a long hug between you two…but this is just getting awkward now.” He sasses from right beside them.

Ali pulls back and gives him a glaring look, her eyes going right back to Ashlyn who she can’t stop staring at right now.
“Kyle.” Ashlyn says softly and immediately pulls him into a tight hug.

“Hey, Harris. Looking good my queen.” He says sweetly before adding his usual humor. “My doing of course, so props to me!”

Ashlyn laughs a bit and releases him after a few more moments. “I missed you, dude.”

“You too.” Kyle replies simply, trying not get teary.


“Absolutely.” Ashlyn replies with a nod, reaching out with each of her hands to grab Ali’s and Kyle’s. “Together?”

“Together.” Ali and Kyle reply in unison as they all walk out the door and into the cold air.

“Here.” Ali says handing Ashlyn a phone in the car while Kyle drives. The two of them had opted to sit in the backseat together, ignoring Kyle’s complaints about feeling like a chauffeur and referring to himself as ‘Jeeves’.

“What’s this?” Ashlyn asks.

“A phone, idiot.” Ali teases her and gets a playful look from the blonde.

“I know that, asshole. Why are you handing me a phone?” Ashlyn plays back.

“Because yours is practically ancient and currently dead. I went to the Apple store with Chris and got you an updated iPhone. Took some major flirting that completely embarrassed your brother, but I got them to transfer your account and everything they had on file into this new phone. So your phone number is the same and everything should be on there, just have to re-enter any email passwords and stuff like that. All your contacts are in there, with a new and very important one added of course!” Ali winks.

“Wow, thanks! You guys are awesome!” Ashlyn says, turning the device over in her hand. It looks a lot like her old phone, just with a bigger screen and a slimmer and sleeker design. She turns it on and looks at the contact list, not finding Ali’s name in there. “I thought you said all the important contacts were in here?” Ashlyn questions, giving Ali a knowing look.

“They are. Keep looking, Harris.” Ali replies.

It takes her a while but Ashlyn finally sees it and smiles. ‘Paladin’. “No wonder I missed it, I was looking under A, she pauses for a second to bait Ali…for ‘Asshole’.“ She laughs at Ali who is pretending to be offended.

“In that case, maybe I should change ‘Hero’ to ‘Idiot’.” Ali gives it right back to her as she holds up her own phone.

Kyle just shakes his head as he drives, working hard to bite the teasing comments on his tongue and let them have their moment.

Ashlyn clicks off the phone because looking down at it is making her feel a bit carsick. She leans her head back on the seat and feels Ali’s head drop into her shoulder, the brunette’s hand entwining with
“Well go over to the bank real quick to make sure this money gets into your account. Then we’ll go right to your place and help you get settled in. Chris will be over for dinner tonight. Is that ok?” Ali asks as she lays out the game plan.

“Yeah, that’s perfect. Thanks, Alex.” Ashlyn replies quietly, trying to focus on the good feelings right now instead of what the inside of her condo must look like.

After a quick stop at the bank, which goes really smoothly with Ashlyn finding out much to her relief that she now officially has $553,324.11 to her name, they’re in front of her condo door. Ashlyn pulls out her keys slowly and clicks open the door lock before turning around to look at Ali and Kyle worriedly. “Guys, I have no idea what it looks like in there. So, I apologize ahead of time for any mess or lack of heat and stuff.” She cringes a bit, not wanting this to be the first time Ali sees her condo.

“Don’t worry, we won’t judge.” Ali says trying to hide her smirk as Kyle nods in agreement beside her.

Ashlyn opens the door slowly and keeps her eyes trained on the floor as she walks into the entrance of the living room area, feeling the warm air hit her face. She takes one last breath and looks around. Everything is exactly as she left it, only the place is spotless, it smells fresh and there are flowers in a vase on the table. She lets out a sigh of relief and really takes it all in with a slight smile on her lips.

“Come on, did you really think Chris and I would let you come home to a dusty, empty house with no heat?” Ali says, coming up behind the blonde and rubbing her back lightly.

Ashlyn can only smile widely at the brunette before going from room to room, completely looking her place over. It doesn’t escape her attention that her clothes are all freshly washed, the cabinets and refrigerator are filled with food she loves, and that there is a new laptop in the office. She sits on the edge of her bed and lets the tears flow freely down her face.

Ali walks into the bedroom after giving Ashlyn a few minutes to find the blonde crying. “Oh no, did I mess up your clothes or something else?” Ali asks concerned as she plops down next to her and moves Ashlyn’s hair away from her face a bit.

“No. No. It’s perfect. You’re perfect. I’m just emotional.” Ashlyn tries to explain. “You guys have taken care of like 80% of everything I was worried about.” She smiles a bit.

“Good.” Ali says as she strokes the blonde’s cheek lightly, wiping away a few tears. “Just relax as much as you can for right now, and we’ll work on that other 20% one day at a time, ok?”

“Thank you. Thank you so much.” Ashlyn says the only thing she can to convey her gratitude as she pulls Ali into her as closely as possible given the awkward position.

“So, are we going to hug all day or…” Kyle comes into the room in dramatic fashion, purposely trying to lighten the mood. “Cause I was thinking maybe early lunch and TV before we get ready for Chris to come over…”

“Sounds perfect.” Ashlyn says, reluctantly letting go of Ali and getting up to put an arm around Kyle. “How about you cook?” She suggests.

“You suck, Harris.” Kyle pouts at her, before relenting and making his way into the kitchen. “I’ll have you know that if you keep making requests like this, I’ll send you back!” He mockingly warns her as he puts an apron on.
The rest of the day goes without a hitch. Kyle makes them sandwiches which they eat on the couch while watching women’s college basketball at Ashlyn’s request. She could care less about the sport or the teams playing, but she’s missed live sports so much that it’s completely wonderful to watch. Chris comes over a few hours later by himself not wanting to overwhelm Ashlyn with the whole family on the very first day, which she is thankful for. The four of them cook dinner together and stick to conversation that doesn’t involve prison or the case. Ashlyn is beyond content not to be the focus of conversation, instead sitting back and listening to what Kyle has been up to and all about Curtis and Elsie from Chris. All in all, it is a much less intense day than Ashlyn was expecting.

“You sure you don’t want me to stay?” Ali asks Ashlyn seriously after Chris has gone home and Kyle makes his way out to the car. She doesn’t want Ashlyn to be alone, but she doesn’t want to intrude either; she knows the blonde needs time to get reacquainted with her home. 

“It’s ok, Alex. Go home and rest, you’ve done so much. I’ll be ok, promise. We’ll see each other tomorrow.” Ashlyn replies. She doesn’t want Ali to leave, but she feels too guilty to ask her to stay.

“Ok. Goodnight, Ash.” Ali places a quick kiss on the blonde’s cheek after hugging her. “Call me if you need anything, doesn’t matter what time. I’m so proud of you.” She reaches to give Ashlyn’s hand one last squeeze before making her way out.

“Sweet dreams, Alex.” Ashlyn replies back quietly, closing and locking the door once she sees Kyle and Ali pull away.

The house feels quiet and foreign to her, so she quickly changes out of her clothes and hops into bed hoping that she’s tired enough to fall asleep fast. The bed feels comfortable and she does nod off as she replays the events of the day. She wakes up an hour later in a panic, cold sweat all over her as she tries to figure out where she is. When she finally realizes she’s home, she tries to take deep breaths to relax, but the space around her in the room feels huge and frightening. She feels vulnerable and exposed.

Ashlyn gets up and does the only thing she can think of to calm herself. She moves her furniture around so that her bed is now pushed into the corner of the room against the wall with her dresser and bedside tables pushed up close to the open side. She grabs her CD Walkman from her bag of prison belongings and gets back into bed, Ali’s voice and the small walled-in atmosphere now making her feel more comfortable.

By the time Ali arrives the next morning, Ashlyn has already brewed some coffee and managed to make some omelets. She’s feeling proud of herself that she remembered how to do at least that much as quickly opens the door with a smile. “Good morning, Alex.” She greets her in disbelief that anyone could already look so beautiful by 8am, feeling a bit self-conscious now that she hasn’t gotten showered or dressed yet.

“Good morning!” Ali replies cheerily, hiding her worry that Ashlyn looks tired even though she had expected that she probably wouldn’t sleep that well last night. “Smells good in here.”

“I made breakfast, hope you’re hungry.” Ashlyn motions to the dining table. “No Kyle?” She asks seeing that Ali is alone.
“He has a client this morning, he’ll be here in a couple hours.” Ali replies, watching as Ashlyn brings over two plates of food and some coffee. The blonde is in a pair of baggy gray sweatpants and a cut-off black t-shirt that shows her full tattoo sleeve. Ali looks her over, finding it amazing that even disheveled and in her most simple state, Ashlyn is seriously attractive.

“Probably for the better. I haven’t showered or anything yet, he’d be appalled.” Ashlyn says with a laugh as she sets the food down and settles across from the brunette.

“It’s a good thing. We have work to do in that closet of yours before Kyle gets here and you’re probably better off showering afterwards.” Ali says and takes a bite of her omelet. “Mmmm, this is so damn good!”

“Well geez, Krieger, don’t act so surprised that I can cook!” Ashlyn says in mock offense. “Glad you like it. So, what do you mean we have work to do?”

“Well, there’s cooking…which Kyle can do. And then there’s Master Chef like this omelet right here, sooo…excuse me for being impressed!” Ali banters back. “Anyway, by work I mean you are going to try on everything in your closet so that we know what fits. Then we’ll go on a clothes shopping mission when Kyle gets here, because we all know that’s his thing.” Ali explains.

“Should have known I wasn’t free of the fashion diva’s grasp just yet.” Ashlyn jokes.

“Once we’re done with that, maybe we can go scope out some possible new cars for you?” Ali suggests.

“Now you’re talking, Krieger!” Ashlyn says excitedly as she chews a piece of toast.

They finish their breakfast pretty quickly and are ready to move to the task at hand. “You go ahead and I’ll be right behind you.” Ashlyn says to Ali as she clears the dishes and points the brunette to her bedroom forgetting the state that it’s in. She follows shortly after to find Ali standing in the middle of the room looking at the furniture arrangement in confusion and immediately turns red out of embarrassment.

“Decided to change it up a bit?” Ali asks lightly, trying to calmly figure out what happened.

“Uh…I uh…” Ashlyn stutters feeling pathetic. “I couldn’t sleep last night. The room felt… just… big.” Ashlyn admits sheepishly, knowing she can be honest with Ali.

“Ash, it’s ok.” Ali runs her hand lightly up and down the blonde’s forearm. “You’ve been through a whole lot and it’s going to take a while to adjust to everything again. It’s nothing to be ashamed of, ok?”

Ashlyn nods in response, glad that Ali isn’t just trying to shove everything under the rug and assume it’s all fine now that she’s out of jail.

“And remember what I said last night, you can call me literally any time. No offense to Harry Potter, but I think I hold a much better conversation than that.” Ali says noticing the CD Walkman on the bed and motioning to it, earning a little smile from Ashlyn. “And, if you don’t want to talk, then you can pick a book you like and we’ll do Ali live and unplugged.” She adds with a wink.

“You’re the best, you know that?” Ashlyn says sweetly.

“Stop… don’t stop!” Ali pretends to love the flattery while batting her eyelashes. “Now, get in the closet and strip woman! We only have an hour before Kyle gets here to complete this little runway show.” She pushes Ashlyn towards the closet and goes to sit on the bed.
Thirty minutes and one too many coming out of the closet jokes later, they are all done because Ashlyn doesn’t have all that much clothes to begin with. The consensus is that most of her stuff is too baggy on her. She hasn’t lost any weight, but all the working out in prison has left her nothing but trim muscle. Ashlyn makes a mental note to keep working out hard so she doesn’t buy a bunch of new clothes only to watch them go waste.

“Why don’t you shower and get ready? I’ll go put another pot of coffee going. We’re going to need it to keep up with Kyle.” Ali says and heads into the kitchen, leaving the blonde to get ready.

About fifteen minutes later, Ali is sitting on the couch with a cup of coffee when Ashlyn comes in wearing the new jeans Kyle bought her and nothing on top but a black sports bra, her hair damp from the shower. “Which one is the lesser of the two evils?” The blonde asks, holding up two shirts she tried on for Ali a few minutes ago. Both were a little big, but they were among the smallest of the clothes.

Ali’s throat goes dry and her breath hitches as she tries not to spill her coffee while her eyes rake up the blonde’s unbelievably defined torso. Her heart rate is picking up and she actually feels tingly in places she would be embarrassed to admit. Cartoon superheroes don’t have bodies this good she thinks to herself. She’s taking her first good look at the blonde’s oblique muscles, the v-line disappearing into the hem of the boxer briefs that peek out of her pants, when Ashlyn’s voice startles her.

“Alllleeex… up here.” Ashlyn teases as Ali finally meets her eyes and blushes. “Yeah, hi…so, which shirt?”

“Sorry, spaced out.” Ali tries to excuse her behavior, but she knows she was caught. “Um, go with the navy button-up. You’ll have your coat on over it anyway, so the slight bagginess will be fine.”

Ashlyn just gives the brunette a smirk and heads back to the bedroom to finish getting ready.

The afternoon turns out to be a complete success with Kyle practically storming the mall and getting Ashlyn outfitted with a whole new wardrobe in no time. That leaves them plenty of time to shop for cars, not that they need it because Ashlyn already knows what she wants. By 5:30pm, Ashlyn is the proud owner of a completely blacked out 2017 Jeep Wrangler Rubicon that she will pick up the next day and is pretty much just an updated replacement of the car she had before. She is positively giddy about it, almost bouncing around in Kyle’s backseat on the way home.


“Yep. I’ve seen what they can do in some pretty crazy military environments, tough as hell. You and Kyle can have your German autos, I’ll stick to my American-made thank you very much!” Ashlyn replies.

“Hey, hey! Your ass has been carted around in my lovely and posh Audi Q7 all day, so don’t hate!” Ali sasses back.

“And don’t you be talking smack about my G-Class! That’s my baby right there!” Kyle pipes up.

“Alright, alright. I’ll admit they’re both really nice, just not for me.” Ashlyn softens her stance a bit.

“Much better.” Ali says with a satisfied smile.

“I’ll let it slide for now, Harris, but watch yourself.” Kyle squints his eyes at her in the rearview mirror. “I actually have a client in like an hour, so I’m just going to drop you guys at Ashlyn’s so I can get my car and head out. That ok?” He adds.
“Yep.” Ashlyn replies and then looks at Ali. “Want to stay for dinner?”

“If you’re cooking, absolutely.” Ali replies.

“Chicken, broccoli, ziti?” Ashlyn asks thinking about what is in the house that she could make pretty quickly.

“Sounds amazing!” Ali says patting her stomach.

“Yeah, just go ahead and don’t mind the guy who will probably have to eat take-out!” Kyle complains.

“Well, it’s your own fault you’re not joining.” Ashlyn shuts down his whining.

“It’s true, the job of a hair guru is never done!” He replies in an overtly flamboyant tone while Ali rolls her eyes at him.

After arriving back at Ashlyn’s condo, she and Ali enjoy a good dinner with plenty of lighthearted conversation. As dinner wraps up, Ashlyn starts to get a little antsy, knowing she doesn’t want to be alone after what happened last night. Still, she feels bad asking Ali to stay after the brunette has already been there the whole day.

“Want to watch a movie before I head out?” Ali asks sensing the change in the blonde as they finish clearing the dishes.

“Sure!” Ashlyn answers far too quickly to sound casual like she wanted to, mentally kicking herself.

“Ok, you pick!” Ali says cheerily, bringing their drinks over to the coffee table and plopping herself down on the couch. She regrets her last statement just a few minutes later when Ashlyn chooses a four hour documentary about sharks and settles in next to her.

“I swear, it’s really interesting.” Ashlyn promises the brunette who is giving her a slight look of disapproval.

“Alright, I won’t judge until we watch it.” Ali says in defeat. “Oh and before I forget. I’ll take you to get your car in the morning, but then I’m scheduled to record a public service announcement about kidnapped kids with the Hamiltons in the afternoon. I’m sure Kyle will come over if you want and I can come over when I’m done.”

“Ahhhh yes, I almost forgot that about your celebrity status.” Ashlyn jokes a little bit before getting serious. “Really though, I think it’s awesome that you’re doing that. I’m actually thinking that maybe I’ll go meet with McNally tomorrow and see what my options are in terms of going back to work.”

“Wow, already?” Ali asks a bit shocked.

“Yeah, I mean, I can’t just sit around forever and I know I’ll be going crazy at home like this soon enough. So, I figure I’ll just try and ease back into it as soon as I can.” Ashlyn explains.

“I guess that makes sense.” Ali replies, still a bit concerned. “Just don’t rush back in before you’re ready.”

“I won’t.” Ashlyn assures her.

“Oh and Ash?” Ali wants to get one more thing off her mind.

“Yeah?” The blonde replies.
“I took your advice and started therapy last week. It was a good idea and it’s going well so far.” Ali pauses for a second. “Maybe you should think about it too?” She suggests gently.

“You’re sweet, Alex. I’m already on it. I went through two therapists before this whole thing, but neither of them seems like a good fit for what I’m going through right now. I started searching to try and find someone new this morning.” Ashlyn admits.

“Good.” Ali says with a smile and entwines their hands together as she leans into the blonde more. “Ok, now that that’s out of the way… Shark on!”

Ashlyn laughs and starts the documentary.

They get about two hours into it before Ashlyn is slumped onto Ali’s shoulder and snoring a bit. As much as the documentary is actually interesting and Ali doesn’t want to leave Ashlyn’s side, she knows this is probably the best chance to get the blonde to sleep tonight.

“Hey, Ash.” Ali gently strokes the blonde’s face, watching her open her eyes groggily.

“Sorry, fell asleep.” Ashlyn mumbles without moving much.

“Come on, let’s get you to bed.” Ali says and Ashlyn just nods. She walks the blonde to her bedroom and helps her get her jeans and shirt off, leaving her in just boxer briefs and an undershirt. She guides Ashlyn around the little fort of furniture she created and pulls back the covers, motioning for her to get in.

“You tucking me in?” Ashlyn asks with a sleepy smile.

“Damn right I am.” Ali says as she pulls the covers over Ashlyn and tucks her in. “Night, night, Hero. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Sweet dreams, Alex.” Ashlyn replies, her eyes already closing. She actually makes it to 5am this time before waking up and not being able to go back to sleep.

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Having spent some of the morning with Ali and being able to drive again, in a sweet new Jeep no less, Ashlyn feels confident as she makes her way towards the police department to meet with McNally. Unfortunately, the feeling starts to fade quickly as she walks through the door of the building. While everyone is really nice and they greet her like an old friend coming back from vacation, it’s her own reaction to it all that throws her off. She suddenly feels uncomfortable and shy around these officers that she once acted as a leader to and trusted with her life. Worse, she feels like some kind of freak show despite their genuine intentions of being so welcoming. She’s beyond relieved when she finally makes it out of the main office area and is sitting in McNally’s office.

“Harris, it’s really great to see you. You look really good, Captain.” McNally says kindly.

“Thanks, McNally. Um, look, before we say anything else… can I just start with something?” Ashlyn requests.

“Sure, go ahead.” McNally replies.

“I just want to make my intentions in coming here clear first. I’m just going to tell you right now that I honestly want no part of being Chief. So, you have nothing to be concerned about in terms of me competing with you for that. I’m happy to just stick to my role for a very long time and I need you to know that so we can have the right mindset in our working relationship moving forward. Well,
assuming I still have a job.” Ashlyn says bluntly.

“Of course you have a job, Harris. Geez!” McNally says lightly, a bit relieved at what Harris said even though he was sure he could maintain professionalism between them no matter what. “Thanks for being honest. I’ll admit that it probably makes things less awkward between us.”

Ashlyn acknowledges him with a slight head nod.

“Now my turn. It probably doesn’t mean much to you and I completely understand that you might not trust me, but I honestly had no idea what the Chief was up to or that you had an investigation open on him. I really and truly would have probed more and done my job better if I had and I’m very sorry that I failed you like that. I’ve changed a lot of protocol around here already and plan to change even more so that this never happens again. Sorry isn’t good enough, I know, but it’s all I have Harris.” McNally says frankly. “And if there is anything I can ever do for you, please don’t hesitate to ask me.”

“Thanks, John.” Ashlyn addresses him less formally so that he understands that she wishes him no ill will. “Nothing can really fix it, but I appreciate you saying that and I do understand. We’re good.”

“Ok, well now that we cleared that up… any idea when you want to come back?” McNally asks trying to gauge what Harris has in mind for a timeline.

“How about tomorrow?” Ashlyn replies quickly before she can change her mind, knowing she just needs to dive back in before she loses her nerve.

“Wow, ok!” McNally says completely shocked. “I thought you’d want to take some time, but I’ll take you back the second you’re willing. We really need you around here. If you’re serious, we’ll get you squared away with Human Resources first thing tomorrow morning and then maybe just work on getting you recertified on your weapons to start.”

“Sounds good. I’ll be here at 8am tomorrow.” Ashlyn says and gets up to make her way out. “Thanks, McNally. I’m looking forward to getting back.”

“No, Harris, thank you. We’re beyond happy to have you back.” McNally says and gets up to salute her for the sole purpose of conveying his respect since they are the same rank.

Ashlyn’s chest is already tight as she leaves the police department, overwhelmed at the prospect of being back here tomorrow. It gets no better as she drives home through South Boston. She grew up in this neighborhood and had never wanted to be anywhere else. Even though she had eventually gone to live with her grandparents and her true feelings of home were associated with their house, South Boston was where her roots were planted. No matter how she felt about her childhood, something about this old neighborhood had always drawn her here and she had vowed to spend her life giving back to it and investing in its future.

Somehow it all feels so foreign now. She has felt out of place and like an outsider from the moment she got back a couple days ago. It’s an odd feeling that she’s never had. She feels completely uprooted and even strangely betrayed. Something she once felt so strongly towards now feels completely indifferent to her.

She’s trying hard not to let herself drown in all these new emotions, telling herself that she needs to give herself the time to readjust to everything. That once she’s immersed herself in her usual routine, things will fall back into place again. She’s back in her own driveway before she knows it, checking her phone and finding a text from Ali which she quickly replies to.
Paladin: How was the meeting with McNally? I’m done at 4pm, you want to meet for dinner or something?

Hero: It went pretty well I think. I’m starting work tomorrow (my choice). I made plans with Chris to go over and have dinner there and surprise the kids tonight. I’ll call you when I get back though?

Paladin: Wow, jumping right back in. Really glad you’re going to see the kiddos, tell them I said hi. Definitely call me tonight, I’ll be waiting :)

Hero: Will do. Have a great rest of the day/evening, Alex. :

Dinner with her family is exactly what Ashlyn needs after her day. The kids are more surprised and excited than she anticipates. Elsie latches onto her and spends the whole night touching her in some way. Curtis is so happy that he gets emotionally overwhelmed and sobs for the first hour before Ashlyn finally gets him to relax by playing hide and seek with them. Of course, spending time with Chris and Bridget is nice too and the whole thing does a lot to lift her mood.

Elsie falls asleep on Ashlyn’s lap shortly after dinner and the blonde happily puts her to bed, not realizing just how much she missed this until now. Curtis is not so easy. When it’s time for bed, she reads him a story like she always used to do and then tucks him in. Before she can kiss him goodnight, he starts sobbing again.

“Hey, buddy, what’s wrong?” Ashlyn whispers, getting close to him and running her hands through his soft hair to calm him.

“I don’t want you to go.” He whimpers. “Last time you said goodnight, you didn’t come back for a long time.”

Ashlyn’s heart pangs and she tries not to tear up. “I’m back now, sweetheart. I promise you, I’m never ever leaving again. I’ll be here every night if you want me to and you can some visit me anytime, ok? I’ve never broken a promise to you, right?”

“Yeah.” Curtis sniffles.

“Promise you I’m not leaving you again.” Ashlyn says again and hugs him close.

“Ok.” Curtis says as he buries his face into her shoulder.

Ashlyn stays with him until he falls asleep, feeling like she has a rock in her stomach at the realization of just how much her absence has affected their lives.

By the time she gets home, she’s practically a wreck with all of these feelings and thoughts swirling around inside. She settles down onto her couch and just breathes for a minute before she calls Ali. All it takes is a “Hi Ash, how was your day?” from the brunette and she finds herself so easily releasing a verbal torrent of details and emotions that have been building all day. Ali listens patiently and quietly the whole time, only speaking small affirmations that signal she’s paying attention. When Ashlyn is finally finished, she feels like a weight has been lifted and also a bit guilty that she hasn’t shut up for the last twenty minutes.

“Sorry, I know, I need a therapist. I think I found one though, I have an appointment next week.” Ashlyn says shyly.

“Not what I was going to say, but I am glad you found someone. I’m really glad you just told me all
of that and really happy that you feel okay talking to me. You can tell me anything anytime, you know that.” Ali reassures the blonde. “I think how you’re feeling is probably really normal even though I can’t possibly fully understand what it feels like. You’ve been out for just three days, Ash. Cut yourself some slack about feeling so overwhelmed. Anyone would feel that way in your position and probably even more so. You’re doing an amazing job and I’m proud of you. Give yourself time to work through things and heal. You owe it to yourself to not put any expectations on yourself right now.” Ali says gently before adding “Just slow your roll, Harris,” to lighten the mood.

“Thanks, Alex. You always know what to say to get through to me and calm me down.” Ashlyn replies.

“Well I hope that’s always true.” Ali wishes out loud.

Ashlyn smiles into the phone even though Ali can’t see her. Much like she was right from the beginning, Ali is like a beacon of light in the dark. The brunette has a way of making her feel anchored to something strong and sturdy, keeping her from getting lost adrift in her own mind. Right now, when everything feels so messed up, Ali is the one thing that doesn’t. The only thing that doesn’t seem distorted or tarnished in some way.

“Hey Alex, will you meet me for coffee in the morning? Ashlyn asks. “I have to be at work by 8am, so I totally understand if it’s too early.”

“Of course I’ll meet you for coffee. I’m an early bird anyway, you know that.” Ali answers already excited for the morning.

“Excellent. I should try and get some sleep and let you sleep.” Ashlyn says, not wanting to end the conversation because she knows she probably won’t sleep much tonight, but feeling bad about keeping Ali up any longer since she’s meeting her so early.

“Ok, yeah, you had a long day and should get some rest. Same for me. Where do you want to meet tomorrow?” Ali asks.

“Peet’s near the Common at 7am?” Ashlyn suggests.

“Perfect!” Ali agrees.

“Thanks again for tonight.” Ashlyn says gratefully.

“No need to thank me. I love when you talk to me.” Ali says honestly.

“Likewise. I promise to let you talk next time though and not be such a chatty Cathy.” Ashlyn jokes a bit.

Ali laughs lightly. “Sleep well, Ash.”

“Sweet dreams, Alex.”

Despite not being sleepy, Ashlyn settles herself into bed shortly after hanging up with Ali. She spends much of the night trying not to think about going back to work tomorrow and the million other negative thoughts in her head. Instead she thinks about what feels right, the very reason she asked Ali to meet her in the morning.

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Ali is early as usual, picking a quiet table in the corner of the coffee shop even though it’s Saturday
and the business-district shop is pretty empty anyway. She takes the liberty of ordering both of their coffees and a couple of chocolate croissants, knowing Ashlyn will be here any minute and won’t have all that long before she has to leave for work. She looks at her watch to see that it’s 7:02am and is about to text Ashlyn when her breath catches in her throat. The cop that has been standing in line for at least the last couple of minutes and that Ali has passingly glanced at twice now is in fact Ashlyn. She completely forgot to anticipate that the blonde would be dressed for work and hadn’t even thought to look at the female cop more closely until now.

“Ash!” Ali calls out and watches the blonde turn and look around before finally seeing Ali and breaking out into a huge grin as she walks over. Yet again, Ali is taken aback by how Ashlyn looks. She has never been one for the ‘girl in uniform’, but she sure as hell is now. Ashlyn is positively stunning in her dark navy blue police uniform, her hair up in a tight bun and light make-up on her face. Ali tries hard not to stare and start sweating as the blonde walks over to her.

“Sorry, Alex, didn’t see you there. Good morning!” She greets Ali with a hug. “I was going to order for us, but looks like you did that already.” She notes as she sits down.

“Yeah, I hope that’s ok. I was early.” Ali says a bit squeakily, finding her voice after the surprise of Ashlyn’s appearance.

“Totally ok, you know by now how I like my coffee.” Ashlyn replies.

“Did you sleep?” Ali asks seeing that Ashlyn looks tired now that she’s gotten a good look at her.

“Not really.” Ashlyn admits.


“Among other things.” Ashlyn says, watching as Ali looks at her inquisitively. ‘Now or never’ she mentally tells herself before going for it. “I always get a little nervous when I’m about to ask a beautiful woman on a date.” She says as assuredly as she can with a grin and watches Ali’s face turn from confused to a knowing smirk.

“Are you trying to insinuate something, Ash?” Ali plays shy.

“Nope. I’m not insinuating anything. I’m full on asking, Alex, will you go on a date with me Tuesday night?” Ashlyn asks confidently even though she has butterflies in her stomach.

“I thought you’d never ask, Harris.” Ali says with a wide smile, her tongue poking through her teeth a bit. “I would love to go on a date with you Tuesday night.”

“Good.” Ashlyn grins like a fool. “That gives me three days to plan a date and three days for you to change your mind.” She laughs at her own joke and reaches for Ali’s hand, content to feel the ever present spark between them on her skin.
Sun-rise, Sun-set

Chapter Notes

Ok, so Bobby is dead, Ashlyn is out of jail, and our girls are finally going on a date. All is right in the world, right? Umm...yeaaaah...about that...prepare yourself to have some very mixed emotions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Ashlyn sat in prison and imagined so many times how she’d feel once she asked Ali on a date, this wasn’t exactly what she expected. She’s over the moon about going on an official date with Ali, just like she thought she would be. The problem is that she also envisioned being settled back into life, happy to be out of jail, and free to focus on the important things in her life. She’s so far from any and all of those things that she feels pretty lost. If the past three days are any indication of how close she is to achieving some normalcy, she’s beyond far.

The first couple days back at work are just as uncomfortable as the day she first walked back into the police station. Her old colleagues flock to her wanting to make conversation, make sure she’s okay, offer their support, and make her feel welcome. They also all feel the need to apologize to her like it was them that shot her in the leg and framed her for a murder that sent her to jail. After only the first hour back at the station she had already had enough of it, but it just continued to happen over and over again with every damn officer she came into contact with. Even the new rookies she doesn’t know have felt the need to offer some sort of awkward statement of solidarity.

It’s not that she doesn’t appreciate it, but she can’t explain how unsettling it feels. It’s the way they look at her, the pity in their eyes that she can’t stomach. Even worse, none of it feels genuine despite the fact that she knows they have good intentions. The whole thing just seems like a charade to make everyone feel better about a really shitty situation that they were all involved in, even if just was peripherally. These are officers that just three years ago she wouldn’t have thought twice about taking a bullet for. Now all they have to say is ‘good morning’ and she’s already skeptical of them. In a place where she once felt the utmost respect, dignity and security, she now feels like the red-headed stepchild.

The only positive thing so far is that she easily passed her weapons certification. From the second she felt the steel of the gun in her palm, the familiarity of it came right back to her like an old friend. In all the things seemingly lost, this one skill is like second nature. Her self-defense talents are also still as sharp as ever and she’s proud that her instincts in this capacity have not failed her; her ability to protect others being among her most highly valued assets in terms of how she sees herself. Unfortunately, the good feelings about being back at work end there.

On her third day, McNally suggests that she does a ride-along patrol with one of the newer rookies because he thinks it will not only be good for the newbie to learn from Ashlyn’s experience, but also for her to get a feel for the neighborhood again. She’s happy to get out of the office, but cringes a bit at the thought of spending hours in the patrol car trying to make conversation.

The guy actually turns out to be really nice and is one of the only people that doesn’t acknowledge anything Bobby related. He merely asks her relevant questions about when she first started with the department and about her military career. He even manages to talk about sports and cars with her
without mansplaining anything, a feat to his credit in-and-of-itself. Truth be told, she probably would have been good friends with him before her life turned upside-down. Unfortunately, making new friends doesn’t seem like an appealing option right now when she feels so closed off from everyone. Despite the good company and quiet afternoon, the ride-along goes far from well.

In her mind, this South Boston neighborhood has always been vibrant and teeming with good people and plentiful opportunity. As she circles it over and over again with the rookie cop, she no longer sees any of that. It seems so dank and downtrodden, polluted and, frankly, downright seedy. The place she once saw so much promise in suddenly seems like nothing more than a perfect place to sustain the organized crime that is already so deeply etched into its history. She has spent countless years proudly protecting, investing, and believing in this neighborhood only to feel nothing but completely disconnected from it now. Her past therapist had once suggested that in feeling like she was giving back to this community, that perhaps it was her way of compensating for the troubling childhood memories she had there; that she had turned her hurt into purpose. Riding along on the patrol it hits her hard that her career and sense of community are now crumbling under her feet, her life’s purpose and self-identity landsliding right along with it.

Perhaps more disturbing is that these feelings of detachment extend to her family too. It has been nothing short of wonderful to be able to spend time with her brother and his family. Being there to put her niece and nephew to bed the last couple nights has meant everything, making her heart feel full. But it has also made her heart ache too. The way the kids have latched onto her and lavished her with over-the-top affection as if she’s going to disappear at any moment has been hard to ignore. It’s not just as simple as her having missed them in her life the last three years, but more poignantly, that they have missed her in theirs too. The thought that they have suffered over her absence makes her heart hurt.

Her brother and Bridget have been wonderful and supportive. Being around her family has been soothing and definitely a good thing. Still, there’s something about the way they are so cautious with her in constantly checking in and the way Chris is so careful about how and what he jokes about even though he never held back before. It makes her realize that this too is somewhat broken. Not in a hopeless and irreparable way, but in the way that it will need time to heal and mend before it is whole and normal again. Her friendships are in a similar state as she tries to figure out how she even begins to reconnect with the people she so selfishly pushed away for three years and how she will ever make it right.

All of these things are fixable. Things she can work through and eventually find a way to be at peace with again. Right now though, with all of it converging like this, it’s just plain overwhelming and she feels completely lost in herself with no understanding of what the right path forward is.

And then there is Ali…

Ali who is the sun. The bright center of her solar system that provides her the light she needs to sustain herself and the force to tether her securely so she doesn’t float away into the dark abyss. Ali is the one single thing right now that doesn’t feel broken or detached or overwhelming. She’s the one perfect, good thing that she can lose herself in without getting lost. It has helped Ashlyn remain cognizant of the fact that something beautiful came out of all of this, that not all of it is a complete mess.

She’s been good about telling Ali everything that is going on, pretty much talking her ear off the last couple of nights. The brunette has somehow calmed her every time, despite the fact that the negative feelings just rebuild themselves the next day in a seemingly endless cycle. Still, she’s been careful not to take advantage of Ali either and has set up twice-a-week therapy sessions with her new psychologist who she already really likes.
The woman, Dr. Gloria Plume, had not been at all shy in their first Monday session in telling her that her feelings are completely valid and that this will be a grind over time to find healing. That she will have to work on rebuilding herself again much like she did after her military career ended. Ashlyn immediately respected that she didn’t try to sugarcoat it. Dr. Plume had also suggested that she try and focus and ruminate on the aspects of her life that feel good to her so that they could work from there. Right now, outside of spending time with her brother and the kids, that pretty much means Ali. So, Ashlyn continues to focus on moving forward with and planning this date that she feels like she’s been waiting forever for. In her heart, she just knows that this is her last first date ever and she wants it to be perfect.

Ashlyn’s face lights up when her phone rings late Monday night, ‘Paladin’ showing on the caller ID. She picks it up and hears Ali’s voice before she can even get a word out.

“So, Hero…are you going to tell me where we are going tomorrow so I can figure out what to wear?” Ali asks playfully. “Also might be nice to know when you’re actually picking me up so that I’m not still naked when you get here.” She adds in jest.

“Well, now that you said that…I think I’ll leave the pick-up time a mystery.” Ashlyn flirts shamelessly.

“Charming, Harris.” Ali teases her.

“I’m kidding, Alex. Well, not really about the naked thing.” Ashlyn piles it on. “Buuuut, I’ll pick you up at your house at 1600 hours sharp. That ok?”

“Yeah, the military time thing always confuses the crap out of me, so I’m gonna need a translation.” Ali laughs a bit at her incompetence.

“4pm.” The blonde clarifies.

“Oh wow, starting it off on the early side. I can roll with that.” Ali comments on the late afternoon timing, having not expected it.

“Yep, we have a lot to get in.” Ashlyn replies vaguely.

“So, are you going to tell me where we’re going so I can dress appropriately?” Ali asks again.

“Nope. That’s for me to know and you to find out.” Ashlyn answers, the smirk on her face evident in her voice.

“I should have known you’d be one of those surprise/suspense first date types.” Ali pretend complains.

“Yeah, you definitely should have seen it coming.” Ashlyn confirms.

“But how will I know what to wear if you don’t tell me?” Ali slightly whines.

“I thought we just established that clothing was optional?” Ashlyn goads her.

“Asssshhhlyn!” Ali whines again.

“Ok, ok…I’ll go easy on you. Wear something casual enough to walk around and be comfortable in, but nice enough that you wouldn’t get the stink eye if we went to a semi-nice restaurant.” Ashlyn
takes pity on her.

“Oh geez. So, what you’re really saying is that I better call Kyle for advice.” Ali replies in a fluster.

“Exactly!” Ashlyn laughs.

“Ok, I’m going to pretend like I’m not completely frazzled about what to wear and just ask you how your day was.” Ali says, the slight anxiety in her voice evident.

“Relax, Alex. You look amazing in everything, whatever you wear will be perfect.” Ashlyn reassures the brunette before answering her question. “Well my therapy appointment today was really good. Dr. Plume gave it to me straight. I’ve been in a somewhat similar place before when I was discharged from the army. I guess I need to come to terms with the fact that this is all going to take time and effort and it’s pretty much going to suck for a while. I just hate being here again.” She says dejectedly. “And work was as crappy as it has been every other day so far. I got put on a simple ride-along patrol today and technically it went fine. Riding around the neighborhood over and over again though… I don’t know, I just can’t see what I ever saw in coming back here in the first place. Why wasn’t I able to see all the negative things before now? I mean, I’ve dedicated my career and then some to this community and now it seems so…worthless…” Ashlyn trails off.

“I’m sorry, Ash.” Ali says sincerely, hating that the blonde is in so much anguish. “I really do believe that even though it will take time and effort, that it will all be okay. You’re so strong and I have no doubt that you’ll find your light again. I truly believe in you.” She says with complete confidence. “Plus, you’ll have one pesky ass bitch as your ride-along the whole way.”

Ashlyn lets out a small laugh. Ali’s words speak right to her very soul and she’s so appreciative of the fact that someone believes that things will be ok and believes in her even when she doesn’t. “Thank you. You have no idea what that means right now.” The gratitude rolls right off her tongue effortlessly. In the few moments of silence that follow, her mind wanders to something else she’s been thinking about. “Hey, can I ask you something?”


“I was wondering if you’re still planning to release a podcast about this whole thing. I mean, things got a lot more personal for you than I think either of us expected and it took a crazy turn. I guess I’m trying to figure out what you’re thinking about it now.” Ashlyn tries to ask sensitively.

“Hmmm, I guess I haven’t really thought about it much. My gut reaction is that even though it’s going to be really difficult for me to get through my own father leaving me for dead, part of me knows that just being open about it will probably go a long way in making me feel less ashamed eventually. A way of being in control of my own truth, you know? So, yeah, I’m still onboard.” Ali replies thoughtfully. “But only if you are!” She quickly adds. “Totally okay if you changed your mind.”

“No, I didn’t.” Ashlyn replies to put the brunette at ease. “The local media has really been on my case, even showing up at work. It seems like they’re not going to stop hounding me until I make some kind of statement or something. I just thought maybe I could say something about not wanting to speak about it and that all of their questions will be answered in the podcast. I didn’t want to presume that there would still be a podcast though.” She explains. “I trust you with my truth more than I even trust myself with it.”

“Well in that case, I’d be honored to tell your truth Captain Harris.” Ali says trying to keep things light even though what Ashlyn just said means the world to her.
“Thank you very kindly, Attorney Krieger.” Ashlyn jokes back. “Anyway enough of my questions and about me for one night. How was last night and how was your day?”

“Same nightmare as always, but at least it was only once last night. Plus I can always sleep in if I want to, perks of being a self-employed podcaster.” Ali says casually before really getting into her thoughts. “I’m starting to realize that part of the problem is just being in this weird limbo. I got an update from Rebecca this morning. Ken is still pretty much in the same shape but showing some small signs of possible improvement. It’s like I can’t have closure until I can either learn to deal with him being alive in whatever state he’s going to be in or properly come to terms with his death. This not knowing which way it will go is difficult.”

“You’re so insightful about yourself, I really admire that.” Ashlyn says earnestly. “You’ve made incredible strides in such a short time. I mean, you are miles and miles ahead of where I was this far out from my past traumatic experiences. I’m sure it must be really frustrating to have your closure dictated by factors outside of your control, but you really are handling it so amazingly well, Alex.”

“Thank you. You’re so good to me. I really love talking to you.” Ali says almost dreamily. “And you’re really good for my self-esteem!” She adds a bit more cheerily.

“Ditto.” Ashlyn replies, once again relishing in the tranquility that Ali seems to bring out in her. “You should go get some sleep, I’m keeping you out late tomorrow.”

“Is that so, Harris? What if I had a curfew?” Ali jokes.

“Then we’d definitely be breaking it.” Ashlyn replies with a small chuckle.

“I really can’t wait.” Ali says honestly. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Ash. Goodnight.”

“Me either. Goodnight, Alex.” Ashlyn replies sweetly and hangs up.

Ali puts her phone down on the kitchen counter for a second while she grabs a bottle of water out of the fridge. She doesn’t even make it halfway there before the phone is ringing again, ‘Hero’ lighting up on the screen.

“Cancelling on me already?” Ali answers mockingly.

“Never. So, um, I just realized I have no idea where exactly you live other than in Newton. Kinda gonna need an address.” Ashlyn says shyly.

“Such an amateur, Harris.” Ali pokes fun at the blonde for a second. “177 Forest Ave.”

“Got it, thanks. Date disaster averted!” Ashlyn says in mock relief.

“I sure hope your game is better than this tomorrow night.” Ali keeps teasing.

“Oh it will be, count on it.” Ashlyn says cockily.

“I don’t know, I’ve been told I have high expectations.” Ali counters.

“And I intend to shatter every single one of them.” Ashlyn replies with finite confidence.

“Well then… good night again, gorgeous.” Ali says through a smile.

“Sweet dreams, beautiful.” Ashlyn says back in an almost whisper.

Ali hangs up and holds the phone to her heart for a second, letting out a contented sigh as her heart
races. Her smile is so big it’s actually hurting her face.

“Oh this is going to be gooood.” Kyle says from the entrance of the kitchen with a grin plastered on his face, startling Ali a bit who had no idea he was home yet.

“How long have you been standing there?” Ali questions with narrowed eyes.

“Long enough to know Alex is in loooooove.” He says in the tone of a middle-school girl spreading gossip.

“You’re the worst!” Ali huffs at him.

“I only speak the truth! Nighty night princess!” He yells as he makes his way up the stairs, leaving Ali to figure out if she’s so obvious that Ashlyn has already figured it out too.

‘Ok, Harris, you got this.’ Ashlyn mentally coaches herself as she turns onto the cul-de-sac that Ali’s house sits at the end of according to the GPS. “Holy shit…whew!” She says out loud with her mouth hanging open as the place comes into view. House is not the right word, mansion is a tad more accurate. The place is a huge light tan, Victorian style home that is at least two stories if not three with beautiful bay windows. Even though there’s a light coating of snow on the ground, Ashlyn can tell the lawn and gardens are perfectly manicured in the warmer seasons. Ali and Kyle’s cars are both parked out in the driveway despite the three car garage.

Ashlyn nervously adjusts her tie a bit and pulls herself together for a moment before grabbing the items on her front seat and heading to the door. She takes one last deep breath and then opts to bang the door knocker even though there’s a doorbell because she’s never actually had the opportunity to use a door knocker before and she thinks it’s cool.

Ali is standing in the kitchen with Kyle when she hears the banging of the door knocker. Both of them look at each other and laugh a bit as Ali shakes her head thinking ’Of course she used the door knocker.’

“I just love that woman!” Kyle announces as he looks at his watch. “And a minute early as usual! See, now aren’t you glad I made you get ready on time?” He gives Ali a playful look as she goes to open the door. He decides to hang back in the kitchen and not intrude like he wants to.

Ali gives her hair a quick toss over her shoulder and lets out a breath before opening the door, only to suck it right back in again through her teeth when she sees Ashlyn. The blonde is standing there in dark gray fitted pants and a white button-up shirt with a black skinny tie that hangs just a bit loosely but not in a sloppy way. She has her black peacoat on with the buttons open and has paired her outfit with black Nike all-court sneakers. Her hair is pulled into a neat bun and she has just enough make-up on her face to perfectly accent her striking features. She’s absolutely gorgeous and Ali can barely breathe for a second, let alone speak.

Ashlyn waits outside the door for a few seconds and shifts her weight a bit from foot to foot. Just as it dawns on her that this house is huge and maybe she should have used the doorbell to be heard, the door opens in front of her. She looks up quickly to meet her favorite whiskey colored eyes, her face automatically breaking into a smile.

“Gosh you’re beautiful.” The words come tumbling out of Ashlyn’s mouth completely unfiltered as she looks at Ali. The brunette has on dark skinny jeans, a slim-fitting beige cardigan with a light gray
floral-patterned accessory scarf and black low-heeled boots. Her make-up is flawless and her soft hair is flowing perfectly over her shoulders. She is literally the most beautiful woman Ashlyn has ever seen.

Ali is still trying to find her voice when she hears Ashlyn blurt out that she’s beautiful. And she knows the blonde truly means it by the way she is looking at her. Ashlyn is standing there with her lips slightly parted and this look of marvel in her eyes like she is beholding one of the great wonders of the ancient world.

Ashlyn only realizes that she actually said something out loud when she sees Ali smile widely and blush a bit. She smiles back and is about to break the silent moment between them when Ali does it for her.

“You look so nice, Ash… completely gorgeous.” Ali compliments the blonde, finally finding her words.

“Thanks, Alex. You are positively stunning. Oh, here… for you.” Ashlyn says moving the hand that was behind her back out toward Ali, a medium-sized stuffed-animal shark held by the tail in her grasp.

Ali lets out a giggle. “Ok, well, not at all what I was expecting… but you’re adorable, Harris. Completely unconventional, but adorable.”

Ashlyn laughs back a bit. “Thought I was going to be all traditional with flowers, huh? Well, I’m pretty traditional in general, just not on a first date.” She explains. “As much as I love flowers, I find them to be antiquated and supplicative on a first date… and certainly not appropriate for my brave, independent lawyer who deserves to be courted and treated like the strong woman that she is. So, the romantic flowers will come after I’ve earned the right to give them and not a moment before. Instead, I give you sharky… because I totally saw you tear up when they killed Jaws and because you definitely stayed up watching that shark documentary despite the fact that I was fast asleep and you could have changed it.”

‘Could you be any more perfect?’ Ali thinks to herself, already practically swooning and over a stuffed shark nonetheless. “Smooth, Harris. So smooth.” She gives the shark a quick squeeze with a smile and reaches her hand out for Ashlyn’s. “Come on in.”

Ashlyn walks passed Ali through the doorway and the brunette breathes in deeply to inhale the amazing scent. It’s a clean fragrance of citrus and sandalwood with soft hints of bergamot and she can’t get enough of it. “You smell so good, Ash.” Ali remarks.

“Thanks.” Ashlyn replies shyly as she takes in the large foyer and cathedral ceilings, an ornate wooden railing framing the staircase just off to her right. The floorplan is really open and Ashlyn can see just about every room on the first floor, her eyes going right to a huge double-sided fireplace that services both the living room and dining room. The décor is on the modern side, but homey and still appropriate for the style of architecture. It’s a beautiful home and really has a lot of Ali reflected in it.

“Wow, Alex. When you said house, you probably should have said palace. Your place is amazing!” She says in awe.

“Oh, thanks.” Ali says a bit bashfully. “Want a tour?”

“Well, I’d say yes, but we really should go soon and this place is so big we’d end up missing out on our date. So, rain check?” Ashlyn replies.

Ali laughs. “Of course! Next time. But, Kyle is in the kitchen probably dying to come out here, so
maybe you’ll come say hi?”

“Definitely! Actually, this is for him.” Ashlyn says looking down at the Tupperware container in her hand.

“Yeah, what is that?” Ali inquires, having noted the blonde holding it but not wanting be nosey and ask.

“Peace offering. A batch of double-chocolate brownies I made this morning. I intend to have you out late and I already know he’ll be up waiting to grill you when you get home, sooo…” Ashlyn explains.

“Brilliant.” Ali nudges her a bit and laughs as they round the corner into the kitchen.

“About time! Do you know how hard it was to wait in here?!” Kyle belts out dramatically. “Took you guys long enough to eye hump each other. Not that I blame either of you…looking sharp, Harris.” He says approvingly as he looks at the combination she put together from the clothing he helped her pick out recently.

“Thanks. This is for you… brownies.” Ashlyn says handing him the container.

“I knew I loved you!” Kyle says, taking the container from her and opening it to grab a quick taste. “Mmmm, these are fantastic. Yep, you can definitely date my sister!” He jokes, earning an eye roll from Ali. “You want me to put those in wat…” He trails off seeing that what is in Ali’s hand is definitely not flowers like he expected, but a stuffed shark. “Oh Harris, you win at life! I fucking love it!”

Ali hits him on the head with the shark while Ashlyn just laughs. “Go put this on my bed, ass.” She directs him.

“Right-O! Well, you kids buckle-up and use protection!” Kyle teases as he heads up the stairs. “Enjoy your night, ladies!”

“I completely forgot how over-the-top he can be. I totally missed that.” Ashlyn says shaking her head.

“He really is too much sometimes, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Ali says fondly.

“I know exactly what you mean.” Ashlyn agrees. “So, you ready?”

“Yes, let’s go!” Ali says grabbing her coat off the mudroom hook near the kitchen and smiling when she feels Ashlyn right behind her helping to slip it on over her shoulders.

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They drive in Ashlyn’s Jeep for about 30 minutes with Ali happily playing DJ with the satellite radio. Ali looks at the blonde quizzically as they pull into a parking garage that she’s familiar with.

“So, are we just parking here or…” She trails off.

“Nope, we’re going here.” Ashlyn replies simply, parking in one of the Museum of Science labeled spots.
“Well, we’re like 30 minutes into this date and I’m already completely impressed by your ingenuity. Keep it coming, Harris.” Ali says approvingly. “Though I am curious as to why the Museum of Science?”

Ashlyn relishes in the compliment before answering. “Two reasons. One, everyone thinks this a place for kids despite being open to people of all ages. Growing up, I never got to do this kind of thing as a kid and the first time I came here was as an adult. So, I’ve gotten to experience the wonder of it through adult eyes and I wanted to share that with you. Second, I tend to put a lot of stock in the symbolism of special moments. In that hospital room, when I told you that I wanted to take you on this date… the Museum of Science was at the very center of the view from that room and I haven’t been able to get it out of my mind.”

The feeling coursing through Ali right now is completely indescribable, mostly because she’s just never felt it before Ashlyn. The woman touches her to the very depths of her soul and she couldn’t adore someone more. She takes Ashlyn’s right hand into her left and reaches over with her right hand to cup the blonde’s cheek, stroking it lightly with her thumb. “You never cease to amaze me, Ash.”

“Likewise.” Ashlyn replies simply, taking Ali’s hand off her cheek and kissing it softly. The way the atmosphere around them is right now, she knows if she says anything else they’ll never leave the car. “Come on beautiful, we have a tight schedule.”

The two of them stand in the main lobby after Ashlyn purchases the tickets. “So, where to first?” Ali asks.

“Well, we don’t have a ton of time here since we have a lot to do tonight. You’ve been here before, right?” Ashlyn asks.

“Yeah, but not since like 8th grade.” Ali replies.

“Doesn’t matter. Think about something you remember here.” Ashlyn instructs the brunette and watches Ali think for a minute.

“Okay, well, they used to have this display that would show a blinking red light every time someone on earth died and a green one for every time a baby was born.” Ali recalls.

“I know that one. The Hall of Human Life, come on.” Ashlyn says taking Ali’s hand and leading the way.

A short walk later and they’re in front of the very exhibit Ali was talking about. They stand there in silence for a few minutes watching the red and green lights blink. The red light symbolizing death goes off once every second and the green one symbolizing birth blinks considerably faster and almost looks constant at 4 times per second according to the explanation on the display.

“I like to believe that the things that stick in our memories are the ones that affect us most. What are you thinking about right now?” Ashlyn asks.

“We used to come here on school field trips every year through 8th grade. It took me until 6th grade to realize that this display was just a symbolic representation based on the math of how many people die and are born each year. Before that, I used to actually think that someone really died every time that light went off. It made me so sad. To the point that when my grandparents died when I was little, the first thing I thought about was that this red light had just blinked for them. For some reason, this always mesmerized me.” Ali answers reminiscently. “Right now though, it’s just makes me realize how time is so much bigger than we are. That it keeps moving without us and that our lives are such
a small part of this world, a mere flash of light. It reminds me to make the most of it because it really
does begin and end that quickly in the grand scope of things.” Ali motions to the flashing lights.

“Hmmm.” Ashlyn says contemplatively.


“Nothing, you’ll see in a minute. Let’s go to my favorite.” The blonde replies, leading Ali to the
Cosmic Light exhibit hall not too far away. She brings the brunette right over the huge light-up wall
map of the Milky Way. “So, this is my favorite display.”

Just like the last exhibit, they both stand there looking at it for a couple minutes. Ali notices that the
sun and all the planets are labeled as well as many well-known stars. She thinks about what Ashlyn
just said back in the other exhibit hall and realizes that the point of this is to get to know each other
more deeply in an unconventional way. “So, what are you thinking right now?”

Ashlyn smiles at Ali for a second, glad the brunette has caught on. “The first time I saw this, it blew
my mind and it still does. Look at that tiny dot that we’re living on.” She says pointing to the one
labeled as Earth. “And look how many other planets and stars are just in this one galaxy. We can’t
even really see much beyond this. We have no idea how big space is, but are able to estimate that
there could be millions of galaxies out there, some even bigger than ours. Imagine how many more
places like Earth there could be out there and maybe other people just like us or even completely
different that we don’t even have a clue about. I mean, look how small we are in relation to what is
around us. It just puts so much into perspective. And then again, what if there is no other place like
Earth and it really is just us? What a complete waste of space, and also, what a special purpose we
must have then. It reminds me that I am fortunate to even exist and not to waste that opportunity.”

“Wow.” Ali whispers, as blown away now as Ashlyn seems to be.

“And when you were trying to figure out why I was looking at you like that back in the other exhibit
hall. I already knew what the most striking thing in the museum was for me and the reason why.
When you showed me yours and explained why… it hit me that we chose very different exhibits, but
for completely parallel reasons. They each remind us that we are such a small piece of a greater
whole.” Ashlyn explains.

Ali is so caught up in the meaningfulness of it all that she almost forgets to breathe. “Geez, Ash, you
really know how take my breath away.” She says in awe of it all. “You might have even just killed
me a little.” She jokes a bit.

“Nope…sorry, no red blinking light for you, Krieger! I have another favorite!” Ashlyn jokes back
and leads Ali to their next museum adventure.

“Come on, Alex! It takes two people to do it!” Ashlyn pleads.

And just like that Ali finds herself being talked into playing Chopsticks on the musical staircase
while about twenty other museum patrons watch them jump up and down on the stairs like five year
olds. In having the time of her life while humiliating herself in public, that’s when she realizes that
she would really do anything for this woman. This magnificent woman who is like no one she has
ever met. Who brings out a side of her she didn’t even know existed, but is so grateful for. And who
she is absolutely and completely in love with in every way that people write books and sing songs
about… and then some.
Ali stands on the top step giggling and trying to catch her breath after all that jumping while she watches Ashlyn take a small bow as the small crowd claps for them. She shakes her head and takes her own bow as the blonde points to her in recognition from below with a huge dimpled grin on her face.

Ali wraps her arm around Ashlyn’s waist and leans in close as they walk around the dinosaur exhibit nearby. Ashlyn follows suit and drapes her arm over the brunette’s shoulders as they look at the huge prehistoric statues.

“You hungry?” Ashlyn asks after a few minutes.

“Starved.” Ali replies with a smile.

“Good, because we should get to dinner.” Ashlyn says leading the way back to the car.

A fifteen minute drive later and they’ve reached their destination. “Oh my god, Bronwyn! I’ve been dying to try this place!” Ali yells out excitedly seeing that they’re in front of the German restaurant that had just opened up in Somerville early last year with rave reviews.

“Good, because you’re ordering the food. I have no idea what I’m doing, so I’m leaving it all up to you.” Ashlyn says before telling the hostess the reservation name and being seated right away.

In only takes a quick scan of the menu before Ali is calling the waiter over. “We’ll have the Bretzel, the Brondog, and the Spätzle. Oh and we’ll split a Hefeweizen.” Ali orders assuredly. Even though neither of them drinks much, she’s not passing up the opportunity to share her favorite style of beer with Ashlyn.

“I like when you’re so confident, it’s sexy.” Ashlyn says with unabashed honesty.

“Don’t even get me started on you, Harris.” Ali says purposely looking the blonde up and down to make her point. “Well, except for the musical stairs. Not sexy at all, but, still completely adorable.” Ali teases.

“But it was fun though, right?” Ashlyn asks with slight puppy eyes.

“So much fun!” Ali gives in. “Can’t believe I actually did that!”

“Me either. I thought you’d never go for it.” Ashlyn admits with a laugh, reaching to hold Ali’s hand over the table.

Their food arrives really quickly and they dig right in. Ashlyn is completely impressed that the odd combination of a soft pretzel, something that looks like a German version of a chili dog, and a plate of cheesy noodles that comes in a close second to her grandma’s mac and cheese makes for such an amazing dinner combination. “Damn, you did good, Krieger.” She says leaning back to pat her stomach.

“Yeah, well, you picked the place. So credit to both of us. Glad you liked it. I haven’t had good German food in a very long time, so thank you.” Ali replies with a smile.

“We better get going or we’ll be late to our next adventure.” Ashlyn says looking at her watch.

Another quick drive across the city of Boston and Ashlyn pulls up to the Boston Opera House, the marquee lit up with the name ‘Hamilton’ across it.

“No fucking way! Are you serious?!” Ali practically screeches as Ashlyn tosses her keys to the valet
and hurries them inside so they don’t miss anything.

“Yes way! You love live theater and I’ve never been, so it seemed like a good idea.” Ashlyn explains.

“I love Hamilton!” Ali replies enthusiastically. She had seen it on Broadway with Kyle early last year and it had quickly become one of her favorites.

“I know, Alex. You talk about it more than you realize.” Ashlyn teases her a bit, earning a nudge from Ali who is leaning in close again as the blonde gently holds the small of her back.

The usher leads them to their seats and Ali’s jaw practically hits the floor when she realizes they don’t just have any seats. They have VIP seats in their very own private balcony overlooking the stage. The very balconies that Ali has always admired as she envied the people sitting in them.

“Ash…” She whispers in disbelief. “How did you…”

“You’re not the only one that doesn’t half-ass things, Alex.” Ashlyn cuts her off with a smile and helps her take her coat off. “Plus… I am not throwing away my shot!” She belts out melodically with a wink.

Ali lets out a laugh. “Oh my god, you actually listened to music for this show, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did. I wasn’t coming in here blind, Krieger!” Ashlyn replies.

“Who’s the perfect one now, Harris?” Ali asks as she pulls Ashlyn’s hand to her mouth and gently kisses each of her knuckles, watching the blonde’s eyes flutter closed for just a second.

“You still are.” Ashlyn replies sweetly as the lights go down and the show starts.

They sit close together, some part of them in constant contact with each other as they watch the show. Ashlyn smiles to herself as Ali unconsciously sings many of the song lyrics throughout the night. When it’s over they both clap until their hands hurt before finally making their way out.

“So, what did you think?” Ali asks as they wait for the valet to bring the car.

“Such an amazing experience! I loved it even though I have no other theater experience to compare it to.” Ashlyn says enthusiastically, wrapping her arms around Ali from behind to keep her warm while they wait for the valet to get the car.

“What was your favorite part?” Ali asks.

“The Guns and Ships song, such a great beat.” Ashlyn answers, choosing to pick from Act One because in Act Two Ali had been absentmindedly rubbing circles on her thigh with her thumb and Ashlyn had a harder time focusing.

“I like that one too.” Ali says before adding, “Who am I kidding, I love them all!”

Ashlyn laughs loudly as the car pulls up and they jump in. “Ok, one last stop!”

“Where to now?” Ali questions curiously since it’s already 11:30pm.

“Machine.” Ashlyn replies.


“The one and only.” Ashlyn confirms. “I used to go there years ago because an old friend of mine
runs all the lesbian nights and I’d go hang with her there for support. I stopped going mostly because she had a rough bout with breast cancer and has just run the operations from the office since then. Anyway, Tuesday is theme night and I thought it would be a fun way to end.” She explains.

“Sounds like fun!” Ali agrees. “What’s the theme?”

“Tonight is country line dancing.” Ashlyn replies.

“Oh um, Ash… I’ve never done that. I don’t have a clue what to do.” Ali says shyly.

“Neither do I, Alex. That’s the beauty of it.” Ashlyn says with a smile.

Thirty minutes later, Ashlyn is do-si-do-ing with Ali all over the place as they both make complete fools of themselves. Ali can’t remember the last time she had this much fun doing something she would normally cringe at the thought of. The place is pretty crowded, but neither of them notice as their eyes never leave each other all night. Not long into it, Ali is already down to a gray tank-top while Ashlyn has lost the tie, rolled up her sleeves, and unbuttoned her shirt a bit. After downing their second glasses of water within an hour, they’re both pretty wiped and decide to go for one more dance before they head out. As they approach the dancefloor, the DJ announces that she’s about to take a short-break, so the music slows to some country love song.

Ali figures that it will be their cue to head out, but Ashlyn doesn’t miss a beat as she pulls Ali close and wraps her arms around the brunette’s waist. They’re one of only two couples out on the dance floor, but Ali could care less right now as she takes in the blonde’s scent and rests her head on Ashlyn’s shoulder. There’s something about the way Ashlyn holds her that she can’t get enough of. It’s protective but comfortable, secure but gentle, and completely blissful.

Ashlyn’s heart is beating a mile a minute as she slowly sways with Ali on the dancefloor. The brunette is pressed tightly against her and Ali’s fingers are lightly playing with the wisps of hair on the back of Ashlyn’s neck, causing her to breakout in goosebumps. She almost can’t believe she’s standing here right now, never in her life experiencing feelings as intense as those that Ali elicits. Ali who is second to no one, perfect in every way, and who she couldn’t possibly be any more in love with, but who she knows she’ll still find a way to love even more tomorrow. As the song nears its end, Ashlyn feels Ali press a few soft kisses onto her collarbone and up to the crook of her neck. She swears her legs almost buckle and she’s struggling to stay upright as she trembles a bit, her thumbs finding their way under the hem of Ali’s tank-top so she can feel the warm skin of the brunette’s lower back. She lowers her head and kisses Ali’s forehead, feeling the brunette smile against her neck.

The song inevitably ends much to both of their disappointment and the fast-beat music starts up again. They stay slowly swaying for just another few moments before reluctantly pulling apart, their eyes meeting and conveying everything that words can’t right now.

“Should we head out?” Ashlyn asks, breaking the silence first.

Ali nods her head with a smile and takes Ashlyn’s hand as they head to the table where they left their clothes and coats. After getting bundled up again, they silently walk close together to where the car is parked, content to just enjoy each other’s presence.

Just like before, Ali plays with the radio while Ashlyn drives. “Favorite part of the night?” Ashlyn asks.

“I honestly can’t pick one. Everything was unique with its own special meaning. You were on point all night, Harris.” Ali admits. “Although, I don’t think I will ever forget you pulling that shark out
from behind your back when you picked me up. As if you weren’t disarming enough already…” Ali adds with a giggle.

“I had such a good time with you. I’m glad you liked it.” Ashlyn replies, her thumb starting to rub circles on Ali’s hand that she’s holding over the center console.

A couple more quiet minutes pass before Ali excited says “Oooh, good song!”

Ashlyn looks down at the radio to see Missy Higgins’ ‘Where I Stood’. “I haven’t heard this in forever.” She remarks thinking back to how her ex, Riley, was a big fan and they spent a summer following Missy Higgins around on her Northeast tour stops. She’s about to make a comment about it to Ali when she hears it…

_I don’t know who I am with you, all I know is that I should_

The lyric hits her like a brick to the face, her heart suddenly dropping like a stone into her stomach. She’s heard the line hundreds of times, but never has it had such a poignant meaning as it does now. Ten seconds ago, she wanted nothing more than to kiss Ali goodnight, profess her love, and promise her everything good in the world. How on earth can she do that when she can’t even promise herself those things?

Ali is everything right now. The only good thing, the singular thing she’s sure about. Beyond that, she doesn’t know anything. What she wants, where she’s going, or even who she really is anymore. Outside of Ali, everything is just a dark labyrinth of confusion that she doesn’t see a way out of. What’s worse is that she knows exactly what her tendencies will be in this situation. She’ll latch herself onto Ali, being content to stay close to what she knows and endlessly endure the rest of the darkness just to keep the status quo. It’s not fair. Not fair to Ali to always have to be the anchor that holds it all together while Ashlyn wanders lost in the dark. Not fair to herself to forgo taking the time to heal and find the inner peace she deserves.

Ashlyn suddenly knows exactly what she needs to do now as her mind reels and races. She refuses to pull Ali down into the darkness with her, especially when the brunette is already struggling with her own. She absolutely will not suck the sun into her black hole of misery. She just wishes she had made the realization sooner, before this night happened and heightened the stakes. Ali’s hand squeezes hers and she feels like she might throw up.

Ali senses the shift in the blonde as they approach Newton and squeezes her hand. She figures Ashlyn must be just as nervous about the goodnight part of this date as she is. She’s not nervous in a bad way, just in an anticipatory way. In that way that she knows her whole world is about to change. For the first time in her life, it’s not about what she doesn’t want. She knows exactly what she wants without question. She wants Ashlyn Harris to hold her and never let go, to steal her heart and never give it back, to be the one who walks besides her always and the kiss on her lips when she takes her final breath.

Both of them have butterflies for different reasons as the Jeep pulls into Ali’s driveway. Ashlyn lets go of Ali’s hand to get out of the car and open the brunette’s door for her. The night is bitterly cold now, so they quickly walk to the front door. When they get there, Ashlyn takes Ali’s hands in both of hers and steel herself as best she can as she loses herself in the whiskey colored eyes staring back into her own.

“Alex, this was one of the best nights of my life without question. You…you’re everything, the only great thing in my life right now, my sun amidst the darkness. Thank you.” Ashlyn says with every
ounce of feeling she has, needing the brunette to understand what she means to her. She feels herself starting to tremble, but not because she’s cold.

“Hey, I’m always going to be your sun.” Ali reassures the blonde as she steps closer, moving her hands to Ashlyn’s waist. “Tonight was amazing. You’re amazing.” She smiles and moves in even closer to where they are now practically breathing the same air. They are so close that she feels more than sees Ashlyn’s hand come up to rest on her cheek.

“I don’t want to say goodnight.” Ashlyn whispers, her warm breath tickling Ali’s lips.

“Me either.” Ali whispers back, letting her eyes dart down to Ashlyn’s lips before closing them and waiting for the kiss that will change everything, ready to let herself completely float away.

Ashlyn watches Ali’s eyes go to her lips and close. The brunette’s lips are just about ghosting hers and she wants nothing more than to kiss her deeply and make her feel everything that is in her heart. She knows that she can’t. If she does, she’ll never have the strength to do what she needs to. She closes the distance and chastely presses her lips to Ali’s, letting herself enjoy the warm jolt that runs through her body for just a moment before quickly pulling away with her eyes still closed.

Ali feels Ashlyn’s lips close in on hers, the tingly feeling spreading through her body as she waits for the moment that it all explodes. It never comes though because Ashlyn’s lips are gone as quickly as they arrived. She lets her eyes flutter open as the disappointment hits her to see the blonde’s eyes doing the same. She’s about to panic a bit over what just happened, but the look in Ashlyn’s eyes calms her. There is so much love in the hazel eyes looking back at her that she think she understands. The blonde is a careful and protective person and has made it clear that she intends to court her. They have plenty of time and there is no need to rush, so why not build the most solid foundation they can first.

Ashlyn opens her eyes to see the surprised and somewhat disappointed look on Ali’s face, guilt filling her immediately. Just as soon as she sees it though, it’s gone again and Ali is just smiling at her sweetly. The brunette takes Ashlyn’s hand that is still on her cheek and kisses the palm before giving it a quick squeeze with her hand and letting it go.

“Goodnight, Ash. Thank you for tonight.” Ali says smiling widely.

“Sweet dreams, beautiful.” Ashlyn replies with the best smile she can manage before starting to walk away as Ali opens the front door. She lets herself look back once to see Ali watching her from the open door and giving a small wave. Ashlyn returns the wave and forces herself not to look back again. She gets into her car and drives for two blocks before pulling over and sobbing until she can’t anymore.

Ali watches Ashlyn’s Jeep drive away and closes the front door, leaning her head against it for a second.

“So, how was it?” Kyle is there before she can even figure out where he came from.

Ali lets out a contented sigh. “Incredible. She had everything planned out meticulously and yet she made sure I was a full participant in all of it. It was nothing I expected and still everything I could have wanted. It was perfect.”

“Oh, wow. That good?” Kyle knew Harris would crush this date, but this seems far beyond that. He’s never seen Ali look like this.

“Kyle, if she had asked me to marry her tonight… I would have said yes without a second thought or
a single regret.” Ali puts it bluntly.

Kyle doesn’t even know what to say other than he couldn’t be happier for his sister, or for Ashlyn for that matter. The two most amazing people he knows just fell in love with each other and he can’t think of anything better in the world. “Well, I’m not crashing in on your fairytale right now. So, go get some sleep and you can tell me all about it tomorrow. I’m really happy for you. Night, night.”

“Thanks. Goodnight, Ky.” Ali says as she heads upstairs almost dreamily. She heads into the bathroom and quickly changes out of her clothes before heading into the bedroom. She plops down on the bed and smiles when she sees the shark Ashlyn gave her sitting on it. She holds it tightly in her arms and her smile grows impossibly wider when she realizes that it smells strongly like Ashlyn. Her eyes close as she takes in her new favorite scent in the world, quickly drifting off to sleep peacefully for the first time in a month.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I'm sure you're all frustrated and that the pitchfork army is surely headed my way. In my defense, these characters are complex and going through some intense emotions, and I wanted to stay true to that. That being said... thanks to the wonder of time jumps in the next chapter, the angst won't last all that long. So, stay with me... we're getting where you want to be, just a quick detour first in the name of character development :)
Ok, let's get to the top of this rollercoaster before we free-fall! As promised, I've kept the angst to this one, albeit long, chapter. The reward for sticking with me through all these ups and downs is coming, so keep your eyes on the prize!

Wednesday, February 1

“Chris, what does your day look like? I’m gonna need your help.” Ashlyn gets out in a rush before Chris even has time to say anything more than hello.

“Ashlyn, what the fuck? It’s like 5am on a Wednesday!” He groans and rolls out of bed before he wakes Bridget who is already tossing and turning from the ringing of his cellphone.

“I know. I’m sorry. I really need your help with something today. Can you do it?” She pleads again.

“Uh, yeah. I have a meeting with the property manager of the East Boston rehab facility, but I’ll be free around 9am and won’t schedule anything for after that if you want. What’s going on?” Chris asks worriedly, hearing the apprehension in Ashlyn’s voice.

“I need to move.” Ashlyn replies.

“Move what? Like out of your condo? Today? Why?” Chris lets the questions fly as he gets more and more confused.

“Yes, out of my condo. I can explain later, just be here as soon as you can ok?” Ashlyn begs him.

“Ok, I’ll be there. You’re not in trouble or anything, right?” Chris questions still concerned.

“No, not really. I’ll tell you when you get here, but don’t worry.” Ashlyn tries to calm him.

“Alright, see you around 9am. Later.” Chris hangs up and heads to the kitchen to start coffee and breakfast. After hearing Ashlyn’s bizarre request, he knows he won’t be able to go back to sleep.

Ali wakes up late after the most peaceful sleep she’s had in quite a while. She knows it has everything to do with the amazing night she just had with Ashlyn and the adorable stuffed shark wrapped up in her arms that serves as a reminder of it.

She checks her phone hoping for the usual ‘good morning’ text from Ashlyn, but there are no new messages. Ali knows it’s her day off from work, so she hopes the blonde is sleeping in like she did.

“About time!” Kyle pokes is head into the bedroom for like the tenth time this morning unbeknownst to Ali. He sits down on her bed and makes himself comfortable. “Reprieve over! Tell me about this date!”
Ali rolls her eyes and flops her head back onto the pillow before spending the next fifteen minutes giving him every detail.

Kyle sighs dreamily. “Oh man, that sounds amazing. No wonder you were all La La Land and googly eyes last night!”

Ali just nods her head in agreement with a smile.

“One question though… after all that insane buildup, why are you cuddling a shark this morning and not a hot blonde?” Kyle inquires. “I mean, I know Harris can be a little too proper sometimes, but still.”

“You know, I’m not actually sure. There’s a lot going on with her in terms of work and how she feels about being home. I think maybe she’s just trying to take things slow with us. I definitely expected to kiss her last night and have it end up in a situation where she didn’t go home…” Ali admits a bit shyly. “Didn’t happen though. She got a little quiet at the end of the date and I think she was nervous. All she did was peck me on the lips and that was that.”

“Really?!” Kyle says incredulously and pauses to think about it a bit. “Hmmm.”

“What?” Ali asks seeing his pensive face.

“Nothing, just didn’t expect that given how things have been between you two. But, I can understand that if she’s in a rough place that maybe she doesn’t want to rush into anything too fast.” Kyle answers. “Did she say anything?”

“I mean, before she kissed me she said I was the one good thing in her life right now, her sun in the darkness or something to that effect.” Ali replies.

“Well that’s adorable.” Kyle says sweetly while his stomach clenches a bit. He knows Harris’ tendency to push people away when she’s struggling. She’d rather drown than let anyone sink with her and he has a gut feeling that this side of Harris is about to come out. He doesn’t want to worry Ali unnecessarily, so he plays it cool and prepares himself to be there if needed.

“She’s pretty amazing.” Ali says with a sigh. “Probably a good idea to talk to her tonight about us and figure out exactly what she’s thinking; you know, get on the same page.”

“Very good idea.” Kyle agrees. “Until then, how about a fun sibling day… lunch, movie, and maybe a little shopping?”

“Um, yes! Just let me shower and get ready.” Ali replies excitedly.

Chris gets to Ashlyn’s condo at 9:07am to find a U-Haul truck parked in the small driveway. He makes his way around the truck, finding his sister inside arranging a few boxes. A quick look inside tells him that about 80% of her stuff is already in there, just missing the larger furniture.

“Ass hat, what the fuck are you doing?” Chris yells into the truck, startling Ashlyn who bumps her head on the leg of a table that is stacked on its side.

“Owww, what the hell, Chris?!” The blonde yelps, rubbing her head.

“Sorry.” He mumbles. “Seriously, Ashlyn, what is going on right now?” He plops himself down on
a stool in the back of the truck and pulls her arm a bit until she relents and sits down on a box across from him.

Ashlyn let’s out a heavy breath. “I’m a fucking mess, Chris. I don’t know who the hell I am or what I even want anymore. I need to get out of here and take some time to figure myself out. I just…I need to start over.”

“Are you getting help?” He asks with serious concern.

“Yeah. I have a therapist I like and we just started, but I need to help myself or I’m never going to get out of this rut. Like I have to just break and rebuild, you know what I mean?” Ashlyn answers.

“Yeah, I do.” Chris understands better than most that sometimes you have to just hit rock bottom and work your way up. “So where are you going?”

“Home.” Ashlyn answers without hesitation and Chris nods, knowing exactly what she means.

“Well, I’ve kept up with it. Should be pretty ready for you.” He informs her.

“Thank you for doing that.” Ashlyn acknowledges.

“Ashlyn, be honest, are you going to disappear on me here?” Chris just puts it bluntly.

“No.” Ashlyn replies back quickly. “I promised the kids I wasn’t going anywhere and I won’t. I’ll be there for them and work on getting this back to normal.” She says pointing between them.

Chis nods in relief before he asks his next question. “And Ali?” The drop in Ashlyn’s face as he asks is enough of an answer, but he waits for one anyway.

“I love her, Chris. I love her so much. She’s the one right thing.” Ashlyn says letting a tear slip out as she tries desperately to hold it in. “I have to let her go right now. If I don’t, I’ll just hold onto her and never let myself get better. I need to figure myself out before I can be the person she deserves.”

“Come here. You’re completely deserving of her and her of you, don’t ever tell yourself otherwise.” Chris says and pulls Ashlyn into a tight hug. “You’re a fucking idiot. I really do get what you’re doing, but you’re a fucking idiot, Ashlyn. I swear to god the Harris family needs to come with a damn warning label.”

Ashlyn gives herself a second to feel the comfort of her brother’s strong hug before pulling back.

“Can you just help me move the furniture and then follow me in my Jeep to the house?” She requests of him.

“Yeah, sure.” Chris agrees. “Did you just stay up all night packing?” He asks looking around again. Ashlyn has never had too many things, but it’s still impressive how packed up she is.

“Yeah, right after I got back from my date with Ali.” She replies.

Chris wants to dope slap her, but he can see the pain in her eyes and that he doesn’t need to add to it.

“Alright, come on ass hat, let’s do it.”

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Even though Kyle is keeping her occupied, Ali can’t help but get more and more anxious as the day passes and she doesn’t hear from Ashlyn. By the time she and Kyle get home, it’s 9:30pm and she
hasn’t even gotten so much as a text from the blonde.

“She was probably with the kids today and fell asleep with them.” Kyle tries to reassure her as he watches her check her phone for like the hundredth time. He’s as nervous as she is, but he isn’t going to let on.

“Yeah I know.” Ali says with a bit of a pout. “I guess maybe I should just go try and relax so I can fall asleep and stop worrying.”

Kyle nods and watches her head upstairs as he silently hopes that his intuition is dead wrong.

Ali changes for bed and turns out all her lights, hoping she’ll fall asleep fast and it’ll be tomorrow before she knows it. Unfortunately she tosses and turns until about 11pm, finally sending off a text to Ashlyn.

*Paladin: Really missed talking to you today. Hope you had a great day! Can’t stop thinking about last night… goodnight, Ash. Call me tomorrow or even tonight if you’re up. :)*

Another half an hour and she finally feels her eyes closing, the stuffed shark pressed tight to her chest as her favorite scent in the world sends her off to sleep.

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Ashlyn settles onto her bed in the empty house that feels cold and bigger than she remembered. Having helped her move most of her stuff into it, Chris left about an hour ago. It had taken her a while to decide what room she was going to sleep in, eventually settling on her grandparents’ old master bedroom since it was the only one with a direct view of the ocean she knew she’d want to wake up to every morning. It definitely feels weird to be sleeping in here instead of in her usual room down the hall, but she hopes she’ll get over it soon enough. As alone and empty as everything feels, it still feels like home. Right now, that’s a small comfort that means everything.

She’s broken from her thoughts by her phone vibrating. She looks and sees a text from Ali. She knew it was coming at some point, but that doesn’t stop the rock she feels sitting in her stomach. She absolutely hates herself right now, but she knows she’d never forgive herself if she strung Ali along and hurt her over and over again with her disaster of a life.

“I’m so sorry, Alex. I’m going to get better for you and give you everything you deserve if you’ll have me by then, I promise.” She says out loud in the empty room as her finger hovers over the phone. She takes a really deep breath and finally wills herself to do it, hitting ‘yes’ as the question bubble pops up asking her to confirm the blocking of the number.

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Thursday, February 2

After a fitful night of sleep, Ali wakes up and checks her phone. Her face furrows in disappointment when she sees there is no reply text from Ashlyn. She heads downstairs and puts a pot of coffee on, finding a note from Kyle that says he was going to head to his place for an appointment, but would be back for lunch. She puts the TV on in the living room while she pulls together some breakfast like she usually does when she’s alone. She’s cracking her second egg when she hears it.

*Breaking News out of South Boston, we’re about to go live from the police department where*
Captain Ashlyn Harris will be releasing a statement shortly.

“Looks like she is finally breaking the silence, Tom.”

“Yes, Diane. I think we all expected that there would be some sort of statement eventually. We got word that she rejoined the department last week and has been getting back to her duties. If you’re just joining us, Captain Ashlyn Harris, who was recently released from prison after being acquitted of murdering Boston business tycoon Liam Gorham in a blackmailing case gone wrong, is about to release her first public statement since the case was dismissed. Chief Robert Dugan, who was going to be tried for the murder, committed suicide in his jail cell just a couple weeks ago.”

“Tom, I think we’re about ready.”

Thanks, Diane. Let’s go live and listen in.”

Ali listens to the newscasters’ dialogue as she stands there dumbfounded with an eggshell still in her hand from having run out of the kitchen so fast. She watches as Ashlyn stands in front of a bunch of microphones on the front steps of the police department, the constant sound of camera clicks in the background. The blonde is dressed in her usual uniform and looking as beautiful as ever, albeit very tired. Ali can’t help the smile growing on her face despite her confusion.

“Good morning. Thank you all for coming.” Ashlyn says and clears her throat. “As you all know, things have been a bit hectic to say the least.” She jokes a bit and there is laughter in the crowd of reporters that can be heard through the TV. “I am not here to talk about details pertaining to what has happened over the course of the last few weeks. My attorney, Ali Krieger, will be releasing a podcast regarding the case sometime in the near future and I think any questions you have will be answered at that point. I am actually here to make an announcement. This morning I respectfully submitted my resignation to Captain John McNally.”

Ali’s mouth drops open as she hears the gasps and whispers on the TV as well.

“I feel that my duties here have come to a natural end and it’s time for me to move on to other things in life. It’s not a decision that I have made lightly or an easy one for that matter. I have enjoyed my time immensely working for this department and serving this community and I will certainly miss it. I want to thank the South Boston community and the police department for all the support over the years. My time here will never be forgotten and I’m so grateful to have gotten the opportunity to serve you all. Thank you all for being here this morning. I will not make any further statements or answer any questions at this time.” Ashlyn finishes and quickly steps away from the podium and back into the police department before she can get swarmed.

Ali immediately grabs her phone and calls Ashlyn, but it rings once and goes right to voicemail. “Ugh!” She groans in frustration and calls Kyle next.

“Kyle, you’re not gonna believe…” she starts, but he cuts her off.

“I saw.” He says, “I’m guessing she didn’t say anything about doing this?”

“Nothing at all. She said she was unhappy there, but didn’t talk about leaving. I mean, she just got back.” Ali says completely puzzled and a bit frantic. “I just tried to call her, but I think her phone is off. She must be freaking out… we need to get to her.”

“I’ll be there in 30 minutes and we’ll head to her place, ok? Just relax, Alex. We’ll figure it out.” He tries to calm her down.

“Yeah, ok… just hurry!” Ali replies, hanging up the phone and running upstairs to quickly get herself
When Ali and Kyle pull up to Ashlyn’s place about an hour later, Ali goes from being confused to completely befuddled and worried. Everything looks fine, except for the obvious ‘For Sale’ sign stuck into the small patch of snowy grass in front of the condo.

“What the hell?” Ali whispers as she gets out of the car and heads to look at the sign as Kyle follows closely behind. She quickly rings the doorbell, but nobody answers. Ashlyn’s Jeep is not there, so Ali isn’t surprised. Kyle shrugs his shoulders a bit behind her as she looks at him trying to figure out what to do. She pulls out her phone one more time and tries to call Ashlyn again, but the same thing happens…one ring and straight to voicemail.

“Hey Ash, it’s me. I saw the news this morning and you haven’t called. I’m at your place right now and you have a sale sign up. Are you ok? What’s going on? Please call me, I’m so worried about you.” Ali leaves a quick and desperate message before starting to dig through her purse.

“What are you doing?” Kyle asks watching her pull out a key.

“I have an extra key from getting this place ready with Chris. Ash told me to keep it. I just…I need to go in there.” She explains briefly, already inserting the key into the door.

“Well ok then, Miss Trespassing. What happened to following the letter of the law?” Kyle says uneasy about going in.

“She knows I have the key, Kyle. Geez.” Ali gives him a glare, willing him to just shut up right now. She opens the door and it only takes one quick glance inside for her heart to drop. It’s completely empty.

“What?” Kyle asks seeing the dejected look on Ali’s face.

“She… she left.” Ali says quietly and motions for Kyle to look.

He takes a look at the completely empty condo just for the hell of it, but deep down he had already known what to expect. He pulls the front door closed and wraps his arms tightly around a very dazed Ali. “It’ll be ok. Come on, let’s go talk to Chris and we’ll figure it out from there, ok?” Kyle tries to reassure her.

Ali just nods silently as endless questions run through her head. She’s quiet during the short car ride to Chris’ house, fiddling with the phone on her lap when she has a disturbing thought. She looks more closely at the now three text messages that she’s sent to Ashlyn with no reply from the blonde. They all say delivered, but not a single one of them has been opened. Her mind goes to the single phone ring before going straight to voicemail… Ashlyn has blocked her number. She’s not sure if she should be hurt or scared, but right now it’s a mix of both.

“Well that didn’t take long.” Chris says to himself as he sees Kyle’s car pull into his driveway from the living room window. He lets out a sigh and makes his way to the door, glad that Bridget and the kids went out the store so that they’re not a distraction.

“Come on in you guys.” Chris says opening the door before Ali and Kyle can even ring the doorbell. “I guess you saw the news this morning?”
“Yeah, and her condo. Chris, is she ok? Where is she? What’s going on?” Ali shoots questions at him one after another, not bothering to sit down like Chris and Kyle have done.

Chris cringes internally at Ashlyn having put him in this position. “Ali, she’ll be ok, but the truth is that she’s a mess right now. It’s a lot like when she came home from the Army and actually seems worse this time. She just… she needs some time to figure herself out. She moved back to our grandparents’ house in Ipswich yesterday.” He explains.

Ali feels a little better knowing Ashlyn isn’t that far away, but the look on Chris’ face is what is unsettling her most. It says everything he’s not saying out loud. “She needs time away from me?” Ali whispers a bit brokenly, finally letting her body sink down to the couch.

“Not just you Ali, everything.” Chris says as he moves closer and puts an arm around her shoulder. “Ashlyn doesn’t handle uncertainty very well, she struggles with it to the point that it’s all consuming. She needs to find herself again and she doesn’t want to bring anyone down with her, especially not you. She really, truly cares about you and she knows she’s going to hurt you one way or another…so, she’s choosing the lesser of the two evils right now and trying to rebuild herself. For the record, I told her she’s an idiot.” Chris says to try and perk up the brunette who is looking absolutely miserable right now as she fights back tears.

Ali nods a bit, but doesn’t speak. She knows if she tries to talk she’ll just burst out crying. She feels Kyle grab her hand and does her best to draw some strength from the two kind men comforting her as best they can.

“Hey, Ali. Remember what I said a while back about the Ashlyn going into the fire?” Chris asks and watches Ali nod. “This is what I was talking about. She just needs to go in there and battle without having to worry about anyone but herself. She’ll come out just fine, she’s strong. And you’re the one she’s going to be in there fighting for and the first one she’ll want to see when she emerges from the flames. You know what I’m saying?” Chris explains and gets another head nod.

“You’re everything to her and she will always need you. She just needs some time to get herself together so she can show you. In the meantime, we’re here for you and for her. It’ll be ok, it will just take a little time.” He adds.

“Thanks, Chris.” Ali chokes out getting up slowly and making her way to the door. She’s not sure what else to say or do right now and she just wants to go home. She hears Chris and Kyle mumble a few unintelligible things to each other in the living room before Kyle comes out and helps her to the car.

“You want to talk about it?” Kyle asks hopefully as he drives them back to Ali’s house, but the brunette just shakes her head no. He reaches over to hold her hand knowing she’ll talk when she’s ready.

It’s not until they’re sitting on the couch a few hours later watching TV in silence when Ali finally breaks into tears and buries her head into Kyle’s shoulder.

“Why, Kyle?” Ali gets out through soft sobs. “Why is it so easy for the people I love to just leave me?”

Kyle feels an awful pang of guilt in his gut, knowing he’s definitely on that list. “Oh, Alex. Look at me.” He pulls back a bit and holds her face. “She didn’t leave you, honey. She’s just trying to find her way to you.”

“How do you know that?” Ali asks in a tiny voice.
“I’ve been there, Alex. I’ve been there.” He tells her honestly. “If I didn’t completely understand what was going on with her right now, trust me that your big brother would have already gone to kick her ass.” He jokes a bit to lighten the mood before he gets into it.

Ali gives him a tiny forced smile.

“Did you know that one of the first unofficial rules in rehab is that you should never date someone new?” He asks her.


“It seems silly, but in the end it’s simply because you need to learn how to love yourself before you can love anyone else. You have to struggle and find your own light, not stand behind someone else’s while they lead the way. Otherwise you’ll never get better because you’ll always have that crutch. As much as it sucks, you need to let yourself hit the bottom and learn to crawl out all by yourself. That way, if it ever gets dark again, you’ll know how to deal with it and know that you’re strong enough to do it. Do you understand what I’m saying?” Kyle asks.

“Yeah, I think so.” Ali answers quietly.

“Harris is drowning right now and needs to learn how to swim so she can get back to shore. She’s never going to learn to swim or get back to shore if she just clings on to a flotation device.” He elaborates further.

“I’m the flotation device?” Ali states more than questions.

“Yep, a big ol’ inner tube with a set of yellow arm floaties for good measure.” Kyle laughs a bit and finally sees Ali crack a genuine smile.

“Thanks. I think I understand better now.” Ali says wiping her tears. “I guess I have a few things to work out myself.”

“For the record, I really think she loves you. As counterintuitive as it seems, she wouldn’t be trying so hard to get through this if she didn’t.” Kyle remarks.

“I know. I really do. This just kind of caught me off guard. I wish she had at least said goodbye first.” Ali lets her mind wander.

“Alex, if you were in her shoes… would you be able to say goodbye?” Kyle poses the question knowing the answer.

“No.” Ali replies honestly, finally understanding that chaste kiss at the end of their date. “When the fuck did you get so insightful?”

“I don’t know. Too much Oprah?” Kyle laughs. “So, what’s the game plan from here?”

Ali thinks on it for a minute before answering. “Get myself together, stay busy, think about her, miss her like crazy, and be completely ready to fall back into her arms when she’s ready.” She declares earnestly.

“Just like that?” Kyle says with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah. Just like that. I love her in a way that just doesn’t happen twice in a lifetime, or even once for that matter. I won’t let it go.” Ali says longingly. “But, if she takes too long… I might just have to break down her door and make her ready.” She adds with a smirk.
"There’s the sister I know!" Kyle exclaims as he pops up off the couch and pulls Ali up with him. "Come on, today calls for a major ice cream binge."

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Friday, February 3

To say that Dr. Plume is unimpressed with Ashlyn’s disappearing act from her life is an understatement. While she understands that in Ashlyn’s mind this is what works for her, she isn’t shy in their second visit when it comes to letting her patient know that she thinks the approach is self-deprecating and not the healthiest way to go about this. Still, she is clear that as long as Ashlyn is honest with her, they will work together to help her overcome the struggles she is facing.

Dr. Plume listens carefully for about half an hour as Ashlyn explains what she is feeling and how being on her own makes her feel like she can focus on healing without burdening others. When she feels like she is missing something, she begins asking some questions.

“Ashlyn, I get everything you’re saying in terms of feeling like you need to find your way on your own. What I’m not fully understanding is your fear that you’ll latch on to something outside of yourself and never let yourself break enough to motivate your healing. You’ve distanced yourself from your job and your community, so I’m trying to understand what you’re referring to. I know you mentioned that you plan to stay in touch with your brother and family, so, is that the root of this fear?” Dr. Plume questions in an attempt to clarify.

Ashlyn has yet to say anything about Ali and she knows now is the time to really put it out there. She starts from the beginning, explaining to the therapist in as much detail as she can and not exactly sure of how long she’s been talking by the time she’s done.

“Okay, well now I understand better. Thank you for being open about it, it answers a lot of questions for me.” Dr. Plume acknowledges as she tries to decide the best way to end the session now that they’re already 25 minutes over the allotted time because she didn’t want to stop Ashlyn’s explanation. “You know what’s best for you in terms of what you need to move forward, but I can’t help but wonder if perhaps even in doing what you know is right for yourself…that you still feel bad about it and are beating yourself up a bit?”

Ashlyn shakes her head yes, the doctor having nailed it. She knows she just needs to be alone for a while, but it hasn’t made the guilt and hurt over leaving Ali the way she did any less painful.

Dr. Plume doesn’t wait for a verbal response before leaving Ashlyn with a final thought. “Maybe there is a middle ground of some sort? I think that sometimes the best thing is to put yourself in that other person’s shoes and be aware of how you might feel in that situation and what you would want to happen. And then maybe find a place that lies in the middle where you can get some peace of mind. Think about it and we’ll pick it up again Monday.”

After the session, Ashlyn heads home and walks the small path from the backyard that leads down to the small private beach below which overlooks Plum Island Sound. It’s cold and windy, but she sits down in the sand and clutches a mug of hot tea as she thinks hard about what Dr. Plume said. The sound of the waves is calming as she ponders what Ali must be thinking and feeling. If she was Ali, she’d be upset to have been left with no explanation, with no assurance, and with no goodbye, even if it was just a temporary one. She realizes that she shouldn’t have just taken off like that and left Ali to worry, but she just didn’t know how else to do it without risking not having the strength to leave.

She stays on the sand for a while longer even though it’s getting darker and colder and the tea is gone now. When she finally decides on what she’s going to do, she makes her way back up to house
to take a hot shower. The warm water does a lot to take away much of the tension of the day and with a plan in mind, she feels like she may have found the very beginning of the path forward.

Tuesday, February 14

Happy Valentine’s Day my darling cuddle bug!” Kyle waltzes into Ali’s room with his hands full, carefully placing the items on her bedside table before fully waking her up with a big smooch on the cheek.

“Ah, my cupid has arrived!” Ali jokes back with a smile. With them both having been single for quite some time, they had adopted the tradition of being each other’s valentines over the last few years. “What time is it anyway?”

“9:15am, lazy.” Kyle answers with a hint of sass. “I thought you would break with tradition and make me breakfast in bed this year, but foiled again!”

“Nope, sorry. Holiday appropriate boxers briefs, a nice dinner out, and a bottle of your favorite cologne is my g- to and I’m sticking with it.” She sasses back as she reaches over to grab the gift box she left by her bed last night so she can give it to him.

“I’m definitely not complaining!” Kyle says, taking the box from her like an excited teenager. “You’re the best Valentine I’ve ever had!”

Ali gives his arm a squeeze and looks over at her bedside table to see his usual line-up as well. A big box of chocolates, a giftcard for a massage, and a caddie filled with fun hair and make-up products. She smiles when she sees the addition of a sizeable vase of sunflowers, knowing he’s been trying extra hard to cheer her up since she’s been down lately. “Kyle, those are so gorgeous! You shouldn’t have, but thank you! Where did you even find sunflowers in New England in the winter? I love them!”

“Actually, I didn’t and I have no idea…but clearly someone knows where to find them.” He says holding up an envelope. “This was delivered for you just a little bit ago.”

Ali looks back at the flowers, the fact that they’re sunflowers making her heart leap a bit. Maybe, just maybe… she lets herself hope a little as Kyle’s voice breaks her thoughts.

“Oh my god, just open it already before I die of curiosity!” He bellows at her dramatically.

Ali takes the plain red envelope from his hand and runs her finger under the seam to open it. Inside she finds a picture of a patch of sand with the ocean behind it, the sun creating a hazy glare in the exposure. She takes it in for a few seconds before flipping it over to see neat handwriting that is unmistakably Ashlyn’s. Her heart races as she desperately takes in the words.

Alex… my Paladin, my Sun,

Nothing I could say would ever make up for the way I left. I can only wish that I had possessed the inner strength to have done it more gracefully and not hurt you in the process. It took the most perfect night of my life, my date with you, to realize that my heart is in no shape to give to anyone until it is mended. Nor could I ever ask you to mend it for me.

I sit on this sand every day, looking out onto the water, and letting the sun hit my face as I think of you. Knowing what I am fighting for and what my light at the end of the tunnel is, I heal a little bit more with each thought of you. I just need you to know that even though my heart is a state of
disrepair, it’s still completely yours. I will work tirelessly until the day comes when I can give it to you in the shape you deserve it to be in and hope that you’ll accept it. Please know that in my heart, no matter what its condition, you are forever my Valentine.

Happy Valentine’s Day, Alex! I miss you beyond words.

Love,

Ashlyn, your tragic hero

Ali lets it wash over her, a single tear rolling down her smiling face from the emotion. Ashlyn’s message is all she needs to know, everything she needs to be okay and move forward, and the motivation to be patient. She reaches out and hands the photo to Kyle who is looking at her anxiously as he patiently waits to read it.

“Wow, well ok then.” Kyle says, handing the card back to Ali. “You ok?” He asks trying to gauge the somewhat serene look on Ali’s face.

“Never better.” Ali gives him a genuine smile as she grabs her phone.

“What are you doing?” Kyle asks as he watches Ali type something into the phone.

“Just in case.” Ali says turning the phone so he can see the text she just typed and sent to Ashlyn.

Your heart will always be in perfect condition for mine no matter what, my Valentine. Until we meet at the end of the tunnel, take care of yourself and be safe. I really miss you too, Ash.

“Oh my god, stop it! I’m swooning even though this whole thing reeks of angst!” Kyle says as he dramatically flops back on the bed.

Ali slaps him lightly on the thigh and rolls her eyes. Her heart suddenly skipping a beat and the smile on her face grows big enough to hurt her cheeks as she notices that the status under her text not only says it was delivered, but also that it was read.

Thursday, March 23

Ashlyn ducks down in the cleaning product aisle at the grocery store, narrowly avoiding Edith seeing her. This is the fourth close call she’s had with the woman since she’s moved back. It’s not that she doesn’t like Edith, she loves the woman like a grandmother. She just doesn’t know what to say after all this time, and worse, when she’s in this embarrassing limbo of not really knowing what to do with her life. Dr. Plume has been encouraging her to slowly start reconnecting with people and she’s been good about casually saying hello to people she knew here and there as she runs into them. Still, she’s just not sure she’s ready to reconnect with the more meaningful people yet. Unfortunately, life has other plans as she turns the corner and runs right into the older woman at the end of the aisle.

“Oh hi! Sorry, Edith, I didn’t see you there!” Ashlyn says cheerily to cover her anxiety.

“Oh huh. Just like you didn’t see me at the gas station last week, the post office the week before that, and the garden store a few weeks before that.” Edith gives the blonde a pointed, but friendly look. “And here I thought you liked me.” She laughs a bit.

“I’m so sorry, Edith. Really I am. I’m just trying to get back into the swing of things and it’s been hard. I guess I’ve just been too embarrassed to see anyone.” Ashlyn admits in guilty honestly.
“It’s ok, sweetheart. I’ve been around the Harris clan long enough to know how overly critical you all tend to be of yourselves. How about we leave all this awkwardness right here and you can come over for some dinner and we’ll catch up.” Edith offers kindly.

“I’d love that.” Ashlyn says in relief at being let off the hook and actually happy to be spending time with the older woman she’s so fond of.

Dinner is anything but awkward and Ashlyn finds herself at ease as she listens to what Edith has been up to and reciprocates by telling her the cliff notes version of what has been going on with her. She feels a deep sense of home that she hasn’t felt for quite a while.

“I’m really happy you’ve come home, Ashlyn.” Edith says with a content smile.

“Me too.” Ashlyn agrees.

“Sounds like you’re still up in the air about what you’re going to do career-wise though.” Edith notes.

“Yeah. I’m thinking maybe I’ll reopen Grandpa’s fishing charter or something.” Ashlyn muses a bit.


“I don’t know. I mean I have to do something, right? Maybe a change is what I need.” Ashlyn explains.

“Or maybe you should just stick to what you’re good at, sweetheart.” Edith replies, seeing Ashlyn’s quizzical look and elaborating. “Your grandpa loved to say ‘don’t reinvent the wheel’, right?”

“Yeah.” Ashlyn remembers the saying fondly and how often her grandfather would repeat it even when it wasn’t all that appropriate for the situation.

“Well, then why are you reinventing the wheel? You know damn well what you were made to do and you’ll never be as happy doing anything else. Just because you had a bad experience in one place doesn’t mean it will be that way in another. Don’t reinvent, just rebuild it stronger this time.” Edith advises her.

The advice hits Ashlyn like a lightning bolt. Edith couldn’t be more right. It’s the one thing that never leaves her and that she can always rely on, her instinct to protect. She is happiest when she knows that she’s taking care of the people around her. And just like that she knows what to do.

“Edith, you’re a life saver!” Ashlyn leans over and hugs the woman.

“You’re welcome, dear. But you might want to hold up for just a second. I have one more question.” Edith says as Ashlyn pulls away a bit. “Can I ask about where that lovely lawyer of yours fits into everything?”

“Oh, um…” Ashly stutters as she tries to figure out how to explain it. “It’s really complicated and also not complicated at all. Everything I’m doing right now, figuring it all out…it’s for her.”

Edith doesn’t need to hear more to understand, she knows Ashlyn and Chris well enough by now. She can’t help but offer one more piece of advice. “You know what your grandmother would say, right?”

“Yep.” Ashlyn says with a little smile, knowing her grandma always gave the same relationship advice thanks to the plight of the Tin Man. “She’d go all Wizard of Oz on me and say that hearts will
never be practical until they are made unbreakable.”

“Exactly.” Edith says with her own knowing smile. “Don’t wait until you think your heart is unbreakable, ok?”

“I won’t, Edith. Promise.” Ashlyn replies as she finishes her last bite of apple pie and sip of coffee. “Tomorrow night, my house for dinner?”

“I wouldn’t miss it, sweetheart.” Edith says happily.

And just like that Ashlyn has regained an old friend and figured out the next step on her path. The very next morning she meets with the Ipswich Chief of Police. After some paperwork and necessary certification procedures, she’s Captain Ashlyn Harris of the Ipswich Police Department just eight days later. With a new community to protect and invest in, she’s well on the way to finding who she is again.

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Wednesday, April 19

“Alex, seriously, stop twitching!” Kyle says for the third time. “Relax, you’re amazing and this story is amazing! This is a sure winner without you even trying, ok?”

“I know. I just, I hope I got it right. It’s important to me that I got it out the way both Ashlyn and I wanted it.” Ali says as she continues to fiddle while they wait for the first episode of the new podcast season to be released on the supported websites. It will be a nine episode series, each one released weekly. Ali has put all her time into perfectly editing the content and narrating the parts of the case that needed further explanation. As much as it has made her miss Ashlyn terribly, listening to the blonde’s voice has been soothing. She has listened to their recorded conversations over and over again in her editing process, pretty much falling in love with Ashlyn all over again despite the very platonic and business-related nature of the recorded conversations.

She feels Kyle nudge her as the link pops up on the website, the title reading ‘Veritas Aequitas Season 3 – The Noble Captain on the Ship of Corruption’. Kyle quickly clicks it so they can listen.

“I first met police Captain Ashlyn Harris in late summer of 2016 after learning that her involvement in my life was far beyond what I realized. She wasn’t at all what I expected and, as you’ll soon see, neither was this case and the way in which it unraveled. In this third season of Veritas Aequitas, we get to the bottom of corruption in its ugliest form right here in our own city of Boston and learn the truth about the valiant hero who stood up to it at the cost of her own freedom.”

Ali hears her own voice opening the episode and wonders if Ashlyn will be listening.

Just 45 miles away, Ashlyn is listening. A smile is plastered on her face as she hears Ali’s voice telling her story, and not just her story, but their story. She closes her eyes and sits back comfortably, letting her favorite voice in the world bring her the peace that it always does.

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Saturday, May 20

Ali is putting together a couple of sandwiches in the kitchen when she hears the doorbell.

“Come on in, Becca! The door is open!” She yells as loudly as she can, knowing her voice will carry outside through the open living room windows that are letting in the fresh Spring breeze.
“Hey, Ali. That looks good!” Rebecca says as she looks at the sandwiches, putting her purse on the counter and going to give the brunette a quick hug.

This has become a routine for them over the last month since Rebecca first delivered the news that Ken had regained consciousness and was no longer in need of life-sustaining measures. As bizarre as it is, Ali and Rebecca have become close to each other in sharing contrasting struggles over the same man. One of them fighting to hold on while the other fights to let go, each of them respectfully understanding the complexity of the other’s pain and forming a bond over it. Jameson has become really attached to Kyle, something both Ali and Rebecca think is a clear sign that he’s questioning his sexuality. Josh, on the other hand, is like Ali’s mini-me, constantly following her around and asking her questions in an effort to pretend to be a lawyer like she is. It’s weird to see so much of herself in him, but something about it is sort of fascinating too. Amidst such unlikely circumstances, the five of them have somehow begun to form a tight little group that feels a lot like family.

“So, what is the prognosis from this last round of assessment tests?” Ali asks, getting right down to it so they can enjoy lunch.

“The memory loss he has already experienced is permanent. Whatever he already remembers is highly likely the only thing he will ever remember. And he doesn’t have the capability to convert any short-term memory to long-term, so he’ll only ever remember is what is already there and nothing new will ever get added. Every day will be like starting all over again for him. His speech will likely improve some with therapy, but it he won’t regain that in full either. As for the burns, they’ll do a few more skin grafts and adjustments, but it won’t be much more at this point.” Rebecca answers a bit dejectedly.

“Oh Becca, I’m really sorry.” Ali pulls the woman into a hug.

“It’s ok. I knew it wouldn’t be easy. It’s just going to be hard to visit him in a care home somewhere and have that be it. But, at least he remembers me… that’s something I guess.” Rebecca replies a little more hopefully. “How do you feel about it?”

Once Ken had regained consciousness and began to try and speak, they learned that he remembered from approximately the time he and Rebecca got married up until Jameson turned 6. Everything after that is blank for him. He also remembers Deb and Ali and Kyle, but those memories are foggier. He recalls a brief period of time when both Ali and Kyle were in elementary school, but nothing before or after that. In his mind, all of his kids are very much still kids. He’s been able to work out that he must have left Deb for Rebecca because he remembers his second marriage, but how it all happened or why he doesn’t know.

“As much as I hate to say it…relieved. I’m realizing that I just can’t forgive him for what he did and that I don’t think I would ever be able to. I’m still struggling with feeling like a bad person for that, but I guess in knowing that there is no purpose in forgiving him or any reason to now, I’m relieved. I’m starting to believe that I can finally just close the door now. He won’t ever be looking for my forgiveness and I won’t ever have to give it. Does that make sense?” Ali rambles her reply.

Rebecca nods in understanding. “I’ll always admire your strength, Ali. You know that. Do you think you’ll ever visit him? I don’t say that to pressure you at all, I’m really just curious.”

“I’m not even close to ready, but I think someday I will. Just one last time so I can close that part of my life and really let it go.” Ali explains. “Are you going to be ok with all of this?”

“No for a while, but I will be. I’m only 44 and I have a whole life to live. Eventually, I know I’ll need to move on to be happy. I’ll always take care of him, but knowing deep down that I will also be living this whole other life without him…it hurts.” Rebecca answers honestly.
“You know, I actually can understand that a bit.” Ali replies empathetically.

“Yeah, about that. Any word from Ashlyn?” Rebecca inquires.

Ali had surprised herself at how fast she had opened up to Rebecca about what was going on with Ashlyn. As much as Kyle and Chris were really supportive, it was nice to get an honest female perspective on it sometimes. Ever since Ali shared what happened, Rebecca has made it a point to ask about Ashlyn.

“No, nothing. I keep sending her little text messages when I’m really missing her or something happens that I want to tell her about. I know she hasn’t read them since that one on Valentine’s Day, but it still makes me feel connected to her somehow.” Ali says.

“It might still take a while, who knows… but I just know that you two are going to be more than okay, you’re going to be a real life fairytale.” Rebecca states confidently.

Ali laughs a little bit. “Oh yeah? What makes you think that?”

“I can hear it in your voices on the podcast. When two people are so in love with each other that you can actually hear it when they’re having a normal conversation... there’s just no other outcome but fairytale.” Rebecca answers simply.

Ali just replies with a slight hum as she thinks about it and is not sure what else to say. “I think we’ve starved long enough, don’t you?”

“Absolutely! You really do make the best sandwiches!” Rebecca says as they grab their food and make their way out onto the back patio to enjoy the mild spring day.

Wednesday, June 7

It turns out that Rebecca isn’t the only one who hears the deeper emotions in the podcast.

Ashlyn finishes a long run along Crane’s Beach in the late afternoon of her day off. She used to hate running, but now she loves the rush of pushing herself to see how fast and far she can go. Her body is in better shape now than it was even in prison when she worked out constantly to pass the time and ease her stress. Her fitness routine comes from a healthier place these days, a want to better herself and get stronger as a whole. It’s not the only transformation she’s made.

She’s fallen into perfect step with her new police department, learning to work better as part of a team instead of taking on everything alone. It’s done a lot to build solid and trustworthy relationships with her fellow officers. She loves that Ipswich is a quaint sea town that doesn’t see much violent crime, but that it still depends on the investment of its police force to instill a sense of order and safety. The people here know her by way of her grandparents and are genuinely happy to see her and have her back. It truly feels like the home she was desperately looking for just a few months ago.

She spends most of the evenings she has free at Chris’ house, putting the kids to bed before making the drive home. Things have completely normalized between her and her family and she loves just being part of their daily routine like she was before. When she’s not there, she’s helping Edith rework the landscaping around the older woman’s home or spending time with Liz and Jess, old high school friends that she more recently reconnected with. For someone who is so good at shutting down and going it alone, she’s done a great job of letting people back in with the gentle
encouragement of Dr. Plume.

There have been physical changes too, especially given the twenty-one hours she’s spent with her tattoo artist in making the latest elements of her life story come to fruition in black ink that covers most of her right forearm as the start of a new sleeve. Gone too are her long blonde locks which have been traded for a darker, short-cropped haircut that she thought she would hate, but has actually grown to love. When she looks in the mirror these days, it’s not exactly what she expected to see, but for the first time in a very long time, she’s happy and proud of the person looking back at her.

Knowing that Chris and Bridget are hosting a small business-related dinner party tonight and that Edith is busy putting together training materials for the woman who is going to take over for her when she retires in a few months, Ashlyn opts to hit the grocery store after her run to grab some food for a quiet night at home. She quickly picks out some steak and vegetables to grill, more than ready to get home so she can shower. There are only two cashiers working, so she stands in the slightly shorter line and starts looking at the covers of the magazines in the stand next to her like she usually does while she waits. She's taken aback when she sees her own face on a couple of them.

The podcast series only has two episodes left, and while it has definitely gotten its fair share of media coverage, especially with the revelation about Ali’s father, Ashlyn can’t imagine what would suddenly draw enough attention to dedicate even a small corner of the front cover to. She picks up one of the magazines that features her and Ali’s pictures side-by-side on the bottom right corner of the cover, the line above it reading ‘Love is on the Air?” Before she can open the magazine and read the story, it’s her turn in line. As much as the curiosity is killing her, she quickly puts the magazine back because she’s too embarrassed to buy it.

She makes the short drive home in record time and plops down in front of her laptop not even bothering to put the groceries away first, her shower long forgotten. A quick internet search makes it clear what the hoopla is all about. There is a rapidly evolving theory among followers of Veritas Aequitas that she and Ali are a couple and the more mainstream media has now picked up the story. Ashlyn finds more than a few websites and blogs that go into detail about how the two interact verbally, honing in on particular things that were said, and even some that claim evidence based on vocal tones.

After about an hour of reading what is out there, Ashlyn finally takes a shower and makes dinner as she thinks through it all. She’s a bit surprised by it, but not in a bothersome way. She makes herself comfortable on the couch with her laptop and listens to tonight’s second-to-last episode of the podcast, Ali’s voice bringing a smile to her face as usual. She listens carefully to the way she and Ali sound and how they treat each other. If she’s being honest, she hears it too. She just never realized until now that it was so apparent.

When the episode is over, she closes her laptop and leans her head back. A few more minutes of pondering and it finally hits her that she not only has what she always wanted, but even more than she wished for. She once told Ali that she wanted people to be able to look at her relationship and just see the love. What she never expected was to have so much love for someone that people could actually hear it in the mundane dialogue between them without seeing or knowing anything. And all of this without there even really being a relationship to speak of.

She feels a slight pang in her heart at that last thought. She feels good about where she is. She’s lighter and happier with a renewed sense of purpose and self. Still, even with so much going right, she’s not sure why those last few steps of the journey feel so hard to take. There’s something that still feels off and that she can’t quite put her finger on. It’s preventing her from making that last push forward because it scares her as to what it might be.
Friday, June 23

“Ashlyn, I want to talk to you about how far you’ve come from where we started in this therapeutic relationship. I can’t help but feel as though we are reaching a point where we’ve met the goals that you set out for yourself at the start. I’m very proud of you in that regard and I am certainly always ready to assist in any way I can, but I’m getting the sense that perhaps we should be starting to move towards more of a maintenance approach from here forward. That being said, I want to hear your thoughts on it.” Dr. Plume says after forty minutes into their session where Ashlyn has only talked about and reflected on positive things as she has for the last few weeks now.

“Yeah, I guess maybe you’re right.” Ashlyn replies tentatively.

“You sound hesitant. Talk to me.” Dr. Plume prods her.

“It’s just that I feel like I’ve gotten to where I want to be with just about everything except the one thing I’m most desperate to get to.” Ashlyn replies.

“You mean Ali?” Dr. Plume asks knowingly. Ashlyn was clear in the beginning about what she was working towards, but Ali is a topic of conversation that has not come up much since. She has gotten the sense that Ashlyn believes that if she just gets all her ducks in a row that everything with Ali will just fall right into line too.

Ashlyn nods. “You’re right that I’m in a really good place. I just… it’s weird… I feel like it’s time to take that last step and reconnect with her, but something still feels off. I feel like there is something that is still broken and it terrifies me that I don’t know what it is. It keeps me from taking that last step forward because I don’t want to get there and realize it was something major that I didn’t fix.”

Dr. Plume smiles a bit, understanding exactly what is going on. For a patient who has made such huge strides in therapy, many of them unassisted, it’s almost surprising that Ashlyn doesn’t see it herself. Still, she can appreciate the power that fear can have over a person sometimes.

“What am I missing?” Ashlyn asks seeing the slight smile on Dr. Plume’s face, the very one she usually sees when the therapist is about to ask her a really deep and meaningful question that will likely have her reeling.

“Ashlyn, have you considered that perhaps nothing about you is broken … that maybe it’s just that you’re not quite whole yet, so to speak. That it’s possible that instead of fixing something, you might just need to add something that you’ve been depriving yourself of?” Dr. Plume poses the question gently.

“Oh.” Ashlyn replies quietly after a minute even though the therapist’s question has hit her like a hammer over the head. “Oh geez, you’re right. How could I have not… everything is in place but her. I didn’t even consider that maybe I was actually ready to…” She trails off in a series of incomplete thoughts. “Wow, I guess this changes a lot.”

“I think this is a good place for us to end today and let you have some time to reflect on how you want to move forward.” Dr. Plume says, satisfied by the new progress. “As you know, I’m on vacation now for a little bit, so we’ll circle back to the maintenance conversation after the holiday.”

“Yeah, ok. Thank you so much for the insight, as usual.” Ashlyn says with a grateful smile as she waves and heads out the door, her mind racing.
Tuesday, July 4

Ashlyn sits in the 50’s era diner car in nearby Rowley waiting for her burger. It’s one of her favorite places to eat when she just wants some unhealthy food. She had scheduled her first vacation around the 4th of July, thinking it would be nice to spend some time on the beach with Curtis and Elsie while taking them to the many fireworks displays along the Northshore even though she’s had a love-hate relationship with the celebratory explosions since her time in Iraq. Unfortunately, in the meantime, Chris and Bridget had won a cruise vacation at a raffle and were now gone for the week. Yesterday she spent most of the day wiring some fog lights onto her Jeep. So, on her second day off she figures she’ll take it easy, grab a late lunch and then see what Liz and Jess are up to tonight for the holiday and hopefully join them. While it’s not quite what she had in mind, it’s something to do at least.

With nothing to do while she waits for her food, she reads through the 61 text messages on her phone for what has to be the hundredth time in just over a week. She had left Dr. Plume’s office that day with a renewed energy, quickly unblocking Ali’s number on her phone for the first time since Valentine’s Day with the thought that maybe she would just finally call her. The energy had quickly faded though as she thought about what exactly she would say. As she sat in the car thinking about it more deeply, her phone buzzed incessantly for a few minutes with a plethora of unread text messages from Ali coming through.

She somehow managed to wait until she got home to read them, spending over an hour deeply engrossed in the words on her phone as various waves of emotions swept through her. Some of the text messages were simple statements of longing. Some were the recounting of a funny story, while others were deeper thoughts and updates about Ali’s father. A few detailed some dreams that had featured Ashlyn in them and still others were ideas for future adventures together. Sometimes they were sent only hours apart, other times days or even a week. The last one was sent on June 21st and reads “The stuffed shark I hold every night has only the slightest hint of your cologne now and I’m scared of the day that I don’t smell it anymore.”

Reading those messages, she never felt so completely cared for and understood before. She had shut Ali out in her quest to find herself again and heal. Still, Ali Krieger had found a way to stay connected. She hadn’t abandoned her for even a second, but instead kept Ashlyn in her life as if she never left. It has touched her so deeply, but it has also put her into a neutral state that she’s not sure how to break out of.

Ashlyn has spent the last week in complete frustration as she agonizes over how to go about this. Does she text and start slow? Does she call and plan some kind of meet-up? Does she just go find Ali in person? She’s run a million scenarios in her head, none of them satisfactory enough to pull her from her paralyzed state of indecision.

Her attention is pulled away from her phone as the waitress puts her food down in front of her.

“Here you go, sweetie. I’ll leave the bill too for when you’re ready.” The middle-aged waitress says with a smile and walks away.

The fries are hot, so she starts with the burger only to stop mid-bite when the unmistakable beat of ‘Straight Up’ by Paula Abdul comes blaring out of the juke box. It immediately brings her right back to that moment in the hospital where Ali had admitted it was her guilty pleasure song. She pulls the burger out of her mouth and looks around quickly as if Ali is going to be standing there somewhere. All she sees though is a booth of college-aged girls singing along as they try and re-live their childhood. Of all things, this stupid song is the final straw.
Ashlyn looks down at her watch, seeing that it’s 2:33pm. With no solid plan in mind other than to get home as fast as she can to shower and change, she drops $20 on the table and rushes out with the hope that maybe this so far sub-par holiday is about to turn into one that she never forgets.

Chapter End Notes

Soooo... are we all excited yet???
Finally, am I right?!
No smut warning here, but it's going to get a little warm in the room... and fluffy, so damn fluffy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In what can only be compared to a fugue state where she drove 45 minutes and stopped for flowers along the way but somehow doesn’t remember any of it, Ashlyn finds herself once again deciding between the doorbell and the door knocker that adorn Ali’s front door. The reality of where she is right now finally hits her and she takes a minute to actually work through what she might say or do, something she didn’t think about in her sudden urgency to get here. There are a couple of other cars in the driveway in addition to Kyle and Ali’s and Ashlyn feels herself start to shake out of nervousness.

“Idiot.” She mumbles to herself. It’s the Fourth of July, Ali probably has plans or people over. The last thing she wants to do is make a scene or pull Ali away from anything. She just can’t wait anymore though, she physically can’t do it. Even if Ali slaps her and slams the door in her face, which she will have completely deserved, she’ll be happy just to get a glimpse of the brunette and feel her palm on her face even if it stings. As that thought enters her head, she realizes she’s slipping back into letting negative thoughts take over. She hears Dr. Plume’s voice in her head reminding her to just try and see the reality of the situation instead of the overly positive or negative aspects of it. And the reality is that there is nothing to suggest that Ali won’t be glad to see her. “Just trust your gut.” She coaches herself in a quiet mutter before throwing caution to the wind and ringing the doorbell.

“Kyle, don’t forget to put ice in the cooler!” Ali directs as Kyle walks by with a 24 pack of soda. Ali is wrapping up the sandwiches she just made while Rebecca cuts up a watermelon. Josh is helping Ali’s childhood friend, Emily, frost some cupcakes while Kyle’s new salon assistant, Ben, is making sure they have enough paper plates, cups, napkins and cutlery. The group is going to head to Marblehead for the evening and picnic at the oceanside park there while they wait for the 9pm firework display. It’s one of the best in the area and they’re all excited about it.

Ali is just wrapping the last sandwich when the doorbell rings.

“That must be Jameson. David’s parents said they would drop him off here after they picked them up from the movie unless I texted them otherwise.” Rebecca explains as she looks for a towel to wipe her hands on.

“Don’t worry, I got it.” Ali says as she finishes wrapping the sandwich. “So is David a friend or a ‘friend’?” She asks as she starts to head towards the living room entrance.

“I have a sneaking suspicion that today was a ‘date’, but he hasn’t said anything.” Rebecca confirms.

“So cute. He could teach Kyle a few things.” Ali says with a smile and heads to open the front door.
“Hey buddy, how was the mov…” She starts, but is taken aback when she sees it’s not Jameson. She doesn’t even realize who it is at first until her eyes fall upon the unmistakable hazel ones looking back at her.

“Ash.” She whispers out as her hand goes to cover her open mouth, her eyes immediately getting watery. The woman in front of looks so different than the one who left so many months ago and certainly not like the image of Ashlyn that has been holding a permanent spot in her mind. She’s wearing loose off-white cargo shorts and a black button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbow, black ink now etched into her once tattoo-free right arm to match the left one. Her striking long blonde hair is gone and replaced with a short, perfectly-styled pompadour with a side-part in her natural brunette hair color, the sides cropped very closely in a high and tight fade. She looks as stunning as ever, and more importantly, she looks completely unburdened.

“Hi Alex.” Ashlyn says in her own whisper, the only words that she manages to get out of her mouth as her mind goes blank and she stands there completely mesmerized by the perfect woman in front of her. Ali is in a white sundress with a blue floral print that is flowy but hugs her in just the right places and displays her toned arms and strong legs perfectly.

“It’s really you.” Ali says still in shock as her body takes over and she launches herself at Ashlyn, who catches her in her arms and holds her tightly as she lets the bunch of sunflowers in her hand fall to the ground. “You’re really here. You’re really here.” Ali repeats in a mumbled mantra trying to convince herself she’s not dreaming as the familiar scent takes over her senses.

Ashlyn pulls back a bit and gently cups Ali’s cheek with her hand. “Hey, it’s ok. It’s really me and I’m really here.” She tries to calm Ali and come up with something meaningful to say, but she practically loses her breath when she gets lost in the brunette’s eyes and realizes just how close they are right now. “God, I forgot just how beautiful you are.” Her words come out without thought.

Ali can only reply with a nose crinkling grin at the moment as she pulls Ashlyn back into a hug. “Ash, look at you…you look so amazing.” She says, releasing Ashlyn so she can look at her again. “Your hair, you look so fit and happy and lit up…just gorgeous. I feel like I’m dreaming.”

“You’re not.” Ashlyn gives her a sweet smile as she picks the flowers up off the ground and holds them out for Ali. “Sorry, here, these are for you.”

“Sunflowers.” Ali says as she takes them. “Still trying to charm me, Harris?”

“Maybe. Is it working?” Ashlyn plays back, relieved that the usual playful banter between them is still alive and well.

“It might be.” Ali replies with a smirk as the reality of Ashlyn being in front of her really starts to hit her. “There’s so much I want to know and for us to talk about. Do you have the time to…I mean, can we…are you able to…” She tries to just spit out what she’s thinking, but she doesn’t have a clue what the right question is right now.

“Alex.” Ashlyn stops the brunette’s ramble of incomplete thoughts. “I’m here and I am not going anywhere, nor will I ever go anywhere ever again. I’m so sorry that I ever did anything to make you doubt me in that regard. This…” she says pointing between the two of them “is the only place for me and I promise you I’ll be right here, as long as you’ll have me.” She says confidently.

“So, we can spend time together and talk?” Ali asks, needing the confirmation one more time.

Ashlyn smiles sweetly at the brunette, completely understanding that she has a lot to make up for. “Yeah, we have all the time in world. I’m here with you. We can do whatever you want, ok?”
“Ok.” Ali says finally letting herself relax. She hears Kyle and Rebecca laughing loudly from inside and remembers she has a kitchen full of people at the moment with plans to go out tonight. “Oh um, I better get back in there before they think I got lost. Come in with me?”

Ashlyn feels apprehensive at barging in on Ali’s company, but she also doesn’t want to deny the brunette anything right now. “I’m sorry. I didn’t really think this whole thing through very well when I just showed up like this. It’s the Fourth and you clearly have company and probably some plans. I’ll do anything you want, but I can come back. I don’t want to intrude on…” Ashlyn says apologetically, but Ali cuts her off.

“Don’t even finish that statement, Harris.” Ali says pointedly but playfully. “We have a lot of catching up to do and my plans just changed. So, follow me and let’s get this show on the road.” She reaches out and takes Ashlyn’s hand, pulling her towards the door.

“Roger that. Lead the way, Krieger.” Ashlyn says lightly and lets Ali lead her inside even though she’s nervous about what she’s about to walk into.

The voices get louder as they make their way towards the kitchen and Ashlyn feels herself starting to sweat a bit at the potential awkwardness.

“Hey guys, so change of plans. Looks like you’re going to have to go ahead without me.” Ali declares loudly as she gets to the entrance of the kitchen.

Ashlyn takes in the room as everyone in the kitchen stops what they’re doing and looks up at her and Ali. There is a young boy and another guy about Kyle’s age as well as a middle-aged looking woman and another woman that looks to probably be in her thirties. She doesn’t know any of them and she’s starting to wonder where Kyle is when he comes barreling into the kitchen.

“Ok, cooler is all set…” Kyle announces as his eyes catch up to what everyone else in the kitchen is looking at. “Oh wow! Holy crap, you’re here. Damn… Harris, you are hot! Stud alert!” He blurts as he takes in Harris’ new look as well as the fact that she and Ali are holding hands. His heart is actually racing for them.

Ashlyn turns red immediately even though she’s glad to see a familiar face. All she can do is just shoot him a smile at the moment.

“Yeah, ok, so thanks for that, Kyle. Way to make it both less awkward and more awkward at the same time.” Ali raises her eyebrows at him. She doesn’t really care because she’s among friends, but she does feel bad for poor Ashlyn. “Anyway, as I was saying. Ashlyn… this is Rebecca who is technically my step-mother, this is my mini-me and step-brother Josh, Emily who is my childhood best friend, and Ben who is Kyle’s new salon assistant, and of course, you already know this loser over here.” Ali says with a smile as she introduces everyone and ends by pointing to Kyle.

“Everyone, this is Ashlyn Harris… who you all better damn well know from listening to my podcast like true loyal fans.”

Ashlyn gives a small wave to the room with her hand. “Hi everyone. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Rebecca says with a smile, helping Ali out and speaking for the room before anyone else can say anything. “I’ll handle these.” She says, taking the flowers from Ali’s hand and going to find a vase for them.

“So…” Ali says trying to just get this over with so she can have her time with Ashlyn. “Ashlyn here not only owes me a second date, but also a complete do-over on the end of our first one.” She announces and looks back at Ashlyn for a second, “I’m giving you a mulligan, Harris.”
Ashlyn shakes her head and laughs a bit, the rest of the room laughing lightly at Ali’s teasing statement too.

“I’m going to cash in on that right now. So, you guys go on ahead without me and have fun.” Ali finishes.

“Well, we’re all ready to go and we better get on the road before we arrive too late to find parking. Come on you guys.” Rebecca tries to get everyone out of there as quickly as possible, knowing what this means to Ali right now.

Everyone swiftly busies themselves with gathering the food and supplies that are in front of them and Ali mouths a silent ‘thank you’ to Rebecca who winks and mouths ‘good luck’ back. The group is out the door within five minutes, except for Kyle of course who purposely hangs back.

Ali knows he wants a minute with Ashlyn, so she goes outside with Rebecca to give them a little privacy.

Ashlyn can only imagine what Kyle must be thinking of her as he gets closer. “Kyle, I’m so sorry. I know what I did was selfish of me, but I needed to…” She starts before he can say anything, but he holds his hand up to stop her.

“Stop. You don’t need to apologize. If I didn’t completely understand what was going on with you, I would have already kicked your ass, Harris. But I really do get it. You’re okay now? Found your path and what you were looking for?” He asks seriously.

“Yeah.” Ashlyn confirms. “Well, all but the most important thing… but that’s what I’m here for.”

Kyle smiles with a nod. “You heard her, Harris…you get one mulligan. Break her heart and I’ll end you.” He gives her the protective big brother speech as best he can.

“No need, I’ll end myself if that happens. Are we good?” Ashlyn asks.

“We’re definitely good.” Kyle replies as he grabs her for a hug. “Seriously, you look so good. Like really fucking hot. Damn girl, all of this just works for you!”

“Thanks, dude. You look good too.” Ashlyn replies, noting that he looks a bit leaner than usual.

“Yeah well, I’ve been making up for your absence by living here with Ms. Thang who makes me eat healthy and run with her. I’m leaving that all up to you now. And for the record, I am not coming back here tonight… or the next few nights for that matter, just saying.” Kyle sasses as Ashlyn gives him a glare. “What, you are too hot for your own good right now and I refuse to pretend like that isn’t going to matter.” He says matter-of-factly.

“Is it my turn yet?” Ali says as she walks back into the kitchen and drapes an arm around Ashlyn’s shoulders, essentially saving her from Kyle’s further jibing.

“Yes, I’m off like a prom dress!” Kyle says flamboyantly as he walks out the door still yelling back to them. “I’ll see you guys… well…in like a damn week or something. Just call me when you emerge!”

“Finally!” Ali says jokingly to keep things light. She heads right over to the refrigerator and pulls out a bottle of champagne that has been sitting in there for a quite a while. “I know, neither of us is much for drinking….but I feel like tonight calls for, well, something.”
“That actually sounds good.” Ashlyn agrees.

“Good. You open it and I’ll grab glasses. Also, I’m sure you probably haven’t eaten dinner yet and I’m starving. Pizza or Chinese are the best in terms of who will deliver here, so which one?” Ali asks.

“Um, how about pizza?” Ashlyn replies, figuring it will be the quickest to decide on and order.

“Champagne and pizza, perfect!” Ali giggles a bit and pulls out the glasses by the time Ashlyn is finished uncorking the bottle with a loud pop.

They spend the next few minutes deciding on what kind of pizza and putting in the order before sitting down on the living room couch about a foot apart and mostly turned towards each other.

Ashlyn is almost beside herself at how quickly they have just fallen back into normal rhythm with each other and she can tell Ali is too by the tranquil but still somewhat surprised look on her face.

“I don’t even know where to start. Just…tell me everything.” Ali starts. “Where are you living and what have you been doing the last six months?”

Ashlyn shoots Ali a jokingly incredulous look. “You really expect me to believe that THE Ali Krieger didn’t keep tabs on me in any way?”

Ali smiles back guiltily and puts her hands up. “Ok, ok. I’ll admit that I sort of did.”

“Well, how about you tell me what you know and I’ll fill in from there.” Ashlyn suggests. “That seems to be our thing.” She adds with a wink.

“Deal. Your brother told me you’re living in your grandparent’s old house in Ipswich which you’ve always owned and just used as a vacation place until now. I saw the news story about how you’re the Captain of the Ipswich Police Department. And Edith may or may not have called me back in May to give me an update about how you were and told me you were pretty much kicking ass at your job. That’s all I know!” Ali spills her knowledge.

“Edith, such a traitor! That woman is a worse meddler than even my grandma was… I freaking love her though.” Ashlyn shakes her head with a slight grin, making a mental note to tell Edith she’s been caught.

“She really is great.” Ali agrees.

“Well, that’s pretty much the gist of it. I already told you why, but I felt like I just couldn’t be in South Boston anymore. It just didn’t feel like I belonged there. In thinking of where I should go and start something new for myself, I guess Ipswich was always home in so many ways. When my grandparents died, I took over ownership of the house and had really only used it as like a getaway. I guess it just seemed like a good place to go to work myself out. I was pretty much a mess when I got there and just sort of flailed around for the first few weeks. Then I ran into Edith even though I was trying to avoid her and just about everyone else. She really just gave it to me straight and helped me figure out that I shouldn’t run from what I’m good at just because of a bad experience. Sooo… I joined the police department there and they were really open to having me. It’s been great so far and I’ve finally learned to really work with the people around me and not just do it all on my own. My officers are amazing and I love the community, it’s been really good for me. Between that and a whole lot of straight talk and hand-holding from Dr. Plume, things fell into place over time.” Ashlyn explains. “I reconnected with a couple of old high school friends that have been good support. I’ve spent a lot of time working on updating the house and running and working out on the beach. That’s
pretty much been life for the last six months. Oh… well… and missing you with every single ounce of my being. I missed you so damn much, Alex.” She adds and reaches to hold Ali’s hand.

“I really missed you too, Ashlyn.” Ali says quietly, closing her eyes for just a second as she feels Ashlyn take her hand. “Before we get to that though, tell me about this hair!” She says, reaching to run her free hand over itlightly. “I loved your long hair and I’ll miss it, but this looks so good on you. You just look so sharp and handsome. It’s stylish and perfect.”

“Thanks.” Ashlyn replies blushing a little bit. “I didn’t really have much of a choice. I went to get my hair dyed and the woman at the salon wouldn’t touch it because it was so damaged. Apparently, prison peroxide isn’t good for your hair…who knew?!” Ashlyn jokes. “She said it was damaged beyond repair and the best thing to do was cut it. I totally freaked out of course and went to another salon. They told me the same thing, so, I freaked out some more and then finally bit the bullet. I thought I was going to hate it, but I actually really like it. It’s fun and easy, think I’ll keep it for a while.”

“Oh wow, that’s quite a story. I can only imagine the look on your face at that first salon!” Ali laughs a bit. “I seriously love it though. The back feels so cool, I would just touch it all day if I was you.” She adds as she runs her hand over the bristle-like hair on back of Ashlyn’s head.

“I kind of did the first couple days, but now I’m used to it.” Ashlyn admits with a chuckle.

“Tell me about these.” Ali says more seriously, dropping her hand down and lightly running her fingers over the black ink on Ashlyn’s inner right forearm and getting her first good look at the new design. It’s an owl whose lower half transforms into a person with an umbrella walking through a dark forest path.

“Well, you know that I use tattoos as a way to tell my story. With everything that has happened, I figured I’d start a new sleeve. The owl represents wisdom and knowledge. Combined with this lower half of the person walking down the path… it’s there to remind me that life is not just about the outcomes and the good moments. It’s about the journey and the dark moments that we walk through to get us to where we want to be and the things we learn along the way.” Ashlyn explains, goosebumps forming on her skin at Ali’s light touch.

“It’s beautiful, as is its meaning.” Ali says reverently as she gives herself just a little longer to admire it. She starts to turn Ashlyn’s arm a bit to see the second tattoo, having only caught an earlier glimpse of it being a face of some sort. Now that she has Ashlyn’s arm turned and can see it clearly, she sees that it’s an image of a woman that almost translucently shows a skull towards top of her head where a bunch of roses are blooming out of it, their roots spreading through the skin of her face. The detail on it is intricate and the shading is perfect. “What about this one?” She asks trying to make sense of it.

“Oh…um… this one is… for you.” Ashlyn says barely above a whisper as she looks up to meet Ali’s eyes which look a bit quizzical. “Brave are the flowers that bloom from the darkness…” She starts the poem she once wrote for Ali.

“Oh… oh my god.” Ali says as she finally gets it, her hand going to cover her open mouth for the second time today.

“This is to always remind me that the most wonderful person in my life came from one of my darkest moments. And that having seen my deepest darkest places, she still embraces me, encourages me to shine, and makes everything beautiful.” Ashlyn says softly before she loses the nerve.

“Wow, I…” Ali starts with a tear escaping her eye, but she can’t find the right words.
“Sorry, too much?” Ashlyn asks nervously.

“No, you’ll never be too much.” Ali reassures her as she moves her hand to Ashlyn’s face. “I’m just so moved that I don’t even have words… and… I’m so honored and happy to be a part of your story, Ash.” Ali is stroking Ashlyn’s cheek lightly and the space between them has closed considerably, their faces just inches apart. Their eyes are locked onto each other’s and Ali feels Ashlyn’s hand run up her arm lightly. The brunette lets her eyes flutter closed, content to let the invisible force pulling them together do the rest when the doorbell rings making them both jump a bit.

Ali lets out an impatient sigh before opening her eyes and seeing the same sentiment reflected on Ashlyn’s face. They both let out a little laugh at the poor timing and Ali gets up to get the door, pretty much ready to kill the pizza delivery person even though it was her own fault for ordering dinner.

After the broken moment, they spend the next hour on the couch eating pizza and sipping their champagne while talking more about what they’ve missed in each other’s lives for the past few months. It’s a light conversation for a while until Ali finally updates Ashlyn on her father, explaining that she finally feels like she can start to get some closure and that she couldn’t be happier about how her relationship with Rebecca and the boys has turned out.

“Will you ever go see him?” Ashlyn asks.

“Yes. I’m realizing that’s the last piece of getting closure for me. I’m not ready yet, but I will be at some point. I just want that one last visit so I can walk away feeling in control of myself over it, so I’m the one dictating how I feel and not him.” Ali elaborates.

Ashlyn nods in understanding, guilt creeping over her as she realizes just how much Ali has been going through on her own while she’s been gone. “Hey, Alex…”

“Yeah?” Ali replies seeing the serious look on Ashlyn’s face.

“I am so sorry that I left you the way I did and that you’ve gone through so much on your own on top of what I put you through. I was just so screwed up and I knew I needed to figure myself out without dragging you down with me, but I shouldn’t have just left you like that. I just… I’m sorry, and I need you to know that everything I did to get myself back together… it was all to get back to you. To be the person that you deserve. I promise you, no matter what happens, I will never ever leave your side again.” Ashlyn declares in heartfelt sincerity, her eyes moving to look at the floor still a bit ashamed of herself.

“Ashlyn Harris, look at me.” Ali commands. “I don’t need you to apologize. I really and truly understand what you did and why. I’ll admit that I was blindsided and upset at first, but your brother and Kyle really helped me to see what was happening. I get it, Ash…I really do. I’m happy and thankful that you’re here now, I’m proud of you like always, and I just want to move forward now.” She states truthfully. “Ok?”

“Ok.” Ashlyn replies with a small smile, knowing for sure that she’ll never understand what she did to deserve such an amazing person in her life.

“There’s just one more thing that’s still bothering me.” Ali commands. “I don’t need you to apologize. I really and truly understand what you did and why. I’ll admit that I was blindsided and upset at first, but your brother and Kyle really helped me to see what was happening. I get it, Ash…I really do. I’m happy and thankful that you’re here now, I’m proud of you like always, and I just want to move forward now.” She states truthfully. “Ok?”

“Ok.” Ashlyn replies with a small smile, knowing for sure that she’ll never understand what she did to deserve such an amazing person in her life.

“There’s just one more thing that’s still bothering me.” Ali says.

“Oh ok, what?” Ashlyn inquires, ready to face anything.

“I sent you a text when Kyle and I were out to ice cream a few weeks ago and was wondering what your favorite flavor was because I didn’t know. You never answered my question.” Ali smiles.

“For what?” Ali asks a bit confused.

“Those texts. For letting me leave without letting me go. It means everything.” Ashlyn answers, picking up Ali’s hand and kissing it softly.

They sit in comfortable silence just looking at each other, neither of them wanting to break the moment and not knowing what move to make next. The chime of the grandfather clock in the living room signaling that it’s 8pm snaps them out of it a bit.

“Come on.” Ali says pulling Ashlyn up off the couch with her.

“Where are we going?” Ashlyn questions.

“Quick tour that I owe you!” Ali says leading the way up the stairs. “You’ve already pretty much seen down here, so I’ll show you upstairs.” There are six guest bedrooms and three bathrooms upstairs as well as a laundry room. Ali leads Ashlyn into each of them, watching her take it all in and make complimentary comments on the architecture and décor.

When they reach her master bedroom, she stops in front of the door for a second. “This is my master bedroom and bathroom, but there’s something I really want to show you about it.” Ali says, not wanting Ashlyn to be weirded out or shy about Ali bringing her into her bedroom right now.

“Ok, show me.” Ashlyn says curiously.

Ali opens the door and heads into the room with Ashlyn following. She lets her take it in for a minute.

Ashlyn looks around the large bedroom carefully. There’s a king size bed with a fluffy white sheet and comforter set, plenty of pillows arranged on top of it. There are several dressers and a long make-up counter with a big mirror and proper lighting. She can see a walk-in closet as well as part of the bathroom where a large Jacuzzi-style tub and a long granite double-sink counter are visible from this angle. She notes that there is a fireplace and that one wall of the room is floor-to-ceiling glass with what looks like a sliding door. “This way.” Ali says and taking her hand and bringing her towards that very glass door.

Ali slides open the glass door and leads them outside onto a deck, watching as Ashlyn looks around with wide eyes.

“Holy crap! You have a freaking deck…in the middle of your roof… off of your bedroom!” Ashlyn practically shouts in admiration of it. From the front of the house you can’t see it because the roof looks normal, but in the back there is a section cut out of the middle that forms this 15 foot by 20 foot deck overlooking the backyard. There are two chaise chairs on it as well as some white string lights around the railing that decorate it a bit.

“This is kind of like my happy place and pretty much the whole reason I bought this house. I just love it up here and I wanted to share it with you. I even put heat lamps out in the winter so I can be out here even if it’s cold.” Ali tells her.

“Wow, this is amazing.” Ashlyn replies in complete awe as she looks up and can see a sky full of stars because the roof is higher than the street lights below. Even though it’s dark, she can tell that Ali’s house has a fair bit of privacy with the thick trees that surround the property. There is also some sort of body of water in the distance behind the trees of the backyard. “I love it.”
Ali just smiles and comes to stand close to Ashlyn in the middle of the deck. “Dance with me.” She whispers when she knows she’s close enough for Ashlyn to hear her, moving to wrap her arms around the short-haired woman’s shoulders.

“Here? There’s no music.” Ashlyn replies a bit surprised.

“Are you always this rigid, Harris?” Ali asks playfully.

“Given our spontaneous first date, I’d say no. Given the police and military thing, I’d say… yep, pretty much.” Ashlyn smiles and wraps her arms around Ali’s waist, pulling her in close.

“Dance with me.” Ali whispers again, feeling Ashlyn start to slowly sway with her. Her heart feels full and happy. Knowing what she wants more than anything, she rests her head on Ashlyn’s shoulder and starts softly singing.

I know it’s late, I know you're weary
I know your plans don't include me
Still here we are, both of us lonely
Longing for shelter from all that we see
Why should we worry, no one will care girl
Look at the stars so far away
We’ve got tonight, who needs tomorrow?
We’ve got tonight babe
Why don’t you stay?

Ashlyn smiles into the top of Ali’s head, hearing the Bob Seger tune and remembering Ali’s penchant for oldies and classic soft rock because of her mom. She listens to the brunette sing the last line and feels her pull back a bit, beautiful whiskey eyes now meeting hers in awaiting a response.

“Hmm, Bob Seger. Are you always this subtle, Krieger?” Ashlyn teases a bit as she looks back at Ali.

“Only when I know what I want.” Ali plays back with a smile before getting serious. “Will you… stay with me tonight?”

“I already told you…I’m not going anywhere.” Ashlyn replies and watches Ali’s face light up in a nose-crinkling grin that she’ll never get enough of. “My turn to play DJ?” Ashlyn asks as they still sway lightly.

“Go for it.” Ali replies and goes back to resting her head in the crook of Ashlyn’s neck.

Ashlyn thinks for just a couple seconds before singing her song.
When evening shadows and the stars appear
And there is no one there to dry your tears
I could hold you for a million years
To make you feel my love
I know you haven't made your mind up yet
But I would never do you wrong
I've known it from the moment that we met
No doubt in my mind where you belong
I'd go hungry, I'd go black and blue
I'd go crawling down the avenue
And oh, there's nothing that I wouldn't do
To make you feel my love.


“Oh you get so many points right now for not saying Adele.” Ashlyn says with a slight laugh.

Ali doesn’t hear the comment though because the lyrics of the song Ashlyn chose just caught up with her. She pulls her head back to look into her favorite hazel eyes. “Love?”

Ashlyn smiles and cups Ali’s cheek lightly in her hand. “Yeah, Alex…love. I love you.” She says softly with her heart drumming, everything she feels finally put out in the open with those three far too simple words.

Ali’s heart pounds, an intensity in her chest that she has never felt before in her life. She feels almost lightheaded and breathless with anticipation because she knows that absolutely nothing is going to stop her this time. Her hands slide up to gently grip the back of Ashlyn’s neck as she closes the distance and presses their lips together. The kiss is slow and gentle for a few seconds and Ashlyn’s lips are impossibly soft as they move against hers. She hears a low moan escape Ashlyn’s throat as their lips part even further, the kiss growing deeper and more insistent as the officer grips Ali’s waist a little tighter, her large hands now framing the brunette’s lower back. Ali feels the tingly flood of energy pumping through her body and she’s sure that if she opens her eyes right now, her feet will surely be floating off of the ground. Stars pop behind her closed eyelids and she hears fireworks in the distance but has no clue if they’re real or just in her head.

Ashlyn’s legs shake slightly as she feels Ali’s tongue against her lips and the brunette’s fingertips stroke the back of her neck lightly. She opens her mouth further and lets her tongue meet Ali’s in a renewed exploration of their mouths, the kiss growing more passionate by the second. Her heart is beating wildly like it might burst and her chest burning from the lack of air, but her mind has never been more at peace in knowing that this exact feeling is what she wants for the rest of her life. She’s out of breath, but holds on desperately for just a few more seconds to memorize the feel and taste of Ali’s mouth on hers.
They pull back slowly, Ali lingering for just a second longer as she holds Ashlyn’s lower lip between hers before letting it go gently. Their foreheads are pressed together, their chests heaving as Ashlyn’s hands go to Ali’s face and their eyes open to meet each other. They each take a couple of gasping breaths before Ashlyn takes hold of Ali’s lips again in another searing kiss that doesn’t last very long before they need to break for air again.

Ali watches Ashlyn’s hooded eyes flutter open while they try and recover, faces still close together. “I love you too, Ashlyn Harris.” She says breathlessly, finally uttering the statement she’s been waiting to say to someone her whole life, having no idea until right now just how inadequate those words would be to describe the force of feelings behind them. “I love you so much.” She softly pecks Ashlyn’s lips before resting their foreheads together again.

“You’re song was wrong by the way.” Ali says quietly with a smile, lips still puffy and glistening.

“Yeah?” Ashlyn challenges curiously, eyes still locked on Ali’s.

“Uh huh. The part about me not having my mind made up…not true. I made up my mind about you a long time ago, Ash. And I’ve been waiting a lot longer than tonight to tell you that I love you.” Ali says with a sweet smile.

“Well, your song was wrong too.” Ashlyn says softly.


“My plans don’t just include you, Alex… you are the plan.” Ashlyn replies with a dimpled grin as she softly kisses Ali’s forehead, each cheek, and then her nose before adding, “And you’re not the only one who’s been waiting…this heart was yours from that very first cup of coffee.”

Ali’s eyes widen at the revelation, not realizing just how long and how much Ashlyn was holding back. “Well, I’m not giving it back.” Ali says sweetly and leans in to kiss Ashlyn deeply again, already her favorite thing in the world to do, her stomach erupting in butterflies every times she feels those lips against hers.

They’re startled apart by a particularly loud boom from the fireworks going off in the distance and appearing just over the tree line.

“Right, Fourth of July.” Ashlyn comments. “Kind of thought those were just in my head.” She says playfully while gesturing to the light display in the sky.

“Me too!” Ali laughs and pulls Ashlyn over to the railing of the deck so they can watch.

Ashlyn wraps her arms snugly around Ali from behind, occasionally leaning down kiss her head and cheek as they watch the fireworks for the final ten minutes of the show. They stand there enjoying the closeness of each other in silence for a few minutes after it’s over, just looking at the trails of white smoke in the sky.

“Will you do something with me tonight?” Ali asks shyly, looking up at Ashlyn.

“I’ll do anything with you, anytime. Not just tonight, but always.” Ashlyn answers sincerely.

“Ok. Give me fifteen minutes and then come in.” Ali instructs the officer and watches her nod, reluctantly leaving Ashlyn’s arms and placing a lingering kiss on her lips before heading inside.

Ashlyn watches Ali until the brunette is inside and out of view. She checks her watch for the time and plops herself down on one of the chaise lounges, letting out a deep breath. “Wow.” She
whispers to herself, having no idea until tonight that she could ever feel anything this good. She gazes at the stars in the sky as her mind wanders to all kinds of places about what her future might bring. It’s the first time in her whole life that she’s ever let herself do it. Probably because it’s the first time that she sees a future for herself worth picturing. She looks down at her watch to see she only has a minute left, so she gives a quick fist pump to the sky to thank the universe and heads inside.

“Alex?” Ashlyn calls out as she walks into the dimly lit master bedroom, closing the sliding door behind her.

“Hi.” Ali says walking out of the bathroom.

Ashlyn just walks over to her quickly and pulls her into a passionate kiss, only pulling apart when they are both breathless again. “Sorry, I just missed doing that already.” She admits.

Ali sighs happily and pinches Ashlyn’s cheek gently. “We’re so going to be that couple, aren’t we?”

“Damn right we are and I’m gonna love every minute of it.” Ashlyn replies adamantly with a cheesy grin, neither of them flinching at the word ‘couple’ since it’s already presumed in both of their minds.

“So, what are we doing?” Ashlyn asks curiously with raised eyebrows, noting that Ali has changed into a bathrobe, the low cut neckline of which suggests that the brunette has nothing on under it.

“In here.” Ali says and brings Ashlyn into the bathroom with her.

Ashlyn looks around to see a filled Jacuzzi tub, the jets already making the water bubble. The lights are off, but five or so lit candles around the room give it a soft glow. She inhales the strong and delightful smell in the air, the very one that she gets a much more diluted hint of every time Ali is close…lavender, vanilla, and baby powder. “It smells so good in here…smells like you.” She comments sweetly.

“It’s a blend of oils I put in the water…vanilla, cedarwood, ylang ylang, and lavender.” Ali explains before coming to stand in front of Ashlyn beside the tub, putting her hands on the officer’s waist and letting out a deep breath. “This…” she points to the tub, “used to be one of my favorite things in the world. There was nothing I loved more than being surrounded by water and relaxing. I haven’t been able to since…” She trails off knowing she doesn’t need to say anything further. She had thought the problem would be solved when she got rid of the hot tub, giving it away for free just to be purged of it. No such luck. She finds herself in a panic now anytime water is anywhere above her waist and she’s wondered how she is ever going to enjoy swimming or even a simple bath again. “I just want to feel safe again… you make me feel safe.” She says looking deeply into soothing hazel eyes.

Ashlyn feels her heart pang a bit while it races with emotions, so in love with the woman in front of her and so sorry that she suffered something so horrible on her behalf. She leans in and kisses Ali gently, the kiss slow and comforting as the two of them get lost in it for a couple minutes. Seeing the nervousness in Ali’s eyes when she pulls back, her penchant for humor in hard situations takes over.

“Are you trying to get me naked on the second date, Krieger?” Ashlyn asks with raised eyebrows.

Ali lets out a quiet laugh, her anxiety easing a bit already. “Maybe Harris. Is it working?” She throws Ashlyn’s earlier line right back at her.

“Oh, it’s definitely working.” Ashlyn winks before getting serious. “Together, ok?”

Ali nods and feels Ashlyn’s hands on her face, pulling her into a deep kiss that sweeps her off her feet again. The officer’s hands drop down and protectively hold the small of her back, pulling her in
closer. When they finally break apart, Ashlyn leaves one more tiny peck on her lips and stays close, letting Ali make the next move. The brunette is all too aware of the water bubbling beside them and it’s making her feel a sense of dread. Knowing she needs to calm down, she focuses on the one thing that makes her feel secure.

“Can I?” Ali whispers, taking the top button of Ashlyn’s shirt in her fingers, her eyes never leaving the hazel ones.

Ashlyn nods her head yes, the blood pumping through her body in anticipation as Ali works her way down her shirt, taking one button at time until they’re all undone. She closes her eyes as she feels Ali’s hands work their way inside her shirt, slowly dragging up her sides and onto the tops of her shoulders before she slides the shirt off. Her breath hitches when she feels Ali’s lips ghosting over her right shoulder, the brunette’s breath hot against her skin. She opens her eyes to find Ali’s fingers lightly tracing over the multiple pinkish shrapnel scars that run from her upper bicep, over her shoulder and down her shoulder blade. She watches Ali study the deep gouges carefully not feeling self-conscious about them for the first time ever as the brunette makes her way behind her back. She usually hates it when people are behind her, but she’s calm now and completely trusting of the brunette.

Ali presses her lips to the deepest, longest scar that runs along the back of Ashlyn’s shoulder blade. She kisses across it, worshipping the strength of this amazing woman and all she has endured. She wraps her arms around the officer’s waist from behind, her hands splayed out on Ashlyn’s toned stomach. “You’re truly my hero.” She whispers into Ashlyn’s ear and presses several soft kisses into the back of the taller woman’s neck, feeling her breathing pick up with a soft moan escaping her lips.

Having never felt as accepted and loved in her entire life the way she does in this very moment, Ashlyn turns herself slowly in Ali’s arms and kisses her with everything she has, tongues meeting in fiery passion until she feels Ali run her hands under the back of her sports bra and pull up. Ashlyn obliges, breaking the kiss and putting her arms above her head to let the brunette slide it off.

Ali doesn’t waste any more time lingering, not wanting to tarnish this moment with the feelings of apprehension that are slowly building in her as she hears the water churning beside them. She runs her hand down the colorful ink on Ashlyn’s left side and unbuttons her shorts, sliding them down the officer’s legs together with her boxer briefs.

Ashlyn steps out of her flip-flops and shorts that are now pooled around her ankles. She wants to laugh at how they’ve been in here for less than 10 minutes and Ali already has her naked, but then she looks up into those whiskey eyes. Ali is looking at her in a way that could set the room on fire in the same way that the brunette has just set her skin ablaze with a few simple touches.

“God, Ash…look at you, you’re a work of art. You are so incredibly beautiful.” Ali says reverently, gently tracing Ashlyn’s perfectly defined abs muscles with her fingertips. She can’t even fathom how anyone could possibly be so flawless and strong like this…defined jawline…long, toned, and lean limbs…small perky breasts with perfect pink nipples…a torso displaying every single muscle effortlessly…like someone sculpted her by hand.

Ashlyn takes a deep intake of breath at Ali’s feather soft touch, her skin hot where the brunette has traced it. Beautiful. There’s that word again. The word that only Ali has used to describe her. A word that once only had meaning for others, but now has meaning for her too. When Ali says it, she can see that the brunette really means it and it makes her actually believe it. She feels Ali move in closer and press a kiss to the middle of her chest, her lips covering the small almost circular scar that has been the source of many a nightmare. The scar is now once again making her feel like her chest is going to explode, but for a very different reason. Ashlyn brings her hand up and entwines it in
Ali’s hair, pulling the brunette up for a brief loving kiss before moving her lips close to her ear.
“Thank you. You make me feel beautiful and I love you, but you’re overdressed and stalling, Alex.”
She gives Ali a smirk.

“But it’s the best kind of stalling.” Ali protests with a small pout that makes Ashlyn kiss her again.

Ashlyn doesn’t reply, she just slowly moves her hands to the tie holding Ali’s bathrobe closed and waits for confirmation from the brunette. Ali gives her a smile and a small nod, so she quickly undoes the loose knot and moves her hands into the robe to encircle Ali’s waist and pull her close, letting the garment drop to the ground behind them. The feeling of Ali’s warm skin against her own is like no other sensation in the world, immediately taking a top spot on her list of favorite things.

She hugs Ali tightly, placing a few kisses on the top of her shoulder before moving to kiss all around her neck where angry lacerations and bruising are now completely invisible. She feels Ali breathing heavily and finally pulls back with the intention of getting into the tub. She stops in her tracks though when she sees the brunette’s nude form in full, her breath caught in her throat. Ali is lean, but also curvy in exactly the right places. She’s strong and defined, her stomach taut and toned with gorgeous black ink running along her side, her skin perfectly tan, her breasts no more than a handful with dusty pink nipples that beg to be touched, and she’s simply the most beautiful human being Ashlyn has ever laid eyes on. Yet, beautiful seems so inadequate right now and Ashlyn finds herself at a loss for what to say until she hears her own voice, the words coming out on their own. “Alex… you’re…Christmas morning.” She whispers out a sentiment that only Ali can possibly understand, where in her world nothing lives up to that one perfect moment on Christmas morning…until tonight.

And tonight, no matter what happens, that perfect moment won’t ever be broken because she’s with the love of her life.

“You’re too much.” Ali replies as the blush works up her chest and into her face, completely enamored by the depth and meaning of the statement. Ashlyn has that look of marvel in her eyes again and it makes her whole body practically flutter. She lets her eyes rake over the officer’s body for a few more seconds, taking in the totality of her body art and trying to memorize the detail of it.

Ashlyn finally drags her eyes away from the brunette long enough to climb into the Jacuzzi tub. The water is soothingly warm and reaches almost to her hips as she stands inside, the oils that mimic Ali’s scent permeating her senses and instantly relaxing her. “Come on, beautiful, get in with me.” She encourages Ali gently and reaches her hand out.

Ali takes a really deep breath and lets Ashlyn help her into the tub. Her heart rate immediately picks up as the water swirls around her hips, her body starting to shiver a bit despite the warmth. She is working furiously to keep the image of her father’s face out of her mind when she feels strong arms envelope her and soft lips capture her bottom lip tenderly. Her mind goes blank and while the same sensations remain in her body, they’ve shifted to being the result of the electricity from Ashlyn’s touch. She presses her mouth more deeply against the officer’s, desperate maintain her focus on the passion between them and keep the demons from making their entrance.

As their mouths part in need of air, Ali finds herself studying Ashlyn’s eyes closely. The light brown center blending into the surrounding bright green edges that are flecked with little gold spots. They’re a work of art equal to the rest of her. “You can do this, Alex.” She hears Ashlyn coax her in a whisper, the warm breath on her ear making her skin erupt in goosebumps. She watches Ashlyn settle herself into the corner of the tub before reaching her hand out again.

“Come here.” Ashlyn beckons sweetly. “I’m here with you and you’re safe. I won’t ever let anything happen to you, Alex. I promise.” She adds reassuringly.

And this is exactly why Ali wanted to do this. As much as her body and mind are fighting her, she
knows she’ll never be able to deny Ashlyn anything. She takes the officer’s hand and let’s herself be gently pulled down towards Ashlyn’s lap. She closes her eyes as she gets lower and feels the water get higher and higher on her body, waiting for the panic to start.

“Doing so good, baby. You got it.” Ashlyn says supportively.

The water is up to Ali’s chest already and she’s almost seated, but she doesn’t even realize because she’s too busy smiling at the pet name that just slipped out of Ashlyn’s mouth. Before she knows it, she feels the sides of her ass against Ashlyn’s thighs, the officer’s legs surrounding her with her chest pressed into her back as her arms wrap around her protectively from behind.

“I got you, Alex. I got you. You’re okay, you’re safe with me.” Ashlyn says softly into Ali’s ear as the brunette leans her head back and their cheeks press together. Ali suddenly becomes aware of the water swirling around her collarbones and waits for the fear to take over, but it never comes. Instead she just feels sheltered and loved, Ashlyn’s body solidly encompassing her own. She feels completely relaxed, her eyes opening to find those of her unwavering protector.

“You ok?” Ashlyn asks, watching Ali’s eyes and body language carefully.

“Never better.” Ali says with a genuine smile before turning her head enough to capture Ashlyn’s lips over her shoulder in a slow but fervent kiss intended to convey both the serenity and more intense emotions of the moment. “I love you, Ash. Really, really love you.” Ali says with her lips still ghosting Ashlyn’s.

“I love you too, Alex.” Ashlyn replies, going in for another quick kiss before she continues. “Even more than I did yesterday, but not as much as I’ll love you tomorrow… because I realize that I love you more and more with every passing day even when I didn’t think it was possible.”

“So damn romantic, Harris.” Ali says, her voice in an almost purr as Ashlyn places hot kisses across her jawline and down her neck.

“Get used to it, Krieger.” Ashlyn husks out as she stops to gently suck on Ali’s pulse point, feeling the brunette squeeze her thigh a bit as she lets out a soft whimper.

“I could definitely get used to it.” Ali says breathily reaching up to run her hand through Ashlyn’s short hair and pull her in even closer as she works her mouth across her collarbone and over the top of her shoulder before making her way back again. “Mmmm, that feels so good.”

“I can’t believe I’m here with you. It’s like a dream.” Ashlyn mumbles against Ali’s skin, softly working on her pulse point again as her hands rake up the sides of the brunette’s torso unconsciously.

The loving touches put Ali over the edge. She turns herself around in the officer’s arms, straddling her lap and placing her hand behind Ashlyn’s neck to pull their mouths together in a kiss that is completely different than their prior ones. This one is hungry and heated as lips, tongues and teeth move together desperately with hands roaming all over each other while soft moans and throaty breaths fill the air. The lengthy exploration of each other is passionate, but respectful, both of them on the same unspoken wavelength. Tonight has been the most intimate experience either of them has ever had and neither wants to ruin it by pushing further.

They aren’t sure how long it’s been, but it feels like at least an hour before things finally slow into short tender kisses and they stop to gaze at each other. Ali is completely entranced by the deep
emerald green color that has saturated Ashlyn’s eyes as she runs her fingers over the short bristly hairs on the back of her head.

“So, what do you think the chances of us being permanently pruned are?” Ashlyn jokes and breaks the quiet.

“I’d say pretty damn good at this point.” Ali laughs as she looks how wrinkled their hands are from being in the tub so long. “We should probably dry off and call it a night, huh?”

“Good plan.” Ashlyn agrees, stroking the small of Ali’s back lightly.

“Thank you for doing this and taking care of me.” Ali says thoughtfully, planting one more quick kiss on Ashlyn’s lips.

“Thank you for letting me.” Ashlyn replies sweetly.

“Come on, Hero. Let’s get you dry.” Ali says getting up out of the water.

“After you, Paladin.” Ashlyn winks and offers her hand for Ali to steady herself on.

“So chivalrous, Harris.” Ali teases.

“So incredibly beautiful, Krieger.” Ashlyn replies seriously, her eyes taking in Ali’s stunning body again like it was the first time.

“Stop it before we never leave this tub.” Ali playfully points a finger at her.

“Ok. Ok.” Ashlyn relents and closes her eyes, pretending to feel around with her hands in jest.

“So lame, Harris.” Ali laughs as she puts her robe back on and pulls another one from the hook on the bathroom wall, wrapping it around Ashlyn’s shoulders and tying it closed for her.

“Five star service.” Ashlyn chuckles and follows Ali into the bedroom.

Ali goes right to her make-up counter and freshens her mascara which is just starting to come off a bit with the moisture of the bath.

Ashlyn watches and shakes her head. “Am I ever going to see you without that mascara?”

“Maybe if you play your cards right.” Ali says with a devilish smirk in the mirror.

“Well, I do have a pretty hot hand at the moment.” Ashlyn flirts.

“Sure do.” Ali turns around and smiles after finishing up. “Soooo…I’d offer you some pajamas, but the thing is that there isn’t a single article of clothing in this house that would qualify.” She says trying to keep a straight face.

Ashlyn chuckles with a dimpled grin. “You may be an amazing lawyer, but you’re a terrible liar, Krieger. Luckily, I’m not in the market for pajamas right now.”

“Good, cause I’m fresh out.” Ali keeps up the ruse as she pulls back the covers of the bed and drops her robe to the floor.

“Dear lord, warn a girl.” Ashlyn says as she watches Ali climb into the bed. “For the record, I will never get over how absolutely, astonishingly gorgeous you are…goddess.” She finishes in a barely audible whisper.
“Ash?” Ali says with a happy smile.

“Yeah?” Ashlyn replies.

“Stop trying to charm me and get your perfect, out of this world, body against mine stat… that’s an order, Captain.” Ali demands playfully.

“Yes ma’am.” Ashlyn gives a mock salute and quickly drops her own robe before crawling into bed and pulling the brunette into her arms. Ali’s chest pressed to hers is enough to ignite a fire on skin. “I love you.” She repeats yet again, feeling like she could say it a million times tonight and still not have it be enough.

Ali kisses Ashlyn deeply before they’re out of breath again and completely exhausted. “I love you too.” She replies enchanted. “It’s late, we should sleep.” She suggests and Ashlyn nods in agreement. “I just… I don’t want to stop kissing you.” She admits shyly.

“Then don’t.” Ashlyn grins widely and directs Ali’s mouth back to hers.

They kiss languidly for a long stretch, neither of them knowing which one eventually pulled away or fell asleep first. Although sleep has so easily eluded both of them for months, tonight they enjoy a deep peaceful slumber as they lay completely entwined in each other with hearts finally drumming to the same tune.

Chapter End Notes

Hope that kiss was worth the wait. Guess we'll just have to see what else was worth the wait in the next chapter ;)}
Body Clock

Chapter Notes

Fair warning that I have an extremely busy couple of weeks ahead and it's going to be very hard for me to find time to write. Promise I'm not abandoning you, but it might take me a little while to get another chapter out.
However, I hope you enjoy the hell out of this one in the meantime :)
And with that I say... Smut Alert!

Ashlyn’s internal body clock wakes her up right around 6:00am as usual. She feels the weight and warmth on her body before she even opens her eyes. She leaves her eyes closed for a couple more minutes just to let herself fully feel the incredible heat and softness of Ali’s skin against hers. The view when she finally opens her eyes is just as amazing. Soft dark brown hair is spread wildly over her shoulder as Ali’s face is pressed to the top of her chest, her mouth just slightly open and her mascara still perfect somehow. The brunette’s right arm resting across Ashlyn’s stomach and lightly clutching the wrist of her left hand. The sheets are pooled at their waists, so she can’t see beyond that but she can feel Ali’s right leg entwined between her own. She is completely overwhelmed by not only how beautiful Ali looks, but that this astonishing woman is in her arms and hers to love. “Total goddess.” Ashlyn whispers softly as she takes it all in, adjusting her right arm that is wrapped around Ali’s shoulders and letting her hand run along the brunette’s side softly.

The slight movement causes Ali to shift a bit and she starts to roll over. “Mmmhmm, I’ll send off a notice of breach of contract in the morning.” She mumbles and says something else unintelligible before re-settling herself facing away from Ashlyn who is trying hard not to laugh too loudly at Ali’s sleep talking. ‘Even in her sleep she’s a bad ass lawyer.’ Ashlyn thinks to herself with a grin, sure that it might be one of the most adorable things she’s ever witnessed.

With Ali no longer on top of her, Ashlyn decides to get up in search of coffee for the two of them. She leaves a few gentle kisses on Ali’s shoulder before quietly getting up and slipping the robe from last night back on. She makes a quick stop to use the bathroom and hopes that she’ll find an easily accessible new toothbrush in there, but no such luck. She’s usually pretty fastidious about oral hygiene even to the point of getting made fun of in the past for carrying floss or a toothpick in her pocket. Unfortunately, all she finds is a half empty bottle of mouthwash which will have to do for now. After swishing some around in her mouth, she heads downstairs to the kitchen.

Ashlyn was hoping that she’d find a simple coffee pot or even a French press like she uses at home, but instead she’s sitting there staring at some fancy combination of a coffee and espresso maker that she has no idea how to use. She’s about to give up when she notices a bag of coffee grounds and another small bag a little further down on the counter with a big note attached to them.

Harris,

Must be like 6am? Am I right? Of course I am, you’re so predictable! Stopped in early and dropped off some fresh coffee cause Ms. Thang was almost out. Don’t worry, that thing is easier to use than it looks like it is (instructions on the back of this sheet).

Also, there’s a new toothbrush and floss in the bag since you probably already panicked about that, you big weirdo. I’m sure you can find toothpaste in any of the bathrooms. Oh, and there’s a comb in
the bag too so you can primp yourself before you wake up the princess. Fair warning, she almost never gets up before 8am.

You’re the best, Kyle! I know, I know! You owe me major bro time, Harris. Now make the damn coffee already and then go make my sister all giddy.

The hottest and not at all modest,

Kyle

Ashlyn snickers as she reads the note thinking that Kyle definitely knows her way too well. It’s not surprising given that he lived with her for quite a long time while he recovered. Still, she can’t help but let herself muse about how life can be so interconnected sometimes. She had tried to help out several people she had come across on the job, but none had ever taken her up on her offer the way Kyle did. Kyle had brokenly admitted that he was so incredibly lost and believed himself to be beyond repair, but she promised him she would battle right beside him the whole way and he had latched onto her quickly. It was the first time she had ever let someone she didn’t know into her home and into her life like that, and in the end, it cemented the foundation of a friendship more solid than she could have anticipated. Kyle had told her on one of his worst days that he had left someone behind on his journey to rock bottom and that he just wanted to find his way to that person. Ashlyn never asked details and he never elaborated, but she could see that his desire to get better for this person was the clear force behind his recovery. She never understood the true power of his motivation until she met Ali Krieger herself, and then she understood it perfectly. If she hadn’t met Kyle, if she hadn’t offered him help, and if he hadn’t taken it… she wouldn’t be standing in this kitchen trying to make coffee for the amazing woman who is truly the other half of her soul. It’s mind blowing.

Before she lets herself think on it any further, she heads to the nearest bathroom down the hall. She finds toothpaste in one of the drawers just like Kyle said she would and quickly brushes her teeth and combs her hair enough to be passable before going back to the kitchen to tackle the coffeemaker. After about fifteen minutes and following Kyle’s directions to the letter, she has two fresh mugs of delicious smelling coffee. She heads back upstairs with the coffee and goes to wake up Ali even though it’s just shy of 7am and she knows it’ll probably be a challenge given what Kyle said in the note.

She carefully places the coffee mugs on one of the bedside tables and lets herself watch Ali sleep for a little bit before pulling off the robe and climbing back into bed behind the brunette. She slips her arm around Ali’s waist and presses her chest into her back while placing open mouthed kisses across the soft skin of Ali’s shoulder, her hand running light patterns between her stomach and hip. Ashlyn smiles when she feels Ali press herself back even further and let out a low moan.

“Good morning, beautiful.” Ashlyn whispers in Ali’s ear and feels the brunette shiver a bit. She kisses the spot just behind her ear and then hugs her close.

“Mmmm, morning, Hero.” Ali says with her eyes still closed, her lips curled into a smile. “Who said you could stop doing what you were doing?”

Ashlyn chuckles lightly and resumes kissing her shoulders and neck until Ali is squirming a bit and reaches back to grab her ass and pull her closer.

“Your coffee is going to get cold.” Ashlyn warns even though she doesn’t really want to stop.
“You got up and made coffee… and walked naked through my house?” Ali says turning around in Ashlyn’s arms to face her. “I sure am sorry I missed that.”

“I put a robe on, Alex. And yes, I made coffee.” Ashlyn laughs.

“Well then, thank you very much for taking it back off.” Ali smiles wickedly and runs her fingertips up Ashlyn’s back, stopping only when she reaches the base of her neck and gets the intake of breath reaction that she was looking for. “Now, where is this coffee you speak of?”

“Right here my queen.” Ashlyn jokes and rolls over towards the bedside table, sitting up a bit and grabbing the mugs carefully before passing one to Ali.

“Thank you, you’re sweet. There’s only one queen in this house though, and he’s thankfully not here right now in his underwear like he would normally be.” Ali jokes and watches as Ashlyn almost spits out her coffee to laugh. “Can’t believe you figured out my coffee machine, Harris. I’m impressed.”

“Well, speaking of Kyle. He clearly was here early and left fresh coffee, instructions for the coffeemaker, and a toothbrush for me. Your brother knows me waaay too well. So, I really can’t take all that much credit.” Ashlyn replies.

“Yeah, someday I need to properly hear all about you two living together. He must have driven your type-A self absolutely crazy.” Ali says trying to picture Kyle and Ashlyn in the same living space.

“Actually, it worked better than either of us expected. When he moved out, I actually didn’t know what to do with myself because I was so used to him being there.” Ashlyn explains.

“You know, Ash… someday I really hope I find a way to convey to you how grateful I am for you having saved him the way you did.” Ali says seriously.

“Alex… you literally saved my life and almost lost yours in the process. I think we’re beyond good here.” Ashlyn replies with raised eyebrows.

“Ugh, fine, so practical, Harris.” Ali jokes to lighten the conversation again.

“But, I mean, if you feel the need to thank me more…” Ashlyn smiles and moves in to pepper Ali’s jaw with soft kisses, “there might be a couple ways I can think of.”

Ali closes her eyes contently feeling Ashlyn kissing from behind her ear, down her jaw and towards her mouth before her eyes pop open. “Slow your roll, Harris.” She puts her finger up to Ashlyn’s mouth. “You got to brush, I didn’t. So hold that thought and give me a couple minutes.”

Ashlyn watches Ali down the rest of her coffee and leap off the bed. She shakes her head when she sees the brunette check her mascara in the mirror first before going to brush her teeth.

“It’s only 7:21am?!?!?” Ali yells from the bathroom after seeing the time on the small digital clock in there. “Why are we up so early?” She asks incredulously, hanging her head out the bathroom door.

“Oh, um, sorry. My body clock is always naturally up around 6am.” Ashlyn explains with a shrug.

“Huh, interesting. Well, we’ll fix that soon enough.” Ali smiles sweetly and goes back into the bathroom.

“What exactly does that mean?” Ashlyn yells from the bedroom.

Ashlyn finishes her coffee and checks her phone for messages and email. It’s only a few minutes before Ali is plopping back down onto the bed and pulling Ashlyn down on top of her.

“Hi.” Ali whispers with a smile, her face close to the officer’s as her fingers play with the hair on the back of her neck.

“Hey there.” Ashlyn whispers back, losing herself immediately in the striking brown eyes she loves.

“I’m ready for that proper good morning now.” Ali beams up at her.

Ashlyn immediately leans down and captures Ali’s lips with her own, the kiss quickly getting heated given the nudity and really intimate positioning. She feels Ali’s tongue slip between her lips and the brunette grabs her ass to pull her in closer. Just as her free hand lands on Ali’s hip, her cellphone goes off and both of them groan.

“Ignore it.” Ali mumbles against Ashlyn’s lips and runs her hands up her back.

Ashlyn lets out a deep sigh. “Sorry, I really can’t. Price of dating a cop.” She says apologetically and reluctantly rolls off of the brunette.

“Harris.” Ashlyn answers the phone. “Not a problem, Chief, what can I do for you?” Ali watches Ashlyn listen to whatever the chief is saying while she takes the short-haired woman’s hand and starts kissing her finger tips. “Yes sir, I signed off on it before I left. So, it should be all set. No worries, I’m glad you checked. Yes sir, have a good day.” Ashlyn finishes the conversation and scoots back down next to Ali. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s ok, I get that your job is really important and that it really can’t wait most of the time. I promise that you don’t ever have to worry about me not understanding that. Although, I might get a little jealous about having to share my hero sometimes, but I’ll get over it.” Ali assures her and purposely ends the statement on a light note.

“Thank you. That actually means a lot more than you think.” Ashlyn kisses her softly.

“So, do you have work today?” Ali asks with a slight pout at the thought.

“Usually yes. I work day shifts Monday through Thursday and then a night shift on Sundays. I took this as a vacation week thinking I’d spend the time with the kids, but then Chris and Bridget won some cruise trip and they’re gone. Anyway, I’m off until Monday.” Ashlyn answers long-windedly.

Ali can’t stop the huge smile that overtakes her face. “So, what you’re saying is that I get you all to myself until Monday?”

Ashlyn laughs. “Yep, if that’s what you want.”

“That’s what I want.” Ali quickly confirms and kisses her deeply until the loud growl of Ashlyn’s stomach disrupts them. “Hungry?”


“That’s ok, I am too.” Ali admits. “Unfortunately, I only grabbed what we needed for the picnic yesterday and there isn’t much in the house. Maybe we can run down to the little corner grocery shop a couple streets away and grab some stuff to make. You can borrow some clothes from either me or Kyle, whatever fits better.” Ali suggests.

Ashlyn thinks it over for a second. “Or… we can just throw on some comfy clothes, hit up my
favorite diner for breakfast and then I can show you my house and around Ipswich. And maybe you can spend the night at my place?"

“I love it.” Ali says excitedly.

“I love you.” Ashlyn pulls the brunette into another kiss.

Ali smiles into the officer’s lips. “Love you too.” She is about to deepen the kiss when she hears Ashlyn’s stomach again and pulls away. “Alright, alright geez…I’ll go pack some clothes!”

“Sorry, it has a mind of its own!” Ashlyn says patting her stomach.

Thirty minutes later and with some help from Ashlyn, Ali is packed with enough stuff for a couple nights away and the two of them are in athletic shorts and t-shirts ready to head to the diner. They make the 45 minute drive north during which Ali fills Ashlyn in more about her and Kyle’s relationship with Rebecca and the boys and Ashlyn tells Ali a bit about her high school friends Liz and Jess. Before they know it, they’re sitting across from each other in a diner booth looking over menus.

Ashlyn thinks she’s being unhealthy by ordering the triple cheese omelet and home fries, but quickly realizes she’s out of her league when Ali orders a huge stack of chocolate chip pancakes and a double side of bacon. “Sweet tooth?” Ashlyn asks with wide eyes.

“Just a little.” Ali laughs and watches Ashlyn pop a quarter into the little jukebox on the table, scrolling through the song selection and entering something she can’t see. “What did you pick?”

“You’ll see in a minute.” Ashlyn says mysteriously.

Two minutes later, Ali hears Paula Abdul playing and shoots Ashlyn a playful glare. “Funny, Harris. Trying to embarrass me over breakfast?”

“Nope. It’s more of a tribute really.” Ashlyn says with a smile.


“Yep. I spent the better part of the last two weeks trying to figure out how to get back in touch with you. After being away so long, I just… I was too nervous to just suck it up and go for it. And then yesterday morning, I was sitting right over there.” Ashlyn points to the counter with the stools. “Some college girls randomly played this song. And I thought about us laughing together over it at the hospital… and I just had to see you, no matter what happened. So, yeah, it’s a tribute to finally finding my way back to you.”

Even though Ali isn’t usually big on overt PDA, she pulls Ashlyn over the table and kisses her soundly. “Well, thank you Ms. Abdul. I better find a way to send her some flowers.” Ali jokes.

“I’m sure she’d prefer crack.” Ashlyn snickers.

“Probably. What the hell is her deal these days?” Ali agrees.

“No idea, but I was just watching some American Idol reruns last month and she is totally on crack. Or at least she was when that show originally aired. Is she even on that show anymore? Ashlyn says laughing.

“Nope. I think they replaced her with Jennifer Lopez.” Ali answers with a shrug.
“That doesn’t sound much better.” Ashlyn says as she thinks about it.

“It isn’t.” Ali confirms with a laugh as their food arrives.

After stuffing themselves to the point of feeling like they can’t move, Ashlyn makes the short drive to her house, excited for Ali to see it.

Ali is taking in the gorgeous ocean scenery as they drive mostly along the shore when Ashlyn pulls into a gravel driveway, a detached gray two car garage with wood-shingled siding in front of them. “Wow.” Ali says as she realizes the house literally sits right near the ocean on a grassy knoll. “This view is insane!”

“Pretty sure that’s exactly why my grandparents bought it.” Ashlyn agrees. “Come on, the house is behind the garage...just kind of a weird driveway entrance because of the grading of the land.” She says grabbing Ali’s bag out of the car and walking them down the gravel path that leads around the garage and to the front door.

The house sits just downhill of the garage, but the styling is the same: light gray wooden shingles, dark gray shutters and a red door. It looks like a typical New England beach house, quaint and cozy with an almost colonial style to it. The house sits on a fairly large swath of grass with a sloped side on the right that is landscaped with a beautiful two-level garden that Ali stops to admire. The rest is just open ocean view as the house is situated about 30 feet above the ocean below.

“Ash, this is so nice!” Ali admires the house.

“Thanks. I’ll give you the proper indoor tour.” Ashlyn replies opening the front door and leading Ali inside.

They walk right into the living room which features the same large comfy couch that Ali had seen in Ashlyn’s condo. She also notices the same abstract ocean paintings hung on the wall and a fireplace with a TV sitting on the mantle above. The house is clearly older with recessed wooden floors and a less open layout even though it’s spacious and airy, but it’s a beautiful blend of rustic beach house combined with a modern flare that Ashlyn has given it. Just behind the living room is a large kitchen which Ali can tell has been newly renovated with granite countertops and dark finish cabinets. Just to the side of the kitchen is a formal dining room. Both the kitchen and the dining room have large rectangular windows that overlook the ocean view at the back of the house.

“I love this house. It’s cozy and modern and just beautiful.” Ali remarks, feeling right at home.

“I’m glad you like it.” Ashlyn says with a dimpled grin, pleased by how much Ali seems to like the place she has called home for most of her life. She takes Ali upstairs for a quick tour of the two guest rooms, and guest bathroom, and finally the master bedroom and bathroom.

“This guest bedroom used to be my bedroom in high school. That other one was Chris’ room.” Ashlyn explains as they move through the house. “It felt a little weird at first to be in my grandparents’ room, but once I remodeled it a bit it felt a lot better.” She explains as she brings Ali into the master bedroom.

Ashlyn’s bedroom is setup pretty much the same as it was in her old condo. Simple and neat with just a few photo frames on the sparse furniture. Ali sees all the same photos she did before, but notices right away that there is one new addition. On the bedside table is a framed selfie of the two of them that Ashlyn had taken on their first date near one of the dinosaur statues at the Museum of Science. Ali walks over and picks it up, admiring it with a smile.
“I really did miss you, Alex.” Ashlyn says quietly, wrapping her arms around the brunette from behind.

“I know, baby. I really missed you too.” Ali lets the pet name slip right out and turns her head to lean back and kiss her.

“Baby?” Ashlyn says with a playful look once they pull apart a bit.

“Hey, you said it first.” Ali challenges teasingly.

“I did?” Ashlyn asks. “When?”

“In the tub last night. Doesn’t matter, I like it.” Ali winks.

“I kinda like it too.” Ashlyn admits a bit bashfully, kissing Ali’s cheek.

“Good. Cause I have a tendency to use all kinds of pet names and nicknames, so prepare yourself.” Ali declares. “Kyle and I probably have like a million for each other.”

“Can’t wait to hear what you come up with, Krieger.” Ashlyn laughs.

“So, any chance a girl could get a shower around here?” Ali asks, more than ready to freshen up.

“Absolutely!” Ashlyn replies, leading Ali towards the bathroom she hasn’t even seen yet. “The shower in here is pretty amazing if I do say so myself.”

“Yeah it is!” Ali says taking in the open stone-tiled shower that is so big it doesn’t have a curtain or a door. It’s just completely open with just a small 6 inch raised tile edge on the floor that would keep any water from spilling out if the drain was blocked. There is a rain showerhead in the center and another pressure massage showerhead on the right wall that can also be used as a hand shower. “Woah, this shower is incredible! Now I’m excited!” Ali says wide-eyed. “I feel like I’m at a spa or something.”

“Well, it’s all yours.” Ashlyn says as she grabs some fresh towels from the linen cabinet in the bathroom.

“So, I really, really want you to join me in here, but if you do we’re never going to leave this house and I was hoping maybe we could go have lunch with Edith if she has time.” Ali suggests a bit ruefully at the thought of showering alone.

“I love that idea! I’ll call her at the bank and see if she has time to have lunch or coffee.” Ashlyn replies, touched by Ali’s want to see Edith. “Raincheck on that shower for sure.” She winks, her mind already picturing it.

“Perfect.” Ali smiles and pulls off her shirt and bra in one motion.

“What did I tell you about warning a girl, Krieger?!” Ashlyn says with wide eyes taking in the gorgeous topless brunette in her bathroom.

“Sorry not sorry.” Ali shrugs with a smirk and starts taking off her shorts.

“Well unless you want to smell like men’s shower products all day, I better go grab your bag.” Ashlyn mutters in a fluster and quickly walks out before she loses her willpower to leave. It only takes her a couple of minutes to grab Ali’s bag that she left next to couch and bring it upstairs. She locates Ali’s toiletry bag and pulls it out before heading back into the bathroom.
She doesn’t mean to stare, she really doesn’t, but just a few steps into the bathroom and her feet stop moving and her mouth goes dry at the sight. Ali’s head is tilted back and her eyes are closed, the water from the rain shower cascading down her perfect body which is soaking wet. Her nipples are hard and slightly rosy and her stomach muscles are contracting as she runs her hands through her wet hair. Ashlyn can barely breathe, let alone move.

“Enjoying the show, Hero?” Ali teases as her eyes open and she catches Ashlyn staring.

“Oh uh, um…sorry. I brought your shampoo and, uh, stuff.” Ashlyn stumbles over her words as she holds up the bag.

“Come here.” Ali steps out of the water and over to the entrance of the shower as she beckons the short-haired woman over.

Ashlyn obliges and walks the last few steps over to the shower, handing Ali her bag. Ali takes the bag and drops it just inside the entrance of the shower before grabbing a fistful of Ashlyn’s t-shirt and crushing their lips together in a heated kiss that leaves the officer reeling and unbalanced when she finally pulls back.

“Thank you, baby.” Ali says resting her wet forehead against Ashlyn’s, whose eyes are still hooded. “Now pick your jaw up off the floor and go call, Edith. I promise we’ll have plenty of naked time later. I love you.” Ali says with a smirk, leaving one more peck on Ashlyn’s lips before getting back under the shower.

“Wow, yeah, ok. Love you too.” Ashlyn replies with a still clouded mind before walking out. She leans the back of her head against the wall of her bedroom for a second, hand to her chest to try and calm her racing heart. “Holy crap she’s hot.” She whispers to herself still trying to recover with her entire body tingling, particularly parts that she honestly hasn’t paid all that much attention to in a very long time. She makes a mental note to take a very cold shower when Ali’s done and finally grabs her phone to call Edith.

“So, I’m guessing the fact that I waited an hour for you to finish getting ready even though you showered before me is the reason Kyle calls you ‘princess’?” Ashlyn goads Ali a bit as they wait for their food. They had just ordered sandwiches at the deli near the bank and are supposed to meet Edith at the benches by the Ipswich River a couple blocks down.

“Pretty much. Sorry, I like to take my time.” Ali giggles a bit.

“I’m just teasing you. Did I tell you how beautiful you look?” Ashlyn says, playfully lowering her sunglasses to rake her eyes over the brunette. Ali is in a pair of denim shorts and a gray tank top, a simple outfit that shows off the toned arms and legs that Ashlyn can’t get enough of.

“Only five times in the car.” Ali quick traces the single dimple on Ashlyn’s face with her finger and gives her a nose crinkling smile.

“Just wanted to make sure you know.” Ashlyn shrugs.

“Not that you should talk. You always look and smell so damn good.” Ali remarks. Ashlyn is wearing simple black shorts that fall at her knee and a black cut-off t-shirt that is perfectly fitted to her frame and displays her arm tattoos prominently. “I don’t know any cops that dress well, do you? You are certainly the exception. Always casual but perfectly stylish.”

“I guess I’m one of a kind then.” Ashlyn replies with a smile.
“Sure are.” Ali says flirtatiously running her hand up the officer’s arm.

“Order 58!” The woman from behind the counter yells and Ashlyn jumps up to grab their food so they can go meet Edith.

“Ali, I am so very happy to see you again!” Edith pops right up off the bench to greet them when they arrive, hugging Ali tightly.

“You too, Edith.” Ali squeezes her lightly.

“It’s been so long since our chat at the bank.” Edith plays it coolly.

“Oh, just stop it. You are so totally busted, Edith! Worse than my grandma, I swear it.” Ashlyn shoots the woman a pretend glare. “I know you guys talked a couple months ago and probably more than that!”

“Ali, you ratted me out?!” Edith says with her hands on her hips trying not to laugh.

“Sorry, Edith… she’s kinda persuasive.” Ali winks.

“Uh huh. Sooo, you two finally get your fucking shit together? Is this finally a thing like it should be?” Edith asks pointedly.

Ali’s mouth drops open at the blunt and vulgar question.

“Oh just you wait, Alex. This one swears like a sailor…you haven’t met that Edith yet. Sweet little old lady my ass!” Ashlyn laughs at Ali’s expression. “And yes, we more than have our shit together. Edith, I’d like you to properly meet Ali… my girlfriend, partner, queen, holder of my heart, soulmate, and anything else she wants to be called because we haven’t officially discussed it yet.” She finishes with a smile.

“Hmm… yes, yes, yes, and yes. I’ll agree to all of those titles.” Ali leans in leaves a lingering kiss on Ashlyn’s lips, so enchanted by what she just said that she forgets Edith is there for a minute.

“Ali, what did you do to my big tough Tin Man? She’s a big ball of mush now!” Edith jokes. “I’m kidding. I’m happy to see you two looking happy and all heart face or heart pants or whatever it is they say these days.”

“Heart eyes, Edith. It’s heart eyes!” Ashlyn chuckles and Ali laughs so hard she almost snorts.

“You know what I meant!” Edith says laughing too.


“I’ll explain later.” Ashlyn promises, knowing her grandma’s obsession with quoting the Wizard of Oz will definitely come up at some point in conversation.

“Alright you two, these legs won’t hold me up forever. Can we sit and eat now?” Edith suggests as she drops back down on the bench.

The three of them enjoy a nice lunch hour together in the shade, mostly talking about the landscaping overhaul Ashlyn has done on Edith’s yard. With a promise from Ashlyn and Ali that they’ll come over for dinner later in the week, they walk the older woman back to the bank and try to figure out the rest of their afternoon.
“So, what do you want to do now? We could walk around the little downtown area a bit or maybe go to one of the beaches.” Ashlyn suggests.

“Those sound good, but I kinda just want you all to myself right now.” Ali says sweetly, running her hand through the short hair on the back of Ashlyn’s head and kissing her softly.

“Mmhmm.” Ashlyn hums a bit, melting into the kiss and going back in for one more. “It’s low tide, so I have the perfect place.”

Ashlyn drives them back to house and runs inside to quickly grab a big blanket. “Come on, Alex. Time for you to meet my little piece of beach.” She says taking Ali’s hand and leading her into the backyard. At the end of the lawn there is a set of wooden stairs that leads down the rocky cliff-like overhang behind the house. The wooden stairs end towards the bottom turning into a short set of stone steps that lead onto a small, private sandy area looking out onto Plum Island sound. Ali recognizes it immediately from the picture Ashlyn sent her on Valentine’s Day.

“This is awesome!” Ali says excitedly. “Is this part of your property?”

“Yep.” Ashlyn confirms. “The water comes right up to the rock wall during high tide though, so it’s only here part of the day.” She explains as she sets out the blanket and motions for Ali to come lay with her.

The afternoon sun is hot, but there’s a nice breeze coming off of the water so it doesn’t feel brutal.

“Good thing it’s private back here. I’m not messing up this tan!” Ali announces as she strips off her tank top and shorts and slides her bra straps down.

“You are going to be the death of me woman.” Ashlyn says, her eyes glued to the brunette laying there in just her underwear. “What a way to die though.” She jokes, pulling off her own shirt so she’s in her sports bra on top.

Ali just smiles and cuddles into Ashlyn’s side a bit on the blanket. “So, you never told me what you thought of the podcast. You listened to it, right?” She asks curiously.

“Of course I did!” Ashlyn starts. “Alex, it was completely perfect. The way you narrated it and edited it to put it all together… it was just so raw and real. You’re honestly amazing. It was exactly what I wanted it to be. And the way you opened yourself up like that about your dad. I’m so proud of you and have more respect for you than I can even voice.” She says genuinely. “Listening to it while being away from you… hearing myself fall in love with you on the air like that… it just stirred so many good things in me.”

“Yeah, you and half the country.” Ali laughs lightly before kissing Ashlyn softly for a couple minutes, just enjoying the warmth her mouth and softness of her lips. “I’m so glad I did right by you, Ash.” She adds, relieved that Ashlyn felt as good about the final product as she did.

“I had no doubt, Alex.” Ashlyn says honestly. “So, yeah, I guess we were a bit too obvious with our on-the-air heart eyes.” Ashlyn laughs. “I pretty much stayed away from media coverage, but then I came across the headlines about us in the gossip magazines. Guess I kind of forgot you were such a celebrity, Krieger.”

“Well, about that. I don’t want you to think that you have to say or do anything you don’t want to, but we should probably prepare for the fact that people will be paying attention to us.” Ali says gently. “I should also probably tell you that this season of the podcast sort of shot through the roof after the first episode aired.”
“Don’t worry, I’m sure we can handle it. It’s not like I didn’t know you were a big deal when we met.” Ashlyn replies. “So, it really took off?”

“Majorly. As in got picked up by huge hosting platforms, like Apple iTunes, and acquired some seriously heavy hitting sponsors. Which you probably noticed from the increase in ads as the episodes went on.” Ali explains.

“Wow.” Ashlyn replies completely impressed. “I can’t say I’m surprised. I mean, Alex… it really was amazing. So, exactly how big did it get?”

“Oh…well…um, how do I say this without sounding pretentious.” Ali struggles a bit to just spit it out because while it is exciting, it’s just not that important to her.

“Just tell me, already.” Ashlyn whines.


“Oh wow. Seriously? Woah…just… holy crap! That’s amazing!” Ashlyn says pulling Ali close. “I’m so damn proud of you.” She says softly before kissing her slow and deep, intended to convey just how much she admires her.

“Thank you.” Ali says a bit breathlessly when they finally break. “Good thing you showed your interest before this happened or I might think you were in it just for the money.” Ali jokes.

“I could care less about money, buuut I still expect you to be my sugar mama.” Ashlyn tries to keep a straight face but breaks out into a chortle.

“Now that, I definitely plan to do.” Ali giggles.

Somehow this leads into a story about Ali dressing up in a Sugar Daddy candy costume for Halloween one year in middle school and Kyle never letting her live it down. They spend next couple of hours swapping stories about their awkward teen years and trying to top each other with the best story, all the while stealing kisses and placing light touches on each other, and even falling asleep together for a little bit. By 4:30pm, the sun is hanging lower in the sky and they don’t have too much longer before the tide comes up.

Ashlyn is on her left side, facing Ali. The way the sun is hitting the brunette right now is making her skin glow in a golden bronze that she can’t take her eyes off of. Caught up in the beauty of the woman beside her, she starts absentmindedly tracing Ali’s side tattoo with her fingertips. Ali lets out a soft moan and Ashlyn watches her eyes flutter closed, the words she memorized coming to the forefront of her mind.

“Man sieht nur mit dem Herzen gut, das Wesentliche ist für die Augen unsichtbar.” Ashlyn whispers into Ali’s ear in perfect German, her fingers still lightly tracing the inked script she just verbalized.

Ali’s eyes shoot open. “You learned it?” She asks in surprise.

“Of course I did. I memorized that whole book you gave me. You said you envisioned me tracing your tattoo and reading it to you. I love you. I’d do anything to make you happy.” Ashlyn says matter-of-factly, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “Man sieht nur mit dem Herzen gut, das Wesentliche ist für die Augen unsichtbar.” She repeats again, raking her fingers over the ink one more time.

The whispered words and warm touch ignite a fire in Ali that she can no longer quell. She climbs on top of Ashlyn and kisses her hard, one hand entwining itself into her short hair while the other one
runs along the officer’s side.

Ashlyn moans in surprise, getting lost in the heated kiss as her hands grip Ali’s back like she’s holding on for dear life. Tongues meet hungrily as hands wander over each other’s bodies aimlessly, the two of them getting more and more worked up by the minute. Ali shifts her position slightly, her leg moving between Ashlyn’s and causing the officer’s hips to buck upward involuntarily as she whimpers slightly into Ali’s mouth. The whimper sends Ali over the edge.

“Ash…” Ali pulls her head up to stare into the Ashlyn’s eyes.

“Yeah?” Ashlyn replies after swallowing hard, the smoldering look Ali is giving her is enough to make her burst into flames at any moment.

“Take me inside.” Ali whispers hotly. “Please… take me to bed.”

Ashlyn feels a surge of electricity shoot through her, culminating in a throbbing warmth spreading in her core. She immediately sits up and kisses Ali heatedly one more time before helping the brunette to her feet and tucking their discarded clothes into the waistband of her shorts. She quickly picks up the blanket and throws it over part of the wooden stair railing where she knows it won’t get wet before coming back and picking Ali up in her arms. She swiftly carries the surprised brunette up the wooden stairs, across the backyard, into the house, and up to the bedroom before gently placing her in the middle of the bed.

“Holy fuck, you’re strong.” Ali says as the officer hovers over her with her muscles showing prominently from the exertion. She’s never being more turned on in her life than she is right now. She can literally feel the wet spot on her underwear growing by the second. She pulls Ashlyn down into a bruising kiss before leaving her lips to nip at her jaw and neck. “I want you so badly, Ashlyn. I love you so much that I’m aching for you…please, I need you.” She husks as she nibbles Ashlyn ear.

Ashlyn truly doesn’t remember the last time her body responded this way or really if it ever has. She feels like she’s burning, literally dripping with need as tiny beads of sweat form on her forehead and warm moisture floods her center. “I want you too, Alex. I love you with everything I am.” She whispers back, sucking Ali’s bottom lip between her own and kissing her deeply for a minute before moving down her neck with hot open mouthed kisses.

Ali can’t stop herself from squirming as Ashlyn lightly sucks her pulse point and then her collar bone, working back and forth across her neck with her lips and tongue. She hears a desperate whine leave her own mouth and knows she needs to feel all of Ashlyn against her before she explodes. She yanks at the officer’s sports bra until she leaves her neck long enough to let it get slipped off over her head. Ali immediately flips their position, quickly stripping off her underwear and pulling off Ashlyn’s shorts and boxers before the short-haired woman can even register what happened. She drops her hips down so her core is resting on Ashlyn’s thighs, hearing the stunned officer whisper out “oh fuck” before she leans down to capture her lips passionately.

Ali leaves Ashlyn’s mouth and works down her neck and across her shoulders. She stops at the right one to place loving kisses on the scars she sees before moving down to her collarbones, encouraged by her heavy breathing and the way the officer’s hands are gripping her hips. She continues licking patterns on her skin, making her way down to her chest as her hand drags up and down Ashlyn’s side. She’s about to take a nipple into her mouth when she feels Ashlyn trembling underneath her, prompting her to stop and sit up a bit.

“Ah, you ok?” Ali asks concerned, her hand going to hold Ashlyn’s face gently as she watches her eyes flutter open to reveal wild hazel eyes overtaken by dark green pigment. “We can stop or slow
down.” Ali adds softly, not able to read the look on Ashlyn’s face.

“No. This feels really good.” Ashlyn gets out quickly. “Sorry…it’s, uh… been a really, really long
time.” She adds sheepishly in a really small voice, a little embarrassed by the way her body is
reacting.

“Hey, shhh. It’s ok.” Ali comforts her by placing some soft kisses to her forehead. “Really, we can
take it down a notch.”

“No.” Ashlyn insists. “I want you so badly, Alex. Maybe a little too badly.” She says with a slight
smile that relieves Ali a bit. “I’m not going to lie that you might kill me a little, Krieger… but I’ll flat
out die if you stop right now.” She jokes and lightens the intense mood.

Ali takes the humor as a cue to continue and leans in close to Ashlyn’s ear. “Ok. Just don’t die
before you scream my name, Harris.” She husks hotly and runs her tongue over her earlobe. “Cause
I really, really like hearing my name.”

Searing heat spreads across Ashlyn’s skin and she pulls Ali’s body tightly against hers, a slight moan
coming out of her mouth. “Not gonna be a problem.”

“Oh, and I should warn you that I’m kind of a talker.” Ali smiles into Ashlyn’s neck.

“That doesn’t surprise me at all.” Ashlyn releases her grip a bit when Ali pulls back to look at her.

“Oh really?” Ali challenges.

“Yeah. I’ve seen how you command a courtroom. Not a shock that you’re gonna take control in here
too.” Ashlyn smirks. “And I’m so going to let you. So fucking hot, baby.” She says pulling Ali back
down against her.

“Glad you think so.” Ali smiles and starts kissing down Ashlyn’s neck again, spurred on by the
hands now gripping her ass. “I’ll go slow.”

“I don’t care what you speed you go at, just touch me Alex.” Ashlyn breathes out desperately as Ali
works her way back down her chest after sucking hard on her pulse point.

“Yes, Captain.” Ali mumbles against her skin before swirling her tongue over Ashlyn’s nipple a
couple times and sucking it into her mouth, hearing a hissing intake of breath from the officer that
makes her core quiver.

“Oh god, that feels so good.” Ashlyn writhes and moans under the brunette, fisting her hand in Ali’s
long brown hair to try and pull her even closer.

Ali just continues to alternate between Ashlyn’s nipples, already completely addicted to the way they
harden in her mouth as she sucks on them gently. She could lavish attention on these perfect breasts
all day, but she can sense the urgency in Ashlyn’s body and knows she needs to move on. She
places a quick kiss to the scar in the middle of her chest as she lightly drags her nails down the
officer’s abs, her mouth following right behind and licking her way down the colorful side tattoo.
“You’re so gorgeous, Ashlyn Harris.” Ali says in a heated whisper as she moves lower.

Ashlyn is a mess of breathless moans and whimpers, her body pulsating and her core hot as energy
builds inside her. She was kidding a few minutes ago when she said she might die, but now she’s not
so sure it was a joke as she feels Ali’s mouth trail down her body and approach her hips. She grunts
loudly and buries her hand in Ali’s hair roughly when the brunette lightly bites her hip bone and then
sucks on it hard enough to leave a mark.
Ali works further down to the officer’s thighs with her mouth, stopping to place loving kisses on even more scars in her path that denote the strength of the woman beneath her. Ashlyn is still trembling and now pulling her head towards her center, breathing heavily through loud moans. Ali realizes she can’t tease much more and prepares to go right after what they both want so badly. She runs her hand over the mound of very neatly trimmed curls and licks the inside of Ashlyn’s thigh really softly.

“Oh god.” Ashlyn squeaks out with a sharp intake of breath as her hips come off the bed involuntarily.

“No god in here baby, just Alex.” Ali smiles against Ashlyn’s thigh before she takes one broad lick from her entrance up to her clit, her hands holding the officer’s hips down.

“Fuck…Alex.” Ashlyn mewls, one hand grabbing a fistful of sheets.

“Much better.” Ali mumbles smugly into Ashlyn’s folds and starts lightly running her tongue over her clit. “Mmmm, you taste so good baby.” Ali hums into her wet center and sucks the slippery folds into her mouth, knowing she’ll never get enough of this woman.

Ali’s voice vibrating through her core combined with the warm pressure on her clit has Ashlyn so close to the edge, her hips starting to move uncontrollably as she tries to hold on as long as she can. “Uhhnn, Alex… yes, fuck.”

Ali is incredibly turned on by the way Ashlyn is grinding on her face, the officer’s head thrown back and her mouth gaping open as she calls out her name through heavy breathing. She squeezes her legs together in an effort to try and relieve her throbbing and incredibly wet core, focusing and immersing herself only in the intoxicating scent and taste of Ashlyn’s sex. “Tell me what feels good, Ash.” She demands, dipping her tongue inside Ashlyn’s entrance and feasting on the wetness pooled there.

“Oooh…my… fuck, yes. That, keep doing that. Aleeex, yes baby.” Ashlyn directs Ali through gasping breaths as the brunette obliges and plunges her warm tongue deeply in and out of her entrance. She can tell by the way Ashlyn’s walls are clenching around her tongue that she’s close.

Ashlyn feels the deep tingly ache in her belly and she knows she’s almost at the peak of the most intense orgasm of her life. She wills herself to lift her head to watch the most beautiful woman in the world work between her legs. The second she meets Ali’s dark hungry eyes, head bobbing between her legs with determination, she’s careening over the edge in a free fall that almost makes her pass out. “Mmm baby…I’m gonna…Aleeex.” She yells out as her body contracts and goes rigid, her hands tightly gripping the brunette’s shoulders as she tries desperately to suck air into her lungs while riding wave after wave of pleasure.

“That’s it, come for me, Ashlyn. I got you.” Ali says lovingly as she gently licks the copious amounts of sweet fluid that Ashlyn has just spilled out for her, slowly moving her tongue over her folds and gently sucking on them until she sees the officer’s hips come back down to the mattress. She indulges herself with a couple last licks and crawls up Ashlyn’s body, tightly pulling her into her arms as the officer’s chest heaves. “Breathe, baby. I love you, Ashlyn.” She coos in her ear and rubs Ashlyn’s back lightly as she comes down.

Ashlyn lets herself completely melt into Ali’s arms for a few minutes, her body still quaking lightly at what felt like the entire earth shifting beneath her. She’s had plenty of good sex in her life, but absolutely nothing that comes even remotely close to the euphoria and emotion she’s feeling right now.

“You’re not gonna to die on me are you?” Ali whispers teasingly as she feels Ashlyn breathing start
to regulate.

Ashlyn smiles into Ali’s neck and lifts her head to look at the brunette. “Wait, this isn’t heaven?” She plays back, but gets no reaction.

When Ashlyn’s eyes look up to meet hers, Ali loses her breath for a minute, not even hearing what she just said. The hazel eyes she loves are now shiny and a beautiful bright green with so many tiny gold flecks in them that they look like a star-filled sky. “Ash…your eyes…wow.” Ali whispers softly, completely mesmerized. They tell her everything she needs to know about what she just did to Ashlyn’s body.

“Guess that’s what they look like when the woman I love more than anything in the world gives me the greatest orgasm of my life.” Ashlyn smiles before getting serious. “Seriously, Alex…never in my life…” She tries to find the words when Ali cuts her off.

“I know, baby. I can see it.” Ali says still holding her gaze until she can’t anymore because Ashlyn’s lips are on hers in a heated kiss that makes her heart race out of control. Ashlyn’s lips are soft but demanding as the officer rolls Ali on her back and hovers over her just enough that her nipples are barely grazing the brunette’s chest. Ali can only moan into her mouth as she feels Ashlyn’s hand drag up her side and land on her breast with a light squeeze.

Ashlyn feels Ali’s nipple pebble between her fingers and can’t wait to get her mouth on them. She gently pulls Ali’s bottom lip with her teeth as she breaks away from the kiss, leaving a trail of hot kisses down the brunette’s neck and down the valley of her breasts before lightly biting one of her nipples and then taking it into her mouth to roll her tongue over it soothingly.

“Mmm, baby.” Ali moans deeply, her hands running though short hair as Ashlyn works one nipple with her mouth and the other with her fingers before switching. She’s already really worked up and Ashlyn has barely touched her. “Yes, Ash…just like that.” Ali tries to pull the officer’s head closer but she has other plans.

Ashlyn let’s Ali’s nipple go with a slight pop, hearing the brunette whimper. She props herself up on her arms and rakes her eyes over Ali’s perfect body. “You are so beautiful, Alex. Completely breathtaking.” Ashlyn says in awe as she lowers herself a bit and starts working her way down Ali’s body, kissing every inch of skin she can see.

Ali can only breathe heavily with interspersed whispers of “Ash” as Ashlyn moves her mouth along her torso in an excruciatingly slow pace that’s making her quiver in anticipation. She feels the officer’s tongue swirl in her naval, starting to lose her mind at light touches.

“Well, hello there Nittany. Nice to properly meet you.” Ashlyn says with a smirk and kisses Ali’s hip tattoo.

Ali is about to shoot her a playful glare when Ashlyn parts her legs and lifts them a bit so her knees are bent. “Ohh… baby, yes Ash.” Ali moans with a hiss as Ashlyn lightly drags her knuckles over Ali’s center, her mouth kissing the inside of her thighs. “Please…please, Ash… I need you.” She begs, as her hips grind in an attempt to get more contact.

Ashlyn immediately drops her mouth down to Ali’s center and uses the very tip of her tongue to lick around her folds and occasionally leave light taps on her clit. Ali is desperately grasping at her hair and trying to pull her closer, but Ashlyn takes her time without budging. She wants to taste, savor, and love every inch of the brunette’s most intimate spot. She very gently and shallowly prods Ali’s opening with her tongue and feels the brunette grab her hand.
“Ash, baby…I’m so close already. Mmmm, uhhnnn you feel so good.” Ali moans out in a low husky voice. Her body is so worked up, she’s practically shaking as her muscles start to occasionally clench in anticipation. Sex has always been a way to get off, a means to an end…but this, this is so completely different. She can literally feel Ashlyn worshipping her body with such gentle touches that have set her on fire and brought her to the brink of ecstasy in a way she never expected. She feels Ashlyn’s soft tongue enter her and her hips cant up in response. “Ooohh, yeeees…don’t stop, Ash. Please, please…Ashlyn.” Her voice is high and her breathing ragged, her head spinning as she spirals towards release.

Ashlyn moves her thumb to rub tight circles on the brunette’s clit as she thrusts her tongue as deep as she can to drive her over the edge. It only takes a few more strokes before Ali’s wet heat spills onto her mouth and chin the brunette writhing above her in a series of loud moans and expletives. She quickly crawls up Ali’s body and kisses her passionately, rubbing her center gently with her fingers as she comes down.

Ali kisses Ashlyn back desperately, whimpers still leaving her mouth as she tastes herself on the officer’s lips. The intensity of the climax, the love she feels right now is making her both emotional and ravenous for more. She breaks away from the kiss slowly, trying to catch her breath for a few seconds as she rolls on her side and rests her forehead against Ashlyn’s, the officer holding her close. “You ok, Alex?” Ashlyn whispers.

“You ok, Alex?” Ashlyn whispers.

“Ashlyn… what you just did to my body…” Ali pauses to take a few more breaths. “Thank you. For loving me, for showing me, for making love to me.” She gets out in a voice full of emotion. She always thought “making love” was the cheesiest term ever until right now when she finally understands why there is no better way to say it.

“I love you so much, Alex. You’re everything.” Ashlyn says sweetly.

“Show me again. Please… love me again.” Ali begs in a whisper and takes Ashlyn’s hand, bringing it down between her legs. “I want to feel you inside me.”

Ashlyn captures Ali lips in a hot kiss as she slips a long finger inside her, gently stroking her a few times before adding another. “You’re still so wet, baby.” She purrs in Ali’s ear.

“Oh my god… yes, Ash! Oh god, like that.” Ali digs her fingers into Ashlyn’s shoulder as the officer’s long skilled fingers pump into her at the perfect depth and pace.

Ashlyn can’t get over the sight… Ali’s head thrown back, her hair wild across the pillow, her mouth hanging open breathlessly as her breasts bounce slightly with Ashlyn’s thrusts. “You’re so beautiful like this, Alex. So hot… I can’t get enough of you.” Ashlyn husks, sucking on the spot behind Ali’s ear. She jumps a bit when she feels Ali’s hand between her own legs, the brunette’s eyes meeting hers and looking so dark and smoldering that Ashlyn’s stomach flutters.

“I want you to come with me.” Ali whispers and slips a finger into Ashlyn’s heat, watching her close her eyes and grunt. “You’re so tight and wet, baby. You feel so good.”

“Alex… fuck.” Ashlyn says loudly through heavy raspy breaths. “More.”

Ali adds another finger and picks up her pace to match Ashlyn’s, the two of them sweating now and moving against each other, the bed starting to creak a bit.

“Fuck baby, you’re fingers are so long. You’re so deep, Ash… Harder.”

“I’m close, Alex, so close. You feel so amazing. Faster, baby.”
They direct each other until they’re right at the edge and can’t speak anymore, nothing but desperate moans between them. Ali tilts her head down and takes Ashlyn’s nipple into her mouth, sending the officer over the edge first with a keening wail as her walls contract around her fingers. Ashlyn immediately pulls Ali into a searing hot kiss that sends her into the throes of orgasm right behind her, biting down on Ashlyn’s lower lip as she rides it out.

They stay just as they are until they can finally breathe again and slowly slip out of each other. They lay there silently for quite a while taking in the glow of each other as the sun sets outside.

“What are you thinking about?” Ali breaks the silence, watching Ashlyn’s fingertips trace the inked script of her side tattoo.

“Honestly… that I love you so much. More than I have ever loved anything or anyone in my entire life, it’s all encompassing. I’m completely beside myself that I am the lucky one that gets to love you like this. I’m so damn lucky.” She kisses Ali softly. “I promise you I’m never going to take that for granted. I’m going to love you like this until the day I die, Alex.”

And just like that Ali is back on Ashlyn again kissing her heatedly. “I love you madly, Ash,” are the only inadequate words she can manage before she abandons words altogether and just uses her body to show Ashlyn the depth of her love all over again.

It’s over two hours later when they collapse into the sheets bonelessly and covered in sweat, any thought of eating dinner forgotten. They’re completely sated and exhausted to the point that they don’t even speak. They just hold each other close, share a few romantic kisses and drift off to sleep.

Ali wakes to the hot sun on her face streaming in from the window. She opens her eyes, slowly adjusting to the brightness and looking down to see Ashlyn asleep on her chest with her fully tattooed arm draped across her stomach. Ali looks around the room remembering where she is and the incredible night they had, a huge smile breaking out on her face. She cranes her neck to see the digital clock on the nightstand that reads 9:37am. Ali laughs and strokes Ashlyn’s back lightly, noting the officer is slightly snoring and not waking up anytime soon.

“Told you I’d fix that body clock, Harris. And by fix I mean, work your body so hard that I broke the fucking thing.” Ali whispers in a soft giggle and adds “love you, baby” before kissing Ashlyn’s forehead and going back to sleep.
Someone Who Does Both

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay in updating, it's been hard to find time to write. However, I reward your kind patience with a really long chapter that has a little bit of everything (which, yes, includes a smut warning). These two ladies are still working through things and learning about each other, so you'll see a lot unfolding here, particularly about Ashlyn's military past. I hope you're all still enjoying the story and I appreciate you being patient with the slower updates. As usual, drop me a comment and let me know what you think. I love to hear from you all!

***I apologize in advance for typos as I didn't have as much time to proofread.

Ashlyn feels the hot sun on her face and slowly opens her eyes. She rolls onto her side a bit so that she’s no longer on her stomach, but her head doesn’t leave the pillow. She looks around her room for a minute and knows that it must be sometime between 9:30am and 12pm given how strongly the sun is streaming in through the window. She could roll over to grab her phone and check, but her body feels too relaxed and still tingly from the previous night’s activities. The space next to her is empty, but she feels that the sheets are still warm, meaning that Ali has only recently gotten up, probably to go to the bathroom. She lingers in bed a few more minutes hoping that Ali will come back soon, her mind replaying last night with a content smile on her face.

She hears the sound of glasses clinking in the kitchen which tells her that Ali is downstairs attempting something. So, she decides to let the brunette do her thing without interrupting and gets up to use the bathroom and brush her teeth before slipping back into bed and waiting. It only takes a few more minutes after she resettles herself before the bedroom door opens.

“Well good morning, gorgeous.” Ali says cheerily when she walks in and finds Ashlyn sitting up a bit in bed, taking a second to appreciate that she’s still naked with the sheets pooled at her waist.

“Oh fuck...wow.” Ashlyn replies in a whisper as she swallows hard. Ali is wearing one of her old army t-shirts and a pair of black skimpy underwear, her nipples clearly outlined through the thin, worn fabric. It’s definitely one of the sexiest things she’s ever seen and the fact that she knows her last name is printed across the back of the shirt is stirring all kinds of things inside her. Add that to the fact that Ali is balancing a tray of breakfast and coffee and Ashlyn is sure she’s the luckiest person in the world right now.

“I didn’t want to rummage through your drawers too much and this was the first thing I could find. I hope it’s ok.” Ali shrugs with a slight blush from Ashlyn’s reaction.

“I am sooo not complaining. Wear any of my clothes anytime… or all the time!” Ashlyn replies
enthusiastically with an eyebrow waggle.

Ali settles into the bed beside her and kisses the officer’s cheek. “Charmer. Let’s eat before it gets cold. It’s just waffles from your freezer, nothing special, but I’m starving.”

“Yeah we didn’t exactly stop for dinner last night, did we?” Ashlyn muses with a grin. “What time is it anyway?”

“10:43am.” Ali answers smugly after looking at her phone on the nightstand. “Told you I’d fix that body clock of yours. When’s the last time you slept this late?”

“So diabolical, Krieger!” Ashlyn gives her a mocking glare. “The last time I slept this late without waking up at all was like four years ago when some jackass we were trailing fled a major drug deal and we gave chase. He ended up rear-ending the cruiser I was driving and giving me some awful whiplash. I was definitely hurting the next couple days after that.”

“Oh geez.” Ali says with wide eyes. “I am not even going to let myself think about how insane and dangerous your job can be right now…I’m not. Now eat your waffles, baby.” She places a plate on Ashlyn’s lap.

“You’re cute. Thank you for breakfast.” Ashlyn says sweetly and starts to lean in for a kiss.

“Thought I was going to have to wait until you ran off and brushed your teeth before I got a proper good morning.” Ali comments as Ashlyn’s face gets close to hers.

“Already did.” Ashlyn slowly leans in closer.

“Should’ve known. Me too.” Ali mumbles and closes the distance, taking Ashlyn’s lips in hers for a slow deep kiss that is enough to turn her world upside down. “Mmmm.” She hums as finally she pulls away. “Don’t waste my culinary efforts, Harris. Frozen waffles might be the best you’ll ever get from me and my mediocre cooking skills, so eat already.”

Ashlyn laughs and gives Ali one more peck on the lips before eating her waffles. They slowly enjoy their breakfast in bed together, occasionally feeding each other as they joke around. Ashlyn is struck by the domesticity of it all, a sense of comfort and home settling deep inside her in a way she’s never felt before. As Ali turns a bit to put their empty plates back on the tray and Ashlyn sees ‘Harris’ across the brunette’s back, the officer’s heart flutters and she doesn’t think twice about asking her question.

“Hey, Alex. Can I ask you about something?” Ashlyn turns herself towards Ali a bit.

“Of course. What’s up?” Ali inquires.

“So, at the end of the month I’m going to Georgia for a couple of days to visit some friends. I want you to meet them. Will you come with me?” Ashlyn asks a bit shyly.

“I’d love to.” Ali replies without even having to think about it. “If you want me there, then I’m there. I promised Kyle I’d help him with this advertising event for his salon, but that is 2 weeks from now and not really near the end of the month. I’m going with you regardless, but I still should check with him and figure it out timing wise.”

“Thank you.” Ashlyn can’t help her beaming smile at Ali’s answer, even if the brunette doesn’t understand the importance of it yet or even what she’s agreeing to. “And yes, check in with Kyle. I wouldn’t want to pull you away from that and I’d also be happy to help out if you need me.”
“I’ll call him in a little bit.” Ali nods. “So, you have friends in Georgia?”

“Sort of. I have one friend in Georgia and the other two are flying in. The four of us used to get together at least twice a year, but obviously that hasn’t happened in a while with being jailed and all.” Ashlyn starts to explain. “I shut them out just like I did to everyone else. I’m not proud of it, but I’m lucky that it was like no time passed when I reconnected with them a couple months ago at Dr. Plume’s urging. So, we planned a long overdue meetup.” She adds as she looks down at the bed ashamed of her actions that she knows hurt people.

“Hey now. Head up.” Ali says gently and puts her fingers under the officer’s chin to tilt her head up and force the hazel eyes to meet her own. “You did what you had to do to survive and you clearly have great friends who understand that. Nothing to be ashamed of. You’re doing great and you should be proud of yourself.” Ali kisses her softly. “Your friends sound awesome, can’t wait to meet them. Surprised you haven’t mention them before.”

“They are.” Ashlyn says fondly and then sighs, knowing she needs to elaborate a bit. “In the interest of full disclosure, they’re not just any friends. They’re the guys from my former Ranger unit. They’re my family really. It’s important to me for you to meet them.”

Ali now understands better why Ashlyn hasn’t mentioned them before. They had tended to avoid talk of her military past while she was in jail other than the nightmare Ashlyn had told her about. Although Ali is curious, she doesn’t ask any questions right now and assumes Ashlyn will tell her more as she feels comfortable. “Well, I’m really excited to meet them and glad you want me to go with you.” Ali says simply and leans in for another kiss, running her hand through Ashlyn’s messy short-brown hair.

“Thank you.” Ashlyn mutters into Ali’s lips as she deepens the contact, only pulling back when she finally needs to breathe. “As much as I love you in my clothes, can I cash in on that shower raincheck?”

“You sure as hell can, Captain.” Ali husks and quickly pulls the t-shirt up over her head, pulling Ashlyn out of the bed by the hand and towards the bathroom.

It’s not long before Ashlyn has Ali up against the wall of the shower, steam and moans filling the bathroom as the brunette gyrates her hips against the strong, muscled thigh between her legs while the officer works her neck. Ashlyn is just starting to drag her fingers over one of Ali’s nipples when her cellphone rings with the ringtone that tells her it’s a work call. They both groan loudly and pull apart.

“Ugh, mother fucker. Be right back.” Ashlyn huffs and quickly kisses Ali one more time before grabbing a towel and running into the bedroom to get the phone.

Ali just giggles at the whole thing and lets the heat of the shower calm her libido a bit. She hears Ashlyn yell “They did what?! What a fucking mess!” into the phone. It sounds like Ashlyn is going to be a while, so Ali figures she might as well really shower and get herself ready in the meantime.

Ali is just about done showering and letting the water stream over her in one last rinse when she feels strong arms wrap around her waist.

“I am so sorry about that.” Ashlyn says apologetically as she kisses Ali’s shoulder, realizing she took almost 20 minutes to come back.

“What happened is that I have two overzealous rookies in my command who decided they would setup a random DUI checkpoint last night in an effort to make themselves look good.” Ashlyn tells her.

“Is that bad?” Ali asks not understanding the issue.

“It is when you legally have to announce it publicly well ahead of time before you do it, and they obviously didn’t. Had they actually paid attention at academy and weren’t so focused on their image, they would’ve known the law. You can’t just stop a vehicle with no probable cause, so the checkpoints aren’t legal in doing that unless you first announce exactly when and where it’s happening and give the public the opportunity to avoid it.” Ashlyn explains.

“Ah, now that I understand.” Ali says with interest. “So, you now have a few DUIs arrests that aren’t legal and you can’t go forward with, right? Paperwork and process nightmare?”

“Bingo. Five of them to be exact.” Ashlyn tilts her head down and kisses the brunette deeply. “I forget how parallel our professions are. I love how easy it is to talk to you. And on that note, want to be a good lawyer girlfriend and help me clean up the mess?” Ashlyn jokes with a mockingly hopeful smile.

“Ha! Nice try, Harris! I’m not touching that with a ten foot pole.” Ali sasses back.

“I’m kidding. The sergeant in my unit is handling it. I just get the fun task of chewing out those two fools when I get back and figuring out disciplinary measures.” Ashlyn says with a smirk. “I’m thinking desk duty for a couple weeks and some high school D.A.R.E. program activities ought to do it.”

“It’s really hot when you’re all in command.” Ali says with a smoldering look.

“Yeah?” Ashlyn asks with a slight grin.

“Uh huh.” Ali confirms as she drags her hand up the taller woman’s side and leans up to kiss her again.

“Your hands are all wrinkled.” Ashlyn says when they break apart, noting the altered texture of Ali’s skin as the brunette slid her hands over her torso.

“Yeah, well, I’ve been in here for almost half an hour, sooo…” Ali replies playfully.

“Yeah, well, I’ve been in here for almost half an hour, sooo…” Ali replies playfully.

“Oh. Right. You should probably get out and go start getting ready before you wither away in here.” Ashlyn plays back.

“Well, I do take longer than you to get ready and I’m going to call Kyle real quick. So, I could use the head start anyway.” Ali reasons.

“I promise we’ll get this shower thing right next time.” Ashlyn groans a bit.

“No worries, baby. We have forever to get it right and I’m sure we will.” Ali says simply with a smile.

Ashlyn feels her heart jump and her stomach flutter at the statement. It’s not just that Ali used the word ‘forever’, but that she said it so casually like it was a given. Any lingering worries about whether it was too presumptuous of her to ask Ali to come to Georgia just went completely out the window. She just leans down and kisses the brunette hard, wrapping her arms around her waist and pulling her in as close as she can. “Go call Kyle and get ready before I never let you leave this
shower.” Ashlyn husks as she pulls away from a hooded-eyed Ali.

“Mmmm, ok. Just one more.” Ali leans in for another kiss before finally conceding and pulling herself away. She steals one more look at her naked girlfriend before forcing herself out of the bathroom to call Kyle.

“Well, well, well… finally pulled yourself away from Captain Hottie long enough to call me?” Kyle answers after two rings.

“Hello to you too, ass!” Ali retorts playfully as she plops down on Ashlyn’s bed. “And yes, I pulled myself away but not for very long. I just have a quick question for you.”

“Well now I feel special! Anyway, what’s up?” Kyle inquires.

“The advertising event you’re doing for the salon, that’s on the 19th right?” Ali asks.


“Ashlyn is going to Georgia for a couple days the week after that and asked me to go with her. I told her I would definitely go, but I wanted to make sure it worked out okay with your event. Obviously, it’ll be fine, but I figured I’d check in anyway.” Ali explains.

“Yeah, definitely not conflicting in any way. So, Georgia huh?” Kyle prods.

“Yes, Georgia. Ash is meeting up with the guys from her Ranger unit and wants me to meet them.” Ali elaborates to appease him.

“Oh, holy crap… oh wow. The brothers… whew, ok then. Wow. I mean, I knew it was gonna go this way, but maybe not quite so fast.” Kyle blurts out excitedly.

“Kyle, what the fuck are you rambling on about?” Ali asks confused at his weird stream of consciousness.

Kyle can sense from her question that she doesn’t quite know the significance of the situation yet. “Alex… what do you know about her Ranger unit and these guys?” He questions.

“Not all that much. All she said was that they were the guys in her former unit and it was important to her that I meet them. And we haven’t gotten into her military background that much outside of what I know from her public records that I read and a specific incident she told me about.” Ali replies. “Why, what do you know that you’re not telling me?”

“Ok, well I don’t know a ton…but there’s a lot more to that Ranger unit than you know about and I’m sure she’s going to tell you all about it. Anyway, those three guys mean everything to her. She legitimately calls them her brothers and it goes far beyond the typical military meaning of that. I met them once when they came out to visit her in Boston while I was living with her. They’re really great, you’ll love them.” Kyle tries to lay it out a bit for her.

“Hmmm, ok… so I’m headed for more than just a friendly hangout then?” Ali tries to make sense of what Kyle is trying to get across.

“Ummm, yeeeh, just a bit.” Kyle says sarcastically. “Ok, Alex. Do you remember what you said
after your first date? The thing about if she asked you to marry her, you’d say yes?”

“Yeah.” Ali replies in confusion.

“Ok, well, even if she had proposed that first night… this would still be a bigger deal than that. You get me?” Kyle puts it as bluntly as he can.

“Oh… Oh shit. Oh god… so this is like the equivalent of meeting the parents or something?” Ali starts to finally get it.

“Yep. Only like 100 times more important than that. Eeek, I’m so excited for you!” Kyle squeals. “Luckily, we have plenty of time to shop and prepare!”

“Oh gosh. I don’t know whether to be excited and happy or nervous and terrified.” Ali admits, her emotions all over the place at the new insight.

“Relax. Harris loves you and they will too! I know they will.” Kyle reassures her. “I’m going to bet that you’re about to learn a whole lot more about her. I’m sure the limited stuff I know isn’t even the tip of the iceberg. So just listen and roll with it. It’s going to be great. I’m happy for you.”

“Alright, I trust you and I trust her too, so I’ll just roll with it.” Ali tries to calm herself. “Thanks for the heads up. I’ll call you after this weekend and we’ll hang out and catch up, ok?”

“Perfect!” Kyle says cheerily. “Tell Harris I said hi.”


“Love you too, princess!” Kyle mimics her kissing sound and hangs up.

Ali lets out a deep sigh and lays back on the bed for a moment as she thinks over what Kyle just told her. Now she’s really dying to know more about these guys she’s going to meet, but she doesn’t want to push Ashlyn before she’s ready to tell her. She sits up and immediately looks over at the framed picture hanging above the dresser. She should have known. Ashlyn has very few pictures visible in the house and all of them are of her family with the exception of the one of the two of them together and this army one.

She walks over to the photo and leans over the dresser to take a closer look. Ashlyn is dressed head-to-toe in desert camo fatigues and body armor as she leans on the hood of a Humvee. Two guys stand to her left, and another one is crouched down in front of them. They are all dressed alike and each hold a military rifle. They’re all smiling, but Ali notes that the same vacant look she previously observed in Ashlyn’s eyes is present in all of them. Even though Ashlyn is obviously the one who commands her attention, she has to admit that all three of these guys are pretty handsome. One of them is fairly tall with blues eyes and a defined jawline. The guy crouching down appears to be Hispanic with a darker skin tone and dark hair. The last one is about Ashlyn’s height with a strong frame and such a perfect set of facial features that he could easily be a model.

“You’re allowed to ask questions, you know.” Ashlyn comments from the bathroom doorway as she watches Ali look over the photo intently.

“Geez, you startled me.” Ali says as she steps away from the dresser. She was so engrossed in the photo that she didn’t hear the shower turn off or Ashlyn enter the room.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you.” Ashlyn says apologetically as she makes her way over to the brunette and plants a quick kiss on her lips, earning her a smile.
“So, are these the guys we’re going to see in Georgia?” Ali motions towards the photo.

“Yep. That’s them. The guy right next to me is Corporal Luke Morris. The guy crouching is Corporal Javier Rivera. And on the far side is Specialist Nathan Porter.” Ashlyn confirms and points them all out in the photo.

“Corporal, corporal, and specialist…which makes you?” Ali trails off in question, wondering about Ashlyn’s role since she doesn’t know the significance of the rank she saw listed in her records.

“Staff Sargent. They were my Ranger unit, my team and under my command. And well… they’re like brothers to me, just like Chris.” Ashlyn elucidates.

Ali nods and stays silent for a few seconds, thinking about what Kyle said and knowing there is more to this. “I didn’t realize units were so small and close like this. I guess I always pictured larger battalions and groups. One too many war movies for me apparently.” Ali shrugs. She knows she’s prodding, but Ashlyn gave her the go-ahead.

“No, you’re not wrong. Typically, Rangers operate in larger units even though they’re a smaller branch of Special Forces.” Ashlyn answers and takes a breath. “Alex, I still have a lot to tell you and maybe we can spend some time talking today?”

“I’d love that.” Ali says sweetly as she runs her hand through Ashlyn’s short and slightly damp hair, both of them still wrapped in towels.

“Oh. Well, I know we just showered, but maybe we can do a proper beach day over at Crane’s Beach? We can walk a bit and find a nice quiet spot to talk. I feel like I just think better by the ocean.” Ashlyn suggests.

“Sounds perfect.” Ali replies with a wide smile. “Let’s just get dressed and we can grab some food for a to-go lunch on the way there.”

“Read my mind.” Ashlyn smiles back and heads into her closet to grab some clothes.

“Hey Ash?” Ali calls out.

“Yeah?” Ashlyn replies as she leans out the closet door.

“I love you.” Ali says as she closes the distance and cups the officer’s face in her hands, pulling her into a romantic kiss.

“I love you too, Alex.” Ashlyn mumbles against Ali’s lips as the brunette pulls away and leaves the officer standing in her closet with closed eyes and a racing heart.

After walking about a mile down the beach and not having seen anyone at all for the last ten minutes, Ashlyn lays out a large blanket and the two of them plop down beside each other. They quietly stare out at the water and watch the waves roll in for a little while with their hands entwined, just enjoying the peaceful moment.

“So, I’m not sure where to start.” Ashlyn finally breaks the silence.

“Hmmm, well I hear that at the beginning is a good place.” Ali sasses and nudges Ashlyn with her
shoulder, using humor to ease into the conversation.

“Spoken like a true lawyer.” Ashlyn teases back. “But yeah, actually, that’s a good place to start.” She adds as she realizes the lawyer remark set her up for a good starting point. “So… I must say that your investigative skills are really damn impressive, Alex.”

Ali smiles proudly until she hears Ashlyn’s next words.

“But…” Ashlyn smirks. “When it comes to my military career, you don’t know jack. Those records you found are just what they want the public to know.”

“Hmm.” Ali smiles pretending to be offended. “Well, I do love a good mystery. Enlighten me, Harris. What is it that I should know… and who is ‘they’?”

“‘They’ is the government, like the heads of military command, the CIA, the president and a host of other people I can’t mention and you probably wouldn’t believe. Some things I really can’t talk about, but most of it is just private information and not classified, so I can tell you all that stuff.”

Ashlyn explains.

“Wow, ok… are you going to tell me that you’re like Jason Bourne or something?” Ali asks jokingly, but can’t hide her serious intrigue.

Ashlyn chuckles. “No, but also not so far off base in some ways.”

“I’m listening.” Ali says with wide eyes and rapt attention.

“Alright, so Rangers are part of the 75th Ranger Regiment of the Army which is considered Special Forces that can be deployed anywhere in the world within 18 hours. The regiment is generally made up of three main battalions which are broken down into six companies each. So when you said earlier that you envisioned larger units, you’re generally right because there are about 150 Rangers per company and from there Rangers work in teams of about ten or so. With me so far?” Ashlyn starts.

“Yep, got it.” Ali nods.

“I was in 1st Battalion, Bravo Company, which is a rifle company. Even within Special Forces each branch of the military has its smaller super elite forces. For Army that’s Delta, Navy has Seal Team 6, Marines have Raiders, and Airforce has Night Stalkers. Have you heard of any of those?” Ashlyn asks.

“I’ve definitely heard of Seals and maybe Delta, but not the others.” Ali replies.

“Alright well you get the point. Rangers usually get deployed in high level and specific situations, but these other more specialized teams go in for even more specific and high value targets and objectives if that makes sense.” Ashlyn pauses and sees Ali nod so she continues. “For the record, I was not a member of any of those super elite forces. But I did work very closely with them because of the specialized training I have.”

“Ah and here comes the Jason Bourne stuff…” Ali remarks lightly, completely fascinated by what’s unfolding.

“Pretty much.” Ashlyn laughs a bit. “As a Ranger, I trained and became highly specialized in close quarters combat or CQC. Early on I wasn’t sure if I wanted to try and make it to Delta level, so I trained in things that would be favorable for it in case it was an option. I also learned middle-eastern
languages. Specifically, Arabic and Farsi and I know enough Kurdish to get by if I need to.”


“Geez, I didn’t even get to the good stuff yet.” Ashlyn jokes a bit.

“There’s more?” Ali asks wide-eyed.

“Getting there, baby. Stay with me.” Ashlyn replies and gets another nod from the brunette. “So the CQC thing… to make a long story shorter, I got very good at it. Top marksmanship with various rifles and handguns, top level jujitsu and grappling martial arts, more knife skills than people can fathom, high proficiency in diversionary techniques, and I can pretty much make a weapon out of anything.”

“Holy hell!” Ali says completely flabbergasted, her mind going right to the story Kyle told her about Ashlyn single-handedly taking on and saving him from those drug dealers.

Ashlyn just smiles and continues. “Because of that, I got picked to lead a very small team of specially trained Rangers like me to join a mission Task Force. I’m not sure if this will mean anything to you, but I was assigned as part of Task Force 88, better known to the public and media as Task Force Black.”

Ali’s eyes practically bug out of her head. “You’re serious?”

“Completely serious. What do you know about it?” Ashlyn asks, trying to gauge what the brunette knows.

“Well, I watched some news story about it years ago. It kind of seemed like something that they made up to be honest. They couldn’t actually confirm that it existed and they made it seem like some make-believe superhero force or something. So, it’s actually real?” Ali tries to wrap her head around it.

“It’s real. The public is more aware of its existence now than they were a few years ago when it was more under wraps. Anyway, it’s an elite counterterrorism task force comprised of a Delta Force, Seal Team 6, Marine Raiders, Night Stalkers, some British special forces, US military intelligence operatives, and two specialized Ranger teams… one CQC and the other a fire support team that deals in heavy artillery. You’re looking at the CQC team leader.” Ashlyn points to herself. “Well, at least back then. Obviously not anymore.”

“I don’t even know what to say right now. Impressed and proud doesn’t even cut it.” Ali replies, her mouth practically hanging open. “I feel like I’m sitting beside a heroic movie character or something.”

“Trust me. It’s not at all as glamorous as it sounds.” Ashlyn replies solemnly.

Ali sees the shift and squeezes the officer’s hand, leaning in and resting her head on her shoulder. “Yeah. I know that. Sorry, just amazed by you. As much as it feels like fantasy, I know it’s not and the reality is that I’m sure you’ve seen some awful things.”

Ashlyn just slightly nods in confirmation, squeezing Ali’s hand tightly and staying quiet for a minute as she looks out at the water.

“Tell me about the guys.” Ali says softly after a couple minutes of silence.

Ashlyn smiles and kisses the brunette on the forehead. “Well, they all had training like I did and were
just as good at it, but we all brought something different to the mix. I was the highest ranking when
the team was put together, so that made me the commanding officer. Morris is the most similar to me
training wise and we came up in the Rangers together. Of the three guys, he and I were always the
closest even though we’re all tight knit as a group. Morris has some pretty extensive medic training
too, so that was clearly a bonus. Porter is a military specialist in martial arts. The guy is trained in
fighting styles I didn’t even know existed, everything from karate to kickboxing. He’s pretty tall too,
so he’s unstoppable in hand-to-hand combat. And then there is Rivera who is a bit more of a
weaponry expert and can provide not only sniper support, but also knows his way around mortar and
explosives. Rivera and I really didn’t get along for a while outside of the obligatory team work, but
that obviously changed.” Ashlyn explains.


“He was just this kind of macho asshole and clearly didn’t love being under the command of a
woman. A lot of it came from his Mexican cultural background, but we definitely didn’t love each
other that’s for sure. I mean, the guy’s go to pick-up line was ‘Have you ever tried Mexican
sausage… would you like to?’ as he grabbed his crotch.” Ashlyn grimaces.

“Gross.” Ali cringes. “So how on earth did that dynamic change?”

“Well, you actually kind of know that part. You’ve read a bit about my first injury. To elaborate a
little. We got sent in with Delta and Night Stalkers to help secure a very important airfield. We ended
up getting ambushed and involved in a firefight with members of Al-Qaeda. As you know I took
shots in the thigh just before our evac units arrived at a meetup point about a little under a mile away.
Rivera took a bullet to the groin area and one near the collarbone and passed out from blood loss. A
lot of our vehicles got disabled in the fight and there was no way to get out unless we ran for it.
Anyway, you read the rest of it. Rivera was the guy I carried on my back. He was a whole different
person to me and in general after that.” Ashlyn recounts.

“Yeah I bet. God this is unreal.” Ali almost can’t believe the things Ashlyn is telling her. How truly
amazing this woman sitting beside her is, the things she’s accomplished and is capable of, and how
it’s almost surreal that this is her girlfriend. She grabs Ashlyn’s shirt lightly and pulls the officer into a
deep passionate kiss, something to ground her and bring some sense of reality to this moment. “You
are one fucking incredible human being, you know that?” Ali says a bit breathlessly as they slightly
pull apart.

“Eh, well, that’s debatable now that I’ve met THE Alexandra Krieger. Personally, I think you’re the
incredible one.” Ashlyn says sweetly and leans in for one more kiss.

“Get real, Hero. I appreciate your sappy sentiments, but I know amazing when I see it. And I’m
looking right at it.” Ali lightly taps Ashlyn’s nose. “So, what do the guys do now? Are they still
enlisted or out like you are?”

“Porter is the only one still in, but not enlisted anymore. He’s a 1st Lieutenant Officer now and is a
martial arts instructor for the 3rd Ranger Battalion at Fort Benning in Georgia. So, that’s why we’re
going to Georgia. Morris got medically discharged around the same time I did.” Ashlyn pauses for a
second and swallows hard. “He uh… he was riding in the same Humvee as me on that last mission
when we hit the IED. Lost his left foot from about mid-calf down.”

“Oh god. I’m sorry.” Ali squeezes Ashlyn’s arm in hers tightly.

“It’s ok. We all knew what we signed up for. He’s alive and we both got out, that’s what counts.”
Ashlyn reassures her before continuing. “Rivera got assigned to lead the new CQC team with Porter
when Morris and I got discharged. So, he was in for another two years before he got too close to a flash grenade on a mission and lost vision in his right eye and got medically discharged for that. Anyway, Morris is a physical therapist now. Definitely his calling after all the rehab he went through with the prosthetic leg and all. He’s married with a 3-year-old daughter that I actually haven’t met yet. Rivera is now an army contractor for stuff related to weapons purchasing and ever the bachelor as usual. You can expect that he’ll hit on you at some point just to tease me. Porter is married with a set of really damn cute 4-year-old twin boys.”

Ali snuggles into Ashlyn more closely. “They sound amazing, just like you. I really truly can’t wait to meet them.”

“They are amazing.” Ashlyn agrees. “They’re family in a way I cannot put words to. We’ve been through things together that no one else can really understand. We don’t have to talk about it, we just know what we’ve seen and know that we have each other now just like we did then. We either lived together or died together as a team in that desert. I guess there’s not much greater of a bond than that when you think about it. They all tried relentlessly to reach me in jail, it was my bad for pushing them away and not letting them in. Still, the second I got back in touch it was like nothing changed. They are here for me just the same as they have always been. You have no idea what it means to me to introduce you to them, but I hope you can at least understand a little better now.”

Ali nods. “I have to admit that I’m just as nervous as I am excited. I feel like I have to pass some kind of test or something.”

“Well, you’re off to a great start seeing as how they know you’re my lawyer and listened to the podcast.” Ashlyn grins. “However, they don’t know anything more than that about us and they don’t know you’re coming, so you have the element of surprise and they won’t have time to prepare.”

“Well thank god for that!” Ali exclaims. “Still pretty nervous though.”

“Don’t be. I’ve never introduced them to anyone I’ve dated before or anything like that, so they’ll understand quickly. I think it’s pretty apparent how much I love you. They’ll love you too.” Ashlyn reassures the brunette and kisses her softly a few times. “Just don’t go all smarty pants and throw fancy legal terms around, that’s a total buzzkill.” Ashlyn teases and earns a light elbow from Ali.

“You really weren’t kidding when you said that I didn’t know jack about your military background. Talk about a lot to take in.” Ali remarks, still feeling both shocked and in awe of it all.

“Yeah. Sorry. I don’t really talk about it unless there’s good reason to, you know?” Ashlyn confesses and watches Ali nod in understanding. “So… I can imagine my beautiful lawyer must have some questions.”


“Ask away. If there’s anything I can’t answer because it’s classified, I’ll tell you.” Ashlyn supplies.

“Ok. So, when you say missions....what kind of stuff did you guys generally do?’ Ali asks just trying to get a more accurate view of this Task Force Black she’s only heard about in a sensationalist media type of way.

“All counterterrorism related missions, like I said before. Specifically though, it was usually missions to either save, secure, or take out high profile targets or individuals. There were high level prisoner of war rescues, capturing of top terrorist cell leaders, hostage situations, securing critical airfields and stuff like that. Our team would mostly get called in with Delta when the mission involved going into tight spaces limited to one small area. We were more specialized than Delta at fighting in very tight
Ali lets the officer’s words sink in, trying to imagine what these high risk situations must be like. “You’ve seen some pretty horrifying shit, haven’t you?” She whispers and rubs light circles on Ashlyn’s back. She watches as Ashlyn takes a deep breath, looks out at the water and nods with a slightly haunted look in her eyes. As much as she doesn’t want to know, she feels the heaviness in the air and understands that this is an important turning point for them. This is her moment to make sure that Ashlyn understands that she’s here and that’s she’s in this with her forever no matter what.

Ali silently scoots and repositions herself behind Ashlyn, her legs surrounding the officer’s hips and her arms going around her waist while her chin rests on Ashlyn’s shoulder.

“Hi.” Ashlyn says as she lets her body relax back into Ali, her head tilting back to look at the brunette.

“Hey.” Ali replies and leans her head down to kiss Ashlyn gently before pulling back again. “Tell me something.” She starts.

“Ok. Tell you what?” Ashlyn says quizzically in an attempt understand what Ali is trying to get at right now.

“Terrible or not…tell me something you’ve never told anyone before. Something you’ve never had to talk about because the only people who could possibly understand were there with you.” Ali says resolutely. She listens and feels Ashlyn take several deep breaths before she speaks again. “You can tell me anything.” She reminds her.

“You’re sure? Anything? What if it’s atrocious and you’ll think less of me for it?” Ashlyn asks quietly, not able to meet Ali’s eyes.

“I love you, Ashlyn Harris. That stands unconditionally. I’m well aware that you’ve dealt with and still deal with insane situations in your military and police careers and that you’ve likely had to do incredibly difficult things. I will never in my life think less of you for that, I promise you. I know your heart and that’s all I need to know, it tells me everything about who you are. No matter if they’re great or horrific, I want to understand all of the things that have made you who you are.” Ali squeezes Ashlyn’s waist a little tighter. “Now, just look out on to that water and talk to me. I’ve got you.”

Ashlyn sits silently for a while just watching the waves crash onto the shore and trying to build up the courage to voice the thing that eats at her conscience the most. She’s never talked about it before, not in therapy, not to anyone. All three of the guys had been in the room with her and had experienced it from their own perspectives, so nothing had ever been said between them because it didn’t have to be. She runs her toes through the sand, feeling its warmth and grit, and decides to start with that because it’s a safe place to begin and hopefully the rest of the words will come out with it.

“You know, I always thought I’d never like the beach again. People always tell you the desert is barren and hot, but no one prepares you for the sand.” Ashlyn speaks up. “It literally got into everything and everywhere and was more uncomfortable than I ever could have imagined. It was in your fingernails, your ears, your nose, even your eyebrows. I can’t remember a meal there that wasn’t gritty from sand in my mouth. Didn’t matter whether something was covered up or not, there would still be sand. It would even hurt to wipe when you peed because it was there too. Growing up near the ocean, I thought I’d be fine with it. I fucking hated it though. It was weeks at home before I stopped finding sand in my ears and stuff. Even simple things like that, people who haven’t experienced it can never really understand it. I always thought that after that the beach would remind of it and I’d hate being near the water. It doesn’t though, the sand is different and softer. The smells
and air are different. I’m really grateful for that. To have not lost a place that brings me peace.”

Ali doesn’t speak, she just holds Ashlyn tight and listens. She feels the officer entwine their hands that sit on her waist and take a few more deep breaths.

“My second to last mission was a hostage situation. A new state-of the art school had been built in Fallujah by American soldiers and several government officials from the Iraqi Prime Minister’s council were visiting during the opening week to interact with the children there as a goodwill effort. Al-Qaeda terrorist cells were notorious at that time for trying to destroy newly rebuilt areas as a way to undermine the America clean-up efforts. Insurgents had battled their way to this school to try and take out the government officials and the Iraqi army providing security was quickly outnumbered in the firefight that ensued.” Ashlyn explains in as hollow a voice as Ali has ever heard. “Our team was deployed to the area with Delta and a Marine Raider team along with some air support to get the officials out of there. We got the area secured in an about an hour after arriving and then focused on getting into the school.”

Ali feels Ashlyn grip her hands really tightly and she silently holds the officer more tightly to her. It’s a school full of children and she can only imagine where this might be going.

“We were told there were two insurgents inside holding the officials hostage. So our team went in while Delta stayed outside to provide security and cover. It happened really fast. Rivera and Morris had the two guys down pretty quick, but we had no idea what we were in for. Turns out they weren’t the real issue. It was a 12 year old girl, Alex…A 12 year old girl with a fucking bomb vest and a detonator in her hand and scared as shit. Insurgents had taken her family and told her that if she didn’t set off the bomb, they’d kill them.” Ashlyn briefly pauses before continuing with her voice starting to shake.

“It’s me and this 12 year old girl staring each other down in a room full of other kids and the government officials. God… her eyes. I will never forget the fear in them. She knew she was going to die either by the bomb or from us killing her and you could just see she was debating what to do and how to save her family. Her hand was shaking so bad I thought she was going to set the bomb off and kill us all before I could do anything. No matter what we told her, she wouldn’t put the fucking thing down. Fuck, I was as terrified as she was.” Tears roll freely down Ashlyn’s face as she stops to take a breath, her body now shaking a bit to match her voice.

“I’ve got you, baby. I’ve got you. Just keep talking to me.” Ali soothes Ashlyn gently, kissing her head and knowing that the officer just needs to get it out.

“It felt like forever, but it was just a couple minutes that I had to decide and then seconds. I had my gun up ready to shoot her when I could see in her eyes that she was going to push the detonator in her hand. God, she was so fucking scared. I ended up making the most dangerous decision I could have made, but also the only one I could live with. I aimed for her wrist, knowing the close range would take her hand right off… knowing that if I missed even a little bit, that we’d probably all be dead. It was a stupid and selfish decision, but I didn’t miss…” Ashlyn says with a soft sob, feeling Ali’s protective hold on her get even snugger.

“I did that thinking that if it all worked the way it was supposed to, then we’d all be out of there alive and that I could save her too. But it just wasn’t that simple in the end. She went down hard and Morris got her stabilized with the bleeding under control while Porter and Rivera got the bomb vest off of her. It all went the best way it could have, but it never goes away for me. I shot a terrified 12 year old girl in front of over 50 other kids who will probably never forget it. There’s just no justifying that in my head. And worse, I took her hand off. So she’s living in a country that already degrades women and now she has to live with no hand on top of that in a place where disability is
considered deplorable. She survived, but to live what kind of life? All because of me.” Ashlyn chokes out.

“Shhh, it’s ok sweetheart.” Ali whispers in her ear to calm her a bit. “Ash, like always, I’m not even going to pretend that I understand how you feel. Hearing it from an outsider’s perspective, I’ll just say this. While it’s one of the most ghastly situations I’ve ever heard, it’s also one of the bravest. You risked your life to save everyone in that room. I’m sure those kids had rough lives and seen many things that they shouldn’t. But you know what, they’re alive because of you. Alive and able to get help and grow up to be great people who fight for change. Whether that happens or not…you still gave them that chance. Same goes for the girl. You’re beyond heroic and you’ll never convince me otherwise.”

“I never thought of it like that.” Ashlyn admits quietly. “I just can’t get past what I did to her. Turns out her family had been killed before they even sent her into the school. I kept track of her to find out how she was doing. She had surgery and was expected to recover despite losing the hand. She was going to be turned over to an orphanage as part of adoptive services. I wanted to try and visit her, but the hospital she was in was in a zone we weren’t allowed into. Three weeks later I went on the mission where Morris and I got injured and I lost track of her completely and pretty much everything else. Aasera Salib. That’s her name. There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t think of that girl and wonder what happened to her and what her life is like.”

“Look at me, Ash.” Ali says gently, loosening her grip so Ashlyn can turn around a bit and meet her eyes. “I love you. I love that big, brave, beautiful, and aching heart of yours so much. I love it. I love every part of you, no matter how you feel about those parts. Thank you for trusting me and telling me. The more I learn about you, the more deeply I fall in love with you.”

The emotions are overwhelming her ability to speak, so Ashlyn just tilts her head up and captures Ali’s lips in a deep hard kiss that topples them both over onto the blanket but doesn’t break the contact. The kiss itself runs a gamut of emotions and goes from desperate to passionate to languid and soft before finally breaking off with the two of them a bit winded.

“I’m so in love with you, Alex. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” Ashlyn finally whispers out before pulling Ali into her arms as they lay on the blanket. “How about you talk to me now… tell me something.” Ashlyn suggests after a long silence between them, wanting to reciprocate the incredible support she just got from the brunette.

“I think that’s only fair.” Ali replies, already knowing what she wants to say. She’s been wanting to tell Ashlyn, but she just hasn’t found the right time yet, not wanting to put any kind of damper on their reunion. “Ken recorded the whole thing on his cellphone. The conversation with Bobby, what happened with me, what happened afterwards. It only ends at the explosion.” Ali blurts out quickly before she loses the nerve.

“Oh shit.” Ashlyn verbally reacts with wide eyes and pulls Ali closer. “How did you find that out?” She tries to recover from the surprise and ease into it more gracefully.

“McNally called me to meet him at the beginning of June. He told me they had found a damaged cellphone in the car and forensics had recovered the memory card. After finally looking to see what was on it, they found that recording among other normal stuff. McNally just gave me a digital copy of it and said he thought I might want to hear it.” Ali elaborates.

“I couldn’t figure out why he thought I would want to listen to it, but there was just something about the way he said it. Took me a week to finally work myself up to being able to listen and even then I had to skip over the part with me in it. When I got to the end… that’s when I heard what McNally thought I’d want to hear.” Ali pauses, looking up to see warm hazel eyes looking back at her as
Ashlyn’s hand goes to lightly stroke her hair.

“Bobby…fucking maniacal, manipulative fuck…he was making Ken watch my private security feed that he hacked into. He made him watch me drown and Ken freaked out, and Bobby just left him in the car and coldly told him to go fucking return it because it was a rental. All the while knowing the fucking thing was rigged to explode!” Ali gets out in emotional anger. “What’s messing with my head is Ken’s voice. The last thing I saw was his cold eyes looking back at me before he left me to drown and I could be hurt and angry and unforgiving to that person. But then hearing him freak out the way he did on the recording… that was my dad… that was the guy I once knew that would never do that to his own daughter. When he started the car, he was….he was coming back for me, Ash. His last words were ’Oh god. Oh god. I’m coming to get you, honey. Hold on.’” Ali gets the last part out in a squeaky raspy whisper.

“Geez, Alex. You haven’t told anyone about this?” Ashlyn asks in concern as Ali crumbles in arms. “I’m so sorry, baby. So Sorry.” She holds her close knowing there is nothing she can say to make it better, but that she can just be here for comfort.

Ali just shakes her head no and tries to pull herself together enough to get the rest of her thoughts out. Ashlyn’s arms feel so strong around her, so solid. “I haven’t been able to talk about it to anyone, especially not Kyle. I just…I was ready to see Ken and put it all behind me. I can’t forgive what he did, I can’t unsee those cold eyes. I knew I could walk in there, see his current state for myself and leave being ok with that. And then I heard that fucking recording and now I don’t know. I’ve expected to walk in and see the monster I’ve seen in my head this whole time… but what if that’s not what I see when I go? What if I just see my dad? Then what do I do?” Ali tries to explain her dilemma, but it’s coming out more jumbled than she wants it to.

“Oh, baby.” Ashlyn says gently. “No one can answer that but you, Alex. And it doesn’t matter what you do in that moment as long as it’s what feels right in your heart and in your mind. I don’t think you can know how you’ll feel until you’re actually there in front of him and that’s ok. It’s ok to be scared, to be uncertain…it’s ok to break. Whatever you feel when you’re there with him, just go with it and know it’s valid. Let yourself feel it and be at peace no matter what comes out. And I obviously can’t tell you what it will be or what will happen, but I’ll be right beside you the whole time if you want me to be.”

“You’d do that? You’ll go with me?” Ali asks shyly.

“Absolutely. I’d do anything for you.” Ashlyn replies confidently.

“And… will you listen to the recording with me? Help me get through the whole thing and wrap my head around it better?” Ali requests, knowing it will be just as hard for Ashlyn to hear it as it is for her.

“Of course, baby. Anything, literally anything and it’s yours.” Ashlyn reiterates as she looks into the brunette’s stormy amber eyes. “I love you so damn much, Alex. So damn much.”

“I know, Ash. I feel you in ways I can’t even explain…I really do know, and I love you too.” Ali replies and kisses the officer softly, letting her body feel Ashlyn’s words more than anything else because what she just said is true. She can feel how intensely this woman loves her. It’s in the way Ashlyn touches her, talks to her, looks at her. It’s a raging fire and comforting warmth all at the same time and it’s incomparable to anything else in this world. And after everything that was just spoken over the last hour, all she wants to do is feel it unfiltered. “Come swim with me, Harris.” She says with a small smile, wiping her eyes a bit and sitting up while pulling Ashlyn with her.

“Yes ma’am.” Ashlyn grins back as she watches Ali strip down to her bikini, following suit and
taking off her own t-shirt.

“Last one in cooks dinner!” Ali yells already in a sprint towards the water.

“Totally unfair, Krieger!” Ashlyn bellows back and does her best to catch up even though she knows she can’t. She laughs heartily when she sees Ali topple into the water ahead of her after only getting a few steps into it. “See now that’s what you get for not playing fair!” Ashlyn teases as she finally catches up to the brunette and helps her up in the almost waist high water, both of them laughing hysterically in a much needed emotional release.

“Oh well, at least I don’t have to cook dinner! Sucks to be you, Chef Harris.” AliSplashes Ashlyn a few times to get the officer as soaked as she is from falling.

“Except you forget that I actually like to cook, sooo…” Ashlyn laughs and takes Ali’s hand, walking them out farther so the water is about chest high and deep enough to swim. She pulls Ali close to her and then lets herself float back in the water with the brunette mostly laying on top of her front side.

Ali feels Ashlyn’s feet come up and touch hers. “Woah, you’re not touching the bottom.” Her eyes go wide in realization. “Seriously, how are you this strong that you can keep both of us afloat?”

“Ranger training. You had to be able to swim with full gear that weighs about 90lbs, plus an extra 50lbs…you do the math. Had to do a 12 mile march/run within three hours with that weight too.” Ashlyn says casually.

“Confirmed…I certainly will never be a Ranger.” Ali says lightly as she drags her hands up Ashlyn’s sides and stares deep into her eyes. “It’s seriously impressive though…and hot.” Her lips go down to ghost Ashlyn’s. “So. Damn. Hot.” She kisses her hungrily surprising the officer and causing them to sink into water a bit.

Ashlyn recovers quickly, planting her feet on the ocean floor so she can hold Ali up and let herself get lost in the passionate and heated kiss. She feels Ali’s legs wrap around her waist, her hands dropping down to the brunette’s perfect ass as she feels soft hands grip the back of her neck and pull her in even closer. She moans when Ali’s tongue starts to duel with her own, the brunette’s hips starting to grind into her.

Ali breaks the kiss and latches her lips to Ashlyn’s neck, the taste of the officer’s skin and salt water mixing in her mouth as she sucks hard enough to leave a mark near her pulse point.

“Alex…” Ashlyn hisses in pleasure, her hands gripping the brunnette’s hips roughly as the water laps against their chests.

Ali makes her way up Ashlyn’s jaw and nips at her earlobe before making her request. “Touch me, Ashlyn. I need to feel you. All of you. Everything.”

Ashlyn complies slipping her hands under Ali’s bikini top as she feels a rush of heat move through her own body despite the cool water surrounding them. Ali’s arms go around her shoulders as she runs her thumbs over the brunette’s already hard nipples. She tilts her head up to meet the eyes of the beautiful woman looking at back at her with such fire that not even this entire ocean could suppress it. “Can’t believe your mine.” She whispers in awe.

“So fucking yours.” Ali husks in reply.

“So fucking mine.” Ashlyn mutters back against Ali’s lips before kissing her hard, the brunette moaning into her mouth as she continues to play with her nipples.
“I need more of you.” Ali demands as she pulls back breathing heavily, her voice dripping with raw need. “Fuck me, baby…please, just fuck me.”

Ali’s words send Ashlyn into overdrive with a racing heart and throbbing core. Never has anyone had this kind of control over her emotions, over her body. “Fuck Alex.” She growls as she wraps one arm around Ali’s waist and uses the other to pull her bikini bottom to the side, finding the brunette’s center to be hot, wet, and wanting. She enters her slowly with two fingers, feeling Ali’s sharp intake of breath against her neck as she begins to pump into her steadily.

“Fuck… yes.” Ali pants out as she buries her head into Ashlyn’s neck and holds her tightly. “Fuck me harder, Ashlyn.” She demands in a low purr. “Fuck me so I can still feel you tomorrow. Fuck me until I forget that we’ve both almost lost each other before we got here.”

It’s all Ashlyn needs to hear as she uses her own hips for leverage to thrust into the brunette as deeply and quickly as she can. Ali is clutching her tightly, the brunette’s hot, heavy breaths against her ear as her hips move against her rhythmically and her silken walls envelope her fingers. She feels close to the edge and Ali hasn’t even touched her. “You’re mine, Alex. I’ll never let you go.” She gets out emotionally and feels Ali start to clench around her fingers.

“I’m yours. I’m yours, Ashlyn. Yours only.” Ali breathes out before pulling her head back to look into Ashlyn’s eyes. The fervent but loving look in those eyes, the emotions of the day, the literal physical connectedness, the pull of the tide, the beat of the officer’s heart against her chest, the coolness of the water contrasting to the heat of their bodies…all of it, it’s all spilling over in one glorious eruption. “Kiss me, Ash.” She manages to breathe out before fingers curl deep inside her and lips overtake her own as her body tightens and her world goes black from the euphoric release.

Ashlyn can only hold on tightly and keep her fingers pumping slowly as Ali quivers against her and fills her mouth with loud, breathy moans and whimpers. As the kiss grows gentler, she stills completely, just staying inside the brunette to maintain the connection. Her own body is so close to the line she almost can’t breathe.

When everything comes back into focus and her muscles relax, Ali slowly pulls her lips away from Ashlyn’s to find bright green eyes looking back at her and knowing exactly what it means. She drops her legs down from the officer’s waist, feeling long fingers gently slip out of her. She doesn’t waste another second as she reaches into Ashlyn’s board shorts and swiftly presses her fingers deep into her core.

“Oh… Alex…” Ashlyn grunts as the brunette takes complete control of her, her hands gripping Ali’s lower back tightly.

“Look at me, baby.” Ali commands and holds Ashlyn’s gaze. “Look at me and come for me. Show me that you’re mine. Mine to fuck. Mine to hold. Mine to love.”

Ashlyn fights to keep her eyes open and focused on the whiskey orbs penetrating hers as Ali works her hard and fast. “Fuck, Alex. Yes. I’m yours. Yours now. Yours always.” She barely gets out before she barrels over the edge in complete ecstasy, her body rigid and everything in a haze. She feels Ali’s fingers leave her as the fog starts to lift, the brunette then holding her close and kissing her slow and deep before pulling back and resting their foreheads together.

“I love you, Ash.” Ali whispers softly as she gets lost in the bright, gold flecked eyes.

“I love you too, Alex.” Ashlyn replies tenderly and pecks Ali’s lips. “Holy hell, that was…”

“Yeah.” Ali says, knowing that neither of them could ever properly finish that statement with words.
She kisses Ashlyn softly one more time before wrapping her legs back around the officer’s waist again and just holding her tightly.

Ashlyn strokes Ali’s back lightly, the water moving around them soothingly. She can’t help but smile when she realizes that the brunette had no reservations about going into the water with her. She’s broken out of her thoughts when she feels Ali smiling against the top of her shoulder. “Whatcha thinking about, beautiful?”

“Not sure you really want to know.” Ali replies, lifting her head up.

“Of course, I do.” Ashlyn says quickly. “Lay it on me.”

“Alright.” Ali raises her eyebrows before speaking. “My mom.”

“Well, ok then. Not what I was expecting, but go on…” Ashlyn laughs a bit, completely surprised by the answer.

“You know how I told you that she and I talked about everything together?” Ali starts.

“Yeah, I remember.” Ashlyn answers, more and more intrigued.

“Well, when I say that… I really mean we talked about EVERYTHING. My mom never held back with me.” Ali prefaces what she’s about to say.

“Ok.” Ashlyn replies expectantly.

“One day we somehow got on the topic of relationships and sex. And she told me, and I quote ‘You know you have the right person when they can do both, make love to you sweetly, but also fuck you senseless in the rawest of passion.’” Ali finally gets to the point and watches Ashlyn’s eyes bug out a bit.

“Wow. Damn. I was pretty open with my grandma, but if she ever said that to me I might’ve died.” Ashlyn replies in slight shock.

“I almost did.” Ali admits. “Anyway… I had no damn clue what the hell she was talking about until just now. Now I know.”

“And knowing is half the battle.” Ashlyn says with a cheesy grin because she can’t help herself.

“You did not just quote G.I. Joe.” Ali smacks her lightly on the shoulder.

“I did, Krieger. Love me or leave me.” Ashlyn says sassily.

“Hmmmm…” Ali pretends to think about it. “Ok fine… love you.” She teases and leans down for a quick kiss. “We should probably get out of here before we get arrested for indecent exposure.”

“Ha, now there’s my lawyer!” Ashlyn chuckles. “Well, no one walked by the entire hour we sat on the sand, so I think we’re fine. Besides, if someone did walk by, then they got a damn good show.”

“Yep, we should’ve charged.” Ali adds to the joke.

“Pretty sure you don’t need to charge, my gorgeous multi-millionaire.” Ashlyn ribs her.

“Funny, Harris.” Ali sticks her tongue out. “But, I give nothing away for free.”

“Well, lucky for you, I do.” Ashlyn pulls Ali around her body so that the brunette is now on her
back. “Free piggyback ride to the shore.”

“Now this I can get used to. Onward!” Ali points to shore as Ashlyn laughs and yells “Yes, Queen!”

When they finally get to the edge of the sand, Ashlyn gently lowers Ali off of her back only for the brunette to take off in a sprint towards their stuff. “Last one to the blanket cooks dinner!” Ali screams.

“You already did that, Krieger!” Ashlyn hollers back and shakes her head as she makes her way up the sand towards Ali.

“Yeah, well…I’m hungry, Harris.” Ali shrugs when the officer finally approaches.

“And I’ll cook for you. That is if you can keep your distance long enough for me to do it.” Ashlyn gives her a playful glare.

“Fat chance of that happening. We’ll get take out.” Ali says immediately with a devilish grin.

“Right.” Ashlyn laughs as she folds their blanket and gathers their stuff. The two of them make the long walk back to the car enjoying the crashing sound of the waves and the presence of each other after such a powerful afternoon.

Ashlyn has every intention of cooking for Ali when they get home… but Ali makes damn sure that they get take-out.
“Okay, not what I was expecting when you said fishing boat!” Ali says standing on the worn Gloucester dock slip with her mouth slightly open.

“I said fishing charter, Alex. Charter… there’s a difference! When people are paying good money to go out fishing, they’re not paying to get carted around in some old jalopy lobster boat.” Ashlyn explains with a slight head shake.

“This is a yacht, Ash.” Ali says with a playful glare.

“As are most fishing charters. This is a sportfish yacht. So pretty much a yacht with the back end set up with fishing equipment. Chris and I got rid of all that stuff though and turned into more of a pleasure boat now with just seating back there.” Ashlyn elaborates.

“So, a yacht. Like I said.” Ali holds her ground teasingly.

“Yes, sweetheart. It’s just a yacht now.” Ashlyn chuckles a bit.

“I win!” Ali exclaims proudly.

“You always do, baby.” Ashlyn admits with a grin.

“Yeah well, I really win this time. You have a fucking yacht!” Ali shouts, not being able to contain her excitement anymore as she stares at the large white boat with the dark black tinted windows. She notices the black script across the back of the vessel: *Eu Nice to Look At.* “Ha! Love the name!” Ali smiles widely appreciating the play on words that includes Ashlyn’s grandmother’s name.

“Gramps was a big dork like that. He wanted to just name his boat ‘Eunice’ but my grandma told him he had to be more creative than that. Sooo…” Ashlyn laughs. “Alright, my beautiful landlubber, all aboard!” The officer smoothly jumps and simultaneously swings her legs to get into the boat before offering Ali her hand.

“So much swagger, Harris.” Ali smiles takes Ashlyn’s hand to climb onboard.

“I have to go check a couple things and make sure we’re ready to go. But go have a look around.” Ashlyn says as she plants a kiss on Ali’s lips and makes her way to the motor.

Ali takes a quick look around the back area of the boat that she just climbed into. It’s fairly spacious, but pretty typical of any boat with rubberized seating that can easily be hosed down and some small surfaces with cup holders. She heads right over and opens the door to the main cabin figuring that this is probably the best part and she’s not wrong. The inside setup is almost like a living room with couch-like gray seating all along one side, a leather coffee table in front of it and a TV on the
opposite wall. The corner features a fully stocked bar and mini-kitchenette. The entire floor is covered by plush royal blue carpeting and the tinted windows all around the room allow for a pretty uninterrupted ocean view. A door opposite from the bar area reveals a small bathroom with a toilet, sink, and small shower setup. "Geez, I could live in here." Ali comments to herself as she makes her way out and up the stairs that lead to the upper deck.

The top deck is open all around with a full overhead roof covering. A control panel and driver console sits in the center with comfortable seating all around the edges. Towards the back of the upper deck are two pillowed chaise lounge chairs that sit under a section of the overhead that is retractable. There is a door next to the control console that has a few steps leading down. Ali walks down them to find a small sized bedroom with a full-size bed and bedside tables, a tinted wrap-around window provides an amazing view from the front of the boat. She gives it all one last look before heading back out and finding Ashlyn on the top deck at the console.

"Hey sailor." Ali says flirtatiously as she raises her eyebrows and wraps her arms around Ashlyn’s waist from behind.

"There you are." Ashlyn leans back into the brunette and turns her head to kiss her softly. "So, what do you think?"

"I think, Harris… that this is not the only vessel you’ll be boarding today." Ali smirks against Ashlyn’s neck and leaves a few lingering kisses there. "You are so getting laid all over this beautiful boat." She adds in a whisper.

"Easy there, Krieger. Maybe we should pull out of the dock first.” Ashlyn winks and kisses Ali again. “Glad you like it. Shall we?"

Ali nods and plops herself in the seat next to the driver’s seat as she watches Ashlyn flip various switches before finally pushing a button to start the motor. A few minutes later, the boat is gently moving across the water and out of the small harbor. She watches the officer effortlessly control the large boat, a slight breeze blowing her short hair a bit as she focuses intently on the GPS screen to keep track of the water depth as she navigates the channel. ‘So fucking gorgeous.’ Ali thinks to herself with a smile as Ashlyn looks up to meet her eyes.

"Want to take her for a spin?” Ashlyn asks as she turns to Ali with a grin.

"Sure do." Ali smiles wickedly and gets up to move in front of Ashlyn, running a hand up her bicep and letting it rest on the back of the officer’s neck.

"The boat, Krieger. I meant the boat.” Ashlyn chuckles with a playful glare.

"I know, but you can’t blame a girl for trying.” Ali shrugs.

"You don’t have to try, baby.” Ashlyn leans in for a deep kiss that elicits a soft moan from the brunette before pulling back. “So, really, want to try driving it?”

"Uh, sure. I’m nervous though.” Ali admits.

"Here, like this.” Ashlyn turns Ali around and puts the brunette’s hands on the steering wheel, resting her own hands on Ali’s lightly as she stands close against her back. “Really soft, gentle movements.” Ashlyn instructs in Ali’s ear, making the brunette shiver a bit. “Now see the tip of the boat there?” Ashlyn asks.

“Yep.” Ali answers.
“And see those two lighthouse towers way off in the distance?” Ashlyn lifts her hand up to motion to them and Ali nods. “Just keep the tip of the boat pointed in between those two lighthouses and we’re good.”

“I can handle that.” Ali smiles confidently, getting a feel for the boat.

“We’ll see.” Ashlyn says and moves Ali’s hair over one shoulder, placing kisses across Ali’s jaw and neck.

“Mmmm, Ash.” Ali hums, leaning her head back.

“Focus, baby.” Ashlyn smirks. “Eyes up there. Can’t have you crashing Gramps’ pride and joy.” She goes right back to working on Ali’s neck, her hands moving just under the hem of Ali’s tank top to lightly stroke the soft skin at the top of her hips.

“You are cruel.” Ali breathes out, fighting to keep her eyes on the horizon as the officer’s hands slip further up her shirt and start to ghost her bikini covered nipples.

“Am I? I guess I should stop then.” Ashlyn teases and starts lowering her hands.

“Don’t you fucking dare!” Ali says desperately and grabs Ashlyn’s hands, moving them back up.

“Hands on the wheel, Krieger.” Ashlyn commands and slips her hands under the bikini top, feeling Ali’s nipples stiffen on her palms.

“Fuck, baby.” Ali moans.

“That’s the plan, sweetheart.” Ashlyn mumbles as she sucks Ali’s pulse point lightly.

“Hurry. Please.” Ali begs, not sure how long she can keep this boat on course while Ashlyn’s works her up.

Ashlyn senses the brunette’s urgency and complies, sliding her right hand into Ali’s bikini bottom and over well-trimmed curls. “You’re so wet. So hot, Alex.” She purrs in her ear, letting Ali’s essence coat her fingers.

“I get wet just looking at you.” Ali says in a low rumble before she feels a familiar jolt run through her body. “Ooooh, fuck, yes.” She hisses out, feeling the officer reach her clit, her hips gyrating to get more contact.

“A little to the left, baby.” Ashlyn directs the brunette as she rubs tight circles on her clit and watches Ali adjust the steering wheel. “A little more. Little more. Right…there.” Ashlyn says as she sinks two fingers into the Ali’s wet and wanting center.

“Ashlyn. Yes.” Ali gasps as she struggles to hold the wheel and keep her eyes ahead. Ashlyn is pumping into her slow and deep at the perfect angle to hit her g-spot every time. “Mmmm, god I love the way you fuck me, Ash. The way you feel inside me… so… good… mmm, fuck baby just like that.”

Ashlyn reaches around with one hand Ali to increase the throttle and speed up the boat when she sees that they’ve gone passed the speed restriction buoys. She moves her hand back up to pinch Ali’s nipple between her fingers as she maintains her steady and smooth strokes into the brunette. “Nice and steady, baby.” She whispers before running her tongue along Ali’s earlobe and down her neck.

The boat’s up and down motion has picked up now that they’re speeding over the waves causing
Ashlyn’s thrusts to get deeper and more rhythmic. “Oh, oh, fuck that’s so…so, oh… good.” Ali moans loudly, her fingers turning white from gripping the wheel so hard. Her orgasm is approaching as fast as the island in front of them. She feels the officer move into her faster and with more urgency as they get closer to the patch of land on the horizon. She wants to tell Ashlyn that they should probably slow down, but her voice is gone as she feels fingers curl deep inside her and her body starts to clench. The intense speed and movement of the boat with Ashlyn so deep inside her brings her right to the brink. Her eyes go wide in both pleasure and desperation to speak with the reflection of the far too close island in her pupils as she succumbs to the climax and presses herself back against Ashlyn, moving her hips wildly on the officer’s fingers while a string of moans and mumbled obscenities leave her mouth.

Ashlyn keeps her fingers slowly moving in and out of Ali’s soaking wet center as she reaches over to the throttle again and slows the boat to a stop just as they reach the buoys marking the end of the safety zone around the island. “We’re here. Just in time too.” Ashlyn husks into Ali’s ear, slowing her fingers down even further as the brunette comes down from her orgasm.

Ali lets herself relish in the sensation of still being filled by Ashlyn for a few seconds before tilting her head back and kissing the officer deeply. She feels Ashlyn slip out of her gently and whimpers lightly into her mouth at the loss of contact. When they finally break apart to breathe, the brunette lets out a long contented sigh and opens her eyes to see the fairly large island in front of them. “Good thing one of us can stay focused, cause I was about to let Jesus take the wheel.” She laughs.

“Well, it was a good thing you orgasmed when you did because otherwise we’d be a big old heap on those rocks over there.” Ashlyn winks.

“Funny, Harris.” Ali says as she swats Ashlyn’s arm lightly and attempts to turn around in the officer’s arms only to find herself a bit wobbly.

“Guess we have to find your sea legs still.” Ashlyn jokes and earns a playful glare.

“We’ll see how good your sea legs are when I’m done with you.” Ali replies seductively and she kisses Ashlyn hard, backing the officer towards the door to the bedroom cabin.

Ali’s tongue is in her mouth, one of the brunette’s hands on the back of her neck while the other one slips under her shirt; Ashlyn tries desperately to clear the fog in her head as she gets backed towards the bedroom stairs. “Wait!” She finally manages to pull herself back. “Hold on. I just need a couple minutes to drop the anchor.” She says still winded from the kiss.

“Aye, aye, Captain.” Ali smiles and kisses her heatedly again.

“It’ll just be a minute.” Ashlyn promises and directs Ali down the stairs to the bedroom cabin. “Then we’re going to rock this boat.” She adds with a smug grin.

“Can a yacht this big even be rocked?” Ali asks with devilish curiosity.

“No idea, but I sure as hell plan to try.” Ashlyn replies with an eyebrow waggle.

“Hurry up.” Ali husks and pulls her in for yet another searing kiss that gets her message across and leaves the officer out of breath.

“Yes, ma’am.” Ashlyn replies as she practically runs across the top deck and down the stairs to get to the anchor.
An hour later, neither of them has any idea whether the boat rocked or not, but it sure felt like it did as they lie there tangled up in each other sweaty and sated.

“We’ve been officially together for four days and sleeping together for three and somehow you can already play my body like an instrument.” Ali muses as she lightly runs her fingers over Ashlyn’s abs and across the colorful ink on her side.

“Your body isn’t exactly shy about what it wants, baby. I’m just a good listener.” Ashlyn replies with a sly smile as she pushes a strand of hair off of Ali’s face and kisses her forehead.

“You and your suave one liners.” Ali giggles and lightly slaps the officer’s stomach. “Whew, it got really stuffy in here really fast.” She adds finally realizing just how sweaty they are.

“Yep and we’re wasting a perfectly nice summer day. How about getting these swimsuits back on and making use of that tanning bed on the front of the boat?” Ashlyn suggests.

“Sold!” Ali says excitedly and quickly pops up to put her bikini back on.

Not long after the two of them are properly covered in sunscreen and letting the high noon sun bathe them in heat as they hold each other close, stopping to steal kisses every so often.

“So, what is this place exactly? I’ve never seen two lighthouses so close together.” Ali motions towards the island in front of them with the twin lighthouses.

“Thacher Island.” Ashlyn answers. “Historically it was one of the most dangerous areas for shipwrecks and named for Englishman Anthony Thacher who wrecked his ship on it. Only he and his wife survived it; the wreck killed all of his children and crew. Anyway, it was owned by their family until it was turned over to the Massachusetts colony which was still ruled by the British at that time. The British built these two lighthouses to prevent shipwrecks. They were the first lighthouses used to mark a dangerous area and not the entrance to a port. And they are arranged on a perfect north/south axis so that fisherman could easily find the true north direction. During the revolutionary war in 1775, the minutemen believed that the lighthouses were aiding the British in battle more than anything else. So, they stormed the island and removed the lighthouse keeper. The lighthouses stayed dark until 1793 after they were turned over to the U.S. Federal government and finally relit.”

“Wow, that’s really cool. Impressive, Ash. I didn’t know you were such a history buff.” Ali remarks.

“Not really. I only got into history when I got bored in jail. My grandpa taught me all the stuff about these lighthouses though.” Ashlyn explains. “When the two of us went out on the boat by ourselves, we’d always stop here to eat our lunch. He always seemed at peace here and I like to believe that he still is.”

“What do you mean?” Ali asks intrigued by the officer’s last statement.

“Oh, uh…Gramps was cremated when he died. My grandma gave me his ashes and told me to spread them somewhere beautiful. She never wanted me to tell her where because she wanted to honor her own memory of him and not a place. She just made me promise that I’d spread hers in the same place when the time came. So, I picked here.” Ashlyn explains solemnly. “Gramps there.” She points to the left lighthouse. “Gram there.” She points to the right one. “Twin beacons forever shining their light together and protecting those who travel the expanse of water that two of them loved so much. I couldn’t think of anything more appropriate than that.”

“That’s one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever heard.” Ali says quietly, moved to the point of a
stray tear escaping her eye. “I love your very soul, Ashlyn Harris. I hope you know that. You’re beautiful.”

Ashlyn’s heart beats fast at the statement and she replies by kissing Ali deeply and slowly, just wanting to taste and feel the brunette on her lips. They kiss languidly for a long time until the sound of a faraway ship horn breaks their rhythm. “I love you too, Alex.” Ashlyn mutters against Ali’s lips as they pull apart and brunette rests her head back onto her chest with a smile.

“Gotta say though, Harris. I feel a little wrong that we technically just had quite the romp in front of your grandparents.” Ali admits as she buries her head further into the officer.

Ashlyn laughs loudly. “You wouldn’t if you knew them. Those two weren’t shy about anything. In fact, Gram is probably thrilled for me.”

“If you say so.” Ali laughs.

They lay in silence for a quite a while when Ali starts to sense that Ashlyn is being a little too quiet. “Hey you. What has you so quiet?” Ali says, scooting herself up a bit so her head is level with Ashlyn’s.

“Just thinking about having to go back to work the day after tomorrow.” Ashlyn says with a shrug.

“Ugh, don’t remind me. I can’t believe I won’t get to spend every minute of the day with you come Monday. I’ve been majorly spoiled.” Ali pouts.

“I know. It’s going to suck, no way around it.” Ashlyn agrees, but doesn’t say more.

“Glad we agree on that, but I can tell there’s more on your mind. What else is bothering you?” Ali probes.

Ashlyn lets out a small sigh and knows this is as good a time as any to get into it. “Okay, well, before I say anything else… I want to make it really clear that what we have between us doesn’t compare to anything in my past and that’s not the point of my concern.”

“Ok, understood.” Ali acknowledges.

“I’m just a little worried about how my job might affect things and I guess I want to address it sooner rather than later.” Ashlyn starts. “The bottom line is that I have a dangerous job. In the past that’s been an issue in my relationships because I’ve been torn between doing my job to highest standard and doing all I can not to worry someone that cares about me.” She tries to explain it as best she can.

Ali just listens intently, not wanting to interject until Ashlyn gets it all out.

“Being a Captain means I have a lot more leeway in what I chose to undertake now. The thing is that I don’t have it in me to send someone else into the line of fire while I sit behind a desk. I know I have every reason in the world to not put myself in harm’s way so I that I don’t burden you, but I just can’t sit back and let someone else do things that I am perfectly capable of just because it’s dangerous. I know that’s selfish of me in terms of our relationship, but doing things to the best of my ability is an innate thing that I can’t just get rid of. I don’t ever want to make you worry or hurt you, Alex… but I also don’t want to stop doing what is right because it’s risky. I don’t know how to reconcile those two things. Am I making any sense? I know I’m rambling.”

Ali takes a second to compose her thoughts so she can articulate them properly. She watches Ashlyn look down and start to nervously fiddle with the tie on her board shorts as the few silent moments pass.
“Look at me, Ash.” Ali says cupping Ashlyn’s face with her hand and meeting hazel eyes filled with concern. “When I say that I love you, it means that I love all of you. That includes the part of you that willingly puts yourself in danger to protect others. I truly mean that. I’m so proud of you. What you do is important and pure and brave. I would never in a million years ask you to change anything about it.” She says earnestly.

“Thank you.” Ashlyn says in quiet relief.

“I’m not done.” Ali says quickly.

“Ok.” Ashlyn waits for the rest.

“I can’t promise you that I’m not going to worry. Doesn’t matter where you are or what you’re doing...I’m always going to worry when we’re not together. I always want you happy, healthy and safe. That’s a part of loving you that I can’t and won’t change. One that I’m very sure you understand yourself.” Ali says and watches Ashlyn nod.

“That being said. I am never going to tell you or ask you to be safe or to be careful. I know you can’t promise me those things and I won’t ask it of you. Instead, I’m going to tell you that I love you and I’m going to say one simple thing that I want you to remember as you go to work every day.” Ali pauses to make sure Ashlyn is following. The officer nods so she continues. “Gehirn im Kopf.” Ali says and then repeats it one more time slowly.

“What does that mean?” Ashlyn asks a bit lost.

“It’s a German phrase my host family used when I studied abroad there. Translated it means ‘brain in your head’. The point of it is to remind you to use your mind and your good sense.” Ali explains. “That is the only thing I ask of you, Ash. I don’t want you going out there and using your heart to act because you’re worried about how I’m feeling. That’s just a sure way for you to be distracted and likely get hurt. I want you to use your brain and your instincts in any situation you find yourself in. You’re so smart and skilled, baby...I know that if you just do that, think with your brain and not your heart, you’ll come home safe to me every night.” Ali finishes. “Can you do that?”

“Yes, Alex. I promise you I can do that.” Ashlyn assures her. “You’re so perfect, you know that?”

“So you keep telling me.” Ali smiles and leans in for a lingering kiss that they both melt into for a minute.

“Well I really mean it.” Ashlyn says whole heartedly.

“As misguided as you are... I know you do, honey.” Ali says with a wink and softly kisses the officer again. “Feel better?”

“Yeah I do.” Ashlyn replies with a smile. “Maybe we should talk about what’s clearly on your mind?”

“What do you mean?” Ali asks with a furrowed brow.

“Well the statement about not being able to spend every minute together stands for itself. But I also didn’t miss what you just said about me coming home safe to you every night. I think it’s safe to say that you have a vision, so let’s talk about it.” Ashlyn suggests with a knowing smile.

“You don’t miss much, do you?” Ali teases.

“You’re not the only perceptive one Ms. Lawyer.” Ashlyn plays back. “So, talk to me.”
“Ok, well… I feel like I’m being crazy and it’s too soon…” Ali starts shyly.

“Alex, it’s ok. We’re both feeling it. Just say it.” Ashlyn encourages her.

Ali takes a quick deep breath before it all comes tumbling out of her mouth. “Ash, I don’t want to be apart from you. We’ve been apart long enough. I want you to come home to me so we can eat dinner together and cuddle up on the couch to watch TV. I want to kiss you goodnight and hold you close in my sleep. I want to wake up to your face every morning and wait impatiently for you to brush your damn teeth before I get my proper good morning kiss. I want to fix your collar, hand you your lunch, remind you to use your brain and kiss you hard before I tap you on the ass and send you on your way to work. I just… I don’t want to waste another second with you. Wherever you are is where I feel at home and I want that feeling all the time.” Ali says bluntly, a blush invading her cheeks at the intense admission.

“Ok.” Ashlyn says with a dimpled grin.

“Ok?” Ali tries to understand the simplicity of the answer.

“Ok, we’ll find a way to not be apart. Yes to all of it.” Ashlyn clarifies with ease. “Do you have any ideas you’ve come up with or can I make a suggestion?”

“I hadn’t gotten that far.” Ali says with a small smile, her nervousness fading. “Suggest away.”

“Well, I work day shifts Monday through Thursday and the easiest is to be closer to work on those days and not have to commute. So, my suggestion is that we stay at my place Sunday through Wednesday nights. And then your place Thursday through Saturday nights. And then we can always reevaluate and we don’t always have to stick to that rigidly of course.” Ashlyn puts forth her idea.

“I love it.” Ali says happily. “So, we’re really doing this?”

“We sure are.” Ashlyn leans in for a romantic kiss. “It’ll probably take a week or so to get ourselves setup at each other’s places so we can easily move back and forth, but we’ll figure it out.”

“We’re officially those U-Haul lesbians now, aren’t we?” Ali remarks with a joking cringe.

“You know it!” Ashlyn guffaws loudly and fist bumps Ali. “Sooo… are you really going to tap my ass every morning?”

“Count on it, Harris.” Ali winks and crashes their lips together, the needy passion stirring inside her again as her mind wanders to the plush royal blue carpeting in the lower cabin.

As quickly as Ali’s lips consume hers, they’re gone again and Ashlyn opens her eyes to see the brunette standing up and headed off towards the back of the boat. “Come on, baby. Follow.” Ali calls back to with a smoldering look.

Ashlyn gets up and watches as Ali disappears from view along the side walkway of the boat. “I’d follow you anywhere, beautiful. Absolutely anywhere.” She whispers to herself and quickly moves to catch up.

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Determined to put their plan into action, they spend Saturday night at Ali’s house. Ashlyn fills up a dresser in the brunette’s bedroom with her clothes before they head out to shop for her necessary
toiletries to make sure she’s all set come the end of the upcoming week. Sunday is spent doing the same for Ali as they head back to Ashlyn’s house and settle the brunette into the oceanside residence.

By the time Sunday evening rolls around, they’re content to just plop down on the couch with some simple sandwiches and enjoy the last night of Ashlyn’s vacation cuddled up together. It’s back to reality in the morning and the two of them just want to relish in the peaceful feeling between them right now.

“What do you want to watch?” Ali asks as she turns on the TV.

“Can you turn on the news for just a bit so I can catch the weather and figure out what uniform I should wear tomorrow?” Ashlyn requests as she realizes she hasn’t paid much attention to anything outside of Ali the last few days. “If it’s going to be really hot, then I’ll want to go with the short-sleeve.” She adds. ‘We can do a Netflix movie after if you want.”

“Sounds great to me.” Ali says with a smile and turns to the local news before leaning into Ashlyn to get comfortable.

A few commercials air before the news comes back on.

It looks like we’ll have a string of less humid and more comfortable days ahead. Weather is coming up in just a few minutes and we’ll tell you just how long the relief will last. But first, breaking news in the entertainment world tonight that has the local area buzzing.

Breaking the story this afternoon, TMZ posted some very telling photos of Boston lawyer and well known podcaster, Ali Krieger, and her rumored girlfriend, police Captain Ashlyn Harris. After representing Harris and getting her acquitted of murder charges in the Liam Gorham murder case, Krieger recently released a season on her podcast that recounted the details of the case proceedings. The podcast has received much national attention and acclaim with many speculating that the relationship between the two women is more than just attorney and client. It appears, however, that the speculation is over tonight as the two were caught getting very cozy on a yacht in Rockport yesterday. Neither woman has commented on the release of the photos, but we’ll keep you updated on the story as it unfolds. And now, let’s go to Tom with the weather…

Ali and Ashlyn both watch in slight shock as a few photos of them cuddling and kissing on the yacht flash on the screen, and just like that the peace of the night is broken as they both groan “ugh, fuck” in unison.
Chapter Notes

Three updates in one week...now I'm just spoiling you all :) Might be a little bit before I can get the next one written, but I'll do my best to get it out ASAP.

Time to deal with the media circus! Rather than warn you about smut, this time I'm going to apologize for deciding not to delve into the details of it despite there being plenty of sexy-time in this chapter. The focus in this chapter is elsewhere, so hopefully you're still satisfied from the last couple of chapters on that front. As always, thanks for reading and don't forget to comment and leave me your thoughts!

Ali and Ashlyn both watch in slight shock as a few photos of them cuddling and kissing on the yacht flash on the screen, and just like that the peace of the night is broken as they both groan “ugh, fuck” in unison...

“Oh god, Ash. I’m so sorry.” Ali finally speaks up anxiously after the two sat in silence for a couple minutes letting the news story and pictures wash over them.

“What, why are you apologizing? Relax, baby.” Ashlyn immediately soothes her. “You didn’t do anything wrong. Last time I checked, you weren’t the one snapping photos of our private time and putting them on the internet. Unless I missed something. You did take a random bathroom break at one point.” She winks and tries to joke to calm Ali down.

Ali smiles a bit but then groans. “I mean I expected to get some attention, but fucking TMZ?! What the hell?! It must be a slow news week.”

“Seriously. When did we become Kim and Lamar?” Ashlyn piles onto Ali’s sentiments.

“It’s either Chloe and Lamar or Kim and Kanye, baby. Get it right.” Ali laughs at her girlfriend’s lack of pop culture knowledge. “Can’t even play the ‘I’ve been in prison’ card on that one, Harris.”

“Harsh, Krieger.” Ashlyn sticks her tongue out pretending to be offended. “Shall we assess the damage?” She asks, holding up her phone.

“Might as well.” Ali replies as they start browsing the internet for gossip about them.

They find several stories that pretty much report the same details about the case and that the two of them were rumored to be together until the new photos cleared up the speculation. The few photos they saw on the TV newscast aren’t the only ones. There are a couple others that are slightly racier where they are kissing more deeply and their hands are clearly wandering.

“Could’ve been worse. They could’ve gotten photos of what we were doing on the top deck before we got to our destination.” Ashlyn tries to look at the bright side, despite being annoyed that their private moment was just put out for the world to see.
“Amen to that.” Ali agrees. “So, what should we do? We know they’re just going to hound us now.”

“I’m inclined to give them nothing until they just give up.” Ashlyn says feeling defiant. “I mean, maybe confirm that we’re together so it’s not some intriguing mystery, but nothing else.”

“I’m on-board with that approach. It’s worth a shot to see if they’ll just get bored with us.” Ali says as she considers the game plan.

“Won’t be the first time we’ll have media in our faces.” Ashlyn adds. “It’s going to suck to deal with it again, but hopefully it’ll just blow over.”

“Hopefully.” Ali nods. “Alright, out of sight, out of mind for now. Movie and bed?”

“Yes, please.” Ashlyn smiles and pulls Ali into her side. “You pick this time.”

“Cinderella it is!” Ali exclaims.

Ashlyn scowls playfully. “Remind me again why I let you pick?”

“Because I picked a movie that is only about an hour long…which means we can get to bed faster.” Ali raises her eyebrows and runs her hand up Ashlyn’s thigh a bit.

“Right. Bring on Cinderella!” Ashlyn says with an exaggerated grin before swallowing hard because Ali’s hand is still slowly making its way higher up her thigh.

Between the movie, which they barely watch, and the completely spent, entangled and naked heap they end up in afterwards, their tabloid troubles are put on the backburner as they drift off to sleep.

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When her phone alarm blares at 6am, Ashlyn quickly rolls over to silence it and hears Ali mumble a few unintelligible words before the brunette snuggles up against her more closely. She plants a few light kisses on Ali’s forehead and lets herself enjoy the feel of the brunette’s warm skin for a few more minutes before making herself get up so she can get ready for work. When she walks out of the bathroom dressed and ready to go thirty minutes later, she’s surprised to see that Ali isn’t in bed.

“Hey you, what are you doing up?” Ashlyn says as she walks into the kitchen to find Ali at the stove and a mug of coffee waiting for her on the kitchen counter.

“Good morning, baby!” Ali says cheerily over her shoulder, too busy to turn around at the moment. “Just wanted to cook you breakfast. Be done in one sec.” She says as she quickly puts some scrambled eggs on a plate beside her that already has toast on it. “Ok, here you go…oh, damn…” She turns around to hand Ashlyn the plate, but finds herself immediately stammered by the officer’s appearance.

Ashlyn is dressed in a short-sleeve cadet-blue police uniform shirt that hugs her biceps enough to accentuate her arm muscles; it’s paired with fitted navy blue pants to match. Her hair is perfectly combed into its usual side-parted pompadour and her hat is tucked under her arm. “Fuck, you look hot. Forgot to account for the whole uniform thing this morning.” Ali says as she bites her lip.

Ashlyn laughs a bit and walks over to kiss Ali deeply. “You’re sweet.” She pecks her lips. “And beautiful.” Another peck. “And I love you.” She kisses her deeply again. “Thank you for breakfast, it looks amazing.”
“Mmmmhmmm.” Ali replies in a hum, her eyes still closed as Ashlyn pulls away and takes her breakfast plate. “Made you a sandwich for lunch and packed you some snacks too.” Ali says once she finally gets herself under control and holds up the paper bag next to her.

“You’re the best, Alex.” Ashlyn smiles widely at this domestic version of Ali that is dressed in just one of her old Army t-shirts again with messy hair and looking sleepy, but mascara still perfect as usual. Ashlyn couldn’t be more enamored if she tried.

They enjoy breakfast and coffee together, making small talk for few minutes before Ashlyn has to go. Ali watches the officer walk over to a small wall safe near the kitchen entrance and open it to grab her gun, placing the weapon carefully in the holster she’s wearing. She takes another moment to shamelessly ogle her girlfriend and wonders whether she’ll ever get used to the way Ashlyn looks in uniform before she finally makes her way over the back door where Ashlyn is putting her lunch bag into her work backpack.

“I’m really going to miss you today.” Ashlyn says ruefully as she runs her hands up Ali’s arms.

“I’m going to miss you too. I’ll be right here waiting for you when you get home though.” Ali replies with a sweet smile. “I’m going to spend some time with Kyle this afternoon, but call or text me if you get a break.” She adds.

“Will do.” Ashlyn promises and pulls Ali in for a kiss, feeling the brunette’s hands grip her collar as it starts to get heated.

“You better go before I don’t let you leave.” Ali mumbles against the officer’s lips as they take a second to breathe. “Gehirn im Kopf, Captain” Ali reminds her.

“Yes ma’am, brain is in there and ready for duty. Promise.” Ashlyn smiles and points to her head.

“That’s my girl.” Ali replies and pulls the officer down by her collar for another hot kiss, forcing herself to eventually pull away before Ashlyn can grip her hips any tighter. “Love you. Go, Harris.” She commands as she spins Ashlyn around, taps her on the ass, and pushes her out the door.

“Love to you too, Alex.” Ashlyn calls back with a love-struck smile as she heads to her Jeep.

Despite the perfect start to the morning, the day is anything but as the two of them very quickly get reminded of their new found popularity. Ashlyn has at least fifteen microphones shoved in her face as she makes the short walk from her car to the police department entrance. Ali fares no better when she goes to her house to meet Kyle and finds a hoard of paparazzi camped out on the front sidewalk.

“Yes we’re together. No I’m not talking about it.” Ashlyn says more times than she can count by the time she heads home from a long day at work where she dealt with all the crap that piled up during her vacation on top of all the paparazzi following her all day.

Ali goes for a slightly more professional approach to deflect, opting for “Ashlyn is my girlfriend. It’s a recent development and we’re not going to comment any further on it, so please respect our privacy.” Unfortunately, it doesn’t do much good as she and Kyle end up abandoning their plans to shop after their lunch gets completely derailed by reporters taking up every table around them and asking questions.

By the time they meet back at Ashlyn’s house for the evening, they’re both tired and frustrated; even
more so after having had to battle their way into the driveway with all the damn media people blocking it.

“They’re fucking relentless! Take a fucking hint!” Ashlyn shouts angrily after getting in the door and dropping her stuff.

“I know! It’s ridiculous! What a fucking day.” Ali commiserates as she makes her way over to Ashlyn and pulls her into her arms. “Hi, baby. I’m happy you’re home. Really missed you today.” She says sweetly, moving to run her hand through the bristly hair on the back of the officer’s neck.

“Oh, beautiful.” Ashlyn replies with a smile, her voice softening and her mood lifting immediately. “Sorry it was such a crappy day for you too.” She leans in to kiss Ali, her hand going to frame the brunette’s face as it starts to immediately deepen.

“Doesn’t even matter right now.” Ali mutters as she takes the officer’s lower lip between her own and then lets her tongue find its way to Ashlyn’s.

Ashlyn moans into the contact as she feels Ali’s hands drop down to squeeze her waist, the movement near her gun prompting her to pull back. “Easy eager beaver. Let me put the gun away before one of us loses a foot.” Ashlyn snickers and pecks a pouty Ali on the lips one more time before taking her gun out of the holster and going to lock it in the wall safe. “Just let me get comfortable and we’ll pick up right where we left off.” She winks at the brunette and heads to the bedroom.

“Oh you’ll get comfortable alright.” Ali whispers to herself and follows in Ashlyn’s wake, coming right up to officer in the bedroom and wrapping her arms around her from behind before starting to undo the buttons on her uniform shirt.

“Didn’t think I could handle it myself?” Ashlyn asks playfully as she watches Ali get to the last button, untucking her shirt.

“Just helping you get comfortable. Very. Very. Comfortable.” Ali says hotly against Ashlyn’s neck, her hands slipping under the officer’s white undershirt and splaying across her taut abs.

Ashlyn smiles and turns around in Ali’s arms, any and all leftover stress from the day completely gone now as she meets darkened whiskey eyes. “Well, you know where I’m most comfortable?” She asks huskily, leaning down to start nipping at Ali’s ear and neck.

“Where’s that?” Ali answers, her breathing picking up as she feels Ashlyn work her neck.

“With you underneath me.” Ashlyn pauses to suck Ali’s pulse point, eliciting a soft moan from the brunette. “And here. Right…here.” She adds, cupping Ali’s center lightly through her shorts.

“Fuck.” Ali whimpers out, her body more than ready to go. “Ash?”

“Mmmmm?” Ashlyn replies as her lips ghost over Ali’s.

“I’m want to get comfortable. Now.” Ali demands and crashes their lips together, hearing Ashlyn whisper “Yes ma’am” when they eventually break briefly to breathe.

The next hour is a mess of flying clothes, tangled sheets, writhing bodies and pleasure-filled moans as everything in the world completely disappears but the two of them. Dinner winds up being a couple of hastily thrown together bowls of cereal that they quickly consume on the couch before finding themselves getting comfortable all over again right there on the living room floor. After a long relaxing shower where an unanticipated and really slow, sensual round three happens, the two
of them fall into bed together completely exhausted and still slightly damp; the crappy day not even talked about, long forgotten, and completely turned around. It’s not at all what either of them had planned or envisioned for their first post-work evening together, but it’s exactly what both of them needed.

Unfortunately, the bubble they so easily disappeared into together at home quickly bursts when they’re forced to face the music again the next day, with paparazzi ready to greet them the second they leave the house. They each work hard to not let it bother them and focus on each other and their happiness together, but for two people who are used to their privacy the frustration builds fast and boils over in no time.

Surprisingly, Ali is the first to lose her cool when she’s out with Kyle on Wednesday morning trying to shop for a few new outfits for the Georgia trip. Although they get left alone while they go into the actual stores, a handful of aggressive paparazzi follow them through the mall asking questions continuously while Ali and Kyle try to get from store to store.

**Ali, when did you and Ashlyn officially become a couple?**

**Have the two of you moved in together?**

**Were you and Ashlyn a couple during the trial?**

**Why did Ashlyn quit her job in Boston?**

**Ali, when was your first date?**

**Are you guys planning to get married?**

**Tell us about the first kiss.**

**Ali, did Ashlyn cut her hair to be more masculine for you in the bedroom?**

Although the questions have gotten increasingly probing and Ali has done her best to just ignore them, that last one is below the belt and has her seeing red as she stops in her tracks and turns around to find the woman who asked it.

“Oh, shit. Here we go.” Kyle whispers to himself, seeing the seething look on his sister’s face as she comes to a standstill in front of a young and good-looking blonde woman who looks a bit like Reese Witherspoon. He’s torn between making a scene by pulling Ali away or letting her vent her frustration. He opts for the later and gets ready to back her up, knowing it’s probably going to be a shit-show either way.

Ali plasters a polite smile on her face and comes right up to the woman who asked the question. “Hi, Ali Krieger.” She holds out her hand and introduces herself to the surprised reporter who shakes it hesitantly.

“Oh, shit. Here we go.” Kyle whispers to himself, seeing the seething look on his sister’s face as she comes to a standstill in front of a young and good-looking blonde woman who looks a bit like Reese Witherspoon. He’s torn between making a scene by pulling Ali away or letting her vent her frustration. He opts for the later and gets ready to back her up, knowing it’s probably going to be a shit-show either way.

Ali plasters a polite smile on her face and comes right up to the woman who asked the question. “Hi, Ali Krieger.” She holds out her hand and introduces herself to the surprised reporter who shakes it hesitantly.

“Um, Sara Kendry.” The blonde answers with a confused expression.


“Uh, yeah ok. Deal!” The blonde says getting excited that Ali Krieger is finally talking and it’s to her. She can sense the pay raise already.
“Do you wear lingerie, Sara?” Ali starts with a sweet smile on her face and watches the blonde’s mouth drop open a bit. “Do you watch porn, what kind? How often do you masturbate? Ever had anal sex?” She rattles off the questions without pausing to hear an answer, watching Sara’s face get more and more shocked.

“Oh damn…” Kyle snickers to himself behind her trying not to laugh.

After a few silent moments, Ali prompts the woman. “So, are you going to answer those or are we done here, Sara?”

The woman looks back at her completely baffled as the rest of the paparazzi look on with recorders and cameras catching it all. Sara swallows hard and debates whether it’s worth it to answer the vulgar questions in hopes that Ali holds up her end of the bargain. “Those questions are kinda…” she starts before Ali cuts her off.


“So sorry…” Sara tries again but Ali keeps going.

“Keep your nose out of my business before I break it.” Ali threatens in a steeled anger that shocks the reporters in front of her. “That goes for all of you. Stop following me.” She finishes and walks away pulling Kyle with her.

“Ohhh yaaas Queen!” Kyle shouts and high-fives her when they finally get out of earshot and he looks back to see that none of the paparazzi has followed them. “What the hell was that?” He asks playfully, amused at Ali losing her cool since he can count on one hand the number of times he’s seen that happen.

“Ugh, I’m just so done with it already!” Ali sighs in annoyance. “Ash and I have been through fucking hell and I just want to finally enjoy my time with her in peace. I’m happy, really damn happy, and I don’t want anything to be in the way of that. Is that too much to ask?” She huffs.

“Not at all.” Kyle says pulling her into a tight hug. “It’ll be alright, Alex. You and Harris just keep doing your thing and it’ll all fall into place, ok? They’ll leave you guys alone eventually. Just focus on Harris and let yourself be happy.” He calms her. “And keep doing what you did back there, cause that shit was fucking hilarious!” He adds and earns himself a light smack to the back of the head.

“Thanks, ass.” Ali rolls her eyes. “Really though, thanks for being here and having my back, Ky.” She says sincerely, knowing she’s been venting a lot to him over the last couple days and that he’s been dealing with the media mob as much as she has.

“Wouldn’t be anywhere else, princess.” Kyle replies with a smile and takes her hand as they move along. “And speaking of being there… can I be there when Harris is watching the repeat of that on the six o’clock news tonight? Cause I really REALLY want to be there for that!” He laughs.

“Ugh, she’s not going to be happy about it. We agreed to not to give into the hoopla.” Ali frowns. “But yeah, might as well make it a good showing… I’ll order pizza and we can all make a night of it.” She shrugs.

“Oh please, Harris is so going to appreciate the hell out of that. Trust me.” Kyle assures her.

“I hope so.” Ali mumbles and heads into the next store to try and forget about it before she has to go home and deal with her outburst.
Although Ashlyn finds it a bit odd when she comes home from work to find both Ali and Kyle waiting for her at her house with a couple of pizzas, she doesn’t question it too much and figures they just got back from shopping.

“Hey lovely.” Ali greets Ashlyn with a soft kiss and a huge smile. “Go get comfy so we can have dinner together. Kyle and I got pizza.”

“Mmm, hi beautiful.” Ashlyn leans in for one more kiss, ignoring Kyle’s dramatic kissy noises from the living room. “Hi to you too, drama queen!” She yells over to Kyle and gets a wave. “Be right back.” She says and heads to get changed into normal clothes.

“We’re watching the news?” Ashlyn asks in surprise when she sees what’s on the TV as she sits on the couch next to Ali who hands her a plate with a slice of pizza on it.

“We are indeed.” Kyle says with a knowing smile.

“I don’t even want to know.” Ashlyn says after seeing the look exchanged between the two siblings.

“Yeah probably not. But keep watching anyway.” Ali says nervously, chewing her pizza slowly as the end of the newscast inevitably approaches.

*In entertainment news tonight, new developments in the Ali Krieger and Ashlyn Harris saga as Krieger broke her silence today by dismantling a reporter from Us Weekly who was following her at the mall. Unfortunately, all we learned was that she’s as ruthless out of the courtroom as she is in it. Have a look for yourself as we bring you the video posted today by US Weekly. Please be warned that the video contains graphic language not suitable for young children.*

Ali watches Ashlyn carefully as the officer watches the screen with wide eyes and a neutral look on her face. The video ends and Ashlyn stays looking at the screen as the story wraps up.

*Whew, Barbara, that was harsh. I can’t blame her though. I’m behind you Ali!*

*Agreed, Tom. Krieger can certainly handle herself. Tabloids beware! Well that’s it for us tonight, we’ll be back with you tomorrow evening and you can catch our nightly newscast with Lester Hall at 10 o’clock. 60minutes is next, have a good night.*

Ali grows more and more anxious as seconds tick by without Ashlyn saying anything. She shoots Kyle a nervous look and he returns it with a shrug when they hear Ashlyn erupt into a fit of laughter.

“Oh my god, Alex that was fucking amazing! You’re such a beast, baby!” She says through loud guffaws as Ali and Kyle start to laugh too, mostly out of relief.

“You’re not mad?” Ali questions quietly after they all finally settle down.

“Oh, uh, sorry dude.” Ashlyn says apologetically as they pull apart and Ali blushes a bit.
“Uhhh, I will never be able to unhear that moan!” He whines dramatically and covers his ears.

“Oh shut it!” Ali throws a couch pillow at him. “Like I haven’t heard plenty of unspeakable noises coming out of your bedroom!”

“Touche!” Kyle replies in amusement. “Well, I think that’s my cue to head out and let you ladies enjoy your night.”

“You can totally stay in the guest room if you want.” Ashlyn offers, knowing he has an almost hour long drive home.

“Nah, I have an early client. Plus I think I’ve heard enough moaning for one night.” He goads them one more time and watches Ashlyn shake her head as Ali shoots him a glare.

“Alright, well, offer always stands. Stay anytime you want.” Ashlyn tells him as they all get up to clear the dishes.

“Thanks, Harris.” Kyle replies with a genuine smile and gives her a fist bump before pulling Ali into a hug and heading out the door with a loud “Don’t break that beautiful Pottery Barn bed frame I once helped her pick out! They don’t make them anymore!”

“Sure you’re ok?” Ali asks as she leans into Ashlyn who rests against the counter and wraps Ali up in her arms.

“More than. Promise.” Ashlyn reassures her. “You’re amazing and I love you more than anything in the world. Thanks for standing up for us like that.”

“I love you too, Ash. You’re worth standing up to every asshole in the world for and a whole lot more.” Ali replies honestly and leans in for a soft kiss that makes her heart race at the feel of Ashlyn’s lips.

“So, what do you want to do tonight?” Ashlyn asks as she runs her hand through Ali’s hair.

“Well, I was going to say cuddle up on the couch with a couple glasses of wine. But… now I’m thinking that I want to try and break that bed frame.” Ali declares with a sly smile.

“Let’s do it.” Ashlyn replies with a devilish grin of her own before taking off towards the bedroom and yelling “Last one there has to load the dishwasher!”

“Cheater!” Ali calls out and tries to catch up.

“I learned from the best!” Ashlyn shouts playfully before she’s tackled onto the bed by Ali who has her pinned down and writhing in pleasure in no time. The bed frame creaks for at least a solid hour and then again an hour after that, but it holds up just fine after all.

It’s the poor mahogany wood of Ali’s bedframe that is tested the following night as the two of them find themselves in yet another fit of passion trying to forget the day after Ashlyn loses her stack that Thursday afternoon when a paparazzo pursuing her clips the side of her cruiser while she’s out training one of her newer officers.

She gets out of the cruiser in a complete rage and practically yanks the guy out of his vehicle before
the rookie cop pulls her back and calms her down. Once she regains even a modicum of control she cites the guy for reckless driving, failure to use a turn signal, following too closely to an emergency vehicle, and having a tail light out… finally handing him an excessive ticket for $3000. It turns into yet another evening news feature where it’s falsely reported that she’s working through anger issues stemming from prison confinement. It’s definitely a far cry from where they started the week with a plan to try and diffuse the situation by giving the media nothing to work with. Now they find themselves attracting even more attention and racking up the tabloid headlines without meaning to.

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“Chief, I just want to say that I’m very sorry and I know that it was unprofessional of me. I completely understand if your hands are tied and I won’t fight whatever you have to do.” Ashlyn says steadily, despite her anxiety, as she stands in the Police Chief’s office Friday morning even though it’s her day off and she had to make the longer drive from Ali’s house where she stayed last night. She knows she has to face the consequences of her actions from the prior day and steels herself for his disappointment in her.

“Relax, Harris. Have a seat.” The Chief motions to the chair in front of his desk and watches Ashlyn settle into it. “I don’t take kindly to destruction of police property and the pursuit of one of my officers. In my eyes, you’re well within the law and power afforded to you. Besides you’ve earned enough respect and goodwill in this town that none of us give a shit. If it was me, I would’ve popped the son of a bitch.” He says as he leans back in his chair with a smile and watches the Captain’s shoulders relax.

“Thank you, Chief. That means a lot to me. I promise to handle it better next time.” Ashlyn assures him feeling more relieved.

“Anyway, I more just called you in here to make sure you were doing ok and to offer you and Ali any support that I can.” The Chief says kindly. “You’re an excellent officer, Captain, and you’re navigating this bullshit more gracefully than any of the rest of us would. Just remember that you have us behind you and you can ask for help when you need it. We’ll do whatever we can to help you.”

“I’m not sure what to say… just, thank you. Thank you so much.” Ashlyn gets out a bit choked up at the support.

“Anytime. Actually, I already have something in mind. I just happened to come across an old town ordinance yesterday that requires police approval for any gathering of more than 6 people on a public sidewalk.” The Chief tells her with a wry smile. “Pretty sure I counted at least 20 of those fuckers outside your house this morning on my way in. And I have no intention of approving any such gathering in your neighborhood for the foreseeable future. So, think I’m going to head over there now and break a few hearts and maybe some cameras too. After that, I’m going to call up Chief Joe Pisqua in Newton and see if he can help me out with Ali’s place.” He finishes with a menacing grin. “Have a nice couple days off, Harris. I’ll see you Sunday night.”

“Aye, Chief. Seriously, thank you.” Ashlyn says with her own huge grin as she salutes him respectfully and makes her way out.

With the weight off of her shoulders, she stops to pick up a surprise bouquet of flowers for Ali as she makes the drive back to Newton where she’ll spend the next couple nights like they originally planned. Kyle is supposed to come over and join them for dinner, so she also stops for some steaks and vegetables to grill for them.

By the time Ashlyn gets to Ali’s house she immediately notices the complete lack of media presence.
and knows the Chief has managed to come through. “Fuck yes! I owe that guy a huge bottle of expensive whiskey and a box of cigars.” She says to herself as she fist pumps in the car and turns into the driveway more than ready for a couple of relaxing days off with Ali.

After filling Kyle in on what happened with the Chief, Ali now hearing the story twice but still beaming about it anyway, Ashlyn decides it’s time to drop the conversation about the nutty week and move onto something else.

“So, dude. How’s the salon event for next week coming along?” Ashlyn asks Kyle since she’s only heard a few bits and pieces from Ali.

“Oh. So-so. I’m starting to wonder if it’s going to be worth the effort.” Kyle answers noncommittally.

“Really? Why?” Ashlyn asks a bit surprised by the response, not missing the encouraging look that Ali is trying to give Kyle.

“Well, the whole point of it is to try and widen my client base. So, I thought having an event like this at the salon, almost like an open wine and cheese night where I did some haircuts and chatted people up, might do the trick if I advertised it well enough. The problem is that my social circle is sort of static even though I have a lot going on with my Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube accounts. You know?” Kyle tries to explain.

“Uh, no, not really. Sorry, I’m not sure I understand the problem.” Ashlyn replies a bit lost.

“Well, the people that already follow me online already pretty much make up my client base. So, I won’t really be gaining anything given that they’re the only ones coming to this event. I might be adding a random person or two, but it doesn’t seem worth it to throw this whole shindig and spend the money to pretty much just hang out with my friends and maybe add a person here and there. I haven’t been able to reach far enough out of my social network for this to be effective.” Kyle elaborates dejectedly.

“Ah, ok. Now I get it. I’m really sorry, Kyle. That sucks. Can we help at all?” Ashlyn nods in understanding and reaches to squeeze his forearm gently, feeling Ali squeeze her hand under the table sweetly.

“Nah, you guys have already done enough to help me with the logistics and set-up stuff. I’ll figure it out or maybe just cancel it.” Kyle says gratefully.

“You’ve done haircuts for some locally well-known celebrities and athletes though, right?” Ashlyn questions, not willing to give up on it yet.

Ali smiles and reaches over to lightly stroke the back of Ashlyn’s neck, touched that the officer is obviously trying hard to help Kyle out.


“Maybe you could get one of them to come as a guest to get a haircut from you. Might get some public interest and draw some wider audience.” Ashlyn suggests.

“Hmm, not a bad idea.” Kyle considers it.

“Might work.” Ali chimes in. “I think the biggest hurdle with that plan is that you’ve already posted YouTube videos doing haircuts and interviewing those people, so it might not be all that unique… but you could always ask different questions.” Ali says and looks at Ashlyn to see if she’s following along. The last time they talked about this, Ashlyn didn’t even know what Instagram was.
Ashlyn sees the surveying look from Ali and smiles. “I’ve actually watched his videos and looked at his social media stuff after you mentioned his online following.” Ashlyn admits. “I was actually thinking about starting an Instagram or Twitter account of my own before this madness around us blew up.” She says proudly and laughs when Ali gives her an exaggerated look of shock.

“Awww, yay! You watched my videos!” Kyle exclaims happily before turning back to the matter at hand. “Anyway, I suppose I could put some feelers out to see who I could get. It’s pretty short notice though seeing as how it’s mid next week.”

“You should get Donnie Wahlberg!” Ashlyn says jokingly, thinking about one of the biggest Boston celebrities. “If he brings his wife Jenny McCarthy with him, her boobs alone would create enough media buzz to bring you some attention!” She hears Ali and Kyle laugh, but the second it’s out of her mouth a flashbulb goes off in her brain. She feels Ali’s hand still running through the hair on the back of her neck and that’s all she needs to put it all together. “Kyle, I think I need a haircut.” Ashlyn says evenly.

“Oooh! I completely forgot that I can cut your hair now!” Kyle wrings his hands eagerly before he walks behind the officer’s chair and starts messing with her hair. “This will be so much fun! Just let me go grab my stuff from the car.”

“No, hold up.” Ashlyn stops him before he can make his way out of the dining room. “I was actually thinking I’d stop into the salon on Wednesday.” She says with a scheming smile that Ali picks up immediately.

“Completely brilliant, baby.” Ali gives Ashlyn a nose-crinkling grin as she catches on immediately. “Oh ok. Well, that might not work because the event is on Wednesday, remember?” Kyle replies completely missing the exchange between the two women due to his excitement about cutting Ashlyn’s hair.

“Exactly, Kyle. I’d be coming in on Wednesday… the night of the event.” Ashlyn gives him a purposeful look and watches Ali do the same.

“Wait, so, you’d get your hair done at the…oh OH!!!” He yells out as he finally gets. “Oh, wow… yeah that’ll work! Geez! Are you sure?”

Ashlyn looks at Ali and gets an approving nod. “Completely sure. The media wants an interview…. I’ll give them one. Provided by none other than Master Stylist Kyle Krieger while he makes me look all sexy.” Ashlyn says confidently.

“You two are seriously the best… my fucking queens!” Kyle squeals and squeezes them both tightly before pulling out his phone to start a to-do list. “This is going to be so fun… and completely insane.”

Ali takes advantage of Kyle not paying attention to lean in close to Ashlyn. “It’s a real turn on when you take care of my brother like that.” She whispers into the officer’s ear.

“Yeah?” Ashlyn asks with a smile.

“Uh huh.” Ali replies as she leaves a trail of soft kisses from Ashlyn’s ear and down her jaw before arriving at her mouth and kissing her passionately. The get lost in it for a minute until they finally hear Kyle clear his throat twice and reluctantly pull apart.

“Ahem. Yeah… still here.” Kyle glares at them playfully. “Anyway… you two are getting all kissy face and starting to look at each other like that again. So, I’m going to head home and let you
“Sorry, sorry… you can stay. We’ll stop.” Ali promises.

“Nope. I should go anyway. I have like a million things to do now before Wednesday and interview questions to come up with!” He rubs his hands together deviously.

“You’re not going to make me regret this, are you?” Ashlyn appeals to him.

“Maybe.” He teases and earns a smack on the arm from Ali. “I’m kidding! Well… unless I find out you two did anything dirty in my bedroom here. Cause then you’re going down, Harris.” He warns mockingly.

“Yeah so, going into my brother’s room to have sex is just about least sexy thing I can think of.” Ali remarks with a cringe.

“I second that!” Ashlyn raises her hand.

“Hmmm, I should probably be offended by that statement because my room is pretty damn inviting if I do say so myself… but, I’m too happy that you two won’t be dirtying my sheets to care. And on that note, goodnight my darling fairies!” Kyle says in a high pitched voice as he blows them kisses and starts to put his jacket on.

“I am so not a fairy.” Ashlyn grumbles while Ali gets up to give Kyle a hug.

“Fine… Goodnight then my butch badass knight in shining armor.” Kyle addresses Ashlyn as he mockingly fans himself.

“Better.” Ashlyn says with a satisfied nod and also gives Kyle a hug. “Night, bro.”

“Thanks for always having my ass. Hers too.” Kyle says quietly in her ear.

“Always.” Ashlyn whispers back. “What can I say, you Kriegers have nice asses. Can’t stay away.”

“Night, Harris.” Kyle shakes his head before heading out the front door. “Don’t go so hard that you break each other! My success depends on you two!” He hollers back from the driveway as they stand in the doorway.

“Just can’t leave it at goodnight, can he?” Ashlyn laughs.

“Never.” Ali giggles as she watches Kyle drive away.

Ashlyn barely gets the door closed before Ali has her pinned against it and locked in a kiss that is so desperate and searing that the officer is sure she might orgasm before Ali even has the chance to really touch her. Without breaking contact, they move blindly through the house with no clear destination. Hands wander all over each other and clothing gets discarded with reckless abandon as they bump into various pieces of furniture along the way. When Ashlyn feels cool granite against her back, she flips their position and lifts Ali onto it, passionately taking the brunette right there on the kitchen counter.

For the first time this week it feels like they’re celebrating instead of getting lost in each other to block out the world. And while they certainly don’t break each other as they sanctify a fair bit of Ali’s first floor, the collateral damage does include a couple broken coffee mugs, a shattered dessert plate and a wall painting that Ashlyn will need to re-hang in the morning.
Chapter Notes

Some important family moments in this one and, of course, the interview you've all been waiting for (obviously, adapted from the real world version). We're off to Georgia in the next chapter to meet some more brothers ;)

As usual, I love to hear what you think!

“You’re sure it’s not intruding for me to just show up at dinner uninvited?” Ali asks for the third time in an hour. Chris and his family had just gotten back from vacation this morning and had made plans for Ashlyn to come over for dinner before they even left. Ashlyn immediately asked Ali to come along, which she agreed to at the officer’s insistence even though she knew the Harris’ had no idea she was coming. She didn’t want to be away from Ashlyn for even a minute these days, but she also didn’t want to interfere with her family time.

“Alex, seriously, they’re going to be thrilled to see you and completely shocked at everything that happened over the last week. They don’t even know we’re together yet. It’ll be a fun way to tell them.” Ashlyn tries to reassure her.

“I really can just hang out with Kyle for the night. Ever since the brilliant plan you hatched last night, he’s been texting me all day with new ideas for Wednesday. I’m sure he’d love to have me help if you want some time with your family.” Ali attempts to give Ashlyn another chance to have private time if she wants it.

“Alex?” Ashlyn says with a small smile.

“Yeah?” Ali replies.

“Shut up.” Ashlyn kisses her sweetly. “You’re coming with me to dinner.”

“Ok, baby.” Ali smiles and leaves it at that, glad she’ll be spending her night with the officer and her family.

At exactly 5pm, because Ashlyn is punctual about absolutely everything, the officer leads Ali right into Chris’ backyard where they find him grilling food on the deck while the kids run around kicking a ball.

“Brotha man!” Ashlyn yells and throws up a hang ten symbol with her hand which Chris returns before he sees Ali and drops his spatula into the grill.

“Ali F**KING Krieger! No way!” Chris practically dives off of the deck as Bridget comes out yelling “Christopher Harris what did we agree to about swearing?!” before her eyes fall on Ali and she yells out “Holy f**k, it’s Ali!” and then immediately covers her mouth when the kids look up at her.

“Uh, hi guys!” Ali barely gets out with a blush before Chris has her wrapped up in a hug and off of the ground. Her slight yelp draws Curtis’ attention who immediately latches onto her leg when Chris puts her down.
“Ali! Missed you!” Curtis says with a huge smile as Ali ruffles his hair and kisses his cheek.

“Missed you too, munchkin.” Ali replies as she kneels down. “Did you get a haircut, C?” She says realizing that it looks like a shorter and more boyish version of Ashlyn’s hair, likely not a coincidence since he idolizes her.

The little boy shakes his head enthusiastically, happy that Ali noticed, and buries his head into her shoulder when she tells him he looks as handsome as his auntie.

“Better get a mop and bucket.” Ashlyn says as she stands next to Chris watching the interaction.

“Why?” Chris asks in confusion.

“Cause I’m about to melt all over your damn yard.” Ashlyn replies as she puts her hand over her racing heart for effect.

Chris laughs a bit and shakes his head, not used to this softer side of his sister that Ali seems to bring out. “I better go get a bucket for Bri too.” He says with an eye roll as he sees his wife smiling widely at Curtis and Ali too.

Ashlyn’s attention gets pulled away when she feels something slam into her legs.

“Auntie Ashwyn! You come play teddy tea time now?” Elsie asks with huge puppy eyes, her hands around Ashlyn’s knees.

“Hi little princess. I sure will.” Ashlyn says and scoops the little girl up into her arms. “Glad someone around here missed me.” She teases about Ali getting all of the attention. Ali is still busy talking to Curtis, so Ashlyn just goes over to the kids play table in the corner of the lawn and plops down in one of the tiny chairs as is routine. She waits patiently while Elsie arranges teddy bears in two of the three empty chairs and pretends to pour tea in small plastic tea cups for them. She can’t help but laugh as Elsie places a feathery purple scarf around her neck and a bonnet on her head.

“How do I look my dear?” Ashlyn asks her in a terrible British accent after Elsie finishes dressing her.

“Beeeoootiful Princess Ashwyn!” Elsie squeals in delight.

“Why thank you! May I have some sugar in my tea? Two lumps will do.” Ashlyn says holding up her teacup as Elsie pretends to put sugar in it. “Thank you dear. And what snack shall we have with our tea today?”

“Apples!” Elsie says excitedly and pulls out a couple fake plastic apples from one of her kitchen food sets.

“Delightful!” Ashlyn replies and takes the apple Elsie hands her before starting to make small talk with the teddy bears. “I dear say, Mr. Paddington, you look dashing in that blue raincoat despite the excellent weather we’re having. And Mr. Corduroy, those overalls are fabulous and really bring out the texture of your fur, but I fear you’ll just wither in this summer heat. Perhaps Princess Elsie can fetch you some ice cubes for your tea.”

Elsie giggles wildly as Ashlyn continues to chat with the bears. Unbeknownst to Ashlyn, Ali has now been watching for a few minutes with her phone out to record it all.

“This makes me swoon every damn time, so I can’t imagine how you feel right now.” Bridget pipes up from beside Ali.
“Like my heart is about to explode in the best way possible.” Ali answers honestly.

“Well, thank you Mr. Paddington! How nice of you to say that. I work very hard to get my hair just so and often use a texturing spray. You should try it yourself and maybe you can finally forgo that rain hat!” Ashlyn says in a high pitched voice.

Bridget belly laughs and Ali laughs so hard she snorts, drawing Ashlyn’s attention who shoots them a smile and pretends to take a bite out of the fake apple.

“Oh no, Princess Ashwyn! That was a poisoned apple!” Elsie says dramatically.

“What the heck have you guys been letting her watch?” Ashlyn yells over to Chris.

“Snow White.” Bridget replies with a shrug.

“Duh.” Ali adds.

“Shhhhh! You poisoned now Princess Ashwyn, no talking.” Elsie commands.

“Right.” Ashlyn flops off the chair and onto the lawn, flailing a few times before closing her eyes. Elsie giggles and then gets serious as she approaches Bridget. “Umm, Mommy, I did bad.”

“What’s the matter Els?” Bridget asks.

“I poison Auntie Ashwyn, but we have no prince to get her awake.” Elsie says with a furrowed brow.

“Oh, well. I’m sure we can find one. Maybe one of the teddies?” Bridget suggests.

“They fake, Mommy. You know that.” Elsie challenges and Ali can only raise her eyebrows in amusement as Bridget shakes her head.

“Right. How could I forget that. Well, maybe Prince Curtis can help us.” Bridget tries again.

“He’s too smelly to be a prince.” Elsie pouts and Ali loses her composure, letting out a chuckle.

“Be nice.” Bridget warns the little girl.

“I got this.” Ali pipes up finally. “How about I help?”


“Come here, Elsie.” Ali says as she kneels down to her level. “Let me tell you a secret. Did you know that princesses are just as powerful as princes?”

“They are?” Elsie asks in confusion, but seemingly open to the idea.

“Yep. They are.” Ali says simply. “Princesses can do anything that princes can do, and even do it better if they work hard and practice at it. Princesses are smart and strong and powerful. And sometimes princesses fall in love with other princesses, and princes sometimes fall in love with other princes. There’s a lot more that goes on in the kingdom than you see in those movies.” Ali watches Elsie nod with a look of wonderment.

“Oh you are good, Ali.” Bridget whispers in approval and gets a quick smile from the brunette.
“Want to know something else?” Ali asks Elsie who nods eagerly. “Princess Ali has completely fallen in love with Princess Ashwyn, just like in the movie.” She adds and sees Elsie’s face light up and Bridget’s eyebrows raise.

“Oh, ok!” Elsie jumps up with a smile. “Mommy we have a salucktion!”

“Solution, honey.” Bridget corrects her. “What’s your solution?”

“Princess Ali is better than the prince!” Elsie announces and pushes Ali towards Ashlyn. “Go fix her, Ali. I’m hungry.”

“Ha! This is too much!” Bridget says in disbelief. “Well you heard the girl, go get her Princess Ali!” She says with a wink and motions to get Chris’ attention at the grill.

Ali walks over to Ashlyn who is lying on the grass just a few feet away and kneels down next to her with Elsie looking on. “Well, this is the most beautiful princess I’ve ever seen. We need to wake her up!” Ali plays it up for Elsie’s benefit, but the little girl isn’t having it.


“Right, of course.” Ali says trying not to laugh. She leans down to place a lingering kiss on Ashlyn’s lips and feels the officer’s hands come up to her hold her face as they break apart.

“The beautiful Princess Ali has saved me! I shall live happily ever after!” Ashlyn exclaims.

“You were right, Ali! She’s awake! Let’s eat!” Elsie runs off towards Curtis, who is back to kicking the ball around, leaving Ali hovering over Ashlyn on the lawn.

Hazel eyes meet warm amber ones as Ashlyn whispers “Well hey there, Princess.”

“Hi yourself, Princess.” Ali laughs a bit. “That was too adorable for words, Harris. It’s doing things to me.”

“I wouldn’t talk, Krieger. I heard what you said to her.” Ashlyn grins.

“Well, can’t argue with true love’s kiss.” Ali says getting closer.

“Nope, absolutely can’t. I love you.” Ashlyn leans up to kiss Ali again before the brunette gets up and helps her off the lawn.

“I love you too, especially with that bonnet.” Ali winks and watches the officer try to get it off without messing up her hair too much. Loud clapping from the deck finally gets their attention.

“Yeeew! That was quite a show ladies! Bravo!” Chris bellows. “I mean, you could’ve just said ‘hey, we’re together now’, but the Disney version was a fun way to go.”

Before either of them can respond, Bridget is calling them all to come sit and eat. As they all enjoy dinner together, Ashlyn and Ali fill Chris and Bridget in on everything that has happened over the last ten days, keeping the details appropriate enough for the kids to hear.

“Despite all the media junk, we’re so happy for you two. I mean, we pretty knew this would happen at some point, but we’re really happy to finally see it.” Bridget says kindly and Chris nods in agreement.

“Geez. You go away on one little cruise and you come back to your sister turning her life upside down!” Chris jokes.
“Speaking of cruise, how was it?” Ashlyn asks, feeling bad that all the attention has been on her and Ali so far.

“So good!” Chris replies. “There was a lot more to do on the ship than we expected and it was really fun to stop on tropical islands for some of the days. The kids pretty much wanted to be in the pool all day.”

“And we ended up in someone’s wedding!” Bridget chimes in.

“Wow, really?” Ali asks.

“Yeah, we met this couple from North Carolina that has been dating for like 5 years. We hung out with them a lot and then on like day 7 they decided they wanted to get married on the front deck of the ship. To make a long story short, we ended up being their witnesses and Curtis and Elsie were flower girl and ring bearer. It was weird, but fun.” Bridget recounts.

“Totally weird, but it’s a good story at least.” Ashlyn laughs lightly.

“Ali, remember how you said that when you married Auntie that I could be in the wedding?” Curtis blurts out as he looks up from his ice cream dessert.

Chris spits out some of his ice tea and Bridget’s eyes go a bit wide. Ashlyn just reaches for Ali’s hand under the table and looks at her with a mockingly expectant smile.


“Oh yeah, oops! Sorry, Ali!” Curtis smacks his forehead. “But can I be the ring bear?”

“Ring bearer.” Bridget corrects.

“Yeah, can I be the ring bearer?” He asks again.

“Pretty sure we can make that happen.” Ali promises with a smile on her face, her eyes going right to Ashlyn’s as the officer starts rubbing light circles on the top of her hand.

“Yes!” Curtis shouts excitedly.

“And on that note, time to get ready for bed kiddos. You guys say goodnight.” Bridget comes to Ali’s rescue.

Ashlyn and Ali handle bedtime stories with the kids, giving Chris and Bridget a little time to finish unpacking and get some much needed laundry going. They end up on the deck again soon after with coffee and a selection of pastries that Chris picked up from the local bakery.

“Oh, Ali, before I forget… I’ve been really needing to talk to you.” Chris says. “Totally dumb of me, but I don’t understand what paperwork I need to fill out to sign the trust back over to you. Can you tell me what you need me to do?”

Ali smiles a bit, wondering when this conversation was finally going to come up. “Actually Chris, you don’t need to do anything.” She answers simply.

“Oh ok. Does it have like an automatic time limit kind of thing, is that why?” Chris asks curiously.

“Nope, no time limit. It stays in your name until you sign it over.” Ali replies.
“Ok, I’m lost.” Chris admits.

“Me too.” Bridget agrees.

“Me three.” Ashlyn chimes in.

“The trust is in your name until you fill out the paperwork to sign it over to someone. What I’m saying is that you won’t be filling out any paperwork to sign it back to me. It’s staying the way it is.” Ali clarifies and watches all three of the faces looking at her turn to surprise.

“Woah, Ali, no no. There’s over $800,000 in there.” Chris immediately argues. “I’m not taking that. That wasn’t the plan.”

Ashlyn isn’t sure what to say or what side to take, so she just stays quiet for a minute to see where this goes.

“Relax. Let me explain, ok?” Ali appeals to him.

“Alright.” Chris says hesitantly and sits back a bit in his chair to listen.

“Almost two years ago when my podcast and Kyle’s salon started to take off, he and I talked about using some of our money charitably. So, we ended up setting up our own small non-profit called Matty’s House, which is named for a childhood friend of ours that was killed by a drunk driver. It’s been nothing huge so far, but we’ve used the funds we allocated there to help out substances users who don’t have insurance and can’t afford to get the help they need. We’ve always wanted to invest in something bigger and just hadn’t found the right project or idea yet. Anyway, we talked about it and we decided that the money in that trust is going to go to our first big Matty’s House investment. And, that investment is you and your clinics.” Ali explains to Chris. “So, the money in there is yours to use for programs or a new center or anything you see fit. We know what you do, your dedication to it all, and how you run things and we are proud to stand behind you and help you launch some of the stuff you envision.”

“I…Ali…” Chris is stunned. “I don’t even…”

“Just say yes.” Ali encourages him. “Kyle and I really really want you to say yes.”

“Ok, yes!” Chris says incredulously, his mind already spinning with ideas. “I don’t even know how to thank you two.”

“Just keep helping people who need it, like you already do.” Ali says confidently. “Kyle is going to be thrilled! Can’t wait to tell him!”

Ashlyn doesn’t even know what to say at the moment as she holds Ali’s hand tightly in hers. She knows how many ideas Chris has that he’s never been able to implement due to lack of funding, this is a dream come true for him. A dream made possible by this amazing woman that has somehow chosen her to love. It makes her feel like maybe all those fairytales she’s been reading to Elsie aren’t so are off base after all.

“We need a toast or something.” Bridget declares. “I think I have some sparkling cider inside.” She says getting up.

“I’ll help.” Ali says so she can give Chris and Ashlyn a few minutes. As Ali goes to get up, she finds herself being pulled down into Ashlyn’s lap.

Ashlyn doesn’t say anything, still not quite able to find the words. Instead she takes Ali’s lips
between her own in a deep kiss that lasts long enough to convey her emotions without making it awkward for Chris and Bridget. “Love you.” She whispers really softly as she kisses the tip of Ali’s nose.

“You too, baby.” Ali replies as she slowly gets up to follow Bridget inside, letting her fingers drag lightly across the back of Ashlyn’s shoulders until she’s forced to break the contact.

“I swear to god, Ashlyn….if you don’t marry that girl…” Chris says as soon as Ali and Bridget are out of earshot.

“Trust me, that’s the only outcome I’ll settle for.” Ashlyn cuts him off before he can finish his statement. “And apparently she’s already planning the wedding, sooo…” She jokes about what Curtis revealed earlier.

“You did so good, little sis. Like not just Ali, but everything else too. I’m so proud of who you are.” Chris says in a rare expression of deep feelings.

“Thank bro. I’m so damn proud of you too and everything you’ve accomplished. Ali obviously sees it as much as I do. You still have so many more amazing things to do and I’m excited to watch you do them.” Ashlyn replies with a smile.

“But Ali Krieger though… you really did as good as it gets there. The bar doesn’t get any higher.” Chris adds, still in disbelief.

“I know, right?!?” Ashlyn exclaims lightly. “So fucking lucky.”

“So fucking lucky.” Chris agrees as Bridget and Ali make their way out with the glasses of cider. The four of them make a toast to the future of Harris Horizons Rehabilitation Group before Ali and Ashlyn leave to head home shortly after.

It’s quiet for a little bit on the ride home as Ashlyn drives and Ali plays with the radio, until the officer finally breaks the silence. “Alex, what you just did for Chris…I’m not even sure you know the extent of what it means.” She gets out a bit emotionally, feeling Ali start to rub the top of her hand.

“Sure I do. You’ve done it for Kyle for years.” Ali says resolutely. “But, this wasn’t a decision based on repaying an invaluable debt. I’ve heard some of your brother’s ideas, they’re really brilliant. I truly believe he’s going to help so many people that need it in such a genuine, caring way that they become better not just in body, but in mind and soul.” She explains before pausing and adding what is actually in her heart. “And… there’s nothing I’d rather do than invest in our family.”

Our family. OUR family. The words play through Ashlyn’s head and all she can do is feel them deep inside where they settle like the comfort of a warm blanket on the coldest day. There is absolutely nothing she can say right now to express what she is feeling, nothing except maybe ‘I love you’ which is just as inadequate as any other words at the moment. Instead she just repeats the words out loud as she brings Ali’s hand up to kiss it. “Our family.”

“Our family.” Ali repeats back with a smile, the words meaning as much to her as they do to Ashlyn. They both take a few minutes to let it sink in and wash over them.

“So, when exactly did you tell my nephew you were going to marry me?” Ashlyn eventually asks with a smirk.

“The day I helped move them back home after the trial.” Ali answers matter-of-factly.
Ashlyn’s mouth hangs open just a bit at the answer, the smirk on her face long gone. She had assumed it was some time while she and Elsie played tea time today. Or maybe over the last couple months before she and Ali had gotten back in touch. But never had she imagined that it was before she even left prison, before they’d even had the chance to begin to understand what was really there between them.

Ashlyn doesn’t say anything in reply and just pulls the Jeep into the first empty looking parking lot she sees, getting out of the car and going around to Ali’s side to help her out before ushering them wordlessly into the backseat. Ali is looking at her a bit bewildered, but Ashlyn doesn’t care because she can’t go another second… not another single second without feeling this woman deep inside her skin. All it takes is one passionate and heated kiss for Ali to understand what she needs... the brunette pressing her down into the seat, one hand holding Ashlyn’s arms above her head while the fingers of the other bury so deeply inside that the officer can feel it in her soul as Ali’s name rolls off of her lips.

‘So, Harris, are you prepared for my intense Q and A tomorrow?’ Kyle asks teasingly.

“Just don’t fuck up my hair and you can ask whatever you want.” Ashlyn laughs and flicks a piece of gravel at him

After switching her work shifts this week so she had Tuesday and Wednesday off instead of Friday and Saturday, Ashlyn had finally scheduled some time to spend with just Kyle. They had decided to spend Tuesday afternoon longboarding through the city just like they used to. After a couple of hours non-stop, they were now sitting at the local skate park taking a breather and watching some high school age guys practice tricks.

“Girl, I would never fuck up that hair. Alex would kill me! I wouldn’t even dream of messing with that!” Kyle says as he waves his hand dramatically to make his point.

“Fair enough. I trust you.” Ashlyn replies genuinely.

“Well you better. I mean… I sent the very best lawyer I know to get your ass out of jail and got you a fine hunny all at the same time!” He exclaims.

“That you did.” Ashlyn agrees. “Of course, you might have mentioned that you had such an incredible and perfect sister to begin with, but I’ll let it slide. Regardless, I’m forever in your debt.”

“Oh please, Harris. You’ve been taking care of my ass for years, if anyone is in debt it’s me. So, let’s not even get into that.” Kyle argues.

Alright, well… speaking of taking care of you…I feel like I haven’t gotten the chance to really check in on you like I used to.” Ashlyn says regretfully.

“Ah yes, a Harris mental workout sesh is upon us. It’s been a while.” Kyle smiles, knowing Ashlyn always made it a point to not just superficially check in with him, but get him to really think and talk deeply about it. “Alright, girl, bring it.”

“Oh, so I’m just going to get into the heavy right off the bat.” Ashlyn warns and sees Kyle nod. “Tell me how you are doing with everything that happened during the court stuff, with Alex and with your dad? Honestly, how are you handling it?”

Kyle lets out a breath and gives himself some time to think and compose his thoughts.
Ashlyn recognizes his body language, knowing that sometimes he needs a little more prompting to get going. “God Kyle, I still can’t get the way she looked that morning when she came into the courtroom all beat up like that out of my head. I can barely stand to think about it and I wasn’t even there when it happened, nor was it my father that did it. I just… you found her… you brought her back to life… I can’t begin to imagine how you feel about it. And I know you well enough to know that you’ve coped with it by focusing on taking care of her… because I would do the exact same thing.”

“It’s brutal. I just can’t unsee it, unhear it, unlive it, you know?” Kyle starts quietly. “Those blue toes sticking up out of the water and knowing she was in there and being so desperate when I realized she was stuck. God my fingers were so cold and hurt so much trying to get that damn knot undone around her neck. I still don’t know how I did it. And then she was just heavy and lifeless, just gone. She was so fucking cold, Harris…so cold. So cold that I was freezing and I could still feel how cold she was. I can still feel the panic, the desperation to do something to save her when I wasn’t even sure what to do.” Kyle says emotionally as tears flow freely down his face.

Ashlyn stays quiet, knowing he’s not done. She just wraps and arm around him and rubs his shoulders for support.

“And I can still feel the panic because I’m still panicked about it even though it all turned out ok and she’s alive, and fine, and happy. I can’t stop wondering what would’ve happened if I hadn’t come home soon enough or I didn’t find her in time. What if I wasn’t there…or worse, what if the CPR didn’t work? Where would I be right now? I can’t fathom it. Up until you two officially got together, I just couldn’t let her out of my sight. I’ve been living at at her place because I was too afraid not to; scared to lose her.” Kyle chokes out before addressing the next part. “The only thing that bothers me about Ken is that it bothers her. I’ve felt nothing for him for years and I feel nothing now. He doesn’t deserve anything from me and he won’t get it…not pity, not anger. That’s the only part of this whole thing that doesn’t eat at me…he’s exactly what I always knew he was, a pathetic asshole who got what he had coming.”

Ashlyn hears Kyle let out a signature soft sigh and she knows he’s done talking for the moment. “Do you ever obsess over what happened all those years ago between me and you and those drug dealers? Do you spend time wondering what would’ve happened if I wasn’t there?” She asks him.

“No, I guess not.” He answers honestly.

“Why not?” Ashlyn probes.

“I think it’s because the outcome is what it is and there’s nothing to dwell on. If you weren’t there, I’d be dead. I’m lucky and beyond grateful that you were there, but I guess there’s not much more to think about. You were there… and because of that I’m here. And all I can do is live the life I was lucky enough not to lose in the best way that I can.” Kyle answers.

“Exactly. It’s not any different with Alex, you know.” Ashlyn levels with him. “You can ‘what if’ all day, Kyle… but in the end, the outcome doesn’t change. You were there…you saved her, and she’s alive. There’s nothing else to think about. Just to spend your time with her in the best way that you can moving forward because you’re lucky that she’s here. We all are.” Ashlyn finishes by using his own words.

Kyle shakes his head with a smile, not able to argue with her logic. “Now why the hell couldn’t I come up with that?”

“Because I’m the smart one. Your job is to look good.” Ashlyn jokes. “By the way, if it helps, you can live with us. I really don’t mind and I’m sure Alex won’t either.”
“Nah, I actually love my condo thank you very much. You’re there with her and that’s all I need to know. I trust you to protect her more than I trust myself in that regard.” Kyle admits. “I may change my mind on this when I meet the man of my dreams someday…but seriously Harris, you’re the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

“Awww, come here my boo boo.” Ashlyn says sweetly and pulls him into a tight hug that he returns with equal force. “You really do give the best hugs…just don’t tell your sister.” She laughs a bit. “Feel better?”

“Always do after these talks.” Kyle says truthfully. “And don’t worry, I’ll only tell her if I need major ammo some day!”

“Well here’s hoping you never need ammo so I don’t end up in the dog house!” Ashlyn replies.

“It’s crazy how this all happened, isn’t it? Who knew we’d truly be family someday.” Kyle muses.

“Is that your subtle-not-so-subtle way of asking me if I’m going to marry your sister?” Ashlyn goads him. “That topic seems to be trending lately.”

“Nope. I don’t need to ask, Harris. The answer is all over your face. The statement stands as is.” Kyle says simply. “You don’t even know how happy it makes me that the two people I love the most in this world are in love with each other.”

“I really do, you know…love her. She’s everything I could possibly want and more than I could ever deserve. I’ll spend my whole life making sure she knows that.” Ashlyn wholeheartedly admits.

“Oh Harris, I know. EVERYBODY who looks at you two love-struck queens knows. You two are relationship goals as fuck and it’s only been like two weeks!” Kyle teases as he gets up. “Come on, let’s get home to the princess before she sends out a search party. I’m sure she can’t possibly go another hour without making out with you…like fucking horny teenagers you two!”

“Cut me some slack, I was pretty much celibate for like half a decade!” Ashlyn rolls her eyes at him.

“Well, I’m happy for you that everything is apparently still working properly.” Kyle jokes. “I’d say more than properly given the ‘I just had amazing sex’ face my sister seems to be permanently wearing these days. Where do you two even find the time? I barely find time to feed and walk Luna.”

“Oh, bro…I love you, but we are not having this conversation.” Ashlyn shakes her head. “Besides, you were the one bitching that you couldn’t ‘unhear that moan’ the other day.”

“Touché. You’re such a prude, Harris.” Kyle lightly elbows her as they walk along. “I’ll fix that come tomorrow night!” He adds and then quickly hops on his board and skates off before she can say anything.

“What the hell does that mean?!” Ashlyn calls out after him, but he’s too far ahead of her. By the time they make it back to the house, the conversation is forgotten the second Ali jumps into her arms and kisses her so hard that one would think they hadn’t seen each other in days, to which Kyle can only shake his head and laugh at them.

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Given the media circus around the two women, Kyle knew he didn’t need much lead time to make the announcement about Wednesday night’s event. He strategically waited until Monday night
before he posted on all of his social media that a haircut interview with Ashlyn would be the featured event. By Tuesday morning, it was clear that so many media outlets would be attending that the salon wouldn’t be able to accommodate all those people. After sitting down to coffee with Ali, the two of them launched a plan to make it work and Kyle released an updated post:

**What:** Wine & Cheese Social Night

**Where:** Bareback Razor Salon

**When:** Wednesday, July 19th 6pm to 9pm

**Special Guest:** Captain Ashlyn Harris, sitting down for a haircut Q & A with Kyle Krieger

**The Deets:** This event is open to the public and is first-come first-serve, however, all non-clients must purchase a $50 gift card towards a salon service to be admitted. All proceeds from gift card purchases will be donated to the non-profit Matty’s House. There will be no video recording devices allowed inside of the salon, please plan accordingly; audio recording devices will be allowed. A video of the special guest interview session will be publicly posted and made available for dissemination on Kyle Krieger’s YouTube channel.

With everything perfectly planned and in place, the salon is packed the minute the event starts. It’s a healthy mix of Kyle’s friends/clients, media representatives, and the curious general public. And that’s only the people that would fit inside, a large crowd also litters the sidewalk outside of the salon trying to catch a glimpse of the goings-on through the window.

Ashlyn closes her eyes at the feel of the warm water running through her hair and fingers gently massaging her scalp. “Shouldn’t Kyle be doing this?” She asks Ali who is washing her hair in the backroom of the salon and getting her ready for her session with Kyle.

“Well someone has to be out there schmoozing the guests and it’s his salon, sooo…” Ali says playfully. “Besides, would he be straddling you while he washed your hair? Doubtful.”

“Oh, I am so not complaining. Just envisioned that this part would be done out there in front of all those people, but I sure am glad it isn’t.” Ashlyn replies, running her hands up Ali’s thighs that straddle her waist.

“You nervous?” Ali asks as she rinses the conditioner out of Ashlyn’s hair.

“A little.” Ashlyn admits.

“Don’t be. Kyle won’t ask you anything too crazy and he has a real knack for bringing out the best in people.” Ali says and watches Ashlyn nod in agreement. “And if you get stuck out there, just look at me and talk to me. Forget everyone else watching.”

“Nervous or not, it’s a safe bet that I’ll be looking at you, Alex.” Ashlyn replies matter-of-factly.

“You really are too charming for your own good, Harris.” Ali finishes up and turns off the water before leaning down to kiss Ashlyn and feeling the officer’s hands go to the back of her neck, pulling her in more deeply. It’s only a few more seconds before the kiss gets heated and hungry, Ashlyn hands sliding just into the bottom of Ali’s shirt. The officer’s fingers are just slipping into the waistband of Ali’s jeans when they’re pulled out of the moment by sound of the door opening and an impatient throat clear.

“Really you two?! A room full of media on the other side of the door and you two are in here doing
“this! Can’t leave you alone for five seconds.” Kyle grumbles despite the fact that he’s clearly amused.

“I was just helping her relax.” Ali say with a wink as she reluctantly slides off her girlfriend’s lap and grabs a towel nearby to dry Ashlyn’s hair a bit.

“Or sexing her up, but whatever you want to call it.” Kyle sasses.

“Anyway, we’re ready!” Ashlyn declares and gets up from the chair.

“Correction…you were ready.” Kyle laughs. “And now Alex has on red lipstick that she wasn’t wearing before and Harris’ lipstick is almost gone. Ugh I have do everything around here!” Kyle mock groans as he quickly fixes Ashlyn’s makeup and hands Ali a wipe for her lips. “Ok, now you’re ready!”

“Let’s do it then.” Ashlyn says ready to get it over with.

“Good luck you two!” Ali says encouragingly as she gets close to Ashlyn again.

“I swear to god if you two even fuck up the lipstick again…” Kyle warns them.

“Ok geez!” Ali heeds the warning and just lightly pinches Ashlyn’s cheek before tapping her on the ass and making her way to the door. “See you out there, beautiful!” She adds with a wink as Kyle rolls his eyes.

The room is packed, but there is a comfortable space around Kyle and Ashlyn. Kyle has his camera set up in front of them with Ben manning it. There is a bright light just off to the left to provide the right lighting, which Ashlyn is thankful for because it’s bright enough to obscure the entire left side of the room. Everyone she can see is watching with rapt attention and she immediately finds Ali, locking on her favorite whiskey-colored eyes as Kyle puts a black nylon cape around her neck and the dialogue unfolds.

Kyle: So first, I just want to thank everyone for coming tonight. Any good business needs good customers and this one is no exception. And while I absolutely LOVE my current clients, I’m always looking to meet new people and help them get all sexy. So, I’m here for all your grooming needs and all of the information you need is on the salon website. With that out of the way, speaking of sexy, I have a very special guest tonight. Tell us who you are darlin’.

Ashlyn: Hi, I’m Ashlyn Harris.

Kyle: Ashlyn Harris, that’s it?! Oh no, no, no, honey. We don’t do modest up in here, so let me help you out! Everyone, this is current Ipswich Police Captain, total bad ass and first-ever female Army Ranger, Purple Heart and Bronze Star recipient, star of season three of the podcast Veritas Aequitas, my own personal knight in shining armor, and my sister’s hot main squeeze, Ashlyn Harris. See, that’s how you do it. (He shoots a glare at Ashlyn as the crowd laughs and claps for her)

Ashlyn: Right. Well thanks for that. (She tries to control the blush threatening to take over her face).

Kyle: So, we’re giving Ashlyn a haircut tonight obviously. This is exciting for me since it will be the first time I’ve done her hair even though we’ve been friends a long time. Let’s just talk for a
second about the hair and what we’re going to do. What’s your vision, Harris?

**Ashlyn:** I like it simple, a nice tight and close fade with the top staying soft and feminine looking.

**Kyle:** I like, I like it. We can totally do that. I’ve known you with both long and short hair of course, but I really am digging this short hair on you. A lot of people don’t realize that you really need the right head shape to pull off this short-hair look. It works really nicely with your head shape and the angles of your face. I mean, you always had nice cheekbones, but the way your hair accentuates them now….well, those things are sharp enough to cut a bitch. *(He says dramatically and the crowd starts laughing along with both Kyle and Ashlyn)*

**Ashlyn:** Why did I agree to do this again?

**Kyle:** Girl, because you love me! Anyway, let’s started on the hair while I give everyone a little background here. So, I know like 90% of you are here because you want the low-down on Harris and my sister. And I know, I know… Ali is a big fancy pants lawyer and big deal and all, BUT this is MY salon so we’re going to focus on me for a minute. I’ll have you all know that before there was ever an Ali and Ashlyn… there was Kyle and Ashlyn! That’s right, you heard it here first!

**Ashlyn:** It’s true. Should we tell them about our engagement? I mean, I did get down on one knee for you. *(She plays into Kyle’s story, but loses her composure and laughs when he starts laughing)*

**Kyle:** Oh my god, did you hear that?! She got down on one knee, she said! Well, geez, make it clear which one of us wears the pants why don’t cha!

**Ashlyn:** Well, I definitely don’t do dresses, soooo…

**Kyle:** Wait are you saying I wear dresses, Harris?

**Ashlyn:** If one of us was going to wear a dress, it would definitely be you. I’m just staying realistic.

**Kyle:** Ha! Well, I’m certainly not the most butch! Anyway, moving on. Let me get serious for just a second. So, what many of you don’t know is that I’m a former addict and have been clean and sober for almost five years now. And I owe that all to Harris here, who not only saved me from being killed by some super scary drug dealers, but also took me into her home and took care of me through recovery. She’s the very reason I’m here right now, so if you’re wondering why she trusts me not to mess up her hair tonight… well there you have it. *(The room erupts into a round of applause for the two of them and Kyle stops to bow for effect)*

**Ashlyn:** For the record, I’m terrified and just pretending to trust you. *(She jokes and watches Kyle put his hands on his hips in mock offense).*

**Kyle:** Watch it, Harris, or I’ll ‘accidentally’ buzz off one of your eyebrows!

**Ashlyn:** Your sister would kill you. *(She raises an eyebrow at him)*

**Kyle:** *(Sigh).* She would, wouldn’t she? *(They both look at Ali who nods her head yes with a wry smile, making the crowd laugh).*

**Ashlyn:** Told you.

**Kyle:** Alright, let’s get into some questions, shall we. So you used to have this long blonde hair. What made you cut it all off?
Ashlyn: Ok, so, I know this is going to be REALLY hard to believe, but I’m just going to tell you… platinum blonde is not my natural hair color (*She deadpans in perfect sarcasm and the crowd laughs again*). I hated having roots, so I kept having it dyed in prison and they use this really harsh peroxide to do it. Long story short, when I got out, it was so damaged that every salon I went to told me to just cut it. So…I hardcore panicked and then finally did it. And now I actually really like it short.

Kyle: Well I love it! Plus I get to cut your hair now, so there’s that. Ok, let’s get into something deeper. Tell me, what’s the best and worst part of being out of prison?

Ashlyn: The best part of being out of prison is being out of prison. As a cop, I thought I kind of had a good sense of what being locked up was like. Turns out, I had no idea. It’s truthfully an awful experience that messes with your mind in so many ways. So, being out of there in and of itself is a wonderful thing.

Kyle: Fair enough. What about the worst part of being out?

Ashlyn: Well, honestly, so far, it’s being followed by the media all the time. And I know I’m probably going to offend most of the room here, but that’s the honest answer. I haven’t had a lot of normalcy in my life. I had a rough upbringing with substance abusing parents and then I went right into my military career, which meant dealing with having seen a lot of horrible things and recovering from some pretty tough injuries. And then I settle into the police department and find myself having to secretly investigate my own Chief, who ends up blackmailing me and sending me to prison… and you all know what followed from there. So, yeah, not exactly a boring or average life. Since getting out, I’ve dealt with some personal things and finally resettled into a new job and lifestyle. And, I fell in love with an amazing person that grounds me, and takes care of me, and makes me feel like everything I went through was completely worth it to get to this point (*She locks eyes with Ali and smiles slightly*). For once in my life, I feel normal…like an average person who is just doing and living what they love in the best way they can. But then the media attention comes in and just rips that away by turning my life into some kind of soap opera. I mean, I appreciate it’s your job and all… but you’ve all single-handedly come in and torn away the normalcy and peace that I’ve worked for and waited so long to get, just for the sake of a fleeting news story and some TV ratings. And that has been the hardest part for me. (*She finishes seriously and sees the shifting eyes in the room that tell her she’s gotten her point across*).

Kyle: Oh snap! Well don’t you all feel like assholes now? (*He uses his eyes to scan the room for show*). Shame, shame, shame on you. (*He wags his finger at them playfully, getting some light laughs that ease the tension in the room*). Mmmkay, so let’s take it down a notch while I finish up this fade here. What’s your most bizarre talent?

Ashlyn: Oh geez. I have no idea. I don’t even think I have any bizarre talents.

Kyle: Come on, Harris…you totally have to have one, everyone does. Like can you do anything with your tongue?

Ashlyn: Ummm… (*Her eyebrows raise dramatically and her eyes bug out as she looks at Ali and tilts her head towards Kyle in disbelief that he just said that before she starts chuckling, the audience already laughing at the innuendo*). Well, ok then.

Kyle: Oh stop it, you know what I mean. Like can you reach anything with it or…

Ashlyn: Oh my god, where are you going with this?! (*She makes the same face as earlier and looks right at Ali who is blushing and laughing as she shrugs. The audience is doubled over*)
laughing at the whole thing).

Kyle: Oh my gaaaaawd, stop it! Mind out of the gutter you two… I swear you and my sister are going to scar me for life! (He points between Ashlyn and Ali and turns red himself). MOVING ON! Do you like pineapple on your pizza?

Ashlyn: Totally! Love a good Hawaiian pizza.

Kyle: Nasty! Fruit on pizza is gross and not for me.

Ashlyn: I’m sure you’ve had worse in your mouth, but we’re not gonna talk about that because this interview is about me.

Kyle: Definitely had worse in my mouth! Though we could debate which one of us has had worse in their mouth, wouldn’t you say? (He side-eyes Ashlyn and makes the crowd laugh at his insinuation).

Ashlyn: There’s no debate, it’s you, but we’re not going there. Next question.

Kyle: You have lots of tattoos, so which one is your favorite?

Ashlyn: My brother’s name under my heart.

Kyle: Hmph, and I thought you were going to say my name that is on your ass cheek. Now I’m just offended.

Ashlyn: You weren’t supposed to tell anyone about that, sweetheart (She plays along with a smirk).

Kyle: Sorry, snookum (He shrugs and they get another round of audience laughs). So, you’ll notice as I scissor cut the longer hair on top that I’m not just cutting straight across but almost on an angle instead. That really adds a nice texture to the hair which I’ll get into more in a minute when we style it. Alright, what’s your favorite thing to watch on TV?

Ashlyn: Shark Week, no doubt.

Kyle: Right, Harris here has a shark obsession. And when I say obsession, I mean there are sharks on her underwear (He rolls his eyes). My poor sister, how many shark movies have you made her watch already?

Ashlyn: I can’t believe you just talked about my underwear! ANYWAY, I’m not that bad. We’ve only watched a couple shark movies. (A loud throat clear in the room draws everyone’s attention).

Kyle: Oooh, busted Harris! Care to weigh in, Alex? (Kyle and the rest of the room look at Ali who was the source of the throat clear).

Ali: We’ve watched at least 5, and it’s more like 8 if you include long TV show documentaries.

Ashlyn: Ugh, fine. You guys suck. I love sharks, sue me! (She sticks her tongue out at Ali).

Kyle: Careful what you wish for, she is a lawyer after all! Next question, where do you see yourself in the next five years?

Ashlyn: Married with kids hopefully. (She anxiously looks right at Ali while she answers, looking
for the brunette’s reaction since it’s not something they’ve talked about. She relaxes immediately when Ali just gives her a big nose crinkling grin, which she returns with a big smile of her own.

Kyle:  What is the most you can bench press?

Ashlyn:  225lbs.

Kyle:  Holy crap! Seriously?! I can only do 180 on a good day! Why you people continue to follow her around is beyond me, she could just throw you if she wanted to! (He addresses the audience who laughs along with him). Alright, so, we’re all ready to style this awesome hair of yours. I’m just going to wet it a bit with R+Co. volumizing spray, which will give it a nice lift and it smells really good too. We’re going to give it a quick blow dry and then we’ll go from there, so everyone bear with me for a couple minutes. (Kyle spends the next few minutes getting Ashlyn’s hair blow-dried and ready for the next step as everyone watches and follows along).

Kyle:  So, now I’m going to use Oribe texturizing spray that will give her hair a bit of a tousled look while holding onto the volume that we just worked to get. And finally, we’re going to use a pomade to give it a final shape and hold. I like this one from Baxter of CA because it’s nice and thick… and we all know that I like it thick! (He waggles his eyebrows and loud laughter sounds through the room).

Ashlyn:  None of us needed to know that, but thanks.

Kyle:  Awww, you’re welcome, Harris. So, time for one more question as I finish styling this up for you. How about we give the people what they came for… what do you love most about my sister?

Ashlyn:  Oh, geez… I have to pick one thing?!

Kyle:  Oh my god, stop it, you’re going to give me a cavity. (He teases after there is a slight ‘awww’ sound from the crowd). I’m going take mercy on you though and let you pick two things.

Ashlyn:  Ok, so, the first is her passion. I’ve never met anyone with so much fire and drive who is also so self-less at the same time. She puts her all into everything and never half-asses anything even if there is no benefit for her. It doesn’t matter whether she’s working on an important case or just washing a dish, she puts her best effort into everything. And what’s better is that is comes from such a pure and genuine place. I really love and admire that about her (She looks right into Ali’s eyes from across the room, ignoring everyone else but her).

Kyle:  Well that was fucking adorable. (He fans himself and gets a laugh from the room). Alright, just put us out of our misery, what’s the second thing?

Ashlyn:  I have to say that it’s the way she loves me. She doesn’t have to say the words…it’s in the way she looks at me and treats me. She accepts me for who I am and doesn’t try to change me. I can be open, honest, and completely vulnerable with her and she protects me. She loves me both thoughtfully and with reckless abandon, and never once has she made me feel like I have to earn her affection even though I know we obviously went through a lot to get where we are. It’s a love that’s patient and kind, a love that listens and understands, a love that’s unwavering and unconditional. And I’m the luckiest person in the world to be its recipient and to return it with my own. (She finishes with a sweet smile directed at the brunette she’s locked in a gaze with as the room murmurs around them).

Kyle:  Oh my goodness, I don’t know about you all…but I’m officially dead after that answer. Good thing your hair is done! Whew, damn girl… Romeo who? Sooo…What do you guys think?
(He asks the room and gets a loud round of applause in approval). What about you, Harris… do you like it?

**Ashlyn**: I LOVE it! Thanks, bro…it looks great!

**Kyle**: Alright, let’s let the only person whose opinion actually matters weigh in. Alex? *(He looks at Ali and waits as the room directs their attention to her as well).*

**Ali**: You look absolutely gorgeous… love you, baby. *(Ali shoots Ashlyn a wink and gives two thumbs up before blowing her a kiss).*

**Kyle**: Oook, I know that look way too well already. *(He motions between Ashlyn and Ali whose eyes haven’t left each other’s).* We all better vacate because they’ll set something on fire with that smolder in no time and no one likes to be soaked in nasty fire sprinkler water…hmmm, though it will bring some hot fireman. *(He pretends to consider it and feels Ashlyn lightly slap his arm as the crowd laughs).* I’m kidding! Well, Ashlyn, thank you so much for coming and being such a good sport!

**Ashlyn**: Of course, thanks for having me and for the amazing haircut! Seriously, he’s a wizard… so, you all better make some hair appointments ASAP!

**Kyle**: Thanks, darlin’! *(He kisses her on the cheek).* As I mentioned before, in the next 24 hours, I’ll put up a YouTube link of the video from today’s interview which you can all access and link to. Thanks to everyone again for coming tonight to hang out with us. There’s still an hour left to go, so eat, drink and have fun mingling and enjoying the space. *(He finishes and the room erupts into a huge round of applause).*

Not wanting to be hounded with any questions, Ashlyn and Ali quickly say goodbye to Kyle and make a beeline for the backroom so they can sneak out the emergency exit door. As soon as the door closes behind them, Ali pins Ashlyn against it crashes their lips together in a kiss so frenzied and heated that it practically knocks the officer off her feet. Ashlyn lets out a soft moan as she feels a strong thigh settle between her legs while their tongues entwine with each other. And just as quickly as the passionate moment started, it comes to an abrupt stop as Ali pulls away and says “Come on, baby,” leading a still close-eyed Ashlyn by the hand towards the exit.

“I’ll drive.” Ali says still a bit breathless as she reaches into Ashlyn’s pocket to get the Jeep keys.

Ashlyn just lets herself get led to the car and settles into the passenger’s seat without question, her mind still trying to unfog. She snaps out of a bit watching Ali start to drive since the brunette has never driven her Jeep before. “You look really damn hot driving my Jeep.” Ashlyn remarks with a smile and watches Ali smirk before reaching over and placing a hand on her thigh.

“You won’t think I’m so hot if I crash it, so don’t let that hand wander too far.” Ali warns and hears Ashlyn chuckle softly.

“Thought we were going to stay at my place since I have to work tomorrow?” Ashlyn questions in confusion as she watches Ali take a left that takes them further into the city instead of the right that will get them on the highway.

“We were, Hero. But that was before we made out in the backroom and then I spent almost an hour watching you be funny, charming, and completely perfect with my brother while you said sweet, romantic things about me in public. And then came out looking so fucking sexy with this haircut to
top it all off.” Ali replies as she bites her bottom lip a bit. “So… if you’re not naked and on top of me in the next 10 minutes, I’m going to pretty much explode and have my way with you in this car in the middle of the road.”

“Well, ok then.” Ashlyn says with wide eyes as she feels her heart rate pick up and core start to throb in anticipation. “Um…although closer than mine, isn’t your house still 20 minutes away from here?” She asks a bit befuddled by Ali’s 10 minute deadline as 3 minutes have already ticked by and they’re not even close to home.

“Exactly.” Ali says as she pulls up to the Mandarin Oriental Boston Hotel at the next block and quickly gets out of the car, tossing the keys to the valet and going around to the passenger’s seat to pull a surprised Ashlyn out of the car. “That means we now have 6 minutes to get checked into the best suite available so I can completely mess up that hair of yours. She says with devilish grin as she pulls Ashlyn by the hand into the hotel lobby. “Sex hair is definitely your best look anyway.”
Here's a very lengthy update for you! It's an important chapter and I didn't have it in me to try and break it up into two, so get comfy before you start. The next chapter will pick up right where this one leaves off, so you'll already know what's coming up next ;) Hopefully the story is still moving along at a good pace for you and not getting too stagnant. Drop me a comment and let me know what you think and if you're still enjoying it! Thanks again for taking the time to read it!

“You are seriously the best.” Ashlyn remarks when she feels Ali’s hands start to massage her tired shoulders as she leans back into the brunette on the couch. Having switched her days off to earlier in the week for Kyle’s salon event and not having time off until they leave for Georgia the following Wednesday, she’s pretty wiped out and it’s only Saturday with three more work days to go. Fourth of July through Labor Day is the busiest tourist and vacation season for Ipswich, which also means higher than normal noise complaints, DUIs, car accidents and domestic incidents as well as a greater number of events needing security detail. The police department has been stretched thin and, consequently, so has Ashlyn.

“My poor, Hero.” Ali coos into Ashlyn’s neck. “What a wretched week it has been for you so far. I still can’t believe you had to crawl into an air condition vent to rescue a two year old today!” She shakes her head.

“Didn’t exactly have much choice, the other guys were too broad to fit. Perks of being kind of a string bean.” Ashlyn laughs. “The worst was that the kid was just in there laughing and having a grand old time. I mean, it’s good that he wasn’t hurt or anything… but after squeezing my ass through that vent, the last thing I needed was to be laughed at by a toddler.” She adds with an eye roll. “Mmm, that feels so good, baby. Thank you.”

“Here, take your shirt off and it’ll be even better.” Ali says moving her hands to the hem of the cut-off t-shirt Ashlyn is wearing.

“You just want me shirtless.” Ashlyn smirks.

“Duh. I always want you as minimally clothed as possible. Completely innocent intentions right now though, I know you’re exhausted sweetheart.” Ali replies and lifts the shirt over Ashlyn’s head, leaving the officer in just a sports bra. Her hands go right back to Ashlyn’s shoulders watching the inked words across them get obscured by her palms.

“Total goddess.” Ashlyn mutters as she feels Ali’s warm hands directly on her skin. She hadn’t realized how stiff she was after today’s vent adventure until right now. Her muscles are just starting to relax when the doorbell rings. “Ugh.” She groans at the loss of contact as Ali starts to get up.

“Has to be UPS, it’s 6:55pm.” Ali remarks, recently having realized that UPS just about always delivers between 6:30pm and 7:15pm at Ashlyn’s house. Given that she orders stuff off of Amazon almost daily, there’s a delivery more days than not at both of their houses. She gets up and leans down to give Ashlyn a soft kiss before heading to the front door. “Be right back.”
Ashlyn shakes her head at the brunette with a playful smirk. “What did you order this time?”

“Who knows, I order so much stuff that I usually forget what’s coming until it arrives. I know, I know. I have an Amazon problem.” Ali says with her hands up on her way out of the living room.

“The first step is admitting it, Krieger.” Ashlyn jokes. She loves how she and Ali can just freely joke about anything, even statements like this one that should probably offend both of them given their family history.

“Hi Ali, I have another one for you today.” Jim, the usual UPS delivery guy, says as he hands Ali a box. “I need you to sign for this one.”

“Oh, ok. Must have ordered something expensive this time to require a signature.” Ali says as she signs and tries to remember what she ordered recently. “Thanks, Jim! Have a good one!” She adds cheerily as she closes and locks the door behind her.

The box doesn’t have an Amazon label on it and is addressed to both her and Ashlyn. It immediately draws her curiosity, so she sets it on the hallway table and opens it up to have a quick look. The first thing she sees inside is a card which she opens and reads, her eyes going wide by the time she reaches the end of it.

“We got another interview invite.” Ali says to Ashlyn as she comes back into the living room with the box in hand.

After the event at Kyle’s salon, the media attention on the two of them had both skyrocketed and calmed down. Because of Ashlyn’s rant about the paparazzi during the haircut with Kyle, they were no longer being followed for the most part and had generally gotten their privacy back in that regard. However, there was a huge increase in articles and stories about them over the last few days. Many of them had reported on Ashlyn being charming, funny, and witty and had detailed the loving relationship that seemed to exist between the two women, putting it up on a pedestal like other Hollywood romances.

As a result, people were already becoming a bit obsessed with them. They had found themselves starting to get fan letters in the mail and being recognized in public, getting stopped by strangers wanting a picture. All of this in just a few days. Even though the relentless paparazzi pursuit had settled down, there had been at least 50 different requests for media interviews. Many of them they had denied already and some they still hadn’t gotten the chance to respond to yet even though they had planned to turn them down as well. At the moment, they were struggling to find a balance between maintaining their privacy and using their new-found popularity for a good purpose. They had discussed and agreed that they would probably do a sit-down interview eventually, but that it would have to be the right one and on their terms. Still, this was all very new, so they didn’t feel pressured to have to make any big decisions yet.

“Add it to the rejection pile.” Ashlyn laughs and points to a pile of letters and boxes in the corner that consists of all the media requests and ‘swag’ gifts they’d gotten so far.

“Yeah, no…I think you’re gonna want to see this one.” Ali hands the box to Ashlyn.

“What did they send this time… chocolates?” Ashlyn asks hopefully as she sits up and reaches into the box, pulling out some type of clothing. She unfolds what is in her hand to reveal a twin set of black t-shirts and boxers. Her eyes bug out when she’s sees the name logo printed across them in simple white lettering… Ellen. “No fucking way!” She squeals excitedly.

“Apparently, yes fucking way!” Ali says just as excitedly. “Read the card!”
Ashlyn pulls out the card in the box and has a look at it.

 Dear Ali and Ashlyn,

 I recently came across your story on the news and embarrassingly admit that I hadn’t heard of the podcast until then (at which point I was relentlessly hounded by Portia to listen to it, she’s a big fan). After catching up on the whole thing in 24 hours like a complete madwoman, I found myself inspired and enchanted by the two of you. There is nothing I admire more than strong, independent, powerful, unapologetic, and humble women like yourselves. I would absolutely love to have you on my show to share your story with the world in whatever capacity you are willing to share it, as I know that it will certainly inspire others as it has inspired me. It would be wonderful to work together to figure out a way in which we could use your appearance on the show as a means of making a greater impact on whatever cause(s) is/are important to you. Of course, we will take care of all travel and accommodations and anything else you need. I hope to hear from you soon and have enclosed all of my contact information on the back of the card.

 Sincerely,

 Ellen DeGeneres

 PS- Portia says she isn’t above begging. Please say yes! Please? Pretty please? With a cherry on top? Ok, I’ll stop now. Really though, say yes! #unprofessionalism (yes, I realize that hashtags are pointless when not online).

 “Unreal!” Ashlyn says a bit shocked. “Are you sure we’re not getting Punk’d?”

 “Heck if I know, but I’m going to be excited anyway!” Ali says animatedly. “So, what do we do?”

 “What do we do?! Alex, it’s Ellen. ELLEN DEGENERES! You don’t say no to Ellen… ever.” Ashlyn replies eagerly. “I totally want to do it! What about you?”

 “Of course I do! So, we’re doing it?” Ali asks like an excited puppy.

 “Hell yes we are!” Ashlyn yells out.

 “It’s only like 3pm in California. Should we call the number on the card?” Ali asks.

 “Yeah, might as well.” Ashlyn agrees.

 Ali swiftly dials the number and gets connected directly to Ellen’s manager who is completely thrilled to hear from them. The woman quickly schedules a call for two weeks from now between them and Ellen herself along with the show’s main producer so they can come up with a game plan for the appearance. By the time Ali hangs up about 10 minutes later, the two of them are beside themselves.

 “I think this might be a great time for my first Instagram post!” Ashlyn says giddily. She just created it a couple days ago and only has a few followers… but, if this post goes the way she thinks it will, she’s bound to have more than she can handle if she isn’t careful.

 “What do you have in mind, baby?” Ali asks curiously.

 Forty minutes later, after figuring out the camera timer and taking a few tries to get the lighting just right, not to mention Ali reappplying her make-up… Ashlyn posts her first Instagram photo. It’s a picture of her and Ali on the couch. The officer’s legs are crossed and stretched out resting on the coffee table in front of them while her left arm is draped around the brunette who is cuddled up into
Ashlyn’s side with her legs curled up on the couch and off to the side. They’re wearing their matching Ellen t-shirts and boxers and the caption reads: @theellenshow Our answer is definitely YES! We’ll see you soon :)

It only takes Ellen about 45 minutes to repost it with a high five emoji, a heart eyes emoji, and the caption: Coming soon! So. Excited. #theysaidyes #imfangirling #callmemaybe

After that they both have to turn off their phones for the night because they’re buzzing with so many notifications that the two of them start to worry the devices are going to explode.

““If Julie gets cleared like she’s supposed to in a couple weeks, you think Tim would be up for coming with us to California for the Ellen show trip?” Ali asks as they sit side-by-side on the plane about halfway into their flight to Georgia. “I definitely think we should have some security with us going anywhere near LA given the greater paparazzi presence there. It would be great to have someone familiar.” She adds.

Shortly before Ashlyn was released from prison, Tim’s wife, Julie, had gotten into a car accident that left her with a back injury that required surgery and a long recovery period. Knowing that Julie was going to be laid up in bed for quite a while and it was going to be hard for them to find childcare, Ali insisted that Tim take a fully paid medical leave to stay home and take care of his family. He had protested, feeling like he was taking advantage of Ali, but the brunette hadn’t let him win. Over the last couple of weeks with all the media hoopla, Tim had a called a few times and tried to convince Ali to let him help since Julie was almost back to normal. Ali wouldn’t hear of it though, telling him he wasn’t allowed to come back until Julie had been officially fully cleared. It was expected that she would be cleared at her follow-up appointment in early August.

“I don’t see why not. I’m sure he’d love a little time away after like 6 months of Daddy duty, even if he’d technically be working. Once we actually schedule the appearance and know the date, we can talk to him about it.” Ashlyn replies and takes another sip of her Coke before eating another pretzel.

“I don’t know how you can eat those cheap and mostly stale airline pretzels.” Ali remarks with a cringe, her own bag sitting unopened.

“Well, they’re not great, but they’re not bad either. I haven’t done a whole lot of domestic airline flying because like 80% of my flight experiences were military. And trust me, there are no snacks served on those flights. So, this is still kind of a novelty.” Ashlyn shrugs.

“Oh sure, play the military card. It’s still gross.” Ali teases and entwines their hands together in her lap, letting her head fall back against the seat with a barely audible sigh.

“Are you nervous?” Ashlyn asks, noting Ali’s stiff body language and the fact that she chose to make monotonous conversation about airline pretzels.


“Pesky bitches don’t get nervous, remember?” Ashlyn grins and tries to lighten the mood.

“True. Buuut… I’m still nervous. What if they don’t like me?” Ali asks uneasily.

“They’re going to love you, Alex.” Ashlyn assures her.

“Yeah, but what if they don’t?” Ali persists.
Ashlyn has no reservations about introducing Ali to the guys because she knows they’ll love her, but she knows her anxious and tenacious girlfriend isn’t going to give up her concerns with such simple reassurance. She turns in her seat a bit to face Ali and uses her fingers to lift the brunette’s chin, forcing their eyes to meet. “Then they don’t like you. All that matters is that I love you.” Ashlyn puts it as bluntly as she can.

“Ash, these guys are family to you. If they don’t like me, it’s going to matter.” Ali argues.

“Alex… I love you with my entire being. You are my heart, my soul, my world. I am sure that my brothers will see all of the wonderful things in you that I do and love you like family. But… if for some reason they don’t, then they’ll see how much I love you, come to understand, and learn to love you. And, if they still don’t… then it’ll suck because I will have lost some amazing and close people in my life, but it doesn’t matter in the end as long as I have you. No one else’s opinion changes my love for you. I leave you for nothing and no one, do you understand me?” Ashlyn lays it out for her unfiltered.

Ali leans in and kisses Ashlyn softly. “Got it, Hero. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome my beautiful Paladin. Feel better?” Ashlyn asks.

“Yeah, definitely a bit better. Of course, now I refuse to let them not like me, sooo…” Ali says with a sense of vigor.

“That’s my pesky ass lawyer! Never take no for an answer!” Ashlyn laughs at how Ali seems to be pumping herself up to approach this like a trial. “Relax, Alex. Seriously, just be yourself…you’re perfect, baby.”

“Ok, ok.” Ali relents. “What you said before…same goes for you. Like with my friends and stuff.”

“Very eloquently said, Krieger.” Ashlyn replies with a light chuckle, bringing their usual humor back into the conversation to put Ali at ease.

“Don’t be an ass, Harris, or you won’t get my pretzels!” Ali mockingly warns her and laughs.

“You’re the most well-spoken, intelligent, and incredible woman I’ve ever known.” Ashlyn says as charmingly as she can.

“Thank you, baby.” Ali says with a nose-creaking grin as she tosses her bag of pretzels into Ashlyn’s lap. “Now stop being a kiss ass and tell me more about the guys, I need to be properly prepared!!”

Despite spending an hour during the rest of the flight telling Ali a bit more about the guys and recounting some funny stories about their time together, Ashlyn can tell the brunette is still a bit tense. As the plane makes it final descent, she comes up with a plan to start things off with a little fun that she hopes will break the ice.

“Let’s have some fun with the boys.” Ashlyn says with a devious smile as she locks her tray table into place.

“Uh oh, I know that look. What are you thinking?” Ali asks with curiosity.

“So, the guys listened to the podcast and they know what happened and who you are, obviously.” Ashlyn starts. “But, they don’t know you’re coming and they don’t know we’re together as a couple
or even that it was a possibility. I didn’t get that far with them when we reconnected.”

“Ok, but won’t they know now with all the media stuff?” Ali questions.

“I know those guys like the back of my hand. Porter and Rivera don’t keep up with anything news or social media related and I know that it wouldn’t have occurred to either of them to look you up. So, they will be flying blind. Morris is a different story. He knows me damn well and I know he will have picked up on something that would lead him to do a little research on you. Which means that even though he doesn’t know you’re coming, I’m sure he probably knows what you look like and read the recent gossip stuff.” Ashlyn explains.

“Doesn’t that foil whatever your plan is?” Ali asks in confusion.

“Nope. All I have to do is shoot him one discrete look and he’ll be on-board with whatever is going on.” Ashlyn says with a smile.

“Alright then, Hero… what’s the plan?” Ali sits back and listens, feeling the plane’s wheels hit the runway with a light thud as they land.

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Ashlyn stands by the baggage claim and texts Porter that she is here and where exactly she is. Morris arrived forty minutes ago, so the two of them should already be together. Rivera was set to arrive fifteen minutes after Ashlyn, so he should be wandering into baggage claim any minute now. Ashlyn looks over at Ali standing alone at another baggage claim area one over from hers and shoots the brunette a quick smile before she hears Morris’ unmistakable voice.

“Sarge!” Morris yells as he sees Ashlyn standing 30 feet away, picking up his pace to get to her as he holds a blonde, curly-haired little girl in his arms. Ashlyn sees his signature limp from the prosthetic as Porter follows right behind him with a smile on his face.

“Morris.” Ashlyn says his name fondly and wraps him up in a hug as soon as she’s close enough, careful not to squish the little girl. “It’s so good to see you, buddy.”

“Hey Porter! Been way too long, dude.” Ashlyn lets go of Morris to hug the taller man beside him, who returns her embrace tightly.

“Hey Sarge, damn glad you’re here!” Porter says close to her ear.

“Damn, Harris…you are looking great! Like great, great!” Morris comments.

“Yeah Sarge, fit as hell and this hair! Like a hardcore soldier, should’ve done it a long time ago.” Porter agrees and moves to quickly rub the scruffy hair on the back of her head.

“Thanks. You guys look just as good, haven’t aged a damn day.” Ashlyn says as she looks them over, everything feeling so comfortable and familiar except for one little thing. “And who is this beautiful little princess?” She asks, motioning to the little girl cuddled into Morris’ shoulder.

“This is Lennox. We call her Lexi.” Morris says proudly and strokes the little girl’s hair to try and break her current shyness. “Lexi, can you say hi? This is your Auntie.” He turns her in his arms a
little bit so she can look at Ashlyn more directly.

“Hi cutie, I’m Ashlyn.” She says softly with a smile as she takes Lexi’s little hand into her own.
“She’s beautiful.” She says sincerely, taking in the little girl’s blonde hair just like her mother’s and blue eyes that are completely her father’s, the rest of her face a mix of the two of them. “Jamie didn’t come?” She asks, not seeing his wife.

“No, she has to work. So it’s just me and Lexi flying solo this time.” Morris answers just as Lexi decides to speak up. “Hi. Hi.” Lexi says with a shy smile that practically melts Ashlyn’s heart.

“That right, Lexi. Say hi to Auntie Ashlyn.” Morris encourages her.

“Daddy, Ashlyn like me?” Lexi says as she looks Ashlyn over carefully.

“Yes, Ashlyn just like you.” He confirms to his daughter and looks up to see the confused look on Ashlyn’s face. “It’s her middle name. Lennox Ashlyn Morris.” He explains with a smile.

Ashlyn’s mouth drops open a bit. “Luke, you named your kid after me?” She says in disbelief and addresses him more personally.

“Like there was ever a question.” Morris answers simply.

“Yeah really, Sarge. No brainer if you want your daughter to grow up bad ass.” Porter pipes up.

“I don’t even know what to say…” Ashlyn replies a bit emotionally before Morris stops her.

“Sentimental conversation for another day, Harris. Let’s just have some fun and catch up, it’s been too long.” He says with a kind smile.

“Yeah, ok.” Ashlyn agrees. “Anyway, hi Lexi!” She directs her attention to the little girl and tickles her cheek to make her laugh.

“The party train is here, baby! Hop on it fast before it pulls out the station… toot toot!” They hear Rivera approach them loudly.

“Hey man!” Porter turns around and is the first to greet him with a chest bump.

“I’m going to warn you right now about your mouth, Rivera...little lady in the house.” Morris warns him with a knowing look as he points to Lexi.

“Of course, of course. Hey little bean.” Rivera addresses Lexi with a smile. “Uncle Javi brought you something special, I’ll give it to you when we get to the hotel.” He says sweetly and earns a smile from Lexi who does a little eye roll and says “Unc J, silly.”

“She’s too darn cute, bro. Ah, so good to see you guys!” Rivera says to Morris before turning to Ashlyn. “Sarge.” He says as he looks her up and down with a grin. “I almost didn’t even recognize you over here looking like Zack Morris from Saved by the Bell with that coif, bro!” He teases her.

“Still the same jack wagon, huh Rivera?” Ashlyn shakes her head and can’t help but laugh at the familiar banter between them. “And you wonder why you’re still single.”

“Like you’re one to talk!” Rivera shoots back at her.

“Yeah well, I’ve been in prison, but you have no excuse.” Ashlyn jibes back and watches each of their eyes shift downward. “Hey now… no elephants in the room, boys. It is what it is and I’m right where I should be now. Only forward from here, ok? Hooah!” She addresses it head on.
“Hooah!” The guys reply in unison.

“Come here.” Rivera pulls Ashlyn into a hug even tighter than the other guys. “For real, Sarge… looking real good. I missed this.”

“Me too. Me too.” Ashlyn replies as they start to pull apart.

“Whheew… damn… fine ass honey on your six, Sarge.” Rivera breaks the moment.

Morris and Porter turn their heads to look and Ashlyn turns around a bit too even though she doesn’t have to, a smirk coming to her face when she sees Ali in Rivera’s line of vision.

“Hey, isn’t that…” Morris starts but Ashlyn quickly cuts him off as she shoots him a nearly imperceptible look.

“One of the hottest women I’ve ever seen? Yep.” Ashlyn finishes Morris’ statement before Rivera and Porter can get wise to what is going on.

“Yeah, well, I saw her first… and I’m gonna need to go talk to her.” Rivera announces.

“Fair enough.” Ashlyn replies, trying to keep her composure. “Good luck with that, Rivera. No way she’s giving you the time of day.” She challenges.

“Oh she will. Just watch.” Rivera promises. “I’ll be right back… with her number.” He adds cockily and he starts strutting towards the brunette.

Ashlyn does her best to stifle a laugh as Morris discretely taps her on the elbow and shoots her quick knowing grin.

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Ali watches Ashlyn casually from a comfortable distance, seeing her embrace these broad, handsome men as she smiles happily. Even from this far away she can see how connected they all are to each other, their body language speaking volumes. She feels her heart flutter as her girlfriend tickles the little blonde girl’s cheek and the child lets out a little belly laugh. The scene unfolding in front of her makes her settle down inside for some reason that she can’t explain. ‘That woman is actually mine.’ Ali thinks to herself as she watches Ashlyn from afar, her heart swelling at the thought. As soon as that thought crosses her mind, she sees the Hispanic looking guy that must be Rivera lock eyes with her and smirk as he hugs Ashlyn. Just a minute later the man is walking right towards her like a rooster with his chest puffed out, Ashlyn smirking behind him in the distance.

“Here we go.” She mutters to herself. Other than the basic plan, Ashlyn had given her no directions other than ‘just have fun with it.’

“Hi there. I’m Javi.” Rivera says and holds his hand out towards Ali.

“Alexandra” Ali replies coolly and shakes his hand, using her full name in case the nickname gave her away.

“Hi Alexandra. Saw you over here by yourself and thought maybe you’d like a hand with your bags.” He says charmingly.

“Oh well, thanks, but they’re pretty heavy so I’ll just use a pushcart.” Ali tries to shoot him a down a bit to see what happens.
“I can handle it. I’m a former Army Ranger, so no bag is too heavy.” Rivera brags as Ali tries not to roll her eyes. “So, are you from around here?” He tries to make conversation.


“Originally from Mexico, but a US citizen for a long time and from Texas. I’ve spent a lot of time nearby here at Fort Benning during my military days though, so I know the area.” He replies with an agenda.

“This is my first time here.” Ali plays into his game.

“Well maybe I can show you around during one of the next couple nights. In fact, have you ever tried Mexican sausage?” Rivera asks with a smug grin.

‘Tell me he isn’t about to say what I think he’s about to.’ Ali thinks to herself and fights back a laugh as she plays along. “No, I haven’t.”

“Well, if you’d like to… I can definitely help you out with that while you’re here.” Rivera says with raised eyebrows and an insinuating smirk.

‘And he went there.’ Ali is practically dying laughing inside as she tries to stay composed. “Well, Javi… I’m going to have to pass… the thing is, I’m more of a taco girl.” She shoots her own smirk at him and watches his eyes go wide. “Though let me just say, that line was actually kind of nasty and I really hope you were kidding.”

“Um, oh, ok.” Rivera stutters and tries to recover. “You sure I can’t change your mind? I’m really good company.” He tries again, testing to see if she was serious about the taco comment.

“I’m sure.” Ali rolls her eyes. “Despite you not being properly equipped, I’m also seeing someone, so…” Ali lets the statement hang in the air.

“All right, I know when I’ve overstayed my welcome. Sorry about that. Have a great day and time in Georgia, Alexandra.” He says with a slight head nod that signals his disappointment.

“You too, Javi. Bye.” Ali gives him a dismissive little wave and watches him walk back to the group with a notable slump in his shoulders.

I didn’t see her hand you a number, Rivera. Did you guys see a number exchange?” Ashlyn teases Rivera as he approaches them with a glum look.

“Looks like a swing and a miss to me… Strike!” Porter adds to the joking.

“Not fair, I didn’t really have any chance. Turns out she likes pu…uh, kitty.” Rivera catches himself with a warning look from Morris as he defends himself.

“Oh well then… that’s my department!” Ashlyn says cheerily. “Let me show you how it’s done, Rivera.”

“Oh please, Sarge, no way in hell you pull it off. Plus, she said she’s seeing someone.” Rivera says still a bit defensively.

“She said that to get rid of you, Rivera. I’d bet money on it.” Ashlyn eggs him on.

“Alright, alright. Let’s make it interesting then, Sarge.” Rivera says as he tries to come up with
something good.

“Ooooh, here we go!” Morris jokes.


“You’re on, Rivera.” Ashlyn says confidently.

“Ok, if you go over there and get her real number… I’ll pay for full deluxe breakfast room service for you tomorrow morning. If you don’t, you pay for the same breakfast for me.” Rivera suggests.

“Get ready to pony up, bro.” Ashlyn says to Rivera with a wink and makes a beeline for Ali.

“Hi beautiful.” Ashlyn smiles as she approaches Ali.

“Hey, baby. Having fun?” Ali asks but keeps her face neutral to keep up the ruse.

“Seeing as how Rivera is going to be buying us a full deluxe room service breakfast in the morning… yep, so much fun!” Ashlyn says, her back mostly turned to the guys so they can’t see her face.

“Well, I certainly hope it doesn’t include Mexican sausage.” Ali rolls her eyes a bit.

“Oh man, he didn’t?!“ Ashlyn says incredulously.

“Oh, he did. I told him I preferred tacos.” Ali shrugs with a slight smile.

Ashlyn fights hard not to explode into laughter. “That might be the funniest damn thing ever! I wish I had thought to have you record it. No wonder he came back over there so dejected and claiming you were into women….well, he actually said ‘kitty’, would have been worse if Lexi wasn’t there.”

“Awww, is that her name, Lexi? She’s really cute.” Ali remarks.

“Yeah, that’s Morris’ daughter that I just met. Turns out her middle name is Ashlyn, I had no idea.” Ashlyn explains, trying not to let herself get choked up by it.

“Thought I saw you looking a little misty over there; that explains it.” Ali says with a sweet smile.

“Alright, should we get this show on the road?” Ashlyn asks with a smirk.

“Absolutely. So, exactly how badly do you want me to bruise his ego?” Ali asks with her own smirk.

“Seeing as he just offered you his dick, I’m gonna say crush him.” Ashlyn winks.

“You got it, Captain.” Ali says as she steps closer to her.

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“Oh, did you see that?! She totally rolled her eyes at Sarge! Breakfast is mine.” Rivera says excitedly as he watches the interaction between the two women closely. He wishes he could see Harris’ face so he could get a better indication, but it doesn’t seem to be going well.

“I don’t know, bro… that kinda looked like a smile.” Porter adds.

Morris just watches on in amusement and stays silent, trying hard not to laugh and blow the whole
thing even though he doesn’t know the extent of it.

“Nah, she just shrugged. That was a fake smile.” Rivera replies.

“Oh bro, now that one was a real smile. Sarge has her smiling.” Porter points out.

“So what? She smiled at me too.” Rivera argues a bit as he watches the hot brunette step closer to Harris.

“Sorry Rivera, but I think Sarge is about to get that number.” Porter teases him as they all watch the brunette get into Harris’ personal space, her hand now going to the back of the short-haired woman’s neck.

“Looks to me like she’s about to get more than her number.” Morris can’t help but join in now as he watches Harris’ hands go to the brunette’s waist and they start to lean into each other.

“Oh damn…get it, Sarge.” Porter says loudly.

“No. Fucking. Way!” Rivera yells out with his mouth hanging open as he watches the brunette kiss Harris hard, the two of them really getting into it. “Oh come on! What the hell did she say to her?!?” He adds in defeat.

Morris just shakes his head, having quickly covered Lexi’s ears in anticipation of Rivera’s outburst.

“Mmmm.” Ashlyn moans softly into the heated kiss, forcing herself to pull back a bit when she realizes they’re in public at the airport. She pecks Ali lightly one more time before fully breaking the contact. “I could do that all damn day.” She smiles.

“Well we could, but maybe we should go put Javi over there out of his misery first?” Ali replies with a grin.

“Oh hell yes.” Ashlyn agrees and takes Ali’s hand, leading her over to the guys. Porter and Morris are smiling, but Rivera looks to be in shock as he stands there with his mouth open and his eyes wide.

“Seriously?! I got the women only message, but you said you were seeing someone.” Rivera addresses Ali as they get close.

“Oh, but I am. This sexy woman right here.” Ali replies as she quickly pecks Ashlyn on the lips and watches Rivera’s eyes get wider as his face registers confusion.

“Guys, this is Ali Krieger… once my lawyer, now my girlfriend.” Ashlyn introduces Ali with a shit-eating grin on her face.

Porter and Morris just laugh while Rivera shakes his head in disbelief. “You seriously sent me over there to hit on your girlfriend, Sarge?” Rivera says incredulously, now laughing a bit himself.

“I didn’t send you anywhere, Rivera. If you remember correctly, you did that of your own accord.” Ashlyn teases him. “FYI, I still win and you still owe me breakfast… her too for putting up with your nasty ass pick-up line.” She says as she points to Ali. “Can’t believe you still use that!” She shakes her head at him.

“Damn, got me good, Sarge.” Rivera concedes. “I definitely owe you breakfast.”
“That was probably the greatest thing ever!” Porter is still laughing as Morris nods in agreement.

“Anyway, Alex... these are the guys. This is Porter, and this is Morris and little Lexi. And you already met Rivera.” Ashlyn introduces her to each of them.

Ali waves at them with a smile. “Yeah, so I’m not military and I’m going to need some first names.” She says sweetly.

“Luke.” Morris says with a smile and pulls Ali into a light hug, knowing damn well if Harris brought her, there’s a good reason.

“Nathan.” Porter steps up next and shakes her hand.

“Of course, I already know you, Javi.” Ali winks at Rivera who groans and shakes her hand.

“Nice to properly meet you, Ali. Really sorry about that.” Rivera says apologetically.

“No worries, all in good fun.” Ali assures him. “But we are seriously going to work on your pick-up lines before you end up with a tramp and an STD. Let’s work on something that will get you a nice girl, ok?” She adds with a laugh as Ashlyn chuckles beside her.

“Deal. My mama is gonna love you! She’s been trying to marry me off for like a decade.” Javi laughs.

“Really great to meet all of you.” Ali says genuinely before going over to properly say hello to Lexi who doesn’t play shy at all and reaches out for Ali to hold her right away.

“Belle!” Lexi says as a somewhat surprised Ali takes the little girl from Luke.

Morris lets out a loud laugh. “Sorry, Ali. She’s big into Disney princesses these days. Apparently, you’re Belle.”

“Well she’s not wrong. This one is a princess and a beauty, sooo…” Ashlyn motions towards Ali with a smile.

“See, now that’s how you do it, Javi.” Ali can’t help but tease him again as she refers to Ashlyn’s statement.

“Noted.” Rivera acknowledges.

“This is Ali, honey. She’s not Belle, but she does look like her.” Morris gently corrects Lexi who is holding onto Ali tightly in the brunette’s arms.


“You got it, munchkin.” Ali says adoringly.

“Allright, so I’m going to drive you guys over to the base hotel so you can get checked in and settled. We’re doing dinner and the like at my house tonight. Kristen and the boys are getting a feast ready and I’ll do some grilling. Our place is a 5min walk from the hotel and there’s a shuttle if you don’t want to walk. I’m thinking everyone can meet at my place at like 3pm? That sound good for tonight?” Porter pipes up to lay out the plan and everyone agrees to it.

“Ok, Princess here will get the little princess.” Ashlyn motions to Ali who is still holding Lexi and making her heart melt at the sight. “The rest of us will handle all the bags.”
“Aye, Sarge.” The guys say in unison like they are still under her command and Ali smiles a bit at the interaction.

“You owe us one hell of a story, Harris.” Morris says as they walk through the airport, Ali walking a little bit ahead of them.

“Yeah, Sarge. Give us the dirty.” Rivera adds.

“Can we just acknowledge that Harris brought a girl to meet us?” Porter chimes in.

“Well I like her already. Girl has cojones.” Rivera says as he elbows Ashlyn lightly and gives her a thumbs up.

“Easy boys. I promise Alex and I will give you the full background on how we got to this point later tonight, ok?” Ashlyn assures them.

“So do we call her Ali or Alex?” Morris asks noting the dual names.

“You guys call her Ali… I call her Alex.” Ashlyn replies with slightly raised eyebrows.

“Gotcha.” Morris replies putting an arm around her shoulders and pulling her into his side as they walk along. “She seems incredible and she’s beautiful too.”

“Don’t have to tell me.” Ashlyn gives him a knowing look. When he smiles widely in return, she knows he got the nonverbal message about how serious she is about Ali. “Missed you so damn much, Luke.”

“Missed you too, Ashlyn.” He replies softly, the two of them having their more personal moment as the other two guys are distracted in conversation together.

Rivera is the first one to snicker as Porter leads them over to a minivan in the parking garage.

“Not one damn word. When you guys have twin boys, then you can insult my car choice. Until then, this is the P-FAV.” Porter says in warning.

“P-FAV?” Morris asks on behalf of all of them.


Rivera takes shotgun and Morris takes the single seat next to Lexi as Ashlyn and Ali take the rearmost seat. Fifteen minutes later, Porter checks in with the guards at the Fort Benning entrance and navigates to the base hotel where he drops them all off. “See you guys in like two hours. I’m texting you all the address in case you need it.. Come hungry!” He reminds them before driving away.

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When Ali had originally heard they’d be staying at the base hotel, she had prepared herself for a Holiday Inn like experience. Contrary to her expectations, Abrams Hall Hotel is actually really nice. The place is spacious with modern décor, high ceilings, and a full-set of amenities that make it more like a nice Hilton than a Holiday Inn. Shortly after checking-in, they had each split off to their
respective rooms to relax and get ready for dinner. Ali had been even more pleasantly surprised to find that their room was a pretty large suite with a separate living room area, a kitchenette, a bathroom that featured a large tub and shower combo, and a bedroom containing a king-size bed with a very inviting soft gray comforter on it.

“So, thoughts?” Ashlyn asks as she wraps her arms around Ali’s waist from behind after locking the door to their room and dropping their bags in an out of the way spot. The brunette had just come back into the living room area after taking a quick tour of the room.

“Oh my gosh, they are great!” Ali answers with honest enthusiasm. “I really didn’t know quite what to expect, but they are really nice and so funny!”

“I trained them well.” Ashlyn jokes before getting serious. “For the record, I’ve pretty much been told they already like you too.”

“Really?” Ali asks anxiously as she turns around in Ashlyn’s arms.

“Really. You can relax, baby. They might still decide to pull a full on inquisition, but it’s just for show.” Ashlyn assures her. “Just be yourself, you’re amazing. And… I love you.”

“I love you too, Ash. Thank you… for bringing me here and making me a part of this. I do realize the extent of what it means.” Ali replies, leaning up to meet the officer’s lips and letting her emotions manifest physically with a romantic gentle kiss that they get lost in for quite a while.

“Naked nap before we have to get ready?” Ashlyn suggests once they eventually pull apart, just wanting to feel Ali’s skin on hers.

“Absolutely.” Ali replies with a smile and strips in record time, pulling Ashlyn into the bed with her and cuddling right against her. “So, ‘Sarge’ huh?” She questions as she rests her head on Ashlyn’s chest and lightly traces the inked designs of the full-sleeved arm that holds her close.

“Yes, they’ve always called me that despite the fact we’re not enlisted anymore and Porter actually outranks me now as an officer. I guess old habits die hard.” Ashlyn responds.

“It’s sweet how they respect you like that. Makes me like them even more.” Ali smiles into Ashlyn’s chest. “And how damn cute is Lexi?”

‘I know right?! I mean Morris is a good looking guy and Jamie, his wife, is a knock-out. So, I guess it’s no surprise, but still… she’s so adorable. And she’s clearly already obsessed with you, which makes her even cuter.” Ashlyn says as she kisses the top of Ali’s head. “Can’t believe they partially named her after me.” She muses emotionally.

“I can. You’re an amazing human being, Ash. And I love that I’m not the only one that knows it.” Ali leans up and finds Ashlyn’s lips with her own, not giving her a chance to give her usual humble reply. “Get some rest, Hero. I’m sure we have a long night.”

“Ok. So happy you’re here with me, baby.” Ashlyn mutters against Ali’s lips and kisses her softly one more time as she pulls her in closer, the two of them shutting their eyes and eventually falling asleep in the warmth of each other.

Ali has to admit she had quite a narrow-minded view of what a military base looked like, as she walks through what appears to be typical suburban neighborhoods and nice normal homes. “I had no idea military housing was so nice.” She remarks as they make their way to Porter’s house.
“What were you expecting, concrete motel looking buildings?” Ashlyn asks playfully.

“Actually, I kinda was.” Ali confesses.

Ashlyn lightly laughs. “I think smaller bases aren’t quite as nice, but this one is pretty amazing. Probably because so many Rangers are based here.”

“Right, because you all are fancy divas.” Ali teases.

“Damn right. We earned the right to be divas!” Ashlyn plays back.

A few minutes later they arrive at Porter’s house, a typical Georgian architecture home with a brick façade that sits on a perfectly manicured lawn. Ashlyn rings the doorbell and hears a distant “Come on in, it’s open!” through the open window next to the door. The officer has been here once before, so she knows to head right down the hall and into the kitchen, leading Ali by the hand.

“Hey, Kris!” Ashlyn cheerily greets Porter’s wife who is behind the kitchen counter working on something.

“Ashlyn! Hi darlin’!” Kristen quickly drops the dish towel she was holding and rapidly makes her way to the officer for a hug. “Look at you with this hair, total babe!” The good looking, light brown-haired woman adds with a huge smile as she releases Ashlyn and notices Ali.

“Hi, I’m Kristen. You can call me, Kris though.” She introduces herself in her thick southern accent and goes in for a hug.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Ali.” Ali replies returning the hug that should feel awkward but somehow doesn’t.

“And Ali is…” Kristen says looking at Ashlyn.

“My girlfriend.” Ashlyn answers with a smile.

“Thought so. I figured when Nate said you had a guest, but I just wanted to make you say it.” Kristen winks. “You are just beautiful, Ali. You done good Sergeant! ” Kristen adds and watches them both blush.

“Thank you, you’re sweet. I’m so sorry we didn’t let you know I was coming. This one wanted it to be a surprise.” Ali points at Ashlyn, who just shrugs.

“Don’t even worry about it! I cooked enough to feed an army… literally.” Kristen laughs at her own joke.

“Can we help with anything?” Ali asks politely.

“Absolutely not! Everything is pretty much done anyway. Ashlyn knows the drill, just go grab yourself some drinks out of the fridge and head out to the patio. The other guys are here already. And the kids are running amuck in the yard.” Kristen instructs them.

“Thanks, Kris.” Ashlyn smiles and makes her way to the fridge, grabbing a bottle of beer and a water and holding them up for Ali to decide. “Which way are we going to tonight?”

“Well if I’m going to be interrogated, we’re definitely going left.” Ali answers pointing to the beer in Ashlyn’s left hand.

“Just remember their bark is worse than their bite. A bunch of kittens when you get down to it really.
You’ll be fine.” Kristen laughs at the mocking glare Ashlyn is giving her as she encourages Ali.

“Hey now. We’re ferocious, bad ass kittens, ok?” Ashlyn defends and grabs two beers as she puts the water bottle back.

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, Sergeant.” Kristen rolls her eyes and Ali lets out a chuckle.

The two of them head out to the patio as Kristen goes to finish up whatever she was doing when they came in.

“Ah the entertainment has arrived!” Rivera says while rubbing his hands together for effect.

“Welcome to casa Porter. Help yourself to the spread.” Porter says motioning to a table of snacks.

“Entertainment?” Ali asks looking at Ashlyn.

“Yeah. We owe these guys the background story on our elicit prison love affair… you know, cause they don’t read TMZ.” Ashlyn jokes.

“Ah, right.” Ali shakes her head with a smile. “Such a shame, the tabloids did a really great job at recounting the story.” Ali rolls her eyes.

Just as Ashlyn sits in the only empty Adirondack chair and pulls Ali to sit in her lap, the kids come running through the patio.

“Woah, hold up minions!” Porter calls out to the boys. “Come say hi to Aunt Ashlyn. And that is Ali.”

“Hi.” The two boys say in unison with a small wave.

“My dudes!” Ashlyn says excitedly and holds out a hand which they each high five. “Wow, last time I saw you guys, I could actually hold both of you at once. So big!” She says in disbelief at how fast the almost five-year-old twins have grown. “Let’s see if I can get this right… this is Everett and this is Emory.” She says, introducing them to Ali who waves and says hello. She groans when she sees the two boys giggle. “And obviously I got that wrong, so reverse ‘em. You’re identical guys, give me a break!”

The boys quickly run off laughing with Lexi trailing right behind them after jumping off of Morris’ lap. Kristen comes out and quickly makes herself comfortable sitting on the arm of Porter’s chair.

“What did I miss?” Kristen asks.

“Nothing. We were just waiting on Sarge here to fill us in.” Morris says with a raised eyebrow as the other two guys join him with expectant looks.

“Alright, alright.” Ashlyn takes a sip of beer and looks at Ali. “Do you want to start or should I?”

“You go right ahead. Make it good, Harris.” Ali teases with a wink.

“Once upon a time, in a prison far far away, two women sat longingly staring and separated by a cheap plexi-glass window…” Ashlyn starts, trying to keep a straight face but failing when everyone on the patio erupts into laughter.

“Longingly, huh? Yeah no.” Ali smirks. “Someone over here was a totally closed-off asshole the first time I visited her.”
“Oh come on, I wasn’t that bad. To my credit, you were being nosey!” Ashlyn defends herself.

“I’m a lawyer! That’s my job!” Ali argues.

“Well you’re good at it, nosy Nellie.” Ashlyn sticks her tongue out.

“Oh man, this is already too good. Get to the good stuff, lovebirds!” Rivera laughs at the couple’s banter.

They back track just a bit to explain how Ashlyn had listened to Ali’s previous podcasts and had been curious enough to accept her visit request, and that Ali was Kyle’s sister and first visited at his request. Having met Kyle once, the guys finally start putting it all together and Ashlyn continues from there.

“And that is how I snagged the hottest, most bad ass lawyer in the business.” Ashlyn finishes after they give the guys just about every detail, save for the intimate ones.

“Correction. I snagged you.” Ali says and leans in for a brief kiss.

“Damn, your dumb ass leaves her high and dry for like 6 months and you still get the girl!” Rivera admires teasingly. “That’s like some romance movie shit right there. Lucky bastard, Harris!”

“Wow, well that was a lot more than I read in the tabloids. Quite a story!” Morris adds.

“Woah, hold up, what? You knew this whole time?” Rivera questions.

“Yep. Sorry man, but it was fun to watch you face plant.” Morris laughs.

“Traitor!” Rivera jokingly accuses him.

“Not my fault you don’t listen to the news, these two are the hot new ‘it’ couple.” Morris replies.

“Yeah, sorry Rivera… I didn’t know either, but that was hilarious and I would’ve done the same thing if I was him.” Porter weighs in.

‘Some squad you are!” Rivera shakes his head. “Letting me embarrass myself by hitting on someone else’s girlfriend.”

“Oh honey, tell me you didn’t use the sausage line?” Kristen says with a raised eyebrow.

“He did.” Ali confirms with a grin. “I’m working on getting him some better material.”

“Such ball busters.” Rivera chuckles. “I need another beer for this.”

“Someone has to do it! Well, I’m just gonna say that you two are adorable together since these lugnuts won’t say it.” Kristen says smiling at Ashlyn and Ali who smile back. “And on that note, let’s do dinner!”

Dinner goes smoothly, filled small talk and plenty of prank stories among the Rangers. Everyone was pretty curious to hear about Ali’s prior podcast cases, so she spends some time talking a bit about those. After eating, everyone goes back to relaxing on the patio like they were before.

“You alright there, bud?” Ashlyn asks Morris when she sees him rubbing the area where his prosthetic leg connects at his calf.

“Oh yeah, fine. After all this time, the damn thing is still uncomfortable to wear on a hot day.” He
replies with a shrug before looking at Ali. “Everyone else here is used to it, so I’ll just ask you. Will it make you uncomfortable if I take this off?” He motions to the prosthetic, knowing he’s wearing shorts and his leg will be on full display.

Ali is so taken aback by the question that she answers without even thinking. “Seriously? You lost that leg defending this country so that people like me could sit home cozily and not think twice about pursuing whatever the hell we want, and you’re asking ME if I’d be uncomfortable to see it? Ask me that question again, Luke, and I might just have to smack you… got it?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Morris replies with a smile as he takes off the fake leg and gets comfortable.

Ashlyn grins proudly not having missed the looks of respect that were quickly shot around the patio among the other guys. She pulls Ali a little bit closer on her lap and leans up a bit to give her a quick kiss on the lips, whispering “love you” really quietly.

“Yikes, it’s already 7:30pm. I better get these kiddos off to bed.” Kristen says as she walks back outside. “Luke, Lexi is still staying here tonight so they can all play in the morning, right?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Morris replies.

“Alright, come on littles! Say goodnight to everyone.” Kristen directs them and the kids make their way around the patio to give goodnight hugs to everyone.

“Three kids is a handful. Why don’t you go help her out, Aunt Ashlyn?” Porter suggests with a clear agenda.

“Would you mind?” Kristen asks.

“Not at all.” Ashlyn replies coolly, knowing this is clearly the scheme they must have come up with before she and Ali got here. “Kittens, remember.” She whispers into Ali’s ear encouragingly and kisses her on the cheek as the brunette slips off her lap. “Behave.” She points at the guys with her finger before heading into the house behind Kristen.

Ali settles back into the chair that Ashlyn just vacated, the warmth of the officer still on it. She sips her beer and looks around to see each of the guys looking at her and leaning in a bit. “So… is this the part where you ask me what my intentions with your Sergeant are?” She takes the bull by the horns.

“Nope, think you two have made that pretty clear.” Morris takes control of the conversation.

“Yeah, Harris bringing you to meet us pretty much told us everything we need to know about her intentions. You’re the first, in case you didn’t know that.” Porter adds.

“She told me that.” Ali confirms.

“We’re really protective of her, Ali. She’s family, more so than blood family in many ways. Hell, she’s the reason my ass is even sitting here right now.” Rivera says almost emotionally.

“What we’re trying to say is that we just want what’s best for her and to see her happy.” Morris tries to explain for them. “She’s been through more than most people can even survive and she deserves the world.”

“I know… well at least a good amount of it anyway. She’s opened up and told me some things and I hope she opens up more.” Ali replies. “I honestly love that woman more than words can express. I
loved her before I even knew whether we had a chance and it only gets stronger with every passing day. She’s by far the greatest person I’ve ever met and I’ll never get over the fact that she loves me…it’s a privilege that I don’t and won’t take for granted. Like you, I just want to see her happy and thriving…and I’ll move hell and earth to make sure it happens. I’m just going to tell you guys what I told my brother after my first date with her. If Ashlyn had asked me to marry her that first night, I would have said yes without a second thought or single regret. She’s everything. Are those intentions clear enough for you guys?” Ali gives them the bold truth.

“Well, thanks for that heartfelt monologue, Ali…but, we know.” Porter says with a grin.

“Yeah, not where we were going with this, but it’s nice to hear.” Rivera adds. “And you’re totally hot on top of it all. Such a lucky bastard that Harris.” He shakes his head with a smile.

“We know exactly what your intentions are…you’ve done something for her that none of us have.” Morris brings the discussion back to being serious.

“What’s that?” Ali asks, unsure what he could be referring to.

“We all listened to that podcast. You flat out died for her, Ali.” Morris says solemnly.

Ali nods, taking a second to process the heavy conversation. “And I’d do it again.” She says with simplistic finality.

“Hooah.” Porter replies quietly and the others follow suit with Rivera reaching over and holding his fist out for her to bump.

After a minute of comfortable silence between them, Ali speaks up. “So, if we weren’t out here for that conversation that just happened anyway… what exactly are we doing here, guys?”

“We actually just wanted to get you alone so we could give you these.” Morris says, reaching into his pocket and handing something to Ali.

Ali takes the item from him and holds it in her hands, inspecting it closely. It’s a set of two dog tags embossed in black metal and on a ball chain. They’re identical to each other and read:

HARRIS
ASHLYN M
122-24-1811 TF88
O NEG.
NO PREFERENCE

Ali gets that they’re obviously Ashlyn’s dog tags, but she’s not sure of the significance or why the guys are the ones giving them to her. “I’m assuming this has some serious meaning?” She asks.

“Correct.” Morris replies. “But, I think Harris should be the one to tell you about that. All we ask is that you make sure you give them a proper debut.” He says with a raised eyebrow that insinuates plenty.

“Oook, so what you’re saying is that it’s not some kind of offensive sacrilege to be wearing these naked?” Ali clarifies and puts them safely in her pocket.
“She catches on quick!” Rivera replies.

“And I think we’re done here!” Porter says with a laugh. “Welcome to the family, Ali. We sure as hell hope you’re staying.”

“A long, long time. Forever really.” Morris adds with a smile.

“Please, we’ll be having wheelchair races when we’re 80, boys. Count on it!” Ali replies lightly, but her message clear. “Thanks though, for well, whatever this was. I mean… I don’t know exactly what it means, but I know it means something important. I sort of gets what it means, even if I still don’t know exactly what it means. Oh, you know what I mean!” The words come out in a jumbled repetitive mess.

“Hmmm, and you’re the one who got Harris through that trial, huh?” Rivera teases her and they all laugh. “So much for well-spoken.”

“I blame the beer!” Ali jokes backs.

“Uh oh, what are we blaming the beer for?” Ashlyn says as she comes back out onto the patio.

“Javi’s lack of lady skills.” Ali covers quickly and gets up so Ashlyn can sit again.

“No surprise there.” Ashlyn laughs, knowing that something else was going on but understanding that she shouldn’t pry.

“You guys all suck.” Rivera throws up a middle finger at them.

“You ok?” Ashlyn asks Ali discretely as the brunette sits back down on her lap.

“Never better.” Ali replies with a sweet smile and kisses her softly.

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After another hour or so of banter and then agreeing to meet Porter at 9am to watch one of his training sessions with his unit, everyone says goodnight and starts to head out. On the walk back to the base hotel Ashlyn, Ali and Morris continue to tease Rivera about his awful pick-up lines as he graces them with what he thinks are some of his best ones, or worst as the case may be.

“How about… is that a cellphone in your back pocket? Cause that ass is calling me!” Rivera says proudly.

“Oh, dude. And I thought the sausage thing was bad.” Ashlyn shakes her head.

“Come on, it’s gold!” Rivera argues.

“No bro, just no.” Morris tells him.

“Seriously.” Ali agrees. “Okay, well now I just have to know even though I kind of don’t want to… but, what’s the absolute worst one you’ve ever used?”

“Oh, I don’t know if you want to hear that one. Even I’m embarrassed about it.” Rivera warns.

“Well now you have to tell us!” Ashlyn urges him.
“Alright, alright. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Rivera relents. “So, I get positively wasted at a bar with my buddies one night and I end up dancing with this really good looking blonde for like an hour. And she’s dancing all up on me and I’m just ready to get her home. Except that I’m so drunk that I’m not thinking straight. Probably would have been smart to just kiss her and get her to come home with me. Instead, I decide I need to throw out some dirty line to get her excited about maybe leaving with me.” He tells the backstory.

“Here we go.” Morris says with a grin.

“Anyway, I start pulling her away from the dance floor and she’s all like ‘where we going?’”. And what do I say? I actually get in her space and go ‘I hope you have pet insurance baby, cause I’m about to destroy that pussy.’” Rivera finishes with a cringe.

“Oh my god, Javi! That is so foul!” Ali says covering her mouth in shock as Ashlyn and Morris laugh.

“I know, I know. I tried to warn you! Even I think it was messed up!” Rivera says with his hands up. “Worst part is that I thought I was being discrete. Nope. I yelled it loud enough that half the room heard me. My buddies will never let me live it down. They still meow at me when we hang out.”

“So gross, bro.” Ashlyn says as she puts her hands on his shoulders. “Don’t worry though, Alex here is gonna set you right in no time.”

“Count on it!” Ali confirms as they get to the hotel entrance. The group makes a quick plan to meet up in the lobby at 8:30am the next morning and says goodnight before heading to their respective rooms.

“Finally have you to myself!” Ashlyn says with a smile as she closes hotel room door behind her. “So, tell me… did it go ok with the guys? I didn’t want to leave you to fend for yourself like that, but I knew they’d find a way eventually. What happened?”

“Easy, baby.” Ali says as she walks towards the officer and drapes her arms over her shoulders. “It was perfectly fine. It was a mostly lighthearted and easy conversation that ended in me making my intentions with you very clear. Let’s just say that me and guys understand each other very well.”

Ashlyn wants to pry further, but she can tell by Ali’s answer that it’s going to be left mysterious. She knows the gist of it anyway, the same conversations were had with Jamie and Kristen before they married Morris and Porter. Instead she lets herself get lost in Ali’s eyes for a moment, letting the events of the day sink in a bit. “Watching you get along so well with the guys today… it does things to me, Krieger.” She admits with a smirk.

“Likewise. Seeing you with them, it’s learning this whole new part of you and completely falling in love with it. They’re amazing, you’re amazing. I’m so happy to be here with you… thank for asking me to come.” Ali says sweetly.

Ashlyn can’t hold back all the swirling emotions anymore and leans in to kiss the brunette heatedly, the way she’s wanted to all day. They both fight for dominance of the kiss, tongues dueling as Ashlyn tightens her grip on Ali’s waist and Ali’s hands go to the back of Ashlyn’s head. Ali hears the soft moan from Ashlyn which signals that this is about to quickly amplify and she forces herself to pull back, acutely aware of the two metal tags pressed against her thigh. The same ones she was clutching inside her pocket the whole walk back to the hotel.

“Slow your roll, Harris. Let me use the bathroom and freshen up a bit, I’ve been sweating all day.”
Ali says with a smile as she pulls back, her hands now on the officer’s chest.

“Ugh, seriously?” Ashlyn groans before pleading “Hurry.”

“Be patient, baby.” Ali smirks at her. “And… be naked by the time I get back.” She adds with a wink as she heads into the bathroom.

“Yes, Ma’am!” Ashlyn says excitedly with a little salute and heads right to the bedroom to follow instructions.

Ali laughs at the officer’s eagerness before heading into the bathroom. Once in there she immediately sheds her clothes, pulling the dog tags out of her pocket and taking another close look at them. She’s dying to understand the full meaning behind them, but she knows she has to be patient and get this right. Whatever they mean, she wants the moment to be poignant for Ashlyn. With that in mind, she quickly wipes herself off a bit with a soapy washcloth to freshen up and reapplies her mascara so she’s satisfied with how she looks. She finally puts the dog tags around her neck, taking a second to admire how they look against her skin in the mirror, before putting on the fluffy robe that was hanging on the door and making sure it’s tied tight so the tags don’t show. With one last deep breathe, she opens the door and walks into the bedroom.

“I so totally love how well you follow orders, Harris.” Ali says with a wily grin, making her presence known after taking a few seconds to admire the muscular art-covered body lying on the bed waiting for her.

“Hey now, that’s not fair.” Ashlyn complains as she puts her phone down on the nightstand and sits up a bit. “You told me to get naked, but you put on a robe.”

“Right, because you can’t resolve that problem in less than a second?” Ali says in playful sarcasm.

“Well then get over here so I can resolve it.” Ashlyn demands.

Ali turns off the main light, leaving on only the corner desk lamp which casts a warm glow in the room. She slowly crawls her way up the bed and lays beside Ashlyn, her hands immediately framing the officer’s face to pull her into a hungry kiss. She feels Ashlyn’s hands start to wander around her waist and lower back and she drops her own hands down to the officer’s arms to keep them in that general vicinity.

“God, Alex. The way you kiss me…” Ashlyn trails off, her eyes darkened with desire as they pull apart to breathe for a few seconds. She barely sees the smile form on Ali’s lips before she briefly crashes their lips together again, dragging her teeth on the brunette’s bottom lip before moving down her neck with open-mouth kisses.

Ali lets out a whimper as Ashlyn hovers over her, the officer’s mouth working right along the edge of the robe at her neckline. Hearing her own whimper makes her immediately aware that she needs to gain control of the situation fast if she’s going to make this happen the way she envisions. She moves to sit up a bit, grabbing the back of Ashlyn’s head and pulling her into another heated kiss as she flips their positions quickly so she’s the one hovering now. She keeps them locked in the kiss as she swings her leg to straddle the officer’s hips and drops her body down so that their pressed together, her hand raking over Ashlyn’s side.

“Mmmm, baby.” Ashlyn moans breathily against Ali’s lips, both of them as desperate for air as they are for each other.

Ali rests her forehead on Ashlyn’s and opens her eyes, the two of them breathing heavily in the same
space. She gazes into the beautiful hazel orbs that never cease to mesmerize her and knows this is the moment. “I love you, Ash. I love you above all else. I can’t picture a life without you in it anymore and know that forever will never be long enough.” She pours her heart out as she sits up on Ashlyn’s hips and takes her hands into her own.

“I love you too, Alex… forever. You’re my heart.” Ashlyn says back, the moment intense with their eyes locked onto each other’s and their chests still heaving. She takes one of their entwined hands and brings it up to her mouth, kissing each of the brunette’s fingers without breaking eye contact. She watches Ali bring both of her hands to the tie on the robe and leave them there with a smile before letting go.

Ashlyn takes the hint and undoes the tie, letting the robe open up slightly as Ali leans forward just a bit. She runs her hands inside the robe along Ali’s waist before moving them around to her lower back and upwards causing the robe to open and fall off the brunette’s shoulders. She hears them before she sees them, a brief clink of metal-on-metal that draws her attention. She recognizes them immediately, having seen them hang against her own chest for years. But they’re not on her chest now… they lay nestled in the valley between Ali’s perfect breasts, the black metal a stark contrast even against the brunette’s tanned skin.

“Alex… are those…” Ashlyn whispers out in question, despite already knowing the answer.

“I don’t know the meaning behind them, but I hope to know… yes, they’re your tags, beautiful.” Ali replies softly as she watches Ashlyn’s expression carefully. It’s a mixed expression of love, comfort, happiness, and uncontrollable fire…one that is making Ali’s heart race wildly as she watches the officer take the tags into her hand.

Ashlyn runs her thumb over her own name embossed deeply in the black metal. The moment comes right back to her… the moment she sat next to Morris in the cafeteria on this very base so many years ago with Porter and Rivera sitting across from them. Her exact words to Morris swirl in her head: “Yeah well, when you meet her and decide she’s the one, you can give them to her yourself.” And here they are in her hand, the message loud and clear. Her name. Resting against Ali’s chest. Hers.

“Ash, what do they mean?” She hears Ali whisper, but the question will have to go unanswered right now because she can’t form the words. Ashlyn grasps the tags tighter in her fist and pulls the brunette down to her before releasing her grip and feeling the cool metal press between their heated skin as she kisses Ali like she has never kissed anyone in her entire life.
Tag, You're it

Chapter Notes

Sorry to make you guys wait for this update, I've been pretty sick with a bad cold and its been really hard to write. So, hopefully it is worth the wait.

As much as there is a lot more contextually going on here than just smut, I still say... smut alert! And if that's not your thing and you just want to know the meaning behind the dog tags, skip down to the bottom :)

As usual, drop me a comment and give me your thoughts...I love hearing from you!

“Ash, what do they mean?” She hears Ali whisper, but the question will have to go unanswered right now because she can’t form the words. Ashlyn grasps the tags tighter in her fist and pulls the brunette down to her before releasing her grip and feeling the cool metal press between their heated skin as she kisses Ali like she has never kissed anyone in her entire life.

Fire. Ali’s body feels like it’s been ignited as she’s pulled into Ashlyn, their lips locked in a scorching kiss. It’s like nothing she’s ever felt before, the kiss is slow, deliberate and extremely passionate as powerful emotions are expressed with lips and tongues. They’ve had so many incredible kisses to date, but this one feels different. It’s voracious and possessive, yet loving and tranquil at the same time. This kiss feels like unity. This kiss feels like forever.

Ashlyn’s hand gently frames her cheek, her long fingers extending almost to the back of Ali’s neck where her fingertips press firmly into the soft skin there. Ali senses the vibrations of low moans forming in her own throat before they release into the officer’s mouth. Her hands grip Ashlyn’s shoulders tighter before she slides one hand up and under the officer’s neck to pull them impossibly closer together. She feels the strong arm wrapped around her lower back pull her in tighter as well, the two of them so fitted to each other now that Ali can no longer decipher which parts of her body are her own anymore.

She isn’t sure if it’s her own heart pounding or Ashlyn’s against hers, probably a mix of both. Her chest physically aches from the intense feelings combined with the lack of air from the heated kiss. She knows she can’t go much longer without air, but she can’t pull herself away, addicted to the raw emotions that Ashlyn is so openly pouring into her body. She feels the officer’s arm around her waist start to go a bit slack, signaling that Ashlyn is fighting the same biological need for breath that she is. She gives herself just a few more seconds until she’s sure that she might pass out before finally pulling back just slightly, her mouth lingering to trap Ashlyn’s bottom lip and then letting it go gently.

She rests her forehead on Ashlyn’s, the two of them panting and still tightly wrapped together as she opens her eyes and locks onto the officer’s bright green ones. While she may not know the full meaning of everything yet, that kiss and these eyes confirm what the dog tags signify… permanence. She is Ashlyn’s… Ashlyn is hers, cemented as permanently as the name etched into the metal she wears around her neck.
“I’m yours.” Ali whispers breathily at the thought, her lips ghosting over Ashlyn’s as the words leave her mouth. She has said it before, but this time the words seem to have more weight as she surrenders herself completely to the woman underneath her.

“You’re mine.” Ashlyn whispers back in confirmation, her thumb stroking Ali’s cheek lightly as their chests continue to heave together.

Ali leans down to take the officer’s lips again, but Ashlyn stops her, the emerald eyes staring so intently into her own.

“I belong to you.” Ashlyn voices her own truth.

“You belong to me.” Ali whispers back, her heart beating furiously at the blatant but unexpected testament. She leans down and captures Ashlyn’s lips in her own. This kiss is hungry and more urgent as the need to physically join themselves together grows even stronger. It’s mere moments before hands are wandering over arms and inked sides, backs and shoulders, hips and thighs. Ali feels Ashlyn start to roll them over a bit and she shifts her weight to prevent it. She promised that these dog tags would get a proper debut and she fully intends to keep that promise.

“Scoot up, baby.” Ali demands huskily against the officer’s neck as she lifts herself off of Ashlyn a bit so that she can comply. Once Ashlyn is sitting up against the headboard of the bed, Ali drops herself down to straddle her thighs, the position providing a straight-on view of her breasts with the dog tags hanging between them.

“Alex…” Ashlyn whispers a bit raggedly, still trying to catch her breath as she takes in the beautiful brunette on her lap. Her hands hold tightly to Ali’s hips, her thumbs lightly stroking her hip bones. “You’re a dream.”

Ali smiles as she watches Ashlyn’s eyes travel up and down her body reverently, her eyes noticeably pausing at the dog tags. “No, I’m so real, baby.” She leans in for a quick hard kiss before moving to nip and lick Ashlyn’s neck as her hand drops down to one of the officer’s breasts, feeling the nipple stiffen against her palm. Ashlyn’s increasingly loud moans egg her on, both of her hands now rolling the officer’s nipples between her fingers as she sucks on her pulse point. She can feel Ashlyn shaking a bit from the intensity of it all and knows that she has to be close. She shifts herself so that one of her upper thighs is between Ashlyn’s legs and immediately feels wetness on her skin, prompting her to move her hips so that she can create friction against the officer’s engorged clit.

“Oh god, Alex…I’m so close already.” Ashlyn gasps out, her head thrown back into the headboard as her fingers dig into Ali’s gyrating hips.

“I know, baby. Just let go.” Ali says as she drops her head to take an already hard nipple into her mouth, alternating between swirling her tongue over it and sucking on it.

“Oh fuck…fuck…Alex.” Ashlyn moans loudly as her own hips start to move with Ali’s, the brunette still lavishing attention on her nipples as she feels her orgasm approaching quickly.

Ali feels Ashlyn’s stomach muscles clench and gives herself just a couple seconds to watch the officer’s face contort in the throes of orgasm before she kisses her deeply, moans and her own name now echoing into her mouth. She pulls back slowly and strokes the back of Ashlyn’s shoulders as she comes down, waiting for those beautiful gold-flecked green eyes to open and then smiling when they finally do.

Ashlyn brings her hands up to hold Ali’s face, tracing her lips, cheeks, and jawline with her thumbs as she loses herself in the brunette’s gaze while she finishes catching her breath. “The things you
bring out in me, Alex…I…I...” She breaks the silence as she continues to stroke Ali’s face, but finds herself stuttering. “I just…I’ve never wanted anything in my life so much the way I want you.” She tries again, letting one hand drop down to trap one of the dog tags against Ali’s chest with her fingers. “Not even when I thought I was dying and wanted desperately to live. I want you even more than I wanted my own life in that moment.”

Ali smiles and runs her hands through the officer’s short hair, completely understanding the sentiment given that Ashlyn was the last thing on her mind too before everything turned black in that cold hot tub. Whatever is transforming itself between them right now, she’s ready for it. She leans in close to Ashlyn’s ear and feels her shiver. “Then take what you want and don’t ever stop taking it. Please. Take me, Ash.”

Ashlyn doesn’t hesitate, kissing Ali deeply as her hands drop down to the brunette’s ass to pull her in closer. The wetness against her thighs tells her that Ali is more than ready, so she quickly trails open mouthed kisses down the brunette’s neck before reaching her chest and gently sucking a nipple into her mouth.

“Yes, baby… that feels amazing.” Ali breathes out as Ashlyn flicks one of her nipples with her tongue and pinches the other one between her fingers before alternating. She gasps in pleasure at the feeling of teeth dragging against her sensitive nub before the officer’s tongue soothes it. “Mmmm, yeah just like that.” Ali directs, loving how Ashlyn is sucking on her nipples with the perfect amount of pressure. Feeling a fresh gush of wetness between her legs, she realizes she’s more worked up than she realized. She lifts her hips slightly and grabs the officer’s right hand, directing it to her core. “You’re so wet, Alex, so hot.” Ashlyn husks as she slides her fingers through Ali’s slick folds, stopping to rub light circles on her clit.

“Unnnh, baby…” Ali moans and lets her eyes close at the sensation as her hips start moving involuntarily. She can already feel the deep ache in belly staring to build, but she needs more. “Inside, Ash. I want you inside me.” She lifts her hips just a bit higher to give the officer room until she feels fingertips at her entrance and then sinks herself down onto the long digits. “Oh Ash… fuck… you get so deep. Feels so good, baby.” She gasps and closes her eyes at the feeling of being filled. Her hands grip Ashlyn’s shoulders to anchor herself as she moves up and down on the officer’s fingers, quickly finding a rhythm to meet Ashlyn’s upwards thrusts. She opens her eyes to see Ashlyn taking in her torso, a complete look of ecstasy on her face. “Yes, yes, fuck… look at what you do to my body, baby. Look at how good you fuck me, Ash. You feel so damn amazing inside me.” Ali gets out between panting breaths.

Ashlyn trails her eyes down Ali’s body trying to memorize every detail of what has to be the most amazing view she’s ever had in her life. She watches her fingers disappear into Ali over and over again, engulfed by the brunette’s warm satin walls as she fucks herself on her hand. Ali’s abs are rippling with the canting movement of her hips, her torso gleaming with a light sheen of sweat that almost makes her look like she’s glowing. Dog tags bearing her name plink off of Ali’s chest where they’re framed by her bouncing perky breasts, nipples hard and dark pink. Her eyes linger there until she hears Ali’s hot words, prompting her to look up at the brunette’s flushed face and hooded eyes. “You’re so fucking sexy, Alex…so beautiful, baby.” Ashlyn husks as she feels Ali start to tighten around her fingers, feeling like she might explode at any minute herself just from the sight alone.

“Oh god… yes, fuck… fuck, harder, baby. Right there, fuck…like that.” Ali is practically screaming now as Ashlyn starts curling her fingers every time she bottoms out. She’s starting to feel dizzy as her climax approaches rapidly, her eyes closing as the officer pounds into her perfectly.

“No. Stay with me, baby.” Ashlyn moves her free hand to up to hold Ali’s face. “Look at me when
you come, Alex.” She urges and watches the darkened whiskey eyes open to meet her own, Ali’s lips parted as she takes gaping breaths between loud moans. She curls her fingers more vigorously inside Ali as the brunette’s movement becomes uncoordinated, her thumb going to her clit to put her over the edge.

“Ash…Ash…Ashlyn…fuck… baby! Ash!” Ali yells out as she orgasms and digs her nails into inked shoulders, fighting desperately to keep her eyes open and locked on Ashlyn’s. When she feels them involuntarily closing, she pulls Ashlyn’s face to hers and kisses her hard, humming into her mouth as she rides out the high.

Ashlyn wraps her arms around Ali tightly when their lips part, pulling her in close and listening to the brunette breathing deeply near her ear. “Breathe, baby. I got you.” She runs her hands lightly up and down her lower back.

“That was so hot, Ash. You’re amazing.” Ali says when she finally catches her breath and leans back a bit to look at Ashlyn, running her hands lightly along her neck and shoulders.

Ashlyn just leans in to kiss her heatedly, muttering “I’m not done, beautiful,” against Ali’s lips before lifting the brunette’s hips with her hands and quickly sliding herself down.

“Baby, what are you…?” Ali starts to question as Ashlyn slides down between her legs, but the answer comes before she is even finished asking when the officer swipes her tongue through her folds. “Oh…oh… god… Ash… yes, baby. Oh fuck.” Ali hips grind into Ashlyn’s face uncontrollably and her hands gripping the headboard tightly as she looks down to watch the officer work her.

Ashlyn looks up to meet the lust-filled eyes watching her, Ali’s face twisted in pleasure as she holds onto the headboard for dear life, dog tags swinging between their gaze. “Mmmm.” Ashlyn moans as she plunges her tongue deep inside the brunette and curls her arms around her thighs to bring her in even closer.

Ali writhes desperately against Ashlyn’s face as the officer’s warm wet tongue swirls against her walls. Still sensitive from the last orgasm, this one comes on quickly with just a few more strokes. Her body goes rigid as Ashlyn’s name passes through her lips over and over again among moans and obscenities. She feels Ashlyn gently licking at the wetness she has spilled for her and relaxes into it, running her hands through soft short brown hair. After another minute she sits back on the officer’s chest a bit and gives herself a few more seconds to collect herself before sliding down to lay on top of Ashlyn. She kisses her softly, tasting herself on the officer’s lips.

“Do you know how much I love you, Ashlyn Harris?” Ali whispers as she traces Ashlyn’s face with her fingers. “Do you know how much you ignite me? How you touch me in ways that no one else ever could? Make me feel things that I didn’t even know were possible?”

Ashlyn smiles and opens her mouth to respond, but she doesn’t get the chance as Ali kisses her softly again.

“Don’t talk, baby.” Ali pulls back and puts her finger to Ashlyn’s lips. “Just feel me.” She whispers into her ear and kisses the soft skin just behind it, feeling Ashlyn quiver and break out into goosebumps. “I love you.” She licks the shell of Ashlyn’s ear and moves down her neck slowly, hearing the officer hiss when she sucks the soft skin near her pulse point hard enough to leave a mark.

“Oh fuck.” Ashlyn whispers when Ali takes her hands and pins them near shoulders, firmly holding them there. The brunette lifts herself up just enough so that the dog tags around her neck are hanging
down to barely brush the top of Ashlyn’s chest. Ali moves down her body slowly, dragging the tags from her chest to just below her belly button and then back up again, never breaking eye contact. “You are so hot, Alex.” Ashlyn says as she tries to move her hands so she can touch the brunette, but Ali holds them still and smirks before leaning down to take a nipple into her mouth.

“You have the most perfect chest, baby. I love your nipples.” Ali mumbles as she sucks hard on one of them before soothing it softly with her tongue and moving to do the same thing to the other one.

“Mmmm, oh god… mmmm, fuck.” Ashlyn whimpers and writhes underneath the brunette, not sure how much more she can take, both of her nipples rock hard and sensitive from Ali’s ministrations. “Please, Alex.” She begs.

Ali takes her time despite the pleading. She watches Ashlyn’s eyes grow dark with want as she kisses and licks over every inch of skin on her torso, spending extra time on ink and scars as she worships the woman underneath her.

Ashlyn can only breathe heavily and watch, sure that there is a puddle pooling on the sheet between her legs. “Alex… please, baby. I need you so badly. I want you…”

‘Want…’ The word spurs Ali to give in. She drags her lips back up Ashlyn’s abs and chest before kissing her heatedly and letting go of her hands, feeling them go immediately to firmly grip her lower back. Ali doesn’t waste any more time and quickly moves down the length of the officer’s body. She purposely lets the cool metal of the dog tags drag over Ashlyn’s clit as she lowers herself, hearing a deep grunt and feeling a hand fist into her hair as she settles her face between the officer’s legs and kisses her inner thighs.

“Alex…baby… oh… my god…” The words come out of Ashlyn’s mouth between ragged breaths as Ali softly licks and sucks on her clit, occasionally moving to tongue her folds and entrance. She feels Ali entwine a hand with her own and use the other to press her belly down, a soft warm tongue now darting into her center. “Fuck…yes. Your tongue, baby… so good, just like that.” Ashlyn belts out in a loud moan that the whole hotel floor can probably hear. She lifts her head to watch Ali work between her legs, opening them impossibly wider when the brunette looks back at her with a smoldering stare. She’s nearing the peak quickly and she tries to pull herself together enough to ask for what she wants. “Alex… need more, please… fuck… mmmm… fuck me.” It comes out sputtered, but it’s good enough to get her request across.

Ali complies and moves her tongue to lick light patterns on Ashlyn’s clit as she sinks two fingers into her and thrusts gently at first before picking up the pace.

“Yes… mmm, harder… I’m so close, baby.” Ashlyn pants and pulls Ali’s head into her more closely as her hips grind against her face. Ali is pumping into her earnestly now and her whole body is tightening as she nears the edge. Suddenly the brunette’s fingers still and just curl over and over again inside her, hitting her sweet spot perfectly. “Uunnnhh, Alex… Alex… yes… Alex. Right there, right there… don’t stop!” Ashlyn wails in a raspy voice. “Alex… fuck… please. Kiss me, please… Kiss me, Alex.” She begs desperately and feels Ali quickly climb up her body and crash their lips together, her fingers maintaining their movement. The fingers deep inside her, the weight of Ali’s body and the taste of herself on the brunette’s mouth make her world go black as the orgasm rips through her and leaves her a shaking and whimpering mess.

Ali keeps kissing Ashlyn gently for a few minutes until her whimpers die down and she feels her body relax, a low moan leaving the officer’s throat when she slowly lets her fingers slip out. Her lips linger just a bit longer on Ashlyn’s before pulling back to look into the bright green, gold-flecked orbs that she lives for. “You’re so beautiful.” She whispers and gently pecks Ashlyn’s lips again, keeping her eyes open.
Ashlyn moves her hand to cup Ali’s face. “I love you so damn much, Alexandra Blaire Krieger.” She’s never said Ali’s full name out loud before, but this feels like the right moment for it. She kisses the brunette softly and drags her hand down her back, pulling her in close.

“I love you too, Ashlyn Michelle Harris.” Ali smiles and settles onto Ashlyn’s chest as the officer rolls onto her back a bit and holds her close.

They lay silent for quite some time, Ali running her hand lightly up and down Ashlyn’s defined stomach as the officer traces the inked script on the brunette’s side. When Ali’s curiosity can no longer hold itself in check, she breaks the quiet moment. “Ash, will you tell me what they mean?” She whispers and reaches to pull out the metal tags trapped between them. She watches Ashlyn close her hand around them and then closes her own hand around Ashlyn’s. “It’d be nice to shed some light on why it feels like we just got married or something.” She adds with a playful grin, using the only words she can come up with to describe what just happened.

“Well, you’re not too far off base.” Ashlyn smiles at Ali’s word choice.

“Oh god, was I just part of some secret military matrimony ritual?!” Ali jokes a bit.

“Wait, the guys didn’t tell you?!” Ashlyn says teasingly with wide eyes and earns herself a poke to ribs from Ali. “Ow, I’m just kidding!”

“I know, baby, but tell me already.” Ali whines.

“Ok, let’s do this our way. Tell me what you know and I’ll fill in.” Ashlyn suggests.

“Alright, well the guys said you’d explain and really didn’t tell me much at all. They just made me promise to, um, well… give them a proper debut.” Ali explains with a smirk.

“Of course they did.” Ashlyn rolls her eyes and laughs. “Well, you most definitely fulfilled that promise… geez, Alex. Let’s just say I won’t ever be forgetting tonight.”

“Good.” Ali smiles and leans up to kiss the officer before continuing. “Anyway, I’ve watched enough movies and read enough romance novels to know that having someone wear your dog tags is a pretty significant relationship thing, so I’m guessing this is something like that. What really confuses me is why the guys have your tags and why were they the ones to give them to me? Also, I’ve never seen black ones before, what does that mean?”

“All excellent questions.” Ashlyn grins and wraps her arm tighter around the brunette. “Let me start with the easy stuff. All special forces wear black metal dog tags instead of the plain aluminum looking ones, so that’s all that means.”

“Ah, right because you are fancy divas…got it.” Ali teases.

“The fanciest.” Ashlyn plays back. “Anyway, you’re generally right about it being significant to have someone wear your tags. Usually it means your relationship with that person is serious, but it’s not always a significant other. Sometimes family or close friends wear them too. And, let’s be honest… there are plenty of times when tags are thrown on just about anyone for a weekend if it gets you laid. Some soldiers don’t think much beyond that sometimes. For the record, I am not that person and I have always taken it more seriously than that. So, despite the fact that there is probably nothing hotter than seeing your girl wearing your tags…no one has ever worn mine.” She explains bluntly and feels Ali squeeze her a bit.

“Wow…ok.” Ali replies quietly, starting to understand the gravity of it all. “I’m truly honored, Ash.”
Ashlyn doesn’t respond verbally, she just lets go of the tags in her hand and moves it to gently hold Ali’s face, leaning down to kiss her slowly for a minute before continuing. “Ready for the heavier part?” She asks as she plants a kiss on the brunette’s forehead.

“Completely ready.” Ali replies and nuzzles herself into the crook of Ashlyn’s neck.

“These are pretty standard military tags, with one exception. She picks up one of the tags so Ali can see it. My name, military ID number, blood type, and religious preference are normal information. See right here though?” Ashlyn points out the ‘TF88’ right next to the military ID number and sees Ali nod. “That part is unique and stands for Task Force 88 that I was a part of. It’s extremely rare to see anything like that on a dog tag, but because we were such a specialized and important unit, the government wanted us to be quickly identifiable for them should anything happen to us.”

Ali swallows hard at the implication of that statement and holds Ashlyn a little tighter as she listens.

“Just before our first deployment, they gave us each two sets of these tags. One for us to wear obviously, and the other for an emergency contact person. Because of the tight security and classified nature of the Task Force, they told us to give the second set to the person we wanted our immediate medical information released to if we got hurt. By presenting the tags, that person would be the only one granted access to us as soon as possible without the delay of questioning or extensive security measures. We just had to register who we gave them to into the required tracking database and then make sure the person held onto them carefully. So, these are my second set of tags.” Ashlyn says as she lets the tag she was holding between her fingers fall out of her grasp.

Ali is listening intently, but she can’t figure out how all the information Ashlyn just gave her fits into the bigger picture. She’s about to ask when Ashlyn breaks the brief silence and starts talking again.

“I literally had nobody back then, Alex. Nobody at all. And certainly no one I would ever give these tags to.” Ashlyn takes a deep breath.

“Oh, baby.” Ali lifts her head and cups Ashlyn’s face gently in her hand, her heart almost breaking at the admission.

Ashlyn hesitantly looks up to meet warm amber eyes, steeling herself for the look of pity that anyone would surely give her in this situation. Instead she just sees that same protective and loving gaze that Ali always has for her when she is at her most vulnerable. She feels an immediate weight lift off of her chest, feeling stupid for thinking for even a second that Ali would ever pity her. Ali is perfect, she understands, she is hers. For that, Ashlyn could not be any more grateful.

“It’s ok. It was just a rough time in my life.” Ashlyn reassures the brunette to ease the mood bit. “Gram had died earlier that year and Chris was nowhere to be found, battling his own demons back then. So, there was no family. I wasn’t dating at all, let alone having someone remotely serious enough to even consider. With being away and so focused on training, I didn’t feel close at all to any friends or even Edith to feel like I could put them in that position. Yeah, so, really no one to give my tags to.” Ashlyn says matter-of-factly. “So, I gave them to Morris.”


“Yep. The week before we first got deployed, we were having lunch right here at Fort Benning after our morning training session and the topic came up about who we gave our tags to…” The scene plays in Ashlyn’s head as she tells Ali the story.
“So, in the spirit of really knowing your squad, let’s talk tags.” Porter suggests as they dig into the fried chicken and mashed potato lunch that is actually pretty good.

“Tags?” Ashlyn asks, not sure what he’s asking.

“Yes, Sergeant. I’m engaged and Morris here is gonna drop down on one knee any day now and snag that hottie of his, so we all know who our tags went to. You two though…” Porter motions to Rivera and Ashlyn. “You are wild cards on that front. So fill us in. Who gets the tags?”

Ashlyn briefly shifts her eyes to Morris who is looking a bit uncomfortable beside her. He’s the only one that knows she hasn’t given them to anyone yet.

“Please bro, I only got one lady in my life that would give a shit if I end up broken and busted… and that’s my Mama. So, I gave her the best sucky metal jewelry I could buy.” Rivera winks. “I’m sure she’s already praying a rosary every night with those damn tags in her hands.” He shakes his head before looking at Ashlyn. “What about you Sarge, there a Mrs. Harris?” Rivera says snarkily, still sore to be under the command of not just a woman, but an obvious lesbian at that.

“Fuck off, Rivera.” Ashlyn retorts at the dig. They all know she’s gay despite the fact that she doesn’t really talk about it, but only Rivera seems to harp on it. “Anyway, it’s just me…on all fronts. So, I guess I just gotta give em’ to my work wife.” She says mockingly and reaches into her pocket to pull out her tags, tossing them over to Morris.

“Funny, Harris.” Morris says tossing them back to her.

“I’m not laughing, Morris.” Ashlyn replies and tosses them right back in his direction.

“Come on, what the hell do I need these for? I’ll already be the first one right there if something happens to you. And if I’m not, it’s because my ass is laid up in the bed right next to you.” Morris states defensively.

“Well, they gotta go somewhere.” Ashlyn replies evenly with a shrug, looking up to see Porter and Rivera looking down at their food in an effort to avoid the awkward conversation.

“How about you hang on to them and give them to the incredible woman that is sure to come along in no time and sweep your single ass off of your feet and make you honest.” Morris suggests seriously, still uncomfortable.

“Yeah well, when you meet her and decide she’s the one, you can give them to her yourself.” Ashlyn replies sarcastically with a wry smile. “Until then, those tags are yours sweetheart.” She blows him a kiss and makes it clear that the conversation is over, watching Morris pocket her tags while he shakes his head.

“I honestly never thought I would ever even see those tags again, let alone on someone else. Pretty much just resigned myself to the fact that I’d never get to experience what it was like to have someone else wear them, you know?” Ashlyn says quietly as she holds Ali close. “I forgot all about them. The guys clearly didn’t…. guess they held up their end of the bargain.” She finishes with a smile.
Ali silently takes it all in and tries to process everything, distractedly tracing the outline of the owl inked into Ashlyn’s forearm. When the real weight of it finally hits her, she speaks up. “So, let me get this straight… by giving me these, the guys are pretty much telling you to marry me?” She clarifies to be sure she understands.

“They’re not pretty much telling me to marry you, Alex… they’re most definitely telling me to marry you.” Ashlyn answers honestly, but a bit nervously since she can’t see Ali’s expression now.

Ali nods and hesitates for just a second before finally letting herself ask what she wants to. “And you? Do you want to marry me?” She asks shyly, putting it out there even though she’s anxious about the response.

Ashlyn gently pulls the brunette up so that they’re eye-to-eye and delicately holds her face with both hands. “Hey, Alex. I know it’s probably completely crazy to be having this conversation because we haven’t even officially been dating for a month yet…but, we’re here right now… so, I’m just going to be honest, ok?”

Ali nods and listens carefully.

“Almost everything about my past can only be described as broken. My upbringing, my past relationships, my ups and downs with my family, my dangerous careers that ended in injury, scars, jail time…” Ashlyn trails off a bit. “All of it is just such a mess and I’ve always believed that I wasn’t meant to be married to anyone. That it’s not worth bringing anyone into a life like this.” She sees Ali’s hurt eyes look away from hers and strokes the brunette’s cheeks to get her attention. ‘Hey, just listen to me, ok?’

Ali takes a deep breath and gives a slight nod, trying to swallow the disappointment that’s beginning to settle in her stomach like a rock.

“And then you happened, Alex. You’ve turned my whole world upside down in the best way possible. You make me feel like I’m worth it… make me believe that I’m someone worth committing to. When I tell you that I love you and I say things like ‘forever’ and that ‘I’m yours’, I really mean it. I know it took a lot for us to get to this point where we are actually together, but I’ve known for a long time that you’re the one. And while I don’t need anyone else to tell me that because I know it in here…” Ashlyn puts Ali’s hand on her chest right over her heart, “There’s just something about the people who know me the best being able to see it too…just makes it all that more real, you know? It’s kind of earth shattering.” She tries to explain it. “You’re it for me, Alex. And whatever the timing of it is, whether it’s years from now or sooner rather than later… I just… I need you to know that, in my heart, that’s where this is going. I’m marrying you if you’ll let me.” She finishes and watches this complete look of relief and happiness come over Ali’s face.

“I’m not just going to let you, Harris…I’m going to haunt your ass for life if you don’t.” Ali closes the distance between them and kisses Ashlyn sweetly, the two of them laughing into the kiss a bit. “In the spirit of full disclosure, I have to admit that I’ve always been really skeptical about getting married myself.” Ali reveals as they pull apart.

“Yeah?” Ashlyn asks and waits for the rest.

“I watched my parents’ marriage implode and leave my family in ruins. They seemed to have it all… they were in love and sweet to each other, inseparable really. Until suddenly they weren’t. It’s always terrified me that you can have it all and then just like that, have nothing at all. That something that should be so permanent, can so easily be undone. That’s been one of my biggest problems in relationships. I’ve never been able to be serious with anyone because I’ve always been scared to have the same thing happen to me.” Ali pauses for a few seconds.
“And now?” Ashlyn prompts her to continue.

“And now, I realize that couples who have successful marriages have them because they’re with the right person. Someone who loves them unconditionally, believes in them, fights for them, is honest with them and never holds back. You’re that person for me, Ash. Being with you has made me realize that my parents didn’t have any semblance of what we have together…not even close. For the first time in my life, I’m not scared at all. I actually can’t wait to be married to you.” Ali admits in complete truth, barely getting it out of her mouth before Ashlyn kisses her so passionately she gets dizzy.

They lay there just silently relishing in the moment for a little while after pulling apart to catch their breath, Ali laying mostly on top of Ashlyn now with her head on her chest as the officer strokes her back lightly.

“So, does that mean I can keep these dog tags?” Ali breaks the silence and picks her head up a bit to look at Ashlyn.

“Yeah, of course. I mean, they don’t exactly have an actual function or meaning anymore obviously, so you don’t have to wear them or anything. But yeah, you can keep them. I can’t tell you how fucking hot it is to see them on you by the way.” Ashlyn answers with a smirk.

“Will it bother you or be weird if I wear them?” Ali questions further.

“Not at all, why?” Ashlyn asks, trying to understand Ali’s questions.

“Because they sure as hell have a lot of meaning to me even if they don’t mean what they used to. These tags symbolize your blood, sweat, and tears…literally. They represent so much that you’ve sacrificed and survived through, things that have played a large part in molding who you are. Things that I wasn’t there for and wasn’t a part of, but things that I love about you and I’m proud of you for. I guess wearing these makes me feel more connected to those parts of you, makes me feel closer to you. They make me feel like I’m yours, Ash… that you’ve chosen me and no one else…and I never want to take them off if I don’t have to.” Ali says resolutely. “So, can I wear them?”

Ashlyn can’t even reply because everything inside her stirs and all she can think about is feeling this woman intimately inside her skin again. She quickly pulls Ali down into a hungry kiss and wastes no time in directing the brunette’s hand between her legs, feeling fingers fill her still wet center as she slips her own digits into Ali’s core.

It’s not the slow and sensual love-making from before, but a more raw and needy fulfillment of desire. There are no words this time, only a chorus of moans and grunts that just barely muffle the sounds of fingers pumping into wet folds. They read each other’s bodies perfectly, tumbling over the edge simultaneously and ending up in a sweaty, spent, and sated mass of tangled limbs.

“Ok, I’ll take that as a yes. I mean…a simple ‘yes, Alex, you can wear my tags’ would have sufficed, but damn baby, I’ll take that any day.” Ali laughs as she catches her breath and entwines their hands together.

“What can I say, I’m a woman of action.” Ashlyn jokes.

“You sure are.” Ali smiles and then shakes her head when she hears Ashlyn’s stomach grumble. “Sounds like you’re as hungry as I am right now.”

“Yeah, well, after all that physical exertion… how could I not be?” Ashlyn raises her eyebrows playfully.
“You think Javi would spring for a late night snack instead of breakfast?” Ali inquires with a smirk.

“Only one way to find out.” Ashlyn laughs and reaches into the bedside drawer to grab the room service menu. “Guess we’ll just have to ask him at the free continental breakfast in the morning.” She shrugs and opens the menu so they can both see it.

After ordering enough food to feed at least six people, they curl up in bed together to wait for it to arrive. Ali is cuddled into Ashlyn’s shoulder, the dog tags hanging from her neck and resting on the officer’s chest. She runs her fingers over Ashlyn’s name on one of the tags and smiles to herself.

“Hey, Hero?” Ali says.

“Yeah?” Ashlyn replies.

“For the record… dog tags are no substitute for an engagement ring. A girl needs her rock.” Ali looks up at Ashlyn with a sly grin.

Ashlyn chuckles loudly. “Duly noted. For the record, my queen… I wouldn’t have it any other way.”
Marked & Owned

Chapter Notes

A little bit of everything in this one as we close out the visit with the guys (yep, that means smut too).
I also want to thank you all for continuing to read the story and leaving me comments with your thoughts, I love hearing what you think (so, don’t be shy)!

Ali’s lips curl into a smile as she feels a warm hand gently trail over her side and across her stomach only to reverse and repeat the motion over and over again. Impossibly soft lips leave tender kisses across her shoulders and upper back. Bare skin is pressed against her own, keeping her warm and making her tingle. Her eyes open just slightly, enough to see the digital clock on the bedside table that reads 6:04am.

“You know, I used to be ready to kill anyone who woke me up before 8am…but, it’s become my favorite thing in the world now. I love waking up to you like this.” Ali says groggily and entwines her hand with the one that was just stroking her stomach.

“Sorry, beautiful. I try so hard to let you sleep, but sometimes I just can’t help myself.” Ashlyn smiles and kisses the back of Ali’s neck, causing the brunette to press back into her more closely.

“Mmmm, don’t be. I love it and hope you never stop waking me up like this.” Ali says sweetly and turns herself in Ashlyn’s arms to face her. “Hi.” She smiles widely and runs her hand through Ashlyn’s messy bedhead hair, meeting the hazel eyes that always make her lose her train of thought.

“Good morning, gorgeous.” Ashlyn pulls the brunette in close, her face breaking out into a huge dimpled grin when she realizes that Ali barely has any trace of mascara on. Given the intensity of last night and the way they fell asleep so lost in each other, Ali never reapplied it like she normally does before going to bed.

“What?” Ali asks, seeing the over-the-top smile on her girlfriend’s face.

“Nothing… it’s just…” Ashlyn wonders if she should even tell her given how invested Ali is in her mascara.

“Spill, Harris. What is it?” Ali presses trying to understand the complete look of awe on Ashlyn’s face.

“Ok, don’t freak out… but your mascara completely wore off… and it’s just my first time really seeing you without it. God Alex, you’re beautiful. Like so completely, mind-blowingly beautiful. You’re breathtaking, baby.” Ashlyn says the last part in an almost whisper. “How did I get so fucking lucky?” She adds in a mutter as she traces Ali’s eyebrow with her thumb.

Ali feels a slight sense of panic about how she probably looks, a gut reaction to being told she has no mascara on. Slowly her mind catches up to what Ashlyn said after that and she immediately sits up, pulling Ashlyn up with her. “Come on. Up!” She commands.

“What? Why?” Ashlyn asks in confusion, reluctantly pulled away from the warm bed and warm
“Because, Hero, you can’t just say incredibly sweet shit like that and expect me not to kiss the hell out of you. So, get up and brush your damn teeth with me so I can do just that without you whining about morning breath.” Ali says matter-of-factly as she drags the officer to the bathroom.

“Yes, ma’am.” Ashlyn says with a smile and quickly gets to the task at hand. She barely puts the toothbrush down and rinses her mouth before Ali pretty much lifts her onto the bathroom counter, steps between her legs, and kisses her so hard she forgets to breathe and has to pull away after only a minute. Ali leaves one more lingering peck on her lips and then very lightly smacks her cheek with a smirk before stepping aside to grab her mascara and heading to the mirror to apply fresh coat.

Ashlyn can only laugh a bit at the interaction, still amused and also really turned on that Ali just put her on top of the bathroom counter like that. “Should we get dressed, go to breakfast, and then shower after?” She suggests.

“Definitely. I need coffee stat.” Ali agrees and stands back to look at herself in the mirror, satisfied enough with the basic makeup to go down to breakfast. She quickly throws on a sports bra, her favorite of Ashlyn’s old army t-shirts and a pair of athletic shorts before rummaging through her bag for a pair of flip flops.

Ashlyn opts for similar attire, putting on some athletic shorts, a sports bra, and a tightly fitted men’s tank shirt. She also puts on a zip up hoodie and throws a snapback on her head to hide her hair. She got distracted by Ali and hasn’t properly looked at herself in the mirror this morning, but she assumes her hair looks as disheveled as it usually does after a long night of sex with the brunette.

“Here. They keep the lobby like a freezer in this place.” Ashlyn hands Ali an extra zip up hoodie that she brought.

“You’re sweet, thanks baby.” Ali smiles and pecks her softly on the lips before taking the hoodie and slipping it on.

“Mmmm, one more.” Ashlyn pulls Ali close and kisses her more deeply for a minute, starting to get lost in it before Ali pulls back a bit.

“Coffee, Hero… remember?” Ali reminds the officer.

“Ugh, fine. Come on, beautiful.” Ashlyn playfully groans at the loss of contact and takes Ali’s hand, grabbing her wallet and their room keys before leading them out the door.

Ashlyn is pleasantly surprised to see that the base hotel has really upped their game when it comes to breakfast. It’s no longer just a self-serve selection of cereal, bagels, fruit, yogurt, and pastries like the last time she was here, but now a full-on breakfast buffet with omelet and waffle stations.

“Woah, this is way better than I expected.” Ali says as she takes it all in. “I know, I know. Clearly my mental picture of an army base was way off.” She concedes before Ashlyn can tease her.

“Nah, it was nothing like this last time I was here. This is a huge improvement. I didn’t expect this either.” Ashlyn admits. “Want an omelet?” She asks while she pours Ali a cup of coffee.

“Hell yes I do!” Ali says excitedly. “Hmmm, I’ll go with cheese, tomatoes, avocado and bacon.” She requests.
“That sounds really good actually, I’m going to do the same. I’ll go put in an order with the cook over there.” Ashlyn replies.

“Thanks, baby. I’ll take these and go find us a table.” Ali says grabbing their coffees. “Looks like you can sit outside too, so, inside or outside?”

“Outside, for sure. It’s cold in here.” Ashlyn replies and gives Ali a quick peck on the lips before heading over to the omelet station.

“Well look what the cat dragged in!” Ashlyn hears Rivera’s voice as she gets to the outside patio and looks around for Ali with two plates of omelets and other breakfast sides she picked out in her hands. She turns her head to see Ali sitting at a table with all three guys and makes her way towards them.

“Good morning, boys. Nice to see our military body clocks are all still functioning properly.” Ashlyn jokes as she takes the empty seat between Ali and Morris. She figured she might see them down here. She hadn’t expected Porter, but assumes he must have stopped in to do breakfast with the other guys on his way to training.

“Mornin’, Sarge.” The guys reply in unison.

“Here, beautiful. I picked other stuff at my own discretion, but let me know if you want something else.” Ashlyn says sweetly as she places Ali’s plate down in front of her.

“Thanks, baby.” Ali smiles and kisses Ashlyn’s shoulder as she sits down.

Rivera snickers and rolls his eyes mockingly, yelling “Ow! What?” when Ali elbows him lightly. “Oh come on, not Sarge!” He protests as the brunette gives him a hard stare. Ashlyn just looks at them in amused confusion.

“We had a deal, Javi.” Ali reminds him. “I just let you off the hook for the room service breakfast and you agreed to say something appropriate and nice to the next woman you spoke to. ‘Look what the cat dragged in’ doesn’t qualify. So, I’m waiting…”

“Yeah, but I was thinking you meant like a woman I was trying to score a date with. No offense, but I’m not trying to score with Sarge here. That’s like incest or something.” He protests.

“Well, you should be… she’s sexy.” Ali smiles and gently cups Ashlyn’s face, bringing her in for quick soft kiss. “Come on, Javi. You can do it. I didn’t say hit on her. I just said say something nice.”

“Alright, alright.” Rivera concedes and turns to Ashlyn. “Good morning, Harris. You look well rested and your snapback is hella tight.”

Ashlyn can’t help but laugh a bit at how Ali just completely owned Rivera. “Thanks, bro. Told you she was fierce.” She winks at him and the other guys chuckle.

“See was that so hard, Javi?” Ali jibes him.

“I swear it’s like my mama sent you to set me straight.” Rivera shakes his head.

“So, sleep well, ladies?” Morris pipes up. He’s dying to know if Ashlyn knows about the dog tags yet, but he can’t tell if Ali is wearing them or not with the hoodie she has on. The two of them sure seem extra happy this morning, but he hasn’t spent enough time around them to know if that’s normal or not.

“Sure did.” Ashlyn replies with a smirk and then shoots Ali a smile. She knows damn well what
Morris is after and she decides to let him sweat it out a bit by not giving anything away just yet.


“Yes, really comfy actually.” Ali says nonchalantly, picking up on what Ashlyn is doing. “Ash, try these hash browns, they’re really good.” She says spooning some onto the officer’s plate as the guys watch them closely.

“Thanks.” Ashlyn replies and puts her fork down so she can take her hoodie off. “Way hotter out here than inside, geez.” She quickly pulls down the zipper and pulls the hoodie off before she registers Ali’s warning.

“Oh, Ash…” Ali tries to stop her as she remembers that Ashlyn is just wearing a tank top, but it’s too late. “Never mind.” She mumbles as the guys immediately react.

“Oh, damn!” Porter exclaims.

“Yeeew!” Morris smiles and covers his open mouth with his hand.

“I didn’t know they had bears in Georgia…cause you’ve been full-on mauled, Sarge!” Rivera yells out and fist bumps Ali.

“Sorry not sorry, baby.” Ali mutters and shakes her head as a blush invades her face. “And I am not a bear… if anything, I’m a tiger!” She adds with a glare at Rivera.

“What?” Ashlyn asks confused and starts to look down at herself, first seeing if there is anything wrong with her tank shirt before just catching the deep purple mark on her collarbone in her peripheral vision. “Oh…” It hits her that she never really stopped to check the outcome of all that nipping and sucking Ali did on her neck and shoulders last night.

“Looking good, Harris! My compliments to the artist.” Morris smiles at Ali and then nudges Ashlyn with his shoulder and hands her his phone in selfie mode so she can see for herself.

Ashlyn just shakes her head and chuckles at the marks….dark ones on her collar bone and pulse point and a few light smaller ones across both her shoulders. “Nice. You want to autograph these, Alex?” She asks playfully.

“Maybe later, baby.” Ali winks. “Well, since the cat is out of the bag and it is really damn hot out here…” Ali says as she unzips and takes off her own hoodie, dog tags hanging out of the t-shirt she has on.

“Boom baby!” Rivera shouts.


“Didn’t even waste any time, I love it!” Porter adds approvingly.

Ashlyn smiles widely and entwines her hand with Ali’s before leaning over to kiss her soundly and turning back to the guys. “Loud and clear, boys. Loud and clear.”

“Hooah.” They all reply in unison.

“Hooah.” Ashlyn replies back and feels Morris gently squeeze her forearm a bit. She gives him a meaningful smile, knowing they have more to talk about. “So, what’s our agenda?” She changes the subject as she and Ali work on finishing up their breakfast.
“I have to go soon to get in a warm-up session with the unit I’m training this morning. The 9am training you guys are meeting up with me to watch is a self-defense session. It’s only an hour long and then I’m done for the day. Kristen wanted to do lunch at the house if you are up for that and then I was thinking we could get in some golf and maybe dinner at one of the restaurants by the river? I know you guys are all traveling tomorrow, so I was going for low-key.” Porter outlines the day for them since he’s technically the host.

“You golf?” Ali asks Ashlyn, a bit surprised.

“Nope. He means mini-golf. We’ve a very mature and refined bunch.” Ashlyn replies with a laugh.

“Oh, I am all over that!” Ali says excitedly.

“Ooooh and Ali is throwing down already!” Rivera jokes. “Better warn her about how brutal the betting can get, Sarge.”

“I’ll be sure to.” Ashlyn smirks knowingly. The last time she lost, she wound up naked in a hotel lobby asking the front desk for toilet paper for her ‘potty accident’.

“All sounds good to me.” Morris agrees to the plan, the rest of them nodding in confirmation.

“Ok then, I’m off to go do my thing.” Porter gets up and adjusts his fatigues a bit and puts his hat on. “See you guys in like 2 hours. Later gators.”

I’m gonna hit up the gym before getting ready. Anyone care to join?” Rivera asks as he gets up.

“Yeah, I’ll meet you down there after I change into some gym clothes.” Morris replies.

“Nah, I’m gonna enjoy the fact that I’m kind of on vacation and not start my morning with a workout for once. And my queen here needs the full allotted time to get ready.” Ashlyn teases and earns an elbow from Ali.

“Right. Plus you got plenty of exercise last night, sooo…” Rivera jibes them.

“You’re damn right we did and I have no trouble owning it, Javi. Maybe if you knew how to talk to women, you too could go the gym less.” Ali shoots him a playful smirk as Ashlyn chuckles beside her.

“Schooled, bro.” Morris laughs.

“I know when I’m beat.” Rivera laughs at himself and starts to get up. “I assume we’re still meeting at 8:30am in the lobby to go over together?”

“Yep.” Ashlyn confirms and gets up to bring their dishes to the busing area nearby, walking with Rivera as he heads towards the lobby door.

“Damn, Sarge. You have got to help me find a girl like that. She’s fucking awesome!” Rivera nudges Ashlyn as soon as they are out of earshot of Ali and Morris.

“Rivera, you couldn’t handle a woman like her if there were like ten of you.” Ashlyn jokes with him.

“That’s so fucking true.” Rivera shakes his head. “This is gonna sound weird, but like… she already feels more like my sister than my own sister.” He adds contemplatively.

“Nah. I get it. She tends to have that effect on people. She had my heart by like the third time I ever met her and probably even sooner if I really think about it.” Ashlyn shrugs.
Rivera nods. “Yeah, that one is a huge diamond in a sea of gravel. Don’t ever forget that, bro.” He says more seriously.

“I won’t, promise. Since when do you give me lady advice by the way?” Ashlyn gives him a mocking stare.

“Since I look at you and don’t see a woman who looks like she’s carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders for the first time ever. I’ve never really seen you truly happy before… I like it. Just making sure you know how clearly crucial she is in your life. Gotta look out for the soldier who once added my weight to the world of shit she already carried on those shoulders, you know?” Rivera says in a very rare moment of seriousness.

“Thanks, man. I appreciate you saying that. For the record, I am really happy and I was already well on my way to locking it all down before I even got you guys’ approval.” Ashlyn replies.

“Always one step ahead, Sarge.” Rivera grins before adding. “And still an overconfident fuck too… letting me hit on your girl.” He shakes his head.

Ashlyn laughs loudly. “Like you were ever a threat, Rivera!”

“Ass.” Rivera lightly punches her arm and starts to walk into the lobby.

“Hey, Rivera!” Ashlyn calls to him as she approaches the busing station and watches him turn around. “I’d carry your scrawny ass any time! Do you even lift bro?”

Rivera guffaws loudly as resumes walking and turns back to yell. “Right back at you with those fucking chicken legs, Sarge!”

“Hey.” Ali comes up behind Ashlyn just as she finishes setting down the dirty dishes. She kisses the back of the officer’s shoulder and wraps an arm around her midsection, giving her a quick squeeze. “I’m going to head up and start showering. Take your time down here, ok?”

Ashlyn looks over to see Morris still sitting at the table. “Ok. Thanks, baby. Don’t rush though, I may want to get in on that shower.” Ashlyn smiles and turns her head to peck Ali’s lips.

“Sure thing, Hero.” Ali winks and gives her one more light squeeze. “Love you.”

“Love you too.” Ashlyn replies with a sweet smile and then watches Ali walk away until she completely disappears from view before heading back to the table.

“So, should I rent a tux now or…” Morris says with a smile as Ashlyn sits down across from him.

“You better do better than a rental. I have standards.” Ashlyn quips back with a grin. “But yeah, I’d say you can start looking.”

“They grow up so fast.” Morris teases her.

“So… this is how you divorce me, huh?” Ashlyn says, knowing he’ll understand that she’s referring to calling him his ‘work wife’ in their conversation so many years ago. “Just like that. No warning. Shame on you, Luke.”

“I never wanted to marry you in the first place, sweetheart.” Morris laughs loudly. “Consider the terms of my placeholder status officially met.”
“I can’t believe you remembered after all those years.” Ashlyn shakes her head in disbelief. “What tipped you off that I was bringing her with me?” She asks curiously.

“Nothing. I had no idea she was coming.” Morris answers honestly. “Let’s just say my carry-on luggage is not going to miss those damn tags.”

“What do you mean?” Ashlyn questions, a bit confused.

“Ever since you gave me those damn things, I have carried them with me every single time I saw you in the off chance that maybe that would be the day when I finally met the person I was supposed to give them to.” Morris says simply. “It’s been a long damn time.”

Ashlyn just nods and takes in what he just told her, trying not to get emotional about it.

“Gotta say that after hearing that podcast and even seeing you guys together in those media pictures…I sure was hoping I’d be meeting her soon. I was pretty sure I’d be handing over those tags to Ali Krieger before I even met her.” He adds.

“That obvious?” Ashlyn smiles at him.

“Ashlyn, I know your voice better than anything else on this planet…including my own wife. No matter how much time has passed in between us seeing each other, your voice is etched in my brain. I’ve heard your voice as my leader, my protector, my confidante, my coach, and most importantly as my sister. I know when you’re happy, angry, sad, scared, nervous, embarrassed, indifferent, stubborn, and surprised. So, imagine my shock that I couldn’t read your voice for the first time ever when I listened to that podcast.” Morris explains. “At first I thought that maybe it finally happened where enough time had passed that I had lost the ability. Then Jamie comes in one night and is listening to it with me for a little bit and she says ‘Sounds like someone is in looove’. It hit me like a brick…I’d never heard you in love before.”

Ashlyn laughs lightly. “Funny thing is that when we recorded that, we both thought we were being so platonic and professional.”

Morris returns the laugh with a teasing eye roll before getting serious again. “Then I got to the part with her father…” He trails off, knowing he doesn’t need to finish the statement. “I just knew in my gut that she should be wearing those tags and I just hoped to god you were smart enough not to let her go.”

Ashlyn nods thoughtfully. “Yeah. I never should’ve walked away from her like I did. I just didn’t know how else to get my shit together so I could truly be with her and be present the way she deserved. I guess that’s just it though. The fact that I could do that and we still found a way to be together, it’s all part of how I know it was meant to be.” She looks up to see Morris waiting for her to continue, so she does.

“She’s incredible. She knows when to push me and when to let me work through something. I mean…she let me walk away from her like I did. I just didn’t know how else to get my shit together so I could truly be with her and be present the way she deserved. I guess that’s just it though. The fact that I could do that and we still found a way to be together, it’s all part of how I know it was meant to be.” She looks up to see Morris waiting for her to continue, so she does.

“Yeah, I guess I get what you’re saying. I mean, geez, what she said last night when I asked about
taking off the leg...she’s no bullshit. That is one genuine and amazing human being right there.” Morris says appreciatively. “I am so damn happy for you, Ashlyn. You have no idea.” He reaches out to squeeze her hand.

“Thanks, Luke. For everything. I don’t think even you fully understand what it means to me that you and the guys gave her my tags. Which, by the way, she says she’s never taking off... god damn she looks good in them.” Ashlyn replies with a knowing smile.

“Now that I understand!” Morris chuckles. “Jamie stills wears mine.” He smirks.

“It really is the sexiest thing ever.” Ashlyn admits and watches him vigorously nod his head in agreement.

“One last thing.” Morris brings them back to the conversation.

“Ok...” Ashlyn waits.

“How well do we know each other, Ashlyn?” Morris asks.

“Seeing as how we’ve even seen each other naked...I’m gonna say pretty damn well.” Ashlyn answers.

“Have I ever lied to you?” He questions.

“Never.” Ashlyn confirms.

“Exactly. So, I want you to really listen to what I am about to say because I know you enough to know that it needs to be said. And then I want you to really internalize it, because you know that I mean it.” Morris prefaces his next words.

“Ok, I promise.” Ashlyn assures him.

“You deserve her and you are worthy of her. And Ali deserves and is worthy of you. You got it?” Morris says earnestly.

“Got it.” Ashlyn replies and feels just a little bit lighter. He was right, it’s still something she questions sometimes...whether she is good enough for Ali. If she believes anyone about being deserving of the brunette, it’s this man sitting across from her. She’s never once doubted him.

“Thanks, Luke. I know that thank you isn’t enough, but it’s all I’ve got.” She gets up and hugs him tightly.

“All I need.” He assures her and pats her back a few times with his hand. “Alright, you’ve got an hour and 10 minutes before we all have to meet up in the lobby.” Morris says looking at his watch. “I suggest you go find those tags of yours, Sergeant.” He winks.

“Yes, Corporal.” Ashlyn gives him a salute and heads off towards the lobby.

Ashlyn is thrilled to hear the water running when she gets back into the hotel room. She strips off her clothes in record time and quickly slips into the shower, wrapping her arms around Ali’s waist from behind. “I am so glad you take long showers, Krieger.”

“Yeah, well, I went extra slow, Harris.” Ali leans her head back on Ashlyn’s shoulder and kisses her jawline a few times. “I’m pretty much done in here, but let’s take care of getting you clean.” She
grabs a washcloth off the small towel rack in front of her and gets it soapy before turning around to face Ashlyn.

“I could definitely get used to this.” Ashlyn relaxes as Ali drags the warm soapy washcloth along her shoulders and arms before washing her chest and torso.

Ali smirks a bit when she hears Ashlyn’s breath hitch as the washcloth moves over her breasts. "Turn around.” She commands and washes the officer’s back once she complies, making sure to massage her muscles a bit as she works her way along. She hears Ashlyn moan slightly and works hard to stay focused for the time being. She rinses out the washcloth and adds more soap to it before bending down and trailing it over the entire length of Ashlyn’s legs, finishing at her ass cheeks. She drops the washcloth and adds some soap to her hand, slipping it between Ashlyn’s legs from behind and gently running her fingers through the slippery folds.

“Mmmmm.” Ashlyn moans and puts one of her hands against the shower wall to steady herself. “You’re not exactly getting me clean right now, Alex.”

“Easy, baby.” Ali says as she pulls her hand away, hearing a small whine from Ashlyn. “Let me wash your hair.” She instructs and moves the officer under the spray of the water to rinse her off and get her hair wet.

Ashlyn lets out a contented sigh as Ali’s fingers massage shampoo into her hair and scalp, the brunette leaning up to kiss her slowly.

Ali pulls back when she feels Ashlyn trying to deepen the kiss, determined to at least get her clean before anything else happens since they have somewhere to be relatively soon. “So, how did it go down there?” She asks, trying to distract Ashlyn a bit.

“Really great. I guess I didn’t realize just how much I missed these guys in my life until we got down here. Especially, Luke… he really knows me better than anyone else.” Ashlyn replies thoughtfully. “They really love you, you know.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to get that impression.” Ali says lightly with a smile as she reaches to hold the dog tags around her neck for a second before going back to rinsing out Ashlyn’s hair. “I pretty damn fond of them myself.”

“Thank you.” Ashlyn says quietly as she moves to hold Ali’s face in her hands.

“For what?” Ali questions.

“For treating them like family.” Ashlyn replies straight-forwardly.

“Well, they ARE family.” Ali replies simply. “That’s what I get for relentlessly hounding my mother for a sister as a kid… a whole bunch of brothers instead.” She smiles.

The statement is so innocent, so genuine that Ashlyn can’t hold herself in check anymore. She crashes her lips to Ali’s and kisses her hard, lifting the brunette into her arms and pressing her against the shower wall.

Once she recovers from the surprise, Ali wraps her legs around the officer’s waist, already incredibly worked up from the heated kiss as Ashlyn’s tongue probes her mouth. “Yes, Ash, yes…” Ali tugs Ashlyn down towards her neck. “Fuck baby, yes… fuck me right here. Hurry.” She pleads, too turned on by the way the officer has her against the wall to wait any longer.

Ashlyn’s heart speeds up, electricity shooting through her body at Ali’s needy and demanding tone.
She sucks on Ali’s nipples for a minute, feeling the arms around her shoulders grip her tightly as the brunette writhes between her and the wall.


Ashlyn slips a hand between Ali’s legs and quickly enters her with two fingers, her free hand going to hold the brunette’s ass. She finds a rhythmic pace and presses her palm against Ali’s clit for extra friction. She can’t get all that deep from this angle, but she uses her hips against her hand for extra leverage.

“Holy fuck that feels so good…so fucking…oh…good.” Ali moans raggedly as Ashlyn’s skilled fingers press against her walls. “Oh my god….I gonna come all over you, Ash. So close…” She bites her on her own bottom lip as she feels her body start to tighten.

“That’s it, baby, come for me. You’re so fucking hot, Alex. I love being inside you.” Ashlyn says hotly as she works Ali harder feeling her really clenching around her fingers now. She leans in and lightly bites near Ali’s pulse point before sucking it hard and hearing a string of load moans and expletives from the brunette as she tumbles over the edge and thrashes wildly against her. She quickly flips their position so Ali doesn’t hurt herself against the shower wall and holds her really tightly. “I love the way your body responds to mine. I love you, Alex.” She whispers softly in Ali’s ear as she comes down from the high.

Ali just hugs Ashlyn snuggly, not yet able to respond. Her own needs are fulfilled, but she is far from sated as she lets her legs drop down from Ashlyn’s waist. They’re still far too shaky after that orgasm to hold her up, but she doesn’t need them to stand right now anyway. She slips down from Ashlyn’s grip and kneels in front on the officer on the shower floor, looking up to meet hazel eyes that quickly become hooded when she swipes her tongue through Ashlyn’s very wet folds. “Mmmm.” She hums into the officer’s center, picking up one of Ashlyn’s legs and putting it over her shoulder as she sucks her clit into her mouth and hears the officer gasp.

“Alex…baby…” Ashlyn presses herself back against the shower wall for stability and fists her hand into Ali’s hair. “Your tongue feels so amazing.” She gets out before she feels Ali’s tongue fully dip inside her, now relegated to moaning loudly as she loses her breath.

Ali grips Ashlyn’s thigh with her hand and pulls the officer in even closer to her face, feeling her passion spread across her cheeks and chin. “You taste so damn good, Ash…mmmm, I’m addicted you to.” She mutters against Ashlyn’s core before diving right back in and feeling the officer’s legs start to tremble. She feels Ashlyn’s hand come down and grip hers and looks up to see the officers’ head thrown back against the shower wall, eyes closed tightly. “Come for me, baby… I want to taste all of you.” Ali husks and uses her free hand to rub tight circles on Ashlyn’s clit as she plunges her tongue back into the officer hard and fast.

Ashlyn feels her muscles tighten, knowing she’s about to explode with the way Ali is working her entire center and vibrating it with her voice. “Alex…Alex…right there, like that… fuck… Allllleeeex!” Ashlyn lets out a keening wail and slides down the shower wall as the orgasm overtakes her, making her legs too weak to stand any more. She feels Ali help her down and then finally opens her eyes to watch the brunette gently lick her clean as she finishes riding out the wave of sensations, her whole body still throbbing in pleasure. “Unnnh.” She lets out one more breathless whimper and tugs Ali up to kiss her passionately, tasting herself on the brunette’s lips.

“I love you, Ashlyn.” Ali whispers and collapses into the officers arms as they sit on the shower floor against the wall, her head resting into the crook of Ashlyn’s neck. “Our sex is so fucking amazing.” She says with a light raspy chuckle. “Seriously mind blowing…every time.” She adds and runs her hand over Ashlyn’s abs.
“It really is.” Ashlyn agrees with a grin and kisses Ali’s forehead. “If I knew it was gonna be this incredible, I would’ve wasted no time during those prison visits, punishment be damned.” She jokes.

“I’m sure that asshole guard, Alton, would have loved that.” Ali laughs.

“Ugh, don’t ever mention that guy when we’re naked.” Ashlyn makes a cringing face.

“Good point!” Ali cringes a bit too in jest. “Speaking of naked… we really need to get ready.” She pats Ashlyn’s stomach and then hugs her tightly one more time before getting up.

“Yeah… and you’re going to need a little extra make-up time.” Ashlyn smiles wickedly as she turns off the shower and quickly gets out, throwing Ali a towel and waggling her eyebrows.

“What did you do, Harris?!” Ali shouts as she wraps herself in the towel and heads to the mirror, already knowing what she will likely see. Sure enough there’s a huge reddish-purple mark on her neck that none of the shirts she brought will cover. She shakes her head with a smile, wishing she had thought to pack something with a collar.

“Sorry not sorry.” Ashlyn smirks behind her and presses a soft kiss to the back of Ali’s neck.

“Yeah well… I’m not really sorry either.” Ali winks and taps Ashlyn lightly on the ass before pushing the officer out the door of the bathroom. “Now go get dressed!”

“I see you found those tags pretty damn fast, Sarge.” Morris cracks himself up as he notices the new mark on Ali’s neck right away while they wait for Rivera in the lobby.

“I always follow orders, Corporal.” Ashlyn snickers.

“Ugh. I was hoping I could get away with saying it was already there at breakfast this morning.” Ali shakes her head. There wasn’t enough make-up in the world to cover it up, so she had been banking on the guys thinking that they just hadn’t noticed it before. “Oh well, Plan B it is.” She shrugs.

“What’s Plan B?” Morris inquires.

“Own it.” Ali says matter-of-factly and pulls Ashlyn in by her shirt for a quick kiss.

“Easy kids, you’re gonna set off a smoke detector or something.” Morris teases.

“Probably.” Ashlyn laughs.

“Who’s setting off who with a what?” Rivera comes up behind them.

“Doesn’t matter, we’re running late…let’s go!” Ashlyn directs them to the door.

“After you.” Rivera holds the door open for Ali.

“See, now that is so much better, Javi.” Ali smiles at him approvingly.

“Hey now! What the hell is that?!” Rivera shouts and motions to her neck. “That so wasn’t there at breakfast, right?” He asks Morris.

“Nope.” Morris confirms with a smile as they walk along.

“And you just ruined it.” Ali rolls her eyes at Rivera.
“You two said you weren’t gonna work out…fucking liars!” Rivera mocks them.

“Awww, you jealous, Javi?” Ali tries to play back.

“I might be…if I wasn’t done with hickies in like middle school.” Rivera raises his eyebrows with a smug grin on his face. “What are you guys, like 13 years old or something?”

“You got me there. I give.” Ali admits.

“Ha! Finally! I win for once.” Rivera pumps his fist in the air in victory.

“Well you don’t have a hot woman sucking on your neck…so, I wouldn’t call that winning. But sure.” Ali deadpans, making Ashlyn and Morris laugh loudly.

“Always gotta one-up me.” Rivera says incredulously. “Whatever. You’re still like a couple of tweens.”

“This Sergeant hadn’t seen active duty for years before this, let me live bro.” Ashlyn says as she grabs his shoulders lightly.

“Fair point, Sergeant Suckface. Live on.” Rivera laughs.

“Sergeant Suckface? Who’s 13 now, Rivera?” Morris pipes up.

“I’ll have you know that I am very mature 15.” Rivera tries to keep a straight face.

“That explains so much.” Ali jokes.

‘Alright, alright. We’re here, kids. Everyone behave.” Morris warns them with a smile as they walk into a gym-like space covered in soft floor mats.

“Geez.” Ali cringes for like the 50th time as she watches a Ranger get taken down hard by his fellow soldier. When Nathan said it was a self-defense training, she had expected some very low impact holding strategies done slowly to learn techniques. This is anything but. These guys are hardcore fighting each other, minus any facial punches.

‘Not what you were expecting?” Morris laughs lightly.

“Not at all.” Ali admits. “This is intense.”

“The best way to really learn is to actually do it. It teaches you not to hesitate because when you do, there’s actually hell to pay. Just like in a real combat situation. These guys can get deployed at any minute, so there isn’t a lot of time to waste in training.” Ashlyn explains.

“Makes sense.” Ali considers it.

“Fall in!” Porter bellows across the room. Ali can’t help but be impressed with how the calm voice she’s come to know from him suddenly sounds commanding and a bit scary. They watch him give the unit a few last instructions and then dismiss them, a flood of Rangers leaving the gym immediately after.

“Hey guys, having fun?” Porter approaches them. “Nice hickey, Ali.” He says without flinching,
making the brunette groan and the rest of them laugh.

“It sure is more fun to watch than to get your ass kicked. That’s for sure.” Morris speaks up and comes to Ali’s rescue.

“Speak for yourself!” Rivera counters and then looks at Ashlyn. “Wanna dance, Sarge?”

“Only if we tango, darling.” Ashlyn smiles with a different spark in her eyes than what Ali has seen before.

“Oh man, just like old times. Here we go!” Porter rubs his palms together excitedly as Rivera goes to the center of the closest mat and stretches his back a bit.

Ashlyn smirks and gets up to follow him when Ali tugs her hand down.

“Hey, woah… you’re not really going to fight, are you?” Ali asks worriedly.

“Relax, I promise we won’t kill each other.” Ashlyn tries to reassure her with humor, but sees the still concerned look on the brunette’s face. She immediately realizes that it probably wasn’t the best approach given that Ali has just been watching a bunch of Rangers intensely go at each other for the last hour.

“I don’t want you to get hurt.” Ali whispers quietly, making sure not to draw the attention of the other guys so she doesn’t embarrass Ashlyn.

“Hey, Alex… I won’t get hurt. I know this isn’t a side of me that you know yet, but trust me that I know what I’m doing, ok? I promise I’ll be fine.” Ashlyn says sincerely, stroking Ali’s face lightly. “This was my life for a long time and it still pretty much is given my job. I can handle myself, baby.”

“Ok. Of course I trust you.” Ali concedes, feeling a little calmer. She knows Ashlyn works hard to stay fit and sharp, and the officer is right that she doesn’t know the first thing about the extent of her abilities.

“Plus, I live to put Rivera in his place and it’s been way too long.” Ashlyn winks and kisses Ali softly. “Be right back, beautiful. Enjoy the show.”

Ashlyn walks over and stands across from Rivera and stretches a bit before signaling that she’s ready.

“Engage!” Porter yells to them to start it off fairly.

Ali tenses up as she watches them circle each other and unconsciously grabs Morris’ forearm.

“Relax. Ashlyn has never not completely kicked his ass and bruised his ego.” Morris tries to calm her down.

“Oh god, sorry Luke!” Ali says when she realizes she just squeezed his arm to death.

“It’s ok, really.” He assures her. “Just watch. Harris is one of the best I’ve ever seen. It’ll blow your mind.”

Ali steels herself and watches Javi and Ashlyn circle each other.

“Come to Papi.” Rivera provokes Ashlyn with a treacherous grin.

Ashlyn doesn’t answer, she just focuses her mind and attacks first knowing that Rivera always waits
her out no matter what. She feigns a kick with her left leg to distract him and then goes in with an elbow to the chest that pushes him back a few feet and leaves him a bit shocked.

As usual it prompts him to counter and he comes at her full force, trying to get her on the ground where he can use his grappling skills that put them on more even ground.

Ali cringes at the force at which Javi’s shoulder connects with Ashlyn’s stomach, but it doesn’t last long when she sees Javi almost bounce off her girlfriend’s torso. Ashlyn had clearly anticipated and tightened up for the blow.

Ashlyn shifts her weight forward to absorb Rivera’s blow to her midsection and easily gets him off balance, quickly shucking his body to the floor. “Who’s your Papi now?” She says smugly as he sits on his ass for a second and pops back up.

Ali sits there more and more amused and in awe of her girl by the second as Javi hits the mat hard over and over again while Ashlyn remains on her feet. “You weren’t kidding.” Ali remarks to Luke.

“That’s right. She anticipates better than anyone I’ve ever seen and she’s fast too. Look at her feet, her heels never touch the mat.” He points out. “Plus she can take a pounding. I’m convinced that woman could get hit by a Mack truck and still be on her feet.”

When Ashlyn finally does hit the mat, it’s by her own choice. She pulls Rivera down on her terms and works to get him into a submission hold.

Ali sees Luke look at his watch, pressing a button on it.

“This will be over in less than 30 seconds, watch.” He says and holds his watch out for her to see the countdown timer.

Sure enough, with 12 seconds to spare, Ashlyn has Rivera in hold where his arm is locked and his shoulder looks ready to pop out of the socket at any second. Rivera taps out with his free arm right away and Ashlyn lets go of him.

“You’re done, Rivera! As usual.” Porter announces and high fives Ashlyn.

“Fucking hell, Sarge. You still got it, you cocky motherfucker.” Rivera admits defeat and punches Ashlyn lightly in the shoulder.

“You really questioned that? Did you forget I’m a cop? I’m still prepared, bro.” Ashlyn raises an eyebrow at him.

“Yeah, but don’t you fuckers just cruise around or sit behind a desk all day eating donuts?” Rivera teases.

“Not the Captain here.” Ali pipes up and wraps her arms around Ashlyn’s waist from behind. “This one works out like she’s a pro-athlete.”

“Yeah, no shit.” Rivera shakes his head. “Fucking feels like I slammed into a fucking mountain side. The fuck are you packing under there, Sarge?” He says as he rubs the top of his shoulder.

“Javi, meet the six pack. Six pack, this is Javi.” Ali mocks him as she lifts the front of Ashlyn’s shirt a bit and runs her hands over her abs.

“Now she’s got better abs than I do too?! I fucking give up, man.” Rivera lifts his shirt and looks down at himself. He has a defined stomach too, but nowhere near Ashlyn’s.
“Eh, this will make you feel better, Rivera… I don’t even rank.” Morris lifts his own shirt to show a trim stomach, but no definition. “I haven’t seen abs in years.” He laughs.

Porter joins in and lifts his shirt to reveal a six pack that certainly rivals, Ashlyn’s. “Yeah no, I’m still feeling pretty good about myself.” He jokes and flexes to be funny.

“Ok, Ali. You’re turn, show us the abs.” Rivera waggles his eyebrows and earns an elbow from Ashlyn.

“Oh you wish, Javi.” Ali sticks her tongue out.

“Ha! Can’t blame a guy for trying, right?” Rivera shrugs. “Alright, Sarge. Show me some of that shit you just pulled on me.”

“Alright, Morris. Come help me show Ali a few things while those two lugnuts work on their holds.” Porter suggests and walks them over to another mat.

“Oh, I don’t know if this is a good idea.” Ali says hesitantly. She’s never really physically fought before.

“We’ll go easy on you.” Porter assures her.

“We’ll just show you a couple really simple and basic things.” Morris promises her.

Both of them feel protective of her and are not willing to let it go, knowing damn well that her podcast gets her in some really questionable situations and neither able to ever forget about what happened with her father. Once she relents, they spend about 30 minutes teaching her some moves before Ashlyn finally walks over.

“What are you two doing with my girl over here?” Ashlyn smiles at the sight of Porter and Morris trying to teach Ali some defense skills. She’d be lying if she said it wasn’t stirring things in her.

“Why don’t you come find out for yourself, Sarge?” Porter challenges.

“Yeah?” Ashlyn questions.

“Come to Papi.” Ali teases and gets set on the mat.

Rivera lets out a loud chortle and shouts “I love it!”

“Alright, alright.” Ashlyn smiles and sets herself across from Ali. “Show me what you got, beautiful. I’m not going easy on you though.”

“You fucking better not, Harris. All or nothing.” Ali warns.

“Go in for a front side take-down, Sarge.” Porter directs Ashlyn so that she knows what Ali can handle based on what he taught her.

Ashlyn doesn’t hesitate, dropping her shoulder to connect with Ali’s torso just like Rivera had done to her. She knows Porter will have told Ali to tighten up her core and that the brunette has a toned build that can withstand her force, so she doesn’t hold back.

The average person will shift onto their heels to brace for the blow when they see someone coming at them, which makes it easy to take their legs out from under them. A trained fighter will know to move into the blow and shift their weight forward. Ashlyn assumes Porter taught Ali to do that and prepares to feel the brunette shift forward, but it doesn’t happen. Instead, Ali surprises her by shifting
back, but only with one leg so that her body weight is evenly distributed. Ali’s forward knee hits
Ashlyn’s inner thigh and throws off her stability. In just two quick moves Ali rolls Ashlyn off her
side and onto the mat, holding onto her arm and quickly locking the stunned officer into a wrist
submission.

“Oh my god, I’m dead!” Rivera drops down to the mat in a fit of laughter at the scene in front of him
while Morris joins him in laughing and Porter claps for Ali.

“Holy shit, what the fuck was that?” Ashlyn asks still stunned at what just happened and how her
anticipation was so off.

“That was Krav Maga.” Porter says proudly. “Israeli military fighting style, purposely designed to go
completely against the expectations of trained combat fighters. It’s my new obsession.”

“You are so fucking teaching me that!” Ashlyn says excitedly.

“Me too!” Rivera agrees.

“Ali can teach you.” Porter laughs.

Ashlyn looks up to see Ali still standing above her with a smug little smirk on her face. She couldn’t
be more turned on right now even though Ali just technically kicked her ass. “And you, are just
fucking hot.” Ashlyn grins and pulls Ali down to the mat with her, kissing her hard and not giving a
shit that the guys are right there.

“Oh, so cold showers, lunch, and mini-golf? Good? Great!” Morris jokes as Rivera pokes Ashlyn’s
gut to make them stop.

“Yeah, I’m definitely ready for something less intense.” Ali admits.

“If you think mini-golf with these guys is going to be less intense, you’re in for a world of
disappointment, Krieger.” Ashlyn warns her. “The stakes are pretty high. The bottom two scorers
battle it out to avoid the loser’s spot. Whichever one of them loses, they have to do whatever the
other one comes up with.”


Ali is eating her words when it comes down to the last hole and she and Rivera are in tie for last
place.

“I don’t have to remind you how bad this will be if he wins, right?” Ashlyn reminds Ali as she rubs
the brunette’s shoulders before the final putt.

“Thanks for the pep-talk, sweetie.” Ali sasses.

“I’m just messing around. I know you got this. My pesky bitch is too competitive to lose to that fool.
Soft hands, baby. Take your time.” Ashlyn plants a kiss on Ali’s forehead.

“Alright you two, exchange your terms.” Porter instructs Ali and Rivera.

Ashlyn watches Ali’s eyes go wide when Rivera leans in and tells the brunette what she’ll have to do
if she loses. She can only imagine what raunchy ass thing he came up with. She smiles when she
sees Rivera’s eyes go just as wide when Ali lays out her own terms.
“Ok. Rivera, you’re up first.” Morris says.

Rivera lines up his shot and takes his putt, choosing not to go for the difficult hole-in-one and safely directing the ball around the pillar obstacles in the way instead. It stops about a foot from the hole and he taps it in with one more putt, smiling confidently because it’s going to be damn near impossible for Ali to beat that. At best, she’ll tie it and they’ll go to another hole to break the tie.

Ashlyn smiles to herself as she watches Ali line up her putt. She can already see the brunette is going right for the hole-in-one and she isn’t surprised in the slightest. Impossible doesn’t exist in Ali’s vocabulary. If it did, Ashlyn would be sitting in a jail cell right now. She watches Ali take the putt and grits her teeth when she realizes that the ball is aimed perfectly, but it’s going too fast. It hits the hole, but skips right over it…only to hit the back edge of the mini-green and bounce back into the hole in a sheer stroke of luck.

“YESSSS!!” Ashlyn jumps up and picks Ali up to swing her in victory.


“Nope. Get used to it, Javi.” Ali winks at him before pecking Ashlyn on the lips.

“So what does he have to do?” Porter asks, dying to know.

“All he has to do is eventually go on a date with a woman of my choosing.” Ali answers simply.

“That’s letting him off easy!” Morris protests.

“Yeah except that she’ll pick one of her perfectly proper and probably gorgeous friends and then kick my ass if I fuck it up.” Rivera grumbles.

“Exactly.” Ashlyn smirks, and kisses Ali’s cheek.

“I take that back, it’s genius!” Morris chuckles and slaps Rivera on the back.

“You’re all done, dude.” Porter shoots Rivera a wry smile.

“So fucked.” Rivera admits in defeat.

Kristen shows up with the three kids a short while later and they have another round of mini-golf just to play with the little ones, not even keeping score. Ali’s heart flutters out of control as she watches Ashlyn teach the twins how to beat the obstacles on the course and has the patience to let them try over and over again when all the other adults get bored and just start chatting. She all but melts into a puddle a little while later when Lexi gets tired and Ashlyn carries the little girl around on her shoulders, allowing herself to be called a pony and even still helping the twins play golf with Lexi on her back.

“Having a kid is pretty amazing. Challenging, but amazing. You guys should try it.” Luke smiles as he plops down beside Ali on the bench she’s sitting on, clearly not missing her expression while she watches Ashlyn and the kids.

“Yeah, we uh, haven’t even come close to that discussion yet.” Ali confesses. “Might want to let us get married first.” She nudges him. “For all I know, she doesn’t even want kids.” She adds with a shrug.
“Seriously? Look at her with them.” He says with raised eyebrows. “The question is, do you want them?”

“Can I answer that and swear you to secrecy?” Ali asks.


“I’ve always wanted kids. Always envisioned having them. And she makes me want them more than ever.” Ali says bluntly as she looks back over at Ashlyn, who is now lying on the ground with all three kids climbing on her. “I don’t know why, but I just feel like maybe she doesn’t. I’ll get over it if that’s the case, I love her way too much not to. Still, I’m a little scared to ask.”

“Can I answer that and swear you to secrecy?” Luke uses Ali’s words.

“Lips are sealed.” Ali promises like he did and listens closely, her heart racing.

“She definitely wants them…but, she’s always felt like she’s being selfish for that. That she shouldn’t have them.” Luke answers truthfully.

Ali nods, feeling her stomach clench a bit at the uncertainty of what that means in the end. “Why does she think that?”

“I think you need to ask her that.” Luke replies. “But… Ali, honestly…I can pretty much assure you that you two will have kids someday. I can see it just by the way you two are together. I know that woman better than my own wife and I know that you’re exactly the person to make her realize how valuable and worthy she is to be a parent and anything else she wants to be.” He says with finality.

Ali can only nod and hug him tightly, feeling like she has all the love in the world to give Ashlyn and show her just how wonderful she is. That she can give Ashlyn the future that she’s always wanted by just doing what comes naturally… loving her unconditionally for who she is and making sure she knows it.

“Thanks, Luke.” She finally manages to whisper as she lets go of him.

“Anytime.” He smiles and gets up to go help Ashlyn untangle herself from Lexi and the twins.

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“So, I have to know. What was Rivera going to make you do if you lost?” Ashlyn asks as she holds Ali close in their hotel bed. They had just gotten back from a very fun and late-ending dinner with the guys and Kristen, leaving them too wiped out to do anything more than cuddle up naked.

“I would have to loudly and seriously say whatever god awful things he came up with while having sex with you.” Ali rolls her eyes.

“Oh man, that would have probably scarred me for life, but also been pretty funny too.” Ashlyn laughs, relieved that Ali won in the end.

““Oh man, that would have probably scared me for life, but also been pretty funny too.”’” Ashlyn laughs, relieved that Ali won in the end.

“I can’t even imagine. And then having to tell him after I did it… yeah, no thanks!” Ali shakes her head a bit. She absentmindedly traces the rose that blooms from the inked face on Ashlyn’s arm, enjoying the comfortable silence between them. It’s not long before she hears the officer yawn. “Go to sleep, baby. We have a long travel day tomorrow with that 3 hour lay-over.”

“Mmhmm, ok. I love you, Alex. So much.” Ashlyn mumbles as she feels Ali reach up and kiss her lips gently.
“I love you madly, Ash. Sweet Dreams.” Ali smiles and kisses Ashlyn’s face a few times before settling back into the crook of her arm and drifting off to sleep quickly.

The next morning is heavier than Ali expected. The promises to be in touch and visit more are sincere, the hugs are tight, and the goodbyes are a mix of somberness and smiles stemming from a time well had together. She smiles to herself when she realizes this is exactly how she felt the time Kyle left to spend six months in California to be trained by a high level master stylist. Another set of brothers to worry about and fuss over, she thinks to herself.

Just a couple hours later, Ali watches Ashlyn eat stale airline pretzels on their first of the two flights they’ll take to get back home. She can’t help but be amused at the complete contrast between how she feels right now to the way she did on the flight to Georgia. Before she was nervous and antsy, now she feels calm and peaceful inside. She’s so in love with this woman beside her and the unconventional little family they’re now a part of together. Family. The word swirls in her head and she thinks back to her conversation with Luke, vowing not to let it go too much longer before she has the kids conversation with Ashlyn.

Ashlyn watches Ali sleep peacefully against her shoulder as they approach Boston. Her heart feels so full right now, she wonders how it hasn’t exploded yet. These last couple of days where more than she ever could have imagined. Ali is her person. She already knew that before, but knowing that others know it too has made it all that more real and tangible. Like a dream come to fruition, a fantasy made reality. Despite the serene feelings inside, she can’t help the one thing still nagging her. With all of the media issues, the event for Kyle, and the trip to Georgia, the conversation she had with Ali about Ken has been put on the back burner. She doesn’t want to push the brunette, but she wants to make sure she takes the time to properly check-in and revisit it again. She had planned to ask while they traveled home, figuring that the stress of the trip would be over and that they’d have plenty of down time to talk. But after such an emotional weekend, she found herself not wanting to break the tranquility between them right now. She kisses Ali’s forehead softly and promises herself that tomorrow is the day she talks to Ali about it.
Getting in an earlier update for you this week! And it's a super teddy bear fluffy one too, so enjoy the feels before we get into dealing with Ken in the next chapter :)
Unfortunately, an immediate member of my family is (expectedly) not doing very well. So, I'm not sure how the next week will look and I'll likely be traveling. Writing time will be limited if I get any at all, so the next update may be a little more delayed than normal.
Thanks for sticking with me and, as always, drop me a comment with your thoughts!

It’s just past 3pm by the time Ashlyn and Ali get an Uber ride home from the airport. Even though they had originally left from Ipswich, Ali’s place is closer to Boston and they had planned before they left to stay there when they got back.

“I just want to pop open a bottle of wine tonight and relax with you.” Ali says as she leans into Ashlyn’s shoulder in the back of the car. Every year on this day, July 28th, she likes to treat herself with her favorite red wine and veg out with some good food and good company. It’s low key and meaningful, exactly the way she likes it. The last few years, that means Kyle and sometimes Emily spending the day with her doing something fun before coming home to watch some trashy TV together. Today is her birthday. She feels a little bad that she hasn’t told Ashlyn, but as soon as she realized the importance of this trip, she knew she wasn’t going to. There was no way Ashlyn would be okay with them traveling on her birthday and not doing something special, so she opted to keep it quiet and swore Kyle to secrecy. She promised him that they’d celebrate tomorrow and that she’d come clean with Ashlyn then too, hoping that the officer will understand and not be too upset. Still, she’s not forgoing her wine tradition tonight and it’s just as well because she’ll have the best company in the world to hold her close for the night. Whether Ashlyn knows it or not, this is already shaping up to be one of her best birthdays ever.

“That sounds great to me, beautiful.” Ashlyn kisses her forehead and rests a hand on her thigh, doing her best not to fidget even though she’s more than ready to be done with traveling and get home.

When Ali opens the front door of the house, the first thing that hits her is a slight gush of cold air.

“Whoops, I must have left the AC cranked. I guess we’ll need those hoodies tonight.” She mumbles with an apologetic smile.

“No big deal, it’s still pretty hot out. If we open some windows, it’ll warm up fast.” Ashlyn replies as she carries their bags in behind Ali.

The second Ali crosses the threshold, something else hits her… a fresh, perfumed smell that she doesn’t immediately recognize. She inhales it a bit deeper to try and figure out what it is, but she doesn’t have to try very hard once her eyes take in the room. There are bouquets of sunflowers and calla lilies placed on just about every surface she can see from where she is standing. There are literally hundreds of flowers.

“Woah, what the…” She starts, but then feels Ashlyn right behind her.

“Happy birthday, beautiful.” Ashlyn whispers softly in Ali’s ear, wrapping her arms around the
brunette from behind as she takes in the room.

“But how did you…wait, you knew? Who told you? How did you do this?” Ali rattles off questions in a mumble as her brain tries to process everything.

“Easy, baby.” Ashlyn hugs her a little tighter and kisses the back of her head. “Did you really think I wouldn’t figure out when your birthday was? Clearly you forgot that I once had to be a police detective before I could eventually be a Captain.” She laughs lightly at her own humor.

“Did Kyle tell you?” Ali turns around to look Ashlyn in the eye, ready to kill her brother.

“No, not exactly. I’ll get to that in a second. But he was very useful when I figured out what you were trying pull here. Why didn’t you tell me, Alex?” Ashlyn questions.

“I’m sorry, Ash. I didn’t mean to upset you. I just knew how much this trip meant to you and well, to us really. I didn’t want my birthday to get in the way of it. I really don’t like to have any big parties or anything, so I didn’t think it would matter whether we celebrated today or another day.” Ali admits, realizing it’s a pretty lame excuse now that she hears herself say it out loud. Now she wishes she had listened to Kyle when he told her not to try and hide it. She sees Ashlyn about to respond and quickly puts her finger up to the officer’s lips. “No, don’t. It just dawned on me that by doing that I didn’t give you the chance to be a part of it. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have done that. I wouldn’t be happy if you did that to me. Won’t happen again, I promise.” She says regretfully.

“Relax, Alex. I’m not mad at you. I can understand what you were thinking. It’s over, let’s forget about it. Especially because you couldn’t one put one past me despite your best efforts, Ms. Big Deal Lawyer. Just for that, now we get to do this my way.” Ashlyn laughs with a waggle of her eyebrows and leans in to kiss the brunette sweetly.

“Mmm, well I gotta say that I like the sound of that, Hero.” Ali smiles against Ashlyn’s lips and goes in for another one before pulling back and looking at the room again. “This is so beautiful, Ash. Thank you.” She pulls the officer into a hug, asking her question again given her mounting curiosity. “So, how exactly did you figure it out and how on earth did you pull this off?”

“I was Instagram stalking Kyle before the salon event to get a sense of what to expect in terms of his friends and clients that might be there. Low and behold, I came across his birthday post for you last year and I practically had a heart attack that it was only a couple weeks away!” Ashlyn chuckles. “I thought maybe you just hadn’t thought to tell me, but then I realized we had the trip booked and you knew we’d be flying that day. So, I figured you were purposely hiding it and pretty much interrogated Kyle until he told me what was going on.”

“You’re smart, Harris. I’ll give you that.” Ali laughs a bit. “Poor Kyle.”

“I was ready to give both of you hell for not telling me, but then it dawned on me that you had just handed me the perfect opportunity to surprise you. Soooo, I took full advantage.” Ashlyn gives Ali an insinuating smile.

“Oh really?” Ali says with a raised eyebrow.

“Uh huh.” Ashlyn replies, not giving anything away. “The flowers are definitely just a starter.”

“Well ok then.” Ali smiles and kisses up the officer’s jawline. “So, how exactly did you get all these flowers in here? I feel like I’m in a Nicholas Sparks movie, they’re amazing.”

“Well the reason it smells like a florist shop is because the flowers have been in here since before our trip. Since we were staying at my place, I had the florist deliver them here the day before we left and
then I left work early to get them all set up before I came home. I had the florist get them still a bit unbloomed and then cranked the AC in here so they would still look good a couple days later when we got home.” Ashlyn explains, feeling proud that she pulled it off.

“You never cease to amaze me, Ash. I love you so much, baby.” Ali kisses her passionately for a couple minutes, whining a bit when Ashlyn pulls away.

“I love you too my beautiful birthday queen, but we need to get this show on the road.” Ashlyn says as she leaves a small kiss on Ali’s nose.

“Show?” Ali inquires.

“Relax, it’s nothing crazy. Kyle explained that you like things low-key. So, when I say we’re doing this my way…I really mean your way, in my style.” Ashlyn says with a sly grin. “Which means… I know you’re going to want to freshen up after that flight. So, you’re going to go and take a shower in the big guest bathroom and get comfy. Everything you’ll need is either in there or in our bags from the trip, which I’ll bring up for you. No going into our bedroom. Got it?”

“Wow, ok. Got it!” She promises, trying not to completely melt at the fact that Ashlyn just called it ‘our bedroom’ for the first time.

“Good. I promise it’ll be worth it later.” Ashlyn winks, knowing she can trust Ali not to go snooping.

“What about you? You’re not going to shower?” Ali asks a bit surprised.

“I will in a little bit, but I need to start dinner. Kyle will be here in an hour and I’m cooking for you.” Ashlyn replies.

“You’re so fucking perfect. Seriously, you couldn’t be hotter right now if you tried.” Ali leans in for another kiss and tries to deepen it, but Ashlyn quickly puts a damper on that.

“Shower, Krieger! Go!” Ashlyn demands.

“Ok, ok!” Ali jokes with her hands up. “Wait, can I ask one more thing?”

“Of course.” Ashlyn replies and waits for it with a smile.

“Do you know how many flowers are in here? I feel like there are hundreds, but I’m curious.” Ali asks, still not over the lavish display yet.

“I sure do. And I knew I could count on you to ask that very question…almost had me worried there for a second that you weren’t going to.” Ashlyn smiles. “There are a thousand and one.”

Ali’s eyes practically bug out of her head. “I don’t even want to know what that cost you.”

“Don’t worry, that’s the only part of tonight that I spent a lot on, I promise.” Ashlyn reassures her.

“So, why a thousand and one?” Ali wonders, knowing darn well that everything with Ashlyn has some meaning.

“The answer to that is also in the guest bathroom, so get going already.” Ashlyn says sweetly.

Ali can’t help but laugh at the built-in motivation that Ashlyn set up to get her upstairs. It totally works and she practically races up there to find another bouquet of sunflowers and calla lilies. She smiles at the choice of flowers… calla lilies being her own favorite, the sunflowers being what Ashlyn always gets her to remind Ali that she is her sun. Propped against the vase is a card and next
to that is Ashlyn’s iPad with a post-it that says ‘shower music’. She opens the card to find a very simple but powerful message that answers her question:

Alex,

In the grand scheme of things, we haven’t know each other all that long. Still, somehow I feel like I’ve known you forever. It’s as if I was just waiting for you to arrive my whole life. Sometimes the feelings in my heart are more perfectly captured by a song than I could ever have thought to write them myself. So…

*I have died every day waiting for you*

*Darling, don't be afraid.*

*I have loved you for a thousand years*

*I'll love you for a thousand more*

*And all along I believed I would find you*

*Time has brought your heart to me*

*I have loved you for a thousand years*

*I'll love you for a thousand more*

A flower for every year of love to come, plus one to symbolize the eternity more than a thousand that it will actually be. Nothing could ever break my connection to you…not time…not mortality. I love you, Alex…infinitely. Happy Birthday, my beautiful Paladin!

Love you,

Hero

Ali holds the card to her heart, letting out a completely love-struck sigh. Now she knows why Ashlyn isn’t showering with her…she’d be having her way with the officer against the shower wall and all over the upstairs of this house for the rest of the night after this birthday card.

She turns on the water to let it get hot and then turns on Ashlyn’s iPad, immediately seeing a playlist of meaningful songs related to their significant moments as well as others that were shared in jest or fun. The first one is clearly just for this very moment, Christina Perri’s ‘A Thousand Years’. She also sees Bob Seger’s ‘We’ve got Tonight’ and Bob Dylan’s ‘Make You Feel my Love’ and smiles thinking of their first real kiss. When she sees Paula Abdul’s ‘Straight Up’, she belly laughs and shakes her head. She starts the playlist and puts the iPad down before quickly stripping and getting into the shower so she can get back to that perfect woman of hers as fast as possible.
Since the outfit Ashlyn left out for her to wear is just a pair of black leggings and a simple gray t-shirt, Ali spends a little extra time making sure her hair and make-up look particularly good before heading downstairs. She looks into the kitchen from the living room, seeing Ashlyn and Kyle standing at the kitchen counter talking. Kyle is in black sweatpants and a black t-shirt. Ashlyn is dressed similarly in gray sweatpants and a black t-shirt. Ali smiles to herself realizing that Ashlyn was keeping good on her promise to keep it low-key and relaxing. She takes in all the beautiful flowers all over the house one more time, still in awe of the romantic gesture, before making her presence known with a little throat clear.

“Finally! The Princess graces us with her presence!” Kyle claps for effect. “Even Harris had time to shower before you finished despite being the chef!”

“Hey now, I’m the birthday girl and I want to look good! Well, as good as I can in comfy clothes anyway.” Ali counters as Kyle hugs her tightly.

“That you do. Happy Birthday, Alex!” Kyle squeezes her tight.

“Thank you, diva! I missed you while we were gone.” Ali smiles at him.

“Ditto.” He replies. “So, holy crap! What do you think about what Captain Romance Ninja pulled up in this place? ‘Hi my name is Alex and I live in a movie!’” He teases her.

“Oh my god, Captain Romance Ninja, I’m so using that!” Ali laughs and walks the short distance towards Ashlyn. “So damn perfect, Harris. Thanks for my birthday card and shower music.” She pulls Ashlyn in by her t-shirt for a lingering kiss. “Mmm, you smell so damn good too.”

“Stawwwwp it! You guys are gonna get me pregnant just by watching you!” Kyle whines dramatically.

Ali picks up a Hershey kiss from the candy bowl on the counter and throws it at him.

“Why are you always throwing things at me?!” Kyle says as he catches the chocolate before it hits him. “I swear I must have a target on my head!”

“Well if you weren’t such a drama queen, I wouldn’t have to keep you in line!” Ali replies with a playful glare.

“Ok my two queens, get the hell out of my kitchen before you mess up dinner! Go chill in the living room and I’ll call you when it’s ready.” Ashlyn steps into their playful tussle. “A glass of wine for my beautiful birthday girl. And a virgin strawberry daiquiri for her not too shabby brother.” She smiles and hands them their drinks as she shuffles them out of the kitchen.

“Oh dear god, I missed your cooking, Harris!” Kyle mumbles as he shoves another bite of steak in
his mouth. “Seriously, I might orgasm.”

“Gross, dude.” Ashlyn shakes her head. “But thanks, I think.”

“Really, baby. This is incredible!” Ali compliments her. Ashlyn had made them perfectly grilled filet mignon wrapped in bacon, homemade mashed potatoes, roasted vegetables, and stuffed shrimp. “How come you don’t always cook like this? You can’t be showcasing these skills and think I’m not going to have expectations now, Hero.” She says playfully.

“Oh I would love to cook you a dinner like this every night, but someone won’t stop pawing at me long enough.” Ashlyn raises her eyebrows at Ali. “So, I’ve had to learn to keep my recipes to under 20 minutes. Not that I’m complaining that you can’t keep your hands off me.”

“What?! I do not paw at you and I can totally keep my hands to myself!” Ali argues in mock offense.

“Alex?” Kyle pipes up and continues when Ali looks at him. “Where is your left hand right now?”

Ashlyn let’s out a loud chuckle as Ali looks down and sees that her hand is on Ashlyn’s thigh.

“Oh shut it, you two!” Ali laughs and pinches Ashlyn’s thigh teasingly. “I could keep my hands off if I wanted to!”

“Yeah, but you don’t want to! That’s what the woman was getting at! Sooo, no feast dinners for you!” Kyle declares in a roar of laughter.

“Well you’re darn right I don’t want to!” Ali sticks her tongue out. “Take-out is just fine thank you very much.”

“Annnyway…I’m glad you both like it.” Ashlyn says, putting an end to it. “Save room for dessert though.”

“Ooooh, there’s dessert!” Kyle says excitedly.

“Of course there’s dessert…it’s her birthday!” Ashlyn rolls her eyes.

“Yeah, but…do I get to stay for this ‘dessert’?” Kyle says with an insinuating smile as he makes air quotations with his fingers.

“Well, yeah. I mean I figured you’d certainly want to join me in covering your sister in whipped cream and licking it off of her, right?” Ashlyn says sarcastically as she throws her cloth napkin at him. “It’s just cake, dude… chill!”

“That is a mental picture I did not need, Harris!” Kyle whines.

“You totally asked for it, Ky!” Ali agrees. “Now…you said something about cake?”

“Easy, baby. We’ll get to the cake.” Ashlyn shakes her head. “Why do I always feel like a parent when you two are together?”

“You’d definitely be a MILF.” Ali winks.

Ashlyn just lets out a joking sigh and looks at Kyle, waiting for his sure-to-be-coming response.

“Well, I was going to call her Daddy…but, I can roll with MILF.” Kyle joins in.
“You two are impossible. Good thing I love you both. And on that note, you kids go back to the living room so I can clean up.” Ashlyn says, noticing that everyone seems to be done eating.

“Absolutely not. You cooked, I’ll clean up.” Kyle demands. “You two go relax, I’ll be in soon.”

“You sure? I was planning on doing it.” Ashlyn protests a bit.

“I got it, Harris. Now go!” Kyle shoos her away.

Ashlyn quickly refills her and Ali’s wine glasses before settling in next to the brunette on the couch and handing her glass to her.

“Thanks, baby.” Ali smiles and reaches to put the glass on the coffee table before taking Ashlyn’s out of her hand and doing the same. She leans into the officer’s side and grins when she feels Ashlyn pull her in close. She places a few tiny kisses on Ashlyn’s jaw as she moves a hand behind her neck to pull her in closer, finally tilting her head up to capture the officer’s lips in a slow romantic kiss that has her head spinning in mere seconds.

“I can’t get enough of your mouth right now, Hero.” Ali mutters against Ashlyn’s lips as she barely pulls away so they can breathe for a few seconds. “I want to kiss you all night.”

“I think I can work that into the plans.” Ashlyn smiles against Ali’s lips and kisses her again. She eventually breaks the kiss when she hears the water turn off in the kitchen, knowing Kyle will be done soon. “Think your brother might have something to say about that though.”

Ali just shrugs before putting her lips back on the officer’s. Kissing this woman is her favorite thing in the world. She lives for the jolt of electricity through her body, the flutter of her heart, the tingle in her skin, and the butterflies in her stomach that go into a tizzy every single time they connect. Tonight she feels even more obsessed with it than ever, never wanting to pull herself away from Ashlyn soft lips, warm mouth, and gently probing tongue. “Mmmm.” She hums into the kiss, letting herself get lost in it even though she knows she can’t with Kyle here…but she just can’t pull herself away.

‘Alex…” Ashlyn pulls back and tries to pull herself together so they can stop. It’s no use when Ali just says “shhhh” and latches back onto her mouth, neither of them willing to let go of the feeling building between them.

“Well, I see we’ve moved on to dessert!” Kyle announces loudly as he plops down next them on the couch unceremoniously.

Ali groans and pulls backs, letting her lips linger for just a second longer before looking up to see Ashlyn’s still hooded eyes. “Love you.” She whispers really softly near Ashlyn’s ear before turning to face Kyle. “Sorry.” She mumbles with a shrug.

“Eh, don’t be. Although seeing anyone mack on my sister is a little wrong, you two are really sweet and I love seeing you happy…both of you.” Kyle says with a genuine smile. “Plus it’s your birthday, so I’ll let it slide!”

“Awww, thank you darling.” Ali leans over and kisses his cheek.

Ashlyn can only smile at them because she’s still recovering from the make-out session with Ali that has her feeling a bit dreamy and dazed.

“Oook and Brady Bunch moment over! No more kissing until I leave! Oh and I was promised cake!” He practically shouts, finally pulling Ashlyn out of her haze.
“Right! Cake! Be right back!” Ashlyn scrambles to move and stumbles a bit as she gets up and heads into the kitchen.

“What the hell did you do to her?” Kyle snickers playfully and Ali just giggles with a wink.

Ashlyn comes back just a few minutes later looking more pulled together with a medium sized cake in her hands, a number 33 candle lit on top of it. Kyle gets them started singing happy birthday while Ali sits back and enjoys them ad-libbing a few funny words and phrases into, laughing hard when Kyle ends it on “Happy birthday dear princess” while Ashlyn simultaneously goes with “Happy birthday dear hot pants” before they end on “Happy birthday to you!” together.

Ali quickly makes her wish and blows out the candle, the level of true happiness and commitment needed to make the silent wish she just did is not lost on her as she thinks about it for a second.

“First slice to the beautiful birthday girl.” Ashlyn says sweetly and holds a plate with cake on it towards Ali.

“Ice cream cake.” Ali practically sighs with heart eyes when she sees it. “You remembered?”

“What, did you think I wasn’t listening just because you were too busy ogling me in my sexy prison jumper?” Ashlyn teases. “I hung on every word, babe. So you’re damn right I remembered that the queen only eats ice cream cake on her birthday!”

“Oh, you’re just too good, Harris.” Kyle says appreciatively with a playful smile. “You are definitely training my next boyfriend. I’ll just bring him in on a leash.”

“Yeah, no thanks.” Ashlyn cringes at the thought.

“And that visual was payback for the earlier one you gave me… ugh, I’m not going to be able to have whipped cream on my mocha in the morning thanks to you.”

“Annnyway, so… birthday movie time?” Ashlyn asks, changing the subject.

“Ooooh, yes!” Ali replies excitedly.

“I’m in, but I want to give you your present first!” Kyle says as he grabs something from beside the couch and hands Ali a medium sized box and another smaller flat, rectangular wrapped gift. “Open the smaller one first.”

Ali opens it to find a framed picture, a nose crinkling smile appearing on her face when she sees what it is. It’s a picture of her and Ashlyn in the back room of Kyle’s salon. Ali is sitting on Ashlyn’s lap at the hair washing station chair. One of her arms is around Ashlyn’s shoulders, the other hand buried in the officer’s hair. Ashlyn has her arms wrapped around Ali’s waist, holding her close. They’re looking into each other’s eyes and laughing about something, Ali’s head tilted down and Ashlyn’s tilted up, their faces close enough to be kissing. But it’s the way that they’re looking at each other that’s everything. It’s happiness, and fire, and adoration, and a million more things Ali can’t even describe at the moment. It’s love. Anyone who looked at this picture would easily be able to see that the two of them were head over heels for each other.

“Kyle. This is beautiful. I love it so much.” Ali says emotionally, eyes still glued to the photo as she feels Ashlyn squeeze her arm and kiss her cheek. “When did you even sneak back there to take this? I never saw you until after I washed her hair.”

“Giiirl, I have my ways. Sneaky, sneaky.” Kyle smirks. “Besides, you two don’t even realize how wrapped up in each other you get. I could’ve dropped a bomb in there and you wouldn’t have
noticed. Anyway, I realized that you don’t have any nice framed pictures up in the house of the two of you yet, so I figured I’d get you started.”

“Well, I absolutely love it!” Ali says excitedly and side hugs Kyle.

“I do too.” Ashlyn adds approvingly.

“Alright, open the other one!” Kyle demands.

Ali opens the second gift to find a top of the line camera with two lenses, a high capacity memory card, and a mini tri-pod. “Oh my god, Kyle! You shouldn’t have spent so much!” Ali yells out in surprise at the expensive gift.

“Well, I wanted to get you started with a good one. I have a feeling you two will be taking a lot more pictures now.” Kyle replies with a smile. “Don’t worry, I’ll teach you how to use it.” He adds after seeing Ali’s brow furrow at the size of the manual booklet.

“Oh thank god, I was already nervous about using it!” Ali admits. “You’re really sweet, these are the best gifts! Thanks, Ky!” Ali gets up and pulls him up with her to give him a proper hug, squeezing him really tightly as Ashlyn watches on with a smile.

“You’re welcome, princess. So, what are we watching?” Kyle inquires and moves things along as he sits back onto the couch.

“It’s the queen’s birthday, we watch Cinderella of course!” Ashlyn declares like it’s obvious.

“You’re the best, baby.” Ali says giddily and pulls Ashlyn in for a quick kiss as she gets herself comfortable against the officer again.

“Such a suck up, Harris.” Kyle jokes.

“Don’t be jealous, honey…it’s not cute.” Ali reaches over and playfully slaps his shoulder.

“What she said.” Ashlyn laughs.

“Whatever. We all know I’m cute…like puppy-level cute.” Kyle smirks and starts to put his feet up on the coffee table before he realizes he can’t with all the flowers. “So, um, Harris… think we can move some of this greenhouse around so we can actually see the TV?” He teases her and earns another slap from Ali.

“Funny.” Ashlyn shakes her head and moves some of the vases off to the side of the room so that they’re not in the way anymore.

“Thank you, Captain Romance Ninja!” Kyle sasses and Ali laughs, both of them getting a playful glare from Ashlyn as she resettles herself on the couch and pulls Ali in close again so they can watch Cinderella.

It’s a perfect movie choice, letting them all relax without having to get too invested in it. Plus they all have a good laugh when Ali and Kyle start singing along to the songs.

“Alright, ladies, it’s time for me to head out like a fetus.” Kyle finally announces with a smirk.
“Gross, Ky!” Ali throws a couch pillow at him.

“Always with the throwing things, geez!” He complains. “Anyway! Happy birthday, Alex!” He pulls Ali off the couch and into a tight hug. “I have a crazy day tomorrow, but maybe we can do dinner on Sunday night?” He suggests as he lets Ali go.

“Unfortunately, I’m back to work for the Sunday night shift. But you two can have a girl’s night.” Ashlyn winks.

“Damn right we will!” Kyle waves his hand flamboyantly.

“Sounds good to me. Can we do it at Ash’s place though, I want to be there when she gets home in the morning?” Ali asks both of them.

“Mi casa es su casa.” Ashlyn answers matter-of-factly.

“Fine by me. I can mix-up the perfect color arrangement she has going in her closet.” Kyle jokes with a devious smile as he rubs his hands together.

“Try it. You know what happened last time you did that for fun.” Ashlyn jokingly warns him.

“Ooh, what happened?!” Ali asks curiously, dying to know.

“Story for another day.” Kyle shakes his head. “Let’s just say it involves me having to re-grow an eyebrow.” He shrugs with a laugh as Ashlyn smirks smugly.

“You are so telling me later! I still have a lot to hear about when you two lived together.” Ali points between them.

“Goodnight, Harris. Don’t keep her up too late.” Kyle winks and gives her a hug before turning to Ali.

“Happy birthday, princess. I love you.” He says hugging her one more time and kissing her cheek. “Definitely keep Harris up too late.” He whispers in her ear and pulls back to see a devilish little smile on her face.

“Thanks for everything and those amazing gifts. Love you too!” Ali squeezes him one more time before he starts to leave. “Good night!”

“Night night, dude!” Ashlyn calls out as he walks out the door.

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“So…” Ali gets in close to Ashlyn, their lips almost touching. “Does this mean we can go up to bedroom now?” She doesn’t wait for a response, crashing their lips together as she puts her hands on the back of Ashlyn’s neck. She swipes her tongue across the officer’s lips and immediately gains entry into her mouth, getting dizzy all over again at the energy between them.

“Mmm, god you’re amazing.” Ashlyn pulls back with her eyes still closed and a bit breathless, the way Ali won’t stop kissing her like this tonight is clouding her mind. She desperately wants to go back in for another one, but she knows she needs to get back to her game plan. “Not quite. This means that I get to go up to the bedroom now. You get to finish your wine and chill for like 20 minutes, and then come upstairs, ok?”

“How about 15 minutes, Hero?” Ali negotiates the terms, taking Ashlyn’s lips in a bruising kiss
again before she can answer.

“Deal.” Ashlyn gasps when Ali drags her teeth over her bottom lip as she pulls away after a couple of minutes.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous.” Ali whispers heatedly and pulls Ashlyn back in yet again before the officer can move to head upstairs. “Mmm, 10 minutes?” Ali mutters against Ashlyn’s lips.

“No dice, Krieger. Overruled… 15 minutes, not a second less.” Ashlyn smiles and leaves a lingering kiss on Ali’s lips before forcibly dragging herself away and quickly heading up the stairs, hearing Ali groan and flop down on the couch in defeat.

Exactly 15 minutes later, Ali slowly opens the bedroom door finding the room softly aglow with lit candles providing a perfect ambiance. There are more bouquets of flowers all over the room and Ali smiles, wondering where else she will find them in the house. There is a fresh white sheet laid out on the bed and a bottle of oil on the bedside table, so she knows that some kind of massage is in order. Her heart races a bit at the thought before she starts looking around for Ashlyn.

“Ash?” Ali calls out softly.

“In here, beautiful.” Ashlyn voice drifts out of the bathroom.

Ali notices the same soft glow coming from the bathroom and heads towards it, walking in to find a similar décor of flower and candles as well as the best sight of all, a very naked Ashlyn smiling at her.

“Damn, baby.” Ali smiles and looks her girl up and down. “What is all this?”

“Jacuzzi bath and a massage for the birthday girl, how does that sound?” Ashlyn asks sweetly.

“Completely, perfect.” Ali grins widely. “Well, assuming that you’re naked the whole time that is.”

“Birthday queen gets whatever she wants.” Ashlyn grins back. “Come here.”

Ali complies and steps to Ashlyn who leans in and gives her a quick, soft kiss. “Turn around, baby.” The officer demands huskily.

Ali does as she’s told and feels Ashlyn run her hands down her sides and then under the hem of her t-shirt before pulling it over her head. It’s taking everything in her not to turn around and kiss the officer, but she knows it’ll be worth it to let Ashlyn be in control. That thought is immediately rewarded with fingers slipping into the waistband of her pants and slowly lowering them down her legs. Ali steps out of them and feels Ashlyn move her hair off of her shoulder from behind her, the officer’s soft lips kissing across the newly exposed skin. “Mmm, that feels so good, Ash.” Ali hums lightly at the sensation, her body erupting into goosebumps.

Ashlyn doesn’t say anything. She just kisses up Ali’s neck before pulling her lips away and gathering the brunette’s beautiful brown hair in her hands and putting it up into a haphazard bun.

Ali just closes her eyes and leans back further into her girlfriend, her heart racing as she feels Ashlyn’s fingers unclip her bra and move it off of her shoulders. Ashlyn’s hands lightly rake down her torso as the officer goes back to nipping at her shoulder and neck, her fingers finally reaching the waistband of her underwear and slowly moving it down her legs.
“Much better.” Ashlyn husks into Ali’s ear before kissing just behind it and feeling Ali squirm a bit with a sharp intake of breath. “Easy, baby. Let’s get in the bath.” She takes Ali’s hand and leads the brunette into the tub.

Ali settles down in the soothing warm water, sitting between Ashlyn’s legs and feeling the officer’s strong arms hold her tight just like the night they reunited. She immediately relaxes, feeling so safe and protected in her girlfriend’s secure embrace. They stay quiet for quite a while and just enjoy the closeness of each other, Ashlyn leaving gentle, loving kisses along Ali’s neck and shoulders every so often.

“Ash, this is completely amazing. This is the second best birthday I’ve ever had.” Ali says in whisper as she leans back into Ashlyn as far as she can.

“Second best?” Ashlyn quirks an eyebrow. It’s not like she’s in some competition that she knows of, but the statement is interesting none-the-less.

“Yeah, sorry…it’s not a knock on tonight. This is absolutely wonderful. It’s just…” Ali nervously tries to find the right way to explain, already worried that she offended the officer with her thoughtless choice of phrasing.

“Hey, shhh…it’s ok. I’m not upset at all, promise.” Ashlyn kisses Ali’s shoulder a few times soothingly. “Talk to me. Tell me about your best birthday ever, I’d love to know.” She holds Ali a little tighter.

The statement is so genuine, so kind that Ali feels walls inside her crumble to dust. She smiles to herself, knowing they never stood a chance against Ashlyn Harris to begin with. She lets out a deep breath and lets the explanation tumble out of her mouth, one she has never bothered to tell to anyone.

“When I was little, my family made a big deal about birthdays. It was always a big party, lots of friends, and tons of presents. Everything a kid could possibly want. Ken left shortly after my tenth birthday, so when my eleventh birthday rolled around… my mom did everything to make sure it was just as big of a celebration. And despite my father not being there, it was just as festive as all the others. And then my twelfth birthday rolled around and this time, we couldn’t celebrate it on the exact birthday like we did all the other years.” Ali pauses.

“How come?” Ashlyn asks and places another kiss on Ali’s shoulder to encourage her.

“Because it was the same day my mom was being sworn in as a judge and it was a huge celebratory affair of day-long events.” Ali recounts. “My mom woke me up with a special breakfast that morning and did everything to make the day great for me, but really the whole day was about her and this amazing achievement… and it was wonderful. I can’t do it justice in explaining it really. It was just this whole day of watching her be celebrated, listening to people tell these stories about hard she worked and the things she accomplished. And god, Ash, I couldn’t have been prouder that she was my mother. I feel like it lit me up inside, made me want to be as amazing as she was.” Ali smiles thinking about it before continuing. “Then at the end of the day, when all the celebrations were over… Kyle and I found her sitting in the courtroom in the judge’s seat in her robes just having a quiet moment and taking it all in. She called me over and I went up there to be with her. And she got up and told me to sit and check out her new view. So, I sat in her spot and she just stood behind me a bit and sang happy birthday to me. I know, it’s not a big thing… but it was her day and she was still making it about me. I’ll never forget that moment. There’s a picture of it somewhere that Kyle took, I’ll have to find it someday.”

Ashlyn swallows hard, knowing what else is still coming tonight and not expecting it to take this turn. Her heart rate picks up a bit as she contemplates the situation and if she should change
“You ok back there?” Ali pauses and asks quietly, feeling Ashlyn’s heart thump against her back.

“I’m perfect, Alex.” Ashlyn smiles and plants another kiss on her shoulder, already making up her mind that she’s not going to change a thing about her plan.

“Anyway, we still had a huge birthday party the next day.” Ali continues. “But it wasn’t the same anymore. It just didn’t even hold a candle to the day before. That was the day I realized that the celebration didn’t matter at all and that spending my birthday with just the people I loved the most was what was important to me. I’ve kept it low-key ever since. And honestly, that was the best day of my life and best birthday ever. I didn’t think anything could ever even come close to it… until tonight. So, yes, second best…but I hope you understand now what a feat that is in and of itself, Ash.”

“Good.” Ashlyn whispers.

“What’s good?” Ali asks a bit confused.

“That I didn’t top that day. I’ll always do everything to come as close as possible…but I never want to top it. I want you to have that moment forever and have it always be the brightest.” Ashlyn admits honestly.

The statement is candid and raw, it makes everything inside Ali feel like it’s shifting in ways she never thought possible. She quickly turns in Ashlyn’s arms to face her, surprising the officer a bit. She finds the most beautiful hazel eyes in the world and gazes into them intently. “I don’t think you will ever understand what you mean to me and how much I love you, Ashlyn Harris. But I swear to you that I’m going to spend every damn breath of my life trying to show you.” She takes Ashlyn’s lips in her own passionately, not giving her a chance to respond.

Ashlyn melts into the kiss and feels Ali deepen it, the brunette’s hands now holding her face as the kiss gets more desperate and demanding. She grips Ali’s hips tighter as she feels her lungs burn from the lack of air. She feels Ali take her hand and direct it between her legs just as the brunette breaks for them to breathe.

“This was supposed to be relaxing.” Ashlyn says breathlessly against Ali’s lips as they breathe the same air.

“Birthday girl gets whatever she wants, right?” Ali mumbles back.

“Absolutely.” Ashlyn replies and gently uses her lips to hold Ali’s bottom one between hers for a second.

“Together then.” Ali husks and slips her own hand between Ashlyn’s legs, moving the other one to the back of the officer’s neck.

“Together.” Ashlyn confirms and hisses in pleasure as she feels the brunette enter her, pressing her own fingers into Ali’s wet center.

“Unnhh.” Ali whimpers softly against Ashlyn’s mouth as the long fingers fill her. “Don’t stop kissing me, Ash.” Ali demands in a needy tone, hearing Ashlyn whisper “I love you” before their lips meet in a scorching kiss that allows no more words to be spoken.

The pace is slow and sensual as they move together effortlessly, losing track of whose body is whose as they fall into rhythm with each other. The kiss never breaks as they read each other’s bodies by
way of soft whimpers and moans, tumbling over the edge within seconds of each other…lips only parting when all they can do is gasp for air and hold each other tightly to ride out the waves of pleasure.

Ali curls herself into Ashlyn’s lap, the officer holding her so close as the water continues to swirl around them calmly. The feeling is euphoric and yet, peaceful at the same time. After a long moment of quiet, she finally speaks up. “As amazing as this feels, we better get to that massage before I get so relaxed that my vital signs stop. I definitely want to get the massage in before that.” Ali jests.

“Who said anything about a massage?” Ashlyn jokes.

“You already said it. Can’t back out now, Harris.” Ali winks.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Krieger.” Ashlyn reaches up to cup her face and kiss her softly. “Come on, beautiful.” Ashlyn slowly gets up and helps Ali out of the tub, wrapping her in a robe before putting one on herself and leading the way back into the bedroom.

“Ok. Come sit for a second.” Ashlyn sits on the end of the bed and pats the spot beside her.

Ali complies and looks at Ashlyn curiously.

Ashlyn takes a deep breath to get herself ready and then takes Ali’s hands in hers. “I didn’t know what to get you for your birthday, so I opted to make you something meaningful.” She explains as her heart rate picks up.

“Ash, you didn’t have to get me anything. Tonight, all of this, is so beyond enough.” Ali says sincerely.

Ashlyn wants to say something else, to explain, but she’s not sure what to say right now. She scratches the back of her head nervously and goes for it, reaching under the bed to pull out a wrapped 20x24 inch frame. “Here, open it.”

Ali smiles and pulls away the wrapping paper, finding the back side of a large picture frame. When she turns it around, she loses her breath at what’s in front of her. “It’s…” the only word she can utter comes out of her gaping mouth before she covers it with her hand.

“Yeah.” Ashlyn whispers out, trying to read Ali’s expression.

It’s that moment. The one that can’t be topped…right here, perfectly sketched in charcoal by the woman she loves more than anything in the world. Her newly twelve-year-old self captured seamlessly as she sits and looks back adoringly at her mother, who looks down happily at her from behind in the robes that defined so much of who she was. Her heart leaps in her chest as she traces her fingers over the glass that covers the drawing. “Ash…how did you know?” She asks in complete wonderment.

“I didn’t, Alex. I honestly had no idea.” Ashlyn tries to explain herself. “I didn’t mean to intrude on anything. I just…I found that picture sitting on top of a shoebox of other pictures in your closet when I cleaned out some space for my stuff like you told me to. I saw it and I was just blown away. The way you’re looking at her and the way she’s looking at you… the connection…it’s breathtaking to me. You’re so in awe of her…and she’s so proud of you. There is so much love in that picture that I couldn’t stop looking at it. It’s everything I ever wanted to have with my mother that never existed, not even an ounce of it. But to see this and know that you did have it, it makes me happier than I can
explain. It makes my heart feel full and I just wanted to put it down on paper the way it’s etched in my mind.” She finishes and squeezes Ali’s hand. “I hope I didn’t cross a line or upset you.”

“No, Ash…it’s perfect.” Ali holds Ashlyn’s face with both of her hands and smiles. “This is truly the most beautiful gift I have ever gotten and somehow I hope that I can eventually find the words to tell you just how much this means to me, but they’re failing me right now. I’m blown away, baby. I don’t know how you did this, but…I… I love you so much, Ash. So, so much. You’re amazing.” Ali leans in and kisses Ashlyn with everything she has, leaving them both completely breathless and in a haze.

“I love you too, Alex. You’re my heart.” Ashlyn replies the second she can breathe enough to do it.

Ali looks down and takes in the sketch again, finally looking beyond the images of her and her mother and seeing something she missed before. The paper the sketch is drawn on isn’t plain, it has writing on it. She holds it up and inspects it closer, reading the words behind the drawing in a handwriting she doesn’t recognize.

I will always ask you...are you happy? If the answer is yes, then I am happy too. In my life, you are the sun. The light that reminds me that everything, all of it, has been worth it. And just like the sun is sometimes obscured by clouds and hidden amongst the darkness at night, so too has your light been dimmed at times. Still, you are always there, hidden or not; always back to reveal your bright light reliably because it is too strong to damper for long.

You are stronger because you have been broken.

You are braver because you have feared.

You are smarter because you have learned from failure.

You are kinder because you have known cruelty.

You are more loyal because you have been betrayed.

But most importantly, you are loved for exactly who you are and deserving of all good things. If you are happy, then I am happy. The world is yours beautiful sun, shine on.

“You’ve always had the power my dear, you just had to learn it for yourself.” – TWOO

Ali reads it twice and finally looks up at Ashlyn. “Ash, what is this behind it?”

Ashlyn smiles. “My grandma was everything to me. She was the mother I never had. The closest thing to what I always wished for.” She runs her fingers over the glass where the words start and continues. “Gram was old-fashioned and she liked to write me letters when I was away. Being in college and then stationed away from home with the army was the perfect excuse for her to write me a lot of them.” Ashlyn smiles at the memory. “This is a blown up copy of the last one I got from her, not too long before I had my first deployment. When I first read it, I thought she had written it because she knew I was going overseas soon. Looking back on it, I think she knew she wouldn’t be around to write me too many more.”

“Oh, Ash…” Ali sets the frame down carefully and wraps her arms around the officer.
“It’s ok. It’s the most meaningful thing anyone ever said to me. If you’ve ever wondered what motivated me, what got me through all those years… it was this. And seeing that picture of you with your mom, it just fit with this in my head somehow. And yeah, so this is what my artistic brain came up with.” She smiles and points at the frame.

“It’s beautiful. I couldn’t love anything more.” Ali says seriously before adding, “well, except you of course.”

Ashlyn just smiles kisses Ali softly.

“What is TWOO?” Ali asks, pointing at the last written word.


“Of course. Duh.” Ali giggles, knowing she should have known that by now.

They sit in silence for a minute before Ashlyn speaks up. “So, massage?”

“Definitely.” Ali gives her a nose crinkling grin and stands up, letting Ashlyn slip the robe off of her before laying on the bed face down. “Yours better be coming off too, Harris.” She says as she lifts her head to see Ashlyn getting the oil ready.

“Yes, Ma’am.” Ashlyn replies and slips her own robe off, spreading some warm oil into her hands and starting to work Ali’s shoulders.

Ali feels her heart rate pick up again when Ashlyn straddles her, feeling course, trimmed curls tickle her lower back. “That feels so incredibly good, baby.” Ali breathes out in a contented sigh as Ashlyn’s large hands gently knead all of the tension out of her shoulders, upper back and arms. She feels almost like a puddle of goo under Ashlyn’s expert hands. This moment is almost perfect except for the one need building inside her that she can’t quell in this position.

“Ash?” Ali lifts her head a bit.

“Ash?” Ali lifts her head a bit.

“Yeah, baby?” Ashlyn replies, continuing to move her hands towards Ali’s lower back.

“This feels incredible, but I really need to kiss you right now.” Ali requests sweetly.

“Birthday girl gets whatever she wants.” Ashlyn smiles. “Think I can accommodate that. Get up for a second.” Ashlyn directs her and gets off of Ali so she can comply. The officer lays on her back on top of the bed where Ali just was and then motions for the brunette to join her. “Ok, come here… lay on top of me.”

“Mmmm, now this I like. A lot. A whole damn lot.” Ali husks as she presses her chest down to Ashlyn’s and gets comfortable, the feeling of the dog tags pressed between them still novel. She feels Ashlyn’s hands go back to work, massaging her shoulders and back from underneath her. “So perfect.” She murmurs against Ashlyn’s lips as she takes them in her own.

They stay locked in a romantic and languid kiss, pausing only to breathe occasionally, as Ashlyn massages every part of Ali that her hands can reach. Ali pulls away after what seems like at least an hour, her lips feeling a bit numb and tingly. She rests her head on Ashlyn’s chest, burying it into the crook of the officer’s neck and enjoying the serenity of it all. “I love you madly.” She says in a barely audible mumble before her breath evens out and starts lightly snoring.

Ashlyn smiles and stills her hands, wrapping her arms around Ali’s torso and holding her snuggly as she relishes in the feel of the brunette’s perfect weight on top of her. “July 28th…best day ever.” She
presses a kiss to Ali’s forehead. “Happy birthday, my queen. I love you.”
Switch

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the longer delay in getting this chapter posted. Life has been a little bit crazy and I didn't want to put it out until I was sure I could put in the proper writing time. As usual, I hope I've made it up to you with a long chapter!
This one gets into some heavier emotional dealings, so prepare yourself. We're confronting Ken...dun dun dun! (Use Chapter 28 as a refresher if you need it).
Thanks for reading and don't forget to leave me a comment with your thoughts!

“Good morning my queen.” Ashlyn smiles when she feels arms wrap around her bare stomach from behind as she tries to make coffee. She turns her head and leans back a bit to give Ali a kiss.

“You didn’t wake me up.” Ali pouts into back of the officer’s neck, leaving a couple of kisses there.

“Believe me babe, I tried. You were pretty much down for the count.” Ashlyn laughs lightly. “I figured if I got ready and made some breakfast, you’d be down here in no time.”

“You know me way too well. I think your birthday surprise really tired me out.” Ali lets out a giggle and presses a few more kisses to Ashlyn’s shoulders. “Mmmm, whatever you made smells really good. Is that bacon?”

“Yes.” Ashlyn turns around in Ali’s arms and smiles at her. “Scrambled eggs and avocado toast too.”

“You are too good to me.” Ali grins and leans in for another kiss.

“And you, are so damn beautiful. Seriously don’t think I’ll ever get used to my stomach dropping like it does every time I look at you.” Ashlyn runs a hand through Ali’s hair.

“So sweet, Harris.” Ali drags her hand up the officer’s muscular arm and finally takes note of what she’s wearing: a sporty black bikini top and black board shorts to match. “I feel like you are buttering me up for something. And why are you dressed for the beach?”

“I’m not buttering you up. Well, not really anyway.” Ashlyn answers honestly. “Since we eventually have to head to Ipswich today, I figured we could do it sooner rather than later. It’s supposed to be hot, so I thought maybe we could find a quiet spot on the beach. Maybe talk a little.”

Ali’s brow furrows just a bit as she reads into the statement, remembering how intense their conversation got last time they settled into a quiet spot on the beach. With everything being so busy the last few weeks, they haven’t really gotten into anymore talks like that one. “Everything ok, Ash?” She inquires.

“Fine, baby. I promise.” Ashlyn reassures her and kisses her forehead. “The last couple weeks have been really busy and packed, so I thought it would be good to just check in with each other.”

“Sounds perfect.” Ali agrees. “I’ll get my stuff together and get ready after breakfast so we can leave soon. Now... I was promised bacon.” Ali waggles her eyebrows.
“That you were my queen.” Ashlyn gives a slight bow and moves around the kitchen island to grab the two plates from the counter behind them, placing one in front of Ali with a mug of coffee.

“You’re the best.” Ali leans over the kitchen island and kisses Ashlyn soundly before sitting down and digging into her breakfast.

After finding a pretty private spot on the beach and laying out a large blanket, the two women decide to head for a quick swim since it’s already so hot and fast approaching high noon.

“So much better.” Ali mumbles as she dries herself off a bit with a towel and settles onto the blanket in the warm sand.

“Definitely.” Ashlyn agrees as she starts re-applying her sunscreen. “Probably going to need a few more cool-down swims today. It’s supposed to hit 95 degrees.” She tosses the sunscreen bottle to Ali, who eyes it as it lands beside her leg.

“Pretty sure I could use some help with this.” Ali playfully grins as she holds the bottle in her hands.

“Pretty sure you don’t have to tell me twice.” Ashlyn laughs and grabs the bottle from Ali, pouring sunscreen in her hands and working it over the brunette’s shoulders and upper back.

Ali relaxes into the soothing touches and closes her eyes, feeling the officer work sunscreen into the exposed skin of her torso and then her legs. “I’m not even going to lie to you, Harris… those large hands of yours are a total perk.”

“Oh yeah?” Ashlyn leans in and whispers into Ali’s ear. “And why is that?”

Ali bites her lower lip hard to try and gain control of herself and tilts her head back to look at Ashlyn. “For now I’m just going to say that they give amazing massages and leave it at that. Because we both know that if I say anything else, this will go somewhere it can’t go right now, Hero.”

Ashlyn groans. “Right. Because then tomorrow morning we’d be the front page story with a headline about how we’re exhibitionists.” She says in a clipped tone as she finishes putting sunscreen on Ali’s arms and unceremoniously plops down on the blanket besides the brunette.

“Okay, I know that tone.” Ali props herself up on her elbow, facing the officer and matching her position. She leans in and kisses Ashlyn really softly. “Talk to me, baby. What’s bothering you?”

“You know how we said we’d ignore all the media stuff after Kyle’s event?” Ashlyn watches Ali nod and then lets out a small sigh. “I have to confess that I haven’t. I’ve been reading what’s out there.” Her eyes shift down to the blanket.

“Hey. It’s okay. I’ve kept tabs on it too.” Ali admits reassuringly and strokes the top of Ashlyn’s shoulder gently. “It’s pretty hard to just ignore it.”

Ashlyn feels the warm, comforting touch and finds herself opening right up. “I didn’t think it would bother me this much, but for some reason I actually give a shit about all the stuff they say about us. I thought the event with Kyle would get them to back off. I mean, it kinda helped in that they’re not so obviously in our faces anymore…. but now they just snap pictures from places we don’t even see them and then make up all this crap about us.” She releases her frustration. “One day we’re some perfect couple, the next day one or both of us is some unstable mad woman. I took Elsie for ice cream last week and suddenly the story is that I have a prison love child with one of the guards. Are you fucking kidding me?!”
“I’m sorry. I know this is a lot.” Ali says quietly and squeezes the officer’s bicep.

“It’s ok, you don’t have to apologize. It’s not your fault. And I know it must get to you too. I just wish that it didn’t get to me as much as it does. I realize that the people who actually know us don’t believe any of it. I guess just being in such a public position at work and having all this bullshit about me out there…it’s embarrassing. Who knows what people must think of me and I’m already self-conscious enough after the whole prison thing.” Ashlyn vents. “I know, bitching about it doesn’t change anything. I just wish there was something we could do, you know?”

Ali takes in what Ashlyn said for a minute before getting her thoughts together. “First, I just want to say that you’re amazing at what you do, Ash. The people in the community know your family and know your reputation and how hard you work. You’re a remarkable and respected Captain, sweetheart… no media gossip story is going to change that.”

Ashlyn smiles at the brunette, ever amazed by how quickly Ali always manages to lift her up. It’s the way that she says these sweet things about her with such conviction and honesty. She’s sure Ali is at least mostly right, but even if she isn’t, the fact that she believes in her so strongly is all that matters.

“In trying to help Kyle out, I think we maybe made more of a show of things than we needed to. It was a bit over-the-top and drew more attention to us in the end even if it helped ease some of the intensity of it.” Ali continues. “We’ll have the Ellen show coming up in the near future, so maybe we can approach that differently. Make more of an effort to just be our normal boring selves and shift the attention to a cause we both feel passionate about.” She suggests.

“I like that idea.” Ashlyn agrees.

“Me too. So, we’ll work on that. I think maybe it would be smart for me to consult with a publicist too and at least run it all by someone who knows more about these types of situations. I’ve met a couple people that I think might be willing to help.” Ali works through the plan verbally.

“You’re so smart, Krieger.” Ashlyn grins and runs her hand along Ali’s side. “And, you have an uncanny ability to calm me like no one else ever has.”

“Good.” Ali entwines her hand with the one Ashlyn was just running up and down her ribcage and moves in close to the officer. “Cause I really hate seeing you upset, Harris. I love you and I’m always here for you.” She leans in for a long slow kiss.

“I know. And ditto.” Ashlyn whispers as they pull apart and rest their foreheads together. “Thanks for letting me rant.”

“Of course.” Ali smiles. “You know you can just rant anytime though, right? You don’t need to plan a special beach trip, Hero.” She adds with a wink.

“Actually… that just happened unintentionally. While I’m glad to have gotten it out, that whole diatribe was not what I had in mind to talk about.” Ashlyn admits as she scratches the back of her head.

“Hmmm. Ok. Well, what did you want to talk about then?” Ali asks curiously.

Ashlyn reaches out to entwine Ali’s hand with her own again and takes a deep breath before getting into it. “Last time we were here, we had a really deep conversation….” She pauses and squeezes the brunette’s hand, looking into her eyes, “about Ken.”

“Oh. That.” Ali mutters quietly, her heart rate picking up a bit.
“Alex, come here.” Ashlyn says as she sees Ali’s face drop and wraps an arm around the brunette, pulling her in very close. “We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to…honestly. It’s just that we talked about listening to the recording and doing this together. And then we got so busy the last few weeks and never talked about it again. I just wanted to check in with you and understand where you are with it and make sure you’re ok. I don’t want to neglect it just because we’ve been busy, but we’ll take it all at your pace. I’m not pushing you on anything, I promise.”

“I know.” Ali buries herself into Ashlyn’s shoulder and groans. “You’re right though.” She mumbles.

“About what?” Ashlyn asks a bit confused.

“I’ve been purposely avoiding it and using being busy with other things as an excuse.” Ali confesses shyly.

“It’s okay, baby. You need to take your time with this and do it on your terms.” Ashlyn runs a hand through Ali’s soft brown hair.

“But I need to just do it. It’s making me miserable the longer I push it off. Even my therapist knows it’s time for me to go after my closure.” Ali explains. “I’m just… scared.”

“It’s okay to be scared. I don’t know what to expect either and I’m scared too.” Ashlyn speaks truthfully. “But we have each other. Together we can get through anything. We’ve already proven that.” She adds confidently.

“You’re right.” Ali lets out a long breath. ‘Let’s just do it.”

“Do it?” Ashlyn clarifies.

“Yeah. Let’s listen to the recording today and then we’ll go see Ken on Friday on your day off. I just have to check in with Rebecca first to make sure I wouldn’t be messing anything up by just going to visit him like that.” Ali says resolutely. “Let’s do it before I can put it off any longer. I’m ready.”

“Just like that? Wow, ok.” Ashlyn agrees in slight shock at the turnaround.

“Is that ok?” Ali quickly asks, realizing she isn’t just doing this by herself anymore.

“Of course it is.” Ashlyn doesn’t think twice. “I’m right here with you, every step of the way. Whatever you need, Alex. I’ve got you. I’ve always got you. I love you.” She buries her face into Ali’s hair and holds her even tighter.

“Thank you.” Ali says sweetly as she pulls back to look into beautiful hazel eyes that both ease and ignite her soul like magic.

“For what?” Ashlyn replies.

“For loving me so wholeheartedly, with everything you have.” Ali whispers as her lips ghost Ashlyn’s. “For always showing me just how much and making me feel it so deeply.”

“Always, Alex. Always.” Ashlyn murmurs against her lips and kisses her passionately, the two of them getting completely lost in the comfort and peace of each other right now, knowing that a difficult afternoon is now looming ahead of them.

*****************************************************************************
“Ready?” Ali asks, her computer in front of them on the coffee table as her finger hovers over the mouse ready to click the play button. The two of them have showered and gotten into comfortable clothes after their beach trip, but the moment is anything but cozy.

“As ready as I can be.” Ashlyn nods and hears the click of the mouse before Ali leans back into her arms on the couch.

And just like that, with one click, they’ve been transported into a nightmare. One that is different for each of them, but a nightmare for both nonetheless.

It starts with footsteps and the barely audible noise of a doorbell ringing, innocuous sounds for anyone who didn’t know what was coming. Ashlyn’s heart is already racing, her stomach churning sourly. She forces herself to focus, to hold it together and help Ali through this.

Ali’s surprised voice fills the air “What the hell are you doing here, Ken?” followed by the voice of demon himself.

“Hello, Alex. I know it’s been a long time.”

Ashlyn watches Ali’s expression carefully, feeling and seeing her whole body tense at Ken’s voice. She holds the brunette really close in an effort make her feel protected and listens to the conversation unfold. Ali’s face contorts as her father’s voice utters lame excuses that she refuses to accept, tears rolling down her face steadily as Ashlyn tries hard to keep up with wiping them. And then the moment comes…

“I love you and I always will. I’m so sorry, Ali…”

Although Ali lets out a soft sob, her body relaxes a bit now that the voices have stopped and the long stretch of background noise takes over for a while. The muffled nothingness void of conversation is where Ali can take the time to somewhat pull herself together and steel herself for the next part of the dialogue. Conversely, it’s where Ashlyn completely unhinges.

Ali jumps a bit at the feeling of Ashlyn’s body tightening up around her unexpectedly. She turns her head to look at the officer, finding a pair of stormy and glazed over hazel eyes and a face set in an almost abject terror. She strains to try and hear what is upsetting her girlfriend, but like before, she hears nothing but some shuffling noises. “Ash…” She whispers, trying to pull Ashlyn out of her trance, but to no avail.

In what is nothing more than soft background noise and a lag between conversations to Ali, Ashlyn is practically deafened by familiar sounds that shake her to the core.

The gasp of a person who has been subdued in surprise attack. The soft thud of a body hitting the floor, the chair following behind it. The low squeak of rubber soles being dragged across tile. The heavy breath and low grunts of physical exertion from carrying the weight of a limp body. And perhaps worst of all, the change in voice…the change in demeanor of someone who has just flipped the switch. The switch Ashlyn has flipped herself and wishes she never had and couldn’t understand. The switch needed to harm another human being, knowing that death is a likely outcome.

They are sounds that Ashlyn could only hope to never hear again, but in this moment they are more chilling than they have ever been. That is Ali’s gasp. That is Ali’s body hitting the floor, her shoes being dragged across the tile. That is Ali’s limp body being lugged around… by a man who has flipped the switch to will himself to kill her. They are among the worse sounds in the world, made only more horrifying in this moment when they involve the other half of her soul, her heart, her breath.
“Ashlyn… baby...” Ali tries again to get through, starting to see Ashlyn’s eyes focus on hers before they are both pulled away by the reemergence of Ken’s voice and running water. Ashlyn’s attention going back to Ali while the brunette drifts away again into despair.

“Oh Ali, I’m so sorry baby girl.”

Ashlyn swallows hard at the desperation in his voice, the desperation to hold onto the aggressive indifference needed to complete the task. He’s failing and he knows it.

“Fuck you.”

The bile rises into the back of Ashlyn’s throat at the sound of Ali’s raspy and choked voice responding...the fraught defiance of someone who has resigned themselves to death.

The rest feels almost surreal, a swirl of haunting madness. Ken’s plea for Ali to fight to survive. Bobby’s maniacal manipulation, his voice dripping with malevolence. And the traumatic distress of a father who has completely shattered at the realization of what he’s done.

“Oh god. Oh god. I’m coming to get you, honey. Hold on.”

With the final jingle of keys and the half crank of an engine, the audio cuts out leaving nothing but Ashlyn holding Ali so tight that she can barely breathe and Ali squeezing Ashlyn’s hands to the point of cutting off circulation.

It’s Ali who pulls it together enough to speak first. “God, that wasn’t much easier to get through than the first time.” She laments in a small voice, her grip on Ashlyn’s hands loosening slightly as she realizes just how tightly she’s squeezing them.

Ali’s voice and the tingling in her hands from blood rushing back into them snaps Ashlyn out of her thoughts. “Fucking hell. That was horrible.” She whispers and buries her face in Ali’s hair, inhaling her scent deeply to remind herself that the brunette is safe in her arms.

“You ok?” Ali turns around a bit and meets Ashlyn’s eyes. “Maybe we could talk it out together?”

Ashlyn nods slowly. “Yeah, just… please, kiss me. I need a minute to feel you, remind myself that you’re here and not there.” She admits as she motions to the laptop on the coffee table.

“I do too.” Ali confesses, still fighting hard not to let her mind get lost in that awful night like it did when she first listened to the recording. She completely turns herself to face Ashlyn and brings her hand to rest behind the officer’s neck. “I’m here. I’m right here, safe with you.” She reminds them both before capturing Ashlyn’s lips with her own, her whole body honing in on nothing but the flow of electricity between them.

They part slightly to breathe a few times, but go right back into another emotional kiss time and time again until they both finally feel more composed and calmed. Only then do they find the strength to talk about it, Ali resting her head on Ashlyn’s chest so she can hear her heartbeat as the officer wraps her up in strong arms.

“What’s on your mind, Alex?” Ashlyn starts them off.

“I thought I might feel less confused hearing it again…at least less nervous. But I’m not.” Ali answers with frustration. “It’s hard to hear both. One second it’s this monster who tried to kill me, the next it’s just my dad. His voice at the end just sort of cripples me inside. The way he sounds so
broken, so regretful… bounding off to come save me, just like when he was coming to my aid after I fell off the playground monkey bars as a kid. But he’s coming to save me from him…from what he himself did to me. There are mistakes, and then there are things you just can’t ever fix. I can’t forget Ash…I can’t. My own father went through with killing me and there is no going back from that.’

Ashlyn strokes Ali’s hair softly and listens, letting her work through it verbally.

“The thing is that he doesn’t remember any of it. He’s stuck in this world now where I’m forever young and he doesn’t understand what has happened. Not how or why he left our family, not what he did to me that night. How can I go in there and confront a man who doesn’t know what happened? A man who is just my dad and who will be excited to see that I’ve finally visited him because he keeps asking for me. I don’t know how to feel or what I should do. What kind of closure is that?” Ali gets out in a ramble.

“Alex, you don’t need to know right now how to feel or what to do when you get there.” Ashlyn says gently. “Whatever you feel and do in that moment when you’re in front of him, that will be the right thing no matter what it is. You don’t owe him anything. You just owe it to yourself to put it behind you and move forward. If that means that you get angry and yell at him, so be it. If it means that you feel sympathetic and forgive him to some extent, then that’s what you do. This is about you sweetheart, not him. Just let yourself get there and be open to what you feel. Whatever it happens to be, it’s valid and right. And, like you said… he doesn’t remember and he won’t remember anything going forward. All the more reason for you to just go with what you feel. It doesn’t matter for him, it only matters for you.”

“You’re right.” Ali lets out the breath she feels like she’s been holding the whole time. “I’ve been overthinking it because I’m scared of what I’ll feel. But all I have to do is just let myself feel it and be free to act on whatever it is. It really is that simple, isn’t it? Just face him and let whatever is in my heart come out in the open.”

“And I’ll be right there with you. I’ll never leave your side.” Ashlyn promises.

“I know. And that’s all I need.” Ali feels some of the tension in her body release, better able to feel the muscled arms that envelope her protectively. “Thank you, Ashlyn. I just knew you could help me get past what I was hearing and down to exactly what I needed to understand.” She says appreciatively.

“I’d do anything for you. Literally anything.” Ashlyn replies quietly and just holds the brunette against her, one hand still gently running through her hair.

Ali relaxes into the soothing touch, both of them quiet for a while. There is still something on her mind that she needs to understand though. “Ash?” She finally works herself up to asking.

“Yeah?” Ashlyn replies.

“Will you tell me what you heard that I didn’t?” Ali requests sheepishly, wanting to know exactly what got Ashlyn so worked up before.

“Yeah, ok.” Ashlyn swallows hard and thinks about how to explain it before speaking. “In close quarters combat, the littlest sound is everything. Sometimes it means life or death. Doing what I did for so many years, and I guess even what I do now… I’m sort of programmed to be attuned to stuff that maybe doesn’t seem like anything to someone else, but to me seems as loud as a thunderclap. There are sounds that I’ve come to know…ones that I wish that I never got so familiar with and that I always hope I never hear again.” Ashlyn pauses and looks down to see Ali with a furrowed brow trying to follow her explanation.
“The sharp intake of breath when someone gets taken down by surprise. The way a body thuds when it hits the ground. The way the feet of a body limply drag on the floor and how you can tell if there are shoes on those feet and what kind. The determined physical exertion of someone carrying the weight of another body.” Ashlyn trails off and pauses before continuing. “That’s what I heard on that recording. And for the first time it wasn’t in the context of tracking down some enemy or assailant. It was you, Alex. You getting attacked unexpectedly…you hitting the ground…your feet being dragged in your running sneakers…your body being carried off. It just…it set off this desperate frenzy inside me. I’ve never felt anything like that.”

“I’m so sorry, Ash. When I asked you to do this with me, I guess I didn’t understand the full extent of how it might affect you.” Ali says apologetically as she scoots up a bit and runs her hand through the officer’s short hair.

“Don’t be sorry, you really couldn’t have known. And I’m really glad we did it together and that you let me do this with you. I needed to hear it as much as you did. It’s ok that it was difficult…there was no way it wasn’t going to be.” Ashlyn reassures her, still processing it all and trying to find it within herself to get the rest out. She doesn’t know if she can say the next part, but she needs to try. This is an important piece of being open and honest with Ali. Letting her see and know every part of her, the good and bad.

“There’s something else, but I don’t know how to talk about it really.” Ashlyn says hesitantly, her eyes going to focus on the ceiling.

Ali can see the same look take over Ashlyn’s face as that time on the beach where she talked about the incident with the 12-year-old girl. “Just try and do the best you can. You can tell me anything, Ashlyn. I love you, no matter what.” Ali encourages her carefully, her hand moving to stroke the officer’s face softly.

“You go through all this training to prepare you for the moment you have to face an enemy. You learn how to shoot and fight, how to protect yourself. And it seems so simple…someone poses a threat, you take them out the way you were trained, right?” Ashlyn asks rhetorically and just continues on. “But nothing…absolutely nothing can prepare you for what will happen when you’re actually faced with it.” She stops and takes a few shaky deep breaths.

“It’s ok, baby. You can tell me.” Ali whispers and kisses her cheek.

“It’s another human being on the opposite side and it doesn’t matter what kind of weapon they have and what their intentions are. It doesn’t come naturally to hurt someone, it just doesn’t. And that’s when you realize what your training was really for…making it easier for you to flip the switch. I don’t know how else to describe it.” Ashlyn tries to find adequate words.

“Something happens inside, Alex. Something changes inside that allows you to see that person as a threat and not just as a human being. It feels like a switch that gets flipped…a switch that changes your instincts and makes you capable of hurting someone, of killing them if that’s what needs to happen. It’s like this adrenaline to survive paired with an almost frantic rage. And even with the intensity of those emotions, there’s also this weird numbness too, this indifference. It’s like you need to be motivated to do it, but also not care that you did. And once you’re in that place, it’s so hard to get yourself out of it until there’s a closure of sorts…until the task is complete in some way. Like, I once saw a sniper get a stand-down order from his commanding officer right as he was about to take the shot. He then practically begged to take the shot and when he was ordered again to stand down, he tried to punch his commanding officer and had to be held back. It’s like he got himself prepared and into that place, but there was no closure to pull him out of it so his emotions shifted to the next person in front of him.” Ashlyn explains as best she can.
“I really don’t know how else to say it. And I hate that I’ve been in that place as many times as I have… hate that I understand what it feels like and that I’ve flipped that switch.” Ashlyn reaches up to hold Ali’s hand that is against her cheek. “You do it enough times and you come to recognize it not just in yourself, but when it happens to someone else too. It’s like this cycle where you see the person go from anxious to cold and combative, and then to sort of uncaring and detached before finally settling into this weird acceptance that stems from a place of desperation to absolve yourself. That’s the best I can do to explain it.”

“It’s ok. You’re doing great, Ash.” Ali tries to calm her a bit, feeling how fast Ashlyn’s heart seems to be beating as her watery eyes focus on the ceiling.

“I heard that in Ken’s voice. I could hear the moment he flipped the switch, the instant he willed himself into a place where he could kill. And to hear that…to hear him flip that switch…and to know that you were on the other side of it. I…I wasn’t prepared for that.” A couple of tears finally spill out down Ashlyn’s cheek and Ali quickly moves to wipe them with her fingers.

“Near the end when he leaves you there, I could hear him losing his ability to maintain it. I could tell he was fighting himself. That’s what it felt like when I shot that girl in that hand, knowing that I needed to keep that switch flipped to do it, but everything in me was fighting myself. And even though the circumstances were completely different, the fact that I could still empathize with Ken on that feeling…I hate that so fucking much.” Ashlyn finishes in a choked voice, her eyes not able to meet Ali’s.

“Ashlyn Harris…look at me.” Ali demands softly, putting both her hands on the officer’s face now to tilt it down. She waits patiently until the stormy hazel eyes focus on her own. “My god, baby…I will never in my life be able to imagine and understand the extent of the things you have felt and seen. But first, you are so fucking right.”

“Right?” Ashlyn questions in a whisper.

“Yes. I don’t give a damn if you can empathize with Ken or not… you are so fucking right that the circumstances are completely different.” Ali says emphatically.

“But the bottom line is the same, Alex. There’s no way around that.” Ashlyn faintly protests.

“Maybe that’s true, Ash…I don’t know, but I do know that the context is everything and so is how you deal with it. You are so damn strong for withstanding what you have. And what will always amaze me most is that, despite it all, your heart is nothing but pure gold. That the ugly you have endured has molded itself into something so kind and beautiful. I meant what I said that first time on the beach. I love every single part of you, even the parts you don’t like. I love them because all together they make up this truly magnificent person. My person. I am so proud and happy to call you mine, Ashlyn…all of you… every single tiny piece. I love you so fucking much, Hero. So much it feels like I might burst.” Ali pulls Ashlyn’s face towards hers and kisses her so hard, letting all of her emotions flow into the exploration of her girlfriend’s mouth and hearing Ashlyn whimper back into hers. They stay locked onto each other for quite a while before they both break away with chests heaving from the intensity, Ali still holding onto to Ashlyn’s face.

“I don’t know how you do that.” Ashlyn says breathlessly.

“Do what?” Ali inquires while trying to catch her own breath. She smiles when she sees that Ashlyn’s eyes are back to being bright and shiny, the green in them coming out.

“Make the heaviest things inside me feel so much lighter to carry.” Ashlyn replies matter-of-factly. “I love you more than anything in the world for who you are, but also because of who I am when I’m
with you. I don’t even know how to breathe without you anymore, Alex… and I don’t ever want to.”

“You have me, Ash. All of me. Forever.” Ali wants to say more, but she’s silenced by Ashlyn’s lips back on hers even though neither of them has caught their breath properly yet. It lasts for only a couple minutes when burning lungs force them to pull apart.

Ashlyn settles for pressing soft kisses all over Ali’s face as they both take in air erratically for a while in silence. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make this about me.” She says when she can finally speak again.

“Please don’t say that.” Ali nuzzles herself into Ashlyn’s neck. “I can’t tell you how much it means to me that you let yourself be so vulnerable with me. That you let me in even when it’s so hard for you to talk about. And you know what, what you just told me helped me so much.”

“Really? How?” Ashlyn asks.

“What I’ve struggled with most is dealing with the way Ken looked at me like that. His eyes were so cold, so devoid of anything familiar to me. And I couldn’t understand how it was possible for my own father to look at me like that. But after what you just said… I think I understand better. He had to go to really dark place to be able to do what he did, a desperate place. I can’t get past that he managed to get himself there with his own daughter in front of him, but I can at least get a better grasp on why it felt the way it did. That he wasn’t there and instead it was this person I didn’t and couldn’t know. Your circumstances and his don’t compare at all, but you’ve helped me get a better sense of what happened with him.” Ali explains. “Thank you for that. I really feel as ready as I think I can possibly be to visit him. Ok?”

“Ok.” Ashlyn replies.

There’s a long stretch of quiet between them as they hold each other, both of them a bit lost in their own thoughts. Ashlyn absentmindedly plays with Ali’s hair with one hand as the brunette plays with the fingers of the officer’s other hand. A few deep shaky breaths from Ashlyn eventually draw Ali’s attention and she looks up to see the officer looking a bit distressed again.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” Ali asks concerned.

“You actually died. You died for me, Alex.” Ashlyn answers emotionally.

Ali hears the statement for the second time this week, the Rangers having said the same thing in Georgia. It settles into her gut and something about it doesn’t feel right. It takes a minute of biting the inside of her lip to figure out why as she feels her heart beating alongside Ashlyn’s with their chests pressed together like they are. Her heart…beating… with Ashlyn’s, for Ashlyn.

“No, Ash…you’re wrong.” Her hands go back to Ashlyn’s face to force the hazel eyes to meet hers again. “I lived for you.” The corrected words leave her mouth so easily. She watches Ashlyn’s face light up with an emotional smile before she’s pulled into a wonderfully tight embrace by the strong, protective arms that she can’t get enough of.

That statement, that final sentiment, sets the tone for the rest of the evening. There’s a clinginess between them, a need to be in constant contact. So much so that even though they go out for dinner, they sit side-by-side instead of across from each other just to be close, not caring how silly they must look. It’s a whole night spent with some part of them touching the other at all times because the connection simply feels too good to break, a physical manifestation of the fact that they are stronger and better together.
The week leading up to the visit with Ken seems to drag for both women, but it’s Ali that is more clearly off kilter.

Kyle stays with her at Ashlyn’s house on Sunday night while the officer heads off to work her night shift. Normally, Ali is in bed by 10pm whether Kyle is around or not, but Ashlyn finds herself still getting texts from her at 1am. Ali tries to blame it on Kyle keeping them up late, but when Ashlyn unexpectedly stops at home on her shift break at 1:30am, she finds Kyle deeply asleep on the couch and Ali sitting in the recliner wide awake and channel surfing. She tucks the brunette into bed snuggly and stays with her until she starts to drift off to sleep before heading back to work. The behavioral anomalies only grow from there.

Ali spends the week sleeping in really late, snacking constantly, going for at least two really long runs a day, and cooking more than Ashlyn has ever seen her attempt. She blames it on having her period and being crampy, saying she’s in need of endorphins and comfort food to ease the symptoms. But Ashlyn knows better. She knows Ali is nervous and, like the brunette once told her during one of their prison visits, she doesn’t like to admit when she’s nervous. So, Ashlyn plays along and does her best to be a reliably soothing presence, making sure to constantly check in with her and be extra affectionate.

By Thursday night, it’s obvious as they settle into bed together that they’re both anxious and neither of them attempt to hide it. They hold each other close and try to make light small talk, knowing that sleep will be elusive. As the hours slowly tick by, Ashlyn notices something else that she can’t quite put her finger on. Ali seems increasingly distressed, almost depressive. It’s distinct from her nervous mannerisms and doesn’t seem to fit with the emotions they’ve delved into relating to Ken. She does her best to be patient, reminding herself that Ali will talk to her about it if she needs to. But by around 5am, Ali is completely restless and almost seems angry now on top of all the other emotions.

“Alex, please talk to me. You’re so agitated. What is going on right now?” Ashlyn finally pleads with her.

“Sorry.” Ali mumbles and presses her face into Ashlyn’s shoulder, feeling herself start to lose her composure. “It’s fine. I’m just upset and irrational about something stupid that I should be more mature about.”

“Whatever it is, it isn’t stupid if it has you so upset. Just tell me, baby. Talk to me.” Ashlyn gently probes again.

“You’re going to meet my asshole of a father today… and you’ll never get to meet my amazing mother. And it’s unfair, and it fucking sucks, and I’m really angry at the universe about it.” Ali blurts out in an almost shout. “I know…it’s stupid.”

“Hey now, it’s not stupid at all.” Ashlyn tries to calm her down a bit and presses a few kisses to her forehead while she strokes her hair. “If I was you, I’d be upset about that too. It is absolutely unfair and completely shitty.”

“You don’t think I’m being immature and dumb?” Ali asks shyly.

“Not at all. I mean it.” Ashlyn assures her. “It’s ok, baby. You have every right to be upset about it.”

“I really wish you could meet my mom. She would have loved you and how happy you make me.” Ali gets out in an emotionally squeaky voice.
“I wish I could too, Alex. I wish I could too.” Ashlyn whispers near Ali’s ear as she hugs her tightly. “She sounds like an incredible and inspiring woman.”

Ali just nods and buries herself deeply into Ashlyn’s neck, not knowing what else to say.

As the heavy silence drags on, Ashlyn’s mind wanders until a solution of sorts hits her.

“Fuck it, let’s go fix it the best we can.” Ashlyn declares loudly, feeling Ali startle a bit from the unexpected outburst.

“Fix what?” Ali searches Ashlyn’s face in confusion.

“Come on. Let’s get dressed.” Ashlyn gets up and pulls Ali up with her, still not explaining herself.

“Ash, where are we going? It’s like not even 6am. What are you talking about?” Ali questions with concern.

“Actually, I don’t know where we are going. But you do.” Ashlyn answers vaguely and finally looks at Ali to find her looking perturbed. “Sorry, I don’t mean to seem so crazy.” She takes Ali’s hands in her own and settles enough to get her thoughts out. “The harsh reality is that I can’t ever physically meet your mom, but I’m all for trying the next best thing.”

“Which is…” Ali inquires still trying to figure out what Ashlyn is thinking.

“I want you to take me to wherever it is that you feel her the most and we’ll spend some time there. I’m not sure if that’s where she’s buried or somewhere else… just take me to wherever it is that you feel her, Alex. Wherever that connection is the strongest, take me there.” Ashlyn requests eagerly.

“Ok.” Ali says with a small smile, somewhat understanding now where this is going.

Less than an hour later, Ali is pulling her car into the Franklin Park parking lot, the soccer fields in direct view. Ashlyn smiles and squeezes Ali’s hand over the console when she sees where the brunette has taken them.

“Come on, Harris.” Ali grins and gets out of the car, going into her trunk to pull out a soccer ball.

Ashlyn is amazed at how much lighter and unburdened Ali looks compared to just a little while ago and she knows they are definitely in the right place. She trails behind the brunette just a bit and takes it all in as they walk to the center of one of the two fields. The grass is dewy from the cool morning air and there is a crisp earthy smell that is familiar and calming; she already feels better herself.

“I grew up playing on this field. She spent countless hours out here practicing with me almost every day that the weather allowed it. I feel surrounded by her here.” Ali explains and drops the soccer ball by her feet. “Kick around with me?” She asks.

Ashlyn nods with a smile and quickly pecks Ali on the lips before stepping back a ways to receive the ball.

They pass the ball back and forth simply and settle into the tranquility of the action. “Tell me the first three things about her that come to your mind.” Ashlyn says now that they’ve fallen into an easy rhythm with each other.

“Injustice really bothered her. That’s probably true for most judges I bet, but it definitely ate at her. We always knew when she just had a case where she felt that the law had worked in the favor of a guilty person. She would come home and practically eat a half gallon of ice cream for dinner and just...
go to bed. She never said anything about it directly, but we just knew.” Ali says and kicks the ball over to Ashlyn, seeing the officer listening intently as she kicks the ball back.

“She loved watching the Price is Right. It was a guilty pleasure. Anytime we were home together because she was off of work or I was home sick or something, we’d watch it together. It was our thing. After she died, I watched it every day because it made me feel like she was there with me while it was on. When Bob Barker retired from hosting and got replaced by Drew Carey, I cried for days because I knew it had changed and wouldn’t have the same effect anymore. In one of his more helpful drunken moments, Kyle got annoyed and finally told me to ‘fucking pull it together and just watch some damn re-runs.’” Ali laughs lightly at the thought, something she can do now that Kyle is sober.

“She always had nail polish on. She said it was just one of those things that made her feel like she looked good. She was a strong believer that if you looked good, you felt good. And if you felt good, you were ready to take on anything.” Ali finishes, finding herself feeling serene with the memory of her mother being really strong right now.

Ashlyn listens to it all, taking in all the little details that Ali is telling her. And after just those three little facts, she oddly feels like she almost knows the woman. It doesn’t take her long to realize that it’s because it all sounds so much like Ali and she smiles widely at the thought.

“What are you smiling about over there, Harris?” Ali asks curiously, noting the big goofy grin on her girlfriend’s face when she kicks the ball back to her.

“Your mom sounds awesome.” Ashlyn says sweetly. “And honestly, I just realized that she sounds so much like you.”

“Really?” Ali asks, wanting to believe that it’s true, but not sure she sees it.

“Alex, seriously? How many pints of ice cream did you eat this week when you were upset about the unfairness of this situation?” Ashlyn says with a raised eyebrow. “Forget that… tell me, how often do you not have mascara on? Pretty much never. And why is that… because it makes you feel like…” She stops with emphasis and waits for Ali to finish the sentence for her.

“Like I look good and can take on anything, like it’s my war paint.” Ali chuckles softly and her whole face lights up as she realizes the similarity.

“The apple did not fall far from the tree at all, sweetheart. I’m sure she would be so damn proud.” Ashlyn stops kicking the ball to go over and wrap the brunette up in hug.

“Thanks for this, Ash. This feels really good and right.” Ali leans back a bit to look the officer in the eye. “She’d definitely be really proud and happy that I found someone like you, that’s for sure. I guarantee you she’d be planning the wedding already.”

Ashlyn laughs. “My grandma would be too. We’d be in so much trouble with those two, but we’d love every minute of it.”

“Definitely.” Ali agrees and pulls Ashlyn in tight again for a couple minutes before finally letting go. “You know what my Deb-Deb would love to see?”

“Deb-Deb?” Ashlyn questions.

“Yeah, that’s what everyone called my mom.” Ali clarifies.

“Oh, ok. So, what would she love to see?” Ashlyn goes back to the prior question.
“Me scoring goals against some cocky goal keeper.” Ali answers with a devilish smile.

“Oh, you are so on, Krieger!” Ashlyn challenges and makes her way between the posts of the closest goal. “Bring it.”

Ali watches a smug smile come over Ashlyn’s face after she easily blocks Ali’s first five shots. Just like when Ashlyn was practice fighting with Rivera, her superior anticipation skills are undeniable. She clearly reads body language really well and has a good sense of where the ball is going right off the bat. However, Ali notices that the officer’s footwork is a bit sloppy and sluggish, clearly she’s out of practice and her anticipation is what’s saving her at the moment. Ali grins to herself, knowing she can make an easy adjustment to exploit Ashlyn’s footwork… take her shots faster.

“Whew, ok then, Krieger!” Ashlyn stops and puts her hands on her knees after Al scores three in a row. “Picked up on my lack of speed pretty quickly, huh? Smart girl.”

Ali just smirks and winks. “Giving up already, Harris?”

“Nah. Let’s see a few more.” Ashlyn challenges as she claps her hands together. She’s been guessing right in terms of where the ball is going, but she’s just not quite getting there in time with these faster shots. As Ali goes to take the next shot, Ashlyn dives and stretches out her body as much as she can. It totally works as her hand just catches the ball enough to deflect it past the post.

It’s a mix of saves and goals after that point, with Ashlyn saving three more and Ali scoring another four. The last shot goes off the top of the crossbar hard and rebounds out well past mid-field.

“Just as well. We should stop before you break something trying to stop balls with no gloves on.” Ali shrugs with a smile at the ball having landed so far away. “I’ll admit, you’re pretty good, Harris.”

“You’re pretty good yourself, Krieger. You know, for a defender.” Ashlyn teases her. “You do realize that I probably would have blocked all of those in my prime, right?” She adds cockily.

“Maybe….but, guess what?” Ali raises an eyebrow playfully. “It’s 2017 and you’re not in your prime, Harris. And I just scored on you… a lot.” Ali winks and slowly walks away to retrieve the ball, making sure to sway her hips a bit.

Ashlyn lets out a loud chuckle as she watches Ali walk away. She sits and leans back against the goal post, closing her eyes and letting herself feel the moment. After a minute she opens them and watches as Ali approaches the ball almost on the other side of the pitch, musing in amazement at how much more she loves this woman with every passing second. She can only wish that she had met the remarkable woman responsible for raising her and molding her into who she is. At that thought she pulls out her wallet and opens the small zippered pouch section inside, taking out one of the two challenge coins she always keeps in there. She grabs a long twig that she spots a few feet away and pushes it into the soft ground as far as it will go before pulling it back out, creating a small deep hole just beside the right goal post.

“I promise you I will always love, honor, protect, and believe in her. I will stay by her side always, doing everything in my power to make her happy, and never leaving until the last breath I take. You have my word on that.” Ashlyn whispers into the air as she twirls the coin in her fingers, finally dropping it into the hole she created and using the twig again to push it all the way down before covering up the surface of the hole using her fingers.

Ali curiously watches Ashlyn appear to be burying something near the goal post using a stick as she approaches the officer from mid-field. “What was that?” She asks and motions to the goal post as she gets within earshot.
“Oh, um, my challenge coin.” Ashlyn answers simply.

“What’s a challenge coin?” Ali wonders out loud, never having heard of such a thing.

“They’re coins that have different military insignias that represent a certain unit or rank. Although, people outside of the military use them now too. It used to be an old tradition to prove membership to a certain military group and you would have to carry your coin to show you belonged. Now they’re used more like business cards or collectibles sort of. Military also uses them as recognition of achievements too. Even the President has them and will give a challenge coin to mark a personal connection or a significant moment.” Ashlyn explains.

“Wow, interesting. I’ve never heard of it.” Ali replies. “So you just have a bunch of them and give them out?”

“Yes and no. I was given a lot of them to use that have my original Ranger unit on them, but I’ve never really done anything with those. They’re in a box in the house somewhere.” Ashlyn shrugs. “Then I have some that are specific to Task Force Black and those are more meaningful to me. Here, I have another one with me.” Ashlyn pulls the other coin out of her wallet and hands it to Ali.

Ali holds the coin in her hand. It’s about the size of a half-dollar and mostly black nickel with a gold edge. On the front she recognizes the Delta, Marine Raider, and Ranger shields with an eagle below them and a banner above it that says ‘Task Force Black’. On the back are three more shields which she assumes are Airforce Nightstalker, Navy Seal, and some other special force she doesn’t know. Underneath there is another banner that reads ‘Insurgents Beware’.

“This is really cool.” Ali smiles as she runs her fingers over it in admiration. “Why do you find this one more meaningful, outside of the obvious specialty of it?” Ali asks curiously.

“Because we only got those when we successfully completed a mission.” Ashlyn answers.

“Hmmm.” Ali considers that statement for a second. “So, can I ask how many of these coins you have?”

“Thirty eight.” Ashlyn replies simply.

“Jesus, that’s a lot.” Ali says with wide eyes, knowing just how dangerous each and every one of those missions was and in slight shock at just how many Ashlyn had gone on.

“Yeah. I’ve given away some of those coins though.” Ashlyn shrugs. “I use them a bit differently than most people I guess.”

“How so?” Ali inquires as she hands the coin back to Ashlyn and watches her put it away.

“I only use them to mark a promise.” Ashlyn elaborates. “These Task Force Black coins are meaningful to me in the sense that they represent when I have fulfilled my duty and kept my vow to protect my country and my fellow soldiers. I see them as a way to represent that I will keep my word on something. So, I’ve only given them away in that context.”

“Oh.” Ali ponders the implication of that for a minute before speaking up again. “So, what did you just promise then?” She asks quietly and motions to the goal post.

“That, Krieger, is between me and Deb-Deb.” Ashlyn smiles and winks.

Ali nods with a nose crinkling smile, trying not to melt into a puddle as her shaky legs help her close the distance between them. She leaves a lingering kiss on Ashlyn’s lips before hugging her tightly.
“You’re perfect, Ashlyn Harris. Thank you so much for this moment, it means the world. I love you.” She whispers with her lips against Ashlyn’s ear.

“It means the world to me too, Alex. Thanks for introducing me.” Ashlyn kisses Ali’s lips softly, then her forehead and then her hand before walking towards the car and giving Ali a few minutes alone on the field.

Ali lays flat on field for a few minutes thinking of her mother and soaking in the peace of the moment, knowing she’s going to need it to get through the day. When it’s finally time to get going, she sits up and looks out over the entirety of the pitch in front of her. “I found her.” She says out loud with a smile. “You said I would and I did. And she’s perfect for me, just like you said she’d be.” And with that she gets up and makes her way to the car where Ashlyn is waiting for her with a kind smile and a loving gaze, just like always.

Showered and dressed, Ashlyn and Ali pull into a parking spot at Massachusetts General Hospital right around noon. Ashlyn can tell Ali is doing everything she can to focus, so she doesn’t say much. She just squeezes the brunette’s hand and whispers “Together, baby. I’m right beside you,” as they walk along following the signs for the Sumner Burn Center.

The entry process is regulated and standardized. They fill out some basic check-in forms and show ID and then get led to a sterile area where a nurse helps them wash their hands and lower arms thoroughly before pointing them to Ken’s room.

Ali hesitates at the door for just a minute before gripping Ashlyn’s hand tightly and pushing it open. Ken is immediately in her line of vision, sitting at a small round table by the window in his room and looking up at a TV on the near wall. The sound of the door opening draws his attention and he looks towards it.

“Alex!” Ken exclaims, his voice laced with excitement as he very slowly moves to get up.

Ali is only able to take three steps into the room before she’s frozen in place. Disfigured. It’s the only word she can use to describe him right now. The left side of his face looks like melted plastic, his eye and nose on that side drooping a bit as if they were dripping down along with his skin. Where there should be an ear, there is merely a ragged hole. He has no eyebrows and no hair save for a small palm-sized patch growing near his uninjured right ear. The right side of his face is mostly unharmed until it gets to his neck, which is a mess of twisted and scarred skin that disappears into his shirt where there is likely more damage Ali can’t see. The rest of his body is covered up by either clothes or a light compression-like covering, including his hands, so she can only imagine the extent of the mutilation. Ali squeezes Ashlyn’s hand really hard as she takes him in and barely recognizes him, searching for familiar features and finding only two. The blue eyes and thin-lipped smile that are unmistakably her father’s… loving eyes and a kind smile looking right at her now and almost transporting her back in time.

“Daddy.” Ali whispers out in a gut reaction, feeling like she’s a little kid with the way he’s looking at her, a tear falling from her eye at his appearance.

“Hi baby girl.” Ken says emotionally as he slowly makes his way towards her. “Wow…you really grew up. You’re beautiful and radiant. Look at you.”

And just like that, reality hits Ali like a brick, breaking the moment as she recalls that he doesn’t remember her any other way than as a kid. Doesn’t remember breaking her heart when he left and never looked back or that he shattered her soul when he killed her. She feels the anger bubble up
inside her at how convenient it is that he has gotten to erase the things that she can’t forget, ones that have scarred her for life.

“Don’t.” She recoils and steps behind Ashlyn a bit as he gets close enough to reach a hand out to her.

He looks down at the floor and nods dejectedly as he backs off, clearly hurt and trying to make sense of it.

“It’s ok. Just let it out.” Ashlyn whispers supportively to Ali, feeling the brunette tremble a bit and placing a hand on her lower back to make her feel more protected. They watch Ken gingerly settle back into his seat at the table.

“Will you sit for a few minutes?” He requests, motioning to the two chairs across from him.

Ali nods and feels Ashlyn lead her over, the officer pulling out her chair for her before sitting down herself. There’s an awkward silence as they all just look at each other for a minute, Ken clearly studying Ashlyn a bit.

“Ken, this is Captain Ashlyn Harris…my girlfriend. Ashlyn, this is Ken.” Ali takes control of things and shines some light on the situation with the introduction. Despite the damage, Ali can see his face clearly drop a bit at the use of his first name. She also notices that he looks a bit surprised and realizes that he’s registering that she’s with a woman.

“Military?” He asks as he looks at Ashlyn.

“Former military, current police officer.” Ashlyn answers straight-forwardly.

“Wow. Good for you, Alex.” He replies with an approving smile.

“Please don’t call me that. It’s Ali.” Ali corrects him. “You haven’t called me Alex since I was a kid and you lost the right to it a long time ago.”

Ken’s eyes shift down to the table as he takes the time to collect himself at the turn of events. “Sorry, Ali. I… I don’t know what to say here.” He pauses and clears his throat a bit emotionally. “I’m slowly gathering that what I remember isn’t reality anymore.”

“Far from it.” Ali confirms.

“Yeah.” Ken rubs lightly at the back of his neck. “I guess that explains why you and Kyle haven’t visited me. I can only remember us as a family, you two being so small still. But, with my uh…I guess my new wife, coming to visit. I get that things must have changed. I keep asking her, but she doesn’t tell me much beyond things about my current life with her and our boys.” He pauses again and looks down at the table. “I’m not the person I remember, am I?” He asks with a shaky voice.

“No, you’re not.” Ali confirms, trying hard to focus on her feelings and not yield to his emotional state just to make him feel better. This is about her, not him.

“Please, just tell me the truth. I need to know. All of it.” He begs.

Truth…veritas…that has always been her creed, the one thing that has never failed to lead her in the right direction. Ali nods and entwines her hand with Ashlyn’s to find her strength, knowing that this is exactly what she needs to do…to make sure he knows and understands the true wretchedness of his actions that brought them to this point. And that’s exactly what she does, laying out every last detail for him from the way he left their family to the night he left her to die. It’s hard for her to watch
him cry, to watch him break in front of her, but she doesn’t hold back any of it. When she’s done, she feels as if a weight has been lifted off of her, allowing her anger to subside and letting her begin to process other emotions.

Ken sits silently for quite a while after Ali finishes before finding his words. “Well…I got what I deserved then.” He motions to his body. “Thank you for telling me. Whether it means anything to you or not, I am sorry that I hurt you like I did and I understand why you’ve stayed away.”

“No one deserves to suffer like this, Ken.” Ali quickly replies, making sure he understands that she’s doesn’t feel vindicated by what happened to him. “The truth though is that you got back what you put in…life is harsh like that.”

Ken just nods.

“Look, I didn’t come here to break you down. I came here to find a way to move forward in my life.” Ali explains to him, letting some of her deeper feelings out. “I had an amazing father once and I will always love him, the man that I know is in there and the one that is looking at me right now.” Ali reaches out and touches Ken’s hand. “But I also can’t forget or forgive the other side of him that I’ve seen, the one who hurt me so irreparably. And that’s why I need to let this end where it is and allow myself be okay with both of those things. To relish the memories I have of a good father, but also know that he has no place in my life anymore. Nothing good can come from coming back here to take pity on you one day and hate you the next. That isn’t good for either of us. You won’t remember this conversation and I deserve to have the peace of letting it go too. I do love you, Dad…but I can’t forgive you and it’s time for me to close this part of me and move forward. I hope you can understand.”

“I do.” Ken replies a bit sadly. “I appreciate you coming in person to tell me and at least say goodbye even if I won’t remember. I know it isn’t fair, but I’m glad that my mind will always hold my happy little girl in it. I love you, Alexandra, and I’m truly sorry even if never forgiven.”

“Ok.” Ali squeezes his hand again as she gets up. “Goodbye, Dad.”

“Goodbye, Alexandra.” He smiles at her with watery eyes.

Ali looks down when she feels Ashlyn let go of her hand, the officer still sitting down.

“Can you just give me a minute?” Ashlyn asks gently, her head motioning towards Ken.

“Sure, I’ll be outside.” Ali nods and makes her way out.

“You keep a journal?” Ashlyn asks Ken directly as soon as Ali is out the door.

“Yes.” He looks at her a bit surprised that she knows that.

“I’ve had some bad injuries, I understand long-term recovery treatment plans.” She explains to him. “And I knew a soldier in a not so different situation from yours. He used to write important things down and read them every day so he would remember them again.”

“That’s what I do.” Ken admits.

“Yeah, I figured when you mentioned knowing some things about Rebecca and your sons.” Ashlyn replies. “Ken, I’m going to level with you here. Don’t write down everything you just learned. I don’t think it’ll do either of you any good.” She motions towards the door where Ali left from. “Let yourself move forward, let her move on…focus on new lives that don’t include each other.”
“Ok. I guess you’re right.” Ken thinks it over.

“I know I am. How about I sit with you while you write something in that journal?” Ashlyn insists more than offers.

Ken nods and reaches to grab the journal on the nearby shelf, opening the page dated for today and starting to write. It doesn’t take him very long before he’s sliding it over for Ashlyn to read.

*My daughter came to visit today. She is all grown up and thriving. She is beautiful and successful. She is happy and loved with a wonderful life. That life doesn’t include me anymore for good reasons that I need not fixate on. She has asked me to honor the memories that I have, let go of what I won’t remember, and move on to just live the life in front of me. And that is what I will do for her.*

“Perfect.” Ashlyn says as she slides it back to him.

“Ashlyn…promise me you’ll take care of her.” Ken pleads.

“Ken, Alex is my whole world and you almost ripped her away that night. I’m not inclined to promise you anything.” Ashlyn answers honestly and watches him nod and look away. “But…” She starts again and watches his attention snap right back to her. “It’s not a hard promise for me to make. So, I’ll tell you what… promise me you won’t write anything else in that journal today and I promise you that I’ll take care of her always.”

“Deal.” Ken reaches to shake her hand. “Thank you.”

“Take care of yourself, you still have a family that needs you.” Ashlyn reminds him as she gets up and walks out the door to where Ali is waiting for her just a little ways down the hallway.

“Hey you.” Ashlyn reaches for Ali’s hand and starts to lead the way out, bringing it up to her mouth to kiss it. “You ok?”

“Actually, yeah.” Ali smiles a bit. She wonders for just a second what Ashlyn stayed behind to talk to Ken about, but the thought passes quickly knowing that she trusts Ashlyn completely and doesn’t need to know.

They walk in silence until they get outside into the warm sun and Ashlyn finally turns to Ali, stopping to pull her into a hug. “How do you feel right now?” Ashlyn asks directly, trying to gauge how Ali is processing everything.

“Honestly… like something in here is finally starting to heal.” Ali answers with a sense of calm, putting Ashlyn’s hand over her heart.

Ashlyn nods and leaves it at that, knowing Ali will talk more when she’s ready. She gives her a soft kiss and asks her next question. “Lunch?”

“Yes, please.” Ali smiles. And just like that she begins to move on, closes the door, turns the page, or as Ashlyn has put it ‘flips the switch’… starting right now with lunch with her favorite person in the world.
First, thank you all for sticking with me and this story despite the longer time between updates recently. Life has been a little hectic lately and it has been hard to find the time to write. Unfortunately, the family member that wasn’t doing well a couple weeks ago just passed away this week and I’ll be traveling again to be with family. So, the next update may take a little bit longer than usual. My apologies for that, I appreciate your patience!

This chapter is a bit lighter as we bring some new characters into the mix and get these ladies out of their bubble... but you know me... light-er, not necessarily light ;) I hope you enjoy it! As usual, thanks for taking the time to read it. I absolutely love all your comments, so let me know how I'm doing and what you're thinking about the story :)

Oh and...smut alert!

“Alex…” Ashlyn whispers breathily as Ali’s soft lips leave open mouthed kisses across the back of her neck. She’s trying desperately to prepare chicken, steak, and veggie skewers for the grill, but it’s not meant to be as her eyes close with the sensation of the brunette lightly licking behind her ear. Her hands drop the veggie skewer she was working on as they go to grip the counter.

“Mmm, you smell so good.” Ali mumbles against her girlfriend’s warm skin as her lips move down her jaw and to the side of her neck. “I want to eat you like a cupcake…and you know how I feel about cupcakes.” She adds huskily and drags her hands from the back of Ashlyn’s shoulders down to her stomach where her fingers splay out across the officer’s abs.

“Baby…uhhh…that feels good.” Ashlyn leans back into Ali a bit more, tilting her head to give the brunette more access. She’s rewarded when Ali starts gently sucking her pulse point. “Alex…we have to stop.” She weakly protests as she presses herself back against Ali even further.

The last couple of weeks have been peaceful and refreshing. The closure with Ken brought some levity and the ability to really start moving on. Tim was back to being available and had quickly been able to help them attain a greater level of privacy when they really didn’t want to be photographed. A brief call with the Ellen show producers and Ellen herself had culminated in a show taping scheduled for September 8th. With things slowly falling into place, the two of them had started getting into a comfortable routine together, enjoying the more relaxed pace of life that had eluded them the prior month.

In the midst of the newfound calm, it had dawned on them just how wrapped up in each other they had been for the last month and how much they had neglected the people around them as they honed in on the burgeoning of their relationship. Their friends and family had been more than patient, clearly knowing that the two of them really needed this time together. However, the texts and phone calls had markedly increased lately, making them realize that they hadn’t even properly introduced some of the more meaningful people in their lives to each other. Ali had suggested that they throw a small party at her house to do just that. Ashlyn had loved the idea of gathering together the people that were important to them in one place so everyone could mingle.
Of course, now Ashlyn is regretting that decision as Ali sucks on her neck while they should be getting for their guests to arrive.

“Don’t wanna stop.” Ali mutters and lightly bites the soft skin in the crook of the officer’s neck before soothing it with her tongue.

“Jesus, Alex… fuck…” Ashlyn moans softly and bites her lip. “I don’t really want you to stop either, but our company is going to be here soon and we can’t be doing this when they get here.” She adds as she tries desperately to gain control of herself.

“Too late! Your company is already here and now scarred for life! Staaaahp it before anyone else gets an eyeful!” Kyle shouts from behind them, making them both jump up and away from each other.

“You scared the crap out of me, ass!” Ali smacks Kyle hard on the shoulder, beating Ashlyn to it who was up and ready to take on an intruder.

“Owww, geez! Call off the dogs!” Kyle yells out, rubbing his shoulder and backing away from Ashlyn.

“Seriously, dude, I was just about to deck you.” Ashlyn shakes her head as she relaxes herself down from a fighting stance.

“Yeah, kinda forgot it’s a really bad idea to sneak up on you, Harris. My bad! Good thing princess was here to bitch slap me first instead.” Kyle glares at Ali.

“You so deserved that!” Ali defends herself. “The one fucking time you actually use your key!”

“It’s true, I should’ve thought that through. Oh well, at least it wasn’t the worst I’ve walked in on, is it?” Kyle winks at Ali with a smirk, an immediate blush taking over her face.

“Oh really?” Ashlyn raises an eyebrow playfully when she sees the blush on Ali’s face. “And which one of you wants to fill me in on that?”

“Oh me!” Kyle raises his hand.

“Don’t you dare!” Ali points a finger at him, but it’s no use because he’s already running his mouth.

“I forgot that princess here had a date one night and barged into her room for a ‘watch a movie with me invite’, buuuut she was too busy playing good cop-bad cop. Right up your alley, Harris!” Kyle laughs as Ali buries her face in her hands.

“Uh, good cop-bad cop?” Ashlyn questions, not quite getting it.

“Let’s just say she had the perpetrator apprehended with some fuzzy pink handcuffs.” Kyle elaborates and gives Ashlyn a knowing look.

“I’m gonna die of embarrassment right now.” Ali groans in a muffle through her hands.

“Oh…oooh.” Ashlyn finally gets it. “Yeah I’d say that qualifies as way worse than what you just saw a few minutes ago.” She shrugs and reaches over to pull Ali’s hands off of her face, kissing one of them. “Relax, babe, nothing to be ashamed of.” She reassures the brunette.

Ali expects Ashlyn to either laugh and tease her a bit or be bashful about it, but she isn’t prepared for the unusual look on her girlfriend’s face. She isn’t able to quite read it, which immediately makes her uneasy. It’s this bizarre appearance of almost nervousness mixed with dejection, but her normally
expressive eyes are giving away nothing. Ali hasn’t ever seen her look like this and it certainly doesn’t seem to fit the situation right now. She leans in to hug Ashlyn and shoots Kyle a death glare over the officer’s shoulder, watching him mouth ‘sorry’ as he walks out of the kitchen saying he has to get the food he brought from his car.

“Sorry, he really doesn’t know when to stop talking sometimes. I’m sure you didn’t want to hear details about my past dating drama.” Ali says apologetically as she pulls back a bit.

“Seriously, it’s totally okay and my fault for asking. I’m not upset about it, baby. I promise. And it’s not like you didn’t tell me about your prior relationship history.” Ashlyn reassures her with a smile and leans in for a kiss.

The contact is electric as always and it does a lot to relieve Ali as she deepens it, pulling away after a minute so Kyle doesn’t come in and start anything else. “Mmm, sure you’re ok?” Ali asks, still slightly bothered by the fact that Ashlyn’s smile isn’t quite reaching her eyes despite the fact that she seems ok otherwise.

“I’m great. And you’re beautiful. And I love your feisty little self.” Ashlyn winks and leaves one more kiss on Ali’s lips before turning back to her food prep.

Ali quickly finds her spot behind Ashlyn again, resuming her open mouthed kisses along the officer’s neck. She smiles into Ashlyn’s jawline when she feels her girl let out a contented sigh and lean back into her again with eyes closed.

“I love you so much, Alex.” Ashlyn whispers as her eyes open and lock onto the whiskey colored orbs that always draw her in.

“I love you too, Hero.” Ali smiles and gets up on her tiptoes to kiss the tip of Ashlyn’s nose sweetly, her arms squeezing the officer’s waist.

“I brought cupcakes! Does that get me back in your good graces?” Kyle asks pleadingly as he walks back into the kitchen, this time making no comment on their resumed intimate moment.

“What kind of cupcakes?” Ali narrows her eyes at him.

“A whole 24 variety pack from Georgetown cupcake on Newbury.” He waggles his eyebrows.


“There better be a funfetti one in there.” Ashlyn chimes in.

“Please girl, not only is there a funfetti one in there… it has a little flag sticking out of it with your name on it.” Kyle says with a dramatic hand wave. “No really, I had them really put a little flag in that one just for you.”

“Ha! You’re officially back in my good graces.” Ashlyn reaches her hand out to Kyle for a fist bump.

“Okeee, well I see that you two are taking care of getting everything properly ‘warmed’ in the kitchen, so I’m going to go fire up the grill.” Kyle can’t help but tease them one more time.

“Out!” Ali sticks her tongue out at him and points towards the door, her arms still around Ashlyn’s waist.

“I’ve been out for years, honey!” Kyle yells back, making the two of them laugh.
“Come here.” Ali whispers when she hears the door close and tilts her head to capture Ashlyn’s lips with hers, the kiss deep and wanting. After spending all their time together over the last few weeks, something about not being able to act on her desire right now is making her feel more voracious than ever.

Ashlyn forces herself to pull away before she loses the ability to. “Ugh, why did we invite all these people over again?” She pouts even though she’s the one that stopped.

“Because we can’t keep living in our little love bubble and ignoring our family and friends. Apparently, it’s in bad taste.” Ali shrugs with a wry smile. “Gotta say that I’m now regretting my own ‘let’s host a party’ suggestion.”

“But I love our little love bubble.” Ashlyn continues to pout.

“You’re cute when you pout.” Ali gives her one more quick peck. “I love it too. But… I also can’t wait to meet your friends.”

“Today is going to be fun.” Ashlyn agrees with a smile. “Can’t wait to properly meet your friends either.”

“Good, because I can’t wait to really show you off.” Ali pinches her cheek. “Get back to work, Captain.” Ali playfully commands as she taps her girlfriend’s ass.

“Yes, Queen.” Ashlyn slightly bows and watches Ali walk away, not sure how it’s possible for anyone to look that good in a simple pair of white shorts and a navy tank top. “That woman…” She whispers to herself with a grin.

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By 2pm just about everyone has arrived and is mingling in the backyard with a drink while Ashlyn finishes up grilling and Ali and Kyle arrange an impressive spread of food on a long table so people can serve themselves buffet style as the day goes on. Once all of the food is ready and served, Ashlyn and Ali feel like they can finally relax and enjoy their company.

“So, I finally get to officially meet THE Captain Ashlyn Harris.” A woman with shoulder length light brown hair approaches Ashlyn as she grabs a water. She’s about Ali’s height with a round face and a kind smile.

“I think we met in the kitchen when I crashed your 4th of July plans.” Ashlyn smiles. “Emily, the childhood bestie, right?” She confirms.

“I’m impressed you even registered that to begin with, let alone remember it. From what I could tell, you only had eyes for one person that day. But yep, Emily… actually most people call me Em.” Emily laughs lightly and holds her hand out towards Ashlyn.

“Nice to meet you, Em. And it’s just plain old Ashlyn, no need for all that Captain stuff.” Ashlyn grins and bypasses her hand, going in for a hug instead. “Sorry, I’m a hugger.”

“Even better.” Emily returns the hug. “In the spirit of full disclosure, I kinda feel like I already know you. Ali never shuts up about you. Ali never shuts up about you.” She adds teasingly.

“Yeah, we’re just realizing that we’re ‘that couple’… yikes.” Ashlyn says apologetically as she scrunches her face. “If it makes you feel any better, you can go talk to Liz and Jess over there. They’re my good friends from high school and will completely commiserate with you on Alex and I never shutting up about each other.” She points out the two women over by the food table.
“Oh don’t even worry about it.” Emily reassures her. “I don’t mind one bit. Especially since this is the first time that girl has ever talked about anyone this much. Between me and you, she’s doing a lot of things now she never did before.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?” Ashlyn asks curiously.

“Well… for starters, she’s never committed like this to anyone. She’s never been touchy-feely or much of a hugger, but now I get why she’s that way with you… gotta say you give a really great hug. She’s less uptight and more relaxed than I’ve ever seen her. She uses more heart-eyes emojis than ever before. Oh, and she has never… and I mean never… looked at anyone like that before.” Emily finishes and motions her head to the patio where Ali is standing with Edith and looking at Ashlyn with a happy but fiery smile. “And I have to say Ashlyn, as much as she talks about you…I haven’t heard a single thing I don’t like.”

“I’m happy to hear that, Em. Because the way I see it, you have a whole lifetime of hearing about me ahead of you.” Ashlyn puts it bluntly.

“Well I just love your attitude. We’re gonna be great friends, Ashlyn.” Emily says with a smile.

“Thought we already were?” Ashlyn nudges Emily teasingly.

“You know it.” Emily plays back.

“Well, new buddy, I think I’m going to need a few childhood Alex stories before this day is over and I think you’re just the person to help me out.” Ashlyn says with a smirk.

“You definitely came to the right place.” Emily holds up her wine glass. “A few more of these and Ali will be trying to put a gag on me.”

“In that case, let me go refill that for you.” Ashlyn chuckles and takes the wine glass from Emily who laughs as she watches Ashlyn walk away to the drink table, returning a few minutes later with the glass filled to the brim.

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“And then you just quickly blow dry it, easy easy.” Ali hears Kyle finish as she walks up to him and the two women he’s talking to.

“I leave you alone for 10 minutes and you’re already inundating people with hair tips.” Ali jokingly shakes her head at him. “We haven’t been officially introduced…I’m Ali.” Ali shakes the shorter brunette’s hand before moving to do the same with the taller dirty blonde woman.

“Liz.” The brunette smiles.

“I’m Jess.” The blonde adds.

“So nice to finally meet you both. Clearly you’ve already met, Kyle the hair guru.” Ali laughs.

“Oh yeah, me and Kyle go waaaay back.” Liz says emphatically. “He once saved me from years of embarrassment and a whole lot of therapy.” She laughs.

“It’s true.” Kyle sighs contently and fans himself.

“Oh now that’s a story I need to hear.” Ali raises an eyebrow in intrigue.

“I was the maid of honor in my brother’s wedding and decided to get my hair dyed two days before.
Long story short, the lady messed up and put perm chemicals in my hair by accident. I looked like a poodle and freaked the fuck out. Then I called Jess and Ashlyn in a psychotic panic. Being the good friends that they are…Jess picked me up and we went straight to Ashlyn’s place where the two of them tried hard to convince me it was fine. Of course, they are both terrible liars and I knew it, but at least they tried.” Liz shrugs. “Anyway, after like an hour of trying to figure out what I could do to style it, Ashlyn remembered that Kyle seemed to know some stuff about fashion and grooming. He was living with her at the time, so she just called him and asked him if he could come home soon. Sure enough, he’s there 30 minutes later and imparted the wisdom that all I had to do was shower and shampoo my hair really well. Apparently, it ruins the chemicals that make the hair curl. Anyway, it totally worked and I’m forever in his debt!”

“He came just in time too. Ashlyn and I thought we might have to shave her head!” Jess teases.

“Wow, that’s quite a story.” Ali laughs. “How did you even know that stuff back then? You weren’t even a stylist yet.” Ali questions her brother.

“Because every good gay boy reads Cosmo…it’s not that hard.” Kyle sasses.

“Well, not sure I can compete with that kind of valor. But, I could do your taxes!” Ali jokingly offers to Liz and Jess.

“Please, you got our girl out of that hell hole. Lizster and I are in complete agreement with Ashlyn that you walk on water. Sorry, Kyle, but your hair god status can’t compete.” Jess says to Ali with a smile while Liz nods in agreement and Kyle pretends to pout. “Aaaand, I’m so taking you up on that tax offer!” Jess adds.

“Oh, me too!” Liz yells out.

“Bribing people with tax offers again, Alibear? A red-headed woman with light freckles says as she walks over to them.

“This is Amber, my good friend from college. Amber, this is Jess and Liz who are friends of Ashlyn’s, and you obviously know this queen.” Ali introduces everyone and finishes by nudging Kyle.

“Alibear…seriously, she is so hot! And she already refilled my drink and got me another fork when I dropped mine. Hot with good manners…girl, you did gooood!” Amber blurts out right after she gives Jess and Liz a little greeting wave.

“Well gee, Amber, don’t hold back.” Ali blushes and mouths ‘sorry’ to Jess and Liz.

“Oh please, relax Ali! It’s not like we don’t all know that she’s like a million times better than Prince Charming and a big tough ass soldier-turned-cop to boot.” Liz waves off Ali’s apology. “Plus she knows fashion and make-up. She’s like the best of both worlds really.”

“Don’t have to tell me.” Ali smiles as she glances over at Ashlyn who is about 50 feet away, talking with Chris, Bridget, Tim and Julie.

“Let me guess, we’re talking about Ashlyn.” Emily jokes as she joins the group and nudges Ali to get her attention. “Busted.”

“I know, I know…we’re like a couple of middle-schoolers. I swear we’ll stop.” Ali groans and puts her hands up in surrender as everyone laughs loudly. “Emily, this is Liz and Jess, Ashlyn’s good friends.”
“We met earlier and they already know how fabulous I am, so no need for your sure-to-be-coming monologue about my awesomeness.” Emily jokes and earns more laughs.

“Ha, you wish!” Ali sasses back.

“Well, I think I probably speak for all of us when I say that we’re really happy for you and Ashlyn. You two are really great people who are great together and we’re glad to be a part of your lives.” Jess raises her glass up. “And here’s to more of these parties, because this is really fun!”

“Here, here, girl!” Kyle raises his glass too and everyone else follows to clink them all together in a makeshift toast.

“Plus all us single people get to live vicariously through you now, sooo…” Amber adds while Emily commiserates with a loud “SERIOUSLY!” that makes everyone laugh again.

“Uh oh, did you two already start the embarrassing stories?” Ashlyn says with a joking glare towards Liz and Jess as she approaches the group, happy to see everyone laughing together.

“Please. If we had started the embarrassing stories, Ali would be rolling on the floor laughing right now.” Liz replies. “Or she would be running for the hills…”

“Nah, she’s seen me talk to my hair while I try and get this perfect wave styled. If that kind of crazy hasn’t made her run, I don’t think anything will.” Ashlyn plays back.

“It’s true. Can’t get rid of me, Harris.” Ali leans into her.

“Never plan to, Krieger.” Ashlyn tilts her head down to kiss Ali’s forehead.

The group starts to ‘awww’ but is interrupted by Kyle who shouts out “There is nothing wrong with talking to your hair!”

“No one wants to hear about your kinky dating life, Hair Guru!” Jess teases him.

Ashlyn is about to join in the tormenting when she sees Jordan and Tanya walk into the yard pushing a stroller. She’s across the lawn in seconds. “Jordan! Hey man!” She calls out to him.

“Hey, Capt! Been way too long! You look really good.” Jordan greets her with a hug. “You haven’t been properly introduced…this is my wife, Tanya. Honey this is Ashlyn Harris.” He introduces them.

“So good to meet you finally! This guy talked about you all the time. And he had me locked up in a cell, so I had to no choice but to listen.” Ashlyn jests to bring some lightness to the connection between her and Jordan.

“Well he told me all kinds of impressive things about you, so I’m happy to meet you too!” Tanya says with a sweet smile. “Sorry we’re late. This lil guy decided to breastfeed for like a century before we left.”

“Oh my goodness, he’s the cutest thing ever!” Ashlyn immediately kneels down and starts making little cooing noises. “Hey there lil man, what’s your name?”

“This is Cyrus.” Jordan answers proudly. “He just turned four months and somehow we’ve all managed to survive.” He jokes and earns an elbow from Tanya.

“Hi Cyrus. We are going to have so much fun together and I’m going to show you all the cool stuff
your parents won’t. Your first lesson is how to flirt with the ladies, let’s get to it.” Ashlyn scoops him up from the stroller. “Tell Mommy and Daddy to go have fun and eat because between me and those other ladies, they won’t see you again for hours…or until you need to eat.” Ashlyn holds his cheek to hers and helps him wave his hand.

“Have fun you two!” Tanya laughs, her and Jordan both clearly excited to have the little break to enjoy some adult conversation. They immediately head towards Tim and Julie, stopping to grab food on the way.

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“That looks really good on her, doesn’t it?” Ali hears from behind her as she stands in the kitchen looking out the sliding door and into the yard, her eyes focused on Ashlyn who is sitting in the grass helping Curtis and Elsie hold baby Cyrus. She had come inside to use the bathroom and then got caught up watching Ashlyn on her way back out, choosing to do it from inside where no one would tease her for staring. She turns around to find Edith giving her a knowing look.

“Yes, yes it does.” Ali openly admits, her eyes going right back to Ashlyn, a feeling of both deep love but also nervousness settling in her stomach.

“Can I offer a word of advice?” Edith asks gently.

“Yes, of course, Edith. Any time, you know that.” Ali keeps her eyes on Ashlyn, watching her kiss Cyrus’ cheeks all over while Elsie plays with his toes.

“She went through a lot very early in life and the doubts she has about herself run deeper than she knows what to do with sometimes. You get through to her better than anyone I’ve ever seen. She’s really happy and so much has already changed in her, I can see it. Still, she has a hard time seeing that she is worthy and deserving of the things she wants.” Edith puts a hand on Ali’s shoulder and leans in a bit closer. “Don’t wait for her to figure it out, go ahead and show her. She trusts you and loves you. She’s ready to hear it and believe it. Edith pauses for a second before finishing with “And she’s definitely ready for that. Personally, I think she’s always been more than ready for that.” She motions to Ashlyn, who is now bouncing Cyrus around in a little dance while she talks to Chris and Bridget.

“Thanks, Edith.” Ali turns to the older woman and smiles. “I’m not sure we’re quite there yet, but I have been thinking about it a lot. I appreciate the confidence boost and the push to be a little bolder.”

“Oh dear, you don’t need to be any bolder…just be you, especially about the things you want, she loves you exactly as you are. Just make sure you fucking get there soon, I need to see your sure-to-be-beautiful kiddos before I die for god sakes.” Edith gives her a pat on the back with a smile and makes her way out to the yard.

Ali can only shake her head and laugh at Edith’s uncanny ability to drop an f-bomb when you least expect one.

“She’s right you know.” Ali hears from just a bit further behind her, turning around to see Rebecca.

“And how long have you been standing there?” Ali questions playfully.

“Long enough to know for certain that my boys are going to be uncles before I know it.” Rebecca replies simply as she approaches Ali and stands beside her at the screen door.

“You really think so?” Ali asks quietly.
“Ali, I know so. There is no way that woman doesn’t want a family. And I already know that you do.” Rebecca says pointing to Ashlyn and admiring the way she manages to effortlessly hold the baby while still playing with her niece and nephew. “Edith really was right. I freaking love that woman by the way, she reminds me of my great Aunt Sarah.” Rebecca interrupts her own line of thought.

“Yeah Edith is pretty awesome and hilarious with her damn sailor mouth!” Ali agrees.

“Anyway, I get it…I’ve been in her shoes.” Rebecca looks back out at Ashlyn. “My parents really sucked and it took me a long time to realize that we are not defined by our pasts, but that we have the power to decide who and what we become. I needed the right person to help me see that it was okay to want the things that I wanted and that the only thing holding me back from making them a reality was me.” She leaves it at that, not wanting to specifically bring Ken into the conversation right now.

“That makes a lot of sense.” Ali takes in the statement. “Ugh, she’s really too damn adorable with that baby.” She adds gushingly.

“She’s so sweet and one of the most down-to-earth people I’ve ever met. She was just out there a while ago giving Jameson some goalkeeping pointers because his coach just moved him into that position…my heart definitely melted a little bit watching that go down. You must be a full on puddle right now.” Rebecca laughs.

“Oh, I am!” Ali confesses with a giggle.

“Just be open with her.” Rebecca gives one last bit of advice. “And in the meantime, go out there and take this whole thing for a test drive!” She winks and pushes Ali out the door towards Ashlyn.

“I suppose I could take it for a spin.” Ali calls back with a smirk.

“That a girl!” Rebecca encourages just before Ali is out of earshot.

“Stop hogging all the cute boys, Harris.” Ali says sassily, holding her arms out to take the baby as she approaches Ashlyn.

“Awww, sorry Cy. I know we were having a blast, but the queen here demands your attention and I can’t in good conscience deny you the chance be held by such a beautiful woman. Besides it’s a great opportunity to try out all those skills I just taught you, let’s see what you got buddy.” Ashlyn says softly to Cyrus before carefully handing him over to Ali once the brunette is sitting beside her on the lawn.

“You’re too smooth for your own good, Hero.” Ali smiles and settles Cyrus into the crook of her arm before leaning into Ashlyn and feeling the officer wrap an arm around her. “He is seriously adorable.” Ali says as she looks down at Cyrus and lightly runs a finger over his chin, causing him to smile and start babbling. “Oh my goodness! He smiled at me!” She says excitedly as he continues to make little cooing noises.

“Taught him everything he knows!” Ashlyn chuckles and pulls Ali closer, unable to ignore the flutter of her heart right now. She leans in and kisses Ali’s cheek, prompting the brunette to nuzzle in even closer and let out a happy little sigh.

Right on cue, Cyrus breaks the moment by squirming. Ali repositions him and ends up getting quite a bit of spit-up on her forearm as she does, the rest of it luckily falling onto the grass and missing her clothes. “Well, I sure hope that isn’t in your repertoire, Hero. That’s a bit too kinky for my liking.”
Ali teases and laughs as Ashlyn uses the burp cloth that was on her shoulder to wipe Ali’s arm.

“Funny, Krieger.” Ashlyn rolls her eyes jokingly.

“Auntie Ashwyn! Can Curtis and I come pretend house with you and Ali and baby?” Elsie runs up and interrupts them.

“You sure can.” Ashlyn answers with a smile as Curtis plops himself down next to her.

“I’m the big brother.” Curtis says nonchalantly.

“No, Curt! You’re the Daddy!” Elsie commands and Ali chuckles at the little girl’s bossy side.

“Fine.” Curtis gives up, knowing by now that she’ll just whine until he gives in anyway.

“Auntie Ali, you’re the mommy.” Elsie continues to direct.

“Auntie Ali?” Ali whispers to Ashlyn, a bit stunned that she’s being called auntie now. “When did that start?”

“No idea, but I love it.” Ashlyn shrugs and kisses the top of Ali’s head. “So, what am I? The uncle?” She questions Elsie just to tease her.

“Nooo! You’re the mom too, Auntie Ashwyn!” Elsie yells out with an eye roll like it’s obvious.

“Ok, so two moms and a nephew as the Dad… sounds like a normal family to me.” Ashlyn chuckles and Ali almost snorts. “And who are you, Els?”

“The dog!” Elsie giggles and gets down on all fours, sniffing at them and barking occasionally.

“Of course, the dog!” Ashlyn laughs. “Well, go easy there Fido, you don’t want to wake the baby or I’ll send you out to the doghouse.” She adds, seeing that Cyrus has just fallen asleep in Ali’s arms.

“Ffffiiine. No more house, Curtis. The baby is sleeping.” Elsie huffs.

“You guys can stay and play.” Ali assures them.

“Sleepy babies are boring Auntie Ali, we’re going to play ball.” Elsie says as she tugs Curtis’ shirt until he gets up and follows her.

“They’re too much!” Ali laughs and Ashlyn nods in agreement.

“I know, buddy, most comfortable spot in the world, right? It’s my favorite too.” Ashlyn leans in and whispers to a sleeping Cyrus as Ali holds him. The feelings inside her right now are something very different and new. She knows now is not the time to delve into it and figure it all out, but she does know that whatever it is, she likes it.

“You’re making me feel things, Harris.” Ali turns her head and kisses Ashlyn’s chin.

“Yeah well, you’re making me feel things too, Alex.” Ashlyn leans in for a real kiss. “And… we’re running low on drinks and sandwich rolls, so I better go be a good host and fix that. Enjoy your time, cause I’m stealing him back the second he wakes up.”

“Mmmhmm.” Ali just hums in response, her eyes still a bit hooded from the kiss and her mind trying to decipher Ashlyn’s statement. “Get Kyle to help you.” She says just before Ashlyn can walk away, finally snapping out of it.
“So. You ready to be an uncle?” Chris nudges Kyle after the two of them watch Ashlyn walk away from the cozy little scene that just played out.

“Please, I skateboard and binge on ice cream while I watch reality TV…I was born to be an uncle!” Kyle laughs loudly and Chris lets out his signature guffaw.

“Sounds about right.” Chris replies.

“What about you?” Kyle returns the question.

“Oh yeah, I figure it’s just like being a Dad only I get to spoil them and get them all hopped up on sugar before I send them home.” Chris laughs and holds up his fist for Kyle to bump. “We got this.”

“Pssshh, we sooo got this!” Kyle agrees as he bumps Chris’ fist and then waves his hand in the air with flair. “How long before you think they figure it out?” He asks as he motions to Ali.

“I give it a month.” Chris smiles.

“I give it a week.” Kyle replies with a grin and pats Chris on the shoulder before walking away.

“Hey, uh, can I ask you a question?” Jameson says as he helps Ashlyn slice open sandwich rolls in the kitchen after he saw her struggling to carry soda and water outside and offered to help.

“Sure, man. What’s up?” Ashlyn replies. She’s been amazed so far by how many little things about Ali and Kyle she sees in Josh and Jameson after only having been around them for a couple hours. Josh is direct and seems to be very observant, a whole lot like Ali. Jameson is a bit more mellow and sensitive in ways that remind her of Kyle.

“When did you know you were…um, that you liked women?” Jameson asks shyly.

“Hmm, well, I really think a part of me always knew. I just wasn’t really conscious of it until towards the end of high school.” Ashlyn replies.

“What made you realize for sure though?” He probes further.

“Oh um…well, I went to prom with a guy and we kissed and stuff…” Ashlyn chooses her words carefully, knowing she’s talking to a 12 year old. “Made me realize that I didn’t like it and that the other feelings I had for girls just made more sense.”

“Ok, cool.” Jameson replies and stays silent for a bit before speaking up again. “Do you think that someone has to be with both guys and girls before they can really know?”

“Absolutely not.” Ashlyn says resolutely. “Whatever you feel inside is what’s right. If you know, you know. Some people don’t know and they try to date both men and women to figure it out and some people just know without ever doing that. There’s no right or wrong, you do what feels right for you.”

“Thanks, Ashlyn.” Jameson says with a satisfied smile.

“Anything you want to talk about, J?” Ashlyn offers without pressuring him.
“Sure. I guess. I mean, I kinda have a boyfriend…David. I really like him and I like kissing him a lot.” Jameson admits and turns red. “I guess, I’m just trying to figure out what that means and how I know for sure.”

“Damn, J…12 and you already have a boyfriend. You are so much cooler than I am.” Ashlyn praises him to lighten the mood before she gets serious. “It’s really okay not to know or figure everything out right now. Trust me, take your time and don’t feel pressured. You still have a lot of learning about yourself and growing to do, just trust in that process, okay? There’s no need to slap some label on yourself for other people. You do what’s right for you.”

“Ok, yeah.” He replies and seems more relaxed.

“Oh and J?” Ashlyn says as she slices the last roll.

“Yeah?” He answers.

“Don’t rush stuff whether it’s mental or physical. Be safe, you have plenty of time and you don’t want to regret things later.” Ashlyn adds, feeling like she should offer some type of safe-sex advice.

“Promise. Don’t worry, I’m not THAT cool.” He replies with a little bit of a joke.

“Good.” Ashlyn smiles. “Alright, bring it in.” She opens her arms out and pulls him into a hug.

“Thanks.” Jameson hugs her back tightly.

“Any time. In fact, give me your phone and I’ll put my number in there. Call or text me any time you want and we can talk about anything you want to. And I don’t just mean goalkeeper stuff.” Ashlyn promises him and then puts her contact info into his phone once he hands it to her.

“You’re the best!” Jameson says with a big smile as he puts away his phone and walks past Ali on his way out the sliding door.

“Well, I already knew you were the best, but why does he think you’re the best? Did you promise him goalkeeper lessons or something?” Ali questions as she leans on the counter next to Ashlyn.

“No, but I probably should have.” Ashlyn muses. “We were just talking love, life, identity…nothing deep at all.” She chuckles lightly at her own sarcasm. “Twelve is definitely on the early side to be realizing you’re gay and with a boyfriend none-the-less, so can’t say I’m too surprised that he’s looking to get some perspective on it from older people who’ve been there.”

“Wait, did he just come out to you?!” Ali asks squeakily and stunned.

“Um, yeah, pretty much I guess. He talked about his boyfriend and just wondering how one knows for sure that they’re gay.” Ashlyn replies feeling confused at Ali’s outburst.

“Oh my gosh. Fuck, with him hanging around Kyle so much and the way he was so forward just now, I assumed he must’ve talked about it to people.” Ashlyn says a bit worriedly. “Alex, you can’t say anything! I don’t want to out him when he just trusted me like that.”

“Chill, baby. My lips are sealed and I won’t ever say a word, I promise you.” Ali zips her lip, her heart full at the fact that she’s not the only one who feels safe around this wonderful woman that she calls her own. “You’re amazing, Ash. I love you so much.” She adds as she places a few soft kisses
across Ashlyn’s jawline, her arms now draped over the officer’s shoulders.

“Thanks, baby. I love you too, Alex.” Ashlyn replies with a smile and grips Ali’s waist. “I hope your lips aren’t too sealed though.” She mutters as she closes the distance between them and takes Ali’s lips in hers.

Ali immediately deepens it with a barely audible moan, her tongue fighting for dominance the second Ashlyn grants her access. Being collectively around these meaningful people in their lives has allowed them to peel back yet another layer of each other and meld together another aspect of their lives, neither of them quite prepared for the intensity of feelings that would come with it.

“People are without sandwich rolls, Krieger.” Ashlyn smirks as she tries to catch her breath when they finally pull apart a few minutes later.

“Mmm, yeah, but if we don’t feed them…they won’t stay as long.” Ali raises her eyebrow suggestively.

“True.” Ashlyn laughs and rests her forehead against Ali’s. “I’m sure they’ll be gone in a couple hours and, if not, we can just awkwardly make out on the lawn until they do.” She jokes.

“Won’t work. Amber would definitely stay and watch.” Ali shrugs with a smile.

“Well, then I’ll just have to call the cops to escort her away.” Ashlyn replies.

“You are the cops.” Ali gives her a playful glare.

“Exactly.” Ashlyn smirks and leaves a lingering kiss on Ali’s lips before walking outside with the tray of rolls.

今天的聚会真是太棒了。”Ashlyn说，她坐在甲板椅上，和Ali并肩，一起享受着美好的时光。8:30pm和每个人都已经离开了，Amber是最后一个，正如Ali所预料的那样。小屋和厨房仍然一片狼藉，尽管Chris和Kyle提出要留下来帮忙打扫，但Ashlyn和Ali赶走了他们，并说他们想要打扫的话，明天也可以来帮忙。

“真的很棒。我真的很喜欢每个人聚在一起的氛围，他们相处得非常好。真是太完美了。”Ali赞同道，她抚摸着Ashlyn的脖子和后背上的毛发。

“今天的天气真好，我只想带你去楼上。”Ashlyn微笑着抬头看，看到天空中星星越来越多，天空越来越暗，温度仍然温暖但又很舒适。

“你是一个真正的神算子，Harris。”Ali笑着站起来，拉起Ashlyn。“来吧，我计划得很好，如果我没说错的话。”

“你在做什么？”Ashlyn玩世不恭地问道，Ali领着她进了卧室。

“你真的以为我今天早上花了将近三个小时准备吗？”Ali挑了挑眉毛。“我在别处。”她又诡异地笑着。

Ashlyn环顾四周，但并没有看到有什么不同，除了床铺被整理得很好，Ali从不整理，而Ashlyn通常都会为她整理。

“你不会真的以为我今天早上花了将近三个小时准备吗？”Ali提高眉毛。"我是在别的地方。"她又带着诡异的微笑。

“你没真的觉得花了三个小时的准备吗？"Ali问。

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like 2 minutes. Ha! You really did take like three hours, didn’t you?” She jokes.

Ali just smiles and kisses Ashlyn deeply, pulling away after just a few seconds. “Don’t make me leave you in the bedroom, Hero. Now be a good girl and follow.”

“Yes, Ma’am!” Ashlyn replies in a high voice and trying to compose herself after the brief but fiery kiss, following Ali out onto the private deck where it becomes immediately obvious what Ali was talking about. There is a queen-sized, 6-inch thick memory foam mattress topper in the middle of the deck, perfectly made up with sheets, pillows and a comforter, a few candles around it in case they need some light.

“Thought we could camp out.” Ali says with a nose-crinkling smile.

“You don’t even understand how amazing this is, I’m so excited!” Ashlyn says giddily, still not grown out of loving all things fort, tree-house and camping like she did when she was a kid. She can think of nothing better than being with Ali under the stars for the night.

“Good, now strip and get in.” Ali directs as she strips down to just her underwear and hops into the makeshift bed. Usually she’d wait for Ashlyn to take her clothes off for her, but she really just wants to be naked with her girl right now and settles for the happy-medium. She lets out a deep breath of contentment once Ashlyn joins her, the two of them practically naked and cuddled up together.

“Ok, start talking. I can hear the wheels in your brain turning, what’s going on in there?” Ali pops her head up from Ashlyn’s chest to look at her. They’ve been laying in silence for quite a while, stealing kisses and enjoying the feel of each other’s skin, not feeling rushed to get where the night is inevitably going given how the morning started. Still, it’s taking much longer than Ali anticipated and Ashlyn is far too quiet, her grip on Ali a bit snugger than normal for the current situation.

Ashlyn opens her mouth, but then only lets out a small sigh and doesn’t say anything.

“Ash… tell me. It’s ok, whatever it is. You know that.” Ali coaxes her, lightly stroking her cheek now.

“Ok.” Ashlyn gives herself a few more seconds. She can’t believe she is even about to get into this and ruin what has been a great day and was sure to be a great night. “Can I ask you a question?”

“You can ask me anything, sweetheart. Absolutely anything.” Ali replies with no hesitation.

“Ok.” Ashlyn wills herself to get it out, her eyes looking up and not meeting Ali’s. “The handcuff thing, is that something you’re into?”

“What?” Ali asks a bit unprepared for the question.

“Earlier when Kyle was saying he walked in on you… is that something you like?” Ashlyn rephrases and elaborates as much as she can manage.

“Oh that.” Ali replies, fully ready to go call Kyle and rip him a new one. “I’m really sorry, Ash…it obviously really upset you…” She tries to find the right words even though she doesn’t quite understand the root of Ashlyn’s dismay.

Ali’s lack of a direct answer sets off Ashlyn’s emotions further. “God I feel so fucking stupid and
pathetic right now.” She mumbles and turns her head away a bit. “I love you and if it’s something you like, then it should be something that I can do with you. But I fucking can’t and it’s ridiculous. I don’t know, like the general idea isn’t the issue…maybe we could try like ties or something like that.” She blurts out in a ramble of thoughts.

“Ash… Ash… hey, calm down, baby.” Ali cups her face again and forces Ashlyn to look at her, the officer’s cloudy hazel eyes finally meeting hers. “Hey, there you are. Relax, everything is fine. Just slow down and tell me what you’re talking about.”

“Handcuffs, Alex. I can’t do handcuffs.” Ashlyn finally gets out something coherent. “McNally had me do this arrest training exercise with some rookies when I first went back to work. They put handcuffs on me and the internal panic it set off was agonizing. I barely held it together through the exercise.” She explains gloomily. “I just don’t think I could ever enjoy a sexual situation like that. It’s pathetic…I can’t even do something you like.” She adds in a tiny voice.

“Ash, nothing about you is pathetic. You were locked up in fucking solitary for 3 years, of course it has an effect on you. Nothing about that is weird or embarrassing.” Ali reassures her. “And what makes you think we need to suddenly bring handcuffs into the picture? I think our sex life is absolutely perfect, don’t you?”

“I swear, I love our sex life!” Ashlyn defends, realizing the implication of her prior rambling. “It’s just… I thought that if you had been doing those things, that you must like it. And I want to be able to give you that, but I can’t. Well, I mean, not exactly. I really do trust you, Alex. And I love when you’re in control of me. I just don’t think I can get there with the handcuffs though, but maybe something else…” Ashlyn rambles on again.

“Ash…sweetheart, please relax. You’re just talking to me, baby, there’s nothing to get riled up about, ok?” Ali leans in and kisses her softly. “I love you and nothing changes that. We’re just having an honest conversation, breathe.”

“Ok.” Ashlyn concedes and lets the kiss calm her, taking a few deeps breaths and pulling herself together.

“Good. Now listen to me.” Ali kisses her nose. “I did and tried a lot of things in the past that I thought I needed to make the sex good. It took me far too long to realize I was just missing the right person. I waited my whole life to feel what I do when I’m with you. And I finally have it and it’s perfect just the way it is. You know what I’m into, Ash? You. Simple as that. I just need you. You’re perfect.” Ali leans in and kisses Ashlyn again, pulling back and continuing before the officer can chime in. “That’s not to say that I’m not willing to try things that you or I want to try, but we’d have to be in complete agreement about it for starters. But Ashlyn, honestly, if we never change a damn thing… I will still be the happiest and most satisfied girl on the planet. To put it bluntly, babe…you are hot as fuck and I love the way you touch me. You set me on fire and make me feel things I never thought possible both physically and mentally. Our sex is mind blowing and it’s more than I ever could have dreamed of. You got that, Harris?”

“What did I ever do to deserve you? You’re truly the best, Alex. Thank you. And yes, I got it.” Ashlyn finally lets herself completely relax and pulls Ali down into a deep kiss. “Thanks for putting up with my crazy.” She mumbles against Ali’s lips.

“Hey, you’re not crazy.” Ali pulls back slightly to look at Ashlyn. “Crazy beautiful, but not crazy. We ok now?”

“Yes, we’re ok.” Ashlyn steals another quick kiss before Ali resettles herself on her chest, both of them needing a minute to regroup.
“You know, we should probably really finish this conversation now before we completely abandon it.” Ali pipes up.

“What do you mean?” Ashlyn questions.

“Sex…likes and dislikes, turn-ons, stuff like that.” Ali replies. “We haven’t really stopped to do that on this wild ride of ours.” She adds playfully.

“Really, we’re going to full-on get into this?” Ashlyn says shyly.

“Relax, babe. It’s healthy and nothing to be ashamed of, just be honest about what you like. If we both like it, we’ll keep it on the table. If not, we toss it out.” Ali explains.

“Ok, yeah. I can handle that.” Ashlyn replies, but then stays silent because she doesn’t know what else to say.

“Well ok then, Captain Bashful, I’ll start. Vibrator… yes or no?” Ali starts mild.

“Uh, I’ve only tried it with myself and not with anyone else. I really just learned that I prefer to be touched, whether it’s by me or someone else. So, no vibrator needed. You?” Ashlyn surprises herself with her directness.

“Similar. I’ve tried it both ways, just myself and with someone else. It was definitely better with someone else, but honestly never added enough to make me want to do it again. So, agreed that it probably isn’t worth it since neither of us loves it?” Ali replies.

“Agreed.” Ashlyn nods.

“Good. See, not so hard. Your turn.” Ali kisses Ashlyn’s cheek.

“Ok… anal?” Ashlyn forces herself to be as bold as possible given how bashful she’s been tonight.


“Haven’t really tried it either. Honestly, one of my exes just let her finger rest there once, I mean no penetration or anything like that, but I’ll admit that it felt good. Can’t say I’ve ever had the inclination to take it any further than that.” Ashlyn replies, not holding back.

“Ok, so maybe let’s put that very minimal aspect of it on the table. I’m not into taking it further, but I’m open to what you just said. So, you tell me if you want me to do that or want to try it on me and I’ll do the same, ok?” Ali sets the loose terms.

“Ok.” Ashlyn confirms. “You’re up.”

“Sex positions?” Ali inquires.

“Oh geez, I’ve tried many and while I’m sure there are like hundreds more that I haven’t…I can honestly say I haven’t disliked any of them and am willing to try anything. I’m really open about that.” Ashlyn responds.

“Agreed, same for me. Any that you particularly like though?” Ali probes further.

“Well, I recently learned that I love you riding my fingers on my lap.” Ashlyn replies with a grin.

“Done and done.” Ali smirks. “I really like orgasming mutually, so I’ll admit that 69 is a favorite and
I like to be on the top of it for some reason.”

“Done and done.” Ashlyn uses Ali’s words and chuckles a bit before moving on. “Ok, so while I enjoy love bites and being a little rough occasionally, I’m not into pain like whips and stuff like that. You?”

“Completely agree, off the table.” Ali confirms. “Strap-ons, dildos, and similar toys?”

“I’ve been on the giving end with a strap-on, never on the receiving. I liked the experience, but don’t know if I would feel any differently on the receiving end. I’m open to it generally though.” Ashlyn replies.

“Hmmm, exact same. Gave and never received. That’ll be interesting.” Ali muses. “I’m open to it too though. So, let’s just leave that on the table and maybe figure it out as we go along based on how we’re feeling.” She suggests.

“I’m game.” Ashlyn confirms. “Ok, so since you never answered my original question… handcuffs, bondage?”

“I’ve only gotten into it very lightly… fuzzy handcuffs as you well know. Also used someone’s tie once. I definitely enjoyed it at the time, but it’s honestly just because I like taking control sometimes. I could give a crap less about the handcuffs or whatever else, the control thing is the central piece of what I liked about it.” Ali explains clearly so that Ashlyn can understand.

“That makes sense, I get it now. I’ve never done it with anyone, but clearly know I can’t do handcuffs now, obviously. I trust you completely though and would be willing to get at it in other ways. Because honestly, it’s a real turn on for me when you take control…like really, really hot.” Ashlyn gets out her thoughts with a smirk.

“Ok, well, we’ll leave that on the table minus handcuffs and just be careful to talk through what feels good and avoid what doesn’t.” Ali supplies.

“Perfect.” Ashlyn smiles, feeling a complete sense of relief now. She leans in and surprises Ali with a scorching kiss, her hands automatically running along Ali’s bare side. “We about done talking here?” She asks as she ghosts Ali’s lips.

“Mmmhmmm, definitely.” Ali giggles softly. “So… you like it when I’m in control, huh?” She asks as she moves to straddle Ashlyn with a sultry stare.

“Uh huh.” Ashlyn swallows hard with the brunette leaned in close to her, the dog tags around Ali’s neck just barely dragging on her chest. She grabs the metal tags in her hands and pulls Ali down by them, crashing their lips together in a passionate kiss. She grants immediate access to Ali’s tongue and meets it with her own, the two locked in a battle for dominance and only pulling away when they need air. Ashlyn moans when Ali lightly pulls her bottom lip with her teeth. “Mmmm, I think you should take the helm right now actually.” She says in a low deep voice as they breathe heavily.

“Yeah? You want me to steer this ship, Captain?” Ali asks hotly, leaving a trail of wet kisses across Ashlyn’s jaw before very lightly biting behind her ear.

“Fuck, Alex. I’m yours.” Ashlyn reaches around to unclasp Ali’s bra as the brunette leans in close to her, the dog tags around Ali’s neck just barely dragging on her chest. She grabs the metal tags in her hands and pulls Ali down by them, crashing their lips together in a passionate kiss. She grants immediate access to Ali’s tongue and meets it with her own, the two locked in a battle for dominance and only pulling away when they need air. Ashlyn moans when Ali lightly pulls her bottom lip with her teeth. “Mmmm, I think you should take the helm right now actually.” She says in a low deep voice as they breathe heavily.

“Yeah? You want me to steer this ship, Captain?” Ali asks hotly, leaving a trail of wet kisses across Ashlyn’s jaw before very lightly biting behind her ear.

“Fuck, Alex. I’m yours.” Ashlyn reaches around to unclasp Ali’s bra as the brunette nips and licks at her neck. As soon as she has the bra off of Ali’s shoulders, she cups the brunette’s breasts in her hands, palms running over her nipples.

“Mmmm, as good as that feels, I’m gonna need you to use those hands to get yourself naked for me, baby.” Ali sits up and pulls Ashlyn’s hands off of her chest, her eyes dark with desire.
With that smoldering look on Ali’s face Ashlyn doesn’t waste any time complying, quickly pulling her sports bra over her head and then reaching down around Ali to pull off her boxers and using her legs to kick them off.

“Points for efficiency, Harris.” Ali leans back down to hover over Ashlyn, feeling the officer slip her fingers under the waistband of her underwear and trying to work it down. “Hmmm…nope. I’m gonna need those wandering hands now.” Ali husks and moves Ashlyn’s hands by her own shoulders, using her hands to pin the officer’s arms down to the deck. “This ok?”

“More than okay. You’re so hot, Alex… so striking.” Ashlyn replies, her heart racing wildly at the sight of Ali hovering over her, skin aglow in the soft light of the single candle Ali had lit.

“Tell me if its gets to be too much, ok?” Ali leans in and whispers in Ashlyn’s ear.

“Ok, I promise.” Ashlyn whispers back, feeling warm all over with the care that Ali is taking with her despite the charged atmosphere. She whimpers slightly when Ali leans down and gives her a really slow and loving kiss, one that amplifies the heat she feels in her core but simultaneously stirs deeper emotions.

“I love you, Ashlyn.” Ali murmurs sweetly before her eyes darken again in a penetrating gaze that makes Ashlyn practically quiver in anticipation. “I’m gonna love taking my time with you.” She lowly grumbles before taking Ashlyn’s lips in a bruising kiss, her hands pinning Ashlyn’s arms more firmly as she starts to squirm. “No hands for you until I say so, baby.” She moves down to leave a string of light bites across Ashlyn’s collarbone before soothing the skin with her tongue.

“Jesus, Alex…uhhhnnn.” Ashlyn grunts in pleasure as Ali nips, sucks, and licks all over her neck and jaw. It’s complete torture not to touch the brunette, but it’s also intensifying everything. She can feel her core throbbing, already desperate for friction and release.

Ali quickly moves down and surprises Ashlyn by taking a nipple in her mouth and sucking on it hard until the officer’s back arches up off the makeshift bed, finally releasing it and gently running her tongue over it until it’s an impossibly hard peak. As soon as Ashlyn’s back hits the bed again, Ali repeats the process on the other nipple and then alternates between them until the officer is panting and writhing underneath her. “Fuck, I love your chest baby.”

“Oh god…Alex, so good.” Ashlyn moans loudly at Ali sucking her nipples perfectly. She can’t believe how close she is to the edge already and Ali hasn’t even come anywhere near the spot where she needs her the most. She’s turned on by the brunette’s display of strength in holding her arms down. When Ali said she was going to take her time, she wasn’t kidding. The brunette kisses and licks over every inch of skin on Ashlyn’s torso that she can reach without letting go of her wrists. Then she’s back to begin a fresh assault on Ashlyn’s nipples. “Baby…fuck…I just want to touch you. You’re driving me crazy, you feel so incredible.” She says through ragged breaths.

“Good. I want you to want to touch me…so bad… until you can’t stand it, and then I’m still going to make you wait.” Ali says in a throaty deep voice, getting close to Ashlyn’s face and staring into her eyes with a fiery gaze. She sees the officer gulp hard and decides to fluster her even more. “I’m not that mean though… I’m gonna let you have a preview, gorgeous.” She lets go of Ashlyn’s right arm and directs the officer’s hand into her underwear, letting out a low hum when fingers lightly stroke through her soaking folds. “Feel how wet am I for you, Ash? It’s all yours… all of it… but, you’re have to wait for it baby.” She says in a raspy whisper and pulls Ashlyn’s hand away, bringing it up to the officer’s mouth.

“You’re gonna be the death of me.” Ashlyn licks her own fingers, getting every last bit of Ali’s essence she can off of them before the brunette is pinning her arm back down near her shoulder.
“Maybe.” Ali shrugs with a smirk and kisses Ashlyn hard, tongues battling again as she tastes herself in the officer’s mouth. She pulls away leaving Ashlyn with eyes closed and chest heaving, restarting the process of working her mouth over every bit of skin she can until her girlfriend is reduced to a trembling mess underneath her. She relents and moves her knee between Ashlyn’s legs to provide the friction she’s been holding back from the officer, feeling the immediate wetness on her skin.

“You’re so fuckin sexy, Ash.” She husks as her eyes rake over the sculpted body under her… Ashlyn’s lips swollen from rough kisses, her hair a bit askew and her eyes shut as beads of sweat form on her brow, her nipples rock hard and a deep dusky pink, her biceps popping out as she presses back against the force of Ali holding her arms down, her hips now gyrating to get friction against Ali’s knee. “I’ve never seen anything more beautiful in my life.” Ali says in a low rumble without even realizing she’s saying it out loud.

“Alex, please…I need you so bad…so bad. Please.” Ashlyn begs with her head spinning and feeling ready to explode, not sure how she’s even made it this far.

“You’ll get me, baby…eventually.” Ali smirks against the middle of Ashlyn’s chest, placing soft kisses on the small circular scar marking her skin. She releases her tension on the officer’s arms just enough to let them come down near Ashlyn’s hips before pinning them there again by the wrist. She hears Ashlyn groan and leaves a lingering kiss on her lips before dragging the dog tags over her abs and giving her lower half the same attention she gave her upper torso. By the time she gets to mid-thigh, Ashlyn is squirming so much she can barely hold her arms down anymore.

“Alex…please, touch me. Please, Alex…touch me. Need you.” Ashlyn moans out the same mantra repeatedly, barely able to speak anymore as her hips cant in desperation and wetness drips onto the sheets from between her legs.

“I’m gonna take care of you, baby.” Ali’s warm breath blows over Ashlyn’s glistening center and the officer’s hips come off the thin mattress as a gasp leaves her mouth. “Tell me exactly what you want, Ash.” Ali’s lips ghost the officer’s folds.

“Your tongue, hard and fast… I need to come, Alex. Please baby…make me come. Hurry.” Ashlyn’s voice is up several octaves in desperation for release.

Ali doesn’t make her wait any longer. She takes a couple of broad licks with her tongue from Ashlyn’s entrance to clit to gather up all the sweetness the officer has already spilled for her before plunging it inside and working her girl hard and fast as requested.

“Fuck, fuck… Alex, yes, baby. Fuck me with your tongue. God…oh my, unnnh, just like that!” Ashlyn is quickly barreling towards orgasm, opening her legs as wide as they will go to try and get Ali deeper. She just wants to grab the back of the brunette’s head and pull her in, but she can’t, Ali still holding her arms down. “Shit… I need to touch you.” She tries to get Ali to let her have her hands back.

“Nope. You want something, just tell me, but no hands.” Ali commands and hears a light whine in protest of the break in contact, diving right back into the perfect folds she can’t get enough of. “You taste so fucking good.” She mumbles as her tongue is enveloped by clenching satin walls.

“Harder, I’m…oh god… so close.” Ashlyn’s body is shaking, the deep ache in her belly becoming impossible to contain any longer.

Ali pushes her tongue in as far as it will go and swirls it around, hearing a deep grunt and feeling Ashlyn’s walls tighten around it and almost pulling it in as she reaches her peak. “Come for me, Ash…all over me, I want you.” Ali moves up to her clit and sucks it into her mouth, putting Ashlyn right over the edge, a string of curses and deities leaving the officer’s mouth as her hips gyrate
against Ali’s face.

Ali slows down the pace, softly licking every last bit of wetness while the officer rides out the high with deep ragged breaths. She doesn’t let go of Ashlyn’s arms, just merely moves down from her wrists and entwines their hands together, both of them squeezing tightly. She moves to lay her head down on Ashlyn’s stomach while she catches her breath, placing soft kisses all over her abdomen and never letting go of her hands.

“Jesus, Alex… you’re incredible, so damn amazing. Are you going to let me touch you now?” Ashlyn rasps out as soon as she can breathe enough to talk, desperate to pull her girlfriend into her arms after such an intense release.

“Hmmm…maybe.” Ali lifts her head with a smirk to see Ashlyn’s head still thrown back into the pillow, eyes still shut. She nips a few more times at Ashlyn’s hip bones, earning herself a few more gasps before moving up her body. She pins Ashlyn’s arms up by her shoulders again and leans down to kiss her heatedly before scooting up even further and turning herself around. Her knees go to replace her hands, securing Ashlyn’s arms down while her core hovers over the officer’s face.

“Holy fuck…” Ashlyn whispers at the literal turn of events, already intoxicated by the glistening folds inches from her face.

“You can touch me, baby. Just no hands.” Ali winks as she looks back at Ashlyn over her shoulder and then quickly lowers her own head back between the officer’s legs, licking light patterns on her swollen clit.

“Oh. My. God. Mmmm, Alex, damn baby.” Ashlyn’s eyes roll into the back of her head, her clit still sensitive but already throbbing again at Ali’s feather light touches. It takes her a few more moments before she pulls herself together enough to lift her head and bury her face into Ali’s center.

“Mmmmmm!” Ashlyn can only moan into Ali’s core at the feeling of fingers filling her, her face and mouth completely absconded in Ali’s tight wetness. She can feel Ali pressing into the perfect spot inside her and knows it won’t be much longer before she’s seeing stars again, her hips already moving involuntarily into the brunette’s hand to impale herself further. She drives her tongue deep inside Ali with renewed purpose. With no hands to help her, she presses her face hard into the brunette to make sure her chin is against Ali’s clit for extra friction as she moans as loud as she can to increase the vibrations.

“Oooooh, fucking fuck…oh god, like that, like that!” Ali practically screams at the sensation, pressing herself so hard into Ashlyn’s face she starts to wonder if she can breathe. Her mind is a complete haze, everything around her disappearing except for Ashlyn’s body moving against hers as their heaving breaths fall into chaotic rhythm which each other. “Ash, ohhhhh my god…I’m there… please baby, come with me.” She gets out urgently and curls her fingers hard over and over again inside the officer until Ashlyn’s hips come off the bed, her abs tight and her core like a vice around Ali’s fingers as she moans so loud it feels like Ali’s whole body vibrates from it. “Yes, baby, yes… Assssssshhh, Ashlyn, Ashlyn, uuuuhhhnnn! Fuck!” Ali feels her whole body tense, her short fingernails breaking the skin on Ashlyn’s thighs as the orgasm rips through her, leaving everything
black because her eyes are so tightly screwed shut in pleasure.

“Alex… oh god… Alex. So incredible.” Ashlyn whispers breathlessly as she lets her head fall back onto the pillow for a minute to take in much needed air, her orgasm having hit right alongside Ali’s. She feels the brunette trailing lazy gentle licks across her center and softly moans at the amazing sensation, moving her tongue to do the same to Ali and getting matching satisfied moans in return.

“Alex?” Ashlyn eventually whispers as they settle.

“Yeah, gorgeous?” Ali replies, lifting her head just slightly from where it was resting on Ashlyn’s thigh.

“I can’t feel my hands.” Ashlyn chuckles.

“Oh geez! Sorry, babe!” Ali quickly lifts her knees to free the officer’s arms, having forgotten they were still pinned under there. “You ok?” She asks quickly, starting to move to right herself.

“I’m fine. Wait, don’t move just yet. Please? Just stay like that a little longer, I like this.” Ashlyn requests and moves to run her tingling hands over the brunette’s thighs and lower back.

“Ok, love.” Ali agrees and drops her head back to where it was, running a hand over the mound of soft well-trimmed curls in front of her before moving to trace the inked mermaid on Ashlyn’s thigh with her finger. Normally she wouldn’t stay in this position a second longer than she had to, feeling too exposed and embarrassed by it, but unlike every other time, she doesn’t feel self-conscious at all. Ashlyn makes her feel completely loved and relaxed.

They stay like that a while longer until they both feel the pull to kiss each other and Ali finally rights herself, the two of them kissing languidly for a while with no words spoken between them.

“You’re so beautiful.” Ashlyn breaks the silence first as she gets lost in Ali’s eyes. “That was so sexy, and hot, and completely wonderful. Although… I didn’t expect to get through half of the stuff on our table tonight.” She can’t help but tease.

“Yeah, well, I was feeling ambitious.” Ali laughs.

“You’re always ambitious, my feisty lawyer.” Ashlyn raises an eyebrow with a grin on her face.

“True, but you knew what you were getting into, Hero.” Ali replies with her own smile.

“Oh, I did. And let me tell you… I like getting into it…over and over and over again.” Ashlyn replies with a sexy smirk.

“Is that so?” Ali plays back, feeling worked up again.

“Mmmmmmm.” Ashlyn hums in response.

“You know what’s really hot?” Ali suddenly asks.

“You.” Ashlyn responds cheekily and earns a playful glare from Ali before saying “What?”

“That you’re so damn strong and powerful, and you could easily get out of any hold that I put you in.” Ali’s eyes darken. “But you don’t… you let me take you.”

“Of course I do, you can take whatever you want anytime you want. I’m yours baby, no one else’s.” Ashlyn replies with ease.
The statement flusters Ali even further. “You know what though… I love when you take me too, show me that I belong to you.” She moves her mouth to Ashlyn’s ear. “Show me I’m yours, how strong you are. Please… fuck me until I lose my breath, until my body falls apart around you. Fuck me so I can still feel you tomorrow.” She puts her hands together above her head, pulling Ashlyn’s hand with them so the officer gets the hint.

Ashlyn loses her mind at those words and Ali’s submissive position. “Alex, there is nothing in the world more stunning than you. So beautiful. So sexy. So mine.” She pins Ali’s hands down firmly with one hand and uses the other to pinch one of the brunette’s nipples as she sucks hard on her pulse point.

“Jesus, fuck… so yours. So completely yours, Ash.” Ali can barely manage the words at the feel of Ashlyn all over her, the officer’s solid sculpted body covering hers. Ashlyn sucks on her nipples until they are deep red and sensitive, her hands already fighting to get free but standing no chance against her girlfriend’s strength. “Baby, I’m ready for you…please, just fuck me.” She begs and immediately gets what she wants as two long fingers fill her.

“So wet and open for me, Alex… I’m going to fuck you so good.” Ashlyn husks into Ali’s ear as she tugs it with her teeth, her fingers thrusting into the brunette steadily.

“Harder… oh fuck, yeah like that.” Ali’s eyes close as Ashlyn grants her request immediately. “Christ, Ashlyn… nothing feels as good as you do, so deep, baby… yeeesss. Harder.”

“Open your eyes, look at me.” Ashlyn demands as she pounds into the brunette steadily, already feeling her clench around her fingers with warm fluid spilling into her palm. Ali is thrashing around, trying hard to free herself to hold onto something as everything builds, but Ashlyn grips her tighter and never breaks her stare.

“I’m so close. Don’t stop.” Ali says raggedly.

Ashlyn doesn’t comply this time, slowing her fingers and moving slow and deep now.

“No…Ash, please. Please don’t stop.” Ali pleads, so close to the edge and wanting the euphoric release so badly. “Please, keep fucking me.”

“I am fucking you, baby.” Ashlyn kisses her hard and continues her slow torturous stroking into Ali’s tight hole, curling her fingers deliberately every time she bottoms out at the knuckle.

“Ahhhh…please, Ash.” Ali begs again in a hiss, her eyes almost black with need as she stares deeply into green-muddled hazel. “I need you. Fuck me only the way you can…make me come like I do only for you… show me I’m yours. Please, please, baby.”

That’s all Ashlyn needs to hear to give Ali what she wants. Still keeping them in a tight grip, she pulls Ali’s hands down so they’re behind the brunette’s head and uses them to tilt Ali’s head up. “Look at me so deep inside you, baby. Look how tight you are around my fingers, how perfectly we fit.”

Ali watches Ashlyn’s fingers disappear into her over and over again, never feeling so turned on in her life as the officer picks up the pace and pressure. “Asshh, you fuck me so…oh…so good, yes. Ash, Ashlyn!” They’re the last words she manages to speak as she loses her breath and electricity shoots through her entire body. She moves her head up to crash her lips to Ashlyn’s, but she can’t even manage to kiss her as everything inside her quakes and spills over…merely breathing uncontrollable moans and whimpers into her girlfriend’s warm mouth. She tries desperately to take in air, but forgets how to for a few moments with Ashlyn still barely working in and out of her to help
her ride out the waves of pleasure.

“Breathe, Alex. Easy, baby. I got you.” Ashlyn frees Ali’s hands and pulls her close, rubbing her back to get her to relax and eventually hearing Ali take some gaping breaths. “That’s it, beautiful. I love you, Alex. So much… so very very much.” She wraps her up tightly, feeling Ali melt into her bonelessly.

“You ok?” Ashlyn asks softly and tilts back to look into Ali’s eyes after a long period of silence where they just clutch each other in a sweaty heap.

“Wow, yeah… never ever better.” Ali responds kisses her softly. “I swear to you, Ash… nothing in my life has ever felt as good or right as when I’m with you…just us, nothing but us.”

“Same, beautiful, same.” Ashlyn leans in for another kiss and then pulls Ali against her tightly again, the brunette mostly on top of her with her head on her chest.

Ali smiles against Ashlyn’s warm, soft skin and traces the inked rose near her elbow, the one blossoming from the skull. She lets her mind ruminate on its meaning, how they’ve learned each other’s darkest places and emerged stronger together, creating something beautiful to behold. Something that is only theirs, for always. She feels deeply loved and fortunate, but also confident. Sure that nothing could ever alter the course that they are on together, even if they have to weather storms, their destination of forever as indelible as the ink under the skin she traces.

“Ashlyn?” Ali says quietly.

“Yes, Queen?” Ashlyn replies with a smile.

Ali means to say ‘I love you’, but her heart has it’s own plan, the words coming out of her mouth before she can even register what she is saying. “I see myself having a family with you.” The tightening grip of Ashlyn’s arms around her are what make her realize that, once again, her unfiltered thoughts have come out. Never in her life has she not been able to censor herself, to stay in control of her feelings… but she can’t be too surprised now, it has always been different with Ashlyn. This woman owns her heart, she owns it all.

The silent seconds tick on and Ali starts to panic about what she admitted out loud as it really hits her. “Ashlyn, I’m sorry… I shouldn’t have…I just…” She's trying to find the words when she feels Ashlyn’s finger on her lips.

“Hey, shhhh. It’s ok, Alex.” Ashlyn soothes her and tugs Ali up so that their faces are close, eyes locked on each other. “Do you feel that?” Ashlyn asks, putting Ali’s hand against her chest.

Ali nods. Ashlyn’s heart is racing, pounding in her chest so hard that Ali wonders how she missed it while laying against her chest, even despite her state of panic. She meets Ashlyn’s eyes again after briefly looking down at her hand held in place by the officer’s larger one. The hazel eyes looking back at her are soft and loving, easing her very soul.

“Up here hasn’t always helped me navigate my path without complication.” Ashlyn uses her free hand to point to her head. “But here… this…” she presses Ali’s hand tighter to her chest, the strong drumming heartbeat so prominent, “this tells me everything I ever need to know.” She leans in and kisses Ali gently with so much emotion that the brunette feels like she might float away, completely lost in it. Ashlyn pulls back just enough to focus on Ali’s whiskey eyes, whispering “I see it too” before claiming her lips again. Nothing else needing to be said on the topic tonight, or anything else for that matter, as they blissfully fall asleep completely entangled with each other.
First, I want to thank all of you for your patience with having to wait longer for this update than normal. Life has certainly been chaotic lately with little time to write. However, I do hope to get the next one out a bit quicker than this one. I'm having my own minor surgical procedure today that will hopefully go just fine and have me back on track in no time. So, I really appreciate you sticking with me despite the wait!

As usual, I hope the lengthy chapter update will make up for my absence! This one is mostly fun with a few other things thrown in (yep, smut alert) since the Ellen Show awaits! Hope you enjoy it and don't forget to comment with your thoughts! Thanks for reading :)

***My apologies for any typos as I didn't have as much time to proofread. I'll clean them up as I see them in the next couple days.***

“Mmmm, hi baby. I love you.” Ali mumbles sleepily, her eyes still closed as she feels an arm wrap snuggly around her waist and warm skin pressing against her bare back. The clean scent of citrusy bergamot fills her nose as she presses herself back further into Ashlyn, the officer’s skin still slightly damp from the shower.

“I love you too, beautiful. Missed you so much tonight. Go back to sleep, it’s only like 5:30am.” Ashlyn whispers into Ali’s ear and holds her closer, happy to be home from her night shift and clean as she melts into the feel of Ali’s soft skin against her own.

“Mmhmmm, ok. I think the case file is on my desk. The one about the tiger entrapment, it’s on the desk…yeah.” Ali murmurs through a yawn.

Ashlyn laughs to herself at the utter nonsense her girlfriend often spouts out in her sleep. It always has some legal connotation and she thinks it’s one of the most adorable things on the planet. She can’t help but snicker at the tiger entrapment part, knowing it’s no coincidence that she recently DVRed a documentary on Bengal tiger trapping; Ali must have watched it. She can’t help but feel proud at having converted the brunette into a documentary aficionado just like she is, despite the fact Ali will never admit it. “Shhhh, sleep, Alex.” She whispers as she leaves a few kisses across the brunette’s shoulder, eventually hearing a very light snore which signals that Ali complied.

Ali opens her eyes to see 9:03am on the digital clock, the smell of saltwater permeating the room as the breeze comes in from the open window. She smiles when she realizes she’s snuggled into Ashlyn’s bare chest with the sheets pooled at their waists. Her leg is draped over the officer’s thighs and a muscular, tattooed arm hugs her close. She lifts her head a bit and rakes her eyes across Ashlyn’s defined torso, her smile growing impossibly wider as she gets to her favorite face in the
world which is currently relaxed and serene in a deep slumber. As she lets herself take in all the little
details of Ashlyn’s face that she loves so much, her smile suddenly drops. She quickly scoots herself
up closer to take a better look, her brow now furrowed as she sees the split lip near the bottom left
corner of Ashlyn’s mouth. It’s pretty deep and still seemingly oozing a bit, a little spot of blood
visible on the pillow next to the officer’s head. Her jaw on that side also appears to have a couple
oddly shaped reddish purple marks. Normally, she wouldn’t dream of waking Ashlyn up after a long
night shift, but she’s too worried to keep herself in check.

“Ash… baby, wake up. What happened?” Ali shakes her girlfriend lightly to no avail. “Ash, wake
up.” She tries again as she runs a finger over the jaw bruises she sees, causing Ashlyn to jump up a
bit.

“Oww, what?” Ashlyn wakes up in confusion as Ali looks down at her worriedly.

“Baby, what happened to your face? Are you okay?” Ali pleads again, watching Ashlyn’s sleepy
eyes try to focus.

“Huh? Oh… I’m fine, promise. Got kicked by a guy on crack that we were trying to subdue, I’m
fine.” Ashlyn explains groggily, trying to wake up enough to give a better explanation.

“Oh, Ash… you poor thing, that looks sore.” Ali scoots to get an even closer look and cringes a bit.
“What happened to Gehirn im Kopf?” She adds while trying to calm herself down.

“Did you not see my jaw? I definitely used my head, babe.” Ashlyn jokes.

“You’re supposed to use your brain, not your head, doofus.” Ali replies evenly.

“Same thing.” Ashlyn counters with a smile before pulling Ali back into her arms. “Relax, Alex. I’m
really ok. Just a couple of nasty bruises from a couple of kicks. Unfortunately, people on bad crack
highs feel so invincible that they’re almost superhuman in terms of strength sometimes. Took three of
us to get him down and into some leg cuffs finally. Unfortunately, you can’t attack a cuffed person or
hit back, so the options are limited.” Ashlyn shrugs with a slight laugh. “Anyway, nothing I can’t
handle.”

“Bruises?! A couple of kicks?! Where else did you get hit?” Ali questions, pulling away enough to
start looking Ashlyn up and down carefully.

“Easy, babe. It’s fine. Just one other near the left ribs, but it’s just a bruise and nothing more.”
Ashlyn tries to reassure her as Ali starts looking over the left side of her torso.

“I can see the asshole’s sneaker treads in your fucking skin, Ash! Oh, baby.” Ali leans down to place
really gentle kisses near the purple marks near the officer’s rib cage. “Are you sure you didn’t break
anything?”

“At least they were Nikes with a pretty cool tread pattern!” Ashlyn laughs before stopping when she
sees Ali’s still concerned expression. “Alex, seriously, I’m fine. Really.” She reassures her with a
grin and pulls her up for a kiss, quickly deepening it before pulling back and wincing slightly. “Ok,
well, I will be fine in a couple days when this lip heals.” She concedes with a wry smile.

“You should go back to sleep and get some rest. I didn’t mean to wake you.” Ali kisses Ashlyn’s
forehead and gets up, pulling on one of the officer’s old t-shirts and some shorts as she makes her
way to the kitchen to make some coffee.

Ashlyn drops her head back into the pillow with a sigh knowing she should really get sleep, but not
being able to get the look on Ali’s face out of her head or ignore the way she left so abruptly just
now. She gets up and pulls on her own t-shirt and boxers on before going to find Ali in the kitchen.

“Hey, Alex. Look at me.” Ashlyn says quietly as she wraps her arms around Ali from behind and turns the brunette around in her arms. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

Ali takes a second to pull herself together before answering. “I’m sorry, I know I said I would be understanding about the dangers of your job and that I didn’t want you to change things or let any of it come between us. And I stand by that…it’s just hard sometimes. I really hate you being hurt, Ashlyn. It’s not funny and certainly not something I take lightly.” She blurts out truthfully.

Ashlyn nods guiltily, realizing that she was a bit too nonchalant about the whole thing in trying to assure Ali that she was okay. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart. I didn’t mean to minimize it and make light of it. You’re right and I would be upset too if you were hurt. I guess I didn’t realize how casual I was being about it in an effort to not worry you.” She puts her fingers under Ali’s chin and lifts it so that Ali is looking into her eyes. “I promise you, Alex…I’m really okay. I’m sore, but I’ve had way worse and this seems trivial to me compared to that. I was never in any real danger, so it’s easy for me to joke about it. But I completely understand what you’re saying and I’m sorry I wasn’t more sensitive to how you’d feel.”

“It’s ok, Ash. I get it and I’m sorry that I over-reacted. I honestly feel so safe knowing that you’re out there protecting me and everyone else in this community. I believe in you and I’m so proud of you, but I worry about you too. Those lips belong to me, you know.” She smiles and runs a finger over Ashlyn’s lips. “And this jaw, and this face, and this completely beautiful and perfect body…” She traces her hands over Ashlyn’s face, jaw, neck, shoulders, and finally down her torso as she leans in close, “So, you’ll have to excuse me if I don’t want to see even a single hair out of place. You’re my world.”

“Well, I promise you that I’ll always do everything I can to bring it all home to you in perfect condition, every single hair.” Ashlyn smiles and ghosts Ali’s lips with her own, breathing the same air as the brunette. “I love you so damn much, Alex. I love being yours.”

“Thank you. I love you too, Hero. So much that I can’t breathe sometimes, and it’s the best feeling in the world.” Ali puts her hands on Ashlyn’s cheeks and pulls her into a romantic kiss, the resulting electric jolt running all the way down to her toes and leaving her breathless in no time. “Breakfast?” She asks a bit winded when they finally break the contact.

“Mmmhmm, yes please.” Ashlyn hums, ignoring the throbbing ache from her split lip and leaving one more soft lingering kiss on Ali’s lips. “What are we having?”

“I’ll make some omelets and bacon. And for you, frozen peas. Now sit!” Ali commands and pulls two bags of peas out of the freezer, pressing one to Ashlyn’s jaw and the other to her ribcage.

“You’re sweet.” Ashlyn smiles at the treatment and pulls Ali into her lap. “But, I don’t think ice is going to do much at this point, I already iced it a lot earlier.”

“Yeah well, you better do something, Harris. You’ll be on national TV in just over a week and there isn’t enough cover-up in the world to hide that bruising.” Ali smirks.

“Ugh, fuck. The Ellen Show, I didn’t think of that.” Ashlyn shakes her head imagining what the media would come up with this time; probably something about Ali hitting her.

“Uh huh, so keep icing and hope it works.” Ali says playfully and gets up off of Ashlyn’s lap. “Now let me make breakfast so we can eat. And then you’re going to go get some sleep while you cuddle my insecure ass and make me feel all better before you have to go off to work again and deal with
assholes who kick you in the face.”

“Sounds perfect to me. But I dunno, Krieger… that ass looks pretty damn secure from where I’m sitting.” Ashlyn pulls the bag of peas away from her face and waggles her eyebrows.

“Peas. Face. Now, Harris!” Ali demands and points her finger in warning.

“Yes, Ma’am.” Ashlyn teasingly salutes and presses the bag of peas back to her jaw. “So feisty, baby. Keep that up and we won’t be doing much sleeping.” She adds with a smirk.

“Right. Talk to me when you can kiss me without wincing, sweetheart.” Ali says with a raised eyebrow and goes back to making breakfast while Ashlyn briefly groans before reminding Ali that her hands are in perfect condition.

“Wow, you look positively stunning.” Ashlyn’s mouth hangs open a bit in awe of her girlfriend. Ali is dressed in a mostly gray and white floral pattern sun dress that hugs her just perfectly. Her make-up is flawless with a bright red lip that makes Ashlyn want to kiss her all day. “So gorgeous.”

Despite getting ready in the same dressing room, they had put on robes and each been whisked off into a different corner of the room to be attended to by a make-up artist. This was the first good look they’d gotten of each other fully ready.

“Looking damn good yourself, Hero.” Ali smiles as she looks Ashlyn over, the officer’s fitted gray pants and simple black button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up stirring things inside her. Ashlyn’s make-up is light except for a similar bright red lip like her own that brings out just enough of her softer feminine features. “You’re beautiful and handsome at the same time, so perfect.” Ali leans in and leaves a very light peck on Ashlyn’s lips, being careful not to smudge their make-up. “I can’t even see the red mark from the busted lip last week.”

“Thanks, baby. Thank god for Kyle and his coconut oil suggestion. That did wonders to heal this thing up fast. Well that and the red lipstick helps too.” Ashlyn says as she hears a throat clear from behind her. “Yes, Timbo, you get major credit too for that weird cayenne pepper and Vaseline remedy that made the bruises go away faster.” She turns around and rolls her eyes at him as he smiles and pretends to be engrossed in a magazine.

Due to Ashlyn not being able to take a lot of time off from work for this trip, the three of them had flown in on an overnight red-eye and spent the morning getting some much needed sleep at their hotel before having to be the Warner Bros. studio lot for the show taping at 1pm. Despite the crazy travel, the Ellen Show had spared no expense with first-class seats on the flight, a large suite in a fancy hotel for the two of them with Tim getting his own large room a few doors down, and a limo to transport them all to the studio. It had taken Ashlyn almost 15 minutes to drag Ali away from the expansive craft food service table just outside their dressing room so they could get ready, and she had only managed to do it once Ali had already indulged in a donut and a cupcake.

“Ready for this?” Ashlyn asks, squeezing Ali’s hand just offstage as they wait to make their entrance.

“Absolutely! We’re just going to have fun and be ourselves, no other agenda.” Ali replies to remind them both to just relax and go with the flow. She playfully sways her hips, bumping against Ashlyn as they watch Ellen dance through the audience to ‘24Karat Magic’.

“If you wanted to dance, all you had to do was ask.” Ashlyn teases as Ali gets closer and moves her
hips against hers. “Oh hey now, Krieger has moves!”

“Damn right, Harris! You haven’t even seen me come out to play on the dancefloor yet.” Ali raises her eyebrows with a smirk as she continues to dance against Ashlyn. “Also, I usually don’t ask anyone to dance…I make them want to ask me.” She adds with a wink.

“Ha! Well I’ll give you that, gorgeous. I definitely want to ask you right now.” Ashlyn plays back, more than a bit turned on by the way Ali is moving against her hips even though it’s still well within the realm of being outwardly appropriate.

“Oh yeah?” Ali moves in a little closer. “I’m waiting, Harris.”

“See the thing is that I don’t ask anyone to dance either… I just reel them in with my hot dance moves.” Ashlyn says flirtatiously.

“Well in that case, I’m really waiting. Bring it, Harris.” Ali challenges.

“Brace yourself.” Ashlyn warns jokingly.

“Still waiting.” Ali pretends to yawn, but then immediately starts belly laughing uncontrollably when she sees Ashlyn break out into the robot before transitioning into the running man. “Oh my god, you’re killing me!” She laughs so hard she can’t breathe.

“I know, baby… I’m hot stuff!” Ashlyn jokes further as she does some bizarre disco move that makes Ali chortle even louder and pretend to fan herself. “Ready to be mine?” Ashlyn questions with a smile.

“Absolutely, Stud…you’ve definitely got me right where you want me.” Ali replies through giggles.

“Here we go!” Ashlyn backs up and pretends to cast a fishing rod towards Ali who plays along and acts like she’s been hooked while she flails like a fish as Ashlyn reels her in. The music has died down a bit and is now only playing on a very low volume offstage as Ellen begins an opening monologue, but they are both a bit oblivious to that.

Ali drapes her arms around Ashlyn’s shoulders once she gets close enough, the laughter finally dying down as she gets completely caught up in the officer’s dazzling hazel eyes with her hips continuing to sway a bit. She feels Ashlyn finally fall into rhythm with her and pulls the officer in even closer so that they’re moving as one. “You’re so damn perfect for me that it almost feels like a dream.” Ali whispers and leans in to very softly kiss Ashlyn, careful not to ruin their lipstick.

“It’s my dance moves, baby. Gets ‘em every time. So good that they can’t possibly be real.” Ashlyn teases and returns the gentle kiss. “Love you, Alex.” She says as she presses her forehead against Ali’s and watches the brunette’s nose crinkle as she smiles, a sight that always sends her heart into a flutter.

“Love you too.” Ali replies sweetly and then surprises Ashlyn by turning around and doing a very quick Macarena that leaves the officer chuckling as they hear Ellen start to introduce them.

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Ellen: I have two very special guests today that I’m really excited about. For those of you that follow podcasts, I’m sure you know who they are. For those that don’t, you probably know them as that ‘cop and lawyer’ couple as my Mama so eloquently put it the other day. And if you still have no idea who I’m talking about, you’re living under a rock. In which case, welcome to the land above ground and I’m so glad you could emerge to join us today! Yeah, I’m taking to you lady with the pale
complexion and confused look on her face. Hey, hi, welcome…we’ll get you some sunglasses, don’t worry!

(Ellen motions towards an older woman in the front row who starts laughing along with the audience)

Ok, ok, Portia is already giving me a look. I better get this show on the road. Did I mention she’s even more excited than I am? I mean look at her (motions to Portia in the front row)...she’s ready to jump out of the chair. The last time she looked at me like that…well…never mind. (Ellen raises an eyebrow as the audience laughs at the insinuation). Ok and now I’m getting a whole different look, so, let’s move along. She’s the creator of the podcast Veritas Aequitas and the two of them took us on one wild ride this year with their very intense legal battle. Please give a warm and loud welcome to Ali Krieger and police Captain Ashlyn Harris.

(‘Crazy in Love’ by Beyonce and Jay-Z begins to play as Ali and Ashlyn walk in to loud applause. They give a few waves and smiles to the audience before settling on the couch across from Ellen as the music fades away).

Ellen: Ladies, welcome, welcome, welcome! We’re really excited to have you here, but I have to ask….no dance moves for us with that entry? You must know that we like to dance on this show!

Ashlyn: Nah, we figured we’d leave that to you. I mean, we have nothing on you.

Ellen: Oh well that’s not true at all! In fact, my stage director tells me otherwise. Do we have a clip? Yep, looks like we have a clip of a little dance-off from backstage.

(A video clip of Ashlyn and Ali dancing backstage plays. Ali buries her face in her hands and Ashlyn shakes her head with a smile as she watches herself break out into the robot. The audience laughs loudly and claps along.)

Ashlyn tenses a bit and feels Ali squeeze her hand slightly when the part where Ashlyn reels Ali in airs on the screen, both of them knowing what’s coming next. But their intimate moment is cut out of the clip, skipping instead to Ali doing the Macarena before ending. Both of them relax at the small courtesy that the show just afforded them by keeping their privacy. It reminds them exactly why they felt so comfortable coming here to begin with and why they trusted enough to tell Ellen that no question was off the table in their initial phone conference.

Ellen: That is definitely one of the best running man moves I’ve seen to date. And Ali, well, I haven’t seen the Macarena since I practically had a mullet! And you two said you didn’t have moves!

Ali: Okay, okay, guilty. (Ali puts her hands up as the audience laughs lightly).

Ellen: So, I know most of the audience is probably familiar with who you are, but just in case, let me give everyone a quick rundown. I’m still looking at you… (Ellen points to the same woman as before and the audience laughs. She then gives a quick one minute summary of Ashlyn and Ali’s story as told on the podcast).

And now that we’re all caught up, let’s grill you two! (Ellen rubs her hands together with a devilish smile that makes the audience laugh again as Ashlyn makes a teasing frown face). I’m kidding, but I definitely have a lot of questions! One of the biggest mysteries to me is how Ali got into this case to begin with. There was some mention at the beginning of the podcast about how your lives were connected in some way, and Ashlyn you said in a later interview with her brother that you and he were friends long before you met Ali. So, give us the rundown of how this came to be. Ali, what
Ali: Well, my brother and I are very close, but many years ago we had a bit of a rift. He was deeply involved in drugs and alcohol and we lost touch with each other in the midst of all of it. And then, after years of worrying about him and not knowing if he was even alive sometimes... he just showed up at my door. He was clean and sober, a completely transformed person. He always referred to someone named “Harris” who he said saved him and helped him get back on track, but he was pretty vague about it other than that. So, fast forward, we were having a conversation after my second season of the podcast wrapped up about what I was going to do next, and he told me I should look into the Liam Gorham case. We went back and forth about it a bit before he finally open up and told me why he was so adamant about it. And I think you can all guess who “Harris” was. (Ali smiles at Ashlyn). I didn’t give it a second thought. I went to visit her that very week and the rest is history. I owed her everything before I even really knew who she was. So, once I found out about her, there was no stopping me.

Ellen: Wow, that’s quite a connection. I always say that it’s a small world. So, was it love at first sight then? I mean, anyone with ears could hear there was something between you two on that podcast. I can’t imagine that was easy, a relationship in the middle of everything.

Ashlyn: Oh god, no. As beautiful as I thought she was, it was far from love at first sight. (Ashlyn laughs and gets a playful elbow from Ali).

Ali: Yeah she was pretty much the opposite of charming that first visit. I kind of wanted to smack her. (Ali makes a cringing face).

Ellen: Well gee, don’t hold back ladies. (The audience laughs). So what on earth happened to change that?

Ashlyn: She stayed. (Ashlyn pauses thoughtfully and Ali grabs her hand with a smile). Ellen, I’ll be very honest. I’ve been through so much in life, and I thought that nothing could ever break me after all of it. I was very very wrong. The whole situation and prison... it broke me. It’s like nothing you can possibly imagine until you’re there. And all I could do was push people away, build walls around myself, and live in my own head. I never allowed a single person to visit me, not even family... and then I got a visit request from Ali Krieger. And I sort of knew who she was, I’d listened to her podcasts in jail. I didn’t know she was Kyle’s sister though. He went by a different last name and never mentioned her. Anyway, I was so intrigued by why she requested to visit me that I allowed the visit. I didn’t have any intention of being the next star of her podcast though, so I did pretty much everything to drive her away. I insulted her outfit, her intelligence, her career. I was a real gem! (Ashlyn says sarcastically and the audience laughs).

Ellen: Yeah, sounds like it! I mean, anyone would want a date with you after that. This sounds like a bad Tinder setup!

Ashlyn: Oh yeah, I did everything I could to push her away and make her walk out. She took it all in stride though and she battled me back on all of it, never faltering. She stayed the whole visiting time that first day, and then only at the end did she tell me who she was and that she wanted to help me. I was so taken aback by it all that I told her to visit again. I knew I just needed to collect myself and be more adamant about denying her. But... she never let me get to that point. She stayed no matter how hard I pushed her to leave and she tussled every step of the way. It only took me to the end of second visit to realize that she wasn’t fighting me...she was fighting for me. I’d never really had that in my life. It felt like she was sent just to save me and once I let myself trust in it and be open to her, she owned my heart and everything else. (Ashlyn smiles at Ali and the audience let’s out a collective ‘awwww’).
Ellen: Ok, that was adorable, am I right? *(Ellen asks the audience and gets a loud applause)*. I’d ask how Ali managed to get you to agree to let her help, but I think we all know she can be pretty persuasive!

Ashlyn: You have no idea!

Ali: Hey now, I didn’t spend all those years getting through law school and working crazy hours at a firm for nothing!

Ellen: Alright, so Ali, we got Ashlyn’s side of it. But what was it that made you fight so hard through all of it? I mean, this was incredibly intense to the point that it almost cost you your life. You essentially put yourself in between Ashlyn and a mad organized crime boss who also happened to be a police chief.

Ali: Well, it started as a favor for my brother, but then I met Ashlyn and just knew. I knew she was innocent. And I just knew I was the one to help her. After learning more about her and getting to know her, she was truly the most amazing person I’d ever met. It sounds almost crazy to say, but it’s like I just felt that I was the one who was supposed to do this with her and that she would change my life more than she already had with my brother. I was definitely right about that. *(Ali smiles at Ashlyn who returns it with a dimpled grin of her own)*. Putting everything on the line for her was easy, I would’ve done anything for her…and I always will.

Ellen: Gee, well… thanks for making my 8 year marriage look completely inadequate. *(Ellen has her elbows on her knees and her hands on her cheeks as she looks between Ashlyn and Ali, getting a laugh from the audience before she turns to look at Portia)*. Sorry honey, I just can’t compete with this. *(She shrugs as she points at the two women on the couch across for her)*.

Portia: No one can! You better still try though! *(Portia points at Ellen in playful warning and gets a round of applause)*.

Ellen: Yep, thanks ladies…a lot. Really. *(Ellen teases and gets another loud laugh)*.

Ashlyn: Awww, sorry not sorry…you’re Ellen, you win at life, soooo… *(the audience claps loudly)*.

Ellen: Alright, alright. So, what was it like to finally be free after like three years and with everything that happened? I can’t even imagine. Like, what’s the first thing you did? And it must have been incredible to finally be able to really be with each other as a couple.

Ashlyn: Honest answer? *(Ashlyn looks at Ellen and then at Ali, who nods encouragingly)*. It was kind of a disaster.

Ellen: Wasn’t expecting that answer.

Ashlyn: Well, that’s the truth. Don’t get me wrong, I was really happy to be out of there. But, everything I went through, it really messed me up. I didn’t know what to do with myself and even who I was anymore. It was really difficult to transition back into my normal life. I tried to just go back to how everything was before… I went back to my condo, my old job, all of it. None of it felt right and I was completely lost. Eventually it hit me that I just needed to start over with everything, get some help, and figure myself out. And that’s what I did.

Ali: Yep. Right after she took me on the best first date of my life, barely even kissed me at the end of
it, and then disappeared. (Ali lightly elbows Ashlyn with a smile). She’s smooth like that.

**Ashlyn:** So smooth. (*Ashlyn runs her hand through her hair for effect*).

**Ellen:** I’m lost. Are you all lost? (*Ellen looks at the audience*). So, were you two together already? Or was this just an after-the-fact symbolic first date?

**Ali:** It was an actual first date. As much as people have drawn their own conclusions from the podcast, we were just friends that whole time. Friends who definitely knew and talked about there being more between us that we’d maybe explore someday, but still, just friends. We both knew that it had to be that way to get through the case and we were committed to seeing it through.

**Ellen:** Ok, that makes more sense. So then you go on that great first date and she disappears?

**Ashlyn:** I’m definitely not proud of it, and it’s going to sound cliché, but that date made me realize that I needed to understand myself and love myself before I could give my heart. So, I just went off on my own and spent six months rebuilding myself and finding peace… admittedly so that I could find my way back to her. (*Ashlyn entwines her hand with Ali’s*). And when I did, I was lucky enough that she was right there waiting with open arms.

**Ali:** Damn right I was. (*Ali jokes and gets some laughs from the audience*). It was the longest six months of my life, but I knew it was all worth it and had faith that we’d get here eventually. And here we are and I’ve never been happier. (*The audience applauds*).

**Ellen:** So, then the tabloids were all wrong… there’s a shock! Alright, if I did my math right…you two have been together for just about two months? Is that right?

**Ashlyn:** Yep, it’s been just over two months.

**Ellen:** Interesting. I would never guess that. You two are so in sync with each other and the love between you is obvious.

**Ali:** Well, you know…the second date was pretty incredible. She had a lot to make up for, but she nailed it. Definitely worth the wait! (*Ali says spiritedly and the audience laughs*).

**Ashlyn:** That’s because the second date was pretty much controlled by you, sweetheart. I just showed up. (*Ashlyn jokes and gets more laughs*).

**Ali:** True, but it was quite an entrance. (*Ali winks*).

**Ellen:** You two have a pretty amazing story and we’re so glad you’re here sharing it with us, so thank you for that. (*The audience claps in agreement*). And speaking of sharing, the two of you have a common passion for helping people who struggle with substance abuse, right?

**Ashlyn:** Yes, it’s something that we’ve both dealt with in our families and people close to us. When something touches your life like that, it’s something you really take to heart and want to do all you can to help. So, that’s what we’re trying to do. Having had his own substance abuse history, my brother now owns and runs a few rehabilitation clinics aimed at using holistic methods that once helped him during recovery. He really focuses on community outreach and helping those that often don’t seek help because they feel they can’t afford to or that it isn’t within their reach.

**Ali:** And my brother and I started a non-profit called Matty’s House together a couple years back in honor of a friend who died because of a drunk driver. We’ve been putting funds into it and investing
in programs to help substance abusers. More recently, we’ve invested in Ashlyn’s brother’s clinics to help build programs that reach those most in need using creative approaches.

Ellen: You ladies are absolutely wonderful. (Ellen gets up and applauds them and the audience joins in). It’s really remarkable when people turn negative life experiences into positive ways forward, so major kudos to both of you and your families for that. Soooo… want to tell them what else you’ve been up to?

Ashlyn: Hell yeah we do! One thing that we’ve learned from our experiences is that it can be really difficult for someone to make connections when they need help. It’s particularly hard for people who struggle with substance abuse to find someone that is outside of a potentially toxic social network and that isn’t too blindly invested in the situation like family and friends can be a lot of time. So, it can be really challenging to get help even when you are looking for it. People need people. And sometimes when you’re at rock bottom, you need someone to rely on. So, we’ve been building a website program that helps match voluntary mentors with people who need help.

Ellen: Right… like Tinder, but not for dating and actually for a good cause.

Ali: And that’s twice now with Tinder…something you want to tell us, Ellen? (The audience laughs loudly).

Ellen: That’s how Portia and I met. (Ellen deadpans and gets a roar of laughter when Portia gives her a joking glare). I’m kidding! We met on MySpace. (More laughter). What? It’s true, I fell in love with her profile song.

Portia: Remind me what it was again? (Portia yells from the audience and raises her eyebrows).

Ellen: And I’m going to get myself in trouble. Really we met backstage at an awards show, how boring! (Ellen pretend yawns and draws more laughs). Just thought I’d jazz it up a bit, geez. Annnnyway, back to the topic at hand. The new website, what else can you tell us?

Ali: Well, it’s set to launch next month and we’ve been lucky enough to have some great partners in making it all happen. Care to jump in yet, Ellen?

Ellen: I would LOVE to! I’m proud to announce that the Ellen Show has partnered with Ashlyn and Ali, along with Boston Medical Center and Massachusetts ASAP, to help this program launch. It’ll start with a New England based service area this fall and the goal is to extend it nationwide with greater sponsorship by the middle of next year. (Standing ovation from the audience as Ellen applauds Ashlyn and Ali).

Ashlyn: We really couldn’t be more thankful for the support and are excited to see it launch.

Ellen: I’m very excited, it's going to be great! And, if you’d like more information, there will be a link on the show’s website that people can use to learn more. Alright, the two of you have said that this will be the last personal interview that you grant…which let me tell you, I feel special! So, I was thinking maybe we could let the studio audience in on the action and field a few questions from them if you’re up for it.

Ali: Sure, why not!

Ellen: Well, probably many reasons why not…but, let’s do it anyway!

Ashlyn: I’m game.
Ellen: Ok, let’s get some mics out here and we’ll let a couple people have at it. Anyone have a question? *(Ellen scans the audience as several hands go up).* Oh good! Would’ve been embarrassing if no one had questions for you…can you say awkward?!(The audience laughs). Ok, how about the gentleman in the blue shirt up there. Tell us your name.

Audience Member: Hi, I’m Kenny. This is a question for Captain Harris. I’m a police officer here in Los Angeles and I was wondering if your experience has changed your view of criminals and the people you deal with on the job and how so? I find that as much as we’re the sort of front line of justice, so to speak, we don’t get too involved with what happens afterwards to the people we apprehend. So, I was curious about your take on it.

Ashlyn: Wow, great question that no one has actually asked me yet. The simple answer is yes, it has definitely changed my understanding of the process and how I go about my job. Having been in prison, I now personally understand how awful it is. It’s hard to know that there are probably other people out there like me that don’t belong there and are suffering their own personal hell. But…and I want to make this really clear… I still believe strongly in our justice system and that people who commit crimes should be held accountable for them with the proper punishment. I’ve always believed that and it’s at the core of what I do. That will never change. However, the most important thing I’ve learned is that it’s far too easy for someone to be charged and jailed without the proper questions being asked and the proper procedures being followed. Unfortunately, police officers are some of the worst offenders when it comes to that because our focus is to get criminals ‘off the street’ as quickly as possible. Everyone deserves the chance to prove their innocence and for the proper justice to be served, but we sadly live in a world where not everyone has the means or capability to fight for their rights or their voice. So, that’s one thing that I’m very committed to in my daily job. To make sure that the people I deal with are given a fair chance under the law. I can’t single handedly change everything, but I can make damn sure that I don’t play a role in imprisoning someone who doesn’t belong there.

(A loud round of applause comes from the audience. Ali is so captivated by Ashlyn that she could care less where she is and leans in to give her a quick soft kiss, earning a few whistles from the audience amidst the clapping).

Ellen: Yeah, give her one for me too! *(Ali complies, going in for one more peck and more claps and whistles come from the audience before it dies down).* That was quite an answer, really powerful. Whoever thought of this audience question thing is a genius! *(Ellen uses her thumb to point to herself and gets some laughs).* Ok, next question! How about the woman with the glasses there in the second row.

Audience Member: Hello, I’m Felicia. I wanted to ask Ali what’s next for the podcast. Do you have a new case or know what you plan to do next?

Ali: Oh boy, I wish I had a better answer for this. I honestly don’t know what’s next. I can tell that I definitely won’t be forcing anything and that I don’t feel pressured right now to hop on anything else until I’m ready. As you all know, this last one was pretty intense and I’m enjoying a lot of new aspects of my life right now and seeing where it all takes me. *(Ali smiles at Ashlyn).* The only time I ever sought out a case was for the first season of the podcast. After that, the next two just fell into my lap and I have to say that I like it that way. When the right thing comes along, I’ll know it. And, if it works out to be something that fits into the podcast, then sure…I’ll put another one out there. Until then, I’m committed to doing all that I can to help people that need it first and foremost.

Ellen: Fair enough! We’ll all be ready and waiting if a new podcast season is in the cards. Bye Felicia! *(Ellen waves at the woman who asked the question and gets loud laugh from the audience and a chuckle from the woman herself who waves back).* Sorry, sorry, I HAD to! Couldn’t help
myself. Ok, moving on…one more question. Lady in the back who’s waving her arm frantically…
you’re up!

**Audience Member:** Hi Ali and Ashlyn, my name is Sara. I have to admit that I don’t actually have a
question. I just want to thank both of you so much for sharing your story and your struggles. I
couldn’t tell you how much it means to me and how much hope I now have because of it. My
partner is serving time in prison for a situation that in some ways isn’t all that far off from Ashlyn’s.
We’ve managed to stay together and find ways to connect through visits and letters, holding on to the
promise of the day that we can be together again. What I worry about most is that when that day
finally comes, that there will be so much I can’t understand and that it will come between us. Hearing
your story and seeing your relationship, it shows me that the reality is that it will be hard, but that it
won’t be insurmountable. That with some help, patience, and time, things will be ok. I can’t thank
you enough for that and I’m truly grateful.

(Ashlyn looks at Ali, who seems lost in thought, before going ahead and speaking for them).

**Ashlyn:** Well, Sara…you are the very reason we’ve shared our story. We can only wish that no one
ever has to go through what we have, but knowing that wish isn’t realistic…we hope that our
experience can speak to and help others. I’m so very sorry that you are going through this. Thank
you so much for standing up here and talking to us today and please let us know if we can do
anything to help you. (Sara gives a small appreciative wave and smile before sitting back down).

**Ellen:** Well, aren’t they just wonderful? Yeah, they are. (Ellen gestures to Ali and Ashlyn, triggering
another round of applause).

**Ashlyn:** Oh, that does sound fun! (Ashlyn rubs her hands together and scans the audience jokingly).

**Ellen:** Oh, I know! You said ‘up to’…is there a catch? (Ellen narrows her eyes playfully at Ellen who is
smiling deviously).

**Ellen:** You know me too well, there’s always a catch! It’s fun though, I swear! P&G is giving two of
our lovely audience members each a chance to earn $50,000 for the charity in a friendly little
competition.

**Ashlyn:** Right! Of course! Traitor! (Ashlyn shakes her head at Ellen with a smile).

**Ali:** You are soooo lucky I’m wearing my waterproof mascara! (Ali playfully glares at Ellen).

**Ashlyn:** Don’t let her fool you, she always wears waterproof mascara. Like even to bed, seriously.
(Ali playfully elbows Ashlyn).
Ellen: It’ll be so much fun, ladies! You’ll earn some money for the new website. You’ll boost my ratings when I get you out here in my Ellen boxers and sports bras. *(Ellen mumbles and gets a loud laugh from the audience)*. It’s a win-win! And we’ll even get our stylists to get you all dolled up again before you go home so I don’t send you back out into LA looking like wet rats!

Ashlyn: Alright, let’s do it!

Ali: I’m in!

Ellen: You two go get changed backstage while we let our musical guest entertain us out here. In fact, we have the excellent and very talented Lukas Graham here with us today! *(Audience applause)*.

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Ashlyn and Ali head backstage and are each handed a matching set of black Ellen boxers and sports bras to change into. They get to watch the musical performance on the TV in the dressing room while they get ready.

“You’re going down, Krieger!” Ashlyn challenges once she’s ready.

“Really? We’re going to compete over which one of us gets dunked more…by audience members we have no control over?” Ali smiles and raises an eyebrow.

“Duh.” Ashlyn replies.

“Bring it, Harris!” Ali counters. “I’m going to cheer on my person so hard that they won’t have any choice but to bring in that $50,000.”

“Ha! I’m going to taunt mine so hard they just want my ass in the water!” Ashlyn laughs.

“Not a bad idea.” Ali considers it and gets close to Ashlyn. “Do you know how sexy you look right now?”

“No, but I know how sexy you look. Given that we’re in the same clothes…I figure I can’t look too shabby next to you, my queen.” Ashlyn smiles and closes the distance between them to capture Ali’s lips in a deep kiss, not caring about the lipstick this time since it’s likely about to be a mess soon anyway.

Ali pulls back after a minute, smiling at Ashlyn’s still closed eyes. “So smooth, Hero.”

“So beautiful, baby.” Ashlyn replies and kisses Ali again, the two of them breaking apart when there’s a soft knock at the door and a voice that yells “Two minute warning!”

“That’s our cue!” Ali pecks Ashlyn one more time before taking the officer’s hand and leading her out the door.

They are met by Paul, the stage manager, who leads them to the side of stage as everything gets set up now that the musical performance is over. “Just a minute and she’ll announce you to go back out.” He tells them.

“Thanks.” Ashlyn replies with a nod.

“Hey, Paul… that woman in the audience earlier, Sara, she asked the last question. Is there any way you can get her backstage to talk to me when the show is over before she leaves?” Ali asks
Hopefully. She hasn’t been able to get what the woman said out of her mind and has decided to go with what feels right in her gut, it’s never steered her wrong before.

“Sure thing! If she’s up to it, I’ll definitely get her back here to meet with you.” Paul assures her.

“Perfect! Thank you so much.” Ali replies with a smile.

“You’re welcome.” Paul smiles back and then presses the button on his headset. “Ok, we’re ready here.” He says into the microphone part of the headset before turning back to Ali and Ashlyn. “She’s going to be bringing you back on now, good luck!”

Ashlyn first bumps him and then looks at Ali with a loving smile, squeezing the brunette’s hand that is still entwined with hers. She will always be in awe of Ali’s compassion and willingness to help other people, it’s one of the things she loves most about her girlfriend.

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Ellen: Now that we are all ready to go, let’s welcome back Ali and Ashlyn! (The audience applauds as the two women come back out onto the stage to the song ‘Splish Splash’. This time Ashlyn dances a bit before twirling Ali as they make their way over to the two dunk tanks). See, now that was a much better entrance! And look at all those tattoos…oh yeah, I can just see the rating meter shooting up! I’d show you mine, but my Mama doesn’t like that picture of herself…or that it’s on my butt. (Audience laughs). I’m kidding! Not really. Ok, really just joking. Or am I? (Ellen raises an eyebrow and gets more laughs). Seriously, down to business. You two ready?

Ashlyn: Definitely! Let’s do it!

Ali: My mascara is locked in!

Ellen: Alrighty then! Now we need two audience members to help us out… (Ellen scans the audience which is now cheering). You two gentlemen up there look like you’re up to the task. (She points to two guys sitting next to each other in the last row). Come on down here! What are your names?

Audience Member 1: David.

Audience Member 2: Clayton.

Ellen: Welcome! Are you two friends?

David: More like colleagues.

Ellen: Oh, ok. Cause it’s weird, you guys look kind of familiar. What do you guys do?

Clayton: We play baseball.

Ellen: Baseball, hmmm. Like professionally?

David: Yep.

Ellen: Well that must be it! Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome MLB pitchers David Price of the Red Sox and Clayton Kershaw of the Dodgers…who just so happen to completely coincidentally be in the audience today. (The audiences stands up and claps with loud cheers).
**Ashlyn:** So sneaky, I love it!

**Ellen:** Yeah well, no one said I couldn’t stack the deck! Alright, ladies, you get into those tanks and let’s get to it. David, you go over to that tank with Ashlyn. Clayton, you’ve got Ali. You each have five balls, let’s make em’ count! Are we ready? Set… go!!!!

(Ashlyn doesn’t even have time to taunt David before the first ball is thrown perfectly and she’s under water. Ali barely gets in a ‘Come on, Clayton!’ before she’s dunked too. They get back up on the dunk tanks only to be back in the water again in no time. The $100,000 is easily earned with ten perfect throws between the two pitchers, leaving Ali and Ashlyn soaked but smiling).

**Ellen:** That was amazing! Thank you to David Price and Clayton Kershaw for that brilliant performance and to P&G for their generous donation! And let’s have a huge and very loud round of applause for Ashlyn and Ali! We’ve loved having you today and hope it won’t be the last time we see you. Keep doing what you do, ladies! (The audiences roars the loudest it has so far as the two women wave and make their way offstage while Ellen closes the show).

Thirty minutes later, Ashlyn and Ali are dry, back in normal clothes and looking great after the Ellen Show stylists have done their job. The two of them and Tim are soon sitting in the studio lounge having coffee with Ellen and Portia when Paul comes to find them.

“Hi, Ali. I have Sara set up in one of the small private lounges if you’d like to come meet her.” Paul tells her.

“Excellent!” Ali replies happily and then looks at Ashlyn, a bit unsure about how she should excuse herself from this coffee gathering.

“Go ahead, I’ll explain.” Ashlyn assures her with a smile, knowing from just one look how important this is to Ali even though they haven’t talked about it.

“Well, I’m not sure if this will take long or not. So, just in case… Ellen, Portia, it was so incredible to meet you and get to work with you on this new project. Today was wonderful, thank you so much for having us.” Ali hugs the two of them and exchanges a few more pleasantries before following Paul, leaving Ashlyn to explain her exit.

An hour later, Ali emerges from the lounge to find Ashlyn and Tim waiting for her by the exit. She expects the two of them to start asking questions, but, much to her surprise, neither of them does. Instead she gets a smile from Tim and sweet kiss from Ashlyn before they walk out.

“Come on my queen, the limo awaits!” Ashlyn puts her hand on the small of Ali’s back as they walk outside, Tim just ahead of them. The ride back to the hotel is pretty short and the three of them fill the time talking about what happened on the show. Still, Ali doesn’t miss the way Ashlyn is looking at her. The hazel eyes she adores are filled with an intense loving gaze and an almost lustful look along with it that makes Ali’s heart pound in her chest, her skin tingling at the officer’s hand resting on her thigh.

“We should’ve known she’d have something up her sleeve like those dunk tanks! She loves putting people in those things. Plus the baseball pitchers being there was hilarious!” Ashlyn keeps the conversation going with Tim as the limo starts to approach their hotel. She smiles to herself at the somewhat bewildered look on Ali’s face, knowing it’s because brunette can’t figure out why she hasn’t asked about her meeting with the woman from the audience.
Ashlyn may not know exactly what happened, but she knew everything she needed to know for the time being from the moment Ali walked out of that lounge. There is a spring in her step, a gleaming spark in her whiskey colored eyes, her body language exuding an unmistakable excitement that Ashlyn knows can only mean one thing…Ali Krieger has found her next case. The details don’t matter right now though. All that matters is the raw passion emanating from Ali and the beautiful heart at the center of it. The way she’s so dedicated to what she does, an unstoppable force of good driven by the belief that everyone deserves true justice. All Ashlyn can think about it is how much she admires it and how deeply she loves this woman, more than eager to feel it all course through her own body in the purest form.

“So, do you guys need me around to go out this evening? If not, I have a friend who lives out here that I might try to catch up with. I’m good either way.” Tim asks, breaking the gaze between Ashlyn and Ali as the limo stops in front of the hotel.

“Nah, I think we’re too tired to do anything too crazy. So, we’ll stick to discrete places and be fine on our own. Go meet up with your friend.” Ali replies for them and Ashlyn nods in agreement.

“Ok, I guess I’ll see you in the morning then. Call any time if you need anything, seriously.” Tim holds up his phone to get his message across as he exits the limo.

“Thanks, Timbo! Just go have fun.” Ashlyn slaps him lightly on the shoulder as she gets out behind him and then turns to help Ali out. “My Queen.” She smiles as she takes Ali’s hand and leads them towards the hotel entrance.

“You’re always so sweet.” Ali compliments her and puts her free hand behind Ashlyn’s neck, halting their progress and pulling the officer in for a quick kiss. And that’s when she really feels the energy behind Ashlyn’s loving stare as the officer’s breath hitches at her touch. She can almost sense her girlfriend’s body buzzing and, if she’s being honest, her own is buzzing too. With no other words said aloud, their pace becomes a bit more hurried until they are finally back in the privacy of their suite.

Ashlyn closes the door and turns around slowly to look at Ali, the desire in her stare unmistakable as she locks eyes with the brunette standing in the middle of the living room area.

“So, what do you want to see in LA tonight?” Ali asks innocently, knowing damn well they aren’t going anywhere for a while, but deciding to play coy.

“You.” Ashlyn answers simply with a smirk as she walks a couple steps closer.

“Cute, Harris.” Ali smiles sweetly and pushes on. “The LA Zoo is nearby and Clayton Kershaw said he had a game tonight at Dodger Stadium. We could check out one of those or maybe just walk around and see where we land. Any of that sound appealing?”

“Just you.” Ashlyn gets even closer.

“Pretty sure you already said that.” Ali sasses a bit.

“Meant it.” Ashlyn replies, her smirk now long gone and replaced with a positively smoldering look as she puts her hands on Ali’s hips, thumbs rubbing light circles on the brunette’s lower stomach. 

“Good. Just checking.” Ali reveals her own playful smirk before letting the buzzing energy between them take over, putting her hands on Ashlyn’s cheeks and pulling her in for a heated kiss. They each fight for dominance, but both lose control quickly as hands start to roam over bunching clothing and it soon becomes a mess of lips, tongues, and the occasional gasping breath when they need air.
Despite her already shaking legs and heaving chest, it’s Ali who finds the strength to pull away first as she feels the heat radiating from Ashlyn’s skin even through their clothes, her fingers fumbling to unbutton the officer’s shirt. Her hands slip inside the shirt the second she frees the last button, running up Ashlyn’s sides, around her back and finally up over her shoulders as she eases the shirt off with a soft moan escaping Ashlyn’s lips. Desperate to reveal more skin, she immediately goes back for the sports bra just as she feels Ashlyn’s hands tugging upward on the bottom hem of her dress. She quickly pulls her hair out of its bun, letting it flow over her shoulders before holding her arms up and letting Ashlyn slip the dress over her head. Before the officer can put her arms down, Ali’s hands instantly go to her sports bra and work it off easily.

While Ali is busy raking her eyes over her chest, Ashlyn takes the opportunity to move in and suck the soft skin of the brunette’s neck into her mouth. She feels Ali’s hands move to the back of her head, the brunette tilting to give her more access. She nips and licks all along Ali’s pulse point and collarbones, her thumbs lightly rubbing Ali’s nipples through the thin white lace bra still covering them.

“God, baby. My legs are going to give out.” Ali breathes out raggedly, Ashlyn’s touch making her tremble with need. She immediately feels Ashlyn’s hands drop down to her ass and pull her up into her strong arms, walking them the short distance to the large couch in the room. She feels the clasp on her bra unsnap, the article discarded before Ashlyn gently lays her down and hovers over her, one large hand raking now up and down her side tattoo.

“You are the most beautiful person I have ever laid my eyes on, Alex. Look at you…beautiful.” Ashlyn whispers sincerely and captures Ali’s lips with her own before the brunette can even think to respond. She pulls away while tugging Ali’s bottom lip with her teeth before moving to take a nipple into her mouth, sucking it just the way Ali likes it before pulling back to run her tongue over the stiff peak and stopping to blow on it.

“Oh yes, Ash. You feel so good, baby. That feels so so good.” Ali moans loudly, mind already in a fog as her fingers dig into the back of Ashlyn’s shoulders.

Ashlyn works Ali up quickly with lips, teeth and tongue… sucking, licking, and grazing every inch of skin she can reach on the brunette’s writhing torso. Ali’s fingertips feel like they are leaving little hot bruises as they desperately press into her skin.

Ali feels the flood of wetness between her legs, sure she must have orgasmed already without realizing. Not able to form words, she pleads through whimpers and moans for Ashlyn to move to where she needs her most. Her head is spinning, every touch feeling like too much and not nearly enough at the same time. She feels Ashlyn running her tongue over Nittany before it all suddenly stops, the speeding freight train coming to a screeching halt. “Ash…” she manages to get out as she watches her climb back up her body, slowing it all back down as the officer lays her head on her chest and just breathes softly.

Ashlyn won’t make Ali wait much longer, but she needs to hear the beating heart that’s connected to her own like a lifeline. She focuses on the feel of it drumming against her ear and reaches to trace the skin around the dog tags laying against Ali’s chest. It’s just worthless etched metal, but the physical reminder it serves that the heart beating underneath those tags is hers to love is beyond measurable value. Sometimes it’s the only thing that can get through enough to let her believe that this amazing woman loves her.

“Believe it. I’m yours, Ashlyn Harris. I’ll always be yours, even if you don’t want me.” Ali says softly, easily reading the look on Ashlyn’s face as she watches the officer trace her skin.

Ashlyn smiles at the statement, ever amazed by Ali’s ability read her thoughts so effortlessly, as if
she’s the only one that holds the key to decipher the code. She presses a few kisses to the skin she was just tracing with her fingers before scooting up to meet darkened whiskey eyes. “That day will never come, Alex Krieger. I will want you forever.” Ashlyn replies, her voice low and deep.

“Ashlyn… show me. I can’t wait anymore. Please, I need you.” Ali demands gently.

“You’ve got me.” Ashlyn kisses Ali hard, bringing the brunette almost right back to the brink again as she works Ali’s white lace underwear down to her knees where Ali takes over and uses her legs to shimmy it down the rest of the way. She then works her own pants and boxers off, wanting to feel every inch of Ali’s skin against her own. The brunet’s hips cant up as Ashlyn runs her fingers through the copious wetness collected in the soft folds, spreading it around her core.

“Look what you do to me, baby.” Ali husks as she breaks the kiss to watch Ashlyn’s fingers become coated in the glistening juices she’s already spilled for her. “Fuck… so good. Ash… baby!” Her voice jumps up several octaves when Ashlyn’s finger starts rubbing tight circles on her clit. The sensation makes her lose her mind, her hips lifting to get more friction. “Ash… yeess, ahh, oh fuck… Ashlyn….” She pants out breathlessly with her head thrown back into the couch before it all stops again. She lifts her head to see Ashlyn looking at her with the same loving and lustful stare as earlier, her heart drumming even harder now at the sight.

“I love you, Alex. I love you.’ Ashlyn says tenderly as she presses two fingers into Ali as slowly as she possibly can, both of their eyes dropping to watch the long fingers slip inside inch by inch until they’re knuckle deep. She looks back up to see Ali’s mouth hung open, soft breaths rapidly passing through her parted lips. She leans down with her mouth close to Ali’s ear as she begins to pump into her rhythmically. “Tell me what you want, Alex.”

“Oh god, Ash… please, don’t stop.” Ali feels like she’s going to explode at the feeling of long deft fingers filling her and hitting just the right spot at the perfect pace.

“Tell me.” Ashlyn insists.

“Fuck me, Ash. Oh, like that… ahhh, yes, baby. Fuck me just like that…till I can’t breathe. Own me.” Ali manages to gets out before her stomach muscles start shaking, her body already tightening up.

“Alex… I love being inside you… you’re so wet and tight around my fingers. That’s it baby, move your hips, help me fuck you just the way you like it. God, you’re so beautiful.” Ashlyn whispers into Ali’s ear as she runs her tongue along the outer shell of it.

Ashlyn’s words push Ali right to the edge and she tries desperately to hold on just a bit longer, never wanting this feeling to end. It’s one of the things she loves most about Ashlyn… that no matter how or where they’re having sex, the officer is right there to whisper loving and heated words into her ear. It makes her feel not just loved, but completely worshipped and revered. She’s waited her whole life for this feeling, the intensity of which she can’t possibly live without now that she’s felt it. She can sense her movements becoming completely uncoordinated as her hips grind into the thrust of Ashlyn’s fingers, her whole body throbbing now. “Ash…don’t stop, don’t stop, Ash, Ash… Ash… oh my, there, right there…oh fuck, pleeeasse…” Ali almost doesn’t recognize her own raspy voice as she yells her girlfriend’s name over and over again when fingers curl and press repeatedly on the perfect spot inside her.

“Come for me, love. Let go and come for me, Alex. You’re so hot, baby…so beautiful like this.” Ashlyn says through her own moan, almost orgasming at the sight of the gorgeous brunette losing herself underneath her.
Ali feels Ashlyn’s thumb go to her clit and her whole body lifts from the couch and moves wildly against the officer’s hand as she barrels over the edge of ecstasy, letting one of the strongest orgasms of her life take her. Ashlyn is still slowly moving in and out of her center, a soft wet squish sound filling the air with each press of her fingers. Ali is riding out each wave of pleasure that hits her until she feels another big one start to build with the slow deliberate stroking deep inside her. “Baby, don’t stop yet… again Ash, please… keep fucking me.” Ali begs as she reaches down without warning to enter Ashlyn’s warm soaked center with two fingers.

“Oh, Alex…oh yes baby. You feel so good…oh fuck, I’m so close already.” Ashlyn grunts at the sudden feel of Ali working inside her body, trying hard to keep her focus on bringing the brunette to another orgasm. She shifts so she’s lying beside Ali, giving them both more room to work.

“Hold on for me. I want to come with you, for you. Oooh fuck, Ash…you fuck me so good, honey. So deep…so, uuuhhnn, fucking good.” Ali yells out through sucked in breaths.

The words send Ashlyn into overdrive, working Ali hard and fast as she feels the brunette’s fingers piston steadily into her core. Her mind is in a complete haze and she knows she can’t hold on anymore with Ali touching every inch of the silken walls inside her, the brunette now sucking hard on one of her nipples. Her whole being feels alive and electric, Ali’s passion and fire being injected into her most intimate flesh and coursing through her veins with each pump of her heart. “Alex, I’m coming… yes, yes, yes, Alex…Alllleeexx, I love you.” Her eyes screw shut as she feels a tight clenching around her own fingers and her name yelled out repeatedly amidst a string of obscenities as Ali’s climax follows her own.

“Kiss me, steal my air.” Ali mutters against Ashlyn’s lips as the officer holds her close, the two of them quivering from the orgasm still as they melt into a scorching kiss that neither of them have the breadth for. Heaving chests rise and fall in chaotic rhythm with each other until they’re forced to pull away for air.

“Alex?” Ashlyn questions as Ali moves to hover over her again before they’ve even half caught their breaths.

“I want every last drop I worked for, baby.” Ali clarifies with still darkened eyes as she turns her body and lowers her core onto Ashlyn’s mouth before bending down to claim her own glistening prize. With wet centers pressed and cupped tightly against each other’s faces, they feast until neither of their bodies can withstand anymore, collapsing in that very position until Ali finds the strength to right herself nearly twenty minutes later.

Ashlyn holds Ali tightly in her arms as the brunette mindlessly traces her inked skin with her fingertips like she so often does. “I love you so much, Alex. I love who you are. Every last corner of your soul. You are everything good… a beautiful fire that I can’t take my eyes off of, that ignites my very being and makes my own fire burn.” Ashlyn says in soft candor before leaning down to punctuate the statement with a romantic kiss.

“I know.” Ali replies emotionally when they finally pull apart. “I feel it in every gesture, every look you give me, and every touch you place on my body. You consume my every sense. I feel you inside of me in places I never even knew existed. You are literally at the heart of me, Ash.” She takes Ashlyn’s hand and places it over her heart. “You take my breath away, but I also can’t breathe without you… nor do I ever want to even try. I love you too, Ashlyn… all of you, with everything I have. Forever.” Ali leans in for another passionate kiss, no further words necessary as every emotion between them settles into a harmonious peace.

They lay wrapped up in each other’s arms in sated silence just listening to each other breath for the better part of an hour before Ashlyn finally asks. “So…tell me about Sara…”
A slightly shorter chapter than my last few, but I didn't want to leave you hanging on what's upcoming for too long. Time to see what Ali is about to delve into! Please put your tray tables into the upright and locked position and fasten your seat belt...never know when there might be turbulence ;)
Oh and tiny smut warning!

They lay wrapped up in each other's arms in sated silence just listening to each other breathe for the better part of an hour before Ashlyn finally asks. “So…tell me about Sara…”

“Thought you were never going to ask.” Ali smiles and nuzzles herself further into the crook of Ashlyn’s neck, her hand still splayed out on the officer’s stomach where her thumb rubs small circles on the sculpted muscles. Her body feels like jello after the three incredible orgasms she just had and based on how relaxed Ashlyn seems, they’re not leaving this hotel couch any time soon.

“Didn’t really have to ask, it’s been written all over your face since you left that meeting with her.” Ashlyn smirks and tilts Ali’s face up with her hand. “Your passion for what you do is seriously the sexiest thing ever.” She leans in and places a quick soft kiss on Ali’s lips. “But…still might be nice to hear the details.” Ashlyn winks and leaves another kiss on Ali’s forehead.

“Aha! So that was what that smoldering look and mind blowing sex was all about! And here I thought you just liked my ass!” Ali teases.

“Oh let me tell you, I definitely love your ass.” Ashlyn counters. “Let’s be honest though, everything about you turns me on.” She admits with a dimpled grin.

“Easy there, Hero, or we’ll never get to see L.A. tonight.” Ali peppers kisses up Ashlyn’s neck.

“The only L.A. I plan to see is Lady Alex and she’s already naked in my arms.” Ashlyn lays it on thick with waggling eyebrows.

“Such a dorky cheeseball, Harris. You’re lucky I happen to find you cute.” Ali lightly slaps Ashlyn’s stomach.

“So…Sara…tell me about her.” Ashlyn gets them back to the conversation at hand.

“She’s really great…the situation is pretty shitastic.” Ali holds Ashlyn a little closer as she replays the conversation in her head and recounts it.

“Hi, Sara. Thank you for agreeing to meet me.” Ali says as she enters the room to find the woman from the audience seated in a large armchair across from a couch with a coffee table in front of it. Sara is a petite woman with a small build and Ali figures she can’t be more than 5’ 3”.
blonde hair cascades over her shoulders. She’s put together, but she wears little-to-no make-up in a simple look that suits her well.

“Oh um…I don’t even know what to say. I can’t believe you even asked to meet me and here you are thanking me!” Sara blurts out nervously as she shakes Ali’s extended hand a little too vigorously. “Sorry, sorry… I uh, I guess I’m a little star struck…and nervous, definitely nervous. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize and definitely don’t be nervous!” Ali smiles at her. “I promise you, I’m just an average person who just happens to have a hobby-turned-job that seems to entertain people.” Ali jokes to try and make the woman more comfortable. “Really, I’m just plain old Ali and I was just hoping to maybe hear a little more about your story and if there was any way I could help. Oh…and before we even say anything else, I just want to be clear that none of this is podcast related. I promise you, that isn’t what I came in here for. Whatever you decide to share stays in this room.”

“Thank you.” Sara says quietly with a tight smile. “I hope you know that I really didn’t say anything earlier to try and coerce you into helping me or anything. I honestly just wanted to tell you how much I appreciated you sharing your story and that it really is helping someone out there.”

“Sara, really… relax.” Ali appeals to her with a kind smile. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to be. Besides, I like to think I’m a pretty good judge of character.” She adds with a wink and finally gets a genuine smile out of the blonde woman. “You already know a lot about me, but tell me a little about you.”

“Oh ok, well… my name is Sara Worthen and I’m from Vestavia Hills, Alabama which is just outside of Birmingham.” She gets started.

“Really? Hmmm…I never would have pegged you as southern. Just goes to show what I know!” Ali says lightly and still a bit surprised that Sara is from the south, especially since she doesn’t have an accent at all.

“Well, to be fair, I’m not really from there. I’ve just lived there quite a while now. I’m originally from Chicago.” Sara explains.

“That certainly explains the lack of an accent. What made you move south, if you don’t mind me asking?” Ali inquires.

I suppose that’s as good a place to start as any.” Sara shrugs. “I met my husband at the University of Chicago and he was from Alabama, so we eventually moved there.”

“Oh, that makes sense.” Ali replies a bit bemused at having misread this women yet again. She likes to think that her gaydar is pretty good, but clearly not.

“You look confused. Did I say something weird?” Sara asks, noting the look on Ali’s face.

“No, no, not at all. It’s just…please don’t take this the wrong way, but my brother tells me that my gaydar kind of sucks and I like to maintain that it’s pretty damn good, but I guess he’s right.”

“You are confused. Your brother is wrong.” Sara laughs.

“Now I’m confused.” Ali shakes her head.

“My fault, I should have said ex-husband. But technically we’re still married, so I don’t know what to call him really.” Sara elaborates.
“So, he’s the one in jail or…” Ali trails off still befuddled

“No, my partner Kira is the one in jail. It’s confusing, I know, but let me back up a bit and I’ll explain it all.” Sara tries to right the ship.

Ali just nods and sits back to listen.

“My first ever relationship was with a woman when I was in high school. Everything about it was great, but in the end, it was just a high school relationship that ran its course and didn’t have the steam to make it past a few months into college when we were almost 1000 miles apart at different schools. I grew up in a fairly conservative family, so I kept it a secret from my parents and definitely struggled with my identity for a while. Anyway, when I met Steve in college… I guess it seemed like the answer I had been looking for. He was handsome and sweet. He treated me really well and I fell for him easily. It made it so simple for me to just shut out the part of me that liked being with a woman. As long as I loved Steve, it didn’t matter.” Sara pauses for a second to take a sip of water before continuing.

“To make a long story shorter, we got married shortly after graduating college. The ironic thing is that my parents hated him and it ended up being the reason we stopped talking to each other. Would’ve been better off telling them I liked women.” Sara shakes her head. “Anyway, he eventually became a cop in his hometown of Birmingham and so that’s where we settled. I took a position at an art museum there.”

Ali nods as she follows along, starting to see some potential parallels now that Sara mentioned her ex is a police officer.

“Things were pretty good for the first couple years there and then… I don’t know…life got the better of us I guess. We got caught up in our jobs and just didn’t make time for each other anymore. We grew apart. And well, he just became such an asshole.” Sara says bluntly.

“The picture is getting clearer.” Ali smiles to encourage her to continue.

Sara smiles back with a slight laugh before continuing. “He never came home anymore and barely even acknowledged me. It’s really stupid that it took that to finally make me wake up… but it made me question what the hell I was doing and the whole relationship itself. I realized that if I was really being honest with myself, I had never truly been happy with him and I was just settling because I was afraid to do anything else. Not my proudest moment.” Sara admits.

“I think anyone who says that didn’t have a moment akin to that in their life is lying.” Ali reassures her.

“You’re probably right.” Sara nods. “Anyway, it got really bad fast. I found out he had been cheating on me and confronted him. He got verbally abusive at first and then completely stopped talking to me. It was at that point that I realized that I was all alone. I didn’t have any real friends I could rely on and was no longer talking to my family. And it was all because of him. I pushed everyone away because they didn’t like him. I let him move us to a place where I didn’t know anyone. And in the end, they were right and I was wrong.”

Sara takes another sip of water and Ali follows suit.

“Then one day, he was just gone. I got home and all his stuff was mostly cleared out, no note or anything. I found out later that he had moved in with the woman he was cheating on me with. For almost a year there was radio silence between us and I guess I just felt almost relieved and happy to move on. I didn’t have a very good paying job, so I stupidly just stayed in the house since it was paid
off and he was off with someone new and clearly didn’t seem to give a shit. So, so stupid.” Sara shakes her head sadly.

“Why is that so stupid? It’s completely understandable that you would do that if you didn’t have other options.” Ali attempts to comfort her.

“You’ll understand in a minute.” Sara bites her lip. “So, shortly after Steve left…I met Kira. She was hired as the new front desk person at the museum I worked at and we got to be really good friends. That is until I eventually realized I was in love with her, nervously asked her on a date, and never looked back.” Sara smiles widely and stares off a bit.

Ali can’t help but grin at the love-stuck look on the woman’s face. She knows she must look like this when she talks about Ashlyn and smiles even wider at the thought.

“We moved fast enough that most people would think we were out of our minds, but we both just knew we were it for each other. Anyway, she came to live with me after a month and I’d never been so happy.” Sara continues. “Since we worked together and lived in the homophobic crap-hole that is Alabama, we kept things pretty low-key in public. Apparently, not low-key enough though. After having not heard a thing from him or even so much as seen him in over a year, Kira and I came home after a movie one night to find Steve sitting on our couch.”

“Oh shit.” Ali reacts out loud without even thinking.

“Yeah.” Sara says quietly, her hands clasped together tightly. “He started yelling all kinds of slurs at us, calling Kira a ‘butch dyke that tricked his stupid bitch wife’. She asked him to leave and he just flipped out. He trashed the living room and then threw a small table at me. Kira lost it when the table hit me and physically tried to push him out of the house. He pulled a gun out…” Sara takes shaky breath.

“Jesus Christ…” Ali whispers, this story going somewhere she hadn’t quite anticipated. She looks down to see Sara’s knuckles almost white from holding her hands together too tightly. She reaches out and lightly touches the woman’s forearm in reassurance. “Hey, Sara, it’s ok. Whatever it is, I’ll help however I can.”

Sara smiles tightly and continues. “I thought he was going to kill us, Ali. I just froze and waited for pain. The bang the gun made was so loud, it’s what I remember most. I shut my eyes for a second and when I opened them, Steve was just lying there on the floor with a bleeding leg. Kira was like two feet away looking stunned. He shot himself and I was so confused. And then he threw the gun at Kira…she just reflex reacted and caught it. I looked at him still trying to understand…and that’s when I noticed for the first time that he had gloves on.” Sara closes her eyes and shakes her head.

“I’ve never felt so stupid. It was all a set up.”

“Wait, what? This is the reason Kira’s in jail?” Ali questions, trying to wrap her head around it all.

“Yeah.” Sara confirms. “Before we could even process what happened, the police was there. He told them that he came home and found Kira trying to sexually assault me and that he fought her off, but that she shot him. We denied it all, of course, but with the way the room looked and Steve being shot…they just arrested her right there.”

“And this story held up in court?!” Ali asks stunned and watches Sara just nod. “How the hell does that even happen?” She asks rhetorically, but sees Sara ready to answer anyway.

“It was definitely a huge wakeup call. I never realized how at the mercy of public officials we are.” Sara shakes her head with a sigh. “With all the public backlash, Kira got fired right after she got
arrested and we couldn’t afford bail. We were barely making it with two jobs, let alone just mine. We
couldn’t afford a lawyer either, so she had to go with a public defender who of course wasn’t
unbiased or helpful. Being in homophobic Birmingham and going up against a well-known local
cop with a great service record, the fight was lost before it even happened. Kira got painted out to be
a monster no matter how much I tried to plead for her. Steve’s lawyer convinced everyone that I had
been brainwashed by this lesbian psycho who preyed on lonely married women. That we were
having a tough time in our marriage and she had gained my confidence with friendly advances and
then attacked. He lied and said we were still living together and trying to work things out. With me
still living in the house and no proof of us separating since I never filed any paperwork, there was
nothing to prove otherwise. People at my job testified that Kira flirted with me and we got really
friendly. But no one knew that we were together that whole time or living together, so no one could
attest that we were a couple. So, it really did come off in court like she was trying to prey on me. Her
fingerprints were on the gun, his weren’t. It was his word against ours and we had no chance. She
got sentenced to 17 years for felony assault and battery with a dangerous weapon with possibility of
parole after 5 years and every two years thereafter.”

“That’s absolutely horrendous. I am so, so sorry, Sara.” Ali says genuinely, completely appalled at
how situations like this still happen. “How long has she been in for?”

“Six and a half years. We visit once a week and talk on the phone twice a week, and write letters too.
It’s really damn hard, but I’ll never leave the love of my life. Ever.” Sara admits in a both dejected
and determined tone.

Ali can’t even speak. It had been complete torture to get through less than a year with Ashlyn in jail
when they weren’t even a couple yet. And that was with frequent visits and special lawyer
allowances. She swallows hard to clear the lump in her throat and tries to compose herself.

“She’s been a model prisoner and I thought for sure she’d get paroled at five years. I forgot just how
shitty and close-minded a place we live in though. They didn’t fully consider her case and just denied
it. She’s up for parole again in November, but I think we both already know the outcome. Talk about
feeling hopeless. I ask myself every damn day why I was so dumb to stay in that stupid house and
why I didn’t try harder to document things or be more open about my relationship with Kira. It
could have changed everything, but now there isn’t a damn thing I can do about it.” Sara finally
breaks, tears flowing freely from her eyes as she falls forward into the open arms that Ali has so
kindly extended to her.

“Oh man… that’s…fuck.” Ashlyn gets out in a slightly quivering voice, surprising herself at how
much emotion she feels at what Ali just told her. Her three years inside can’t even compare to this
woman’s almost seven, and it had practically destroyed her inside.

“Yeah.” Ali hugs Ashlyn tighter, already knowing what must be running through the officer’s head.
She’d be lying if she said the same thoughts hadn’t been occupying space in her own mind. Even
though she doesn’t really know Sara and the situation is different, somehow sharing the story with
Ashlyn has suddenly made it feel more personal for some reason. She nuzzles herself even further
into her girlfriend, not able to get close enough at the moment no matter how entwined they are.

“So what do we do to help her and fix it?” Ashlyn asks, stroking Ali’s back.

Ali feels herself come alive at the question. It doesn’t surprise her that Ashlyn asked it, but it’s the
way she asked it…. with such innocence, as if it was a given. The word ‘we’ standing out as if it had
somehow been spoken louder than the others. And although she already knew it deep down, it
serves as a blatant reminder that her heart and its every desire has found its perfect match. She’s not
alone anymore… in anything. Not in love, not in life, not in her greatest passion and grandest visions. Ashlyn Harris is with her beat for beat, stride for stride, side-by-side both in battle and in peace. She wants to answer the question, she really does. To let all the ruminations busying her mind since her meeting with Sara spill out unfiltered to the one person she knows won’t judge her no matter how outlandish or improbable they may seem. But Ashlyn’s simple question makes her body act first and foremost, the answer now having to wait as scoots up and pulls her girlfriend into a heated kiss that clouds her brain in mere seconds.

“Alex…. what…?” Ashlyn whispers breathlessly as Ali moves down along her neck, surprised by Ali’s sudden reaction.

“Shhhhh.” Ali shushes her and moves back to her lips. “Just make my heart race, baby.” Her voice gets lost in the cavern of Ashlyn’s mouth as she guides the officer’s hand between her legs. It was Ashlyn who had just a little while earlier stopped their lovemaking to listen to Ali’s heart, and now it’s Ali whose pulled in by the muscle drumming within the officer’s chest as if that’s what is holding her to the planet.

Ali hugs Ashlyn firmly as they lay side by side, their chests so tightly pressed together that Ali can feel the dog tags practically embedding themselves into her skin. All her attention goes to one spot as long fingers fill her center and start gently stroking, her mind practically going blank at the sensation for a few moments until she presses her own fingers into Ashlyn and her focus goes back to their chests. She feels like Ashlyn’s pounding heart is vibrating her sternum as hers drums increasingly to match it.

No words are spoken, just breathy exhales and soft moans into mouths as they each lose themselves in the other to create a perfect chaotic unison that rises to the top and comes down together. Their two hearts beating in such close juxtaposition in this moment that it physically feels like the metaphorical one heart that symbolizes their emotional connection.

“Holy damn… Alex… wow.” Ashlyn whispers between gasping breaths as the arm she has under Ali’s neck and around the brunette’s shoulders finally eases its tight grip. She rolls on her back a bit when Ali releases her own grip and hears a satisfied sigh when she slowly slips out of the brunette. She lets out her own soft whimper as Ali’s fingers leave her core.

“I love you… dear lord, do I love you woman.” Ali leaves several short kisses on Ashlyn’s lips since neither of them have the breath left for anything more than that. She peppers a few more down the officer’s defined jawline before settling back on her chest, immediately noticing the red imprint of the dog tags on Ashlyn’s chest and knowing hers must look the same. “Sorry, baby.” Ali traces the marks with her fingertip.

“Never be sorry for that.” Ashlyn smiles into Ali’s hair as she holds her close. “I love you too, Alex.”

They lay there quietly again for a few minutes, each tracing inked patterns until their breathing regulates.

“So…” Ashlyn smirks and tilts her head down to look at Ali. “Will an orgasm be involved in the answer to any and all questions I ask tonight?”

“Maybe.” Ali lifts her head and smirks back. “That gonna be a problem, Harris?”

“Hell no, Krieger. Just planning ahead so I can ask a lot of simpler questions instead of just a few complicated ones.” Ashlyn winks.
“So strategic of you.” Ali drops her hand and lets it lightly run down the v-line that frames Ashlyn’s abs, getting the breath hitch reaction she was looking for before bringing her hand back up to the rest on the officer’s bicep. “Just remember who runs the show, Hero.”

“Believe me, I know who runs this ship. I’m just trying to keep up with your legal genius, sweetheart.” Ashlyn plays back.

“You kissing my ass now, Harris?” Ali sasses.

“It’s a nice ass, Krieger.” Ashlyn makes her point by squeezing it gently and earns a playful smack from Ali. “So, my beautiful Paladin… I believe you owe me an answer now.” She brings them back to the matter at hand.

“I wish it was a better answer, but right now all I have is one path forward to work with and a ton more follow-up to do if I manage to get some kind of access.” Ali replies honestly. She’s drawn out various scenarios in her head, but none of them are based on anything solid.

“Access?” Ashlyn questions.

“Yeah. I’m not licensed to practice law in any other state but Massachusetts. You have to take the bar exam for every state you want to practice in. So I’m pretty limited in that regard.” Ali clarifies.

“Oh, right. Forgot about that caveat of the legal world.” Ashlyn shakes her head. “Does that mean you can’t really do anything? Would you have to pass the Alabama bar just to help her?”

“It means that I can’t get access to any case files or documents at the moment. As much as information that Sara can give me is helpful, I can’t use it any of it in an official legal capacity. What I need to do is petition for entry as counsel pro hac vice.” Ali explains.

“Huh? You lost me at counsel. What is counsel pro-hockey ice?” Ashlyn exaggerates her mishearing of what Ali actually said.

“Counsel pro hac vice, Ash.” Ali rolls her eyes teasingly and kisses Ashlyn’s cheek. “It means I need to find a practicing lawyer in Alabama willing to sign on to this case and then agrees to take me under their wing so-to-speak and let me handle the case from there. A judge would also have to approve it before I would be allowed to do it.”

“Oh, like in the movie My Cousin Vinny?” Ashlyn finally gets it.

“Actually, yes.” Ali smiles at Ashlyn’s cute way of piecing it together. “It’s not going to be easy to do. I can’t just pay someone off to take the case, especially such an old and messy one like this. It’s going to be really difficult to pull it off.”

“If anyone can do it, you can.” Ashlyn assures her.

“You really believe that, don’t you?” Ali asks, touched at the blind confidence Ashlyn always seems to have in her.

“Damn right I do. Without any question or doubt at all.” Ashlyn leans down and kisses her sweetly. “So, let’s pretend you get to that point, then what? Do you file an appeal like you did for me?”

“Highly doubtful. I don’t think there’s even a chance of that. So much so that I don’t think I’d even bother looking into trying it.” Ali replies matter-of-factly.

“Why not?” Ashlyn inquires, not understanding why it would be so different.
“It’s pretty hard to get an appeal hearing granted after more than 6 months passes from the date of the conviction decision. One of the big things that can get your appeal heard after that grace period expires is a procedural illegality, like in your case. Southern states are known for being more procedurally stickler, particularly highly conservative areas. That’s a well-known fact in the legal world; apparently, it’s a pride thing. There’s slim-to-no chance that there will be any procedural issue to exploit. And even if there had been initially, it would likely have been covered up well before the case even started in a situation like this where her ex was so well-connected in such a tight-knit community.” Ali elaborates.

“So, if you can’t appeal, how do you get her off of the charges?” Ashlyn asks a bit befuddled.

“I can’t. But I don’t have to get her off the charges to get her freed. Getting her out on parole would be the best I could do, but at least she’d be out and then it would shift to helping beyond that with the fall-out and readjustment stuff.” Ali replies, hating that the situation isn’t ideal, but knowing that this is the reality of it. “I’d have to attack that parole hearing, it’s the only shot. Logistically that means finding a way to become Kira’s lawyer, doing major case research, and pulling together an argument in two months. Plus keeping it all seriously under wraps so I don’t attract any unwanted attention that could interfere with the chances of making it work.”

“I know it’s not the perfect resolution, but you know what, Alex… free is better than perfect any damn day. That much I can tell you.” Ashlyn says reading the slightly disappointed look on Ali’s face.

“Yeah, I know you’re right.” Ali squeezes Ashlyn against her gently. “Still a long damn way to free though.” Ali sighs, wondering if she can even deliver on that aspect of it.

“I believe in you, Alex.” Ashlyn says sincerely as she cups the brunette’s face with her hand. “And even if none of it goes the way you want it to, because let’s face it, sometimes life just sucks like that… it’s still more than anyone else has done for them and I know they’ll be appreciative of that. Just promise that you’ll let me help you in every single possible way that I can. It’s not just you against the world anymore you know.”

“You really make me feel like I can do anything.” Ali kisses Ashlyn’s chin. “And yes, I promise. You’re the best there is, Hero.”

“You really can do anything, baby. I’ve seen it. I’m proof of it.” Ashlyn adds to her previous sentiment and feels Ali’s hand entwine with her own in response. “How about you get Kira’s contact information from Sara for me and have her pass along mine? Maybe I can get her to talk to me and hopefully start helping that way.”

Ali smiles and pops her head up to look into her favorite hazel eyes. “Already ahead of you, Harris. It’s been done. I know that golden heart of yours far too well already.”

“You better.” Ashlyn returns the smile with a dimpled grin. “You are this heart, baby.” She moves Ali’s hand to the middle of her chest to put more emphasis on her statement.

“Thank you.” Ali says quietly as she lets herself settle back onto Ashlyn’s chest contently.

“For what?” Ashlyn asks.

“For being all in with me.” Ali answers.

“Always.” Ashlyn says and leans down for kiss that quickly deepens.

L.A. goes unseen and not another word is spoken about their new undertaking for the night as they
go two more glorious rounds in the bedroom before blissfully falling asleep utterly spent.

“Sorry we never made it out to see L.A. last night.” Ashlyn says apologetically as she brushes her teeth alongside Ali the next morning, knowing the brunette had mentioned wanting to do something touristy when they first planned the trip.

“What are you talking about?” Ali raises her eyebrow playfully and runs her hand up Ashlyn’s side. “I saw plenty of Loyal, Luscious, Lovely Ashlyn last night. Best kind of L.A.”

“Cute, Krieger.” Ashlyn rolls her eyes jokingly and leans in for a kiss.

“Just stealing your line, Harris.” Ali winks and turns to start working on her mascara.

“Well, we have like 5 hours before we have to be at that airport. How about we pack up, find some good coffee, and then figure out something super touristy to do before we go?” Ashlyn suggests.

“Perfect!” Ali agrees.

An hour later, they find a fun hipster coffee shop not far from the hotel and sit down to sip their lattes and decide on an activity. Only two minutes into the conversation, the plan to see L.A. is lost again when Ashlyn’s cellphone rings.

She pulls the phone out of her pocket intent on silencing it when her heart seizes in her chest at the name on the screen… Chief Bobby.

Chapter End Notes

A cliffhanger?! Yeah, sorry…it’s been a while and I gotta keep you on your toes :)
Ali is in the midst of looking at an L.A. tourist website on her phone and telling Ashlyn some of their possible destinations when the officer’s phone rings. Ali stops her verbal listing of options as she waits for Ashlyn to silence her phone, her eyes still scanning the screen for ideas. Ashlyn’s phone rings a third time and then a fourth before Ali lets out a slightly impatient sigh, knowing that they must be attracting attention by now with the annoying musical tone. “Babe, just quiet it already.” She huffs a bit. When it rings a fifth time, the brunette snaps her head up and looks beside her to see what the issue is, finding Ashlyn staring at the phone in her hand and looking pale. “Ash? Who is it?”

Ashlyn doesn’t respond or even so much as move as the sixth ring fills the air.

“Baby…what’s wrong?” Ali’s brow furrows in concern when she sees how petrified Ashlyn looks. The officer’s eyes are wide, her mouth just slightly parted and a few beads of sweat are forming on her upper lip. “Ash? Hey.” Ali tries again, putting her hand on the officer’s forearm to no avail. She feels her own anxiety rising inside when she can’t get Ashlyn to respond to her. The officer looks like she’s seen a ghost and when Ali finally adjusts herself to be able to see the phone on the seventh ring, she realizes it’s for damn good reason.

Chief Bobby is lit up on the caller ID screen and Ali feels her heart drop into her stomach…the ghost is calling.

The ringing finally stops, the screen changing to reflect the missed call as Ali’s mind races. No fucking way. She had forced herself to look at those pictures, wanting to be able to tell Ashlyn with 100% confidence that he was dead by having seen it herself. The images of his bruised and misshapen neck are still burned into her mind. There’s no fucking way. That thought in mind she looks at the phone screen more carefully, ignoring the name and finally noting that the number looks familiar before the screen goes black.

Ali quickly gets herself under control and pulls out her own phone to confirm before starting to settle down enough to focus on Ashlyn who has yet to move a muscle. “Ashlyn, baby…it’s ok. It’s not him, honey. It’s not him.” She frames Ashlyn’s face with her hands as best she can from beside her, but the officer is completely frozen. She can feel Ashlyn’s racing heartbeat where her pinky finger
rests near her neck artery. “Ash…please…you have to listen to me, sweetheart. Can you hear my voice?” Ali tries desperately to get through to her and finally feels Ashlyn swallow, the officer’s eyes fluttering closed.

“Can you hear my voice?” Ali tries again and gets an almost imperceptible nod in response. “Ok, ok…easy baby, breathe and listen to me.” She coaches gently and pulls Ashlyn’s face to hers so their foreheads are resting together. “You trust me, right?” Ali asks and gets another very slight nod. “I promise you, Ashlyn…he’s dead. I’ve seen it myself. That wasn’t him, honey. That’s just the phone number for the Chief’s office…McNally uses it now. That was McNally calling. It’s just an outdated contact in your phone baby. It’s ok, Ash. It’s ok.” Ali uses one hand to lightly rub the back of Ashlyn’s neck, feeling her start to take deeper breaths. “That’s it, baby. I’ve got you, just breathe and come back to me.”

They stay like this for a couple minutes before Ali feels Ashlyn’s hands cover her own and pulls back to look the officer in the eyes. “There you are.” Ali smiles sweetly and kisses Ashlyn’s nose lightly and then her cheek. “You ok?”

Ashlyn nods her head, embarrassed for freaking out and attracting attention in the coffee shop as she starts to notice a few people watching them.

“Come on, let’s go get some air and we’ll get new coffees somewhere else, ok?” Ali grips Ashlyn’s hand and helps pull the officer to her feet.

“Ok.” Ashlyn acknowledges, her first spoken words since her phone rang. She lets Ali lead her outside where they settle on a small bench. “Sorry. I’m such an idiot.” She says in a tiny voice.

“Hey, no, no… don’t you dare apologize. I had the same reaction until I got beyond the name and recognized the number.” Ali admits to help settle the officer. “You gonna be ok?”

“Yeah, thank you.” Ashlyn smiles slightly, her body still coming down from the rush of adrenaline and anxiety.

“Come here.” Ali pulls Ashlyn into her side and feels the officer start to melt into it after a few seconds. “It’s alright. Just a stupid thing that caught us off guard.”

“Are we ever going to be over this shit?” Ashlyn asks in a soft voice.

“It’s always going to be part of our experience and something that molds us… but, yeah, I think eventually it’ll all be a very distant memory. It hasn’t even been a year yet Ash, give it time.” Ali replies with her honest thoughts.

“I know.” Ashlyn concedes. “I’m so glad there’s someone in this world that gets through to me the way you do. Thank you.”

“I love you.” Ali kisses Ashlyn really gently before pulling back and tracing along the officer’s jaw with her fingertips.

“I love you too.” Ashlyn replies and leans back in for another kiss.

“Maybe you should call McNally back while I go to that café right over there and get us some new coffees. Then we can walk around a little.” Ali suggests as she points to a café less than a block from where they are sitting.

“Oh yeah… ok. Why the heck is McNally even calling me?” Ashlyn muses out loud, finally letting the reality of the situation hit her now that she’s calming down.
“No clue, but that’s why you should probably call back and find out.” Ali says with a shrug. “But first… give me your phone so I can make sure it doesn’t give us a damn near heart attack again.” She adds as she takes Ashlyn’s phone. She quickly goes into the contacts and changes ‘Chief Bobby’ to ‘John McNally’ before also taking the liberty to delete the entry listed as ‘Chief Bobby Cell’ completely. “Done and done.” She smiles and hands the phone back to Ashlyn.

“Thanks.” Ashlyn smiles and takes the phone in her hand, finger hovering over the newly edited contact name.

“I’ll give you some privacy and be right back. Sure you’re ok?” Ali confirms as she starts to stand up.

“I’m ok, promise.” Ashlyn lifts Ali’s hand that she is holding and kisses it, letting her arm stretch as far as it will go as Ali walks away, only letting go when Ali is out of reach. She watches Ali until she walks into the coffee shop and then hits the call button on her phone.

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“You’ve got McNally.” The voice comes over the phone after just two rings.

“You’ve got Harris.” Ashlyn snickers at McNally’s ridiculous greeting and mimics it to tease him. “What the hell kind of a way is that for the police chief to answer the phone?”

“Well excuuuuse me, Harris. This is Police Chief John McNally, how may I help you?” McNally says in an overly cheery voice. “That better?”

“Nah, go with the first one.” Ashlyn replies in jest. “Anyway, did you just call me?”

“Oh uh, yes, I did.” McNally answers as if he’s caught off guard by the question.

Ashlyn waits for him elaborate, but she’s met with nothing but silence. “So, what can I help you with?” She prods him after too many silent seconds pass.

“Um, well…I have some final pay stuff to work out with you. Human Resources came to me…I, uh…can you meet me to take care of it?” McNally replies disjointedly.

“That can’t be right. I made sure I was set before I left. I got my last paycheck and my benefits squared away. Plus it’s been like a damn year and now you call me about it?” Ashlyn says in confusion. Something definitely seems off, but she can’t quite put her finger on it.

“I…I...I don’t know, maybe you accrued something in a benefit cash out that you didn’t know about.” McNally stutters. “HR just wants it squared away. So, can you come meet?”

“Well shouldn’t I be meeting with HR then?” Ashlyn questions, trying to push him since he’s being weird.

“No, no…I, uh…I told them I’d take care of it. Didn’t want to you have to deal with them, especially since it was our mistake. So, can you come in this evening?” McNally asks anxiously.

“Sorry man, I’m in L.A. right now.” Ashlyn replies, her stomach starting to feel a bit queasy at how weird McNally is being.

“Oh. When do you get back?” McNally asks quickly.
“I’ll be back by tomorrow morning. Come on…level with me. What’s going on?” Ashlyn probes more seriously. The payment story doesn’t add up and McNally is being far too insistent on meeting up.

“Nothing, Harris. Just really want to get this pay issue taken care of so I can get HR off my back. Can you meet me at like 11am tomorrow?” McNally tries to play it cool.

Ashlyn lets out a deep sigh. The last thing she wants to do is go anywhere near South Boston, let alone the damn police station…especially after a long flight home from L.A. “Sure, I’ll be there.” She promises despite her reservations. Something is definitely going on and she needs to find out what.

“Great!” McNally answers a bit too enthusiastically. “You know what…it’s been so long since we’ve caught up. Let’s just meet at Triangle on Dry Dock Ave, you know it?”

“Yeah I know it.” Ashlyn’s stomach is definitely churning nervously now. You don’t pick a tiny, pricy coffee shop away from the main drag unless you want to be discrete. Nor is it an appropriate place to deal with a payroll issue. McNally is definitely hiding something. “John…you ok?” Ashlyn presses him with a more personal tone to see if he reveals anything.

“Yeah, yeah. Just uh, don’t forget…tomorrow, 11am at Triangle. I’m excited to see you, Harris.” McNally blurts out quickly and ends the call before Ashlyn can even respond.

“Well goodbye to you too, geez.” Ashlyn puts her cellphone into her pocket and tries to make sense of the bizarre conversation she just had. The plan of have a nice calming day before the flight home, especially after the little scare this morning, has just gone out the window. There is no way she can relax now knowing that something is very wrong about this McNally meeting. Her mind immediately goes to her case as she starts running scenarios in her head for what it could be.

“Everything alright?” Ashlyn hears Ali’s voice approach as a coffee is handed to her.

“I don’t even know.” Ashlyn admits truthfully as Ali settles back down next to her on the bench.

“What happened? What did he want?” Ali asks, her hand going to rub the back of Ashlyn’s shoulders as the bad feeling in the pit of her stomach grows again.

“He said he needs me to come meet him to sign some final stuff to do with my pay. He was so weird though, Alex. Like…I don’t know, really nervous and just completely off. Plus, I know for a fact that I took care of everything with my final paperwork…it’s a bullshit excuse. He was so pushy about meeting me in person. Something is up and I have no idea what. I tried to call him on it, but he just kind of ignored me and kept with his final paperwork story.” Ashlyn recounts, feeling even more jittery now that she said it out loud.

“Hmmph. You sure he wasn’t just distracted or something? I mean, he can be kind of aloof sometimes.” Ali suggests hopefully.

“I’m sure. He was worked up about something. And obviously he doesn’t want to talk over the phone about it. What could it be? What about the case could he have to tell us now?” Ashlyn thinks out loud, taking a sip of her coffee even though she feels nauseated.

“If it’s about the case, wouldn’t he have brought me into it too though? I mean, it would likely involve both of us, right?” Ali tries to think it through logically.

“I guess.” Ashlyn shrugs. “But what else does he have to be so weird or secretive about when it comes to me?”
“Maybe they did make some big mistake with your paperwork and he’s nervous about it?” Ali says even though she doesn’t really buy into it herself.

“Maybe. I just think he was way too worked up for it to be that.” Ashlyn replies, not buying it either.

“So, are you going to meet him?” Ali finally asks.

“Yep. Tomorrow morning at 11. He picked some isolated little coffee shop in Southie that no one goes to. He’s being sketchy.” Ashlyn answers.

“Will you let Tim go and keep watch? Please. He doesn’t have to be in the way…just to keep an eye on things from a safe distance. I don’t want you going alone.” Ali pleads, feeling even more nervous now about the odd circumstances. The idea of Ashlyn in South Boston at all these days makes her feel uneasy.

“Ok. I will.” Ashlyn doesn’t fight it, knowing damn well that it’s better to be safe than sorry.

“Thank you.” Ali leans over and kisses the top of Ashlyn’s shoulder. “Come on, babe.” She stands up and pulls Ashlyn away from the bench by the hand.

“Where are we going?” Ashlyn asks as she follows along.

“Well, there is no way L.A. is going to hold our attention now that we’re all fired up. So, let’s go back to the hotel and veg out at the spa for a few hours before we have to go. That ok?” Ali replies and squeezes Ashlyn’s hand.

“Oh, Alex…I’m sorry. I know you wanted to spend time in L.A. doing something fun.” Ashlyn says apologetically, her voice dejected.


“You’re too good to me, Krieger.” Ashlyn kisses the top of Ali’s head and pulls her into a hug.

“I suppose. Would have been a waste anyway…I’d just end up staring your ridiculously buff arms, perfect ass, and killer smile no matter where we went. Who needs to sightsee when I have all that sexy to look at?” Ali smiles and pinches Ashlyn’s cheek to try and lighten the mood.

“Oh, is that so?” Ashlyn plays back. “Hmmm, guess I don’t have to bother taking you to Germany then. No point if you’re just going to ogle me the whole time.”

“No one said I couldn’t ogle you in pretty places… you better take me, Harris.” Ali says through a smile.

“Oh I can certainly promise you I’ll take you in Germany.” Ashlyn winks, feeling temporarily lighter with the teasing banter.

“I said take me TO Germany, not IN Germany.” Ali shoots her a joking glare.

“No, you just said ‘take me’. But of course, I gotta take you to Germany before I can take you in Germany.” Ashlyn waggles her eyebrows.

“I’m holding you to both, Hero.” Ali kisses her deeply. “Come on, let’s go try and unwind a little bit.”
Despite a couple of hours at the spa that included a hot stone massage and a couples hot tub session, neither of them was able to fully relax. By the time they were in the air and headed home, Ali had finally just worn herself out thinking about what on earth could be up with McNally. She would already be asleep if it wasn’t for Ashlyn nervously twiddling her thumbs beside her and looking out the window of the plane even though there was nothing to look at but cloud cover.

“Ash…” Ali gets the officer’s attention and pats her shoulder when hazel eyes meet hers. Ashlyn doesn’t fight it and rests her head on the brunette. “I know you’re anxious, baby. I am too. You need rest though so you can go in there with a clear head tomorrow, ok?”

Ashlyn just nods softly. She knows Ali is right. No matter how long she thinks or worries about it, she’s never going to know what is going on before she talks to McNally tomorrow and showing up exhausted isn’t going to help. She tries hard to clear her mind, deeply taking in Ali’s scent and melting into her. Still, her mind won’t shut off.

“Close your eyes.” Ali instructs the officer, running a hand lightly through the short bristly hair on the back of her head. She’s doing everything she can to get Ashlyn to relax, but she can tell her girlfriend is still letting her mind run by the way her breathing hasn’t slowed like it usually does when she’s about to fall asleep.

Ashlyn is running through the phone conversation yet again in her head when she hears Ali’s voice in her ear. “Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you’d expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense.” She opens her eyes to see Ali reading to her from her tablet. Her heart feels like it’s going to float away. She knows Ali is wiped out and tired, but here she is reading Harry Potter so that Ashlyn can relax and rest. No thought in the world, good or bad, is worth stealing her attention from this amazing woman. She reaches up to cup the brunette’s cheek and places a tiny kiss to the corner of her mouth. “I love you so much, Alexandra.”


Harry Potter hasn’t even boarded the train to Hogwarts before Ashlyn is snoring lightly on Ali’s shoulder, the brunette’s left arm held between her own. Ali turns off the tablet and places a feather light kiss on the officer’s lips before resting her head on Ashlyn’s and giving her own mind the much needed reprieve of a peaceful slumber.

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“Of course he’s fucking late.” Ashlyn mumbles to herself as she sits towards the back of the Triangle Café with her latte. Her nervous energy has already caused her to break her wooden coffee stirrer into pieces, lining them up in different arrangements before just starting to fiddle with them distractedly between her fingers. She checks her phone for like the hundredth time, seeing 11:13am on the clock. She also sees that she has a new text from Ali.

Paladin: No matter what it is, it’s you and me together ♥

Ashlyn smiles seeing that attached to the message is a selfie that Ali took of them at the Ellen show after the dunk tank experience. They’re both soaking wet and Ali has a nose crinkling grin on her face as Ashlyn kisses her cheek.

Hero: You never cease to make my heart flutter, love you. Also…he’s fucking late!

Ashlyn sets her phone on the table and sweeps the broken pieces of the stirrer into her hand. She
makes the short walk to the trash receptacle across the room to throw them away and kill time, not caring that she left her phone behind because, as expected, there isn’t anyone in here besides the very bored-looking barista. She settles back at the table, looking at her phone again to see that another two minutes has gone by. Just as she’s shoving the phone in her pocket to keep herself from clock-watching, she hears a familiar voice behind her.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the hair, but it’s definitely bad ass.” McNally comments as he approaches Ashlyn.

“About fucking time, McNally. Did they remove the clock in that state-of-the-art Chief’s SUV cruiser? Cause I swear there used to be a big ass time display on the dash.” Ashlyn goads him.

“Funny, Harris. Sorry I’m late. I had to be in court this morning and it went longer than expected. I didn’t mean to keep you waiting.” McNally says apologetically as he sits down across from her.

“It’s alright. I’m just giving you a hard time.” Ashlyn lightens up on him quickly when she notices how gaunt he looks. The man she’s always known to be brawny with rosy cheeks is now pale and looks like he hasn’t eaten or slept in months. “Go grab a coffee and then we can get to my ‘paperwork’.” Ashlyn says using her fingers to make air quotations. “And hell, grab a muffin too… or like five… you look malnourished.”

“Yeah, yeah, you sound like my wife. Thanks, Harris.” McNally shoots her a tight but appreciative smile before getting up to go get a coffee.

Ashlyn pulls out her phone again to distract herself while he’s gone and finds another text from Ali.

*Paladin: Right back at you. If he’s not there by 11:30, you should leave. I don’t like you sitting there. Be careful.*

*Hero: He just got here and is getting a coffee now. Looks like shit and has no paperwork with him… shocker. Wish me luck.*

“So, how have you been, Harris?” McNally asks as he sits back down at the table with a coffee.

“I’m doing good. At least I was before you called.” Ashlyn doesn’t waste words with him. “I think we both know you didn’t come here to exchange pleasantries or to fill-out paperwork that you don’t even have with you. So, how about you just level with me, McNally? I really don’t want to have to drag it out of you.”

McNally nods his head and looks down at his coffee for a few seconds. “Harris…if I had literally anyone else I could go to, I swear I wouldn’t be here. I just… you don’t deserve to be pulled into this, I know that. I have nowhere else to turn and I’m neck deep in shit. I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t desperate.”

“Oh, noted.” Ashlyn feels her stomach clench at having no idea where this is going. “You look like shit and I’ve never seen you so derailed. What’s going on?”

“What’s going on is that I feel like a damn wildebeest surrounded by a pack of hungry lions.” McNally sighs. “If you had asked me like six months ago, I would have told you I was happy and proud of being the Chief. Now… fuck, I’m fucking. I don’t know what the hell I was thinking. How did I not realize that I would face the same shit Bobby did? Problem is, I’m not Bobby fuckin’ Dugan!”

Even though his explanation is pretty vague, Ashlyn doesn’t need any further elaboration to understand. She should have known it would happen, but the thought of South Boston and its
happenings couldn’t be further from her mind these days. She finds herself immediately reeled back in as she watches McNally fidget with the cardboard sleeve on his coffee cup. “Which lions are in the den?” She asks, knowing her question will be perfectly understood.

“Pretty much all of them. They spent a while sizing me up before they started pouncing. I kept things even keel for a while, but now it’s ramped up. They all have demands and they’re getting aggressive. I have Train, Ruddy, and Porkchop hot on my ass these days. Porkchop’s crew shot one of my guys on patrol last week; it was definitely a warning.” McNally tells her, using their known street names. “Thefuckers have all been in my office for ‘meetings’ where they lay out their terms.”

“Jesus Christ.” Ashlyn runs her hand through her hair. It’s definitely bad. McNally is contending with the top three crime bosses in Southie, and he’s obviously losing. Dangerous is an understatement. Ashlyn sat by Bobby’s side while he rolled with these criminals for years and she knows damn well what they’re capable of. If McNally isn’t going to bend like Bobby did, he’s in serious trouble. “What are they asking of you?” She asks even though she has a pretty good idea.

“Everything you’d expect. They want my guys off their ass and for me to turn a blind eye to the typical fraud, laundering, racketeering, drug running, and gun deals they pull. And not for nothing either…they expect me to accept their heavy bribes in exchange. Of course they do, just puts a nail in my coffin if I ever try to deny I took part in helping them.” McNally pushes his coffee to the side, too stomach upset to drink it anymore. “They’ve started to move beyond threatening my guys, it’s my family now too.”

“Well the lack of phone conversation and the discrete coffee shop makes sense now.” Ashlyn says sympathetically. “I’ve seen how this works, John… it’s not good. You go against them, you’re toast. You quit your job, they’ll take you out because you know too much. You give them what they want, you’re Bobby Dugan.” She says bluntly because there is just no way to sugarcoat it.

“I know. I’m not Bobby, and I’ll never be Bobby. I’d rather die than do that shit. Beyond that, I don’t know what the hell to do or how I protect my family and my guys. I…I’m…it’s a mess.” McNally gets out emotionally. “Please, Ashlyn… help me. Please.” He asks urgently, the use of her first name signifying the desperation of it all.

The pleading voice and the look in his eyes just about breaks any resolve she had coming into this meeting. She’s shocked by how quickly her mind jumps right to thinking about how she can help him. The scenarios start immediately banging around in her brain. She knows the criminal underbelly of South Boston better than anyone, thanks to Bobby. She knows the players, she knows their games and their vulnerabilities. She really is the best one to help even if she’s not sure how yet. Her thoughts are broken by the pulsing vibration of the phone in her pocket, the unique pattern of which tell her that it’s a text from Ali. And just as quickly as she was reeled into this situation, she finds herself being just as quickly cast back out. Her life is not just hers to be reckless with anymore. The words ‘Gehirn im Kopf’ running through her head in the voice of the beautiful woman that speaks them…the one she lives for and fights to come home safely to every night.

“Look, John…” Ashlyn addresses him personally again and holds his gaze across the table. “I want to help you, I do…”

“But…” McNally lets out a shaky breath, his fear and disappointment obvious.

“But…first, I don’t even know what help I could even give you that would work. But more importantly, I’m not the same Harris without a care that I used to be. You’re married, you should understand. I gave my heart and it’s not just me that I make decisions for and protect anymore. I have Ali to think about and this is as much about her as it is about me. Do you even realize what you are asking?” Ashlyn impresses the seriousness of it on him. “You’re asking me to get involved again
with the very thing that almost cost me my life, almost cost me the love of my life, and that has broken me in ways that I can’t ever quite repair.”

“I know.” McNally says so quietly that Ashlyn can barely hear him. “I’m sorry I asked. I mean that genuinely. Last act of a desperate man, I guess. It’s not fair to you and I shouldn’t have called. You deserve to be far far away from this shit.” He adds guiltily, wanting to kick himself for even thinking this was a good idea. “I’m really sorry, Harris. Please just forget about this whole thing.”

“Hey, man… chill, ok?” Ashlyn tries to stop his nervous rambling apology. “I can’t just say yes to you right now, I can’t. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to leave you in a burning building either. I need a little time to think it through. I need time to talk to Ali and figure it out. I honestly don’t know what to do to help you out of this situation or even if I can, but I’ll think about it. Maybe I’ll come up with something. If I can’t do it, I’ll tell you. But I can’t commit to anything here and now…I know you don’t have a lot of it, but you need to give me time.” Ashlyn appeals to him.

“Yeah, ok. Really, Harris…I appreciate you even coming today. I’m not expecting anything else and I’m beyond sorry that I brought you into it. I wasn’t thinking. Please don’t do anything you can’t do. I don’t want you or Ali getting hurt…think I already played enough of a role in that shit to begin with.” McNally replies sincerely.

“Alright, easy. We’re not going to play the blame game. You already know how Ali and I feel about that and you know you’ve more than made up for it. Let it go.” Ashlyn warns him, not needing him to go through anymore apologizing for his role in her imprisonment than he already has. “Just do the best you can to hang in and I’ll be in touch soon. I’ll text your cell discretely, so only you’ll know it’s me.”

“You’re a better person than anyone I’ve ever met, Harris. Thank you, even if the answer is no.” McNally says and quickly gets up, walking out the door before Ashlyn can say anything else.

Ashlyn sits back in her chair and lets out a deep breath, everything inside her feeling like a jumbled mess. She pulls out her phone to check the time, 11:59am, a notification of a text from Ali on the screen.

*Paladin: Incredible people like you don’t need luck, Hero. Call me as soon as you’re done, I’m dying to know.*

Only half an hour has passed and she sits there with her thumb hovering over Ali’s number. Ali… how the hell does she explain this to Ali? How can she possibly entertain the idea of putting them back in the middle of a dangerous situation like this after everything they’ve been through? How can she convey to the woman that she loves that she can’t live with putting her at risk, but that she also can’t live with herself if she sits back idly as someone she could potentially help gets hurt?

She feels completely torn and lost for a direction. All she knows is that this isn’t a discussion she can have over the phone. She pockets her phone, feeling guilty that she’ll be making Ali wait until she gets home on top of the all the other conflicting emotions taking control right now. She has an hour long drive to figure out exactly what she is going to say, but about half-way home she starts to wonder if she can even say it at all.

There’s only one option… together. Can she…will she…really ask Ali to venture down this path with her? As she pulls into the driveway, she still doesn’t know the answer.
The plot thickens... thoughts?
Blueprints in the Bat Cave

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, this chapter is a bit longer and took a bit to write! Strap in and let's ride this rollercoaster...or is it a Train?

Also, smut alert.... did you really think the chapter would have "bat cave" in the title and not have a smut alert? Of course not!

As usual, let me know your thoughts...I love to hear from you!

Before Ashlyn can even fully get herself in the door, Ali is already down the stairs and standing in front of her. Given the distance from the detached garage to the house, there’s no way she would have heard the car and Ashlyn knows Ali must have been looking out for her Jeep. She tries hard to swallow down the guilt she feels for not calling and puts as much of a smile on her face as she can.

“Hey, baby.”

“You didn’t call me.” Ali says softly, her eyes quickly taking in Ashlyn’s appearance in an effort to determine what her state of mind is.

Ali looks more concerned than upset, but Ashlyn doesn’t miss the slight look of hurt in her expression. “I’m sorry, Alex.” Ashlyn quickly leans in and hugs her, letting the feel of Ali in her arms calm her a bit. “I just really needed the drive home to process everything. I didn’t mean to upset you or make you nervous, but I wasn’t ready to talk about it.” She admits apologetically, feeling truly bad for making Ali worry.

“Process everything? What happened, Ash? Please talk to me.” Ali pulls back from the hug and searches Ashlyn’s face, finding her hazel eyes to be the muddled gray-brown color that signal when she’s troubled. “What did he say?” Ali tries again, her voice more insistent as her anxiety level rises.

“It’s not about us…it’s to do with him.” Ashlyn replies quickly when she hears the worry in Ali’s voice. “I…” She starts again, but the words are already failing her. “Can we just go down to the water out back for a bit?” She requests, knowing that if she just has the ocean in front of her and Ali beside her, the rest will come out on its own.

“Of course we can.” Ali answers and brings her hand up to lightly stroke Ashlyn’s cheek before kissing her softly. “Let me go get my flip-flops and our blanket. I’ll bring you down a long-sleeve t-shirt too, it’s chilly with the breeze coming off the water.

“Thank you.” Ashlyn says simply, a slight smile on her lips despite everything running through her mind. There isn’t a single wall she can put up that Ali Krieger can’t break down in a matter of seconds with a few simple gestures, there’s no point in even trying. She grabs a bottle of water from the fridge and stands looking out over the water from the kitchen window as she tries to compose her thoughts. She doesn’t get very far before she feels Ali run a hand up her back.

“Here, baby.” Ali reaches up and slips the navy long-sleeve t-shirt in her hand over Ashlyn’s head and helps her get it on. She then silently takes Ashlyn’s hand and grabs the blanket, leading her outside and down the stone steps in the backyard to their little piece of beach. The tide is just starting to come in, so they have at least an hour before their time is up. Ali spreads the blanket out and plops herself down towards the back of it, patting the space between her legs for Ashlyn to sit.
Ashlyn doesn’t waste any time, more than ready to be wrapped in Ali’s arms while her mind empties its contents. She leans back into the warmth of her girl, Ali’s arms already snugly around her waist with the brunette’s face pressed into the crook of her neck.

“It’s just you, me, and the water. You can tell me anything, Ash. Just take your time.” Ali whispers with her lips right near Ashlyn’s ear. She hugs her just a little bit tighter and closes her eyes, waiting patiently until Ashlyn is ready. As usual, she feels the officer take in a few deep breaths and it’s not long before her favorite soft voice fills the air between them.

“Bobby once told me that if he was going to teach me anything, it would be that ‘milking the system was often much better than fighting it’.” Ashlyn chooses to start right from the beginning, knowing that she’s usually better at explanations when she does that. “He wasn’t always the seedy asshole he turned into, you know. He actually worked his way into the Chief’s position admirably. He used to be a really good cop.”

“Hmm.” Ali says a bit surprised by the statement. “So, what happened to change that?”

“Southie happened.” Ashlyn says simply. “You know as well as I do that it’s a hot bed for organized crime, always has been. Those fuckers think they’re so untouchable, that they’re above it all. They have nothing but guts to do whatever the hell they want. So, it doesn’t faze them for a damn minute to walk into a police department and lay a bribe at the feet of an official. Bobby was easy to turn… he grew up really rough and really poor. Sure he made good money being chief, but it was nothing compared to what these guys could lay out for him. Being arrogant the way he was, them making him feel like he had some kind of power just fed into his ego… and he was in bed with them in a hot second after that. Anyway, that was long before I ever arrived…I only knew that because he told me how it started.”

“Wow, never would have thought that it happened so fast or even so simple as that.” Ali remarks. “I guess all those mob movies are art imitating life then.”

Ashlyn nods. “With Bobby gone, it put an end to it in my mind. I didn’t even think to consider that the cycle would just begin again.”

Ali takes in Ashlyn’s words, trying to piece it all together and coming to a conclusion that makes her eyes widen a bit. She’s about speak her thoughts out loud to confirm they’re accurate when Ashlyn does it for her.

“Problem is that John McNally is not Bobby Dugan.” Ashlyn says flatly, her voice working hard to hold steady.

“I know that’s bad for some reason that you’re going to have to explain, but it definitely doesn’t sound like a problem. Sounds like a damn miracle to me.” Ali says, knowing damn well the hammer is about to drop by the way Ashlyn’s eyes hold steady on the water.

“It’s a huge problem when being like Bobby Dugan is your only way to stay alive.” Ashlyn puts it bluntly. “If he doesn’t give into these guys, they’ll kill him and try again with the next chief. If he just quits, they’ll kill him because he knows too much and they can’t risk it. Giving in is the only way he doesn’t get taken out.”

“Fuck.” Ali reacts in a whispered voice. She doesn’t know McNally all that well outside of their case-related interactions, but she feels her heart clench at his predicament. Her thoughts go right to his wife and their two little girls. Her mind works to understand why McNally called Ashlyn, but then realizes it’s only logical that he could confide in her. “You’re the only one he could tell.” She confirms out loud, feeling awful that Ashlyn is now having to carry this burden because she’s a good
person that can be trusted.

Ashlyn takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. Based on how Ali just phrased her last statement, she can tell the brunette doesn’t get the extent of the implication. “It’s more than that, Alex… he asked me to help him.” She finally puts it out there.


“I walked alongside these guys for years thanks to Bobby. I know how they operate, who they run with, who in the police department is under their thumb, all of it.” Ashlyn explains, her voice quiet and shaky now. “I’m the only one that stands a chance at helping him.”

“And you said you’d help him.” It comes out of Ali’s mouth more like an accusation than a question as she backs herself up a bit and lets go of Ashlyn, her hands going to rub the back of her own neck. Her mind immediately goes to what Chris said about Ashlyn running into the fire with no thought about anything else. She can’t help but feel her heart drop a bit at not being important enough that Ashlyn would think twice about getting involved with McNally. She knows it’s the officer’s nature, the very soul of who she is, but that’s not making her feel any better right now.

Ashlyn turns around a bit when she feels Ali’s arms leave her, finding the brunette with glassy eyes and a distraught look on her face. It’s enough to make Ashlyn want to throw up, but Ali’s words catch up to her and it’s clear she’s jumped to the wrong conclusion.

“Alex… hey, just look at me for a second…please.” Ashlyn pleads and waits until whiskey colored eyes meet her own. “I told him I wasn’t sure I could. I told him I needed time. I told him above all else, I needed to talk to you. And this…is me talking to you.” She finishes in a whisper and pauses for a second before adding one more thing. “I told him that it’s not just me anymore. That I’m not just risking myself. That I gave my heart and the person I gave it to is as much a part of this as I am.”

“Thank you.” Ali says very quietly, her hands slipping back around Ashlyn’s waist and pulling the officer back into her. “God Ash, I’m sorry…I…” She finds herself blubbering, embarrassed by her assumptions and completely unsupportive reaction. “Can I just compose myself for a second and get a do-over on my response?” She asks bashfully.

“Sure can, beautiful.” Ashlyn puts her hands on Ali’s and squeezes them further into her waist. “I get it, Alex… that’s exactly why I couldn’t call you on the way home, I needed to give myself a moment. Take your time.”

Ali gives herself a few minutes to let her mind process everything, to understand why she reacted the way she did. In the end, it’s simple. After everything they’ve gone through, she’s scared. She can’t blame herself one bit for that; it’s unlikely that anyone in her position wouldn’t be terrified of potentially throwing themselves right back into the fire again. Still, it doesn’t excuse her lack of faith in Ashlyn. Sweet, wonderful Ashlyn who just two days ago did nothing but support her when she dove head first into another case. That thought makes her work harder to dig through what she is feeling right now, until she finally gets to the heart of it and is pleasantly surprised by what she finds there.

“Ash…” Ali starts, quickly kissing the officer’s temple and hugging her tightly from behind. “I’m really sorry that I jumped on you like that. It’s no excuse, but honestly, the whole thing terrifies me.” She feels Ashlyn give a small nod. “But…if I strip away that fear… baby, I’m so damn proud of you and in love with who you are and how big your heart is. You know that. I trust you completely. I’m in this and everything else with you together, always. And it means the world to me that you’re talking it through with me. I should’ve done that with you before I started on the new case, but we can step back and do that before I get any further on it.”
Ashlyn turns her head and leans it back again to kiss Ali’s chin. “Everything you just said… right back at you. I love you.” She leaves a few more light kisses on Ali’s face. “And about your new case…nothing to talk about. We technically talked about it and I’m proud of you too, my headstrong lawyer. If I had any doubts about it, I would have told you…so, full steam ahead. Ok?”

“Ok.” Ali acknowledges. “So, back to the matter at hand. Honest answer… what’s in your heart right now?”

“That I can’t live with myself if I don’t try to help him… but I also can’t live with putting you and us at risk.” Ashlyn replies truthfully with her dilemma.

“Ok, so we try to help him without putting ourselves at risk.” Ali considers it. “Do you think there’s a way to actually do that?”

“I don’t know. It would have to be some kind of plan where I could guide him through it without us being involved directly or in any way that anyone would know about other than him.” Ashlyn answers.

“Alright, so we start by going into strategic thinking and planning mode and see where we come out on both of our ventures.” Ali puts some finality on the conversation.

Ashlyn nods in agreement before groaning a bit as she leans her head back into the crook of Ali’s neck. “Strategic planning is not my thing. I’m more of an on-the-fly, in the situation, hands-on kind of person. This is going to be hard…how do you do it?”

“Lucky for you, the pesky bitch lawyer you live with happens to be all about strategic planning.” Ali smiles and pecks Ashlyn on the lips. “First thing I always do is give myself hard deadlines on things. It forces me to do my best thinking.”

“Ok, so what’s your current deadline?” Ashlyn inquires, knowing Ali must have one since she’s been already working on Sara and Kira’s case.

“By the end of the week, I need to have someone in Alabama who will agree to sponsor me so I can act as Kira’s lawyer. And I need to have a step-by-step game plan for the general ideas I have and things I want to accomplish in the case.” Ali tells her.

“Wow, that’s intense.” Ashlyn sighs and takes in what Ali said. “Ok, my beautiful, pesky, asshole lawyer… let’s do it your way. By Sunday night, we both have some blueprints laid out to go over with each other.” She commits herself to the deadline.

“Deal my gorgeous, steadfast, idiot cop. I really like it when you do things my way.” Ali replies playfully before letting the rest of her emotions take over, pulling Ashlyn’s face to hers for a slow, deep kiss. “I love you, Ashlyn Harris.”

“I love you too, Alexandra Krieger.” Ashlyn leans in for one more quick, soft kiss before getting up and reaching down to pull Ali to her feet too. “I have one condition.”

“What’s that?” Ali asks with a smile.

“We start tomorrow. No more talking about any of this stuff for the rest of the day.” Ashlyn lays out her terms.

“I can roll with that. What do you have in mind?” Ali inquires with a coy smile playing on her lips.

“You. Me. Yacht. Dinner. Sunset. And whatever else your heart desires.” Ashlyn suggests with a
dimpled grin.

“Hmmm…yes, yes, yes, yes, and yes… and you know damn well what my heart desires.” Ali drapes her arms around Ashlyn’s shoulders and crashes their lips together in a brief heated kiss before pulling back, satisfied to see the officer’s eyes still hooded. “Let’s make it happen, stud.”

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By just after 5pm, the two women are finally settled on the yacht and ready for their evening. They had originally planned to have Kyle over for dinner to fill him in about the Ellen Show and their L.A. trip. Rather than completely cancel, Ali had spent the rest of the afternoon hanging out with him at his salon and going for coffee. Meanwhile, Ashlyn had gotten them unpacked from the trip, stopped in at Chris’ house to share afternoon snack time with Curtis and Elsie, got the yacht gassed up and ready, and figured out dinner.

“Mmm, why does food just taste so much better when you’re near the water?” Ali wonders out loud about halfway through her container of Thai food. Ashlyn had navigated the yacht just out of the Gloucester Harbor so they’d have an open-ocean sunset view. She anchored them just far enough away from the channel that they wouldn’t be near any boat traffic, but close enough that she could easily navigate them back in the dark.

“My grandpa always said that it was because the salty air cleansed the senses. That and that anything tasted good after a long day of being on the water.” Ashlyn remembers fondly with a smile. “We’ve been here less than an hour though, so it must be the salty air then.”

“I’ll buy into that.” Ali leans in to bite a piece of basil chicken that Ashlyn offered her from her fork. “Alright, what’s the worst thing you’ve ever eaten?” She asks a random question like they usually do over dinner for fun.

“Caviar. Ugh, like what the hell do people go so crazy about? Disgusting salty little balls that get stuck in your teeth. I’ll keep my hundreds and go eat a damn cheeseburger thank you very much.” Ashlyn answers with a cringe. “What about you?”

“Zungenwurst in Germany.” Ali replies, scrunching up her nose. “What on earth is that?” Ashlyn asks.

“It’s like this thin salami-like patty made of pig’s blood, tongue, fat and breadcrumbs.” Ali explains. “Oh fucking gross! You actually put that in your mouth?” Ashlyn almost gags and wishes she hadn’t asked.

“Well I had no idea what it was! My host family served it and I was being polite, they told me it was a delicacy. Anyway, the blood taste was so overpowering…it tasted like a mouthful of pennies. I swallowed it down fast and when I found out what it was, I promptly excused myself and threw up a bit in the bathroom.” Ali shudders at the memory.

“I swear, if you even dream of feeding me that in Germany someday, Krieger…” Ashlyn starts, but Ali cuts her off.

“I wouldn’t do that to my worst enemy.” Ali promises.

“Seriously, why are we talking about awful food while we try to eat? Whose brilliant idea was that?” Ashlyn shoots Ali a playful glare.
“My bad!” Ali shrugs. “Do over. If you had to be a superhero, who would you be?”

“Batman. No question.” Ashlyn answers confidently.

“Interesting. Why is that?” Ali probes.

“Cause he doesn’t actually have superpowers. He’s just a crime-fighter that uses his own strength and skills combined with technology that he develops. Well, he and Alfred. But anyway, it’s bad ass.” Ashlyn elaborates.

“I should’ve known that it would either be him or Green Lantern based on your collection of underwear. And while I definitely appreciate a superhero who understands the importance of a great ring…” Ali pauses and winks to emphasize her insinuation before continuing, “I have to say that Batman fits your personality really well.” Ali smiles. “You’re a pretty damn self-sufficient bad ass yourself, Harris.”

“Thank you, baby.” Ashlyn laughs lightly and leans in for a quick peck between bites of food. “You’re up, who would you be?”

“I’m gonna have to go with Rogue from the X-men.” Ali replies.

“Is that the one that can absorb any other person’s powers, talents, memories, etc.?” Ashlyn tries to remember from her X-men movie obsession days.

“Yep.” Ali confirms.

“I feel like that answer is almost cheating.” Ashlyn teases a bit.

“Yeah, well, I like to keep my superpower options open.” Ali shrugs.

“Spoken like a true lawyer.” Ashlyn shakes her head.

“Whatsoever you say, Batman.” Ali retorts with a playful look.

“Hey now, I don’t hear you complaining when I take you to my bat cave.” Ashlyn waggles her eyebrows.

“Oh my god, you did not just use Batman lingo to try and sex me up!” Ali says in mock offense.

“Damn right I did.” Ashlyn says confidently. “Like you’re one to talk…did you or did you not just use Green Lantern to drop a hint about wanting a big ol’ rock to adorn that beautiful finger of yours, Krieger?”

“Proudly and with no shame.” Ali admits through giggles.

“In that case, I’ll make sure it glows bright green and everything.” Ashlyn teases her and earns a light smack on the forearm.

With 20 minutes to go until sunset, the sky is already radiant with hues of orange and pink as they finish up their dinner. “How about dessert on the front tanning bed and we’ll watch from there?” Ashlyn suggests.

“Absolutely. I’ll grab the dessert.” Ali agrees and grabs the small dessert box near her before making her way to the front of the yacht.

“I’ll get us some pillows from inside and a blanket.” Ashlyn adds. It has been a little chilly all day
and now as sunset approaches out on the open water, it’s definitely cold. They’re both wearing pants and a jacket, but Ashlyn wants to make sure they’re extra comfortable.

They lay on the padded tanning bed, propped up by the pillows that Ashlyn brought out there, while sharing bites from a slice of cheesecake and watching the sun sink slowly towards the horizon. When they’re done eating, Ashlyn wraps the blanket around them and holds Ali snuggly as the brunette practically crawls into her lap to get closer.

“This is perfect.” Ali leaves a couple lingering kisses on the side of Ashlyn’s neck as the glowing orange ball in the sky starts dipping below the horizon line.

“You’re perfect.” Ashlyn gives her signature reply to the brunette with a smile before angling her head so that Ali’s lips are now on hers instead of her neck. They get so wrapped up in the slow burning kiss that the sun is fully below the horizon by the time they look back at it.

“Oops.” Ali shrugs slightly and leans in for one more peck. “So much for watching the sunset… more like half a sunset.”

“Eh, it was just an excuse to get you out on the boat with me tonight. I’ll take you over a sunset any day.” Ashlyn smiles as her hand moves softly through Ali’s hair.

“You didn’t need an excuse, Harris, but you’re sweet. And so so warm, geez it got cold.” Ali snuggles herself tightly into Ashlyn.

“Well, let’s take this party inside then. I didn’t think to bring coffee for the French press or any tea, but there’s a fully stocked bar in the main cabin.” Ashlyn suggests.

“Works for me.” Ali agrees and starts to get up.

“Go ahead inside and pour us some drinks, baby. I’ll quickly clean up out here and be right behind you.” Ashlyn gets up and starts gathering the pillows, blanket, and the empty container from dessert. She stows the pillows and blankets in the bedroom cabin and then stops to pick up the empty cartons from dinner to put in a trash bag before she joins Ali inside.

The warm air of the cabin hits Ashlyn immediately and she quickly shucks off her jacket. She finds Ali sitting on a stool at the mini corner bar with two poured glasses in front of her, the room only dimly lit by the small recessed lights above the bar. By the time she crosses the cabin and sits next to Ali, the brunette is already handing her a glass of whiskey. She smiles and takes a sip of it, letting the fiery amber liquid warm her up. She watches Ali put her own glass to her lips and do the same, a bit surprised that it isn’t a glass of wine. The slight cringe on Ali’s face as she swallows it just further confirms her prior knowledge that the brunette definitely isn’t a whiskey drinker.

“Why are you drinking whiskey? There’s plenty of wine in here. Did you not find it?” Ashlyn asks, feeling bad that Ali had clearly missed the full wine cabinet in her search.

“No, I saw it…but I’m drinking whiskey because it’s your favorite.” Ali says simply with a tiny smirk on her face. “And since it’s your favorite…” She pauses and stands up to close the short distance between them, “I can do this…” Ali takes another small sip of whiskey from her glass, but doesn’t swallow it. Instead she takes Ashlyn’s lips in hers and lets the liquid run into her girlfriend’s mouth, her tongue following right behind it as a rumbling moan emanates from the officer’s throat.

Ashlyn has half a second to swallow the burning liquid before Ali’s tongue is on hers, an unsuppressed moan immediately leaving her mouth as the smoky flavor lingers on her taste buds and mixes with familiar taste of Ali’s mouth. Spurred on by the tingling of her skin and the gush between
her legs, Ashlyn stands up from her stool and makes quick work of Ali’s jacket, tossing it haphazardly on the floor without breaking the kiss. She slips her right hand inside the back of the brunette’s shirt, relishing in the feel of the soft warm skin she finds there while her left hand fumbles along the top of the bar until it locates the remote control. With the push of a button, the blinds automatically drop down to cover the wrap around windows surrounding them. Ashlyn isn’t taking any chances with their privacy tonight.

Ali smiles into Ashlyn’s lips when she hears the electric hum of the blinds lowering, knowing her strategic move with the whiskey had the desired effect. As soon as the humming stops, she breaks the kiss and puts her hands on Ashlyn’s face, tracing the sculpted cheekbones with her thumbs before letting them drag down the officer’s neck and shoulders.

Their faces are close, Ashlyn breathing heavily in soft warm puffs against her neck as Ali reaches down and quickly grabs the hem of the officer’s shirt and lifts it over her head in one motion. She breathes in the unmistakable scent of woody bergamot that is so uniquely Ashlyn’s, letting it intoxicate her as her hands roam. She gets lost in the bliss of Ashlyn’s skin under her hands, her eyes never leaving the darkened hazel ones gazing into her own as her fingers move along the perfect v-line that disappears into the waistband of the boxer briefs that are peeking out of the officer’s jeans. Not able to hold herself back from all of the skin in front of her, she moves in to leave open mouthed kisses all over Ashlyn’s neck only breaking away to eventually get the officer’s sport bra off before going right back to it.

Ali nips and licks her way to the officer’s already semi-hard nipples, alternating sucking them into her mouth and running her tongue over them as she gently squeezes the perfect breasts they belong to. She hears Ashlyn whimper out “feels so good” before she’s unexpectedly turned around and pressed against the bar. Ashlyn’s large hands cover her own and hold them down against the cool tiled surface of the bar top. “Mmm, baby… yes, honey.” She whispers breathily when Ashlyn’s lips start working on the back of her neck, incredibly turned on by the sudden change in control.

Ashlyn briefly lets go of Ali’s hands to unzip the athletic hoodie the brunette is wearing, happily finding that there is nothing underneath it but a bra which she makes quick work of too. She presses a few kisses to the back of Ali’s shoulders before craving more skin and moving to rid the brunette of her leggings and underwear in one rapid motion. She brings her hands back up to secure Ali’s hands against the bar before sucking the skin on top of the brunette’s shoulder into her mouth and biting lightly.

“Ash… fuck, baby.” Ali moans loudly when she feels Ashlyn’s hard nipples against her back. The officer is slowly licking patterns down her spine and it’s driving her crazy, her already wet center quivering in anticipation. When Ashlyn moves her hands to Ali’s breasts, rolling the nipples between her fingers, Ali takes the opportunity to use her arms to pull the officer tighter against her back and grinding her ass into Ashlyn’s crotch. Ashlyn doesn’t miss a beat, adjusting her thigh to rest between Ali’s legs so she can get some friction.

“You’re so damn hot.” Ali husks as Ashlyn drags her hands down her sides before going back to holding Ali’s hands against the bar. She can feel Ashlyn smirking against the skin between her shoulders before the officer moves back up to suck her neck again. Her body is already well past the point of desperation, wanting Ashlyn to give her more. “Please, Ash… touch me, baby.” She pleads as her hips steadily grind back into Ashlyn’s thigh.

“I am touching you.” Ashlyn whispers into Ali’s ear, knowing full well the brunette can’t take much more teasing.

“Touch me more.” Ali replies demandingly.
“One condition.” Ashlyn sucks on Ali’s pulse point and hears a loud moan leave the brunette’s mouth.

“Anything.” Ali says an exhale of breath.

“Your hands stay on the bar until I say so.” Ashlyn commands and tilts her head in to capture Ali’s lips in a heated kiss, only breaking it when she feels the word “ok” spoken into her mouth. “What was that, beautiful?” Ashlyn asks with a smile playing on her lips.

“Hands on bar.” Ali confirms, leaning her head back into Ashlyn and tilting to give her more access to her neck before begging again. “Please, touch me. Need you, baby.

Ashlyn can’t deny this woman anything. She leaves the spot she’s licking on Ali’s neck and quickly rakes her hands down her back, watching it arch at the sensation as the brunette lets out a gasp. She leaves a few kisses on Ali’s lower back before dropping down to her knees and kissing down the back of the brunette’s strong thighs and back up again until she reaches her perfect ass.

Ali is ready to explode as Ashlyn starts zeroing in on where she needs her most. For all the people she’s had sex with and all the positions she’s tried, this isn’t one of them. Not that a few of them didn’t attempt it, but she had always redirected them to something else, feeling far too vulnerable and exposed to even try to enjoy it. Vulnerable and exposed are far from what she feels at the moment. Right now she feels wanted and incredibly turned on, relaxed albeit eager for the love of her life to take her in such an intimate way. She feels Ashlyn’s warm breath on her core and her legs start to shake a bit in anticipation. “Fuck, baby…I can’t wait to feel you…please, Ash.”

“You smell so damn good, Alex.” Ashlyn husks as her entire body tingles at the intoxicating, aroused scent of her girlfriend. She takes a second to breathe it in before using the tip of her tongue to lightly lick around Ali’s entrance.

“Unnh, oh my god… more, Ash.” Ali’s fingers spread out, trying to find something to grip on the surface of the bar.

Ashlyn takes her time, hands going to cup Ali’s ass cheeks and spreading her wide open. “So beautiful, baby.” She slowly pushes her tongue all the way into the brunette’s core a couple times before pulling back a bit and sucking the glistening lips into her mouth. “Mmmm, I love the way you taste.” She mumbles into Ali’s wet center and hears the brunette let out a loud whimper.

“Oooh, yes baby, fuck… keep talking, you feel so fucking good. So good, Ash…so…oh, good.” Ali repeats in a mantra and lowers her head down to the bar, her forehead pressing against the cool tile as she feels the vibrations of the officer’s voice move through her intimate flesh.

Ashlyn’s tongue is too busy licking patterns on Ali’s clit for her to talk, but she moans loudly to keep up the vibrations. She can feel the brunette’s legs trembling steadily and she knows she doesn’t have much longer before Ali lets go. She moves her tongue to Ali’s entrance, hungrily lapping up the fresh wetness pooled there before swirling it deeply into the brunette, plunging in as hard and fast and she can.

“Fuck, fuck…. Ashlyn, yeees, like that, like that. So close for you, baby…I’m so close. Ooooh…” Ali presses herself back into Ashlyn’s face, her hips moving wildly as her fingertips turn white from pressing into the bar so hard. “Unnh, fuck me just like that, don’t stop… oh my god, baby… please…” She screams out breathlessly as her head goes back and her eyes close tightly, her entire body coiled up and ready for glorious release.

Ashlyn’s face is completely coated in Ali’s essence as the brunette’s fucks her face with hips
gyrating chaotically. She moves her thumb to rub tight circles on Ali’s clit to push her over the edge, squeezing her own thighs together tightly in an effort to control her own throbbing core. She feels the shiver go through Ali’s body and the clench around her tongue, the signal that she’s about to come, and sucks the brunette’s clit into her mouth, rolling her tongue over it amidst the gentle suction.

“Ashlyn…Ash, Ash…oh, oh, fuuuck, baby…Ash!” Ali’s entire body tightens and shakes as the orgasm overtakes her. Her hips continue to move as she rides out the pulses of pleasure, feeling Ashlyn lick her gently as she comes down. She reaches back with her arms frantically, desperate to feel the officer against her. It’s only a few moments before she feels hard nipples press into her back again and she reaches to grip Ashlyn’s ass and lower back with her hands, pulling her in as close as she can. “Holy hell, unnh… you’re so incredible, baby.” She managing to get out in between her panting, still trying to catch her breath as her whole body buzzes.

Ashlyn kisses the back of Ali’s neck softly and moves Ali’s hands back to the bar, pressing them down again. “I love you like this…the way you let go for me. You’re so sexy, Alex.” She pauses and gently bites the top of Ali’s shoulder before soothing it with her tongue and moving to the brunette’s ear. “I’m not done with you beautiful…I want you again.” She whispers into Ali’s ear and feels her breath hitch.

“I’m yours, Ash. All yours.” Ali’s voice goes up an octave as she feels the officer press a finger into entrance. “Yes baby, fuck me…fuck me so good.”

Ashlyn’s mouth continues nipping and licking across Ali’s neck and shoulders as she adds a second finger and fucks the brunette extremely slow and deep from behind, drawing it out and wanting her to feel every single movement. “So tight and wet and warm…I love being inside you, beautiful.” Ashlyn softly sucks the skin behind Ali’s ear.

“Mmm, harder Ash…faster…you’re so fucking hot… mmmm, fuck me harder.” Ali moans, feeling the twinge of orgasm just starting to build again. But Ashlyn doesn’t change her pace, steadily pushing in until she bottoms out and then slowly withdrawing almost completely again before repeating the process. Ali groans, not sure how long she can handle the slow buildup on her already shaky legs. She focuses on the feel of Ashlyn’s long fingers filling her so completely, the hot skin of the officer pressed all over her back. “Unnh, you get so deep inside, baby… so deep, I love you.” She moans loudly as the ache deep in her belly grows faster than she was expecting.

Ashlyn maintains her steady thrusts, enjoying the feel of the brunette’s satin walls around her fingers and the soft squishing sound every time she presses into her very wet hole. When Ali’s head is thrown back again, her mouth gaping open trying to breathe, and the signature shiver running down her body…only then does Ashlyn give in, using her hip for extra leverage and suddenly pumping into Ali hard and fast.

“Oh fuck, yes, yes, yes…Ashlyn, yes… baby fuck, harder… take me, don’t stop! Ali screams as her body shakes around Ashlyn, being held up by only the officer’s hand inside her and the arm wrapped tightly around her waist.

Ashlyn watches Ali’s body quake as she fucks her hard just the way she wants, the brunette’s small breasts bouncing against the bar with dog tags clinking right beneath them as she holds on, hair hanging down around her face and swaying wildly… she’s never seen anything more beautiful in her life… her Alex, giving herself so completely. “You’re gorgeous, Alex… so incredibly gorgeous… come for me, show me what I do to you.”

“Ash, oh oh, oh yeeees….fuck, kiss me.” Ali manages to blurt out as her whole body erupts in spasms of pleasure. She breaks her promise of keeping her hands on the bar and reaches back with both hands to grab the officer’s head and pull her into a scorching kiss with whatever breath she has
left in her lungs. She tastes and smells herself all over Ashlyn’s face, triggering yet another wave of
pleasure.

Ashlyn almost orgasms from the passionate kiss, Ali’s moans and obscenities filling her mouth as the
brunette rides out her high. She moves her tongue against Ali’s while still fucking her really slow and
gentle. She keeps it up until she feels her girlfriend’s legs completely give out, letting her fingers slip
out as she smoothly guides Ali down to lay on the floor and holds the brunette tightly against her
chest. “I love you, Alex…so much. You are the most beautiful woman in the world.” She says
sweetly as she wipes the sweat from Ali’s brow with her hand and presses tender kisses all over her
face.

“I love you more than anything…literally more than anything and everything.” Ali says emotionally
as she smiles into Ashlyn’s chest, her breathing still trying to regulate. No one has ever made her feel
this good in every single way and she’ll be damned if she doesn’t make sure Ashlyn knows it.

“I don’t know…cupcakes are pretty awesome.” Ashlyn teasingly replies to Ali’s affectionate
statement.

“Shhhh.” Ali shushes the officer and kisses her hard, Ashlyn’s soft surprised moan filling the air. She
wants to feel Ashlyn writhing beneath her so badly that her body aches for it no matter how worn out
she is from those two powerful orgasms. She wastes no time, moving right down to take a nipple into
her mouth as soon as she breaks the kiss.

“Damn baby, go ahead.” Ashlyn says playfully, but her banter completely falls off when she feels
Ali lightly bite down on her nipple before soothing it with her tongue while her fingers pinch the
other one. “Jesus, Alex.”

Ali kisses and licks random patches of the colorful tattoo adorning the officer’s side before hearing a
sharp intake of breath when she sucks hard enough to leave a mark in the center of Ashlyn’s abs.

“Ahhh, fuck that’s hot…” Ashlyn hisses at the love bite and watches Ali’s move lower, her tongue
now dragging along the skin near the waistband of her boxers.

“Naked. Now.” Ali uses just enough words to get her point across as she moves back up to Ashlyn’s
nipples and alternates between them until they are sensitive, dark pink peaks.

Ashlyn obliges as soon as she can pull Ali up from her chest, working on unbuttoning her jeans
while she kisses the brunette. She breaks the kiss and lifts her butt to pull the jeans off and
immediately lets out a chuckle as she looks down. “Ha! Would you look at that? What a perfect
coincidence!” Ashlyn draws Ali’s attention to her Batman boxers and watches the brunette smile. “I
mean what are the chances…” Ashlyn starts before Ali’s fingers go to her lips.

Ali catches the little sparkle in Ashlyn’s eyes, the same one she gets when she gets fired up about
something interesting or funny and is about to go off on a tangent. She can already hear the officer
trying to determine the odds of her wearing her Batman underwear and them having that
conversation over dinner. Normally, she’d oblige her… but not right now, not when everything in
her is aching to taste the officer. She puts her fingers to Ashlyn’s lips in an attempt to shut it down
quickly… “Ashlyn…baby, I love you…but shut the hell up and let me into the damn bat cave.”

Ashlyn is speechless at the sultry demand, just nodding and quickly moving to discard her boxers.
Before her brain can even catch up enough to laugh at the humor of Ali’s statement, she feels the
brunette suck another hickey onto her hip bone and settle between her legs. “Holy fuck, Alex… yes,
ahhh.”
Ali’s entire core throbs at the sight before her… Ashlyn’s pink, perfect, glistening center so wet that a few drops are now beaded on plush royal blue carpet beneath her. “You’re so wet, Ash…so wet and sexy.” Ali runs her fingers through Ashlyn’s folds, collecting the wetness on them and licking it off as she stares into darkened hazel eyes. “Mmmmm, so good, honey. I want all of it.”

“Alex, please… I need your mouth on me… now…please, Alex.” Ashlyn pleads, no longer able to control her need with the smoldering look on Ali’s face as the brunette nibbles at the inside of her thigh.

Ali doesn’t make her wait even a second, taking one broad lick through Ashlyn’s dripping center before giving the officer exactly what she wants…her mouth everywhere, sucking and licking folds, lips, clit and entrance until Ashlyn’s hips are off the floor with loud moans and obscenities passing through her lips.

“Allleex… I’m there already, I’m there… fuck… inside me, go in.” Ashlyn yells out in a wail, feeling Ali’s firm tongue enter her as her walls immediately clench around it. It only takes a few more strokes of the brunette’s tongue for Ashlyn to lose it, feeling a gush between her legs as her body tightens up and quakes.

Ali feasts on the copious flood of wetness Ashlyn spilled for her and moans lightly, turned on at the fact that she caused it. She watches Ashlyn’s face carefully as she licks, the officer’s eyes shut tightly in ecstasy as she gasps for air. Her eyes go to Ashlyn’s hands which are still gripping as much of the plush carpet as she is able to grab. Ali smiles at the vision, remembering how she pictured almost exactly this very one when she walked into this cabin on her first time on the yacht, the royal blue carpet definitely broken in now. She’s pulled away from her thoughts at Ashlyn tugging her up.

“Alex… again… please.” Ashlyn gets out through ragged breathing before kissing her deeply and moving Ali’s hand between her legs. “Don’t stop until I have to limp off this boat, understand?”

Ali doesn’t even answer, flipping Ashlyn onto her side and settling in behind her. She reaches around and enters her as she sucks a third mark onto the back of her shoulders. She gives in to Ashlyn’s every demand, going deep and hard through two more consecutive orgasms until the officer is a boneless, breathless heap on the cabin floor.

“My god, baby… incredible.” Ashlyn rolls over like a slug and meets Ali’s eyes, finding them still dark with desire. She can barely move, but there’s no way she’s not going to make those eyes shine in the same state of spent bliss as her own. She wordlessly drags her hand down Ali’s side and between her legs, rubbing firm circles on the brunette’s clit.

“Mmmm… just like that, stay right there, baby.” Ali breathes heavily into Ashlyn’s neck and clutches her tightly. She’s so worked up from taking care of Ashlyn that it’s not going to take much to get that one last release she craves. Ashlyn is putting the perfect amount of pressure on her swollen clit and her head is already foggy, stars forming behind her closed eyelids. “Like that…oh god, Ash, you’re fucking perfect baby.” She barely whispers out, her voice failing her. Ashlyn drops down to suck one of her nipples just the way she likes it and she feels her body tense up and let go, everything spinning for a few moments from the rush.

Neither of them has anything left but a few whispered “I love yous” before they doze off holding each other close. It’s Ashlyn who wakes up a couple hours later and gathers enough energy to put her clothes on and navigate them back to the dock where she anchors the boat. She knows there’s no way they’re making it back home tonight, so she wraps a still naked Ali in a blanket and carries her across the yacht to the main bedroom cabin being careful not to wake her.

She watches Ali sleep for a couple of minutes, just awed by her splendor and ever in disbelief that
this woman is hers to love. “Angel… so beautiful. I love you.” She whispers and places a soft kiss to Ali’s forehead before getting up to take off her clothes again so she can hold Ali against her skin. She giggles and shakes her head when she sees her Batman boxers again, deciding to leave them on and making a mental note to get a sign for their bedroom door that says ‘Welcome to the Bat Cave’. She settles herself into the bed and scoots to hold Ali close, feeling the good kind of soreness between her legs and letting out another soft giggle at the fact that she may indeed be limping off of this boat in the morning.

After a long week of spending their evenings pouring over their new undertakings, Ashlyn and Ali find themselves at their Sunday night deadline sitting next to each other on the couch. They’ve worked diligently all week, Ashlyn more so than Ali because she also had to go to work, both as ready as they can be for this reveal to each other.

“You first.” Ashlyn says, motioning to the big binder in front of Ali that she has been keeping all her information in.

“Oh, well I have great news first.” Ali says with a nose crinkling smile.

“Tell me, tell me!” Ashlyn says excitedly.

“I’m in! I have a lawyer who will supervise me so I can officially take the case.” Ali blurts out, happy to finally tell Ashlyn after sitting on that knowledge since last night when she found out about it. As much as she wanted to tell the officer, she didn’t want to distract her from her own thoughts until tonight when they had agreed they’d share.

“Alex! That’s excellent, baby!” Ashlyn leans in and kisses her solidly on the lips. “I’m so proud of you. I knew you’d find a way! How did you find someone? Who is it?”

“I got really damn lucky. I went through all of my old firm contacts until this guy Andrew I used to work with suggested that I talk to another lawyer he knew in the firm’s D.C. office. So, I call this this other guy, Tom, and it turns out that his sister is an Alabama lawyer about an hour out of Birmingham. With having the connection to the firm and my old reputation to rely on, he was totally willing to help me get his sister on-board. So, long story short…she agreed and I’m good to go! Her name is June Nixon.” Ali elaborates and gets another kiss from Ashlyn.

“You’re so incredible, Alex. I’m honestly in awe of you.” Ashlyn admits.

“Thank you, sweetheart.” Ali blushes a bit.

“So, what’s the plan then?” Ashlyn gets them back on track.

“Well first thing is that I want to get my hands on those case files and whatever evidence I can. The goal is to prove to the parole board that Kira isn’t a threat and can be released safely into the community. I have Wayne Henning, the ballistics expert I used in your case, ready to have a look at the bullet and the weapon that will likely be sitting there as evidence. So, hopefully that gives me something. More importantly though, now I have to start scouring through bank and property records and any other documents Sara and Kira have. I think it will be important to show that Steve wasn’t living with them and that he and Sara were unofficially separated.” Ali explains.

“Sounds like the parole board can’t get around letting her go free if you can show them that.” Ashlyn agrees.

“I would hope so. Although, it is Alabama.” Ali shrugs.
“True.” Ashlyn nods. “Alright, Krieger… tell me what else, I can see on your face that you still have something else up your sleeve.”

“You know me too well.” Ali smiles and entwines their hands.

“I can never know you well enough, but I’ll spent my whole life trying.” Ashlyn replies sincerely.

“Stop making me swoon so I can tell you, Harris.” Ali leans in for another kiss.

“Ok, ok, tell me already.” Ashlyn implores her.

“Well, I’m going to try and help them relocate to another state. Preferably a more open-minded one where they maybe have some existing connections.” Ali divulges.

“To get out of shithole Alabama and away from Steve?” Ashlyn asks, not sure why Ali would push for it other than those two reasons.

“Well, yeah. But also because if it’s clear that a parolee is going to settle somewhere else, it makes their decision to let her go easier. If she’s not in the state, she’s not their problem anymore. The trick would be to get another state to take on her parole and monitoring. I’m pretty sure I can make it work though, assuming Sara and Kira are willing to relocate.” Ali finishes outlining her game plan.

“Goddamn you’re smart, woman. Truly remarkable…I swear there is no better lawyer on the planet. I think your plan is great, Alex. I know you’ll find a way to make it all work out.” Ashlyn replies confidently, sure that nothing can stop her girlfriend once she sets her mind to something. “Once you’re officially working on the case, I’ll get in touch with Kira and try and provide whatever support she needs.”

“You’re the best, Ash. I can’t tell you how much more empowered I feel with you beside me…it’s like…well, nothing I’ve experienced before so I can’t compare it. But it means everything.” Ali places a soft, loving kiss on her lips.

“Yeah, you might want hold that thought until we get through my ‘blueprint’.” Ashlyn scratches the back of her head.


“Let’s just say I wouldn’t be surprised if you got me committed and kicked me to the curb.” Ashlyn admits quietly.

“Doubtful, but try me. Whatcha got, Harris?” Ali replies resolutely.

Ashlyn slowly grabs her small notebook off the coffee table. In contrast to Ali who has a sizeable binder going, her notes fill only one page. “Fair warning, it’s not as much of a prepared plan as yours is…it kind of can’t be.” Ashlyn hesitantly tells Ali what to expect.

“Ash…” Ali gently holds the officer’s cheeks in her hands. “Don’t be worried or self-conscious about what you came with up, baby. We’ll work through whatever it is together. Just relax and tell me, I’m not judging.”

Ashlyn nods and feels more settled with the little kisses that Ali leaves on her nose and chin before letting go. She flips her notebook open and sets it on her lap, ready to explain the simple contents.

Ali looks down at the page Ashlyn has opened to. Her lips curl into a smile as she sees little drawings all over the margins, recognizing notable buildings from the Boston skyline in the sketches.
The one of Fenway Park blows her mind, it’s only about 2 inches by 3 inches in size, but the accuracy and detail is incredible. It’s something she loves about the officer… that she sketches when she needs to think or feels anxious. Her mind wanders to the many times she looked over at Ashlyn this past week and watched her moving the pencil steadily in this notebook, her face in complete concentration. She feels Ashlyn shift a bit beside her and knows she’s gotten sidetracked by the sketches, quickly turning her attention to the writing on the page. It’s nothing more than two lists of names, one longer than the other.

“The way I see it, McNally can only play the game and try to come out on top.” Ashlyn says as she sees Ali’s attention focus to the writing on the page. “The thing is, for him not to become another Bobby, his role in the game has to be finite. He has to play solely to find a way out and take it when he does. Does that make sense?”

“So far I’m following.” Ali replies.

“I only see one way out that ends the game.” Ashlyn explains. “We all know that Southie is a haven for organized crime with all kinds of groups having their hand in it. It’s a never-ending cycle. One criminal goes down, another just takes his place.”

“Oh…” Ali nods in understanding.

“But, there’s a hierarchy among the lawless madness. A top dog who has the upper hand among all of them.” Ashlyn continues.


“Yep. The head of the snake.” Ashlyn confirms. “McNally needs to make a statement so he can walk away; be the one who gains the respect and upper hand. It’s the only way the cycle won’t repeat while he’s the chief. He needs to cut the head off the snake.”

Ali’s eyes go wide. “Wait, are you saying…”

“He needs to take down Train.” Ashlyn finishes the statement for her, looking up into Ali’s eyes and trying to gauge her reaction.

“Train? The head of the Winter Hill Gang? The guy that the FBI has failed to take down repeatedly in over 20 years? The son of bitch who’s notorious for getting rid of people who wrong him by tying them to tracks down in the subway tunnels, but has never been caught doing it? That Train?” Ali asks incredulously.

“The one and only.” Ashlyn replies matter-of-factly.

“Jesus Christ, you’re serious?” Ali questions.

“As a heart attack.” Ashlyn answers.

“How? How on earth does anyone do that without getting killed?” Ali says in a whisper, her heart beating hard.

“The only reason the FBI can’t take him down is because they use him as an informant. They’ve given the fucker so much immunity on so many things that they can’t legally go after him for most of what he does. And he’s smart. Now that he has so much power, he has lots of people under his thumb to do the dirty work for him.” Ashlyn pauses to make sure Ali is still following, finding her with a furrowed brow as she tries hard to understand. “But… there is one thing I know he handles
himself. One thing he has no immunity for.”

What?” Ali questions quickly.

“He’s majorly involved in purchasing large caches of automatic and illegal weapons from international Asian crime organizations. There’s huge money in that market and it’s one thing the FBI would never grant immunity for given the threat level to homeland security. It’s his Achilles heel. That’s why he handles it himself, he can’t take chances.” Ashlyn elucidates.

“But how do you exploit that and bag him for it?” Ali inquires, not understanding how anyone can catch this guy if nobody has yet.

“That’s where it gets complicated. It’s a delicate game of trust and trickery… you just have to play to try and get the outcome you want. There’s no other way.” Ashlyn says, knowing the answer in and of itself is unsettling.

“Game?” Ali clarifies.

“Yeah, look at it like chess. McNally is the white queen, Train is the black queen. Every police department has good officers, ones you can trust for protection… the knights, rooks, bishops. Same for the criminal gangs, they have their loyal members.” Ashlyn points to the shorter list of names on the sheet of paper. “These are people McNally can trust.”

“And these?” Ali motions to the longer list.

“The dirty cops and the mercenaries for hire. In other words, the pawns you need to play the game but can’t trust for any kind of protection.” Ashlyn replies.

“Alright, I can sort of get what you’re saying here. But where do you fit in?” Ali finally asks what she’s been wanting to this whole time.

“I’m moving the pieces without them knowing it. I’m the only one with enough perspective right now to see the board, strategize, and adjust.” Ashlyn lets out a deep breath. “It’s the only way I can think of.”

Ali nods. “And what is the strategy right now?”

“Well, for starters, McNally needs to appear to give in and play by Train’s rules. He needs to get one of these trusted people deep into Train’s camp…get Train to trust that person so that McNally has a true informant. Meanwhile he needs to use all these people he can’t trust to his benefit…feed them incorrect information so that it trickles down to Train and starts throwing things off. With everything unstable, the right opportunity will eventually present itself…and when it does, McNally has to strike hard. If he can take down Train, no one will cross him while he’s the Chief. I have no doubt that criminal activity will go on as usual, but at least it won’t involve the police department anymore. No one is going to fuck with the guy who took down Train.” Ashlyn lays it out.

“But won’t McNally incriminate himself if starts giving in to Train and these other guys? He’ll be into majorly illegal stuff.” Ali sees a hole in the plan.

“Not if he quietly opens an investigation on Train and gives himself a level of immunity like I did with Bobby. And, I’d have him donate every cent of money that comes to him from all this bullshit to charity. No one with a sound mind is going to go after him for that.” Ashlyn replies, hoping Ali agrees that this would work.

“Yeah…I think you’re right about that.” Ali confirms as she thinks it all over. Ashlyn’s right, it’s not
much of a well-laid out plan, but it’s also not something she can manage to shoot any holes through at the moment. The whole premise is pretty solid for something that has so many factors and so much potential to go wrong.

“Be honest. Am I crazy?” Ashlyn asks quietly, ready for the hammer to drop.

Ali takes a minute to think it all through one more time as she focuses again on the little sketches on the page before looking back up at Ashlyn. “Positively mental.” She says simply and watches Ashlyn’s face drop before adding, “But also completely brilliant.” She cups Ashlyn’s face in her hands again and presses their foreheads together. “Is it insane and unpredictable? Absolutely. But…I couldn’t believe and trust in anyone more than I do in you. I have faith that no matter what the outcome is, it’ll be one we can live with. I’m with you, like always.”

“Just like that?” Ashlyn questions, her voice emotional.

“Just like that, Ash.” Ali replies and kisses her so hard that it knocks Ashlyn back onto the couch as a surprised whimper fills the air, the blueprint conversation clearly over for the night.
This train is leaving the station, away we go! 
Not sure how many of you are still following along with me on this adventure, but I appreciate all of the comments that I do get...so, let me know what you think, if you're still enjoying it, and if there is anything you want to see as we move along!

Sunday, September 17 - Monday, September 18

Ashlyn groans sleepily when she hears her phone vibrating on the coffee table. She reaches over to silence the alarm which signals that she now has 40 minutes to get dressed and go to work. She lets out a sigh knowing that she can’t just go back to sleep like she wants to, like the warm arm around her waist is tempting her to do.

Ali is perfectly sandwiched between Ashlyn and the back of the couch, the brunette’s face nuzzled into the top of her chest and her arm draped along the officer’s waist. Ashlyn smiles, taking in the naked and trim body pressed against her own. Her lethargic body practically begs her to stay right where she is, wrapped up with Ali. Ashlyn hadn’t meant to fall asleep. Despite always setting an alarm to be safe, she never sleeps before her night shift. However, the sharing of their game plans followed by a quick but intense love-making session on the couch had lulled her into a peaceful slumber the minute they finished and Ali pulled her in close.

She traces Ali’s collarbone lightly with her fingers, moving down the brunette’s arms and side while she tries to wake herself up and garner the motivation to move. Her lips curl into a smile when she sees Ali’s eyes flutter open and look into her own.

“Mmmm, what time it is?” Ali asks, her voice heavy from sleep.

“Only 8:22pm, we fell asleep for like an hour.” Ashlyn answers as she kisses Ali’s cheeks.

Ali sighs, her mind just now waking up enough to remember what day it is and that Ashlyn has to be at work by 9pm. “I don’t want you to go.” She pouts.

“I don’t want to go either, sweetheart. But somebody has to protect the good citizens of Ipswich.” Ashlyn jokingly puffs out her chest as best she can in this position.

“My Hero!” Ali plays back as she bats her eyelashes and fans herself, the two of them sharing a laugh. “Five more minutes?” She begs quietly with her best puppy face on.

“Anything for you.” Ashlyn replies sweetly and goes to pull Ali close again, but the brunette has other ideas and leans in to capture the officer’s lips. They kiss languidly as they hold each other tight with Ashlyn not able to help the smile that forms on her lips at the thought of how obsessed Ali is with kissing her, the feeling definitely mutual. “Best extra five minutes ever.” She whispers with her eyes still closed as they pull back.
“Really don’t want you to go.” Ali repeats as she presses several quick pecks to her girlfriend’s slightly puffy lips.

“I know, baby. I know.” Ashlyn brushes a strand of hair from Ali’s face and tucks it behind the brunette’s ear, kissing her softly one more time. “I’ll be home before you know it and we’ll get right back to this, just in our bed instead.” She smiles.

Ali nods and returns the smile, lightly squeezing the officer’s lower back where her hand is resting. “Go get ready, Hero. I’ll make you some coffee to perk you up.”

“You’re the best.” Ashlyn says as she reluctantly gets up and stretches her back a bit before heading into the bedroom to get ready. She walks into the kitchen fifteen minutes later ready to go, finding Ali now wearing the sweatpants and t-shirt that she herself had been wearing earlier. She can’t help but smile to herself at which pile of discarded clothing the brunette had chosen to re-dress herself in. There is simply nothing better than Ali Krieger dressed in her clothes.

Ali turns around from the counter at hearing the sound of heavy booted footsteps in the kitchen. “Patrol tonight?” She asks as she takes in Ashlyn’s neat uniformed appearance and notes the addition of the tactical vest that more often than not isn’t there.

“Yes. I’m supervising those rookies that messed up with the DUI checkpoint a few months ago. They’re learning to execute a proper one this time.” Ashlyn replies, heading over to the small gun safe on the near wall and punching in the access code to retrieve her weapon.

“Well, they’ll learn from the best then.” Ali replies with a smile as she walks over with a to-go cup of coffee and a brown paper bag. “Here you go, lovely. I made you a quick PB&J sandwich and there’s a brownie in there from the batch we made yesterday.”

“You’re the sweetest, baby. Thank you.” Ashlyn gives her a dimpled grin as she finishes holstering her gun and then kissing Ali on the forehead, taking both the cup and the bag in one of her large hands. “Coffee for you too?” She questions a bit surprised at seeing the extra mug on counter.

“Kyle is coming to hang out around 10pm when he’s done for the night and I don’t want to be all sleepy when he gets here.” Ali explains.

“Tell him I said hi. I hope you two have fun.” Ashlyn replies, happy that Ali will have company for the night. She loves that Kyle often comes to spend the night here when she works the late shift, despite the 45 minute drive for him each way. “Also, I might be a little later getting home this morning. I’m hoping to get McNally to come meet me as soon as my shift is over.” She adds, knowing she doesn’t have to explain any further.

“Good luck, can’t wait to hear about how that conversation goes.” Ali says with a knowing look. “Get home as soon as you can, you know I’ll miss you.” She wraps her arms around Ashlyn’s waist and lets her thumbs slip under the bottom edge of the tactical vest to stroke the officer’s lower back through her shirt.

“Already can’t wait to slip back into bed in a few hours and hold you for our Monday morning sleep-in.” Ashlyn places a few more kisses on Ali’s forehead, breathing her in as she does.

“Me either, honey. Gehirn im Kopf.” Ali reminds the officer as she catches her hazel eyes.

“Always my love.” Ashlyn assures her and leans in close, giving herself a second to take in all of Ali’s features that she loves so much. “God, you’re so beautiful.” She says before kissing Ali hard and hearing a soft moan from the brunette.
Ali puts both of her hands on Ashlyn’s face as the kiss slows down and comes to an end. “Go, you wicked charmer, before I don’t let you. You’re gonna be late.” Ali warns, using all her willpower right now to stop the start of a make-out session that will surely make her girlfriend very late.

“Fine. One more…” Ashlyn sighs and leans in for a soft and lingering kiss. “I love you so much, Alex. See you in just a few hours. Sweet dreams, beautiful.”

“I love you too, Hero. Now go save the city and come home safe to me.” Ali smiles and pushes Ashlyn lightly towards the door.

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Ashlyn blows out a deep breath when she sees McNally’s reply text come in around 11:30pm, glad that he understood her intentions despite the veiled nature of her message.

A. Harris: Got your paperwork all signed like you asked McNally. Seeing as how I’m saving your ass from HR, only fair that you come get it from me. I get off shift at 5am, Zumi’s in Ipswich?

John McNally: Sure thing, Harris. Thanks for being so quick on the turnaround. I’ll be there.

With that out of the way, she goes back to focusing on the task at hand and heading to try and help clear the small back-up of six cars waiting at the DUI checkpoint. By 3am, she and the rookie cops shutdown the checkpoint for the night and head back to the department to take care of the paperwork required for the two DUI busts they made. Only two DUIs is considered really light for a checkpoint night and she couldn’t be more thankful for that. With only 10 minutes left to the end of her shift, she shoots Ali a quick text and gets ready to go meet McNally.

Hero: Pretty uneventful night, only 2 DUIs. First girl we caught was so sloshed she proposed to me in front of her boyfriend. Awkward. Watch out, Paladin…I’m a hot commodity ;-) Off to meet McNally now. Miss you and love you so much, beautiful. Be home ASAP to that perfect and warm body of yours :)

Ashlyn walks into the coffee shop to find McNally already waiting for her. “Look at you, actually on time for something!” She teases as she walks over to him.

“Shut it, Harris.” McNally elbows her lightly and motions to the counter. “My treat.”

Ashlyn quickly orders a green tea and waits while McNally gets a coffee before they settle at a small table in the corner.

“Tea? You going soft, Harris? Cops don’t drink tea unless they’re English.” McNally goads her.

“Cops who just got off their shift and have a gorgeous woman at home waiting to sleep the morning away with them in bed most certainly drink tea.” Ashlyn replies with a smirk.

“Ah yes, I remember those days. Lucky son of a bitch. Enjoy it, that shit changes when you have kids…wouldn’t have it any other way though.” McNally smiles.

“Trust me, I don’t take a minute of it for granted.” Ashlyn replies. “So, you ready to hear me out?”

“Only if you’re going to tell me that I’ll be somehow salvaged from getting tied to the train tracks of the red line.” McNally half jokes.
Ashlyn merely shrugs and then gets right into it, explaining it all to him the way she told Ali just last night. She has to give the guy credit, as wide as his eyes are, he listens all the way through without interrupting. “So…” Ashlyn prompts him to give her some kind of response when she’s done.

“So…do you want to tie me down to the tracks or should I just go ahead and do it myself?” McNally asks sarcastically. “Take down Jimmy ‘Train’… are you out of your fucking mind?!” He exclaims.

“Hmph… Ali said I was mental too…” Ashlyn smirks and pauses briefly before adding, “But she also said it was brilliant.”

“Ali thinks this is brilliant?” McNally probes, now seemingly more intrigued.

“She does. Couldn’t find any holes to shoot through it.” Ashlyn assures him.

McNally sits there and bites his lip for a solid minute before finally throwing his hands up. “You two are gonna put me in a fucking grave, but I’m headed there anyway at this rate. And who the fuck am I to argue with the wonder Captain who somehow already survived this criminal underbelly bullshit and her hotshot attorney who single-handedly took down Bobby Dugan? Fuck it, I’m in.”

“You’re in?” Ashlyn confirms, a bit stunned by his sudden change in demeanor. “You haven’t even heard my terms yet.”

“She does. Couldn’t find any holes to shoot through it.” Ashlyn assures him.

“Okay. Well, for starters…I meant what I said before about not putting Ali and myself at risk. I’m going to guide you along and give you my best advice and strategy, but the moves are yours to make and the situation is yours to control. I can’t get in any deeper than that. I owe Ali my promise to keep her safe and protect her always. I won’t fail in that.” Ashlyn lays out her conditions.

“You’re in?” McNally confirms, a bit stunned by his sudden change in demeanor. “You haven’t even heard my terms yet.”

“Doesn’t matter. Just give me the terms, Harris…I’ll agree. I told you, I need help and I’m not going to question the manner in which you provide it. It’s completely insane, but you’re the only one I have that I can trust.” McNally replies like a man resigned to his fate.

“Alright. Well, for starters…I meant what I said before about not putting Ali and myself at risk. I’m going to guide you along and give you my best advice and strategy, but the moves are yours to make and the situation is yours to control. I can’t get in any deeper than that. I owe Ali my promise to keep her safe and protect her always. I won’t fail in that.” Ashlyn lays out her conditions.

“What else?” McNally replies.

“There’s a big difference between playing the game to get out and playing to get into the winner’s circle, you catch me?” Ashlyn eyes him seriously.

“Are you saying…” McNally starts, but Ashlyn cuts him off.

“You go rogue on me, John, and I’m done. I’ve been there and I’ve seen how fast this shit gets tempting and how easy it is to fall into. If I even dream that you’re going in that direction…I’ll be gone so fast you’ll see nothing but dust. We clear on that?” Ashlyn makes her terms very clear.

“Geez, I’d hope you’d just shoot me if I ever did that. We’re clear, Harris. You have my word.” McNally promises. “So, what now?”

“A few things.” Ashlyn takes a sip of her tea. “First, we’re going to very openly be very good friends.”

“What do you mean? Didn’t you just say you didn’t want anyone knowing you were involved?” McNally asks with a befuddled look on his face.

“Involved in this Train takedown, yes. Involved with you, no. Think about it. If we start sneaking around to meet up and talk with each other, eventually someone close to Train is gonna see us and figure it out. Then the questions are going to fly on why you’re meeting with me so secretively and then shit hits the fan. So, we’re going in the completely opposite direction. We’re going to show...
them good friends who meet up regularly with no need to hide. Rather than sneak texts and calls with private phones, we’ll keep our electronic communications normal and friendly. Then when we meet in person, we’ll use that time to discretely talk logistics. We won’t ever meet up in Southie if we can avoid it. We’ll never meet in the same place more than twice and constantly mix it up…that’ll throw off anyone trying to trail you to bug the conversation since you won’t have a predictable pattern. Make sense?” Ashlyn gets into the plan.

“Yeah…I never would have thought of that.” McNally shakes his head. “Maybe you’re not nuttier than a squirrel turd after all.”

“That’s gross and I’m going to forget you just said that.” Ashlyn cringes and gives him a pointed look.

“Alright, alright so we’re bbfs or bfs or whatever the hell my daughters say. What else?” McNally implores.

“BFFs, man…it’s BFFs, get it right.” Ashlyn rolls her eyes mockingly. “So, I’m thinking you’re going to have to fire Patrick Murphy.”

“Fire Murphy?! I was wrong, you’re a complete nut job! The guy is one of my best, Harris… clean nose, hard worker, why in the actual fuck would I fire him and what does he have to do with any of this?!” McNally practically yells.

“Easy, McNally. We’re supposed to be discrete, remember?” Ashlyn raises her eyebrows at him.

“Yeah, well stop being so fucking mysterious and just tell what the hell you’re talking about.” McNally spits back.

“Look, this whole damn thing is going to come down to trust and the people you can count on. If you’re going to bag Train for an illegal weapons operation, you need to get into his camp. It would take you years to gain enough trust from Train for that, he’ll be way too wary of you. It took Bobby like 7 years to get in on some of that more secretive shit and you don’t have that kind of time. You need someone who can get in there fast. I think your best bet is Patrick Murphy.” Ashlyn explains.

“I get the big picture, but I don’t see the connection to Murphy.” McNally finally starts to get it.

“Bingo. As far as the department record is concerned, you’d be actually firing Murphy. But you’d do it all under an approved FBI undercover operation so there would be no problems later when this is all done. That way the official records all stay classified at an arm’s length from anything Train could infiltrate and Murphy doesn’t lose anything no matter what happens. The trick is to make it all look
good enough that Train takes the bait. Like you said, smoke and mirrors.” Ashlyn crosses her arms and sits back.

“You really think Murphy will go for it?” McNally asks, feeling a bit doubtful.

“I think so, but I can’t say for sure. You have to make it attractive for him, McNally. Be honest, tell him what the goal is. He’s pretty dedicated in cleaning this neighborhood up, so it’s a good bet he’ll at least be intrigued by it. Still, you have to make it completely worth it. The guy would be putting himself in major danger here if something were to go wrong. You have a captain’s spot to fill last time I checked. We both know he’d make a great one. So, put that promotion on the official record pending his return. Put it all on the table for him and let him decide. Even if he says no, you can trust him to keep his mouth shut about it.” Ashlyn replies.

“Wow, ok. I can do that.” McNally nods as he thinks it all over. “What would he get fired for though?”

“That part is easy. You’d drug test him after you get a complaint from another officer that Murphy seems to be drunk on his shift. He fails for opiates and you fire him under the no tolerance policy. After that, all he has to do is go make a couple drug purchases in Southie and maybe get rowdy enough to get kicked out of a couple bars. It’ll get back to Train in no time and you can bet he’ll be all over that shit…taking Murphy under his wing.” Ashlyn sets out the plan.

“Damn… fuck, this really is pretty damn brilliant. Legit crazy and like I have a death wish, but it’s solid enough.” McNally says appreciatively. “What order do I do this crap in?”

“About time you admit I’m a genius.” Ashlyn teases before getting serious again. “First thing, you need to do is go through every single damn thing that I documented in that big file Ali gave you regarding my case against Bobby. It’ll give you a really good sense of who the players are and who you can and can’t trust. In fact, here’s a list of who I know you can count on and who to stay away from.” She hands him a piece of paper with a copy of the list in her own notebook. “I know nothing about the officers that have started in the last few years since I was locked up, so it’s on you to figure them out a bit or at least stay away from using them in this situation.”

McNally nods and listens.

“Second, talk to Murphy and figure that part out. If he’s in, then you go through with it ASAP. Open the FBI undercover operation with Agent Frank Phillips. He’s clean and trustworthy, nothing will get back to Train if it’s under his investigation. Make sure they include you and cover you with immunity too as the main case operative. Only then do you go through with firing Murphy, got it?” Ashlyn makes sure it’s clear.

“Got it.” McNally affirms.

“If all that works out, give Murphy a week or so to start getting Train’s attention. Then third, you request a meeting with Train. You’ll act completely rattled while telling him that you know he was involved in an incident where your wife almost got run off the road with the girls in the car. Of course, it’ll be a fake story and he’ll have no idea what you’re talking about, but he’ll play it to his advantage if he thinks you’re freaking out. That’s when you’re going to agree to go into business with him and make him promise to leave your family alone. And you’re gonna set other terms too. You’ll tell him that you’ll only deal with him and no other associates. So, that will eliminate Porkchop and Ruddy from the equation and make Train provide you with some kind of protection umbrella. From that point forward, you play the game as it goes along and get as far into his world as he’ll let you.” Ashlyn finishes.
“You’re a fucking mastermind, Harris. How the hell did you come up with this?” McNally looks at her completely bewildered and impressed. He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t about to crap his pants at what he’s about to attempt, but there isn’t a single thing he can think of that is better than this plan she just laid out for him.

“I had a whole week to think about it.’ Ashlyn says with fake arrogance and smirk.

“I could think about it for a lifetime and not come up with that.” McNally compliments her. “Then again, I did think of coming to you, sooo I’m a fucking genius too.” He jokingly pats himself on the back.

“Oh yeah, a real Albert Einstein.” Ashlyn shakes her head with a chuckle. “So, we’re good here for now?” She asks as she finishes the last sip of her tea.

“Yeah, I guess so. Jesus, here we go.” McNally lets out a deep breath.

Alright, so remember… occasionally friendly texts. We plan to meet up regularly or when you need to talk. We only talk shop face-to-face, got it?” Ashlyn reminds him.

“Aye, Aye, Captain.” McNally mock salutes her.

“Asshole.” Ashlyn punches him lightly in the arm.

“It’s what I’m best at.” McNally laughs.

“Well… I have a beautiful woman waiting for me in bed.” Ashlyn waggles her eyebrows as she gets up.

“Yeah, yeah… go ahead you lucky fuck.” McNally stands up and jokingly pushes her towards the door.

“Good luck, man.” Ashlyn calls over her shoulder as she makes her way to the exit.

“Hey, Harris…” McNally calls loudly behind her and watches Ashlyn turn around in the doorway. “Thank you.” He says sincerely and tips the hat he just finished putting back on his head.

“Aye, Chief.” Ashlyn salutes and winks before walking out.

Ali smiles when she feels the bed dip a bit, the usual woodsy citrus scent filling the air as a strong arm wraps around her waist and warm skin presses against her back. She’s only been sleeping lightly for the last hour, waiting for Ashlyn to get home. She immediately turns to face her girlfriend, kissing her deeply and catching her off guard with a soft moan escaping Ashlyn’s lips.

“Mmmm, good morning to you too.” Ashlyn mutters with a smile as Ali’s lips slowly drag away from hers. She’s about to apologize for waking Ali up when the brunette grabs both of her hands and starts inspecting them. “What are you doing?” Ashlyn questions the odd behavior.


“A ring?” Ashlyn’s brow furrows in confusion.

“Yeah, you never told me if you said yes or not.” Ali replies like it’s obvious.

“I’m so lost here.” Ashlyn complains. “Yes to what?”
“The proposal, Captain Hot Commodity.” Ali giggles.

“Oh! So you did read my text then.” Ashlyn laughs loudly. “For the record, my answer was hells no! Well that, some handcuffs, and a nice reading of the Miranda Rights.”


“Funny, Krieger. Don’t think you’re getting out of marrying me that easily.” Ashlyn plays back.

“Oh I definitely don’t want out, that I can assure you darlin’. You’re stuck with me, Harris. I’m kind of like a wart.” Ali laughs.

“Hmmm…” Ashlyn pretends to ponder it. “Are we talking like a stubborn genital wart or just a run of the mill wart?”


“You’re the one who called yourself a wart.” Ashlyn shrugs. “I beg to differ.”

“Oh yeah?” Ali raises an eyebrow.

“Yep. I’d prefer to think of you like a beautiful tattoo…” Ashlyn holds up her forearm and runs her hand over the tattoo that symbolizes Ali, “thoughtfully and lovingly inked into the skin, meaningful and permanent.”

“So sweet…” Ali leans in and places a soft kiss on Ashlyn’s lips, “and also total overkill, Harris.” She teases again.

Ashlyn laughs, completely charmed by Ali’s playful mood this morning. “You love me and my overkill.”

“I absolutely do.” Ali locks her eyes on Ashlyn’s and gets in close, her hands going to the back of the officer’s neck as the mood gets more serious. “I love you so damn much, Ash.”

“I love you too, Alex… to GN-Z11 and back.” Ashlyn says with a dimpled grin.


“Furthest visible galaxy we’ve been able to see in space to date. The moon wasn’t far enough, so GN-Z11 it is.” Ashlyn replies simply.


“Never my queen.” Ashlyn kisses Ali’s nose with a laugh and pulls her into a tight hug, letting herself melt into it.

“How did it go with McNally?” Ali finally asks, her lips pressed close to Ashlyn’s ear in this position.

“Pretty sure he thought I escaped an insane asylum at first, but then he said I was brilliant. So, it’s game on.” Ashlyn answers.

“Not gonna lie, I’ll be very happy when it’s finally at checkmate…but, I’m glad we’re helping and he’s letting us.” Ali admits.
“Me too.” Ashlyn agrees. “You talking to Sara today?”

“I’m calling to update her on the good news that I’m onboard this afternoon after Kyle leaves.” Ali replies.

“Good. Oh and I just passed Kyle on my way in …he’s currently asleep on our couch in his underwear with a bag of pita chips and a container of hummus resting on his stomach. Clearly he never made it to bed.” Ashlyn snickers.

“Oh perfect.” Ali says sarcastically. “Speaking of sleep…” Ali lifts her head to take a peek at the clock. “You need to rest. You only have like five hours before your next shift.”

“Mmm’kay.” Ashlyn gives in, admittedly feeling pretty tired. She leaves a romantic kiss on Ali’s lips before letting Ali pull her into her chest, pressing her cheek to the soft skin and allowing her body to fully relax. “Love you, baby.”

“Love you too, Hero.” Ali whispers back and runs her hand through Ashlyn’s short locks of hair until sleep finds her again.

“Oh my goodness, you’re serious? You’re really going to take on Kira’s case and help her get paroled?!” Sara practically yells into the phone after hearing from Ali that she’s taking the case and a brief overview of her plan.

“Completely serious.” Ali confirms.

“Geez, ok, calm down, Sara…” Sara tries to calm herself and think it through. “So, what do you need me and Kira to do?”

“Well, I can think of three important things right now.” Ali answers. “First, June Nixon, the local lawyer sponsoring me, is going to need Kira to fill out the paperwork to retain her as her lawyer. Then she’ll file the paperwork she needs to get me involved with the court and get it approved. Once that happens, Kira will essentially repeat the paperwork to retain me as her lawyer.”

“That’s pretty straight forward. Consider it done.” Sara replies.

“Second thing is that I want to get going on this as soon as I can. Like I mentioned, one of my goals is to try and show that Steve wasn’t living with you and that you had separated even if there is no paperwork to back up the separation. So, I need every document you can possibly give me access to… bank records, property records, bill statements, car titles, insurance plans, medical documents…literally anything and everything you can think of and get a hold of for me, even if it doesn’t seem relevant.” Ali requests. “I’m sorry, I know it’s a huge invasion of privacy. I promise you it all stays confidential between you and me and I’ll make sure to tell you exactly what I will need to use for the case so that you’ll know what might become public.”

“I’m not worried about privacy, I trust you completely in that regard. This is definitely going to be a harder and more time consuming task, but I’ll get on it and pull together everything I can.” Sara promises. “And you’ll keep audio recording everything so that if it turns out you want to use this for your podcast you’ll be able to, right? That’s the least I can do here.” She adds.

“Perfect, I appreciate it.” Ali replies, knowing the paperwork request is asking a lot. “And yes, I’ll keep audio recording like I am right now and we’ll cross the podcast bridge when we come to it. The recordings are a great way for me to keep track of everything case related and it will always be completely up to you how I use them beyond that, there’s zero pressure from me on that.”
“That’s great and I’m happy with that avenue, so is Kira. What’s the third thing you need?” Sara inquires.

“Well, Sara… outside of Kira being there right now, how tied are you to Alabama?” Ali puts out the feelers.

“Other than my job and Kira, I guess not all that tied. Why?” Sara replies.

“Because my best advice is that you move.” Ali says matter-of-factly and proceeds to explain how it would be ideal for them to be away from Steve and that it could potentially be the factor that wins them Kira’s parole. “Would you consider it?” She ends with the important question.

“It’s a lot to take in, but yes, I’ll completely consider it. I just don’t know where we’d go and I’m not leaving Alabama while Kira is still here.” Sara admits honestly. “And uh…well, Ali… I also don’t see where I’m going to find the money to afford relocating.” She adds sheepishly.

“Right now, please forget the financial aspect of it and leave that to me to figure out, ok? What I need you to do is talk to Kira and get on the same page. Try and think about some possible places you’d consider relocating to and let me know. To make this work, I’d really need some lead time to try and get a tentative agreement from the new city and state to take on the transfer of Kira’s parole should it be granted.” Ali tries to simplify it while still pushing a bit so that Sara really gives it her attention. “Sara? You there?” Ali speaks again after she gets only silence for a few too many seconds.

“Yes, sorry! I just… I’m a little shocked that this is really happening. That THE Ali Krieger is helping us. I’m overwhelmed.” Sara confesses before quickly adding “In a good way!”

“Sara, relax. Just take it all one day at a time and we’ll see it all through, ok?” Ali tries to calm the woman down.

“Ok. Just… you’re an amazing human being. Thank you, Ali.” Sara says in such genuine appreciation.

“You’re very welcome. I’m going to do everything I can to help, I promise.” Ali assures her. “Which reminds me, one more thing on my agenda.”

“Sure, what is it?” Sara replies.

“When Kira gets her lawyer retainer signed up for me, I want you to do one too.” Ali requests.

“Oh ok, of course. I didn’t realize I needed a lawyer too. Just figured that only Kira did.” Sara replies, her voice sounding a bit puzzled.

“Well, technically you don’t need a lawyer… but, I’d really like to get you divorced if you’re up for letting me.” Ali suggests.

“Seriously?!” Sara exclaims.

“Of course, I’m all over it if it’s ok with you.” Ali replies.

“Absolutely!” Sara answers excitedly before she gets quiet again. “But he won’t sign the papers, remember? I think it’s a dead end.”

“He doesn’t have to sign squat, Sara. Trust me, I’ll have you divorced in under 30 days. Just make sure you send me copies of all the previously unsigned divorce papers that he sent back to you with
the postmark dates.” Ali instructs her.

“Wow, ok.” Sara pauses to compose herself. “Ali, I don’t even know what to say right now.”

“Don’t say anything. Just get yourself busy gathering paperwork for me!” Ali says kindly. “We’ll get this done and with the best outcome we can. One day at a time and we’ll talk again soon.”

“There isn’t enough good karma in the world for you, Ali. Thank you so much. I’ll be in touch!” Sara finishes the conversation.

“Have a great rest of the day, Sara.” Ali hangs up the phone with a smile and a renewed sense of vigor now that she’s ready to dive into the case head first.

Friday, October 13

Ashlyn groans when the text from McNally comes in around 9am, wanting nothing more than to spend her day off vegging out on the couch with Ali. Sure the brunette is working hard on Sara and Kira’s case, but Ashlyn is happy just to hang out and relax beside her, helping out when she can and just enjoying Ali’s company. The incoming text quickly puts a bit of a damper on that plan.

John McNally: You won’t believe the drunken fool we had in temp lock-up last night. Catch up at lunch today? Panera in Danvers at 12:30pm?

She should’ve known things were going too smoothly. Patrick Murphy was willingly fired weeks ago and getting deeper into Train’s business every day, already relaying back valuable information to both McNally and Frank Phillips at FBI. McNally had officially been in cahoots with Train for just over a week, starting to settle in and figuring out exactly what that entailed… and now this clearly urgent text.

‘Drunken fool’ is their emergency code for Train and it’s clear to her that McNally isn’t asking her to meet up casually. She finishes the last of her coffee and fires off a quick reply text before loading the dishwasher and going to find Ali in the living room to tell her about her new lunch plans.

A. Harris: Count me in, can’t wait to hear this story!

“Alright, lay it on me…what’s going on?” Ashlyn asks the second she’s seated across from McNally in a quiet corner at Panera. She’s patiently waited while they both ordered lunch, but she can’t wait any longer to find out why McNally seems so up in arms.

“He’s brought you up twice now. He’s questioned our friendship and I don’t like it one bit. He seems way too suspicious and untrusting. I think it’s definitely a factor in how he deals with me and it’s like he’s bringing you into this in a way I don’t know how to prevent.” McNally says nervously. “I don’t think this ‘openly good friends’ thing is going the way we want it to.”

“Guess I can’t be shocked.” Ashlyn mulls it over. “I mean, Bobby pulled me along on all kinds of shit he did with Train. I don’t think Train ever liked it to be honest. And he doesn’t know the extent, but he knows from the podcast that I documented shit that went down and it obviously led to Bobby going down…so, can you blame him? He’d be stupid to trust me.”
“Well clearly he’s not stupid then. But that doesn’t help us. The first time he brought you up, he just sort of noted our friendship and I told him we’ve been pretty good friends for a while. He shrugged it off. This morning though… he wanted to know why I’d want to even associate with someone who took down the guy who was doing exactly what I’m doing now. I told him that your intentions are far from what he thinks they are and not an issue, that you’re a million miles away from the Southie scene and damn happy about that. And that you’re the one who made it possible for me to be chief and that we have a mutual respect. I dunno… I was a bit caught off guard and just tried to be vague so I didn’t fuck things up, but my explanation wasn’t really enough for him. He said he thought I was being a bit too ‘cavalier’ about my association with you, but that he’d let me handle my business until it affected him. It was damn clear that he’s not comfortable with it though. I don’t like it, Harris.” McNally recounts and voices his concern.

Ashlyn nods and takes a minute to think it through while she pushes the lettuce around on her plate with a fork, finally realizing the options are limited. “Well, I only see one viable option and it’s go big or go home. He’s not comfortable with me, so, we make him comfortable with me.”

“And how exactly do we do that without throwing you into the lion’s den? It’s not like I didn’t already try to sway him myself.” McNally asks.

“Easy. Give him everything you’ve got from me.” Ashlyn says simply. “Give him a full on copy of every damn thing I ever documented on Bobby, my whole damn file.”

“How is that a good idea? What is that going to do besides make him more suspicious of you?” McNally questions doubtfully.

“First of all, it grows his confidence in you. You giving him inside stuff like that just makes him think you’re actually full-on invested in being locked in with him. But more importantly… did you go through all my files like I told you to?” Ashlyn inquires with a hard stare.

“Yeah, I did my homework, Harris. Still don’t know what you’re getting at.” McNally fails to see her point.

“Think really hard about everything you read, saw, and heard in those files. Anything in there you could use to nail Train…or Porkchop…or Ruddy… or really anyone else besides Bobby?” Ashlyn raises an eyebrow.

“Oh shit… no… not a single thing.” McNally finally realizes after a few silent minutes of thinking about it, the relief evident on his face. “It was all centered on Bobby.”

“Ding, ding, ding! Winner!” Ashlyn smiles. “I picked my battle early on. There was no way I was going to single-handedly take down the Southie crime web on my own. So, I chose to focus on Bobby and cleaning up the police department that I represented. Nothing more, nothing less. I think it’s time Train knew where he ranked on my priority list…he didn’t rank at all.”

“You are a sly motherfucker, Harris.” McNally smirks, his eyes with more life in them now. “I think this might just fucking work.”

“Only one way to find out.” Ashlyn concurs with a shrug. “So, go give Train a nice present. We done here? Cause I have an amazing woman waiting for me on the couch at home.”

“Yeah, we’re done. Geez, rub it in why don’t ya.” McNally shakes his head.

“Nothing to rub in…you’re married, remember?” Ashlyn eyes him jokingly.

“Yeah and I love my wife dearly, but she doesn’t look like Ali Krieger.” McNally waggles his
“Hey now, no ogling my girlfriend! Don’t make me smack you for both me and your wife.” Ashlyn warns him in jest.

“You wouldn’t smack me, Harris.” McNally replies nonchalantly.

“You’re right, I wouldn’t…” Ashlyn concedes. “I’d fucking deck your ass with a good punch and a knee to the crotch for good measure.”

“Now that… that I believe.” McNally laughs and gets up to leave.

“Eyes open and head above water, Chief.” Ashlyn reminds him as he turns to go.

“Got it, Captain. You just keep yourself far far away from the shit swamp I’m swimming in.” McNally reminds her back before walking out the door.

Thursday, October 19

Of all the things Ashlyn expected on her birthday, waking up to an empty bed and cold sheets was not one of them. Especially not after Ali unsubtly demanded a few weeks ago that she take the day off of work today. She stretches a bit and rolls herself out of bed, throwing on her discarded boxers and t-shirt from the last night and making her way across Ali’s large house to get to the kitchen where she is sure she’ll find her girlfriend waiting with a cup of coffee like always.

Instead she finds Kyle at the kitchen counter with a heaping plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast. “Happy Birthday you sexy thang!” He yells and throws up some jazz hands exuberantly.

“Uh, thanks dude.” Ashlyn scratches the back of her head and quirks an eyebrow at him, quickly scanning the room for Ali.

“What? Not what you were expecting?” Kyle teases her.

“Not exactly.” Ashlyn admits a bit disappointed. Particularly since she invented all sorts of naked Ali scenarios in her head on her way downstairs just now. “But this is great! Thanks!” She adds in an overly cheery voice when Kyle looks offended by her answer.

“Yeah, yeah, fine, I know… I’m not Alex in some skimpy lingerie!” Kyle waves his hand dramatically. “Personally, I think I’m better, buuut…” He mumbles before his voice gets loud again, “I’m sure you won’t be disappointed soon enough. I’m only here to make sure you get a good breakfast and then hand you the first clue.” He explains.

“Clue?” Ashlyn asks.

“Oh yeah… Princess has quite the day planned for you if I do say so myself.” Kyle waggles his eyebrows with a grin. “Now eat up, you’re going to need it!”

“Well, ok then.” Ashlyn smiles widely, her head already inventing all new naked Ali scenarios as she digs into the plate of food. “This is really good Kyle. Thank you, I mean it.” She says appreciatively, noticing the big bouquet of red roses on the kitchen table. “Is that my first clue?” She motions to the arrangement with a smile.
“Actually no. Ali’s clues are all picture clues… totally adorbs, trust me. My instructions are to give you the first one after you eat. The flowers just came like half an hour ago.” He answers.

Ashlyn nods and takes another bite of eggs before going over to the flowers and plucking the card out of them. She figures it must be from Liz and Jess and she immediately feels guilty, knowing damn well that she and Ali have been neglecting their friends again with their focus being elsewhere the last few weeks. She makes a mental note to talk to Ali about planning another get together with everyone.

She opens the small card to find unfamiliar handwriting, the bite of eggs she just swallowed ready to come back up as she reads the message.

*Happy Birthday, Captain Harris.*

*I’m sure your day is filled with pleasant happenings, but you won’t beget me the opportunity of a celebratory drink in your honor, right? Every year is a blessed milestone for one who has lived through so much. Let’s drink to you. The roof deck at Coppersmith, 12pm today.*

*XOXO,*

*James McGuiness*

“Fuck.” Ashlyn whispers, reading Train’s note for exactly what it is… not a friendly request… a mandate.
Well, this is one whopper of a chapter, so settle in cause it's lengthy. But... we have a Train to catch and a birthday to celebrate, so enjoy!
Also, smut alert...I mean, come on, it's Ashlyn's birthday after all :-)
Thank you for all the great comments on the last chapter, I appreciate the heck out of all of you. Keep em coming!

Thursday, October 19 continued…

Ashlyn takes one more look at the picture in her hand and sighs… Ali’s perfectly manicured toes digging into the soft sand that is very clearly their little backyard beach. It’s her first birthday clue, Ali’s neat loopy handwriting on the back:

You, me, and the salty sea,

A spot where no one else can be.

Our sacred place to be carefree,

Come start your special day with me.

She should be putting on some warm but appropriate beach clothes, but instead she’s opting for fitted gray slacks and a white button-up shirt. By the time she drives to Ipswich, she figures she has maybe 30 minutes with Ali before she has to drive right back to meet Train. There’s no sense in wasting any of that time changing clothes.

“Fucking, Train…piece of fucking shit.” She curses out loud to no one, completely pissed off that her first real birthday with Ali is starting like this when it should have been a wonderfully relaxing day together. And now she still has to go break the news to Ali about the wrench that just got thrown into her clearly thoughtful plans. Train may think he’s being clever with this little birthday surprise, but taking her away from Ali like this… the man has no idea he’s just unleashed a beast.

Ashlyn slowly walks down the stone steps of the backyard, finding Ali exactly where she expects her to. Although she just spent the 45 minute drive here working through various scenarios in her head regarding the meeting with Train, all of it is momentarily forgotten when she lays eyes on the brunette who hasn’t noticed her yet.

Ali is dressed in a simple pair of tight jeans and a loose navy sweatshirt. She’s sitting on top of their usual blanket with her legs stretched out, her bare feet digging into the sand as she looks out onto the water. Her sable hair is loose and blowing slightly in the cold morning breeze, her face looking serene. She’s a vision to behold and her splendor steals Ashlyn’s breath away as the officer stops dead in her tracks on the last step to watch her. She gives herself a minute to enjoy the view in front
of her, pulling out her phone to snap a picture so she never forgets this moment.

“You’re the most beautiful woman in the world, Alex…truly majestic.” Ashlyn walks the last step down to the sand, finally announcing herself and watching Ali turn around. Twinkling whiskey eyes and a radiant nose-crinkling smile greet her immediately as Ali quickly gets up and jumps into her arms.

“Baby! Happy birthday!” Ali beams as her legs wrap around Ashlyn’s waist, her arms around the officer’s shoulders. She kisses Ashlyn deeply for a minute before pulling back to really look at her. “You look sexy. A bit overdressed for plopping down in the sand with me, but still sexy…did Kyle not give you the clue before you got dressed like he was supposed to?”

With that question, Ashlyn’s mind finally snaps back to reality. As much as she doesn’t want to do anything to break this moment, she knows she has to tell Ali what is going on and she needs to burst the bubble now.

“Ash, what’s wrong? Did I fuck this up?” Ali sees the sad look on Ashlyn’s face and starts to panic that she read things all wrong, her stomach immediately dropping.

“No, no. Alex…please relax. Come here.” Ashlyn pulls Ali into a tight hug and leans right into her ear. “Thank you for this, you’re so sweet and so damn good to me. I don’t even know what all this is yet, but I already know this is going to be the best birthday ever because you planned something for me. I don’t care what it is. If it involves you, it’s perfect. Ok?”

“Ok.” Ali replies and leans back just enough to see the melancholy still clouding her favorite hazel eyes. “What’s going on then?”

Ashlyn sighs. “It’s just… before this goes any further, I need to tell you something.”

“I know. It’s just that I don’t want to have to tell you this.” Ashlyn sits down in the sand right where she is and pats the spot next to her, entwining her hand with Ali’s once the brunette settles beside her.

“Just tell me, baby.” Ali coaxes her.

“I have something that I need to do this afternoon that I’m pretty sure is going to mess up whatever you have planned and I feel really bad about it.” Ashlyn gets it out.

“Oh, Ash…it’s ok. I’ll figure it out or rework something! I’m not upset, so don’t be sad, sweetheart. That’s what happens sometimes when someone surprises you and you don’t know the plans.” Ali immediately tries to calm the officer down, her mind already racing to figure out how she might change things up even though she doesn’t even know what she’ll have to change yet. She just wants Ashlyn to be happy and have a good birthday, the rest be damned.

“You really are the best, Alex.” Ashlyn gives Ali a small smile. “It’s not something I was expecting to have to do today and I know that when I tell you what it is, you’re going to be upset and worried and there’s nothing I can do to change it.”

“We work through everything better together, babe. And we always will. So, let’s work through it. What do you have to do today?” Ali asks, determined to resolve the issue.

Ashlyn reaches into her back pocket and pulls out the small card that came with the roses and hands it to Ali. “I got this with a bouquet of roses this morning.” She explains and watches Ali’s face
Ali reads the brief message twice and lets it sink in a minute. Ashlyn was wrong, she’s not upset or worried…she’s just angry. Angry that the kind heart beating in the woman seated beside her just never has it easy. That even though she always fights for good, the battle is always twice as hard as it should be. That dark is always trying to find a way to infiltrate the person who has never failed to choose light. That for even just one day…especially on this day, when she should just be able to relish in being celebrated by those that love her…the universe still won’t let her have it. Ali lets those emotions settle deep inside for a moment and allows them transform into a resolute determination. The meeting with Train will be a blip, but it will be nothing more. She’ll fight it all, darkness and the whole damn universe if she has to, but Ashlyn is going to have her special day no matter what.

“Sorry.” Ashlyn says quietly, trying to read the look on Ali’s face.

“Don’t be.” Ali smiles and leans in for a soft kiss. “I’m not upset and I’m not worried.”

“You’re not?” Ashlyn questions, still unsure.


“No, I don’t. I thought you would be. I’m glad you’re not, but I’m not sure I understand why.” Ashlyn replies truthfully.

“Because you are everything that is good and right, and that sad excuse for a human being doesn’t even deserve to be in your presence. You are honest, you are virtuous, you are strong, you are loyal, you are kind, you are brave… every single thing that he is not. Your power is real, his is illusion. And even though he doesn’t deserve even a second of your time, you will go in there and face him. You will stand tall and confident and show him who you are. That your good will not cower to his evil. That you are impervious to the fear he instills. That you are not under his thumb, you never were, and you never will be. That you are Ashlyn Michelle Harris, and that you are yours and no one else’s to control.” Ali pauses and holds Ashlyn’s face in her hands, looking right into her eyes. “Because I know that you are going to go in there and completely shut him down and walk away unafraid of whatever comes next like the incredibly badass and honorable human being that you are, the one I love in ways I can’t even put words to. And once it’s over, his part in this day will be done and forgotten while we celebrate the hell out of you just like I planned. For all his effort, he won’t even be a fucking passing thought while we eat cake. Understand?”

Ashlyn is so stunned and emotionally overwhelmed that she doesn’t know what to say, her head giving a slight nod as she makes an attempt to string some words together. “Yeah… I… wow… I… Alex….”

“Shhhh.” Ali cuts her off by crushing their lips together. The kiss is slow and deliberate, sensual and emotional, conveying everything that needs to be said but can’t be spoken. “I love you, Ashlyn.” She whispers breathlessly against the officer’s lips once they part.

“I love you too, Alex.” Ashlyn replies through a soft gasp for breath, the words inadequate but their meaning clear.

“What time do you need to leave?” Ali takes the control of things after a few silent moments of breathing the same air.

“11:00am.” Ashlyn replies.

“Ok, that gives us about 25 minutes to do what I planned. But two things first.” Ali starts to rework
her plans in her head.

“Ok…” Ashlyn waits.

“First, text Tim. I want him to go with you. He can stay distant, but I want him there in case you need anything. Second, you’re done by 1 pm. I don’t care what the hell he wants, Train gets no more than an hour of your time today. He’s lucky he’s even getting that.” Ali sets her terms.

“You got it.” Ashlyn doesn’t hesitate, immediately sending Tim a text where to meet her.

“Good. Now come over here.” Ali tugs Ashlyn’s hand and leads her to the blanket where they resettle in a very familiar position…Ashlyn sitting between Ali’s legs and leaned back into her while the brunette holds her tight, chin rested on her shoulder.

Ashlyn smiles at their positioning, it means Ali wants to know something…that she wants to understand yet another part of her. She melts into the arms around her and just waits for the question.

“I asked you to come here this morning because I wanted to learn the answer to something I don’t really know about you yet.” Ali starts and then continues when she feels Ashlyn’s head nod against her cheek. “When we had a conversation about birthdays back in the prison, we both shared that we weren’t into big celebrations. But we never shared why. You found out my reason on my birthday this year, but I still don’t know yours. And the thing is that even though you said that your birthday isn’t a big thing for you… when I brought you that cupcake that day… Ash, your face said otherwise. You lit up over a cupcake with a fake candle in it. And well, I planned this whole day with that face in my mind. So, I guess I want to understand why in that rare instance, your words didn’t match your emotions. And then figure out how badly I might have missed the mark by planning today the way I did.”

Ashlyn smiles and lets out a small laugh, turning her head to kiss Ali’s cheek. “I can assure you that you didn’t miss the mark. You read me perfectly even back then, just like you always do.” She feels Ali smile against her face.

Ashlyn lets her eyes roam over the water in front of them and the words practically speak themselves. “The earliest birthday I can remember was the one where I was five. As neglectful as my parents were, they never missed throwing us birthday parties. Of course, it took me a few years to figure out why even though every one of those parties ended the same way. They got really drunk, fought loudly in front of everyone, usually did something wildly inappropriate, and then passed out at the end of the night if they weren’t in jail. When they threw a party, it meant people would bring food and drinks… so it was really a party for them. Took me getting a little bit older to understand how awful and embarrassing that was. At my 5th birthday party, my dad threw up on one of my kindergarten friends and the girl had to go home in my clothes. At my 6th birthday party, my mom shoved her hands down our next door neighbor’s pants in front of the guy’s wife. At my 7th birthday party, my mom broke her hand when she punched my dad in the face. At my 8th birthday party, my dad got arrested for shoving the cop who came to ask us to keep the noise down after a neighbor complained. On my 9th birthday, I convinced them that I didn’t like parties and made them promise not to throw another one.”

“Oh, Ash…” Ali squeezes the officer lightly and buries her face into the crook of her neck. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

“It’s ok. I just learned that my birthday was much better not celebrated and that was that. It’s been that way ever since and I’m fine with it. I guess I could never miss something that I never really had to begin with.” Ashlyn shrugs. “But… no matter how much I protested, I always got a card from my
grandparents with money in it and then Chris would sneak into my room on the night of my birthday
with a pastry from the bakery down the street with a candle in it. It would remind me that no matter
how much I pushed to be forgotten, that I actually wasn’t. It meant the world to me. And then
eventually all that went away over the years with my grandparents passing away, Chris going
through his problems, and me being in the army and then in jail. And then you brought me that
cupcake, and it just brought me back… reminded me that I wasn’t forgotten again. So, yeah…I’m
sure my face didn’t hide it that day. It’s not that I don’t like to celebrate, it’s that the celebration was
never worth it, you know?” Ashlyn finishes.

Ali nods in understanding. “Thank you for telling me that.” She peppers Ashlyn’s jaw with gentle
kisses. “And now that I know… I’m hoping that you’ll be okay with what I planned and what I want
to make sure you know…”

“Which is?” Ashlyn inquires with a little smile.

“Well, the exact plans you’ll see as they unfold. As for what I want to make sure you know… it’s
that the celebration is worth it. That you deserve to be celebrated and I’m going to do exactly that.”
Ali puts her hand under Ashlyn’s chin and turns the officer’s face so she can kiss her soundly.

“You know…you’re the first one to really make me believe that.” Ashlyn admits in a whisper.

“Good.” Ali smiles and kisses her again. “Ready for the next part?”

“Ready.” Ashlyn replies.

“First, a gift that is going to come in handy today.” Ali scoots back a bit and reaches for her purse
near the edge of the blanket, pulling out a small wrapped box and handing it to Ashlyn.

Ashlyn makes quick work of the wrapping and finds a Skagen watch inside the box, the only brand
she ever wears because it’s sleek, stylish, and durable. She loves the way the mesh band looks and
that these watches have never gotten in the way no matter what situation she’s found herself in. She
owns a couple of them, but none like this one. This is the special edition, all black titanium save for
the tiny silver dials and numbers on the face. This is the one she’s never let herself splurge on but
always wanted. Of course she and Ali have never talked about any of this, but somehow this watch
is now in her hands, the brunette clearly knowing.

“Alex… I absolutely love this. How on earth did you know?” Ashlyn says excitedly, already trying
it on.

Ali can’t help but beam at how happy Ashlyn seems with the gift. “My investigative skills are top
notch, Harris. You should know that.” She winks.

“Thank you, baby. This is the best, I love it. You’re the best, I love you.” Ashlyn finally gets the
watch on her wrist and then immediately leans over to kiss Ali sweetly.

“Glad you like it. Let’s make good use of it today, shall we?” Ali smiles knowingly. “Alright, the
next thing in my plans is now off the table thanks to he-who-shall-not-be-named…” She makes an
obvious comparison between Train and Voldemort from Harry Potter, making Ashlyn laugh. “But,
I’m going to figure out a way to re-work that part, so fear not! So, for now…we’re skipping to clue
3 and part 3.” Ali pulls an envelope out of her purse and crosses out the 3 on the front of it with a
pen and changes it to a 2 before also adjusting the time written on it and handing it to Ashlyn.

“All of my plans involve just a little setup time on my part,” Ali explains further, “so, you’ll have
short periods of time without me in between things today while I go do that. The way it works is that
I give you the next clue and then head off to where I need to be. In the meantime, you’ll open the
clue at the exact time I’ve written on the envelope and go from there. Make sense?”

“I can handle that.” Ashlyn grins and looks down to see 1:05pm written on the envelope in her hand.
Ali was damn serious when she said she wasn’t letting Train have any more than an hour of time.

“Excellent. Make good use of that watch, Harris. And don’t open them a minute before you’re
supposed to.” Ali warns.

“Yes, Ma’am.” Ashlyn confirms.

“Alright, you need to go in like five minutes. Let me walk you to the Jeep.” Ali stands up and helps
pull Ashlyn up with her.

They walk up the stone steps and down the driveway with hands entwined and arms lightly
swinging. The mood between them is peaceful and serene until they get to the Jeep and Ali changes
it, pushing Ashlyn up against the driver’s side door and surprising her with a heated kiss. Ali
dominites it and Ashlyn is content to let her, a moan escaping the officer’s throat as a warm tongue
probes her mouth and the brunette’s hands wander her torso. She’s completely breathless and dazed
by the time she feels Ali pull away, her girlfriend’s hot breath now on her ear.

“Happy birthday, Hero. I love you. Now go derail that motherfucker and get back to me.” Ali
punctuates the statement with a gentle nip to Ashlyn’s ear and one more lingering kiss on her lips
before turning and walking down the path to the house.

Ashlyn shakes the fog out of her head and watches Ali walk away with hips swaying lightly until
she’s out of sight. She quickly gets into the Jeep and runs her fingers over her now tingly and puffy
lips left in the wake of Ali’s kiss. Her face breaks into a smile at feeling something she has never felt
before… she feels invincible. Train picked the wrong girl to fuck with on the wrong day.

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Ashlyn arrives at the bar with only five minutes to spare, quickly parking just a few spots down from
the main entrance. She wastes no time making her way to the door, spotting Tim’s car less than a
block away and nodding discreetly in his direction to acknowledge that she’s seen him.

Unsurprisingly, the two suits sitting by the door get up when she walks in, but they unexpectedly
wave her on to where Train is sitting without patting her down for weapons. ‘Such a cocky fuck.’
She thinks to herself, realizing that he clearly doesn’t think she’s a threat in that regard.

Outside of the two suits near the door and the bartender, the place is completely empty except for
Train himself who is sitting at a small round table near the center of the room. Ashlyn isn’t surprised,
this place doesn’t actually open until 4pm, but of course it’s open for Train. Although his usual gray
suit is neatly pressed and his appearance sharp, he looks significantly older to her than she
remembers. She makes her way to the table and wonders whether it’s because he’s actually aged or
that she now has a clearer perception of him, much like the one she had of Bobby near the end.
Regardless, it gives her greater confidence. She remembers what Ali said…. he is an illusion.
Stripped down, he is nothing more than an old man riding on the coattails of what he was in his
prime.

“Captain Harris, it’s been too long.” Train addresses her as she reaches the table and points her to the
seat across from him.

“Not nearly long enough, Jimmy.” Ashlyn does nothing to hide her displeasure at being here as she
sits.
“Well, I see absence has not made the heart grow fonder then.” He smirks and looks her over. “The hair is very different, but it works. I’m sure you got good pussy before, but I bet you get prime pussy now that even I couldn’t touch. What a fucking waste.” He shakes his head with an air of disappointment.

“Yeah well, yours looks different too…a lot grayer and quite a bit less of it.” Ashlyn retorts with her own smirk, not letting herself get agitated at the fact that he was obviously referring to Ali and looking to get a rise out of her.

Train lets out a hearty chuckle. “I forgot how amusingly defiant you could be, Harris. I missed that.”

“Feeling is not mutual, I can assure you.” Ashlyn doesn’t give into him.

Train uncorks the bottle of Pure Pot Irish Whiskey sitting on the table and pours two glasses, sliding one to Ashlyn before lifting his own. “To you. Happy Birthday.” He drinks a sip and leans back to watch her.

It’s one of the most expensive whiskey bottles in the world, but Ashlyn won’t let a drop of it pass her lips, refusing to indulge in anything that Train’s dirty money has purchased. She reaches instead for the water glass on the table and takes a sip, her eyes set like stone and never leaving Train.

“Still not a drinker?” Train states more than questions.

“Only at special occasions. You’re not a special occasion.” Ashlyn responds coldly.

“Not even a nice toast to you.” Train shakes his head. “Still not an ounce of warmth for me after all these years?”

“Nope. Get used to it.” Ashlyn confirms.

“Too bad. I’ve always liked you, Harris.” Train takes another sip of his whiskey and reaches to light a cigarette, taking a long drag of it.

‘Of course smoking laws don’t apply to him either.’ Ashlyn internally snorts. “You’ve never liked me, Jimmy.”

Train nods with a smile as he exhales a cloud of smoke. “I’ll admit that’s true. What can I say…you’ve always had their air of being up to something, Harris. That has never sat well with me. I wasn’t wrong though, was I?”

“You weren’t.” Ashlyn admits freely.

“Well, I appreciate the honesty.” Train shrugs. “And now?”

“And now, what?” Ashlyn repeats the question back at him.

“What is Captain Harris up to now?” Train rephrases, his expression more menacing.

“I’ll tell you what I’m up to now…I’m living, Jimmy. I’m fucking living and wondering what the fuck I’m doing here.” Ashlyn spits back at him.

“How cliché.” Train sneers.

“Maybe, but one of us knows what it’s like to rot in jail. It puts some perspective on things.” Ashlyn works to bring her composed coldness back.
“Yes, I’m sure it does. Bobby Dugan got plenty of perspective very quickly now didn’t he.” Train replies evenly.

“Got all the perspective he deserved.” Ashlyn answers just as calmly. “Is that what I’m here to answer for? To give my penance? For the record, I have none.”

“No. I have none myself.” Train’s callousness seeps out. “I’m sure you have things to do today, let me cut to the chase.”

“About time.” Ashlyn mumbles loud enough for him to hear.

Train chooses to ignore her remark. “Despite my clear reservations, Dugan insisted on bringing you along on everything. I knew you were a renegade and my eye was always on you, but Dugan dispatched you long before I ever needed to. And I was right in the end, you recorded and documented it all. I’ve seen your work, Harris. Quite the work of art.” Train smiles maliciously holds up a flash drive.

“Yeah, it’s a good read. Maybe a best-seller.” Ashlyn asserts her indifference.

Train ignores her comment again. “The thing is that nothing on here is substantial enough to bag me or any other associate of mine. But for Dugan…well, it’s a goldmine of shit on him. And I know I was never careful around you. I could have killed you any damn day I wanted to, there was no need for careful. Still, there’s nothing there. So…you’re here because I want to know why. Why just Dugan? Why not me?” Train poses his question and sits back in his chair expectantly.

“Bobby gets buried and only now are you worried?” Ashlyn scoffs at him purposely.


“Simple question with a simple answer.” Ashlyn makes him wait longer to push his patience.

“Then you won’t mind enlightening me. I’m asking just one more time, Harris…” Train warns her.

“Why not me?”

“Because you didn’t threaten my family, Jimmy.” Ashlyn finally answers, her stare as hard as Train’s with neither of them backing down from each other.

It’s quiet for a few seconds before Train lets out a loud, deep chuckle. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.” Ashlyn confirms.

“I can appreciate that, Harris. I thought you were more righteous than that, but I can appreciate it.” Train nods as he considers the answer.

“Better than not righteous at all.” Ashlyn levels a look at him. “Are we done here?”

“Not yet. Tell me about John McNally.” Train throws it out without any lead up.

“What about him? It seems perhaps you know him well enough already and that’s too damn bad.” Ashlyn points to the flash drive on the table.

“I do. And yet, you’re still friends…” Train’s stare is penetrating now, sizing her up.

“He’s a former colleague who has redeemed his wrongs with me. We’ve found a mutual ground of respect. Beyond that, I have no investment in his dealings. I just learned far more than I needed to
today and plan to forget it when I walk out that door.” Ashlyn says matter-of-factly in a complete lie.

“That’s quite a change from walking your moral high ground.” Train notes, clearly suspicious of her.

“It is.” Ashlyn agrees before leaning into the table, almost invading Train’s space. “Let me make my new found perspective very clear for you, Jimmy.”

“I’m listening.” Train sips his whiskey.

“I wasted years being dedicated to something that was never dedicated to me. And I mean that… wasted. But no more. Not one more day. Not one more minute serving on a sullied police force in a city that has never loved or given back to me. My actions thus far have surely shown my resolve in that. I’m done being a doormat, that hand has been played and a new one dealt.” Ashlyn’s voice is strong with conviction.

“Oh? And what hand are you holding now, Harris?” Train questions, feeling a bit caught off guard by her answer.

“The one where I’ve created my own family from those who value me and whom I value in return. The one where I’m proud of what I do for a living and can live with myself. The one where I’ve found the other half of my soul in the most amazing woman on this planet, who I will marry, raise children with and we’ll ride off into the fucking sunset together. The one where I’m a million times more fiercely protective of all of it than a mama bear is of her cubs. That’s the one I’m holding.” Ashlyn answers, the words deliberate and measured.

“Well, how nice for you, Harris. Far be it from me to provoke a mama bear with cubs.” Train says simply, not sure of how else to reply.

Ashlyn smirks to herself at how taken aback he seems at her answer, knowing it’s her time to strike and she takes it. “That’s good to hear, Jimmy. That’s real good. Because I want to make sure it’s crystal clear.” She leans in even further. “I’m really dedicated to that future I just laid out and the people in it. So, when I say fiercely protective…let me help you really truly understand. If I even so much as dream that something or someone is standing the way, I’ll stop at nothing to eradicate it.”

Ashlyn leans in even more and stares Train right in the eye, her face merely a foot from his now. “Don’t make the same mistake as Bobby… don’t underestimate that love is a stronger motivator than hate. Get in my way and I’ll find a way to put a bullet through your skull, even if I know for certain that one is going to rip through my own just seconds later. That’s not a promise, it’s a guarantee.”

Train’s face goes slack, his mouth opening, but nothing comes out.

Ashlyn gets up and eyes him sternly, knowing she is done here. “I’m going to say this hoping that for both our sakes, it’s the last time… goodbye, James McGuiness.” With that she walks away, hearing a muttered “Happy Birthday, Harris” behind her, but not turning around to acknowledge it.

Train watches her go, pouring another whiskey once she’s out the door and downing it quickly. In 41 years of dealings, never has a meeting not ended on his terms, never has he not gotten the last word. The breaking of this record unsettles him and though he doesn’t like it one bit, he’s unsure of what move to make or even if he should make one at all.

Ashlyn waves at Tim once she leaves the bar, her signal that all is fine and that he can go. She quickly gets in her Jeep, seeing that it’s 12:58pm and leans her head back in the seat with her eyes closed. Her mind is racing, in complete disbelief at what just happened. She feels oddly calm for a
woman who just threatened the most notorious Boston gangster in history. But, if it means keeping Ali safe, then she’d do it a million times over. Ali... her mind goes right to the brunette and she reaches for the envelope sitting on her front seat. She waits three long minutes, fiddling with the corner of the envelope until the clock on her dash hits 1:05pm and she quickly tears it open.

Her breath hitches immediately at the picture in her hands: Ali’s bikini clad torso glistening with massage oil, the bottle of which is sitting next to her muscular thigh and branded with the Mandarin Oriental Hotel logo. “Dear god, Alex…” she whispers out loud, raking her eyes over the picture a few more times before she finds the willpower to turn it over.

_In my hands your stress will melt,

The most relaxed you’ve ever felt.

Of all the spas, this is the best,

I can’t wait to get you undressed.

Find me quick so I can begin,

Caressing every inch of skin._

Of all the things that could make her forget all about Train right now, this one takes the cake. Ashlyn has the car in gear and headed towards the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Spa in no time, happy that she’s only about 15 minutes away if traffic cooperates. Luck is on her side and she makes it in 16 minutes after only getting caught at one long traffic light. She quickly drops her car with the valet and rushes inside to the spa’s main desk.

“Uh, hi…I’m not entirely sure if the reservation is under my name or…” Ashlyn starts but is cut-off by the smiling raven-haired woman at the desk.

“Ms. Krieger is expecting you, Ms. Harris. Follow me.” The woman leads her down two small hallways and then points to a door, the plaque on the wall next to it reading ‘Couple’s Suite #1’. “Right in there. Enjoy your Mandarin experience and let us know if you need anything.” She smiles one more time before turning and heading back to the desk.

Ashlyn takes just a couple seconds to compose herself before finally walking in the door, her eyes immediately finding Ali who is laying on one of two cozy massage beds in the room and looking at her phone. Her earlier outfit has been traded for a pair of black leggings and plain gray t-shirt. Although Ashlyn was hoping for the bikini, she’s still hopeful that it’s just temporarily covered.

“Alex…” Ashlyn gets out in a sweet and almost relieved whisper as their eyes meet. Ali is up and over to her in no time, holding her face and planting a slow, soft kiss on her lips.

“You ok, Ash?” Ali asks as she searches hazel eyes.

“Yeah, I’m excellent. It was…” Ashlyn starts, but Ali stops her.

“That’s all I need to know right now. The rest can wait. Today is about you.” Ali says resolutely and pulls the officer into another slow and deliberate kiss, this one lasting for quite a while until the brunette pulls away first to put her plans in motion.

“Mmmm… the way you kiss me, baby….” Ashlyn smiles with hooded eyes.
“You like that?” Ali asks playfully.

“I love it.” Ashlyn mirthfully replies before looking around the room and noting the two luxurious massage beds, a steam shower, a large Jacuzzi tub, and counter full of oils and other products. “This place is so nice. So, what’s on the agenda…couple’s massage?” Ashlyn guesses.

“Something like that.” Ali smirks. “I paid for the room, the products, and a whole lot of privacy. Because… I am the masseuse.”

“Oh, now that I really really love.” Ashlyn’s face lights up in a grin.

“Thought you might.” Ali winks. “Now come here so I can turn you into a puddle of super relaxed goo.” She steps closer to Ashlyn and has the buttons on the officer’s shirt undone in no time.

Massage doesn’t even come close to describing it when Ashlyn finds herself naked with Ali’s hands roaming every inch of her skin for over an hour. The brunette thoroughly and lovingly working every muscle in her body, releasing every bit of tension that existed from head-to-toe. It’s a challenge to keep herself in check, especially when Ali flips her over onto her back and proceeds to give her front side as much attention as the back, only skipping over her nipples and her folds, both of which are displaying their obvious arousal. She’s never been so turned on and simultaneously so relaxed in her life, enjoying the hell out of the competing sensations that are driving her wild.

“How does that feel, gorgeous?” Ali whispers before leaning down to kiss Ashlyn sweetly.

“Oh my god, so good. Fucking amazing. You’re incredible.” Ashlyn’s husky voice matches her tranquil euphoria. “You know what would make it better though?”

“What’s that?” Ali replies.

“You laying naked on top of me.” Ashlyn smiles at her wickedly. “In other words, you’re wearing too many clothes, Krieger. How about we take care of that?”

“Whatever you want birthday girl, but… it requires you to open a gift first.” Ali smiles widely.

“I have another gift?” Ashlyn asks excitedly.

“Damn right you do.” Ali replies, working hard not to give anything away. She’s incredibly nervous about this gift and wants to make sure it gets revealed properly.

“Well, I’m ready when you are… ready to get you naked that is, but I do love presents.” Ashlyn says cheerily.

Ali laughs lightly at the statement, knowing what’s coming next. “Good, on both counts.” She winks and picks up an envelope off the counter, handing it to Ashlyn who sits up on the bed. “Here, baby. Open it.”

Ashlyn wastes no time tearing open the envelope and finding yet another picture inside. This time it depicts a tight close-up of a tattoo gun against bare skin that looks a whole lot like Ali’s. She swallows hard at the potential meaning behind it and flips it over.

*Smooth seas do not a good sailor make they say,*

*Good thing rough seas have paved our way.*

*A strong ship on my own both then and now,*
With sturdy mast and solid bow.
So many waters I have crossed,
Unaware in my wander that I was lost.
I was a ship without a port,
That is where my strength fell short.
A massive storm fought to run me aground,
But in that fated tempest, you I found.
You are my port, my happy place,
My home, my drive, my haven space.
It hit me then upon reflection,
My heart had lacked a true direction.
After aimless years of back and forth,
My compass finally has its north.
You are my fire, my air, my guide,
This ship’s port is by your side.
Whether skies of storm or clearest blue,
My compass always leads to you.
You are my one, I hope you see,
Now come and find your mark on me.

She looks up at Ali in disbelief, trying to confirm that she’s read this right and completely unsure of what exactly she’ll find. Her heart is pounding, the love she feels an almost overwhelming ache radiating outwardly from her chest. She watches Ali smile and nod at her before stepping between her legs that are dangling off the edge of the massage bed, the brunette taking her hands and placing them on the hem of her t-shirt.

“Open your gift, baby.” Ali whispers and watches Ashlyn’s face light up as it registers.

“Did you really?” Ashlyn asks, still in disbelief.

“Come find out.” Ali lightly squeezes Ashlyn’s hands that are held in her own at the hem of her shirt, a little push for the officer to get moving.

Ashlyn slowly lifts Ali’s shirt up over her head, running her fingertips down the length of the brunette’s arms and then down her sides. She smiles when she sees the same black bikini from the picture clue, the very one she had been hoping for. She leans in and kisses the hollow of Ali’s throat and makes her way across her collarbones and up her neck, thoroughly enjoying the brunette’s skin without bothering to search her torso because she has already realized something. Two nights ago
they had gone to bed naked and there had definitely been no new tattoo. Ashlyn had thought nothing of Ali coming to bed last night in just a pair of sleep shorts, but it clicks now and gives her a good idea of where some new ink might be hiding.

Ali smiles, knowing by the lack of searching that Ashlyn has at least somewhat figured it out. She watches the officer stand up and move around behind her, leaving open-mouth kisses all along her shoulders and upper back. Ashlyn’s actions make her melt. She knows how much the woman reveres tattoos and how impatient she can be to reveal surprises and gifts. And yet, Ashlyn is taking the time to show her how loved and wanted she is, not rushing at all even though she knows how much the officer must want to. Any lingering nervousness she had about having done something so permanent completely leaves her, now free to focus on the lips fluttering across her skin and the fingers deftly untying her bikini top.

When Ashlyn has dragged her mouth over every inch of skin on Ali’s torso…when Ali is breathing heavily and squirming at her touch…only then does she move down to slowly work the brunette’s leggings down, revealing the skimpy black bikini bottom that matches the top now discarded on the floor. She rakes her fingertips up Ali’s bare legs intent on kissing every inch of them too, but then she freezes…her breath caught in her lungs at the tiny edge of black ink peeking out of the bikini bottoms just a few inches from her face.

Barely any of it is showing and there is no way to tell what it is yet, but it doesn’t matter…it’s in her spot. The same exact spot that the Nittany Lion occupies on Ali’s right hipbone, this new tattoo takes up on the left. It’s THE spot, HER spot.

She has no idea why, but she’s been drawn to Ali’s hipbones from the moment they shared tattoos in the hospital almost a year ago. When she holds the brunette’s waist, her thumbs gravitate to that area unconsciously. When she spoons Ali at night, her hand always finds its way there, tracing mindless patterns until she falls asleep. When they make love, she has never not thoroughly kissed the tantalizing skin of those hips before moving on to anything more. And when they’re spent, it’s the first place she rests her head for a few minutes and wishes she could stay longer, but is always far too drawn to Ali’s lips to make it happen.

In her obsession with Ali’s hipbones, she has always loved the placement of Nittany. Still, she is forever conscious of the way she expresses that sentiment. That tattoo symbolizes Ali’s soccer career, something that she so fondly connects to her mother… an inked tribute to the woman that raised her and whom she idolizes. For that very reason, despite her feelings about its sacred location, Ashlyn has always treated that right hipbone with love and respect, careful to never cross the line by being overly sexual about it. But the left hipbone… that bare one… that one is hers alone. The one she favors and lavishes with the kind of attention that she cannot give the right one. The one she nibbles and bites, the one she sometimes marks, the one she finds her hand stroking whenever there is an opportunity. She has occasionally wondered if Ali has noticed. Tonight she knows with complete certainty that she has.

The bare skin now inked with whatever design Ali has chosen to symbolize her, her spot is now truly hers. Ali Krieger has permanently marked herself with a representation of her, in one of the most personal spots on her body, a spot with placement equal to that of the brunette’s own incredible mother. The thought makes Ashlyn’s eyes well up with tears, never having experienced such a powerful testament of love as this one.

Ali watches carefully as Ashlyn approaches the tiny hint of ink that is just visible on the edge of her bikini bottoms, waiting for the officer to notice. The halting stop of Ashlyn’s movement up her legs unmistakably signals the moment that she sees it. Ali swallows hard and studies her girlfriend’s face for her reaction, the emotional tears in the officer’s eyes a clear confirmation that this tattoo has as
much meaning for Ashlyn as it does for her. She takes the initiative from there, tilting Ashlyn’s head up to look at her with one hand while the other undoes the ties on the bikini bottom. Her whiskey eyes stayed locked on the hazel ones looking up at her until the bikini bottom hits the floor. She then trails her eyes down to the new ink on her hip, leading Ashlyn’s eyes to do the same.

Ashlyn’s eyes follow Ali’s… and there it is. An all-black compass a bit bigger than a half-dollar sits perfectly on the hipbone. The inside features a six-pointed star design, with four longer segments that protrude from the compass’ closed circle for the four cardinal directions. None of the cardinal directions are marked except for one. North… but instead of the usual ‘N’ positioned atop the compass, a bold ‘A’ takes its place. A… for Ashlyn… the compass always points to her, just like Ali had written. The tears threatening to spill just a moment ago are now rolling down her cheeks as the emotions course through her.

Ashlyn can’t find the words to speak and rests her forehead against Ali’s stomach, her eyes taking in the small details of the design. The ink is fresh with a light sheen from the coating of ointment protecting the still healing skin. She slowly traces her fingers around the area, followed by her lips, careful to avoid touching the tattoo itself as she listens to Ali’s breath hitch and then grow heavier. The brunette’s hands are in her hair as she repeats her ministrations over and over again, unaware of how much time has passed until she is pulled up and Ali’s lips are on hers.

“Do you like it, my love?” Ali pulls back to look into Ashlyn’s eyes, watching the officer’s lips curl into a loving smile.

“I couldn’t love anything more, Alex.” Ashlyn pulls the brunette back into a passionate kiss and moves to lay Ali down gently on the massage bed behind them, intent on showing her just how much she loves and treasures her gift beyond what words can convey. She only gets as far as down as Ali’s stomach before the brunette stops her.

“As much as it’s going to kill me to stop you right now… this part doesn’t come until later, baby.” Ali sits up a bit, forcing herself to ignore the needy throb between her legs.

“But I’m the birthday girl.” Ashlyn protests in a pleading groan, her face pressed against Ali’s abs as she plants a few more kisses there before letting the brunette tug her up.

“I promise it will be worth the wait, birthday girl.” Ali kisses her softly.

“Mmmm, I know it will.” Ashlyn replies in an almost hum and she goes in for a deeper kiss that has them breathless in minutes. She stays close to Ali’s face and moves her hands to gently cup her jaw and upper neck, her thumbs lightly stroking the brunette’s cheeks as she finally finds the words. “This is the best and most meaningful gift I have ever gotten… I can’t properly tell you what it means to me, but know that it means everything, it means the world. I love you so much, Alexandra Krieger. I will always be your port, your guide, your place of protection and safety… yours, always.”

“I know, Ashlyn. I know. I love you more than anything in the world and I’m so lucky that you are my home.” Ali whispers back.

With that said, Ashlyn’s eyes make their way down to the design again. “It’s perfect, it’s beautiful. I love it.”

“Glad you think so. Because I like to think of you as a beautiful tattoo, thoughtfully and lovingly inked into the skin, meaningful and permanent.” Ali smiles, stealing Ashlyn’s words about her from just last week.

“So I’m not a wart then?” Ashlyn plays back.
“Never.” Ali pecks her lips.

“Can’t get rid of me now, Krieger. Then again, name and initial tattoos are pretty much the biggest relationship jinx ever.” Ashlyn teases.

“Not when you both have the same first initial, Harris.” Ali winks.

Ashlyn lets out a soft chuckle. “I like the way you think, baby.”

“Well… right now I’m thinking that we have about half an hour left in here and there’s a perfectly filled Jacuzzi tub over there with your name on it. How’s that for a thought?” Ali smirks.

“Yes please.” Ashlyn says excitedly.

“Fair warning though, I’m not getting in with you.” Ali watches Ashlyn face turn into a small pout. “There is no way I’m messing up this tattoo by soaking it in hot water.” She explains further.

“Oh, right… duh.” Ashlyn completely gets it.

“But… I’m going to sit right there and wash you from head to toe while you get nice and relaxed.” Ali smiles and points to the spot beside the tub.

“Have I ever told you that you’re perfect?” Ashlyn says sweetly.

“Only like a million times.” Ali laughs lightly.

“Not nearly enough.” Ashlyn replies before sinking into the warm water, emerging twenty minutes later with her body feeling like it’s floating after receiving all the attention Ali had promised.

“Ok, so I need to get going.” Ali says wistfully as she gets Ashlyn wrapped up in a fluffy white robe and then hands the officer a room key. “This is the key to the penthouse suite upstairs that we’ll be staying in tonight. There is clothes laid out on the bed for you for and everything you need from home to get ready. The next clue is on the bedside table, pay attention to the time on it so you know when to open it. I amended today’s plans a bit to fit everything in, so the next adventure is a blend of the missed second clue and the originally planned fourth one. So, I just put them both together. Pay attention to the picture for clue two and the location for clue four and you’ll get it.” She explains carefully as she gets her clothes back on.

“Got it.” Ashlyn assures her, blown away by thoughtfulness of it all. “You’re amazing, Alex. I love you.” She kisses the brunette romantically, drawing out every second of time she can.

“I love you too, baby. Happy birthday! I’ll see you soon.” Ali gives the officer one more quick kiss and is out the door to orchestrate the next part of the day.

“Damn, Alex… wow…” Ashlyn exclaims to herself as she walks around the huge and luxurious penthouse suite reserved for them. It has everything. Living room, bar, dining area, and most importantly a huge master bedroom with a California king bed and a steam shower/Jacuzzi combo that rivals the one she just came from. Amazing views of Boston surround it all through the wrap around windows.

She smiles when she sees the clothes laid out for her on the bed. Fitted black dress pants, a light gray
button-up shirt, a black skinny tie, a black suit jacket to match the pants, and a pair of silver compass cufflinks that she’s never seen before. Ali Krieger is such a meticulous and detailed planner, this time all for her, and the thought makes her tingle.

She makes her way to the bedside table and finds the envelope, 5pm marked on the front of it. That gives her about an hour to get ready. She’s already clean thanks to Ali, so she spends the first 30 minutes just relaxing and catching up on her social media messages before getting dressed and working to get her hair perfect. When the clock strikes 5pm, she immediately opens the clue.

Her face breaks into a huge grin when she focuses on the picture from clue number two like Ali told her to. It’s actually not one picture, but a collage of many. Various photos of hands are cutout and arranged around what looks like a basket of fish and chips from Woodman’s Seafood in Ipswich, her favorite. But it’s not the food that makes her smile, it’s that she recognizes each and every hand.

Ali’s hand stands out first with her light blue nail polish. And of course, there are two other hands with nail polished fingers in the same color that are obviously Emily and Amber because the three best friends still call each other to coordinate little things like that. She can see the start of the black ink that forms the base of tattooed trees on Kyle’s wrist and her own brother’s large paw next to three others, a petite feminine one and two small ones and that clearly belong to Bridget, Elsie, and Curtis. There’s a tiny lotus flower tattoo near the thumb that gives away Jess and a small faded scar that marks Liz. The caramel colored skin of Rivera’s hand is right next to a hand that has no discerning features but that Ashlyn would recognize anywhere as Morris’ with Jamie’s and Lexi’s hands near his. Porter’s hand is more obvious with knuckles heavily scarred from being busted open and healed time and time again because of his self-defense fighting drills, Kristen and their twin boys right beside it. The set of three dark skinned hands could only belong to Jordan, Tanya and baby Cyrus. Tim’s heavily chewed fingernails are there too, Julie and their two kids right next to his. She doesn’t immediately identify one set of three hands, but given the placement near Ali and Kyle and the size, she reasons it’s Rebecca, Josh, and Jameson. And perhaps one of the most obvious of all, Edith’s wrinkled skin denotes the hand near the bottom of the picture. She finally flips over the picture to read the clue even though the location it reveals is no longer relevant.

A basket of fries,

Heaps of fried fish,

It’s not a very fancy dish.

But you love it,

And we love you,

Come and join your motley crew.

Ashlyn gasps in disbelief. Can it really be? Are they really all here and on a Thursday no less? The most important people in her life…her family. She tries to temper her excitement, especially knowing that this part of the plans didn’t come to fruition today. She takes a deep breath and looks at the second picture. It’s an elegantly set table with a single rose in the middle, two glasses of champagne poured next to the pristine china place settings. One chair is empty, but Ali sits at the other one in one of the most amazing little black dresses Ashlyn has ever seen. She smiles and gives herself a minute to stare at the beautiful woman in the picture that she’s so lucky to call her own before finally flipping it over.
Originally this was dinner for two,
But so many of us care for you.
The clue you missed was a special lunch,
But nothing could deter this bunch.
The gang’s all here, we’ve changed the plan,
Come join us for a black & tan.
You know the place, your favorite steak,
And you bet your ass, funfetti cake!

PS- Uber is already waiting for you.

It’s actually true, they’re really here for her birthday. She purposely rushes out the door before she can get too emotional about it, knowing exactly where the Uber will take her… Grill 23 in Boston’s Back Bay.

“Well hey, sexy. Hot date tonight?” Ali smiles at Ashlyn, already waiting for her at the door when she arrives.

The brunette is wearing the same black dress as in the picture, one that hugs her perfectly and leaves little to the imagination. “Alex, you’re a goddess.” Ashlyn’s jaw drops at the sight before she composes herself and leans in for a soft kiss. “Are they really all in there?” She motions towards the inside of the restaurant.

“Yes, sweetheart…every last one.” Ali smiles before adding “Well, except all the kids because the tweaked plan is now a bit too adult and too close to bedtime for them.” She laces her fingers behind Ashlyn’s neck as she sees the emotion building on the officer’s face. “Hey, baby. Just take a second, ok?” She calms her. “Everyone is here through the weekend, so there’s plenty of time to be together. Just relax and enjoy tonight. Don’t feel rushed or pressured for anything, we’re all just here to celebrate with you. We love you. So, have fun.”

Ashlyn nods, one of the tears she’s fighting hard to hold in escapes despite her efforts and Ali quickly wipes it.

“Don’t ruin your make-up baby, you look beautiful. Now show me my favorite smile. You know, the one that makes angels sing.” Ali winks and hears Ashlyn laugh as the officer grins at her. “There it is.”

“You’re really something, Alex… completely wonderful.” Ashlyn kisses her soundly. “You realize you’re never going to be able to top this birthday, right?”

Ali laughs at the statement, knowing that it’s become an even grander day than she planned. What was once a simple fried seafood group lunch has now transformed into a very expensive dinner for twenty at one of the city’s premiere restaurants. She wouldn’t have it any other way though and is
just glad that the restaurant had been able accommodate the change by swapping the original private Alcove Room she originally reserved with the larger Wine Room. “Yeah, I can’t say I really thought about that when I planned all this.” Ali shrugs. “But you know what, I’m sure as hell going to have fun trying to beat it.”

“I love you so much I feel like I’m going to explode.” Ashlyn says sweetly as she holds Ali’s hips, acutely aware of the symbolic ink that now that lies under the spot where her thumb comes to naturally rest.

“I love you too, birthday girl.” Ali gives her a nose-crinkling smile. “Now come on, let’s go join the fam and blow the roof off this place.”

And what a rag-tag bunch they are… all standing up and holding up a drink of some sort in her direction as they each yell whatever name they call her by in a raucous chorus when Ashlyn walks in. She makes her way around the room giving tight hugs and engaging in many short conversations before finally settling down beside Ali when dinner is served. They feast on a surf and turf meal of filet mignon and lobster tails with a variety of sides, the dinner going exactly as expected with so many interesting personalities mixed together.

Rivera makes several inappropriate comments that draw a playful warning glare from Ali even as the brunette does everything in her power to push Javi and Emily into conversation, her grand plan to get them on a date together finally at its inception. Edith wastes no time in pulling out the embarrassing childhood stories and Chris, Liz, and Jess jump in to join her until Ashlyn is red in the face and actually thankful when Morris and Porter take over with slightly less embarrassing stories from their Ranger days. Kyle, of course, chimes in with some embarrassing stories about Ali to make Ashlyn feel better until Ali practically tapes his mouth shut when he starts to get into her prior dating blunders…only for Emily and Amber to tell some of the funnier ones anyway despite Ali’s pleading. Tim and Jordan get the whole table laughing as they tease the happy couple about how completely obvious they were right from the beginning. And it’s Rebecca who is the sentimental one, bringing it all together with a toast that reminds them all how lucky they are to have each other and to know and love such an amazing person as Ashlyn.

As dinner winds down, the waiter brings an extremely fancy looking cake with intricate frosting designs, the kind you would take a picture of and never want to cut into. Thirty-two candles get lit despite the fire hazard and Happy Birthday gets sung. The combined voices might make for the worst rendition of it that Ashlyn has ever heard, but nothing has ever sounded sweeter. Of course, no one is leaving without cake and Ashlyn is forced to finally cut into the confectionary masterpiece, finding the inside to be funfetti just like Ali promised. The mismatch between the fancy outside and child-flavored inside of the dessert is humorous, but everyone agrees that it’s absolutely delicious.

By 10pm, coffee has been had, the cake is almost polished off, and Ali announces that it’s time for her to whisk Ashlyn away for the night. It’s not as simple as that of course and a round of wolf whistles and teasing comments are directed the couple’s way as they start to say goodnight. With lots of happy birthday wishes and promises made to meet up for brunch tomorrow as well as a few other smaller weekend gatherings, Ali finally has Ashlyn all to herself.

“Thank you so much, Alex. Tonight was perfect, truly the best and it meant so so much to me. I can’t imagine all the work you put in to plan all this and make it happen.” Ashlyn’s voice is full of sincere appreciation and love as she leaves little kisses on Ali’s face in the back of the Uber.

“You’re welcome, baby. The night isn’t over yet though, we still have almost two hours.” Ali smiles knowingly.

“Ah yes, it’s officially ‘later’.” Ashlyn smirks remembering Ali’s earlier promise to follow through
on what she had stopped at the spa. “Can’t freaking wait.”

“Me either.” Ali leans in for a kiss. “And luckily, we don’t have to.” She points to the hotel that is now just a block away.

After all that has happened today, Ashlyn really can’t wait, pinning Ali against the door of their room as soon as it closes and kissing her hard. Her hands roam Ali’s sides through the dress as the brunette’s hands clench the fabric of her shirt under her unbuttoned suit jacket. She’s feeling around for the dress’ zipper in the tight space between the door and Ali’s back when the brunette breaks the kiss and stops her.

“Hold on, baby.” Ali halts the charged moment before she loses her ability to think. She kisses Ashlyn one more time when she hears a little whine of protest leave the officer’s mouth. “Patience, gorgeous. There’s just one more thing tonight and I want to get it right. Trust me?”

“With my life.” Ashlyn answers simply, giving Ali room to get away from the door.

Ali quickly hands Ashlyn the final envelope and draws her attention to the time written on it. “Just 10 minutes away, baby. So, get rid of all this…” she points to Ashlyn’s outfit, “until you’re down to just those shark boxers I know you are almost definitely wearing under there. Then meet me in there after you open your clue.” She motions towards the bedroom, kissing Ashlyn softly.

“You know me way too well.” Ashlyn laughs lightly at the shark boxers comment because Ali is totally right.

“Not as well as I’m about to.” Ali winks and heads to the bedroom.

“Dear lord…” Ashlyn sighs thinking about what might be in store for her as she watches Ali walk away. She quickly gets to work stripping down to her boxers, getting rid of the sports bra too since Ali did say just boxers. She still has six minutes to kill so she quickly checks her phone and grabs a water from the mini bar, her mind trying to figure out what Ali could possibly have up her sleeve still. She counts down the seconds and then tears into the envelope the second the clock hits 10:47pm.

Her mouth goes dry when she sees the picture. Ali’s naked torso takes up the whole shot from shoulders to upper thighs. The brunette’s arm is draped over her chest and a decent sized gift box is placed on her crotch just right so that both Nittany and the new compass tattoo can still be seen. The picture is black and white except for the red bow on the gift box that stands out. Although she could look at this picture all night, Ashlyn knows the real thing is waiting in the next room and she quickly flips it over.

It’s 10:47pm and you’re officially thirty-two,

The happiest birthday ever to you!

Today’s celebration is almost done,

But, this birthday is a really special one.

The first together, in love, and free,

Ashlyn, I want you to have all of me.
My heart is yours, my soul is bare,

I have one more gift I’d like to share.

In these arms that you call home,

Come get what’s yours and yours alone.

The first thing that strikes her is 10:47pm. She’s never known the exact time she was born until right now, but of course Ali Krieger knows. Ashlyn can’t even imagine what Ali went through to figure that out, but that fact that she did touches her in a way she’s never felt before. She feels important and wanted… important enough that someone wants to know these trivial little details about her because they care about and love her so deeply. She’s never known love like this and it’s the most amazing feeling in the world.

Unlike the other clues, it isn’t immediately clear what exactly Ali is referring to other than the obvious part. Given the sexy picture and the meaningful words, she’s in a rush to get into the bedroom and doesn’t think on it any further, chalkling it up to Ali being metaphorical.

Ashlyn walks into the bedroom to find Ali comfortably sprawled out on the large bed in nothing but a lacy black bra and underwear set, the gift box from the picture sitting on the bed next to her. Her body feels like it’s on fire just looking at the brunette, so much so that she won’t be surprised if she spontaneously combusts when she actually touches her. “You are such a vision, Alex. You’re so beautiful that I can’t believe you’re mine.” The words leave her mouth unfiltered.

“Believe it. I’m completely yours, baby. And you are a vision yourself, birthday girl.” Ali replies as she runs her eyes over Ashlyn bare upper body. “Come here and kiss me.” She demands.

Ashlyn doesn’t have to be told twice, quickly hovering over the brunette and joining their lips in a slow, deep kiss that gets them warmed up but not out of control just yet. She enjoys warmth of Ali against her, the brunette’s signature vanilla, lavender, and baby powder scent permeating her senses. It’s simultaneously sexy and familiar, a perfect combination as the fire starts to build.

After a few minutes, Ali pulls away just enough to mumble “you need to open your gift first, baby.” That’s enough to get Ashlyn’s attention as she nips at Ali’s lips one last time before sitting up a bit. “There’s actually a gift to open?”

“That’s what a gift box usually means, honey.” Ali teases sarcastically as she points to the gift box still on the bed.

“Kinda thought it was just a prop.” Ashlyn laughs and hears Ali snicker as she reaches for the box.

Ali sits back and bites her lip as Ashlyn unties the bow and slowly opens the box, the anticipation building. She watches the look of slight intrigue pass over the officer’s face before her eyes go a bit wide and look up at Ali for an explanation.

Ashlyn isn’t sure what she was expecting or even if she was expecting anything at all, but the box’s contents definitely take her by surprise. Inside she finds a smallish, pink silicone dildo and a simple black harness featuring a clit stimulating knob. She knows they’ve had a conversation about this before, but her mind is racing and she doesn’t want to assume anything so she just looks up at Ali
expectantly.

Ali scoots in close and pecks Ashlyn lips before speaking. “So, when we talked about this not so long ago… we admitted that we were both experienced with it and open to it, but that neither of us had been on the receiving end, right?”

“Right.” Ashlyn acknowledges as she swallows hard and her heart rate picks up.

“I thought about it a lot and I decided that I want this with you. You’re my one, Ash. I want to have something with you that is only yours, that is only ours together. I want you to love me like no one else ever has.” Ali says confidently and waits for Ashlyn’s reaction.

The gravity of the moment is not lost on Ashlyn at all. Despite having already gone through so much together, this is a whole new level of trust and vulnerability. Sometimes the emotions between them are so intense that it almost feels as if Ali has crawled inside of her, cradled her heart, and settled up against her soul… this is one of those moments. “I’m absolutely honored to, Alex.” She whispers against Ali’s lips and kisses her passionately, the heat building quickly this time.

Tongues probe and hands roam with Ali working her fingers under the back waistband of Ashlyn’s boxers and slipping them down her legs as the officer hovers over her. The brunette quickly flips their position and licks her way down Ashlyn’s neck. It gives the officer an easy opportunity to level the playing field which she takes promptly, Ali’s bra and underwear hitting the floor in no time. Their bodies slide against each other and it becomes immediately clear that they’re too worked up for this first round to be anything but an impatient and needy release of sexual tension.

Ashlyn’s thumbs roll over Ali’s nipples as the brunette leans down and takes one of Ashlyn’s into her mouth.

“Fuck that’s good.” Ashlyn moans the first words spoken in the last several minutes.

“Mmmmhm.” Ali hums in agreement, mouth too busy sucking Ashlyn’s nipple to form any other response. “Ahhh…yeah.” She lets out a few seconds later when she shifts so that Ashlyn’s thigh is between her legs and starts grinding to get some much needed friction. She feels Ashlyn tug her up a bit, her nipple now in the officer’s mouth and she grinds her hips down harder. “Unnnhh… yes, Ash… need you, baby.” She flips herself around without warning and buries her face into the dripping wet folds in front of her.

“Jesus, Alex…oh my god… fuck, yes… baby, oh my god.” Ashlyn barely has time to register before her clit is being sucked into Ali’s mouth and the brunette’s equally wet center is in front of her face. “Need you.” She hears and feels Ali’s voice vibrate through her core, spurring her into action. “You taste so damn good.” She allows herself a few long broad strokes with her tongue to gather up the sweet juices already there before pushing her tongue inside Ali as deep as it will go, the brunette’s back arching immediately to push harder against Ashlyn’s face.

“Ashlyn, yes, yes… like that! Oooohh!” Ali screams, her fingertips digging into Ashlyn thighs as her mouth pulls away from the officer’s center in the distraction.

Ashlyn wraps her arms around Ali’s thighs and pulls her in even closer against her face, working her tongue in and out of her girlfriend as fast and hard as she can. Ali’s hips gyrate rhythmically against her face at first, but the movement quickly gets sloppy as she feels the tight clench around her tongue. She feels the shiver go through Ali’s body and she knows the brunette is almost there. Despite Ali having stopped licking her in the heat of it all, the loud moans coming out of the brunette’s mouth and the wild movements of her body have Ashlyn pretty close to the edge herself.

“Alex, fuck me, baby… I want to come with you… please, fuck me.” She pulls her mouth away just
long enough to beg and goes right back to it just as she feels Ali’s fingers enter her.

“You’re so fucking hot, Ash… mmm, god, baby…yes, I’m so close…so fucking good. Unnhh, I love to fuck you.” Ali moans through biting her lip and she buries her fingers deep inside of Ashlyn, curling them firmly against her walls over and over again to bring Ashlyn to the edge. She knows she’s about to tumble over the edge herself and she wants the officer to be right there with her.

“Holy shit…I’m right there, baby, yes! Fuck!” Ashlyn gets out through panting breaths and sucks Ali’s clit into her mouth hard, hearing a loud gasp from the brunette before Ali’s hips buck against her face wildly.

“Ash, Ash, Ash, oh, god… Ash!” Ali screams as the orgasm rips through her and she feels Ashlyn’s body tremble underneath her, willing herself to keep her fingers moving through the pleasure taking control of her body. “Yes, yes, yes, yes…Ash, yes.” She keeps whispering as her body keeps throbbing and silky walls clench and quiver around her fingers with Ashlyn’s voice calling out.

“Alex, unnnnh, oh fuck….oh yeah, fuck…Alex, yes baby. Oh my god…” Ashlyn comes with a deep grunt, head now thrown back into the bed as her hips squirm with Ali still slowly moving inside her.

They collapse exactly as they are for a few minutes as they both come down. As soon as she finds the strength, Ali rights herself and lays down facing Ashlyn. The two of them are content to just gaze into each other’s eyes silently for a while and get lost in the loving stare as hands lightly stroke each other’s skin.

When the want becomes too much to ignore again, Ali lightly runs her tongue over Ashlyn’s lips and they find themselves in a slow and soft exploration of each other’s mouths. It’s not long before Ali breaks away to drag her lips all over Ashlyn’s body. She takes her time kissing and loving every single scar, every inked line, every divot, ridge, freckle, and defined contour she finds on her path from head to toe, until Ashlyn is breathing heavily and moves to hover over her.

“You are everything and you’re so beautiful.” Ashlyn whispers into Ali’s ear and kisses her deeply before returning the favor. She makes her way down Ali’s body, kissing and licking random patterns all over and in no particular order. She pauses to admire the newly inked skin on her sacred spot and feels the noticeable uptick of her heartbeat as she traces her fingers and lips around the outer boundary of it, careful not to irritate the healing skin. Ali is releasing soft puffs of breath and light whimpers above her as she makes her way back up to kiss her again. They move their lips together until they’re breathless and back to where they started…in a loving and fervent gaze that signals without words that they’re both ready for what’s next.

“I’m going to take really good care of you, Alex.” Ashlyn promises in a whisper so genuine and so sweet that it makes Ali tear up.

She’s admittedly nervous, but in a good way. In the way that you get when it’s your first time, you’re in love, and you want it to be perfect. She had even taken great care in her selection, choosing the more forgiving silicone and a smaller size that she knew she wouldn’t struggle with. In the end, it’s about the act itself and what it symbolizes more than anything else. Still, Ashlyn’s thoughtful promise makes every last bit of nervousness leave her instantly as she realizes that any experience in the world with this woman will always be perfect no matter what. “I know you will, Ash. I want you.” She replies softly and kisses Ashlyn deeply as her hand reaches blindly for the box she knows is on the bed behind her somewhere. She eventually locates it and breaks the kiss to hand it to the officer with a smile.

Ashlyn looks down at the box and its contents one more time, smiling at the pink color…of course it’s pink, Ali picked it. She gets the harness settled on her hips and moves to tighten the straps with
Ali’s help, the process going a bit more smoothly than either of them expected for an unfamiliar toy.

Ali settles on her back and parts her legs, reaching out to grab Ashlyn’s waist with her hands and pulling the officer in to settle between them. She had bought a bottle of lube and put it in the bedside drawer just in case, but the sheets under her are so soaked that she knows she doesn’t need it. She looks up to see Ashlyn’s eyes staring back at her with so much fire that it makes her body break out in goosebumps. “I’m ready for you, baby.” She husks and feels Ashlyn coat the toy with her wetness before positioning it at her entrance.

“I love you, Alexandra Krieger.” Ashlyn professes as she very slowly pushes the tip into Ali and stays still.

“Keep going.” Ali urges and feels Ashlyn gently push in a bit deeper.

Ashlyn eases into Ali as slowly as she can, pausing at times to let her get used to it and watching the dildo disappear into her girlfriend inch by inch. Between the visual and the intense pressure on her own clit from the harness’ built-in knob, her eyes roll into the back of her head at the unexpected level of stimulation.

Ali moans at the wonderful pressure deep inside her core as she feels Ashlyn’s hips finally press flatly against hers, the officer’s face looking just as satisfied as she can imagine her own does.

“You okay?” Ashlyn whispers when she feels herself bottom out inside of Ali, searching the brunette’s face for any sign of discomfort.

“So much more than okay. You feel so incredibly good.” Ali smiles and kisses her, hands entwined at the back Ashlyn’s neck. “I love you, Ashlyn Harris. Go ahead, baby… love me.” She gives the officer free reign over her body.

“Talk to me… tell me what feels good, ok?” Ashlyn insists.

“Ok.” Ali promises. “Right now, everything feels good. Please baby… more. More of you, more of everything.” She begs, her breathing getting heavier at the feel of being so full and stretched with Ashlyn’s body so tightly against her that the dog tags around her neck are pressing into both of them. “Oh, oh…oh my god…” she stutters as Ashlyn pulls out a bit and thrusts back in slowly. “That’s amazing, so so good… little faster.” She directs as her hands dig into the back of Ashlyn’s strong shoulders. “You feel so good, Ashlyn… oh, baby… Ash…yes, more. Ash, please don’t stop, baby, please.” Ali moans loudly as Ashlyn thrusts into her faster.

“Alex…my god this is incredible, so damn good. God, I love you so much, Alex.” Ashlyn moans right back, her face buried into Ali’s neck as the brunette grasps her tightly. The pressure on her clit, Ali’s breathless moans, the sound of their hips slapping together along with the soft squishing of Ali’s wetness, the sweat glistening on both of their bodies…it’s almost all too much. Ashlyn fights hard to keep herself in control and focused on Ali even though her body feels like a runaway freight train.

They fall into a perfect rhythm together for a few minutes with the intensity building fast, their movements quickly becoming sloppy and uncoordinated. Ashlyn feels the disjointed pattern between them and slows it all down to regroup, changing to slow and deep thrusts that make Ali moan loudly and pull her down for a kiss until they find a rhythm again.

“Yes, yes, baby…oh Ashlyn, right there, just like that…oh god, yes love…” Ali yells out between panting breaths as Ashlyn suddenly hits just the right spot inside her at the perfect angle and at the perfect pace.
Those are the last words uttered in the room as loud moans, ragged breathing, soft whimpers, and the sound of sloppy kisses fill the air between them. Ali’s heels are digging mercilessly into the back of Ashlyn’s thighs with the officer fighting to maintain the perfect pace as she holds on to try and get Ali to an orgasm before she can get lost in her own.

Ali clutches Ashlyn’s body tightly against her, the room starting to spin as the wonderful pressure in her core quickly builds like a tight coil ready to release. Her skin tingles and burns at the same time, the officer’s weight on top of her completely perfect.

Ashlyn can feel the toy getting harder and harder to move as Ali’s walls clench around it, the brunette’s body finally letting out its telltale shiver. Ashlyn’s abs and quads are burning from the exertion, but she holds on just a bit longer. “Come for me, Alex. Let go, baby, I got you.” She manages to whisper out and kisses Ali hard. She gives a few deeper thrusts and hears Ali yell out her name, the brunette’s short fingernails breaking the skin on her lower back in the throes of orgasm. She changes to moving her hips slowly in a circular pattern as Ali’s body shakes and writhes underneath her and that’s all it takes to put her over the edge too. She lets herself go, not even recognizing her own voice as she moans Ali’s name repeatedly and feels herself spill out onto the harness, everything going black for a minute as her muscles spasm.

Ashlyn goes to move once their breathing starts to regulate so that Ali isn’t uncomfortable, but Ali immediately stops her. “No baby, stay inside me just a little longer.” She pleads, not wanting to let go of the extremely intimate feeling just yet. They just hold each other really tightly and breathe together for quite a while until their muscles pretty much give out and their grip becomes loose and slack. Only then does Ali let Ashlyn roll off of her and rid herself of the harness.

“That was infinitely more amazing than anything I ever could have imagined.” Ali smiles as she runs her hand through Ashlyn’s short and slightly damp hair.

“I completely agree. Just wow.” Ashlyn smiles back, her hand lightly running up and down Ali’s side as they lay facing each other.

“Totally wow.” Ali repeats the sentiment. “Holy hell, look at you… you’re such a masterpiece.” She whispers reverently as her eyes take in Ashlyn’s body and her hand runs down the officer’s stomach, all her muscles firm and popping out in perfect sculpted definition from all the activity, like someone chiseled her out of granite.

“I wouldn’t talk, goddess.” Ashlyn replies back sweetly, running her hand down Ali’s strong thigh and giving her perfect ass a quick squeeze, both of them breaking out into a laugh before the mood gets serious again.

“Thank you, Alex… I don’t even have words to express it properly. Just, thank you… for one of the best days of my life and the best birthday I’ve ever had. For always taking the time to make sure you learn about and understand the things about me you don’t know, for my new watch that I love, for changing the plans you worked so hard to make, for believing in me and making me believe in me, for relaxing and caring for my body, for making my favorite spot on your body mine and connecting us is such a permanent way, for bringing our family together, for this moment that is only ours, for you. Thank you, I am so beyond grateful.” Ashlyn says emotionally.

“You’re so very welcome, baby. You deserve every bit of it and then some… I’m just happy to be yours and to be the one that gets to show you and love you. Happy birthday, Ash.” Ali replies and pulls her in close again.

“I love you, Alex… fiercely, madly, completely.” Ashlyn kisses the brunette softly.
“Same, baby. Same. I love you to GN-Z11 and back.” She winks and makes Ashlyn chuckle by using the officer’s own cheesy line right back at her. “Sweet dreams, Hero.” She turns in the officer’s arms and feels Ashlyn press into her back, spooning her securely.

“Sweet dreams, queen of my heart.” Ashlyn smiles into the back of the brunette’s neck, her hand subconsciously coming to rest right next to the black compass that will always symbolically point Ali in her direction.
Tighten those belts, this train ride is about to get a little bumpy!
Thanks for all the great comments! I love hearing your feedback and thoughts, always keeps me motivated! So, keep them coming :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday, October 20th

“A bit early for you isn’t it old man?” Ruddy takes a drag from his cigarette and plops himself down on the patio chair across from Train.

“Not when you haven’t gone to bed.” Train answers with a smirk.

“Yeah, what was it this time? A Double D princess from Providence? Or maybe that new piece with the perky titties dancing over at Glass Slipper?” Ruddy asks with a raised eyebrow.

“Twin sisters from Kentucky…blondes, small tits, but their asses were prime beef.” Train says smugly.

“The fuck you manage that?” Ruddy asks in disbelief.

“Had dinner at The Black Rose with Vic, they were at the bar. Bought them some drinks, then dinner… found out they missed a connecting flight to get back to college after being in Canada for their grandma’s funeral. The next flight they could afford was in two days and they were trying to figure out some train options… told them I could get them on a free private jet home this morning and give them a place to the stay the night. They accepted, drank, did some lines, we fucked, and they left an hour ago…no sleep.” Train replies matter-of-factly.

“Ah, so you were hunting then?” Ruddy shakes his head. “What’s on your mind, pops? Think we all know you hunt to clear the mind… and the pipes.”

“I need the services of one of your boys. Finley specifically.” Train replies.

“You know I don’t give out my shit for free, not even for you.” Ruddy eyes Train. “I don’t get too many requests for the brainiac…why Fin?”

“Cause I need some discrete information. I want whatever he can get on these two… I’m talking strictly electronic, no in-person involvement.” Train hands Ruddy a piece of paper.

“One hacker coming right up.” Ruddy unfolds the paper to look at it. “Harris? Thought that ship sailed outta here with Dugan a long time ago?”

“It did. Just want to make sure it really left and isn’t just anchored offshore, you know what I mean?” Train replies a bit mysteriously.

“Yeah alright, I get it. You’ve been alive longer than anyone in your position has the right to be, so I ain’t gonna question your moves. Ali Krieger… the legal eagle?” Ruddy asks intrigued.
“Yeah, you know her?” Train questions, surprised since Ruddy can be pretty imperceptive.

“FUCK, wish I did. What a fuckin piece… shit, she can probably crack fuckin walnuts with those thighs.” Ruddy smirks. “I seen her on the news with them big cases and shit. Why you interested in her?”

“Cause the only thing between those thighs of hers is Harris. They’re all puppies and rainbows these days.” Train rolls his eyes.

“No shit. Fuckin waste.” Ruddy shakes his head.

“My thoughts exactly.” Train agrees.

“I get it… go for the soft spot of the belly, get some assurance, makes sense. I’ll get Fin on it today.” Ruddy confirms. “As for payment…” He levels a hard expectant look at Train.

“I want good info fast. I’m a good businessman… you know that.” Train lights his own cigarette. “The load coming into Dry Dock 3 tomorrow night, it’s yours.”

“That’s like over a mil worth of cocaine…you mental?” Ruddy is shocked by the old man’s generosity, the service of Fin not anywhere near worth this payout.

“I’m not fuckin around on this… give good and you get good. I know Finley to be good at what he does when he’s dedicated. Make sure he’s dedicated.” Train makes his demand clear.

“FUCK, for that payout… I’ll make sure the kid don’t sleep until he knows it all, even what she ate for fuckin breakfast this morning.” Ruddy promises confidently.

“Think we all know what she ate for breakfast and probably dinner last night too… it was Harris’ birthday yesterday.” Train chuckles.

“Fish stew and tuna tacos, man… fuckin waste.” Ruddy shakes his head and puts out his cigarette with his boot. “Tomorrow by noon, you’ll have it.”

Train nods. “Dry Dock 3 at 2am. Harbormaster patrol will help you load the truck if you don’t have enough guys.”

“Cops loading trucks with illegal drugs…still haven’t lost your touch, old man.” Ruddy remarks with respect.

“Not until I’m dead. Don’t forget it.” Train says in a joking tone, but the warning is clear.

“I got a good memory, pops.” Ruddy replies with a bit of bite as he gets up. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

“Oh and Ruddy?” Train stops him as he walks away.

“Yeah?” Ruddy looks back over his shoulder.

“Call me old next time and I’ll rip your balls out through your asshole. Don’t forget whose hand you eat from.” Train says in an even, calm voice that instills a greater severity than if he had yelled.

“Yah, ok then tween.” Ruddy chuckles and walks away.

“Riley?” Train calls to tall lanky man in the corner of the patio.
“Yes, boss?” Riley stands quickly and responds.

“The fuck is a tween?” Train inquires.

“It’s like a kid that’s like not really a teen yet. Lydie and her friends call themselves that.” Riley refers to his daughter.

“Hmmmm. Funny.” Train considers it and tucks it away for later.

Ashlyn’s eyes adjust to the dim light of the room, the shades are all drawn so it’s hard to tell what time it is. She reaches for her phone to find out and feels the weight on her stomach. A goofy grin overtakes her face as she looks down and sees Ali sprawled out and sleeping soundly across her lower half, the brunette’s face pressed into her abs. She lightly runs one hand through Ali’s hair while still trying to grab for her phone, the final stretch she makes to reach it wakes the brunette who starts making little cooing noises that make Ashlyn giggle.

“Baby…time?” Ali asks as her eyes start to flutter open.

“Only 7:04am, beautiful.” Ashlyn tosses her phone onto the bed and continues playing with Ali’s hair.

“That feels nice.” Ali smiles and looks up at Ashlyn, finally feeling a bit more awake.

“How’d you get down there, Krieger? Pretty sure you fell asleep way up here and you don’t usually move that much.” Ashlyn questions as she points to her chest.

Ali just starts laughing, her hand going to rest on Ashlyn’s hip.

“What’s so funny?” Ashlyn asks, her head cocked to the side as she looks down at Ali.

“Well I just remembered…so I kinda woke up somewhere around 4:30am and decided I wanted you for breakfast. I must’ve still been pretty asleep cause this is as far as I got.” Ali says through a fit of giggles and buries her face into Ashlyn’s stomach.

“You know better than to attempt absolutely anything before like 8am. My queen needs her sleep.” Ashlyn chuckles along with her.

“Oh well, still a nice place to wake up.” Ali kisses Ashlyn’s stomach and hugs her around the waist as best she can with the awkward angle.

“I’m not complaining.” Ashlyn smiles. “So, we have what, like 4 hours to buy food, get back to your place and pull together brunch?”

“Pretty much.” Ali replies. “Don’t worry though. We’ll get bagels, muffins, sandwiches, salad, and a fruit platter all pre-made. Then we can just whip up some eggs and bacon and we’re good. Low stress.”

“Good, cause I’m dying to have some fun with all those kiddos I missed last night.” Ashlyn says excitedly.

“You’re too cute.” Ali squeezes her lightly again. “Luckily, it’s supposed to be warmer today and we can get them all playing in the yard.”

“Speaking of playing…how about we go play with that fancy schmancy shower in the bathroom
before we have to go?” Ashlyn suggests.

“In a little bit…” Ali looks up and smirks at her. “I still want my breakfast first.” She leaves a couple open mouthed kisses down the center of Ashlyn’s abs and then sucks hard enough to leave a mark on one side of her defined v-line.

“Jesus, Alex…” Ashlyn gets out after a sharp intake of breath. “Baby…ahhhh yeah” Ashlyn gasps again when Ali sucks another mark just below her hip bone, her head going back into the pillow when her clit gets pulled between Ali’s lips. “Unnhh, holy…ohhh, fuck.”

Ali can only smile into Ashlyn’s soaked center as she holds her hips down and works her hard, reducing her to nothing but gyrating hips and breathless moans as the officer grips the brunette’s hair in one hand and clutches a fistful of sheets in the other. It’s just a few minutes later when Ashlyn gives a few final grunts interspersed with Ali’s name, rewarding Ali’s efforts with a sweet gush of ambrosia.

“Mmmm, breakfast of champions.” Ali mumbles as she licks Ashlyn gently, the officer breathing heavily.

“Oh…my… god.” Ashlyn whispers out through labored breaths. “Think you might have just killed me a little.”

“Aww, baby. Sorry not sorry.” Ali teases and climbs up Ashlyn’s body, leaving a few kisses on the way up. “You’re not going to make me wait until you brush your teeth for a kiss are you?” Ali gives her a knowing look as she gets close.

“After that… hell no. Kiss me.” Ashlyn pulls Ali down for a short deep kiss, not able to go longer than that as she still tries to catch her breath. “You’re covered in me anyway.” She shrugs and laughs a bit.

“Just the way I like it.” Ali licks her lips and leans in for another kiss.

“I just need another minute and then you’re all mine, Krieger.” Ashlyn runs her hand along the brunette’s collarbone.

“Nope, that was all about you sweetheart. After last night, think I need a day.” Ali smiles and buries her head into Ashlyn’s neck.

“Oh… Alex, I’m so sorry. Did I hurt you?” Ashlyn quickly sits up a bit in concern.

“No, no! Relax, Ash. I’m just a little sore in a really, really good way. Like really fucking good. Last night was amazing, you felt amazing. It was just something new and my body hasn’t adjusted. Really, I’m fine. I promise.” Ali assures her and emphasizes it with a slow romantic kiss.

“You sure?” Ashlyn double checks.

“You see?” Ashlyn double checks.

“Positive. We are so doing that again, damn you’re incredible.” Ali runs her hand through Ashlyn’s short messy hair and kisses her jaw a few times.

“Speaking of sore… I am too.” Ashlyn laughs lightly.

“Really?” Ali asks in a giggle.

“Yeah, didn’t realize until that little morning activity of yours just now…but, my lower abs and upper thighs are a little stiff and sore. Clearly pelvic thrusting isn’t covered by my workout regimen.”
Ashlyn answers with a grin.

“Well, guess you better add it in then.” Ali winks.

“Guess so.” Ashlyn leans in for one more kiss. “Steam shower now?”

“Yes please.” Ali quickly pops up and pulls Ashlyn with her. “One hour to get ready and out of here, Harris. We’ll never live it down if we’re late to our own brunch.” She warns.

“Says the queen who actually needs the hour to get ready.” Ashlyn gives her a playful glare. “We both know I’ll be ready in 30min and have us both packed up with the car pulled around by the time you’re done.”

“Yep. And that…sexy…” Ali grabs Ashlyn’s ass and kisses her hard as they get in the shower, “is why you’re perfect for me.”

“Darn, I thought it was the dimple.” Ashlyn jokingly shrugs.

“Oh it’s also definitely the dimple.” Ali kisses the single dimple that appears on the officer’s face and hands her the soap. “Now get busy…I may be too sore for play time, but that definitely doesn’t include the Hero special shower service. That I really, really want.”

“Only for you my queen.” Ashlyn soaps up Ali’s shoulders and starts massaging them as Ali leans back into her. Much to both of their surprises, they make it out of the hotel only two minutes later than their planned one hour deadline.

“I’m sure their parents are going to be thrilled.” Ali teases, scrambling a second skillet of eggs as she watches Ashlyn pour batter on the griddle for the chocolate chip pancakes that she insisted on making for the kids. Luckily it’s not quite the large affair it was last night. Although everyone was invited to brunch, only the people who traveled in for the weekend plus Kyle and Chris and his family are planning to come.

“You don’t maintain your status as cool Auntie by serving the kiddos eggs, Krieger.” Ashlyn replies with a grin.

“Well cool Auntie, seeing as how you’ll be the one chasing them around the yard…I’m supportive of your sugar fix pancakes.” Ali laughs.

“Why thank you, baby.” Ashlyn says happily.

“And you couldn’t be any more adorable right now if you tried.” Ali playfully smacks Ashlyn on the ass with her spatula and leans in for a quick kiss.

“Ewww, you better not be putting that back into the pan! I’m not eating Harris ass-flavored eggs!” Kyle bellows as he barges into the kitchen.

“Right on time as always.” Ali rolls her eyes.

“Well, I’m not eating one of yours for a few hours.” Kyle winks.

“Also, isn’t ass kind of your thing?” Ashlyn winks at him.

Kyle lets out a loud high pitched cackle. “Oh Harris, that was too good! Right you are.” He slaps her on the shoulder as he continues to laugh and reaches for a pancake.

“Hey, hey, those are for the kids!” Ali starts to warn him but then thinks better of it. “You know
what, never mind, you fit the maturity level criteria.”

“Oh man, you two are on one. I guess I don’t even have to ask how the tattoo reveal and birthday sex was!” Kyle exclaims.

“And you are officially banished from the kitchen. Go set up the food outside and be useful.” Ali shoves a tray of bagels into his hands and points to the patio door.

“You wound me, princess.” Kyle says dramatically.

“Not as badly as I’m going to wound you if you don’t get going.” Ali jokes and points again at the door.

“Meow! Hiisss!” Kyle claws the air and turns to walk out the door.

Ali laughs and walks back over to Ashlyn who is still busy flipping pancakes, pulling her in for a kiss.

“Not that I’m complaining, but what was that for?” Ashlyn asks with a smitten smile.

“I just really love you in my kitchen, Hero.” Ali gives her one more quick peck before moving to plate the eggs.

“Well, I happen to love being in your… kitchen.” Ashlyn insinuates with a smirk.

“Don’t start fires you can’t put out right now, babe.” Ali kisses her again, this one longer than the others.

“Says the woman wo keeps kissing me like that.” Ashlyn challenges.

“Sorry not even a little sorry.” Ali shrugs and grabs her phone that just vibrated against the countertop. “Hmmm, well then.” She remarks as she looks at the text she just got.

“What?” Ashlyn asks.

“Em just texted that she’s coming to brunch all of a sudden.” Ali smiles knowingly.

“Oooooh… Emily and Rivera sitting in a tree…” Ashlyn starts in a singsong voice.

“Bingo!” Ali high fives Ashlyn. “I think we officially found Javi a girl.”

“Something must’ve happened last night. I’m so grilling him when he gets here.” Ashlyn rubs her hands together.

“I’ll get the deal from Em and we’ll rendezvous in the kitchen.” Ali conspires.

“In the kitchen… or in the ‘kitchen’?” Ashlyn waggles her eyebrows to go with her air quotes.

“Easy, Harris.” Ali jokes back just as the doorbell rings.

“Belle!” Lexi is the first one to rush through the door and hug Ali around the knees.

“Honey, that’s Auntie Ali remember? She’s not Belle, she just looks like her.” Morris reminds the little girl before mouthing ‘sorry’ to Ali.
“Stop it, it’s totally fine. I’m flattered!” Ali waves him off and says hi to Jamie beside him, before quirking an eyebrow at them. “Auntie Ali?”

“Oh please, are we wrong?” Jamie says simply and Morris just looks at Ali expectantly.

“Nope.” Ali replies with a huge smile at the implication.

“Exactly.” Morris goes in for a hug.

“Hey, little princess.” Ali kneels down to talk to Lexi. “I think Auntie Ashlyn has something delicious for you in the kitchen. Are you hungry?” Ali asks and watches Lexi nod excitedly. “Go find her, she can’t wait to see you.” She points the little girl in the right direction.

“Auntie Assssssshhhlyn! Hungry!” Lexi yells as she runs off to try and navigate her way to Ashlyn.

“I’m going to just vehemently apologize now for the fact that my darling girlfriend made chocolate chip pancakes for the kids.” Ali gets out just as Porter, Kristen, the twins and Rivera walk through the door.

“Well shit, she better have made some for me too!” Rivera exclaims and quickly makes his way to the kitchen, stopping only for a quick “Hi Ali! This place is a freakin’ palace!” as he kisses the brunette’s cheek.

“Correction. She made pancakes for the kids, Javi, and Kyle.” Ali rolls her eyes. “Come on in! The action is in the kitchen and on the patio.”

“Hey, what about me?!?” Porter protests.

“Oh hell no. I married you for those abs and you already had way too much beer last night. No pancakes.” Kristen teases, making Ali and Jamie laugh hard.

“Owned, bro.” Morris pats Porter on the back as they head towards the kitchen.

“Woah, woah. Back up there, Corporal!” Ashlyn holds her spatula out at Rivera to keep him from the pancakes after Lexi and the twins each run off with one.

“Alicia said I could because I’m childish!” Rivera protests proudly.

“And you will, but I need a briefing first.” Ashlyn looks at him expectantly.

“Briefing, Sarge?” Rivera questions looking confused.

“Emily. Spill.” Ashlyn demands.

“Oh uh….um…” Rivera stutters.

“Busted, bro.” Morris says knowingly as he and the rest of the group make their way into the kitchen.

“Yeah Javi, care to tell us why Emily is suddenly coming to brunch when she said last night she was having a girl’s day with her mom today?” Ali crosses her arms and smiles.

“She’s coming to brunch?” Rivera says far too excitedly before he can stop himself and then tries to tone it down. “I mean, that’s cool that she’s coming. She’s cool.”
“So not subtle, dude.” Ashlyn shakes her head at him. “Start talking before I get the kids after you with the hose… in New England… on a fall day.”

“Damn. Full on Spanish inquisition on the poor Mexican up guy in here… I see how it is.” Rivera shakes his head and sits down at the counter in defeat. “There isn’t much to tell. We talked a lot, stayed and had drinks until like 1 am when the restaurant closed. I walked her to her car and we exchanged numbers, and I told her I hoped we could hang out again before I had to leave. She promised she’d stay in touch, we hugged, done.”

“Hold up.” Ashlyn eyes him. “You didn’t try to kiss her? No cheesy or dirty pick-up lines?”

“No, Sergeant. That’s your girl’s bestie, I know better.” Rivera replies adamantly.

“I can vouch for him until at least like 12am when me and Kristen left.” Porter chimes in. “They were just chatting. Rivera was all doe-eyed.” He adds with a laugh.

“Awww, Javi! You’re growing up!” Ali walks over and pinches his cheeks. “I’m so proud of you! Also… yeah, that’s my girl and I’d fuck you up.” She points a finger at him in warning.

“Yeah, I got that message on my own.” Rivera puts his arms up teasingly in defense.

“For the record, she was the one I was going to set you up with on a date to settle our bet. You can say it, I’m good.” Ali jokes and just continues right on. “Now… don’t you dare blow it.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Rivera replies sincerely.

“Gooooood boy, here’s a pancake.” Ashlyn teases him as if he was a puppy and Rivera plays right into it and pretends to wag his tail as his tongue hangs out of his mouth.

“Well, I’m just hoping it means we don’t have to worry about him sneaking women into our house.” Kristen pipes up and Porter nods in agreement.

“Why would he being sneaking women into your house?” Ashlyn asks.

“Oh yeah, I think you guys left before that part.” Rivera explains. “Army hired me on private consult to evaluate some Ranger field training of new SCAR rifles to replace the standard M4. So, I’m down at Fort Benning for about a month and Porter here has been nice enough to host me.”

“Well, about damn time they consult an actual weapons expert that knows the capabilities and has seen extensive combat!” Ashlyn exclaims.

“Hooah!” Morris and Porter agreed loudly.

“Easy there squad.” Jamie shakes her head at them.

“Yeah how about we head outside and eat before it all gets too cold. I’m sure Kyle and the kids have devoured half of it already.” Ali motions to the back patio door just as the doorbell rings again “You guys go ahead, I’ll grab the door.”

“My sister from another mister!” Emily says cheerily as she walks in the door and hugs Ali. “You look like you had a damn good night… glowing girl, glow-ing.”

“I did indeed.” Ali smiles, but then gets right back to business. “But don’t you dare distract me! Apparently, you had a damn good night too. So, why don’t you start by admitting you came here this
morning for Javi and give me the dish.”

“Oh, yikes…am I that obvious?” Emily scrunches her face a bit.

“Just a tad.” Ali joking rolls her eyes. “No one cares though. We all agree it’s cute and the whole group just grilled poor Javi, so you’re lucky it’s just me right now. Tell me everything!”

Emily sighs. “I mean there’s not that much to tell yet. We talked for a really long time. He’s really funny and sweet. The conversation was just so easy and I feel like he gets me for some reason. And it sure as hell doesn’t hurt that he’s really good looking. Those big brown eyes and that short buzzed hair with that body, ugh, Latin hottie!”

“Well ok then.” Ali laughs at her candidness. “I’ll give it to you, he’s good looking. That whole little Ranger crew is blessed with good genes. Of course, we all know Ash is the hottest.” Ali winks.

“Well duh.” Emily agrees. “She has a better body than all of them. Plus the hot tattoos…so yep, she wins. Don’t tell Javi I said that!”

“Oh my god, you’re already obsessed!” Ali jibes her.

“Anyway! He was so unpresumptuous and I don’t know, he seemed like he really wants to get to know me and he didn’t push for anything. Which, let’s be serious, was a tiny bit disappointing…but mostly it was just nice for once. I really like him and I want to see if it’ll go somewhere if we keep talking. Obviously, the distance thing won’t make any of it easy, but I’ll cross that bridge if and when I get there.” Emily elaborates.

“Well, I should probably warn you that last night was Javi on his best behavior. He doesn’t exactly have a great track record with women.” Ali confesses.

“Yep, I’m well aware. He was very honest in disclosing his tendency to be a macho asshole and that it hasn’t led him to anything good. I heard all about the nasty pick-up lines and that he even pulled the sausage one on you.” Emily recounts with a giggle.

“No kidding. Wow, can’t believe he admitted all that.” Ali says a bit stunned. “You know, the more I’ve gotten to know him… the more I see that there’s a really sweet and great guy who I think is afraid to be vulnerable under that macho façade of his. And I get it now, it hasn’t always been easy for Ash to open up either. I’ll tell you though, if you can break through those walls a bit… worth everything and then some.”

“Makes sense. I can kinda see it there too and I want to try and explore it more.” Emily admits. “Besides, the way he thinks so highly of you and the way he defers to Ashlyn…I mean, he calls her Sarge like she’s still in command for pete’s sake…it tells me everything I need to know about who he really is. Plus the boy sure does seem to love his mama and that’s adorable.”

“He and I do love to battle each other, but it comes from a place of mutual respect. He’s family.” Ali laughs lightly in agreement thinking about the constant banter she and Javi have had from day one.

“That reminds me…early in the night I told him you were pretty much my sister, and you know what he said?” Emily pauses and continues on. “He said ‘well, we already have something in common’. And you could tell he really meant it. Pretty much half the reason I kept talking to him.”

Ali smiles at the thought, realizing just how deep all these bonds have gotten in such a quick time. “I trained him well.” Ali jokes before getting a bit more serious. “Well, Em…I’m going to give you the same warning I gave him. Don’t blow it! I’ve grown to love that macho asshole and I don’t want to see him hurt as much as I don’t want to see you hurt. I’ve got my eye on both of you.”
“Message received. Pinky swear that I’ll make sure he and I stay friends above all else, no matter what happens.” Emily locks pinkies with Ali as they both kiss their hands, just like they did as kids.

“Well, go get him, tiger!” Ali smacks Emily on the butt and pushes her towards the back door.

Just as everyone is starting to settle down with a plate of food, Chris’ loud voice sounds from the side of the house as he comes into view. “Sorry we’re late! Curtis’ dentist appointment went longer than we thought.” He explains as Bridget follows right behind him and the kids go running off to join the others in the yard.

“No worries, glad you’re here!” Ashlyn waves off his apology as she grabs the tray of pancakes and yells across the yard. “Curtis, Els! Pancakes! Better get ‘em before the big kids eat them all.” She motions to Kyle and Javi.

“Thanks, babe!” Curtis hugs Ashlyn and kisses her cheek before he grabs two pancakes and puts them on a plate.

Elsie copies him and does the same, shocking Ashlyn further with “Thanks, Auntie Babe!”

“Um?” Ashlyn looks to Chris and Bridget while everyone else laughs at the interaction.

“Chris said ‘thanks, babe’ and kissed me the other day when I brought him some lunch. Curt has been doing it ever since. I think he’s in a stage of testing out things he sees adults doing. So, fair warning to keep it PG today.” Bridget explains with a laugh while Chris just shrugs. “And of course, Elsie does everything he does!”

“Well then, we better get the non-PG part over with while they’re out of earshot.” Morris smiles knowingly before looking at Chris. “Pay up, bro.”

“Awww, come on! I was wrong?” Chris bellows and shakes his head, already reaching for his wallet.

“Ah geez, what did you two bet on?” Ali questions with a playful glare as the rest of the table snickers and is clearly in on it.

“Chris here bet $50 that you two would be late for your own brunch this morning.” Morris enlightens them.

“Ass.” Ashlyn elbows her brother.

“Oh please! The way you two rushed off last night…it was a sure bet!” Chris defends himself.

“I told you they wouldn’t be late! They know better than to subject themselves to the relentless teasing of this pack of wolves.” Morris shakes his head.

“Yeah, yeah. I admit defeat.” Chris shrugs.

“You all suck.” Ashlyn shakes her head at them even as she laughs.

“Ok…I’m gonna put a quick end to this.” Ali addresses them as she looks to make sure the kids are still out of earshot. “Yes we had a damn good night. Sooooo fucking good. And yes, we’re both walking funny…yeah, I’m talking to you two…I see the look on both your faces that tells me one of you is just waiting to say it!” She points at Javi and Emily who simultaneously pretend to be shocked at the accusation before looking at each other and doubling over laughing with Javi saying “like they just rode a…” and Emily finishing with “horse!”.
“Yeah and you know you’re all insanely jealous, and you damn well should be.” Ali finishes and pulls Ashlyn in for a hard kiss as loud claps and a few whistles rise up from around the patio. “Now shut it and let’s enjoy brunch.” Ali smiles.

“My girl!” Kristen toasts Ali with a glass of orange juice and Jamie follows suit with a “fucking amazing!”

“Whew, ok then… let’s eat!” Ashlyn finally comes out of her just-kissed daze. “You sit, I’ll make you a plate.” She squeezes Ali’s hand sweetly.

“Oh my gawd, stahhhhhp!” Kyle yells as he rolls his eyes and then promptly gets hit in the head by a flying chocolate chip pancake. He immediately glares at Ali who feigns innocence but has an obvious smudge of chocolate on her hand, making everyone erupt in laughter.

“Motley fucking crew indeed.” Ashlyn chuckles as she takes it all in; she wouldn’t have it any other way.

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Saturday, October 21st

“Have something good for me?” Train asks as he sits on a stone bench that overlooks the common.

“Depends on what you define as good, but I have all there is to get.” Ruddy replies and hands Train an envelope. “Fin is thorough.”

“Give me the run down.” Train demands, not ready to bother himself with reading through the report Fin created.

“Harris is cleaner than a virgin, no ship anchored offshore there. Emails, basic calls logs, whereabouts, financial transactions…all of it… nothing weird. She’s just some low-key suburban cop now. Too bad, huh? I thought she was pretty good at this shit, lethal even given the chance.” Ruddy says. “Like you said, all rainbows and puppies now.”

“Hmmm. I was sure she was still involved somehow. Something just seemed… off.” Train leaves it at that, still unsettled about the way she threatened him. There was an ease to it, a lack of fear. People who aren’t afraid to die are dangerous, period.

“Anyway. Her side piece was harder to dig up shit on. Slippery little bitch that one…has all her emails and important information so encrypted that not even Fin could decipher it. Her financial transactions are under the radar too and all hidden behind private trusts. Not much to go on but call logs and there was nothing there worth noting with those. I fucking hate lawyers… especially ones that can do shit like this.” Ruddy growls out. “Bet she’s dominant as fuck, probably fucks Harris into the ground. No wonder Harris is such a pussy these days.” He laughs.

“So, what you’re telling me is that you have nothing useful.” Train says evenly, his voice laced with controlled anger still not unleashed.

“I’m not finished.” Ruddy answers quickly.

“Then get to the point.” Train says impatiently.

“You can’t see what’s in the lawyer’s emails, but you can see the sender and recipient. Fin checked them all out…all personal contacts and business related people for the most part, nothing interesting. But there was one name that had an interesting story behind it. Woman by the name of Sara Worthen
who a few years back was involved in some love triangle deal with her husband cop and some woman she was having an affair with. She claimed her husband was her ex-husband and the lesbo was her girlfriend, but jury didn’t buy it in the trial where apparently the lesbo shot the cop husband. This Sara chick claimed the ex-husband broke into their home and attacked them for revenge. He claimed she was brainwashed and the lesbo shot him in his home. There was no evidence that they were separated or anything, so jury sided with him. Anyway, lesbo shooter is serving out some big sentence and is up for parole in a few weeks. Given the way that Krieger bitch likes to stick her nose in shit to make money… I’m sure she has her hand in it somehow.” Ruddy explains.

“This local? I’ve never heard it before.” Train asks curiously.

“Nah, Alabama. Fucking hickville.” Ruddy replies. “Anyway, not sure what you consider useful, but it’s as useful as it gets on these two. All the info is in the envelope.”

Train nods and thinks on for a minute before speaking. “Tonight, Dry Dock 3 at 2am… load is yours. I’m a man of my word. It’s a low-key drop, so no more than three guys including you. If you need help, harbormaster will assist like I said.”

“You still know how to do business, old man. I’ll give you that. Pleasure.” Ruddy gets up and walks away.

“Pleasure is mine.” Train smirks as he watches Ruddy walk away. This was going to end the same no matter what, but the ‘old man’ comment just makes it all that much easier. Train motions to his second in command who is sitting a few benches away. “Riley…”

“Yes, boss?” Riley replies and sits next to him in the spot Ruddy just vacated.

“I want you, McNeil, Dowd, Rourke, and Culvin at Dry Dock 3 just before 2am tonight.” Train instructs.

“Isn’t the shipment coming into the navy yard at 3am?” Riley asks in confusion. “I thought Dry Dock 3 was the decoy. I’m sorry boss, I swear I listened carefully, but clearly I didn’t.”

“No, Riley, you have it right. You’re my best guy, you know that.” Train assures him. “Ruddy and two of his guys will be at Dry Dock 3 at 2am waiting for what they think is the real shipment. I’m guessing he brings Paulie and McCoy, but who knows. Doesn’t matter…you be in place before them and make sure they take a nice swim in the harbor. I want it quiet, understand?”

“Yes, boss. Silencers and cement booties, got it.” Riley confirms with a bit of humor. “Ruddy….bold move isn’t it?”

“It is.” Train says calmly even though he feels anything but. “People seem to think there’s a chink in my armor lately. It’s time for a message.”

“Consider it done.” Riley answers unfazed.

“Make sure you’re back at the navy yard by 3am for the actual shipment.” Train reminds him and Riley nods. “Actually… I changed my mind. The other two can make a home at the bottom of the harbor, but not Ruddy. I want Ruddy on the red line tracks… just before the South Station stop outta do it. Don’t care if he’s alive or dead when you put him there, just do it. I want to make sure the message is clear as day.” Train smiles menacingly and walks away.

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Sunday, October 22nd
Ashlyn wakes up tangled in the sheets and sprawled out across the bed. She stretches a bit and looks at her phone, frowning when she sees that it’s only 1pm. She was hoping to stay asleep long enough that Ali would come back and snuggle with her, but she can already tell she’s too awake to go back to sleep.

After getting everyone who needed to travel home off to the airport early this morning, she and Ali had settled in for a nap as soon as they got back. They both really needed it after Friday brunch turned into a whole day of everyone hanging out until very late and Saturday was spent doing kid friendly tourist activities all over Boston. As amazing of a weekend as it was, they were exhausted by Sunday from all the hosting duties and Ashlyn still had her night shift ahead of her.

Ashlyn had woken up to a soft kiss from Ali around 11am, the brunette explaining that she had to run a quick errand with Kyle but would climb right back into bed if Ashlyn was still asleep when she got back. She was so groggy that all she could manage was to kiss Ali back and mumble an ‘I love you’ before falling back to sleep.

Now fully awake, Ashlyn realizes that she’s starving and figures Ali will be home soon, so decides to fix them all some lunch. She already has a pair of long black Ethika boxers on and just throws on a gray t-shirt to go raid the refrigerator. She hasn’t even rounded the corner yet when she hears Ali and Kyle’s laughter coming from the kitchen.

“Well, I’m glad I put a shirt on.” Ashlyn announces from the doorway to get their attention.

“Wouldn’t have fazed me one bit if you didn’t.” Kyle quickly replies as he stacks a box on the counter on top of several others already there.

“And I would’ve preferred that you didn’t put one on at all, sooo that’s two votes for no shirt.” Ali smiles and comes over to give the officer a chaste kiss. “How was your nap, baby?”

“Pretty good, except I didn’t wake up to you.” Ashlyn pouts a bit.

“Awww, well we can spend the rest of the afternoon snuggling if you want.” Ali offers hopefully.

“I want.” Ashlyn grins and pulls Ali into a hug.

“Well who the hell needs all this candy when you two are already sweetness overload? I’m just gonna put you two in a big bowl on the porch and boom, done!” Kyle teases them.

“Yeah, I was just about to ask… is this all for Halloween?” Ashlyn inquires as she looks at the huge Costco boxes of assorted full-size candy bars and candy bags. There has to be at least 300 or so pieces of candy.

“Yep!” Ali says excitedly.

“Damn, you guys are all in at Halloween! Full-size? That’s madness, lucky ass trick o’ treaters!” Ashlyn replies still a bit stunned by the candy.

“Well, since we’re doing Halloween here… there are expectations.” Ali explains. “It’s the ritziest area of Newton and people come from all over to trick or treat here because of the reputation of full-size candy. So, if you don’t join… you’re the one scrapping dried eggs off your house in the morning. I’d rather buy the candy and have fun making the masses happy.”

“Geez, when did kids get so spoiled?” Ashlyn wonders, never having gotten a single full-size candy bar on Halloween that she can ever remember.
“Since the invention of the iPod, iPhone, iPad, Facebook, Instagram? Who knows.” Kyle wagers a guess. “So spoiled, but at least the costumes have gotten better!”

“See, now I kind of liked the old homemade costumes better.” Ali contends. “I appreciate the creativity.”

“I’m with her on that.” Ashlyn sides with Ali.

“Ugh, aren’t you always with her?” Kyle challenges.

“Yes. She’s too sexy and perfect to say no to.” Ashlyn proudly admits which prompts Ali to give her another kiss.

“Whatever.” Kyle jokes and makes a whip cracking sound.

“Anyway, speaking of costumes… we better get cracking. Are we going to do a couples thing or…” Ashlyn trails off.

“I’ve got it covered.” Ali answers immediately. “And yes, couples costume… sort of.” She adds with a smile.

“What do you mean you’ve got it covered? Why wasn’t I part of this discussion? Our first couples costume and I don’t even get to brainstorm with you?” Ashlyn protests.

“I guarantee you’re going to love it, babe.” Ali replies.

“How can you be so sure?” Ashlyn eyes her warily. “I can be pretty picky about costumes, Krieger.”

“Do you trust me, Harris?” Ali asks, knowing she can easily play this card and get the answer she wants.

“With my life.” Ashlyn replies the same way as usual.

“Then just trust me. Good things happen when you do, remember.” Ali kisses her cheek.

“Well do I at least get to know what it is?” Ashlyn asks even though she already knows the answer given that Ali has offered up no information thus far.

“Nope.” Ali replies with a little grin.

“Awww, come on! Why not?” Ashlyn whines.

“Because it’ll be more fun if you don’t know. Duh. Stop whining.” Kyle chimes in.

“Wait, do you know?” Ashlyn demands. “And also, shut up, you whine more than most toddlers!”

“I do not! And yes, I know!” Kyle sticks his tongue out.

“Why does Kyle get to know??” Ashlyn looks at Ali incredulously.

“Baby…” Ali gets close and looks into the officer’s eyes, using one hand to frame her cheek. She leans in for a lingering kiss, dragging her teeth lightly over Ashlyn’s bottom lip as she pulls back. “Just trust me.”

“Ok.” Ashlyn whispers, a little dazed as always after Ali kisses her like that.
“Damn, I have got to learn that!” Kyle says as he stacks the last candy box on the counter.

“Hungry?” Ali asks Ashlyn while ignoring Kyle’s comment.

“Yeah. I was actually coming in here to make us all some lunch.” Ashlyn replies.

“We brought home burrito bowls from Chipotle, go sit.” Ali kisses her again and points to table with a smile.

“I love you, woman.” Ashlyn pats her stomach and goes to sit.

“Love you too, my always hungry love bug.” Ali replies as she goes to grab the food.

“And I love Chipotle, sooo let’s go already before I barf!” Kyle yells loudly and gets hit in the head with napkin ring a few seconds later. He stands there in slight shock at the fact that it came from Ashlyn’s direction and not from Ali’s.

“Nice one, babe!” Ali laughs and goes over to high five her girlfriend.

“I’m learning.” Ashlyn smiles and sticks her tongue out at Kyle.

“Et tu, Harris?” Kyle dramatically quotes Julius Caesar as he falls to the floor pretending to be stabbed in the back.

“Did you hear something, Alex?” Ashlyn jokes.

“Nothing at all.” Ali replies with a laugh as the two of them start to eat without Kyle who is still writhing on the floor.

“You two suck!” Kyle glares at them and finally sits down to eat. “You’re so lucky I love you.”

“Love you more.” Ashlyn replies sweetly.


“Awww, you guys!” Kyle gushes in satisfaction and fans himself before digging into his food, completely missing Ali mouth ‘queen’ to Ashlyn who gives a slight nod in agreement.

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Monday, October 23rd

Ali wakes up as the sun just starts to shine through the cracks in the blinds which means it’s after 6am. The realization slowly dawns on her that it’s well after 5am when Ashlyn usually gets home from her night shift and the officer’s arms aren’t around her waist like normal. She quickly sits up and looks around, feeling Ashlyn jump up a bit from the other side of the bed.

“You okay?” Ashlyn quickly scoots towards Ali, concerned at the brunette’s sudden movement.

“Yeah, sorry. I woke up and didn’t feel you in bed, so I just got worried.” Ali replies, immediately calming down.

“I’m here. I just couldn’t sleep and didn’t want to wake you up with my fidgeting.” Ashlyn leans over and kisses her shoulder.

“Ash, what’s the matter?” Ali asks, the worried feeling back right away at the look of unrest in the
“They found Ruddy dead early yesterday, news just broke this morning.” Ashlyn tells her. “Tied down to the red line tracks.” She adds after a pause.

“Train?” Ali asks not knowing what else to say.

“They have nothing to prove it, but it’s pretty clear it was him.” Ashlyn answers.

“But I thought they worked together or were some kind of partners or something?” Ali says confused.

“They were. That’s the messed up part. Ruddy had a reputation in his own right, so for Train to do this…” Ashlyn trails off for a few seconds before finishing. “It’s a message. He’s trying to prove he’s the top dog. Something shook him…or maybe several things, who knows.”

Ali nods and thinks about it all for a minute. “Are you worried?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I did threaten the guy…but, that has never seemed to set him off before with other people. Plus he won’t find anything that will connect me to any business of his, so I don’t see why he would give me a second thought.” Ashlyn pauses.

“But…” Ali says sensing it coming.

“But I just get the sense that he’s not done testing me yet. There’s no way to know that for sure until he either tries to or doesn’t. So, I just have to be careful in how I respond to anything that seems off or really think about any moves I make.” Ashlyn admits.

“I’ll be really glad when this bullshit is over.” Ali confesses her nervousness.

“Me too.” Ashlyn agrees.

“Come here.” Ali pulls Ashlyn into her arms and rests her head against the officer’s. “Did you talk to McNally? Is he doing ok?”

“Not yet and I probably won’t for a while. This was part of our game plan, no sudden communication if something big like this happens. It’s too suspicious, so I’ll wait until he contacts me when he feels like the scrutiny has died down a bit.” Ashlyn explains.

Ali nods and kisses the top of the officer’s head. “You need to rest, Ash. You have to be at work again by 1pm and I’m not letting you go in there all tired. Can I read to you?” She suggests, knowing that it almost always does the trick to relax her.

“I’d like that.” Ashlyn squeezes the brunette’s waist lightly and settles herself more comfortably against her girlfriend.

Ali is only halfway through The Little Prince when she feels the tattooed arm around her waist tighten a bit and Ashlyn mumble “Love you, Alex.” She smiles and only gets through a couple more lines of text before she hears a light snore and puts the book down, kissing Ashlyn’s lips really gently. “I love you too, beautiful. Sweet dreams.”

Thursday, October 26

“To you.” Train pours two double-shots of his pricey Pure Pot whiskey and slides one to Riley who
sits across from him.

“Boss?” Riley questions. Train almost never drinks with his men, and he certainly doesn’t toast them.

“You did a hell of a job the other night. I’m pleased and we’re going to celebrate. Drink.” Train encourages him.

“Thanks, boss.” Riley downs the drink to show his respect.

“I have another task for you.” Train gets down to business.

“Whatever you need.” Riley replies easily.

“Nothing difficult.” Train prefaces his instructions. “There’s a police Sergeant named Steven Foster in the Birmingham Alabama Police Department. I want you to make sure the information in that envelope gets to him as soon as possible. I think he’d like to know what his ex-wife has been up to.” Train says with a crooked grin.

“I’ll get it done.” Riley promises and opens to envelope to look it over and make sure he doesn’t have questions. “Harris? Thought there was nothing there and you weren’t going down that road?” He asks a bit surprised.

“I’m not quite going down the road, but… when you lived through enough infestations, you know to leave some good cheese out in a trap in case a rat happens to come around.” Train replies coldly.

“Right you are, boss.” Riley nods and gets up, knowing the conversation is done.

Tuesday, October 31st

“Ugh, why did you let me eat so many full-size candy bars?” Ashlyn groans and rubs her stomach as she wipes off the last bit of silver metallic paint on her face.

“Right, like I could have stopped you.” Ali glares at the officer playfully in the bathroom mirror as she wipes off the copious blush on her cheeks.

“Yeah, yeah.” Ashlyn grumbles knowing the brunette is right, only taking solace in the fact that Kyle ate even more than she did. She makes a mental note to recruit him to do a few extra workouts with her this week.

“I’m sure it will hardly affect your perfectly sculpted exterior, Tin Man.” Ali jokes as they climb into bed.

“Well if it does, you’re just going to have to love me anyway, Dorothy.” Ashlyn gets under covers and pulls Ali against her.

“Without a doubt, always.” Ali says sweetly and lifts her head a bit to kiss Ashlyn’s jaw.

“Thanks for tonight. You were right, I loved it and it meant a lot to me…and Chris too.” Ashlyn smiles into Ali’s hair as she thinks about the last few hours.

Ali had dragged her upstairs the second she got home from work and an hour later she was completely shiny and silver, transformed into the Tin Man with axe and all. Ali looked just an impressive decked out as the perfect Dorothy, right down to the braided pigtails with the ring-curled
ends and bright ruby red slippers. Although the choices had been perfect for each of them, Ashlyn couldn’t help but tease Ali that Dorothy and Tin Man were a bit of an odd pairing. Ali had just smirked and shrugged.

It all began to make more sense just half an hour later when Kyle busted through the door dressed as the Scarecrow, but the big surprise came when Chris and his family showed up. Chris was dressed as the Cowardly Lion, Bridget as the Wicked Witch of the West, Curtis as Toto, and Elsie as Glinda. Edith had completed the ensemble when she showed up dressed in a suit and top hat as the Wizard of Oz himself. Ashlyn could only think of her grandmother and grin like a fool at Ali’s perfect costume idea. She already knew that the group picture Ali’s neighbor had taken of them would be framed and grace a special spot in the house.

“You’re welcome. I thought of it as soon as I learned about your grandma’s love of the Wizard of Oz and figured it might make for a really special first Halloween.” Ali explains. “Plus, you make a really hot Tin Man.” She adds with a flirty smile.

“Yeah well, not only were you a beautiful Dorothy, but a handsy one too.” Ashlyn raises an eyebrow. “No one missed the fact that there was no silver make-up left on the back of my neck by the end of the night, Krieger.”

“Sorry not sorry.” Ali nuzzles into the crook of Ashlyn’s neck.

“You say that a lot.” Ashlyn laughs.

“Because I’m not sorry at all that I can’t keep my hands off of you.” Ali says resolutely as her hand lightly strokes Ashlyn’s side under the covers.

“I don’t want you go tomorrow.” Ashlyn whispers after a few comfortable minutes of silence.

“I don’t want to go either, baby. But, I have two weeks until this parole hearing and I need to get some final things into place that I can’t do from home.” Ali replies.

“I know and I’m not really complaining, but I’m going to miss you. We haven’t been apart since…” Ashlyn trails off.

“Since you realized you couldn’t live without me, grew a set, and finally showed up at my door looking irresistible?” Ali teases.

“Yep, that.” Ashlyn smiles.

“I’m going to miss you like crazy.” Ali leans in for a kiss. “I’ll be back in three days and I’ll call, text, FaceTime, all of it, any chance I get.”

“I also wish you weren’t going by yourself to conservative hellhole Alabama.” Ashlyn voices her other concern.

“I’ll be fine, Ash. It’s not like in LA where we had paparazzi following us. All the attention on us has died down now that the Ellen segment aired and people finally realized that we’re just a boring, do-gooder lesbian couple. Besides, I used to do this stuff all the time by myself before hiring Tim and I was fine.” Ali tries to reassure her.

“True, but you also haven’t had to do stuff in the backyard of the KKK.” Ashlyn raises an eyebrow.

Well I’d hire some other security if I could, but we both know that if I did that Tim would insist on coming. And there is no way I’m letting him do that when his mother-in-law just died a couple days
ago.” Ali replies.

“Agreed.” Ashlyn nods.

“I’m not doing anything crazy anyway. I have the main argument ready and put together. The medical examiner and Dr. Henning’s analyses both show that the bullet entry angle would have made it so that Kira was practically standing over Steve on a chair, which doesn’t match Steve’s testimony of the events. So, that is solid doubt right there. I also have some pretty good electronic records showing that Steve purchased a home with another woman shortly after Sara and Kira started dating and that their finances were completely separate for quite some time before that night. Also have financial records that show Kira was paying money towards upkeep of the house and their vehicles.” Ali elaborates.

"The courts still like paper copies of everything and not electronic versions, especially in the South. So, I need to spend time tracking those hard copies down. That’s the only thing I’ll leave the hotel for. The rest of the time I’ll spend with Sara to finalize the divorce so I can file it before I go. It’ll take two weeks to process and for the judge to make the default judgement of divorce, so Steve won’t know until after the parole hearing happens. I also need to spend time on the phone with parole departments in the districts of Chicago. That’s where Sara and Kira decided to move, so I need to get at least one district to agree to the parole transfer. And if we run into trouble with that, then I’ll have Sara right there so we can amend the plan. So, I’ll be busy, but I won’t be doing anything crazy. The point is to not attract any attention.” Ali lays out her plan to calm Ashlyn even though the officer already knows the gist of it.

“You’re incredible, you know that?” Ashlyn says in complete admiration. “And a total badass that I have no doubt can handle herself. I’m just going to miss you.” She adds and shifts so Ali is more on top of her.

“Yeah? Well, maybe I should show you how well I can handle myself… and how much I’m going to miss you too.” Ali grins devilishly as she straddles Ashlyn’s waist and runs her hands over her shoulders and up her neck.

“Bring it.” Ashlyn encourages playfully, but is quickly silenced when Ali kisses her hard and has her gripping the headboard as she screams the brunette’s name in the throes of orgasm just ten minutes later.

Wednesday, November 1st

“Ten more minutes.” Ali groans as her cellphone alarm goes off at 4am. She’s comfortably tucked into Ashlyn’s side, her body still wonderfully tingly and exhausted from the prior night’s activities.

“Can’t beautiful, you have a flight to catch.” Ashlyn reaches over to silence the alarm. “Besides, you’re the one that picked an early flight.” She teases just a bit. “I’ll go make you coffee.”

“Mmmmmmm, ugh… thanks, baby.” Ali groans again and rolls over to let Ashlyn up. She smiles when she feels soft lips on her forehead and then quickly frowns when they leave. She finally wills herself to get up a minute later, glad that she forced herself to pack everything before yesterday’s Halloween fun.

“Wow that was fast! I’m pretty sure you have never gotten ready this fast before.” Ashlyn is stunned when Ali walks into the kitchen before she has even finished making the coffee. “Actually, I’m not even sure I’ve ever gotten ready that quick…maybe at West Point my first year during drills.” She
jokes and actually pretends to be in deep thought about it.

“Funny, Harris.” Ali rolls her eyes. “Add it to the list of things you are learning about me. I always travel in comfortable clothes and minimal makeup, then I shower and get ready when I arrive at the hotel. I’m just going to sleep on the plane anyway.”

“Noted. But to my credit, you did not take that approach when we went to Georgia.” Ashlyn challenges.

“True, but that was different. I was about to meet the most important people in your life and I was nervous as hell. Of course I was going to look my best and not sleep on the way there!” Ali replies adamantly.

“Good point.” Ashlyn concedes and hands Ali her coffee.

“Thanks, babe.” Ali says appreciatively and immediately takes a big sip.

“I’m gonna go get ready for work, so I can head straight there after I drop you off. Be done in like 15 minutes.” Ashlyn says as she makes her way out of the kitchen.

“Show off!” Ali calls out, knowing darn well Ashlyn is going to be ready in 10 minutes just to beat her time this morning.

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“Now I know why people hate airports so much. This sucks.” Ashlyn holds Ali tight, already dreading the goodbye even though it’s only three days and she feels ridiculous for being so needy.

“And it sucks extra because you are looking so damn good in your uniform. How I am supposed to leave you when you look like this?” Ali plants a quick kiss on Ashlyn’s lips.

“That was my big plan, make it so you can’t leave.” Ashlyn jokes.

“It’s working.” Ali pouts.

“No, it’s not. Because I know you’re going to get that fine ass onto the plane and go absolutely crush it like you always do so that the parole hearing is in the bag before it even happens in a couple weeks. You’re Alexandra Blaire Krieger, pesky bitch lawyer extraordinaire, amazing human being, owner of my heart, Liebe meines Lebens.” Ashlyn says sweetly as her hands go to Ali’s face.

“You couldn’t be any more perfect and adorable if you tried.” Ali whispers, her heart fluttering.

“You’re the love of my life too, Ash.

“If you can call my terrible German accent perfect, then sure.” Ashlyn says playfully.

“Yeah, but it’s a terrible German accent that’s just for me, so you see…perfect.” Ali kisses her passionately, the two of them getting lost in it for quite a while until a taxi whistle sounds nearby and they pull apart remembering where they are.

“This police uniform has its benefits… we would’ve been kicked out of this drop-off terminal parking area like ten minutes ago if you weren’t dressed like this.” Ali says as she grabs Ashlyn’s collar, realizing the officer patrolling the area hasn’t even bothered to look at them even though he’s been clearing everyone else out in less than two minutes.
“Perks of the job.” Ashlyn says proudly. “I hate to say it, but you need to go, sweetheart.”


“I love you too, Alex.” Ashlyn replies, hugging the brunette tightly one more time before letting go, but keeping their hands entwined.

“I’ll text you when I land and call when I get to the hotel. I’ll be in touch anytime I can be.” Ali promises. “Gehirn im Kopf.” She reminds the officer.

“Right back at you,” Ashlyn returns the sentiment. “Have a safe flight, beautiful. I’ll be right here waiting to pick you up on Saturday morning.”

Ali nods and kisses Ashlyn softly one more time before forcing herself to quickly turn away and get going so she doesn’t linger any longer and miss her flight.

Ashlyn watches Ali walk through the terminal door and towards security until she can no longer see her through the glass windows, finally getting in her Jeep and leaning her head back on the seat for a few seconds. Ali has been gone for all of a minute and she’s never missed someone so much in her life.

Thursday, November 2nd

Ashlyn immediately grabs her phone when she hears the text notification even though it’s only around 5am. Despite the fact that she and Ali FaceTimed each other last night until they were both exhausted, she hadn’t been able to sleep well in the bed all by herself and has been up for an hour already. The early text likely means Ali hasn’t slept well either and is checking to see if she’s awake. Even though she feels bad that the brunette is up early too, she’d be lying if she said she’s not excited to talk to her anyway. Her face drops when she sees that the text isn’t from Ali.

**John McNally: Ready for some drunken fool stories this morning? I have a real whopper! 6am, Daily Harvest Café in Danvers?**

Based on the early time of the text and the random little coffee shop McNally picked that’s exactly halfway between them, she knows he has something important to tell her. She quickly texts back and goes to get ready for work as fast as she can so she can go straight there after their meet-up.

**A. Harris: Definitely, I’ll be there!**

When she steps out of the shower, she sees a text from Ali and sighs in disappointment that neither of them really have the time to talk this morning.

**Paladin: Good morning, Hero! I’m up early, just don’t know how to sleep w/out you anymore :-( Sara is able to meet early, so I’m going to get a head start on the day. I’ll call you when we break for lunch around 1pm. Hope I didn’t wake you with this text & that you’re all warm & sleepy in bed just like I’m picturing you. I love you so much, Ash. Miss you dearly!**

**Hero: Good morning, beautiful! I’m up too, that makes two of us for poor sleep. Glad you can get crackin’ early my lil go getter! I’m headed to meet McNally before work, about time I get the scoop from him! I love you like crazy, Alex and I can’t wait to hear your voice. Go get ‘em, baby <3**

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“Harris!” McNally gets her attention as soon as she walks in the door. “Got your coffee.” He says as she approaches and sits down.

“About time you get in touch, man. I’ve been dying to hear about this Ruddy thing. What the fuck happened? Do you have any sense of what Train was thinking? He feels threatened, right? It has to be a message.” Ashlyn unloads a bunch of questions before she even gives McNally a proper greeting.

“Hey, just stop for a second, ok?” McNally stops her. “We can get into that shit later, but right now I need to tell you something.”

“What’s up?” Ashlyn asks, finally noticing McNally’s nervousness.

“Train tipped off Steven Foster.” McNally doesn’t waste words.

“Steven Foster?” Ashlyn asks, not registering the name.

“Yeah, the cop from the case Ali is working on. He tipped the guy off about Ali.” McNally gets it across as clearly as he can.

“Wait, what? What the fuck, why?” Ashlyn feels both angry and panicked at the same time, lost as to why this is even happening. “When? He told you this?” More questions shoot out of her mouth before she can even stop to think.

“No, he didn’t tell me shit. He told Murphy about it. Murphy just told me last night. You were right about Train letting him in and trusting him. I don’t know what the fuck is going on, but Train is kind of unhinged. Murphy said it’s like he feels the need to prove himself for some reason. I know he’s had a few close calls with our guys on some drug deals, obviously because we know about them ahead of time from Murphy. I think he’s getting suspicious, but I didn’t expect him to get like this so fast.” McNally rambles. “He fucking killed one of his own top guys, that’s messed up. And why the fuck is he gunning for you and Ali?”

Ashlyn tries hard to take in everything McNally is saying, but her brain is stuck in one place. “When? When did he tip off Steve Foster?”

“Uh… A few days ago I think, maybe even earlier. Murphy just found out yesterday and told me last night to warn you. He had Riley do it for him. Anyway, if I know Ali, that’s not gonna deter her… but, she needs to watch herself when she goes down there for that hearing. You should go with her and maybe get some additional security just in case.” McNally suggests.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Ashlyn’s fist is clenched so hard it’s completely white as her mind races.

“What?” McNally asks at her outburst.

“Ali is in fucking Alabama right now, without Tim as her security because his mother-in-law died! She’s down there until Saturday on her own and who knows what the fuck this twisted bastard has up his sleeve and he’s had days to plan ahead. Fuck!” She explains even as she starts to panic in earnest. “Come on, pick up, Alex! Pick up!” Ashlyn whisper-yells as she calls Ali twice only to get her voicemail. “Shit!” She throws her phone down on the table. Ali must be with Sara already and definitely won’t answer until their lunch break which is still over 6 hours from now.

“Fuck.” McNally voices the only thing there is to say right now as he watches Ashlyn bury her face in her hands.
Chapter End Notes

What do you think, is Train being reckless or is he up to something more calculated?
The Wizard

Chapter Notes

Ok, time to jump off that nice cliffy I left you with last time. Let me just put up all the warnings here, this chapter has some... violence, derogatory/slur language, and mention of sexual assault. As usual, let me know what you think... I love your feedback!

Thursday, November 2\textsuperscript{nd} continued…

“Come on, fucking think!” Ashlyn yells at herself as she rubs her forehead. Ali is in danger with every minute that ticks by and she has to do something. “Alright, calm down… think it out. Just step out and assess.” She does her best to get composed by distancing herself from her emotions so she can see the situation for what it is, slipping into the strategic planning mode so ingrained in her as a Ranger. “Help me talk this out, McNally.” She requests.

“Ok, let’s go through what we know.” McNally suggests.

“Alright, so Train questioned you about me. I didn’t get to tell you yet, but he made me come meet him on my birthday and asked me about you. I gave him pretty much the same answer you did and he didn’t seem to buy it, so long story short… I told him I was living my life and done with all this bullshit, and that if he messed with me I’d put a bullet in his head.” Ashlyn starts.

“Holy shit. Well that explains his motivation here. But, let’s be serious… if you didn’t threaten him, he would have just come at you more directly. So, it’s probably good you did. The way he went around you like this, he’s shaken by it for sure.” McNally replies.

“Then he kills Ruddy. And Murphy said he’s acting impulsive and like he has something to prove. That seems like he’s afraid of something. So the Ruddy thing was for show… like maybe he doesn’t know who’s coming after him, so he kills Ruddy to put out a general warning that he’s still top dog and not to mess with him.” Ashlyn reasons.

“That sounds right to me. But why now? Not much has happened to have caused him to get so suspicious and strange. Sure he took in Murphy and he thinks maybe he has me under his thumb now, but this has to be routine shit for him.” McNally questions.

Ashlyn thinks about what she knows for a few minutes until it hits her like a lightning bolt. “He’s gonna make a purchase! Fuck, how did I not see that?!”

“Purchase? What?” McNally isn’t following.

“This is how he got before when he had a big weapons cache coming in! He knows he always has leaks in his crew, that’s just the nature of the business. And usually he just uses it to his advantage, but these weapons deals… he knows he can go down hard for them. The last one I saw, he ran a few drug deals and put out some false information among his own guys before the weapons exchange. Then he cleaned house when he figured out who was leaking shit and those guys were goners. So then he felt pretty good going into the exchange. He’s gotta have one coming now. That’s what he’s doing! But he doesn’t know who is leaking and who he can trust, especially with new acquisitions
like you and Murphy. He’s trying to clean house.” Ashlyn gets out in a rush.

“Shit, that makes so much sense. He’s trying to draw us out even though he’s not sure it’s us.”

McNally finally sees it.

“Think about it. He told Murphy about tipping off Steve. If Murphy’s the leak, then he tells you and you tell me. If either of us goes anywhere near Ali right now, he’ll know. Fucking hell, if we do anything obvious to try and protect her, he’ll kill us all. It has to be subtle… but we don’t have fucking time for subtle!” Ashlyn yells in frustration.

“Alright, calm down, Harris.” McNally tries to help. “She usually has security, so would it be that weird for her to just hire someone down there? She can pretend like she felt unsafe going somewhere or something.”

“It’s not a bad idea, but I don’t think it’s fast enough. By the time we find someone who can be discrete, this could all be a mess. And it would have to be Ali that hired them and not me. It’ll be at least 1pm before I hear from her. That’s too much time.” Ashlyn thinks it over.

“But we don’t even know if this guy will do anything. We might have more time than we think.” McNally does his best to inject some realistic positivity.

“I don’t think so. This guy is a loose cannon. He broke into his ex-wife’s house and shot himself in the leg all so he could pin it on her girlfriend because he couldn’t stand to be embarrassed by the fact that his ex-was was dating a woman.” Ashlyn shakes her head. “He’s going to assume Ali is there to put this whole thing in the public eye. There is no way he’s going to let that go without doing something about it. Train is certainly betting on it… and this is definitely not something I’m going to bet against Train on. I have to find a way to protect Ali.”

“I don’t think there’s any way to do that without it giving us away to Train. I think we just have to bite the bullet to make sure Ali is safe and deal with Train later.” McNally concedes.

“Damn it, fuck!” Ashlyn yells again. “We just need more time to nail this motherfucker for good. We’re so damn close, there has to be a damn way to protect Ali and get around this.” She closes her eyes and tries again, working hard to visualize all the pieces and what moves she can make.

“Think out loud, Harris. I can’t help if you’re not talking it out with me.” McNally reminds her.

“Ok, option one. Fastest thing is to call the cops down there… can’t do it because Steve is a cop and clearly has all kinds of shady connections.” Ashlyn eliminates the idea.

“Damn it, fuck!” Ashlyn yells again. “We just need more time to nail this motherfucker for good. We’re so damn close, there has to be a damn way to protect Ali and get around this.” She closes her eyes and tries again, working hard to visualize all the pieces and what moves she can make.

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“Ok, option one. Fastest thing is to call the cops down there… can’t do it because Steve is a cop and clearly has all kinds of shady connections.” Ashlyn eliminates the idea.

“That’s local cops though. What if we call state?” McNally throws out an idea.

“We don’t know who this guy is connected to. Plus, I think that draws too much attention if we call them. It would get back to Train for sure.” Ashlyn explains. “We’d have to have some connection to someone on the force down there that could keep it quiet. I certainly don’t, do you?”

“No.” McNally answers dejectedly.

“Option two. Next fastest is for me to hop on the next flight down there. If I could get on one right away, it would still take me like 5 hours to get there. Not bad, but obviously our cover would be blown.” Ashlyn pretty much reiterates what they already talked about.

“Yeah, we’d just have to bite the bullet with that one.” McNally agrees.

“Option three. Not fast at all, but I could have Ali hire someone down there and at best they would
be in place by tonight. It’s the quietest option. I’d still have to wonder who Steve is connected to though and if there’s any chance that private security is part of that web. Circles run deep in places like that, I mean, look at how bad South Boston is and things are more civilized up here.” Ashlyn lays out her last idea.

“Ugh, these are all terrible. Fucker has our hands tied. Damn it, I wish one of us knew someone down there we could trust.” McNally grumbles and then looks at Ashlyn really seriously. “Ali is priority. Just get on the next flight, Harris. That’s the best way to keep her safe. Fuck Train, we’ll deal with him when it comes down to it.” He waits for Ashlyn’s response, but all he gets is a blank stare.

Ashlyn stops listening at ‘I wish one of us knew someone down there we could trust’ as her mind starts racing. She’s too busy thinking through all of the possible angles to hear anything else McNally is saying.

“Harris? Hey, Harris! Hello?!” McNally waves a hand in front of her face until he sees her eyes come back into focus. “Come on, we have to find you a flight ASAP.”

“Huh?” Ashlyn responds, but isn’t really paying attention as she gets up and makes her way over to the barista.

“The fuck is she doing now?” McNally mumbles to himself.

“Excuse me, do you have a landline phone I could use or know where there is a payphone nearby? It’s a bit of a family emergency.” Ashlyn asks the barista.

“Sure. There’s a phone in the little back office back here you can use. Just give me a second to unlock the door.” The barista grabs a set of keys from a drawer behind the counter and motions for Ashlyn to follow. “I assume given the uniform that I don’t have to worry about you stealing anything in here?” He asks her with a bit of humor.

“You assume correctly, but let me give you a tip. I’ve come to learn that you shouldn’t trust anyone just based on how they look, especially not people with higher authority. So… here’s my license and my credit card. Anything looks awry when I leave and you can charge it on there. Deal?” She holds out her cards to him.

“I was just joking around, I really don’t need that.” The barista says a bit embarrassed.

“I know you were, but I wasn’t. Really, it’s good advice… take it.” She holds the cards out again until he finally relents and takes them. “I’ll just be a few minutes.”

“Take your time.” He says and closes the door to give her privacy.

Ashlyn emerges ten minutes later and makes the barista check the room so that he’s satisfied that everything is in its proper place. He does so a bit red in the face, but Ashlyn makes sure he’s thorough before taking her cards back and thanking him. She finds McNally pacing near the long counter-style table at the front window of the shop.

“What the hell was that?” McNally demands, trying to figure out what the hell just happened.

“Option four.” Ashlyn says simply. She’s not calm by any means, but this is as good as it’s going to get until she hears from Ali.

“What’s option four?” McNally asks expectantly.
“Honestly, it’s better that I don’t tell you. I want to, but the less you know, the safer you are and the more unlikely Train gets any confirmation he needs. We’re gonna bag this motherfucker and he’s not even going to see it coming.” Ashlyn says resolutely.

“Jesus Christ, I feel like I’m walking around in the dark. Ok, Harris. Let’s do whatever the hell this is.” McNally just gives in. “And Ali will be safe with whatever option four is?”

“I think so… as long as this bastard holds off another few hours. If I can’t send myself... send the next best thing.” Ashlyn replies.

“And that is?” McNally tries to get more information.

“All you’re getting. Thanks for getting to me as fast as you could with this… I appreciate it more than you know. We’re gonna get this done and over with soon enough. Have a safe day, McNally.” Ashlyn replies with stark determination and walks out the door…it’s all she can do to keep herself from going to find Train and ending him right now.

“Yes Commander, I can fax all of the documentation we discussed over to you within the next hour.” Ali speaks into the phone as Sara looks on. “And pending your receipt of the documents and your discussion with the parole unit, can I expect a tentative agreement for courtesy supervision?” Ali asks and waits. “Yes, ideally you would provide me with some written documentation of your willingness to provide courtesy supervision of the parolee should parole be approved.” She pauses to listen again. “Thank you, I appreciate it and you can expect those documents I promised within the hour. Thank you again, I appreciate your time and willingness to help.” Ali ends the call and lets out a deep breath.

“Does that mean…” Sara trails off.

“We’ve found you ladies a home base!” Ali says excitedly.

“Ali, oh my god, you’re amazing! Ahhhhh!!!!” Sara shouts happily.

“Yeah, have to say I surprised myself on that one.” Ali admits and she leans back into her chair. “Liberal feminist women are the fucking best!” She lets herself enjoy the excitement for a minute.

Ali had anticipated that getting a parole department in another state to agree to take on a parolee who hasn’t even been paroled yet would be an extremely difficult task to say the least. She had hoped that providing the back story and the evidence for the argument she would be making on Kira’s behalf at the parole hearing would at least get a conversation going with a department or two that would then lead to a greater back and forth dialogue that might get them somewhere. She never expected to have a department ready to agree after a conversation that lasted about an hour, but here they were.

“Really? You seemed to handle it so easily. You didn’t expect it to go that way?” Sara asks.

“Really. I thought this would take days and that it would involve calling as many police departments in the Chicago area as I possibly could. I definitely ranked them strategically, but this is above and beyond what I expected even for the top choice.” Ali confesses. She had spent hours going through the people in command of various police districts in Chicago to get a feel for which individuals might be sympathetic to the case and more willing to engage her. She had chosen the Wentworth district to call first simply because the commander there was a woman well known for her liberal politics. She had an army background and had quite a list of achievements as an officer. The woman had reminded Ali of Ashlyn in many ways and she found herself putting this district first on her list like
Sure enough, Commander Alicia Wiggins had been kind enough to hear Ali out and then asked whatever questions she had. Ali had answered them all with ease given her well versed knowledge of Kira’s case. By the end, Commander Wiggins had seemed appalled by the situation and had promised to do all she could to facilitate a courtesy supervision through their district. She had assured Ali that all she needed was the written argument Ali would be using on Kira’s behalf as well as any supporting documented evidence to back it up. Once Ali provided her with that, she said would speak with the officer in charge of parole and get Ali a written agreement to provide courtesy supervision to Kira pending the granting of her parole. Ali is beside herself and completely shocked at how smoothly it went and she’d be lying if she said she didn’t believe some of it was just pure luck.

“I don’t even know what to say…I just…I’m going back home!” Sara practically shouts and jumps up to hug Ali.

Ali smiles and hugs the woman back, glad to see her so happy. Still, she doesn’t want to let things get too far ahead of where they are realistically. “Well, I don’t want to be a buzzkill…but we have to remember that this all hinges on an actual parole being granted. I’m pretty confident I can make it work, but there are always things beyond our control that could happen. I just want to stay cautiously optimistic.”

“I know, Ali. I promise I understand that and that I don’t have crazy expectations of you. But this all just feels so different from where everything has been in the past. I have a lot of hope and I’m going to let myself believe in it for once, no matter what happens.” Sara replies decisively.

“Fair enough. You just let me be the level-headed buzzkill lawyer in the meantime.” Ali jokes.

“Deal.” Sara laughs. “So, what now?”

“Well, that went a hell of a lot faster than I expected. We got the default divorce petition filed yesterday and I got all of the financial documents I needed thanks to you. I thought it might take us most of the day today and tomorrow to figure out this parole transfer thing, but clearly not. Really all I need now is to run over to the assessor’s office and pick-up the property records I requested. That’s all I needed to accomplish before the hearing… and all by 10:30am on Thursday!” Ali puts her hand in the air for a high-five which Sara quick reciprocates.

“You don’t mess around, girl!” Sara praises her.

“I’ll just run over to grab the property records in a little bit. Do you think you’ll need me for anything else while I’m down here?” Ali asks.

“Nothing that I can think of. So, I’m happy to show you some of the fun touristy stuff around here.” Sara offers.

“As much as I’d like to take you up on that… I’m going to be THAT person and say that I’m really hoping to get on a flight late tonight or tomorrow morning and surprise Ash with being home early.” Ali confesses with a slight blush.

“There is no way I’m standing in the way of that agenda.” Sara smiles. “You two are so sweet. You have no idea how blatant it is how much you love each other. It’s really beautiful and inspiring to see. And Ashlyn has been a godsend in emailing back and forth with Kira. I have no idea what they’ve discussed, but I’ve seen a big change in her attitude about this parole hearing. It’s almost like she’s been more nervous about the possibility of being released than being in prison… but, that’s
been really different since she started emailing with Ashlyn. She seems more relaxed about it and as ready to move forward as I’ve ever seen her since she’s been in there.”

“I honestly have no idea what they’ve been talking about either, but I can guess a bit. Despite being glad to be free, Ash had a lot of reservations about being released and she had a lot she needed to work through. I’m sure she’s probably given Kira some perspective on that.” Ali explains.

“Well, all I know is that I’ve never been more thankful for two people in my life.” Sara says resolutely. “So, how about we work on finding you a flight home and then I can take you out to lunch?”

“That sounds great. Except I’m taking you to lunch, no ifs, ands, or buts! Save that money for moving to Chicago.” Ali winks and Sara nods with a smile. “It’s probably best for me to run by the assessor’s office to get the records first and it’ll be quick, so maybe you pick the place and I can meet you there?” Ali suggests.

“Of course, I’ll text you where it is. That’ll give me a chance to run over to the museum and check in on the progress they’re making with the new exhibit I’m in charge of.” Sara replies.

“Oh, so reconvene at around 12pm for early lunch?” Ali solidifies the plan.

“Perfect. I’ll see you soon! I hope you can find a flight for tonight!” Sara says as she makes her way out.

“Me too.” Ali says to herself and smiles, already lost in the thought of being back in her girlfriend’s strong arms.

Ashlyn tightens her grip to keep from letting go of the rope she’s holding as she feels her phone vibrate in her pocket. ‘Of fucking course’ she thinks to herself as she lets out an audible groan of frustration.

“You ok, Captain? Do we need to stop for a second?” The firefighter to her left asks.

“No, no, I’m good. Let’s get him up.” Ashlyn replies as she re-doubles her efforts to pull up the rope with her biceps burning from exertion.

Given that many of the higher ranking officers often take time off around Thanksgiving and Christmas, some of the lower ranking officers usually choose to take vacation time in the early weeks of November and December since they likely won’t be approved for time off around the holidays. In order to pick up the slack, Ashlyn and a couple of the higher ranked Lieutenants have been covering some of the patrol duties.

Today’s patrol has certainly been eventful. Her patrol unit received a call this morning that a car had gone off a small bridge over a marsh inlet. Luckily, the marsh isn’t all that deep even with it being high tide. The car was above water when they arrived and the driver is generally okay despite a few broken bones according to the fire department EMT on the scene. The problem is that there is no way to get the guy up without lifting him on a backboard using a rope and pulley system over the side of the bridge. It takes almost an hour to get the guy secured and ready, but he’s now already halfway up thanks to the strength of Ashlyn and her patrol partner as well as three other firefighters. And of course her phone would be ringing now when she can’t answer it and when she desperately needs to talk to Ali.

She tries to push it out of her mind, thinking that it probably isn’t Ali since it’s only somewhere
around 11am and she isn’t supposed to be done until about 1pm. She calms herself with the thought that even if it is Ali, she’ll be done pretty soon and can just call her back; forcing her focus to go back to the task at hand.

“You want to join the fire department, Captain Harris? I think we could use a replacement for this old bastard.” One of the firefighters jokes and points to their fire Captain as they all stretch their arms out after finishing hauling the accident victim up.

“Funny, Kline. Just for that you’re on dish duty tonight.” The fire Captain shoots back.

“Nah, I think I’m reckless enough without running into burning buildings. I’ll leave that to you guys.” Ashlyn replies with a smile.

“He’s right though. I would bet you’re easily stronger than half our guys and definitely stronger than your partner there.” The fire Captain laughs as he points to the cop standing next to Ashlyn.

“Hey now!” Officer Redding replies from besides Ashlyn. “Excuse me for not being on steroids like Harris!”

“Oh you wish I was on steroids, Redding!” Ashlyn pushes him lightly. “Keep telling your wife that’s why you aren’t as built as me.” She teases back and the firefighters all laugh.

“Well, it was a pleasure working with you as usual. We need to get back.” The fire Captain respectfully salutes Ashlyn.

“Same to you, Captain. I hope the rest of your day is less eventful.” Ashlyn salutes back.

“Likewise.” The fire Captain replies and gathers his team to leave.

“Redding, I need to make a quick call. Can you finish up the summary report here and then we’ll go?” Ashlyn requests.

“Sure thing, Capt.” Redding replies and heads to the cruiser to type the brief summary into the onboard computer.

Ashlyn walks a little ways away from the bridge to get some privacy and pulls her phone of her pocket. She looks at the dark screen and sighs, unsure of whether she wants the missed call to be Ali or not. She uses her thumbprint to unlock the phone and immediately sees the voicemail notification, ‘Paladin’. “Dammit!” She yells as she presses the play button to hear the voicemail.

Hey, Hero! I had a really productive morning and just saw that you called twice. I think you’re on patrol today and you didn’t leave a message…you totally butt dialed me, didn’t you? Your butt loves me, so who could blame it. And let me tell you, I sure love it back! God, I miss you, Ash. I can’t wait to be back in your arms, baby. I’m heading over to the assessor’s office to pick-up property records and then meeting Sara for lunch. I know you don’t usually use your phone on patrols, but if you call back I’ll answer if I can. If not, we’ll still talk around lunch when you can break away. I love you so much. Muah!

Ashlyn’s emotions are all over the place as the message ends. There’s frustration from missing the call, and anxiety that Ali is not safely tucked away in her hotel room at the moment, but there’s also the wonderful ache of love she feels at hearing Ali’s voice, her little laugh, and that kiss she just blew over the phone. It’s been about 25 minutes since she missed the call and she hopes that Ali hasn’t moved onto something where she can’t answer. She quickly hits the callback button and waits.

One ring…. Two rings… Three rings… Four rings… Five rings…
Hi you’ve reached the voicemail of Ali Krieger. I’m not available right now, but if you leave your name, number, and a brief message, I’ll return your call as soon as I’m able. Have a great day!

“Fuck!” Ashlyn yells and restrains herself from throwing her phone. “Chill, Harris… just chill. You just heard her, she’s fine. She’ll be out in public places…it’s fine, she’s fine. You’ll talk to her in less than two hours.” She coaches herself out loud so she can get her composure back for the rest of her patrol duty. She opts to send Ali an inconspicuous text just in case it means they can talk sooner. With that she pockets her phone and hopes that it’ll be ringing again in no time.

Ali checks her phone while she takes a quick look in the hotel mirror to make sure she still looks presentable before heading to the assessor’s office. Her face lights up in a smile when she sees two missed calls from Ashlyn. They’re only a few seconds apart and there’s no voicemail. She knows Ashlyn is on patrol this morning and doesn’t use her phone while on active duty, so it has to be a butt dial. She laughs at the thought. It’s happened before and she can’t wait to bust her chops about it.

It’s only 10:51am and it’s highly unlikely that the officer will answer her phone, but Ali figures she can just call and leave a message anyway. She gets Ashlyn’s voicemail as expected and smiles at the short professional greeting before leaving the officer a sweet little message and promising to talk to her soon. She grabs her purse and heads out to complete her last task before lunch.

Although she had cringed at the airport car rental counter when they told her what type car she was getting, Ali has to admit that this little Toyota Prius isn’t as terrible as she expected. The lack of engine noise when the electricity kicks on is a bit weird, but it drives pretty well. It’s certainly no Audi and the exterior is pretty ugly, but it’s not a bad little car to drive. She’s laughing to herself about what Ashlyn would say if the officer saw her behind the wheel of this thing when she hears her phone vibrate twice. She quickly grabs it thinking it might be Ashlyn, but it’s just a text from Sara with their lunch location and a low battery notification. “The battery on this thing sucks.” She mutters out loud in annoyance even though she knows it didn’t properly charge overnight because she was awake a lot and playing on it. Luckily, there’s a charger in the car and she plugs it in hoping to get at least a decent charge despite the short drive.

Although some of the areas she drives through look pretty sketchy, she arrives at the assessor’s office with no trouble and is greeted by a stout older woman with glasses.

“Welcome to the Jefferson County Assessor’s Office, how may I help you?” The woman asks with a smile.

“Hello, my name is Ali Krieger. I ordered some property record copies and I’m here to pick them up.” Ali says politely even though all these heavy southern accents make her want to laugh. Of course, they’re probably thinking the same about her Boston accent.

“Well that’s easy enough. If you ordered them ahead of time, they should just be in this bin right here.” The woman turns to a small wooden file box with a few large yellow envelopes in it that sits on the counter to her left. “How do you spell your last name, is that a K or a C?”


“Krieger, Krieger… yep, here it is!” The woman locates the envelope and removes a small sheet of paper stapled to front of it, quickly looking it over. “Looks like it’s been paid for and you’re all set. Here you go.” The woman hands Ali the envelope. “Anything else I can help you with?”

“That was fast! Thank you. I’m all set now.” Ali replies kindly as she quickly looks inside the
envelope to make sure everything is there.

“Well you have a good day then.” The woman replies and gets back to what she was doing.

“Thank you, you too!” Ali returns the sentiment and leaves, happy that it was so quick and she can get on her way. As soon as she starts the car, her phone vibrates from being still plugged into the charger. “Can’t believe I forgot my phone in the car.” She shakes her head at herself and picks it up to make sure she didn’t miss anything, groaning immediately when she sees another missed call from Ashlyn and a new text message.

*Hero: I really really can’t wait to talk to you, baby. Call me as soon as you can and I’ll answer even if I’m out on patrol still. I love you so much, Alex. Don’t forget, Gehirn im Kopf.*

Ali reads the message a couple times, finding it sweet but a bit cryptic. Then it dawns on her that she just told the officer in her message that she was headed out to pick up records and go to lunch. Ashlyn hates the idea of her in Birmingham by herself, so it’s no surprise the officer is a little nervous every time she has to leave the hotel. She smiles at Ashlyn’s protectiveness and gets ready to call her back, but then thinks better of it. Given the sketchiness of the some of the areas she drove through on the way here, it’s better that she pays attention and isn’t on the phone, especially since she always tends to get so lost in the conversation when she talks to Ashlyn. Besides, the place she’s meeting Sara for lunch is only two blocks from the hotel and in a nice area, so she’ll have the whole walk there to talk to her girlfriend and Ashlyn will be pleased that she’s being so careful. That settled, she tosses the phone back into the center console and starts the short drive back to the hotel.

The hotel is just coming into sight when Ali hears the siren and the blue lights flashing behind her car. She starts to pull to the side to let the police cruiser pass, but it just stays behind her.

“Fucking seriously?! What the hell?!” Ali yells out, realizing that she’s getting pulled over and trying to figure out why. There’s really no safe place to pull over on the narrow two-way road lined with parked cars, so Ali opts to pull into the parking lot just across the street from the Redmont Hotel where she is staying. She turns off the car and eyes the officer getting out of the cruiser as she puts her purse on her lap for easy access to her license. She knows she wasn’t speeding and luckily not on her phone either, but it’s always possible she forgot to put her turn signal on or maybe this stupid rental car has a light out or something.

A tall, fit, and clean-cut officer approaches the driver’s side and motions for her to roll down the window. Ali turns the key in the ignition just enough to comply and puts her hands back on the steering wheel, knowing that keeping your hands in plain sight always makes officers happy and easier to deal with.

“Good morning, Ma’am. Would you please exit the vehicle?” The officer drawls in his thick southern accent.

“What am I being pulled over for, officer?” Ali requests immediately, stunned at being asked to get out of the car.

“Ma’am, you have been instructed to exit your vehicle. Please do so at this time. I will not make the request again before calling for back-up.” The officer says more firmly.

“Back-up? I haven’t done anything to warrant that. I’ll get out if that’s what you need me to do, officer. But this is not standard procedure for a traffic stop, sir.” Ali makes it clear that she’s irritated and not going to back down easily, but she also isn’t looking to completely piss this guy off. For all she knows, this is normal in Alabama. She exits the car, taking her purse with her since it has her identification in it.
“Please come around here and put your purse on the trunk Ma’am, and then face the vehicle.” The officer directs her.

“Am I getting arrested?” Ali asks incredulously.

“No, Ma’am. Not at the moment, but please follow the directions I give you.” The officer replies calmly.

“Ok.” Ali rolls her eyes and does as she’s told.

“I’m going to check your person for weapons now, Ma’am.” The officer voices from just behind her.

“I do not consent to that! You have no probable cause to check me.” Ali turns her head to make sure he can hear her clearly.

“It’s not a request, Ma’am. This is our lawful procedure.” The officer stands his ground.

“We’ll see about that when we’re done here, Officer…” Ali turns her head further so she can see his name badge, “Foster.” Her eyes widen as the name rolls over her tongue. ‘Shit.’ Her mind races to figure out what to do next as her eyes search to see if there is anyone in the immediate vicinity but finding no one at the moment. She takes one more look back to make sure she’s read the name right because this guy looks a bit different than what she saw in pictures of him. He’s a lot leaner and fitter and there’s no beard like in the clearly outdated photos of him she has seen. Now that she’s mostly turned around and getting a good look at him, there’s no question.

“Turn around, Ms. Krieger. I think you’ve had plenty of time to get a good look.” Steve makes it clear that he knows exactly who she is and that this is not a coincidence.

Ali complies, but only because it gives her another chance to look around and see if there is anyone she could call out to for help. Still no one. She cringes as he roughly pats her down and then looks in her purse until he’s satisfied that she’s unarmed.

“Let me tell you how this is going to work… you’re going to cooperate and get into the back of the cruiser without making a scene.” Steve instructs only to hear Ali snort.

“Fat fucking chance of that happening.” Ali says evenly.

“You think you’re such a powerful little bitch, don’t you?” Steve’s voice is laced with contempt.

“We can do this two ways and I just gave you the easy way… you get into the cruiser and we try and work something out. But since you didn’t like that, let me tell you about option two. You decide not to cooperate and I shoot you point blank in the chest right here and put the second gun I have here in your hands. And guess what this second gun is… a nice little SIG Sauer that the ladies just love to have in their purses. Even better, it’s already registered to you in the Alabama firearm system and dated back to a month ago when you cited your reason as work related personal protection. No skin off my back if you pulled a gun on me during a routine stop and I had to shoot you point blank to protect myself. Choice is yours. You’re not the only one who knows people in high places, bitch.”

Ali closes her eyes as her heart drums in her chest. She can hear it in the coldness of his voice, he’s not bluffing. She thinks hard about whether it’s worth engaging him here in the hope that someone will come by, but given that no one has in several minutes, she’s running out of time. There’s no telling what he’ll do if she gets in his cruiser, but it might give her a new environment and perhaps more advantageous circumstances to get away if she can. Above all, the option of cooperating at least buys her more time. Her mind goes right to Ashlyn, trying hard to think about what she would do in this situation. Against her better judgment and every other force in the universe urging her not
to, she grabs her purse and lets Steve lead her into the back of his cruiser.

“Thought so. No one likes to argue with a bullet to the chest.” Steve says smugly and practically pushes her into the backseat of the cruiser before slamming the door. He walks over to Ali’s rental car and tosses the keys onto the floor of the driver’s side before shutting the door and locking them in there.

Ali watches him closely, quickly taking the time she’s left alone to press the record button on the digital recorder that’s in her purse. If she makes it out of this alive, she’ll make damn sure this bastard goes down. She’s like a caged animal in the back of this cruiser, no way to open any doors or windows or have any access to Steve other than a tiny hole in the surrounding plexi-glass and iron cage bars for the purpose of communication. Her mind goes back to Ashlyn again, trying to remember everything she told her about the back of a cruiser when she remembers her cellphone. ‘Call Ashlyn, you idiot!’ She mentally chastises herself for not doing it sooner and starts quickly digging in her purse to find it before Steve comes back. Her hand makes just a few swipes around the bottom of her purse when she realizes… it’s still in the rental car in the console. ‘Fuck.’

Steve hops in the driver’s seat of the cruiser and quickly pulls away. Ali expects him to say something, but he says nothing at all and doesn’t even acknowledge her. She uses the quiet time to pay close attention to the roads he’s taking and where they are going because no matter how this ends, she’s pretty damn sure he’s not driving her back to the hotel. It’s just a few turns before he’s driving them up highway 65.

“You know, we could have talked this out in the hotel over a couple of drinks. No need to get all OJ Simpson by taking to the highways.” Ali tries to get him talking knowing that she can now pay attention to the exits without too much effort.

“Oh, so you want to talk it out, do you? Didn’t really seem that way a little while ago. Amazing how being trapped in the back of a cruiser changes one’s attitude.” Steve replies smugly.

“All you had to do was approach me like a normal human being and talk. I’m a lawyer, I negotiate… kind of my job. You didn’t have to kidnap me, FYI.” Ali lays the sarcasm on thick. The more she gets him to say out loud, the better.

Steve laughs. “Oh yeah, I’m sure you wouldn’t have run the other way if I’d given you the chance to. All you lawyers are the same, such fucking liars.”

“Well, let me tell you how I do things… for one, I never lie. I’m a woman of my word. For example, I think you’re a completely unstable and mental asshole who can’t stand the fact that his ex-wife is happier with a woman even though he’s the one that left her high and dry. You’re a total douchebag and whoever gave you a badge should be dope slapped. I don’t care if you put a gun to my head, truth is truth. How’s that for some honesty?” Ali unleashes on him.

Steve laughs again. “You know, if you weren’t such a disgusting dyke bitch with a smart mouth…I might actually like you. But by all means, let’s negotiate then.”

“Well, I have to know the facts before I can negotiate. Care to tell me why you give a shit about your ex-wife divorcing you and getting her girlfriend paroled so they can move on with their lives? Last I checked you were doing just fine with your own new woman, who by the way must be blind as fuck to be with an egotistical maniacal bastard like you.” Ali retorts.

“Don’t play stupid! We both know you’re involved so you can make a pretty penny turning this story into some fucking Hollywood drama.” Steve spits back. “If you think for a fucking second that I’m going to be exposed as the guy who’s ex-wife left him for a woman and then sought revenge on
them for it... you’re out of your fucking mind.”

“Oh, so now you’re admitting that you went there that night and shot yourself so you could pin it on them? That’s new.” Ali replies dryly.

“Oh please, like you haven’t already dug up enough shit to show the world that I did. I know how you work, such a cunning little bitch! Not so fucking crafty stuck in the back of my cruiser, are you?” He practically yells at her.

“Yep, I did dig up plenty of shit.” Ali freely admits, no need to hold back now. “But you obviously didn’t do your homework thoroughly.”

“Oh really?” Steve replies.

“Really. If you did, you’d know I’m a multi-millionaire with no damn need ever put out another podcast. You’d also know that I’ve worked plenty of cases with no financial incentive at all.” Ali says matter-of-factly.

“Oh ok, so add self-righteous and goodie-goodie bitch to the list of shit that makes you annoying.” Steve says with bite. “I don’t see what difference that makes.”

“You really are dense, huh?” Ali throws back at him. “The point is that this story doesn’t have to be broadcast on a national podcast. And, if you’re worried about your reputation on a more local level then I’m happy to give you the platform to tell your side of the story… whatever ridiculous web of lies that happens to be. I’m a fair person like that.”

“Well, how nice of you. See the thing is…I’m done negotiating.” Steve replies calmly as he pulls into a gated weigh station exit off the highway.

Ali watches him get out of the cruiser and work on opening the gate. Her heart sinks, knowing for sure now that her gut was right. All she’s done is buy herself time to give Steve a more ideal way to get rid of her than shoot her in public. She feels oddly calm, her mind going right to Ashlyn... her heart knowing that at least she has had the chance to experience true love with the most amazing person in the world. What more could she ask for if this is how it ends...maybe one last kiss.

“I promise you I’ll fight to very end, Ashlyn. I’ll give everything to get home to you. I love you more than you will ever know, baby. You have been the greatest gift I’ve ever been given, Ashlyn Harris...don’t you ever forget it.” She says loudly as she takes the digital recorder out of her purse and sticks it down the back of her pants as far as it will go. She can only hope that it stays there until someone finds her. She takes a deep breath as Steve makes his way back to the cruiser and gets back behind the wheel. He drives through the gate and stops again, getting out of the car to close it again before driving them down the road that leads to a large secluded parking lot completely surrounded by a thick tree-line. He backs the car into the far left corner and gets out.

“Get out.” Steve opens the back door of the cruiser, his gun now pointed at Ali.

She hears it. Just like Ashlyn had explained it to her after they listened to the recording of Ken that night. The lack of emotion in his voice, his face devoid of any expression. He’s flipped the switch and she’s not leaving here alive. Her mind races to recall that conversation as she slowly makes her way out of the backseat. ‘Make him feel something...anything.’ She coaches herself, keeping her promise to go down fighting as hard as she can.

“What are you going to do this time, shoot yourself in the foot? Let me give you a tip and suggest that you shoot the left one so you can at least drive away after you leave me standing here with your
gun in my hands.” Ali provokes him with what he did to Sara and Kira.

“You wish I was the one that was leaving with a bullet hole, bitch.” Steve replies coldly as he continues to point the gun at her. “Walk to the front of the car.”

“Oh, well in that case... you probably want to use the other gun and not your police issued weapon to shoot me, dumbass. Do I have to walk you through it or can you take it from here?” Ali mocks him even more.

“Shut your fucking mouth, you fucking dyke!” Steve shouts at her and presses the gun against her forehead.

Ali’s heart is practically beating out of her chest, but she wills herself to keep at it. He’s getting frustrated and frustrated is still something better than nothing. He’s really close to her, roughly grabbing her shoulder with one hand, gun trained on her head with the other hand while he pushes her to walk towards the front of the car.

“Are you really that stupid and arrogant that you think you won’t get caught by shooting me with your registered gun?” Ali laughs at him.

“Keep thinking I’m stupid, you dyke bitch. We’ll see if you’re so smart when the contents of your head is paving this parking lot.” He spits back at her. “Let me tell you what’s about to happen since you won’t be able to fully appreciate it. First, I’m going to be real sweet and knock your ass out with the nice bottle of chloroform in my pocket. Then your little dyke head is going to lay right there in front of my tire where it’s going to pop like a pimple the second I run it over. After that, I go get your little Prius, park it right here over your flattened head, pop the tire, put the cheap ass tire jack that comes with it under the car. And Voila! You’re just a pretty little princess who thought she could change a tire and didn’t use the jack properly... awwww. Happens all the time. Your big tough lesbo cop is going to throw her fucking guts up when she has to identify you.”

Ali feels the contents of her stomach rise up into her throat, the visual completely shaking her for a minute. This is beyond shooting someone and walking away, this is downright sick. This guy is seriously deranged beyond what she anticipated. She works hard to compose herself. No way in hell is she letting this happen, not like that. If he wants her dead, he’s going to have to shoot her. Her mind starts racing through the options. Can she hold her breath and pretend to pass out from the chloroform, maybe make a run for it when he tries to run her over? He’s probably expecting that; he’s obviously thought this through. She immediately thinks about all the moves that Porter and Morris taught her, but he’s behind her and too close for any of them to be effective at the moment. She needs to get him to back up a bit so she can get some kind of momentum and leverage.

“It’s too bad that you put so much effort into a getaway plan. Really, don’t bother going through all the work, just shoot me. You’ll be dead in like 48 hours anyway.” Ali says matter-of-factly.

Steve just laughs in an evil cackle. “Oh is that so? Enlighten me.”

“Another place you failed to do your homework. My wife isn’t just one of the best cops out there. She’s a former special-ops army Ranger who has taken out top-level insurgents all over the world. So good luck with that... you’re dead.” Ali has no idea why she just called Ashlyn her wife, it just feels right in this moment where girlfriend seems so inadequate for what they mean to each other. Her voice is steady and proud in the issued threat. The thought of Ashlyn gives her the strength to go down the road she’s about to try next.

“I’m not afraid of your stupid dyke bodyguard.” Steve growls at her.
“Doesn’t matter. Easier for her I guess.” Ali shrugs. “At least one of us will die knowing they’ve pleased a woman in their lifetime. Newsflash, it’s not you.” She laughs at him. “You know what they say about guys who have to use big guns….” She adds with a smirk before finishing in a whisper, “tiny dicks.” She feels his grip tighten on her shoulder and the gun press harder into her head…she knows it worked and a slight cold shiver runs through her body at the thought.

“Well… I guess I better make sure I check off that box before I die then, right? Let’s see how small my dick is. At least you’ll die knowing what a real man feels like.” His voice is low and venomous.

“Please don’t. Please. Just shoot me, please.” Ali pretends to beg, knowing this is what he’s expecting.

“Your smart mouth went too far this time, bitch. Put your hands on the hood.” He presses the gun further into her head and pushes her into the car.

“Please, don’t. Please.” Ali begs again, her ears listening for every sound so that she knows when to make her move.

“Save the pleases, you’ll need them in a minute when you can’t get enough of me.” Steve mocks her.

Ali feels the hand drop down from her shoulder, the gun lowering from her head. She hears the clinking of a belt buckle and she knows this is it, waiting just a few more seconds until she hears the zipper and the unmistakable sound of fabric dragging across skin. She doesn’t second guess, throwing her body back as hard as she can into him, her head whipping back with it as hard as she can. The force of bodies colliding sends them both to the ground. Ali can feel his nose crunch against the back of her head as he lets out a loud yelp, his gun making a clanging sound as it hits the pavement. Her head immediately spins from the impact and she struggles to scramble to her feet in the small space between Steve and the car.

She isn’t the only one scrambling. Steve is quick to his feet, making a grab for Ali with one hand and missing as he works to get the second gun out of the holster that is now down near his upper thighs with the rest of his pants.

Her head is spinning as she pulls herself up using the side of the car, but the sounds around her are deafening and almost in slow motion. She can hear Steve’s boots drag across the pavement as he gets back up on his feet, the clinking of his belt buckle swinging wildly as he tries to grab her, the whoosh of air as he misses, the grunting as he unsnaps the latch on his holster…and footsteps… heavy footsteps breaking twigs in their wake, footsteps that don’t fit with what’s happening around her and that Ali swears is just the throbbing in her own brain. She hears a familiar click and she’s sure now that it’s over… she waits to hear the bang and feel the pain from the bullet that Steve is about to fire. But what comes instead is a familiar voice that she can’t place as her brain tries to unscramble.

“Put your hands up! Don’t you dare reach for that gun!” The voice shouts. “Hands up! Go for your gun and I’ll shoot.” It demands again.

Ali tries to turn her head to look at who it is, but gets even dizzier. She grabs the car and rests her head on roof of it, not able to manage anything else right now.

“Mind your own fucking business, spic!” Steve yells out.

“What and miss out on all this wonderful southern hospitality? Nah. Get your fucking hands up!” The voice retorts with an edge of humor. It’s then that Ali recognizes it… but how can it be? There’s no way. The knock on the head she took must be serious and she’s hallucinating, it’s the only
“Fuck you, Juan Valdez! Why don’t you hop back over the border before I shoot you too.” Steve growls back.

“I’ll give you the border comment… but Juan Valdez is fucking Colombian, bro. Look man, state police is on its way… I really don’t want to shoot you, but I will if you go near that gun. Get your hands up and then get down on the ground. Final warning.” The voice barks back.

Ali can hear the sudden shuffling sound that Steve makes nearby just before the loud bang she had been waiting for all along, but she doesn’t feel any pain, just the thud of a body falling near her feet. Her mind is just starting to unfog, her eyes coming back into focus when she’s pulled into a strong set of arms.

“Ali! Ali, you ok?” The familiar voice is deep but soft near her ear.

She looks up and finally focuses on what she can only call a glorious sight for sore eyes. “Javi? What are you doing here?” She manages to whisper out, her mind still trying to process it all.

“Nevermind that, just here… sit.” Rivera moves Ali towards the back of the car and away from Steve who is groaning on the ground but not moving much. “You ok? That was some fucking head butt, champ!” He praises her before getting serious about the fact that Steve’s pants are still somewhat down. “He didn’t…” He trails off as he kneels down next to her.

“No… no!” Ali answers immediately. “Pretty stupid way to get him to take that damn gun away from my head, but it worked. I’m ok, I think. Just a little headache now.”

“Ok, just let me know if you feel anything else. State police and EMT are on their way…was kinda hoping they’d get here before I had to shoot the fucker. Jesus Christ this is crazy.” Rivera lets out a deep breath and pulls Ali into another hug before looking over at Steve and immediately jumping up. “Fuck, that’s too much blood.”

“Is he dead?” Ali asks, seeing that Steve is completely still and pale.

“No, but I think I hit the artery in his leg…shit.” Rivera exclaims as he pulls off his own belt and immediately wraps it around Steve’s upper thigh, pulling it as tightly as he can to stop the bleeding. He checks the thigh wound after a few seconds and sees that the major blood spurting has stopped. “I was just looking to get him down, damn. I think I have the artery closed, but his breathing is weak. Where the hell are these fuckers?”

It’s just a minute later when the sirens come blaring into the lot and several officers with guns raised approach quickly. Oddly, Ali finds this part almost more terrifying than the prior ordeal as bullhorn voices demand that they lay on the ground with their arms stretched out.

“It’s ok, Ali. Just breathe and relax, it’s going to be ok. They’re just being safe.” Javi’s voice says soothingly from beside her as boots step near her head and hands suddenly roam her body to check for weapons before she’s helped to her feet.

Ashlyn fidgets with the pencil in her hands, only realizing she’s gripping it so hard when it breaks. She gets up from her desk and starts to pace again like she was a minute ago. It’s 2:03pm, her lunch break was over three minutes ago, but she can’t get herself to move from her office and back out to the patrol car.
She didn’t call…Ali didn’t call at 1pm like she promised she would. She should have heard by now…from one of them at least. She’s called them both at least ten times each, leaving messages and sending texts to no avail. She tries to reason that maybe Ali’s lunch went longer than she expected, but she can’t get herself to believe that. Something happened. What if he didn’t get there on time? Or what if he did and something happened to both of them? She sits back in her desk chair and closes her eyes, trying not to pass out as her heart races and her stomach churns, beads of sweat on her brow.

“Hey Capt, you ok?” Officer Redding calls from her the doorway of her office.

“Oh uh, yeah. Yeah.” Ashlyn answers and quickly jumps up a bit woozily.

“You don’t look good…you ok to go back out?” Redding probes again.

‘Of course I’m not fucking ok.’ Ashlyn yells in her head, but she knows she needs to keep her composure. ‘Calm down until you know something, Harris.’ “Yep, I’m fine. Let’s go.” She grabs her hat and makes her way out the door.

She’s just settling into the passenger’s seat of the patrol car when she feels her cellphone vibrate, her heart jumping into her throat as she unlocks it to see the text message.

Cpl. Rivera: She’s ok, Sarge. Shaken, but completely ok. I got here in time. Tango down.

Ashlyn’s hands shake violently as she types the fastest reply she can.

Sgt. Harris: Are you ok? Where are you?

She waits for two long minutes, ignoring that Redding is staring at her worriedly from the driver’s seat of their cruisier as her whole body shakes.

Cpl. Rivera: Completely ok. We’re together at state police headquarters just getting through the procedural mess. I’ll have her on a flight home to you tonight, that’s a promise. Call you as soon as we can.

Ashlyn breathes a sigh of relief, her entire body still on overdrive. She throws her head back into the seat and finally looks at Redding. “Sorry man, I need to go home. Family emergency.” She blurts out as best she can. “I’ll go in and find someone to cover for me.” She adds as she gets out of the car and heads back into the office.

Ali listens carefully as Javi recounts his story to the state police investigator, starting to put it all together in her head even though she knows some of it is a lie. Javi explains their relationship, that Ali is like a sister to him and that he was planning to surprise her since she was down here and he was only a 3 hour drive away at Fort Benning:

When I my pulled car up to the hotel Ali was staying at, I saw this cop roughly shove her into the back of his cruiser and I just assumed she was in trouble. It seemed really suspicious and I knew Ali was here working on a case involving the ex-wife of an officer, so I didn’t think twice about following the cruiser. I was hoping to surprise Ali for lunch and left Fort Benning in a hurry, so I was still dressed from the field training I left from, armed and with a body camera. So, I turned the camera on as soon as I started following the cruiser just in case anything weird happened.

I followed it for a while up I-65 and then saw it pull off at a closed weigh station that was gated. I couldn’t stop in time and just had to pull over a little ways up on the side of the highway, about a
quarter of a mile. That’s where I abandoned my car. I knew something was wrong, so I just ran and hoped I could get to her. By the time I got there, I could hear him yelling that she was a dyke as I made my way through the trees as quietly as I could. Then when they were in sight, he had his pants down around his thighs and I saw her lean back and head butt him in the face. They were both on the ground and then she was trying to get up and run away and he was trying to grab his gun to shoot her when I held my gun up to stop him. I told him a few times to put his hands up and not go for his gun, but he didn’t listen. He went for his gun and I shot him in the leg just to get him down, and then I went to make sure Ali was ok. Then I noticed he was bleeding a lot and realized I must have hit him in an artery, so I did my best to stop the bleeding until you arrived.

“Thank you, Mr. Rivera. We will need to hold onto the drive containing the footage from your body camera.” The investigator informs him.

“That’s going to be a bit of a problem.” The JAG Army lawyer Rivera had called before they even left the weigh station parking lot pipes up from beside them. Being a Hispanic man who just shot a cop in Alabama, he wasn’t going to take any chances. “That drive and camera are U.S. Army property and contain footage of classified field testing of weaponry. The drive cannot be turned over to the Alabama state police. However, we will cooperate fully with this investigation and a copy of the footage pertaining to this case can be made with an Army technician present.” The JAG lawyer explains.

“Alright, we can abide by those terms.” The investigator concedes. “Ms. Krieger, will you please tell me what happened from your point of view?”

Ali reports it all, starting with how she is working with Sara on getting her divorced from Steve and helping with Kira’s parole hearing. She explains being surprised by Steve pulling her over, how she knew she was in trouble once she realized it was him and turned on her recorder. She spares no details in reporting the attack and what she did to try and stop it, and how she was shocked that Javi was suddenly there.

“Thank you, Ms. Krieger. Like with Mr. Rivera, we will need to confiscate the recorded audio.” The investigator explains.

“I’m in a similar situation. That digital recorder contains confidential information bound by attorney client privilege before the recording of today’s incident. I cannot give you the recorder itself, but can provide a copy of the pertinent recording.” Ali stands her ground. She and Javi had a few minutes alone before having to give their statements and Ali had conferred with the JAG lawyer to agree on the fact that it was critical for them to fight to keep their original video/audio evidence since Steve was an officer and it was unclear who he was connected to. The last thing they needed was for evidence to go missing and for one or both of them to be charged for the shooting.

“The Army technician can supervise both of these copy-making processes.” The JAG lawyer jumps in again.

“Very well. I think that wraps up what we need from you for the time being then and you are free to go once the copies of the electronic files have been made. I must warn you that you can and may be summoned back for questioning and must appear here in Alabama should that occur.” The investigator tells them before pausing and letting them know the next part. “Between all of us in this room, I don’t foresee much further inquiry given the self-defense nature of this. The official report is that Officer Foster suffered cardiac arrest on the way to the hospital and was unable to be revived. He was pronounced dead upon arrival.”

Ali eyes go wide, but she can’t find any words to speak. It’s the JAG lawyer who thanks the investigator and walks Ali and Javi to the small cafeteria where they wait an hour for an army
technician to arrive and the copies of files to be made. It’s over two hours later before they’re out the front door of the state police headquarters.

“Can you drive?” The lawyer asks Rivera as he motions to Rivera’s car that was brought to headquarters after being searched.

“Yes, sir. I’m good to drive. Thank you for the quick arrival and help in there.” Rivera replies.

“That’s my job. I’ll be in touch with any other issues or final steps.” The lawyer shakes Rivera’s hand and turns to Ali. “Ms. Krieger, it was a pleasure to meet you. I hope you can go home and take some time to relax and recover from this. Please let me know if I can be of any assistance.”

“Thank you, I really appreciate the help.” Ali replies kindly and shakes the guy’s hand before getting into the car with Rivera, the two of them riding in comfortable silence for the fifteen minute drive back to the hotel.

Only when they get back to the hotel and up to Ali’s room does she hear the full story about how Ashlyn had met with McNally this morning and learned that Train tipped off Steve. That Ashlyn had done the only thing she could think of to get someone there as fast as possible to protect Ali, and all without making it obvious to Train. She had called Rivera and explained it all to him, knowing he could be there in just a few hours. Rivera had re-dressed himself back into full field gear even though the session had ended over an hour prior and he was in regular clothes, knowing he would need to be armed and that a body camera might come in handy. He had turned a three hour drive in to a two hour and fifteen minute one, arriving at the hotel just in time to watch Ali’s car get pulled over. The rest happened just as he had explained it in his statement to the police.

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“Oh my god, Alex! Are you ok, baby?” Ashlyn quickly answers the phone that was already in her hand as she paces Ali’s kitchen with Kyle sitting nearby looking just as anxious. It’s already past 6pm and they’ve been sitting there for over three hours just waiting to hear something.

“Ash…” Ali breathes out, a sense of calm finally washing over her. “I’m ok, promise. Just a little bump and a headache, but no concussion or anything. I’m ok. It’s just… it’s really good to hear your voice. Just talk to me for a minute…”

Ashlyn shuts her eyes and lets herself breathe for what feels like the first time since this morning. Ali sounds exhausted, but otherwise alright. “Oh Alex… it’s going to be ok, beautiful. Rivera is going to make sure you get on a flight home tonight. I’m going to be right there waiting the second you get off that plane. I will never let anything happen to you, Alex…I promise. I promise you. I’m never letting you go.”

Ali smiles at the statement. “Trust me, Ash…I know. Turns out I have quite the crew of body guards nowadays.” She says lightly.

“You sure do, honey.” Ashlyn agrees. “I love you so much, Alex.”

“I love you too, Ashlyn.” Ali replies, her voice sounding raspy and wiped out.

“Promise me you’ll go rest until your flight. Let me talk to Rivera about the logistics and I’ll see you before you know it, baby. I can’t wait to see you.” Ashlyn says softly.

“Ok, I will. I can’t wait either. Here’s Javi… love you, Ash.” Ali gives the phone to Rivera and sinks into the chair beside her, finally able to relax a bit.
“Hey, Sarge… don’t worry, she got all checked out by the doctors. Just like she said, tiny bump from when she went all Wonder Woman and head-butted the fucker like Porter and Morris taught her. I’ll make sure she chills until the flight. She’s on a Delta direct, Flight 905 leaves Birmingham at 10:05pm and arrives in Boston 2:15am. Made sure she’s in first-class so she can get some sleep. I’ll drive her to the airport myself before I head back to Benning. I’ll text you the flight info so you have it. Oh and I talked to Ali… I’m going to go pick up Sara and take her back to Benning with me until the parole hearing. That way she’s safe just in case anything else goes nutty around here. I think that’s about it.” Rivera gets out before Ashlyn has the chance to get a word in.

“Rivera… Javi… I…” Ashlyn stutters, trying to find words that are even remotely adequate to convey her gratitude.

“Hell no… don’t you dare, Harris.” Rivera stops her immediately, his voice serious. “You carry my weight, Sergeant. I carry yours. Nothing else.”

Ashlyn nods silently as she holds the phone to her ear. “Hooah!” She choked out emotionally.

“Hooah!” Rivera replies. “Take good care of our girl when she gets there, Sarge. Goodnight.”

“Absolutely, Corporal. Goodnight.” Ashlyn taps the end call button and lets out a sigh as she runs her hand through her hair and finally looks at Kyle who is waiting as patiently as he can to get the full update.

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“Ok, your suitcase is checked. You have everything you need accessible on your carry-on. Ticket and ID in hand. I think you’re good!” Rivera smiles as he double checks that Ali is all set as they approach the airport security check-point. Her flight isn’t for another hour, but the security line is pretty long for 10pm at night, so they don’t have that much time to kill. “I’m going to go get Sara after this just like we talked about. Porter and I will get her a room at Benning and watch out for her until she needs to be back here. I’ll drive her back for the parole hearing myself.” He promises.

Ali tears up, the weight of everything that has happened today finally hitting her. She has no idea how she could ever thank him properly for saving her life, for coming to her rescue without a second thought, for treating her she was his family. The words may never be enough, but she’s going to say them anyway in hopes that she can convey the emotions behind them. “Javi…” She starts, but he cuts her off immediately.

“Nope. Let me stop you there.” He holds his hand up and watches her face turn a bit surprised. “Ali, you know Ashlyn saved my life, right?”

Ali nods, not really sure how else to reply at the moment.

“I doubt she told you everything, so let me quickly fill you in. I won’t get too into the gory details of it…but I got shot in the groin and near the collarbone in a firefight on a mission one night. The shot to the groin nicked my artery and I lost a lot of blood even though the guys got the tourniquet on pretty quick. I remember hearing over radio that we had to rendezvous over a mile away because the evac unit couldn’t get any closer with such heavy fire. And I knew I was a goner. I couldn’t make it all that much longer without treatment, I could just feel it. And I sure as hell couldn’t walk that mile. I was dead.” Rivera says evenly and then pauses to smile before continuing.

“And then Sarge comes right on over and just throws me over her shoulder like a dam ragdoll and says ‘Porter, Morris, lay down cover. Sit tight Rivera, we’re going home.’ And Ali, I thought she was nuts. I outweighed her by at least 50 lbs and she was already hobbling from two gunshots to her
own leg. Before I passed out, I remember yelling at her to just leave me and get the hell out… but she never did. That woman carried me over a mile bleeding all over herself and in pain that I can’t even imagine because she wouldn’t leave me behind. And all after I spent months treating her like shit and undermining her ability as a leader.” Rivera shakes his head as if he still can’t believe it.

“When I woke up in the hospital the next day, I couldn’t believe I was still here. I remembered what happened and I vowed to apologize for every negative thing I ever said or did, get to truly know her and become her friend if she’d let me, and spend the rest of my life showing her how grateful I was.” Rivera explains. “When she came to visit me the next day, hobbling in on crutches and all, I tried so hard to thank her but she wouldn’t let me. And that was the first time I actually learned something personal about her… how her grandmother loved the Wizard of Oz.” Rivera recounts fondly. “Right now, I’m going to say to you what she said to me that day and we’ll leave it at that…”

Ali smiles and nods in agreement, waiting for whatever it is.

“I know I am not the wizard you were expecting, but I may just be the wizard you need.” Rivera winks and pulls Ali in for a hug. “Have a safe flight home, Ali. Give Sarge my love.”

Ali smiles and hugs him tight. “Eh, I’d say wizard’s apprentice… but you’re still a damn good one.” Ali brings it all back to the true heart of their playful bond and hears him laugh. “Drive safe and let us know when you get back to Benning. I’ll give Emily your love too.” Ali pulls back and winks before heading to the security check-point. Once she’s through, she gives him one final wave and heads to her gate.

Friday, November 3rd

Ashlyn’s eyes dart from person to person coming through the arrival gate in the early hours of the morning as she searches the crowd of tired-looking people for Ali. Her heart jumps when she finally spots her in the distance, shifting her weight anxiously as she watches the brunette get closer. Ali is dressed in the officer’s baggy sweatpants and West Point sweatshirt, her hair styled in a messy bun, and her mascara is so minimal it’s barely even there. She looks as drained as Ashlyn has ever seen her, but she’s never seen a more beautiful sight in her life.

Ashlyn walks right up to the security line of where she’s allowed to stand and watches as Ali smiles and practically runs. It’s mere seconds, but it feels like forever until the brunette is flying into her arms, Ali’s scent flooding her senses immediately. She hugs her as tight as she can, one hand going to back of Ali’s head to pull her in as close as possible. She has no idea how much time goes by before she feels Ali pull back just a bit to look at her.

“Oh…” Ali whispers, her eyes watery as they meet the most beautiful hazel she’s ever known. She hears Ashlyn whisper back “Alex…” and that’s all it takes. She kisses the officer with everything she has, the intensity of it causing them both to sink to their knees right there in the middle of the crowd of people rushing past them that they don’t even notice.

The rush Ali’s feels spread through her body is everything…it’s love, it’s need, it’s safety, it’s home. Just a few hours ago she was desperately wishing to kiss these lips one last time and now here they are against her own… and it’s not the last time, not by a longshot.
A quick update to bring things down just a notch and get centered again before we get into the next round of fun ;-) Enjoy the temporary quiet!

Thank you for all the great comments on the last chapter! Keep them coming, I love to hear your thoughts along the way!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday, November 3rd continued…

“What time do you have to be at work?” Ali asks. She’s leaned over the console of the Jeep with her head resting on Ashlyn’s shoulder and her hand entwined with the officer’s right one as she attempts to navigate them out of the airport parking garage. She knows it’s probably hard for Ashlyn to drive like this, but she can’t tear herself away right now. It’s already past 3am having taken them a while to pull apart long enough to get Ali’s suitcase from baggage claim and make their way to the car.

“Not until Sunday night, beautiful. It’s Friday, so it’s my two off days until Sunday.” Ashlyn answers and leans her head down to quickly kiss Ali’s forehead.

“Sorry, I sort of lost track of what day it was.” Ali mumbles.

“Don’t apologize, it’s been a crazy twenty-four hours.” Ashlyn soothes her and rubs light circles on her hand with her thumb.

“Is Kyle at the house waiting?” Ali asks, knowing he probably freaked out right along with Ashlyn during this whole thing. She feels better knowing that they had each other at least.

“Actually, no. I think he wanted to be, but he left and said to tell you ‘The shoulder is at your beck and call, but some nights are for tears with the blankie bear.’ I’m not sure what that means exactly, but he said you would understand.” Ashlyn replies.

Ali smiles into Ashlyn’s shoulder and explains. “When Ken left, we both felt like we didn’t want to burden my mom with being sad about it in front of her. We both took it hard in our own way, but Kyle seemed to have it more together than I did for a while. That wasn’t true of course, but at the time, he never let on. He’d always make sure to come into my room at night and check on me. Some nights I’d lean on his shoulder and talk for hours, others I just wanted to be by myself. I had this little bear that held onto a blanket and it was my favorite thing as a kid. Even when I grew up, I would always hug it at night especially when I was upset. Anyway, the nights I wanted to be alone…Kyle would always remind me that his shoulder was there if I needed it, but that he understood that I just wanted blankie bear.”

“That’s really cute.” Ashlyn smiles at the thought even as her heart drops a bit. Despite knowing Ali so well, she feels a little dumb that, unlike Kyle, she didn’t pick up on the fact that maybe the brunette needs some time to herself tonight. As much as all she wants to do is hold Ali close, she understands more than anyone that sometimes you just need to be alone. “Well, we can get you set
up wherever you feel comfortable tonight and then I can go do my thing while you and blankie bear have some quality time.” She says as she places a couple more kisses on Ali’s head so the brunette knows that she genuinely understands.

“You are the absolutely sweetest, Harris… but also a complete idiot sometimes.” Ali squeezes her hand.

“What? Why?” Ashlyn asks a bit stunned by the response.

“Because you’re my blankie bear now. And if you think some part of me isn’t going to be in constant contact with you until you have to go to work Sunday night, you’ve got another thing coming.” Ali says resolutely.

“Oh…ok, got it.” Ashlyn replies with a smile she can’t wipe off of her face. “Do I at least get to meet the old blankie bear? I have to make sure I’m a proper replacement.”

“I think an introduction can be arranged.” Ali plays back before the two of them stay in comfortable silence for a few minutes until they finally exit the parking garage.

“Since Kyle isn’t waiting at the house… can we go to the Ipswich house tonight?” Ali requests. It’s a longer drive, but she knows exactly what she needs right now.

“Of course. We can do whatever you want, baby.” Ashlyn assures her and heads in that direction.

“Are you exhausted?” Ali asks, wanting to make sure her plans for the night aren’t too overwhelming.

“I’m a little tired from not sleeping so well and it being late, but I’m good to go. We can do anything you want, Alex. I mean it.” Ashlyn replies adamantly. She can tell Ali has something on her mind and she already knows she’ll do anything to make it happen no matter what it is. “What’s on your mind, beautiful?”

Ali bites her lip for a second and presses herself further into Ashlyn’s shoulder, a bit nervous about her request.

“Alex… anything, sweetheart. Just tell me.” Ashlyn encourages her when Ali stays quiet.

“Ok… I know it’s kind of cold out, but I want to lay outside with you and listen to the ocean. So, maybe we can make a fire in the fire pit. And…” Ali pauses and lets out a deep breath. “I don’t want to just sit on this and ruminate on it endlessly like I did last time. I want to process it together with you and put it behind us. When I got taken by Steve, I turned my recorder on… so, it’s all there… I just… will you listen to it with me tonight? That way you’ll know, and I can turn off my mind once I hear it with a better perspective than when I went through it.”

Ashlyn doesn’t say anything, but just pulls the Jeep over to the side of the road. The second she has it in park, she just leans over and kisses Ali slowly. Both of them melt into it and it’s a few minutes before they finally pull apart. “You don’t even have to ask. Anything, Alex…anything. You could ask me to fly you to the moon right now and I swear I would find a way.” Ashlyn finally replies.

“You know, I actually believe that. Thank you.” Ali tilts her head up for another soft kiss. She can already feel herself slipping into the mood where she can’t drag herself away from Ashlyn’s mouth. “We better get going before I don’t let us.”

“So… moon or home?” Ashlyn grins as she puts the Jeep back in gear and pulls back onto the road.
“Definitely home. And then maybe the moon later.” Ali leaves a few kisses on Ashlyn’s jaw and then settles back in, closing her eyes and enjoying all the little things about Ashlyn’s presence that mean home: her woody citrus scent, the warmth of her skin, the pattern of her breathing, her ability to bring tranquility without speaking words.

“Just give me 15 minutes to get us set up outside and the fire started, ok?” Ashlyn says as she drops Ali’s suitcase and carry-on in their bedroom.

“Ok, I’m going to use the bathroom and wash my face. I’ll come out after.” Ali replies and hugs the officer tight, hesitant to let go even for just a few minutes. She gives herself a few more seconds before giving Ashlyn one last quick squeeze and finally letting go.

Ashlyn gets a fire going and quickly drags the oversized chaise out of the storage shed, placing it close enough to the fire pit to stay warm but far enough to be safe if they fall asleep. She gets several warm blankets from linen closet, including a small Cars themed one that belongs to Curtis, and stops to grab two Oktoberfest style beers out of the fridge before heading back outside. Knowing she likely only has a couple minutes left before Ali comes outside, she strips out of her clothes with a slight shiver from the chilly night and gets right under the covers, thankful now more than ever for the privacy of their back yard.

“Look at you with everything perfectly ready.” Ali smiles as she walks across the backyard, taking in Ashlyn snuggled under the blankets next to the glow of the fire with two bottles of beer on the little table next to the chaise.

“Get in here, beautiful.” Ashlyn lifts the covers just slightly as Ali gets close.

Ali’s eyes go wide as she gets her first peek under the covers where Ashlyn is completely naked and holding a small kids blanket in her arms. “Oh wow, extra perfect. You know me too well.” She grins and puts her digital recorder on the table next to the beer. “What’s with the Cars blanket?”

“I take my duties as blankie bear very seriously and have to make sure I look the part. I figured blankie bear probably didn’t have clothes on, soooo, bear naked, bare naked, you know...” Ashlyn replies playfully.

Ali laughs heartily, the first time she’s laughed since this whole ordeal started and it feels really good. “Right you are. Of course, blankie bear certainly didn’t have those abs...” Ali plays back as she rakes her eyes over Ashlyn. “He was a whole lot fuzzier too...” She adds as her eyes stop at the very neatly trimmed curls at the apex of the officer’s legs. “This is a major upgrade. Sorry original blankie bear, you’re fired!” She finishes with a giggle, making Ashlyn laugh too as and strips her own clothes off before getting under the covers and pressing herself as close to her girl as she can. “Thank you, baby... this is exactly what I need.”

Ashlyn just leans in for a brief kiss and then reaches over to open only one of the beers, knowing they always share. She watches Ali take a few sips and then takes a couple of her own before getting the ball rolling. “Do you want to just relax for a while or jump right into it?”

“Do you really need to ask this go-getter pesky bitch?” Ali says lightly, running her hand from Ashlyn’s bicep to her shoulder and back.

“Nope, but I figured I would anyway.” Ashlyn kisses the tip of Ali’s nose.

“Tell me what happened with McNally this morning and then we’ll listen?” Ali suggests.
Ashlyn just nods and gets right to it. She details the conversation with McNally and how they figured out what Train was up to, frantically trying to come up with a way to protect her while keeping Train in the dark. She explains how it suddenly hit her that Rivera and Porter weren’t that far from her. She had reasoned that sending both of them would be too obvious and that if she had to pick, between Porter being pulled away from his family and knowing that Rivera was the more discrete and quicker thinker of the two, Rivera was the clear choice. He hadn’t even hesitated for a second, all he wanted to know was the necessary logistics before he was promising Ashlyn he’d make sure Ali got home safe and hanging up the phone. “When I didn’t hear from either of you… even though I trusted in him and in you… I was still scared, Alex.” She admits. “For all the things I’ve been through, the thought of something happening to you just brings me to my knees.”

“I know, sweetheart. I know.” Ali just kisses her passionately, knowing that if the situation were reversed she’d be the one brought to her knees. Being faced with it twice now, it’s become very clear to her that she’s not afraid of dying. Rather, she’s afraid of being pulled away from Ashlyn before she’s ready….before she’s had the chance to live the life she’s dreamed of with this woman she loves so deeply. She lets her mouth convey all her emotions, letting it all pour out through the intense and loving kiss they’re locked in until she can’t breathe anymore and pulls away gasping. “I love you. I love you.” She repeats as she kisses the hollow of Ashlyn’s throat. “I’ll always do everything in my power to never leave you.” She promises breathlessly.

“Same, Alex. I love you too, so much.” Ashlyn clutches the brunette even tighter against her as they lay quiet for a little while just listening to the ocean waves in the distance, fire crackling beside them, and their own breathing as it regulates back to normal.

Alright, Hero…let’s do this before I change my mind.” Ali suddenly sits up and takes another long pull from the beer, passing it to Ashlyn as she grabs the recorder. “Are you ready?”

“Ready when you are.” Ashlyn confirms and watches Ali push the play button.

Despite both being a little nervous to listen to it, it goes a bit better than the last ordeal involving Ken. They actually even crack a few laughs when Ali insults Steve numerous times as he drives down the highway. “Such a force to be reckoned with, baby.” Ashlyn whispers into Ali’s ear as she listens to Ali give the guy hell. But then it gets increasingly serious as Steve pulls off the highway. Ashlyn physically tenses at Ali’s message to her, a stark reminder that this might’ve been the last thing the brunette ever said to her had things gone differently.

“I promise you I’ll fight to very end, Ashlyn. I’ll give everything to get home to you. I love you more than you will ever know, baby. You have been the greatest gift I’ve ever been given, Ashlyn Harris… don’t you ever forget it.”

“I’m right here with you.” Ali reminds the officer with a soft kiss when she feels Ashlyn’s body tighten.

Ashlyn relaxes slightly and another few snickers get shared between them as Ali continues to mock Steve relentlessly. Ashlyn has to marvel at Ali’s genius in frustrating the guy, keeping him off kilter and making it difficult for him to stay locked into the zone where he could so easily do her harm. Still, Ali can only hold him off for so long and Ashlyn feels like throwing up as Steve describes his plan to run over the brunette’s head and stage it as an accident. But listening to this recording is like a rollercoaster, and up they go again as Ali stays defiant and promises Steve he’ll be contending with Ashlyn in no time.

And just as fast as they’ve gone up, the rollercoaster is crashing down again. Ashlyn’s body completely clenches in anger as Steve gets ready to sexually assault the love of her life. She can’t even bear the thought, let alone stomach the sound of his belt buckle coming undone. She doesn’t
even feel the beer bottle break in her hand until Ali clicks the recorder off.

“Hey… baby, look at me.” Ali cradles Ashlyn’s face and waits for the hazel eyes to focus on her own. “It didn’t happen and it was never going to happen. He would’ve had to kill me first. I just needed a way to give myself the best chance to fight and that was it, but I was fighting to the death, Ash. Never would have happened.” She calms the officer and feels her tight grip loosen just a little.

“Sorry…I know…it’s just, he was going to…” Ashlyn tries hard to relax and let it go.

“No, Ash. He just thought he was going to, but there was no way in hell. I’ve learned from the best how to kick some ass.” Ali lightens the moment as best she can and finally gets a tight lipped smile from Ashlyn. “Let me see your hand.” She demands and quickly checks for cuts, only finding a tiny little scratch on Ashlyn’s palm that is barely bleeding. She presses her lips to it before picking the broken bottle pieces up off of the blanket and tossing them close to the fire pit so they don’t step on them later; luckily they’re large and easy to get rid of. “You’re lucky that was empty, Harris. Waste some of my favorite beer and you’re in the doghouse.” She playfully warns, earning a genuine smile from the officer. “You, ok?”

“Yeah. Yes, I’m ok. Just wasn’t expecting that.” Ashlyn replies, feeling a bit more under control now.

“I know. I told Javi not to mention it. I didn’t want you to have this reaction without me being here with you.” Ali confesses.

Ashlyn nods, completely understanding. “I’m ok. We can keep going. You ok?”

“I actually am. Hearing this again… I feel proud of myself for standing my ground.” Ali replies.

“You should be. You’re so brave and strong, Alex. Listen to you, so controlled… such a bad ass.” Ashlyn pulls her in close again and feels Ali kiss her neck a few times before the brunette pops her head up.

“Yeah, well, wait until you hear his nose break against my head.” Ali shrugs and pushes the play button to resume.

The rest is a muffle of sounds as Ali and Steve scuffle before Javi’s voice is loud and clear. Ashlyn immediately feels an immense sense of gratitude and love for her brother as he comes in and handles the situation, ensuring that Ali is safe just like he promised he would.

The only time Ali flinches is at the sound of the gunshot being fired. She grips Ashlyn tightly even though she knows it’s coming. Of all the things that happened, the gunshot is the most prominent in her mind, the most rattling.

Ashlyn doesn’t say anything because she understands this part of it best of all and knows they’ll talk about it when Ali is ready. She just rubs Ali’s back as they listen to the end, which is pretty uneventful compared to rest of it. They lay in silence again for a while when it’s over until Ali finally breaks it.

“It’s odd, but I really don’t feel as upset as I thought I would. Still definitely going to make a therapy appointment ASAP just in case. You?” Ali says candidly.

“Agreed, I’ll do the same. I’ve learned that therapy is a never a bad thing.” Ashlyn concurs.

“How on earth do we get ourselves into stuff like this?” Ali muses out loud. “I mean, what are the chances that these two situations we’ve been dealing with suddenly get connected like they did?
Who knew helping people was so damn risky.”

“Oh, me! I knew, I knew!” Ashlyn jokingly raises her hand and gets a laugh from Ali. “What a fucking mess this turned out to be.”

“Promise me something?” Ali asks, her tone serious.

“What’s on your mind?” Ashlyn replies, already prepared to give Ali anything she wants.

“Promise me that we’ll clean up the rest of this mess together. I mean, I know we’ve kind of been working on things together, but I mean really together. You come with me to the hearing in a couple weeks and I’m with you if anything goes down with Train. It’s going to sound morbid…but, if we’re going to get taken out, I’d rather it happen together.” Ali requests in a quiet voice.

“Promise.” Ashlyn replies simply. She understands the sentiment and there really is no other answer.

“You’re getting soft, Harris.” Ali teases at having gotten her way so easily.

“Only for you, Krieger. I did transform into blankie bear for you, after all.” Ashlyn shrugs, taking a few long sips of the second beer before handing it to Ali who finishes the rest.

“Blankie bear had already been replaced by a certain stuffed shark quite a while ago, so the transition was only natural.” Ali tilts her head up from Ashlyn’s chest and kisses her slowly and deliberately, letting herself enjoy every aspect of it from the officer’s soft lips to the taste of the beer on her tongue. A loud crackle in the fire pit just a few minutes later startles her and breaks them apart.

“You ok?” Ashlyn asks in concern.

“Yeah.” Ali whispers and cuddles back into the officer.

“Do you want to go inside?” Ashlyn makes sure Ali is still comfortable.

“No, I like this. I don’t want to move yet.” Ali replies, happy to let herself melt against Ashlyn’s warm skin. Her mind is still running a bit, but she feels safe and comfortable.

Ashlyn doesn’t reply and just goes back to rubbing Ali’s back lightly. She can tell the brunette probably isn’t done talking, but doesn’t want to push her just yet. They lay there for the better of an hour, letting the gentle touches and hands roaming over bare skin soothe and relax them. When Ali’s hand has been in the same area for the last twenty minutes, Ashlyn knows it’s time to push a bit. The brunette has been running her fingers over the bullet wound scars on her thighs for much longer than she has ever dared to linger there. “Talk to me, Alex.” Ashlyn says softly as she reaches down and takes Ali’s hand in her own, moving it to rest over her heart.

Ali stays quiet for another minute before letting out a deep sigh. “What’s it like?”

“Getting shot?” Ashlyn clarifies even though she doesn’t need to and feels Ali nod against her chest. “Probably not like what you would expect, I guess. At first, it’s like you don’t even realize what happened. It doesn’t really hurt much to get hit. You more just feel the impact… like if someone threw a rock or a snowball at you or something. It’s weird though, it’s like your body knows but your brain hasn’t caught up yet. In my experience, my body just felt heavy and tired before I could fully even process that I was hit. And then not too long after, your brain finally catches up and you realize you’re bleeding and why. That’s when you feel it… it burns, like nothing you could ever compare it to. It’s this awful radiating burning pain and there’s nothing that makes it feel better, it’s enough to steal the air out of your lungs. Next thing you know, your attention goes to everyone poking things into your skin and trying to save you and then it all goes blank. Then comes waking
up to the worst pain and soreness you’ve ever had and the realization that the recovery is actually worse than the damn gunshot itself. That’s the best I can describe it, at least my experience with it anyway.”

“You’re so strong, Ash.” Ali picks her head up and kisses the officer again. “It’s stupid… I could be so fearless about being shot, even preferring that to whatever else Steve had in mind and begging for it. But then hearing that loud bang, watching it happen right in front of me… it’s awful, horrible. Made me realize how privileged I was to be so naïve about it, so stupid for being so fearless. And no matter how much he might have deserved it and brought it on himself… I essentially watched a man die and I can’t reconcile that in my head. How do I turn off the part of me that hurts over it?”

“Oh, Alex… I wish I had a better answer for you, sweetheart. The truth is that if you have a good heart, you really can’t turn it off. No matter how many times you’ve seen it or, in my case, done it yourself… it never gets any easier. A part of me got stolen away with every single one of those people. A piece of any innocence I had left, a piece of my heart, a piece of my mind… every single time.” Ashlyn replies honestly.

“And yet, you’re still the kindest, most caring and compassionate person I’ve ever known. You’re truly amazing, Ashlyn Harris. And I love you… I love you in ways no one has even come close to describing yet. I love you.” Ali lets the intensity of the moment overtake her, repeating those three little inadequate words over and over again as she kisses every single scar on Ashlyn’s body willing herself to do everything she can to replace even a small part of those missing pieces.

Ashlyn closes her eyes and lets herself be encompassed by Ali, lets the force of the love she feels for this woman give her the strength to say the words she’s been holding in. She heard it… she heard it loud and clear, but chose not to draw attention to something that was said in a moment of complete vulnerability. But vulnerable or not, it’s truth. Spoken or not, it’s real. And in this instant, nothing matters but love and truth and the fact that they belong to each other.

“Alex…” Ashlyn puts her hands on Ali’s cheeks, stopping the brunette from kissing her shoulder and pulling her down for a long romantic kiss before pulling back to look into her whiskey eyes. “That’s how I think of you too…”

“Ash?” Ali whispers, not sure what Ashlyn is talking about.

“My wife.” Ashlyn replies referring to what she heard on the recording and not able to keep the smile from overtaking her face. “I just want to do it right, you deserve that… plus Gram would come back and kill me if I didn’t.”

“Ready when you are, Hero… have been since the first date.” Ali admits with her heart racing.

“Been ready since the first cup of coffee, but who’s counting.” Ashlyn replies with a wink before Ali kisses her hard, a soft moan involuntarily escaping her throat.

“Make me feel you, show me your forever.” Ali whispers in Ashlyn’s ear, placing soft kisses all around it. “We’re forever. Show me.”

“We’re forever.” Ashlyn promises and flips their position and hovers over the brunette. “You’re my only. My always.” And that’s the last thing she says for the next hour, kissing down Ali’s body slowly until the brunette is shaking with need for her. Gently slipping inside her, only to feel Ali slip deep inside her own center in an unhurried joining of bodies that slowly builds into a frenzied, uncontrolled freefall that leaves them in a sweaty, breathless, tangle of limbs.

And this is when it happens… now that’s she safe, protected, sated, surrounded by love and
security…this is when the stress of everything that happened finally releases and Ali finds herself crying away the fear and hurt as Ashlyn holds her tight.

“I know, honey. I know. I’m here… I’ve got you. Just let it all out, Alex.” Ashlyn whispers and lightly rubs Ali’s back with one hand while she runs her hand through the brunette’s hair with the other. She knows it won’t be long before her girlfriend is emotionally and physically exhausted and does what feels natural in this moment to soothe her… she sings.

*Once there was a way,*

*To get back homeward.*

*Once there was a way*  

*To get back home.*

*Sleep, pretty darling,*

*Dot not cry*  

*And I will sing a lullaby.*

*Golden slumbers,*

*Fill your eyes*  

*Smiles await you when you rise*  

*Sleep pretty darling*  

*Do not cry*  

*And I will sing a lullaby.*

*Once there was a way*  

*To get back homeward*  

*Once there was a way*  

*To get back home*  

*Sleep, pretty darling*  

*Do not cry*  

*And I will sing a lullaby.*

Ali can only close her eyes and smile against Ashlyn’s chest, calm and peace finally settling in at the soft melody carried by the voice she loves and the memory that comes along with the song itself. Like it always has been, it’s over far too soon and she picks her head up to find the hazel eyes that house her universe. “You haven’t sung to me since…”

“Since the night I realized I couldn’t live without you, grew a set, and finally showed up at your door looking irresistible?” Ashlyn cuts in, stealing Ali’s words from just a few days ago.
“Yeah that.” Ali laughs a bit. “I love that song and I’ve always wished it was longer. My mom used to…”

“Sing it to you and Kyle when you had nightmares. I know. Kyle told me that.” Ashlyn chimes in again.

“You’re perfect. Thank you.” Ali plants a soft kiss on Ashlyn’s lips. “I love your voice.”

“Good. Then you won’t mind me singing her favorite then.” Ashlyn whispers back. “I love you. Sleep, Alex… I won’t let go.”

“I won’t let go either. I love you so much, Ash.” Ali replies as her head falls right back onto the officer’s chests, her eyelids already heavy and only able to hold out long enough for the first two verses before sleep finally finds her.

*When the night has come*

*And the land is dark*

*And the moon is the only light we’ll see*

*No, I won't be afraid*

*Oh, I won't be afraid*

*Just as long as you stand*

*Stand by me*

*So darlin', darlin'*

*Stand by me, oh, stand by me*

*Oh, stand, stand by me*

*Stand by me*

*If the sky that we look upon*

*Should tumble and fall*

*Or the mountain should crumble to the sea*

*I won't cry, I won't cry*

*No, I won't shed a tear*

*Just as long as you stand*

*Stand by me*
Sunday, November 5th

“No one is that lucky.” Train spits out angrily as he downs his whiskey.

“Harris is. Well, at least this time. Just shit coincidence really. One of her old army squad buddies went to surprise the lawyer for lunch and came across Foster kidnapping her. It checks out, nothing weird about it.” Riley assures him. “That guy was a fucking idiot anyway. Not surprising he fucked it up even though we practically handed the lawyer to him on a platter.” Riley shrugs.

“Fine, doesn’t matter anyway. As long as she’s out of my hair, I don’t fucking care. It served its purpose. That rules out Murphy and McNally as leaks. And Harris isn’t something to worry about apparently. So, what do we have?” Train questions with a hard stare.

“I purposely gave Culvin the wrong address for the drug drop last night. Cops swarmed the wrong place that I told him about.” Riley replies.

“Damn it. His knife skills were so good too.” Train shakes his head. “Get rid of him.” He commands and watches Riley nod. “Anyone else?”

I have my suspicions about Doyle, but I can’t confirm yet.” Riley admits.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m keeping this one tight. Only you, me and, Murphy. That’s it, no one else. So we keep it to the three of us, leak plugged up by default.” Train says resolutely. “The drop is Friday night. You’ll get more details when you need them.”

“Yes, boss.” Riley replies. “So, Culvin... quiet or loud?”

“Loud… so damn loud that anyone trying to leak information on me will piss themselves.” Train smirks.

“Tortured and tied to the tracks, got it.” Riley nods and walks out of the bar.

Train pours himself another whiskey, this time in celebration of having poked the bear and managed to get away with it unscathed. Once he feels like his nerves are a bit steadier, he dials the number and waits for the voice he’s expecting to pick up the phone.

“Fujita… I’m ready to discuss terms and delivery logistics.” Train declares with a smile, feeling more in control than he has in months.
coffee when she thinks better of it. Ali’s words replay in her head…’clean up the rest of this mess together’ and she quickly changes the plan.

A.Harris: Can’t wait! And of course I’ll give you my best advice on that checkpoint. Ali says it’s been too long since she’s seen you. Come over for dinner tonight (Ali’s place) and we’ll catch up, 7pm sharp.

She puts her phone back on the bedside table and rolls over to spoon Ali, kissing the brunette on the back of the head and listening to her soft breathing. “Together.” She whispers, falling back to sleep until her alarm goes off.

Chapter End Notes

In case you're wondering about those songs...some golden oldies!
Golden Slumbers by The Beatles
Stand by Me by Ben E. King
The train is leaving the station... where will it go? Nobody knows! Hope you're ready for the uptick in action again :-) Smut alert in this one too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tuesday, November 7th

“This looks amazing, thank you Ali!” McNally says excitedly as a plate of stuffed-baked chicken, mashed potatoes, and roasted vegetables is placed down in front of him.

“Don’t thank me, I just plated it and brought it out. Chef Harris gets the credit for the food.” Ali replies and puts down plates for her and Ashlyn too.

“No shit. Who knew Harris could cook?!” McNally says incredulously.

“Hey now! Why does everyone have such a hard time believing I’m domestic?” Ashlyn protests as she walks into the dining room mid-conversation with a bottle of wine and a pitcher of iced tea.

“Because you’re built like fucking Hercules and you shoot things, Harris.” McNally answers and makes Ali chortle.

“The man doesn’t lie, sweetheart.” Ali adds to the teasing.

“Well excuse me for being non-conforming!” Ashlyn exclaims with her hands up. “For the record, I’m just as good with a frying pan as I am with a gun. So suck on that, McNally!”

“Yeah, I can see that and I’m not even going to pretend like I’m not very thankful for that fact… geez, look at this! How much do I have to pay you to give my wife cooking lessons without you telling her I did?” McNally asks in jest.

“How about I give those lessons to you so you can cook your hardworking wife a proper meal you antiquated ass?” Ashlyn plays right back with a raised eyebrow.

“Touche, Harris. I kneel and will accept said lessons to rectify my chauvinist ways.” McNally bows his head and laughs.

“Better, much better.” Ashlyn replies with a smile while Ali sits down next to her laughing at the interaction. “Alright, let’s dig in and get down to business.”

“Finally!” McNally eagerly digs into his food, letting out a satisfied hum at the first bite of chicken. “So good! Ok, sorry… let me give you the update. Should we first go over everything we know up until this point or…” He looks at Ali.

“Nope, I caught her up.” Ashlyn replies and Ali nods.

“Great. Well, there’s not a lot to it, but I have some concrete info on what we’re looking at.”
McNally starts. “Murphy and Riley were briefed together by Train yesterday. According to Murphy, Train wouldn’t say much about incoming load, but that it was a low-key deal with just the three of them in. It’s set for Friday night, 11:15pm coming into Dry Dock 3. Sounds like he’s using Harbormaster Patrol again in some way.”

Ashlyn cocks her head to the side as she thinks about it. “Sounds about right for the most part. He’s going to be very stingy on details, so Murphy probably won’t get much more than that. Any idea who he’s dealing with?”

“Murphy says he’s been in touch with a guy named Fujita.” McNally responds.

“Hiroto Fujita? Really?” Ashlyn furrows her brow. “That’s a little weird. He dropped back from being a weapons dealer years ago, like back when I was first starting to go on runs like this with Bobby. On their last deal that I know of, Train had Bobby get the Harbormaster Patrol in place and I was there for some of what went down. They had a disagreement over price and Fujita wound up bending to Train, but said he was done with him. Train was doing business with other people after that. Clearly they reconciled, but I can’t imagine how that happened. Fujita is a very proud man and Train is arrogant as fuck, so I don’t know how you get that to mesh after a fall-out.”

“Well, there’s been no one else brought up in conversation as far as Murphy knows. Given that it’s just him and Riley on this little mission, Train must have enough trust in them not to hide too much.” McNally reasons.

“Riley is his right hand man. And Murphy is the new puppy. Train is obviously proud to show him off and get his feet wet so he can be just as involved as Riley. Makes sense to me that he picked those two. He’s throwing Murphy in to see what the kid can do, so to speak.” Ashlyn replies.

“That’s good for us though, right? He’s not coming in with a horde of henchmen. Makes it easier to take control of the situation.” McNally says.

“Certainly less of a shootout if it comes to that… but, also easier for him to move around and slip away if he gets wise to what’s going on. Pros and cons on that front.” Ashlyn weighs the situation.

“I feel like I’m in the Sopranos only with more fair-skinned and freckled players.” Ali finally chimes in after listening to some of the back and forth.

“Hey, hey… I’m one of those fair-skinned lads. You calling me a leprechaun, Ali?” McNally pretends to take offense.

“You said it, not me.” Ali puts her hands up and laughs.

“Irish mob…” McNally shakes his head. “Fucking idiots make us look bad.” He says as he looks at Ashlyn.

“Us? You talking to me? Cause Harris is English, bud. Got some Native American mixed in and a few other things, but no Irish. Hate to break it to you, but you’re on your own there.” Ashlyn chuckles.

“Huh, no kidding. I would’ve bet on it. I forget the old blonde hair was dyed.” McNally shrugs. “Oh well, at least I still have Murphy! Anyway… so, what’s our play? I mean… our guys get there before Train and set up shop at Dry Dock 3, right? Wait for the exchange to go down and make the move?”

“Nowhere near that simple.” Ashlyn says regretfully. “He won’t stay stationary for this exchange. It’s a series of orchestrated moves that only Train knows. Riley and Murphy won’t even really know, they’ll just follow as it happens.”
“Wait… what do you mean?” McNally asks a bit perplexed.

“If it’s anything like before and I have no doubt it will be, he’ll keep it unpredictable. He’ll start at Dry Dock 3 to get on a boat and decide from there where he’ll make the exchange and radio Harbormaster. Harbormaster will rendezvous with Fujita’s boat and escort it in to the exchange site. And Train will likely change the location a couple times before he settles, has the boats dock, and makes the exchange. Might happen on the docks, might happen on one of the boats. Sometimes he even ends up back at Dry Dock 3. There’s no telling. He’ll keep changing the plan the whole way until he’s sure no one can track him.” Ashlyn explains.

“Shit. We can’t prepare for that.” McNally says defeated. “We don’t have the man-power to set up in more than one or two spots, especially since we only have a handful of guys that we know for sure won’t tip the fucker off. This is impossible unless we can just track Murphy and be ready to move.”

“That won’t work either. He’ll sweep them both him and Riley for GPS with a scanner and you can bet he’ll make them leave their phones back at Dry Dock 3.” Ashlyn shoots down the plan. “You put something on Murphy and he won’t make it more than 5 minutes in.”

“So, then what do you propose? Cause I don’t see how we do this unless we guess the exchange site and get majorly lucky.” McNally says exasperated.

“I see one surefire way to end up wherever Train is, but how we execute it with confidence is beyond me.” Ashlyn replies.

“Well that’s brilliant!” McNally exclaims.

“That won’t work either. He’ll sweep them both him and Riley for GPS with a scanner and you can bet he’ll make them leave their phones back at Dry Dock 3.” Ashlyn shoots down the plan. “You put something on Murphy and he won’t make it more than 5 minutes in.”

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“I see one surefire way to end up wherever Train is, but how we execute it with confidence is beyond me.” Ashlyn replies.

“Well yeah if we can do it without Train finding out. That would’ve been a cake walk like 5 years ago when Train had the Chief of Police handling the Harbormaster situation. But thanks to Bobby who thought that role was too small time for him…Train has Sergeant Joe Hillman, who heads that unit, under his control and has for years. Bobby gave up being the go between, so Train isn’t going to need you for that purpose. Which means that if you or your guys get involved in any Harbormaster dealings, Train will get tipped off before we even have a chance.” Ashlyn lays out the dilemma.

“What if we trap Hillman, threaten to expose him and crush his career?” McNally suggests after thinking about it for a couple minutes.

“We can never be sure that he doesn’t tip off Train though, especially if we cross him like that. He might just do it out of pure spite and then we’re fucked.” Ashlyn replies. “The best thing I can think of outside of that plan is to get to Fujita ahead of Harbormaster by using a fake harbor patrol boat to approach. The only problem with that is that we’d have to play Fujita on top of it. Only the real Harbormaster boat will be in touch with Train to know where to go. So, it would mean getting a couple guys onboard Fujita’s boat and working out some kind of immunity deal with Fujita so that he’ll agree to help nail Train and still get to escape with no consequence. That’s a lot of moving pieces, and that’s if Fujita doesn’t have his guys just shoot up whoever tries to get aboard his boat. Especially since he won’t ever be expecting the Harbormaster to try and board him. That’s why getting onboard and making a deal with him would work, the real Harbormaster wouldn’t know
about the extra people onboard his boat because they wouldn’t be boarding. But that also sets up a potential situation where Fujita would be suspicious of the fake harbor patrol boat right off the bat for trying to board and cut them down and run.”

“This is so complicated and too many unpredictable factors. Plus how do we even know which boat is Fujita’s?” McNally grumbles in frustration.

“That’s easy. The guy is a billionaire and only travels in Musashi Japanese luxury yachts. They’re huge and you can’t miss the damn thing. Plus you won’t find a Japanese-made yacht like that around here randomly. It’ll be clear it’s Fujita.” Ashlyn is confident in at least that part.

“Great, at least one thing is easy.” McNally says sarcastically before getting serious. “I know this is our opportunity, Harris. But I don’t think we have a chance in hell and this is going down in three days.”

Ashlyn nods, knowing that he’s right as the plan stands and not knowing what else to come up with. She doesn’t want to let it go… she can’t let it go, but she also can’t justify forcing it with such a shoddy plan. The three of them eat their food in silence for a few minutes, the hard thinking going on in the quiet is clear from the looks on their faces.

“I have some questions.” Ali announces.

“No surprise there.” Ashlyn teases and earns a playful elbow from Ali. “I’m kidding, babe. Ask away.”

“Will Fujita completely know every step of the plan? As in will Train keep him fully updated on every move or does he just go along with following along as it happens?” Ali asks her first question.

“From my experience, he’s about as in the dark as Train’s guys. I think he’ll know the general plan of the Harbormaster rendezvous and whether the exchange will happen on land or on the boat, but beyond that he’ll just follow the Harbormaster’s lead and sit back and wait until he gets to Train.” Ashlyn answers.

“So, if something slightly unexpected were to happen or a little shift in the plan occurred, he wouldn’t necessarily be triggered or get suspicious?” Ali clarifies.

“Right, assuming it wasn’t anything majorly strange.” Ashlyn confirms.

“Would Fujita find it weird for Train or one of his guys to rendezvous with his boat ahead of or instead of the Harbormaster? So, let’s say Train or one of his guys shows up in another yacht and tries to make contact with Fujita before the Harbormaster, would that be out of the realm of possibility?” Ali throws out her second question.

Ashlyn thinks about it for a minute before answering. “No, I don’t see why he would get suspicious of that. He would either assume it was part of the escort plan or that the exchange was happening right there. He’d have no reason to distrust Train or his guys.” Ashlyn replies.

“Ok. Next question…does Fujita know you?” Ali inquires looking right at Ashlyn.

“Yes, in a business sense. These exchanges are serious and done in the presence of few eyes. Each side will cut the risk by making sure they know everyone involved. So, Train will know exactly who Fujita has with him and likewise for Fujita with Train’s guys. There’s a sort of transparency to it. I’ve witnessed once such exchange involving Fujita in person along with Bobby, so he would know me from that.” Ashlyn answers as she tries to decipher the pattern of Ali’s questions.
“Last question. Would Fujita pay enough attention to know what has gone on with you in terms of
the Bobby situation and jail?” Ali asks hopefully.

“Doubtful.” Ashlyn replies after giving it a bit of thought. “He’d have no reason to track anyone
beyond the exchange itself or think about them after the fact. Plus he lives in Japan and I can’t
imagine he would pay close enough attention to US news to hear anything about it. I’m not
internationally infamous, so it wouldn’t be on his radar unless Train said something. And given that
they’ve been at odds previously and that they wouldn’t be in contact outside of a deal, I wouldn’t see
why Train would ever bother saying anything. Just wouldn’t be relevant.” Ashlyn finishes still
unsure of why Ali is asking these questions, but that poised look of determination that she’s come to
know so well is plastered all over Ali’s face. “What exactly are you thinking, Alex?” She finally
asks.

“Well, if another yacht comes in contact with Fujita’s boat, he’s probably going to assume it’s Train
himself coming to make the exchange or one of Train’s guys as part of the larger plan. So, no reason
for suspicion to be aroused, right?” Ali asks just for confirmation.

“Ok, yeah.” Ashlyn confirms, still not really seeing where this is going.

“Think about it. You have access to a convincing luxury yacht, Ash. You pull up to Fujita’s boat and
he expects to see either Train or one of his guys. What he’ll see is you… and he has no idea you’re
not one of Train’s cronies. He’ll assume it’s part of the plan and it gives you an in. You go in, you
cut the deal with him and get him to let McNally and his guys board his boat before Harbormaster
shows up. Then you head your way and Fujita heads his. And Trains gets the surprise of a fucking
lifetime.” Ali finishes with a smug look.

Ashlyn can only blink in stunned silence at the plan Ali just laid out as her mind races to think it
over.

“Harris?” McNally prompts after a few quiet seconds. He sure as hell can’t find anything wrong with
it, but he also didn’t see anything wrong with his original plan until Harris ripped it apart. “Say
something.” He prods her again.

“I… holy fucking shit, Alex…” Ashlyn looks at Ali in astonishment. “That’s genius!”

“Yeah?” Ali asks excitedly while McNally simultaneously says “Really?!”

“Outside of Fujita deciding to shoot me for the fun of it… I don’t see how it doesn’t work. I think
there’s no question he lets me on the boat and hears me out. It’ll definitely be quite a task to convince
him to cooperate, but I’m pretty sure I can get there. Realistically, I think worst case is that he turns
me down, kicks me off his boat, and tips off Train. Then we just have to make a run for it and worry
about how to deal with Train ourselves.” Ashlyn says with renewed vigor.

“But then Murphy…” McNally voices his concern, knowing Murphy would get cut down first.

“I already had a safety plan for that if we got this point, and we’re here. So, I’ll handle that part.”
Ashlyn says matter-of-factly.

“Safety plan?” McNally questions.

“Sorry, I can’t say, but I need you to do something for me to make it happen. Get back in touch with
Frank Phillips at FBI and quietly let him in on this. We’ll need his help anyway to take Train down
for the weapons deal and he’s the federal head of your investigation. But I also have to find a way to
talk to him myself. So, I need to you tell Frank that I said ‘This is the time to bet the bank and play
the big hand.’ He’ll know what that means and find a discrete way to get in touch.” Ashlyn instructs.

“You and your damn holdouts, Harris! Am I ever going to be in the know?” McNally grumbles.

“My holdouts keep your ass safe, McNally.” Ashlyn raises an eyebrow at him. “If I could tell you, I would.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I’m on it.” McNally promises.

“Ok, so that’s the plan we go with. I use my yacht to approach Fujita’s boat, hopefully cut a deal to get you and your guys onboard his boat, and we take that fucker down for good as soon as the exchange happens.” Ashlyn reiterates the plan.

“Boom, fuck yes!” McNally agrees.

“Yeah, um…objection!” Ali pipes up. “I’d like to make a motion.”

“Oops, forgot to run it by my lawyer first.” Ashlyn laughs and McNally chuckles. “Seriously though, what’s up?” She looks at Ali who is smiling at the playful banter.

“Well you said ‘I’ as in ‘I use my yacht to approach Fujita’s boat’ etc. etc. etc. I formally request a change in vocabulary to ‘we’. As in ‘we’ had a deal, Harris.” Ali quirks an eyebrow at her girlfriend before adding, “Besides, luxury yachts and business deals are always more convincing when you have some arm candy, right?”

“Right.” Ashlyn nods, remembering their promise to each other. “Together it is. Motion sustained. ‘We’ use the yacht to approach Fujita’s boat, yatta, yatta, yatta.” She winks and entwines her hand with Ali’s on top of the table and leans in to quickly peck her lips before looking at McNally. “She’s my plus one, so add her to the gameday roster, McNally.”

“Hmph, well alright then.” McNally just shakes his head, having no idea what just happened but still beyond impressed by Ali’s plan and her involvement. The woman’s strong will is clearly a force to be reckoned with and he certainly won’t ever be putting himself at odds with her. “And now that I can add schooling Harris to the list, is there anything you don’t do well, Ali?” He jokingly asks with a smirk.

“Besides cook a fancy dinner, not that I know of…but, I’ll keep you posted.” Ali replies with a playful smile as she gets up and heads towards the kitchen. “Oh, and you’re welcome, idiots. You can express your gratitude by clearing those dishes while this asshole goes to get dessert.” She calls back over her shoulder, leaving Ashlyn to explain the idiot cop and asshole lawyer inside joke.

“I’ll get that in a minute. Come here.” Ashlyn gets Ali’s attention as she walks back into the dining room after seeing McNally out. The brunette is moving around the table collecting the plates from dessert and coffee mugs when Ashlyn sits down and pulls her into her lap. “You’re incredible, you know that? I never would have come up with that plan in a millionaire years.”

“Sure you would have, but you were too busy trying to keep your promise that you wouldn’t get too involved in this and not make it risky for us. That ship sailed when Train handed my ass to Steve, so I put our involvement back on the table. You would’ve been all over that plan if you thought you could involve yourself. I know how that selfless heart of yours works better than anybody else, Hero… you always put yourself on the line first if it’s an option. All I did was make it an option and force you to bring me along.” Ali shrugs with a smile.

“Look at you my little vocabulary wizard.” Ali says flirtatiously after pulling back from the kiss, dragging her teeth across Ashlyn’s bottom lip. “Let me tell you that there are a few more B words are coming to mind right now…”

“Oh yeah? Like what?” Ashlyn asks.

Ali shifts her legs so that she’s straddling Ashlyn’s lap, her fingers playing with the short bristly hairs on the back of the officer’s neck as she locks onto her hazel eyes. “Like… Body… Bare… Bedroom… Bang….” Ali raises her eyebrow with a smirk.

“Oh.” Ashlyn swallows hard as Ali leans down and starts trailing hot open mouthed kisses across her neck. “Alex…” Her breathing is already getting heavy and she moves her head to change their positioning just enough so that she’s the one working Ali’s neck now.

Ali whimpers at the feel of Ashlyn sucking lightly on her pulse point. “Baby?”

“Oh huh?” Ashlyn replies still buried into Ali’s neck.

“Begin… don’t make me… Beg.” Ali demands and feels Ashlyn smile into her skin.

“Right…Brisk… Bustin’ a move!” Ashlyn announces as she gets up off the chair lifting Ali with her who lets out a small squeal as she carries the brunette up to the bedroom in no time, still leaving soft kisses and licks across her exposed skin. They aren’t even through the bedroom door and Ali has already worked half of Ashlyn’s clothes off somehow. It tells the officer everything she needs to know about what Ali wants right now and that it certainly doesn’t involve teasing or drawing things out. She follows the brunette’s lead and works her own pants and boxers down her legs before quickly getting Ali into the same naked state and hovering over her on the bed.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid my eyes on.” Ashlyn husks as she stares deeply into Ali’s eyes and holds the brunette’s hands against the bed near her shoulders. “Tell me what you want, Alex.”

“God you’re sexy… killing me right now, so fucking hot.” Ali bites her lip at the penetrating but passionate stare Ashlyn is giving her. “Hurry.” She whispers just wanting to feel Ashlyn’s body on hers before she explodes.

“Tell me, Alex.” Ashlyn insists near Ali’s ear, tracing the outer shell with her tongue.

“Mmmmm, fuck… I want your tongue, deep…now. Please. Need you…now.” Ali blurts out and pleads with Ashlyn who is already swirling her tongue over one of her nipples. “Yes, Ash…please.”

Despite Ali’s moaning pleas, Ashlyn has a hard time leaving the brunette’s chest, completely addicted to the way Ali’s nipples harden in her mouth as she sucks them, the way they feel on her tongue as she flicks them softly, the way Ali quivers when she drags her teeth over them. It’s only a few more moments though before she feels Ali’s hands on her shoulders pushing her down to where she needs her most. She takes the time to kiss from one tattoo to the other across Ali’s hipbones, spending an extra minute on her tattoo, her spot, before settling between the strong legs that are already spread wide for her. “You’re so wet…” She can’t help but comment at the sight of perfect, glistening folds completely soaked and ready for her.
“Want you. Hurry.” Ali demands again before letting out a loud gasp when Ashlyn licks soft patterns on her clit for a minute and then suddenly plunges her tongue into her as far as it will go. “Oh my god… oh god, fuck…like that…Ash, yes, yes, like that… baby!” Her hips grind desperately into Ashlyn’s face as her hand goes into the officer’s hair to pull her in even closer. “You feel so good… Ashlyn, umnh, don’t stop…”

Ashlyn alternates between darting her tongue in and out of Ali’s center and moving up to occasionally tap her clit and suck it into her mouth. She feels the slight shiver go through Ali’s body after just a few minutes, the brunette’s legs opening impossibly wider, and she knows she’s ready. “So beautiful, baby… let go, come for me. You taste so good.” Her voice vibrates through Ali’s core as the brunette’s moans turn into a keening wail at the new sensation. She wraps her arms around Ali’s hips to hold them as steady as she can, one hand moving up to entwine with Ali’s feeling it immediately squeeze hers as the brunette’s whole body starts to tighten and clench.

“Jesus, baby… feels so good…oh my god…Ashlyn…fuck, baby! Ash!” Ali yells out raggedly as she gasps for air and feels her body tremor in orgasm. Her loud moans turn to vibrating whispers of Ashlyn’s name as her hips continue to gyrate slowly against Ashlyn’s face. She can already feel herself getting sensitive as she comes down, but Ashlyn’s warm mouth feels too good against her, the weight of her arms on her hips too perfect. “Don’t stop, babe…please… slow, gentle… keep going. I love you.”

Ashlyn smiles into the brunette’s still hot center and moves her tongue around lazily, gathering up all the wetness she can while letting the taste and smell of Ali completely intoxicate her. She can tell Ali is too sensitive and too spent for more, so she keeps up the slow and gentle movements with her tongue everywhere she can reach and lets herself get as lost as Ali is in enjoying the sensation of it. Eventually she feels Ali tug her up, but she only moves slightly, letting her head rest right on Ali’s upper hip with her cheek against the compass tattoo that marks her spot. She feels Ali’s hand running through her hair as her own hand lightly strokes up and down the brunette’s thigh…it’s her favorite place in the world and she could stay here forever.

“Come up here and kiss me before I start charging you rent down there.” Ali eventually breaks the moment, her body feeling heavy and relaxed.

“What kind of rent are we talking?” Ashlyn lifts her head up.

“Certainly not the monetary kind.” Ali says with a devilish grin.

“Well in that case, I might just have to buy the place… make you an offer you can’t refuse.” Ashlyn waggles her eyebrows as she climbs up Ali’s body.

“You already you own it, baby. Now shut up and kiss me already.” Ali pulls Ashlyn’s face down to hers and connects their lips in a slow kiss that quickly heats up with tongues dueling. She pulls herself away just long enough to mutter “my turn” before flipping their position so she’s on top.

The fiery kiss brings Ashlyn’s attention to the intense throbbing between her legs and the feeling of wetness on the inside of her thighs. She’s so worked up from taking care of Ali that this kiss alone might just push her over. Ali’s hand is sliding up and down her side and she can feel her abs starting to contract and tremble. “I’m so close already, baby…choose wisely.” Ashlyn murmurs playfully against Ali’s lips.

“Oh wow, yeah you are.” Ali eyes go wide at the amount of wetness she feels as her fingers slide easily through Ashlyn’s folds, the officer’s hips canting up at the contact. “Are you sure you didn’t already…”
“I couldn’t tell you, I was too busy eating you into oblivion to think about what was going on down there.” Ashlyn replies smugly only to have the smirk drop from her face as she feels Ali’s fingers slip inside her. “Oh fuck… yes… mmmm, good choice… Alex… fuck, baby, yeess…” Ashlyn’s hand clutches the brunet’s lower back and her head drops back into the pillow.

“Well I’m choosing these too.” Ali replies dipping her head down and running her tongue over Ashlyn’s nipple. “I fucking love these.” She mumbles and moves to the other one, sucking it into her mouth and releasing it with a pop that earns a loud moan.

“Al…Alex…I’m, oh god…right there, right there…Alex…” True to her word, Ashlyn’s body is shaking wildly in just a couple minutes with toes curled as the waves of pleasure break over her, Ali’s name and expletives rolling off her tongue all jumbled together in the midst of her panting breaths. She groans when she feels Ali’s fingers leave her, but starts humming in bliss again when she feels the brunet move down her body and start gently licking her clean. “That feels so damn good, baby. You’re amazing, Alex… so good.” She rides out the little aftershocks of orgasm, letting the impossible softness of Ali’s tongue bring her all the way down.

Once she hears more regulated breathing from her girlfriend, Ali moves herself up and flops onto her stomach on the bed beside Ashlyn, turning her head to face the officer. “So incredible, that was the… Bomb.” She smiles widely.

“Boom.” Ashlyn agrees as she turns on her side to face Ali, propping herself up on her elbow.

“Today’s mind-blowing sex brought to you by the letter B.”

“Such a dork, Harris.” Ali laughs lightly.

“Yeah, but I’m your dork.” Ashlyn shrugs.

“Hottest dork ever and all mine.” Ali scoots her body over just a bit so that her side is pressed against Ashlyn’s front even though she’s still laying on her stomach. “I feel so damn relaxed and good right now.”

“Me too.” Ashlyn admits, her fingertips now running up and down Ali’s spine.

“That feels really nice. I swear you know how to touch me before I even know how I want to be touched.” Ali closes her eyes.

“That feels really nice. I swear you know how to touch me before I even know how I want to be touched.” Ashlyn jokes a bit. “You tired, baby?” She asks more seriously.

“Never too tired for you, love.” Ali opens her eyes and rolls on her side to face the officer. “What’s up?” Ali asks, easily reading that Ashlyn wants to talk.

“Well, I was pulling you into my lap earlier to tell you something… not that I’m complaining one bit about the detour we took. But, I still want to tell you.” Ashlyn replies.

“Sorry, gorgeous. It’s just that you promising that we’ll stick together on everything and then really holding to that… the way you let me in the way you do and treat me so equally in everything. It does things to me, Harris.” Ali confesses before propping herself up a bit and looking at Ashlyn attentively. “Tell me.”

“Well, first, you are equal in every way no matter what. You’re my other half, Alex...the better half for sure. A ship in the harbor may be safe, but ships aren’t made to sit in the harbor. As much everything in me wants to keep you safe in that port, I’d be a damn fool to go into battle without my strongest ship. I love you and I hope you know how much I respect and value you.” Ashlyn leans
over and kisses the top of Ali’s shoulder.

“Ash… the things you say and the way you so genuinely mean them, it’s everything. I love you too
and same goes for you.” Ali smiles back at her adoringly.

“I really do mean it, Alex. And along those lines… I never want to have any secrets from you, at
least intentional ones anyway. And right now, I do have one. I’ve kept it for a very long time
because it wasn’t and still isn’t mine to reveal. But I want you to know everything I know going into
this and I obviously couldn’t trust anyone more than I do you, so, I’d like to tell you if you’re willing
to hear it.” Ashlyn says and looks at Ali for confirmation.

“Oh course I am. You’re secrets are my secrets, Ash, and they’re safe with me.” Ali promises.

“Thank you.” Ashlyn leans in for a quick soft kiss before starting. “So, I came up in the Rangers
with a guy named Ryan Cormac Sullivan, Jr. and we went through training together and knew each
other pretty well. We got assigned to different battalions and then I got picked to become part of the
task force, so we lost touch. Anyway, years later we came across each other in less than ideal
circumstances and there was a confrontation where we both ended up doing some major explaining
and swearing each other to secrecy. And this is the first time I’ve ever spoken about it since then.”

Ali nods and listens as Ashlyn elaborates and fills in the basic story she just outlined in more detail.
By the time the officer is finished, Ali is astounded and only now completely understands the risks
that Ashlyn is willing to take and why. This is going to be one hell of a ride and she can only hope
they’ll come out unscathed in the end.

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Wednesday, November 8th

“Boss, do you have a second?” Riley pops his head out of the screen door to find Train smoking a
cigarette as he reads the newspaper.

“You look perturbed, Riley.” Train motions for him to sit. “What can I do for you?”

“I just wanted to check in about something. Do we have transport? You didn’t ask me to arrange it,
so I thought you must have Murphy on it. But then I asked him and he didn’t know a thing about it.
It’s just the three of us…and you don’t usually… are we good with transport?” Riley gets out his
question.

“Relax. We’re fine. No need for transport, that’s why I didn’t ask you for it.” Train replies simply.


“What part was confusing, Riley?” Train asks with a hard stare.

“Sorry, Boss. I just don’t understand how we can move a large number of weapons without
transport.” Riley swallows nervously, trying hard not to look stupid with his question even though he
knows he’s failing with the impatient look Train is giving him.

Train finally drops the hard look on his face and laughs, slamming his hand down roughly on Riley’s
shoulder. “Riley, Riley, Riley…I’m fucking with you. You should have seen your face just now!”
Train shakes his head, clearly amused. “Look, you’re my right hand man. So, I’m gonna let you in
on a little secret. We don’t need transport because all we’re purchasing is a medium-ish briefcase.
Think we can manage that just fine between the three of us, eh?” Riley laughs again.
“Briefcase? But the high tech weapons…” Riley trains off still completely lost.

“High tech automatic weapons are very 5 years ago…I’m upgrading my business a bit.” Train says mysteriously. “What’s coming in that briefcase is worth millions more on the black market than any gun and so much easier to move too.” He adds with a menacing grin.

Riley is baffled as his mind tries to figure out what could possibly bring Train more money than illegal weapons and yet come in such a small package. “Diamonds, Boss?” He takes the best guess he has.

Train just laughs again. “Sure, diamonds. Let’s go with that. A bunch of tiny microscopic gems.”

Riley furrows his brow as Train walks away still chuckling to himself, trying hard to read into the man’s statement. His mind initially goes to potential drugs, but he quickly realizes that Train would never be this cautious with drug exchanges and with Fujita in the picture that explanation makes even less sense since the Japanese businessman doesn’t deal in drugs. He replays the conversation in his mind and his stomach suddenly drops when the words ‘weapon’ and ‘microscopic’ stand out, something finally connecting and making him wish he never asked.

Friday, November 10th

“You look gorgeous.” Ashlyn’s eyes trail over Ali’s body from head-to-toe, appreciating the tight leather pants and the black tank-top with a silky and form-fitting royal blue blazer over it. The outfit is fancy and impressive while still comfortable in allowing Ali the ability to move easily in case it’s needed tonight.

“Looking sharp yourself, Hero.” Ali checks out Ashlyn’s perfectly tailored gray suit with light tan pinstripes, a white collared shirt with a few buttons left undone underneath and no tie. Ashlyn smiles and entwines Ali’s hand in her own. “Ready for this, Mrs. Harris?”

“As if there was a better role to play than the one of your wife.” Ali beams.

“We’ll call it a trial run.” Ashlyn teases and earns a little glare from Ali.

“I’m ready, baby. Live together, fight together, and if there’s no way out…die together.” Ali says matter-of-factly.

Ashlyn nods in agreement and squeezes Ali’s hand tightly in hers before leaning into kiss her deeply. “I love you, Alexandra Krieger.”

“I love you too, Ashlyn Harris. Let’s do this.” Ali replies confidently.

“Ok, game on.” Ashlyn leads Ali up the stairs to top deck of their yacht where the driving console is. From there they have a clear view of Fujita’s luxurious yacht all lit up on the dusky harbor horizon line and directly in front of them less than half a mile away.

“God that thing is such a gawdy monstrosity. How is that subtle at all?” Ali asks as she eyes the luxury boat in the distance. There’s enough lights on the thing that it looks like a floating house.

“You don’t need to be subtle when the damn Harbormaster is helping you get away with illegal shit.” Ashlyn replies with a head shake. “Besides, the more obvious he is, the less people think anything weird is going on. They just assume some rich bastard is getting harbor patrol to provide
“some kind of security.”

“Makes sense.” Ali considers it as they hear Ashlyn’s phone buzz.

_John McNally: I’m in place with my guys while you do your thing. We’re about a half mile from Fujita’s current portside and have both of you in visual range. God speed._

Ashlyn takes a second to appreciate how blatant their messages are tonight before replying back. There’s no more need for secrecy. If Train doesn’t go down tonight, they’re exposed and under the gun anyway.

_A.Harris: Copy that. Anchors away. Go forth and conquer._

“Well, we have about an hour to work with in order to give us a good safety net. McNally is in place. I guess it’s show time.” Ashlyn looks up from her phone to find the whiskey eyes that always center her.

“Start ‘er up, Captain.” Ali smiles and moves herself a little closer to Ashlyn’s side as the officer starts the engine and gets the boat moving towards Fujita’s yacht. As soon as they’re on the right trajectory, Ali feels Ashlyn’s free hand come to rest on her lower back. She leans in and rests her head on the taller woman’s shoulder. “So, I probably should have asked before, but how exactly do we get on his boat?”

“Kinda glad you didn’t ask before.” Ashlyn admits. “Essentially we get close enough and then use the horn and flash the spotlight at them to signal that we’re going to approach. And then comes the scary part…”

“I’m a big girl, lay it on me, Harris.” Ali says assuredly.

“As soon as we make ourselves seen, you can bet there will be guns trained on us fast. These guys deal in automatic weapons, so you can expect machine guns and the like. Doesn’t get more nerve-wracking than that when you’re on the water and a single trigger touch releases a spray of bullets.” Ashlyn gives it to her straight. “I’ll identify myself and I have no reason to think Fujita won’t let me onboard. If he doesn’t, then I’m sure they’ll just tell us to get lost.”

“Ok.” Ali nods attentively to signal that she’s listening carefully.

“I won’t lie to you…once we’re on his boat, we can expect to get patted down and manhandled. I’ll protect you as much as I can, but you have to prepare for them to be rough with me. You can’t let it rattle you. The less you give away in your expression, the better. I promise you, I’ll be more than fine and I can handle it. Ok?” Ashlyn explains.

Ali lets out a short sigh, already knowing it’s going to take everything she has to swallow down the rage she’ll feel at anyone touching Ashlyn. “Ok, Ash…I promise to hold it in tight.”

“It’ll be over fast. And once we’re past that and sitting down with Fujita, it’ll be a cake walk from there I hope.” Ashlyn finishes.

“And if it’s not?” Ali questions.

“Then we leave before we wear out our welcome and figure out how to deal with Train.” Ashlyn says simply, knowing in reality that it might be a lot more complicated, but hoping it doesn’t come down to that.

Ali nods and looks up to see that Fujita’s yacht is just ahead of them now with Ashlyn slowing the
“I’m with you every step of the way, Ash. I love you.”

“I wouldn’t want anyone else by my side. I love you too, Alex. And I’m going to love you even more tomorrow when I wake up to your beautiful face.” Ashlyn asserts, her confident words calming them both. “One for the road.” She kisses Ali softly, letting the slow kiss linger and pulling back with eyes hooded. “I’m going to sound the horn now, we’re on.”

“Ok.” Ali’s replies and takes a deep breath, squeezing Ashlyn’s hand as the officer lets the horn sound in three long blows before moving to flash the spotlight three times as well.

From 50 yards out they can start to see some movement on the main deck of Fujita’s boat, but nothing aggressive or concerning just yet. From 20 yards out they can make out what appears to be four guys on the main deck of Fujita’s boat holding some kind of weapons. From 10 yards out, it’s clear that Ashlyn was right and they are automatic weapons. Ashlyn tells Ali to keep yacht as steady as she can and runs down to the main deck to throw the rubber bumper pads off the side of the yacht that faces Fujita’s boat so that if the water pushes them into each other there will be no damage. She then quickly drops the anchor and tells Ali to cut the engine and come down. Ashlyn has refused to look up and over at Fujita’s boat this whole time, not caring to see what waits for them until she has to.

“Ok, baby, just hold tight.” Ashlyn reminds Ali as she meets the brunette in the middle of the main deck and then leads her by the hand to the side of the yacht.

“Show hands! Show hands! The fuck you want?” A heavily accented voice immediately calls out to them as at least four sets of Uzi machine guns point in their direction.

Ashlyn and Ali immediately get their hands up and Ali is almost taken aback by the strong and dominant tone that comes from beside her.

“Please alert Mr. Fujita that Ashlyn Harris requests a meeting with him. We are unarmed and it’s just my wife and myself onboard. You’re welcome to come aboard and confirm.” Ashlyn yells back and watches two of the men confer with each other before one of them leaves the main deck.

“Stay hands up!” The man calls again.

Ashlyn and Ali comply, waiting for a few minutes with guns aimed at them until the man from before appears back on the deck and says something inaudible to the one that appears to be in charge.

“Fujita will see you.” The man shouts to them. “Keep hands shown!” Ashlyn just nods at him and watches as they lower a small boarding ramp to connect the two boats. She quickly goes over and properly attaches it to the side of her yacht before stepping onto it and then reaching for Ali’s hand to help her up as well. “One minute at a time, stay calm and breathe.” She reminds the brunette and squeezes her hand slightly and they wobble their way across the gap and onto Fujita’s boat.

Ashlyn wasn’t kidding when she said these guys would be rough. Ali watches with wide eyes as two of the men immediately grab Ashlyn and slam her up against the nearest wall-like surface, the officer’s chin hitting hard from the force of it. Ali bites the inside of her lip so hard she’s sure it must be bleeding as she watches them pat Ashlyn down, roughly grabbing at her chest and around her inner thighs and lingering in those spots long enough that it makes her want to throw up. She works hard to keep her expression as stoic and unaffected as the one on Ashlyn’s face even as the officer is being felt up. Before she knows it, the two men yank Ashlyn away from the wall and push her back in Ali’s direction. It takes everything in her not to reach out and wipe the little trickle of blood on Ashlyn’s chin from the cut that has opened there. She’s so focused on Ashlyn she barely registers the
two men reaching for her until the officer steps in front of her.

“Back up.” Ashlyn barks at them, her voice steely and cold. “You want to scan her for weapons and bugs, go ahead. Nobody touches my wife but me. Not a fucking finger on her.”

“You don’t make rules here.” One of the men sneers at her and holds his weapon back up at them despite the fact that two other guys are already doing so from the other side of the deck.

Ashlyn is about to respond when they are interrupted by a new voice on the deck.

“Enough.” A small statured, older man says in a voice that seems far too booming for his appearance. A few other words are spoken in Japanese and the men lower their weapons, using a handheld scanner to quickly check Ali before moving away from them and keeping their distance.

“Welcome. Let us go inside.” The man motions for Ashlyn and Ali to follow him into the main cabin.

If Ali thought the outside of the yacht was gawdy, the main cabin takes the cake with a large African Blackwood table in the center that features gold inlaid patterns. The walls are decorated with what appears to be expensive looking art pieces with various antique swords interspersed between them. All of the typical luxuries are there too: a large bar, a pool table, two large flat screen TVs, a state of the art sound system, leather seating, and more crystal vases and trinkets littering the room than in a Swarovski store.

The man sits at the large table and motions for the two women to sit across from him before finally addressing them. “Harris-san, it is good to see you. I almost didn’t recognize you with the new look. It has been so long that I assumed you were no longer in business with Mr. McGuiness.” He says referring to Train.

“Fujita-san, I could say the same for you. It has been a long time indeed.” Ashlyn replies respectfully to stay on his good side.

Ali smiles proudly to herself as the officer offers up no information and merely answers the man’s question by throwing his own words back at him. It was something they had worked on a lot last night as she helped Ashlyn run through the potential dialogue. If there was anything she was good at, it was deflecting questions and anticipating conversational directions. She had done her best to teach Ashlyn some tricks last night, the officer had clearly paid attention.

“Well, Mr. McGuiness pays handsomely for what he wants. I found myself getting lured back in.” Fujita admits. “In any case, of all the associates to send, I’m must say I’m glad he chose you. As the father of a law enforcement official back home, I have great respect for your chosen path even if it is at odds with my own.” He bows his head at her slightly. “My apologies for the less than tactful welcome you received. Hired hands have a tendency to take matters into their own hands when unsupervised.” He motions to the small cut on her chin. “But you look well, in good health… and you’ve come with very beautiful company, so I assume good fortune as well.”

“Greater fortune than I deserve.” Ashlyn smiles and takes a brief glance at Ali before looking back at Fujita. “This is my wife, Alexandra… one of the best lawyers in the business.” She introduces Ali proudly.

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“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs…” Fujita pauses just enough for Ali to chime in.

“Harris. But you can call me Ali.” She smiles sweetly.

“A pleasure to meet you, Ali. And a lawyer… as impressive as you are lovely.” Fujita compliments
her and bows his head again. “As they say in my native language, Utsukushī tsuma utsukushī seikatsu… beautiful wife, beautiful life. I suppose in this case, that goes for both of you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Fujita. It’s nice to meet you as well.” Ali replies politely.

“You look well yourself, Fujita-san.” Ashlyn pipes back up. “I appreciate your hospitality and I do not want to mislead or be here under false pretenses. Train did not send me. I am here of my own accord.”

“Oh? Then to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?” Fujita asks looking a bit confused, but seemingly unbothered by the confession.

“I come with a proposal for you Fujita-san, one which I hope you take for your own sake.” Ashlyn starts. “James Train McGuiness will be closed for business after tonight and I would like to think that you have better sense than to go down with his ship so to speak.”

“You have my attention.” Fujita folds his hands on the table and leans back a bit in his chair.

“You have two options, Fujita-san. You either get caught in the trap tonight or you become a part of it.” Ashlyn tells him straight-forwardly. “The FBI and Boston Police are tracking Train as we speak and ready to move on him once this weapons exchange is made. If you choose to stand with him, you will meet the same fate.”

“And if I choose to not to stand with him?” Fujita asks calmly.

“Lucky for you, the FBI and police are hoping to make the operation go more smoothly and with less man-power. The deal is that you allow four Boston Police officers aboard your boat and agree to maintain the secrecy of the operation as the exchange is made. One such officer is Chief of Police, Jonathan McNally. If you agree to those terms, the weapons you brought will be seized by the FBI, but you will be allowed to leave with your payment unscathed. Boston Police patrol will immediately escort your vessel to international waters and you are free to go. Those are the terms.” Ashlyn lays it all out for him.

“I see your chosen career has become your fulltime calling then, Harris-san.” Fujita smiles a bit at her.

“It has. The truth is that it always was.” Ashlyn confirms.

“And the Chief of Police… he is someone new? Can I assume this has something to do with your cutting of ties to Mr. McGuiness?” Fujita inquires.

“Bobby Dugan passed away this past year and John McNally has replaced him. Dugan and I had a falling out a few years back that made me reevaluate my options in ways I care not to discuss, but your assumptions are generally correct. My ties with Train were cut the day I walked away from Dugan.” Ashlyn avoids divulging the full story without telling any lies, just like Ali taught her.

“Good for you, Harris-san.” Fujita nods approvingly. “At my age, I think I missed that chance myself, but I’m glad at least my son has better sense than me.”

Ali lets her hand brush the side of Ashlyn’s thigh under the table, a quiet message of pride and support for how she is controlling the situation. She can feel the tables turning in their favor, this man clearly not a fan of Train and appreciative of the respect and honesty with which Ashlyn is treating him.

“I apologize for my haste, Fujita-san, but as you can imagine, time is of the essence. I need an
answer on how you would like to proceed.” Ashlyn pushes a bit, knowing they don’t have too much more time to play with.

Fujita nods and sighs. “I respect you very much Harris-san. It makes me happy to know that you are no longer associated with Mr. McGuiness and are operating on the other side of the equation these days. And my congratulations to you and your very lovely wife. I do wish you both joy and good fortune. As much as I would like to help you and take my own leap away from Mr. McGuiness… I’m afraid I cannot.”

Ashlyn nods disappointedly. “I urge you to reconsider, Fujita-san. I’d hate to see you get tangled in this mess along with Train.”

“I assure, I won’t be. You see… there are no weapons aboard this boat other than in the hands of my security. There is no exchange to be made and my dealings with Mr. McGuiness are minimal and not quite what you think. I’m sorry Harris-san, but I must tell you that I am merely a very expensive decoy. And based on your presence on my boat… I’d say a decoy that has worked exactly as Mr. McGuiness expected it to.” Fujita confesses apologetically and watches as both Ashlyn and Ali straighten up in their seats.

Chapter End Notes

I promise not to leave you hanging too long on this one... next update in the next day or two!
Crunch Time

Chapter Notes

Ok all... strap in and away we go on the crazy train! Drop me a comment and let me know what you think of all this madness!

Fair warning that I have a really busy week coming up next week and it may be a while until the next update, so hang tight and thanks ahead of time for your patience! On the bright side, I didn't leave you on a cliffhanger.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday, November 10th continued…

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“Cut the engine and hold it here.” Train directs Riley who is at the controls of the Sea-Ray Entertainer sport boat.

“We’re not going all the way over?” Riley asks while motioning to Fujita’s large yacht only a relatively short distance away, noting the change in routine.

“No. We’re just here to see if he draws any company.” Train replies with no further explanation.

“Company? Did you send someone else with instructions?” Riley inquires, surprised that there is more than the three of them involved given that Train seemed so adamant about keeping this under wraps.

“I sent nobody. That’s the damn point.” Train answers impatiently, making it clear he doesn’t want any more questions for the time being as he grabs a pair of night vision binoculars and scans the horizon for a few minutes before putting them down and lighting a cigarette. “We’ll wait here another 20 minutes, then we’ll head to Dry Dock 3.”

“Ok, Boss.” Riley shrugs and looks at Murphy who sitting quietly in one of the seats in the back of the boat. He had anticipated that the exchange was going to be made on land until Train had them go out on the boat, but apparently this is just some version of the misdirection that the criminal mastermind is known for on these big deals. Dry Dock 3 makes more sense to him and he assumes that Fujita will be following to join them shortly after they depart. He listens in as Train starts telling Murphy about how his grandmother once hit him over the head with a bag of flour when she caught
him smoking. They’re all laughing as Train does an impression of the deceased woman when suddenly the boss is on his feet and grabbing the binoculars again at the sound of a boat horn.

“Boss?” Riley questions, looking in the direction that Train is looking towards. Train doesn’t reply, but he doesn’t have to as a decent-sized and well-lit yacht is clearly moving towards Fujita’s boat. They all watch closely as the yacht docks itself right beside Fujita’s boat.

“I fucking knew. I knew she was still in my fucking kitchen!” Train growls as he continues to look into the binoculars. “It’s fucking Harris… stupid cunt eating bitch. When this deal is over I’m gonna tie her and that nosey bitch lawyer in a fucking 69 to the tracks myself. Actually no, they’d probably enjoy that too much. I’m gonna tie ‘em on opposite sides so they can only hear each other scream. I told that stupid bitch not to fuck with me.” Train scans the area again and finds exactly what he is looking for… an unmarked police boat sitting idle off to the left of Fujita’s boat. “Of course, of course, McNally too. I’m gonna completely fuck with him. Off Harris and the lawyer and then let him sweat it. Make him think I don’t know he’s in on it. Then I’m gonna make him tie his own damn wife and kid to the fucking tracks, make him watch, and then shoot the fucker in the head.” Train is yelling when he feels a hand on his shoulder.

“Easy, Boss. This is a big exhange tonight, don’t lose your head. We can deal with those two tomorrow.” Riley tries to calm him, knowing how fast Train can get irrational.

“You’re right, you’re right. It’s not like I didn’t know something must be up… let’s just get through the deal and then I can dream of the damn ways I’m going to make those two beg for death.” Train’s voice becomes steadier. He looks into the binoculars one more time to see Harris and Krieger being escorted into Fujita’s yacht. “Money well spent.” He grunts with a smile at having ever questioned his idea to pay Fujita half a million dollars to do nothing but come around. “I’ve seen enough. Let’s go.”

“Do we signal Fujita somehow?” Riley asks, not sure how the businessman will know where to meet them from here.

“Fujita’s job is done here. I hired him to look like a pretty jewel on the ocean. He’s not our supplier.” Train answers simply. “Dry Dock 3.”

Riley looks at Murphy who just shrugs, neither of them knowing exactly what to expect from here. He then just nods at Train and navigates them to the instructed location, tying the boat up to one of the docks there just 25 minutes later.

“Take out your phones, turn them off, and leave them in the boat. We can come back for them later.” Train directs them and watches the two men comply before running a small handheld scanner over them to look for any GPS signals. “Ok, off the boat.” He commands once he’s satisfied.

“We have an hour until drop, want me to do a perimeter loop and secure?” Riley asks, knowing this is routine for any deal. Despite this being Train’s preferred spot for transactions, he knows better than to take the privacy it offers for granted.

“Sure. Take the kid with you, show him how.” Train replies and sits on a wooden crate nearby.

“You alright there, Murph?” Riley asks after hearing a slight sigh from beside him.

“Yeah. Just nervous a little. My first big deal, you know? Don’t want to fuck it up.” Murphy lies. He’s rattled now that Train is on to McNally. The last time he’d been in touch the plan was for McNally to be coming in on Fujita’s boat. Will that happen now? And if not, has McNally put guys in place on the Dry Dock just in case? And if he did, is Riley going to find them on this perimeter
check? His palms are sweating as he tries to get himself under control before he gives himself away. 'Relax. Relax. You have a gun in your hand and he doesn’t know about you. Like McNally said, if it goes south, stay in your role and don’t pull the trigger unless you have to.'

“I know, kid. I been there. This stuff is quicker and easier than you think, just a lot of build up for very little action. Pull it together though. You can’t let him see that you’re nervous.” Riley levels with him.

“Yeah, ok. I know. Thanks.” Murphy replies, glad to have side-stepped Riley at least. It takes them 15 minutes to do a loop, checking any docked boats, truck containers, and small offices near the dock where they find nothing and no one. Murphy isn’t sure whether to be happy with that outcome or not.

“Clear, Boss.” Riley announces as they approach Train.

“That’s good to know, but we’re moving. Let’s go.” Train starts walking away from the docks.

“We’re not staying?” Riley asks as he and Murphy follow, trying to hide his surprise but failing.

“Nope.” Train replies with no explanation and leads them to a black Range Rover parked nearby, tossing Riley the keys.

“Where to?” Riley asks casually as he gets behind the wheel.

“Navy Yard.” Train replies.

“The Navy Yard?!” Riley can’t hide his shock this time. The Navy Yard is open to the public 24 hours a day and while it’s getting late, anyone can walk in at any time, making it hard to secure. It works well for some things, but for this type of exchange it seems downright risky.

“I love how off kilter I have you tonight, Riley. Makes me feel like I still got it.” Train says proudly. “And yes, the Navy Yard. We’re doing this in plain sight because it’s the least expected. The package is small enough anyway, not that weird even if we encounter anyone, which I doubt at this hour.”

“You never cease to amaze me, Boss.” Riley replies with a smirk.

“Good.” Train smiles as they pull away from Dry Dock 3.

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Ashlyn feels Ali’s hand squeeze her thigh under the table as her own body tenses at the ready for what might come next.

“I appreciate your honesty, Fujita-san. I’m sure you are not at your liberty to tell me that nor is it part of whatever deal you worked out.” Ashlyn says appreciatively before adding, “Perhaps someday you will teach me your ways.”

“My ways?” Fujita asks, his face looking confused. Harris took the news of being caught in Train’s trap better than he expected.

“Yeah, I am not nearly as good a businessman as you are apparently. You’re here making a boatload to act as a decoy tonight and here I am offering the exact same service for free.” Ashlyn smiles at him and watches his face register. She feels Ali tense up further next to her. This is the part that’s unpredictable… there’s no telling how Fujita will react to being played as part of their own ruse.
The loud clapping that suddenly comes from older man after a few moments of silence startles both women a bit. “Bravo, Harris-san!” Fujita chuckles. “He is a chronic under-estimator that man, but I think tonight he has far far misjudged his competition. I, for one, am bowing out gracefully.”

Ashlyn slowly lets out the breath she was holding at the realization that they’re not about to get shot and thrown into the ocean for disrespecting the proud older businessman. “We need to be underway.” Ashlyn gets up slowly and helps Ali up as well. “Do I assume correctly that you are headed for Dry Dock 3 now?”

“That’s what I was paid for, yes. But… I have my money and I’m betting it on you, Harris-san. I think if I skip out on that meeting point and head home, it won’t count against me in the end. My time in these waters is done for good.” Fujita replies with a smile as he stands up.

“Well, then I thank you for the fine conversation and the thoughtful cooperation. And I say this with the best intentions… I hope I never see you again, Fujita-san.” Ashlyn bows slightly.

“Your sentiments are returned, Harris-san.” Fujita bows back. “Mrs. Harris, a pleasure to have met you. I trust you will keep her out of trouble.” He bows to Ali.

“Lord knows I try, but with such interesting ‘friends’…it’s not always easy.” Ali raises an eyebrow before bowing back.

Fujita laughs. “Such wit. You have met your match, Harris-san. Luck and fortune to you both… and to me for putting my stock in you. Goodnight.” Fujita smiles and calls out a few commands loudly in Japanese to have his security escort the women back to their boat.

“Holy crap this shit is crazy.” Ashlyn says as soon as they’re back onboard their yacht and pushed away from Fujita’s boat.

“You, ok?” Ali asks a bit out of breath even though they haven’t done anything to physically exert themselves.

“Yeah. Need to check where we’re at though.” Ashlyn replies as she pulls out her cellphone. “You doing ok?”

“I’m good. Mind boggled, but good. Let me see your chin.” Ali uses her fingers to tilt the officer’s head up a bit and get a good look. It’s a pretty deep little split about an inch long with some bruising around it now, but the bleeding has stopped at least.

“Alex, I’m fine, honey. I promise. We can worry about it later.” Ashlyn assures her and dials McNally.

Ali nods and smiles, knowing she’s worried about something very trivial in the grand scheme of what could have happened thus far and what could still happen. It’s easy to forget just how tough and durable Ashlyn is when she usually gets to see the side of the officer that is so sweet, loving and occasionally vulnerable. Seeing her so locked in right now and controlled, it’s a stark reminder of just how lethal her girlfriend is…and maybe that should be scary, but all she feels right now is safe and protected.

“Where are we on the sitting duck, McNally?” Ashlyn asks when the Chief picks up.

“I’m gonna go with ‘sitting dick’ instead…but, he showed and just left 15 minutes ago.” McNally replies.
“You sure he saw?” Ashlyn ignores the joke not wanting to waste any time.

“Oh he saw. Could actually see the fucker standing up and ranting on his boat from here.” McNally replies.

“Well hopefully that means he thinks Fujita will play his part and lead us to Dry Dock 3. Fujita is bagging out and going home by the way.” Ashlyn tells him. “Navy Yard in 20 minutes?”

“Smart man that Fujita. We left as soon as you got back onboard your yacht. We’re five minutes ahead and we’ll meet you there. Everyone is in place. Let’s hope we’re right about his choice of location.” McNally finishes.

“Yeah. We’re rolling right behind you.” Ashlyn replies and hangs up, looking at Ali. “It’s a go.”

“Well, get that anchor up then, Harris. I’ll start her up and get us moving in the right direction.” Ali smiles and heads towards the stairs to the top deck.

“Do you even know how sexy it is that you kind of know how to drive this thing now?” Ashlyn calls over her shoulder, letting Ali break through the disciplined mindset she’s in right now. The ability to shut out distraction and focus has never failed her, but neither has Ali’s presence and the calming effect of their banter. There’s something about finding a happy medium between the two that is making her feel invincible and there’s no better time to feel that way than tonight.

“Yeah well, when we’re not under the threat of death, maybe I can do it naked for you sometime.” Ali calls back as she gets to the top deck. “Now get your ass back in gear so you don’t sink yourself and your best ship.”

“Oh sure, easy to do when you make me picture you naked.” Ashlyn mumbles to herself with a smile as she pulls the rubber bumpers into the boat.

“What was that?” Ali calls down.

“Nothing, just a ‘Yes Ma’am!’” Ashlyn replies knowing she was caught.

“Uh huh. Get a move on down there before I come take control of things myself.” Ali smiles and starts the engine.

“That’s not much of a threat when I like you in control, Krieger.” Ashlyn yells back as she gets the anchor up.

“That’s why it wasn’t a threat…more so a preview of later.” Ali puts the boat in gear as Ashlyn comes up the stairs.

“Well, you sure know how to motivate a woman to get to later.” Ashlyn raises an eyebrow and checks the GPS to make sure they’re on course before increasing their speed.

“Exactly.” Ali winks and entwines a hand with Ashlyn’s, ready to face whatever ending the night has in store for them.

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“Perimeter check, Boss?” Riley asks as the three of them walk into the quieter area between the two docks where the USS Cassin Young destroyer and the USS Constitution tall ship are stationed.

“No need, he’s here already.” Train replies and motions to a man in a hoodie sitting on a concrete
The fact that the guy is by himself makes Riley uneasy. It makes sense though that someone in this type of business would be a lone wolf.

“Omar.” Train addresses the man as they get close enough.

“Train.” The guy replies in a raspy deep voice in an accent that Riley can’t figure out. It’s hard to pick out any discerning features in the low light with this guy having a hood on and wearing sunglasses. All he can see is that he is fair-skinned with a light brown full beard.

Omar opens the briefcase that is handcuffed to his wrist without uttering another word, showing the contents to be 10 little vials protected by an inner padding structure. “5 anthrax, 5 live specimen Ebola. Just like we agreed.” Both Riley’s and Murphy’s eyes go wide at learning of the contents as Omar continues. “Briefcase has a cooling mechanism that will work for 48 hours to maintain proper temperature. You’ll have to transfer them to proper storage after that.” Train nods and pulls out his phone typing a few things into it before looking up again. “Wire transfer is ready to go.”

Omar nods and hands the briefcase to Train without uncuffing it from his wrist yet. “Make the transfer.” He says as he pulls out his own phone.

The two men study their phones for a couple of minutes until Train speaks up first. “The wire transfer is complete. $1.7 million as we agreed.”

Omar looks down at his phone and sees the confirmation from his own account. “Pleasure doing business with you.” He uncuffs the briefcase from his hand and gives it to train, turning around and walking away from the area with no further fanfare, already out of sight in just a minute.

“Now if only it was always that easy…” Train says with a smile. The words are barely out of his mouth when spotlights flood the area and temporarily blind the three men.

“This is the FBI! Put the briefcase down and put your hands up! Drop your weapons! Hands up!” Voices call over bullhorns as Train’s eyes dart around.

“No…” The word leaves Train’s mouth in a whisper as his mind races to run through the options.

Two days earlier (Wednesday, November 8th)…

“Harris.” Ashlyn answers the unknown call on her phone as she finishes her evening workout.

“Harris it’s Phillips.” The voice on the other end greets her.

“Frank, it’s been a long time!” Ashlyn says kindly.

“It really has. Unfortunately, we only seem to get in touch when things go south with the scum of the earth.” Frank replies.

“Ain’t that the truth.” Ashlyn replies lightly. “So, you got my message from McNally?”

“I did and he went over the plan with me. We’re a go at FBI for supporting the operation and making the arrest on federal grounds. I’ve been in touch with our guy. He agreed that he’s ready to come forward and be a part of this. But, none of that matters right now because we’ve got a major problem on our hands.” Frank says in a harried tone.
“Problem?” Ashlyn questions. “What’s going on?”

“We have credible information that McGuiness isn’t making a normal weapons purchase. He’s buying a biologic.” Frank gives it to her straight.

“A biological weapon?! Jesus Christ. How did he get his hands on that?” Ashlyn asks, completely stunned. This changes everything. The danger of the operation is unprecedented.

“I’m not sure. Our source only knows the basics.” Frank admits that he doesn’t have much to go on.

“There is no way this is coming from Hiroto Fujita. He doesn’t have the connections for that and probably not the stomach for it either.” Ashlyn tries to think through the situation.

“I completely agree with that. The question is how Fujita fits into this whole thing. Anyway, we had our biologics unit try and trace their own leads to see if they could come up with anything. They think it’s a guy that goes by Omar, no last name, and no known affiliations. He’s a bit of a wildcard, but he seems the most likely to be the supplier here. He’s known for dealing in anthrax, maybe some other things. It’s not all that clear since they don’t know a lot about him yet.” Frank explains.

“Frank… this is crazy. The unpredictability of what might happen here. I’m not sure I understand how we’re a go with all this. It’s too many variables.” Ashlyn admits that it seems like a bad idea with this new information.

“I know, Harris. But we don’t have an option other than to push forward now and hope for the best. It’s a biologic weapon. The implications of that... well, we have to try at least. We just need to have a plan in place that gives us the best possible chance.” Frank is unwavering.

“Yeah, ok. Just give me a second to think here.” Ashlyn requests and takes the time to work out what she knows. After what must be at least five minutes that she’s quiet, a few things strike her.

“Still there, Frank?”

“Yes, still here. Just giving you some time like you asked.” Frank replies.

“Ok, let me give you my best thoughts on this.” Ashlyn starts. “Fujita being involved makes absolutely no sense if there are no automatic weapons being bought. That’s all he deals in. There is no reason for him to be here unless he’s some kind of bait.”

“Interesting thought.” Frank considers it.

“It sort of fits given that Train hasn’t done business with Fujita in quite some time. He can’t be asking him for much if Fujita agreed to it. I’m really sold on the idea that Fujita will be there to draw the attention of anyone who is trying to bust Train. He’s smart. If Fujita attracts attention, then that person or persons get caught up in the bait and it gives Train time to make the real exchange. Not to mention then he’ll know who he needs to take out next for betraying him. If no one is drawn out by Fujita, then it’s no skin off Train’s back outside of whatever money he paid to Fujita.” Ashlyn elaborates.

“I think you’re right. Any thoughts on what we do about it?” Frank asks.

“I say we take the bait. Keep the plan we have knowing that we’re purposely walking into the trap. I have no doubt Train will either be watching or get a full report from Fujita. If he thinks we’re all caught up in the trap he set, then he won’t worry about us finding out about the actual exchange. Then we strike when he’s not expecting it.” Ashlyn suggests. “There’s always the risk that Fujita is paid to get rid of whoever takes the bait, but I’m thinking that him knowing me and being respectful
to him will go a long way in thwarting that. The goal would be to just stay long enough to make Train think we’ve fallen into the trap and then find our way to the exchange location."

“Ok, so the plan stays the same in that regard, but we still have one huge hole to fill. We have no idea where the exchange will happen and now we have no one that can lead us to it since Fujita is just bait. With a biologic we can’t afford to setup in a bunch of small teams…. I think we’ll have trouble doing it discretely that way and get caught before it even goes down. I think we have to focus on a single place and hope we have the right one.” Frank voices his thoughts. “If we’re wrong, then our guy will be ready to go it alone and try to nab Train himself.”

“Well, we also have McNally’s guy right in there with Train. So that might up the chances if I don’t go our way.” Ashlyn adds to Franks thought.

“Right. All that’s left is to figure out where to set up shop. I have to admit that I’m lost on that. It’s a guessing game and I’ve never been so unsure to make the call in my entire career. I’m apt to just pick Dry Dock 3 since that’s what we’re going on right now.” Frank confesses.

“Frank, let me make the call then.” Ashlyn requests.

“You want to make the call on where station to all the resources? I don’t know, Harris. That’s a lot of pressure on you given that you aren’t even technically involved in the official investigation.” Frank hesitates.

“Frank, I want the decision. I have the best chance… let me make it.” Ashlyn urges, already knowing what she’ll pick.

Frank lets out a sigh. “Ok, Harris. You gotta sell me on it, what would your decision be?”

“Navy Yard.” Ashlyn replies simply.

“Navy Yard? That’s one of the last on my list. Why? You have to tell me why.” Frank inquires.

“Train and Bobby Dugan had a bit of an old boys club thing going. Train once told him that the Navy Yard was his go to for all his early drug deals and to this day, it’s still his fall back.” Ashlyn explains.

“Yeah but for a deal like this… that place is too public, anyone could come along and the exchange is going down just before midnight which means people will still be out and around. That’s taking a lot of risks for such a delicate exchange. He’d be crazy to do it there.” Frank challenges.

“Exactly. It’s a place he knows well and favors, but it’s one of the least expected. Plus we’re not talking a big exchange here. The stakes are high, but we’re talking something pretty small changing hands. It won’t be that obvious that it would draw much attention even in public. And if shit does hit the fan, he’s in a public place that he can wreak havoc in to try and make a run for it. I’m telling you, Frank… it’s the Navy Yard. I just know it.” Ashlyn says confidently even though her chances of being right are as good as anyone else’s given Train’s unpredictability. There’s always the chance he avoids the Navy Yard for the very reason that he’s so connected to it.

“Jesus Christ, Harris. You’re really that sure?” Frank tests her.

“Yeah, I am. It’s my best guess. We both know that out of all of us, I have the best chance at making the right guess, Frank.” She levels with him.

“Ok. It’s your call and that’s where we’ll set up. I sure as hell hope you’re right.” Frank relents.
“Me too.” Ashlyn replies. “Thanks, Frank. I appreciate the leap of faith in me.”

“I know better than to think it’s that big of a leap, Harris. You’re one of the best and I’m trusting in it.” Frank says honestly, feeling good about such a seemingly crazy plan. “We’ll talk again Thursday to go over any needed details.”

“You got it. Thanks again.” Ashlyn replies before hanging up. Her body feels amped up from the discussion and she returns back to the bench press to try and work off some of the energy. She’s midway through a second set of ten when Ali comes in.

“Hey you, still at it? Thought you’d be done by now.” Ali walks over and spots her by helping hold the bar.

“Almost done. Thought I’d put in a little extra.” Ashlyn grunts out as she pushes the weight up.

“Well you certainly don’t need any extra, Ms. Muscles.” Ali winks and helps Ashlyn get the bar back in place after the last rep, but the lack of response to the flirtatious comment concerns her right away. “Hey, you ok, baby?”

“Oh, uh, yeah. I was just thinking, sorry.” Ashlyn replies, trying to figure out the best way to tell Ali all the new information.

“Don’t apologize. Whatcha thinking about?” Ali smiles and sits on the free weight chair near the bench Ashlyn is on.

“I just got off a call with Frank Phillips at FBI. Everything is a go, but he found out a whole bunch of new stuff that changes the whole plan even though it’s kind of the same plan still.” Ashlyn replies and then realizes that her statement must have sounded weird. “And that was vague, nonsensical, and unhelpful.” She laughs at herself.

“Wasn’t going to call you out, Hero…but yeah, just a bit.” Ali teases. “Well, I came in here because I made lasagna for dinner and it actually looks edible. So, I was coming to ask whether I should get it ready to serve or keep it hot in the oven so you could shower. How about I go make sure everything stays warm while you start showering. Then I’ll join you in there so we’re both nice and relaxed. And then we’ll talk over dinner, ok?”

“You’re the best. I’ll explain everything over dinner.” Ashlyn gets up and quickly wipes her face with a towel before giving Ali a quick kiss.

“Lasagna and a shower… so easy to pry information out of you, Harris.” Ali jokes and smacks Ashlyn on the ass lightly as she makes her way out and back to the kitchen.

“You are a master of your craft, Krieger.” Ashlyn calls back with a smile as she makes her way to the bathroom.

“Ok.” Ali just nods her head resolutely as she finishes her last bite of lasagna.

“Ok? That’s it?” Ashlyn cocks her head to side as she looks at Ali a bit surprised by the simple response. “I tell you all of his intense new info and the danger of a new plan and you have nothing more than ‘ok’?”
“Yep.” Ali responds simply again before taking pity on Ashlyn. “I believe in you. It’s that simple for me. I think you’re right about Train and his plan. And even if you’re not right, you’re still the person who is best equipped to handle this whole thing. Don’t second guess yourself, Ash… you know I never will. I’m beside you no matter what.”

“You really think I made the right decision?” Ashlyn asks, letting Ali’s faith in her raise her own belief in herself.

“I know so.” Ali replies and gets up to wrap her arms around Ashlyn’s shoulders from behind her. “Help me with these dishes and then we’ll Netflix and chill.” She places a kiss to the back of the officer’s neck.

“Hey, Alex?” Ashlyn gets Ali’s attention as they load the dishwasher and wrap up leftovers.

“Yeah, babe?” Ali looks up from the Tupperware she’s trying to fit the leftover lasagna into.

“Did you tell Kyle about what we’re about to do?” Ashlyn asks curiously.

“No. Did you tell Chris?” Ali returns the question.

“No. I mean, they both know about what happened in Alabama… but, I haven’t said anything about this. I guess the less people know, the better in my mind. Plus I don’t want to involve our family in this if we don’t have to… just seems like the smart thing to do to is keep it quiet.” Ashlyn answers.

“Agreed. That’s why I haven’t said anything either.” Ali affirms before adding. “You know they’re going to kill us if we get ourselves killed, right?”

“And I thought I was being non-sensical earlier.” Ashlyn laughs the oddly worded statement.

“Trust me. Kyle would find a way to kill me again for not telling him.” Ali laughs and watches Ashlyn nod her head with a chuckle. “I know we don’t plan to say anything, but maybe we can have Kyle, Chris, Bridget and the kids over for dinner tomorrow night?” She suggests.

“I love that idea.” Ashlyn replies and wraps her arms around Ali’s waist from behind.

“Me too. Just in case, you know?” Ali whispers the subdued statement.

“Just in case.” Ashlyn replies in agreement as she drags her lips down Ali’s neck and starts softly sucking on her pulse point.

“Mmm, whatcha doing there, baby?” Ali asks, her voice low as the familiar electricity flows through her body at Ashlyn’s touch.

“Just in case.” Ashlyn repeats the sentiment as she continues to work along Ali’s neck, her hands slipping under the front of Ali’s shirt.

Ali just tilts her head to give Ashlyn more room to work with and then she uses her arm to slide everything off the kitchen island in one quick swipe, most of it landing in the sink. Luckily all of the glassware is already in the dishwasher. Ashlyn pauses at the sudden action and Ali uses the opportunity to turn in the officer’s arms and quickly flip their position. She lifts Ashlyn onto the counter and then pushes her down onto it before climbing to hover over her, a fistful of the officer’s t-shirt in her grasp. Ashlyn’s eyes are darkened, her face a bit stunned by the sudden change of control. “Just in case…” Ali husks and smiles wickedly before leaning down to kiss Ashlyn so hard it takes the officer’s breath away, not ready to settle for anything less than making the whole world disappear around them tonight, starting right here in the kitchen.
Friday, November 10th continued…

McNally’s boat pulls into the small boat dock one pier away from the main Navy Yard dock which is too high to accommodate anything smaller than large ships like the two USS tourist boats permanently moored there. They aren’t even off the boat yet when loud voices boom through megaphones and main dock is flooded with lights.

“Shit, it’s happening early.” McNally immediately takes off running, the four other officers with him right behind him. “Quick assessment when we get there and support where needed.” He yells instructions over his shoulder as he sprints. They arrive just a minute later to take in the scene.

FBI units are setup inside the USS Cassin Young and USS Constitution boats, agents now perched on the decks of both ships with guns aimed at Train, Riley, and Murphy who are on the dock area between the two ships. Two ground units arrive just as McNally does, one being a hazmat crew for dealing with the biologic weapon upon seizure.

“Secure the open area here, make sure no one comes in or out. Secure that Range Rover.” McNally directs his officers and the FBI ground unit. “Warren, Buckley with me. We’re moving in from this side.” McNally starts slowly pushing forward, closing off any access Train has to getting off the dock. The gangster and his guys are surrounded on three sides with only an open dock leading to ocean behind them.

“Keep your guns out, don’t put them down.” Train yells to Riley and Murphy as a plan forms in his head. Riley just nods, but Murphy looks stunned at the instruction. “Back up slowly, towards the water. Keep your guns up.” He directs them, opting to use his hands to secure the briefcase over his own head.

“Boss, we’re trapping ourselves!” Murphy blurts out trying to get an angle on what the heck Train is thinking if he’s ignoring the FBI directions and moving towards the water.

“Hold it together kid. You can swim, right?” Train smirks.

“That water is fucking cold, we won’t get far.” Murphy replies, hoping Train will make this easy and just give in.

“Don’t have to get far, just one dock over. Speedboat docked at the small docks. They’ll never catch us before we get to international waters. Just swim fast, kid. It’ll warm the blood.” Train says straight-forwardly without making any eye contact, his eyes trained on the scene in front of them so he doesn’t give anything away just yet.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Murphy exclaims.

“Easy, Murph. Gun up, grip tight.” Riley pipes up.

“They’re gonna shoot if we keep the guns.” Murphy warns.

“One would think.” Train smirks again as they hear the ‘Don’t move, drop your weapons, hands up’ command for the fifth time. “About twenty-five feet to go, keep slowly moving back boys. We have to clear the Cassin before we jump from that side.” He says referring to the USS Cassin Young destroyer docked to their right. If they can clear the ship, they can get an open jump off the solid concrete dock into the water, the drop down only about 15 feet.
“Last time, don’t move, drop your weapons, hands up! We are preparing to open fire!” Frank Phillips’ voice booms from the deck of the USS Constitution. “What the fuck is this guy doing?” He says to the agent next to him, a bit surprised that Train hasn’t given up already with at least 25 guns pointed at him.

“Fire at will!” Train yells loudly. “By all means, shoot through a briefcase loaded with Ebola and anthrax! Why kill three when you can kill us all!” He chuckles maniacally still holding the briefcase up near his head. It only took him a minute to realize that all of the officers were positioned up above them in the ships, giving them only a higher angle to shoot from. Knowing they won’t risk puncturing the briefcase because of the contents all he has to do is keep it above his head to block that shot. The officers in front of him are too far away to risk a shot from that distance. All he has to do is get to the jump area before the ground officers get close enough.

Murphy’s eyes go wide at the realization that it’s now on him to keep Train from making the jump. Riley has a gun out and Train’s gun is still strapped in his holster. Take Riley out first and then go for Train, he runs through the best scenario in his head.

“Shit. He’s going swimming.” Frank Phillips calls out in sudden realization as Train and his guys continue to back up down the dock. They’re not prepared for this. “Fucking hell. Where are we on the chopper?” He asks the agent manning the radio.

“It’s up in the air in 5 minutes, here in 12 minutes.” The agent responds.

“Not fast enough!” Frank yells in frustration. They had a helicopter scheduled to join the operation for air support once the ground units had made their presence known, but the exchange went down 20 minutes early and had thrown the timing off. He called to scramble the helicopter sooner, but this was the best they could do with short notice apparently. “Patrol boats?” He asks.

“A mile out on the harbor like we planned. 10 minutes to the docks with having to navigate lower water level spots.” The agent replies.

“Of fucking course.” Frank shakes his head. With all the ground and air support, they hadn’t been planning to rely on patrol boats and had chosen to keep them out as a safety net without getting too close and giving away the operation. “Alert them to start coming in and get ready to intercept a runaway boat.” He commands.

There is no way Train is going to try and swim away in this cold water, so he has to have a getaway boat somewhere Frank reasons. The question is where. There are a bunch of docks nearby and even a cluster of boats anchored on the water in the nearby marina; they can’t cover it all. There is no way to know ahead of time where exactly Train will go and in the dark it’s going to be hard to track them swimming in the water without air or patrol boat support…neither of which will be here in time if Train continues his current pace towards the dock clearing. “Mason, get agents suited up in dive suits and ready to enter water. Fast.” Frank barks out.

“Hold up.” Train stops them with about ten feet to go. “Murphy, give your gun to Riley.”

“What? Why?” Murphy questions as his stomach drops. He can’t give his gun to Riley if he has any chance of stopping the jump.

“You’re looking too nervous, kid. You’re gonna either shoot yourself or one of us. That water is
fucking cold, we don’t need any shellshock accidents. Give him the fucking gun and focus on swimming.” Train demands coldly.

Murphy finds Riley hovering over him immediately, hand already out for the gun. ‘Fuck.’ He has no choice now, Riley is too close for him to make a move and not get shot. If that happens, Train is going to run and make the jump for sure. He’ll have to take Train out in the water. He lets out a deep breath and hands his gun to Riley.

“Shit!” McNally growls as he watches Murphy hand his gun over. “Buckley, we have a shot yet?” He questions the sharpshooter in his unit.

“No, Chief. From this distance, I risk hitting Murphy. Should I take it?” Buckley replies.

“Dammit! No, not yet.” McNally replies, his anxiety building.

“Alright, move.” Train starts backing up again as the loud voice cuts through the air once more.

“You have no escape, Jimmy. If you jump in, we’ll subdue you in the water. Give it up, there’s nowhere to go. Drop the guns, drop the briefcase, and hands up!”

Train looks up at the noticeable commotion of divers getting ready on the deck of the Cassin Young, his mind already in motion again. “I’m swimming whether you like it or not! If I see even one of your motherfuckers in the water, I’m releasing every damn one of these vials into the harbor. Have fun explaining to the people of Boston how it was more important to capture me than prevent their contamination!” He shouts as loudly as he can. He has no idea if these specimens can even survive or spread in water, let alone salt water…but he’s betting that these shithead police officers don’t know either.

“Shit, shit! Fucking shit!” Frank yells out to the agents beside him. “This fucker would rather infect his own damn self than get caught! He’s not going to back down... we can’t press, he’s a damn time bomb. Can’t take the risk. Hold the divers back for now. Fuck!”

‘They bought it.’ Train smiles smugly as he sees the divers aboard the Cassin Young stop moving so frantically. “Almost there boys, prepare your testicles.” He laughs.

“Almost there boys, prepare your testicles.” He laughs.

“Well fuck, they started the party without us.” Ashlyn remarks as she slowly navigates the yacht towards the concrete dock just 20 yards away now.

“How rude.” Ali smiles, glad to see that the situation is already being handled without them.

“Wait, look at that. He’s still on the dock and they’re holding fire. What the hell?” Ashlyn finally gets a good view as they get closer.

“Well we already said he wasn’t going to let himself get caught. He’s going to make them shoot him.” Ali shakes her head.

“Yeah, but they should be on him by now or at least be closing it. They’re holding steady with Murphy and Riley still there…” Ashlyn is trying to figure it out when she hears Frank’s voice, followed by Train’s.

“You have no escape, Jimmy. If you jump, we’ll subdue you in the water. Give it up, there’s
nowhere to go. Drop the guns, drop the briefcase, and hands up!”

“I’m swimming whether you like it or not! If I see even one of your motherfuckers in the water, I’m releasing every damn one of these vials into the harbor. Have fun explaining to the people of Boston how it was more important to capture me than prevent their contamination!”

“Oh damn, he’s going to jump and swim for it. He’s actually going to release that shit if they go after him, holy fuck! Crazy son of a bitch!” Ashlyn yells out. “There’s no copter in the air and no patrol boats, we’re off schedule.Fuck!”

“What do we do?” Ali asks with her heart racing. Guns are one thing, catastrophic pandemic viruses are a whole other beast.

Ashlyn thinks quickly, settling on the only thing she can think of which is to go for surprise. “He doesn’t know we’re here. I’m going to cut the engine down to the slowest speed so he won’t hear it. We’re not tall enough to be seen above the dock coming in. Think you can manage to maneuver a bit in a tight space?”

“Oh god, I’ll try. I don’t know.” Ali replies nervously. “What are we doing?”

“I need to go down to the front and get ready to jump in as soon as he does. Just have to watch for where he goes in and jump as close to him as possible. If I can get to him fast, he’s not expecting me and I can take him down in the water.” Ashlyn explains quickly. “I just need you to get us right in next to the dock there near the Cassin Young without hitting it and then hold steady. The dock wall is solid concrete, but it’s lined with tire rubber so it’s ok if you hit that a bit, it won’t make much noise. Just avoid the Cassin. Can you do that?”

“Yeah…yes…I’ll handle it.” Ali says determined.

“What’s the water temp gauge say?” Ashlyn asks as she strips off her suit jacket and shoes.

“58 degrees… Ash, that’s freezing! You can’t…” Ali voices in a panic but is cut off.

“Baby…” Ashlyn quickly grabs Ali’s face to calm her. “I’m good for about an hour, and just short of a mile of swimming before I get too exhausted and hypothermic at that temp. I’ll be ok, trust me.”

“Ok. ok.” Ali replies a bit more easily, oddly not surprised at all that Ashlyn even knows that about herself. “Alright, I can do this. We can do this.”

“Damn right we can.” Ashlyn smiles. “Netflix and chill in no time.”

“I’m holding you to that. Gehirn im Kopf.” Ali locks onto beautiful hazel orbs.

“Do the best you can to hold her steady near the Cassin, I’ll be up on the front and ready to go in when he does.” Ashlyn repeats the plan one more time. “I love you always, Alex.” She leaves a soft kiss on Ali’s lips and pulls back for one more look at her.

“I love you forever, Ash.” Ali replies with a hard swallow. And just like that Ashlyn is down the stairs and headed towards the front of the yacht.

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“God I hope my testicles come back down out of my stomach when this is over.” Train jokes as they reach the edge of the dock, preparing himself for the very cold swim ahead of him. He doesn’t care if his dick falls off, he’s not getting captured tonight. He’ll let himself freeze to death or bleed out first.
“Murphy, you’re in first. I’m next. Riley you go last to provide cover. On my go…” He directs.

“Yeah, that’s not going to work for me.” Riley points his gun at Train “Don’t move, Jimmy.”

“Riley? What the fuck?” Train yells angrily. “The fuck is this, Riley?”

“William Riley… real name, Senior Special Agent Ryan Cormac Sullivan, Jr. Nice to meet you.” The man Train knows as Riley holds his gun on Train from just three feet away, his face set in stone.

“What…you’re… but it’s been…” Train stutters as his mind runs, trying to place the name Riley has just revealed to him.

“8 years.” Sullivan fills in for him. “8 long ass years since you caught ‘William Riley’ selling drugs in your zone and beat him until he begged you to stop because he was just trying to feed his wife and kid. And you did… and you took him under wing and made him your right hand man.”

“8 fucking years you piece of shit, you traitor fucking piece of shit!” Train launches a mouth full of spit at him, but Sullivan doesn’t flinch.

“8 years.” Sullivan repeats. “And 21 years since you killed my father because he refused to bend to you and pay you money to operate his gas station in your fucking zone. 21 years I’ve been waiting for this fucking moment… remember me now, fucker? Remember shaking my fucking hand at the funeral and saying ‘sorry for your loss’ like you weren’t the one responsible? Don’t you wish you had actually cared now? That you had actually had enough remorse and paid enough attention to remember who I was and to be able to recognize me the day you took me under your wing? Too late asshole…tonight is my night.” Sullivan says venomously.

Train’s eyes widen as he places the name and recalls the situation, the little boy he shrugged off so many years ago without a second thought. “Come on, Ril…uh, Sullivan… you know me. I’ve protected you, I’ve given you everything. We can talk it out.” Train tries to reason with him as he moves his feet right to the edge of the dock.

“No more talking. Uncuff the briefcase from your hand.” Sullivan directs him. “Officer Murphy… give him a hand.” He motions with his head to the undercover officer looking on in slight shock, making it clear that he has known about Murphy this whole time.

“Yeah, ok. Geez man, you should’ve told me.” Murphy shakes his head a bit at not having been in the know about who Riley really was.

“And you too.” Train growls at Murphy. “Where the fuck is the trust anymore? No fucking respect!”

“Not for you.” Sullivan retorts. “Give him the key.”

“You’re getting rusty old man.” Murphy adds as he takes the key from Train and unlocks the cuff, removing it from his wrist and going to grab for the briefcase.

Train sees his chance, making the only move he has left as he yells “Fuck you”. He grabs Murphy’s arm with his free hand, pulling him in front and shoving him into Sullivan as he throws himself back off the dock with the briefcase still in hand. He hears the gun go off, but no bullet hits him.

“Fuck!” Sullivan yells out as Murphy crumples onto him. He immediately feels the wetness on himself and knows he hit Murphy and not Train. He quickly disentangles them and sees the bullet hole in the crook of Murphy’s neck bleeding steadily. Having no idea how critical it is, he can’t afford to jump in after Train and puts steady pressure on the wound while signaling the other officers for help.
Ashlyn hears the commotion above, but from her angle below can’t see exactly where Train is above her. She prepares herself to jump in at any second, but is taken aback when Train suddenly lands on the front of the yacht.

“Ugh.” Train lands with a loud grunt, completely baffled at having something solid under his feet and not water like he was expecting. He scrambles to stand up just now realizing that he’s on a boat when he gets clocked in the face hard enough to spin him around. He manages to stay on his feet, shaking it off to find Harris standing in front of him and ready for another swing.

“Fucking bitch, I’ll kill you!” He shouts and launches himself at her, swinging the briefcase as hard as he can and catching her right above the eye. A loud thwack fills the air as the metal corner splits her eyebrow wide open.

Ashlyn eyes go black for a few seconds, her head spinning as she stumbles trying to steady herself and works hard not to go down. She knows if she falls, this is over.

“Ash! Dammit! Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Ali screams from the top deck helplessly watching the scene below as she works to hold the yacht steady. Everything in her wants to run down and attack Train, but then she risks the boat hitting something and knocking Ashlyn into the water. “Come on, baby. Come on…” She urges the officer to come back from the hit and fight him off.

Ashlyn staggers backs out of Trains reach as she tries to shake it off, but her head is still a bit dizzy and she can’t see out of her right eye. She can fuzzily see him closing the distance between them and ready to swing at her with the briefcase again. She wills herself to get set and waits for her chance. Train swings his arm violently with the briefcase, but Ashlyn ducks just enough for it to miss as she launches into him and takes him all the way over to the railing of the boat where he flips over it.

“Bitch!” Train yells as the railing of the yacht smashes into his back and he feels himself going over. He kicks his feet as he goes over, feeling one foot connect with Harris as he quickly grabs onto the railing with his free hand. He uses his strength to pull up enough to put the briefcase onto the yacht so he can use both hands to pull himself back in.

“Yes! Come on…where the hell is back-up?!” Ali shouts, feeling slightly more relieved now that Train is hanging off the side of the boat and Ashlyn has the upper hand.

Ashlyn falls backwards with a hard kick to the chest as Train goes over the railing. She’s still dizzy so it takes a second for her to get up. She immediately sees the briefcase and heads right for it knowing she needs to grab it.

Ali feels even more relief when Ashlyn is back on her feet, seeing the officer in motion to grab the briefcase. It’s short-lived however when she sees how slow and unsteady Ashlyn is on her feet, she’s definitely hurt. But she doesn’t have time to process it as she notices Train reaching frantically for something around his waist as he hangs on with one hand. She cranes her head to try and see when it hits her. “ASH! GUN!” She screams as loudly as she has in her life, but Ashlyn just keeps moving forward. Ali can’t understand until her mind registers the helicopter hovering above. Ashlyn can’t hear her and she doesn’t see what Train is doing. “Oh my god, fuck, oh god… Ash!” Ali yells again as panic starts to set in. Her eyes dart from Ashlyn to Train to the dock and her body acts instinctively.

Ashlyn fights her body to keep moving forward, everything feeling shaky as she walks the few steps towards the briefcase. The loud buzzing noise above her not helping her throbbing head. She’s just about in reach when she’s taken off her feet by the sudden violent backwards motion of the yacht. She sits up just in time to watch the side of the yacht collide hard with the concrete wall of the dock. A loud crunch audible even over the buzz of the helicopter. Before she can even register anything
Ali is by her side.

“Baby, Ash… no don’t get up!” Ali cradles Ashlyn’s head in her lap, the officer’s right eye is swollen shut and the open gash on her eyebrow bleeding freely. “Easy, Ash. It’s ok.”

“No, Alex…Train… the briefcase…” Ashlyn fights to get up.

“Hey, hey… he’s gone! It’s over, it’s fine. You did so good. Just stay still. Please baby, just stay still.” Ali pleads and tries to calm Ashlyn down. There’s no reason to worry now, no reason to rush. She had watched it all as if it was in slow motion… Train’s head getting sandwiched and twisted between the edge of the yacht and the dock wall, the awful crunch noise, his hand going slack and slipping off the rail as he dropped into the water… his body now floating near the dock, his head sickeningly misshapen.

“He’s dead?” Ashlyn questions, her mind starting to settle and register what happened.


“You know who I am, right?” Ali asks, trying to figure out how badly Ashlyn is hurt.

“Sure do, wife.” Ashlyn smiles a bit even though it makes her head hurt.

“Take it easy, baby. Do you know where we are?” Ali questions.

“Using Gramp’s bad ass Eunice yacht to kick some ass. He would’ve been psyched.” Ashlyn replies. She can see Ali is really worried and upset, so she knows she must look like hell right now. Her head still feels a little fuzzy and it’s throbbing badly, but she tries hard to settle Ali as much as she can with her usual humor.

Ali smiles despite the seriousness of the moment. “What day is it?”

“Uh, Friday maybe. Although probably Saturday by now…kind of lost track of time.” Ashlyn answers. “Hopefully not too late for Netflix and chill though.” She keeps up the humor.

“Alright my sweet little clown, please just relax.” Ali breathes a little easier with Ashlyn being able to answer all of her questions and with some joking on top of it. She tries to use her sleeve to stop the bleeding from the cut along Ashlyn’s eyebrow, but it causes the officer to jump and groan. “Ok, honey. I’ll leave it alone.” Ali promises, though her stomach churns at the fact that she can see bone. It’s not a huge gash, but it’s wide open. She doesn’t have any more time to think on it when a hazmat crew drops down onto the boat, followed by McNally and two EMTs. It feels like hours have passed, but it has only been 5 minutes.

“Harris, shit… you, ok? Ali?” McNally goes right over to them.

“We’re ok. She needs some help, but I think she’s alright.” Ali answers even as the EMTs are going to work on Ashlyn.

“Aw fuck! Little sore here people!” Ashlyn yells and squeezes Ali’s hand hard as gauze gets pressed to her eyebrow by one of the EMTs.

“It’s ok, baby. I’m here.” Ali keeps Ashlyn’s head steady on her lap as the other EMT checks the officer’s eyes with a flashlight.

“Yeah, I think she’s gonna be fine.” McNally smiles at her outburst. “Jesus, Ali… that was some maneuvering. I…just… I don’t even know what to say.” McNally is still slack jawed over what he
watched happen from above as he got towards the Cassin Young.

“Me either. He was gonna…” She can get the rest out.

“I know… I know. But you were there, you had it.” McNally reassures her as he puts a hand on her shoulder. “The two of you, fucking hell… get ready for the medals and honors. God damn… just saved…well everything really.”

“So he’s…” Ali trails off again.


Ali just nods as Ashlyn answers several questions from the EMT that are similar to the ones Ali just asked a couple minutes before.

“Alright, I’m thinking no major concussion, but definitely a minor one. That eyebrow needs stitches and x-rays to check for fracture. We’ll get her onto a backboard and onto the patrol boat coming in so we can pull into a dock that the ambulance can get to more easily.” The EMT explains.

“Ok, thank you.” Ali replies appreciatively.

“How you doing, Harris? You took a hard one, Capt.” McNally checks in with her.

“Headache from hell, but I’ll make it.” Ashlyn replies, the conversation she just heard between Ali and McNally filling in some information. “Did she really squash him with the boat?” She asks the simplest question she can form in her hazy brain right now.

“Yeah. He was going for his gun…” McNally replies truthfully before trying to stay away from the topic for now. There will be time to deal with that. “You two really don’t do shit halfway, huh? Gotta be full-on action hero all day long. You’re making me look bad.”

“Pretty much, we like to keep it exciting. We’re compatible like that.” Ashlyn smiles, only half of her mouth visible under the icepack on her face.

“Thank god for that.” McNally reaches out to squeeze both their arms lightly. “I have to go help out where I can. This is going to be a long fucking night. Murphy got hit by an accidental shot, but he’s going to be fine. You go get patched up and then I’ll check in on you in the morning after I go see Murphy. Take it easy, both of you. We have time now to figure this all out. Let’s just all get healed up first, ok?”

“Deal.” Ashlyn replies.


“I will.” McNally slowly gets up. “Both of you… thank you…you’re truly incredible. I owe you my life.”

“You owe us nothing other than to stop calling on us like were Batman and Robin. I think these two crime fighters need a break, right babe?” Ashlyn replies.

“What she said.” Ali repeats again with a grin.

“Ha! You got it! No more calls from me, I promise.” McNally smiles. “Seriously though, anything you need…I got your back, always.”

“Same for you.” Ali replies for them.
“What she said.” Ashlyn jokes.

“Geez, cut the crap lovebirds. Get better and get rest. I’ll see you in the morning.” McNally promises as he heads off.

There isn’t much more talking as Ashlyn is secured and eventually moved into an ambulance. She just holds on tight to Ali’s hand and the brunette can tell she’s in pain. It isn’t until they’re on their way to the hospital that Ashlyn finally speaks again.

“You’re really damn beautiful, you know that?” Ashlyn says sweetly as she looks up at Ali who hovering above her a bit in the back of the ambulance.

“You can barely see.” Ali teases.

“And yet, even with one eye you’re still so obviously breathtaking,” Ashlyn keeps at it.

“Yeah well, you’re still gorgeous even with half your face bloody and fucked up. So, you win.” Ali smirks.

“Liar.” Ashlyn plays back.


“I love you, my Paladin.” Ashlyn whispers.

“I love you too, my Hero.” Ali smiles and kisses Ashlyn’s cheek again.

“Oh and Alex…” Ashlyn says with a serious look on her face.

“Yeah?” Ali asks, leaning in to make sure Ashlyn is ok.

“Thanks for holding the boat steady, asshole.” Ashlyn says in perfect sarcastic humor as her face breaks out in a big grin.

“Yeah well, thanks for literally using your head, idiot.” Ali lets out a laugh..their familiar banter a starting point for moving forward from tonight and being okay.

Chapter End Notes

So... did you see any of that coming?
Laundry Therapy

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the longer time between updates! Between summer travel with the fam bam and my real work picking up, it's been really hard to find writing time. As usual, a pretty lengthy chapter as we deal a bit with the aftermath of all that action in the last chapter and prepare for the next task. So really just some healing, honest conversation, and of course fluff (cause these two are heart-eyed marshmallows for each other). :-) Keep those comments coming, I always love to hear your thoughts on the story!

Saturday, November 11th

“Ok, Captain Harris… the x-rays came back clear as did the CT scan. So, no fractures of the skull or bleeding issues. My final diagnosis is a grade 2 moderate concussion and we’ve stitched up your eyebrow already. Seeing as how it’s past 3am already and I still want some of that swelling to come down before we release you, I’d like to keep you until a little later this morning. We’ll have you come back on Wednesday to remove the stitches and see where we are at. Faces heal fast, so we want to get the stitches out and re-assess within a 4 to 5 day timeframe and we can always use glue to close it beyond that if need me. I’ll have you keep up a regimen of Tylenol and rest, which is typical protocol for a concussion. I won’t place official restrictions on you, but rest as much as possible to let yourself heal and don’t overdo it. Listen to your body and when you feel pain, confusion, frustration or fatigue, tone it down. Make sense?” Dr. Pembroke, the attending ER doctor, finishes explaining to Ashlyn and Ali. “I know, I know, that’s a lot to remember for a concussion patient, but I’m sure Ali here can help you out and we’ll print it all out for you.” He adds with a smile.

“Think we got it, thank you.” Ashlyn replies, her head still pounding.

“I’ll make sure she follows the instructions to the letter.” Ali chimes in, squeezing Ashlyn’s hand from beside the bed.

“She’s not lying.” Ashlyn chuckles.

“Good!” Dr. Pembroke replies. “I know I checked in earlier on this, but I just want to document any changes. Anything different about what you remember of the incident?”

“Not really. I mean, I know what happen because of what Ali and the Chief at the scene told me… but, I don’t really remember anything except hitting the guy and then telling myself I needed to get the briefcase. And then Ali was there beside me. That’s all I remember on my own.” Ashlyn answers.

“That’s ok. Amnesia of the event after the trauma itself is expected for this level of concussion. You may remember more as you heal, but you may not, and that’s normal too. The important thing is to take it easy.” Dr. Pembroke reminds her.


“Of course. Have a goodnight….well, good morning actually. Get some rest and I hope you feel
better soon!” Dr. Pembroke hangs Ashlyn’s chart on the door and makes his exit.

“How are you doing, baby?” Ali asks for about the tenth time in the last hour as the doctor leaves.

“I’m ok, Alex. A really bad headache, but my face feels pretty numb now with the ice and the anesthetic for the stitches. Promise I’m doing just fine.” Ashlyn brings Ali’s hand up to kiss it. “The question is, how are you doing?”

“I’m not the one that got decked in the face.” Ali says a bit flatly. “I’m just tired.”

Ashlyn goes to respond but doesn’t get the chance to as one of the nurses comes in. “Ok, Ashlyn… we’re going to move you over to a quieter room in the main wing. It’s just a couple hallways down, so if you’re ready, we’ll just wheel the whole bed right over there now. That way you two can be more comfortable and get some rest. There’s an extra bed in there that Ali can use if she wants to.” The nurse explains.

“Ready to roll.” Ashlyn jokes.

“Dork.” Ali teases and gets up, brushing a few stray hairs from Ashlyn’s forehead after the nurse removes the ice pack.

“You love me.” Ashlyn replies with a playful pout.

“You’re damn right I do.” Ali leans down and kisses her shoulder.

“Alright, we’re good to go.” The nurse announces as another nurse comes into the room to help wheel the bed. It’s a short distance to the new room, but Ali refuses to let go of Ashlyn’s hand despite the narrow hallway. It’s only a few minutes before they are settled into the new room.

“Both of you please try and get some sleep. The plan is for 20 minutes on and 40 minutes off with ice packs for the next couple hours to bring that swelling down, but we’ll be quiet and quick. So, hopefully we won’t even fully wake you when we change it. We’ll just very gently rouse you each time for a few seconds to make sure you’re ok, Ashlyn. Georgia is the nurse on shift right now, so if you need anything just push the button and she’ll come right in. She’ll be in here in about 30 minutes anyway for the fresh ice pack.” The ER nurse explains before getting a thank you from the two women and making her way out.

“So really, how bad is it?” Ashlyn finally asks Ali as the brunette still stands beside the bed holding her hand.

“I won’t lie, you’re definitely really swollen and already pretty bruised. They closed up that gash pretty nicely though, so hopefully the scar won’t be too bad. And… you’re still the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen.” Ali smiles and leans in to place the softest, gentlest kiss she can on Ashlyn’s lips.

“You’re sweet… and really biased, Krieger. How about a mirror?” Ashlyn asks.

“I’m so not biased, but here.” Ali digs her compact out of her purse and hands it to Ashlyn.

“Yeeeeeeew! That is pretty epic!” Ashlyn yelps as she inspects her face, a row of stitches lining the underside of her eyebrow and crossing it at about the midpoint. “Damn.” She adds noting how badly her eye and cheek are swollen and the deep reddish purple already setting in over her eye.

“The doctor said it’ll look rough for a few days and then get better fast around the one week mark, remember?” Ali tries to soothe her a bit.
“Right… until then, it looks like you’ve found your Beast my darling Belle.” Ashlyn jokes.

“You are not a beast!” Ali lightly smacks Ashlyn’s arm. “I’m just upset that I only get one gorgeous hazel eye to gaze into for a few days, so work on getting that swelling down, Hero.”

“Will do.” Ashlyn smiles. “How about you work on getting into this bed with me?”

“Thought you’d never ask.” Ali grins widely. She just wants to be as close to Ashlyn as possible, but she didn’t want to ask in case the officer was in too much pain. She quickly makes her way over to the chair and selects a pair of hospital pajama pants that the nurse left and that are just like ones Ashlyn is already wearing, striping off the uncomfortable leather pants she has been wearing all night.

“Ugh… now I’m really mad I only have one good eye.” Ashlyn smirks as she takes in Ali’s ass which is perfectly framed by the black panties the brunette is wearing.

“Easy, Hero. Don’t go getting all dizzy on me again.” Ali winks as she finishes getting comfortable and makes her way over to the bed. Ashlyn lifts the covers and Ali wastes no time crawling right in and resting her head on the officer’s chest, the familiar heartbeat against her ear calming her fast. She feels Ashlyn’s strong arm wrap around her shoulders and snuggles herself in even closer. “Let me know if I’m hurting you or you get uncomfortable.”

“You feel perfect, honey. But yes, I promise I’ll tell you if anything hurts.” Ashlyn assures her and pulls Ali in closer, the position they’re in reminding her of the very first time they did this.

“Funny how it’s been pretty close to exactly a year that we were in this same position.” Ali muses, remembering Ashlyn’s knee surgery while the officer was still in prison.

“Great minds. I was just thinking that exact same thing. One of the best days of my life.” Ashlyn rubs Ali’s back.

“Really? I mean, makes sense for me to think it was one of the best days ever… but you hate hospitals and the situation was less than ideal back then.” Ali asks.

“I didn’t hate the hospital that day. First time ever I’ve been sad to leave one. Being so close to you like that, opening up to each other…it made me feel alive again. It was such a turning point for us, for me. Gave me all the hope in the world and made me feel like I had a purpose again.” Ashlyn confesses. “So yeah, one of the best days ever… even though I didn’t get to kiss you.” She finishes playfully.

“Actually… that’s not entirely accurate.” Ali buries her face into Ashlyn.

“Ok, what are you not telling me, Krieger? Spill.” Ashlyn probes.”

“I may or may not have kissed you after you feel asleep.” Ali admits shyly.

“What?! Alex, you little minx! Oh sure, give me a lecture about how we have to stay friends and then kiss me when I’m not conscious!” Ashlyn laughs. “No wonder I slept like a baby and woke up tingling. Now I’m just upset I don’t remember it!”

“Sorry not sorry.” Ali gives her signature reply with a giggle and earns another little laugh from Ashlyn before the two of them lay quietly for a while.

Ali closes her eyes for a minute and tries to clear her mind, focusing on the feel of Ashlyn’s hand rubbing circles on her back, the officer’s steady heartbeat against her face, the sound of her love’s
rhythmic soft breathing, her scent, her warmth. As soothing as it is, nothing feels relaxed inside right now. She feels both heavy and oddly anxious, almost like the nervous feeling you get when you realize you left the stove on and are already miles away from home. She’s exhausted, but her mind keeps racing and her heart feels like it’s pounding even though it isn’t. The worst is that she knows why, but she’s been avoiding the answer because then she’ll have to think about. She killed someone. A horrible, awful, terrible someone, but still a someone. A human being, who no matter how dreadful, was alive and breathing until she acted. A human being gone… because of her. Her stomach drops at the thought, her every emotion conflicted right now.

Despite trying to keep everything light between them so far, Ashlyn can feel Ali’s melancholy as if it were her own. Ali’s eyes lack the usual shine, her smiles not creating the captivating little wrinkle marks on her face like they always do. The brunette has confessed that she’s tired and while that’s definitely part of it, Ashlyn knows better than to believe that’s all of it. She understands better than anyone. After letting the silence settle in between them, she knows it’s time to address it. “Alex?”

“Yeah, baby? You, ok?” Ali lifts her head a bit to see Ashlyn’s good eye looking down at her.

“I’m fine. I just want to say three things and then we should just rest and try to sleep, ok?” Ashlyn says softly.

“Ok.” Ali rests her head back on Ashlyn’s chest and listens.

“First… thank you. For standing up like you did, for being there, for saving me yet again. You call me Hero all the time, but I don’t think you realize how much of a hero you are yourself… not just in big things like tonight, but in everyday ones too. You’re my hero, my Paladin, and I couldn’t be more grateful for you.” Ashlyn gets out a bit emotionally and feels Ali tighten a little, just like she anticipated.

“Second, before you even spend another second thinking about the word ‘hero’ and feeling torn up about it, just listen carefully. Please let yourself feel whatever you are feeling, baby. The good, the bad, and the ugly… it’s all valid, all of it. I know it’s unsettling to feel so much all at once and so much of it at odds with itself, but don’t try to shut it down. I know you’re probably not ready to talk about it yet, but know that I understand completely and I’m here. When you’re ready, the more you talk about it, the better… to me, to your therapist, to anyone you want to. It’ll be ok, Alex. I won’t lie to you… there will always be a little piece of it that will never feel completely ok, but I can tell you from experience that it does get better and that it’ll be alright. You’ll get there… we’ll get there.” Ashlyn finishes, her voice gentle and soft as she tries to be as reassuring as possible.

Ali hugs Ashlyn really tightly. The way the officer knows her so well, even better than herself sometimes…it makes her feel like her universe is always in sync even when it’s disjointed. It’s a remarkable feeling of being understood, of always being safe and protected even if there isn’t something obvious that she needs protecting from. Ashlyn’s words do so much to ease her mind and unseize her heart right now.

“Thank you, Ash… I get it, it’s ok for me not to be ok. God, I really needed to hear that. I didn’t even know I needed to hear that.” Ali whispers emotionally. “I wouldn’t change a damn thing about what happened no matter how I feel. I need to know that you know that. I will always do everything to protect you and never hesitate when it comes to you, count on it. I’d do it all the same all over again no matter what. You’re everything.” She kisses Ashlyn’s chest. “I really need to hold myself together this week with Kira’s parole hearing, but I promise you… you’ll be the first to know when I’m ready to talk.”

“I’ll be right here, sweetheart. To help hold you together and to pick up the pieces with you when they fall apart. These arms, this heart, all of me… completely yours. I’m here when you’re ready to let
it out… just don’t take too, too long, ok?” Ashlyn replies, her hand entwining with the one Ali has resting on her stomach.

“Promise. And same goes for you too, you know you don’t ever have to hold back.” Ali reminds her.

“I know, Alex. You’re my rock, have been from day one.” Ashlyn says simply.

“And you’re mine.” Ali replies with a little smile. “Baby, I love you so much. So much.”

“I love you too, beautiful. More than anything in the world.” Ashlyn returns the sentiment and they lay quietly again for a few minutes.

“I really fucking hate when you’re hurt.” Ali pipes up again.

“Me too!” Ashlyn chuckles softly. “I don’t like seeing you hurt either. Sucks for you that you fell for a cop though… my odds are terrible in that department.”

“True, but the sexy uniform more than makes up for it.” Ali teases. “And the odds are even worse when you fall for a cop that thinks she’s Batman.”

“Better than falling for a lawyer who acts like she’s a cop.” Ashlyn teases back.

“Touche.” Ali smiles. “Bet I could rock the uniform though.”

“No question about that. In fact…I’m getting ideas…” Ashlyn trails off.

“Easy, Hero. Let’s save the sex fantasies for when you can actually see me with both eyes.” Ali gently swats Ashlyn’s stomach.

“Right, fair point.” Ashlyn agrees.

“So, you said you wanted to say three things… but you only said two. What was the third thing?” Ali asks after another silent minute.

“Oh yeah…perfect timing actually.” Ashlyn replies. “Just a request really.”

“Ok.” Ali waits for it.

“I know my face is all messed up and I can’t feel much, but can I have one more kiss?” Ashlyn asks shyly.

“Oh Ash, you can have all the kisses you want. All the kisses.” Ali smiles and picks her head up, tilting it until her lips are ghosting Ashlyn’s. “Just go easy, I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t.” Ashlyn whispers and moves just enough to close the distance between them, her lips meeting Ali’s gently in a very slow and soft kiss that lasts about a minute. She wasn’t lying, she can’t feel much because of the numbness… but the warmth of Ali’s lips against hers and the familiar taste of her mouth are enough to make her heart flutter and take her breath away like always. She pulls Ali tightly against her again once they pull apart. “Close your eyes, baby. Get some sleep… I’m right behind you.” Ashlyn says softly into Ali’s ear, her hand rubbing the brunette’s back again as she closes her own eyes.

“Don’t let me go.” Ali says in a small voice that almost breaks Ashlyn’s heart.

“Never.” Ashlyn promises and kisses her forehead. She holds her own exhaustion at bay until she
hears Ali’s breathing even out and a light snore escape the brunette’s lips, only then giving into the sleep that her throbbing head has been begging for.

“ Well, well, well… if it isn’t Captain Superhero and her trusty sidekick the Legal Girl Wonder!” The Ipswich Police Chief says as he walks into the hospital room just as the nurse finishes removing Ashlyn’s IV so she’s ready to be discharged in a couple hours. “How’s the noggin, Harris?”

“Oh uh… Chief… um… it’s ok, the headache sucks, but I’m ok.” Ashlyn stutters through her reply while Ali sits up a bit in the chair beside the bed.

“What, do I have food on my face or something?” He asks since both women are giving him a stunned look. “And yeah, you definitely look ok, Harris. Very… colorful.” He adds sarcastically with raised eyebrows.

“Sorry, Chief. Think we expected one of our brothers to come in here yelling at us first before we expected anyone else.” Ashlyn composes herself. “You two haven’t officially met. Ali, this is Chief Mark Fulton. Chief, this is the Ali I never shut up about.” She laughs a bit.

“Nice to meet you finally, Ali.” Chief Fulton leans in to shake the brunette’s hand. “And she’s not lying, she doesn’t shut up about you… ever. Even told her once that I was going to dock her pay every time she said your name, still didn’t work. Good thing I was only kidding or she’d owe the department money by now.”

“Nice to meet you as well. If it makes you feel better, she talks about you a lot too.” Ali smiles.

“She better.” Chief Fulton lets out a guffaw. “I won’t even pretend like I’m any competition for you though.” He jokes. “Well, sorry to sneak up on you ladies. But imagine my surprise as I’m having my coffee this morning and watching the news, only to find out that my own Captain was just involved in one of the biggest criminal busts ever. I figured it required a personal visit, don’t you think?”

“Chief, I am so so sorry. I… initially it was me helping McNally just think things through and it was all on my own personal time. I really just saw it as helping an old friend and I wasn’t supposed to be this involved. Then Train kind of roped me into the game when he sent someone after Ali. And then we were really involved and this whole thing happened so fast. I really should have said something, but it was so tight-lipped and the stakes were so high that I didn’t want to involve anyone we didn’t have to. I… I should’ve given you some kind of heads up though. I know this looks bad for the department and I’m sorry for that. I respect you very much and don’t want you to think that I don’t with all of this craziness. I’m beyond done getting involved in things I shouldn’t.” Ashlyn rambles out an apology as best she can.

“Are you done, Captain?” Chief Fulton asks with a wry smile.

“Uh, yes sir. I’m sorry.” Ashlyn repeats again quietly.

“Looks bad for the department? Really, Harris? What kind of drugs did they give you?” Chief Fulton smiles. “And what the heck is with all the damn apologizing? I mean, I was gonna stop you, but you just kept trudging on like a damn tug boat. I’m damn proud of you, Captain. What you did… and Ali too, and the rest the guys involved, un-fucking-believable! Might have been nice to know what was happening beforehand so I could help out, but I get it. I’m just upset that you got your head knocked, Harris. Now I have to let my best sit on the sidelines for a while, but hey, I’ll take it! I’m glad you’re both okay and like I said, couldn’t be prouder of you.” The older man smiles genuinely. “You are
something else, Harris. And you have a woman here to match you in every way. It’s like the NBA Dream Team! Best thing I ever did was bring you into my department.”

“I really appreciate you saying that, Chief. I’m still sorry I didn’t keep you in the loop and I promise to be better about that in the future. According to the doctor, I just need a couple days to rest, but I’ll be back for Tuesday and Wednesday before I have two vacation days to go with Ali to Alabama for her parole case hearing.” Ashlyn assures him.

“Well that brings me to the real reason I came other than to check in on you both.” The Chief smiles knowingly. “The way I figure it, you probably worked at least…oh… like 120 hours on this whole takedown. I put that in this morning as overtime hours we owe you. I don’t want to see your ass in the station until after Thanksgiving, Harris. Head injuries are no joke. Rest, get better… that’s an order! We’ll be happy to have our healed and well rested Captain back after that.”

“But Chief, it’s the busy holiday season and we’re already short. Really, I’ll be good in a couple days. I can’t take that much time, it’s too much…not that I don’t appreciate the offer…” Ashlyn rambles on again in protest, but is interrupted when Ali just gets up and goes right over to hug the man.

“Thank you, Chief! Thank you so much. I’ll make sure she does everything to get healthy.” Ali says appreciatively as she steps back to find the Chief looking a bit surprised at the hug, but pleased.

“See, Harris… now that is how you do it. You really need to learn when to just shut up and say thank you. Right now would be a good time to start.” He smiles and gives Ashlyn a jokingly challenging look.

Ashlyn shakes her head and smiles. “Yes, sir. Thank you, Chief. I really appreciate it. I’ll be back better than ever.”

“Much better. And you’re welcome. Like I said, I’m proud of you and honored that you’re my Captain. Just give me a few more years before you steal my job, will ya?” Chief Fulton chuckles.

“Aye, Chief. I wouldn’t dream of it.” Ashlyn replies.

“I’ll check in on you both frequently to see how you’re doing. Let me know if you need anything.” Chief Fulton.

“Maybe when the dust settles a bit we can have you over for dinner?” Ali asks.

“I’d like that.” Chief Fulton replies. “Ok, ladies… get rest and heal up. Ali, make sure she takes it easy. Harris, make sure you give this woman anything she wants, think she’s earned it.” He adds with grin.

“Yes, sir.” Both women reply in unison and then laugh.

“Captain.” Chief Fulton nods salutes Ashlyn as he leaves.

“Chief. Thanks again.” Ashlyn salutes back and watches him walk out the door.

“What on earth are you going to do with having my lazy ass around the house for three weeks?” Ashlyn turns to look at Ali teasingly.

“Oh, I can think of plenty of things to keep us entertained.” Ali smiles devilishly.

“Is that so?” Ashlyn plays into it. “Like what?”
“Like… laundry.” Ali jokes and earns a groan from Ashlyn.

“Because… we might need to wash a lot of underwear.” Ali adds with a wink.

“Not if we don’t wear any.” Ashlyn says smugly.

“Yes, that brain of yours is just fine!” Ali says cheerily and earns a loud laugh from Ashlyn. She makes her way closer to the bed again and leans down to give the officer a gentle kiss on her good cheek. “I just can’t wait to be at home with you.” She whispers.

“I can’t wait either, baby.” Ashlyn grins widely and tugs at Ali lightly until the brunette complies and lays back down in bed with her.

With about an hour left to go before the hospital discharge, the two women are sitting close together in the hospital bed while trying to keep themselves occupied with funny stories they haven’t told each other yet. Ashlyn’s eyebrow, eye, and upper cheek on the right side are a deep reddish purple and while the swelling is better than before, her eye is still closed shut and will be for a few days. Despite Ashlyn still having a headache and soreness and both of them being exhausted, they’re focusing on the closeness of each other and relishing in it right now, knowing damn well that they’re lucky to be here.

Ali is giggling over Ashlyn’s confession that she learned how to fix the popcorn machine at the movie theater she worked at in high school just because she knew she could spend more time with the female co-worker she was crushing on who worked in the concession stand. Just as Ali is about to tease her, the door to the room slams closed behind a very flustered Kyle. Ali had texted him a couple hours ago to make sure he knew they were fine, but she hadn’t heard anything back.

“What the actual fuck?!” Kyle says loudly, his face a bit red and stern as he approaches. “Oh yeah, sure, just sit there all cuddled up and smiling like this is a movie date and not a damn hospital! Are you two out of your fucking minds?! You knew! You knew at least the night we had dinner and you said nothing about this stupid little mission of yours! And I knew something was weird about it… but, I was like ‘stop being silly, Kyle, it’s just dinner’, but was it? No! It was a fucking ‘let’s have a nice family dinner in case we fucking die trying to take down the most dangerous Boston mob boss in history!’” Kyle yells at them with his hands in the air.

“Am I not trustworthy? Have I done anything to make you think I can’t keep my mouth shut?!” He adds angrily only to get a challenging glare from Ali. “Oh, fine don’t answer that last part! But, fucking hell… not even a damn hint that something might be up! And worse is that maybe I get it a little bit, and that makes me more pissed! You two drive me fucking crazy! Believe it or not, it’s not up to the two of you to save the fucking world all the time! And your face all busted up right now, Harris… I fucking can’t!” Kyle finishes his rant and runs his hands through his hair with a sigh.

“You about done now?” Ali asks gently.

“Yeah.” Kyle whispers in a voice so defeated that makes Ashlyn wince a bit.

“Come on, dude… room for one more.” Ashlyn taps the bed and watches Kyle slowly walk over and squeeze himself in next to Ali. The officer reaches over to take his hand in hers. “I promise you that you knew everything important that we did until just before this whole final mess happened. This takedown thing came up on us fast and the stakes were really high, which you probably figured out from whatever is on the news already. By telling anyone else, we risked compromising ourselves, the
others involved, and the entire operation. I know it isn’t much of an excuse, but we did whatever we
could to make sure both we and those around us came out of this safely.” Ashlyn does her best to
reassure and calm him. “We love you, Kyle. And you know that we trust you."

“I know.” Kyle lets out another sigh and does his best not to tear up. “It’s just… you two are kind of
all I have… and watching you get involved in shit like this, the danger you get yourselves into… it’s
beyond maddening. But I’m so proud of you both too…it’s…ugh, it’s a lot.”

“I’m sorry, Ky. I know you’ve been through a lot in the last year because of me.” Ali says guiltily
and hugs him tight, burying her head into his shoulder.

“I didn’t come for an apology, princess. I’d do it all over again a million times.” Kyle reassures her.
“I’m sorry I came in here so crazed just now, I was just taken by surprise and worried. I love you
guys and I’m glad you’re both ok.” He hugs Ali tight with one arm while still maintaining his grip on
Ashlyn’s hand. “Besides, I probably deserve all of it after all the shit I once made you go through.
But… if you ever try to make me bring you back from the dead again, I swear to god I will leave you
to become a zombie with no mascara!” He finishes with his typical humor and the mood in the room
finally lightens a bit as they all laugh.

“Deal!” Ali smiles as she pulls back from the hug. “You don’t have to worry though… I’ve been
doing a lot of thinking and after this case with Sara and Kira, I’m going to change the premise of
Veritas Aequitas a bit. Ash and I are done adding extra danger to our lives by getting involved in
things that are so risky.”

“Ooooh, really? Do tell!” Kyle sits up a bit excitedly, eager to hear about the new idea.

“Yeah, do tell. Cause I don’t know a thing about it either.” Ashlyn pipes up looking just as eager as
Kyle.

“Well, it’s just an idea right now… but, given the popularity of the podcast and the sponsors I have. I
was thinking of putting together a team to help make this more of a web series. Rather than take on a
huge case, I am hoping to take on everyday public interest cases for people who just can’t afford
proper legal representation. I think it would be really eye-opening for the public to see what it’s like
for a mother struggling to get her child back from the state or an immigrant trying to get their family
into the country or even a person trying to come out of bankruptcy. So each case would just be like a
one hour-long episode…something like that.” Ali explains.

“Eeek! Yes!” Kyle claps and Ashlyn nods in agreement with a smile.

“It’s so easy for us to scorn and think the worst of people in these situations. Even I thought that way
once. But then I actually worked some cases that were pretty eye-opening and I realized just how
easily I could have been in their shoes. They were often kind, normal people just caught up in shitty
circumstances. I don’t know… I just think it would be cool to have a series of shows that tackle one
person’s case per show and give people a glimpse into their life and their legal struggle. Maybe it
won’t be as exciting as the podcast has been, but I suppose if all it does is bring a little more empathy
to the world, then I’ll have done my job. Plus, I’d be able to help more people who really needed it.
It’s one way of achieving my dream of following in mom’s footsteps with my own twist on it.” Ali
finishes.

“Alex, I love it. It’s amazing… truly a beautiful idea. I’ll help with anything to make it happen,
baby.” Ashlyn moves in slowly and leaves a kiss on Ali’s forehead.

“Me too!” Kyle bounces up and down a bit excitedly on the bed. “I love it so much! Mom would be
so proud of you, Al. I’m so excited!”
“Well, I need to get the right people to help me out and sponsors that will get onboard. Plus, I have no idea what I’m doing with the web series part, so it’ll take a while. I’m fine with that though…I think I could use a little break anyway.” Ali smiles, truly happy that the two most important people in her life are so excited about her new concept.

“I can’t freakin’ wait!” Kyle is still bouncing excitedly.

“Kyle, I’m as thrilled as you are, but you’re making me a little nauseous, buddy.” Ashlyn scrunches her face a bit.

“Oh gosh! I’m sorry, Harris! I didn’t even get to ask yet what was going on besides the obvious.” Kyle cringes at his behavior as he motions to her face. “Not to be mean, but that looks majorly rough and painful. You doing ok?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. I have a moderate concussion and just the obvious stitches and bruising. Still have a headache and just have to move my head slowly right now so I don’t get nauseated. Just need to relax a few days and I’ll be good as new.” Ashlyn assures him.

“Such a tough bitch, Harris. I’d offer to put some make-up on that shiner, but I’d need a damn semi-truck full of cover up for that!” Kyle jokes and earns a light warning slap from Ali.

“Well I appreciate the honesty.” Ashlyn laughs.

“How about you, does your face hurt, Princess?” Kyle asks Ali.

“No, why?” Ali replies a bit confused.

“Cause it’s killing me!” Kyle jokes with a chortle and Ashlyn chuckles along with him.

“Ass!” Ali slaps him harder on the arm. “And don’t you be laughing over there, one-eye!” She playfully glares at Ashlyn.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry…I just had to!” Kyle stifles his laughter. “My 6th grade science teacher once used that joke on me when I asked to go to the nurse’s office and I’ve waited years to use it on someone else. So worth the wait!”

“You really suck sometimes, you know that?” Ali sticks her tongue out at him.

“Oh honey, I suck all the time. You know that. It’s my best skill really.” Kyle can’t help but retort with his usual sexual innuendo.

“Gross.” Ashlyn and Ali reply in unison.

“Annnyway! So, when does Blackbeard over here get to go home?” Kyle asks before adding “I’m so getting you a pirate eye-patch, Harris.”

“In the next hour, thank god!” Ashlyn replies, ignoring his pirate jibe.

“Oh, wow, ok! Where are you guys heading, Ali’s or yours?” He inquires.

“Mine for at least tonight and probably tomorrow.” Ali answers. “I have to get myself together for Kira’s parole hearing on Friday and get packed up. Then we’ll head to Ash’s and get anything she needs there before we leave for Alabama on Thursday.”

“Makes sense.” Kyle nods. “Ok, so I’m gonna get going and go to the grocery store so that I can
make sure you guys have what you need at home the next few days. I’ll do some meal prep and cooking once I get back to your place so that you just have to heat stuff up and can really rest up.” Kyle tells them.

“So sweet, babykins.” Ali kisses his cheek. “That would be really helpful, thank you so much.”

“Yeah, seriously, Kyle. You’re the best.” Ashlyn agrees. “Plus, I need some real food!”

“You got it! Any requests?” Kyle asks.

“Well since you’re around this afternoon, I could totally go for your grilled cheese and tomato soup.” Ashlyn requests cheerily.

“I’m on it!” Kyle declares. “How about you, princess?”

“You know my favs… the stuffed peppers you make, your fiesta chicken and rice, oh and your homemade pad Thai is sooo good!”

“Check, check, check. Easy enough.” Kyle gets up and claps his hands together. “Let me get going so I can get stuff and get back to the house. If I have time, I’ll change the sheets on your bed so you guys can be all fresh and ready to chill.”

“Uhhhh…you are the beeeeest!” Ashlyn practically moans at the thought of a good meal and a fresh bed.

“What she said.” Ali smiles and gets up to kiss his cheek again. “Thank you, Ky, really.”

“Sure thing. Gotta make up for being such an ass when I came in here, even though I was sort of justified.” Kyle winks.

“You’re not an ass. Now get over here and give a girl some love before you go get all Martha Stewart.” Ashlyn beckons him over and holds her arms out for a hug.

“Gentle.” Ali reminds him as he gets close.

“Duh, princess.” Kyle rolls his eyes at the warning as he softly hugs Ashlyn. “Glad you’re ok, Harris. And thank you… I know you’re taking care of her.” He whispers knowingly in the officer’s ear so Ali can’t hear him.

“Always.” Ashlyn whispers back before he pulls away.

“Alright ladies, I’m off like a prom dress! See you soon!” Kyle waves and is out the door pretty quickly.

“One down, one to go.” Ali comments after Kyle leaves.

“Yep.” Ashlyn sighs and pulls Ali back into her. “At least Chris will certainly be a little less diva about it.” She laughs lightly.

“Thank god for that. One diva in our lives is enough.” Ali giggles in reply.

“In my case, two.” Ashlyn smirks.

“You calling me a diva, Harris?” Ali side eyes her.

“Never.” Ashlyn smirks again.
“Uh huh. Well, I might just have to eat half your grilled cheese.” Ali threatens.

“You wouldn’t.” Ashlyn challenges.

“No, I wouldn’t…but a diva definitely would.” Ali winks.

“I take it back.” Ashlyn pouts. “Did I say diva? I meant Queen.”

“Better.” Ali smiles and kisses Ashlyn really gently. “Close your eyes until we can get out of here, baby. You’re gonna be wiped out just getting home.”

“Ok.” Ashlyn complies knowing Ali is probably right. She feels Ali nuzzle into her neck and drape and arm across her stomach, the brunette’s thumb rubbing soft little circles on her side. She’s spent her whole life hating hospitals and yet somehow Ali Krieger has managed to find a way to make her comfortable in one for the second time now. This woman will never cease to amaze her.

Looking a little green there, Harris. You ok?” Kyle asks as he runs over from the kitchen to help support Ashlyn on the side that Ali isn’t already supporting.

“Yeah, just a little dizzy from the car ride.” Ashlyn admits as she wills the room to stop spinning while she breathes deeply. Despite Ali driving very slowly and carefully, the ride home still made her feel a bit woozy and car sick.

“Almost there, baby. Let’s get you right up to bed.” Ali soothes the officer, one hand on her lower back the other holding her bicep.

“Clean sheets await.” Kyle entices her further to keep moving. The two siblings help Ashlyn up the stairs and finally lower her into bed.

“That feels so good.” Ashlyn hums, stretching out on the bed with her head and upper back propped up by pillows.

“Lunch is just about ready. I have the soup done and the grilled cheese is prepped. I just didn’t make the sandwiches yet because I wanted them to be hot. So, I’ll be back in like ten minutes.” Kyle says before heading back downstairs.

“I’m just going to go grab us some waters, your Tylenol, and some ice for your eye. You want some ice for your hand too? Those knuckles are looking a bit purplish today.” Ali asks as she gently moves a few stray hairs away from Ashlyn’s forehead.

“Thanks, baby. My hand is fine though. Hurry back?” Ashlyn pleads softly with her eyes closed.

“Back in a flash.” Ali kisses the officer’s cheek and follows after Kyle.

“So, give me the skinny. How are we really feeling about your sweetpea’s poor face?” Kyle asks as he places the sandwiches into the hot griddle pan.

“Oh please, you know me well enough by now. I worry even when there isn’t anything to worry about!” Ali replies while grabbing two waters and a Gatorade from the refrigerator. “I just hope that cut heals without getting infected and that she doesn’t end up with too many lingering concussion
symptoms. Hopefully it’ll be much better after she rests a couple days. I hate seeing her hurt.”

“Yeah, I know. She does look pretty roughed up. Did he punch her? They didn’t really get into the fine details on the news…just that they fought a bit and then well, you know…” Kyle trails off not really sure how to word it.

“He hit her really hard with that metal-edged briefcase that had all the vials of virus in it. We’re so fucking lucky that damn thing didn’t bust open.” Ali shakes her head.

“Well, she’s gonna look extra bad ass and hot with that scar. How’s that for a silver lining?” Kyle smirks and flips the sandwiches.

“Well even though I’d much prefer she never got hurt in the first place, I already know I’ll love the new scar just as much as all her others. I hate that they all happened, but they symbolize what she has survived and how amazing she is. It’s hard not to completely love every last one of them.” Ali smiles.

“Girl you are in sooooooo deep!” Kyle teases in a high-pitched voice.

“So deep. And so happy about it.” Ali admits with a slight blush.

“Alright, so get real with me… how are we feeling about smashing that fucker’s head like a pumpkin on Halloween?” Kyle probes a bit deeper in an effort to just rip the bandaid off.

Ali sighs, not really wanting to get into right now. “Do I have regrets? No. I’d protect Ash always no matter what. Am I feeling a lot of conflicting things about what I just did and what it means about me as a person? Yeah, I am. But I’m not really ready to get into it just yet. I need to get through this week, let myself decompress and then give myself time to sort through it.” She answers honestly.

“Fair enough. You know I’m always here for you, right?” Kyle reminds her.

“I know and you know I’ll take you up on it, thank you.” Ali smiles. “I better get back upstairs to my babes. Thanks for doing all this cooking, you’re a lifesaver.”

“Of course!” Kyle waves off her compliment. “Oh and Alex…” He walks over to her.

“Yeah?” Ali replies as she finds herself wrapped up in his arms.

“I think what you did was nothing short of brave, heroic, and amazing. You saved so many lives. I’m proud of you and think you’re incredible, don’t forget it. I love you.” Kyle says quietly.


By the time she finishes giving Ashlyn her Tylenol, Kyle is already upstairs with a tray of lunch for all of them. “Kyle’s special grilled cheese awesomeness is served.” He says merrily as he sets the tray down so Ashlyn can use it and then hands Ali a bowl of soup on top of a plate where the grilled cheese sits on the edge. He then takes his own and joins them on the bed. They’re all too busy shoving their faces to talk much, but the two women still manage to bestow Kyle with several comments about how good it is until he is blushing a bit.

“That was soooo good! Really hit the spot.” Ashlyn comments, patting her stomach. “You’re seriously the best.” She says to Kyle and Ali nods in agreement.

“I’m glad you liked it.” Kyle replies and collects all the dishes onto the tray. “And now that I’m in
your good graces, I just want to tell you that Chris will be here in like 20 minutes. Ok, gotta go cook
the rest of the food, byyeeeee!” He dashes out of the room before Ashlyn or Ali can say anything.

“So much for rest.” Ashlyn groans.

“At least we’ll get it over with.” Ali shrugs. “Well, we have 20 minutes or so. Close your eyes a bit, baby.”

“Ok.” Ashlyn readily agrees, knowing she might as well build up some energy to deal with Chris.
“Need you right here though.” She pats her chest.

“You got me, Hero.” Ali says sweetly and cuddles up against her girl.

Sure enough there is a knock at the bedroom door a short while later and in walks Chris looking
surprisingly unaffected.

“Damn you ass hat, look at that shiner!” He bellows in his usual loud voice, making Ashlyn wince.

“Turn down the volume big guy, she’s got a nice concussion to go with that shiner.” Ali quickly
warns him and feels Ashlyn squeeze her hand appreciatively.

“Alright, let’s get it over with. We suck for not telling you ahead of time, we’re stupid for getting
involved in such dangerous crap, and we drive you nuts, anything else?” Ashlyn says in a groggy
raspy voice having just woken up.

“Nah, none of that. I just came to check in on you two.” Chris replies simply.

“Really?” Ashlyn eyes him carefully. “That’s it?”

“Yes. That’s it.” Chris answers noting the wary look on Ashlyn’s face. “Look baby sis, after all
we’ve been through I’ve finally learned to let you do your thing and trust it. I’ve watched you go
through so much and at the end of the day as much as I worry, I also have to admit that you always
seem to know what you’re doing. I’ve learned that you’re smart, committed, strong, and courageous
as fuck. So, if you didn’t tell me beforehand, I know there must have been a damn good reason. You
never put yourself first, which does drive me crazy… but it also means that you always do
everything to protect me and my family. I’m always grateful for that and you know that road goes
two ways. I’m here, I love you, I’m glad you’re ok. Oh, and holy fucking shit you two are so
fucking boss! Ding, dong, the Train is dead… unbelievable!” He says melodically with a smile.

Ashlyn takes it all in for a minute, looking at Ali to see the brunette looking as stunned-but-pleased
as she is. “I’m not exactly sure what to say, but thanks. I appreciate everything you just said and I
promise you I didn’t keep you in the dark for no reason.” Ashlyn assures him. “I love you too.”

“Now that we settled that. How are you feeling, both of you?” Chris questions.

“Well I feel a lot better than she does.” Ali replies first with a small smile. “I’ll admit that it feels like
a big whirlwind up here…” she points to her head, “but, I’ll sort it out in time and be just fine.”

Chris just nods and looks at his sister.

“I’ll be fine once I get some rest. I’ll be happy when this pounding headache is gone and when I
have two eyes to see out of again!” Ashlyn says lightly.
“Yeah well, at least you’ll have a tough guy scar to mark the occasion.” Chris smiles and taps her leg a few times. “I should go and let you sleep. I just wanted to come over and see you for myself. Damn sensationalist media… some of them make it sound like half your face was ripped off. Glad to see that’s not the case… even though it would be an improvement.” He laughs at his own joke.

“Can’t go five minutes without being an ass, huh?” Ashlyn says with a slight laugh.

“Oh course not.” Chris gets up and leans in to give her a kiss on her good cheek. “Go sleep and get better so you can come see the kids without scaring them.” He can’t help but throw in one more barb.

“Hey now! Elsie loves Beast!” Ashlyn plays back.

“That she does.” Chris shakes his head and walks towards the bedroom door. “Later gators.”

“I’ll walk you out.” Ali jumps up off the bed. “Be right back, cutie.” She kisses Ashlyn’s hand before letting it go.

“I swear I’ll make sure she rests and gets all healed up.” Ali promises Chris as they reach the front door. “I’ll never let anything happen to her.”

“Oh Ali, I couldn’t be more sure of that.” Chris replies and pulls her into a hug, lifting her off the ground slightly because of his height. “Thank you… for not being afraid of fire and going in to get her when she needs you.” He says sincerely.

“I told you right from that start that I would.” Ali replies.

“I know, but sometimes it’s a big ass fire to deal with and things don’t always go your way.” Chris shrugs.

“Yeah, but then you just light your own fire and make things go your way.” Ali says and pulls back from the hug with a wink.

Chris laughs loudly. “You are something else, Ali Krieger. And I thought Ashlyn was tough. Don’t forget to take care of yourself while you’re busy fawning over her.”

“Promise.” Ali replies.

“Good luck with your parole thing this week. Call us when you get back so we can have dinner, ok?” Chris requests.

“Try and stop me.” Ali smiles and waves as Chris walks towards his truck. She quickly checks in with Kyle in the kitchen who waves her off and tells her to get upstairs before she heads back to Ashlyn. She finds the officer fast asleep and smiles at the sight of her mouth slightly open and her short hair a bit wild.

As soon as she lays down and gets close, Ashlyn’s arms reach out and wrap her up even though the officer is deeply sleeping. It’s one of the things she loves most, that Ashlyn always just instinctively feels her there and wants her close even when she’s not conscious of it. She listens to the officer breathe and quickly runs through the list of what she needs to do over the next couple days. Luckily she got her argument and filing done a bit early and filed it last week. So, outside of calling to check in with Sara again which she feels bad for not doing more frequently after all that happened with Steve, she can completely focus on Ashlyn, getting rest, and packing for the trip. That settled, she finally closes her eyes and lets the rise and fall of Ashlyn’s chest lull her to sleep.
Tuesday, November 14th

“Hey baby, mind if I call Sara in here and put it on speaker? I won’t make it too loud.” Ali asks Ashlyn who is sitting on the couch finishing up the breakfast sandwich Ali just made for her.

“Please do!” Ashlyn says a bit too excitedly.

After three days of sitting around and not doing much, the officer has been a bit restless. Turns out she’s not the best at just relaxing and paired with the fact that she has been getting frustrated easily with her less than optimal hand-eye coordination due to the still swollen eye, Ali is doing everything she can to distract her. They’ve done a lot of cuddling, talking, and napping. Ali has read out loud a lot and they’ve caught up on a few podcasts and listened to a few documentaries without having Ashlyn look at the TV screen. Still, the officer has been bogged down with an ongoing headache on top of getting tired and easily irritated when she can’t do something. So when Ali sees Ashlyn’s excited face at being asked to join in on her call with Sara, the brunette smiles widely at having found a way to get the officer enthusiastic about something. She quickly dials the number and sets her phone between them on the couch.

“Hi Sara, it’s Ali.” Ali announces herself after Sara picks up.

“Ali! Oh my goodness, how are you and Ashlyn? I’ve been dying to call you, but the guys here assured me that you two were fine since they checked in with Ashlyn’s brother. Javi even joked that the less we hear from you two the better since it meant you were actually relaxing.” Sara replies a bit anxiously.

“Oh, I didn’t even realize you guys had heard about it.” Ali says a little shocked. “We’re doing ok over here. Ash took a pretty good knock to the head, so we’ve been doing a lot of resting, but we’re doing great considering. I’m really sorry I haven’t checked in with you more. Things obviously got a bit complicated around here.” Ali says apologetically.

“Don’t you even start to apologize.” Sara says adamantly. “And of course we heard, it’s national news! You two are amazing! I’m so happy you’re okay!”

“Geez, we’ve been staying away from phones and TV with Ash having a concussion and trying to avoid all the hoopla. I had no idea this got beyond the local news. I guess Train was a bigger deal that I thought.” Ali replies, not so sure how to feel about it. “Anyway, I thought I would touch base with you and give you a quick overview of how I expect things to go on Friday and just check-in with you in general.”

“Wait, are you actually still coming down here for the hearing?!” Sara asks incredulously. “You filed the hearing argument summary thing already, so I figured you’d just have June Nixon handle it from there after everything that you just went through.”

“Oh hell no. I will definitely be there to see this through to the end. Ash will be coming too for moral support even though the hearing is closed to the public.” Ali replies resolutely. “Besides, I have slightly bigger plans than just that basic argument.”

“You came up with more of a plan?” Sara inquires, sounding completely beside herself that Ali is even coming, let alone doing anything more.

“Her middle name is plan.” Ashlyn can’t help but chime in.
“That was Ash.” Ali says with a slight laugh.

“Hey Ashlyn! Hope you’re doing okay! And thanks for letting me pull away Ali’s time like this.” Sara replies kindly.

“Like I could stop her.” Ashlyn jokes. “Thanks, Sara. I’m doing just fine, a little better every day.”

“So, Sara… first tell me how you’re doing and how Kira is as we head into Friday.” Ali gets them back on track.

“I’m actually pretty great. I uh… well, I kind of feel bad saying that. I just…I’m happy that everything with Steve is over with and I guess I feel a little guilty that I feel that way, but I do. Besides that, Javi and Nathan have been such sweet hosts to me. I had no idea military bases could be so nice! My hotel room is nicer than any place I’ve ever lived!” Sara answers cheerily.

“I said the same thing when I visited that base.” Ali admits. “I get what you mean about the Steve thing, but I’m honestly glad you feel so relieved and okay. You have every right to be happy that you can move forward regardless of the circumstances.”

“Thank you for saying that.” Sara says appreciatively. “Oh! And I just got a job offer in Chicago after a phone interview two days ago! It’s nearly double my current salary and I would be the sole curator for a whole wing of an art museum starting in late January. I told them I’d give them an answer on Monday…just in case it doesn’t go our way. I don’t want to jinx it.”

“Ahhhh! That’s so exciting! It’s perfect timing.” Ali replies enthusiastically, knowing this will make the transition to Chicago much easier for them in terms of finding housing and being financially stable.

“Wow, congrats Sara!” Ashlyn offers her own congratulations.

“Thank you!” Sara replies.

“Sara, honestly, forget about jinxing things. I promise you I will do everything to make this work. I feel good about this parole hearing.” Ali assures her. “How is Kira doing?”

“She’s a bit nervous, understandably. But… she’s actually much better this time around than for the last parole hearing. I think the confidence you two bring to the table has really rubbed off on her.” Sara answers.

“Good, I’m glad she’s in a decent state of mind. That’s a good thing headed into the hearing since they’ll likely ask her some questions. I sent her a list of questions she can expect and how she should answer, so hopefully that will take some of the pressure off.” Ali explains.

“She got it and she’s been practicing.” Sara says.

“Perfect!” Ali replies.

“You really are a meticulous planner, I’m so impressed. I’m lucky if I can even find my shoes in the morning.” Sara laughs.


“Speaking of… you said you had a bigger plan?” Sara inquires, remembering what Ali said earlier.

“You know it.” Ali smiles. “Ready to get the rundown?”
“Yep, bring it on!” Sara replies.

Ali spends the next twenty minutes going over the strategy she has devised and intends to execute. The plan is simple but powerful and Ali feels confident about it. By the time she is done, all Sara can do is excitedly thank her profusely over and over again until Ali tells her to go relax and that she’ll see her in a couple of days. When she finally hangs up the phone she finds Ashlyn looking at her with an animated expression that mirrors Sara’s excited voice over the phone.

“What?” Ali eyes the officer.

“You. You’re so damn wonderful…beyond words. Your heart, your mind…I’m truly in awe of you and so lucky to get to love you. And dear lord do I love you, Alex.” Ashlyn says sincerely, reaching out so that Ali will scoot closer and snuggle into her. “You never cease to amaze me, woman.”

“I still say you’re the amazing one, baby. But thank you. I love you too, Ash.” Ali presses a kiss to the officer’s chin. “How about we try a nice slow walk on the beach? It’s not that cold out and I know you’re drying to get out of the house. Worst case we can just chill on the sand.” She suggests.

“See…you’re brilliant!” Ashlyn replies eagerly. “Let’s go!”

“I’ll get you settled into the car before I run back in for some sweatshirts and snacks in case we get hungry. Follow me, cutie.” Ali gets up and reaches her hand out to help the officer off the couch.

“I will follow you absolutely anywhere, beautiful.” Ashlyn smiles.

“Charmer… save some for the beach, baby. Much more romantic.” Ali winks and pulls Ashlyn up off the couch, more than ready for the two of them to get a little normalcy back even if it’s just a quick beach trip.

Thursday, November 16th

“That was some majorly solid room service.” Ashlyn leans back on the couch in their hotel room after finishing her last bite of chicken fried steak and washing it down with lemonade. The flight down to Alabama had sparked yet another headache, so she and Ali has opted to stay in for the night. Luckily, the Tylenol had taken care of it before their room service feast had arrived.

“Agreed, that was so delic… oh my god, hi!!!” Ali stops mid-word and practically squeals as she looks at Ashlyn ecstatically.

“Um… hi?” Ashlyn looks back at her confused at what is happening.

“Baby, your eye just opened up a little!” Ali explains happily, before getting worried that Ashlyn doesn’t realize it. “Can you see out of it?”

“Oh yeah! I didn’t even notice the difference in vision. Still feels a little tight around the eyelid, but I can definitely see!” Ashlyn joins in on the excitement. Her stitches had come out yesterday and they glued the still healing gash shut to make sure it stayed closed and kept the scarring to a minimum. The area has felt a bit looser ever since and the deep purple bruising is just starting to lighten. Clearly the swelling is on its way down now too, as it should be seeing as how Ali has been relentless with the ice packs.

“Your eyes are my favorite thing in the world.” Ali whispers and puts her hand on the officer’s uninjured cheek, leaning in for a sweet kiss.
“So, my ass is not your favorite?” Ashlyn teases as Ali pulls away slightly.

“I have lots of favorites, Hero.” Ali leans in for another kiss that Ashlyn quickly deepens. She feels the officer’s tongue slip past her lips and welcomes it eagerly with a soft moan. They’ve been so careful over the last few days not to overdo it, but Ashlyn is obviously feeling a little better and the brunette quickly decides to let things get a bit heated knowing that they have a little leeway to work with now.

“God I missed this.” Ashlyn mutters against Ali’s lips and goes right into another passionate kiss, her hands roaming to the back of the brunette’s neck as Ali hovers over her a bit.

“It’s only been like four days, baby. But I missed it too.” Ali mumbles back in amusement before her lips are captured again.

“One day is…mmmm… too long.” Ashlyn gets out through another kiss, her hands in Ali’s hair now.

They make-out on the couch for quite a while, moving to drag lips, tongues, and teeth across necks and the surrounding exposed skin when they need to catch their breath. Eventually Ali can feel Ashlyn slowing down, her movements becoming lazier and her breathing heavier. She can tell the officer is reaching her exhaustion limit. “Easy, Ash… let’s slow it down and relax, ok? We don’t want to go too far too fast, honey.” Ali pulls back, leaving one more peck on her girlfriend’s lips as Ashlyn pouts a bit.

“Ok. You’re right. I’m a little wiped, but that was so worth it.” Ashlyn caves and smiles at Ali who lays them both down on the couch and nuzzles her head into the crook of the officer’s neck, resting her forehead against Ashlyn’s jaw and lightly dragging her fingers across the top of her chest.

“I love kissing you. I’m so obsessed with your mouth, you have no idea.” Ali grins as her eyes look up to take in Ashlyn’s still puffy lips that she just wants to kiss all over again.

“Think I have some idea.” Ashlyn plays back. “The feeling is mutual.” She runs her hand up and down Ali’s back as she holds her.

“Ok, let’s talk about Thanksgiving, Hero.” Ali suggests as they relax.

“Oh geez, that’s next week!” Ashlyn exclaims as it dawns on her. “I can’t believe I didn’t even realize that until right now.”

“I think we’ve been just a bit occupied the last month, babe.” Ali says sarcastically. “Pretty understandable that we let it slip for a while. We still have plenty of time though, so let’s figure it out. I know this will be the first normal one in a while for you, but what did you usually do?”

“Before I got stuck in the pokey, I cooked and Chris and Bridget came over with the kids. Pretty low-key.” Ashlyn answers lightly. “You?”

“Not too different. Kyle and Emily would come over to my place and we’d cook together and watch football.” Ali replies.

“So, maybe we can sort of combine that?” Ashlyn supplies.

“My thoughts exactly.” Ali smiles before adding “Only bigger.”

“Bigger?” Ashlyn questions.
“Yep. I know Nathan and Luke probably have family plans since they told some pretty hilarious in-law Thanksgiving drama stories last time we were together, but I’m thinking Javi might like to come and spend some time with Emily. We can still double-check with the other guys though. I’m sure Edith will join us if we ask her to. And I hope Rebecca and the boys would come too. Obviously, your brother and his family too.” Ali replies enthusiastically.

“I love the idea of that! You think we have time to pull it off?” Ashlyn asks.

“Definitely. We can cook the turkey and maybe a couple of other simple main things, but then ask everyone else to bring their favorite dessert or side dish to contribute. That way it won’t be so intense.” Ali answers.

“You’re a genius.” Ashlyn hugs Ali tightly. “So, would we do it in Newton or in Ipswich? Our Newton place is bigger and more party suited, but our Ipswich kitchen has the amazing double-oven.”

Ali doesn’t reply, but just scoots up and kisses Ashlyn romantically.

“What was that for?” Ashlyn asks, still a bit dazed from the kiss.

“We always refer to the houses as my place or your place… you just said ‘our’ and I love that so much.” Ali says with her eyes shining emotionally, leaning in for another quick kiss.

“Just came out that way. Certainly feels that way…everything is ‘ours’ in my head. I love it too.” Ashlyn says as they get back to their prior cuddling position. She can feeling Ali smiling into her neck. “You still didn’t answer the question, Krieger.”

“Oh uh…our Newton place is definitely bigger, but honestly Ash, I love the coziness of our Ipswich place and the ocean there.” Ali says with a smile at having used ‘our’ herself. “And I never knew your grandma, but something about having Thanksgiving in her dining room just feels so right to me for some reason. You always talks about how she loved gatherings and cooking.”

“Settled then. We’ll call Javi tomorrow since he needs more time and then everyone else when we get back on Saturday. So damn perfect.” Ashlyn leans down and initiates another deep kiss.

“Our Thanksgiving plans or me?” Ali asks flirtatiously against Ashlyn’s lips.

“Both… but you more.” Ashlyn pecks her lips again.

“Good answer. I love you something fierce, Harris.” Ali says contently.

“Love you more, Krieger.” Ashlyn runs her hand through Ali’s soft hair.

“Impossible.” Ali replies with a playfully raised eyebrow.

“We’ll see.” Ashlyn smirks.

“Come on, love. Let’s get to bed and get a really solid night of sleep.” Ali gets up and helps Ashlyn get off the couch. They quickly brush their teeth, Ali freshening her mascara before bed as usual with Ashlyn shaking her head and smiling at her through the bathroom mirror.

“How about we make our Thanksgiving plans even easier by starting this less laundry game plan of mine?” Ashlyn says as she starts taking off her clothes in the bedroom, watching Ali dig through their luggage for pajamas.
“Less laundry?” Ali questions as she continues looking.

“Yeah… you know, no underwear. Which means…” Ashlyn trails off as she watches Ali’s lips curl into a smile.

“No pajamas.” Ali finishes and stops looking through their bags.

“Right.” Ashlyn smirks, slipping off her boxers and standing there naked.

“Yes. So. Much. Yes.” Ali replies even as she’s quickly shucking off her own clothes, everything tossed into the corner of the room as she swiftly takes Ashlyn’s hand and pulls the officer into bed with her. She makes sure Ashlyn is propped up on pillows like she’s supposed to be to support her head and neck before pressing herself into Ashlyn’s side and involuntarily letting out a moan at the contact. “You feel so damn good, so warm. Fucking incredible.” Ali melts into Ashlyn even further.

Ashlyn smiles at the thought of how something so simple can feel so good to them after only being without it for less than a week. But their skin knows exactly how much they’ve missed each other even in the most basic ways. She can feel Ali’s nipples pressed into her ribcage, one of her legs entwined in between her own, the brunette’s hand stroking up and down her abs softly. It’s heaven. “This, you… it’s everything.” Ashlyn voices before they just lay there enjoying the feel of each other for quite a while.

“So, you ready for tomorrow?” Ashlyn asks. The two of them have just slightly loosened their tight grip on each other as they fully relax and she knows it’s only a matter of time before they fall asleep. She wants to make sure she checks in to see how Ali is feeling about the hearing in the morning.

“Yeah, I’m as prepared as I can be. I’m ready and I think it’ll go our way.” Ali replies simply.

“I know it will. You’re going to absolutely crush it, Alex.” Ashlyn says resolutely as if there is no other possible outcome.

Ali smiles widely at the bold statement and lets Ashlyn’s confidence in her dictate her own thinking and belief in herself. “You know what… you’re damn right I am.”

“That’s my girl.” Ashlyn says proudly, leaning down for a kiss that conveys exactly how proud she is.
Friday, November 17th

Ali organizes the paperwork in front of her as she and her sponsoring lawyer, June Nixon, sit behind the table set up for the parole hearing and wait for Kira to be escorted in. The room is fairly small and a bit stuffy, the décor plain and typical of a conference room. There is a long table at the front of the room with five chairs and five microphones for the parole board. In front of it is the smaller table with three chairs that Ali and June are currently sitting behind. An officer guards the door and a woman serving as the hearing recorder sits in the corner of the room at a small desk. Only a couple more quiet minutes pass before the door opens and Kira is escorted in by two guards.

Ali internally cringes at the orange prison jumpsuit, angry at the fact that prisoners aren’t even allowed the opportunity to present themselves in normal attire at their parole hearings. It’s not something she wasn’t aware of, but the thought irks her nonetheless. Kira looks mostly expressionless, like a woman resigned to her fate and Ali stands up and smiles widely to try and give her a bit of a boost. It seems to work when Kira smiles back and seats herself at the empty chair between Ali and June.

“You doing ok?” Ali leans in and whispers after she sits back down.

“Yeah, I think so. I’m a little nervous.” Kira admits quietly.

“Try not to be. You know exactly what you should say and we’ll handle the rest. Just breathe and do your best to stay calm and not let them rile you up.” Ali reminds her and gets a nod from the short-haired woman just as the parole board is ushered in.

Two older men and a middle-aged woman quickly seat themselves at the head table and the hearing begins immediately with the older man in the middle speaking on their behalf.

“Welcome. This is the parole hearing for inmate Kira G. Draper who is eligible for discretionary release. I am Commissioner Kevin Hodges. I am joined today by Commissioner Paul Fuller and Commissioner Jody Pratt.” He motions to the commissioners on either side of him. “Ms. Draper, I see that you have counsel with you to help present your case, is that correct?”

“Yes, sir.” Kira answers.

“Very good. Will counsel please introduce themselves for the record?” Commissioner Hodges
requests.

“Attorney Alexandra Krieger.” Ali stands up and announces herself before quickly taking her seat again.

“Attorney June Nixon.” June follows suit.

“Good. Let’s get started.” Commissioner Hodges says and looks down at the folder he has in front of him. “Ms. Draper, we are here today to allow you to present your case for discretionary release. We will first ask you a series of questions to which you will respond on your own. Then we can allow for any additions from your counsel. Please be aware that anything you say in here today does go on the record and can be used against you in any future proceedings. So, while we will ask you questions, please do not respond to anything you don’t feel comfortable discussing. By law, we will not judge you negatively for things you choose not to answer. Is all of that clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Kira replies.

Commissioner Hodges nods in acknowledgement and continues. “On May 14th, 2010 you were involved in a domestic incident where you were arrested and charged with felony assault and battery with a dangerous weapon. You were found guilty at trial and sentenced to 17 years, 7 years of which you have now served. You were denied parole two years ago at your first hearing and this is your second hearing. Is that all correct?”

“Yes, sir.” Kira answers simply.

“In your own words, will you please recount the night of the incident and your role in the events that took place.” Commissioner Hodges requests and the board listens as Kira spends the next 7 minutes going over all of it matter-of-factly just like Ali told her to.

“Ms. Draper, I have noted that your answer is consistent with your original testimony and your prior parole hearing plea. As you know, a court of law found you guilty based on that testimony and the facts of the case. Further, as you were notified previously, this parole board denied your first petition for release on account of the fact that you showed no acknowledgment of your own actions on the night of the crime. Do you understand Ms. Draper that this board felt that you were still a danger to the community on the grounds that you have not shown remorse for your crime?” Commissioner Hodges looks at Kira with a hard stare.

“I do understand that sir, but I maintain that I did not commit a crime and have been found guilty of something I didn’t do. The only thing I am guilty of is being in a relationship with Officer Steven Foster’s ex-wife and being at the wrong place at the wrong time. For that reason, my statement remains the same.” Kira replies honestly.

“And knowing the outcome of the prior parole hearing, you wish to continue with the same position that you are innocent of a crime you were found guilty of in a court of law?” Commissioner Hodges confirms.

“Yes, sir. Because it’s the truth.” Kira answers resolutely.

“Very well. Ms. Draper, would you please give us a quick overview of your job skills and any enrichment programs you have participated in while imprisoned?” Commissioner Hodges asks and the board listens carefully as Kira outlines the job qualifications she has and the prison program she has been a part of that teaches women various trades. She explains how she has learned to weld and fix HVAC units.
“So, if released, your job prospects would likely involve one of these trades?” The commissioner clarifies.

“Yes, sir.” Kira confirms.

“You’re aware Ms. Draper that these are typically male dominated professions and finding a job could pose some difficulty?” The commissioner prompts her.

It takes everything in Ali not to snort in disgust at that statement and even though she holds it in, she can’t help rolling her eyes.

“I am. However, I know my skill level is up to par and I am confident I can find employers that would be willing to give a woman an equal opportunity. If not, I am more than capable of starting my own business.” Kira answers directly.

“Noted. Thank you.” Commissioner Hodges says evenly before probing further. “Ms. Draper, what would you do if released?”

“The goal would be to find a job and settle back into a quiet life like I had before. That’s all I’m looking for.” Kira says simply.

“Would you be in contact with or involved in any kind of relationship with Sara Worthen?”

Commissioner Hodges asks point blank.

“Yes, sir. My relationship with Sara Worthen was always loving and stable and still is to this day as we have maintained our relationship while I have been imprisoned. Our relationship has never been problematic in any way outside of angering Steven Foster. And I see no reason that it wouldn’t continue as it has been if I am released.” Kira answers straight-forwardly.

“Ok.” The commissioner replies with a slight sigh that clearly signals his disapproval. It makes Ali want to walk up to the table and smack the guy, but she stays stoic and bides her time.

“One final question. Where would you live if released?” The commissioner inquires.

“The plan would be for Chicago, sir.” Kira replies.

“Chicago? You do realize that you are required to remain in Alabama so long as you are under parole supervision?” Commissioner Hodges looks at her impatiently.

“I do understand that, sir. However, I would be immediately applying for a transfer of parole to a specific Chicago district under which I already have a tentative agreement for acceptance of the transfer pending my release. Given the circumstances surrounding my imprisonment, it seems best for me to start somewhere new that is perhaps more accepting of my lifestyle.” Kira says with an even determination that makes Ali feel proud even though she had crafted the answer herself.

“I see.” Commissioner Hodges replies, his face clearly showing that he doesn’t know how else to respond. “That concludes the board’s questioning for you, Ms. Draper. Let us now turn to counsel’s filed petition for release and evidentiary support documents. Commissioner Pratt will handle this aspect of the hearing.” He motions to the woman next to him.

“Counselor Krieger, the board has received a summary from you filed on Kira Draper’s behalf which outlines the facts of her case and disputes the finding of the trial court with evidentiary support documents. Would you please summarize your argument as it was filed?” Commission Pratt begins without fanfare.
“Yes, Commissioner. I will not re-state the findings of the trial court as everyone here is aware of the facts of the case and the final judgement. Rather, I will quickly go over the new evidentiary documents I have provided which support Ms. Draper’s repeated testimony that she is innocent of the crime she has been found guilty of.” Ali explains and waits for affirmation that she should continue.

“That would be appreciated, counselor. Please proceed.” Commissioner Pratt replies.

“As consistently stated by Ms. Draper, she and Ms. Sara Worthen became involved in a relationship after Ms. Worthen had separated from Steven Foster. It was disputed by Mr. Foster at trial that he and Ms. Worthen were separated. He testified that he and Ms. Worthen were still married, not separated, and living together. Again, both Ms. Worthen and Ms. Draper testified counter to Mr. Foster’s statements. What I have provided to you is a series of documents that show evidence of a long-term relationship between Ms. Draper and Ms. Worthen. There are also a series of documents which show active pursuit of separation and divorce from Mr. Foster by Ms. Worthen as well as evidence of Mr. Foster’s relationship with another woman.” Ali outlines before going into a bit more detail.

“First, bank records and billing statements clearly show that Ms. Draper paid an equal share of living expenses alongside Ms. Worthen and that the two were residing at the same address for almost two years. In addition, you will find in the documents five sets of dated divorce petitions filed by Ms. Worthen and returned unsigned by Mr. Foster over the course of a four year period. This illustrates Mr. Foster’s lack of acknowledgement of the ending of his relationship on the part of Ms. Worthen. Further, I have provided property records which show that Mr. Foster purchased a home with the woman he had been residing with for over three years prior to the night of May 14th, 2010. Combined with the prior evidence, these documents demonstrate and support Ms. Draper’s repeated assertion that she was in a mutual relationship with Ms. Worthen who was separated from Mr. Foster despite his contention of these facts.” Ali finishes her explanation the first part.

“The board acknowledges these documents as new evidence that support Ms. Draper’s claims, counselor. It appears you have also provided the results of some expert analyses?” The female commissioner questions.

“Correct, commissioner. I solicited the opinion of a top ballistics expert and a medical examination expert who specializes in bullet wounds. Upon running analyses on the bullet itself and examining medical records and photos of Mr. Foster’s injury, both experts concluded that for Ms. Draper to have fired the shot that injured Mr. Foster she would have to have been standing on a chair directly above him. As you know from the facts of the case, that does not match with Mr. Foster’s testimony of the events. Together, the experts’ analyses estimate that it is 90% likely that the bullet was fired by Mr. Foster himself. Again, I would like to note that these results are consistent with Ms. Draper’s testimony both at the trial and in her prior parole hearing.” Ali finishes.

“Thank you, counselor. This is in fact some fresh information for us to consider. However, we must be clear that while some of this evidence is new, the trial court debated these very facts and a jury found Ms. Draper guilty of felony assault with a dangerous weapon.” Commissioner Pratt warns and the other two nod in agreement to support her.

‘Of course these close-minded assholes don’t want to give her a chance despite the clear evidence. They’re just going through the motions for show.’ Ali bites her tongue to keep from speaking her thoughts out loud, knowing that the card she plays next is what will force their hand. She has saved it just for this moment.

“Does this conclude your presentation, counselors?” Commissioner Pratt looks at both Ali and June.
“Actually no, Commissioner, it does not.” Ali says confidently as she holds in a smirk. “Has the board been informed of Steven Foster’s recent passing?” Ali questions respectfully.

“Yes, counselor. We have been notified that Officer Foster was shot and killed in the line of duty on November 2, 2017.” Commissioner Pratt answers succinctly.

Ali can’t help but laugh sarcastically at the statement. “Interesting, I didn’t realize that kidnapping your ex-wife’s lawyer and attempted sexual assault and attempted murder of said lawyer qualified as ‘the line of duty’.

June Nixon can’t help but crack her own smile at the Ali’s retort.

“I bet your pardon, counselor?” Commissioner Pratt says in irritated confusion.

“I’m pretty sure my words were clear, commissioner. If the board were to look into the circumstances surrounding Mr. Foster’s death, it would find that he kidnapped Ms. Worthen’s attorney, held her at gunpoint, and attempted to sexually assault her with the intention of murdering her thereafter.” Ali says with a hard look.

“Although the board is not aware of these particular details, counselor, I must inquire what exactly this has to do with the present parole hearing other than the connection to Ms. Worthen?” Commissioner Fuller pipes up for the first time in a clipped tone.

“Well, commissioners… that kidnapped lawyer was me.” Ali stands up in determination to make her full presence felt and watches as all three commissioners sit there with wide eyes. “Not only did I get to experience Mr. Foster’s vindictive nature firsthand, but he made it very clear to me that my death was what I would get for legally representing Ms. Worthen and Ms. Draper.” Ali pauses to let it sink in. “If the board was to investigate the official case file, it would find that an audio-recording of the entire incident was made by me as well as the party who came to my aid and shot Mr. Foster. That recording revealed information pertinent to Ms. Draper’s case and, if the board will consent, I would like to play a portion of my original personal recording from that day for you. A copy of this same recording is found in the official case file.” Ali requests as a formality, already knowing they are required to hear the full presentation of any and all evidence for this hearing.

The three commissioners confer briefly, but come to a quick decision. “You may proceed, counselor.” Commissioner Hodges speaks for them.

Ali says no more for the time being, she just places her recorder on the table, turns the volume to the loudest setting and hits play. Her own voice sounds through the room.

Ali: “You know, we could have talked this out in the hotel over a couple of drinks. No need to get all OJ Simpson by taking to the highways.”

Steve: “Oh, so you want to talk it out, do you? Didn’t really seem that way a little while ago. Amazing how being trapped in the back of a cruiser changes one’s attitude.”

Ali: “All you had to do was approach me like a normal human being and talk. I’m a lawyer, I negotiate… kind of my job. You didn’t have to kidnap me, FYI.”

Steve: “Oh yeah, I’m sure you wouldn’t have run the other way if I’d given you the chance to. All you lawyers are the same, such fucking liars.”

Ali: “Well, let me tell you how I do things… for one, I never lie. I’m a woman of my word. For
example, I think you’re a completely unstable and mental asshole who can’t stand the fact that his ex-wife is happier with a woman even though he’s the one that left her high and dry. You’re a total douchebag and whoever gave you a badge should be dope slapped. I don’t care if you put a gun to my head, truth is truth. How’s that for some honesty?”

Steve: “You know, if you weren’t such a disgusting dyke bitch with a smart mouth…I might actually like you. But by all means, let’s negotiate then.”

Ali: “Well, I have to know the facts before I can negotiate. Care to tell me why you give a shit about your ex-wife divorcing you and getting her girlfriend paroled so they can move on with their lives? Last I checked you were doing just fine with your own new woman, who by the way must be blind as fuck to be with an egotistical maniacal bastard like you.”

Steve: “Don’t play stupid! We both know you’re involved so you can make a pretty penny turning this story into some fucking Hollywood drama. If you think for a fucking second that I’m going to be exposed as the guy who’s ex-wife left him for a woman and then sought revenge on them for it… you’re out of your fucking mind.”

Ali: “Oh, so now you’re admitting that you went there that night and shot yourself so you could pin it on them? That’s new.”

Steve: “Oh please, like you haven’t already dug up enough shit to show the world that I did. I know how you work, such a cunning little bitch! Not so fucking crafty stuck in the back of my cruiser, are you?”

Ali clicks off the recording and gives the parole board a cold stare. All three of them sit there looking perturbed with their mouths slightly agape. She gives it a few more seconds before speaking. “Well, there you have it. A confession from Mr. Foster himself that proves Ms. Draper’s assertions of innocence to be true.”

The board is quiet for a moment before Commissioner Hodges attempts to take control of the situation. “Counselor, you must realize that while this evidence is very compelling… this is not an appeals court with the power to overturn a criminal sentence. We need to be extremely clear that your efforts here are fruitless in that regard.” He declares a bit arrogantly.

Ali merely nods with a tight-lipped smile before going in for the kill. “No, commissioner, this is not an appeals court. I am very aware of that. However, it is a parole board. A parole board with the power to provide discretionary release for a woman who has served 7 years of prison time for a crime she very clearly didn’t commit, with plenty of evidence to prove it. Let me be extremely clear that I have filed a writ with the higher appeals court which I am confident, given the new evidence, will force them to act in obliging the lower appeals court to overturn the decision in this case.” She pauses again to make sure her message is getting across before continuing on.

“Further, this entire case and parole hearing will be publicly released in the media via my personal, nationwide podcast. Now, I think we all know it is just a matter of time and process before the original verdict of guilt is overturned. So, the way I see it… you can either be the parole board that got ahead of this issue and began making reparations, or, you can be the parole board that remained obstinate and narrow-minded despite the evidence and the fact that Ms. Draper will be transferring her parole to another state entirely. The choice is clearly yours. That concludes our presentation.” Ali finishes with some bite and sits down. She quickly peeks over at June who smiles and gives her a nod that signals solidarity. Kira just looks a bit shocked sitting between them, having had no idea of exactly what was coming before it happened. Ali gives her a light tap on the forearm to try and settle
her a bit.

The commissioners look positively discombobulated and uncomfortable as they glance between each other and Ali a few times. Ali can tell they feel threatened and are trying to decide whether or not to call her on it, but she knows darn well that she used only facts to make her argument and no actual threats were made despite the underlying insinuations. Threatening-but-completely-professional is exactly what she was going for, walking the line perfectly.

“Ms. Draper, this concludes your parole hearing. The board will confer to go over the transcript of this hearing and the supporting documents provided on your behalf. We will return with a decision within the hour. Counselors, you will remain here in the meantime. Ms. Draper, you will go into a holding area until we reconvene. This parole hearing is in recess until then.” Commissioner Hodges ends the session, his voice almost gruff.

“Thank you. We await your decision.” June speaks up on their behalf and they watch the commissioners leave.

“Chin up, Kira.” Ali reminds the woman as she’s quickly led away by the two guards who escorted her in.

“Alright, what food would you say is a ‘must try’ in Alabama?” Ashlyn asks Sara as they sit in the prison waiting room. She’s been doing everything she can to distract the very anxious woman sitting beside her. They’ve talked music, sports, movies, and even a lot about Ashlyn’s prison experience, her case, and how she and Ali fell in love. It has been about two hours and she has no idea whether that’s a good thing or not. She wishes she had asked Ali about that so she’d have some indication about how it might be going.

“Fried pickles for sure.” Sara answers as she taps her foot nervously. “It sounds weird, but seriously so good with a cold beer. Nobody makes them better than in Alabama. Magical really.”

“Should’ve known it would be fried something.” Ashlyn laughs. “I swear they probably just batter and fry your clothes here if you take it to get dry cleaned.” She jokes.

Sara lets out a loud laugh. “You’re hilarious!” She’s just about to mention that her dry cleaned clothes actually do smelled like fried food sometimes because the closest place is right next to a restaurant, but she doesn’t get the chance as Ali and June walk into the room.

Ashlyn and Sara quickly pop up from their chairs, Ashlyn a little more slowly so she doesn’t make herself dizzy.

“Oh my god, how did it go?” Sara blurts out, not able to read the expressions on Ali’s or June’s face.

“Well, we put it all out there as planned. I actually have an important question for you though, Sara.” Ali replies straight-forwardly.

“Oh uh, ok… what?” Sara replies, ready to do anything to help the situation.

“Do you know how to cook a turkey?” Ali asks, her face serious.

“Turkey? Yeah, I do, but why does that matter?” Sara questions, her brow furrowed in confusion, her voice almost irritated at the randomness of the question when she so desperately wants to know what is happening with Kira.
“Good. I’d suggest picking one up when you leave here. Kira’s parole was granted and she’ll be released next Wednesday morning just in time for Thanksgiving. And let me tell you from experience, girl is gonna come home hungry!” Ali finally lets the huge grin she’s been holding in take over her face.

“So Ali!” Sara screams and throws herself at Ali.

Ali barely has time to catch the woman before Sara is off the ground and hugging her tightly, ‘oh my god’ and ‘thank you’ leaving her mouth over and over again.

Ashlyn smiles widely as she watches the scene unfold, her heart bursting with pride for Ali even though she already knew the brunette would find a way to get this parole granted. “Congratulations, Sara! Alex, I’m so proud of you, baby! You too, June! You ladies nailed it!” She says happily.

“I guess maybe we should hug too?” Junes says to Ashlyn and laughs a bit at Sara still hoisted into Ali’s arms. “I’m not doing that in heels though…” she points to the two women.

Ashlyn laughs and gives June a quick hug just as Sara finally snaps out of her excited state and realizes she’s completely wrapped around Ali.

“Oh gosh, I’m so sorry! I got excited.” Sara looks between Ali and Ashlyn with a blush as her feet finally come down and touch the ground.

“Girl, you just go right on ahead! You should be excited! Plus, I’m not ready to jump her like that quite yet, so she might as well get in some lovin’ while she can!” Ashlyn teases while pointing to her bruised face.

“How do you get anything done at home with her around, she’s so funny!” Sara asks Ali as she lets go.

“Eh, she’s not that funny at home.” Ali shrugs playfully and gets a pout from Ashlyn. “I’m kidding, honey. You’re the funniest.” She relents as she walks over and leans into Ashlyn’s side, kissing her cheek lightly.

“Ali, June… oh my god, thank you so much! I…don’t even have words… I…I don’t even know what to do with myself right now!” Sara is bouncing on the balls of her feet. “She’s really coming home…” She adds in a quiet emotional voice.

“No need to say anything else, Sara. You’re very welcome…now just try and relax and get yourself ready for her to be back home with you.” Ali adds. “Obviously, there will still be a few things to take care of like the transfer to Chicago and any other proceedings that happen as a result of the writ I filed, but June is going to help you take care of all of that since she’s able to fully practice in Alabama. There’s time for all of it later though. For now, just try to breathe, process everything, and let yourself enjoy her being home.”

“Oh, ok, I will.” Sara promises and lets out a breath. “Thank you so much. I owe you everything.” She leans in and hugs both Ali and Ashlyn together before hugging June too. “I wish you weren’t leaving tonight so I could take you all to dinner.” She adds regretfully.

“We’ll do a raincheck for when Kira can join.” Ashlyn replies for them and they watch Sara beam all over again.

“I’ll give you a ride home, Sara.” June offers sweetly and Sara nods in agreement. “I’ll just be
outside the door.” She says, wanting to give Sara a few minutes alone with the couple. “Ali, it’s been a total pleasure. You know how to get ahold of me if we need to collaborate for anything else.”

“Same, June. Thank you so much for your willingness to work with me on this and take on the next parts.” Ali says appreciatively and shakes June’s hand before turning back to Sara.

“Stay in touch and let me know how things are going, if you need any help, anything at all… call me.” Ali reminds her. “And I’ll definitely be in touch about the podcast after the holidays.” She adds, knowing she’ll have to have it ready to air as soon as possible so it can act as their back-up plan to pressure the court to act on an appeal. She knows damn well that if her writ doesn’t compel the higher court to act, once the story gets out, LGBT and civil liberties advocacy groups all over the country will be filing writs for Kira too. The higher court will never be able to ignore it with all that attention.

“And make sure Kira reaches out any time she needs to… I’m here. We both are.” Ashlyn chimes in.

“I’ll keep you updated, I swear!” Sara says and hugs Ali one more time. “You two are angels. I just can’t believe it! I’ll never be able to tell you how thankful I am, but I’ll sure try every chance I get. Thank you so much. Happy Thanksgiving!” Sara tears up and then works to compose herself.

“Happy Thanksgiving.” Ali smiles. “Now go work on that turkey!”

“Yeah she wasn’t kidding about that… might want to cook two.” Ashlyn adds with a goofy grin. “And the fried pickles!”

“I will! Alright, I shouldn’t keep June any longer… just… one more…” She hugs and thanks them both yet again before finally walking out the door to find June.

“You’re the most amazing woman in the world, you know that?” Ali says and hugs Ashlyn one more time. “You two are angels. I just can’t believe it! I’ll never be able to tell you how thankful I am, but I’ll sure try every chance I get. Thank you so much. Happy Thanksgiving!” Sara tears up and then works to compose herself.

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“I will! Alright, I shouldn’t keep June any longer… just… one more…” She hugs and thanks them both yet again before finally walking out the door to find June.

“You’re the most amazing woman in the world, you know that?” Ashlyn leans in for a proper kiss as soon as Sara is gone.

“So you say.” Ali smiles. “I’m just happy it turned out the way I was hoping it would. Now I just wish I could celebrate by taking you back to the hotel and having my way with you until our flight leaves tonight.”

“Mmm, I wish you could too.” Ashlyn pouts, bummed out that she’s not nearly recovered enough to even think about attempting it. “But how about a long bath together and… fried pickles.”

“What is with the fried pickles?” Ali quirks an eyebrow.

“I’ve been told they’re magical with a cold beer.” Ashlyn shrugs. “And I’m not one to turn down magical.”

“Cold beer sounds pretty damn magical to me right about now. And that bath with you sounds downright enchanting, Hero… like rainbow unicorn-level enchanting. Let’s go!” Ali tugs Ashlyn by the hand, more than ready to relax into the arms of her favorite person in the world and get back home tonight.

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**Sunday, November 19th**

Ashlyn feels Ali’s body tense up, the brunette’s hand squeezing her forearm hard enough to wake her up. She sleepily looks at the clock to see 3:06am and tightens her grip around Ali from behind, leaning in close to her ear. “Ali baby, wake up. You’re ok, sweetheart… just a nightmare, it’s ok.
Wake up, honey, I’m here.” She speaks softly to gently rouse her girlfriend.

Ali groans groggily with a frown before turning herself in Ashlyn’s arms and burying her face into the officer’s chest as she wakes up a bit. “Sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Hey, don’t apologize. It’s ok, I’ve got you.” Ashlyn soothes her and wipes a few beads of sweat from her brow. “Same nightmare?”

“Yeah.” Ali whispers in reply.

Ali waking up startled and in a cold sweat has become a nightly routine since the incident with Train.

Ashlyn hasn’t been surprised in the slightest, knowing exactly what she herself has gone through in the past. She knows Ali needs to get to a place where she can start talking it out, but she knows it has to come from the brunette on her own. So, she has focused on doing all she can to make Ali feel safe and coax her back to sleep every night, sometimes twice a night. Luckily, it has worked enough that Ali has still been getting plenty of rest despite the nightmares. The brunette has just been cuddling into Ashlyn as closely as she can, sometimes laying mostly on top of her, and letting the officer’s calming voice lull her to sleep.

“Ash?” Ali’s voice cuts through the quiet room.

“Yeah, honey?” Ashlyn replies, knowing immediately by Ali’s alert sounding voice that tonight will be different.

“Do the nightmares stop?” Ali asks a bit squeakily.

Ashlyn sighs. “Yes and no. Yes, they get better and go away for the most part. No, they don’t ever completely go away….at least not for me. Sometimes when I’m struggling or down about something, often completely unrelated, one will just creep up on me. Honestly though, it’s pretty manageable and I’m able to let it go and not let it get to me anymore. So, it really does get a whole ton better.” She’s answers completely truthfully.

Ali nods softly against Ashlyn’s chest and stays quiet for a few minutes before she finds it in her to speak again. “I feel like such a bad person. Like a complete monster. And I don’t understand. I mean, I know you’ve had to kill people before… and I think the world of you. I’ve never for even a second thought any less of you for it. In fact, I’m so proud of you for all you have survived and accomplished. I don’t know if I think that way because of it being part of your job. But I look at myself… and I just can’t believe what I’ve done, that I was capable of killing someone. And it makes me hate who I am.” She sobs softly against Ashlyn’s skin.

“It’s ok, Alex. I know, baby. I completely understand.” Ashlyn hugs her tight and rubs her back lightly. “I went into my careers knowing exactly what I was getting into, what I would face and be asked to do. I was trained to be able to do it, to know what to expect and how deal with it. And even then, even with all of that, I felt the same way you do now once I actually did it.” She admits.

“But you’ve come to terms with it?” Ali asks shyly.

“Yeah, I have. It still takes effort to keep myself there, but I have.” Ashlyn says gently, running a hand through Ali’s hair.

“How did you get there?” Ali wonders out loud.

“Well, first I talked it through a lot. With people in the same position as me, Luke was my go to. And with a therapist. That really helped me put it into perspective. And once I could do that, I started to see that I’m not some terrible person. Everything I have done, good and bad, has always been with
the aim of protecting others. At the end of the day, I can think of no better purpose than to use whatever talent I have to protect innocent people from those who have no other intention but to do harm. It really took me understanding what was in my heart and focusing on the all the good that I do and continuing to do it. Sometimes it can be really hard to remember all that, but then I have wonderful people like you to remind me.” Ashlyn describes it as openly as she can.

Ali doesn’t reply, she just squeezes Ashlyn really tightly and lets a few more tears leak out.

“Alex, is it ok if I try to ask you something?” Ashlyn says after a few more silent minutes pass.

“Of course.” Ali replies in a whisper as Ashlyn scoots down bit so they can be more face to face.

“Just answer whatever comes to mind, ok? Don’t hold anything in. You can say anything, honey. You know I’ll never judge you and nothing you say is ever going to change the way I think of you, I promise you that.” Ashlyn gently instructs her and wipes a few tears from Ali’s cheeks with her thumb. “Ok?”

“Ok.” Ali replies.

“When you saw Train hanging off the boat and trying to grab his gun, what was going through your mind?” Ashlyn inquires.

Ali thinks about it for a minute before just letting the words come out freely. “Just that I needed to keep him from getting to his gun no matter what. I couldn’t let him shoot you, Ash. I couldn’t. I knew I wouldn’t make it down to the front deck in time to help you. I scrambled for a second to find something to throw at him to distract him and give you more time. Then it hit me to just use the boat to knock him off the side. The briefcase was on the deck. If I could just shake him off the boat, he’d drop into the water and couldn’t hurt you and we could go after him after that. So, I just gunned the boat engine to shake him off…and then it hit the dock and…” She trails off, not able to finish the rest as another small sob comes out.

“Shhhh, it’s ok. I’ve got you.” Ashlyn gives Ali a minute to settle before asking her next question. “Did you even for a second think about killing him?” She feels Ali tighten again and goes back to rubbing her back lightly as she looks into her eyes and waits for the answer.

Ashlyn’s question swirls around in her mind as Ali thinks really hard, trying to recall every thought and emotion she felt in the moment. It takes her a couple minutes to really go through everything and really unpack it all, her body unclenching as she finally realizes the answer. “Actually, no. No, I didn’t. I really didn’t at all. I just thought about protecting you and getting him away from his gun and from the boat.”

“Exactly, Alex. Exactly.” Ashlyn smiles at her. “If I’ve learned anything, it’s that people who intend to do harm intend it right from the start. And that those who don’t, never have the intention and are upset when harm is the outcome.” She explains softly as she looks right into Ali’s eyes, the brunette’s expression a bit surprised. “You’ve done nothing but good Alex, you’re whole life dedicated to helping other people. Your heart is gold, your intentions nothing but virtuous even in the most dire situations. This one was no different. Don’t forget who you really are as you work your way through your emotions.”

Ali doesn’t reply, she just leans in for a very soft kiss leaving her lips just lingering against Ashlyn’s without much movement as the officers hands come up to hold her face gently.

“What are you feeling right now?” Ashlyn asks as Ali pulls away from the kiss.
“Relief I guess. A little discouraged that I have quite a ways to go with all this still and that I couldn’t have worked that out on my own. But mostly just relief. And hopeful… for the first time since it happened, hopeful.” Ali replies with completely honesty.

“I’m here every step of the way. You’re not alone.” Ashlyn reminds her.


“I love you too, Alex.” Ashlyn replies just before Ali captures her lips in another kiss, this one longer and deeper.

“Can we go to back to sleep?” Ali says when her own yawn forces them apart.

“Of course, baby. Let’s get some rest.” Ashlyn agrees and pulls Ali into her chest like before.

“I feel a lot better. What would I do without you?” Ali whispers as she closes her eyes.

“Be the same bad ass, kind, and amazing lawyer and person that you already are.” Ashlyn replies with a smile.

“Maybe, but I’m a much better one with you. Actually, I’m a much better everything with you.” The words come out of Ali’s mouth so easily in her sleepy state because it’s just simple truth.

“Ditto, Alex. Love you. Sweet dreams, beautiful.” Ashlyn smiles into Ali’s hair as she feels the brunette’s breathing already falling into a slow and steady rhythm that signals sleep.

Thursday, November 23rd

“Wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey!” Kyle yells as he walks into the bedroom with a tray of breakfast and coffee.

“Ugh, why?” Ashlyn groans and buries her head into Ali’s back as she spoons the brunette.

Ali lifts her head and looks at Kyle who is standing there in his underwear with a big grin on his face before she turns and looks at the clock. “Kyle! It’s fucking 5:30am! What the hell?!”

“It’s turkey day!!” Kyle replies cheerily. “Which means, turkey has to get cooked. Which means, starting early so it’s done on time. Which means, get your asses up because it’s Thanksgiving, bitches!” He yells even louder to get them awake.

“Whose idea was it to let him sleep over last night?” Ali questions.

“Yours.” Ashlyn answers with her eyes still closed.

“Oh don’t you two even start bitching! You should be happy that I’m cooking the turkey for you and I even made breakfast…so, suck it the fuck up!” Kyle gives it right back to them and he sets the tray on the bed.

“Thanks, this looks really good, but I have two questions.” Ashlyn says as she sits up a bit and looks over the eggs and bacon on the tray. “First, why are you in your underwear in our bedroom? We talked about this.”

“Really, Harris? Did you truly expect me to follow that rule? Anyway, it’s Thanksgiving and I made you breakfast. Plus, I’m cooking the turkey! I think I get a free pass.” Kyle defends himself with
satisfied smile.

“Fine, I suppose. Which leads me to my next question… why are you the one cooking the turkey? Pretty sure we’re capable of that. Well…at least I am.” Ashlyn yelps as she gets a light elbow to the ribs from Ali.

“Watch it, Harris.” Ali points her finger at Ashlyn in mock warning.

“I’m cooking the turkey because we all know what happens when you leave two lesbians unattended with a turkey baster.” Kyle waggles his eyebrows and laughs, already ducking his head for when Ali’s pillows goes sailing past him. “I’m kidding! I just figured you two could use some extra rest instead of being up at 4am to start the damn thing and I wanted to try a new butter, sage, and spice seasoning for it anyway. So, I’m on turkey duty!”

“Right.” Ashlyn just shakes her head with a smile and digs into her breakfast. “Well, I’ve got stuffing covered. Nobody tops my stuffing.”

“Sold!” Kyle agrees wholeheartedly. “What about you, princess? What will you be burning… I mean, cooking this year?”

“Ass! If I wasn’t too busy eating this delicious crunchy bacon you just made, I’d totally smack you right now!” Ali glares at him.


“Annyway! I have grand plans this year that I’m not revealing just yet. You two just stay out of my way and watch the delicious magic happen.” Ali says cheerily.

“Well, you certainly have me intrigued.” Ashlyn eyes Ali curiously.

“Good.” Ali smiles and leans in for a quick kiss. “And by the way… good morning, gorgeous.” She leans in for another one.

“See! This is why I can’t trust you two with the turkey baster!” Kyle exclaims and gets up. “You two are getting all gooey, sticky, sweet gross up in here and that’s my cue to shower and check on my bird. I expect help in the kitchen in like an hour, so get moving!” He warns them as he leaves.

After a couple hours of prep work, the three chefs have their dishes ready to go into the oven by late morning. The timing is perfect since their guests will be arriving around noon. It’s been a bit of a tight squeeze in the smaller kitchen of Ashlyn’s house, but the double oven is proving to be a lifesaver.

Ali’s surprise dish became apparent pretty early on when the brunette started boiling elbow macaroni and grating piles of cheese. As much as mac and cheese is Ashlyn’s favorite food of all time, Ali’s choice of dish makes her nervous. The truth is that her grandma’s mac and cheese was her favorite of all time and no other mac and cheese has ever even come close. While she’s incredibly touched that Ali is attempting to make her favorite food, she has no idea how to handle it. Like every other version she’s tried, she already knows Ali’s might be good…but it won’t be her grandma’s. They don’t lie to each other, so what is she going to say when Ali inevitably asks how it tastes? How does she go about telling Ali it’s good without being misleading about it? Especially when Ali knows damn well that Ashlyn loved her grandma’s mac and cheese. What if she asks how it compares? Then what? It’s only 10am and Ashlyn is already sweating it.
“Ding dong!!!” Chris yells like a doorbell as he lets himself right into the house, the kids rushing in behind him.

“Kiddos! Give me love!” Ashlyn says excitedly as she scoops Elsie and Curtis up in a hug. “Happy Thanksgiving! I made you guys some special pilgrim hats.” She grabs the hats off the counter and places one of each of their heads.

“Hey, big guy. Where’s Bridget?” Ali asks, not able to keep the huge goofy grin off her face as she watches Ashlyn with the kids. She had almost melted yesterday while she watched the officer painstakingly cut and glue cardboard and construction paper together for pilgrim hats.

“She’s just grabbing the food from the car.” Chris replies and gives Ali a big hug. “Happy Thanksgiving, Ali!”

“Same to you.” Ali smiles and makes her way to the door to make sure Bridget doesn’t need any help.

“Mashed potatoes and roasted sweet potatoes.” Bridget announces as she walks in, happy to hand off one of the roasting pans to Ali.

“Sounds amazing!” Ashlyn chimes in on her way into the living room to put on “A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving” for the kids while the adults finish pulling the meal together.

“Refreshing soda?” Kyle asks Chris as he hands him a glass bottle of coke. The two share a knowing smile and clink their bottles together.

“Ash, can you get the door, babe? I have to check my mac and cheese!” Ali yells from the kitchen as the doorbell rings.

Ashlyn opens the door to find Rivera and Emily smiling back at her, the fact that they’re holding hands not escaping her observation. She and Rivera haven’t seen each other since before he came to Ali’s rescue and Ashlyn immediately finds herself getting choked up, just able to motion them into the house.

“I’ll find you in the kitchen in a minute.” Rivera whispers to Emily and hands her the dish of food he was holding.

Emily nods and kisses Ashlyn’s bruise-free cheek as she walks by, saying a quick “Happy Thanksgiving, Ashlyn” before heading to find Ali.

“Rivera… Javi…” Ashlyn starts, but is quickly cut off by Rivera.

“Nope. We talked about this. Just bring it in, Sarge.” Rivera pulls Ashlyn into a tight hug and feels her squeeze him back firmly.

“Well I was about to tell you that Javi flew in two days ago and we’re officially an item, buuuut… now I’m not so sure.” Emily says to Ali with a laugh as they watch Ashlyn and Rivera holding each other tightly, Rivera saying something in Ashlyn’s ear as the officer nods. “Think your girl just stole my man.”

“Nah, that’s what they call a ‘bro hug’.” Ali jokes back before getting serious. “I’m so happy for
you, Em. That is one good man right there. Can’t think of anyone better for my bestie.”

“Don’t have to tell me that.” Emily pulls Ali into her closely. “I’m so glad you’re okay and that Ash is okay. You two have to cut the shit before you give us all heart attacks before the age of 40.”

“That’s the plan. Our new goal is to take it down a notch.” Ali promises.

“Do you even know how to do that?” Emily eyes Ali playfully.

“ Probably not, but we’ll give it a go.” Ali laughs.

“Ha, I knew it! I’ll give you an A for effort though.” Emily replies. “What are you making that smells so good?” She asks as Ali checks the oven.

“Mac and cheese. It’s Ashlyn’s favorite.” Ali answers, pulling the hot casserole dish out of the oven.

“So cute. Look at you Betsy Baker. I love what that woman has done to you.” Emily teases before getting serious. “So… Javi asked me to go home with him and meet his Mama at Christmas.”

Ali’s eyebrows raise immediately. “Oh wow! That’s huge! Geez, you guys are really moving things along, huh? We need a major catch-up date, girl.”

“We so do. And yeah, we are. So what do I do?” Emily asks.

“You go home with him and meet the boy’s Mama, dumb dumb!” Ali exclaims.

“Yeah thanks but, I’m gonna need a bit more direction than that, Ali! But, we have a month. So, today we just enjoy the food and fam.” Emily says with a smile.

“Relax. You, me, and Ash will have a little “Meet Javi’s Mama’ pow wow and figure it out. Ash has met her, she’ll know what’s up,” Ali assures her.

“You’re the best!” Emily says happily.

“Of course she is!” Ashlyn joins in as she walks into the kitchen and wraps her arms around Ali from behind. “Everything okay in here, baby?”

“Yep.” Ali smiles and leans back into Ashlyn as she feels a light kiss get pressed to the top of her shoulder. “Everything okay out there?” She motions her head towards the entrance where Ashlyn and Javi were just standing.

“Never been better.” Ashlyn places another kiss on Ali’s cheek. “That looks and smells completely wonderful by the way.” She adds as she eyes the mac and cheese on the counter, happy she can start by giving it such high praise at the moment. It really does look and smell amazing.

“Only the best for you.” Ali blushes a bit at the compliment.

“You two could get a girl pregnant just watching you. Good thing I’m on birth control.” Emily rolls her eyes at them.

“Wait a minute…you’re back on birth control?” Ali eyes Emily knowingly. “Hold up… did you two…”

“Duh. We’ve been talking every night for like a month and he’s been here for two days…” Emily shrugs with a wicked smile.
“We are sooo talking about this later!” Ali says incredulously and Ashlyn just laughs at the two of them.

“What are we talking about?” Rivera asks as he comes into the kitchen, making Emily jump a bit.

“Oh, uh…” Emily starts and Ali comes to the rescue.

“I was asking what you guys brought for food.” Ali quickly covers and feels Ashlyn squeeze her hand.

“Please, you know what I brought.” Emily says and gives Ali a knowing look.

“Yes! Em’s famous green bean casserole.” Ali replies with a fist pump. “Sooo good!”

“You know it!” Emily declares proudly. “Javi made something too.”


“Oooh, what is that?” Ali asks curiously as Ashlyn rolls her eyes at Rivera’s voice tone.

“Just buttermilk biscuits.” Rivera chuckles. “Sounds so much better when I say with some Mexican love though, right?”

“Sure bro.” Ashlyn swats him with the dish towel.

“Think you’re so tough with that new eyebrow battle scar, huh Sarge? I know your soft spot though.” Rivera blocks the swat and tries to move in to tickle-poke Ashlyn just below the ribs.

“Ok, you three… go help Kyle, Chris, and Bridget setup the table and arrange the food.” Ali directs before they break something in the kitchen. “I’m going to…” She’s cut off by the doorbell ringing.

“Answer the door.” She adjusts the end of her sentence.

“Yes, Ma’am.” Ashlyn smiles and heads to the dining room with Rivera and Emily in tow as Ali walks to the door.

“Happy Thanksgiving!” Rebecca says when Ali answers the door.

“Happy Thanksgiving!” Ali replies with a smile and ushers her in along with Joshua and Jameson. All of them exchanging quick hugs.

“I didn’t have a lot of time to cook, so I just brought a ton of cranberry sauce and a few assorted pies from the best bakery ever. Sorry.” Rebecca apologizes.

“That’s perfect!” Ali assures her and points the boys in the direction of where to bring the food. She knows Rebecca loves to cook, so it’s immediately clear why she didn’t have the time to. “How is he?” Ali asks quietly once the boys are out of earshot. They almost never talk about Ken, but Ali feels good enough right now to bring it up.

“Oh um, he’s doing good.” Rebecca replies after the surprise of Ali’s question wears off. “He was upset that the boys and I were going to be alone today, so I told him we were eating with you and Kyle. That really settled him down.” He um… well, he actually told me to tell you something. I definitely didn’t plan to tell you, but since we’re talking about it, do you want to know?”

“Sure.” Ali replies, now wondering what it could be,

“I have no idea what it means, but he said to tell you “World Peas”. Rebecca shrugs her shoulders.
“Does that mean anything to you?”

“Yeah it does.” Ali smiles and laughs a bit to herself at the memory, just realizing right now how far she’s come in healing and feeling at peace with how things ended up with Ken. “He and my Mom used to ask us what we were thankful for and I always said ‘World Peas’ because I had no idea the real word was ‘peace’ when I was little.” She can’t believe Ken remembered that of all things.

“Awww, that’s really cute.” Rebecca smiles, feeling a lot lighter now.

“Really glad you guys are here, the food is just about ready and Edith should be here any minute too.” Ali says warmly and leads Rebecca to where everyone else is hovering around somewhere between the living room and dining room.

Sure enough the doorbell rings just a minute later with Edith arriving just after noon. “Sorry I’m late, just wanted to get the glaze right on these carrots. I brought corn too.” She explains before rushing right into the house after handing off the two bowls in her hands to Ali. She immediately goes up to Ashlyn and lightly grabs her chin. “Let me see that face, Tin Man. You know you’re not really tin, right?” She says as she carefully looks Ashlyn over.

“I’m fine, Edith. I promise you. It looks worse than it is and I’m feeling much better.” Ashlyn appeases her and wraps her arms around the older woman.

“Ok, ok…I’ll stop pestering for now. But put vinegar on it, I swear it helps the yellow bruising clear up faster.” Edith adds before going to say hello to everyone else.

Ashlyn can only shake her head at one of the old wives remedies Edith and her grandma were always famous for. The two of them shared the belief that vinegar was the cure for anything.

With everyone finally there, Kyle instructs them all to grab a plate and serve themselves buffet style from the counter filled with food before they all settle down around the table in the dining room. Elsie and Curtis get them started on a round of what everyone is thankful for. The kids each list typical things like their parents, family, food, friends, and then get the whole table laughing when Elsie throws in My Little Pony and Curtis follows suit by rattling off Pokemon Go characters until Chris finally stops him.

Ashlyn gets the adults started and clears her throat trying not to get too emotional, deciding instead to keep it simple. “I’m thankful for the endless amount of love I feel for every single person at this table. That I have the most amazing chosen family in the world and that we can be here together. I couldn’t ask for anything more, except maybe for all the people who couldn't make it to be here too.”

Kyle is up next, but he gives up right away and says he couldn’t word it any better than Ashlyn just did. The rest of the table agrees and raises their glasses up in toast, all of them deciding to just stop there and dig into their food after that.

“Try it before it gets too cold.” Ali leans in and whispers to Ashlyn, her eyes going to the pile of mac and cheese on the officer’s plate.

“Ok.” Ashlyn replies with a smile, realizing that apparently she’s not the only one nervous about it. She takes a forkful and chews it carefully. It takes a few seconds, but then it hits her immediately. It can’t be, but it actually is… her eyes close involuntarily as the familiar tastes spreads across her tongue, the feeling of comfort it elicits inside is so strong that it takes her by surprise. It’s grandma’s… exactly like grandma’s… even though it can’t possibly be… it is. When she finally
swallows it and opens her eyes, she doesn’t say anything. She just looks at Ali with an emotional
smile and gets up from the table to go over to the counter to pile several more spoonfuls onto her
plate before sitting back down, leaning in to kiss Ali sweetly, and digging back into her food. She
feels the brunette squeeze her thigh under the table, their quiet interaction enough to get the message
across for now.

Just two minutes later, Ashlyn watches with a grin as Chris suddenly gets up and heaps more mac
and cheese onto his plate too. “What don’t you do?” Chris asks rhetorically while leaning in close to
Ali as he walks back to his seat with a completely satisfied look on his face. Ali gets a lot of
compliments on the mac and cheese, but nothing makes her happier than Ashlyn’s reaction to it.

Once everyone is stuffed full of food, the rest of the day is pretty uneventful as they all sit around
watching football and playing a few rounds of the game Pie Face with the kids. Ashlyn pulls Ali into
her lap and keeps her close, content to feel the brunette against her and happy that the headaches stay
away while they watch the TV. When she sees that most people in the room are sprawled out and
napping on the various chairs and couches, she takes the opportunity to sneak away with Ali…
getting up and wordlessly leading her down to their little backyard beach patch.

“How on earth did you do it?” Ashlyn asks as soon they plop down on the sand next to each other,
leaning in close to help keep each other warm.

Ali smiles, not needing any further reference to understand what she’s asking. “You’ve me told a
million times that your grandma’s mac and cheese was your favorite and that nothing had ever come
close. I always thought it was some secret recipe, but then I found your grandma’s cookbook with
the mac and cheese recipe earmarked. And I got so confused because you’re such a good cook and I
couldn’t understand why you didn’t just make it for yourself. Then I reasoned that you must have
tried and not been able to. So then I realized I must be missing something. Anyway, I thought to ask
Edith and she solved the mystery for me.” Ali explains, Edith’s words replaying in her head as she
and the older woman had looked over the recipe page.

“Oh darlin’, that is just the base she went by. Eunice liked to put her own spin on it. She used an
extra half pound of Gouda to make it extra cheesy. Then she added a pinch of nutmeg and cayenne
pepper to give it a little extra kick. Oh and most important, double the butter because ‘those kids are
too skinny’!”

Ashlyn smiles and holds Ali’s face in her hands. “I don’t know where on earth you came from, Alex
Krieger… but you take such good care of me and I’ve never been more thankful for anything in my
life as I am for you. I’m so lucky…so damn lucky. I love you, queen of my heart.” She doesn’t wait
for Ali to respond, leaning right in to kiss her deeply. It immediately gets heated, Ali’s hands going to
the back of Ashlyn’s neck as the brunette lets out a soft moan.

They makeout on the little beach for quite a while, Ali now straddling Ashlyn’s lap as their hands
wander under each other’s shirts and stroke backs and sides. Ashlyn’s lungs are burning, her body
battling between the need for air and the need to stay connected to Ali. The brunette solves the
problem for them, dragging her mouth to Ashlyn’s neck when they’re suddenly interrupted.

“Get a room!” Rivera’s voice comes booming down from above them and Emily giggles beside him.
The two of them standing at the top of the stone steps leading down to the beach.

“We did get a room! Get your own room!” Ashlyn calls back a bit winded with Ali still buried into
her neck.

“We did, but then we saw that this one had a hot lesbian sex-scene playing…so we decided to switch
and stay to watch.” Rivera yells with a chuckle.
“Can’t blame you one bit.” Ali says loudly and gives Ashlyn another quick hard kiss.

“Alright, alright… we came to get you for dessert. Come on you two!” Emily summons them and tugs Rivera towards the house with her.

“But I was already having dessert.” Ashlyn pouts.

“Awww, I know baby, but technically we’re the hosts.” Ali kisses her again. “Let’s go be that annoying couple that feeds each other pie.”

“Mmm, ok. Apple or pumpkin?” Ashlyn smiles.

“Both.” Ali replies as she helps pull Ashlyn up off the sand.

“You’re perfect, Krieger.” Ashlyn leans in for one last soft kiss and puts her arm around Ali’s shoulders for the short trip across the back yard.

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“You are such a sight, sweetheart. So beautiful.” Ali whispers really softly as she takes in all of Ashlyn’s features, barely tracing her defined jawline with her finger. She watches Ashlyn’s chest rise and fall, the officer having fallen asleep as they lay cuddled up naked in bed talking about their wonderful day.

“This was by far the best Thanksgiving I’ve ever had.” Ali continues to whisper softly to the sleeping officer. “I’m so thankful for you, baby. How could I not be? You’re everything I ever dreamed of and then some. I love you so much, Ash… so much that it’s hard to even wrap my head around sometimes. And what really blows me away is that I can feel how much you love me too. You love me so hard and so wholeheartedly….it’s… complete magic. You say you’re lucky, baby, but I’m the lucky one.” Ali trails a few soft kisses across Ashlyn’s shoulder and then lays her head down on her chest, listening to the rhythmic heartbeat for a while before continuing in a hushed voice.

“I see you with the kids and I just want to start a family with you. I want that so much with you… because I know you’re going to be the most amazing mother and I’m almost impatient to see it happen. And god, I can’t wait to be your wife, Ash. I wish I already was. I just want to be yours and connected to you in every way possible. I know it’ll happen soon enough and that you must be waiting for something. Doesn’t matter… I’d wait forever for you, but I’m glad you won’t make me. I really do wish sometimes that I knew what it was. What are you waiting for, baby?” Ali continues to muse out loud softly, jumping when she hears Ashlyn’s voice respond.

“Waiting to be in my underwear.” Ashlyn mumbles, the arm she has around Ali pulling the brunette in closer.

Ali pops her head up a bit startled, checking to see if Ashlyn is awake. The officer’s face is relaxed and expressionless, her breathing still soft. She sighs in a bit of relief that Ashlyn is still asleep. It’s not that every single thing she just confessed isn’t true, it’s just that they haven’t exactly talked about it all in detail yet and she would never want to pressure Ashlyn before they’re both ready. She laughs quietly to herself at Ashlyn’s ridiculous and incoherent response to her question. She laughs harder thinking about how she’s going to tell this story when the officer does finally propose. It suddenly dawns on her that she could always propose instead, but as the idea starts swirling in her head she realizes she’s too sleepy to give it proper thought right now, resigning herself to think about it more when she’s not so tired.
“You’re my world, sweetheart. I’m so thankful for our love. I love you, Ash.” Ali places a gentle kiss on Ashlyn’s lips and settles back down on her chest, sleep finding her pretty quickly.

Ashlyn hears Ali’s slight snore and finally lets the huge smile she’s been holding in take over her face. She had been falling asleep when Ali started talking, but she was awake enough to hear every word and definitely wake enough to give a technically honest answer with Ali being none-the-wiser.

“I won’t keep you waiting long, baby. We’ll have it all, Alex, and I can't wait either. I love you.” Ashlyn presses a kiss to Ali’s forehead and actually gives in to sleep this time.

Chapter End Notes

As a side note, in real life it usually takes a couple days for a parole decision (not just an hour or two) and then release usually takes a little while as well. I took some creative license on that part, so I thought I'd note that here.
Unhaunting Eyes

Chapter Notes

Lots going on in this one because Ali is always up to something (*smut warning too)! Did you really think I'd completely take my foot off the gas even though Bobby and Train are long gone? Of course not...onward!

Keep those comments coming, I love to hear what you think and always feed off of your feedback and suggestions for future chapters :-)

Tuesday, December 5th

Ali is scouring the web for flight options when she hears the distant sound of a car door closing. It’s around 5:30pm so she knows it has to be Ashlyn. She opts to leave the webpage up in the hopes that she’ll be coming right back to this later, instead just closing the laptop screen down for now.

Knowing it takes a couple minutes to walk the path from the garage to the house, she stops to quickly check her make-up in the guest bathroom mirror closest to the little office room she has set up. Satisfied that she looks good, she runs down the stairs just in time to see Ashlyn coming in the door.

Ashlyn barely gets the door closed before Ali wraps her arms around her neck and presses their lips together in a romantic kiss that makes the officer’s toes curl inside her boots.

“Mmmm… hi…baby…glad you’re…home.” Ali’s words come out in between several short kisses she continues to plant on Ashlyn’s lips.

“Hi yourself.” Ashlyn mutters back against Ali’s lips with a smile before pulling back to look at her. “So beautiful, Alex.” Her large hand goes to frame Ali’s face. “And incredibly determined to make one of us lose a foot one of these days.” She shakes her head at the fact that she rarely ever gets to put her gun away safely before Ali greets her, despite her repeated warnings to the brunette.

“Not my fault you look so damn good in uniform, Harris. A bullet through the foot is a small price to pay to get my hello kiss and it would be totally worth it if it happened.” Ali shrugs with a smile. “Besides, that’s what the safety is for, duh.” She winks and Ashlyn chuckles. “Your hands are cold. Is it snowing?” She asks after finally standing back enough to notice that there are little droplets of water on Ashlyn’s winter police jacket and little white flakes in her hair and eyebrows just starting to melt.

“Yep, first of the season. Coming down pretty hard too. I think we’re just supposed to get a couple inches tonight or something like that.” Ashlyn replies as she makes her way over to the gun safe and finally locks the weapon away. “Ok honey, gun is away…feel free to climb me like a tree now.” She teases.

“Cute, Harris.” Ali walks over and places a little tap on her cheek with her hand. “Speaking of gun…I’m dying to know, how did it go this afternoon?” Because of the concussion Ashlyn has been stuck on desk duty for the last week until she could be tested and recertified on her gun per police safety regulations regarding head injuries.

“Aced it with no problem. Actually, I was more accurate and on target than the last time I did it. I
guess that knock to the head did me some good!” Ashlyn grins.

“I knew you’d crush it, babe!” Ali kisses her again. “Can’t say I agree on your head injury being a good thing, but I’m happy things went well today. In fact, I cooked some dinner to celebrate.”

“Yeah it smells amazing in here by the way.” Ashlyn compliments and peers into the kitchen to try and get a look at what it is. “But what if I hadn’t passed the test?” She quirks an eyebrow at Ali.

“Oh please, we both know that would never happen. But, I was prepared regardless. I made chili with roasted root vegetables in it... just as easily comfort food as it is a hearty celebratory dinner!” Ali says proudly.

“That sounds so amazing right now. And totally perfect for this weather.” Ashlyn slides her hands down to Ali’s hips, her thumbs finding their usual spot on the brunette’s hipbones. “Let me go change into something comfy and I’ll be right back down. Maybe we can eat on the couch and dim the lights to watch the snow come down out there?”

“That sounds completely perfect, Hero. I’ll get everything ready. Hurry back.” Ali places a couple kisses across Ashlyn’s jaw and then one on her neck before giving the officer a little push towards the stairs.

Ashlyn finally takes her jacket off and hangs it up on the coat hooks near the door before heading upstairs, turning back just in time to see Ali walking back towards the kitchen, the brunette’s hips swaying a bit. “God I love that woman.” She whispers to herself with a smile, climbing up two steps at a time so she can get back downstairs all that much faster.

“Yeah it smells amazing in here by the way.” Ashlyn lays back on the couch and pats her full stomach very glad that she put on sweatpants.

“That’s because I refuse to serve you anything that I think might be questionable. Trust me, I’ve scrapped my creations and gone with take-out a few times now.” Ali admits sheepishly.

“Seriously?” Ashlyn asks.

“Seriously.” Ali replies.

“Oh my god, I can’t believe you’ve actually done that!” Ashlyn pulls the brunette against her shoulder. “Baby, I’ll try anything you make. You should know by now that I’m not picky at all and will eat anything even remotely edible! Besides, if for some reason it’s that bad, you know I’d tell you and then we’d laugh about it and get take-out together.”

“I know, I know…I just still want to impress you.” Ali divulges in a mumble.

“You impress me without even trying! I’d tell you to relax, but I kinda get it… I’m always trying hard to impress you too.” Ashlyn confesses right back.

“Well aren’t we the perfect pair then?!” Ali laughs.

“We always have been.” Ashlyn smiles and runs her hand up and down Ali’s bicep. “Netflix?”

“Oh uh…” Ali stutters a bit as she tries to redirect the evening. “Maybe in a little while? Kinda just want to do this right now.” She lightly pushes Ashlyn into the corner of the couch and then curls
herself up in the officer’s arms. “This ok?”

“Way better than ok.” Ashlyn replies and kisses the top of Ali’s head. It’s a sure sign that something is up. They’re always close like this, but when Ali has something to talk about, the brunette becomes a stage five clinger. With the extra affectionate greeting when she got home, the lingering touches, the fact that Ali sat so close during dinner that their elbows constantly rubbed together, and now turning down Netflix for cuddly quiet time… there’s no question something is on her mind. Of course, Ashlyn doesn’t mind one bit other than having to wait out her curiosity until the mystery is revealed. As usual, she’s just going to be patient until Ali comes out with it, just holding the brunette close against her and enjoying the weight and warmth of her body in the meantime.

Ali listens to Ashlyn’s heartbeat trying to build up the courage to bring up something she’s been trying to find the right way to approach for a little over a month now. With everything going on with the parole hearing and Train situation, the timing never seemed quite right and she thought she’d have a bit more time to work with. After the email she got this morning, the timing window is much tighter and it’s now or never. What had seemed like a really great idea months ago is now making her stomach churn nervously. She hadn’t even been sure anything would come of it and then got excited at the possibility of it working out, but now she doesn’t know what to think.

“You ok down there?” Ashlyn asks as she feels Ali fiddling with the hem of her t-shirt, the brunette’s fingers tickling her lower stomach. As if it wasn’t clear enough before, Ali only fidgets when she’s nervous about something.

“Yeah, I’m good.” Ali replies quickly, smoothing out the bottom of Ashlyn’s shirt with her hand and then moving to rub light circles on her hip instead. She knows she has to say something, but she’s torn on how to start. Especially because she has no idea how Ashlyn will react. When she first went down this road, she thought it was as simple as doing something to bring the officer some peace of mind. With her own recent experience with violence, she’s not so sure it’s as simple as that anymore. She understands now just how complicated the emotions are, how deep they run. Does she just go for it and rip the proverbial bandaid off or does she ease into it? She feels Ashlyn’s hand gently rubbing her back, calm and steady as always, and opts to go for the latter option since the tranquility of this moment between seems to call for that approach.

“Can I ask you a hypothetical question?” Ali finally opens her mouth and pops her head up a bit to look at the officer.

“You know you can ask me anything.” Ashlyn responds easily, the smile on her face giving away that she knew something like this was coming.

“Oh, so… let’s say that I did something that I thought would be a good thing for you and that was done completely out of love…” Ali starts and watches Ashlyn’s face carefully, finding it calm and caring as always despite her mysterious statement. “If it turned out that it wasn’t a good thing for you and that it upset you… would you tell me? Like, you wouldn’t go through with it just because you didn’t want to hurt my feelings, right? And you’d tell me truthfully how you were feeling?” She puts it out there, knowing this doesn’t sound hypothetical at all.

“Alex, you know that we don’t lie to each other and we don’t have secrets. Of course I would be honest and tell you what I was really thinking and feeling.” Ashlyn answers without even thinking.

“I know, but I also know how much you want to protect me from everything. In a situation where you thought you might hurt my feelings, I wouldn’t want you to pretend you weren’t upset or do something you didn’t want to do just so you could prevent me from getting my feelings hurt. You know what I mean?” Ali probes further.
“Yes, I know what you mean. I promise you though, I’ll always be 100% honest with you about everything even if it means we have to work through some hurt feelings together. Ok?” Ashlyn replies genuinely.

“Ok.” Ali gives her a little smile.

“So, are you going to stop pretending this is all hypothetical and tell what you actually did or plan to do that might get me upset?” Ashlyn asks as she gently lifts Ali’s chin up with her fingers to make the brunette look at her. “I knew before you even said anything just now that something was up… you can tell me, Alex. You know you can talk to me about anything.” She reminds her.

“I know that. I’m just a little nervous.” Ali admits.

“You don’t get nervous, Krieger. And if you do, you certainly never admit it.” Ashlyn lightens the mood by using the very words Ali once did when visiting her in prison.

“Yeah well, you still make me nervous, Harris.” Ali smiles and tilts her head up further for a kiss. “In the best way possible though, the butterflies in my stomach way.” She adds and runs her fingers down Ashlyn’s neck and across the top of her shoulder. “I love you and I’d do anything to see you happy and thriving.”

“I feel exactly the same way about you. I love you too, beautiful.” Ashlyn kisses her deeply for a minute before pulling back. “Now stop stalling, Krieger.” She raises an eyebrow expectantly.

Ali nods, back against the wall, she finally lets it out. “During the first really deep conversation we had as a couple, you told me all about your real Ranger background and then things got even deeper and you confided in me about the second-to-last mission you went on…the school in Iraq. You remember?”

“Yeah, I remember.” Ashlyn replies, not sure at all where this is going.

“From the moment you said that there wasn’t a day that goes by that you don’t wonder about that girl and what happened to her… I couldn’t stop thinking about it, Ash. I…uh… found her.” Ali says it as simply as she can.

“Wait, what?” Ashlyn immediately sits up a bit, jostling Ali along with her. “Found her? Aasera Salib? What do you mean found her?” She asks with wide eyes.

“Well, I pretty much started searching a couple weeks after you told me. And after a lot of digging, I eventually tracked her down. So, I found her… as in I know where she is and a bit about her.” Ali explains anxiously. Ashlyn is definitely surprised, but beyond that there is no indication from her expression whether it’s a good surprise or not.

“Jesus, Alex… I… my god. Tell me about her, what do you know?” Ashlyn sits up even further, her eyes still wide in disbelief, her voice giving away nothing but curiosity at the moment.

“She was adopted by a well off couple from Dubai less than a year after the incident. She’s lived there since. She just turned 20 and is a student at University of Sharjah which is just outside Dubai. She’s actually married and goes by Aasera Tahan now, and she’s doing really well.” Ali elaborates and then stops to let Ashlyn process it.

“Wow…woah…” Ashlyn’s hands are clenched and she’s rubbing them against each other absentmindedly. “God, I don’t even know what to say. I have like a million questions…I…” She can’t find the right words. “Did you find out anything else?”
“Ok, honey, let’s just pause for a minute. Please?” Ali suggests and continues to search Ashlyn’s face for any signs of her being upset, but it’s still too hard to read. “I can’t get a read on you right now. Can you please tell me what you’re thinking and feeling?” Ali takes Ashlyn’s hands in her own and turns to face her more.

“Uh, yeah, sorry. I don’t know… I guess I feel relieved that she’s okay. I feel happy about that. But I sort of feel disappointed that I don’t know more. I know that’s really selfish…like I should be glad that you found out this much. But, I guess I really want to know what she went through to get where she is. Was it hard on her or has she done ok? How’s her hand? Does she manage without it ok or it is really difficult? Does what happened still affect her or does she not really think about it? Is her adoptive family good to her? Is she happy? Just all this stuff I wonder about. Even what she looks like. Oh…do you have a picture of her?” Ashlyn gets out in a ramble.

“No, I don’t have a picture. Ash…baby, I know it’s a lot, but try and calm down just a little. Please, just breathe for a second, ok?” Ali says gently as she realizes the officer is shaking slightly and her breathing is heavy.

“Ok, sorry.” Ashlyn lets out a slow deep breath, just now realizing that her heart is racing.

“Don’t apologize. I have a lot to tell you and you seem really overwhelmed right now, so I need to make sure you’re ok.” Ali explains.

“I’m ok. Really. I promise I’m ok. It’s just a lot to take it.” Ashlyn assures her.

“I know.” Ali nods. “Can you tell me… are you upset with me?”

“No, Alex, I’m not upset with you or upset about the situation right now. I know you did it with good intentions…” Ashlyn pauses.

“But…” Ali can sense it coming.

“No buts… it's… well, how long have you know about her?” Ashlyn inquires.


“A month?! Alex, why didn’t you tell me?” Ashlyn asks sounding a little hurt. “I’m not mad… I just don’t understand why you didn’t think you could tell me you were looking for her? Or why you didn’t tell me right away when you found her?”

“Oh Ash, I know it looks bad on the face of it, but it’s different than you think. Will you let me explain to you?” Ali pleads softly.

“Yeah, of course.” Ashlyn nods.

“I really should have told you that I was going to do it. That was my fault and, looking back on it, I see that I maybe should have done that part differently. In the beginning, it was this seemingly impossible task. It was truthfully a total longshot and I frankly believed that nothing would come of it. Being so new in our relationship, I reasoned that I didn’t want to start something or get you upset over something that I thought would end in nothing. I figured that if for some reason I did find something out, then I would tell you and we could figure out at that point how you wanted to proceed. Does that make sense?” Ali checks in.

“Yeah that part makes sense to me when you put it that way. But you didn’t tell me right away when you knew something…” Ashlyn presses.
“I know. I didn’t see it going that way when I started this. Let me start from the beginning.” Ali tries to explain it as best she can. “After thinking about everything you told me, I did a typical person search for her like I do sometimes for my cases and found nothing. Then one day it struck me to try and see if there were any immigration records, especially with the adoption part of it. I got in touch with an immigration lawyer that knew my mom and had her help me do an Iraqi immigration records search for her. Two records popped up…one that definitely wasn’t her based on the age and another that seemed like maybe it could be. Again, it seemed like a longshot that it was her. So, I dug a bit further and found out all the things I just told you about her, but I still couldn’t be completely sure it was her. I really wanted to be sure it was her before I said anything, Ash. I wasn’t trying to keep it from you. I just didn’t want to get your hopes up and have you go through all of these emotions for no reason.” Ali pauses. “I’m so sorry if I hurt your feelings.”

Ashlyn squeezes Ali’s hands. “You didn’t. Hearing how this happened… I would’ve done the same thing if I was you. I wouldn’t have risked dropping this all on you knowing how conflicted you felt about it if I wasn’t completely sure. I get it, Alex. I’m not hurt and I’m not upset with you.” She replies, her emotions settling a bit. “I’m not sure I understand everything though. You just told me all that stuff about her… so, how are you confident now that it’s her when you weren’t before?”

“Well… that’s what I was getting to with all this.” Ali lets out her own deep breath. “Once I found out where this person was a student, I searched to find some kind of contact and came up with an email address. The only way I could be sure was to email and ask her.”

“Oh…ok…so, she replied?” Ashlyn prods a bit impatiently.

“She did. I can let you read the emails if you want. I really shouldn’t have opened that can of worms without you, I can see that now. She replied and confirmed who she was the day before the night with Train happened and things have been sort of crazy for us since then. Not only did it not seem right to drop this on you in the midst of everything going on, but I learned something that ended up requiring another email back to her. And then it took a little bit for her to reply. She just got back to me this morning and here we are.” Ali does her best to fill in the details, feeling more and more guilty that she didn’t say something sooner. “Ugh, god Ash, I’m sorry…I feel like I really messed this up.” She buries her head in her hands.

“Hey, Alex… no. You didn’t mess this up. I’m just trying to understand it all.” Ashlyn tries to pry Ali’s hands away from her face. “Please look at me.” She waits until whiskey eyes meet her own. “I’m so lucky, baby. So fucking lucky that I have someone like you that cares so much about me and is so invested that they go all out to do something like this. You did the best you could with the most loving intentions…I swear to you, I see that. Alex, look at everything you did so that I might have even the slightest chance to get my wish of knowing what happened to her. And maybe even a little hope of contacting her myself if she even wants to ever hear from me. It means the world to me that you did all this for me and I’m not going to question how you went about it. You did it for me, from your heart… and I love you for it. I love you.” Ashlyn gets out emotionally and pulls Ali in for passionate kiss to make sure she fully gets her message across.

“Can I just tell you the rest?” Ali asks as soon as they pull apart, just wanting it all on the table.

“Tell me, sweetheart.” Ashlyn replies, her voice and demeanor more calm now.

“When I emailed, I told her who I was and my connection to you…explained very minimally why I was looking for her. When she replied she mentioned the very basic things I already knew from the records…that she got adopted by a couple from Dubai, that she lived there now, that she was in college and married. And the most surprising thing was that she’s actually in the U.S. right now as part of a study abroad program at the University of Delaware with some fellowship that she got.” Ali

“Not if you’re studying to be a physical therapist apparently. It’s ranked in the top ten schools in the world for that.” Ali replies, her smile growing a bit.

“Oh…physical therapy…geez, good for her.” Ashlyn can’t hold her own smile in. Something about that fact just lightened her heart a bit. The thought that maybe whatever this girl went through has driven her towards a great life purpose.

“Ash…” Ali leans in close.

“Yeah?” Ashlyn replies and buries her face into Ali’s hair.

“She wants to meet you.” Ali finally drops the bomb.

“She…she does?” Ashlyn asks a bit stunned, her voice nervous and shaky again. “Why would… I mean I guess I can see that. I supposed I’d want to face down the person who took my hand too… get an apology, maybe unload a lot of angry feelings. I owe her that.” She says a bit sadly.

“I can’t pretend to know exactly what she’s thinking, sweetheart. But you can read the emails yourself… it seems different than that. She seems happy to have found you and excited to meet you. That’s the vibe I get from the emails. She said she’s been searching for you for over 5 years now, but had nothing to go on but “Harris” and what you looked like.” Ali tries to calm her.

“Ok, yeah, I’d like to read them.” Ashlyn says softly.

“One of the reasons I was waiting to hear from her is because she was a bit unsure of her timeline for traveling back to Dubai. Her time here ends this semester, but she wasn’t sure if her husband was going to meet her here in the U.S. for the holidays or if she was going home before that. She emailed me back this morning to tell me she’s going home in a couple weeks. I thought we’d have more time to work with since she thought she might be here through January, but it looks like we don’t.” Ali explains.

“Yeah, I guess not.” Ashlyn replies a bit disappointedly.

“Ash… do you want to meet her?” Ali asks bluntly. “I’m committed to making it happen if you do and she really wants to meet you. But sweetheart…I really want you to be sure before you agree to it. If you truly want to, I’ll make it work. If you’re not sure right now, we can wait and we can travel to meet her in Dubai at a later time. Or if you don’t want to at all, that’s completely ok too. Whatever you want, I support you completely. This is what I meant when I said I don’t want you to go through with something just so you don’t hurt my feelings, or anyone else’s for that matter.” She levels with the officer.

“I want to meet her.” Ashlyn says resolutely.

The response is so fast Ali barely has time to blink. “Ash, you don’t have to decide right this second. Take your time and think about it.”

“Alex, I want to meet her.” Ashlyn repeats insistently. “There’s nothing for me to think about. I’m nervous about it, but I know I’ll regret it if I don’t. At the very least, I want to tell her that I’m sorry. And if I have the guts to ask and she’ll appease me, I want to know all those things about her that I wonder about. I have to meet her. I want to.”
“Ok. I told her if we could work it out, that I would fly her into Boston, get her a hotel room, car service, all of it paid for. I’ll make it happen if you’re sure. I was already looking at flights today just in case… she could fly in this Friday afternoon and leave Sunday morning…” Ali lays out a plan.

“I’m sure. Do it.” Ashlyn says confidently before letting out another deep breath and pulling Ali into her really tightly. “I’m really sorry if I made you think I was upset with you in the beginning. I was just surprised and needed time to wrap my head around it all. It means everything to me that you listen to me so intently and care about and love me so much that you would work so hard to do something like this for me. I just can’t believe it. Thank you, Alex. It doesn’t matter how this meeting turns out, thank you for giving me the chance. I love you so much.”

“I love you too. You deserve to have peace and everything in this world that is good. I’d do anything to make sure that happens. I just want you to be happy, Ash.” Ali whispers.

“I am happy.” Ashlyn hugs the brunette impossibly tighter.

“Me too.” Ali returns the sentiment, her hands squeezing the small of Ashlyn’s back where they are resting.

“Can we go get some fresh air? Take a walk in the snow?” Ashlyn requests after they sit quietly for a few minutes.


They walk in silence for almost an hour, following the long winding road along the ocean that their house is on. They enjoy the crunching of snow under their feet, the cool air on their skin, the sound of the waves that can’t be seen in the dark, and the warmth of each other as they walk along with their arms interlocked.

“How are you doing? You ok?” Ali is the first one to speak once they get back inside. She takes Ashlyn’s winter hat off for her after her coat, her hand lightly stroking the officer’s red and cold cheek.

“I’m ok, promise. Just a lot running through my mind…mostly questions and scenarios about how it might go, you know? I’m really nervous, but I’m excited too if that makes sense.” Ashlyn says honestly.

“Makes complete sense. I kind of feel that way about it too. I know it’s a lot. Anything I can do for you?” Ali says sweetly.

“Makes complete sense. I kind of feel that way about it too. I know it’s a lot. Anything I can do for you?” Ali says sweetly.

“You’ve already done so much, baby… but, yeah, there’s something you can do for me.” Ashlyn replies in a quiet voice.

“Name it.” Ali replies adamantly.

“I feel a little all over the place. I need to settle.” Ashlyn leans in close to Ali’s ear, kissing the soft skin behind her earlobe. “I just need to feel you, Alex. I want to get lost in you. Completely and totally lose myself in you. Take me upstairs and make love to me…please.” She requests, her voice so low and deep that it makes a shiver run through Ali’s body.

Ali’s heart flutters and her stomach fills with butterflies at the request. They haven’t been intimate since Ashlyn got hurt, being cautious to make sure her face and head injury had the proper time to heal. The officer has been mostly back to normal lately, but Ali is still slightly hesitant to push too far too fast.
“Anything you want, love. Just promise me we’ll go really slow and you’ll stop if anything feels off or hurts.” Ali implores her.

“I promise.” Ashlyn drags her lips down Ali’s neck before moving to capture her lips in a slow deep kiss that leaves them both breathless in no time at all, one that elicits a soft whimper from the brunette as she pulls away. Her hands drag down Ali’s sides slowly as she backs up just enough to gaze into gorgeous whiskey colored eyes. “Take me to bed, Alex… please.”

Worship. That’s the only word that even comes close to describing how it feels as Ali works lips and tongue over her body. The brunette taking her time to taste every inch of skin, kiss every scar, trace every inked line with her tongue. It’s loving, and sensual, and intense, and it leaves Ashlyn gasping for breath and writhing against the bed. “Alex, that’s so good, baby.” The words come out in whispered whine as Ali goes back to giving her nipples attention, rolling her tongue over one with she rolls her fingers over the other. Everything is tightening, building, her body trembling as it starts down the road to release. “Please…” It’s all she manages to get out, but she doesn’t have to say anything more. Ali reads her body as if it were her own.

“I’m so addicted to your body, the way it feels under my hands, the way it responds to me. You’re perfection, Ashlyn… beautiful sexy perfection.” Ali slides her hand down to Ashlyn’s center, her fingers parting the soaking folds to find a flood of wetness that she drags up to the officer’s swollen clit, staying there to rub tight circles. Ashlyn’s hips come off the bed to meet her hand, a cross between a moan and a hiss leaving her lips as she grips Ali’s back tightly in her hands.

“Please…” Ashlyn soon finds herself begging again, energy surging through her body as she lets everything go and gives complete control to Ali. “Alex…yes…yes…please more…”

“I love you…all of you.” Ali sucks the skin behind Ashlyn’s ear and slowly pushes two fingers inside her, pumping slow and deep as she presses into her g-spot every time.

“Oh god…” Ashlyn’s short fingernails dig into the soft skin of Ali’s back, her whole body humming in a sweet vibration that she can’t get enough of. “Just like that…Alex… unnnh, baby. Please, like that…oh my god.” Her breathing is ragged, her voice raspy as she grips Ali’s equally sweaty body against her own as close as she can. It’s still not enough. She needs more, needs to be even closer. Her hand slides down between them, findings Ali’s core as wet and wanting as her own. She hears the brunette’s gasp as her middle finger massages her clit, Ali’s fingers thrusting just a little bit faster into her now.

“Ash…I want you so badly.” Ali husks into the officer’s ear. “Inside me… baby, please, inside. Hurry.” She can feel Ashlyn’s walls tightly clenching around her fingers, the officer’s body so close to reaching the peak and she wants to be there right with her. Two long fingers fill her and her hips start moving of their own accord to meet Ashlyn’s every stroke, the leverage against her own hand helping her get even deeper inside the officer. “That’s it, baby….oh mmmm, god Ashlyn…yes!” She’s so much closer than she realized.

There are no words, just moans and gasping puffs of breath. What was once slow and sensual is now a frenzy to meet each other at the edge and tumble over it together. This…this place is exactly what Ashlyn needed tonight. The place where there are no thoughts outside of each other, where there is nothing but skin against skin, heartbeat against heartbeat, carnal instincts, and whispered words of love…where everything separate comes together as one and nothing else matters.

“Look at me, Ash.” Ali mumbles through her panting and pulls her head up just enough to find shiny hazel eyes with her own. Her body shivers, Ashlyn’s abs clench, and everything becomes hazy.

“Kiss me, Alex.” Ashlyn just manages to whisper before a loud moan escapes her lips and finds its
way into Ali’s mouth when the brunette complies immediately. She feels Ali’s tongue against hers and the tight coil inside her finally releases, her whole body shuddering in pleasure as she feels Ali writhe against her in the same state of orgasmic ecstasy.

“Ash…” Ali breathes out as she collapses on top of the officer and buries her head into Ashlyn neck as they both desperately suck in air. When Ashlyn’s hips still, she slips her fingers out of her so she can hold her closer. She feels Ashlyn’s fingers leave her body shortly after and the officer does the same, the two of them now in a tight embrace as their bodies come down and relax.

“You’re amazing… I love you with all my heart.” Ashlyn breaks the long minutes of silence as they hold each other.

“I love you too, wonderful.” Ali lifts her head. Ashlyn’s eyes look heavy and tired, but gleaming and peaceful. “Close your eyes, love…sleep. Everything else can wait. Sweet dreams.” She leans down to kiss each of her girlfriend’s eyes before placing a soft lingering kiss on her lips and settling back down on her chest.

It’s only about fifteen minutes before Ashlyn is deeply sleeping, her face completely relaxed, light puffs of breath leaving her mouth. She looks so serene and Ali could watch her forever, mapping every little line and freckle on her face even though she knows them by heart. Seeing that it’s only just past 9:30pm, Ali brushes a few stray hairs from Ashlyn’s forehead and presses a kiss there before very slowly getting out of bed without disturbing her. She pulls on a robe and makes her way to her office, opening her laptop screen and getting back to work.

Just half an hour later and it’s done. Flight, hotel, and car service all booked. An email sent to Aasera with all the details. The task complete, Ali slips back into bed and settles against Ashlyn’s chest, relishing in how warm the soft skin feels against her own. The room is bathed in a soft pinkish glow from the snowy night outside as fluffy flakes swirl outside the window. Ashlyn’s arm instinctively wraps around her shoulders and holds her protectively like always and the officer’s steady heartbeat lulls her into a recently elusive dreamless sleep.

Friday, December 8th

“Are you sure my hair is ok? And my outfit is appropriate?” Ashlyn asks Ali as she looks in the mirror for like the twentieth time in the last half hour. “Like, are you sure I don’t look too gay or something?”

Ali can’t help but let out a quiet little laugh at that last question before making her way over to the very anxious officer. “Baby…” She gently puts her hands on Ashlyn’s cheeks. “You look perfect. Your hair looks great, your makeup is just right, and your outfit is nice but casual. And since when do you even worry about looking gay at all, let alone too gay? Besides, I already told her exactly who I am, remember? She knows your gay, sweetheart.”

“Ugh, I don’t know… I just don’t want to look intimidating or freak her out.” Ashlyn admits. She wanted to look nice and had opted for a pair of fitted dark-wash jeans and a light blue collared shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Now she’s wondering if it’s too much.

“Ashlyn, I promise you…you look great. I know you’re nervous, but it’s going to be ok. You want to meet her and she wants to meet you. You’ll talk and hopefully end up in a good place. No matter what happens, you’ll be a very different place than you have been up until now and good or bad, it’ll put an end to a lot of questions and unknown, right?” Ali talks her through it.
“Right. You’re right.” Ashlyn concedes and tries to chill out a bit. “Sorry. I don’t mean to be so needy. I’m just so fucking nervous.”

“Hey, you’re not needy.” Ali pulls her into a hug. “Just be your normal honest and kind self and it’ll be just fine. That much I’m sure of.” Ali gives her a soft kiss to punctuate the statement. “Come here, sit.” She walks them over to the comfy living room chair nearby and settles Ashlyn into it before going around the back and starting to massage the officer’s shoulders. “How’s that feel?”

“Really good. Thank you.” Ashlyn leans back into the soothing touch and closes her eyes.

“What are your favorite and least favorite monopoly pieces?” Ali asks in an attempt to distract Ashlyn while they wait. Aasera should be arriving any time in the next 20 minutes.

“So random, Krieger.” Ashlyn chuckles.

“Just answer the question, Harris.” Ali continues to massage her strong shoulders.

“My favorite has always been the top hat. It’s stylish and cool and just sort of fits with my vibe. My least favorite is probably the thimble. Not to be an uber crazy feminist, but I always felt it symbolized the oppressed woman stuck being a housewife. And while I get that being a housewife in and of itself isn’t a bad thing….I just, I don’t know, it always rubbed me the wrong way.” Ashlyn answers.

“Whew, that’s a lot of spite to put on a thimble.” Ali teases and gets a playful glare from Ashlyn as the officer pauses to look up at her. “I’m kidding. You’re going to laugh but my least favorite has always been the iron for the exact same reason. Come to think of it, the thimble also fell into that same camp for me, but I always disliked it a bit less because it was fun that it actually fit on your pinky finger.”

“Feminist power!” Ashlyn jokes. “So, are you going to be fighting me for the top hat then?”

“Nope. My favorite is the battleship.” Ali replies with a smile.

“Really? Hmmm, can’t say that would’ve been my first pick for you… but, now that you say it, it fits.” Ashlyn thinks about it.


“Well, it’s not the biggest piece but something about it seems sturdy and strong. It’s one of the more detailed pieces and what’s better than having a battleship to represent you given that the game is pretty much a battle in and of itself. You’re a totally feisty fighter, Krieger. So, yeah, it fits.” Ashlyn elaborates.

“Those are most of the reasons I like it so much. You know me too well, Harris.” Ali smiles.

“I could always know you better.” Ashlyn smirks and tilts her head back to look up at the brunette.

“Sure can.” Ali smirks back and leans down, kissing Ashlyn deeply despite the somewhat awkward positioning.

Both of them jump apart at the sound of the entry gate buzzer going off which alerts them that Aasera is here and will be at the door before they know it. They had decided to have this meet-up at the Newton house since it was closer to the airport and less of a trek. Ashlyn is quickly up on her feet looking a bit like a deer in the headlights before Ali goes to stand in front of her.

“Easy, baby. Just chill in here and relax. I’m going to go get the door, ok?” Ali strokes Ashlyn’s
cheek lightly and gets a nod from the officer. “Breathe. Try to relax and just be yourself. It’s gonna be ok.” Ali reminds her, pressing a quick soft kiss to her lips before she heads to the door.

Even though it might seem a bit overzealous, Ali chooses to open the door so she’s already there when the car pulls up. The driver is professional and helps the woman out of the car and up the steps where Ali is waiting.

“Hi Aasera, I’m Ali.” Ali smiles widely as the woman gets to her and smiles back. “Welcome to our home.”

“Thank you very much for having me, Ali. I am so appreciative of your kindness with all of the travel arrangements and it’s very nice to meet you in person.” Aasera replies kindly and reaches to shake Ali’s hand.

Ali has to admit that she’s surprised by how impeccable her English is. She has an accent, but beyond that you’d never know she wasn’t a native speaker. She wears a simple outfit of jeans and a thick gray cardigan, her head covered in a rose colored hijab, and her coat and travel bag slung over her left shoulder mostly obscuring her hand on that side. She’s about as tall as Ashlyn, a bit lanky, and very pretty. “You’re very welcome. We’re really happy that you’re here. I hope the flight was good and you got through the airport ok. Here, let me take your coat and bag.”

“Everything was great, really easy. Thank you, Ali.” Aasera says with another smile, handing Ali her things.

It’s the first time Ali gets a glimpse at her left hand, clearly a prosthetic, but she quickly averts her eyes so she doesn’t linger on it. As sweet and polite as the woman is being, Ali can tell she’s about as nervous as Ashlyn. Her posture is rigid and her eyes are a little wide and alert, scanning around a bit as if Ashlyn could suddenly pop up from anywhere. “Please, come on in.” Ali gestures and begins walking them through the door, hanging her coat on the hook and putting her bag beside it.

“Would you like something to drink?”

“Thank you for the offer, but I’m fine right now. This is such a beautiful home.” Aasera replies as she looks around the large foyer area and into the open space with the kitchen and dining room in full view.

“Thank you, it’s a bit too much for just the two of us. But I bought this house a long time ago when I was a young lawyer and was excited to be buying my first home. I went very overboard back then, but I still love it.” Ali admits. “We have a smaller home about an hour away that is near the ocean and we spend a lot of our time there.”

“Sounds wonderful. I love the ocean.” Aasera smiles widely as she continues to look around.

“And I’m babbling. I know you certainly didn’t come all this way to listen to me ramble. Come on into the living room.” Ali leads the way. “Ash honey, Aasera is here.” Ali calls as she approaches even though Ashlyn obviously knows they are coming. She just wants to make sure the introduction is pleasant and not awkward.

Ashlyn is already standing up when they get there, quickly wiping her sweaty hands on her jeans before Ali and Aasera come into full view. Her heart races as she gets her first glimpse of the girl, but she’s not a girl anymore, she’s a grown woman. That part alone throws Ashlyn off a bit because it strays so far from the mental image of the 12-year-old child that has been the subject of her thoughts for so many years. She’s tall, healthy-looking and truly beautiful.
As if Ashlyn wasn’t already feeling off-balance with the discrepancy between her memories and the new reality, Aasera’s eyes lock onto her own and it’s almost earth-shattering. Her eyes… they’re the exact same deep dark brown orbs that she remembers with one monumental difference. Gone is the fear, the hollow and haunting stare that has plagued her dreams since that awful day. Instead these eyes house vibrancy, contentment, and warmth… a lovely smile appearing just underneath them and aimed directly at her. She’s frozen to the spot for a moment as everything hits her at once, her body slow to react as her mind races. A little throat clear from Ali breaks her out of her trance and she scrambles to step forward.

“Hi Aasera, it’s so good to see you. You look great.” Ashlyn gets out a bit squeakily in somewhat rusty Arabic as she extends her hand out respectfully, knowing that greetings are very formal in the woman’s culture.

Ali’s eyes go wide at hearing Ashlyn speak another language, having no idea what her girlfriend just said even though it appears to be some kind of greeting. She knew the officer spoke middle-eastern languages, but she’s never heard it firsthand. She hadn’t even considered that Aasera might not understand them that well given that she was studying in the U.S., but she feels warm inside that Ashlyn did and is trying so hard to make everything as comfortable as it can be.

Aasera doesn’t say anything right away. She slowly walks closer until she is right in front of Ashlyn before speaking only one word. “Harris.” She whispers with a teary smile and throws her arms around Ashlyn’s shoulders, hugging her tightly.

Ashlyn is so surprised that she fumbles for what to do with her arms for a few seconds before returning the secure hug wholeheartedly. She knows damn well that this is very intimate even for greeting a family member in Muslim culture, let alone a stranger. She had expected the worst… that maybe Aasera had come here to exorcise her own demons and unleash a torrent of pent up emotions on her. And maybe that will still happen, but right now there is this amazing hug and Ashlyn feels everything inside herself loosen and lighten at the gesture.

“I’m betting my English is a lot better than your Arabic, so perhaps we should stick to that.” Aasera says in perfect English and pulls back still smiling, taking both of Ashlyn’s hands in her own. “I’ve dreamed of this day for a long time.”

“Yes.” Ashlyn replies with her own huge smile, though admittedly it’s been more nightmare material than the dreamlike actuality this is turning out to be so far. She feels an almost cold, rubber-like sensation on her hands and finally looks down at it for the first time. It’s a completely robotic hand, made entirely of black metal and rubber and more advanced than anything she could have imagined. It holds her own hand so gently with the perfect pressure and only then does it hit her that she was expecting something much more basic and cumbersome for some reason.

“It’s pretty amazing. Black is my favorite color too. I’m a little jealous.” Ashlyn chooses to respond with equal lightness following Aasera’s lead. Their eyes lock onto each other’s again and the two woman share a sweet and genuine look between them for a few moments.

“Very futuristic, isn’t it?” Aasera says lightly as she follows Ashlyn’s eyes down to her hand. “And a whole lot stronger and abler than a real one. I call it my upgrade.” She adds with a laugh.

“It’s pretty amazing. Black is my favorite color too. I’m a little jealous.” Ashlyn chooses to respond with equal lightness following Aasera’s lead. Their eyes lock onto each other’s again and the two woman share a sweet and genuine look between them for a few moments.

“Okay, well… I think you ladies have a lot of catching up to do. I’m going to go work on some snacks and drinks.” Ali breaks the moment to excuse herself. “Aasera this is Ashlyn. Ashlyn… Aasera.” She playfully introduces them to get the ball rolling before smiling and leaving the room.

“Ashlyn.” Aasera repeats as she sits down on the couch that Ashlyn just motioned to. “I never knew that was your name. I’ve known nothing about you all these years but ‘Harris’ and what you looked
like. This is very different.” She motions to Ashlyn’s hair. “My memories have always had very light blonde hair in them. But your eyes are the same as I remember, just much happier looking now.”

Ashlyn smiles at the statement, the woman’s thoughts paralleling her own when it came to eyes. “Yeah, it’s very different even for me. I just cut it this year, so it’s my natural color now and not the blonde that I used to dye it.” She explains, getting herself comfortable on the couch beside Aasera with a comfortable space between them.

“It suits you very well. You’re still just as striking as I remember, just maybe more... handsome now.” Aasera says with very hesitant tone. “I’m not sure if that’s appropriate to say that to a woman and I don’t want to offend you, it certainly wouldn’t be okay at home. I just don’t know a better word and I mean it in a good way, I’m sorry…I shouldn’t have…” She stammers apologetically.

“No, no, it’s fine!” Ashlyn quickly assures her. “I take it as a compliment and Ali tells me that all the time.”

“Oh, ok.” Aasera relaxes a bit.

“You’re different than I remember too. You’ve grown up so much... you look so healthy and happy, just wonderful. It makes me very glad to see that.” Ashlyn says honestly. “A lot of time has passed for both of us.”

“I am very happy. And healthier than I’ve ever been despite still falling into the invalid category.” Aasera replies with a smile and a playful little eye roll as she raises her left hand up a bit. “Would you like to know about it?” She asks seeing Ashlyn looking curiously at her hand again.

“Yes... I mean, anything you’re willing to share, I’d love to hear.” Ashlyn responds trying not to sound overly eager or pressuring even though she’s dying to know everything.

“I started out with something much more inferior to this. First, it was a hook-like device and then a plastic hand that just opened and closed. Those just got me used to triggering the different muscles in my arm that so many of us ignore in order to get the prosthetics to operate. I am lucky that my adoptive parents had the means to pursue better treatment for me and I got involved in robotic prosthetic research at the main hospital in Dubai. I had surgery two years ago to attach controller electrodes to my muscles and nervous system. This robotic prosthetic connects to those and reads my natural muscular movements to operate. In many ways, it’s as mindless as just having a normal hand. I just have to be careful because it has a lot more strength and I have to be conscious of not over-controlling it. You can touch it... here.” Aasera explains and holds the hand out towards Ashlyn, opening the fingers and then closing them with a soft electric hum. Then she makes each finger move and the thumb rotate, just like a real hand could do, finishing with a peace sign to make Ashlyn laugh.

“This is incredible. My best friend has a prosthetic leg and it’s nothing near this.” Ashlyn marvels at it, running her hand along the rubber-coated metal fingers and watching their deliberate and intricate movement in awe, smiling when the hand lightly clasps hers.

There’s a couple minutes of silence between them and Ashlyn suddenly feels her anxiety building as it goes on. She looks up at the woman and her emotions get the best of her. “Aasera, no matter how great this hand is... I can’t ever give back what I took away from you and I am so so sorry. I can never forgive myself for what happened that day and...”

“Stop.” Aasera says firmly with a slight frown, halting Ashlyn mid-sentence. “Don’t do that. That’s not why I came here. That’s not why I’ve searched for you all these years with almost nothing to go on. You won’t forgive yourself and I won’t forgive you, but only because there is nothing to forgive.
Nothing at all to be sorry for. Do you understand, Harris?"

“Not really, no.” Ashlyn replies a bit stunned.

“Can I call you ‘Harris’? Is strange for you if I do that?” Aasera asks, her voice back to being calm.

“Of course you can. Many people call me that, especially since I am a police officer now. I’m very used to it.” Ashlyn replies easily.

“Ok, good. That’s what I’ve called you for years because I didn’t know anything else. I’ve gotten used to it and am attached to it if I’m being honest.” Aasera admits, looking down at Ashlyn’s arms and noting how her sleeves are rolled up almost the same way as the day it happened. “I used to call these your markings before I knew they were called tattoos. You have more of them than before, right?”

“Yeah. I didn’t have any tattoos on this arm before, these are pretty new.” Ashlyn answers as she lifts and turns her right arm a bit.

“Can I show you mine?” Aasera asks softly.

“Of course! You have tattoos?” Ashlyn perks up a bit.

“Only one.” Aasera smiles and grabs the base of her prosthetic hand.

Ashlyn watches on curiously as the woman clicks tiny knobs in a few spots to remove the robotic hand, carefully placing it on the couch before turning to loosen a couple of screws on the remaining base that appear to go into her skin. She then wiggles the piece to work it off, leaving nothing but the stump of her hand at the wrist. Aasera looks up at Ashlyn and holds her arm out, turning it so the inner wrist area of the stump is upwards for her to see.

“Do you know what it says?” Aasera inquires and studies Ashlyn’s face.

Ashlyn looks it over carefully. The black ink runs right along the wrist, just under the stump where the first area of unscarred skin is. It’s appears to be a few Arabic letters, the entire script about three inches wide and half an inch high. She studies it a bit more closely, her mind working to figure out the letters seeing as how it’s been quite a while since she’s dealt with the Arabic alphabet. Hey eyes go wide and her mouth drops open when she puts it together. “It’s… it’s my name?” She questions, completely beside herself in disbelief.

“It’s your name.” Aasera confirms with a smile.

“But why?” Ashlyn asks in a whisper, looking at ‘Harris’ permanently inked in Arabic characters into another person’s skin. Her mind can’t help but wander to something negative…maybe she did this so she won’t forget who took her hand from her.

“Do you know what Harris means in Arabic?” Aasera asks and gets a head shake from Ashlyn which signals that she doesn’t know. “It means vigilant guardian. And that’s what you are to me… my guardian, my savior. You’ve always been. And I’ve waited so long to tell you that…to show you how much you mean to me.” She looks up to see Ashlyn appearing to be in deep thought, so she just continues.

“When I was kidnapped from my family by those men and told that they would be killed if I didn’t cooperate, I was terrified. Terrified for myself, terrified to lose my family. But only because it was the only thing I knew.” Aasera pauses for a second. “That day… I didn’t know what to do. I was too scared to die and too scared that my family would be killed. The choice was impossible until I was
sure that I was going to die either by my own hand or by that of an American soldier’s. I had finally chosen to die by my own hand…to kill us all. But you…” She pauses again and lets out a deep breath. “Any other soldier… any other at all, would have killed me that day. But not you. You risked everything and everyone…you risked yourself…to do this.” She holds up her arm. “And by doing that, you changed my life. Or better said, you gave me life. You saved me. Without you, there is no me sitting here now. So yes, Harris, you are my savior, my vigilant guardian that I am grateful for and will never forget.”

“But I’m not all those things. I did what I did because I was too scared to do anything else, too afraid of what killing a child would do to my soul.” Ashlyn says out loud for the first time ever. “And look what you went through because of me…it must have been so hard. And losing your family… I can’t even imagine.”

“Truthfully, it wasn’t always easy and I was very upset and angry at the death of my family for a while. But it was only because I didn’t know any better, I didn’t know anything else. I would go through all of it all over again to be where I am now. You were in Iraq long enough to have seen how difficult it is for the people there, how awful it is for the women?” Aasera says more like a statement than a question and gets a nod from Ashlyn.

“I was no exception.” She continues. “We lived through explosions and death all around us every day. I was nothing more than a servant to my family. My father had all but sold me off for marriage to the highest paying man in the settlement. I worked hard to help run the household or I was beaten by my brothers and father. To my mother, I was often just a way for her to avoid getting beaten herself when she could blame her mistakes on me. And I loved them. I loved them because I didn’t know there was any other kind of life until I was adopted. My adoptive parents… they are my parents, my real family that loves and cares for me. It’s hard for me to even remember sometimes that I had another family before them… because true family doesn’t hit you, and starve you, and sell you like an animal. My adoptive family has given me a life I never could have dreamed of back then. Without you and what you did… you gave me a chance to actually live, Harris. And I’ve wished so hard to find you so I could show you that I didn’t waste it, that I’m living… well and happily.” She takes Ashlyn’s hand and squeezes it.

Ashlyn can’t help the tears leaking from her eyes and down her cheeks. “I’ve have thought about you every single day since the day it happened. I tried to keep track of you, but I wasn’t allowed to go into the zone the hospital was in to visit you. I was sent on a mission shortly after and was injured. It was my last mission. I was too badly injured to be a soldier anymore and I got sent home. I lost track of you in all of that and I was never been able to find you, but I always wondered. Every single day. What happened to you and what your life was like. And I don’t mean this rudely at all…but you’ve haunted me with me not knowing. When Ali found you… I was so happy, like a weight was lifted off me… because even if you hated me, I’d finally know.”

“Ali… she is delightful and very beautiful. I could not be more appreciative of her and her kindness in doing this.” Aasera smiles sweetly.

“She is… well… everything. Honestly, she is my savior, my protector, and I’m so lucky to have her. I’d tell you how much I love that woman, but you’d be here for a year if I did that.” Ashlyn says unabashedly. “She’s incredible.”

“She’s as amazing as you are from what I’ve read about the two of you. When she first got in touch with me and I learned enough about you to finally do some research, I have to say I was pretty astonished by what I read. And a bit envious too… seems like I’m not the only one who has Ashlyn Harris as a valiant protector. You’ve been busy, Captain.” Aasera says with a smile that lets on just how much she knows already.
“Oh, uh… it’s just my job.” Ashlyn replies shyly.

“And yet you do it on a much different level than anyone else I’ve seen in those positions. You’re too humble, but that’s not exactly a flaw.” Aasera shrugs. “I’m also really sorry about what you went through…the imprisonment. What an awful thing you have lived through, but you are so very brave and clearly it did not change who you are.”

“It definitely wasn’t a good time in my life, but I’ve come a long way in a relatively short time to come back from it. I’ve been very lucky to have such great support around me. If it wasn’t for Ali, I would still be stuck in there.” Ashlyn addresses it head on.

“Well, I’m very glad to know that you have found your very own ‘Harris’.” Aasera smiles again. “Can I tell you something very fascinating?” She asks as she works to reattach her prosthetic.

“Please do.” Ashlyn replies and sits forward a bit to listen.

“In my culture there is a lot of pressure to marry as soon as you come of age, which is pretty young at around 16. Some more traditional sects still follow through with arranged marriages. My family is very modern in that regard, so there was just sort of a gentle push to encourage me when I got to that age. Usually parents start trying to make matches for you from the sons of families they know. I was very lucky though… I fell in love with someone of my very own choosing, my secondary schoolmate that had been my best friend for years. My husband is a wonderful man, a successful engineer. He is very loving and completely supportive of my dreams and my career. He stops at nothing to make sure I’m happy and taken care of. He puts no pressure on me for anything and is content to live life at whatever pace we see fit. He’s a true companion which is really not all that common in the culture. I’m beyond lucky. Are you ready for the very fascinating part?” Aasera looks at Ashlyn.

“That’s so great to hear and I hope I get to meet him. And yes, I’m ready…” Ashlyn replies.

“His name is Ali Tahan. Ali, the male Muslim version of course, but Ali spelled just like your Ali. How fascinating that our other halves are both named Ali, isn’t it? We both married an Ali.” Aasera says in wonderment.

“Wow, that’s unbelievable. Amazing really. What are the chances?” Ashlyn muses. “Ali and I… we actually aren’t married. Well, we aren’t married yet.” Ashlyn explains and leans in close as she sees the inquisitive look on Aasera’s face. “Between you and me, by this time next year, we will be. She just doesn’t know it quite yet.” She says quietly and winks.

“Oh…OH!” Aasera catches on quickly. “I’m so excited and happy for you both… what a truly magnificent couple you are. Marriage will only bring you closer together, trust me.”

“Thanks. I’m pretty excited about it myself. Just have to get there, but I know exactly the route I’m taking.” Ashlyn replies with a grin and they fall into a comfortable silence again.

“We have a lot to learn about each other don’t we?” Aasera breaks the quiet moment.

“We sure do.” Ashlyn agrees. “Luckily, we have all day to get started and I’d love to hear about anything you’re willing to tell me.”

“Is it safe now to say that we are friends?” Aasera asks in a hopeful voice.

“No.” Ashlyn replies as she shakes her head, quickly following it up with “we are family.”

Aasera is now the one who can’t hold back the tears and can only nod and repeat “family.” She gets
herself back under control after a couple minutes. “Can I have another hug?” She requests.

“Try and stop me.” Ashlyn says sweetly as she leans over and wraps her arms around the slender woman.

“Well, I hope this means that everything is going ok in here.” Ali walks in with a tray of snacks and drinks as promised, feeling a little guilty to be breaking up the teary hug between the two women. Her heart lifts when she sees the completely joyful look in Ashlyn’s eyes despite the tears.

“Much better than ok. Thank you, Alex.” Ashlyn says, giving Ali a meaningful look and wiping the tears on her face.

“You’re just in time, please come sit. We’re about to start a life story exchange, you don’t want to miss it!” Aasera says cheerily.

“Oh, I don’t have to stay. Really, I can go. I just wanted to bring in the food I promised.” Ali assures them.

“Nonsense, you are just as much a part of this as we are. I want to hear all about you too, please stay.” Aasera pleads.

“Well in that case, I’d be happy to.” Ali quickly concedes and settles next to Ashlyn who quickly entwines their hands and squeezes tightly.

They start munching on the veggie, cheese, and cracker tray Ali made and the conversation flows easily with Aasera starting them off. It turns out that she had only been in Iraq for about 6 months after the incident before she was adopted by her parents from the United Arab Emirates. Her adoptive father is a world renowned brain cancer specialist and her adoptive mother is a microbiologist. The two had met doing research in the same lab as university students. After learning that they were both carriers for Tay-Sachs disease, they vowed to adopt children from war torn areas of Iraq who needed medical help. Aasera was the second they adopted. She also has a younger brother Yasin who suffered severe burns over 80% of his body after being set on fire by terrorists, and an older sister Tahira who lost a leg in a bombing. As Aasera tells it, all three of them are healthy now and very fortunate to have such wonderful parents that have cared for them in every way and made so many of their dreams possible.

Ashlyn doesn’t hold back either when it’s her turn, explaining the injury she suffered in more detail and how she was sent home and discharged from the military. She recounts her journey through the police academy and working her way up the rank of Captain only to get caught up with Bobby Dugan and then wind up in prison. Ali joins in at that point as they give Aasera all of the background on how they got Ashlyn freed, fell in love, and what they’ve been up to since then. They spend a decent amount of time talking about their recently launched non-profit website that matches mentors with substance abusers because Aasera is very interested in it. Before they know it, it’s almost 7pm and dark outside.

“We really should have dinner. I lost track of time.” Ashlyn suggests. “I know you’re probably tired and ready to go settle in at the hotel soon, but you’ll at least stay for dinner with us, right?” She asks Aasera, feeling silly now that they got her a hotel room and didn’t just offer to have her stay at the house with them. Still, she understands the value of having your own space, especially tonight when they all have a lot to process.

“I’d love to.” Aasera replies with a smile.

“Perfect. I’m just going to order us something. We have a pretty wide variety of delivery options near
us. What kind of food do you like?” Ali asks.

“Oh I LOVE pizza! It’s so good!” Aasera says excitedly and Ashlyn can’t help but laugh a bit.

“Pizza it is!” Ali says and grabs the phone. “What do you like on yours?”

“Anything except those gross little fish, I forget what they’re called. My roommate loves them and it’s a real battle sometimes.” Aasera scrunches up her nose.

“Anchovies. And yeah, they’re so gross.” Ashlyn agrees. “You have a roommate?”

“In Delaware, I have two roommates. Well, I did. The program just ended this semester and I’m headed back home to the University of Sharjah now to finish my last year and a half. Anyway, I lived with two other students, Lisa and Carla. Although sometimes it felt like three roommates because Carla’s girlfriend Eva was always there. Anyway, Lisa is the one that loves the anchovies.” Aasera elaborates.

“Well I guess that explains why you didn’t even bat an eyelash about me and Ali.” Ashlyn laughs. She had figured that maybe Aasera wouldn’t be all that comfortable around a lesbian couple, but much to her surprise, the woman hadn’t so much as flinched at any of it.

“Oh yeah, I’m very used to it even though you’d think I wouldn’t be based on where I’m from. Actually, Ali’s best friend is gay. Life is very hard for him back home and Ali is very protective of him. We keep trying to get him to consider a graduate engineering program in the U.S. or Europe. I think he’s finally going to try it and we think he’ll be much happier in a place where he won’t get deported or go to jail for trying to date.” Aasera explains with a frown.

“Yeah I’d say so.” Ali agrees, the thought of what this man must go through is completely sickening. “Let us know if we can help at all if he ends up coming to the U.S.”

“Thank you. You two are really the nicest people I’ve ever met. I can’t wait to tell my parents about this. You’re going to have to be ready for a Skype call… I’m sure they’ll want to meet you too.” Aasera warns them. “Don’t worry, they are very modern in their political views as I am.”

“Pretty sure we can handle that.” Ashlyn assures her. “So, tell us about this physical therapy career of yours.”

The huge smile that takes over Aasera’s face when Ashlyn asks is a dead giveaway of just how passionate she is about it. She immediately launches into how she is specializing in prosthetics and how there is much more of a science to fitting people with the right device than one would imagine. They talk right through dinner about her current research and ideas for the future, about how she hopes to open her own clinic in Dubai someday.

To say that Ashlyn and Ali are completely floored by it all is an understatement. Not only is Aasera extremely well spoken and intelligent, but the ideas she has for prosthetic advancement are so high-level that she has to dumb it down for the two of them to even begin understanding. It’s very clear that she has quite a future ahead of her and, knowing how limiting things can be for women in Muslim culture, Ashlyn is just happy that her husband is so supportive of her and her career. Add that to the fact that officer is positively mesmerized by how normally Aasera uses her robotic hand, her eyes glued to it in respectful awe as the woman shakes salt on her pizza and effortlessly grabs her glass to drink, and it has been very educational dinner experience.

Although she could go on for several more hours, Aasera wraps up the conversation when she hears the clock in the dining room chime, signaling that it’s 9pm. “Sorry, I tend to just go on for hours
about this stuff if you let me. Poor Ali has no choice!” She jokes about her husband. “It’s something that means a lot to me and after everything I went through with surgeries and therapy, I can’t think of any better life purpose than to pass on what I’ve learned and can relate to.”

“Don’t apologize even for a second. I love your enthusiasm and could listen to you talk about it all day.” Ashlyn waves off the apology and Ali nods in agreement, neither of them bored in the slightest. “Even though we can barely keep up with the level you’re on.” She adds with a laugh.

“Yeah, I always thought I was pretty smart about technology and science until tonight. Guess not!” Ali shrugs with a giggle.

“Well you two have me beat in many other ways, so I’m glad I have the upper hand on at least one!” Aasera jokes back. “This has been one of the best days I have ever had, but I know I should be getting to the hotel and getting some sleep. I’m sure the two of you are as exhausted as I am.”

“Of course.” Ashlyn says, completely understanding.

“The hotel is just down the main road. Can we take you or do you prefer I call the car service?” Ali asks.

“Either is perfectly fine. I can’t tell you how thankful I am for your hospitality and I don’t want to put any other burden on you. You were so kind to get me here and make this all happen. I’m so very grateful.” Aasera replies sweetly.

“We’ll definitely take you. I’ll pull my car closer to the door and Ali will get your coat and bag.” Ashlyn says while heading towards the garage before the woman can change her mind.

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“Do you have plans for tomorrow?” Ali asks as they start to approach the hotel. She had booked things so that Aasera would be in Boston until Sunday morning and didn’t have to fly back to Delaware right away. However, given all the unpredictability of what might happen today, they hadn’t made any other plans with her outside of this initial meeting.

“Not really. This is my first time in Boston, so I thought I would use the time to sightsee a bit.” Aasera replies.

“Any chance you want two somewhat lame but highly Boston knowledgeable tour guides?” Ashlyn speaks up quickly.

“That would be wonderful! I’d be lying to you if I said I wasn’t hoping for that.” Aasera admits shyly.

“Perfect!” Ali says happily. “And speak for yourself, Harris…I’m so not lame!”

“She calls you Harris too?” Aasera questions as she laughs.

“Sometimes, usually only when we’re teasing each other.” Ashlyn explains.

“I usually call her Ash, which nobody really uses. And she calls me Alex, which no one but my brother uses either. So we’re even.” Ali adds.

“That’s very sweet.” Aasera smiles. “I assumed that Ali was short for Allison, but now that you say Alex, I suppose not.”
“My real name is Alexandra, but I only use that in professional settings.” Ali supplies.

“Hmmm… helper of man.” Aasera muses out loud.

“What?” Ashlyn asks as she pulls up to the hotel, not quite able to catch what was said.

“Helper of man. That’s what Alexandra means in Arabic.” Aasera repeats more loudly. “You two are a perfect pair.”

“I certainly like to think so.” Ashlyn smiles at Ali sitting in the backseat through the rearview mirror.

“Please, I know so. She’s stuck with me.” Ali smiles back.

“You two are just wonderful, beautiful people. Today was beyond anything I could have imagined.” Aasera says a bit emotionally as she gets ready to leave the car. “I don’t have all the words or even my thoughts worked out enough to say everything I want to yet, but I promise I will before I leave.”

“I completely agree that today was an amazing day. I can’t tell you exactly how happy I am to have gotten to know you because I don’t have all the words yet either, but I promise I will by the time you leave too.” Ashlyn assures her. “Come on, I’ll walk you to the door.”

“I have your number and I’ll text you tonight with what time we’ll pick you up in the morning.” Ali chimes in from the backseat. “Thanks for a great day and sleep well.”

“Same to you. I’m excited for tomorrow!” Aasera reaches to lightly squeeze Ali’s forearm when they both exit the car so Ali can get into the front seat.

Ali watches from the Jeep as Ashlyn walks Aasera to the hotel entrance. The two women talk for a minute before exchanging a tight and lingering hug that makes Ali melt inside. Ashlyn is back in the Jeep before she knows it, the officer leaning her head back into the seat.

“Wow.” Ashlyn sighs.

“Yeah.” Ali agrees and takes Ashlyn’s hand in hers. “You ok?”

“So much more than ok.” Ashlyn replies with a smile and puts the car in gear.

“Good.” Ali smiles back and leaves it at that for now, the short ride home spent in contemplative silence.

The quiet continues as they get home and start getting ready for bed, but it’s familiar and comfortable, both of them knowing that there’s a lot to think through before anything is spoken out loud. They share a loving smile through the bathroom mirror as they brush their teeth, the sparkle in Ashlyn’s eyes obvious.

Ali has just finished stripping out of her clothes and is going through Ashlyn’s drawer to find her favorite threadbare West Point t-shirt to wear to bed when she feels the officer come up behind her, warm skin pressing into her back. Ashlyn’s hands find her hips and long fingers graze the compass on her left hipbone.

“She has a tattoo of my last name written in Arabic on the wrist of her missing hand.” Ashlyn whispers and moves Ali’s hair to the side, planting a light kiss on the back of her neck.

“Really?” Ali asks, her eyes going a bit wide at the revelation.

“Really.” Ashlyn leaves another kiss on Ali’s neck. “She said my last name means vigilant guardian
in Arabic and that is how she has always thought of me, like a guardian. And at first, it completely threw me. With what happened that day, I certainly never felt like a guardian…the opposite actually. But then after everything today, it’s exactly what I do feel in a weird way. I feel like a proud parent and it’s pretty great.”

“I can’t even imagine everything you’re feeling, sweetheart, but I’m so happy for you that it went well and so proud of you for going through with it.” Ali replies and leans further back into Ashlyn’s bare skin, the warmth and softness of it drawing her in like always.

“You know….for the first time ever, her eyes don’t haunt me. I feel so at peace right now… so incredibly peaceful inside, Alex. Thank you.” Ashlyn leaves more soft kisses along the top of Ali’s shoulder.

“Well I hate to say I told you so… but, I told you so.” Ali lightens things a bit, knowing they need a little reprieve from the intensity of the day. “I’ll stop at nothing to make sure you’re happy, Ashlyn Harris. I love you and you’re so very welcome.”

Ashlyn doesn’t reply, she just turns Ali around in her arms and smiles at her. She brings her hands to Ali’s face and traces her cheeks with her thumbs before slowly walking them back towards the bed. She lays Ali down as they reach it and covers the brunette’s body with her own before kissing her passionately, hungrily. It’s desperate and a bit sloppy, but the emotion and vulnerability conveyed through it makes Ali’s stomach drop and her heart race.

“Promise me something.” Ashlyn can barely breathe, only pulling away just enough to speak. Her forehead rests against Ali’s, their lips ghosting, and their eyes open and locked onto each other’s.

“Anything.” Ali threads her fingers through the officer’s short hair.

“Don’t ever stop surprising me.” Ashlyn says through ragged breath.

“Never.” Ali whispers and is immediately pulled back into the powerful kiss. The exhaustion of day is long gone for both of them, their night just really beginning.
Green Lantern's Light

Chapter Notes

So, I have to warn you that the next update is going to take a while. I have a couple very busy weeks ahead of me that will leave no time to write. However, I am definitely not abandoning and I appreciate your patience.

With that out of the way, I think many of you are really going to like this chapter :-) So, prepare yourselves, enjoy, and let me know what you think (cause I'm dying to know).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday, December 15th

“Are you sure you want to do Christmas here?” Ashlyn asks as she stands on a ladder trying to line the edge of their Ipswich home’s roof with Christmas lights. “Chris and Bridget really won’t mind going to Newton. We already did Thanksgiving here.”

“We talked about this. This house is cozy and has family importance and history to it. Our Newton house is nice and big and all, but it just doesn’t have that same feel to it. I love this house and the fact that it has family roots and good memories for you. That’s why I want to do all of our holidays here. So yes, for like the hundredth time, I’m sure!” Ali says in playful exasperation. “Now keep hanging those lights, it’s fucking cold!”

“Oh, ok.” Ashlyn groans as she realizes the little hooks she’s using to attach the lights need to be trimmed to fit against the gutter on this particular section of the roof. Truth be told, this is much harder than she ever expected. Not only is it the first time she’s ever put lights on this house because her grandmother just used to put fake candles in the windows and hang wreathes with bows, but it’s the first time she’s ever hung Christmas lights at all. “Damn it, who knew putting up lights was so hard?!”

“Oh me! Me! I did! I did!” Ali jokingly raises one hand from the ladder she’s holding steady. “That’s why I hire someone to do it in Newton, that roof is crazy high and there is no way in hell!”

“What insisted on Christmas lights again?” Ashlyn plays back. She was just going to go with her grandmother’s usual decoration plan until Ali convinced her that white Christmas lights are the ultimate addition. On her never-ending quest for the perfect Christmas, it didn’t take much convincing on Ali’s part.

“Also me.” Ali replies with a wry smile. “It’s looking great though, baby. Almost there.”

“Easy for you to say, your fingers are in warm gloves and not about to fall off.” Ashlyn says sarcastically as she figures out how she wants to trim the hooks. “Can you go grab me a pair of scissors?” She isn’t even finished asking before Ali is reaching up to hand her a pair. “Well, ok then. Super service, thanks!”

“Aw crap, this set isn’t working. I think I need to replace the little fuse in the plug.” Ashlyn calls out again a couple minutes later and starts to step down the ladder when Ali stops her.
“No wait, I have some fuse replacements here, hang on!” The brunette fishes in her pocket for a couple seconds and pulls them out to hand to Ashlyn.

“Look at you, Ms. Helpful!” Ashlyn smiles and quickly changes out the fuse, sighing in relief when the string of lights comes back on.

“I better be helpful since I made you do this.” Ali replies.

“Ugh!” Another grunt of frustration leaves Ashlyn’s mouth just a minute later.


“I think I need like a zip tie or maybe a couple nails to get the lights to attach to this area. These hooks aren’t going to work.” Ashlyn grits her teeth.

“Alright, well, which one do you want to try first?” Ali asks.

“Oh, I guess the zip ties… but just grab both from the garage.” Ashlyn replies.

“No need, I have both right here.” Ali says as she hands up two zip ties.

“Ok, Inspector Gadget… what the hell are you going to pull out of that coat next?” Ashlyn teases, definitely surprised that Ali has been so on top of this. “Not that I don’t appreciate your level of preparedness, but do you seriously have a hardware store in there?”

“Listen here, Harris… I’m a planner. And when the love of your life, who is injury prone as fuck, is standing atop a ladder near the roof… you don’t leave that damn ladder for even a second. So, you put everything you could ever need to hang lights in your coat just in case.” Ali replies with a mocking glare.

“I am not injury prone! My job just puts me in risky positions sometimes!” Ashlyn protests.

“Right. Keep telling yourself that, Harris. As for the risky positions… we’ll save that talk for later.” Ali says flirtatiously.

“Oh sure, worry about me falling off the roof but then distract me with sex talk. Good idea, babe.” Ashlyn plays back. “Anyway, what exactly do you have in that coat?”

“Various sized nails, screws, hooks, and thumbtacks. String, zip ties, staples, staple gun, fishing line, wire, electrical tape, duct tape, a hammer, both kinds of screwdrivers, extra bulbs and fuses, a Swiss army knife, and pliers. Oh and a bottle of water, you thirsty?” Ali smiles and bats her eyelashes.

“Oh I’m thirsty alright.” Ashlyn waggles her eyebrows. “I do love it when you get all battle ready.”

“Uh huh. Just don’t fall off the ladder and set us back in that department for months.” Ali warns.

“See, now that is solid motivation right there.” Ashlyn laughs. “How the heck are you even still standing up with all that weight in your pockets?”

“Precisely why you should stop talking and get it done before I fall over. Shut up and put up, babe.” Ali commands.

“Yes Ma’am. So feisty, Krieger… meeeoow raaawwr!” Ashlyn does a cat-lion roar mix.

“Don’t make me kick the ladder.” Ali deadpans.
“As evidenced by your preparedness…You wouldn’t.” Ashlyn challenges.

“You’re right, I love that ass way too much.” Ali replies with a laugh, prompting Ashlyn to shake her butt a bit. “Ash! I swear to god if you fall off…” She yells.

“Alright, alright, geez!” Ashlyn smirks.

“So, explain this Christmas getaway gift thing to me again?” Ashlyn asks, still not fully grasping all the details from when Kyle and Ali explained it over dinner. All she really got out of it was that they don’t do normal Christmas gifts and expect her to join in on that game plan.

“So Kyle and I decided years ago that rather than spend money on random gifts… we both like to travel, so we’d just each get the other a surprise weekend getaway. So, each person writes down five weekends within the next year that they’d like to potentially travel on and puts them in their own jar. They can be holiday weekends or any weekend at all. Then I’d pick one from Kyle’s jar and plan a weekend for him as a gift. And he’d pick one from my jar and do the same. And the important thing is that the getaway doesn’t have to be some major trip. It can just be fun and more local or really anything at all, just be creative. This year I thought it would be fun to have you, Chris and Bridget join in. So, we’ll do it like a Secret Santa where we each get a name first and then pick from that person’s jar. Everyone will get a weekend getaway and we’ll save the typical gift stuff for the kids and really spoil them.” Ali explains it all again.

“That sounds really fun. I’m sure Chris and Bridget will be on-board. I’ll text him now and have them come over for dinner tomorrow so we can agree on it and then get the person selection out of the way already so we can all start planning.” Ashlyn suggests. Unlike Thanksgiving, most people have plans with other family, meaning that Christmas will be a smaller affair with just Kyle, Chris, Bridget, and the kids joining them. So, this new tradition is a great way to make it fun with the more intimate group.

“Perfect.” Ali reaches over to the nightstand and hands Ashlyn her phone so she can text Chris. It’s only a couple minutes before he replies confirming that they’ll come over for dinner tomorrow.

“Done and done.” Ashlyn smiles and puts her phone down, sinking back down into their bed and pulling Ali back into her.

“I’m so excited for Christmas with you, baby. So, so excited.” Ali places a few kisses on Ashlyn’s freckled chest as she melts into her.

“Me too… you have no idea how excited I am.” Ashlyn hides her big grin in Ali’s hair.

“Well, I have some idea. Your heart is running wild in there right now, babe. I’d say you’re pretty damn excited. You alright up there?” Ali asks as she picks her head up a bit and turns to find Ashlyn looking down at her with a giddy dimpled smile.

“I’ve got the most beautiful woman in the world right now, and she’s naked, and she’s talking about my favorite holiday. Did you expect anything less?” Ashlyn quirks an eyebrow.

“You’re cute. How are your fingers, can you feel them yet?” Ali teases. She and Kyle had listened to the officer whine about her numb fingers all through dinner.

“Yep, think I managed to avoid a case of Christmas light frostbite.” Ashlyn jokes back while
dramatically flexing all of her fingers.

“Good.” Ali takes the officer’s hand and moves it down to her breast. “Think I have another job for those fingers, Harris.”

“Yes Ma’am.” Ashlyn winks and quickly moves so she’s hovering over the brunette, lips just barely touching. “I fucking love Christmas.”

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**Saturday, December 16th**

“Ok, everyone listen up!” Ali commands the room. “First, write your name down, fold the paper, and put it in the mason jar on the center of the table.”

Everyone quickly settles down from the conversations they’re having and starts doing what she asked. All except for Ashlyn who is just walking in from the living room where she put on a movie for Curtis and Elsie.

“Well gee, start without me why don’t ya.” Ashlyn fake pouts.

“You didn’t miss much, just princess being a dictator.” Kyle sasses.

“That’s cause you wouldn’t shut up. No one wants to hear you brag about reaching 700,000 followers on Instagram for the third time tonight.” Ali shrugs at him.

“As happy as I am for you, she has a point, bro.” Chris pipes up and lightly elbows Kyle.

“You all suck. I’m a hot commodity and you’re all jealous.” Kyle sticks his tongue out.

“You’re very hot, sweetie. Now shut up and do what I said.” Ali kisses his cheek to appease him.

“It’s so sexy when you’re all bossy.” Ashlyn sidles up next to Ali and leans in for a lingering kiss.

“Stttttaaaaahp! If I can’t brag about Instagram, you can’t do that.” Kyle mockingly reprimands them.

“Allright, alright. So what I am supposed to be doing?” Ashlyn asks.

“Write your name. Fold. Put it in the center jar, babe.” Ali kisses her cheek.

“Boom, done!” Ashlyn says as she puts her name in the jar with everyone else’s.

“Now everyone write down five weekends and/or holidays within the next year that they would want to travel or do something fun on. Then fold those all up individually and put them in your own name-labeled jars in front of you.” Ali directs.

After about twenty minutes of looking at personal calendars and writing thoughtfully, everyone has completed the task.

“Next up, we’ll go around and pick a name from the center jar like a Secret Santa. So, no revealing who you get! If you get yourself, put it back in the jar and go again.” Ali warns. “Kyle you start us off.”

“What next?” Chris asks.

“Now, everyone into the living room. Then in the same order we picked names, each one of us will go into the kitchen and draw a weekend from the jar of the person we selected and come back to the living room. That way it all stays secret until Christmas morning.” Ali instructs.

Everyone sits around watching some of Home Alone with the kids as each person fulfills their task. Ali goes last and can’t help but beam when she picks New Year’s weekend out of the officer’s jar. Her job is already done…she’d planned a New Year’s weekend getaway for them shortly after Thanksgiving and was planning to surprise Ashlyn with it on Christmas Eve. Now she’ll just wait until Christmas morning instead.

************************************************* Sunday, December 24th  

“Merry Christmas Eve, my queen.” Ashlyn softly whispers into Ali’s ear, placing light little kisses along her jaw, down the side of her neck, and across the top of her shoulder as the brunette is still fast asleep lying face down on the bed. “I love you, gorgeous.” Ashlyn says a little louder and pulls down the sheets a bit, placing more feather light kisses all along Ali’s upper back as she starts to stir.

“Mmmmmm, that’s so nice to wake up to.” Ali mumbles sleepily, immediately picking up the scent of coffee in the room. “You and coffee…yes, please.” She adds as she rolls over to find Ashlyn kneeling on the bed and hovering over her a bit. “Come here you.” She pulls the officer down onto her. “Merry Christmas Eve, love.”

“Damn Alex, seriously…you’re so beautiful.” Ashlyn takes in the sight of the brunette under her, she’ll never get enough of it.

“So are you, Ashlyn.” Ali blushes a bit at the look of complete awe on the officer’s face, lifting her head up to peck her lips. “Now, what exactly are you buttering me up for?”

“Nothing, baby. Just getting you up a little earlier than planned because I want to go somewhere together before everyone gets here in a few hours. I made you some coffee.” Ashlyn says sweetly.

“You got it. Where are we going?” Ali agrees easily.

“You’ll see. No need to shower or anything, we can get ready when we get back. Just put on some warm and comfortable clothes, ok?” Ashlyn says, giving Ali one more kiss before handing her the mug of coffee and heading to the bathroom to get herself ready.

“So mysterious, Harris.” Ali calls after her.

“And you love mysteries, sooo…” Ashlyn pops her head out of the bathroom door and winks.

As if Ali’s curiosity wasn’t peaked before, it’s at an all-time high when she realizes they’re headed all the way into Boston. She plays with the radio and holds Ashlyn’s hand, doing everything she can to be patient and just see what happens. When they turn onto Columbia Road, she finally realizes. “You are the sweetest person in the world.” She leans over the console and kisses Ashlyn’s cheek.

“T ook you long enough.” Ashlyn teases a bit and squeezes Ali’s hand tightly.
It’s only a few more minutes before Ashlyn parks the Jeep and helps Ali out, grabbing a soccer ball and a small bag from the back before walking them onto the Franklin Park soccer fields.

Ali stands on the side of the field ahead of them and takes it all in, inhaling the earthy scent of the crisp air and letting the good memories of this place flood her senses. Like always, she feels her mother so strongly that it almost seems like the woman is right here with her.

Ashlyn stands right beside Ali and gives her a couple minutes before taking the brunette by the hand and leading her onto the field. “Come on, baby… Deb-Deb likes a good show, remember?” She smiles at her girlfriend. “I even brought my gloves this time. So don’t hold back.” She adds as she leaves Ali on the penalty kick mark and takes her own spot between the goal posts.

“Did you forget how easily I caught onto your weaknesses last time, Harris? You sure you want a piece of this?” Ali heckles her.

“Did you forget I’ve been helping Jameson work on his goalkeeping skills and therefore getting my own footwork back up to par? And for the record, I always want a piece of you.” Ashlyn winks with a smug smile.

“So cocky.” Ali shakes her head.

“For good reason.” Ashlyn replies as she claps her gloved hands together a couple times. “Bring it, baby.”

Much like before, Ali groans as Ashlyn saves her first six shots with ease. She has to admit that the officer looks immeasurably sharper than the last time. There’s not much to exploit this time around, so she has to rethink her approach and focus on not giving away her ball placement. Ashlyn saves a few more of her shots as Ali systematically tries to shut-down her tells… don’t look up when you kick it, don’t plant your foot too soon, don’t turn your hips. Finally she manages to get a couple past the officer.

“Nice, baby!” Ashlyn encourages her as a perfectly struck shot sails into the upper right corner just out of her reach. She smiles to herself having just realized that Ali taps the thigh of the leg she’s going to kick with just before she kicks. With that realization, she manages to block the next few shots and smiles a bit when Ali groans again.

“You’re way too good at figuring me out so fast.” Ali shakes her head.

“Stop tapping your kicking leg before you shoot, sweetheart.” Ashlyn smiles.

After a couple more blocked shots, Ali realizes she’s still doing it automatically and can’t really stop. So, she opts to try and not decide which leg to kick with until the very last second, pretty much leaving it up to surprise even to herself. It works the first time and the ball sneaks in by the bottom of the right post. The next time she finds her legs almost getting tangled up over the last second indecision and the ball sails right over the crossbar and into the adjacent field.

“Whew, not sure that one even landed yet!” Ashlyn teases as she looks behind her to where the ball went.

“I officially give up!” Ali shakes her head with a smile and walks over to Ashlyn.

“You were great, honey.” Ashlyn wraps her up in a hug, the warmth of Ali’s body against her making her realize just how cold it is out.

“You were better.” Ali admits and kisses the officer romantically.
“I know.” Ashlyn smirks.

“Damn goalkeepers.” Ali mutters playfully and walks away to go retrieve the ball.

Ashlyn plops herself down by the goal post and takes her gloves off, closing her eyes for a second before she gets to what she came here to do. She opens the bag she brought and puts away her gloves, pulling out a soil knife and her wallet. Just like she did last time she was here, she takes one of her challenge coins out of her wallet and then uses the soil knife to dig into the frozen ground as far as she can…dropping the coin into the deep hole she made and covering it up.

“I promised you that I would always love, honor, protect, and believe in her….to forever stay by her side and do everything in my power to make her happy. I stand by that and none of it has changed, but I came here today to tell you that I’m going to do all of it as her wife. It’s so easy to tell from how she talks about you and from all the pictures I’ve seen that you loved her so much and were so proud of her. You must have had such great dreams and aspirations for her. I really hope that I’m what you had in mind. But you know what…you raised an amazing woman who knows what’s right for her and I’m going to trust her judgment on that. I promise you I’ll never fail you because I will never fail her. Merry Christmas…Mom.” Ashlyn winks and smiles as if the woman was actually there and pats the ground where she just buried the coin.

Ali grabs the ball and walks back towards Ashlyn, watching the officer go through the same little ritual with the coin like she did last time. She smiles, her heart warmed as her mind wonders what on earth her girlfriend must be promising this time before moving to another thought. If somehow she were able to go back in time and tell her mother that her future girlfriend would do this…she has no doubt in her mind that she would tell her to hold onto that woman forever. And that’s exactly what she intends to do.

“Another promise, baby?” Ali questions with a smile, putting her hands on the still sitting officer’s shoulders from behind before crouching down and kissing the top of her head.

“No. Just an amendment to the first one.” Ashlyn answers simply.

“You don’t even know how much this means to me… how much you mean to me.” Ali puts her hand under Ashlyn’s chin, turning her head so she can kiss her as deeply as she can from this angle.

“Maybe not, but I know how much you mean to me.” Ashlyn replies and captures Ali’s lips softly again before finally pulling away and standing up. “Come on, lovely… we have a Christmas Eve bash to get ready for and get underway.” She gives Ali’s shoulder a light squeeze and makes her way to the car to give Ali her private time.

Ali smiles watching Ashlyn walk away before laying down flat on the cold ground and looking up into the sky like she always does, letting the peace she feels here soothe her. “And that mom, is the woman I’m going to marry. I wish more than anything that you’d be there to see it, but I know you’ll be there in some form…you’re a part of who I am. I miss you so much, but you know, as much as I’ve spent so much time questioning things in my life… I finally know that I’m right where I should be. Merry Christmas, Deb-Deb.” Ali whispers and gets up, really starting to feel the cold seep into her skin. She takes one more look over the field and turns to walk briskly to the car, eager to hold the warm hand that she knows is waiting for her.

Ok kiddos, you each get to pick one present to open right now and the rest are for tomorrow morning!” Ashlyn announces as they all sit in the living room. The area under the tree is full of presents and it has been a struggle to keep the kids away all day. Ali had suggested this open one gift
on Christmas Eve idea since it’s what her mom used to let her and Kyle do. Ashlyn and Chris thought it was brilliant.

“Yeeeeessss!” Curtis screams excitedly with Elsie doing the same mostly because she just copies everything he does.

Everyone sits on the couch as the two kids walk around the tree trying to decide which presents to pick. Ashlyn couldn’t be anymore content right now if she tried. It has been a completely wonderful day filled with great conversation, good food, and of course, playful banter and great laughs.

Kyle had gotten there just after noon, helping Ali do her hair while Ashlyn finished getting dressed. The three of them had previously agreed to wear ugly Christmas sweaters today and dress up nicely tomorrow. Ashlyn went pretty traditional with a green sweater that featured a cat with a Santa hat on it. Ali had gone with her Penn State ugly Christmas sweater that Emily had gotten her last year. And Kyle had been completely Kyle with a stylish red sweater that had two round ornaments pictured on the front with the word “Balls” written underneath them in white cursive script. Chris and Bridget had shown up dressed normally, only to laugh at the three of them and declare that they were very happy that they didn’t get the ugly sweater memo.

The day had been spent talking, watching movies and playing games with everyone taking turns in the kitchen to make some kind of food to add to the grazing fest that went on through the afternoon. Chris was the only one whose creation wound up not being edible after he attempted stuffed mushrooms and burned them so badly that Kyle was still trying to figure out how it was scientifically possible to burn a mushroom like that when they have so much water in them naturally. However, Chris definitely made up for it later with his after dinner hot chocolate that had everyone feeling cozy and relaxed.

Ashlyn kisses the top of Ali’s head as the brunette cuddles into her side on the couch, the two of them watching Curtis and Elsie debate possible present choices. The officer looks around the room, everyone’s face reflecting a smile of some sort, and she can’t remember any Christmas Eve that was better than this one. She’s spent her whole life waiting for the perfect Christmas and she already knows that this one is going to be it. Because this year she’s not going to sit back and helplessly hope for it. No, for once she’s making her own perfection and nothing can stop her.

“I love you.” Ashlyn whispers into Ali’s ear, the brunette tilting her head up from its spot on the officer’s shoulder and looking at her dreamily.

“I love you too, Hero.” Ali beams and pulls Ashlyn’s head down for a quick kiss that the officer prolongs by deepening it slightly.

“I want that one!” Elsie exclaims loudly, pulling Ashlyn and Ali out of their moment and pointing to a medium-sized present wrapped impeccably in light pink paper with an expertly tied white bow that has a candy cane in it.

“And I want this one!” Curtis shouts right after her, picking up his own medium-sized box wrapped in shiny red paper with a strip of black paper around the whole thing that comes together in the center with a belt buckle made to resemble Santa.

“Of course they picked yours!” Kyle points at Ali. “They’re so flawlessly wrapped that it looks like they came out of a catalogue. Show off!”

“Don’t be jealous bb, it does nothing for your holiday cheer.” Ali replies with a smirk.
"You’re officially wrapping any and all presents I give from now on.” Bridget says incredulously, not having paid much attention to the gift pile until now. “That’s pretty amazing, Ali.”

“Thanks, I can teach you.” Ali blushes a bit at the attention, but it quickly shifts again when Elsie starts yelling.

“I open now? I open now?” Elsie shouts with Curtis looking at them questioningly right beside her.

“Yep, rip into ‘em!” Chris gives them the go ahead.

“Actually, watching your perfect wrapping job get savagely ripped to shreds like that is pretty funny! I take it back, nicely done princess!” Kyle laughs heartily and Ashlyn can’t help but join him, both of them earning a playful glare from Ali.

“WOAH!” Elsie squeals joyfully as she reveals a big Lego set that can be built into something that looks like a Barbie dream castle on the front of the box. She immediately brings it over to Bridget to help her open it.

Ali smiles happily at having gotten that gift right and then watches Curtis closely to see his reaction. He is much more subdued than Elsie, carefully looking over the picture on the box he just unwrapped. Ali starts to worry at his lack of excitement. It was definitely a bit of gamble since she was only operating on having watched him play with Elsie a few times. She had noticed that he was a typical boy in loving all things sports, action, cars, trucks, and superhero. Still, when he played with Elsie he always gravitated to her kitchen playset and seemed comfortable there. The classic red easy bake oven seemed like an unexpected but perfect gift choice for him, but now she’s not so sure since he hasn’t reacted as enthusiastically as Elsie.

“Can we bake cookies?” Curtis suddenly shouts animatedly, looking at Bridget with a huge hopeful grin.

Ali can literally feel the relief wash over her as she watches him bounce up and down on the balls of his feet waiting for an answer.

“We definitely will tomorrow, but you two only have 30 more minutes until bed. You have to sleep so Santa will come!” Bridget answers and watches Curtis’ face fall a bit. “But, how about you and Daddy put it together right now so it’s all ready for tomorrow.”

“Yay!” Curtis does a little jump and immediately brings the box over to Chris.

“You almost just had a heart attack right there, didn’t you?” Ashlyn teases Ali a bit. Everyone else probably just assumes these are fun gifts that Ali picked out for the kids, but Ashlyn knows better. She knows how much it drives Ali crazy that toys are so gendered and that kids feel the need to fit certain molds and often never get to try anything that’s outside of the box. Looking at these gifts, she can easily see how much thought the brunette put into them. She got Legos for Elsie knowing that they foster the scientific and mechanical aspects of the mind that are often credited with being the origin for future engineers. She got the oven for Curtis having noticed that he was clearly interested in cooking but that none of his current toys matched that interest. Still, she kept it subtle with making sure the Legos fit Elsie’s penchant for all things pink and princess and the oven for Curtis was neutral and not so overly feminine that he would reject it.


“You are going to be the best mom ever. Our kids are going to be so damn lucky.” Ashlyn whispers into Ali’s ear, not holding back what she’s feeling at all right now.
If Ali wasn’t so snugly tucked into Ashlyn’s side, she would have fallen off the couch. The room is bustling with conversation, but she can’t hear any of it right now. All she can see is Ashlyn’s twinkling eyes and dimpled grin in front of her, her heart racing. They’d sort of talked about it once, at least confirmed they were on the same page….but this is the most blatant statement to date and it means everything.

“Yeah?” She whispers back in question, her hand going up to Ashlyn’s face.

“Yeah.” Ashlyn smiles even wider, watching Ali’s smile grow just as big with her nose crinkling and her tongue poking through her teeth a bit.

“Funny, I think the same thing about you.” Ali says quietly and doesn’t wait at all for a reaction, crashing her lips to Ashlyn’s in kiss that makes her head spin.

“Hey now! The adults don’t get to open presents tonight!” Kyle breaks their moment by throwing a pillow at them.

They both pull away a bit flushed at being caught, giving each other one more loving glance before Ali looks away to narrow her eyes at Kyle. It’s just as well because Bridget makes sure that the kids go thank Ali for the gifts and before they know it, they have two little ones jumping all over them.

With cookies left out for Santa, the kids finally get shuffled off to bed at 8pm, occupying the little office room Ali uses upstairs. Chris and Bridget will sleep in Chris’ old room for the night and Kyle is in Ashlyn’s old bedroom.

“Come on, the A Christmas Story twenty-four hour marathon is just starting!” Ashlyn announces excitedly as she brings several bowls of fresh popcorn into the living room and turns on the TV. Everyone sits around watching the movie and quoting their favorite parts as the fireplace crackles.

“I’m so glad I didn’t live in the 1940s.” Kyle declares as the movie ends. “That drab baggy clothes would do absolutely nothing for me.” He adds as everyone chuckles.

“Speak for yourself, I have a gut to hide.” Chris says as he grabs his stomach. “Plus, you’d look all sexy in one of those dress frocks, babe.” He teases Bridget.

“Would be a lot easier to hide your post baby body in one of those and not exercise like a post-modern madwoman.” Bridget shrugs in response and gets her own round of laughter.

“Speaking of… are we eating those cookies for Santa or what?” Chris asks and looks at Ashlyn, but she’s already glued to the TV watching the start of the movie as it replays again.

“You’re not seriously going to watch it again are you?” Chris questions.

“Damn right I am. I love this movie and I’m perfectly comfy.” Ashlyn hugs Ali a little tighter to prove her point, the brunette resting against her chest as they’re both sprawled out on the couch.

“What she said.” Ali adds her own reply.

“Ha, dorks!” Chris bellows. “Well we know those wilds kids of ours are going to be up mad early and we’re going to get some good sleep for once.” He speaks for him and Bridget and they get up from the couch to head upstairs.

“Goodnight, see you in the morning. Thanks again for a fun night and dinner. Oh and those gifts
were so sweet, Ali!” Bridget shoots them a smile.

“You’re welcome, night night you two.” Ali replies.

“Don’t scare Santa away with that ugly mug of yours baby sis!” Chris calls over to Ashlyn on his way up the stairs and gets elbowed by Bridget.

“Love you too, DingBat! Good night!” Ashlyn yells back.

“Wait for me!” Kyle pipes up as he gets up. “Sorry ladies, I can only take so much leg lamp in one night. Plus, we all know I’ll be up before the kids!” He says with a little hand wave.

“Goodnight, queen.” Ali pops her head up. “Oh and Ky… wear pants!” She reminds him since the kids are sleeping over.

“Ugh fine, such a Grinch!” Kyle huffs dramatically. “Good thing I have the perfect and most adorbs Rudolph sleep pants with me. Love you my little sugar plum fairies, nighty night!” He turns off the light for them, leaving only the Christmas tree lights and the glow of the TV.

“Sleep well, bro. Love you too.” Ashlyn replies as Ali blows him a kiss, watching him go up the stairs.

Ali scoots up a little bit so she can rest her head closer to Ashlyn’s face, but they don’t say anything. They watch about an hour of the movie in wonderful cuddled silence until their eyes both wander and lock onto each other. It sparks the start of a languid make-out session that they get completely lost in until the music from the movie credits pulls them back to the present.

“Dang… gonna have to watch it again.” Ashlyn says breathlessly with a smile, looking up at Ali who is on top of her.

“Pretty sure we should actually go to bed so we’re not Christmas zombies.” Ali replies equally out of breath and happy. “Come on, love.” She rolls off the officer and starts cleaning up the left over bowls and cups in the living room while Ashlyn folds the blanket and makes sure the fireplace is mostly out and safe for the night.

“Oh wait! One more thing!” Ali says as they start turning off the lights to go up to bed.

“What?” Ashlyn questions.

“Here, drink it and eat two of them, but leave half of the third one with a nice bite mark in it.” Ali instructs as she hands Ashlyn the plate of cookies and glass of milk the kids left out for Santa.

Ashlyn laughs a bit and does as she’s told while she watches Ali go over to the hall closet and pull out about twelve more wrapped gift boxes. “What is all that?” She inquires, her mouth full of cookie.

“The gifts under the tree are all labeled from either us, Kyle, or Chris and Bridget. These are labeled from Santa.” Ali winks and heads towards the tree with an armful. “We’re doing this right, Harris. Duh.”

“Oh, right. Duh.” Ashlyn practically melts at Ali’s thoughtfulness, walking over and feeding the brunette one of the cookies as soon as she finishes arranging the gifts. She pulls Ali into a hug as they stand there in front of the lit tree. “Baby?”

“Yeah?” Ali replies.
“You’re the best there is.” Ashlyn says sweetly and kisses Ali’s forehead softly.


Ashlyn says matter-of-factly.

“In that entire drawer of boxer shorts, you mean to tell me that you don’t have a single pair of Christmas ones?” Ali asks in disbelief, her own sleepwear being an Elf themed t-shirt and shorts set.

“Nope. But this totally works. See… red and green.” Ashlyn says proudly, looking down at her Green Lantern boxer shorts and her The Flash t-shirt.

“Ash, what the heck are you wearing?” Ali questions as she comes out of the bathroom and looks over her girlfriend who is already laying on the bed.

“I believe, my beautiful lawyer, that we have a reached a settlement.” Ashlyn smiles and quickly pulls off her shirt, revealing a plain red sports bra.

“I wish. But seeing as how we’ll have two small kiddos and one giant one knocking at our door at some obscene hour of the morning, I think we need the pjs.” Ali smiles devilishly.

“Merry Christmas Eve, sweetheart. Today was perfect, thank you.” Ashlyn brings her lips close to Ali’s. “I love you, angel. Sweet dreams.” She softly kisses her goodnight.

“Love you too. Merry Christmas Eve, baby.” Ali pecks Ashlyn’s lips one more time and settles herself into the crook of her neck, left arm draped over the officer’s stomach and her hand holding Ashlyn’s forearm.

Ashlyn forces herself to shut her brain down despite the fact that it’s brimming with thoughts, her body practically humming with nervous energy like it always does as Christmas morning approaches. This year it’s at an all-time high and she knows she needs to find a way to relax and get some rest. She focuses on the warmth of the places on her body where Ali’s skin rests directly against hers, and repeats a mantra in her head as she falls asleep… ‘it’s going to be perfect, it’s going to be perfect…’.

Ali’s mind runs as she tries to fall asleep listening to Ashlyn’s soft breathing, the officer’s statement replaying in her head: “Tonight was perfect.” She couldn’t be happier that this Christmas Eve had been so perfect, but what about Christmas Day? The thought alone makes her incredibly nervous about tomorrow.

All Ali can think about is the conversation they had in prison about Ashlyn’s love/hate relationship
with Christmas and her dream of the perfect holiday. Then her mind wanders to the first time Ashlyn saw her naked, the words ‘Alex…you’re Christmas morning’ practically ringing in her ears right now.

She knows how perfect that moment of anticipation on Christmas morning is for Ashlyn, until of course the officer opens her eyes and it all goes downhill. She has done everything she can think of to make sure it doesn’t go downhill this year… to try and have that perfect Christmas for Ashlyn. But what if perfect doesn’t exist… or at least not the perfect that Ashlyn envisions. She takes a deep breath and tries to calm herself. Maybe it won’t be perfect, but they’ll be together and having fun with their family. No matter what, it’ll still be the best Christmas ever, their own kind of perfect even if not truly perfect. With that thought she finally lets herself give in to sleep with only one thought in mind… ‘it’ll be perfect, it’ll be perfect…’.

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Monday, December 25th

Ashlyn feels her phone vibrate and reaches out blindly to silence the alarm she set last night. Her heart is already pounding, the anticipation of the Christmas morning ahead of her is stronger than ever this year. She feels Ali’s light puffs of breath near her collarbone and a calmness settles in, the brunette wrapped around her serving as a reminder that this Christmas morning will be so different than all the others before it. This new peaceful feeling alongside her usual anticipation is already proof of that. She absentmindedly runs her fingers lightly across the soft skin of Ali’s lower back and just lets herself breathe with her emotions running freely.

Ali wakes up to the feel of Ashlyn’s fingertips stroking her skin. She opens her eyes to see the room still dim, early enough that the morning sun is not quite up yet. Ashlyn’s eyes are closed, but she’s definitely awake…Ali can practically feel the officer thinking. “Merry Christmas, love.” She places a little kiss on Ashlyn’s chin.

“Merry Christmas, beautiful.” Ashlyn replies.

Normally, shining hazel eyes and a dimpled smile would already be aimed in her direction by now. The smile is there, but Ashlyn’s eyes are still closed, making the nervous feeling in Ali’s stomach creep in again. She knows damn well Christmas morning is perfect until those eyes open, after that it’s a battle to keep it that way. “Not already overthinking, are you?” Ali asks softly after hearing the officer let out a deep breath, tracing Ashlyn’s jawline with her finger.

“No, just enjoying.” Ashlyn smiles and lightly squeezes Ali’s side with her hand, her eyes still closed.

“Good.” Ali kisses Ashlyn’s chin again. “I can only hope that your pjs are more of a Christmas morning buzzkill than my bedhead is.” She tries hard to keep the impending moment light, knowing that it’s looming…that those hazel eyes will open any minute now.

“Your bedhead is perfect and so are these pjs.” Ashlyn replies easily.

“Oh yeah?” Ali says, not knowing how else to respond.

“Yep. You know what I love about Green Lantern?” Ashlyn asks.

“I know absolutely nothing about Green Lantern other than that he has a green ring that gives him super powers, so you’re gonna have to enlighten me, honey.” Ali replies and rests her head back
down on Ashlyn’s chest, knowing those eyes aren’t opening just yet.

“Well, first, Green Lantern isn’t just one guy. It used to be that way, but then it became a corps of several guys that all wore a green power ring and collectively they are called Green Lantern.” Ashlyn explains.

“I did not know that. Go on…” Ali says intrigued.

“The amazing thing to me is that the rings don’t give all of them the same super powers. Instead, the ring enhances the individual willpower and spirit of each person that wears it, giving them all some type of unique power. The ring sort of absorbs who they are and then harnesses that to make them stronger. And that makes me think of us. Being with you is like that, Alex. I’ve never had to change who I am to be with you. I can be the same person I’ve always been, completely true to myself. But you complement me and enhance me...with you by my side I am a better version of me, I am the best of me. And I feel like that’s what I do for you too, or at least, I really hope that I do and that you feel that way too.” Ashlyn finishes a bit open-endedly, the hopefulness in her tone evident.

“Oh Ash… that’s exactly how I feel. I couldn’t say it better myself if I tried.” Ali picks her head up to find Ashlyn’s eyes still closed. She leaves a soft kiss on Ashlyn’s lips. “That is the sweetest, most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me… and I’m officially a Green Lantern fan.” Ali watches Ashlyn’s lips curl into a smile before adding, “But… I fail to see what that has to do with Christmas at all.”

“I’m getting there.” Ashlyn insists, pulling Ali back down against her and holding her close. She keeps her eyes closed, knowing that when she opens them it will be for the most perfect moment of her life. She lets a few quiet minutes pass, listening to Ali breathe before it’s time to pour heart out.

“You know, Alex…it’s moments like this... when I’m sitting quietly with you, just listening to you breathe and connecting with you without having to speak… that’s when I realize just how little I really need in life. If you’re by my side, I can do anything. It’s that simple for me. You make me feel things I never thought possible, complete pieces inside me that I didn’t know could be whole. You don’t just catch me if I stumble, you pick me up and lift me higher than I was before. You’ve taken down every single brick of every single wall I’ve ever put up around my heart and have used them to build me castle, your castle… inside of which I can be completely open and vulnerable knowing that I’ll be sheltered and safe. You challenge me as much as you protect me, giving me space to grow on my own but always making sure that we grow together.” Ashlyn pauses for a second before continuing.

“I’ve spent my whole life chasing this perfect day only to realize that it was never about the perfect day…it’s about finding the perfect person to spend it with no matter what the day brings. You are my perfect, Alex, and I want all of you. I want your past so I can understand you, your now so I can love you completely, and your future so that our love is endless and forever. Which brings me to Green Lantern…” Ashlyn starts to get up.

Ali listens to Ashlyn’s words, completely enamored, feeling even more in love with this woman right now than she ever thought possible. The Green Lantern part at the end confuses her though and her mind works to make the connection between what Ashlyn just said and what she explained earlier about Green Lantern. She doesn’t get the chance to connect the dots, her thoughts broken by Ashlyn sitting up and then getting off the bed to stand beside it, the officer’s eyes still closed.

“In brightest day, in blackest night… No evil shall escape her sight…” Ashlyn starts the Green Lantern oath. She pauses to take a breath and then gets down on one knee, reaching for the ring box under the bed and putting her own twist on the ending. “She is my hero, she is my life… Alex, will you be my wife?” She opens her eyes to find Ali’s whiskey colored orbs staring back at her in
surprise.

Ali swears her heart just beat right out of her chest the second Ashlyn dropped down on one knee, her hands going to cover her open mouth only to drop down immediately as her answer comes out without the slightest hesitation. “Yes! Oh my god, yes!” She pulls Ashlyn up onto the bed with her and kisses her harder than she ever has, the love behind it speaking what words cannot.

“Yes?” Ashlyn confirms against Ali’s lips.


“I love you.” Ashlyn’s face already hurts from smiling so hard, her whole being so alive and energized that’s she shaking a bit.

“I love you too.” Ali kisses her again and hugs her tight as they kneel on the bed.

“You want your ring now?” Ashlyn chuckles softly into Ali’s shoulder.

“Hell yes I do!” Ali finally looks at the box in Ashlyn’s hand, immediately laughing at the fact that it’s glowing bright green in the dimly lit room from a small glow stick that Ashlyn put in there under the ring. “Oh my god, it’s actually glowing green!” She exclaims, thinking back to their original Green Lantern versus Batman conversation on the yacht.

“A promise is a promise.” Ashlyn smiles.

“Wow, it’s beautiful… I couldn’t love it more.” Ali takes in every little detail of the white gold ring, a flawless princess cut diamond in the center that is clearly more than a full carat but not so much more that it’s gaudy, two smaller diamonds set on either side of it.

“You sure? We can always exchange it.” Ashlyn asks.

“Ashlyn, it’s perfect. I absolutely love it.” Ali assures her, a smile permanently plastered on her face. “Now put it on me already!”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Ashlyn smiles and slips it onto Ali’s finger, their lips back on each other’s immediately.

“Mmmm, wait…” Ali interrupts them by pulling away and going over to her purse that’s on the chair in corner of the room. She digs around in it for a minute and comes back to the bed clutching a small box in her hands.

“What is that?” Ashlyn asks with a smile, suspiciously eyeing the box in Ali’s hand.

Ali doesn’t answer the question, she just kneels back down on the bed facing Ashlyn like they just were before and takes her hand. “I have been waiting for you my whole life, Ashlyn, and now you’re right here and your mine to love and be loved by. I could never have envisioned it like this and it certainly wasn’t how I planned on doing this, but I couldn’t have created a more perfect moment if I tried. Because I love every single part of you unconditionally with all my heart, because I will love you forever, because you deserve all that is good in the world, because I will do everything in my power to make sure you get all of those good things, and because you most certainly deserve to be asked… Ashlyn Harris, will you marry me?” Ali opens the box in her hand to reveal a silver titanium band with a line of small diamonds inlaid in the center and going all the way around.
“I won’t just marry you, Krieger…I’ll marry the fuck out of you.” Ashlyn uses Ali’s words to reply with a huge dimpled grin and kisses Ali deeply, the emotions running even higher than before. “Yes, Alex. Always yes. I belong to you. I’m yours, baby…always have been. I can’t wait to be your wife. And this ring is beyond amazing, you did so good.”

Ali slips the ring onto Ashlyn’s finger, happy to see that it fits like she hoped it would. They fall back into the bed with a laugh and hold each other tight, stealing kisses occasionally, admiring their rings, and just enjoying whatever private time they have left before everyone else wakes up.

“So wait, do I have this right… you were going to propose to me?” Ashlyn finally asks.

“Yep.” Ali replies simply.

“Do I get to know when and how that it didn’t happen whatever way you planned?” Ashlyn inquires.

“You do, but not until you open your Christmas present this morning.” Ali winks.

“Hmph, ok. So much for secret Santa then.” Ashlyn laughs.

“You were going to find out soon anyway.” Ali shrugs.

“I’ll act surprised.” Ashlyn assures her.

“My turn.” Ali runs her hand through Ashlyn’s hair. “How long have you been planning?”

“Bought your ring just after my birthday.” Ashlyn divulges. “I’ve always known we would end up at this point and I never wanted to rush us, but something just seemed to turn that weekend and I just knew in my heart that we were ready.”

“Might it have had something to do with some really intimate ink?” Ali asks with a giggle.

“It just might have.” Ashlyn smiles as her hand goes to Ali’s hip, her thumb finding that very tattoo over the brunette’s boxer shorts. “What about you, how long?”

“I have to admit that you beat me to it. It dawned on me Thanksgiving night that I could always just ask you.” Ali confesses, her mind replaying that night when it suddenly hits her. “Oh my god!” She sits up and looks at Ashlyn. “You were awake! You heard me… you said you were waiting to be in your underwear! We’re in our underwear, you were awake!” She playfully accuses and begs for confirmation at the same time.

“I was awake.” Ashlyn admits honestly. “What you said that night meant the world to me, but you fell asleep before you got to hear my reply.”

“Oh really…what did I miss?” Ali asks.

“That I couldn’t wait to be your wife either and that we’d have all of it. Marriage, family, forever…I want all of those things with you.” Ashlyn barely gets it out before Ali has her locked in another passionate kiss. Her hands bury themselves in Ali’s hair as the brunette’s tongue finds hers, the heat between them turning into an inferno fast as Ali’s hands wander her torso. Ali’s fingertips are just starting to find their way under her bra when they both jump at the sound of the toilet flushing in the guest bathroom. They pull apart a bit winded and just smile at each other, knowing they probably only have a few more minutes to themselves.

“I can’t believe you just proposed on Christmas morning…in your underwear… with the Green
Lantern oath and a glowing ring.” Ali laughs.

“I can’t believe you dropped an f-bomb in your reply and then proposed back...in your underwear, with barely any mascara on.” Ashlyn leans up for a quick kiss.

“And it was the most perfect and romantic moment ever... and so us.” Ali smiles and rests her forehead against Ashlyn’s.

“So us.” Ashlyn agrees. “We’ll never have a boring story at least.”

“Nope. It'll be a lot of fun to watch people’s faces when we tell this one.” Ali giggles.

“Alex?” Ashlyn looks right into her eyes.

“Yeah?” Ali replies.

“Thank you for being my perfect.” Ashlyn says sweetly.

“Perfect together.” Ali corrects and kisses her again. “We’re getting married.” She says happily emotional.

“We’re getting married.” Ashlyn repeats softly just as a loud knock at the door startles them.

“Wake up my buttercups! Santa came and he slayed!” Kyle shouts. “Slayed...Sleighed... get it? Oh man, I am on a roll this morning! Up, up, up...let’s go!” He knocks again with a loud chuckle at his own joke.

“Here we go.” Ashlyn shakes her head with a huge smile, slipping on her t-shirt and handing Ali her own.

“Ready when you are, fiancé.” Ali says giddily.

“I love how that sounds, fiancé.” Ashlyn says taking Ali’s hand.

“Me too. I mean... it does rhyme with Beyoncé, sooo...” Ali jokes.

“Oh wow, don’t ever say that to anyone but me.” Ashlyn plays back and gets a playful slap to the bicep.

“Too late now, you still have to marry me.” Ali warns.

“Please, like you’d ever get away that easily. I’m a Ranger, baby...once I lock on, it’s done and done.” Ashlyn plays back.

“Well then, Rangers lead the way!” Ali uses the motto in jest and points to the door with a laugh.

“Dork.” Ashlyn teases.

“Whatever you say, Green Lantern.” Ali teases back and steals one more kiss before they go downstairs.

“Finally!” Chris says when he sees Ashlyn and Ali walk into the living room. “Ok kiddos, you can go nuts with those gifts now... but...” He stops them for just a second longer, “you have to read all the tags and thank the people who gave them to you. Mommy can help you, Els.” Once they both
agree he gives them the thumbs up and yells “Go!”

“Eeeek, so cute!” Ali squeaks loudly at how excited the kids are to open the presents, leaning into Ashlyn on the couch and hugging her tight.

Ali’s happy little squeal draws Kyle’s attention and he gives her a quick smile, turning his attention back to the kids before snapping his head right back to the radiant couple. “Woah!!! Waaaayyyooow, Waaaayyyooow, Waaaayyyooow!” He makes loud noise like a siren, causing Chris and Bridget to look over at him. “Bling Alert! Bling Alert! Alexandra Blaire Krieger, what is that on your finger?! Oh my god, it’s blinding me!” He pretends to shield his eyes before getting serious. “Oh my god you guys, are you...” His voice trails off emotionally.


“Ahhhhhh! Oh my god!!!!” Kyle jumps up off the couch with Chris and Bridget following right behind him, mouths all gaping open. “I’m so happy!” Kyle fans his face as tears start falling.

“Congratulations ladies, I’m so happy for you!” Bridget adds to the sentiment and goes right in to hug them both.

“It’s about fucking time, ass hat!” Chris says to Ashlyn and gets a slap on the back from Bridget. “Ow! I’m kidding! I love you too, I’m so proud of you, and I’m really excited and happy.” He says more seriously. “Welcome to the family, Ali.” He adds as he pulls them into one big hug together. “You ok, bro?” He asks a crying Kyle as he steps back.

“I’m good, I’m good!” Kyle tries to pull himself together as Ali gets up and holds him tight.

“And here I thought you’d want to see the ring first.” Ali teases him to lighten the moment.

“Oh please, princess. Who do you think helped pick out that perfect ring… that’s right… seen it!” Kyle pulls back a bit and gives her a shit eating grin.

“Wait a minute, you helped her pick it out?!” Ali asks in disbelief. “You knew?” She looks at Kyle.

“Duh. Had no idea when she’d ask or how…but I was all over helping with this ring. Looks damn good too, might I add!” Kyle says proudly.

If Ali thought she was emotional before, this takes the cake. Something about knowing that Ashlyn had found a way to include Kyle, to have in her own way asked for his support, means everything. She hugs Kyle again and looks at Ashlyn over his shoulder, mouthing “I love you” to her future wife with the most loving stare she can manage and getting a mouthed “I love you too” back.

“Ok, ok, tell us everything! Was it last night? Please tell me it wasn’t with A Christmas Story on!” Kyle says plopping himself down next to Ashlyn on the couch and pulling Ali down too so he’s in between them. “Woah, hold up!” He yells, just now seeing Ashlyn’s hand. “You have one too?!”

“Curve ball.” Ali says with a sly grin.

“Oh my god, just tell us already!” Chris says impatiently, dying to know.

“I asked her. She asked back. We both said yes.” Ashlyn replies simply, hoping to avoid the harrassment that will certainly follow when they tell them the whole story.

“Oh hell no… I want all the deets!” Kyle insists. “All of it! The kiddos are too busy with presents to listen so, we want the dirty!”
“I second that!” Bridget agrees.

“Third it!” Chris follows suit.

“All you, babe.” Ashlyn looks at Ali who just smiles and tells them everything in detail.

By the end of it, Kyle and Bridget are a mess of tears while Chris is just happily chuckling and the first one to speak. “Green Lantern in your underwear.” He guffaws. “Well, baby sis…points for originality. But let me just warn you right now, you will never ever live this one down.” He playfully warns.

“Figured.” Ashlyn shrugs with a smile. “Laugh all you want though… I get to marry her.” She leans over and kisses Ali.

“Yeah, yeah, you win.” Chris admits and finally pulls Ashlyn up and into a real hug. “So happy for you Ashlyn, so damn happy. I love you.”

“Love you too, big man. Thank you. Wouldn’t be here without you, you know that.” Ashlyn squeezes him tight.

“This is the best.” Kyle sighs contently, finally settling his emotions. “Alright, alright, back to Christmas everyone! It isn’t all about the princess and Captain Muscles!” He goes right back to his usual self.

“Yeah look at them go!” Ashlyn chimes in, redirecting everyone’s attention back to Curtis and Elsie who are happily ignoring them and opening gifts, still only about halfway through the pile. The two of them have hilariously sorted the opened gifts into two obvious piles: clothes and toys.

It takes about another hour before the kids’ gifts are all opened and they’ve gone around the room giving thank you hugs before settling down to play with their new things, looking pretty petered out with their energy already zapped.

“I guess it’s our turn then.” Ali announces, grabbing the stack of envelopes that will reveal their Secret Santa Weekend Getaway gifts. “Let me guess, you want to open yours first?” She looks at Kyle.

“Duh, princess. Queens first, always.” Kyle sasses.

Ali just rolls her eyes teasingly and hands him the envelope with his name on it.

Kyle opens his envelope to find two tickets to Burning Man over Labor Day weekend including the flight and car rental. “Oh my god, this is the best! I’ve always wanted to go and just never end up doing it. Who came up with this?” He asks excitedly.

“That would be me.” Chris reveals. “The tickets can be extended beyond the weekend and I made sure you could change the flights too in case you wanted to go for longer. Just seemed like something cool and artsy that you might want to do.”

“This is incredible, I am so so excited! Thank you! Way to set the bar high!” Kyle high-fives Chris across the coffee table and starts looking over the Burning Man pamphlet that was included.

“Oh, Chris, you’re up.” Ali hands him his envelope.

Chris’ envelope has two tickets to the X-Games in Minneapolis in July. He had written down one of his weekends from his already planned vacation week and was pleasantly surprised by what he got.
“No way! I didn’t know the X-Games were over my vacation or I might have already gotten tickets! This is so awesome!”

“Yeah I totally had my eye on it and somehow this whole Christmas Trip thing worked out perfectly! I thought maybe you could take Curtis and have boys weekend.” Bridget divulges that she’s his Secret Santa.

“You’re the best, woman! I do not deserve you, baby!” Chris says happily and leans in to kiss her. “Curt, we’re gonna shred with the big boys!” He calls out, but Curtis is too distracted to hear him so he just kisses his wife again.

“Bridget is next.” Ali announces once the two finally stop kissing each other.

Bridget opens her envelope, finding a trip for two to New York on a March weekend during the kids’ school vacation week. It includes a food tour and a special one-on-one lesson with Chef Mario Batali himself at his Eataly restaurant. Cooking has been a quiet passion of hers as long as she can remember and she’s beside herself at the gift.

“I know how much you like all things food and kitchen, so I thought you and Chris could go have a fun food weekend. And that includes me and Ali watching the kids while you go.” Ashlyn explains her gift.

“Ashlyn, this is so thoughtful of you. I honestly cannot wait for this!” Bridget immediately gets up and hugs Ashlyn really tightly. “I guess I’m more obvious about being a total foodie than I realize. Thank you so much!”

“Alright baby, your turn.” Ali hands Ashlyn her envelope, but Ashlyn shakes her head.

“Nope, you first my queen. Queens go first, remember?” Ashlyn insists by using Kyle’s line. As much as she can’t wait to see what Ali has planned for her, she wants to be able to pay attention to everyone else’s gift before she gets distracted by hers.

“Can’t argue with that.” Ali shrugs and opens her envelope to see a Columbus Day weekend Oktoberfest beer tour through Vermont complete with three different hotel accommodations for each night, three dinner reservations, and a private limousine service for the entire weekend. “Holy crap, Kyle! No way! This is amazing!” Ali shouts animatedly, already knowing it has to be Kyle by process of elimination.

“You’re very welcome, princess! I know how much you love Oktoberfest and German style beer. It’s something I haven’t been able to do with you, but I know you’ll have a blast sharing it with your lovely fiancé over there.” Kyle smiles. “Oooh, fiancé…I like saying that! Sounds like Beyonce!” He adds flamboyantly.

“See!” Ali shoots a look at Ashlyn who just cracks up laughing.

“What am I missing?” Chris asks Bridget who looks just as confused.

“Better that you don’t know, trust me.” Ashlyn shakes her head at the Krieger siblings who are now wrapped in a hug.

“I love this, Ky, so much. Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Ali says appreciatively.

“Yeah, just don’t call me when you two are drunk and naked in the back of the limo!” He warns her and gets a light smack to the shoulder.
“Annnyway, definitely your turn now, babe.” Ali hands Ashlyn her envelope with a huge smile, knowing her cards are about to be laid out on the table.

Ashlyn tears right into it and finds flight and hotel accommodations for Reykjavik, Iceland for New Year’s weekend in just a few days. Her face lights up and she looks at Ali wanting to know more.

“It was on your bucket list of places to visit when we talked about that once. And they have one of the biggest and best New Year’s celebrations in the world… nowhere I’d rather be with you than bundled up in the middle of downtown Reykjavik watching grand fireworks to ring in what is sure to be the best year ever.” Ali explains, keeping the rest to herself for now as Ashlyn’s lips find hers.

“It’s wonderful and I can’t wait. I love you so much.” Ashlyn quickly gets out before kissing Ali again.

“Oh, I give up! You two are completely adorable!” Kyle throws his hands up. “Chris and I are going to make breakfast while Bridget gets the kids dressed. You two just stay in here and makeout, do your thing.” He sasses and follows everyone else out, leaving Ashlyn and Ali giggling. “I’m never going to keep you two apart long enough to do your hair on your wedding day!” He yells from the kitchen.

“So…” Ashlyn starts as soon as they’re alone. “You were going to propose in Iceland on New Year?”

“Yep.” Ali smiles back at her. “I was giving you until the very start of 2018, Harris, and then I was asking you myself. I could think of nothing better than kissing you at midnight in the middle of a festive crowd and then asking you to marry me with fireworks overhead just like the first time we really kissed each other.”

“That is so much better than me proposing in my underwear.” Ashlyn playfully cringes with a laugh.

“No, I definitely like the underwear version better.” Ali says truthfully.

“So, any other reason you chose Iceland besides the bucket list thing and big celebration?” Ashlyn asks curiously.

“Oh yeah…I definitely wanted to hike a glacier the next morning and scream off the top of it that we’re getting married. Then I planned to spend the rest of the day relaxing in those natural volcanic hot springs together.” Ali confesses.

“Oh man, that sounds so amazing! Damn…I’m sorry I ruined your proposal plans, Alex. I promise we’ll still have an amazing time though.” Ashlyn says feeling a little guilty.

“Who says you ruined my plans, Harris? Prepare yourself baby, cause I am definitely asking you again and I expect a damn good response even though you already have that ring. Oh and the glacier thing, totally happening. As for the volcanic hot springs, also happening… just maybe a bit more x-rated than I originally planned because I’m already struggling to keep my hands off of you. Expect it… all of it.” Ali replies with a wicked grin.

“Well now that you mention it…I’m having a similar struggle.” Ashlyn runs her hand up under Ali’s shirt and down her side. “How about we go shower?”

“Thought you’d never ask.” Ali leans and kisses her heatedly before abruptly pulling away and practically dragging Ashlyn up the stairs with her.
When they come back downstairs nearly two hours later, they’re both so relaxed and sated that they feel like jello.

“My, my, don’t you two look all sexy.” Kyle compliments them on their nice Christmas outfits. Ashlyn is wearing dark gray dress pants, a navy button up shirt with little white polka-dots and a maroon tie. Ali is outfitted in a simple but stunning red dress that features a sweetheart neckline and accentuates her curves just right.

“You look amazing yourself.” Ashlyn returns the compliment, taking in Kyle’s black dress pants and dress shirt, accented with a red bowtie.

“Everyone looks so nice!” Ali says cheerily as she takes in all the fancy outfits, even the kids are all dressed up for Christmas lunch.

“Well… you two missed breakfast, but somehow the engagement glow is suddenly all that much brighter.” Kyle eyes them knowingly. “Hopefully it wears off by the time lunch is over so I can do your first engagement photoshoot! Lord knows I don’t have camera lenses to account for that much glare.” He pretends to shield his eyes from them.

“And on that note… help me and Bridget get lunch together in the kitchen.” Ashlyn redirects him before he can say anything else. “You two keep the kids busy, we don’t want any burned lunch incidents on Christmas.” She teases Chris and Ali.

“Fine by me!” Chris happily concedes.

“Watch it, Harris.” Ali warns with a playful look.

“Oh, I’m watching it alright.” Ashlyn waggles her eyebrows and gives Ali a lingering kiss before walking away.

“And they still haven’t had enough!” Kyle exclaims incredulously as Bridget drags him away.

Chris gets the kids playing Candyland together and then sits down next to Ali on the couch. “So, I never thanked you properly for the Christmas gift, new baby sis.”

“Oh, that was all Bridget… she actually didn’t ask Ash or I for any help.” Ali assures him.

“No, not that.” Chris laughs at her confused look. “I meant the other gift.”

“I didn’t get you a gift.” Ali replies completely lost, still not catching on.

“You just promised to love and take care of my baby sister forever. Trust me, you got me a gift.” Chris finally takes pity on her.

“Oh that.” Ali says laughing at herself for not getting it right away.

“Yeah that, thank you.” Chris smiles genuinely. “Couldn’t ask for anything better.”

“I will, you know… take care of her.” Ali promises him.

“I know, Ali. You already do.” Chris says and then squeezes her hand. “You know, growing up, I always wanted another sister. Who knew that would actually happen.” He admits with a smile.
“Yeah well, I got a second brother and an amazing and hot wife-to-be this Christmas. I think I’m the one who wins when it comes to gifts.” Ali argues back playfully.

“Agree to disagree.” Chris laughs and goes to join the kids’ game.

“I can roll with that.” Ali shrugs and goes to join them too.

When lunch is over, Kyle follows through on his promise of a photoshoot by taking the newly engaged couple down to their little backyard beach just as the light is starting to dim and the sky is a purplish orange. It only takes him ten minutes to capture the perfect shot, which is great because the two women are practically freezing since he didn’t let them wear coats.

Ashlyn and Ali sit close together facing the water. Ali’s ring hand is stretched out behind her on the sand, Ashlyn’s is resting on the small of Ali’s back…both rings are shiny and prominent in the fading sunlight. Their faces are turned towards each other, the two of them locked in a sweet kiss against the gorgeous colored horizon.

Just a little while later, both women post that photo to their Instagram with the same simple caption: “We said yes to forever.”

Once it’s posted, everyone takes bets on who will be the first person they know to comment on it. Ali and Kyle both guess it will be Emily. Ashlyn bets on Luke. Chris thinks it will be Liz and Bridget goes with Jess.

They’re all wrong. In fact, the very first comment on both posts comes only 30 seconds after it was posted… from Ellen DeGeneres: “I can’t believe I found out like this! Where is my Skype call, ladies?! I see how it is…you owe me another show just for that! Seriously, you’re both beautiful and deserving of the world. Congratulations and best wishes from me and Portia! #giftonitsway #yournextpicturebetterbeinmyboxershorts #callme #youbettercallme #iwantthebackstory #sohappyforyou”

“We should actually call her this week.” Ashlyn suggest after they all finish laughing.

“Good idea.” Ali agrees, knowing they probably should catch up on a few business items anyway.

After fielding some very animated and happy phone calls from their close friends, they have to put their phones away in another room because of the constant notification buzzing. Today is for their family time, the rest can wait for tomorrow.

By 8pm all of the food is eaten and everyone is sprawled out in the living room in various stages of dressing down. The kids are already in the pajamas for the night. Kyle is down to boxers and his undershirt. Chris and Bridget have changed into sweatpants and sweatshirts. Ali and Ashlyn are the only ones still mostly dressed up. Ashlyn’s tie is loosely hanging from her neck with her shirt unbuttoned while Ali’s dress is hiked up comfortably near her thighs as she snuggles under a blanket.

Ashlyn takes in the state of the room and smiles to herself at what she sees. The room is lit only by the glow of the tree, the fireplace and the TV which is playing the last showing of the *A Christmas Story* marathon. Chris and Bridget are asleep on the floor, backs against the far couch with the kids snoozing in their laps. Ali is pressed into her side with Kyle’s head resting on the brunette’s shoulder, both of them asleep too. There are cookie crumbs all over the coffee table, dishes in various spots, and torn Christmas wrapping paper all over the place.
The is house a mess, their unconventional little family looking disheveled and exhausted, not to mention that Kyle is drooling all over Ali’s shoulder right now, and that today brought a same-sex engagement in underwear. It’s miles away from the Hallmark holiday Ashlyn has carried around in her head for so long. Still, as she looks around the room, she couldn’t be happier.

She glances down at her hand entwined with Ali’s, their rings close together in a now concrete symbol of the forever that they had already promised each other right from the beginning. It may not qualify as perfect to anyone else, but it’s her perfect... it’s their perfect.

Chapter End Notes

So... is it at all close to what you expected for these two? I certainly hope I did it justice for you.
Friday, December 29th

“You look so comfy and cute. I just want to cuddle the heck out of you right now.” Ashlyn takes in Ali’s appearance as she gets into the brunette’s Audi. True to her word about flying in comfort, Ali is dressed for their flight to Iceland in gray leggings and one of Ashlyn’s worn black hoodies that says Army across the front in yellow lettering. Her hair is up in a messy bun and her makeup is light with the usual mascara.

“Yeah well you look like the hottest cop I’ve ever seen, so where’s my kiss, sexy?” Ali replies with a smile as she leans in a bit from the driver’s seat, her eyes glued to Ashlyn like they always are when the officer is in her uniform. They’ve officially been together for almost seven months, but she still isn’t over the way the police attire fits her girlfriend’s body so perfectly, accentuating her strong, lean form and adding to the already off-the-charts level of handsome she is. She moans slightly as soft lips capture hers in a sweet kiss, hearing a light moan from Ashlyn in response to her own.

“Get a move on Krieger, I need time to change before we board the plane.” Ashlyn mutters against Ali’s lips, going in for one more kiss before pulling back and holding the brunette’s hand over the console. In an effort to get as much time as possible in Iceland, Ali had booked the trip so that their flight left just a few hours after Ashlyn’s work shift ended on Friday. It’s now 5:05pm and they have until their 8:35pm flight time to make the hour long drive to the airport, check bags, and get through security.

“Away we go, Harris!” Ali says cheerily as she pulls out of the Ipswich Police Department parking lot. “You know, I probably should have asked this sooner… do we need to go home to drop off your gun or are you bringing it? How does that work?” She asks as she takes another quick look at Ashlyn in uniform.

“Relax, honey. I locked it up in the weapons safe at work. I don’t do air travel with it unless I have to and definitely not to foreign countries.” Ashlyn replies easily.

“Yeah, but then what about going into work on Wednesday morning when we’re back? I thought you were supposed to be armed at all times when you’re in uniform?” Ali questions.

“I’ll just carry my off-duty gun that I keep at home. That’ll be fine until I get to work and am back on duty.” Ashlyn answers.
“You have another gun? Why didn’t I know this?” Ali shakes her head at her own lack of knowledge.

“I don’t carry it much, but yes, there’s another one in the gun safe at home. It’s smaller and lighter, better to conceal when I’m in plain clothes if I need to carry off-duty. You’ve never looked in the gun safe?” Ashlyn inquires. She had figured Ali must have looked in there at some point even just out of curiosity.

“Nope. I never thought to. Who knew?!” Ali shrugs. “Well, glad to know you’re well covered and we won’t get held up at security. I’m sure airport food is better than the airline food if we can find the time to grab something.”

“Agreed.” Ashlyn replies and lets herself relax into the seat. “You know, now that I’m thinking about it, maybe I should teach you how to handle a gun and shoot. I mean, if you want to.” She thinks out loud.

“I suppose it wouldn’t be the worst idea to at least know how to handle one safely since we have them in the house. I’m not sure about the shooting thing though.” Ali replies a bit hesitantly.

“No pressure, baby. Really. It was just a passing thought. And yes, I just want you to be safe since guns are in the house…but I do lock them up, so it’s not a necessity or anything like that.” Ashlyn reassures her.

“Ok, I promise to think about it and we can revisit this when we get back. Right now, I want to think about nothing but our romantic getaway.” Ali smiles.


“Ahhhh this is so cool!” Ashlyn says giddily as she wipes the back of her neck with a hot towel and sips the pre-flight complimentary champagne the flight attendant just poured as they wait for take-off. Ali can only giggle at her girlfriend’schildlike wonder as she taps their champagne cups together and takes her own sip. “You’re too adorable.”

“Well, I’ve never flown first class before.” Ashlyn admits quietly.

“Really? I couldn’t tell.” Ali teases with a wink and draws a playful eyebrow raise from Ashlyn. “I figured that out when you told me on the way to Georgia that you hadn’t flown commercially all that much. So, I thought this might be a nice time for the full experience with the longer flight.”

“You’re way too good to me, baby.” Ashlyn nudges Ali’s cheek with her nose before leaving a kiss there.

“I could be even better.” Ali flirts.

“Oh yeah?” Ashlyn eggs her on.

“Uh huh.” Ali lifts the arm rest between them and gets close, leaving a few kisses down Ashlyn’s jaw before moving down to lightly suck the soft skin just below her jawline.

“Jesus, Alex.” Ashlyn whispers, looking around to make sure no one can see them. Apparently this isn’t a very busy flight. There had been relatively few people waiting at the gate to board and there is only one other passenger in first class… an older man sitting seven rows diagonally behind them and
already asleep.

“Relax.” Ali mumbles against Ashlyn’s skin, trailing more open-mouthed kisses down her neck. She’s about to move back up to kiss the officer’s lips when they’re interrupted by the flight attendant explaining the safety instructions over the loudspeaker. She nips Ashlyn’s neck one more time and then pulls away with a wink knowing that officer likes to listen to the safety instructions on flights. In fact, Ashlyn reliably sizes up all of the possible exits no matter where they go as soon as they get there and ranks them in order of the fastest and easiest way to leave. She is also constantly scanning for threats. As much as it makes Ali feel safe and protected, it also makes her feel sad that Ashlyn carries such a burden on her shoulders, that she can never just completely relax and let go because she’s pretty much programmed to do the opposite. It makes Ali try all that much harder to put her at ease whenever and however she can.

The flight attendant checks to make sure their seatbelts are buckled after giving her safety demo, leaving them with a menu for their complimentary meal once the plane is in the air.

“You hungry?” Ashlyn asks. They had just quickly eaten sandwiches at the airport before boarding.

“Not all that hungry, but I could snack. You?” Ali replies as she looks over the menu.

“I can always eat. I was thinking we could each get a different appetizer tray and share them with some more of this champagne.” Ashlyn suggests.

“Thirty minutes in and you’re already a first-class pro, babe. That sounds perfect.” Ali smiles and entwines their hands.

“What can I say, the high life is easy to learn.” Ashlyn laughs and rests her head on Ali’s head, the two of them recounting their day to each other as the plane takes off and reaches cruising altitude. It’s not long before the flight attendant is taking their order and back with their food and drinks in less than 10 minutes.

“Wow, that hit the spot. Hard to believe that was airline food.” Ali remarks after finishing her last bite. Ashlyn had ordered a cheese sampler tray and Ali had gone with a fruit and dessert medley tray, the two combined were a perfect pairing with the dry champagne.

“You’re aren’t kidding. A girl could get used to this.” Ashlyn replies just as the flight attendant comes right over to clear their trash.

“We should probably try to get some sleep.” Ali suggests. “It’ll be like 2am our time, but that’s 6am Iceland time. So, we have to try really hard not to completely sleep away the morning when we get there so that we’re not all off.”

“You’re the boss.” Ashlyn smiles and reclines her seat to match Ali’s, putting the airline pillow behind her head and covering both of them with the provided blanket before wrapping an arm around Ali’s shoulders and pulling the brunette into her chest. “Sweet dreams, beautiful.” She kisses Ali’s forehead.

“Don’t think I’ve ever been this comfortable on a flight before. You’re like a big cuddly teddy bear, Harris.” Ali snuggles in a bit closer and closes her eyes as Ashlyn chuckles at her statement.

Twenty-five minutes later, Ali can still feel Ashlyn’s hand running up and down her arm. She opens her eyes to find the officer looking out the window of the plane. “Can’t sleep?” She asks, watching Ashlyn’s head snap back in her direction.

“Oh, uh….sorry, baby. I didn’t mean to keep you up. Was I fidgeting? Sorry.” Ashlyn apologizes.
“No, no, you’re fine. I could just tell you were awake.” Ali clarifies. “You ok?”

“I’m great. I just have a hard time sleeping in flights is all. Sorry.” Ashlyn admits.

“Yeah I’ve noticed that. And stop apologizing.” Ali coaxes her. “Is it just nervous energy? It doesn’t seem like you mind flying, but maybe I missed that part.”

“Something like that, and no I don’t mind flying.” Ashlyn explains. “Like 80% of flights I’ve been on were all military, so cargo planes that are loud and pretty uncomfortable. And even though I learned to pretty much sleep anywhere, those flights usually either meant I was going into a warzone or that I was coming home. Both things kept me awake for different reasons. Anyway, I was always used to being awake on the flights because I couldn’t get myself to relax enough. I guess old habits die hard.”

Ali considers what Ashlyn said for a minute before her lips curl into a smile. “Time for some new habits then.” She tilts her head up and gets close to Ashlyn’s face. “Kiss me.”

“Pretty sure that will do the opposite of relax me, but you don’t have to tell me twice.” Ashlyn closes the distance between them and captures Ali’s lips in a sweet kiss that immediately turns heated when the brunette surprisingly deepens it, her tongue already begging for entrance. She can already feel a flush rising up her chest and into her face as Ali’s tongue duels with her own. She’s so honed in on Ali’s mouth on her own that she doesn’t register the brunette sneaking a hand up her shirt until it rakes up her abs and fingertips start working their way under her sports bra.

“Alex…” Ashlyn whispers breathlessly as she pulls away from the kiss, finding Ali’s eyes dark and lustful. She quickly turns her head to scan the cabin again.

“Hey…” Ali gets Ashlyn’s attention, a small smirk on her face at the officer’s flushed appearance. “That guy isn’t waking up until we land in Iceland and the flight attendant isn’t coming over here unless we hit the button.” She kisses down Ashlyn’s jaw until her lips are ghosting her ear. “Relax, baby. Relax and get lost with me.”

“Right here?” Ashlyn asks a bit hesitantly, looking around one more time and letting out a deep breath. “Ok.”

“Ok? I was hoping for a bit more enthusiasm, Harris.” Ali quirks an eyebrow and takes Ashlyn’s hand, moving it under her shirt and putting the officer’s hand on her right breast. “Right here. Close your eyes. Hear me. Feel me. Nothing but me, baby.” Ali whispers hotly in the officer’s ear. She’s about to tell Ashlyn to kiss her again, but the officer crashes their lips together so fast that she doesn’t need to.

Ashlyn quickly pulls up the blanket so it’s completely over them as Ali’s hand slips under her bra and starts expertly teasing her nipples, doing her best to stifle the moans that are threatening to spill into the brunette’s mouth. She kisses Ali harder and busies herself by returning the favor, a light moan escaping despite her best effort to suppress it at the feel of the brunette’s nipples stiffening against her fingertips.

“Baby…I love the way you touch me.” Ali husks in Ashlyn’s ear after breaking the heated make-out session to work on the officer’s neck.

Goosebumps break out on Ashlyn’s skin with the brunette’s breath on her ear, her thighs clenching together to get whatever friction she can on her already wet and throbbing center.

“I got you, baby.” Ali softly hums at feeling Ashlyn’s legs clamp together. She lightly scratches
down the officer’s abs, working her fingers under the waistband of her boxer briefs.

“Oh god, Alex.” Ashlyn murmurs quietly as Ali massages her clit, quickly kissing the brunette again before she gets too loud.

Ali feels more than hears Ashlyn’s slight whimper in her mouth, the officer’s hips starting to move against her hand. She can tell by the intensity of the way Ashlyn is kissing her that she is ready for more. She lets herself enjoy the warm wetness coating her fingers as she teases Ashlyn’s entrance for a minute, earning one more whimper before pressing two fingers inside.

“Right there, baby… just like that. Oh god…Alex.” Ashlyn gets out in a low and winded whisper, her lips resting on Ali’s upper jaw after pulling away from their kiss to breathe. Ali doesn’t tease, pressing right on her g-spot with her fingertips in short deep thrusts. The gentle vibration of the plane and the tight space is intensifying it all, a light sweat breaking out on her skin as she feels herself losing control.

“Fuck, Ash…I love when I feel you throbbing on my fingers, baby. You’re so fucking hot. I’m gonna come just fucking you, feels so good.” Ali nips at Ashlyn’s earlobe, hearing the officer let out a breathy gasp as her hips starts grinding harder to meet her hand. “Look at you…so beautiful, so damn hot. I can’t keep my hands off your body, inside you. I want to come with you…all over your fingers, baby. Look at me…fuck me. Fuck me while I fuck you, Ashlyn. Make me come with you.” Ali whispers, lightly biting Ashlyn’s jaw and hearing a sharp intake of breath from the officer before hazel eyes eventually meet hers and two long fingers fill her completely.

Ali’s hot words drive her. The space is tight and she can barely move between Ali’s legs, but that doesn’t deter her one bit. Ashlyn’s eyes look into the brunette’s darkened whiskey orbs and she follows Ali’s lead, getting deep and using whatever leverage she has to press firmly against her walls. “Baby… so tight…fuck, Alex. You feel amazing, come for me…with me.” It’s the last thing Ashlyn manages to speak between them as the deep ache in her own core builds to the max, her muscles tightening as she loses it. Short puffs of breath leave her mouth as she fights to hold her gaze on Ali’s eyes, the brunette’s own soft gasps are tickling her lips and her entrance is clenched tightly around her fingers practically pulling them in.

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Ali’s eyes close and Ashlyn’s follow. A desperate kiss now muting their almost simultaneous orgasms as they tremble together, hot silken walls still throbbing against now barely moving fingers with muscles beginning to relax into the feel of each other.

With the desire to taste her girlfriend burning hot, Ashlyn is the first to recover, bringing her fingers to her mouth to lick them clean before wiping a few beads of sweat from Ali’s forehead and kissing her slow and deep. “You’re incredible… damn, baby…that was so good.”

Ali replies with a sweet kiss, pulling away to lick her own fingers with a smile. “I love you… and I can’t believe we just did that.” She giggles and snuggles herself into the crook of Ashlyn’s neck, the two of them flushed and still breathing a bit heavily.

“You?! What? But you were the one that…I thought for sure…” Ashlyn stammers, pulling away enough to look at Ali in slight surprise.

“That I’d done this before? Nope. What kind of girl do you think I am, Harris?” Ali smirks.

“Figures.” Ashlyn laughs lightly and shakes her head. “Your confidence is so damn sexy, you know that? The things you do to me…I swear…”

“What can I say…you bring out my best, sweetheart.” Ali replies with a sated smile, kissing
Ashlyn’s neck softly. “You’re right though, that was so fucking good. Like so damn hot. I’m officially a genius for suggesting it.” Ali giggles.

“Amen to that, Einstein.” Ashlyn hugs Ali against her. “This is your Captain speaking…I’d like to welcome you to the mile high club. Now sit back, relax, and enjoy the rest of your flight.” She jokes.

“Cheeseball.” Ali teases and leans up to steal another kiss. “Close your eyes, baby. Relax, feel me breathe and just rest.”

Ashlyn leaves one last peck on Ali’s lips and leans her head back into the seat, closing her eyes and focusing on the rise and fall of the brunette’s body against her side. “I love you so hard.” She mumbles groggily as the exhaustion sets in, the warmth of Ali’s body lulling her to sleep.

“I love you too, Ash. Sweet dreams, love.” Ali whispers back and gives into her own drowsiness.

It’s a few hours later when they’re roused from a peaceful sleep by the flight attendant asking them to put their seats upright for landing. As soon as she’s gone they share a couple of sweet kisses and grin sleepily at each other for a short moment before righting themselves and looking out the window at the scenery below as the plane descends.

With a soft thud of plane wheels, they’ve officially arrived in Iceland and both are looking forward to a few more hours of sleep once they get to their hotel. Ashlyn can’t help herself when she takes the airline flight experience survey that pops up on the little screen in front of them as they taxi to the arrival gate, winking and smirking at Ali as she rates the “in-flight entertainment” as five stars.

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Saturday, December 30th

Although she rented a car for this trip, Ali is patting herself on the back for thinking ahead and having arranged to have the car delivered to them at hotel. With both of them exhausted and still tired from the flight, it’s not the time to try and navigate a country they’ve never been to in the early morning hours to get to their hotel. Instead, they quickly take a pre-reserved car service and do their best to stay awake and take in some of the scenery on the drive. Of course, they both fail and are gently awakened by the driver when they get to the hotel.

The Reykjavik Marina Residence is a hotel of suites sitting right on a working marina with all kinds of boats docked just across the street. The building fits right in with the colorful and charming architectural styling that is common to Reykjavik.

“Wow, this place looks so nice.” Ashlyn comments and yawns, immediately looking out over the ocean in front of them. Though quaint, it’s immediately clear that this is a luxury hotel just from the location and outside appearance alone.

“It does. I had no idea what exactly to expect when I booked it, but it got rave reviews so I went with it.” Ali admits. “Come on, we’ll have all day to sightsee. Let’s go check-in and rest a bit.”

“Yes please.” Ashlyn agrees and willingly lets herself get pulled along by the hand.

Ali gives her name to the man at the front desk who finds the reservation. He immediately looks up with a smile from the computer in front of him. “The Adalbjörg Suite, our very best. Are you celebrating?” He asks with an accent.

“Something like that.” Ali flashes her ring and then looks at Ashlyn with a sweet smile. She had read that Iceland was one of the most gay-friendly places on the planet and now is as good a time as any
“Congratulations! You are a very lovely couple. On behalf of the Marina Residence, I wish you a beautiful life together.” The man doesn’t even flinch.

“Thank you so much.” Ashlyn replies with a slightly blushing grin and squeezes Ali’s hand.

“You must be tired from your travels. Everything is ready and Aron over there will show you to your suite and bring up your luggage for you. Please let us know if there is anything we can assist you with during your stay. We can help with recommendations for sightseeing, food, tours, travel arrangements and many other things. Don’t hesitate to ask for anything at all. We hope you enjoy your visit!” The man smiles kindly and hands Ali two keys, pointing to a younger man dressed as a typical bellhop by the entrance.

“Thank you again!” Ali replies and tips him generously before heading over to the bellhop.

The Adalbjörg Suite might just be the coolest hotel suite either of them have ever seen. It’s spacious with a luxurious style that looks like a cross between U.S. 1950s retro and Nordic rustic. The full kitchen is done completely in a very light blue and features a large eat-in counter. The open layout of the kitchen leads right into a nice sitting area that has a fireplace, a large leather couch, and a glass-top coffee table that looks like a bright red coiled heating radiator. A loft featuring another smaller sitting area with a desk and smaller couch looks over the main living room. Off of the living room are two bedrooms. A smaller bedroom with two twin beds and the master bedroom. The master bedroom has a king bed with a down comforter, a comfy chair in the corner, a couple of dressers, a mini bar, and a wall mounted TV. The master bathroom is completely funky and done in floor-to-ceiling black and white checkerboard tiles. It has a huge four-footed bathtub and a shower area that is completely open with just a drain in the floor since the space is roomy and all tiled.

“Holy crap, look at this place!” Ashlyn repeats herself for the third time as she goes into each room, completely impressed with and in love with the unique style.

“It’s amazing!” Ali agrees wholeheartedly. She walks up behind Ashlyn and wraps her arms around her waist, placing a few kisses on the back of the officer’s neck. “I am going to have so much fun fucking you all over this suite.” She whispers in her ear.

Ashlyn chuckles and turns around to look at Ali who has an innocent little smile on her face. “I swear you are like those adorable little cartoon bunny greeting cards that are all smiley and harmless looking, but then have vulgar things written underneath them like ‘eat me’.

“You love me.” Ali leans in for a kiss.

“Mmmhmm, I do indeed.” Ashlyn replies. “In fact, I have my own plans for that kitchen counter.” She winks.

“Well, I have plans right now for that king bed…” Ali raises her eyebrows.

“Do they include nothing but nudity, cuddling, and snoring?” Ashlyn asks.

“You know it.” Ali smiles. “Let’s get some sleep.”

Ashlyn kisses the brunette and then fist pumps, wasting no time in stripping out of her clothes and getting into the bed. Ali just laughs and quickly strips down to join her, melting right into Ashlyn’s arms and against her warm skin.

“We’ve been here for like an hour and I’m already having the best time. Thank you, baby…this is
amazing and I know we’re going to have so much fun.” Ashlyn says sweetly.

“Me too. Love you so much, Hero. Now sleep.” Ali captures Ashlyn’s lips in a slow kiss for a few seconds before pulling away and nuzzling back into the officer’s neck.

“I love you too, beautiful. Sweet dreams.” Ashlyn replies quietly, already feeling herself start to doze off.

By the time Ashlyn opens her eyes again, Ali is hovering over her a bit and smiling down at her. “Mornin’, baby. What time is it?” Ashlyn asks groggily, but already feeling a million times more rested than before.

“Around 11:00am.” Ali replies and kisses Ashlyn’s cheek. “Hi.”

“Oh geez, I’m sorry. You should’ve woken me up. I know you wanted to get out and not waste the morning.” Ashlyn replies apologetically.

“Babe, relax. I just woke up too. This trip is going to just be chill and fun. I have some plans, but everything is flexible.” Ali reassures her. “Besides, I already knew we’d end up sleeping in like this. Which is exactly why I ordered the in-room brunch buffet for today when I booked this trip.” Ali winks.

“Oh my god, you’re the best. I’m starving!” Ashlyn pulls Ali down onto her.

“You’re always starving, Ash.” Ali rolls her eyes. “Someone should be here at 11:30am to set it up for us. So… how about a shower in the meantime?”

“Definitely!” Ashlyn replies enthusiastically.

“Strictly business, Harris… we only have like 30 minutes and we can’t be naked and having sex when the food person gets here.” Ali warns.

“True, but making out isn’t sex…” Ashlyn says suggestively.

“Can’t argue with that …let’s go!” Ali jumps off the bed, pulling Ashlyn with her into the bathroom.

Even though the kissing and hand roaming gets heated, they manage to pull on robes just before the food arrives. They both watch in complete amazement as plate after plate of delicious looking food is placed on the large kitchen counter by two hotel sous-chefs. When they leave about 5 minutes later, there is literally no space on the counter.

“Ok, wow.” Ali is the first to break the silence as they stare at the impressive display.

“Yeah, you aren’t kidding! Damn, that is a lot of amazing looking food. Can we eat?” Ashlyn asks excitedly.

“No, sorry…we just have to stare at it.” Ali replies sarcastically. “Of course we can eat! Just let me snap a picture first. Kyle is gonna die when he sees this.”
An hour later and the two of them are completely stuffed, having made sure to try every single dish. They finish getting dressed and decide to head out to explore the city and let themselves digest all that food.

“Wait, this is our rental car?” Ashlyn asks as she ogles at the all-black, decked out Jeep Wrangler the valet just pulled up for them in front of the hotel.

“Sure is. My girl loves Jeeps, she gets a Jeep.” Ali replies matter-of-factly. “Besides we needed something that could handle a little off-road snow driving.”

“You’re seriously the best, Alex!” Ashlyn says excitedly before she realizes the rest of what Ali said. “Wait, off-road snow driving? What exactly are we going to be doing?”

“You’ll see on New Year’s Day, no more hints!” Ali replies with a smirk.

“Awww, come on!” Ashlyn protests.

“Babe, have I ever led you astray? Ever not given you a good surprise?” Ali questions.

“Fair point.” Ashlyn concedes as they get in the Jeep, sliding into the driver’s seat herself after helping Ali in. “Where should we start?”

“Hmmm… how about we go check out that Hallgrímskirkja church tower that we can see from like anywhere we look? Then work our way out from there maybe?” Ali suggests.

“Sounds great. You work the GPS and tell me where to go.” Ashlyn directs and starts to pull away from the hotel.

“Roger that, Captain.” Ali playfully salutes with a smile and puts in the directions.

Although the tower is a pretty incredible sight, the two of them find themselves just wandering the streets of the city for the rest of the afternoon. They wander from shop to shop, stopping a couple times for hot beverages to warm up a bit given the cold weather. Neither of them can get over how stunning it all is. Every building and house is colorful and artistic in its own way and all of it is surrounded by snow-capped volcanic mountains, glaciers, and silvery seas, the combination is beautiful. After only a few hours, both of them agree this is one of the most breathtaking places they have ever been.

“We should get back to the hotel and dress a little more warmly for tonight.” Ali says as they get back to where they parked the Jeep.

“What’s tonight?” Ashlyn asks curiously.

“I made dinner reservations at this cool restaurant that takes you out on a Northern Lights cruise after dinner. Hopefully we’ll get a good night and actually get to see the Northern Lights.” Ali reveals.

“You’re way too good to me. I have always wanted to do that. I’m so excited!” Ashlyn says animatedly.

“I had no doubt. Your obsession with all things space and sky is only second to your shark obsession.” Ali smiles.

“You make me swoon, Krieger.” Ashlyn leans over the console for a romantic kiss.

“Ditto. Now hit the gas, Harris.” Ali pecks the officer’s lips one more time and buckles her seatbelt.
They’re both dressed more for warmth than fancy, relying on Ali’s research that this restaurant is casual. Still, they’re relieved when they see that the other people in the restaurant are dressed similarly with jeans and heavy sweaters, warm coats draped on the backs of chairs. They’re also pleasantly surprised to see that even though the room has about twenty tables, only six of them have occupants. There are five tables that appear to have couples at them and one with a group of four that seem to just be friends. The restaurant is exclusively for patrons who will be taking the nightly boat tour, so it’s a clear indicator that the boat won’t be crowded.

After getting seated at a quiet corner table by the waiter, they briefly look over menu and easily settle on their choices. Having asked the hotel concierge what the best foods in Iceland were, they take the man’s advice and both order a lamb dish. Ashlyn opts for lamb chops with roasted root vegetables and cucumber salad. Ali goes with lamb kebobs over mashed potatoes with a pickled beet salad. They also both order the classic Iceland beer Viking Gylltur since it’s the suggested pairing for both of their meals.

“So, I have a confession to make.” Ashlyn takes a sip of her beer and nods approvingly.

“Oh this is good.” Ali says after taking a sip of her own. “What’s your confession?”

“I’ve never tried lamb before. So, this might be a disaster.” Ashlyn laughs. “Good thing I’m not a picky eater.”

“It’s not all that different from beef and pork, almost like a combo of the two if I remember right.” Ali responds casually.

“So you’ve tried it?” Ashlyn asks.

“Yeah, I had it a couple of times at dinner events at my old law firm. I remember thinking I still would have preferred a nice steak, but that it was still decent overall. Supposedly Iceland has the best lamb in the world, so I’m hopeful that this will be miles above what I’ve had before.” Ali elaborates. “How come you’ve never tried it? Just no occasion to or never wanted to?”

“Never wanted to actually. Plenty of opportunities since my gram used to make it at Easter, but I flat out refused.” Ashlyn reveals.

“Oh no, how come? Did it gross you out? Geez, you didn’t have to order lamb! We can get the guy back here and order something else.” Ali voices her concern about their dinner.

“No, no. I swear it’s nothing like that. I can’t believe I’m about to say this out loud…” Ashlyn looks down at the table. “So my favorite show when I was a kid was Shari Lewis with Lamb Chop the puppet and then Lamb Chop’s Play-Along when that show came out later. Anyway, anytime I saw lamb all I could think about was that delightful puppet and I just couldn’t do it. And I officially just admitted that I love Lamb Chop the puppet…on a dinner date…with my future wife. Wow.” Ashlyn shakes her head.

“Baby?” Ali reaches across the table and puts her hand on Ashlyn’s cheek, pulling the officer closer to her as she leans in.

“Yeah?” Ashlyn looks up at Ali as she gets pulled in.

“You’re the most adorable person in the world and I freaking love you.” Ali gives her a nose-
crinkling grin and closes the distance for a chaste kiss over the table. “I might never let you live that
down…but you’re definitely so damn cute.”

Ashlyn groans and then can’t help but laugh. “Fear not, I’m over it and won’t hesitate to gobble
down my dinner despite any lingering Lamb Chop memories. I mean, she wasn’t a real lamb after
all, sooooo…”

Ali laughs and takes another sip of her beer, hooking her pinky finger on Ashlyn’s on top of the
table.

“Do I get an embarrassing childhood Alex story now?” Ashlyn asks hopefully.

“Oh you wish, Harris. You’re gonna have to bribe Kyle for those.” Ali answers with a playful smile.

Ashlyn is about to protest, but the waiter comes over to serve their food. The officer digs right in and
has to admit that the lamb is pretty good. “This is actually really good.” She says, looking up from
her plate. Ali hasn’t taken a bite of her food yet. Instead, she’s sitting there looking at Ashlyn with
both of her hands up like pretend puppets. “Whatcha doing there, Krieger?”

Ali clears her throat and then uses one of her hands to pretend like it’s eating the lamb kebob on her
plate. “Mmmmmmm, oh yummy, this is soooooo good!” She says in a high-pitched voice to mimic
Lamb Chop as her hand continues pretending to eat the food. Ali then gets her other hand talking in
a pretty accurate impression of Charlie Horse, the other main puppet on the show, to start a dialogue:

“Oh…um… Lamb Chop… do you know what you’re eating?”

“I have no idea, Charlie Horse. But it tastes so good! I’m so full but I can’t stop eating!”

“Oh my… Lamb Chop, I hate to tell you, but you’re eating lamb!!!!”

“What?! Lamb?! Oh no, Charlie Horse! I just…I can’t help it…it’s too good…ooooh noooo!”

“That’s ok, Lamb Chop. I’ll still be your friend, even if you’re a cannibal.”

“Awww, thank you Charlie Horse!”

Ali uses her hands to make the fake puppets bow and then smiles at Ashlyn. “Ali Krieger childhood
fact… I’m also a fan of Lamb Chop.” Ali winks and finally takes a bite of her food.

Ashlyn just laughs for a few seconds as she shakes her head. “Funny babe… completely twisted, but
funny. Please don’t do that at our wedding.” She teases.

“You’re right though, this is amazing. Americans officially suck at cooking lamb, this is so much
better than the lamb I’ve tried before.” Ali comments on the food before addressing Ashlyn’s teasing.

“Oh, did I forget to tell you that I was saying my vows in my Lamb Chop voice? My bad.”

“Ha! I dare you.” Ashlyn challenges.

“Well, I would…but then you’d probably find me all adorable and never eat me again. Can’t have
that happen.” Ali shoots a flirtatious smile across the table.

“And we’ve officially gone from Lamb Chop to me eating you out.” Ashlyn chuckles. “And now
every time I eat lamb, that’s what I’m going to think of.”

“Well you always say I’m delicious, so…lamb problem solved.” Ali swallows another bite of food and smiles at Ashlyn wickedly. “How’s that lamb now, baby?”

“Delicious.” Ashlyn waggles her eyebrows, causing the two of them to crack up laughing.

The tour boat is large enough to accommodate at least 50 people, so with just a few other couples onboard, everyone easily finds their own private space on the seats lining the sides of the deck. It’s definitely a lot colder out on the water and the two women sit closely together with Ashlyn’s arms around Ali as the boat cuts through the dark ocean waters. It’s not too long before the boat is far enough away from the lights of the shore that the sky full of stars is truly revealed.

“Oh wow, that is…sooo much better than the view from the private deck at home.” Ali comments as she looks up in awe. “I’ve never seen so many stars.”

“Yeah, it’s really clear out.” Ashlyn adds. “That was one of the bonuses of being deployed in the desert, great night skies sometimes. Gotta say being on the water like this is a million times better though.”

The boat continues on for at least another fifteen minutes, the two of them engaged in light conversation pausing occasionally to look up or steal a kiss. Only when the boat motor suddenly slows do they both really look around, the sky now completely different.

“Oh my god, look at that.” Ali’s mouth hangs open as they see it. The sky is completely lit up in swirls of green, blue and purple.

“So breathtaking.” Ashlyn agrees, the two of them standing up now and side-by-side with Ashlyn’s arm around Ali’s shoulders. They both stand there marveling at it for a while with excited chatter from the other passengers in the background. When Ashlyn pries her eyes away from the view to look at Ali for a second, she finds herself not able to look back up. Her breath gets caught in her throat as she takes in the gorgeous soft features of Ali’s face, the swirls of color from the sky reflected in the brunette’s whiskey eyes. It’s mesmerizing, it’s alluring, it’s hers, and she’s completely captivated.

“Isn’t it the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen?” Ali asks, her eyes still on the sky.

“Yes…it truly is.” Ashlyn replies, her eyes never leaving Ali’s face. “Nothing more beautiful in the world.”

The emotion in Ashlyn’s voice makes Ali look over at the officer, finding Ashlyn intently looking at her, her gaze as passionate and loving as the brunette has ever seen it. “I bring you all the way to Iceland to see one of the most exquisite natural wonders of the world…and you’re looking at me.” Ali smiles warmly, the intensity of Ashlyn’s stare making her tingle.

“I am. Because nothing compares to you…not even that.” Ashlyn replies matter-of-factly, her hand barely moving to motion to the colorful sky above.

It’s completely over the top, but Ashlyn’s voice is nothing but genuine and heartfelt. She actually means it and it makes Ali’s heart pound, her stomach dropping at the bold statement. She puts her hand behind Ashlyn’s head and pulls her in, kissing her with everything she has. Tongues entwine in the midst of quiet moans, the two of them pulling back completely breathless after a few minutes. Eyes lock onto each other as their foreheads press together, their fogged breath filling the cold air
between them.

“You’re everything, baby. I love you. And if we don’t break that damn hotel bed tonight, I’m going to be really disappointed.” Ali grins and kisses Ashlyn again, feeling the officer smile against her lips. “Now look at the fucking Northern Lights, Harris.”

“Whatever my natural wonder wants.” Ashlyn grins and kisses Ali one more time before moving behind her and wrapping her arms around the brunette’s waist, resting her chin on Ali’s head. It’s the best way to ensure she doesn’t get caught up in staring at her girlfriend again…but, as amazing as the Northern Lights are, her eyes still wander down several times to take in the much more entrancing view.

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Sunday, December 31st

Ashlyn lifts her head to look at the artistic analog clock on the bedroom wall showing that it’s 9:38am. She lays her head back down and kisses top of Ali’s shoulder, happily relishing in the warmth of the bare skin pressed to her front as she spoons the brunette. She smiles at the thought that Ali has pretty much shattered her once reliable body clock, no longer automatically waking up at 6am unless it’s a work day and she has to. Instead her body just melds itself into Ali’s, embracing however many hours of peaceful slumber they have together even if it lasts well into the late morning or early afternoon. Right now she’s perfectly content watching Ali sleep, not being able to resist pressing her lips to the soft skin of Ali’s shoulders and back in gentle kisses. They’re still in the exact position they fell asleep in last night, diagonal on the bed and sharing one pillow since the other ones got tossed in the throes of several orgasms. Ashlyn can’t even remember how many rounds they went nor when they fell asleep, but if her body is any indication, they went well past the point of exhaustion.

“I love when you wake me up like this.” Ali mumbles with her voice heavy from sleep, her eyes still closed as she tilts her neck a bit to encourage Ashlyn to keep up the light little kisses and nips. “Mmmm, feels really nice.” She lets herself enjoy it for a couple of minutes, her butt pushing into Ashlyn’s hips to get as close as she can before finally turning in the officers arms to look at her. “Hi, love.”

“Good morning, my queen.” Ashlyn replies with a loving smile, the passionate energy from last night still flowing plentifully. Before she can even worry about morning breath, Ali is kissing her slow and deliberately drawing out the heat that’s already amplifying between them.

Ali lightly tugs on Ashlyn’s bottom lip as she pulls away slowly, gently rolling the officer onto her back and moving to place soft kisses all over the top of her chest.

“We didn’t break the bed last night, but I think you might have broken me just a little bit.” Ashlyn jokes as she stretches slightly, feeling a bit stiff all over and the tell-tale glorious soreness between her legs that signals an amazing night of lovemaking.

“Well, we can’t have that.” Ali continues kissing across Ashlyn’s chest. “I better get to fixing you then. Plus, I’m a little sore myself.” She smiles against the officer’s skin.

“And how to you propose to fix it, darling?” Ashlyn lifts her head off the pillow to look down at Ali. Ali pauses her ministrations and rests her chin on Ashlyn’s chest so she can look at her. “You know when you’re sore the next day after a hard workout?”
“Yeah…” Ashlyn waits for her to continue.

“Well the best thing is always to exercise lightly again even though all you want to do is sit on your ass, right? You have to get your muscles moving to make them feel better.” Ali smiles devilishly. “Sex is exactly the same.”

“Oh really?” Ashlyn tilts her head to the side a bit.

“Really. Look it up.” Ali states confidently even though she just totally made it up.

“Nope. Sounds logical to me. More sex is always logical.” Ashlyn replies with a smirk, but it goes unnoticed by Ali who is already running her tongue over the officer’s nipple. “Alex…” The name leaves her mouth in a gasp as her back arches slight off the bed at the sensation.

Unlike last night’s multiple rounds of intense love making, this time is slow and sensual. Both of them take their time to run lips over every inch of skin…every line, freckle, scar, crease, tattoo, all of it. They use nothing but tongues, feasting on each other to gradually build the smolder into a white hot release of energy. It takes over an hour before both of them are lying breathless and tangled together on the bed, completely satisfied after only one drawn out round. Neither of them means to, but their bodies are so relaxed that they fall asleep again for over an hour.

It’s Ali who wakes up first to her stomach grumbling hungrily. She takes a few minutes to watch Ashlyn sleep and can’t help the tranquil feeling that comes over her. Sure, she already asked Ashlyn to marry her right after the officer asked her first. But Ashlyn had really laid it all on the table by putting beautiful words to what was deep in her soul, and now it’s her own turn. Tonight is the night she truly returns that pure expression of love. Up until right now she had no idea what she was going to say, planning to just speak from the heart in the moment. As she watches Ashlyn sleep and knows without a single doubt that this is the face she wants to wake up to every morning of her life, she realizes exactly how to express her feelings in words.

“Wake up, sleepy head.” Ali kisses all over Ashlyn’s face to wake her up, not able to keep her hunger at bay much longer.

“I’m up, I’m up.” Ashlyn mumbles in a sleepy haze. “I know we probably slept way too late, but… Best. Morning. Ever.”

“Well they say you should do on New Year’s Eve whatever you want to happen for the rest of the year… so, check amazing sex off the list for 2018.” Ali jokes.

“Check!” Ashlyn laughs and rubs her eyes a bit. “Good morning yet again, beautiful. Also… I’m starving.”

“Me too!” Ali sits back on the mattress.

“What time is it?” Ashlyn asks.

“Almost 1pm.” Ali answers. “Just as well, we’ll be up late tonight and have plenty of time to explore more today with no real agenda. How about we order room service while we shower and get ready? Then we can head out for the day well-fed and not have to go searching for good food.”

“Perfect plan!” Ashlyn confirms and sits up. “You go order whatever you want for us and I’ll go get the shower started.” She kisses Ali’s cheek and runs a hand through the brunette’s messy sable hair with a smile before getting up and heading to the bathroom.

By the time they make it out of the hotel, the sunlight is already just about gone for the day with
Iceland only getting about four hours of daily sunlight in the winter. They spend about three hours wandering city again, mostly walking along the water to take in the ocean views and stopping to try some of the country’s more bizarre foods. Ashlyn actually tries an Icelandic shark delicacy called hákarl, which turns out to be these chewy cured fish pieces and almost like a soft jerky. It tastes like fermented, sour seafood and the look on her face after taking a bite is enough to make Ali refuse to try it. After that, they grab some strong coffee so that Ashlyn can get the taste out of her mouth and then stop to watch some street performers juggling lit torches for a while.

Although Ashlyn is a bit hesitant after the shark jerky incident, they opt to try a seafood restaurant for dinner. Luckily, the fish is very fresh and the meal is as amazing as their lamb dishes the previous night. By the time 7pm rolls around, New Year’s Eve in Iceland is really starting to get underway with huge bonfires popping up all over the city. Bonfires are open to anyone and everyone and each one seems to have its own unique crowd and drinks being served. It’s the perfect way to be able to enjoy the festive night outside while still staying somewhat warm.

After walking around just to take an overall stock of the bonfires around them and what they’re like, they finally settle at one that has a sizeable crowd with a seeming mix of locals and tourists based on appearances. They find a spot to sit on the ground that is close enough to the fire to feel its warmth and lean into each other just quietly people watching and taking in the boisterous atmosphere. That is until Ali catches Ashlyn lovingly gazing at her again like she’s the only one there.

“You’re missing out on the experience to stare at me again.” Ali teases. Truth be told, she hopes Ashlyn looks at her like this forever.

“Can’t help it. You are the experience.” Ashlyn charms.

“So smooth, Harris.” Ali leans in for a deep kiss, not hesitating one bit even though they’re in a crowd of people. Not a single person has so much as flinched at them here, as if they were no different than any straight couple. The reviews about Iceland being extremely gay friendly were right on the money.

As they pull away from the kiss and are just smiling each other, two middle-aged men plop down in the space next to them.

“Nýgift?” The taller of the two with light hair and a goatee says with a questioning tone.

“Oh… we’re not from Iceland. Um…American.” Ashlyn tries to convey it simply, a bit on high alert that they just showed up right after she and Ali kissed. She can tell Ali is feeling the same apprehension by the way the brunette is pressed in closer to her than before.

“Oh, yes, apologies. I am Oliver and this is Kristofer.” The man switches to English with a heavy accent and points to the guy with shaggy light brown hair and piercing blue eyes next to him. He smiles and extends his hand.

Ashlyn loosens up a bit and shakes his hand and Ali follows suit, all of them exchanging friendly greetings.

“I was just asking if you two were newly married?” Oliver explains his original question.

“No. Not married, but just recently engaged.” Ali answers for them and Ashlyn nods.

“I knew!” Kristofer belts out jubilantly.

“Yes, yes, fine. You were right. Engaged, not married.” Oliver concedes. “I am sorry to admit that we had a bet about you between us. I lost.” He laughs shyly, hopeful that the two women aren’t
“Totally ok.” Ashlyn laughs.

“It’s in the way you look at each other.” Kristofer elaborates.

“Yeah, this one used to look at me like that and kiss me like that too.” Oliver points to Kristofer jokingly.

“Well if you shaved that damn thing off your face, you’d get better kisses.” Kristofer teases back, and then leans in to peck Oliver’s lips.

Ashlyn and Ali immediately relax even further and join in laughing with their new, and apparently very gay, acquaintances. The four of them exchange a little bit of background information. They learn that Oliver builds boats at the ship docks and Kristofer is an engineering professor at a local university. They met when Oliver took some job advancement courses at the university.

“How long have you been married?” Ali asks.

“Ten years next month.” Oliver replies.


“Thank you.” The two men reply in near unison before Kristofer pipes up. “When will you two get married? You can get married in America, yes?”

“Yes, we can. We just got engaged at Christmas, so we haven’t had time to come up with a plan or a date yet.” Ashlyn answers.

“Wow, very recent then!” Oliver exclaims. “Cheers to you!” He holds up a bottle of liquor that he had sitting beside him. “Join us in a drink?”

“Yes. That’s kind of you.” Ali replies after looking at Ashlyn and getting a nod from her.

“It’s a birch schnapps mixed with a little tonic water, it’s made with the sweet sap of the tree and very traditional.” Kristofer explains before going over to a nearby table and getting four clean paper cups. “To a happy year ahead and a wonderful marriage for you.” He toasts after pouring the drinks.

“To new friends and a healthy, prosperous year for all.” Ashlyn toasts back before they all take a sip. The liquid is sweet, fizzy, and has underlying smoky tones.

“This is good, thank you.” Ali says appreciatively, the strong alcohol providing greater warmth in the cold night. “Certainly helps heat you up out here.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get the feeling in your toes back during the Áramótaskaupið.” Oliver laughs.

“What is…?” Ashlyn pauses when she realizes she can’t pronounce it. “Whatever you just said?” She cringes at herself.

“Áramótaskaupið is a special news show for New Year’s Eve. It’s like a review of everything that happened in Iceland this past year, but it’s done as a comedy sketch. It’s on the television for about an hour and everyone goes home to watch it before coming back out for New Year. It starts at 10:30pm.” Oliver explains.

“Yes, no one is outside during that. So you should go at least warm up wherever you are staying even if you don’t watch it.” Kristofer adds.
“Oh, good to know! We would have been wondering where everyone was going or if something was wrong.” Ali says, grateful for the information.

“Speaking of, we have a thirty minute walk home. It’s almost 10pm and we should get on our way.” Kristofer realizes as he checks the time on his watch. The crowd around them has noticeably thinned already.

“It was so nice to meet you.” Ashlyn stands up and helps Ali up too. “Thank you for introducing yourselves and for the drink.”

“Of course!” Oliver waves it off. “It was wonderful to have met you too. We like making new friends. Perhaps we could exchange emails or something?”

“I’d love that.” Ali replies, her phone already in her hand. “My brother actually plans to visit Iceland someday and I think he would love you two. To be honest, he’s a gay man who has gone through a lot and doesn’t necessarily think that he’ll ever find a healthy and long-term relationship with another man. I think you’d be a wonderful influence on him and I’d really like to stay in touch.” Ali confesses.

“We’d be happy to. And he can always stay with us when he comes to visit!” Kristofer replies easily with a smile as they exchange information. “Any marriage is work to stay happy and together, but if you want it, then it will happen for you.”

“I agree. And let me offer a word of advice…” Oliver jumps in. “Someone will surely advise you to always go to bed naked together after a fight no matter how you feel. Take the advice…it’s magic.” He winks at them.

“It’s definitely great advice.” Ashlyn chuckles and smiles back. “Happy New Year!”

“Happy New Year and congratulations again! Enjoy the celebrations!” Oliver calls to them as they start to walk away and Kristofer gives a little wave.

“You too!” Ali calls back and then turns to face Ashlyn. “Should we head back to the hotel for a bit and see what this Armadilloketchup show is all about?”

Ashlyn bursts out laughing at her word choice. “Yep, let’s go.” She takes Ali’s hand and starts walking in the direction of their hotel. “Look at us being all social and not too wrapped up in each other to make new friends.” She adds proudly.

“Honey, the reason we made new friends is because we were wrapped up in each other.” Ali teases her.

“Details. Details.” Ashlyn plays back.

“Lawyers thrive on details.” Ali reminds her.

“I love my lawyer.” Ashlyn stops walking to leave a lingering kiss on Ali’s lips.

“I love my cop.” Ali counters and steals another kiss. “Thank you.”

“For what?” Ashlyn inquires as they start to walk again.

“For always looking at me in the way that makes everyone think we must’ve just gotten married.” Ali smiles and leans her head against Ashlyn’s arm as they walk along.
“Always…and right back at you.” Ashlyn kisses the top of Ali’s head.

They’re lucky enough that the TV in their hotel room has a closed captioning option that can be used to translate into English. It’s very delayed and the translation is often poor and misspelled, but it still gives them enough of an idea of what is going on during the special show that they have a few laughs.

“This has been a really fun day. Thank you for planning this, what a great New Year for our first official one together.” Ashlyn says appreciatively. The two of them are cuddled under a blanket on the bed and fully dressed, still trying to thaw from the hours spent outside in the cold.

“The best is still to come from what I’ve been told.” Ali replies.

“Oh yeah? What exactly happens out there when we go back out? Is there like a grand countdown on that big church tower like in Times Square?” Ashlyn guesses.

“Actually, the city has no official celebration. It’s all put on by individual people. They suspend the illegal fireworks law for twenty-four hours and let everyone have a free-for-all. It’s supposed to be one of the most amazing fireworks displays in the world, and completely uncoordinated. I can’t wait!” Ali reveals excitedly.

“Oh wow! This is going to be awesome!” Ashlyn shares in the excitement. Fireworks have always been a love/hate thing for her, the sound being too bomb-like to let her fully enjoy it despite being so amazing to watch. Still, she’s learned that being beside Ali makes her feel secure and calm, and ever since the Fourth of July night that they became official, the love side of fireworks has been winning out easily.

The TV show doesn’t hold their attention for too long, the two of them getting lost in languid kissing session for a while before Ali pulls away to check the time and immediately pops up out of bed.

“Come on, babe. We gotta get to a good spot!” Ali quickly puts her shoes back on and throws Ashlyn her boots so she can do the same.

“Easy there, Eager Krieger.” Ashlyn chuckles at Ali’s sudden hurry, but moves quickly to get ready to go.

“Funny, Harris. We need to get to a good viewing area and I have an idea based on the research I did for the trip. We only have thirty minutes, so let’s get a move on so we can beat the crowd.” Ali explains.

“Lead the way, sweetheart.” Ashlyn gets up already ready to go and finds Ali in the bathroom checking her make-up. “Oh, are you not ready yet, babe?” She teases, knowing full well she’s almost always ready first.

“Ash?” Ali walks over and gets close to her face.

“Yes dear?” Ashlyn smiles smugly.

“Shut up.” Ali kisses her hard. “And follow.” She walks away leaving Ashlyn with hooded-eyes, the officer catching up just Ali is about to leave the room.
“Ok, right here I think. Good, right?” Ali asks as they get to the top of Öskjuhlíð Hill. They had visited the Perlan dome building there as a tourist stop on their first day and she knew this would work perfectly. The hill was high enough to offer a 360 view of most of Reykjavik.

“It’s perfect.” Ashlyn grins at Ali’s seemingly nervous excitement. She knows exactly what Ali plans to do in the next twenty minutes and completely understands the brunette’s emotions. Truth be told, she’s feeling it too despite the fact that she knows it’s coming and it won’t change the fact that they’re already engaged.

Like before, they pick a quiet area with a good view and sit down close together on the frosty grass. The TV show must be over because the city is buzzing again with people starting to fill in the hill and lots of movement on the streets they can see below. It’s still 10 minutes to midnight but a few fireworks are going off sporadically and it’s already a pretty amazing sight with a sure promise to only get better. Ali is immediately struck by how loud it is when a firework goes off, she hadn’t thought of that. She had planned to wait until midnight, but with the noise sure to be overwhelming, it’s time. She wants Ashlyn to hear every word.

Ali moves her body so that she’s completely facing Ashlyn, her legs resting on top of the officer’s crossed ones. “Can I have your left hand?”

“You can have whatever you want.” Ashlyn gives her a dimpled grin and watches Ali take off her glove.

“I’m gonna need this back for a minute.” Ali smiles and takes the ring off of Ashlyn’s finger, putting the officer’s glove back on.

“Can’t imagine why.” Ashlyn smiles knowingly.

Ali leans forward a bit and kisses Ashlyn’s chin. “The thing is, Ash, I’m not going to ask you to marry me tonight.”

“Ok.” Ashlyn says, not sure where exactly this is going now or how to respond.

“For two reasons…” Ali continues. “One, because we already did that and I can’t see doing it any better than it happened. And two, because marriage itself is merely a transient wedding ceremony that marks a legal commitment to each other. But a relationship…love…the promise of forever… it’s so much more than that. And that’s what I want with you, Ashlyn… the so much more and everything that comes with it.” Ali locks onto Ashlyn’s eyes, finding them bright green even in the dim light, the hazel flecked with little golden specks. The lively color pattern signals the officer’s happiness and it gives her the confidence to find the rest of the words easily. Ali takes Ashlyn’s left hand in her right one, holding the ring in her left hand, her eyes never leaving their gaze.

“I want the journey with you and everything that it brings, to love you in every version of reality. The happy, the messy, the downward spiral into the weakest, most frail version of ourselves that life inevitably is. Simply put… I want to grow old with you.” Ali pauses for just a second to smile at Ashlyn before continuing.

“To wake up to your face day-in and day-out for years, falling in love with every new line and wrinkle that appears with time even if I don’t realize it until we’re looking back at old photos of ourselves. To always hold your hands and find strength in them even when they tremble. To go for long walks together until they become short walks at a snail’s pace and still enjoy them just the same. To tell you always that I love you and that you’re beautiful even if you don’t remember who I am. To believe the best is yet to come even when we're wrinkled and grey because I know I’ll love you more with every passing day. To love so ardently during our spring that the conversations and
memories are enough to get through our winter. You are my soulmate…my one…my good thing…my miracle. I love you with everything I have. So, tonight…I’m not going to ask you to marry me. I’m going to ask so much more of you than that.” Ali takes a breath and finally asks her question. “Ashlyn Michelle Harris, will you grow old with me?”

Ashlyn can’t find her voice, she can barely even breathe as her heart drums wildly in her chest. Tears leak from her eyes as she stares into warm amber ones that look at her so full of love and hope. As if there was ever any question, she is completely and totally Ali’s…her heart fully promised to the brunette until its final beat. The feel of Ali’s thumbs on her face wiping her tears and the loud voices around them counting down from ten in a mix of both Icelandic and English are what finally snap her out of her trance. She tries to say yes, but her voice is still caught in her throat. Instead she just smiles and nods her head affirmatively, pulling Ali in for their most passionate kiss to date.

For the second time in their relationship, they’re so wrapped up in the intense kiss that they have no idea if the fireworks erupting around them are real or just in their heads. When a particularly loud one shakes the ground and pulls them apart, Ashlyn finally finds her voice despite the fact that she has to yell over the fireworks now.

“Yes, Alexandra Blaire Krieger… I will grow old with you. I’ll wake up to your beautiful face every morning and always feel as exhilarated by it as if I discovered a new planet. I’ll hold your hands steadily, trembling or not. I’ll walk with you even if I have to carry you. I’ll tell you my name a million times if I have to just so you know who loves you unconditionally. I’ll love you more every single day, knowing the best is always yet to come because our winter will be better than anyone else’s summer. And I’ll do it all, forever wishing that I was in your place with any suffering you may face. My last breath is for no one but you. I love you in every version of reality, Ali. Yes… the answer is yes. Now give me my ring back.” Ashlyn belts out, getting pulled into another deep kiss that she knows she’ll never forget the feeling of even if someday her mind forgets the moment.

This time they’re broken from the kiss by loud cheering and clapping which turns out to be for them now that the crowd around them has noticed what appears to be a proposal. “I love you so much, Ashlyn.” Ali says sweetly as she puts the ring back on Ashlyn’s finger, replacing her glove again before they both stand up and give the people around them a slight wave while blushing a bit. With that, they finally look around while hugging each other close.

“Oh my god.” They both gasp in unison at the sight. The whole sky is lit up in fireworks, but not just in one spot. They’re going up all over and in every direction. The variety, color, and random patterns are a sight to behold. It’s a beautiful chaos of vibrant light and smoke.

“You’re doing it again.” Ali says a few minutes later when she glances over to find Ashlyn looking at her instead of the fireworks.

“Happy 2018 my love.” Ashlyn leans in to kiss Ali softly.


“This is so going to be our year.” Ashlyn says happily.

“Every year is going to be our year, babe.” Ali corrects.

“I love your outlook, baby.” Ashlyn hugs her tight again.

“Come on, Hero. Let’s go really join the melee, shall we?” Ali says as she pulls Ashlyn down the hill by the hand, stopping only when they reach the very bottom.
“What are we doing?” Ashlyn questions.

“Well, I read that pretty much EVERYONE in Reykjavik lights off fireworks on New Year. And that appears to be true, sooo…” Ali smiles and pulls four sizeable fireworks and a lighter out of her purse.

“So, that’s where you snuck off to while I went to get coffee!” Ashlyn laughs and shakes her head.

“Yes! Come on, let’s set off our own fireworks!” Ali insists giddily.

“Thought we already did.” Ashlyn smiles warmly.

“Yeah… we sure did.” Ali kisses her sweetly. “But let’s light these anyway. Get to it, Harris.”

“Whatever my queen wants…always.” Ashlyn winks at Ali and lights it, the two of them watching it shoot up into the air and explode into a red heart. “Nice touch, Krieger.”

“You’re not the only one with game, Green Lantern.” Ali teases as she gets ready to light the next one.

“I’m certainly not. And I can fully admit when I’ve been beaten.” Ashlyn plays back.

“Well, this marriage is going to work out just perfectly then.” Ali replies and lights the wick.

“Without a doubt.” Ashlyn agrees as they watch the tiny explosive barrel into the sky.

Monday, January 1st

Ali rolls over to quickly turn off the alarm on her cellphone before rolling back over to wake Ashlyn up. She’s surprised to find the officer already awake and propped up on one elbow smiling at her. “Well hey there, gorgeous. How long have you been up?” She asks curiously. Despite Ashlyn tending to be an early riser, she set her alarm for pretty early and they went to bed late.

“About twenty minutes. Good morning, lovely.” Ashlyn replies with a sweet smile that takes over her whole face.

“You look happy.” Ali says with her own exuberant smile.

“I am happy.” Ashlyn shrugs and bursts out into song, belting out Michael Buble at the top of her lungs:

It's a new dawn
It's a new day
It's a new life
For me
And I'm feeling good!

“And now you’re singing.” Ali giggles. “Ok you, what gives? Why are you so giddy this morning?”
“Well, I did just discover a new planet.” Ashlyn winks.

“Huh?” Ali asks quizzically before immediately remembering Ashlyn’s promise from last night to always wake up to her face every morning and feel as if she discovered a new planet. “Oh, right. You’re the sweetest in the world, you know that?”

“And you’re the most beautiful woman in the world.” Ashlyn counters.

“And you’re going to give me a cavity.” Ali teases before taking Ashlyn’s face in her hands and pulling her in for a soft kiss. “Come on, babe. We have somewhere to be this morning.”

“Where’s that?” Ashlyn inquires.

“The top of a glacier, dress warm.” Ali answers simply, kissing Ashlyn on the cheek and getting up to get ready.

“No coffee for you this morning, Captain Over-the-Top.” Ali warns.

“Awww, baby.” Ashlyn pouts.

“I’m kidding, honey. I would never deny you coffee.” Ali assures her.

Yep, this marriage is definitely gonna work out.” Ashlyn chuckles, tapping Ali’s ass as on her way to the bathroom sink.

The Sólheimajökull glacier tour is only about three hours long, an up-and-down climb to the top and back. According to the general information, the tour is rated a two out of five on the difficulty scale and Ali figured when she planned it that it would be pretty easy and enjoyable sightseeing for the two of them seeing as how they’re both in great shape. They’re greeted by three tour guides when they arrive, two men and one woman who immediately pass out helmets, crampons for their shoes, ice picks, and harnesses to the group of ten tourists going on the hike.

“Hmmmph.” Ashlyn nudges Ali as they attach the crampon ice spikes to their feet. “This looks kind of intense.”

“It does look intense, but the guide says this is one of the easiest glacier tours and it’s considered an ice walk more than anything else. Can’t be that bad.” Ali shrugs. “I’m sure a lot of this stuff is just precaution since we’re walking on ice. Besides, I’m sure my tough Ranger will carry me if it gets too difficult.” She adds with a smile.

“Full disclosure…I was trained to climb walls of numerous types, repel off of things, and deal with various terrain. During no part of that was ice part of the equation. Make of that what you will, Krieger.” Ashlyn plays back. “I’ll definitely carry you, but I make no guarantees about falling and taking you down with me.”

“I can’t ask for more, babe.” Ali laughs. “Alright, quick selfie cause we look like seriously pro climbers in this gear.” She holds out her phone and snaps a quick picture before the tour guides announce that they’re getting started.

The first thirty minutes of the tour are really fun as everyone adjusts to having to stomp their feet
really hard into the ice as they walk in order to get their footing on the slippery surface. The views are great and the incline isn’t all that steep.

“Oh wow, check it out!” Ali says excitedly as they approach an ice cave that they have to walk through.

“So cool!” Ashlyn agrees, laughing at her own pun and earning a soft elbow from Ali when a couple other people around them hear her and laugh too. Everyone takes turns taking amazing photos in the ice tunnel before it’s time to get going. It turns out the first part of the tour was a cake walk compared to what comes after the cave. Before they know it, the incline gets much steeper and it takes much more energy to dig their feet into the ice for stability. It only continues to get harder, eventually getting to a point where they only move a couple feet of distance at a time by slamming the ice pick into the ice and pulling themselves forward.

“So much for being in shape.” Ali gets out through winded breathing.

“What the hell does a difficult glacier hike look like? Geez.” Ashlyn joins in, everyone else around them appearing just as exhausted and surprised. “Need to be carried yet, honey?” She can’t help but tease.

“Please, this queen has it down!” Ali brags and goes to flex but winds up slipping a bit and sliding back into Ashlyn who belly laughs as she steadies her.

“Riiiiight. Down on the ground maybe.” Ashlyn jokes as she gets Ali back on her feet. “You ok?”

“Yep, slight ego bruise, but I’m good!” Ali laughs at herself.

“Awww, but you’re still cute…so, there’s that.” Ashlyn reassures her.

“Ego fixed.” Ali winks and slams her ice pick back into the ground to keep moving forward.

Only about ten minutes later the incline levels out and excited chatter starts amongst the tour group, everyone glad for the reprieve and hopeful that they’re close to the final destination since it’s approaching about an hour that they’ve been hiking.

“Almost there everyone, we just have to climb this part here and we’re at the top!” The female tour guide announces and points to a steep hill that is a complete sheet of ice. It’s only about a 45 degree incline for about twenty feet, but after all that strenuous ice walking, there’s an audible groan from the group and Ali’s is probably the loudest.

“Come on, bad ass, we got this!” Ashlyn encourages and holds up her hand for a high five.

“Can we make-out at the top like teenagers?” Ali cocks her head to the side.

“Try and stop me.” Ashlyn promises.

“Ok, we got this!” Ali says enthusiastically and finally high fives the officer.

“One track mind, Krieger…one track mind.” Ashlyn shakes her head with a little laugh.

“Yeah but, it’s a fucking amazing track.” Ali pecks Ashlyn’s lips and heads to the bottom of the ice hill.

“She’s not wrong.” Ashlyn shrugs and follows.

The final climb is no picnic and they have to tether themselves to little hooks on the wall of the ice
hill to ensure they don’t fall back if they slip. It’s a bit daunting to say the least, but they go foot by foot until suddenly they’re at the top without even realizing.

“Oh my god, we’re alive!” Ashlyn announces victoriously.

“And look at the view! So worth it!” Ali exclaims as she starts walking around a bit on the top of the glacier. Everyone has cameras out to snap pictures of the snowy mountainous scene all around them, patches of ocean visible as well. The two of them follow suit, snapping a few pictures of the landscape on their phones before turning the camera on themselves and cheesing for a few shots together.

They’re standing in a spot a little bit away from the group and taking in one of the ocean views when Ashlyn is completely startled by Ali’s scream.

“I’M GOING TO BE MRS. HARRIS!!!!” Ali yells as loud as she can, her voice reverberating in a booming echo.

“Oh my god, you were actually serious about doing that!” Ashlyn says with a blush as everyone turns to look at them.

“Of course I was.” Ali beams at her.

“You do realize that avalanches are…” Ashlyn starts but stops as her brain catches up to what Ali actually yelled out. “Wait… Harris?”

“Harris.” Ali confirms with a nod and a huge nose-crinkling smile that has her tongue poking through her teeth a bit.

“You want my name?” Ashlyn asks again. “You know I’m not so antiquated that I expect you to take my name, right? I thought you’d want to keep yours or even hyphenate. And I’d be more than happy to be a Krieger. I know you’ve built your career on your name.” She babbles.

“Baby… Ashlyn… I want your last name.” Ali confirms again and kisses her softly. “I want to be a Harris more than I can even express. Is that ok? Do you not want me to be?” Ali asks for her own confirmation.

“Of course I do! Alex, I’d be completely honored for you to have my name and for us to be joined like that. I just want whatever makes you happy though. Are you sure?” Ashlyn questions one last time.

“Ashlyn Harris, you are without a doubt the most incredible person I have ever met. I want to be a part of you in every single way that I can be. For everyone in the world to know that I am yours and you are mind. I want to look at these…” Ali reaches into her jacket and pulls out the dog tags around her neck, “and know that I am a part of your amazing journey, a part of you. That this is us together.” She runs her finger over the ‘Harris’ embossed in the black metal. “To be honest, Krieger is Ken’s name and it doesn’t mean much to me at all. Harris is my life. Got it?”

“Got it.” Ashlyn grins, her heart beating a mile a minute. “Wanna make-out now?”

“Finally!” Ali shouts and kisses Ashlyn hard, immediately deepening it and not caring one bit that they have their tongues down each other’s throats in full view of the whole tour group. It’s only a few minutes and a couple soft moans between them later that they hear the tour guide announce that they’ll be descending in just a couple minutes. They regretfully pull away from the kiss, leaving a few more quick ones on each other’s lips.
“I love you, Mrs. Harris.” Ashlyn can’t help but grin like an idiot when she says it.

“I love that so much.” Ali admits with a contented sigh. “I love you too, Hero.”

“Wait, does that mean I can’t call you Krieger anymore?” Ashlyn inquires.

“Of course you can, silly. I’m sure I’ll still call you Harris even though it will apply to me too. As long as it’s said out of love, baby…you can call me anything you want.” Ali replies.

“Oh really?” Ashlyn raises her eyebrows with a smirk on her face.

“Oh geez…I’m going to regret that, aren’t I? Keep it clean, Harris.” Ali teases.

“Whatsoever you say, hot tits.” Ashlyn deadpans and moves just quickly enough to avoid Ali slapping her ass.

Ali just laughs at the interaction and they finally make their way over to the group that is now getting ready to depart. They’re just getting their helmets back on when the only other American couple on the tour approach them.

“Congratulations, Mrs. Harris!” The blonde woman says and her husband gives them a thumbs up.

“Thanks!” Ali says happily and then turns to Ashlyn. “See?”

“You’re right, it’s awesome.” Ashlyn agrees wholeheartedly at hearing someone address Ali that way.

“Also, reason number 596 why I want your last name…it’s going to drive Kyle absolutely mad when he says ‘Harris’ and we both reply.” Ali giggles.

“Fucking brilliant.” Ashlyn laughs and kisses Ali one more time before they start walking again.

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“How are you feeling, baby?” Ali asks as she and Ashlyn devour huge plates of delicious fish and chips from a food truck they found on their way back from the glacier tour. It’s a well-deserved fried food binge after that hike.

“I’m good. The way back was really pretty easy since they took us on a different trail.” Ashlyn replies. “What I want to know is why they didn’t take us up that way to begin with?! It was so much less steep.”

“Seriously!” Ali agrees. “I’m guessing because the hike up probably wasn’t anywhere near as difficult as it seemed to us novices and it probably makes everyone feel completely bad ass having done it. I’m sure it’s good for business.”

“Good point. I definitely felt pretty bad ass.” Ashlyn admits.

“Me too.” Ali replies. “So, are you up for another adventure?”

“You already know I’d follow you anywhere.” Ashlyn answers without hesitation.

“Excellent. Just remember that you said that.” Ali smirks.

“Oh god, what did I get myself into?” Ashlyn raises her eyebrows.
“You’ll see.” Ali finishes her last bite of food and stands up seeing that Ashlyn is already done too. “Chop, chop, Hero! We’re losing the light.”

Ashlyn drives the Jeep while Ali pays attention to the GPS and squints at some kind of hand-drawn map she’s holding in her hands. The officer doesn’t think to question it, dutifully cruising down route 848 for quite a while and past scenic Lake Mývatn. It’s only when Ali suddenly tells her to stop and turn onto a narrow gravel road labeled ‘Grjótargjárvegur’ that she looks over at the brunette questioningly. The road barely accommodates the car and is layered with a couple inches of snow.

“This is why we got the Jeep, babe. You good?” Ali responds to Ashlyn’s quizzical look.

“Yep, if I can handle New England blizzards in a police cruiser…this is a piece of cake.” Ashlyn says confidently.

“Good, onward!” Ali motions to the secluded road.

It’s slow going, but they go about a mile down the road before Ali stops them again, telling Ashlyn to pull over into a small clearing with a trailhead marker labeled ‘Grjótagjá cave’. “We have to walk from here.” The brunette instructs as she gets out of the Jeep and grabs a backpack from the back that Ashlyn didn’t even know was there.

“What’s that?” Ashlyn questions.

“Necessary supplies.” Ali says mysteriously as she reaches into the backpack and hands Ashlyn a head lamp flashlight. The sun is already low in the sky and getting ready to set even though it’s only 3pm.

“You’re not going to dump my body in a cave are you?’ Ashlyn jokes, taking the backpack to carry. “Am I carrying my own body bag?”

“Be anymore morbid, geez. Nope, sorry Hero, not getting out of marrying me that easily.” Ali replies.

“Definitely don’t want out of that.” Ashlyn smiles. “You didn’t tell me I was going to have to mess my hair up for the second time today though.” She pouts as she slips the head lamp band around her head, having just fixed her hair from the climbing helmet right before lunch.

“Trust me, it’s about to get way more messed up than what that head lamp can do to it.” Ali giggles.

“Ok, now I’m really curious.” Ashlyn replies, hoping Ali will reveal something about where they are going.

“Good. Follow me.” Ali pulls Ashlyn by the hand.

“Anywhere.” Ashlyn sighs happily and follows along.

They walk only about a quarter of a mile on the snowy-but-level wooded path before they reach a little clearing with a large rock formation.

“Here it is.” Ali says excitedly.

“Here what is?” Ashlyn asks, not seeing anything notable.

“Grjótagjá cave.” Ali says like it’s obvious and points to what appears to be a large crack-like
opening in the rock. It looks almost like a spread open fault line in the ground.

“We’re going in there?” Ashlyn says with wide eyes as she looks over the pitch black opening.

“Yep!” Ali replies simply.

“What could possibly be in there that is worth dying in a cave for?” Ashlyn starts to wonder if this is the best idea.

“Where is your sense of adventure my big tough Ranger?” Ali smiles. “But to answer your question… me.” She turns on her headlamp and starts climbing into the dark hole.

“Good answer.” Ashlyn shakes her head with a laugh and turns on her own light, letting out a deep breath and following behind Ali.

The space is tight and they have to almost crawl in for a few feet before it opens up a bit more. It’s immediately warm inside and it pretty quickly opens up into a cavernous space after that initial tight entrance.

“Holy shit.” Ashlyn’s mouth hangs open as the headlamp illuminates the inside of the cave on a small flat rock ledge.

“Woah.” Ali’s sentiment is one of equal amazement even though she’s seen pictures of this place online in her planning. It’s nothing compared to the in-person experience.

It’s a sizeable cave with water covering most of the bottom, small rocky ledges all around. The water is clear blue, revealing the little rock formations at the bottom since it isn’t all that deep. Wisps of steam are coming off the water, making it clear that the water is pretty warm. The only light comes from their head lamps and both of them stand there in complete awe. It’s a thrilling view, both eerie and tremendously beautiful.

“Strip, Harris.” Ali is the first to recover from the wonderment, already taking off her clothes.

“Really?” Ashlyn looks around as if they’re not the only ones there.

“Well, if you want to walk back in the cold in wet underwear…be my guest.” Ali jokes. “I brought towels, but no extra clothes.”

“Funny.” Ashlyn sticks her tongue out. “You don’t think anyone else will show up?”

“From what I read, not many people know about this place. It’s more of a locals only kind of thing. Besides, if anyone does show up, we’ll hear them and see the lights in plenty of time to cover up. Coming or not?” Ali replies and starts lowering herself into water under Ashlyn’s gaze.

“Oh I’m coming alright.” Ashlyn whispers huskily, watching Ali’s gorgeous nude form wade through the clear blue water. She snaps out of it quickly, getting her clothes off in record time and into the water herself. It feels just like a hot tub without moving water. She makes her way over to Ali who has settled on a small rock ledge that makes a sort of natural bench under the water.

“Here… better.” Ali says, reaching to adjust both their headlamps to the side of their heads so they don’t shine the light in each other’s eyes.

“This is pretty damn amazing. How did you find out about this?” Ashlyn gets close and wraps her arm around Ali’s shoulders.
“Just came across it on an insider’s guide webpage I found after a ton of digging. Most tourists don’t know about it and very few attempt to bother finding it even if they do. Apparently, they filmed some Game of Thrones scenes in here.” Ali answers proudly.

“So cool. And a little scary too.” Ashlyn looks around. “I mean…we’re in an underground cave, in hot water, in a volcano, in one of the world’s most volcanically active areas.”

“Yep, and that’s what makes it so erotic.” Ali kisses Ashlyn’s jaw line.

“Erotic, huh?” Ashlyn smiles and closes her eyes at the feel of Ali’s lips on her skin.

“Mmmhmm. I could’ve taken you to one of those huge public hot springs…but then I couldn’t do this.” Ali straddles Ashlyn’s lap and runs her hands across the officer’s shoulders and rests them behind her neck. “And I really really want to do this.” Ali closes the space between them and kisses Ashlyn slowly, making sure every movement of their lips can be felt.

Ali naked on her lap, the warmth of the brunette’s mouth on hers, the hollow coziness of the cave and the warm water lapping against their bodies…it couldn’t be any sexier if she dreamed it.

“Mmmm, Alex…” Ashlyn moans lightly and pulls Ali’s mouth back to hers when the brunette tries to pulls back to look at her. She loses herself in the kiss having no idea which one of them is even moaning and only breaks it when she can barely breathe anymore, finding Ali’s eyes to be as hooded and darkened as her own must be.

They stare at each other lovingly for a few seconds before Ali reaches up and turns off both of their head lamps, leaving then in completely encompassing darkness. Their faces are mere inches from each other, but the blackness is so obscure that they can’t even make out each other’s outline.

If it wasn’t for the weight on her lap and the warm breath near her lips, Ashlyn would have no idea where Ali was. “Alex?” She questions in a whisper at the brunette’s actions.

“Tell me a secret.” Ali replies near the officer’s ear, causing Ashlyn’s skin to breakout in goosebumps.

“Good secret or bad secret?” Ashlyn clarifies.

“Doesn’t matter. Tell me something that is relevant to our relationship that I don’t know about.” Ali changes the stakes, pressing her cheek to Ashlyn’s so that both of their mouths are near each other’s ears. Her arms drape around the officer’s shoulders, hugging her close and feeling Ashlyn’s arms firmly encircle her waist.

“Ok.” Ashlyn thinks for a minute before speaking. “You know the last letter my gram wrote to me? The one in the background of that sketch I made you for your birthday?”

“Yeah.” Ali replies, knowing right away. The sketch hangs in their bedroom at the Newton house and she looks at it all the time.

“Do you remember the first sentence?” Ashlyn asks.

“Sure do.” Ali replies easily and quoting it. “I will always ask you…are you happy?”

“That part always upset me.” Ashlyn confesses. “Because the answer, not even once was it yes. All she wanted was for me to be happy, and if I was being honest with myself… I never was.”

“Oh, Ash…I’m sorry, baby.” Ali presses her face closer into Ashlyn’s and hugs her tighter.
“Don’t be. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.” Ashlyn explains. “The answer is yes now. It has been yes since you came into my life. I’m happy, Alex. I’m really truly happy. Just wish she was here to see it.”

“I like to think that she knows somehow, sweetheart. I’m happy too, Ash. That’s all I want you know…for you to be happy, no matter what it takes.” Ali replies in an emotional whisper.

“I know, love. I know. That’s all I want for you too.” Ashlyn replies, kissing Ali’s cheek a few times.

“Then don’t ever leave me.” Ali smiles against Ashlyn’s face.

“Never.” Ashlyn says resolutely. “Your turn.”

After hearing Ashlyn’s revelation, it seems obvious to Ali what she should divulge. “You know when Steve kidnapped me and I recorded that message to you?”

Ashlyn’s stomach tightens at the thought of it, but she stays calm and listens. “Yeah, I do.”

“That was so fucking hard, Ash. It had just hit me that even though I was going down fighting, that I was trapped and I very likely wasn’t going to walk away. And as scary as that thought was, it was scarier to know I was leaving you…that I was saying goodbye.” Ali pauses and hugs Ashlyn really tightly. “But I did it. I pulled myself together and used those few minutes I had to make sure you knew how much I love you. It was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do…find the words, say them, know it was goodbye. You know what happened as soon as I said them?”

“Tell me.” Ashlyn runs her hands soothingly up and down Ali’s back, swallowing the lump on her throat.


“Lucky?” Ashlyn asks, not expecting it.

“My first thought after I finished that message to you was ‘How lucky am I to have something in my life that makes saying goodbye so hard.’” Ali elaborates. “And then I wasn’t scared at all anymore, I just felt free and ready to fight for what I had whether I lost or not. I am so lucky, Ashlyn. No matter how long I have with you, I’m so lucky to have it. I love you.”

“We’re both lucky, Alex. I love you too.” Ashlyn pulls back just enough to find Ali’s lips, their emotions driving the intense passion behind it. Their confessions only stand to confirm what they already know… they’re each other’s one perfect, good thing and no one can touch it.

“We could be luckier.” Ali husks as she kisses down Ashlyn’s neck.

“Mmmmm, how’s that?” Ashlyn gets out a bit breathlessly.

Ali doesn’t answer with words, she just finds Ashlyn’s hands and put them on her breasts, the energy between them already smoldering.

“You’re beautiful.” Ashlyn whispers, her fingers starting to move over Ali’s nipples.

“You can’t see me.” Ali giggles softly.

“Don’t need to.” Ashlyn replies lovingly and captures Ali’s lips, her hands roaming all over Ali’s torso and eventually finding their way between the brunette’s legs where it’s somehow even hotter
than the water. She rubs light circles on Ali’s clit until the brunette is grinding down hard trying to get more friction, sinking two fingers deeply inside her.

They’ve had plenty of sex in the dark together, but this is like nothing either of them has ever experienced. They can’t see a thing, just feel… their other senses amplified with the loss of sight. Everything adds to the scorching intensity… the echoing of gasps and moans in the hollow space, the warm water splashing around them, the puffs of hot breath against each other’s ears, Ali’s fingernails digging into the skin on the back of Ashlyn’s shoulders, her hands in the officer’s hair, the fingertips of Ashlyn’s free hand pressing into Ali’s hip, the clink of the dog tags as Ali rides Ashlyn’s fingers hard.

Ali tries to hold on as long as she can, never wanting to let go of the tremendous aching energy building deep inside her. The effort is fruitless however, the orgasm hitting hard and almost catching her by surprise. “Oh…ohhhh… Ashlyn…oh my god, yes… Ash…yes, yes… unnnnhh…Ash.” She pants in a breathless whisper, her hips gyrating in wild circular motions against Ashlyn’s hand, trying to sink herself ever deeper on the officer’s fingers as she rides out the waves of pleasure rolling through her body. She gives herself a minute, hugging Ashlyn close while her walls quiver against the officer’s fingers. And then she’s up, pulling Ashlyn to stand up with her and pressing her against the rocky wall with her body.

“Stay inside me.” Ali begs, not wanting to break the connection yet and giving Ashlyn room to keep her hand in place as she leans down to take one of the officer’s nipples in her mouth after kissing around her breast to find it with her tongue. She can feel Ashlyn’s trembling both against her and inside her and she knows she doesn’t have time to tease, immediately entering her slippery center and thrusting at a quick pace that has the officer grunting loudly in pleasure.

“Right there, Alex… don’t stop, baby…don’t stop, oh god, Alex…oh shit…” Ashlyn yells out, her whole body already clenched tight and ready to let go as Ali works her steadily, hitting the perfect spot inside her over and over again. The brunette surprises her by sucking her pulse point hard and stars pop behind her eyelids as she tumbles over the edge with unintelligible words escaping her lips along with Ali’s name.

Before Ashlyn can fully come down, she feels Ali grinding against her hand, the brunette breathing hard into her neck. “Fuck baby, yes… come for me again. God I love the way you feel, Alex.” Ashlyn barely gets out before she involuntarily moans loudly at Ali’s fingers moving inside her core again too.

“Want to come with you… I’m too close already…” Ali stammers through labored breathing, trying hard to wait for Ashlyn but not being able to keep her orgasm at bay any longer. She lets out a wail as Ashlyn sucks and bites her collarbone, feeling the wet gush escape around officer’s fingers as she shakes from the climax. A loud gasp near her ear brings her attention right back to Ashlyn, using all the energy she has left to curl her fingers against the officer’s g-spot repeatedly while moving to massage her clit with her thumb.

It’s mere seconds before Ashlyn’s hips are involuntarily thrusting against Ali’s and her hand reaches down to still the brunette’s fingers as the ecstasy courses through her body in electrifying pulses. They free their hands and hold each other tight, sinking back down on the bench in the position they started in as their ragged breathing vibrates through the cave.

They hold each other like that for a quite a while, just breathing and enjoying the feel of each other in the dark. Ali is still straddling Ashlyn’s lap, head on the officer’s shoulder while they’re completely wrapped around each other. It’s Ali who eventually moves first, with Ashlyn smiling at feel of the brunette’s hands on her cheeks.
“Just when I think it can’t possibly get any better with you… you blow me away.” Ali kisses her softly.

“Preach, baby.” Ashlyn grins against Ai’s lips. “That was earth shattering. Just…wow.” She reaches up to turn on her head lamp, not able to wait any longer to look into her favorite whiskey eyes. “Hi.”

“Hi, love.” Ali traces Ashlyn’s face with her fingertip as their eyes adjust to the light.

“It’s the first day of the year and it’s already the best year of my life.” Ashlyn says genuinely.

“Agreed, 364 more days of fucking amazing still to come, baby.” Ali giggles.

“You know it.” Ashlyn pecks her lips.

“We should probably go before it’s completely pitch dark outside. Or you know, get out of here before there’s an eruption.” Ali teases.

“Ha! Too late on the eruption thing, babe.” Ashlyn chuckles loudly.

“You would.” Ali shakes her head and laughs at the sex reference.

“You can always count on me.” Ashlyn smiles proudly.

Ali leans in and kisses her slowly, deliberately, putting every single thing she feels for this woman into it before pulling back to look at her. “I love you so much, Ashlyn Harris.”

“Love you to GN-Z11 and back, Alex Harris.” Ashlyn replies and gently carries a beaming Ali in her arms back towards the entrance of the cave, looking back at the spot they were just sitting in so she can etch it into her brain…yet another place they’ve openly shared themselves in every way, becoming a stronger unified whole. She looks up at Ali to find her doing the same thing. “The best is still to come…” She uses the words from Ali’s proposal.

“And it always will be.” Ali finishes.
In keeping this whole thing realistic, things aren't always sunshine and rainbows...especially when you're planning a wedding. So, try not to kill me ;-) If you twist my arm, I'll work to post the next part later tonight. Drop me a comment and let me know what you think. As always, thanks for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Thursday, January, 25th**

“Are you expecting anyone?” Ashlyn asks from the couch where she just finished plopping down as the doorbell rings.

“No idea who that could be. I’d say UPS, but they already came.” Ali shrugs from besides her, looking at the clock which shows it’s just past 6pm. Ashlyn had just gotten home from work and into comfortable clothes before Ali settled in next to her on the couch to cuddle and discuss dinner options when the doorbell rang.

“Geez, impatient.” Ashlyn grumbles as the bell rings again. “I’m going to bet that it’s the Mormon missionary guys again. Want to go open the door and make-out in front of them?” She jokes.

“Yeah, I’m not about to give bunch of college boys erections, but thanks for the suggestion.” Ali rolls her eyes playfully.

“Fair point.” Ashlyn starts to get up.

“No, no! You just got home. Relax baby, I’ll get it.” Ali gently pushes her back down onto the couch and quickly pecks her lips before heading over to the door.

“Hidee ho! It’s cold, let me the hell in the house!” Kyle yells as soon as Ali opens the door, pushing right past her.

“What are you doing here? And why didn’t you just use your key?” Ali questions with her hand on her hip, purposely giving him a hard time even though she’s happy to see him as always.

“One, nice to see you too, princess. Two, knowing my luck you two would be having wild sex on the couch when I walked in… and don’t give me that look, you know it’s true! Three, I brought pizza!” Kyle holds up the two pizza boxes in his hand with a smile.

“Ok, you’re completely forgiven for showing up unexpectedly because Ash and I are starving and too lazy to make dinner.” Ali motions for him to go into the living room, eyeing the pizza boxes excitedly when she sees it from her favorite place.

“Duh, I know you two better than you think. Between Harris always being hungry and you practically willing to sign over your house for a slice of Antonio’s pepperoni… I can do no wrong
right now!” Kyle laughs.

“Shut up.” Ali sticks her tongue out at him. “Glad you’re here and even gladder that you brought pizza. Captain Hottie is in the living room, I’ll go get the plates. Diet Coke, juice, or water?”

“Diet coke, please.” Kyle gives her a cheesy grin before walking towards the living room and hollering for Ashlyn. “Captain Hottie, your sexy brother-in-law has arrived!”

“Hey, bro! What brings you by?” Ashlyn greets him as he walks in.

“Well, I saw Alex for lunch earlier in the week, but I missed your face, Harris.” Kyle says enthusiastically.

“Doubtful, but I’ll let my queen interrogate you properly.” Ashlyn eyes him suspiciously.

“What? Can’t a guy bring by some pizza for his two favorite people and enjoy a nice dinner?” Kyle protests.

“Ha! Even more unlikely! We both know that you’re usually here to eat our food and not vice versa… you’re digging yourself a hole.” Ashlyn teases him.

“I’m not saying anything else until Alex gets in here.” Kyle replies defiantly.

“Right.” Ashlyn shakes her head at him as her mind starts wondering what exactly he’s up to. She doesn’t have to wonder long because Ali comes in with a tray of drinks, some paper plates and napkins.

“I hope casual is ok for you, diva. I don’t feel like doing dishes tonight.” Ali addresses Kyle as she hands him a paper plate.

“While I do appreciate only the finest china, this will do given my hunger level.” Kyle sasses back, putting a slice of pepperoni pizza on a plate and handing it to Ali.

“Wait!” Ashlyn stops Ali as she dives in for a bite. “It’s a trap! He has an agenda and he’s trying to lull you into a false sense of security with delicious carbs.”

“Ugh, I knew it was too good to be true.” Ali looks at Kyle expectantly. “Alright, spill.”


“Out with it!” Ali demands and Ashlyn crosses her arms for effect.

“I’m staging an intervention!” Kyle announces proudly.

“Intervention?” Ashlyn eyes him quizzically. “Did you forget something? Like maybe a few other people?” She jokes as she mockingly looks around the room.

“What exactly are you intervening in? If you think we’re going to stop being all over each other like teenagers, you’re wrong. We love each other and Ash is sexy, so let us live. Can we eat pizza now?” Ali tries to thwart whatever Kyle has in mind other than eating.

“You two are impossible.” Kyle throws his hands up. “First of all, Harris, I’m armed with pizza and need nothing else for this kind-of-sort-of intervention. Second, princess, I’m well aware that I can’t stop whatever magnetic force draws you two together like a couple of lovesick puppies. Now if you’d let me finish…”
“So, why aren’t we eating pizza yet?” Ali cuts him off.

“Cut to the chase, bro.” Ashlyn agrees.

“Ahhhh, stop! Ok, ok… this is a wedding intervention!” Kyle shouts.

“Wedding intervention?” Ashlyn questions. “We haven’t even planned one yet.”

“DING DING DING DING!!!!” Kyle bellows. “Exactly!”

“I’m officially more confused than a chameleon in a bag of skittles. I’m eating.” Ashlyn shrugs and bites into her pizza.

“Yes, food, finally!” Ali follows suit, stuffing her mouth full.

“Not how I planned this.” Kyle mumbles to himself as he pinches the top of his nose, trying to compose himself and restart. “Ok… you’re engaged… you have no wedding plans… do you see anything wrong with that?”

“We’ve been engaged for a month, Ky. What is the big deal? Can we not just enjoy being engaged for a while, geez? Where’s the fire?” Ali says between bites.

“Where’s the fire?! Seriously?!” Kyle asks incredulously. “You want to get married this year, right?”

“Yeah, so?” Ali replies.

“Are you two planning on eloping?” Kyle inquires smugly and looks at Ashlyn.

“Don’t look at me dude, I’d marry her right here, right now. Whatever she wants is fine by me.” Ashlyn grins happily.

“So sweet, baby.” Ali leans over for a quick kiss which Ashlyn prolongs by going in for a second one.

“Don’t make me hose you two down.” Kyle rolls his eyes.

“Anyway… we’re not eloping. We’ll have a wedding of some kind.” Ali answers.

“Small or big? Destination or local?” Kyle shoots out more questions.

“I don’t know, probably not all that big and I’m sure it will be local so that people don’t have to travel. What’s with all the questions?” Ali says casually.

“Ok, let me lay this out for you.” Kyle tries his best to be patient. “Even if you invite only your closest friends and family, your guest list is already at about 50 people. Add in some co-workers, colleagues, and maybe friends that you’re not as close to and you’re easily at 100 people. It takes at least six months to plan a proper wedding in terms of getting out save-the-dates and invites. Not to mention your outfits, flowers, photographer, food, décor… so much stuff! Plus, you’re going to need a place to hold all these people. And, unless you plan to get married in between the holidays and when it’s cold… you’re never going to find an available place for this whole shindig if you don’t set a date and book something like yesterday! I know it sounds dramatic, but if you want it to happen this year, you gotta get on it ASAP!”

“Oh.” Ali stops eating to contemplate it and looks at Ashlyn who gives her a looks that suggests Kyle is probably right.
“Yeah, oh.” Kyle says with emphasis, happy that he finally got his point across. “I’m not trying to get you all riled up, but you have to get going on it. So, I’m here to help!”

“The two of us haven’t even started talking about it, how are you going to help?” Ashlyn asks skeptically.

“Kyle Krieger…master stylist, social media starlet, photographer extraordinaire, and of course…expert conversation starter, at your service!” Kyle bows and applauds himself.

“Yeah, it’s getting you to shut up that’s the challenge.” Ali teases and goes back to eating her pizza. “Crack a window, babe…his head could explode at any minute.”

Ashlyn just laughs and sips her drink as Kyle and Ali make faces at each other.

“Alright, I’m only teasing you. What exactly do you have in mind?” Ali asks more seriously.

“Well, all wedding plans evolve from having a time and a place. So, I’m going to help you guys narrow those two things down. Hopefully it will help you get those two things taken care of in the next couple of weeks and then the rest will flow from there.” Kyle explains.

“I’m in. Where do we start?” Ashlyn gets into it.

“Let’s talk date since the weather will sort of dictate your location.” Kyle suggests. “Is there any time of year that you definitely don’t want?”

“I guess what you just said about in between the holidays and it being winter doesn’t appeal to me at all.” Ali starts and looks at Ashlyn. “What do you think?”

“Agreed. I like the idea of having the option to do something outdoors, especially for pictures.” Ashlyn confirms.

“Perfect! So, no winter. Which leaves summer or fall.” Kyle rubs his hands together excitedly.

“Hold up, why not spring?” Ali questions.

“Well we could, but then it would have to be 2019. Spring is in like two months.” Ashlyn beats Kyle to the answer.

“Oh, duh.” Ali slaps her own forehead at her dumbness. “I’m not going another year without getting hitched to you, Hero. No spring.”

“So…like I said, summer or fall?” Kyle repeats himself.

“I’m really open to either one. I know…not helpful.” Ashlyn looks at Ali with a shrug.

“Well, on one hand, I love that summer is warm and vibrant. On the other, fall is my favorite thing about New England. I love the cool weather, the fall colors, all of it.” Ali thinks out loud as everyone contemplates it for a minute.

“Why not both?” Ashlyn pipes up. “We could aim for the in-between of late summer and early fall.”

“Oh I love that!” Ali exclaims happily. “Like mid-September?”

“Perfect! Still warm, but not too hot and the fall colors are just starting to show up with lots of leaves still on the trees.” Ashlyn says enthusiastically.
“Squeeeee! Yes! It could be like an outdoor sort of rustic fall type wedding! SO. MUCH. YES!” Kyle joins in with a squeal.

“Easy bro, your gay is at an all-time high right now. I’m pretty sure a rainbow unicorn is about to fly out of your nose.” Ashlyn laughs and Ali chortles along with her.

“Whatsoever you say, female police Captain with a better six pack than most guys I know.” Kyle taunts back.

“He has a point, baby. Pot, meet kettle. Kettle, this is pot.” Ali mockingly introduces them with a laugh.

“Oh yay! She took my side for once!” Kyle shouts excitedly with a fist pump, while Ashlyn pretend pouts.

“I did not!” Ali defends and leans in close to Ashlyn. “I was just agreeing that you, my dear brother, are uber gay and that you, my handsome fiancée, are sexy as hell.”

“Oh yeah?” Ashlyn’s pout quickly turns into a smirk as she gets closer to Ali.

“Oh huh.” Ali ghosts Ashlyn’s lips with hers. “So incredibly hot.” She mumbles as she kisses the officer soundly for a few seconds, dragging her teeth across Ashlyn’s bottom lip as she pulls away.

“Oh my god I need to go bleach my eyes!” Kyle yells dramatically after watching the interaction and noting the entranced and flustered look on Ashlyn’s face that easily gives away how turned on she is.

“Bleach is in the laundry room.” Ali replies simply, her eyes never leaving Ashlyn’s.

“Can you at least wait until I leave to give each other wild monkey sex eyes?” Kyle pleads.

“Wild monkey sex eyes?” Ashlyn snaps out of it.

“Well that look certainly isn’t platonic!” Kyle rolls his eyes. “Anyway, wedding… let’s keep it rolling so I can leave well before you two decide to do that again.”

“Ok, so we settled on mid-September, but I don’t know where to begin on a location.” Ali gets them back on track.

“I don’t really know either.” Ashlyn confesses.

“I have a plan to get you going.” Kyle reaches over and grabs a little notepad and pen off the coffee table. “Each of you write down three places that you’ve seen or attended a wedding and thought it would be cool to get married there. Or even just somewhere you’ve ever thought you might want to get married. We’ll see what we get and go from there.”

“Good idea!” Ali praises him and immediately starts writing. Ashlyn takes a bit more time to think about it before eventually putting pen to paper and coming up with her three places.

“Okeee…let’s see.” Kyle holds up both sheets of paper and has a look. “You two are unbelievable! We have an obvious answer on where to start.”

“Really?” Ali asks, moving to look over his shoulder.

“You both listed Castle Hill at the Crane Estate in Ipswich. Good choice, ladies… prime venue right there. Truly beautiful.” Kyle approves. “That’s the only match you have, but I’m beyond impressed that you even had a matching answer.”
“What else did she list?” Ashlyn asks.

“Alex has the Endicott Estate in Dedham and The Red Lion Inn in Cohasset.” Kyle replies. “Clearly going with the rustic theme, that’s my girl!” He high fives Ali.

“Ok, read Ash’s other two.” Ali demands.

“Harris has Hammond Castle in Gloucester… whew, damn girl, expensive taste.” Kyle commends her. “And… the Museum of Science in Boston. You’re a weird one, Harris.”

“Should’ve known, you’re so romantic, baby.” Ali curls herself against the officer and places a few kisses down her jaw.

“I actually saw a wedding there once. The setup was done around the bottom of the piano staircase. You have to admit it would be pretty cool to do a chopsticks entrance to your reception.” Ashlyn smiles.

“I’m failing to see the romantic part of this.” Kyle scrunches his nose at the idea.

“We went there on our first date.” Ali reminds him.

“Oh yeah, I forgot that. Captain Romance Ninja strikes again! Hiiiiyyyya!” Kyle pretends to do a karate chop.

“And I’m the weird one?” Ashlyn raises an eyebrow at him.

“Annyway! So, Castle Hill…” Kyle prompts.

“I think it’s amazing and really close to our Ipswich house, which is perfect. Plus I love that we both picked it.” Ali says with a smile.

“Sold!” Ashlyn replies playfully. “Really though, I love that we both picked it too. It’s a stunning place.” She says more seriously.

“Ok, so you’ll call tomorrow morning and make an appointment to tour it and check availability for mid-September. My job here is done...for now.” Kyle smiles cockily.

“Really babe, go open the window. His head is growing at an alarming rate.” Ali deadpans.


“I’m kidding. Thank you, bb.” Ali leans down to where he is sitting on the floor and kisses the top of his head.

“Yeah, thanks, bro. Also for the food…I’m so full, that pizza was solid.” Ashlyn reaches out for a fist bump.

“What would you two do without me?” Kyle replies proudly.

Ashlyn just gets up and opens the nearest window, making Ali giggle.

“Rude.” Kyle pretends to be offended. “Well, I should go. If I hurry, I can make it home for Project Runway.”

“Stay a while, we’ll watch with you.” Ali says. As much as they tease each other relentlessly, she loves having him around.
“Only if you promise not to eye fuck each other.” Kyle points his finger at them in warning.

“Oh stop it and turn on the TV already.” Ashlyn tosses a couch pillow at him. She settles against the arm of the couch and opens her legs so Ali can sit in between them and lean back into her arms. She squeezes the brunette gently and rests her chin on top of Ali’s head, taking in the scent of her shampoo.

It’s twenty minutes into the show when Ali feels Ashlyn playing with her fingers. She smiles at the gentle touch that makes her tingle every time, turning her head and tilting it back to find her favorite eyes looking back at her. “I really can’t wait to marry you, Ash.” She whispers softly.

“I can’t wait either, love.” Ashlyn replies sweetly, capturing Ali’s lips in a slow romantic kiss that makes her heart pound from the emotion behind it. She feels Ali’s hand come up to cup her cheek and she melts into it even further, everything in the room fading away except for Ali.

“I knew I should’ve gone home.” Kyle shakes his head after having turned around during the commercial break to find the two women lost in each other as usual. Still, he can’t help but smile widely. These are his two favorite people in the world and he’s never seen either of them as happy as they are together.

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Sunday, January 28th

“Hi, I’m Anne, the event coordinator here at the estate. Which one of you is Ali?” A middle-aged woman with silvery blonde hair greets them at the door of the Crane’s Estate. After calling Friday morning, Ali was thrilled to get an appointment so quickly for that Sunday morning.

“I am.” Ali steps forward and shakes the woman’s hand.

“Nice to meet you.” Anne smiles. “And you must be Ashlyn. Welcome.”

“Yes, nice to meet you.” Ashlyn confirms with a handshake of her own.

“Let me take you ladies on the grand tour of the building and the grounds and then we can discuss whether you think the venue is right for you and if you want to talk availability.” Anne directs them inside.

They spend an hour walking through every room in the large mansion and the outside areas. Much of it has been converted into bedrooms where guests can stay, but the estate has a few large dining and ballroom spaces that are perfect for indoor celebrations. It’s antique and elegant with a modern flair that makes it feel both luxurious and comfortable at the same time. The outside grounds are even more impressive, perfectly groomed and lush even in winter. The estate sits atop a rolling hill that overlooks the ocean in the distance, everything nicely framed with hedges and stone walls. The two women steal little glances at each other a few times during the tour, their eyes in agreement that this place is breathtaking.

“I’ll let you ladies take a few minutes to discuss and we can proceed further if you decide the venue works for you.” Anne excuses herself politely, leaving Ali and Ashlyn on a large leather couch in a fancy office.

“So…do we really have to talk about it?” Ashlyn asks with a smile as soon as the woman is out of earshot.

“I can already picture carrying you through the door of that honeymoon suite upstairs, I’ll tell you that much.” Ashlyn winks.

“So much for not being antiquated, babe.” Ali teases her.

“Well, you can always carry me instead if you’re up for it.” Ashlyn laughs.

“Nope, I’m perfectly happy being held in those strong arms of yours.” Ali kisses her cheek. “So, this place is it then?”

“Yep, assuming they have a date that works.” Ashlyn brings some reality to the situation.

“Ugh, I really really hope they do.” Ali squeezes her hands together. “It’s going to be pretty expensive to rent this whole place out like we’d want to and get it set up right for the ceremony and reception.”

“Well, yeah. Probably more than the Museum of Science anyway.” Ashlyn jokes before getting serious. “It’s our wedding though and we should both love it, you know?”

“Completely agree.” Ali nods before getting excited and letting out a high pitched squeal of delight. “Eeeeee, our wedding!”

Ashlyn manages to sneak in a quick kiss just before they hear Anne’s footsteps outside the door.

“So, what are we thinking?” Anne asks as she sits across from them on the opposite couch.

“I think we’re sold, assuming there’s a date that works for us.” Ali answers for them.

“Excellent. Let’s talk date and see what we can do. I have to confess that our scheduling is pretty tight. What do you have in mind?” The older woman inquires.

“Mid-September.” Ashlyn replies.

“Hmmmph. That’s a pretty popular time and from what I remember of the calendar, we’re all booked.” Anne pulls out a binder and starts to turn pages in it. “We can always aim for 2019 though.”

“Oh, um… that won’t work. We’re committed to marrying this year.” Ali explains, already feeling bummed out that they’ll have to look elsewhere. She feels Ashlyn reach over and give her hand a squeeze, entwining their fingers together.

“I see.” Anne frowns as she continues to flip pages. “Oh…well, hold on.” She stops at one of the pages and looks at it carefully for a minute. “This could work maybe… we usually only do full weekend bookings for weddings, but if you are a bit flexible on that…”

“We can be flexible.” Ali replies quickly.

“On the weekend of September 21st through the 23rd, we have two corporate events scheduled. One taking up Friday and Saturday and the other being a dinner on Sunday night. The first event was just cancelled yesterday and the dinner for Sunday night is in the main dining room. If you were to have your wedding either on that Friday or early afternoon on Saturday… and not plan to use the dining room as part of your event, we could book your event for those dates as long as your guests were out by Sunday at noon. Would that work?” Anne looks up at them.

“Ash?” Ali looks at the officer hopefully.
“We’ll make it work.” Ashlyn smiles and feels Ali squeeze her hand tightly.

“Excellent!” Anne says cheerily. “Let’s book you and get through the reservation paperwork. Then we can start to discuss maybe what you envision a bit and how we might make it happen.”

Twenty minutes later, after Ali has meticulously read through the contracts before signing them like a true lawyer, their reservation is booked and held with a $1000 deposit. They spend the next hour after that talking about possible setup and pricing packages.

“I think we both like the outdoor plans the best. Ceremony on the upper lawn so that the estate is in the background and then reception on the lower lawn closer to the ocean” Ali says after her and Ashlyn have a chance to look at all the options.

“That’s a great choice. May I suggest having a tent done over the reception area. If the weather cooperates, the tent is clear and roomy with open sides so it just feels upscale and elegant while still being airy and outdoorsy. If the weather is bad, we can add the sides to the tent and you get the outdoor setting while still being protected. That way you’re covered in either scenario. And we do a great job of adding little touches and lights to it so that it doesn’t feel like a tent, if I do say so myself.” Anne suggests in a slight boasting tone. “The ceremony is easily moved indoors in case of bad weather, so no need to do much for that.”

“Probably a good idea.” Ashlyn agrees and Ali nods.

“Pricing wise for exclusive rental of the entire estate, an outdoor ceremony setup for 150-200 people, and tented reception…which includes tables, chairs, place settings, linens, dance floor, bar and electrical setup for a DJ and lights... the estimate is $50,000. And we require you to use our bartending services and list of exclusive caterers. For that number of guests, the food and drink charges range anywhere from $20,000 to $70,000 depending how fancy you want to go with the food and alcohol served. Your total cost would come in somewhere around $70,000 to $120,000, which of course doesn’t include any photography or music services you choose.” Anne lays it out for them and pauses to let them think it over.

Both women raise their eyebrows a bit, but one look at each other and they know they’re on-board. They can certainly afford it without even so much as making a dent in their savings, it’s just that they don’t normally splurge quite like this. Still, they take a quick minute to talk it over, agreeing that it’s a lot but worth it to have the wedding they envision. And just like that they find themselves signing the first round of paperwork needed to get the tenting process started.

“Oh…I should’ve told you sooner, but I completely forgot!” Anne puts her hand on her head. “This may change your vision a bit on how you want the setup to go. The hedges on the lower lawn hide the ocean view a bit, so the guests can’t see the water at all while they are seated in the reception tent. It can only be seen when people stand up. I know the ocean backdrop was important to you.” Anne explains.

“Oh.” Ali says a bit disappointedly. “It’s not ideal, but it’ll be fine, right?”

“It’ll be totally fine.” Ashlyn assures her.

“Well, we have a work around if you’re interested.” Anne says and pulls out a few photos from the back of the binder she is holding. “In the past, a few couples have had a platform built on the lower lawn with the tent going on top of the platform. It raises everyone up so the ocean view is unobstructed at all times. I think it’s a nice touch. Here is what it looks like.” She shows them the photos.
“That’s really pretty looking actually.” Ali comments on the pictures. “Why wouldn’t we do that?”

“Well, the cost is significant and often deters people. It’s $100,000 to have the platform built with the tent on it.” Anne elaborates. “But if you want to do it, we can tack it right on to the order for the tent setup and you’ll be good to go.”

Ashlyn’s eyes go wide at the outrageous cost of the platform, a laugh already in the back of her throat at the ridiculousness of it. She doesn’t have to try very hard to hold it in though because Ali speaks up quickly and she finds herself practically choking instead.

“Doesn’t matter, add it to the tent order.” Ali agrees immediately without much reaction at all.

Ashlyn pauses at the brunette’s response, certain that she must have heard the price wrong given Ali’s confident and instant reply. She sits quietly and watches as Anne fills out the paperwork, this time audibly coughing when she sees $100,000 added to the cost line.

“You ok, honey?” Ali pats Ashlyn’s back.

“Uh, maybe some water.” Ashlyn gets out raggedly.

“Of course, I’ll be right back.” Anne gets up and walks towards the door. “This will give you a chance to look everything over before we sign the rest.” She adds over her shoulder as she walks out.

“Alex, what was that?” Ashlyn says in disbelief.

“What was what? You ok?” Ali looks at her in concern.

“Did you just really agree to spend $100,000 to build a platform so that people can see the ocean while they are sitting during dinner?!” Ashlyn asks incredulously.

“Uh…yeah. Wait, are you upset?” Ali looks at her with confusion, Ashlyn’s face looking almost outraged.

“Don’t you think that it’s really excessive? It didn’t occur to you that we should talk it over first?” Ashlyn spits out in question.

“But, this whole thing is kind of excessive and didn’t we just say it was worth it for us to have a wedding we love?” Ali replies defensively.

“Yeah we did, but geez Alex. I mean, come on, the damn platform by itself is almost the cost of the whole damn wedding. Think about it… we’d be paying $100,000 just for people to see the ocean while they’re sitting. I can’t think of anything more frivolous and ridiculous!” Ashlyn says heatedly, starting to lose her composure as it hits her even harder. “Do you know how many people we could help with $100,000? We could feed a village in Africa for like over a year with that! And we’re going to spent it to build a platform so people can still see the water for all of like the two hours that they’ll be sitting down… absurd!”

“Easy, Ash.” Ali tries to calm her down. “I know it seems like a bit much, but we only get one wedding day. We don’t ever spend our money on things like this and we’ve given both our time and money, and even our damn professions, to help people. Don’t you think we deserve to spoil ourselves for once? We have millions of dollars, it’s nothing in the grand scheme of things.” Ali argues.

“You have millions of dollars, not me.” Ashlyn mumbles to herself, but can tell Ali heard it when she
sees the brunette's eyes narrow. "It doesn’t matter though… the thought that we would ever spend money on something so dumb and over-the-top makes me feel sick. That’s money that can go to something better and you know it. So what if it doesn’t mean a ton to us, it can mean everything to someone else. I grew up with practically nothing. My family scraped by my whole life and my younger self would smack me so hard for even considering something this ludicrous."

“Oh, so now our wedding is dumb?” Ali raises her eyebrows. "New flash Ashlyn, you’re not that person that scrapes by anymore. You worked your ass off and fought to make something of yourself, and here you are a complete success after all of it. You deserve to actually enjoy it for once. You don’t have to keep paying penance for your past all the time.” Ali gets out with more bite than she intends.

“I don’t think our wedding is dumb! Just… you don’t get it…you don’t know what it’s like.” Ashlyn raises her voice, hurt by Ali’s lack of understanding right now.

“Oh, and why is that?” Ali loses it at Ashlyn’s words. “Oh right… because I’m a spoiled little princess who can’t possibly understand what it’s like to work hard and struggle, right?”

“That’s not what I think and I didn’t say that!” Ashlyn retorts.

“You didn’t have to, it’s all over your face.” Ali replies angrily.

“You know what, do whatever you want, Ali. Get the platform or don’t, doesn’t matter.” Ashlyn says dejectedly, feeling completely nauseated over how this has unfolded. “I’m leaving.”

“You’re really just going to leave right now?” Ali asks in disbelief at how they got to this point, not missing the fact that Ashlyn just called her ‘Ali’ which she hasn’t done since they first met. “We drove together.” She adds in an attempt to get them back on track.

“It’s not that far, I’ll walk.” Ashlyn says flatly and just turns to go with nothing else said.

“Un-fucking-believable!” Ali mutters under her breath as she watches the officer walk away. She’s angry, but more than anything else her chest aches at the look on Ashlyn’s face and how little it seems the officer thinks of her. She quickly wipes the tear that escapes her eyes and composes herself to deal with Anne who she can hear approaching.

“Ready to finish up?” The woman asks as she walks in.

“Yes.” Ali replies with the best smile she can muster.

“Should we wait for Ashlyn? Did she go to the restroom?” Anne asks having noticed the woman’s absence.

“Oh uh, no. She got a work call and had to leave.” Ali lies through her teeth, her stomach churning. “I’ll just finish up with you, if that’s ok?”

“Not a problem at all!” Anne replies easily and gets the paperwork together for Ali.

--------------------------------------------------

The cold air stings Ashlyn’s cheeks as she walks faster and shoves her hands deeper in her pockets. Given that she feels so numb inside, the pricking of the bitter wind on her skin is welcome. Her mind races as fast as her heart does, doing everything she can not to throw up on side the of the road. The hurt that Ali didn’t even consider how she might feel to begin with settles in deep, festering further over the fact that the brunette didn’t give it much more consideration even afterwards when
Ashlyn had tried to explain it to her. She pushes the thought out of her mind, focusing on just getting home before Ali does so she can grab her stuff for work and leave before she has to face her again.

She makes it home in about thirty minutes, relieved to see only her Jeep parked there. She rushes inside and grabs a fresh uniform, her gun, and an overnight bag just in case. Her night shift doesn’t start until 7pm tonight and it’s only 11am, but she can’t think of anything else to do with herself right now. Work has always been a way to stay busy and avoid plaguing thoughts. So, she opts to head to the police department and hit the gym and gun range for a couple hours before clocking in at 2pm and putting in some serious overtime.

“Didn’t know you were on today, Captain.” Lieutenant Hurley stops in the doorway of Ashlyn’s office. The woman usually coordinates the officers’ schedules and is surprised to see Ashlyn there.

“Technically I wasn’t and I’m on shift tonight, but I had nothing much to do today and figured I’d put in a little OT while I got the chance.” Ashlyn replies casually.

“Please, Harris…I heard you just got engaged to that lovely woman of yours. Pretty sure you have plenty to do at home.” Hurley winks and teases. She and her wife have been married for five years now and she likes to jibe Ashlyn about settling down.

“Well, you forget she’s as much of a workaholic as I am. She’s busy today.” Ashlyn replies a bit shortly in trying to cover.

“Ah, makes sense.” Hurley can tell by the look on Ashlyn’s face that she pushed the wrong button, but thinks better of trying to pry. “Well, Doucette called in sick this morning and Bailey is out on patrol by himself…you feel like cruising with him since you’re here?” She inquires.

“Absolutely.” Ashlyn quickly agrees, happy to have something more engaging to do.

“Such a team player, Captain…it’s what I like best about you.” Hurley salutes her. “I’ll call Bailey in so he can pick you up. Safe day, Harris.”

“Always try, thanks Lieutenant.” Ashlyn replies to the usual sentiment they give each other before patrols and starts gathering her gear. She glances down at the picture of her and Ali on her desk and sighs. She promised herself she’d be better about not volunteering for active patrols she didn’t have to be on even if for no other reason than making sure she gets home safe to Ali, but right now she really needs the distraction.

“Great.” Ali bites her lip when she sees that Ashlyn clearly took the clothes she needed for work as well as her overnight duffle bag. She had raced to finish the paperwork with Anne, hoping to find the officer at home so they could talk it out. Instead the house is empty and it looks like Ashlyn has plans to stay out as long as she can. Ali feels a renewed surge of hurt and anger bubbling up and knows she can’t stay in this house right now. She quickly locks up and gets back in the car, making the hour long drive to Newton so she can spend her time there.

She turns up the music in the car, hoping to clear her mind on the drive, but the opposite happens. She finds herself alternating between being angry at Ashlyn for how the officer acted and feeling guilty for how she responded. By the time she gets to Newton, her thoughts are so muddled that she’s just plain frustrated. She busies herself with some simple chores to try and settle down. An hour later, she’s cleaning up glass for the second time after breaking a drinking glass and then a dish in her
distracted emptying of the dishwasher. Her big toe is now throbbing because she kicked the kitchen cabinet in exasperation and she knows it’s time for to let herself vent before she explodes.

“Tell me everything!” Kyle answers his phone excitedly. “Was the place perfect? Did you book a date? When is it? Tell me, tell me!”

“Can you just come over?” Ali begs flatly.

“Alex, you ok? What’s the matter?” Kyle immediately gets concerned at the tone of her voice.

“I’m fine… I guess. I don’t know.” Ali replies. “I mean I’m not like physically hurt or anything. Can you please just come over?”

“Yeah, of course. I just finished with my last client for the day, so I’ll be there in a little over an hour.” He assures her.

“I’m actually at the Newton house.” Ali tells him.

“Oh, ok. Well, I’ll be there in like 20 minutes then.” Kyle says a bit surprised and confused. Ali is always in Ipswich when it’s a work day for Ashlyn. “Is Harris with you?” He asks when he remembers that Ashlyn isn’t supposed to be at work until tonight.

“No.” Ali offers nothing more.

“Sit tight, hunny. I’ll be right there. Whatever it is, we’ll work it out.” Kyle promises and quickly gets off the phone so he can drive over, his mind wandering to all kinds of possible scenarios.

Chapter End Notes

So, who's side are you on in the platform battle?
Platform Heals

Chapter Notes

Wow, lots of you weighed in on that last chapter! Thanks for all the comments and keep 'em coming...I love to hear your thoughts. Seems like a lot of you are split being a little bit Team Harris and a little bit Team Krieger. For the record, I know a couple that faced this exact situation... yes, apparently it does costs $100k to build a platform to see the ocean (they ended up going no platform if you're wondering how it ended, and the wedding was beautiful).
So, let's get to how these two ladies handle it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunday, January 28th continued…

“Of fucking course. Had to be today.” Ashlyn seethes as she holds a cold compress and gauze to the side of her head while she sits in the emergency room. Only two hours into the patrol she and Officer Bailey had been dispatched to a local bar after a fight started over the Patriots game. They were the first to respond and had managed to break it up with just the two of them, but not before Ashlyn was hit in the head with a glass bottle by a large burly man that had pretty much let himself get arrested after he realized that he had hit a woman. That had only pissed Ashlyn off more, prompting her take him to the ground and cuff him herself no matter how much she was bleeding all over the place.

Luckily she avoided a concussion, but the top of her right ear is completely split in two with a bump on her head just above it and a couple small scratches on her cheek. As she sits there waiting for the doctor to stitch her ear, all she can think about is how worried Ali is going to be… especially given that it happened on a patrol she wasn't supposed to be on. It makes her feel miserable. Did I overreact? Should I have left like that? Is the stupid platform really that big of a deal? The questions swirl in her head and she knows she should call Ali and tell her what happened, but she’s still angry and hurt…she wouldn’t know what to say right now. Instead, she just sits there letting it all stew.

By the time she gets back to the department and gets through all the report paperwork from today’s incident, it’s already 9:30pm. Lieutenant Hurley had insisted she go home, but Ashlyn had stubbornly refused. Her feelings are still all over the place and the last thing she wants to do is go home with a busted face and deal with everything that has happened today. She’s not even sure if Ali will be there or not when she gets home and she can’t decide which is worse.

She leans back in her chair and closes her eyes after taking a couple of Advil. It’s now 11pm and her ear is throbbing painfully with the anesthetic having worn off. A heavy sadness has settled in and she feels tired. She’s caught up on all of the paperwork that has been piling up for weeks and now she’s stuck on desk duty for the night because of her injury. There’s literally nothing to do but sit here and think. As soon as she opens her eyes, they fall right on the picture of Ali on her desk again. Her heart pangs in her chest and she just wants to crawl out of her skin.

She first thinks to call Chris because she knows he’ll understand her side of things better than anyone. He’ll see it her way without question and back her up. The more she thinks about it though, the more she knows she needs better perspective than that. Not able to take the conflicted feelings anymore, her finger hovers over the number for a minute before finally making the call despite the
late hour.

“Hey, Sarge! To what do I owe this surprise night owl call? You’re not pregnant are you?” The voice on the line says jokingly after only three rings.

“Hey, Luke. Sorry bro, I know it’s late. Do you have a minute?” Ashlyn asks, completely ignoring his jesting.

“All the time in the world for you. What’s going on, Ashlyn? Everything ok?” Morris immediately gets concerned by the use of his first name and the sound of her voice.

“Alex and I had a fight. I just…I’m lost.” Ashlyn just puts it out there bluntly, having no energy for anything else.

“First fight?” He asks knowingly.

“Yes.” Ashlyn replies sadly.

“I know it feels like the end of the world right now, but it’ll be ok, buddy. Tell me what happened.” Morris says supportively and listens carefully as Ashlyn gives it to him unfiltered.

“And then she just left. She just fucking left me there to deal with the rest, Ky. She actually walked home and was gone by the time I got there. I think maybe she just went to work early, but I don’t know. I didn’t have it in me to go there and check.” Ali gets out in a sob. “Why does she just fucking leave like that?!” She gets out in one final yell.

“Because she doesn’t trust herself not to make a bigger mess of things when she’s upset. When it gets tough, her mind convinces her that she needs to walk away to deal with it or she’ll mess it up. She had the perfect example growing up of what not to do in a relationship and, as much as she learned from it, I think she doesn’t trust herself not to fuck things up sometimes. Harris is used to being on her own and working through things all alone…she doesn’t know another way.” Kyle explains.

“But she’s not alone anymore!” Ali yells in frustration and glares at Kyle.

“Hey, calm down. I’m not taking her side here, just telling you what I know.” He reassures her when he sees the defensive look on her face. “Come here.” He pulls her into his side on the couch.

“She thinks I’m just some spoiled princess that throws money around to get what I want.” Ali cries into his shoulder.

“Did she say that?” Kyle asks even though he’s sure Harris would never utter those words or anything remotely close to it.

“No, but the look on her face…she looked disgusted with me.” Ali says in a muffle.

“I’m sure she was just upset about the situation, Alex. You were both heated and probably both misunderstood things.” Kyle tries to calm her down.

“Am I?” Ali’s voice is tiny and quiet. “Am I just some self-centered brat that is used to getting what I want?”

“Stop it, Alex. You know damn well that you’re not. You’ve worked hard for what you have and
Mom worked damn hard for everything we had growing up. Yeah, you have money that you’ve most certainly earned, but you’ve never been wasteful about it and you’ve spent so much of your time and used your assets to help other people. You’re a good person, honey…the best I know.” Kyle says genuinely.

“Thank you.” Ali dries her eyes a bit on her sleeve before she ruins Kyle’s shirt.

“Don’t thank me, it’ the truth.” Kyle says resolutely before he decides to push a bit. “The other best person I know… is Harris.” He waits to see if Ali is going to react, but she just stays quiet so he continues. “And I know for a fact that she thinks the world of you, Al. She loves you so deeply and she would never think those awful things about you. You have to know that. It’s just a difficult situation that you each view differently.”

“I guess.” Ali concedes a bit, but says nothing more.

Since she didn’t shut him down, Kyle presses further. “Can I be honest?” He asks.

Ali just nods.

“I think you’re both a little right here and just haven’t stepped back enough to see each other’s viewpoints.” Kyle tells her.

“What else is there to see? I think it’s a normal part of splurging on an expensive wedding and Ash thinks it’s some gaudy excessive display.” Ali shrugs.

“Ok, you know me, I am an all-out diva. I completely get where you’re coming from, Alex. It’s your wedding day and you’re marrying this amazing person that you love more than anything. You want it to be perfect and you have the money to do it. So, it’s a no brainer to just give in to whatever will make the day spectacular, right? Hell, you never thought you’d ever even find a love like this, so you’re gonna do this thing huge!” Kyle indulges her.

“Exactly!” Ali exclaims. “I mean…Ash is everything, I’d give her the whole world if she’d let me.”

“I know you would. But Alex… you’re her world and she just needs you, babes.” Kyle levels with her and watches her face drop a bit. “Just hear me out for a second.”

“Ok.” Ali agrees.

“Let’s say Harris needs a new car. What would you do?” Kyle asks.

“I’d get her a new one.” Ali replies, not sure of what he is getting at with such a seemingly out-of-the-blue question.

“No, no, be more detailed. What exactly would you do?” Kyle requests.

“Um…well, I know she loves Jeeps. So I guess I would go to the Jeep dealer and get her a nice Wrangler like I know she loves.” Ali answers.

“Ok, better. But you wouldn’t just get her the base model, right?” Kyle probes further.

“Well, duh. I’d obviously get her the top of the line version that is all hooked up… black on black, best sound system, lift kit, premium tires, running lights, all of it. What does this have to do with anything?” Ali gets impatient.

“Bingo. You want her to always have the best. So you get her what she loves in the best possible
“version.” Kyle summarizes.

“Yeah, ok.” Ali tries to follow along.

“Alright, well, your wedding is that Jeep in this example.” Kyle elaborates. “You pick everything top of the line for her, and she loves it and accepts it because it comes from your heart. She understands because she wants the best for you just like you want the best for her.”

“Ok…” Ali nods. It makes sense, but she still doesn’t see the whole point of the example.

“But, there’s a line, isn’t there?” Kyle asks rhetorically. “I mean… what’s better than one top of the line Jeep? How about two? Or even three?! She loves the one you got her, but you want to her to have it all. So, why not get her a second one or third one? Would you do that, Alex? Would you get her another Jeep if was happy with just the one?”

“Of course not, that would just be weird and unnecessary. There would be no reason to unless she really needed a second one.” Ali replies easily.

“Exactly.” Kyle smiles. “That platform… that’s the second Jeep. Hell, for $100,000, that’s like five fucking Jeeps.” He laughs a bit before getting back on track. “She already has the best by marrying you. You’re everything she wants and needs. Sure it’s nice to have some bells and whistles for your special day together, but you don’t need an extra set of bells and whistles on top of those. To Harris, that platform is a second Jeep. Do you understand?”

“Oh.” Ali lets it sink in, the awful feeling in her stomach is back again as she thinks it over. “I am such a fucking idiot. She tried to tell me, but I just couldn’t see it.” It finally hits her hard. “Ugh, I even told her to lighten up and actually learn to enjoy the good life she’s worked for.”

“Go easy on yourself. Your heart was in the right place.” Kyle comforts her. “You just needed to see it from her point of view so you could understand her reaction. I mean, think about it… will you love her any less or will your wedding be any less amazing because your guests can’t see the ocean for like two hours while they eat?” Kyle raises an eyebrow.

“Uh, fuck…no.” Ali dope slaps herself.

“Darn right. Girl, we have legs… we can stand up if we want to see the damn water! Especially for $100,000! And seriously, no one is even going to notice anyway. We’ll be too busy feasting and talking!” Kyle hugs her close as she groans.

“Thanks for that… I needed that huge fucking reality check. Wish I had seen it sooner.” Ali cuddles into him.

“So, what now?” Kyle asks. “Might as well pay me that $100,000 for this effective therapeutic session by the way.” He jokes, but Ali is too lost in thought to appreciate it.

“Now I go back to Ipswich and wait. I hope she doesn’t hate me and comes home after work. I’m not sure she will. I just want to fall down at her feet and beg her to forgive me right now.” Ali replies defeatedly. “I didn’t even tell her I loved her, Ky. Her job…you never know…fuck, what if something happens tonight?” She lets out another soft little sob at the thought.

“Relax, Alex. She’s good at what she does and she loves you too. She’ll do everything to get home safe to you like always. You two will be just fine. And you don’t have to grovel, honey…it’s not sexy. Like I said, both of your hearts are in the right place. You just need to step back and get on the same level. Talk it out, that’s all.” He assures her confidently.
“Ok… you’re right… ok.” Ali gives in and pulls herself together. “Can we go get some ice cream together before I head back?”

“Hell yeah we can! Mint chocolate chip can save the world!” Kyle declares and wraps her up in another hug. “It’s gonna be ok. Let me fix your masacara.”

“I hope so.” Ali whispers and gets up to go grab her mascara.

“I know so. Come on, Bridezilla!” Kyle teases and finally gets a smile to go along with the slap on his arm.

“I mean, $100,000?!?! All so that people don’t have to stand up to see the water which they probably won’t be looking at much anyway. Am I crazy, Luke? Is that not the most outrageous thing you’ve ever heard of? And why can’t she see that? Sure, she’s always been fairly comfortable in life… but, she works her ass off and so did her Mom. It’s not like she grew up like royalty or something. Alex isn’t like that. She’s humble and kind and completely genuine. So, what the fuck with this?” Ashlyn is practically yelling into the phone.

“Harris… geez, bud… take it down a notch for a second, alright?” Morris interjects now that he’s gotten the details.

“Yeah, sorry, bro. I’m just worked up.” Ashlyn apologizes for her loud raving.

“I can hear that. It’s ok. Let’s do what we do best, eh? Look at all the angles and take path of least resistance. Ok?” He appeals to her.

“Yeah, ok.” Ashlyn complies, hearing Jamie’s voice in the background over the line.

“What’re you doing out on the porch in this cold?” Jamie asks Morris.

“Just on the phone with Ashlyn. She and Ali had a fight. I didn’t wanna wake Lexi.” Morris explains to his wife.

Ashlyn cringes at her poor and very late night timing. She’s about to apologize when she hears Jamie’s voice again. “Took them this long to have a fight? Amateurs.”

“That’s what I said.” Morris laughs.

Ashlyn shakes her head with a tiny smile at the back and forth between the couple before she hears Jamie’s voice even louder. “Go home naked and go get your girl, darlin’. Show her how much you love her and nothing else will matter in the morning. You’ll be fine, sweetheart. Just get to talking and don’t let it linger too long.”

“You hear that, Sarge?” Morris asks.

“Yeah, tell her I said thanks and I’m really sorry for calling so late.” Ashlyn replies and hears Morris relay the message before Jamie’s voice is audible again. “No apologies, Harris, that’s an order! Come visit us soon, Lexi misses you! And give Ali some sugar for me when you get to fixing things… goodnight, Sarge!”

Ashlyn laughs a bit at Jamie calling her ‘Sarge’ since she never does. “Tell her I will, goodnight, and to give Lexi a kiss for me.” She listens to Morris relay the message again and tell Jamie he’ll come to bed when he’s done.
“Alright, Harris…back to it.” Morris gets back to their conversation now that Jamie is gone. “Look, Ashlyn, we had a fairly similar upbringing and I get where you’re coming from. Spending $100k on a platform so your wedding guests can see the water while sitting is absolutely over-the-top. It would feel like a complete betrayal of your roots.” He sympathizes with her.

“So, I’m not crazy?” Ashlyn checks again.

“No, you’re not crazy.” Morris confirms. “But, you’re also kinda wrong too.”

“What? But you just said…” Ashlyn utters in confusion.

“I know what I said. Follow along with me, Harris.” Morris instructs. “You and Ali don’t drink much, right?”

“Right.” Ashlyn replies a bit befuddled.

“Ok, so you’re out at a bar and Ali decides to have a drink.” Morris sets up a scenario for her. “Now, obviously you two don’t drink much, so you know she’s only going to have the one drink. You ask what she wants and she tells you to pick for her. What do you get her, Harris?”

“Prosecco. She loves a good beer, but Prosecco is her absolute favorite thing if she’s just having one.” Ashlyn answers almost proudly at knowing that.

“Alright, good.” Morris encourages. “You’ve got a hundred dollars in your pocket and there are three prosecco options: an $8 glass, a $15 glass, and a $32 dollar glass. Which one do you get her?”

“The $32 dollar one, no question.” Ashlyn replies immediately.

“Ok, why that one? Would she even notice the difference between the expensive one and the others?” Morris inquires.

“No, she probably wouldn’t. She’s only having the one drink and it’s not that expensive when you think about the fact that we’d probably spend that much at the bar anyway if it wasn’t just one drink. But besides that I just would want to get the best one for her. She doesn’t drink often and I’d really want her to enjoy it as much as possible.” Ashlyn answers without much thought.

“Good, good. So, you get her the very best because you love her and want her to be happy.” Morris reiterates.

“Yeah.” Ashlyn agrees.

“Well, that one drink is your wedding. And in this case, Ali is you.” Morris reveals.


“If you’re lucky in life, you get one wedding day. One perfect day to commit to the person you love most surrounded by the people who are important to you. Ali loves you to the ends of the earth, Harris. I mean, till death do you part…literally, think she’s proven that. You want the very best for her, but she wants that for you too. That woman would give anything and everything for you. If a $100,000 platform is the best there is on your wedding day, then she’s not thinking twice about it making it happen. Just like you wouldn’t think twice about a pricey $32 glass of prosecco even though she’d never know the difference. You get me?” He lays it out for her. “Is $100,000 a shit ton of money that you could spend in a million better ways than a stupid platform that you’ll be on for just a few hours? You betcha. But can you understand why Ali didn’t jump right to that conclusion when that overpriced setup means the very best there is for the person she wants to give everything
she has to?"

“Shit.” Ashlyn mumbles. “Didn’t think of it like that.”

“I know. And that’s exactly why we’re on the phone. I know it hit you hard, buddy… but you have to put yourself in her shoes. You’d do the same thing if you were in her place.” Morris gives it to her straight.

“Ugh, I let her think that I thought she was a spoiled princess. She accused me of it and I told her that it wasn’t true, but she didn’t believe me and I did nothing else to reassure her or correct her. And I’m a total fuck for walking away like I did and just leaving her to deal with shit. What is wrong with me?” Ashlyn gets mad at herself. “I was just afraid I was going to say something I’d regret if I stayed and argued.”

“Come on, dude. Relax a bit. It’s not all that bad. Like I said before, it’s not like you’re wrong for how you felt about it or for taking time to cool down. You just didn’t take the time to understand why she didn’t see it the same way you did. You know, I think maybe you guys see things more similarly than you think you do. Now that you understand her side a bit more, go talk to her with a level head and explain your thought process, make sure to clarify why you needed to walk away. I have no doubt that you two will come to a place of mutual agreement.” Morris says, his confidence in them evident.

“Yeah, you’re right. Thanks, bro… for talking some sense into me and being here tonight.” Ashlyn says gratefully.

“I’ve always got your six, Sarge.” Morris replies simply.

“Likewise.” Ashlyn responds. “Guess I better get my ass home and make things right.”

“Yep, don’t rush off though. I mean, don’t put it off… but make sure you take the time to settle your emotions and get your head right first.” He advises her. “Oh and Harris?”

“Yeah?” Ashlyn replies.

“From one hand-me-downs, welfare kid to another… it’s ok to enjoy everything you’ve worked for. She was right about that too. You’ve fought and clawed your way to the top. You deserve to be happy and it’s totally acceptable to full-on spoil yourself sometimes. Even if it’s a $100k platform that seems like it’s fucking bananas and some Queen Elizabeth level shit. You hear me?” Morris laughs.

“Yeah, bro. I hear you.” Ashlyn chuckles. “You just want the ocean view, Tiny Tim.” She teases him.

“Damn fucking right I do, Little Orphan Annie!” He gives it right back to her. “Alright, go ice your head and stop getting hurt, lugnut. You’re not twenty-five anymore.”

“Tell me about it. Assuming Alex can forgive me for my asshole performance this morning, I still have to explain my busted cranium.” Ashlyn groans.

“I’m thinking she’s not going to care all that much once you two actually get to reconciling.” Morris laughs.

“Ten-four on that, over and out.” Ashlyn laughs at his insinuation, hoping he’s right. “Thanks again and thank Jamie for letting me take up your time. Give my little princess a big old kiss in the morning for me. Love you, Luke.”
“Will do. Go get your girl, Sarge. Love you too, g’night.” Morris ends the call.

As much as all she wants to do right now is rush to get to Ali, she knows Morris is right that she needs to settle herself. There’s still about four hours left in her shift and it’ll be some of the longest hours she’s ever sat through, but she’ll make them count and get her shit together so she can make things right.

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Monday, January 29th

12am…1am…2am… Ali watches the hours pass on the digital clock next to the bed as sleep eludes her. She drove right to the Ipswich house after ice cream with Kyle half hoping that Ashlyn would be there waiting for her even though she knows the officer’s shift doesn’t end until 4am. She’s completely exhausted and has tried everything to get to sleep, but all she can think about is Ashlyn being at work after they fought like that. She was obviously upset when she left… what if she’s distracted? What if something bad happens tonight? Will I ever forgive myself if something happens to her? Her mind swirls with the worse possible scenarios, leaving her restless and on-edge as she tries desperately to calm down to no avail. She’s taken a hot shower, made tea, and watched TV in bed, but it hasn’t helped. She eventually finds herself sobbing into the pillow while dressed in Ashlyn’s clothes just to feel close to her.

Ashlyn is in her Jeep and racing home the minute her shift is over. Her leg bounces nervously the whole way… what if Ali isn’t there? She decides she’ll drive right to Newton if she doesn’t find Ali at their Ipswich house. And if she still doesn’t find her there, she’ll try Kyle’s place. If that fails, she has no idea where else to go…but she doesn’t even want to think about it.

She lets out a huge sigh of relief when her headlights reveal Ali’s car in the driveway as she gets home. “Thank god.” She says out loud and walks as fast as she can from the garage to the house. The living room light is on, but Ali is nowhere to be found downstairs. Ashlyn quickly puts her gun in the safe and heads upstairs to their bedroom.

“Oh, baby…” Ashlyn whispers sadly at what she sees when she gets there, her eyes tearing up a bit and her heart dropping. Any tiny inkling of hurt she was still harboring is completely gone now. Ali is dressed in her sweatpants and one of her long-sleeve Ranger shirts, clutching her pillow tightly. The TV is on, something the brunette rarely does in the bedroom. There are tissues strewn all over the bed and Ali’s mascara is smudged, a few lines of black trailing down her cheeks. She clearly cried herself to sleep.

Ashlyn strips off her still blood-stained uniform, leaving her in just boxers and a sports bra. She turns off the TV before climbing into bed and just follows her heart. She wraps her arms around Ali and pulls the brunette in as close as she can. “I’m so sorry, Alex. I love you so much, baby. So much.”

Ali stirs at the feel of arms around torso, her lips curling into a little smile at the familiar touch as she opens her eyes to find hazel ones looking back at her in the mostly dark room. Her mind is still foggy from sleep and she starts to panic as it lifts and she remembers everything. “Ash?” She gets out in a groggy voice, her eyes darting wildly around the officer’s face. Is she real? Is this a dream? The solid feel of the protective arms around her and the woodsy citrus scent that is uniquely Ashlyn’s are
enough to convince her. She’s really here.

“You came to bed. You came home. You’re here.” Ali whispers softly, her arms encircling Ashlyn’s waist as she breathes the officer in. It doesn’t matter that the hazel eyes gazing into her own look so sad right now, it’s still the most wonderful sight in the world.

“I’m here, Alex. Of course I’m here.” Ashlyn whispers back. “I’ll always come home to you love, no matter what. I’m so sorry if I made you question that.”

“You called me Ali and then you just left…I thought…” Ali’s voice gets caught in her throat as her emotions get the best of her.

“I know. I shouldn’t have done that without making it clear that I just needed a little time to clear my head. I promise you, Alex…I will never ever leave you. It’s just… growing up, my parents never walked away when they were angry with each other. They just stayed and battled no matter how heated it got. They said things to each other that were just awful and that you can never come back from once you’ve said them no matter how hard you try. I felt myself get angry today and…well, I never want to say something out of anger that I don’t mean and that I can never take back. I’d like to think that I wouldn’t be capable of that, especially with you… but knowing my gene pool, it scares the crap out of me. That’s why I walked away when I felt myself losing it.” Ashlyn explains and hugs Ali tight. “I just needed some space to calm down. Leaving you that first time was one of the biggest mistakes I’ve ever made and just like I promised you before, I will never do it again, Alex. I’ll always be here no matter what happens. I love you.”

“I love you too, Ash. And deep down, I know better. I mean, I didn’t know the thing about your parents, but I know you won’t just leave me. I guess I just got scared. We’ve never been mad at each other like today.” Ali lets out a deep breath that she feels like she’s been holding since this morning.

“Sweetheart, I am so very sorry for this morning. I let the situation control my feelings without considering or listening to your side of things. I get it now, I really do. You always want the very best for me and our wedding is no different. You’re right, our day should be the very best of everything. I want the best for you too and I’m so damn sorry I was too stubborn to see it that way to begin with. Thank you for always loving me so much that you’ll stop at nothing to make sure I have everything I could possibly dream of. But honestly, baby…I just need you. Just you, Alex. Anything else is a total bonus. I’m really, really sor…” Ashlyn gets out in a complete ramble of an apology before Ali finally succeeds in interrupting her.

“Stop. Please stop.” Ali pleads until Ashlyn stops mid-sorry to look at her with her mouth still open.

“Please don’t apologize. You’re right, I do want only the best of everything for you and that’s what I was thinking this morning when I agreed to that platform. But I’m the one who owes you an apology, Ash. I know you better than to think that the best has to be the most expensive or luxurious thing. You were absolutely right. That platform is completely absurd and unnecessary. We could do so much better with that money and still have an amazing wedding. We’re already going to have the greatest wedding on the planet…because you’re completely right about that part too… all that matters is that you’ll be there, that you’re the one I’m marrying. I just need you too, Ashlyn. Just you. I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t mean so be such a spoiled, entitled bitch this morning.” Ali gets it all out.

“Hey, you’re not a spoiled bitch. You know I don’t think that, right?” Ashlyn asks in concern.

“I know. I just let my emotions run wild this morning. I’m sorry.” Ali apologizes again.

“I’m sorry too and you most certainly deserved an apology from me. How about we agree that we both fucked up royally and go from there?” Ashlyn suggests.
“Deal.” Ali gives her a little smile.

“So…platform or no platform?” Ashlyn asks playfully after a minute of quiet between them.

“No platform.” Ali replies resolutely with a grin. “This wedding is all about us. And while I thought that the ocean view would be important to you, I clearly didn’t realize that it wouldn’t be $100,000 worth of important to you.” Ali giggles. “I mean, you can always stand up to look the water, right? Gotta work for it, Harris.”

“Standing or not, that ocean view isn’t actually important to me at all.” Ashlyn smiles back.

“Really?” Ali quirks an eyebrow in disbelief.

“Really. If you think my eyes are leaving my beautiful wife long enough to appreciate the ocean view, you’re out of your damn mind, Krieger.” Ashlyn kisses her forehead. “Pretty sure our guests are gonna be too busy looking at you too. You’re gorgeous, baby.”

“Always so charming, babe. But our guests better be busy eating their expensive ass food and not looking at me or I’m laying down the law!” Ali laughs.

“That’s my girl.” Ashlyn laughs with her. “Morris is gonna be so disappointed at the lack of platform. He set me straight tonight.”

“Same with Kyle.” Ali shakes her head.

“We’ll get them really nice best man gifts.” Ashlyn suggests with a little chuckle.

“Definitely.” Ali agrees and buries her head into the crook of Ashlyn’s neck with a yawn.

“You must be exhausted. You were up all night, weren’t you?” Ashlyn asks knowingly.

“Yeah.” Ali admits. “I just kept worrying that something was going to happen to you, especially after we left things the way we did. I don’t know what I’d do if you got hurt with us fighting like that. I just couldn’t sleep.” She explains and feels Ashlyn’s body tighten. She knows exactly what that means and immediately sits up, her hands searching for the bedside lamp. “Ashlyn, what happened?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” Ashlyn works quickly to reassure her before Ali can turn on the light. “It’s just a scratch.” The light floods the room and she watches Ali frantically look her up and down.

“Oh, honey…your face!” Ali immediately reaches out to gently grab Ashlyn’s face and inspect the two small scratches surrounded by a light bruise on her cheek.

Ashlyn winces at the touch, not because it hurts, but because she knows it’s only going to be a matter of seconds before Ali’s eyes wander farther.

“Ash!” Ali yells when she sees it. “What the hell happened? Oh my god.” Her eyes go wide at the line of six stitches holding the top of Ashlyn’s very red and swollen ear together.

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“I’m ok, I promise. I got called in to help stop a bar fight and got hit with a bottle in the process. Just some stitches, the scratches, and a bump, nothing else. I’m really ok.” Ashlyn tries to calm her down.

“I even arrested the fucker after it happened.”

“I knew! I fucking knew something like this would happen tonight after everything. It’s like bad karma or something.” Ali shakes her head as she works hard to calm down a bit. “Your poor ear, baby. That has to hurt like a bitch. Makes me hurt just looking at it.”
“Sort of does, but I took some Advil and iced it. It’s tolerable and it’ll be fine, just add another scar to the list.” Ashlyn shrugs and pulls Ali back down against her.

“Another scar to love.” Ali sighs and kisses her softly. “You think maybe you could hold off on acquiring another one before our wedding day? Might be nice not to have stitches on your face somewhere for our pictures.” She jokes mostly for her own benefit.

“I’ll try my best, love.” Ashlyn promises.

“I really fucking hate when you get hurt. I didn’t think you had to go out on patrol tonight.” Ali says as she continues to inspect Ashlyn’s ear.

“Uh… I didn’t. I kind of volunteered to go out on one in the afternoon when another officer called in sick. I thought it would be a good way to keep myself busy.” Ashlyn admits with a cringe and just gets raised eyebrows from Ali. “I know, I know! Dumb idea. I wasn’t exactly at my best today. Sorry, Alex. I promise you I’ll stop being so cavalier with the risks I take from now on. I’ve really been trying to be better about it.”

“Nope, don’t promise that. We had this conversation before. You love what you do and you’re good at it, Ashlyn. I’m not the only one that needs you, I know that. Just use your head and follow your gut. I trust you’ll make good decisions and get yourself home to me. I love you just the way you are.” Ali says genuinely, her eyes never leaving Ashlyn’s.

“Ok. Thanks for saying that.” Ashlyn nods, she couldn’t feel luckier to be with this woman right now if she tried. “So, what was that look for then?”

“You know damn well that going out on a patrol to stay busy when your mind was otherwise preoccupied and unfocused was a bad idea. That’s not what I call a good decision where you’re using your brain.” Ali challenges.

“Fair point.” Ashlyn concedes. “Won’t happen again.”

“Good.” Ali leaves it there. “So…”

“So…” Ashlyn repeats, her eyes holding Ali’s gaze.

“Are you going to kiss me or not?” Ali smiles.

Ashlyn doesn’t reply, she just leans in and kisses Ali deeply, both of them letting the release of emotions dictate the passion and heat behind it. Tongues entwine and battle for dominance and hands start to roam as Ashlyn pulls away to hover over Ali.

“I’m going to do so much more than just kiss you, baby.” Ashlyn smirks and kisses down Ali’s neck.

“Oh yeah?” Ali says, already breathing hard.

“Mmmhmm.” Ashlyn sucks Ali’s pulse point hard enough to leave a mark, the first of many she plans to leave tonight.

“Fuck, Ash…” Ali moans softly, her fingers digging into the bare skin of Ashlyn’s lower back.

“That’s the plan.” Ashlyn kisses the skin behind the brunette’s ear and leaves her lips there. “I’m going make love to every inch of you…eat you until you lose your mind…and then fuck you slow and deep, just the way you like it until you can’t breathe and come undone all over my fingers.”
“Jesus Christ.” Ali practically purrs at her bluntness. “I’m so damn close already and you’ve barely touched me.”

Ashlyn lets out a low chuckle pulls back to look at Ali, sweetly brushing a few stray hairs from her forehead. “I love you, Alex. Completely.”

“I love you too, Ashlyn. Show me.” Ali brings the intensity back to the romantic moment.

Ashlyn works back down Ali’s neck, relishing in the brunette’s soft moans before pulling back to look at her again. “Know what best part of a fight is?”

“What?” Ali breathes out, her eyes closing.

“The make-up sex.” Ashlyn husks.

“Never had make-up sex.” Ali admits, her past relationships never long enough to get to that point.

“Prepare to have your world rocked then.” Ashlyn says smugly, but she barely finishes speaking when Ali pulls her down by the neck and kisses her hard for a few seconds before pulling back just enough to let Ashlyn seen her darkened eyes.

“Bring it, Harris.” Ali smiles wickedly and pulls Ashlyn down again to officially begin the process of making-up.

Save for the moment when Ali loses control and squeezes Ashlyn’s head between her thighs, resulting in a loud yelp and brief pause in action to let the pain in her ear subside…it’s some of the most passionate sex they’ve ever had. They go round after round into the late hours of the morning until neither one of them can move, both falling asleep happily without even the slightest thought of an overpriced platform.

Chapter End Notes

How are we all feeling now?
Alright, so I promised that I'd give you all a heads up when this story was nearing its end. I've now officially framed out how the rest of it will go, but I have no idea how many chapters it will take to get there. I'm going to guess somewhere between 5 and 10 to give you a sense. So, now would be a good time to tell me if you want to see anything specific in this story so that I can try to work it in as we slowly wind towards the end.

And by slowly winding towards the end, I mean that we're about to jump out of a plane and hit some stuff on the way down before we finally come in for a landing. Hold on tight, cause this ride isn't over yet and we're going to pull this thing into the station all used up and spent. Just remember that I won't break your heart in the end.

Enjoy this somewhat calmer chapter to the top before we start free-falling again! Even though Jill Ellis won't let these two play together (cause she fucking sucks)... I certainly will, so smut alert ;-) And as always, let me know what you're thinking in the comments. Happy Friday!

Wednesday, February 14th

“Which one is hers, Capt?” Officer Cooper asks with a sigh.

“The white Audi Q7.” Ashlyn replies from the passenger’s seat of the cruiser, motioning to the car parked in the lot of Zumi’s Espresso where Ali often grabs a coffee before she heads to Newton for the day.

“Can’t fucking believe I’m helping you do this. You’re such a sap, you know that? You realize you’re never going to live this down in our department, right?” Cooper informs her.

“I’m going to be just fine.” Ashlyn replies confidently. “Because no one will ever hear about it.”

“Oh, they’re gonna hear about it.” Cooper assures her.

“Well, if they hear about it, you can bet you’ll be squaring off against me in your self-defense recertification next month. I’ve been told I have a reputation for making my opponents look like discombobulated clowns.” Ashlyn says smugly. “Pretty sure you need to pass that recertification to step up from your rookie status.”

“Awww, come on!” Cooper whines. He has definitely heard about how impossible it is to take her down. Even the best officers wind up looking like untrained fools next to her skills.

“Choice is yours, rook.” Ashlyn shrugs. “If I was you, I wouldn’t piss off the Captain who’s in charge of your promotions.” She teases him, knowing she’d never actually act on it.

“Yeah alright, Capt.” Cooper concedes. “But only because I think it’s cool as hell that you do active patrols, especially with us newbies. You realize you’re supposed to just sit your ass behind a desk
and look good once you make Captain, right?”

“Not my style, Cooper.” Ashlyn replies simply.

“I respect the hell out of that. Really.” He says more seriously.

“Thanks. Now stop sucking up and focus.” Ashlyn laughs.

“You realize that we’re technically on duty here, right? Can’t actually pull her over without a reason.” Cooper reminds her.

“I’m well aware. Not gonna be a problem.” Ashlyn smiles confidently. “She’ll turn right out of the lot and then make that first left at the light to head towards the highway. She’s a great driver, but there’s only like a 5% chance that she’ll use her blinker on that left turn. And even if she does… no way she’ll use it to make the right turn after that. It’s her biggest flaw and I nag her all the time about it.” Ashlyn chuckles.

“Seriously? That predictable?” Cooper says amused. “Why is it so hard for people to use a blinker around here?”

“You’re from Philly and just can’t understand. People in Massachusetts view using the blinker as a sign of weakness. Especially in Boston itself.” Ashlyn jokes. “God forbid you let people know you’re turning, just gives them license to cut you off or not let you turn. Driving is a contact sport around here.”

“I’m starting to see that.” Cooper laughs. “Anyway, how come I’m the one pulling her over? Why aren’t you doing this yourself?” He questions.

“Because if I pull her over, she’ll see that it’s me right away and the surprise won’t be as good.” Ashlyn shakes her head. “How are you married and yet know this little about being romantic?” She goads him.

“I know enough not to pull my wife over. Just saying.” Cooper throws his hands up defensively with a wry smile as Ashlyn shoots him a look.

“Oh, there she is. Get ready!” Ashlyn spots Ali leaving the coffee shop and ducks down a bit even though they’re across the street and she wouldn’t see them anyway.

“Damn, Capt…wowza, she is hella fine.” Cooper can’t help but comment as he watches Ali get into her car.

“Watch it, Cooper, don’t make me call your wife.” Ashlyn points her finger at him in warning. “And she’s beautiful, get it right. Now focus and execute!”

Yeah, ok. Easy there, Captain Cupid. There’s like hearts coming out of your eyes and shit.” Cooper takes the opportunity to mess with her. “Now get down more so she can’t see you and let the master reel this fish in for you.”

Ashlyn just rolls her eyes and slumps down below the level of dashboard as Cooper puts the cruiser in gear to follow behind Ali. It’s not long before she hears Cooper let out a small laugh and mutter “Unbelievable.”

“No blinker?” Ashlyn confirms since she can’t see for herself from the crouched position.

“Nope.” Cooper replies.
“Told you.” Ashlyn says proudly.

“This is hilarious.” Cooper shakes his head and turns on the lights and siren. “Here we go.”

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Ali puts her coffee in the cup holder and plugs her phone into the car charger, checking it one more time just in case. She figured probably have a text from Ashlyn by now seeing as how it’s past 9am and the officer has been at work since 5am. It must be a busy morning though because there are no messages yet. Plus, it’s Valentine’s Day, so all the more reason to think Ashlyn must be really busy or otherwise she’d already have a dozen sweet little messages from her girl by now. She makes a mental note to work a nice massage into their evening plans since Ashlyn is always a bit more tense after a crazy day at work.

The last two weeks have been pretty hectic for both of them. Ashlyn has been dealing with training two new officers, which means being out on a lot of patrols. Ali has been frantically working to finish editing the next season of Veritas Aequitas so she can get Kira’s story out there in hopes that the case will be overturned eventually by way of the writ she filed. On top of that, they’ve made some headway with wedding planning in having found a wedding coordinator who has already helped them settle on save-the-date and invitation designs as well as find a photographer and decide on the dinner menu. With so much going on, they came to an easy and mutual agreement on Valentine’s Day plans: a relaxing night together at home.

Ashlyn had come up with the idea of cooking dinner together and watching a movie. Ali had added making a dessert and taking a Jacuzzi bath together to the list. Both had agreed that it would be the perfect night to unwind and connect with each other.

With Ashlyn working until 2pm today, Ali knows she can get in a couple solid hours of work in before she has to drive back to Ipswich. Even though she has an office space at the Ipswich house, it’s not as well set up for podcast narration as her office in the Newton house is. She’s been spending a lot of time driving back and forth between the two houses for that reason, but it gives her a chance to think about what she needs to accomplish on the drive, so she doesn’t mind at all.

Knowing she’ll be on the road for about an hour and not on her phone, she opts to text Ashlyn before starting the drive.

**Paladin: Happy Valentine’s Day, Hero :-) I hope your morning hasn’t been too busy, but I have a feeling it has been. Can’t wait for tonight with you and making the whole world melt away, baby. I love you to GN-Z11 and back! 5 more hrs…I’m counting down.**

With that done, she tosses her phone into the center console and gets on her way.

“Ugh.” Ali groans as she gets caught at the first red light. The left turn only lane at this intersection not only has a green light that lasts less than a minute, but it also takes forever to cycle to the green light too. She scans through her favorite satellite radio stations while she waits, finally settling on Top 40 hits since she’s feeling peppy this morning. The lights turns green and she’s off, hoping to make it through the green light for the next turn ahead before it changes. Just when she thinks she’ll manage not to catch another red, she hears a siren and looks in the rearview to see a police cruiser with lights flashing right behind her.

“Fuck. Come on, just be trying to pass me.” Ali says hopefully as she pulls over. Unfortunately, the cruiser pulls over right behind her. “Damn it, damn it, damn it!” She yells repeatedly as she opens the window and cuts the engine. She can already hear Ashlyn nagging her over getting pulled over for not using her blinker. It’s not like the officer won’t find out eventually since her license plate will get
documented on the stopped cars list for the day.

She tries to get a better look in the rearview mirror to see if she knows the cop who pulled her over, but she can’t get a good enough look just yet. If it’s someone that knows her, she probably won’t get a ticket, but Ashlyn will totally get teased about it. If it’s someone unfamiliar, she’s likely to get a ticket, but then she can tell Ashlyn on her own terms. She can’t decide which one is the better option.

‘Well, I guess I get to tell Ash myself.’ She thinks to herself just a minute later when a stout officer with piercing blue eyes that she’s never seen before makes his way over to her car.

“Good morning, Ma’am. License and registration please.” He demands politely.

“Sure thing.” Ali smiles sweetly and hands it to him. “Can I ask why I was pulled over, Officer… Cooper?” She asks after noting the name on his uniform, hoping that playing dumb might help.

“You failed to use your turn signal, Ms... Krieger.” He replies politely as he looks over her license.

“Oh. I’ve been so distracted with this legal case that I’m working on for my podcast that I must have forgotten to put it on as I stopped at the light.” Ali lays it on thick in hopes that he’ll figure out who she is and let her off easy.

“Well, you shouldn’t be driving if you’re distracted, Ma’am. That’s what Uber is for.” Officer Cooper replies a bit smugly.

‘Ass.’ Ali grits her teeth at his arrogant attitude and bites her tongue. “You’re right, officer. My apologies.” She gives him another big smile.

“I’ll be back in a minute, please stay here.” He directs her and walks back to the cruiser, taking her documents with him.

“Ugh, motherfucker.” Ali grumbles audibly at the fact that she’s almost definitely getting a ticket. She watches the officer get back in the cruiser, settling in and looking like he’s typing on a laptop and talking. “Yep, definitely getting a ticket.” She groans one last time and grabs her phone to kill time while she waits. Still no messages from Ashlyn, so she starts reading through a couple of her emails.

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“She totally just pulled the celebrity lawyer card.” Cooper laughs as he pretends to use the onboard computer so he can talk to Ashlyn who is still crouched below the dashboard.

“She didn’t!” Ashlyn laughs hard. “That’s my girl.”

“Totally did! Said some shit about being distracted by her legal podcast or something like that. Fucking hilarious!” Cooper snickers.

“What did you say?” Ashlyn questions.

“Shut her down and said she shouldn’t drive if she’s distracted.” Cooper answers smugly.

“Oh man, she’s must have been pissed!” Ashlyn can only imagine the look on Ali’s face.

“She looked like she might kill me for a second. You got an intense one there, Captain.” He remarks.

“You have no idea.” Ashlyn smirks knowingly.
“Gross, Harris. So, you doing this or what?” Cooper prompts her.

“Yep. She looking?” Ashlyn asks.

“Nah, she’s like playing with her phone or something.” He replies after taking a look at Ali.

“Good.” Ashlyn sits up and fixes her uniform a bit before starting to get out of the cruiser.

“Hey, don’t forget your sunflowers, Captain Pansy.” Cooper mockingly reminds her and points to the bouquet on the console. “And here’s her stuff.”

“You are so close to eating that mat next month, Cooper. So close.” Ashlyn warns him as she grabs the flowers and takes Ali’s license and registration from him.

“Sorry, sorry, just had to get one last one in. Good luck, Capt! Go get her!” He salutes her and tries to recover.

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“Ma’am. Here’s your license and registration.”

Ali is startled by the sudden voice at her car window having been distracted by her phone. She initially scrambles to put her phone down when it hits her that she’d know that voice anywhere. Her head immediately snaps up, twinkling hazel eyes and a dimpled smile look back at her.

“Ash!” Ali yells excitedly, taking in her handsome officer in uniform as her hands flail a bit in delayed reaction.

“Hi beautiful.” Ashlyn smiles widely at her.

“Hi baby!” Ali replies happily before the confusion sets in at Ashlyn standing there leaning into her car window a bit with her license and registration in hand. “Oh my god, did that cop call you because he pulled me over?” She asks with a cringe.

“Nah, don’t blame Officer Cooper. He’s just being a good rookie by doing my bidding. Technically, I’m the one that pulled you over.” Ashlyn laughs lightly. “Happy Valentine’s Day, love.” She reveals the sunflowers behind her back and gives them to Ali.

“Well look at you, Hero… aren’t you the sweetest?! Thank you baby, these are beautiful.” Ali practically melts at the gesture and Ashlyn’s usual choice of flowers. Someday she’ll have to find out how the officer manages to get sunflowers in the middle of winter. “Only you would pull me over to give me flowers. Such a romantic, Harris.”

“I heard you played the celebrity lawyer card, Krieger.” Ashlyn teases her.

“Well I thought I was getting a ticket.” Ali defends herself. “So embarrassing.”

“Yeah, so…actually, you are getting a ticket.” Ashlyn informs her.


“Sorry, honey.” Ashlyn winces a bit and hands her the small yellow envelope marked with the Ipswich Police Department address.

“Well, I guess I’ll take it. At least it means I got to see you.” Ali smiles abashedly, pulling the ticket out of the envelope. “What’s the damage?”
“I don’t know. Have a look.” Ashlyn shrugs.

Ali looks it over and immediately breaks out into a grin. “Oh you are good, Harris. Way, way too good.” It’s not a traffic ticket at all, but a ticket to see the musical *Waitress* tonight at the Boston Opera House.

“Will you be my valentine date, Alex?” Ashlyn asks sweetly.

“Always, baby. Count on it.” Ali replies, her face a little flushed at this whole romantic display. “I’m so excited! I’ve heard this show is so good, but I don’t know much about it.”

“Yeah I figured we could enjoy something completely new and have a fun night together.” Ashlyn smiles knowing just how much Ali adores live theater. “The show isn’t until 8pm and I can make it to Newton by like 3pm once I’m off shift. So, we’ll still have plenty of time to cook dinner together like we planned. And then when we get home from the show, we can make dessert and get our bath time in too. So, I’m only adjusting the Netflix movie part of tonight if that’s ok?”

“You’re too much, baby. I love it and I love you.” Ali leans in close. “So, can I get a kiss or is that a no no since you have me pulled over in public?”

“I’m sure I’ve already broken at least ten rules this morning, what’s one more?” Ashlyn quickly looks around and then closes the distance, kissing Ali lovingly with a little bit of heat behind it. She reluctantly pulls away after a few too many seconds to find the brunette’s eyes closed and mouth still slightly parted. “Can’t wait to do that all night.” She adds, leaving one last peck on her lips.

“Me either.” Ali’s voice is low and wanting.

“I better go. I love you so much, Alex. I’ll see you around 3pm.” Ashlyn starts to push back from the car a bit.

“I love you too, Hero. Really can’t wait.” Ali beams back at her as Ashlyn starts to turn to walk away.

“Oh and Alex?” Ashlyn says turning back towards Ali again.

“Yeah?” Ali replies.

“Use your blinker, asshole.” Ashlyn winks with a smirk.

“Oh she has jokes!” Ali laughs before retorting. “Use your head, idiot. And not literally for once!” She blows Ashlyn a kiss and watches the officer catch it and put it on her heart before getting back into the police cruiser.

Ali sighs dreamily and leans her head back on the seat for a minute with a smile. She watches the cruiser pull away and drive past her, Ashlyn giving her one last wave, before she starts her own car and gets on her way.

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“Well that was cuter than a basket of kittens. Big tough Captain Harris...who knew?” Cooper teases her as they get back on the road.

“Thin ice, Cooper. Thin ice.” Ashlyn reminds him. “I suggest you shut up and drive.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Just couldn’t help but tease you again, but my lips are sealed.” Cooper relents.
“Besides, look at her… can you blame me?” Ashlyn looks at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Not one damn bit. Lucky fuck.” Cooper playfully punches her in the arm.

“I’m well aware. Which is exactly why I pull out the big guns every damn chance I get.” Ashlyn replies.

“Smart. For the record, I am so totally using this pull over your wife trick in the future. I’m learning so much from you today.” Cooper admits with a chuckle. “Where should we start patrol?”

“Town hall.” Ashlyn answers matter-of-factly.

“We picking something up?” Cooper asks at the unusual stop request.

“More like dropping something off.” Ashlyn answers simply. “Is that not where your wife works?”

“Yeah, so?” Cooper replies befuddled.

“Clearly you haven’t learned anything this morning, have you? Pay attention, Cooper.” Ashlyn schools him. “First we pick up coffee and a sweet treat. Then you go give it to your wife at work while asking her to be your valentine. And then you can thank me later after you’ve had the best night of your life.”

“Ha… is that an order, Captain Cupid?” Cooper asks amused, but already making the turn towards the coffee shop near Town Hall.

“Darn right it is.” Ashlyn replies casually. “Gotta think of everything for you damn rookies.” She mumbles lightheartedly as she shakes her head.

“Well, no one can say you’re not well-rounded.” Cooper laughs.

A short while later Ashlyn waits for Cooper in the cruiser outside of Town Hall wondering what the delay is all about. After almost twenty minutes of sitting there and luckily not getting any calls they need to respond to, Cooper finally emerges looking flustered and a bit dazed.

“Geez, Cooper… everything ok?” Ashlyn asks in concern. “What happened in there? It didn’t backfire, did it?” She adds, ready to apologize.

“Oh god no.” Cooper smiles shyly. “I won’t get into what happened in there, but uh… THANK YOU, Captain!” He grins with a knowing look and reaches out to her for a fist bump.

“Oh wow, ok. Happy for you there, Coop…but you’re nuts if you think I’m touching your hand now.” Ashlyn nudges him with her elbow. “Also…told you so.”

“Yeah you did. You’re the fucking best.” Cooper replies.

“Alright there, giddy. Now who’s the sap with the heart eyes? Drive already and get your head back in the game, Officer Cupid.” Ashlyn instructs with a playful eye roll.

“Aye, Capt.” Cooper nods and gets them back to it.

“Here, let me help you!” Ali quickly runs to the door to help Ashlyn with the two grocery bags she’s balancing along with her lunch bag.
“Thanks, honey.” Ashlyn replies, happy to be relieved of one of the bags. She quickly drops the other bag and her lunch bag on the counter and puts her gun away in the safe while Ali is still occupied putting things in the refrigerator.

“Hi, beautiful.” Ashlyn wraps her arms around Ali from behind as the brunette puts the last item in the fridge.

“Hey there, gorgeous. Missed you.” Ali turns her head for a kiss. “Still can’t believe you pulled me over, Harris.”

“All in a day’s work, Krieger.” Ashlyn pecks her lips one more time.

“So, what are we cooking for dinner Chef Hero?” Ali asks, not fully able to tell from the ingredients she just put away.

“Ribeye steak finished in rosemary truffle butter, potatoes au gratin, sautéed broccoli, and caesar salad.” Ashlyn answers.

“That sounds so completely amazing.” Ali’s mouth is already watering at the thought. “I hope you’re ready to pick up the slack when your sous chef isn’t up to par.” She jokes about her cooking skills.

“I’ll make sure to give you the easy stuff.” Ashlyn laughs. “So, what’s for dessert?” She inquires since Ali was in charge of that.

“Triple chocolate salted caramel brownies with coffee ice cream.” Ali says enthusiastically.

“Dear lord, sounds like orgasm brownies to me.” Ashlyn jokes.

“That’s what I’m going for.” Ali winks. “What are these?” She asks, pulling two valentine cards out of one of the bags.

“Oh, for Curtis and Elsie. I always stop in to give them valentine cards. Forgot to ask if it was okay if we did that on the way into Boston tonight?” Ashlyn grimaces at having not mentioned it sooner.

“Of course it’s ok! That’s so cute!” Ali squeals. “Thank god I always have candy on hand. You can’t be the cool auntie unless you put a lollipop on these cards.”

“No, but you can be the auntie that Bridget doesn’t kill for getting them all hyped up on sugar.” Ashlyn snickers.

“Well it’s happening, so she can deal.” Ali shrugs. “Go ahead and get changed, babe…I’ll finish putting the groceries away and getting the kitchen ready.”

“Thanks, be back in a flash!” Ashlyn kisses the top of Ali’s shoulder and heads off to go change out of her work clothes. By the time she comes back in comfortable clothes that match Ali’s casual look, she finds the brunette holding up the chilled bottle of prosecco she bought at the store.

“Going all out, are we?” Ali asks with a grin, holding the bottle up in her hand.

“Yep. I got us a car service to drive us around tonight.” Ashlyn informs her with a smile and takes the bottle, popping the cork.

“Oh and we’re starting early?” Ali raises an eyebrow.

“We have like an hour of cooking to do and then an early dinner before we go, so I’m all for starting now.” Ashlyn replies simply.
“I’m all in!” Ali grabs two glasses out of the cabinet and hands them to Ashlyn.

With that, Ashlyn pours them each a glass and holds hers up towards Ali. “To having a best friend that you can’t keep your hands off of.” She smiles sweetly at the brunette.

“Yeah, Luke is pretty good looking.” Ali can’t help but tease for a second, getting a playful look from the officer before clinking their glasses together and kissing her. “Couldn’t have said it better myself.” She takes a sip and hums in approval. “That’s really really good.”

“I may have sprung for the expensive bottle.” Ashlyn smiles, thinking immediately about her conversation with Morris a couple weeks back. “Only the best for you.”

“Save that thought until you see whether or not I burn my part of dinner.” Ali jokes.

“Speaking of, wanna get started?” Ashlyn suggests.

“Let’s do it!” Ali replies enthusiastically.

“Ok, how about you handle the salad and broccoli? I’ll get the steak and potatoes.” Ashlyn delegates the tasks.

“I think I can handle that and get dessert prepped too so we can just put it in the oven when we get home later.” Ali replies confidently.

“My little Julia Child.” Ashlyn laughs.

“Another glass of this prosecco and I’ll be as blasted as she was by the end of every show.” Ali giggles and takes another sip as they get started.

“Wow, took you a whole thirty minutes before you started pawing at me. I’m impressed, Krieger.” Ashlyn jokes as she feels Ali kiss the back of her neck several times while she sears the steaks.

“I was busy. Now I’m not.” Ali mumbles into the officer’s skin, lightly sucking near her pulse point and hearing a little gasp.

“Alex…” Ashlyn whispers, not wanting to stop her but knowing they need to eat dinner soon if they want to make the show on time tonight. “We’ll never get to dinner if you keep it up.”

“Fine.” Ali leaves a few more wet kisses just under Ashlyn’s jaw. “But we’re picking this up later.”

“Count on it.” Ashlyn agrees wholeheartedly and turns her head to give the brunette a real kiss before getting back to the task at hand. “How about you stay busy setting the table so you’re not tempted?”

“Already did.” Ali smiles proudly.

“Your domesticity is doing things to me.” Ashlyn smiles back.

“Good. Then you’ll love my next suggestion.” Ali quirks and eyebrow.

“What do you have up your sleeve?” Ashlyn inquires.

“Naked dinner.” Ali replies with a wicked smirk. She can’t believe that neither of them had thought to do this sooner.
“Well then, gonna be hard to just eat dinner…but, I love it.” Ashlyn snickers a bit.

“And I love you. Hurry up with that steak, Harris. I can’t go much longer without that perfect rack in my line of vision.” Ali flirts.

“You’re killing me, Krieger.” Ashlyn groans, trying to focus on finishing her culinary masterpiece.

“Not yet.” Ali winks and walks into the dining room to refill their glasses of prosecco, purposely swaying her hips because she knows Ashlyn is staring at her ass.

Despite the food being delicious, dinner gets off to a slow start as does the dialogue because the two of them are too busy ogling each other. After ten minutes and the food starting to get cold, Ashlyn finally suggests that they sit next to rather than across from each other. It’s the perfect adjustment, the two of them leaning into each other a bit and enjoying great food, warm skin, and easy conversation. The bottle of prosecco is gone in no time and with the food consumed, the two women head upstairs to get ready for their night out with slightly flushed cheeks and warm tingly energy from both the alcohol and the nudity.

Just like she expects to be, Ashlyn is ready first and sits on the couch playing with her phone until she hears a little throat clear from the entrance of the living room. Her eyes lift and her breath immediately hitches at the sight. Ali is wearing a long red dress with a halter neckline, the body of which hugs her curves tightly and leaves absolutely nothing to the imagination especially with the long split up the side that runs to the top of her thigh. Her hair is up in a stylish low bun and her makeup is flawless as usual. “Wow, Alex…” Ashlyn’s voice comes out high pitched from her suddenly dry throat.

“Wow yourself.” Ali smiles at Ashlyn’s reaction to her dress, but is already too caught up by how incredible the officer looks. “Look at you.” She says reverently as she reaches for Ashlyn’s hand and takes it all in. The officer is in a slim-fitting gray suit that frames her strong, lean body perfectly, a black collared shirt underneath with a light gray bowtie to accentuate it all. Her hair is styled into an impeccable pompadour and her make-up is a bit heavier than usual with a smoky eye and red lipstick. She’s handsome with a feminine beauty that Ali can’t get enough of. “You should’ve known better than to wear lipstick when you look this good.” Ali leans in for a soft kiss and inhales her. “And you smell so good, baby…do we have to go out?” Ali asks hopefully.

“Thanks, honey. But I’m not the one everyone is going to be looking at. That dress might end some relationships tonight.” Ashlyn jokes before getting serious. “You’re so beautiful, Alex. I feel like I’m not even worthy enough to look at you, but somehow you’re mine and by my side tonight. So, you’re damn right we have to go out.”

“You really are too sweet.” Ali goes in for another kiss. “I’m so totally yours and as long as you’re the one looking at me, that’s all that matters.”

“Oh, I can assure you…I’ll be looking. All. Night. Long.” Ashlyn promises, still mesmerized.

“Well in that case, I hope looking leads to touching.” Ali winks just as a horn sounds outside. “I assume that’s the car?”

“Yep, but I may have changed my mind about going out.” Ashlyn replies, her thoughts lingering on Ali’s last comment.

“No way, Harris. I’m showing you off tonight. You’re like sex in a suit. Let’s go!” Ali pulls the officer out the door by the hand, barely taking the time to grab their coats.
“Hot damn, look at you two!” Bridget wolf whistles after answering the door to find the very dressed up couple. “Big plans tonight?”

“You know it.” Ashlyn replies as they make their way inside. “Just wanted to drop by like usual to court my two special Valentines.”

“I keep telling her this is total mood killer on a date, but she never listens.” Chris jokingly says to Ali as he enters the room. “Hey Ali. Hey ass hat.” He greets them as usual.

“Are you kidding? Stopping to give kids valentines is like an aphrodisiac. You know nothing about women.” Ali teases him back.

“He absolutely doesn’t.” Bridget laughs loudly before turning to a pouting Chris. “I’m kidding. I love my roses, Stud.”

“Roses…” Ashlyn shakes her head in mock disappointment. “Such an amateur.” She messes with him.

Chris is about to give it back to her when Curtis and Elsie come bounding into the room, putting the bantering conversation to an end.

“Perfect timing!” Ashlyn exclaims. “One for you, and one for you.” She hands them each a card.

“Lollipop!” Elsie yells immediately.

“All her.” Ashlyn puts her hands up defensively and points to Ali when she sees the look that Bridget is giving her.

“And I’m not even a little sorry…it’s Valentine’s Day!” Ali shrugs at Bridget.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Just wait until after dinner for those, ok kiddos?” Bridget gives up.

“Ok.” Curtis replies as he opens his card while Elsie just nods. “Five bucks!” He yells happily when he sees what’s in the card. “Thanks!” Elsie just squeals when she sees her five dollar bill and runs to give Ashlyn a hug.

“You’re welcome. Will you two be my Valentines?” Ashlyn asks them just like she usually does.


“Love you too, little man.” Ashlyn smiles at him.

Elsie just stands there looking between Ashlyn and Ali for a second before finally saying something. “But Auntie Ashwyn, your Valentine is Auntie Ali. And I have Tommy.” She says matter-of-factly.

“Tommy?” Ashlyn asks with raised eyebrows.

“Yup. He gave me a valentine at school.” Elsie replies enthusiastically.

“Oh really… well, Auntie is going to need his last name, address, and birthdate as soon as possible.” Ashlyn says with an over-the-top fake smile on her face and earns a smack on the shoulder from Ali. “Ow, what?”

“Ok. You can be my number two valentine!” Elsie responds having no idea what Ashlyn is talking
about, yelling “love you!” before running after Curtis.


“I’ve taught you well, my apprentice.” Ashlyn walks over and high-fives him, the two of them getting looks from Ali and Bridget.

“Apprentice? Please, I’m the master.” Chris argues.

“Uh huh, you keep thinking that. And on that note, we have a date to get to.” Ashlyn replies and slips her arm around Ali’s waist.

“Thanks for stopping by, you’re really sweet to always think of them.” Bridget smiles at them. “And extra sweet this year.” She can’t help but add, thinking about the lollipops and impending bedtimes.

“Still not sorry.” Ali sasses and gives her a hug. “Happy Valentine’s Day you two.”

“Same to you. Have a great night out!” Chris wraps them both into one hug. “For the record, I taught her everything she knows.” He tells Ali.

Ashlyn is about to reply when Ali does it for her. “Doubtful.”

“Ouch.” Chris puts his hand over his heart in jest.

“I love this woman!” Ashlyn proclaims with a laugh.

“We know!” Chris and Bridget jokingly reply in unison while rolling their eyes.

“Come on, babe. Just for that, I want to shout it loudly in their driveway before we go.” Ashlyn plays back and leads Ali out the door with a little wave.

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Neither woman knows anything about the musical Waitress other than that it got rave reviews on Broadway a few months ago before coming to Boston, nor did either of them think to look it up. Both are just excited to experience a new show together, having no idea where it will take them by the end of the night.

The show begins with light humor and high energy as the characters are introduced. The main character, Jenna, is a waitress at Joe’s diner where she is also known as an expert pie baker. The diner’s owner, manager, and other waitresses are all interesting characters that keep things fun and lively in the first few scenes. Soon, it’s revealed that Jenna is in a loveless marriage and is squirreling
away much of her earnings to try and enter a pie baking contest in hopes be able to earn enough prize money to make it on her own. And just as the stage is set, Jenna’s world comes crashing down when she finds out she is pregnant after a rare night of sex with her drunk husband. It only strengthens her resolve to win the pie baking contest so she can leave her husband and raise the baby on her own. She decides to hide the pregnancy from him in the meantime and, on top of that, soon finds herself involved in an affair with her doctor.

Despite the dire circumstances, the musical is beautifully done, capturing the progression of pregnancy within a constantly evolving and dramatic plot. Each act is tied into a new type of pie that Jenna is working on to perfect her skills and there’s as much humor as there is despair.

Ashlyn is enraptured by the story, unaware of the different emotions swirling inside her until she eventually notices that Ali is squeezing her hand tightly. Only then does she realize that she’s squeezing back just as hard. Only then does she recognize what she’s feeling. Only then does she understand that something is transforming between them right now despite the seeming lack of cognizance. Only then does she know she’s ready… that they’re ready. She brings Ali’s hand to her mouth, placing a gentle kiss on it to acknowledge the moment and sees Ali’s loving smile directed at her before turning her attention back to the show.

They spend the brief intermission munching on a small bag of popcorn they bought at the concession stand, discussing some of the more interesting parts of the show and taking guesses on what will happen in the end. Ashlyn goes optimistic and predicts that Jenna is going to win the pie contest. Ali goes for more realistic, guessing that Jenna will lose the contest but still leave her husband for the doctor. They’re both wrong. Jenna’s husband finds out about the baby and the money she was saving, stealing it and leaving her in complete disarray just as she’s about to go into labor. Once the baby is born, she finally leaves her husband and also chooses to end her affair with the doctor. Jenna is at rock bottom, but she has endless hope with this new baby girl and is determined to turn her life around somehow by saving herself and no longer settling for anything less than happy. It happens faster than she thinks with the diner’s owner passing away and leaving the diner to her… the closing scene being of the diner’s new sign one year later: Lulu’s (her baby girl’s name).

“I didn’t see that ending coming, did you?” Ashlyn asks as they sit close to each other in the back of the car on the ride home. Ali’s head is resting on her shoulder, their hands entwined.

“Not at all.” Ali replies, thinking it over. “But you know, now that we know how it ends… I can’t see it ending any other way. It was so fitting.”

“Completely agree.” Ashlyn affirms.

There’s a sense of both peace and anticipation between them that neither of them can quite put words to at the moment. Instead they simply relax into it and enjoy it, the rest of the ride spent in comfortable silence as they stay close and touching at all times.

“Still up for dessert?” Ali checks with Ashlyn as they make their way inside and rid themselves of their coats.

“Is either of us ever not up for dessert?” Ashlyn counters with raised eyebrows.

“Nope. I’m on it.” Ali quickly preheats the oven to the right temperature and takes the pre-prepped brownie tray out of the refrigerator. “Coffee?” She asks.

“I’d love some, thanks baby.” Ashlyn replies with a smile. It’s pretty late already, but it’s also pretty
clear that they’re not going to bed anytime soon.

Ali nods and sets a kettle of water on the stove to boil before preparing the simple French press that she bought shortly after Ashlyn first started spending time at their Newton house. By the time that’s done, the oven beeps and she goes right over to put the brownies in before turning around to find Ashlyn sitting at the counter watching her.

“Whatcha doing over there, darlin’? Ali asks.

“Watching the most beautiful woman in the world and not being able to take my eyes off of her.” Ashlyn doesn’t miss a beat.

“Yeah, I shined up the appliances really well if I do say so myself. Can see your reflection in them from across the room.” Ali flirts right back.

“Funny, Krieger. Very cute.” Ashlyn shakes her head with a grin as Ali gets closer, their foreheads pressing together for a few seconds before the brunette kisses her slowly.

“Can I give you your present now?” Ali mutters against the officer’s lips.

“You got me a present?” Ashlyn asks.

“Of course I did!” Ali says cheerily. “Come on, to the basement.”

“Basement?” Ashlyn jokingly lets her eyes go wide. “Is this the part where the night turns into _My Bloody Valentine_?” She references the slasher movie and laughs.

“Stop it you big weirdo.” Ali rolls her eyes. “Get a move on, the brownies will be done soon.”

“Oh sure, lure her with the promise of brownies.” Ashlyn keeps it up and gets a playful glare from Ali. “I’m kidding, babe. Right behind you.” She pecks Ali’s lips and follows the brunette down the stairs.

Ali turns on the basement lights and leads them over to the storage area, pausing before she opens the door. “You know back in October when you had to renovate the little back deck at the Ipswich house?”

“Yeah.” Ashlyn replies, not sure where this is going.

“I know how hard that was for you. And, well… I saved some of the wood and had a couple things made from it.” Ali prefaces what is behind the door.

“Really?” Ashlyn asks in a choked voice, immediately getting a bit emotional. Her grandfather had built that deck by hand and she had done everything she could to save it, but the weathered wood eventually couldn’t hold out any longer. It had nearly gutted her to have to replace that deck, feeling like she was losing a part of him.

“Really. Go on.” Ali motions to the door and steps aside.

Ashlyn opens the door to the storage area and turns on the light in there, her eyes immediately falling on a small wooden cart framed by antiqued black metal. Her mouth drops open a bit as she takes it in. The wood is in a fairly natural state and just oiled to give a rustic look. The black metal gives it little bit of an industrial feel. The top is almost like a tray surface and the bottom features a wine and liquor cabinet with a place for wine and other drink glasses. It’s a magnificent piece of furniture even without the sentimental aspect of it. “Alex… it’s amazing!” Ashlyn runs her hand reverently over the
familiar wood. “I love this so much, sweetheart. So much. I can’t believe you did this, it’s genius.”

“It’s a bar cart.” Ali states even though it’s fairly obvious. “I thought it might go nicely in the corner of the dining room in the Ipswich house.”

“It’ll be perfect there.” Ashlyn agrees. “I don’t even know what to say. This means so much to me. You know me so well, honey… I am so fucking lucky. Thank you.” She adds and hugs Ali tightly.

“You’re welcome and you don’t have to say anything else. I’m happy you like it. Now open the cabinet and get your other gift.” Ali points to the bottom of the cart and watches Ashlyn excitedly open it and pull out a small box.

Ashlyn examines the long rectangular box in her hands for just a second before opening it. Inside she finds a medium-sized pocket knife, the handle made of smooth polished wood that looks exactly like the bar cart. She holds it in her hand and turns it over to get a feel for it.

“You mentioned a while back that you needed a new knife to replace the one you carry on your duty belt. I had this one custom made with the wood from the deck. I tried the best I could to get one that was as similar in size and shape as the one you have now.” Ali explains.

Ashlyn opens the 4 inch blade as she listens to Ali, finding the words ‘Gehirn im Kopf’ engraved into it. The second the brunette stops talking, Ashlyn kisses her passionately, lightly pressing her against the wall as her emotions take over. She only stops when she needs air, hearing a slight whimper from Ali as she pulls away just enough to whisper “you’re incredible” against the brunette’s lips. “I love all of it…especially you.”

“Happy Valentine’s Day, baby.” Ali says happily, kissing Ashlyn again before reluctantly stopping when the oven timer beeps upstairs. “Up we go, Harris.” She takes the officer by the hand and leads her back up the stairs.

Ashlyn examines the beautifully crafted knife one more time before putting it away in the safe next to her gun while Ali takes the brownies out of the oven. “That smells so good.” She comments on the sweet chocolatey smell filling the house.

“Hopefully it tastes as good as it smells. Just needs a few minutes to cool down a bit.” Ali places the tray on a cooling rack and leans on the counter.

“We have time for your gift then.” Ashlyn smiles at her.

“Woah, hold up. There’s more than the theater tickets and the flowers?” Ali asks incredulously.

“Duh.” Ashlyn teases her.

“Always gotta out-do me, Hero.” Ali shakes her head.

“I do not. This was just a necessity. And I technically can’t give it to you tonight, but I can show you.” The officer says a bit mysteriously.

“Well peak my curiosity why dontcha?!” Ali pinches Ashlyn’s arm lightly as she comes to stand beside her.

“You’ve been doing a lot of driving back and forth so that you can use the office you have in this house. But, you haven’t gone into the office in the Ipswich house recently, have you?” Ashlyn asks with a knowing grin.
“No, I guess I haven’t.” Ali admits.

“Well, it’s a bit different than it was last time you worked in there.” Ashlyn tells her and holds out her phone for Ali to see.

“Ok…” Ali says as she looks at the phone, her face registering disbelief when she sees the picture. “This is the office… in Ipswich?” She asks wide-eyed as she looks at the picture more closely.

“Yep.” Ashlyn responds simply and starts scrolling through the twenty or so pictures on her phone that show the room from various angles.

“Holy shit!” Ali yells out when she realizes exactly what she’s looking at. The room is completely transformed. The walls are done in gray foam-textured material that are obviously some kind of sound-proofing. The desk is new, now twice as large to hold a proper microphone, sleek speakers, and a whole host of recording equipment alongside a top-of-the-line laptop. There’s a new comfy-looking desk chair, a new black leather couch under the window, and a larger file-cabinet with a locking system. If that wasn’t enough, there’s a mini refrigerator too. It looks like full on broadcast studio, only smaller. “Ash, you did this?!”

“Yeah. You needed a space you could really work in without being hindered by lack of access to things you need.” The officer replies casually. “Does it look ok?”

“Does it look ok?! Seriously?! Babe…it’s fucking marvelous! Oh my god, I can’t believe you did this! When did you find the time?” Ali is still in shock at how absolutely perfect this new space is.

“Just put in a couple hours here and there when you were busy. Kyle helped me pick out the furniture and Chris helped me move it all in.” Ashlyn replies. “You really like it? We can change whatever you want.”

“This is one of the most thoughtful things anyone has ever done for me. Honey, I love it. I’m not changing a thing. I can’t wait to actually see it!” Ali says animatedly. “I can’t believe it. I’m so excited!”

“Well, I may have been motivated by the fact that you’d be at home more without having to drive back and forth.” Ashlyn smirks.

“So selfish, babe.” Ali smiles against the officer’s lips and kisses her deeply.

“That’s me.” Ashlyn jokes when they pull apart. “I love you.” She says more seriously.

“You sure do. I love you too.” Ali kisses her again.

“Know what else I love?” Ashlyn asks with a playful grin.


“Brownies.” The officer jokes.

“Right! Almost forgot!” Ali immediately turns to grab a knife to cut the brownies before going to get the coffee ice cream in the fridge. Ashlyn pours them each a cup of the freshly brewed hot coffee in the meantime. “Two bowls or just one big one?” Ali asks.

“One big one, I like to share.” Ashlyn winks.
“This is so damn good.” Ashlyn practically purrs as they eat dessert. The two of them are sitting side-by-side on stools at the counter and sharing one big bowl of brownie and ice cream. Despite each having their own spoon, they’ve stopped to feed each other several times now.

“Glad my baking skills shined through like I’d hoped.” Ali smiles at the compliment, admittedly having impressed herself with how good this dessert turned out.

Other than the praising comments, they eat in relative quiet. As comfortable as the silence is, Ashlyn can sense that it’s all building up to a poignant moment. Something shifted between them at the theater and, although neither woman has really acknowledged it, there’s a buzzing energy surrounding them. An energy that can’t be muted by the distraction of gifts and dessert and anything else on the agenda tonight. She can’t possibly know what Ali is thinking, but somehow she just feels it. This conversation is happening tonight and, if she’s being honest, she can’t wait to have it. With just a couple bites of brownie left, she can’t hold it in anymore.

“So…should I say it or do you want to?” Ashlyn looks deep into Ali’s eyes and gently squeezes her thigh.

Ali sighs with a little smile. She hadn’t wanted to jump the gun, but now that they’re here… “Well, you know how I like to command a room…”

“Command away.” Ashlyn very softly pecks Ali’s lips and waits for it.

Ali clears her throat, hesitating for just a second. She’s pretty sure she’s read this situation right. Still, there’s a slight nervousness that maybe she’s wrong. If nothing else, at least she’ll truthfully reveal exactly what she’s thinking. She takes a couple more seconds to steel her nerves before just blurting it out. “I’m ready for a family with you.”

“Me too.” Ashlyn voices quickly before Ali’s face can look any more anxious than it already does.

“Really?” Ali asks even though she knows the answer already. “We’re going to do this?”

“Yeah, Alex. We are.” Ashlyn’s smile is shy and dimpled. “I’m ready for this amazing journey with you and I couldn’t possibly have a more wonderful person to be on it with. I’m with you.”

“Wow…Ash, I…I’m…I’m so happy, baby” Ali gets out a bit squeakily, her voice heavy with emotion. “I love you. I want this so badly with you.”

Ashlyn takes Ali’s face in her hands and kisses her deeply, slowly, pouring everything she feels into it. Despite being unhurried, the kiss is intense enough that they break frequently for a breath of air, but find themselves connecting their lips over and over again until they both feel a little dizzy and take a minute to collect themselves.

“Should we talk about it more tonight?” Ali asks, her eyes still hooded while she breathes deeply.

“Let’s talk about it.” Ashlyn agrees, too excited not to. She feels like she’s just made one of the biggest and best decisions of her life and she feels giddy about it.

“Ok… I’m not even sure where to start. Um, I guess maybe…have you ever wanted to be pregnant?” Ali throws out the first question.

“Honestly, I’ve never had the urge to be. Like, I know how some women just feel this pull towards wanting to be pregnant. I’ve never felt that or could picture myself pregnant.” Ashlyn replies genuinely. “But, that being said, I certainly wouldn’t be opposed to it. I would never presume that you’d be the one getting pregnant, if that’s what you’re asking.”
“And I love you so damn much for that.” Ali replies, completely enamored by the officer’s consideration of her feelings and the way in which Ashlyn is so sensitive to and in tune with her.

“But you know what Ash… I’ve wanted to be pregnant since as far back as I can remember. I think I kind of gave up on it with such a messed up relationship history. And then you came along and it’s all I can think about. I see you with your nieces and nephews and my ovaries practically ache.

You’re everything I’ve always dreamed of in a partner and I’m actually kind of glad you’re not dying to be pregnant… cause I really want to be. For us.”

“Well, that settles that then.” Ashlyn chuckles. “We’re knocking you up, Krieger.” She adds playfully and earns a little slap on the arm from Ali who laughs with her. “Really though… thank you, Alex. You have no idea what that means to me. There really aren’t words, but it means the world that you’d do this for us.” She says seriously and feels Ali take her hand and squeeze it.

“So, how do you think we should go about it? There are a few options. I’ve read a lot about it, but I’m not sure what you know or what you’re thinking.” Ali keeps the conversation moving.

“I’ve actually read up a bit about it too. I really don’t have much of an opinion on it, honey. Especially since it isn’t my body. Whatever is most comfortable for you or whatever you think you want… I’ll support you every step of the way.” Ashlyn replies. “Do you already know what route you might want to take?”

“I kind of do.” Ali admits. “We don’t really have any financial constraints, so it just seems logical for me to go with the most effective approach. Why not give ourselves the best chance right off the bat?”

“So in-vitro fertilization then, right?” Ashlyn clarifies and sees Ali nod in confirmation. “Ok. I’m all in with you, obviously.” She says confidently, but then sees Ali biting her bottom lip with a hesitant look on her face. “What? Did I say something wrong?”

“No, no.” Ali assures her. “It’s just…” She pauses trying to find the right words. “I know you don’t want to be pregnant and I don’t know what your full feelings on it are… ugh… I don’t know how to say this…” She groans in frustration.

“Alex…” Ashlyn reaches out and strokes Ali’s cheek to calm her down. “Just say it. It’s me… you can say anything.”

“Ok.” Ali lets out a deep breath. “I want to have your baby.” She gets out and closes her eyes for a second before opening them slowly to look into Ashlyn’s.

“My baby?” Ashlyn questions, the meaning of the statement not fully hitting her yet.

“Yeah. I mean, I know that it would mean some physical procedures for you too and I know that maybe it would be getting too close to the whole pregnancy thing for you. I don’t know. And I know you well enough to know that your mind is probably already setting off alarms about your genetics… but, please don’t go there right now. Baby… Ashlyn… you’re a truly wonderful and beautiful person and that tells me everything I need to know. You and your brother have come out of shitty circumstances triumphantly. Genetics won’t mean shit because we’re going to raise our child with love and wisdom, being supportive whether they succeed or fail in whatever they do and always guiding them to the right path. So, forget about that part. If I think about what I want more than anything else… in a perfect scenario… it’s to carry your baby.” Ali elaborates in a complete ramble, carefully watching Ashlyn’s face as it seems to go through a range of expressions. “What are you thinking? Talk to me.”

“I… I guess I never thought about… I’m okay with what it would mean for me medically. And the rest… I…” Ashlyn stutters through her answer as her mind races, until she looks up and sees the
completely loving look on Ali’s face. “Yes.”

“Yes?” Ali asks, not entirely sure what it means.

“Yes. You can have my baby.” Ashlyn clarifies with a smile.

“Ash, you don’t have to answer me right now. You can think about it for a while and we can talk about it more.” Ali says immediately, not wanting to pressure her.

“Don’t need to. I feel honored that it’s what you want…I feel so much love right now. Yes, my answer is yes.” Ashlyn repeats her answer. “But I want you to feel free to change your mind if you want to.”

“I’m not going to change my mind.” Ali beams and wraps her arms around Ashlyn’s neck, pulling her in for a tight hug. “You sure you’re ok with it?”

“Promise. If I’m being completely open and honest though, I am disappointed about one thing.” Ashlyn divulges.

“Oh, ok. What’s that?” Ali asks a bit worriedly.

“That the baby won’t look like you. I just realized that is how I’ve pictured things in my head. Just going to take a little adjustment for me that it won’t be that way.” Ashlyn admits.

“I actually kind of knew you would say that eventually if we got to this point.” Ali confesses. “I guess because I know how much I want the baby to look like you…I can understand how you feel the same way about me.”

“It’s ok, really. I’ll get over it. I mean it has to look like one of us, right? Might as well have this charming single dimple.” Ashlyn lightens the mood.

“Don’t even play! You don’t even know how badly I want our kid to have that dimple.” Ali divulges. “Of course, I also realize that I’m in so much trouble if our kid has that dimple.”

Ashlyn just laughs and leans in for a quick kiss.

“Sooot… I have an absolutely wild suggestion regarding this topic.” Ali says.

“Oh really, what?” Ashlyn asks curiously.

“Ok, it’s really pretty weird and please don’t think you have to go along with it in any way, shape or form. Seriously, it’s just an idea. A very odd one at that.” Ali prefaces it.

“Understood, now tell me already.” Ashlyn pleads impatiently.

“A couple years ago, I was talking to Kyle about wanting to find someone to settle down with and have a family with. Anyway, we got into some pretty deep conversation and he eventually threw out that if my future-partner was the one having kids…well, he’d be cool with donating so it could be as close to the real genetic make-up as possible.” Ali just rips the band-aid off and tries her best to read Ashlyn’s expression, but can’t quite figure it out.

“Hmmm…” Ashlyn responds and then stays quiet again, really thinking it over. “Ok, yeah… that is definitely pretty weird.”

“I know, sorry. I didn’t mean to just drop that on you. I’m really not tied to it or anything. Just given what you said before, I wanted to put it on the table.” Ali cringes a bit at the way she just approached
Ashlyn just keeps thinking about it. “I mean, on one hand, it’s so odd and just bizarre. On the other, how amazing would it be to have a child that is as close to being ours as it gets. I love Kyle and it certainly doesn’t bother me that it would be him if it didn’t bother you.” She considers it further. “I guess there is just a lot of potential for weirdness in the actual relationships if something doesn’t go right, especially with everyone being so close to it all. It’s not the physical stuff that concerns me, I think it’s more the emotional side of it for everyone. That being said, I guess if we talk to Kyle and we all get on the same page about everything and all feel comfortable… I really don’t see why not.” Ashlyn finally reaches a tentative conclusion.

“Wow…ok… wow. So, let me just put this all together for a sec.” Ali’s hand goes to her forehead as she attempts to put it all in clear terms. “So, we’re going to try to have a baby…that I will carry…that will be yours. And, if the circumstances pan out, my brother will be the donor and our baby will be as close to ours as it gets.”

“Yeah, I think that about sums it up.” Ashlyn runs a hand through her hair. “Wow is right.”

“Really have to admit that I never expected to have this conversation tonight, let alone get this far into it. Or end up at this sort-of conclusion.” Ali confesses.

“That makes two of us. But, I’m glad we’re here.” Ashlyn runs her hand up and down Ali’s arm.

“Me too.” Ali agrees with a big smile.

“So… guess this means we only have one more big agenda item.” Ashlyn says.

“We do?” Ali tilts her head to the side.

“Yeah… when?” Ashlyn asks. “When do we do it?”

“Well, are you really ready for it all?” Ali questions seriously.

“Yeah, I am. Truly ready anytime.” Ashlyn replies easily.

“So, why don’t we talk to Kyle right away and see where that goes. Then, let’s go ahead and make some doctor appointments.” Ali says with no hesitance.

“Wow, so right away then?” Ashlyn is a bit surprised. “Like I said, I’m ready when you are. I just thought for sure you’d want to get married first. What if you’re pregnant before we get married?”

“Doesn’t matter to me at all. You’re my one, Ash…my forever. I know that whether we’re married or not. Besides even if I got pregnant tomorrow, we’d still be married before the baby was born. And the process is still going to take a while obviously. I’m more worried about age complications than whether or not I’m pregnant when we get married. Unless of course you don’t want a pregnant bride?” Ali replies.

“Alex, I want you in every version of yourself. I can’t wait to marry you no matter what. Pregnant or not, you’re going to be the most beautiful bride in the world… and more importantly, all mine.” Ashlyn says genuinely.

“You always know what to say.” Ali smiles at her.

“I only say what I feel.” Ashlyn shrugs.
“So, to further what I was saying… I’m turning 34 in just a few months and by the time I give birth I’ll probably be closer to 35. And that’s when things start to get much riskier for birth defects and complications. It makes sense to me to give ourselves the best possible chance for a healthy baby. So, that means starting as soon as we can.” Ali further elaborates.

“Makes sense to me too. We agree that we’re both ready, so there’s no reason to put a hold on it.” Ashlyn confirms. “So, settled then? We talk to Kyle ASAP and then go about doing this as soon as we can?”

“Yes, settled.” Ali’s face breaks out into a nose-crinkling smile and she pulls Ashlyn into another tight hug. “I can’t believe we’re doing this. I’m so excited and happy. Definitely happy.” She whispers into the officer’s ear.

“I can’t believe it either, but it feels so right. I feel so peaceful and happy right now too.” Ashlyn whispers back and holds Ali even closer, running her hands up and down her back.

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They hold each other snuggly for a few minutes before Ali lets go and stares into hazel eyes that seem almost aglow right now. She reaches to grab the spoon and feeds Ashlyn the last bite of brownie, her eyes never leaving the officer’s.

Ashlyn savors the last bit of chocolate as it practically melts in her mouth and smiles. She swallows it down, knowing by the proximity of Ali’s face to hers that a kiss is imminent. She closes her eyes, waiting for Ali’s soft lips on hers, but is surprised when she feels the pad of Ali’s thumb running along her bottom lip. She opens her eyes to find Ali still gazing deeply into her own and sucks the tip of the brunette’s thumb into her mouth, running her tongue over it. She watches Ali’s eyes close and hears a moan leave her lips, and that’s all it takes to make her feel like she was just tossed into an inferno. Her heart is racing, her legs trembling a bit, Ali’s hand on her face becoming the origin of the tingling heat spreading across her skin.

Ali does her best to compose herself after just about losing it when the officer sucked on her thumb like that. She opens her eyes and locks onto to hazel again, moving her hands to the collar of Ashlyn’s shirt. She lets her fingertips barely graze the skin of Ashlyn’s neck and undoes her bowtie, leaving it just hanging open there. She takes her time unbuttoning every single button of the officer’s shirt, drawing it out and maintaining her fervent stare as she feels Ashlyn’s hands tighten on her hips. Her eyes dip for only a second to gladly see that there is no undershirt to hinder her, just a black sports bra. She brings her hands back up to hold Ashlyn’s face, thumbs on either side of her jaw and fingers resting on the back of her neck. Keeping her eyes open, she leans in and very lightly drags her lips down Ashlyn’s chin while raking her finger tips softly down her neck and across the top of her shoulders.

Ashlyn gasps at the feather light touches, just now realizing that she’s been holding her breath this whole time. Ali has barely touched her, but she feels like she’s ready to explode. If the wetness between her legs is any indication, it’s possible that she already has without realizing. Ali’s hands drift across the back of her shoulders, pushing her shirt off a bit before dragging down her sides and across her abs. “Alex…” Ashlyn whispers breathlessly, no longer able to keep her hands rooted to Ali’s hips. “You’re killing me.”

“Not yet.” Ali murmurs into Ashlyn’s mouth and kisses her hard, pushing her tongue into the officer’s mouth when she feels her unzip her dress and stick her hands inside the back of it. They kiss with a desperate hunger, letting dominance pass back and forth between them as hands find their way to every inch of bare skin that’s exposed. “Baby… upstairs…need you.” Ali manages between kisses.
Ashlyn just lifts Ali into her arms effortlessly, carrying her up the stairs bridal-style while continuing to steal kisses.

“Love when you carry me.” Ali says as she kisses Ashlyn’s neck. Being carried is just adding to the euphoria of the moment. If she felt like she was floating just a few seconds ago, she almost literally is right now.

Ashlyn lays Ali down softly on their bed, ready to join her when she thinks better of it. As much as she loves that red dress, it needs to come off. She takes Ali’s hand and gently pulls her to her feet, eyes locking onto each other’s again. She runs her hand up Ali’s back and then takes out her hair clip, watching the brunette’s hair come out of the bun and cascade down over her shoulders. She moves some hair off of Ali’s left shoulder, kissing and sucking from behind her ear to her collarbone as the dress starts to fall.

“Ash, yes.” Ali moans as Ashlyn sucks the sweet spot on her neck, making her knees feel weak. Her dress falls to the floor, pooling at her feet and she opens her eyes when she feels Ashlyn’s lips leave her skin. She finds the officer staring at her with as much love and desire as she’s ever seen, Ashlyn’s eyes roaming up and down her body as if she was piece of fine art.

“You are so beautiful, Alex… the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.” Ashlyn runs her fingertips across Ali’s collarbones and down to her chest, lightly pinching already hard nipples through the see-through red lace of Ali’s bra.

“Oh god.” Ali whispers heatedly at Ashlyn’s touch, her determination to draw things out going completely out the window. “Take it off. Touch me.” She begs, already working Ashlyn’s shirt off and tugging on the officer’s sports bra. She watches Ashlyn smirk before the officer complies and takes off her bra, raising her arms right after and letting Ali lift the sports bra over her head. Ali takes one look at Ashlyn’s dark pink nipples hardening in the cool air and she completely loses her composure, pushing the officer down onto bed and capturing her lips in a scorching kiss.

Ashlyn quickly finds herself on her back, her hands going right to Ali’s ass as the brunette sucks on her pulse point and grinds her thigh into her center. “Alex…jesus, baby… fuck.” She pants, her breathing already heavy as her core throbs under the friction Ali is applying to it. The sudden move signals just how worked up the brunette is and it makes Ashlyn practically quiver in anticipation. She loves when Ali is like this…untamed, unfiltered, and unrelenting. It’s the side that only she gets to experience and it’s enthralling. Usually she’s content to let Ali take control in releasing all that sexual energy, but not tonight. Tonight she’s going to love the future mother of her child until she can’t breathe, until she knows that nothing in the universe is equal to her.

“She’s always been yours, Ashlyn. I need you.” Ali leans on her right arm and drags her left hand over one of Ali’s nipples, down her taut stomach and hip before stopping at her inner thigh.

“Mmmm, baby?” Ali moans in question when Ashlyn suddenly flips them. She quickly pulls the officer down and kisses her hungrily as she attempts to get back on top.

“Not tonight, Alex.” Ashlyn husks as she pulls away from the kiss and hovers over Ali. “Tonight you’re mine first. Let me take care of you.” She leans on her right arm and drags her left hand over one of Ali’s nipples, down her taut stomach and hip before stopping at her inner thigh.

“I’ve always been yours, Ashlyn. I need you.” Ali pulls Ashlyn down by the neck and kisses her deeply, dominating the kiss with her tongue for just a few seconds before completely relinquishing control. “Take me already.” She breathes out when Ashlyn’s lips move down her neck.

“Tell me what you want.” Ashlyn nips at Ali’s earlobe. “What do you want, Alex?” She repeats her request when Ali just moans and doesn’t answer right away.

“I need your mouth, your tongue inside me.” Ali starts pushing Ashlyn’s shoulders down. “Can’t
wait much longer.” She inhales sharply when the officer suddenly sucks on her nipple while pinching the other between her fingers. “Yeesss, feels so good.”

Ashlyn alternates between Ali’s nipples, flicking them with her tongue and sucking them just the way Ali likes it until she feels the brunette’s stomach muscles clench. As much as she wants to take her time, she knows Ali isn’t far from the edge. She leaves quick sloppy kisses all over her torso before reaching her hips. She hooks her thumbs on the lacy red thong that’s still in her way and hastily pulls it off. She immediately goes right back up to Ali’s left hipbone and spends some time in her favorite spot, running her tongue over the inked compass and leaving a few little bites there until Ali is moaning loudly and squirming desperately underneath her.

“Baby…please…please, Ash…” Ali begs raggedly, tangling one of her hands in Ashlyn’s short hair and trying to guide the officer’s head to where she needs her most.

“I got you.” Ashlyn reaches up to entwine her hand with Ali’s free one, sucking hard on the inside of the brunette’s thigh before flattening her tongue and taking a few broad licks from her entrance to her clt.

“Oh fuck! Oh my god, unnnhhh.” Ali yells out at the feel of Ashlyn’s warm tongue between her folds. She pulls the officer’s head further into her center, her legs opening impossibly wider.

“You’re so wet…so good.” Ashlyn mumbles into Ali’s glistening core, tapping her clit a few times before surprising the brunette by plunging her tongue inside her.

“Ash, yes baby! Like that… like that…fuck, I’m so close. Your tongue, fuck me…so good, so good. Don’t stop, please, don’t stop.” Ali pants, her hips coming off the bed briefly before Ashlyn holds them down.

Ashlyn swirls her tongue as deep inside of Ali as it will go, only pulling it out occasionally to lightly suck on her clit. She can barely hold Ali’s hips down and the brunette’s back is arching off the bed now. Knowing Ali is about to lose it, she moves her thumb down to Ali’s clit and rubs tight circles while continuing to move inside the brunette’s wet hole. She feels Ali clench around her tongue and fresh wetness spill into her mouth as Ali’s whole body tightens.

“I’m coming, baby…oh god, oh god… Ashlyn, Ash… yeeeesss, fuck…I love you.” Ali yells as her body spasms, her thighs closing around Ashlyn’s head. “Ash…Ash… oh, Ash…” She continues to whisper in a breathless mantra as her body eventually starts to relax a bit and she relishes in the feel of the officer’s tongue still lazily licking her. “Kiss me. Please kiss me.” She pleads when the need to feel Ashlyn’s lips becomes too great to ignore.

“You’re so beautiful…so unbelievably beautiful.” The words tumble out of Ashlyn’s mouth as she climbs up Ali’s body and kisses her tenderly, enjoying the soft warmth of their lips moving together before pulling back to let the brunette catch her breath.

Ali traces Ashlyn’s jawline and lips with her fingertips for a while, studying her chiseled-but-feminine features as her breathing regulates. “No one has ever touched me the way you do. Loved me the way you do. Made me lose myself the way you do. Owned my body the way you do. You take my breath away, Ash.”

“Good.” Ashlyn replies with twinkling eyes and dimpled grin. “I’m going to spend my whole life doing that and I’m going to enjoy every second of it.”

The genuine and loving statement emboldens Ali to begin returning the favor, rolling them over and catching Ashlyn off guard. “You’re wearing too much clothes and I’m about to full on ruin these
pants… off now.” Ali instructs, and starts working on Ashlyn’s belt buckle.

“Definitely don’t want to explain that to the dry cleaner.” Ashlyn laughs, but it gets caught in her throat when Ali pulls off her pants and boxers in one swift motion and bites her inner thigh on the way up. “Oh damn, ok then…” She’s cut-off by Ali’s lips on hers, already moaning at the feel of the brunette’s hard nipples against her chest.

They stay locked in the kiss for a long time, flowing from heated-and-desperate to passionate-and-deliberate and back again. Little whimpers and moans get lost in each other’s mouths and both of them are flustered and climbing fast, but it’s Ali’s dripping center that is sliding up and down Ashlyn’s thigh as things build between them.

“Oh god, mmmm.” Ali pulls away from the kiss and buries her face into Ashlyn’s neck as she feels herself losing control again. This is not what she intended, but her body has other plans as a raging fire ignites inside her all over again. “I’m sorry…I need you again.” She breathes heavily into Ashlyn’s ear, hips still grinding down hard on the officer’s thigh.

“Don’t be sorry, I want you again.” Ashlyn purrs back and holds Ali’s hips tightly against her, helping the brunette gyrate faster. She can feel Ali’s heartbeat against her own and her emotions get the best of her again. “I love you, Alex. So much. I want you forever, just like this. Forever.”

Ali lets her full weight fall onto Ashlyn at hearing those words, hugging her tightly as her hips slow a bit and her mind settles on exactly what she wants. She lets herself enjoy the protective feel of the officer’s arms around her for a few minutes before propping herself up a bit to look into bright hazel eyes. “I want you forever too, love.” Ali kisses her softly. “And right now… I want you to love me the way that only you ever will. Only you.” She reaches to open the bedside table drawer and feels around blindly until her hand falls on the strap-on.

“It’ll always be an honor, every time.” Ashlyn says in sweet truth, watching Ali smile as the brunette adjusts the straps around her hips and tightens them. She gasps at the feel of the stimulation knob inside the harness pressing into her clit, only now actually realizing just how worked up she is. She sits up a bit and starts to move to position herself over Ali, but the brunette pushes her back down.

“Let me.” Ali says simply, straddling Ashlyn’s lap with the officer propped up against the head board looking a bit surprised but nodding slowly. She leans down to kiss Ashlyn deeply, pulling back after a minute and putting the officer’s hands on her breasts before positioning the dildo at her soaked entrance and slowly sinking herself down on it. “Oooohh. My. God. Unnnmh.” Ali bites her lip at the both the sensation and the look of pure desire in Ashlyn’s eyes as they dart from her face to between her legs.

“Baby…you’re gorgeous.” Ashlyn whispers, her fingers starting to drag over Ali’s nipples as the brunette begins swirling her hips a bit. “Holy shit…mmm...” She moans at the pressure on her clit with Ali’s movement.

“You feel so good…so fucking good…” Ali murmurs, her hands going to Ashlyn’s shoulders to hold herself up. She knows exactly what she’s doing as she starts moving herself up and down, watching the officer’s face closely. She knows this is Ashlyn’s favorite position…knows how much the dog tags framed by her bouncing breasts turn her on…knows how much the officer loves her fingertips digging into the skin of her neck and shoulders…knows she can make her come just by the way she moves her hips against her. “Ash…yes Ash, like that.” She whimpers when Ashlyn tugs harder on her nipples. The tingling ache deep inside her belly is already mounting as she fucks herself steadily on Ashlyn’s lap. “Oh god…oh fuck…harder…” Ali yells even though she’s the one directing the pace.
“Unnnnh, mmmm, shit.” Ashlyn moans, her clit throbbing under the pressure of the knob. She slides her hands down to Ali’s hips and grips them tightly, using the leverage to start thrusting her own hips up to meet the brunette on her way down. The clinking of the dog tags get her attention with the increase in movement and her breath hitches at watching them plink off Ali’s chest, perky breasts swaying along with them …both Ali’s face and perfectly filled pussy are in her peripheral vision. She feels her body tremble at the sight, nearing the edge already and trying to hold on. “Alex…so perfect…” She breathes out as her eyes catch ‘Harris’ on the dog tags despite the wild movement. It strikes her that it won’t just be her name anymore… it’ll be their name… all of them. And just like that her body tightens and she lets go, Ali’s name leaving her lips over and over as she presses her fingertips into the brunette’s hips and feels the same on the back of her shoulders.

“Ash…fuck, baby…I’m so close, so close…” Ali sees Ashlyn’s eyes open and fight to refocus on her. It’s only a couple more seconds before Ashlyn rolls them over, somehow managing to keep the dildo inside her despite the sudden movement. “Oh my god…please, don’t stop.” Ali begs desperately, gripping the officer’s lower back as Ashlyn starts to pound into her in earnest. “Baby, like that… fuck, don’t stop… ever… Ash…fuck me forever.” She screams over the slapping of their hips. She feels Ashlyn pull almost all the way out and then thrust back in deeply. “Holy fuck… again… Ash, please baby, please.” Her eyes roll into the back of her head and she feels like she might pass out, her body shaking hard as the officer complies. It only takes two more strokes before one of the strongest orgasms of her life rips through her, her blunt fingernails breaking the skin on Ashlyn’s back. She’s so winded that all she can do is pant and moan as she holds the officer tightly against her.

“Breathe, love. I got you. I love you.” Ashlyn whispers softly into Ali’s ear as the brunette desperately sucks in air, her body still trembling underneath her. She tries to move off to the side a bit so Ali can breathe better, but the brunette only hugs her tighter.

“Stay… stay inside.” Ali pants and feels Ashlyn just relax on top of her. Her body is still buzzing even as she starts to come down and catch her breath. “I think you just impregnated me.” She declares with a laugh as soon as she can.

“I wish! If only it were that easy.” Ashlyn laughs and props herself up a bit to look at Ali, immediately getting lost in her eyes. “Unless of course this is a magic dildo and you didn’t tell me?” She adds with a smile.

“Damn, I knew I should’ve paid extra for the deluxe version.” Ali laughs and picks her head up to kiss Ashlyn softly. “You’re amazing.” She says more seriously.

“And you’re perfection.” Ashlyn replies sweetly. “That was… I don’t even have words anymore… incredible, marvelous, wonderful, wow… all of it.”

“Spectacular, awesome, unbelievable, mind-blowing, and definitely wow.” Ali adds a few more. “My body feels like jello…but…I’m not done.” She smirks. “I’m gonna need those lips right here.” She points to her mouth.

“Don’t even have to ask.” Ashlyn leans down to kiss her.

“Mmmm, nice try…but wrong lips.” Ali smiles devilishly.

Ashlyn looks befuddled for a second before it hits her. “Oooh, gotcha. Clever, Krieger…very clever. I see what you did there.”

“Harris?” Ali raises an eyebrow.
“Yeah?” Ashlyn replies.

“Shhh and get on my face.” She puts it bluntly.

“Right, get on the queen’s throne…I’m on it!” Ashlyn giggles as she starts scooting herself up Ali’s body.

“If you were on it, we wouldn’t be talking anymore.” Ali challenges. “Hurry baby, I want to taste you.”

Ashlyn is about to joke about Ali’s eagerness but she doesn’t get a chance, her thighs pulled down against the brunette’s face the instant she got close enough. “Holy fuck…oooh fuck.” She shouts at the sensation of Ali already feasting on her hungrily. It feels like Ali’s tongue is everywhere at the same time and she feels her legs go a little weak, reaching to grab the headboard with one hand while the other buries itself in the brunette’s hair. “Oh my god, Alex.” Her stomach muscles quake as Ali’s tongue moves inside her.

“Mmmm, you taste so good… you’re so hot.” Ali mumbles into Ashlyn’s soaked creases, hearing a louder moan from the officer from the vibrating sensation. She feels the signature tremor moving through Ashlyn’s hips and thighs already and she knows it’s only a matter of minutes now. She moves just a bit to lick and suck on her clit, her hands going to the officer’s ass cheeks to spread her even wider, pull her in even closer. She smiles at the feel of Ashlyn’s hand fist into her hair and looks up to see her eyes tightly shut, her mouth agape as she moans loudly above her and holds onto the headboard for dear life.

Ashlyn knows words are leaving her mouth as she pants loudly, but she can’t even register what they are. Her entire focus going to Ali’s mouth working her pulsating core. She can feel herself just about to unravel, but she tries desperately to hold on longer, never wanting this feeling to end. “Unnh, Alex…Alex…” her minds starts to go blank when the brunette’s tongue dives back into her. She feels Ali’s fingertips come to rest just between her butt cheeks, putting pressure on the sensitive virgin skin there and it throws her completely over the edge. A string of expletives leave her mouth as she comes undone on Ali’s face, her whole body clenched tight and hips bucking as she screams out her orgasm.

Ali keeps her tongue moving gently along Ashlyn’s slit, enjoying the copious sweet fluids that she worked hard for as she brings the officer down. She smirks when Ashlyn slides down her face, the officer clearly having trouble holding herself up. “Easy, honey… relax.” Ali’s fingers splay across Ashlyn’s abs to help support her as her body continues it’s slow descent. “You ok?” She asks when Ashlyn flops down beside her and rolls onto her back bonelessly.

“I think you actually killed me.” Ashlyn smiles with eyes still closed, her breathing still really labored.

“Yep, see, now I’ve actually killed you. Told you earlier that it still had’t happened yet.” Ali teases, quickly wiping her face on the sheet before resting on the officer’s chest and wrapping an arm around her waist.

“Sorry, can’t hear you. I’m dead.” Ashlyn laughs, her voice a bit raspy from exertion.

“Damn. I was really hoping to do that again.” Ali’s fingers trace the colorful flowers on Ashlyn’s side.

“Eh, I can die twice.” Ashlyn replies and moves to wrap both of her arms around the brunette. “The things you do to me… incredible.”
“I know the feeling.” Ali smiles into Ashlyn’s warm skin, her own body heavy and sated. “Sorry we never got around to the jacuzzi bath.” She adds as she sees the digital clock reading 1:11am.

“Who says we still can’t?” Ashlyn challenges. “Besides, our bodies will thank us in the morning.”

“Yeah but it’s really late and you need to rest for work tomorrow.” Ali tries to be logical. “Plus, I’m not sure I can move. I feel like a slug.” She confesses.

“Well, you certainly leave a wet trail.” Ashlyn chuckles and feels Ali slightly slap her stomach. “I’m kidding…well, not really… but you’re not a slug.”

“Digging your way to trouble, Harris.” Ali mock warns her.

“Annyway… I worked extra hours this week, so tomorrow is a half day and I’m not on until noon. So, we can sleep in.” Ashlyn explains. “And, after this absolutely amazing night, you damn well know I’ll run that bath and carry you into it.”

“Sold.” Ali tilts her head up and kisses the officer languidly for a minute. “Ok, better get going or I’ll fall asleep.”

At that, Ashlyn immediately gets up and rushes into the bathroom. She runs them a hot bath, dropping a soothing lavender bath bomb into it before going back to get Ali. Just like she promised, she lifts Ali carefully into her arms and carries her the short distance to the bathroom, slowly lowering her into the water before climbing in behind the brunette so she can hold her.

“You’re strength is seriously such a turn on. I wish you could carry me everywhere. It feels so nice.” Ali says dreamily as she lays back against the officer.

“You say that now, but you’re way too independent for that, sweetheart. Which I absolutely love about you. But, if you want me to carry you…just say the word.” Ashlyn says sweetly.

“You’re cute. And totally right. The first hour would be bliss until I let the feisty side take over. Then I’d probably make you put me down and challenge you to race to prove that I didn’t need to be carried.” Ali laughs at herself.

“That’s my girl.” Ashlyn agrees with a chuckle and starts massaging Ali’s shoulders. The next fifteen minutes pass silently as they relax in the warm water and enjoy the feel of being close after such an eventful day.

“Ash?” Ali eventually breaks the silence.

“Uh huh?” Ashlyn replies.

“Do you think we’re doing this too fast? Are we out of our minds?” Ali questions. She feels completely confident about what she wants, but she still wants the reassurance that it’s okay.

“Not at all.” Ashlyn moves her hand to Ali’s cheek and turns the brunette’s face to look at her. “It probably seems fast because we haven’t officially been together a year yet. But Alex… our hearts have belonged to each other a lot longer than that. We know everything we need to know about each other and have more than proven that we’re unstoppable together. I love you more than I have ever loved anything or anyone. I know I have the perfect person to be by my side and raise a family with… and nothing else matters. Go ahead and try to tell my heart that it hasn’t loved you forever and always will, I dare you.”

“I can’t… because I feel that way too. I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life, and my
whole career is centered around being sure. I just needed to hear you say that for some reason.” Ali kisses Ashlyn’s cheek.

“Well, I meant it. We got this.” Ashlyn promises her.

“I can’t wait to have your baby. We so got this.” Ali puts finality to the conversation and beams, knowing this is the last time she’ll need any form of reassurance about it.

“I’m so in love with you, Alex.” Ashlyn whispers against Ali’s ear.

“Yeah well, I don’t just love you, Ash…I’m full on obsessed.” Ali smiles and turns her head for a kiss. “Let’s go to bed.”

“Mmm’kay.” Ashlyn nods in agreement and hugs Ali close for just a few more seconds. “Happy Valentine’s Day.”

“It’s not Valentine’s Day anymore.” Ali says teasingly.

“Fine. Happy everyday then.” Ashlyn rolls her eyes in jest.

“Exactly.” Ali turns around and kisses her hard before getting up and pulling a still hooded-eyed Ashlyn with her to bed, not caring in the slightest that they’re dripping water everywhere.
Let's really start this fun ride towards the finale, shall we? (Don't worry, I'm thinking at least 73 chapters at this point...so we're not that super close yet). Keep those comments coming so I know how to steer this thing as we move along ;-) As always, thanks for reading!

Saturday, February 17th

“I’m sorry… you want me to do what with my what and put it in who?” Kyle asks wide-eyed.

“Well this conversation is already a smashing success.” Ashlyn mumbles sarcastically under her breath, digging back into her plate of eggs, bacon, and homefries that she made for brunch.

“There’s more to it, just let me…” Ali speaks up quickly, but Kyle cuts her off in his continued tirade.

“Alex, there’s no way anyone would let that happen. I mean, that’s incest, right? And when I offered, that’s not what I meant. Like, why would you two want that anyway? Is it that hard to find a donor? I love you guys and you know I’d do anything for you, but this can’t really happen anyway…at least I think.” Kyle starts to further consider it in his head, starting to whisper as he tries to figure it out.

“Oh my god, will you shut up for like 5 seconds?!” Ali finally yells loudly as she hits the table with her hand, making both Kyle and Ashlyn jump a bit. Kyle immediately nods and zips his lip at the stern look on her face.

“Fucking finally.” Ashlyn laughs.

“If you had let me finish instead of going off on some madman rant, you would have heard the important part about how we’re using Ashlyn’s eggs and I’m just carrying.” Ali glares at him. “So yes, I’d be pregnant…but not with my own baby. Got it?”

“Oh. Ohhhh! Got it!” Kyle dope slaps himself. “Oh gosh, I’m sorry! You said you would be getting pregnant and then mentioned the thing about me offering and my mind just jumped to the wrong thing. Sorry guys.” He says apologetically in a quiet voice.

“Listening skills, Diva.” Ali shakes her head.

“It got really good when you accused your sister of incest though.” Ashlyn teases him. “I think you’ve been watching way too many Game of Thrones episodes lately. This isn’t a Cersei and Jamie thing, bro.”

“And now that I’m thoroughly embarrassed, can we start over?” Kyle cringes at himself, his face a bit red.

“Ok let’s recap, so like I said before… Ash and I decided we want to have a baby. I am going to be the one getting pregnant, BUT I really want to have her baby. After talking it through, Ash decided
she was onboard for what that entails for both me and her. So, HER eggs will be used to get me pregnant. With me so far?” Ali spells it out for Kyle slowly.

“Yep, I’m good.” Kyle replies attentively.

“One of the only lingering hesitations in her mind was that the baby wouldn’t look like me. We talked about it and then the conversation that you and I had a couple years ago about you being willing to donate to my partner struck me as a possible solution … and here we are. Do you get it now?” Ali asks.

“Totally get it. And much better than what I made up in my head a few minutes ago…geez, sorry!” Kyle apologizes again. “I freaked out so fast that I didn’t even get the chance to properly… ahhhh, you guys… you’re going to have a baby!” Kyle says in a sentimental squeal of excitement, his eyes getting watery.

Ali can’t help but smile widely at the statement, finally getting the initial reaction from him that she was hoping for to start with. “Well, yeah…we’re sure gonna try.” Ali reaches over and takes Ashlyn’s hand, squeezing it tightly and giving the officer a loving look.

“I’m just… like happy doesn’t even come close. I’m over the moon for you two! I can’t think of two better people in the world to have a child together. Wow… fucking lucky kid and it isn’t even conceived yet!” Kyle starts going off the handle again with his emotions running high as the news really hits him.

“Well, we have a long way to go still. It’s beyond exciting and we’re thrilled, but we have to remember that there’s a lot of factors and many things that have to go right.” Ashlyn tries to temper the excitement just a bit so they can get back to a realistic conversation.

“You can be excited, just take it down a notch will ya?” Ali smiles at his giddiness.

“Oh dear god, why?!” Ashlyn practically spits out the sip of orange juice she just took.

“How about we not be gross? K, thanks.” Ali pats Ashlyn on the back to make sure she’s ok and shoots Kyle a look.

“Sorry, sorry, couldn’t help myself. I’ll behave now, I promise!” Kyle assures them. “Anyway, my offer still stands and it’s a definite yes from me.”

“Ok Ky, just hold up a second. First, we love you and we can’t tell you how much we appreciate you being so willing to just jump right into this. Especially with it being something so odd.” Ali keeps things level.
“Yeah, it really does mean the world to us, Kyle. Just… we really need to talk about a few things and it’s really important that you think everything through very carefully and be brutally honest about how you feel about the situation.” Ashlyn jumps in.

“Um, ok. What is there to talk about besides the logistics?” Kyle questions, a bit lost on why they are looking so serious.

Ali reaches out and lightly grabs his forearm. “Ky, you’ll be the biological father of our kid… and his or her uncle. There’s a lot to emotionally unpack there. I mean, how are you going to feel about being so close to a child that is biologically yours, but that you’re not acting as a parent to? That is something Ash and I can’t anticipate or answer for you, but that we need you to really think about. Think about the feelings that it might stir up and what it might mean for you. It will likely mean a situation where our child eventually finds out and that can be really tricky for all of us if we don’t get on the same page now. And maybe we won’t get on the same page and this won’t work…which is completely ok. We just all need to be honest and then worry about whether or not it’s an option.”

Kyle sits there quietly for a minute to compose his thoughts before speaking. “I have thought about it. A lot actually. Right after I offered, I thought about what it might be like. And for some reason, I’ve revisited it a few times anytime you’ve ever talked about wanting a family.” Kyle says to Ali. “I’ve always come to same conclusion.” He admits honestly. “I’m going to do the best I can to explain my feelings on it. So… let’s say you guys chose to just have Alex get pregnant with another donor…”

“Ok.” Ali follows along and Ashlyn nods.

“Your kid would probably look somewhat like me since Alex had him or her, and I’d just be Uncle Kyle. I mean, best uncle on the planet of course, but still just Uncle Kyle. I’d do everything to help you guys raise that kid in any way that you needed me to. I’d work hard to be a good role model, someone who is in their life and that they can rely on for whatever they need. And I’ll spoil them too, count on it! With me so far?” Kyle looks up to find Ali with a teary smile and Ashlyn with her own tight smile that signals she’s trying to hold in her emotions.

“With you.” Ali answers for them.

“So now, let’s say we go ahead with this thing together. Your kid still probably looks like me… and Harris too, which is cool as hell. But, in my mind, I’m still just Uncle Kyle. Biology doesn’t make a parent you guys, I firmly believe that. Look at our parents, Ken and both of yours Harris…I mean, we’re prime examples of how biology doesn’t equal a parent. They’re separate spheres in my eyes.” Kyle tries to explain. “It’s really simple for me. In both situations, I’m always Uncle Kyle who is there for your kid in all circumstances as someone they can rely on. I’m there in any capacity that they need me, whether it’s minimal or more intense. If they need questions answered, time to bond or to get to know me in whatever way they need… biological father or not, I’m there. But you’re the parents…just like in the situation where I’m not biologically involved, you’re the ones who will make all the decisions and I’ll just be there to support you. The only difference in my mind is that I will feel honored to have helped make it happen. As nutty as it all seems, I think it’s just such a cool and miraculous thing.” Kyle gives it to them unfiltered, pausing for a few seconds before he can’t help but add “Besides, this would be the cutest kid EVER!”

“Woah…that was…” Ashlyn tries to find the words to respond. “Thank you for being so open and honest. You couldn’t have hit me with a better answer than that.” She admits before turning to Ali. “Alex?”

“What she said.” Ali wipes away a few tears. “I love you, Ky.”

“We talked a lot over the last couple days and we feel similarly to you. You’re an amazing person that we love and we’d be lucky to have you as our donor. And although we wouldn’t want you playing a father role because that would be really weird, we’d want you to be as involved as we already know you would be as an uncle.” Ashlyn answers for them as Ali nods in agreement. “I guess the only thing is that as questions inevitably start to arise from our child… we decided that we’d want to be honest right from the start. We wouldn’t want to hide anything only for he or she to find out later and have it be a big deal. And we’d want to be in control of anything and everything that gets or doesn’t get revealed. We’d hope you’d be okay with that and help us work through any issues that come up as a result. Would you be okay with that and what it might entail?”

“Completely. Like I said, I’m there in any way I’m needed no matter what. And nothing would ever come out of my mouth about it to anyone unless you specifically allowed it.” Kyle responds easily.

“And would you be good with signing all the appropriate legal contracts that we would have any other donor sign? Like giving up parental rights and things like that?” Ali asks more directly.

“Absolutely. I’d expect no less from you, princess.” Kyle teases her.

“Wow, this is like so real right now.” Ali replies as it really hits her.

“So damn real.” Ashlyn agrees.

“Well, I’m a complete yes and don’t need more time to think about it. How are you two feeling about it now? Are you going to take some more time to figure it out?” Kyle inquires curiously.

Ali looks as Ashlyn and they share a knowing look before she answers. “We did a lot of thinking and talking before this, and well, at this point we’re at the exact ideal situation we would have hoped for out of this conversation. So… green light.” She finishes with a huge smile.

“Ahhhh! I’m knocking up Harris!” Kyle shouts excitedly before his forehead wrinkles in concentration. “Well, technically I’d be knocking up my sister with Harris, right? Man, it’s hard to come up with crude humor with such complexity involved!”

“Ugh, something tells me this is going to be the longest pregnancy ever.” Ali cringes at Kyle’s statement.

“Yup.” Ashlyn shakes her head.

“Damn right! I have to get out all my inappropriate jokes before the baby gets here.” Kyle laughs. “Oh, I forgot to ask… so, what’s the timeline on all this?”

Ali smiles and squeezes Ashlyn’s hand again. “Well, given how well this went. Ash and I are going to call the doctor on Monday to have preliminary appointments and go from there. So, we’d ideally sign up the contracts with you as soon as possible and then, if all is well physically, we’d go for it right away. From what I’ve read, it seems like that would be like a month or two.”

“Holy shit! Before the wedding?!” Kyle yells in disbelief, his eyes like saucers. “Did not see that coming.”

“Yeah, well I’m not getting any younger and who knows how long this will take to happen. No matter what, I wouldn’t have the baby before the wedding and probably only be a few months pregnant if it happened to work right away.” Ali explains.
“She’ll be the most beautiful bride in the world, pregnant or not.” Ashlyn adds sweetly, repeating what she already told Ali in private.

“Oh my god you guys… this is so… ahhh, I’m so excited! You two are so damn cute!” Kyle jumps up from the table and goes over to hug them both tightly. “I’m so happy. So, so happy. And really touched to be a part of it, obviously.”

“We don’t even know how to thank you… but, Kyle, thank you.” Ashlyn squeezes him really tight.

“Oh Harris, just leave it at the hugs, girl. You owe me no thankyous, you never have.” Kyle says seriously and squeezes back.

“I feel like we need cupcakes to celebrate!” Ali announces.

“Spoken like a woman already hormonal.” Kyle jokes and gets an eye roll from Ali. “Wanna go into the city and get the best around?”

“You know it!” Ali says happily. “You two are all ready, but I need to quickly redo my hair. So, I need like ten minutes, be right back.” She says as she heads up the stairs.

“Right, ten minutes. Sure. That means we have time for at least a round of Mario Kart and cleaning up the dishes before she comes down. If not two rounds. Ready to get creamed, Harris?” Kyle asks with a chuckle.

“Tough talk for a guy who has never beat me.” Ashlyn challenges. “You’re on. Word of advice, stop picking the princess.”

“Never!” Kyle yells as he yells towards the living room.

It takes Ali about twenty minutes to come back downstairs. She hears voices in the kitchen and heads in that direction only to catch the tail end of a conversation between Ashlyn and her brother.

“Oh honey, you don’t even know just how much that means to me. It’s different for me though with not being able to just naturally do it like you two. If and when I ever find myself in the right position… this world is already filled with little ones that need love, and I’ll be happy to be the one to provide it.” Kyle’s voice floats into the hallway.

“Just the same.” Ashlyn’s voice replies.

“Always my guardian angel, Harris. Thank you.” Kyle seemingly ends the conversation.

Ali makes her footsteps pronounced so that they know she’s there, not wanting it to seem like she was eavesdropping. She walks in to find Kyle’s hands on Ashlyn’s shoulders as if they’d just pulled away from a hug. She feels a little bad for interrupting whatever it is, but they smile at her like they don’t mind at all. “Ready to go.” She declares.

“Finally!” Kyle waves his hand dramatically. “I’m gonna go warm up the car, it’s freezing out!” He quickly puts on his coat and walks out the door.

Ali walks over to Ashlyn and wraps her arms around her waist. “What a morning, huh?”

“That’s an understatement. You doing ok?” Ashlyn checks in with her.

“Never better. You?” Ali asks back with a grin.
“Exact same.” Ashlyn kisses Ali’s forehead.

“Can I ask what just happened in here? What you said to him?” Ali asks curiously. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, I just caught the tail end of what he said as I came towards the kitchen.”

“Oh, um…well, I offered… oh, geez I just realized I really should have asked you first. Ugh, sorry Alex, I just let the moment take over and…” Ashlyn stutters a bit.

“Relax, Ash. Whatever it is, it’s fine.” Ali assures her.

“Ok, well… I told him that if he ever wanted kids someday, that I’d be happy to return the favor and be a surrogate for him.” Ashlyn divulges and waits a bit nervously for Ali’s reaction. “He said he plans to adopt though.” She adds when Ali doesn’t say anything.

Ali blinks a couple of times as the statement washes over her before surprising the officer with a hard passionate kiss that leaves Ashlyn standing there breathless and with eyes still closed when it ends a couple minutes later. “Your heart, Ash…” Ali whispers in disbelief as Ashlyn’s eyes open. “So unbelievably good and beautiful. I love you so much that I don’t even know what to do with myself.”

“For starters you can kiss me like that again.” Ashlyn gives her a dimpled grin, the two of them still close enough to be breathing the same air. “I love you too, Alex.”

“And I’m the luckiest girl in the world for that.” Ali says resolutely before kissing the officer again, only to be interrupted by the sound of Kyle honking the horn.

“The Queen beckons!” Ali laughs and leads Ashlyn out the door.

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Monday, February 26th

“I have good news for you both.” Dr. Baylor says with a smile as she walks into the office and settles herself down behind her desk. “Your blood panels both came back normal as did your pap smears and pelvic exams. Everything looks healthy and normal, so we can go ahead with the plan and general timeline we talked about in the initial appointment. How are you both doing? I know it’s only been a few days since your appointments, so let’s talk about where you are now.”

“We’re still ready to go ahead as planned. Actually feeling really relieved that everything looks good. We were nervous all weekend.” Ali answers for them and Ashlyn nods in agreement.

“Well, there’s no reason to be. You two are both in good shape and in excellent health. Of course, there are no guarantees, but we’ll get you there somehow.” Dr. Baylor says optimistically. “For what it’s worth, I think the outlook here is great.”

“I know we sort of went over an overview last time, but what can we expect timing wise more specifically?” Ashlyn asks.

“So, first thing we need to do is really get a sense of both of your ovulation cycles. This first month you will both need to fastidiously take your temperatures every morning before you do anything else and chart it for me. You’ll also need to get ovulation kits to supplement that so we have a more exact indication. We’ll give you some recommendations on what to buy before you leave today. Once you provide that, we can get going at the start of the next cycle right after that.” Dr. Baylor explains. “Any questions on that?”
“No, think we can handle this part. We’ve read a lot about it.” Ali replies.

“Ok, good. The experience after that will be a little different for both of you, but you’ll start with the same hormone injections. And you’ll be able to do those injections yourself at home, either on yourself or for each other.” Dr. Baylor informs them and Ashlyn visibly tenses. “Everything okay, Ashlyn?”

“Yep. I’m just not a fan of needles, so it’ll make for an interesting month.” Ashlyn feels Ali squeeze her arm.

“I’ve never met anyone with that many tattoos that didn’t like needles.” Dr. Baylor remarks a bit surprised.

“You wouldn’t be the first one to say that. I wish I could explain it, but for some reason the tattoos are different for me.” Ashlyn shrugs.

“Well, Ali can certainly help you out with the injections at home if she’s up for it or you can always come in daily to have them done here.” Dr. Baylor suggests.

“I can handle it.” Ali confirms and gets a little smile from Ashlyn.

“Perfect. So, a little bit after the first week of each of your cycles, you’ll move to different hormones. At that time, Ashlyn, you’ll move to a follicle stimulating hormone that will get several eggs to grow and mature in your ovaries. We’ll have to very carefully monitor your hormone levels and how the eggs are responding to them, but you can expect anywhere from 2 to 4 injections a day at that point. This will also be a more invasive time period for you and will require you to come in almost daily for blood work and transvaginal ultrasounds. It’s about a 10 day time period give or take. And then once we reach the point where the eggs are perfectly matured, we administer a trigger shot that sort of stops growth. And then you’ll come in the next day so we can retrieve the eggs, which will be done under sedation. So, you won’t feel or see a thing. Recovery is quick...you just may feel very cramped for a day or two or have a little spotting, but nothing otherwise.” Dr. Baylor outlines Ashlyn’s process. “Any questions?”

“Nope, it’s pretty clear to me.” Ashlyn replies easily with Ali squeezing her arm really tightly now. “Alex?” She checks to see if Ali has any questions.

“No, I guess I’m good too. Ugh, I just can’t believe how much she has to deal with to do this.” Ali admits out loud, feeling a bit guilty about just how invasive and uncomfortable this will be for the officer.

“Well, it’s not the easiest road, but it’s completely doable. Nothing like two women in the same house with hormones in overdrive, right?” Dr. Baylor tries to lighten the mood. “If it helps...I do this all the time, and honestly, it goes fast and most couples don’t find it to be a negative experience. I obviously cannot speak for the two of you or what your experience will be like, but I’ve had a lot of couples in your position tell me that they felt a lot more connected doing it this way. You’ll each have your spans of undergoing invasive aspects for different reasons and it seems to bring a higher level of understanding between partners through the process.”

Both women nod and continue listening.

“As for Ali, you’ll switch to progesterone injections around the time of ovulation. And that will just help your body maintain the best possible state for embryo transfer and implantation. Once we retrieve the eggs, we will fertilize them in the lab and see how many successful embryos we can get over the next couple days. Usually we retrieve about 10 to 15 usable eggs and on average get about
5 to 10 embryos. In a healthy person like yourself, we’d usually only use three of them for each transfer and you could freeze the remaining ones for future tries. The transfer is really simple and is done right in the office. Just takes a few minutes and is painless, just like an IUI only we’d be inserting eggs into the uterus with a thin catheter tube instead of sperm. Speaking of sperm, are you using frozen vials from an anonymous donor or will this be an in-person fresh donation?” Dr. Baylor asks.

“Oh um, it’ll be fresh. We’re actually using my brother and he’s local.” Ali admits frankly.

“Excellent.” Dr. Baylor doesn’t flinch. “So, we’d have him come in on the same morning as Ashlyn’s retrieval to provide a sample for us. We usually only need one sample.”

“Ok.” Ali replies and Ashlyn nods, both of them a bit surprised that Kyle being the donor didn’t elicit any reaction.

“What? Surprised that I’m not more shocked about your donor choice?” Dr. Baylor reads their faces perfectly with a knowing smile.

“Pretty much.” Ashlyn fesses up.

“I’ve delivered at least twenty babies from sibling donors. It might seem rare, but a lot more people than you think take that route. I’ve seen it all, ladies.” Dr. Baylor smiles. “It’s lovely that you have such great family support. You can’t go wrong with that.”

“Thanks.” Ali smiles, not even sure if that’s the correct response.

“So, the last stage seems almost worse than the rest of it for most people. It’s pretty much a two week lull of nothing… after all that work until we just wait to see if there is a successful pregnancy. We’ll monitor your menstrual symptoms and check your blood work around 10 to 14 days to see what happens. And that’s pretty much it. If we succeed the first time, excellent. If not, we’re here to support you in trying again. It’s normal to have to do this more than once.” Dr. Baylor stays realistic.

“Questions?”

“It fits with everything I’ve read, but if you have anything that explains it all in writing, that would be a great help in keeping it all straight.” Ali says before looking at Ashlyn.

“I think I’m good too. It makes sense and we can call anytime if we have questions, right?” Ashlyn asks.

“Yes, of course, call any time for anything! And I have a whole binder for you that explains it all in detail and has the ovulation charts you’ll need and timing schedules. I just don’t like to hand it off to you without going over it all verbally first.” Dr. Baylor replies.

“Great, thank you.” Ali says appreciatively.

“So, if we’re good to go… here is the binder and the receptionist will print out the sheet of recommended ovulation kits before you leave. Just keep really good track of everything and I’ll hopefully see you in about three weeks to see where we are at with it all.” Dr. Baylor starts to get up.

“I promise you we’re going to do this as smoothly as we can. Again, call any time.”

“Thanks again.” Ashlyn says as she and Ali make their way to the door.

By the time they make their way through reception and get out to their cars, it’s already 10am and Ashlyn still has an hour drive to get to work. Despite knowing she has a long day ahead to make up for coming in late, the officer insists on walking Ali to her car.
“What time do you think you’ll be home?” Ali asks, fixing the collar on Ashlyn’s uniform a bit.

“Probably around 7:30 pm.” Ashlyn replies. “Don’t worry about dinner, I’ll pick something up on my way home.”

“You’re the best. I’ll work on finding us those ovulation kits.” Ali smiles and lets out a deep breath. “You ready for all this?” Her eyes locking onto hazel.

“Ready for anything with you, Alex. We got this.” Ashlyn answers with ease, leaning in for a soft kiss.

“Me too. We definitely got this,” Ali smiles. “I know this is going to be a lot for you. Thank you, Ash, for doing this for us. You really are my hero, in so many ways.”

“Please, you’re the hero here. I’m just excited and happy to do this with you, baby. I love you.” Ashlyn smiles at her.

“Love you more.” Ali goes in for a longer kiss. “Gehirn im Kopf, love.”

“Always. See you tonight, beautiful.” Ashlyn gives her one last peck and stands back, watching the brunette get in her car and drive away before making her way to her Jeep and heading to work.

Friday, March 23rd

“Well, well, ladies…you two are certainly the epitome of women’s cycles syncing up when they live together.” Dr. Baylor jokes as she looks over their ovulation charts from the last month and the questionnaires they filled out before today’s appointment.

“We U-Hauled it early on.” Ali jokes back.

“Ali, looks like you’re tracking peak ovulation just a few days after Ashlyn, which makes it easy for us to go through the process about as quickly as we can without any extra hormone intervention for you. Your body will be naturally ready and on schedule for the embryo transfer and hopeful implantation, so the hormone injections will just be there to aid that and we don’t have to force anything.” She explains.

“Overachiever.” Ashlyn teases the brunette and gets a playful eye roll in reply.

“You’re not one to talk, Ashlyn. This is like a clockwork machine!” Dr. Baylor holds up her ovulation chart with a raised eyebrow. “It perfectly fits the standard 28 day ovulation timing curve that we go by as an example. So, if anyone is the overachiever here…” She trails off lightly laughing while Ali nudges Ashlyn.

“All kidding aside, this looks really great for moving forward. So, if you both agree that you’re ready to go ahead and start the process, I would put in the prescriptions and have you both start the initial set of daily injections this coming Tuesday. Thoughts?” Dr. Baylor looks at them.

“We’re ready to go ahead.” Ali answers for them, the two of them already having discussed it at home thoroughly.

“Excellent. Well, that doesn’t leave much for me to do right now. I’ll have the nurse come in and show you how to do the injections and provide you each with an individualized schedule for timing. So, on Tuesday morning you’ll go ahead and both start. Then we’ll follow your more tailored plans
after that. I’ll probably only see Ali in here a couple of times until the transfer. As for you, Ashlyn, we’re gonna get to be best friends this month.” Dr. Baylor keeps the conversation easygoing.

“We better be. Only friends let friends perform vaginal ultrasounds on them, right?” Ashlyn jokes away her slight nervousness. Of course, Ali easily reads the emotion behind the officer’s humor and holds her hand, giving it a little squeeze of comfort.

“Right.” Dr. Baylor laughs. “I promise, it won’t be as bad as it sounds. And after the first couple, it tends not to phase people anymore.” She reassures the officer.

“Alright, well, I guess we’re good to go.” Ashlyn says and looks at Ali.

“Good to go.” Ali confirms.

“Great, I’ll send the nurse in and I’ll see you both soon. Again, call or come in anytime for absolutely anything. Remember that there are no stupid questions and that it’s better safe than sorry.” Dr. Baylor reminds them and waves goodbye before exiting the office.

They spend about an hour with the nurse going over every detail they need to know before Ashlyn runs off to pick up Curtis and Elsie from school since Bridget and Chris are in NYC for the weekend enjoying Bridget’s getaway Christmas gift from Ashlyn. Meanwhile, Ali uses the time to tackle a few promotional tasks ahead of the new season of Veritas Aequitas being released next week before the weekend is completely lost to babysitting duty.

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“Princess Ali!” Elsie yells through the house with Curtis and Ashlyn in tow. “Her castle is huge!” She adds, still mesmerized by the size of the Newton house even though they’ve been there several times.

“Well, she is the most beautiful princess in all the land. Of course her castle is huge.” Ashlyn replies with a smile.

“I heard that, Harris. Very smooth.” Ali pops up behind them from the kitchen entrance and quickly pecks Ashlyn on the lips before turning to the kids. “Hey munchkins! You guys ready to have a fun weekend?”

“Can we do movie night?” Curtis asks, throwing himself onto the couch.

“Sure can.” Ali replies and gets a smile from Ashlyn.

“What about pizza?” Elsie requests.

“Ok, we can do pizza tonight and a movie. But...tomorrow we have a normal healthy dinner and get to bed on time, deal?” Ashlyn warns them.

“Yuuuuup!” Elsie agrees with a shout.

“Ok, but can I play video games with you?” Curtis presses for more.

“Depends how well you listen and behave. So, maybe. All up to you.” Ashlyn says diplomatically.

“Promise I will behave!” Curtis gives her a thumbs up.

“Alright, we have about two hours until dinner. If we’re having pizza, then we’re most definitely burning off some energy outside first. Let’s walk over to the playground down the street.” Ali
“Grab your coats!” She adds and watches the two kids run off to the hallway closet.

“Brilliant, beautiful.” Ashlyn gets close to Ali, savoring the minute they have to themselves before the kids come back to get them. “Run them ragged so they’ll go to bed easily and we don’t have to feel guilty about the pizza.” She gives Ali a proper kiss now that the kids aren’t in view.

“Yeah well, major confession…” Ali cringes a bit.

“I’m listening.” Ashlyn says attentively as she hears the coat closet door close in the hallway and noises that sound like shoes are being put on.

“I’m good with babies and teenagers, but I’ve never done any babysitting or spent any real length of time with this in-between age. So, kind of have no clue what I’m doing here. I did my best to plan ahead for everything I could think of, but I’m officially glad we’re in this together for the next couple of days.” Ali divulges.

“You’ll be fine, Alex. They’re like puppies.” Ashlyn smiles and tries to instill some self-confidence into the brunette. “The kind of puppies that pee on the floor, chew your shoes, and wake you up at all hours of the night.” She mumbles under her breath, knowing Ali is in for a learning experience with Curtis and Elsie who are very energetic. They’re good kids, but they can be a handful when it comes to keeping them entertained.

“What?” Ali asks, trying to decipher what Ashlyn said at the end.

“Nothing important!” Ashlyn says in a high-pitched voice just as the kids run back into the room ready to go.

“Okay you two, here’s a pile of pillows and blankets. Your mission is to build us a blanket fort for movie night.” Ashlyn tells Curtis and Elsie who are now freshly bathed and in pajamas. She knows this will keep them occupied for at least twenty minutes while she and Ali clean up the dinner dishes and give themselves a tiny break. “Wait!” She stops them. “No climbing on the furniture, no touching remote controls, no taking anything off tables or shelves, and most certainly no touching anything glass.” She warns them and gets nods of agreement before heading into the kitchen where Ali is.

“So rigid, Harris.” Ali teases her.

“You know it. Structure is key for those two.” Ashlyn replies.

“Spoken like a true Ranger and police Captain, baby.” Ali leans against her as they pre-rinse the dishes together. “Can you load these into the dishwasher while I get the rest of the stuff ready?”

“Rest of the stuff? What stuff?” Ashlyn inquires.

“Movie popcorn, Chex mix, and special juice drinks with twizzler straws.” Ali says like it’s obvious.

“Geez, what haven’t you thought of today?” Ashlyn asks rhetorically, watching Ali pull out special popcorn containers that look like they came from a theater concession stand.

Ashlyn can hardly be surprised after how the day went. When Elsie fell and scraped her elbow at the playground, Ali was ready with an antiseptic wipe and a Cinderella band-aid. When Ashlyn scraped
a knuckle while playing around with Curtis just a few minutes later, she expected to be wearing a kids band-aid for the afternoon. Ali was ready for that too though, putting a normal adult bandage on the cut and giving it a kiss while whispering “so injury prone, Harris” and smiling. When the kids decided they didn’t like the ham and cheese pizza that they had begged for, Ali had a small plain cheese backup pizza ready. When Elsie insisted she cut up her own pizza, but then couldn’t handle it, Ali pulled out a pair of kid scissors that worked like a charm. When the novelty of the large jacuzzi tub wore off after only 10 minutes into bath time, Ali pulled out bubble bath. And now, here the brunette is with Pinterest worthy movie night snacks.

“I knew you were a planner, my sexy lawyer…but, this is like Supreme Court level.” Ashlyn kisses Ali hard, pressing her into the counter a bit. She’s both completely charmed and incredibly turned on by the brunette’s thoughtful preparation.

“Mmmm, stop it or we’re both in major trouble and you know it.” Ali pulls away flushed. “Pull yourself together and keep it in your pants this weekend, Harris.” She leaves a lingering kiss on the officer’s lips and taps her nose with her finger playfully.

“Ugh, I so did not mentally prepare for that aspect of this weekend. No surprise that you did.” Ashlyn laughs and taps Ali on the ass before starting to load the dishwasher.

Movie night goes off without a hitch, the four of them watching Trolls on the mess of blankets and pillows on the floor that Curtis and Elsie insist was a blanket fort before they accidentally ruined it playing hide-and-seek. Ashlyn smiles to herself, one of her arms wrapped around Ali while the other holds Elsie on her lap. Curtis is tucked into Ali’s side happily sipping his special juice drink. Ali turns her head to meet the officer’s eyes and Ashlyn sweetly kisses her forehead in acknowledgement of how great today has gone thanks to her. She knows damn well that neither of them can anticipate everything and it’s only a matter time before something gives way, but she’s not going to put a damper on Ali’s proud mood stemming from her perfect streak today.

“We didn’t even do that much today and I’m exhausted.” Ali admits, cuddling into Ashlyn’s side. After getting the kids off to bed in their respective rooms, the two of them quickly changed into pajamas and dropped into bed.

“Same. They’re a lot to keep up with.” Ashlyn agrees. “You were like super woman with everything though. Krieger for the win!”

“Thanks, honey.” Ali tilts her head up for a kiss. “What are the chances the rest of the weekend goes this well?” She asks hopefully.

“Zero.” Ashlyn laughs and gives it to her straight.

“Ugh. Can we at least pretend for now?” Ali begs playfully.

“Sure, babe. It’ll be smooth sailing the whole way.” Ashlyn plays into it.

“Thank you, my sweet liar. Love you, Ash.” Ali steals one more kiss.

“Love you too, Alex. Sweet dreams, beautiful.” Ashlyn holds her close and lets her heavy eyes close, falling asleep to the sound of Ali’s even breathing.

It only takes until 11pm for the water to get choppy when Elsie barges into their room, her lip quivering because she’s afraid to sleep in her room by herself. After insisting that she sleep in Curtis’ room, Ashlyn groggily gets up to put together a makeshift bed in there without waking up Curtis.
while Ali reads Elsie another bedtime story. The two women just manage to fall back to sleep when Elsie is back in their bedroom again announcing that Curtis is snoring too loudly for her to sleep. Ashlyn gives up at that point, giving Ali an apologetic look when the little girl crawls into the bed between them. Even though Elsie falls asleep fast, it doesn’t get any better from there as she stretches out horizontally on the bed, pushing Ashlyn and Ali right to the outer edges of the mattress.

Saturday, March 24th

“Uuuuuugggh, why?” Ashlyn groans as little fingers poke her face.

“I’m hungry, Auntie Ashwyn!” Elsie bounces up and down on the bed.

“Yeah, ok. Just stay still so you don’t wake up Auntie Ali.” Ashlyn sleepily picks her head up to see Ali face down in her pillow, one leg hanging off of the bed.

“Auntie Ali is up.” Ali’s muffled voice comes from the other side of the bed.

“See, breakfast time!” Elsie yells and jumps off the bed to go wake up Curtis.

“So sorry, baby.” Ashlyn crawls over to Ali and kisses the back of her shoulder a few times.

“It’s ok. What time is it?” Ali asks, rolling over to face Ashlyn.

“Probably better that I don’t answer that.” Ashlyn laughs.

“Tell me it’s not before 6am.” Ali grumbles.

“Ok, it’s not before 6am.” Ashlyn deadpans, clearly lying.

“Noooooo.” Ali playfully whines.

“I got you, baby. Double shot latte coming right up. Go shower and I’ll make breakfast.” Ashlyn takes one for the team.

“Thank you, sweetheart. Promise I won’t be too long.” Ali says appreciatively. “I prepped pancake batter last night, it’s in the fridge.”

“You’re seriously the best!” Ashlyn holds the brunette’s face and gives her a chaste kiss since neither of them has brushed their teeth yet. “I better go before I hear something break.” She laughs when she only gets a little sleepy whimper from Ali in response and heads downstairs to find the kids.

Despite breakfast going well with the kids loving the pancakes, the morning gets off to a rocky start when Curtis takes forever to get ready, still grumpy from Elsie waking him up early. The delay causes them to get to the Children’s Museum late, missing the Arthur stage show that Elsie was dying to see. That of course leads Elsie to a full on meltdown in the lobby while Curtis sulks across the room, refusing to stand anywhere near the rest of them.

“I’ll get her, you get him.” Ali suggests the divide-and-conquer approach and gets a quick nod from Ashlyn.

“Hey little princess, can you listen to me for just a minute?” Ali kneels down near Elsie and attempts to soothe her.

“Okay.” Elsie whispers with a snifflie, scrunching her nose when Ali tries to wipe it with a tissue.
“I know we missed the show this morning, but there is another one at 2pm. Rather than have lunch at the Rainforest Café, we’ll just go to the sandwich shop nearby and make it back here for the next show, ok?” Ali appeals to her.

“Really?” Elsie smiles, her eyes still teary.

“Really.” Ali assures her.

“Okay, yes! Yes!” Elsie starts bouncing happily while Ali breathes a sigh of relief and looks over to Ashlyn who is now getting a high five from Curtis.

“So, what do you guys want to see?” Ashlyn asks as they all reconvene as a group.

“Robots!” Curtis yells.

“Painting!” Elsie shouts simultaneously.

Ali and Ashlyn look at each other for a second, their hope of the kids wanting to do the same thing going out the window.

“Alright, Elsie we’ll go paint while Auntie Ashlyn and Curtis go do robots. After that, we have to agree to do the rest together, okay?” Ali lays out a plan that both kids agree to.

“Wait, hold up just a second.” Ashlyn stops them as Curtis starts to pull her away and Elsie is doing the same to Ali.

“Thank you guys for calming down and figuring out a new plan with us.” Ashlyn praises both kids before getting to her point. “But… I want you both to realize that you have to be more flexible when things don’t go your way, especially when you do things that you’re not supposed to. Elsie, you woke up Curtis early this morning when you weren’t supposed to and we ended up getting here late. Curtis, you chose to drag your feet this morning and not get out of the house on time. Because of that, we all missed out on fun things this morning. You have to remember that if you choose to do things that you’re not supposed to, that you have to deal with what happens because of it. Understand?”


“Sorry, Aunties.” Elsie follows suit.

“It’s ok, just remember for next time.” Ali replies and Ashlyn nods with a smile, the two women exchanging a meaningful look and a quick hand squeeze before parting ways for a bit.

The rest of the afternoon goes pretty well, but it only takes until dinner time for the other shoe to drop. Literally.

“Ok guys, how about you go outside and play until dinner is ready? Curtis you keep a close eye on Elsie. Just go upstairs and get your hats from your rooms, please.” Ashlyn instructs as she and Ali try to get dinner ready. Luckily, the yard is completed fenced in and gated and she knows she can trust Curtis to watch Elsie.

The officer quickly regretted the no pizza rule she set for tonight when she remembered how picky the kids were about food. Elsie only eats limited things, so Ashlyn opts to make her plain pasta with butter sauce. Curtis will eat whatever they do, only it can’t have any spices or sauces on it. So, the two women work to juggle three different dinners while the kids run around the house. Ashlyn’s plan of having them go outside is genius…or so she thinks until she calls them in for dinner and
hears a clunking noise and looks over to see Ali staring at Elsie with her mouth hanging open.

“Alex, what’s the mat…oh.” Ashlyn cuts off her own question as she looks down at Elsie’s feet. “Elsie!” Ashlyn immediately yells seeing Ali’s brand new, never worn Christian Louboutin heels on the little girl’s feet covered in mud.

“I told her not to.” Curtis says proudly, taking his seat at the dinner table.

“Elsie, take those off right there and sit in that chair. Curtis, go wash your hands.” Ashlyn says sternly.

Elsie’s lip immediately quivers at Ashlyn’s serious tone and she starts to sob softly, breaking Ali out of her trance. After having stayed quiet until now so she could compose herself, Ali finds herself completely not caring about the heels. “Hey, Ash….let me, ok?” Ali says, putting her hand on Ashlyn’s shoulder and getting a nod from her.

“Elsie, look at me sweetheart.” Ali tries to get the little girl to look up from the floor, but she just shakes her head no.


“I mudded your nice shoes. You don’t like me.” Elsie gets out in sobs.

“Oh sweet girl, of course I like you. I love you, no matter what. Yes, I got upset that you got mud on the shoes, but I know you made a mistake and you’re sorry, right?” Ali coaxes her.

“Yes, I’m big huge sorry.” Elsie replies quietly.

“Then it’s ok. The shoes can be replaced. Next time you’ll know to ask whether you can touch something, right?” Ali reasons with her.

“Yes.” Elsie replies with an overly enthusiastic head nod.

“Alright, we’re good then. Can I get a hug?” Ali opens her arms and finally gets a smile from the little girl who hugs her tight.

“Sorry, Auntie Ashwyn.” Elsie adds, looking at Ashlyn hopefully.

“It’s ok, little princess, but you have to really think hard next time before you do things. I know you know better than that.” Ashlyn gets down to Elsie’s level. “You wouldn’t like it if Ali went into your special dollhouse and took your favorite Peggy doll outside and got her dirty, right?”

“No!” Elsie seems horrified at the thought.

“Well, this is the same thing. You know not to take people’s things without asking them first.” Ashlyn reiterates to make her point.

“Oh. I know. I’m sorry and I won’t do it again.” Elsie promises.

“Ok, give me hug and go wash your hands for dinner.” Ashlyn wraps her up for a few seconds before pointing her to the bathroom that Curtis is walking out of.

“Not so fast, little dude.” Ashlyn stops Curtis on his way to the table. “How come you didn’t tell me or Ali when Elsie got the shoes?”

“I don’t know.” Curtis shrugs and shoves his hands in his pockets.
“Look, Curtis… I know sometimes she can get on your nerves because she’s your little sister, but you’re supposed to help her stay out of trouble. You’re older and it’s your job to help look out for her. It’s not ok to stay quiet when you know she’s doing something wrong. Especially when you’re supposed to be in charge. You know and understand things better than she does and it’s important for you to help her make the right decisions. And if nothing else, you come tell an adult when something is wrong. That wasn’t nice of you to let her do that with Ali’s shoes when you knew it was wrong. You know what I’m saying?” Ashlyn gets right down to it.

“I know.” Curtis says guiltily.

“It wasn’t very nice to let her do something that you knew would get her in trouble without saying anything, right? And it doesn’t feel very good right now, does it?” Ashlyn asks.

“No. I won’t let her get in trouble like this again.” Curtis promises apologetically. “Sorry, Auntie Ashlyn.”

“It’s ok, bud. Just do better next time. Why don’t you apologize to Ali and then we can have dinner.” Ashlyn suggests and ruffles his hair.

“I’m really sorry, Auntie Ali.” Curtis gives the brunette a hug.

“It’s ok now, I think we all learned to do things better next time around.” Ali gently pats his back. “Go on and start eating.”

“God, I am so sorry, Alex.” Ashlyn closes her eyes and leans on the counter a bit as the two women steal a quick moment in the kitchen.

“Oh baby, don’t even worry. I was upset for like 30 seconds until I realized that they’re just shoes. Expensive, yes, but easily replaceable shoes. Totally okay.” Ali assures the officer and leans into her, smiling when she feels Ashlyn’s strong arms envelope her.

“We really have to get in there before we regret it, but I love you so damn much, Alex.” Ashlyn whispers in her ear and holds the brunette tight. She wishes she had time to say more with all that she’s feeling right now, but the simple words will have to do.

“I love you more, Ash.” Ali pulls back to look at her with a smile and then leans in to place a few quick kisses along the officer’s jaw, leaving one last one on her lips. “Dinner awaits. Come on, Hero.”

Thankfully, the rest of the night is quiet and the kids agree to a round of board games to stay occupied until Ashlyn announces that it’s time for bed half an hour early.

“We still have thirty minutes. Can we play video games with you?” Curtis pleads.

“Do you think today was a day where you earned the privilege of staying up to play video games?” Ashlyn asks him bluntly.

“No.” Curtis concedes.

“Right you are. Let’s go get ready for bed.” Ashlyn repeats and neither of them fight her on it, the two of them looking pretty exhausted.

By the time the couple settles into bed an hour later, they’re too tired to even say anything to each other. They just share a long, sweet kiss and then snuggle in close while facing each other, both of them falling asleep just minutes later.
When Elsie comes in about an hour later, neither woman even fully wakes up. Ashlyn just pulls back the covers to let her in while Ali moves over a bit to make space for her. Although they both sleep with limbs hanging off the bed again because Elsie is sprawled out, at least she doesn’t wake them up until just after 7am the next morning.

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Sunday, March 25th

“Heeeey, I’m hungry here!” Elsie pokes at Ashlyn’s face like the prior morning. The officer just grumbles and rolls over causing her to fall off the bed with a thud.

Ali lifts her head from the pillow and can’t help but laugh a bit. “You ok, baby?”

“Yes, Peachy.” Ashlyn raises her hand with a thumbs up so Ali can see from above.

“Elsie, go brush your teeth and do NOT wake up Curtis yet.” Ali instructs the little girl.

“Okeeeeee!” Elsie jumps off the bed and hurries off.

“T-minus 5 hours until we’re free.” Ashlyn jokes and finally gets to her feet while rubbing her eyes a bit. “G’morning, honey. Don’t worry, I’ll handle breakfast.”

“You absolutely will not.” Ali says defiantly. “Get back in here.” She lifts the covers and waits for Ashlyn to comply, smiling at the confused little look on her face. “Get a few more minutes of sleep and then go shower. When you get up, wake Curtis up too. I’ve got it this morning.” She kisses the officer quickly before she can protest.

“Mmmmkay, thank you. Love you.” Ashlyn rolls back into her pillow appreciatively.

“Auntie Ashwyn! We made breakfast and I was the shoes chef!” Elsie announces proudly when Ashlyn and Curtis walk into the kitchen. The little girl is kneeling on a stool at the counter decked out in an apron and a chef’s hat while putting bacon slices on plates.

“Sous chef, little princess.” Ali corrects her with a smile. “And you did an awesome job helping!” She praises her.

“That’s what I said, shoes chef! I was awesome at breakfast!” Elsie says excitedly.

“You absolutely will not.” Ali says defiantly. “Get back in here.” She lifts the covers and waits for Ashlyn to comply, smiling at the confused little look on her face. “Get a few more minutes of sleep and then go shower. When you get up, wake Curtis up too. I’ve got it this morning.” She kisses the officer quickly before she can protest.

“Mmmmkay, thank you. Love you.” Ashlyn rolls back into her pillow appreciatively.

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“That’s what I said, shoes chef! I was awesome at breakfast!” Elsie says excitedly.

“Yeah I can see that. Wow!” Ashlyn smiles at the sight. “Check it out, Curtis…aren’t you excited for this amazing looking breakfast?” She nudges him.


“Thank you my sweet girls. Should we eat?” Ashlyn suggests.

“YES! The shoes chef is done here!” Elsie quickly throws off her apron and hat, running to the living room with Curtis following.

“You own a chef’s hat?” Ashlyn sidles her way up to Ali.

“It’s Kyle’s.” Ali rolls her eyes.
“That explains a lot.” Ashlyn laughs. “I can’t get Els to sit still in the kitchen for more than ten minutes. You’re amazing, you know that?”

“I already buttered my own toast, Harris. Don’t think I need any extra, but thanks.” Ali teases her.

“But I love buttering your toast.” Ashlyn pouts.

“Good, cause we’re having toast for dinner too.” Ali winks and kisses the officer’s pouty lips.

“Come on, they’re gonna finish before we can even take a bite of ours.”

“Curtis, I could really use a special bus boy to help me clean up these breakfast dishes while Ali and Elsie go get ready. Think you are up for that important job?” Ashlyn tries to use Ali’s approach from this morning.

“I know what you’re doing and that’s not going to work on me, Auntie.” Curtis shakes his head. “I’ll help though, because that’s just good manners.”

Ali can’t help but chortle at the exchange.

“Well excuse me! When did you get so smart?” Ashlyn asks, still dumbfounded by his answer.

“After kindergarten.” He replies like it’s obvious.

“Oh right, of course.” Ashlyn shrugs with an eye roll. “Here smarty pants, take the glasses into the kitchen. Elsie, why don’t you go pick out your clothes so Ali can help you with it.” She directs them.

“Well that backfired.” Ashlyn laughs at herself.

“Crash and burn, Harris.” Ali jokes. “Leave the hard stuff to the pros, baby.”

“Pro, huh?” Ashlyn raises an eyebrow. “Well, pro, what do you suggest for the rest of the morning seeing as how it’s too cold to be outside very long today? I was hoping to just playground it for a while, but that’s out.”

“Don’t you worry. You’re gonna love what I have planned for after I shower.” Ali says proudly.

“And that is?” Ashlyn questions.

“Multi-tasking.” Ali smiles and kisses her on the cheek, saying nothing else before going upstairs. She had formulated the plan last night when Elsie’s foot was pressing so hard into her back that she was up for an hour.

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Ashlyn just sits there in awe as Ali convinces the kids that the two women really need their help to decide on colors and table centerpieces for their wedding. Even Curtis, who only an hour ago claimed he was too smart to be fooled, gets easily charmed into it and helps Ali arrange pictures of the options on the table. The kids don’t just go along with it, they get seriously invested.

It’s Curtis who manages to convince Ali that the driftwood branches in the vase with tea light lanterns hanging off of them is the best centerpiece because it fits the ocean theme and the fake tea lights can be adjusted to any color with the changing mood of the evening. “Plus it’ll look cool to light up the tent more.” He adds to finally make Ali agree.
And it’s Elsie who brings an end to the much debated color options with a single statement: “Navy and white because it’s like the color of Auntie Ashwyn’s police uniform and, Auntie Ali, you look good in every color.”

“The girl doesn’t lie. Done and done.” Ashlyn says with finality, watching as Ali puts the navy and white color swatches into the final decision folder along with the driftwood centerpiece picture. She’s still completely shocked that they managed to kill two hours doing this while keeping the kids completely engrossed the whole time. Just like that, the wedding tasks they have been putting off for over a week are now done and they only have enough time for a quick lunch before Chris and Bridget show up to pick up the kids. “You’re a genius.” Ashlyn whispers into Ali’s ear on her way to the kitchen to make sandwiches.

“Salvation!” Ashlyn yells when the doorbell rings as they are cleaning up from lunch, earning an elbow from Ali who goes to answer the door.

“Hey, kiddos!” Bridget is the first one in the door, wrapping both kids up in a hug. “Did you guys have fun? Did you behave yourselves?”

“Duh.” Curtis answers and Elsie just nods vigorously.

“Really, how were they? What did they break and how much to replace or fix it?” Chris chimes in as he messes up Curtis’ hair and throws Elsie over his shoulder.

“They were great! We had fun!” Ashlyn says happily.

“Yeah, we did all sorts of fun things like go to the museum, a movie night, and they helped make some wedding decisions.” Ali adds.

“You two are the worst liars ever.” Chris looks at them skeptically. “These two can’t go more than a few hours without raising hell.”

“And I can see that under-eye cover-up caked on from here, so I know you hosted at least one bed guest if not two.” Bridget adds knowingly.

“Stop, it was fine! Really, we had a good time and we’re happy we got to spend time with them. How was your weekend?” Ashlyn redirects.

“It was amazing! Thank you so much, Ashlyn! We had a blast and it was such a nice break. I’m totally cooking you two a new dish that I learned to make the next time you come for dinner.” Bridget says cheerily.

“We’ll tell you all about another day.” Chris pipes up. “Right now, we’re going to take these two off of your hands so you can go relax and enjoy the rest of your day. Go get your stuff and make it quick, kiddos.”

After a quick round of thankyous and goodbye hugs from the kids, the door closes and the house is quiet again. Ali doesn’t waste any time, pulling Ashlyn up the stairs by the hand and leading them into the bedroom.

The officer just stands there completely amused as Ali silently works off both of their clothes and pushes Ashlyn onto the bed. “Little eager there, Krieger?” Ashlyn smirks.

“Oh you wish, Harris. You’re back on duty tonight in like 6 hours and I’m not sending you off to work tired. Now get over here and get to sleeping.” Ali pats her bare chest and opens her arms.
“This is nice. You’re so warm.” Ashlyn happily settles on Ali’s chest and melts into the brunette’s arms. She closes her eyes at the feel of Ali’s hand softly running up and down her back, the weekend replaying in her mind. “Hey, Alex?”

“Yeah?” Ali replies.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, because you’re always great with Curtis and Elsie… but, you were beyond incredible this weekend. You were so prepared and had things so well planned. And I knew that you would, but then I also know how quickly those two tend to derail things. You were so amazing though…just simply adjusting when things went unexpectedly and handling it so calmly. It was next level. You always wow me, love.” Ashlyn says genuinely.

“Thank you, that means a lot to me.” Ali tilts Ashlyn’s chin up for a kiss. “You though…I couldn’t be more impressed. The way you talk to them like they’re adults, especially when they’ve done something wrong. I mean, you don’t talk down to them, but yet manage to explain things in a way that they understand. I wish I could do that. It really blows me away. And I can see how much they love and respect that about you because you don’t treat them like babies. Instead you put them on your level and it’s clear that they’re so proud of that and open to you. You’re the amazing one, Hero.”

“And I love the way you made sure they knew they were loved and supported by us even when they messed up this weekend. How you always stayed firm-but-kind even when they deserved a good scolding. Not like I didn’t already know, but this weekend really sealed it…we’re a really great team, baby.” Ashlyn tightens her arm around Ali’s waist a bit.

“We are.” Ali agrees happily. “Team Harris.”

“Team Harris.” Ashlyn replies with a goofy grin, kissing Ali sweetly and letting it transition into a lazy and languid makeout session that slows down with every passing minute until they unknowingly fall asleep with lips still pressed together.

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“Hey Chief, got a minute?” Ashlyn asks as she walks into his office. He’s usually not around on Sunday nights, but they have a department-wide emergency preparedness simulation in a couple weeks and he’s been working hard on it. Even though he hardly cares about her schedule, knowing how many mornings she’s going to be in late over the next month, she still wants to run it by him despite the fact that she’ll be making up the time by staying later. It’s quiet in the department on weekend nights, so this is as good a time as any.

“Always have time for you, Harris. What’s up?” Chief Fulton looks up from his computer.

“Well, I crammed a lot of appointments into this month, so I have a couple weeks where I’ll be in late just about every morning. And then I’m off a couple days towards the end of the month. I’m staying later on those appointment days to make up the time, but I still wanted to give you the heads up.” She keeps it vague and just hands him her anticipated time schedule for the month.

“Not a problem, you know that. You’re the last one I’m worried about when it comes to making up time. It’s getting you to not put in too much overtime that is the real challenge.” He raises his eyebrows at her. “You still have to use up 20 hours of time-off by the end of next month or you lose it, so don’t forget to factor that into this.” Chief Fulton reminds her as his eyes scan the page she just handed him.

“I won’t.” Ashlyn assures him and silently watches him look it over.
“Hmmm, well then…” He looks up at her with an unreadable expression and hands the paper back to her. “Please know you don’t have to answer this because I’m asking as your friend and not as your boss…but, should I be planning for your maternity leave?”

“Well Ali is the one carrying, but I’m…” Ashlyn starts answering automatically before his question fully registers. “Wait, how did you…” She fumbles as she looks down at the sheet of paper to try and figure out what gave it away, but finds nothing obvious.

“I know an in-vitro appointment schedule when I see one, Harris. Kind of gives me the shakes just looking at that thing.” Chief Fulton admits as he points to the paper Ashlyn is holding. “Lori and I spent a bit too long being career focused. By the time we thought about kids, we were on the older side and had a really hard time. In-vitro eventually became a last ditch effort for us…took us five cycles, but Max eventually found his way into the world.” He elaborates when he sees the confused look on Ashlyn’s face.

“I had no idea.” Ashlyn says still a bit shocked. She’s met his son a few times now and the Chief always proudly brags about him, especially since he started at MIT this past fall.

“Not something that comes up or that I really talk about, but now seems like a good moment.” Chief Fulton shrugs.

“Jesus, five cycles?” Ashlyn asks, that part of it hitting her hard. “Is it really that bad?” She prods even further when she realizes that he said it gave him the shakes just thinking about it.

“Relax, Harris. For one, we really had terrible odds to begin with because we both weren’t at 100 percent fertility potential going into it. As for the experience, it wasn’t the easiest, but it wasn’t terrible. It was more having to do it over and over again that felt emotionally and physically draining. Besides, that was in the late 90s when this was process still being perfected. I’d like to think that the science is a lot better and more efficient than it was then.” He reassures her.

“Oh, ok. You’re right, I’m not gonna freak out.” She replies, coaching herself. “So, um like I was saying…Ali is the one that is going to carry. We’re using my eggs though, hence all the appointments.” She explains as least awkwardly as she can, returning the Chief’s honesty with her own.

“Good for you two, I’m really happy for you and I know it’ll go just fine. And, in the case that it doesn’t… whatever you need, I’m here.” Chief Fulton says warmly. “And it stays between us unless you tell me otherwise.”

“Thank you, Chief. I really appreciate you telling me all that, you have no idea.” Ashlyn says gratefully.

“Sure thing, Harris. Just take it one day at a time and you’ll be fine. Gonna be one lucky kid with you two superstars for parents, I’ll tell you that much.” Chief Fulton replies. “Oh and one more thing…”

“What’s that?” Ashlyn asks.

“Plan on that maternity leave. Doesn’t matter who has the baby, you’re still entitled to one. And trust me, Harris, the second you see your kid…you’re never going to want to leave and go back to work. A few weeks will feel inadequate at best, but it’s still something. Got it?” Chief Fulton explains to her.

“Yes, Chief. Thank you. I’ll let you know when we get there.” Ashlyn promises.
“I’m counting on it. I wish you both the best of luck, but I have a feeling you won’t need it. Tell Ali she can call Lori anytime for anything she wants to ask or talk about. Same goes for you of course.” He offers.

“You’re the best and I appreciate it more than you know.” Ashlyn says sincerely. “I better let you get back to work though.”

“Anytime. Yeah, I need to finish this and go home. Safe night, Captain.” He smiles at her.

“Aye, Chief. Thanks again.” Ashlyn salutes him and leaves his office feeling a bit lighter at actually knowing someone who understands what they’re about to go through and can be a resource if they need it.

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Tuesday, March 27th

“Alright, we should probably just do it now, right?” Ashlyn says nervously, pulling Ali a little closer into her. Neither of them slept all that much last night and they’re up early, both of them lying here awake for the last twenty minutes just enjoying the comfort of skin on skin as their minds run a bit.

“I was just waiting for you to be ready, baby. You ready?” Ali says more calmly. For her it’s more of an anticipatory energy than nervousness. She knows Ashlyn is just hung up on the injection part right now, usually being able to mentally tough it out at the hospital but having a harder time doing that at home with the brunette when she feels so comfortable being vulnerable together.

“I’m ready. I swear, I’m ready.” Ashlyn lets out a deep breath. “You know I trust you and I’m excited, right? It’s not that…”

“Ash, relax, I know honey. It’s ok… and it’ll be really quick and over before you know it. Just try and focus on what it all symbolizes rather than on the needle itself, ok?” Ali reassures and coaches her.

“Ok. I really am excited… and happy. We’re actually doing this.” Ashlyn smiles.

“We’re actually doing this.” Ali repeats back and kisses her deeply. “First step to Babyland.” She adds with a giddy little giggle.

“Let’s do it.” Ashlyn gives her one more squeeze.

“I’ll go first. I can just do it in the bathroom so you don’t see and then come help you out, or you can watch if you want. Up to you.” Ali sits up on the bed.

“Uh, geez… I don’t know.” Ashlyn thinks about it, settling on the fact that she doesn’t want to miss a single second of anything related to this process no matter how trivial it seems. “Do it here. I want to be with you.”

“Ok, I’ll be right back.” Ali quickly goes to get the supplies and then sits back down on the edge of the bed, using the bedside table as a surface for preparing both of their syringes. “I’m going to do mine now.” She announces and lays back on the bed a bit.

Ashlyn feels herself getting shaky as Ali cleans the area on her stomach with an alcohol wipe, not even the brunette’s nudity being able to distract her right now. She swallows hard as Ali grabs the syringe and uncaps it… her eyes going wide as she then unceremoniously sticks the needle into herself just a few inches to the left of her belly button and presses the plunger. “Fucking christ…”
Ashlyn blurs out in a squeaky whisper. “You are so fucking hardcore.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Ali laughs lightly and puts a tiny circular band-aid on the spot before putting the syringe into the little biohazard container and looking up to find a pale looking Ashlyn. “You okay, baby?” She reaches over and runs a hand up Ashlyn’s now slightly sweaty arm.

“Yes… I’m ok. I’m ok.” Ashlyn reiterates more to convince herself than Ali.

Ali grabs the other prepared syringe and drops it near them on the bed, getting a little nod from Ashlyn to signal that she’s ready. “You sure?” She asks as she starts to clean the area on Ashlyn’s lower stomach with the alcohol wipe.

“Yeah… uh… just a sec…” Ashlyn says shakily.

Ali just smiles and hovers over the officer, leaning down to place wet kisses along her jaw and neck until she hears Ashlyn let out a little moan.

“What are you doing?” Ashlyn whispers, starting to get turned on despite the situation.

“You looked like you were gonna pass out, so I’m getting you relaxed and making you forget about the injection for now. We’ll worry about it afterwards.” Ali continues her assault on Ashlyn’s neck.

“Best idea ever.” Ashlyn replies breathily, another little moan leaving her mouth as Ali lightly bites her collar bone.

“Shhhh, just close your eyes… relax and feel me.” Ali mutters with her lips pressed to Ashlyn’s pulse point. She spends quite a few minutes dragging lips, tongue, and teeth all over Ashlyn’s neck and shoulders before moving down to suck a nipple into her mouth without warning.

“Oh god, that feels good.” Ashlyn’s hands go to the back of Ali’s head, the needle beside them on the bed long forgotten as the brunette alternates between her nipples, licking and sucking on them until their rock hard and sensitive.

Ashlyn keeps trying to pull Ali down against her, but the brunette maintains her hovering on purpose so she doesn’t mess up the spot on the officer’s stomach that she just cleaned. She knows exactly what she’s doing as she moves her tongue across Ashlyn’s upper abs, listening to the officer’s breathing get heavier and heavier as she works her way down. She swirls her tongue in Ashlyn’s navel and stealthily grabs the syringe nearby, managing to quickly uncap it with one hand. Ali positions herself as best she can while kissing her way to Ashlyn’s left hipbone, finally sucking really hard there while simultaneously administering the injection in the right spot.

“Unnhhh, yes Alex! Fuck.” Ashlyn lets out a loud moan at sensation of the surely forming mark that Ali just left on her hipbone.

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Ashlyn waits for the feeling of Ali’s tongue on her inner thigh just like always, but it doesn’t come right away and now she hears a crinkling paper sound. She opens her eyes to find Ali arms resting on her thighs while she tears open a little band-aid. “What are you doing?” Ashlyn asks in confusion.

“Well need one more sec… lay back and relax, baby.” Ali smiles up at her, looking a bit smug.

“Wait, did you just…” Ashlyn starts to realize when Ali places the band-aid on her lower stomach
and kisses the spot.

“Yep. All set.” Ali replies proudly, reaching over to toss the syringe into the disposal container.

“Unbelievable.” Ashlyn throws her head back into the pillow and laughs. “Am I that predictable and easily distracted?”


“Feeling amazing. I’m so in love with you, baby.” Ashlyn smiles down at her and reaches down to run a hand through Ali’s soft dark hair.

“I love you so much, Ash. So much.” Ali takes the officer hand and kisses it before resting her head against Ashlyn’s hipbone.

“You know what would make me feel even better?” Ashlyn says after a quiet minute.

“What my love?” Ali lifts her head to look back up at the officer.

“If you hadn’t stopped.” Ashlyn waggles her eyebrows.

“Anything to keep my baby Harris eggs happy in there.” Ali giggles and pats Ashlyn’s lower belly where her uterus is. With that she quickly drops down and licks the inside of Ashlyn’s thigh.

“Fuck, baby…” Ashlyn gasps at the sudden action. “Screw happy, they’re on the road to euphoric.”
Warriors

Chapter Notes

Seeing as how I didn’t want to break-up the whole baby-making process, this yet another long chapter. Hopefully that makes up for the fact that the next update may take a little while as I head into another busy couple of weeks. There’s a good amount of medical-type description in this one related to said baby-making, so just a warning if that’s not your thing.

Be sure to leave a comment and let me know what you think… I’m sure there’s bound to be some fun thoughts on this chapter ;-) Thanks for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Monday, April 2nd

“Hey, baby. Did Tim go home already?” Ashlyn asks as she walks in the door. With the new podcast season having just been released on Friday, they know to expect the uptick in media attention for a little bit. Tim has been back to being around a lot as a precaution and accompanying Ali to any meetings, events, or interviews she has to go to.

“Hi! Yeah, he left like an hour ago.” Ali replies as she pulls a casserole dish out of the oven. Ashlyn rushes over to the gun safe and locks it up as fast as she can before practically tearing off her uniform shirt, undershirt, and bra right there in the kitchen. “Oh my god, so much better.” She lets out a sigh of relief as the cool air hits her nipples.

Ali can’t help but giggle a little at the sight that has become the norm the last couple days. They’ve had to keep all the blinds closed since Ashlyn has been constantly topless unless she absolutely can’t be.

“Oh, Ash…I’m sorry, honey.” Ali sympathizes and kisses her sweetly, careful not to brush her chest. She knows it’s bad when Ashlyn runs to rip her shirt off before even kissing her hello when she gets home from work.

“Seriously, how can they be this sensitive?” The officer looks down at her nipples like they’re foreign objects. That’s certainly how they feel right now. She can barely stand to have anything touch them.

“I have no idea. My boobs are still feeling kinda sore, but nothing like your poor nipples,” Ali replies. “I made mac and cheese for dinner.” She says proudly, knowing some comfort food might help right now.

“You’re the best, Alex!” Ashlyn says excitedly and plops right down in her chair, feeling completely wiped after her work shift. “Thank you. I know you’re exhausted too and this is really sweet of you.”

“Anything for my girl…and my little Harris babies.” Ali kisses the top of Ashlyn’s head before putting a bowl of food down in front of her.
Ashlyn just smiles and shakes her head at how Ali keeps referring to her eggs as their ‘little Harris babies’, she can’t help but find it endearing.

The past week has certainly been an interesting experience. They’ve each had their own set of side effects. Ali has dealt with some headaches, sore breasts, extreme thirst that has her drinking more water than she ever has, and as of Saturday, she finds herself tearing up at cheesy commercials.

Ashlyn has unfortunately experienced the more uncomfortable symptoms of really sensitive nipples, feeling nauseated for the first couple hours after she wakes up, and occasional hot flashes at night that the officer can only describe as ‘lava’…the one last night being so bad that Ali had to cover her in icepacks until it subsided.

They’re both sporting matching little bruises all around their belly buttons from the injections and feeling exhausted most of the time. On the bright side, they haven’t experienced any major mood problems and have actually found themselves feeling happier than normal…probably due in large part to the best side effect of them all: increased sex drive.

Intimacy certainly hasn’t been without its challenges given Ashlyn’s nipple situation and Ali being a bit dryer down there than normal (yet another side effect), but they’ve worked around it eagerly, even sneaking in a few quickies during Ashlyn’s lunch breaks like a couple of horny teenagers.

“Are you feeling okay about tomorrow? You ready?” Ali asks as her finger traces the blue-inked butterfly on Ashlyn’s side. Her head is resting on the officer’s stomach where she’s been sleeping lately and where she collapsed after they just mutually orgasmed in one of their new work-around positions: Ali eating Ashlyn out upside down and on all fours beside her while Ashlyn pumped into the brunette with her fingers from behind. After a couple nights ago when Ali forgot and pinched Ashlyn’s nipple in the heat of the moment, eliciting a howl of pain from the officer that totally killed the mood…they’ve been extra careful to make sure nothing touches the highly sensitive area ever since.

“Is anyone ever ready to have an ultrasound wand shoved into their cooter?” Ashlyn jokes.

“Probably not.” Ali laughs. “Sorry, Ash...I know this whole thing really sucks and will probably get a lot worse.” She adds apologetically, still feeling guilty.

“It’s fine, honey. Really. I love that we’re doing this together and that I’m a part of it. The side effects definitely suck, but it’s great too in a lot of ways. Actually pretty mind blowing when you think about what our bodies are doing.” Ashlyn answers thoughtfully as she plays with Ali’s hair. “Plus, I’m even starting to get used to the injections!” She adds proudly.

“You sure are, champ.” Ali gives her a little squeeze. She’s now been able to just quickly kiss the officer while she sticks her with the needle rather than have to completely get her all hot and bothered to distract her like the first two days. It’s certainly helped them get ready faster in the morning. “I love that we’re doing this together too. You’re my rock, Ash.”

“And you’re mine, beautiful.” Ashlyn replies and kisses her own thumb before reaching down to put it on Ali’s lips…she knows that neither of them is moving anytime soon now that they’re in a comfortable position.

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Tuesday, April 3rd
Although Ali wishes she could be in the room with Ashlyn, the fertility clinic’s appointment schedule is very tight this morning and she has to go get her blood drawn while the officer gets her ultrasound. Then Ashlyn will have to get her own blood work done right afterwards. Luckily, Ashlyn doesn’t seem overly nervous so they leave each other with a sweet little kiss and meaningful look before they part ways after checking in.

“How are the injections going and what are your symptoms like so far?” Dr. Baylor tries to makes small talk while she preps Ashlyn for the ultrasound.

“Ali’s crushing the injection thing, let me tell you…so, going well there.” Ashlyn answers proudly. “My nipples try to retreat into my chest if anyone so much as looks at them, so that’s been fun.”

“Really sensitive, huh?” Dr. Baylor unrolls what looks like some kind of condom over the ultrasound wand.

“To say the least. That part has been the worst for me, but I’ve also been a little nauseous in the mornings and the hot flashes are a killer when they strike… but, I’ll take the ravenous sex drive any day.” Ashlyn jokes.

“Thank god for that little built-in bonus to make up for the rest, eh?” Dr. Baylor laughs. “Of course, it helps if you both feel that part of it and not just one of you. Turns out that a small percentage of women experience the opposite reaction with a depressed sex drive.”

“Wow that would flat out suck. Everything is working out perfectly for us in that department though.” Ashlyn divulges.

“Excellent. How’s your mood otherwise? Any mood swings, anxiety, angry, depressed or sad feelings?” She inquires.

“Surprisingly, no. I have a history of depression, so I thought for sure…but, my mood has been great actually.” Ashlyn replies.

“While all that extra estrogen does give women some mood swings, it can actually really be a bit of a happy mood boost for a lot of women. That’s a good thing for you going forward, it means that the next round of follicle stimulating hormone injections won’t change that aspect of it much. You’ll probably just feel yourself getting a little emotional at times, but you may not even have that.” Dr. Baylor explains.

“Oh good. Ali is mostly the same as me mood-wise, but she has little moments where she gets emotional over stuff she normally wouldn’t and can’t explain it.” Ashlyn tells her.

“That’s normal, and that’s what you may find yourself experiencing too. Or not. Everyone is different with this stuff and I have yet to see two identical cases.” She says with everything ready now. “You comfortable?”

“As comfortable as one gets spread eagle and covered by a paper napkin, Doc.” Ashlyn deadpans.

Dr. Baylor laughs and gets back to business. “I’ll go really slow and be as gentle as I can. You’ll probably feel some pressure and maybe a little fullness or discomfort as I move around, but nothing should be outright painful. So, tell me right away if anything hurts. Just try and relax.”

“Ok. Go ahead.” Ashlyn closes her eyes and bites her lip as she feels the wand making its way in. There’s a little sting at first, but it’s mostly just a weird foreign pressure inside and the awkwardness of the whole thing after that.
“You ok?” Dr. Baylor asks a few minutes later when she sees Ashlyn’s hands gripping the sides of the exam table.

“Yeah, just a much deeper ache in there right now.” The officer admits, trying to breathe through it.

“Sorry, I’m trying to get a better view of that left ovary so I’m pressing a bit.” Dr. Baylor concentrates on the screen. “Oh, there we go!” She quickly grabs a few screen shots of the image and slowly pulls the wand out. “All set!”

“That was pretty fast.” Ashlyn says in relief.

“Yeah and it would have been faster if that left ovary didn’t want to play hide-and-seek. Anyway, I see a lot of little follicles ready to go in there, which is great! So, now we just work on getting some eggs nicely developed in as many of them as we can. It looks great.” She shows Ashlyn the printed pictures and points out what she was talking about.

“How’s my heart look?” Ashlyn asks seriously.

“Your heart? We can’t see your heart with this.” Dr. Baylor explains nicely despite not expecting the question.

“I didn’t think so, but it sure felt like you were in there far enough to see it, Doc. Figured I’d ask.” Ashlyn laughs at her own joke.

“You’re a riot!” Dr. Baylor laughs hard. “I wish all my patients were this good natured.” She laughs for a few more seconds before getting back to the important stuff. “Assuming your blood work comes back okay for hormone levels, you’ll start the follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) injections tomorrow morning. You’ll still have to keep up with the Lupron injections you’ve been doing, so you’ll be doing at least two injections a day. We’ll evaluate how things are going over the next few days and see if we need to up the number of FSH injections as we go along. The worst case is four total injections a day, best case is two.”

“I’m slowly getting used to them, so hopefully it’ll just get easier to deal with even if there’s more of them.” Ashlyn tries to be brave about it.

“Look on the bright side…it’s only about 8 to 10 days from here and then we’ll be giving you that HCG trigger shot to stop growth and retrieving those eggs.” Dr. Baylor puts a positive spin on it.

“Awesome. I got this!” Ashlyn fist pumps.

“Of course you do, Captain.” Dr. Baylor addresses her more formally to instill as much confidence as she can. “Phlebotomy next door should be ready and waiting for you for that blood work. I’ll see you Thursday morning for a repeat.”

“It’s a date!” Ashlyn teases.

“I’ll bring the coffee.” Dr. Baylor plays back.

“I’ll bring the flowers.” Ashlyn piles it on.

“You’re too much!” Dr. Baylor belly laughs as she walks out the door.

“How was it?” Ali asks anxiously as Ashlyn walks into the lobby café where they agreed to meet up
after their appointments. They have half an hour to kill while Ashlyn’s blood work is being processed so they can see if it’s a go for starting the next round of injections.

“Cold, sticky, and a little awkward. Everything you’d expect really. Stung a little at first and it was mostly just a lot of pressure, especially when she had to get really deep to see one of my ovaries. Let’s be real, I haven’t hosted anything quite like that since high school…so, it was an experience.” Ashlyn gives it to her straight.

“Oh god.” Ali cringes at that last part and squeezes Ashlyn arm.

“Really Alex, it was fine and I can already see how people kind of get used to it. I’m good and everything looks great.” Ashlyn reassures her.

“I’m still sorry you have to go through all this…I feel bad.” Ali admits.

“I’m sure you won’t feel so bad when you’re having to push our baby out.” Ashlyn jokes to lighten the mood.

“So true.” Ali giggles and leans in for a kiss. “What can I get you?” She asks as she smooths Ashlyn’s uniform collar like usual.

“Just a regular coffee is good.” Ashlyn replies with a smile. “Thanks, baby.”

The half hour goes fast and they quickly find themselves back in the clinic talking to one of the nurses about Ashlyn’s results.

“Hi ladies, I’m Ginger.” The middle-aged nurse quickly introduces herself and gets right into it. “The blood results look good, so Dr. Baylor gave the green light for you to do a daily FSH injection starting tomorrow morning along with your usual Lupron injection.” She tells Ashlyn. “These injections are a bit more time sensitive, so you ideally want to do them right around 7am every morning. Let me give you a quick demo on how you do it.”

“You’ll want to explain it to her, she’s my own personal nurse.” Ashlyn smiles and points at Ali.

“Tough girl like you can’t inject herself, huh?” Ginger can’t help but tease.

“Absolutely not.” Ashlyn admits shamelessly. “This one is bad ass enough for both of us thankfully.” She says as she looks at Ali.

“Well the process is really the same with the FSH injections as the Lupron ones you’ve been doing. You’ll want to inject in the same vicinity of your belly as you have been and if it gets to be too tender there, you can move to the upper thighs. These FSH injections actually come in pre-dosed syringe pens like an epi-pen, so you don’t have to do anything but inject them. You’ll keep them refrigerated, just like the little vials of Lupron.” She explains.

“Easy enough.” Ali replies.

“Well, there is one change.” The nurse tells them. “We don’t want the FSH injections to interfere with the estrogen ones, so we have to change up the injection site for the Lupron. That Lupron shot can also be given in the buttocks, so we’ll have to move it there now.”

“Oh come on! You’re killing me, Ginger.” Ashlyn protests, trying to keep a sense of humor. “Really though?”

“Really.” Ginger says apologetically. “You’ll want to stick to the upper quadrant of the butt cheeks,
near the lower back. Right along here.” She points out the area to Ali over Ashlyn’s pants. “And that’s pretty much it. Any questions?”

“I’m good. Ash?” Ali looks at the officer.

“All set. Thanks, Ginger.” Ashlyn replies.

“Great, I’m sure I’ll see you again soon.” Ginger smiles.

“Count on it.” Ashlyn laughs a bit as the woman leaves.

“Guess you’re giving it to me in the butt, Krieger.” Ashlyn laughs as they walk to their cars.

“Glad you’re keeping it all in perspective, Harris.” Ali shakes her head. “My poor baby.”

“Don’t worry, it won’t be the first time. Those army immunizations are no joke.” Ashlyn shrugs it off.

“Thanks for being so good about all this. I know it’s rough, but you’ve had such a great attitude. It really helps me get through it too.” Ali says genuinely as they get to her car.

“I really love you, Alex.” Ashlyn gives the only reply she can at the moment.

Ali hugs her, being careful not to put too much pressure on her chest area and leans in for a quick kiss, knowing the officer really has to get going to work. “I love you too, Hero. Have a good day and come home safe to me, and of course…”

“Gehirn im Kopf.” Ashlyn finishes for her.

“You know it.” Ali pinches Ashlyn’s cheek with a big smile and gets in her car.

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Thursday, April 5th

“Hey ladies, how are things going so far? What’s good, what’s bad, what’s new?” Dr. Baylor asks as she gets ready for Ashlyn’s ultrasound, happy to see both of them in the room today since it makes it easier to check in with both women at once.

“Actually, not too much different. It feels like maybe my nipple sensitivity is turning more into breast soreness, but I’m not sure yet. Oh and thanks for warning on the butt injections, Doc. Those are great!” Ashlyn says in a sarcastically high pitched voice with a chuckle.

Ali laughs a bit and gives Ashlyn a little puppy face in sympathy. The new FSH injections have been no problem since she just goes about them in the same way as she did with the Lupron injections on Ashlyn’s stomach like before. As for the new location of the Lupron injections…no matter how much she has tried to distract the officer by kissing the back of her neck and anything else she can think of, they just flat out hurt. The little yelp that Ashlyn let out after the very first one made her heart pang. Last night they had to ice the area just so she could feel comfortable enough to sit on the couch.

“Yeah sorry, I know that is a really sensitive area. No way around it. Are you having soreness there?” Dr. Baylor asks.
“Yep, we tried ice last night and that kinda helped. Definitely sore though.” Ashlyn answer.

“Keep doing the ice, it definitely helps. And Ali, maybe try moving a bit to the outer areas back there…closer to her hips. That will help avoid pressure on it when you sit.” Dr. Baylor suggests.


“At least I learned that I won’t be tatting up my ass anytime soon.” Ashlyn shrugs.

“She’s hilarious!” Dr. Baylor says to Ali as she laughs.

“She’s the best.” Ali agrees, not able to feel anything but love right now as poor Ashlyn lays there with legs in stirrups and covered in some scratchy looking paper gown, all of it for them.

“How are you doing, Ali?” Dr. Baylor inquires as she finishes prepping everything.

“I’m still feeling all the same things…tired, thirsty, little breast soreness, and if I don’t stop crying at cheesy commercials I’m going to lose it, but nothing I can’t handle. The headaches are getting way better though.” Ali replies.

“All sounds normal, but if something changes be sure to tell me.” Dr. Baylor assures her. “Well, I’m ready if you are, Ashlyn. Same as before.”

“I’m good to go.” Ashlyn confirms.

Ali chooses to keep it as least awkward as possible, staying beside the upper part of the exam table and just watching Ashlyn’s face as she holds her hand. Ashlyn seems pretty relaxed for the first few minutes, but then Ali feels a tight squeeze on her hand as the officer winces. She moves to hover over her a bit and uses her free and to hold Ashlyn’s face, leaning down to kiss her forehead and look into her eyes. “Love you.” She whispers really quietly and sees Ashlyn eyes lock onto hers, a calm look returning to her face.

“Everything ok up there?” Dr. Baylor asks, having seen the interaction.

“Yeah, just more pressure than last time.” Ashlyn tells her.

“Unfortunately that is going to be the case as we move along. These eggs are definitely in there and already growing pretty healthily. I’m counting at least 17 right now and that’s a lot for not being able to see them all on here. It’s a great sign, but that does mean you’re going to be feeling fullness and pressure from the tight space filling up in there.” Dr. Baylor explains.

“Now that you say that, I guess I’ve been feeling more bloated since yesterday, but I wasn’t really sure.” Ashlyn admits.

“Totally normal. And it’s going to feel a lot more full and uncomfortable in there over the next few days as these eggs grow, so expect to feel that. You might even feel your pants getting a bit tighter, it’s nothing to worry about… just an annoying discomfort unfortunately.” Dr. Baylor warns her.

“Good to know.” Ashlyn replies, glad that she can at least mentally prepare for it a bit.

“Anything we can do to make it any better?” Ali asks and gets an appreciative hand squeeze from Ashlyn.

“Not a whole lot, but definitely avoid any foods that normally trigger you to get gassy or bloated. Drink plenty of water to help keep the bloating down. And try walking a bit before bed, the extra
movement can help even if it seems uncomfortable.” She advises. “Alright, we’re all set here.” She removes the ultrasound wand. “Everything looks great, so we’ll do it all again tomorrow morning.”

“Of course, can’t start my day right without our usual hot date.” Ashlyn keeps up her joking.

“Well now I’m just jealous.” Ali can’t help but chime in with a laugh.

“No problem, Ali. We can set you up for an ultrasound too.” Dr. Baylor deadpans.

“I’m not that jealous!” Ali replies and hears Ashlyn chuckling beside her.

“You two might be my favorite patients ever.” Dr. Baylor smiles at them. “See you in the morning.” She waves and leaves the room.

“Come on, let’s get you dressed.” Ali says sweetly and helps Ashlyn put her uniform on.

Ashlyn can only stand there and smile as Ali buttons her shirt for her and adjusts the collar before tucking it into her pants and buckling her belt. Never in her life has she felt this cared for. This crappy fertility treatment is nothing compared to what she would do for this woman, she’d go to the ends of the earth for her.

Sunday, April 8th

Ashlyn closes her eyes when she feels Ali’s arms gently wrap around her waist from behind as she grabs a fresh uniform out of the closest.

“Wish you didn’t have to go to work today.” Ali whispers, her hair still wet from the shower.

“Me either.” Ashlyn replies, still wondering how on earth she’s even going to make it through today.

“Anything I can do?” Ali kisses the back of her shoulder.

“Baby, you’re already doing everything both of us could possibly think of and then some. You’re amazing. Thank you.” Ashlyn turns around and smiles at her, the statement completely true.

The last few days have been challenging to say the least. Dr. Baylor wasn’t kidding when she said Ashlyn would be feeling full, bloated, and uncomfortable. She feels like she’s carrying two footballs around in her pelvic area and is starting to wonder whether she’s walking funny because it sure feels like she is. To top that off, her upper butt and lower back are really sore from the injections and it just adds to the discomfort. The hot flashes and nipple sensitivity are gone, but now her breasts are sore enough that she has to keep a bra on at all times to keep them from moving around too much. And of course, her libido is still in overdrive at the worst possible time because she can barely do anything about it with all the pressure she feels in her pelvic area. Despite feeling grumpy, she’s done everything to stay positive for Ali because the woman has been nothing short of a saint.

Not only is Ali keeping track of both of their injections while she’s going through her own side effects, but she has stopped at nothing to make sure Ashlyn is as comfortable as possible on top of it all. She’s been making healthy meals, icing the officer’s injection sites, gently holding or rubbing her belly to generate some soothing warmth, taking slow walks with her every night, and gently licking Ashlyn’s clit for over half an hour sometimes just so she can get a much needed release that isn’t painful. And there’s at least three more days to go, if not more.

“And you, my love, are my hero. Growing me little Harris heroes in there. You’re the amazing one.”
Ali strokes her cheek.

“Nah, these are gonna be little feisty warrior babies, just like you.” Ashlyn smiles and kisses her slow and deep, pouring all her love into it.

“Let’s get you started with a proper breakfast now that the nausea is going away for the morning. It’s gonna be a long day for you.” Ali says as they pull apart, leaving a little kiss on Ashlyn’s chin.

“To say the least. But after that amazing shower with you, I can face anything.” Ashlyn says with a smile as Ali heads to go make breakfast, hoping that the statement is actually true.

Ashlyn has to be at work by 11am today because the Ipswich Police Department is participating in an emergency preparedness drill in coordination with the city’s fire department, hospital, and local Red Cross chapter. The scenario they’ve been given is a Category 3 hurricane hitting the MA coast directly and creating widespread flooding as well as wind damage and knocking out electricity. The fire department will be running simulations related to rescue operations and evacuations alongside the Red Cross chapter who will be dealing with distributing aid resources. The police department will have to deal with a looting simulation that results in several casualties where they have to coordinate with the hospital. And after all of that, Ashlyn still has to work her usual night shift afterwards. Then she’ll go home to get a couple hours of sleep before heading off to the daily bloodwork and ultrasound appointment, after which she might get a couple more hours of sleep before she’s back on duty at 1pm for her normal Monday shift.

How she is going get through the next 24 to 48 hours feeling like she does right now, she has no idea. She’s considering using time off to cut her night shift short if she can, but there’s no telling how busy things will be and if she’ll have enough officer coverage to do that. All she can do is hope for the best.

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By 4pm, Ashlyn and Chief Fulton are standing there proudly as the emergency preparedness drill starts to wrap up.

“You doing okay, Captain?” Chief Fulton asks. He knows she’s in the midst of one of the more uncomfortable aspects of her treatment and is truly amazed by her even being here when he thinks back to how his wife felt during this time.

“I feel pretty crappy and like my belly is about to pop, but I couldn’t be more thrilled about how this went.” She motions to their officers in an attempt to deflect his attention on her.

“Me too, I feel like we nailed this one.” Chief Fulton agrees. “If you’re like Lori, this is just about the worst of it…it’ll be over soon.” He reassures her. “Really try and go home tonight as soon as you can. Heck, I’ll even take on your shift so you can get out of here earlier.”

“Thanks, Chief, but I’ll figure it out.” Ashlyn shrugs it off, doing her best to stay professional. “I feel like we should do a little lunch party or something this week after how this drill went today.”

“Not a bad idea.” The Chief considers it.

The department and their officers performed beautifully all afternoon. They always do things to prepare for situations like this, but it’s nice to see it actually come together. Unfortunately, it all goes downhill fast when they get a real ‘all officers report’ call over their radios just a few minutes later. There’s been a robbery at the general store downtown with reports of multiple shots being fired and unknown injuries or casualties. The officers all race to abandon the drill, but with everything setup
for this specific simulation it takes longer than normal for them to get out of there and over to downtown.

“Come on, move that fucking thing!” Ashlyn yells from the passenger seat of the Chief’s car as they wait for a firetruck that is blocking them in to move out of the way. She’s anxious to get to the scene and hoping that the few officers left on normal duty today have already gotten there and are handling things okay. She grew up here, she knows the owner of the store, Joe Thorton. He was friends with her grandparents for years, a usual visitor at their house. She knows he’s at the store most days of the week and always on weekends.

“It’s ok, Harris. We’ll get there. I’m sure our guys are already handling.” Chief Fulton says reassuringly even though his own stomach is churning.

“I know…just… this kind of shit doesn’t happen here.” Ashlyn replies, still in disbelief. Ipswich is a quiet beach community with a pretty low crime rate and certainly nothing serious like this.

“I feel like Americans have been saying that a lot more lately.” Chief Fulton shakes his head and finally slams the accelerator down the second he gets enough clearance to get around the firetruck.

Ashlyn breathes a sigh of relief when they finally get to the scene and she immediately sees Joe Thorton sitting on the sidewalk with paramedics, looking shaken but otherwise fine. There are several other cruisers already there, which is also comforting.

After a quick assessment of everything, it’s a bizarre situation to say the least…but, with no one getting injured, it’s about as good as you can hope for aside from catching the guys who did it (which unfortunately they haven’t). The store is a complete mess, bullets having been fired all over the place despite the fact that there was no real threat with officers showing up after the perpetrators left. No cash was stolen even though Joe was asked to put it in a duffle bag. The bag is still sitting on the floor near the register and the only thing missing is a very expensive bottle of tequila. None of it makes much sense and Ashlyn already knows she’s not going home early tonight. She fires off a quick text to Ali so the brunette doesn’t worry and gets back to work.

*Hero: You’ll probably see a robbery on the news. Everyone is fine, the perps were gone before our guys even got there. The scene is a confusing mess, so won’t be home early. Get some rest & I’ll see you around 5am. Me & the Harris babies are tired & uncomfy but hanging in. I love you madly, miss you already.*

Ali is just getting off the phone when she hears the text come in. She’s spent almost two hours talking to a legal representative from the Human Rights Campaign who had emailed her this afternoon. It turns out the HRC is considering filing a writ on Kira’s behalf after becoming aware of the case from the podcast. Ali was thrilled at the prospect of it and spent time walking the person through the details of the case. She reads Ashlyn’s text and groans, feeling awful that the officer won’t make it home early to relax. She hasn’t heard a thing about the robbery since she’s been occupied this afternoon and immediately turns on the TV to catch the 7 o’clock news that starts in a few minutes while she texts back.

*Paladin: I’m so sorry, honey. I’m glad everyone is ok. Try not to overdo it, I’m worried about you. Call me anytime and let me know if I can do anything for you...literally ANYTHING ANYTIME. I love you so so much, Hero. Miss you more!*

Ashlyn spends the whole night shift with Detective Miller who is heading up the investigation on the robbery. Some of her best memories as a police officer were when she held the rank of detective in South Boston even as brief as it was. This is what she was trained to do as a Ranger… look at all the angles, study all the details, figure out what happened, why it happened, and what the next move is.
She’s good at it and has always been asked by the detectives to have a look at their cases to find things they might have missed. Tonight is just plain frustrating though.

There isn’t much to go on other than the scene itself, the security camera footage, and Joe Thorton’s account of what happened. Joe had sent the usual store clerk home because they only had a handful of customers all day and he figured he’d handle the last couple hours by himself. Around 3:45pm a couple of guys dressed in all black and wearing ski masks showed up and held him at gunpoint. They told him to empty the register into a bag that they handed him, zip-tied his hands together behind his back, and then shoved him into the back office of the store. Ashlyn watches it all happen on the security camera footage and it makes no sense.

The two guys appear to be fairly young based on movement and body-build, one carrying a TEC-9 semi-automatic handgun and the other a sawed-off shotgun (which is an odd choice for a robbery due to lack of versatility and accuracy). After making Joe empty the register and putting him in the backroom, they just wander the store aimlessly like they have no plan at all. Suddenly they empty round after round of shots into the store shelves for no apparent reason. Then they hang around a few more minutes appearing to be in no hurry and almost bored. Eventually one of them grabs a bottle of tequila that is kept behind the registers with the other expensive liquors and they start taking swigs from it. After a few more minutes pass, one of them looks out the window and they signal something to each other (a likely sign that they hear sirens approaching). Neither of them bothers to grab the bag of cash on the floor, they just casually walk out the back entrance of the store, again with no hurry. There’s no camera to capture outside the rear exit of the store, so there’s no telling what direction they went or how exactly they got away.

The entire event takes twenty minutes and about fifteen from the time shots were fired, which means it took at least fifteen minutes for their officers to respond…a fact that makes Ashlyn cringe even if it was bad timing today with the drill going on. After hours of looking over whatever facts they have, they’re nowhere closer to figuring it out than when they started. It completely unsettles Ashlyn, the whole thing seems to be random and completely lacking in motive or logic. They really don’t have anything else to go on, so all she can do now is leave it to Detective Miller to keep following up and gathering any new information he can find in hopes that something comes of it. She’s frustrated, wiped out, her belt feels like a vice grip around her bloated waist, her injection sites ache, her head is pounding, she’s hungry, and all she wants to do is get in bed with Ali and sleep for days.

It’s 5:11am when she walks in the door and she’s not even sure how she finds the energy to lock her gun away and take off her boots and uniform shirt. That’s all she has left in her though, going upstairs immediately and dropping into bed with the rest of her clothes still on.

“Ash baby, you okay?” Ali pops up immediately as soon as she feels the bed dip beside her. She’s been sleeping lightly since 3am just waiting for the officer to get home.

“Yeah, I feel like crap…tired, but okay.” Ashlyn grumbles. “The robbery thing was such a shitshow…” She starts to try and explain but Ali quickly cuts her off.

“Hey, baby…you had a long day. You don’t need to tell me now, we’ll have time later. Here, drink this real quick.” Ali reaches over and grabs a protein shake out of an ice bucket near the bed. She figured there was a slim chance that Ashlyn took the time to eat properly tonight and prepared before going to bed. Her suspicions are confirmed when Ashlyn gulps it down in less than a minute.

“Go to sleep, love. I’ll wake you up 15min before we have to go so you can quickly get ready.” Ali whispers. Their appointment is at 9am at Mass General Hospital in Boston, which means they’ll need to leave at 7:45am to make the hour-long drive (something that has certainly complicated this daily appointment schedule, but they wanted a top notch fertility clinic). Ali knows the officer just needs a
few minutes to throw on some comfy clothes and a hat and brush her teeth, then she can sleep more on the drive.

“But the injections…” Ashlyn weakly protests, remembering it needs to be done at 7am.

“I’ll handle it, baby. Just sleep.” Ali kisses her forehead.

“Mmmkay.” Ashlyn concedes and closes her eyes. She feels Ali unbuckle her belt and take her pants off, the relief on her belly immediate. “Thank you, Alex. Love…you.” She just manages to whisper before she’s out like a light.

“I love you too, Ash.” Ali whispers softly to her already sleeping fiancée, holding her close and gently stroking through her short hair for a few minutes before falling back to sleep herself.

Monday, April 9th

Ashlyn wakes up in a bit of a fluster when Ali rouses her, but true to her word, the brunette is fully prepared. She just hands Ashlyn some loose sweatpants, a hoodie, and a hat to throw on and tells her to use the bathroom and brush her teeth.

“What about the injections?” Ashlyn questions in concern, seeing that it’s already 7:30am.

“Already done, you slept right through them.” Ali gives her a little smile.

“Oh…wish I was tired enough to do that all the time.” Ashlyn shrugs. “Thanks, baby.”

“You’re welcome, sleepy head. Meet me in the car when you’re done.” Ali kisses her softly and goes downstairs.

When Ashlyn gets in the car, the seat is already reclined and there’s a blanket and pillow there. She practically melts at Ali’s thoughtfulness, giving the brunette a teary-eyed smile as the emotions get the best of her.

“Here, honey. Eat up and then get some sleep.” Ali hands her a muffin and a bottle of orange juice before starting the drive.

“Thanks. You’re really the best, Alex.” Ashlyn manages to choke out emotionally, giving herself a couple minutes to pull it together before finally eating. She does her best to try to fall asleep afterwards, but between the usual appointment jitters and her mind still running over the robbery, she’s awake. “Can’t sleep.” She eventually voices out loud.

“Ok, baby. Just stay comfy like that and talk to me then.” Ali reaches over and holds her hand.

Ashlyn spends the rest of the drive venting about everything that happened with the robbery last night, giving the brunette all of the details. By the time they pull into the hospital parking lot, Ali agrees that the whole thing is definitely fishy and can understand why Ashlyn is so frustrated by it. They have to rush inside get blood drawn first, so there’s no time to discuss it beyond that.

“Good morning, ladies!” Dr. Baylor says cheerily as she enters the room and hears them return the same greeting in unison. She looks up from the chart in her hands to see Ashlyn ready on the exam table and immediately drops the chart on the desk at how the officer looks. “I’m not even going to
sugarcoat this...you look rough, Ashlyn. What’s going on?” She asks in concern, her eyes darting to Ali.

“She just worked 18 hours straight through a city-wide emergency preparedness drill and then an actual robbery scene before getting in at 5am and having to leave to come here just before 8am. And she’s back on duty at 1pm today.” Ali lays it out for the doctor.

“Pardon my language, but holy shit! And I thought I was bad.” Dr. Baylor shakes her head. “You gonna be ok there?” She addresses Ashlyn as she lightly pats her forearm.

“Yeah, I’ve done worse.” Ashlyn assures her.

“Maybe, but I’m sure not while feeling like you have watermelon in your pelvis and like a million bees stung you in the butt on top of all your other symptoms. You need to take it easy.” Dr. Baylor raises her eyebrows.

“Very true.” Ashlyn admits. “I’ll relax tonight and really catch up on sleep and I’ll be fine.”

“Make sure she does.” Dr. Baylor says to Ali.

“Oh I will, even if I have to strap her down.” Ali promises.

“Ok, I’m going to make this really quick so you can get out of here.” Dr. Baylor gets right to it, making sure Ashlyn is ready and going right ahead with the ultrasound. “I’m sorry, Ashlyn. I know that doesn’t feel very good.” She empathizes when she hears the audible grunt as she moves the wand around.

Ashlyn just closes her eyes and squeezes Ali’s hand tightly, trying hard just to focus on the brunette’s other hand that is stroking her cheek. Luckily, the doctor is true to her word and it’s only a few minutes before it’s over.

“Alright, let me just check both of your blood results from this morning.” Dr. Baylor pulls it up on the computer screen and looks it over for a minute. “Ok, so Ali, this looks good and I’m ready to have you stop the Lupron after Tuesday and start the progesterone injections Wednesday morning. We’re tracking right on time for what I initially planned for, so I think the timing is right to start getting you ready for the embryo transfer. Everything is exactly the same in terms of injection site, timing, and amount...it’s just the change in the hormone itself. I can have the nurse come in and go over it all again if you want though.”

“No need, I’ve got it down.” Ali replies confidently.

“Ok, great. Are you still feeling the same? Any changes?” She inquires.

“Still the same, no changes really. Actually some things have gotten better like the headaches.” Ali answers.

“Perfect. I doubt you’ll see all that much change with the progesterone, but you can let us know if something doesn’t feel right.” Dr. Baylor turns to Ashlyn. “As for you, Ashlyn... I have a little good news and a little bad news.”

“Ok. Hit me with it.” Ashlyn says a bit nervously.

“We have lots of eggs in there growing nicely, which is fabulous. However, I see a few that are just a little behind some of the others in terms of maturation. And we want to really push to get them a bit more caught up so that we can have as many usable eggs as possible. You hormone levels are within
good range, so I’m going to bump up the FSH and have you do one more daily injection at midday starting today. So, you’ll do the Lupron and first FSH shot at 7am like you have been and then another FSH shot at 12pm.” Dr. Baylor gives it to her straight.

“Well hey, what’s one more daily jab in the grand scheme of things.” Ashlyn tries to joke through it as best she can even though she feels like she just got punched in the gut. She feels Ali squeeze her hand and she knows it didn’t come off that convincing.

“We’re almost there. Just a few more days. I’m really anticipating that we’ll be giving you that trigger shot by the end of the week and getting this done.” Dr. Baylor levels with her, seeing right through the brave façade that Ashlyn is not so successfully hiding behind this morning. “You can do this.”

“I know. Thank you, Doc. Really.” Ashlyn gives her a genuine smile.

“Alright, call me if you need absolutely anything and I’ll see you again in the morning. I’ll bring the flowers this time and some chocolates too.” She says as she leaves, getting a real chuckle from Ashlyn like she was hoping for.

“You okay, sweetheart?” Ali asks worriedly.

Ashlyn just sits up on the exam table and swallows hard, nodding her head and choosing to stay silent.

Ali can easily see that now is not the time to press her, so she just quietly helps her get dressed and leads her to the car.

Ashlyn settles into the passenger seat, adjusting it back to the normal position because she knows she’s not going to sleep right now. She drops her head back into the seat for a second and lets out a deep breath before the floodgates open and she just starts sobbing uncontrollably. She feels silly to be this level of upset right now, but with the frustration leftover from work, the exhaustion, and the way she feels so physically and mentally wrecked right now… the news of adding of another daily injection, one that Ali will have to go meet her at work to help her with, just pushes her over the edge.

“I’ve got you, Ashlyn…I got you, baby.” Ali pulls the officer into her arms as best she can from the driver’s seat and holds her tight. “It’s ok, honey. Just let it out. I’m here. I got you.”

Ashlyn buries her face into Ali’s neck and does just that, letting everything swirling thought in her mind empty out through her tears until she’s spent and practically limp in the brunette’s arms twenty minutes later.

“Sorry, Alex. I can do this…we can do this… I swear. Sorry. I just needed a good cry.” Ashlyn says quietly as she calms down, feeling bad that she just unleashed on Ali like that.

“Hey, look at me.” Ali pulls back a bit and holds Ashlyn’s face in her hands. “Don’t apologize. You’re incredible and you’ve been a fucking rock star through this whole thing. If I was you, I would have had like fifty good cries by now, so don’t you dare apologize. I’m so proud of you, Ash, and so damn grateful for you. Damn right we can do this… we’re almost there. Together.” She wipes the officer’s eyes a bit and kisses her softly.

“Together.” Ashlyn repeats. “I could never do this without you.”

“Well you don’t have to, Hero. So, cry on this shoulder as much as you need to and then get ready to return the favor…cause we all know that a pregnant me is going to be stage-five clingy, ugly crier!”
Ali lightens things a bit.

“Yeah, maybe I should invest in some wicking fabric shirts so they dry faster.” Ashlyn teases back and feels a lot better for the time being. “I love you so hard, Alex.”

“To GN-Z11 and back, baby.” Ali smiles and kisses the officer romantically, letting it get a little heated before she pulls away a couple minutes later. “Let’s go get you some more sleep.”

“But what if I want to do something other than sleep.” Ashlyn waggles her eyebrows.

“Non-negotiable. You’re sleeping, Harris.” Ali shuts her down playfully.

“But baby…” Ashlyn starts again only for Ali to cut her off right away.

“Overruled, Harris. But you can try your objection again later when you get home from work tonight. Maybe you’ll have better luck swaying the judge then.” Ali shrugs and smiles smugly.

“Whatever you say, counselor.” Ashlyn chuckles and rests her hand on Ali’s thigh for the drive home.

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Despite only getting another two hours of sleep before going back on duty, Ashlyn definitely feels a lot better than she did last night. Physically she still feels downright uncomfortable and achy, but the crying session in the car followed by the cuddly nap with Ali has done wonders for her mental state.

She’s only at work for about an hour before she gets called into a long meeting with Detective Miller to go over the details of the robbery with Chief Fulton and provide him with any current theories and progress on it. There’s nothing new to report, but with a fresh mindset and better perspective than last night, Ashlyn feels better about the tentative conclusion that it appears to be just a random incident perpetrated by a couple of loners with nothing better to do.

No one got injured, insurance is covering the store’s damages, and nothing was even taken other than a bottle of tequila. The three officers agree that they really couldn’t ask for a better resolution than that given the circumstances. The Chief shares Ashlyn’s frustration that their officers took much too long to arrive on the scene, but both know that’s just the nature of bad timing with the drill going on yesterday.

“No surprise that Miller brought you in with him this morning to present the case. Just can’t stay away, can you?” Chief Fulton addresses her after Detective Miller leaves the office. “Let me guess, you stayed here all night to help him sort through it?”

“Guilty, Chief. You know I live for this stuff.” Ashlyn owns up to it with a shrug.

“Take care of yourself, Captain. I mean it. I know better than to believe you’re as fine as you’re pretending to be right now.” Chief Fulton says in concern. “I’m watching you…as your boss and as your friend.” He uses his fingers to point to his eyes and then to her.

“I fully admit that yesterday and last night were really hard, but I’m doing a little better right now. Be even better after a good night of sleep and even better than that when release day happens, hopefully this week.” She levels with him.

“Release day?” Chief Fulton laughs and shakes his head at her. “You’re such a cop, Harris. I believe it’s called ‘retrieval’ day.”
“Yeah well ‘release’ sounds a lot more relieving than ‘retrieval’ right now, sooo… let me live, Fulton.” Ashlyn teases him back.

“Alright, alright. I gotta go brief the mayor on yesterday’s drill and robbery before I can go home. Safe evening, Captain… and for fuck’s sake go home soon!” Chief Fulton excuses himself.

“I do not envy your job.” Ashlyn commiserates. “In light of your meeting, safe evening to you too, Chief. Good luck with the mayor.” She jokingly cringes and salutes him as she leaves his office.

“Hey Harris, you just missed Ali!” Lieutenant Hurley yells from her desk when she sees Ashlyn walking out of the Chief’s office.

“Awww, crap. Really?” Ashlyn replies as she looks down at her watch and sees that it’s 4:06pm.

“Really. She dropped off some dinner for you, it’s on your desk. Said she couldn’t stay.” Lieutenant Hurley tells her.

“Yeah, she has a Boston Globe reporter coming to the house at 4:30pm for some interview related to her podcast.” Ashlyn explains.

“That poor woman. I frickin’ hate the media.” Hurley huffs.

“Roger that.” Ashlyn agrees wholeheartedly. “She’s good at what she does though and she certainly has a lot more patience than I do.” She adds proudly.

“Plus she’s so much cooler than you too.” Hurley messes with her.

“Right… and I’m cooler than you, sooo…you’re low on the cool totem pole, Hurley.” Ashlyn gives it right back to her.

“Don’t make me steal your dinner.” Hurley narrows her eyes.

“Don’t make me cuff you to your chair for the night.” Ashlyn laughs and gets an eye roll from Hurley. “Speaking of dinner, I’m starved!” She starts heading towards her office.

“Of course you are, Harris. It’s like you and Ali share a brain.” Hurley calls after her.

“Probably true, don’t be jealous!” Ashlyn calls over her shoulder as she walks to her office only to hear Hurley yell “You know I am. I doubt my wife even knows my favorite color!”

She really is starving even though it’s a little early for dinner, but she knows Ali almost always has a snack ready when she gets home on Monday nights, so she doesn’t think twice about digging right in. She opens the brown paper bag to find a chicken basil and veggie stir-fry with brown rice from their favorite Thai place and her mouth literally waters.

She pulls the food out of the bag and finds another small Tupperware container in there too. She curiously opens the lid and sees that it’s a big homemade funfetti cupcake with funfetti frosting, her favorite. But more than that, it’s Ali’s handwriting on it in blue icing that strikes her, the message reading ‘Sorry I have to poke you’ with a little sad face underneath.

She sits there with a goofy grin on her face appreciating the humor in the message as well as the sincere sentiment behind it. And just like that she feels completely centered again, everything anchored securely to Ali with the next few days no longer seeming like such an insurmountable feat.
She feels strong, confident, loved, lucky as hell, and with Ali Krieger by her side… invincible. She looks at her watch again to see that there’s still 10 minutes before Ali’s interview starts, so she fires off a quick text.

**Hero:** Every day I thank the universe for you, but right now that seems beyond wholly inadequate. There are honestly no words for how much you mean to me, Alex. For the record…out of all the people that have poked me (and there have been a lot), you’re my favorite :-) Thank you, love.

She starts to eat her food, only managing one bite before she hears her phone buzz and is happy to have a little text conversation with her girl.

**Paladin:** It’s just a cupcake, Hero ;-) There are no words for how much I love you. Also, I better be your favorite! You’re so very welcome, baby.

**Hero:** Right, just a cupcake… and Green Lantern is just some guy with a silly glowing ring.

**Paladin:** Hmmmm, last time I checked Green Lantern was a bad ass lawyer chick with a hella shiny diamond bling ring.

**Hero:** Exactly my point! Hence, this cupcake made by said bad ass lawyer chick is no normal cupcake. It has super powers. Good luck with your interview. I love you, Alex. You’re the reason my heart beats.

**Paladin:** Well then go feed my little Harris babies that magic cupcake already! I love you so fierce, Ash. You’re the reason mine goes wild :-)  

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**Thursday, April 12th**

“Well Ali, I’m sorry to inform you that you only get one more chance to jab Ashlyn in the butt.” Dr. Baylor tries to keep a straight face, removing the ultrasound wand as she finishes up.

“Really?! Only one more day?” Ashlyn pops her head up from the exam table excitedly before Ali can even process Dr. Baylor’s statement.

“Actually, just one more shot.” Dr. Baylor says enthusiastically and then explains further since both women look a little confused. “Everything looks perfectly ready in there, so we’re going to administer that HCG trigger shot right now to stop the maturation process. Since Ali has been so integral in the injection department, I figured I’d let her have one last hurrah.”  Dr. Baylor smiles. “We’re a go for the egg retrieval tomorrow morning.”

“Of course it has to be another butt shot.” Ashlyn rolls her eyes. “I don’t even care, I’m so excited right now!” She reaches for Ali’s hand and holds it tight, seeing that the brunette is tearing up a bit. “You ok, babe?”

“I’m great…just really happy, and of course, completely emotionally out of control about it. Excellent timing!” Ali lets a few tears fall, a bit embarrassed that this is turning out to be one of her more hormonal moments.

“You are not emotionally out of control…I’ve seen a lot of emotionally out of control, and this definitely isn’t it.” Dr. Baylor kindly reassures her. “Let yourself feel it and let it out in whatever way you need to…this is a really happy time.” She smiles at them both.

“Thank you.” Ali says appreciatively, wiping her eyes a bit and kissing Ashlyn’s hand.
“Pull it together, Krieger, before that mascara gets in your eye and you inject me in the back of the head by accident.” Ashlyn teases her to make her laugh. “Love you, baby.”

“Love you too.” Ali smiles at her.

“She does have a point though.” Dr. Baylor chimes in. “I can have the nurse do the injection if you’d like.”

“Oh hell no, that last one is all mine!” Ali says resolutely.

“Just dying to stick me one last time, huh?” Ashlyn gives her a playful look.


“And on that note, I’ll have the nurse get it ready and be right back with the instructions for tomorrow’s procedure. Really the biggest thing is no eating or drinking anything after 8pm tonight. I’ll be right back.” Dr. Baylor tells them and leaves the room.

“We made it.” Ashlyn smiles, sitting up on the exam table with her legs dangling off.

“You made it.” Ali smiles back and goes to stand between the officer’s leg.

“No honey… we… definitely we.” Ashlyn kisses her deeply, only pulling apart when she hears footsteps coming towards the room.

“Ok, so we’re officially scheduled for 7:00am tomorrow morning. Ali, your brother will need to come in with you so that he can provide a sperm sample for us while Ashlyn undergoes the retrieval. As you know, his bloodwork from a couple weeks ago was great and negative for anything we would be concerned about…so, he’s good to go.” Dr. Baylor says and hands Ashlyn the instruction sheet. “Everything on there is completely the same as what was in the original binder I gave you. The only real important thing, like I said before, is no eating or drinking at all after 8:00pm tonight. If you’re thirsty, a couple small sips or water or ice chips are fine. Do you have any questions at all?”

“None. I think I’m all set. Alex?” Ashlyn replies and looks at Ali.

“I’m good too. Thanks.” Ali responds.

“Perfect! Alright, Ashlyn, let’s get the most important thing done here. Why don’t you stand up and face the table so I can find an ideal injection spot.” Dr. Baylor instructs.

“Right-O, Doc.” Ashlyn does as she’s asked.

“Ok, I’m just going to lightly feel along your lower back and upper butt muscle here. You’re a little inflamed in spots back here from the prior injections, so I want to get away from those areas.” She talks as she gently presses in a couple places. “Right here I think, this looks good.” She picks a spot on the outer area of Ashlyn’s upper left butt cheek and marks it with a pen. “Alright, Ali… you’ll want to go right there. The syringe is prepped for you on the counter here. Just leave it on the tray when you’re done and let the nurse know on your way out. She’ll take care of cleaning up. Ok?”

“Yep, I got it. Thank you.” Ali says appreciatively.

“I’ll see you both bright and early! Get a good night’s sleep, we’re almost there and it’s looking great!” Dr. Baylor says encouragingly.

“Thanks, Doc. I’ll wear my best hospital gown just for you.” Ashlyn jokes.
“In that case, I'll wear my best surgical cap and my most expensive latex.” Dr. Baylor laughs and gives them a wave as she leaves.

“Ok baby, give it to me good.” Ashlyn snickers and turns to face the exam table again. Ali doesn’t say anything, she just grabs the syringe from the counter and gets close to the officer, running her fingertips lightly up her bare back right along her spine. She smiles when Ashlyn’s breath hitched and goosebumps break out across her skin. She trails open-mouthed kisses all along the top of the officer’s shoulder and the up the back of her neck before finally stopping just behind her ear. She takes a quick look down to make sure she has the right spot before nipping Ashlyn’s earlobe while she steadily eases the needle in. “I love you so damn much.” She whispers and pushes the plunger before pulling the syringe out gently and tossing it back onto the metal tray on the counter. With that, she turns Ashlyn around in her arms and kisses her with everything she has until the two of them are gasping for air.

“Well who the hell needs a HCG shot to stop things when you can stop my whole world with just one kiss like that.” Ashlyn gives her a dimpled grin, still trying to catch her breath.

“I’m in so much trouble if our little Harris heroes are as charming as you.” Ali smiles. “I hope our baby is just like you.” She kisses the officer again before Ashlyn can respond.

Ashlyn manages to pull away just enough to mumble “Warriors...they’re Harris warriors” before letting Ali capture her lips again and being content to leave it at that.

Friday, April 13th

“Hey princess, how’s the Captain?” Kyle asks as he meets Ali in the hospital lobby as planned.

“Surprisingly more calm than I was. They just took her in about 10 minutes ago. I got to stay with her right up until they were about to sedate her and she was trying to reassure me and not vice-versa. Go figure. When did I suddenly become such a basket case over this stuff?” Ali wonders out loud since she’s usually so practical about things like this.

“Hmmm, let’s see…maybe since your whole life literally revolves around the person that they just put under, who is currently having eggs removed to make future babies for you while you’re on mega doses of hormones that make you emotionally unstable. Just a guess.” Kyle attempts his usual humor to cheer her up.

“Ugh, I knooow. These hormones really make me a crazy lady sometimes. A couple nights ago, I cried for like ten minutes after watching a commercial where a puppy hides in the back of his owner’s pick-up truck so he can follow him to work. Like what the actual fuck?!” Ali shakes her head.

“Ought to make for a fun pregnancy!” Kyle laughs.

“I’m not even gonna think about that right now. Anyway, we have like fifteen minutes before you have to be upstairs for your appointment. You want a coffee?” Ali offers.

“Nah, I’m good. I usually don’t drink coffee before a hot date.” Kyle replies casually.

“Hot date?” Ali asks quizzically.
“Yep, in fifteen minutes with Rosy Palm and her five sisters.” Kyle smirks.

“Really right now?!” Ali slaps him on the arm.

“Did you expect anything less?” Kyle raises an eyebrow.

“I suppose not.” Ali shakes her head.

“Well, come on… let’s go upstairs so I can wax the carrot.” Kyle says cheerily.

Ali can only roll her eyes and shoot him a look, but she’s actually really thankful that he’s there to distract her.

“Hi again, Ali. You doing okay?” Ginger the nurse asks as she and Kyle approach the check-in desk.

“Yep, still antsy of course.” Ali replies. Ginger had helped prep Ashlyn before the procedure this morning.

“Relax. If she was doing anything less than great in there, they would have called me in to help with something. And they haven’t, so…she’s doing great.” Ginger reassures her. “This must be Kyle.”

“That’s me. The golden goose.” Kyle pipes up.

“Ha! Good one. I’m Ginger, the nurse who is going to be helping you out today.” Ginger introduces herself.

“Nice to meet you.” Kyle says cordially before quirking an eyebrow and adding “so, define ‘helping me out’.”

“Oh geez, he’s worse than Ashlyn.” Ginger looks at Ali with a crooked smile.

“By miles.” Ali rolls her eyes and slaps Kyle again lightly before issuing a warning. “Behave yourself.”

“Well, Kyle…we’re all ready for you. So why don’t you follow me back and we’ll get you set up.” Ginger goes to open the door for him.

“Be right back sis, gotta go polish the family jewels!” He declares loudly with a cheesy smile as he follows Ginger.

Ali can only put her hand on her forehead and be incredibly thankful that there is no one else in the waiting room right now. She picks a seat where she has a view of Ginger’s workstation just so she can see if the woman gets called away for any reason, especially after what she just said about Ashlyn’s procedure. She watches Ginger take her seat just a couple minutes later and tries to distract herself by scrolling through her Instagram feed.

Just two minutes later, Ali sees Kyle approach Ginger’s desk and thinks ‘wow, that was fast’ despite the fact that she has no real basis of knowledge for how long something like this takes for guys. She watches him say something to Ginger, whose eyes go wide as she immediately blushes and hands him what appears to be his phone. Kyle just winks and walks away again, clearly not done, and leaving Ali to wonder what just happened.

Another fifteen minutes pass before Kyle finally walks out to sit next to Ali.
“Everything go okay?” Ali asks a little anxiously.

“Yep, officially killed a kitten and we’re good. You can relax.” Kyle smiles at her.

“What happened with Ginger a little while ago?” Ali asks curiously, ignoring his crude humor.

“Oh that. Well, I get in there and all of the ‘material’ in the room that is supposed to help me out… it’s all pictures of girls with huge tits and some super vanilla hetero sex DVDs. There was no way I was gonna be able to crack one off to that. Sooo, I had to go tell poor Ginger that I needed something a bit different for the spank bank. She had asked me to leave my phone with her, but then agreed to let me have it back so I could pick my own poison.” Kyle explains with no shame.

“Oh god, I’m sorry I asked.” Ali immediately regrets her curiosity.

“Don’t worry though princess, I left them a big ol’ Dixie cup of beautiful babies in there.” Kyle says proudly.

“Oh, you get ONE more masturbation joke and then we’re done for today.” Ali warns him. “You want a coffee now?”

“Sure, why not… I mean, I already shook the creamer.” Kyle can’t help himself.

“Well thank god that is over! Come on, I don’t want to be gone for more than like five minutes.” Ali leads them out the door to the little cafeteria just down the hall after telling Ginger where she was going. “Hey Kyle?”

“Yeah?” He replies.

“Thank you.” She says sincerely.

“I really am honored, Al… thank you guys for asking.” Kyle wraps an arm around her and pulls her into him as they walk.

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“Ali, you can come on back with me.” Dr. Baylor comes into the waiting room with a smile just under an hour after Ashlyn went in.

“You going to come?” Ali asks Kyle.

“As much as I would love to get Captain Loopy on video and upload it to YouTube, I think this is a time for just the two of you.” He smiles warmly. “I just wanted to keep you company while you waited, but I think this is my cue.” He gets up and gives her a quick hug. “I’ll come by tonight to visit and I’ll bring dinner.”

“You’re the best.” Ali hugs him tight.

“Course I am, princess. Good luck, tell her I love her.” Kyle pushes her lightly in the direction of Dr. Baylor who is waiting by the door.

“She did great! I’m very pleased by the results.” Dr. Baylor tells Ali immediately as soon as they’re in a private room. “We retrieved 36 usable eggs, which is really about as good as it gets. That’s a lot. No wonder she was feeling so uncomfortable.”

“That’s my superstar.” Ali beams proudly. “How is she?”
“Everything is great. She’s still asleep, but vitals look excellent. Superstar indeed.” Dr. Baylor pauses before saying the next part. “I’m going to take off my professional hat for just a minute here and admit that I actually knew exactly who you two were the first day you walked into my office. And, I have to say that I’m thrilled to be the one who gets to guide you two amazing women through this process. I’m really optimistic about everything, but no matter what happens, I will get you there somehow. There are lots of options on the table, and though I hope this is a first time success and we don’t have to go there…I want you to know that I’m with you until you hear that baby cry.”

“Thank you so much for saying that.” Ali says a bit tearily. “We couldn’t have picked a better doctor.”

“Sorry, didn’t mean to get you worked up. I would’ve waited until your hormones weren’t elevated, but they’ll be that way for the foreseeable future either artificially or because you’re pregnant, sooo…” Dr. Baylor smiles at her.

“I’m getting used to it.” Ali laughs at herself.

“So, I’ve read through Ashlyn’s complete medical history and I’m well aware of her tendency towards anxiety and confusion post sedation. I spoke with the recovery nurse who is getting her setup in the recovery room right now. She knows to expect you in there as soon she completes the required baseline vitals. Ginger will bring you in there ASAP and that way you’ll be there as she’s waking up and hopefully that will help keep her calm. Should really just be only a few more minutes.” Dr. Baylor looks at her watch.

“Thank you so much.” Ali says gratefully.

“No problem. I’ll be back in to see you both once she’s more alert to go over a few things before you leave.” Dr. Baylor says and leaves the room.

Only five minutes pass before Ginger comes in and leads Ali to the recovery room where, for the second time now, she doesn’t even notice the nurse in there because she’s too busy worriedly looking over Ashlyn who is still connected to several machines and some oxygen tubes.

“Hi Ali, I’m Wendy.” The nurse gets her attention. “She’s doing great and she was just briefly awake a minute ago. She asked me if the warriors were safe and fell back to sleep. I have no idea what that means, if anything at all… sedation brings out all kinds of interesting things.”

Ali can’t help but giggle. “She’s talking about the eggs. That’s what she calls them.”

“Warriors…no kidding… that’s a new one!” Wendy gives a slight laugh as she takes Ashlyn’s blood pressure. “I’m sure she’ll be coming around again soon. She might be a little confused or not make much sense for a bit, but it’ll pass quickly. This sedation isn’t as strong as anesthesia, so it leaves the system a lot quicker.”

“Thanks.” Ali replies as she carefully watches Ashlyn’s face. After a couple minutes, the officer’s eyes flutter open and then close a few times before she fully opens them and locks onto Ali.

“Beautiful angel…hi.” Ashlyn gives her a tired little grin, her voice a little raspy.

“Hi, baby.” Ali smiles at her. “You okay, sweetheart?”

“Mmhmmm. Hungry.” Ashlyn replies and starts looking around, her gaze settling on the nurse.

“No surprise there.” Ali giggles.
“We’ll get you something to eat soon. Do you know where you are, Ashlyn?” Wendy asks her, trying to assess her alertness level.

“Mmhmmm. Hospital to get the warriors. Are they good?” Ashlyn asks looking at Wendy.

“They sure are. Nice and safe. There were 36 of them.” Wendy answers now that she understands the question.

“Thas’ a lot.” Ashlyn slurs a bit.

“You did so great, honey.” Ali squeezes her hand.

“Do you know who that is, Ashlyn?” Wendy points to Ali.

“Mmhmmm. That’s my Alex.” Ashlyn replies with a smile as she looks at Ali.

“Good.” Wendy encourages and takes another blood pressure reading. “She’s doing great.”

“Most beautiful woman in the world, right?” Ashlyn taps Wendy’s arm to motions to Ali.

“She’s lovely.” Wendy smiles as Ali starts to blush a bit.

“You should get yourself a wife, they’re great. This one is mine though, can’t have her.” Ashlyn tells Wendy.

“Sorry.” Ali cringes and apologizes for Ashlyn’s statement.

“Oh don’t even worry. I hear all kinds of things in here. That one doesn’t even register as weird or offensive.” Wendy laughs. “Not sure my husband would agree with you though, Ashlyn.” She plays back.

“Yeah, big talk for someone who doesn’t even have a wife herself.” Ali lightly pinches the officer’s cheek.

“Whaaaa? You’re not my wife?” Ashlyn asks in surprise.

“Not yet, baby. We’re engaged and working on it though.” Ali reminds her.

“No way, we totally got married. Remember? Under the redwood trees in the little tree fort, remember?” Ashlyn insists.


“Awww man.” Ashlyn pouts.

“Don’t worry, our wedding is in September. Not so far away.” Ali assures her.

“Oh yeah, I knew that. Yeah…I knew.” Ashlyn realizes and spends a minute looking at Ali’s face intently. “When I’m away from you, even for a little bit, I forget just exactly how beautiful you are. And then it hits me again when I see you and I can hardly breathe for a minute. Can’t wait to marry you.”

Ali practically melts at the statement. She can see Ashlyn’s eyes have more clarity to them now and her words were spoken clearly and thoughtfully, meaning she’s definitely more with it now. It makes the sentiment all that more powerful.
“Can’t wait to marry you either, love.” Ali leans down for a chaste kiss.

“Scratch that, I definitely need a wife!” Wendy chimes in after witnessing the sweet exchange.

“Told you.” Ashlyn smiles at her.

“Everything looks great, Ashlyn. I’m going to start unhooking some of these things. We’re just going to leave the IV in for a bit longer to make sure you’re nice and hydrated. I’ll go get you some toast as soon as I’m done, ok?” Wendy explains.

“Thank you.” Ashlyn says appreciatively with a tired smile.

“You can close your eyes again if you’re tired, baby.” Ali runs a hand through the officer’s short hair.

“Don’t wanna stop looking at you.” Ashlyn replies sweetly.

“I’m not going anywhere. You can rest.” Ali promises her. “You did so good, honey. So good.”

“Didn’t want to let you down.” Ashlyn admits.

“You could never let me down.” Ali squeezes her hand. “In fact, you went all overachiever with three dozen little Harris babies.”

“Our own little warrior army.” Ashlyn grins.

“You know it.” Ali laughs. “Close your eyes for a bit. I’ll wake you up when the toast comes.”

“But will you butter it for me?” Ashlyn winks with an insinuating smirk.

“And she’s back!” Ali chuckles and shakes her head.

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“How are we doing in here, ladies?” Dr. Baylor comes to check in on them.

“Great!” Ashlyn answers, now dressed and ready to be discharged. Ali nods beside her.

“Excellent, you’re looking good.” Dr. Baylor says, seeing that Ashlyn looks alert and back to normal. “So, I just want to go over a few things before you go. It’s all in that binder I gave you as well, but stop me if you have questions.”

“With you.” Ashlyn responds.

“So, we retrieved 36 eggs today during the procedure which is absolutely fantastic. Way above the average. They are already undergoing the process of fertilization as we speak. So, we wait now to see how many eggs become viable embryos over the next few days. You should be aware and prepared for that fact that nowhere near 36 eggs will make it to that stage. Some people only end up with a few, others are lucky enough to end up with over ten. There’s no telling what will happen, so we just have to wait and see. With me so far?” She checks in with them.

“I’m not going anywhere. You can rest.” Ali promises her. “You did so good, honey. So good.”

“Didn’t want to let you down.” Ashlyn admits.

“You could never let me down.” Ali squeezes her hand. “In fact, you went all overachiever with three dozen little Harris babies.”

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“With you.” Ashlyn responds.

“Day four is perfect timing to go ahead and plan for a transfer of three embryos, assuming we end up with that many. So, Ali, I’m going to go ahead and schedule the transfer day for Tuesday, April 17th at 9am here in the clinic. You don’t really have to do anything to prepare. Just keep doing your
routine progesterone injections like you have been. Is that ok?” Dr. Baylor checks.

“Yep, perfect.” Ali affirms.

“Great. So, let me just put this out there bluntly… it’s absolutely not required by any means, but there is some science that suggests that having an orgasm shortly before the transfer slightly increases the chances of successful implantation. So, you may want to consider working that into your timing plans for that morning. Again, not a necessity, but I wanted to put it out there. After the transfer, we’ll want Ali in a two week state of complete pelvic rest…which really just boils down to no sexual intercourse and avoiding any orgasms during that time. Make sense?” She asks.

“Get in one last good one before the dry spell, got it.” Ashlyn answers for them and gets a little nudge and smile from Ali.

“Pretty much.” Dr. Baylor laughs. “As for any embryos that are left after the transfer, we wait to make sure they survive past the 5th day and then chromosome test them for viability before any freezing happens on the 6th day. Any that are successfully frozen can be used for future transfer. Many don’t make it past the 4th day, so again, I just want you to have realistic expectations.” Dr. Baylor levels with them.

“We understand.” Ali acknowledges.

“That’s pretty much it for that. As for you, Ashlyn… as the numbness wears off this morning, you’re going to feel pretty crampy and maybe a bit sore for a couple days. Make sure you take Advil every six hours, eat healthy high protein meals, and make sure you drink a lot to stay hydrated. I would even suggest drinking some Gatorade to help as well. Definitely take the next two days to rest and relax as much as you can. You might also have some spotting, but it shouldn’t be heavy at all. Some of the symptoms may linger for about a week, but you really should feel much better in a couple days. If you’re not feeling better, something doesn’t feel right, or you’re bleeding steadily…make sure you call us and we’ll get you right in, ok?” She outlines.

“Will do.” Ashlyn nods.

“Ok, well, that’s everything. I will see you both on Tuesday morning for the big transfer!” Dr. Baylor smiles warmly at them. “I’m gonna miss our mornings together, Ashlyn.” She jokes a bit.

“Awww, doc. Don’t be sad…it’s not you, it’s me.” Ashlyn plays into it.

“That’s what they all say.” Dr. Baylor shrugs and then immediately looks at Ali. “Pick you up at 9am on Tuesday?”

“I’ll be waiting in my paper gown.” Ali chortles.

“You cut me real deep just now, Doc. Real deep.” Ashlyn shakes her head in jest. “They move on so fast!”

“Almost there, ladies. Rest up and I’ll see you Tuesday!” Dr. Baylor chuckles and makes her way out.

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Tuesday, April 17th

The transfer day is upon them before they know it, both of them a little jittery but mostly just excited.
Just like Dr. Baylor had said, Ashlyn had a really crampy and sore 36 hours after the retrieval, but it got a lot better after that. She and Ali spent the weekend mostly cuddled up and laying low, the two of them feeling more connected than ever. The officer made it to work on Monday afternoon with no problem and now here they are at the last step.

“Why did we leave so early again?” Ali asks, noting that they’re about five minutes away from the hospital now and the procedure isn’t for almost another two hours.

“I want to make sure we have plenty of time.” Ashlyn smiles knowingly.

“Think we have more than enough time for that, honey.” Ali giggles.

“We’ll see.” Ashlyn shrugs.

“Why are we parking here?” Ali asks as the officer pulls into valet parking lot of The Liberty Hotel just across the street from the hospital.

“Come on, did you really think I was just going to pull you into the backseat of the Jeep for a quickie?” Ashlyn raises her eyebrow with a smile. “That has a bit too much of a Teen Mom unplanned pregnancy vibe for what we actually have going on here, don’t cha think?”

“You’re sweet.” Ali smiles at her lovingly and then looks at the hotel. “You know, I’ve heard so many awesome things about this place, but I’ve never been here.”

“Me either. Now is as good a time as any to see what’s so awesome about it.” Ashlyn winks and goes to open Ali’s door, tossing the keys to the valet and leading the brunette inside.

The luxury of the place becomes immediately apparent as they check-in inside a beautifully decorated lobby with distinctive chandeliers and bare-bulb lights that hang from the high ceiling. The interior is open in such a way that you can see all three floors of the main building with the inner hallways overlooking the lobby. They quickly find out from all the history plaques on the wall that the building was once the old Charles Street Jail until it was renovated and redesigned into this luxury hotel in 2007 and is now owned by the hospital. With many of the original elements kept, the architecture is unique and stylish and it’s easy to see why the place gets such rave reviews.

Ali is hardly surprised when Ashlyn leads them into one of the nicest suites in the hotel with a beautiful view of the Boston skyline and Charles River. She doesn’t get much time to appreciate it though, the officer immediately pressing her against the nearest wall and kissing her passionately until she feels unsteady. And just when she thinks her knees are going to buckle, Ashlyn gently picks her up and carries her to the bed, laying her down and ghosting her lips against her ear.

“I love you, Alex. I’m going to love you slow and deep, just the way you like, until you can’t breathe… and then I’m going to start all over again.” Ashlyn promises heatedly and kisses the brunette hard before she can even respond.

Ashlyn doesn’t lie. Ali is wrapped up in her arms just an hour later gasping for breath, completely sweaty, spent, and sated.

“Pretty sure she said orgasm, Ash. Not orgasms.” Ali smiles into Ashlyn’s neck and hugs her tight, still a bit winded.

“You know me, I like to be triple safe.” Ashlyn says smugly. “You okay?”

“Never better. You play my body like instrument.” Ali shifts to find a comfy spot on Ashlyn’s chest.
“Well you make beautiful music, especially when you hit those high notes.” Ashlyn teases and feels Ali lightly slap her stomach.

They lay quietly for a little bit, knowing they have a little bit longer to enjoy the closeness.

“I hope I don’t upset you by saying this…” Ali breaks the silence and qualifies what she’s about to say.

“You won’t, doesn’t matter what it is.” Ashlyn assures her.

“It’s kind of poetic when you think about it, isn’t it… where we met, what we’re about to do, and that we’re in an old prison right now, very likely an old cell of some sort.” Ali muses.

“Yeah, wow… didn’t think about that. It really is. Feels like coming full circle.” Ashlyn says in wonderment.

“You think it’s good luck?” Ali whispers.

“You know… I really think it is.” Ashlyn tilts the brunette’s chin up with her fingers and kisses her deeply.

After everything that they have been through to get here, it surprises both of them how quick and easy the transfer is. It only takes about fifteen minutes for the whole thing to happen, with Ali feeling nothing more than the usual slight discomfort of the speculum being used.

“Presto! That’s it!” Dr. Baylor announces when she’s done, gently pulling out the cervical catheter tube and the speculum.

“Already done?” Ali asks in surprise, her eyes finally breaking from Ashlyn’s where her gaze has been this entire time as the officer stroked her cheek and stole kisses.

“All done.” Dr. Baylor confirms. “So, I want you to continue with the progesterone injections for this next week and then you can stop them. You should run out of injections by that point anyway. Remember what I said about pelvic rest and no sexual activity, you’ll want to stick to that. I’m going to have you lay down in here just like you are for the next thirty minutes to give everything a chance to settle. I’ll set this timer on the counter and when it goes off you can get dressed and head out. Now it’s just the waiting.”

“Thank you so much for everything.” Ali says genuinely.

“My pleasure. I’ll see you two back here in a couple weeks, hopefully with some good news. In the meantime, call with any concerns or if you have any bleeding or pain and we’ll get you in to have a look. Relax and stay positive.” Dr. Baylor gives them a few last instructions.

“We will, thanks again.” Ashlyn replies for them.

“Good luck, ladies. I’m rooting for you.” Dr. Baylor smiles and leaves the room.

“I love you, Alex.” Ashlyn presses her forehead to Ali’s she lays there.

“I love you, Hero.” Ali smiles and kisses her nose, closing her eyes when she feels Ashlyn’s fingers gently weaving through her hair. “You think we just made a baby?”
“I most certainly do.” Ashlyn smiles against Ali’s lips and captures them softly for a couple seconds.

“Ready for the longest two weeks of our lives with no sex to distract us?” Ali asks with a little nose crinkle.

“Absolutely! I DVR’ed all of Shark Week this past July, a four-part documentary about cheating in casinos, and the first five episodes of this season’s House Hunters.” Ashlyn says happily.

“Of course you did.” Ali rolls her eyes playfully. “Is it too late to trade in my fiancée for a new one?”

“Nope. But then you would have to give back the Harris warrior babies.” Ashlyn smirks.

“Shark Week it is.” Ali laughs and pulls her down for a kiss she already knows she’ll never forget no matter what the outcome.

Chapter End Notes

Place your bets… pregnant or not pregnant?
Whew, managed to get a chapter in this week despite my busy schedule! I’ll apologize in advance that I don’t know how long the next one will take, but I’ll do my best not to leave you hanging for too long... cause yeah, we hit the top of that coaster and we’re wild riding now! Hope you buckled up *yelp*.
Oh and smut alert!
Comment away and help me steer this thing :-)
works against her only to hear a loud groan as the brunette turns a bit and buries her face into the
officer’s neck.

“You’re the worst.” Ali whines.

“I’m the best.” Ashlyn plays back.

“Truth.” Ali kisses Ashlyn’s jawline a couple times and then regretfully turns her attention to the TV
just in time to see a great white shark nab a big tuna. “Lovely.” She shakes her head and hears
Ashlyn chuckle.

It has only been three days since the embryo transfer procedure and between Ali still being on
hormones and Ashlyn still coming down from them, both of them have been struggling more than
they anticipated with the no sexual activity rule. Work kept them busy the first couple days and away
from anything too heated to pull back from. However, with today being Ashlyn’s first off-duty day
since the transfer, it has been a much bigger challenge to say the least. Both of them are still a bit
fatigued and just want to do nothing more than spend the day snuggled up together. Unfortunately,
that plan has also meant plenty of opportunities for idle hands to wander. They have certainly already
wandered on more than one occasion today and it’s still only 4pm, which is exactly why Ashlyn
decided it was time for Shark Week.

Just twenty minutes into the show and they quickly learn that even watching great white sharks
violently rip into animals and humans alike can’t quell the heat between them. Lips are locked with
tongues dueling for dominance as moans fill the room. Ali’s hand is down the back of Ashlyn’s
joggers, pulling her in closer. Ashlyn’s fingers trail lightly up and down under Ali’s shirt, making
goosebumps breakout across the brunette’s skin. It’s only when Ali involuntarily shivers a bit that
Ashlyn snaps out of it enough to pull away, knowing her girl’s telltale sign of being on the brink of
not being able to stop.

“Hey… Alex… we need to stop, baby. We can’t.” Ashlyn whispers breathlessly, doing everything
she can to regain some composure and control of herself.

Ali just lets out a desperate whimper and kisses Ashlyn slowly and less heatedly before pulling back
and whimpering again into the officer’s neck.

“I know, baby. I want to so badly too, but we worked way too hard to mess it all up now, right?”
Ashlyn appeals to her apologetically.

“Absolutely. Sorry I keep losing control…my body just goes into overdrive so fast.” Ali says a bit
embarrassed at her lack of resolve.

“Don’t ever be sorry for not being able to keep your hands off me.” Ashlyn winks. “Maybe we
should go out for a little while? We could go into the city for dinner.”

“Good idea.” Ali agrees. As much as she’s tired, heading somewhere that she can’t easily grope
Ashlyn for a while will give her some time to reset and pull herself together so they can get through
the rest of the night without a repeat of this afternoon.

The problem is that neither of them moves right away, content to just sit there cuddled up just a little
bit longer. Ashlyn is just about to insist that they should really get going when the doorbell rings.

“What did you order this time?” Ashlyn teases, figuring it has to be the UPS delivery guy that shows
up most weekday evenings.

“ Heck if I know. And yes, I’m well aware of my Amazon problem…let me live, Harris.” Ali sits up
so Ashlyn can go get the door.

“We really should start inviting him in for drinks or something. He’s here more than our family is.” Ashlyn laughs on her way to door. She’s prepared to joke with the poor guy, but when she opens the door it’s not him at all. “Rivera? What are you doing here?” She asks in surprise, looking at him standing there with a big brown paper bag and a smile.

“Well hey Sarge! Nice to see you too!” Rivera pokes fun at her reaction. “What? Can’t your friendly neighborhood Mexican swing by with some dinner? If I remember right, I believe Ali is a taco girl.” He winks at her and holds the bag up.

“Hey, bro! Really good to see you, come on in!” Ashlyn immediately snaps out of her surprise and pulls him in for a quick hug. “Sorry, just obviously wasn’t expecting you at our door. You by yourself?”

“You really think I’d be in the Boston area by myself these days?” He gives her a knowing look. “Em is grabbing the dessert she made from the car. She thought it would be fun if I just showed up at the door by myself. And speaking of the hottest…” He says as Emily walks up the path to the door.

“Hey Ashlyn! Where’s my Thing 2 at?” Emily says cheerfully as she walks right past them both and into the house.

“Hi Emily, she’s in the living room.” Ashlyn replies with a smile before turning back to Rivera. “So, you visiting for a bit?”

“Something like that.” Rivera says mysteriously before following right behind Emily.

“My sista from another mista!” Emily announces with a smile when she sees Ali on the couch. “What the hell are you wearing? It’s like 5pm on a Friday night…geez, you two went all old married couple fast.” She adds, noting Ali’s athletic leggings and worn t-shirt.

“Em! Hi!” Ali jumps up excitedly and hugs her tight. “We weren’t exactly expecting company and we had a crazy week, so it has been a stay in kind of day.” She defends her outfit.

“Well, mascara is on point as usual!” Emily fist bumps her.

“Girl you know I don’t play when it comes to that.” Ali laughs.

“Wow, Sarge…I knew you were savage, but getting down to sharks is like a whole other level of kinky. Such a beast!” Rivera remarks as he walks into living room and sees what’s on the TV.

“Javi! You’re here too!” Ali gives him a hug to match the one she gave Emily. “I’m not complaining, but what’s with the surprise visit?”

“They brought dinner.” Ashlyn answers from the doorway and holds up the bag she took from Rivera. “And we were not getting down!” She adds and shoots Rivera a look.

“Right. Tell that to your sex hair, Sarge.” Rivera motions to her head and Ashlyn immediately runs her hand through it when she sees Ali giving her a look that suggests that he’s right. “Hi Ali, looking lovely as always.” Rivera finally greets her with a smile.

“It’s nap hair!” Ashlyn protests.

“Of course it is.” Emily smiles and looks at Ali. “When I nap, the back of my t-shirt always ends up a bit tucked into my underwear.” She says matter-of-factly with a smug look and reaches over to fix
Ali’ shirt for her.

“You two are fucking made for each other.” Ashlyn shakes her head at Rivera and Emily while Ali just blushes a bit. “Back to the real matter at hand, to what do we owe this awesome surprise?”

“Weeeell, we wouldn’t have to surprise you if you two would join the land of the living once in a while. We haven’t seen you since before Christmas. It’s been months of just texts and phone calls, so we said fuck it and took matters into our own hands.” Emily explains.

“Ugh, I’m sorry, Em. I haven’t been a very good friend lately.” Ali says feeling really bad. With all the work that has gone into the podcast, wedding planning, and everything baby related, they’ve been really out of touch with people other than Kyle and Chris. “We’ve been really busy between work and wedding planning, but that’s no excuse.”

“Relax, I get it completely. I’m not even remotely upset…you know damn well we both have our hermit moments. Just don’t be shocked when I plant my ass in front of your door because you haven’t called me to go dress shopping yet. Please tell me you didn’t go without me!” Emily waves off the apology.

“I would NEVER go wedding dress shopping without you!” Ali exclaims. “God, I reeeally have to get on that.”

“Ya think?!” Emily replies with an eye roll. “I’m surprised Kyle hasn’t dragged you yet. I don’t care how busy you are, we’re doing it ASAP.” She warns.

“You got it, and thank you.” Ali hugs her again, beyond thankful to have one of those best friends where the two of you can always just pick right back up where you left off no matter how much time passes.

“Still got my six, right?” Rivera looks at Ashlyn.

“Got everything but your twelve, so focus on that and leave the hard stuff to me, sweetheart.” Ashlyn replies in a way only he would or one of the other two guys would understand. The four Rangers never take offense to missed calls and time apart, but stand resolute in enjoying whatever time they have together in whatever manner it presents itself. There are no excuses made or apologies issued and there never have been.

“That’s my girl right there! Back at ya, Sarge.” Rivera clamps a hand down on her shoulder and squeezes it. “So, can we eat already? You two done over there?” He looks at Ali and Emily.

“Alright, alright, we can eat.” Emily rolls her eyes at them. “You think we’ll ever have this Ranger bro code all figured out?” She asks Ali.

“Doubtful, but it’s kinda cute, so I don’t care.” Ali grins.

“Hey now, we are fierce and lethal.” Ashlyn defends.

“I dunno, Sarge…I kinda like being cute. Like a Doberman puppy that’s all adorable, but could rip your face off in like a second.” Rivera muses.

“What did you do to him?” Ashlyn jokingly eyes Emily.

“Made him better, duh.” Emily says nonchalantly and walks into the living room with Ali.

“Bro.” Ashlyn looks at Rivera who is watching Emily walk away with a goofy smile on his face.
“Oh shut up, Harris. Don’t even get me started on you and lawyer princess over there!” Rivera raises his eyebrow.

“Yeah, yeah. Come on, I’m starving.” Ashlyn puts an end to the banter.

“Finally!” Rivera follows her.

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“Alright, so spill. What is going on with you two? Something is different.” Emily asks out of nowhere as they eat dinner.

“Different?” Ali replies in a high pitched voice, almost dropping the taco she was eating. Ashlyn immediately feels the brunette tense up beside her. The two of them had agreed that they wouldn’t tell anyone about the baby attempt other than Kyle and Chief Fulton who had figured it out on his own. As much they’re excited about it, neither of them wants to deal with having to tell people bad news if it doesn’t work out right away. After talking it through, it just seemed easier to work through any unsuccessful attempts quietly on their own and then celebrate good news with other people when the time eventually comes.

“Yeah, I don’t know. You two look extra loved up somehow. Like I can see that you’re both tired, but there’s this sweetness between you and it’s like you have to be touching at all times. I mean, you’re always all sappy around each other, but this just seems different. Anything going on?” Emily elaborates and repeats her question.

“You just haven’t been around us since we got engaged.” Ashlyn quickly covers for them and feels Ali squeeze her thigh appreciatively. “It shouldn’t be different, but I guess it is. Makes us feel closer.”

“What she said.” Ali nods in agreement and continues eating before she gives anything else away.

“Geez, you’re right…we haven’t actually seen you since then. That must be it. So sweet you two.” Emily smiles at them.

“Soooo…when did you two move in together and where?” Ashlyn drops the question without warning, looking between Rivera and Emily. “That’s the real reason for this surprise dinner, right?” She adds, while Ali actually drops her taco this time with her mouth hanging open a bit.

“How the hell…” Emily starts but is cut off by Rivera.

“See! I told you! Didn’t I tell you? She doesn’t miss anything.” Rivera says to Emily before looking at Ashlyn. “What was it this time, Sarge?”

“You’ve had your thumbs tucked into your palms off and on since you got here. You only do that when you’re trying to not to jump the gun.” Ashlyn gives him a meaningful look before continuing. “I was between moving in together or engaged, but then with the vague response you gave when I asked if you were visiting and no real reaction to what I just said about engagement…moved in together it is.” She explains casually.

“It is so fucking hot when you do that.” Ali leans over and whispers in Ashlyn’s ear, giving it a quick little nip for good measure, her hand moving just a bit higher up the officer’s thigh.

“Easy there, Krieger.” Ashlyn warns and gives her a soft, chaste kiss before turning back to Rivera and Emily. “So, are you going to confirm or…” She trails off and laughs at how dumbfounded they look.
“Well you kind of took the fun out of it!” Emily exclaims.

“So, it’s true?! You guys moved in together? When? Talk about spilling, get going!” Ali prods her.

“Just this week. On Tuesday actually. I mean, it was in the works since like February, but we didn’t want to say anything until it actually happened. We moved into a nice two-bedroom apartment in that new development in Waltham for now.” Emily smiles at Rivera and squeezes his hand.

“Wow! This is so exciting…you guys!!” Ali squeals happily and gets up to go hug the two of them together. “You’re like ten minutes from here!”

“So awesome! Congrats!” Ashlyn joins in. “You weren’t kidding when you said ‘neighbors’ before. My little Corporal is all grown up.” She pretends to wipe a tear.

“Speaking of… so, you’re not engaged?” Ali questions.

“Not yet.” Rivera confirms with an insinuating smile.

“Damn, Javi… how does your mama feel about all this? I’m sure she had plenty to say.” Ali looks at him with a slight cringe.

“Ha! It was her idea!” Rivera replies.

“Really? Your conservative, catholic, helicopter-parent, Mexican mama is happy that you moved in with your definitely not Hispanic girlfriend who you’re not even engaged to…and all the way up in Massachusetts no less?” Ashlyn asks skeptically. She loves Rivera’s mama, but the woman is majorly overprotective when it comes to her son.

“Christmas went really really well.” Emily says with a huge grin.

“Yeah apparently, wow.” Ali says in disbelief.

“To say the least.” Ashlyn adds.

“Mama loves Em, and she sees how much I love her. She could care less about the rest. I think she’ll skin me alive if I fuck this up.” Rivera laughs. “I actually think she’s hoping that I knock her up. She wants grandbabies, like yesterday.”

Ashlyn feels her Ali squeeze her leg again and gently covers the brunette’s hand with her own.

“Well then you better get a move on, Papi. This girl is not warming up this oven for a bun until she’s had a proper honeymoon.” Emily warns him teasingly.

“Duly noted, mi alma.” Rivera gives her a sweet smile before turning back to the conversation.

“That’s just how it is with Mama… once she likes a person, nothing gets in her way. I mean, she used to be homophobic until Harris came around and saved my ass. Now she bakes cookies for the local high school’s LGBT student club and writes checks to the HRC with reckless abandon.”

“Oh my god, really?” Ali giggles.

“Really.” Ashlyn laughs. “I love that woman. You know she still knits me a handmade scarf every year for my birthday?”

“Awww, that’s cute.” Ali replies and Emily nods with a smile.

“Yep, except the first couple years they were always rainbow colored.” Rivera laughs and Ashlyn
chuckles along with him. “What can I say, she’s committed. You should’ve seen her the last few years when the prison mailed the scarves back to her because Harris couldn’t have them. She was ready to fly here and crack some skulls.”

“Wait, she still tried to send them to me in jail?” Ashlyn asks a little bit emotionally.

“Yeah.” Rivera says simply.

“Did not know that.” Ashlyn sighs. “I really need to visit her.” She adds with a little smile.

“Nah, just invite her to the wedding. She’d be thrilled. Plus, she already LOVES you, Ali. Between stealing Sarge’s heart and introducing me to Em, not to mention that she googled you on the internet and saw how much free immigration work you’ve done for Hispanic people… you’re like her hero.”

“Oh so sweet, of course she’s invited.” Ali assures him. “I can’t wait to meet her… and tell her how you hit on me that one time.”

“You wouldn’t!” Rivera eyes her nervously.

“No I wouldn’t, but it sure is fun to watch you squirm.” Ali laughs.

“Speaking of hitting on women. I want to know what this thumb tucked into your palms thing that Ashlyn mentioned is all about…” Emily looks between Ashlyn and Rivera expectantly.

“Not what you think… war, not women.” Rivera clears it up and looks at Ashlyn to signal that it’s okay for her to reveal it.

“He used to tuck his thumb against his palm to keep his fingers away from the trigger when he was lining up a sniper shot.” Ashlyn elaborates it without getting too detailed.

“I was always an overzealous fuck when it came to women. My rifle though…I treated that thing like…well… you.” Rivera smiles at Emily lovingly and she immediately gets flushed and smiles back.

“Oh my god, and you two think we’re bad?! Really?” Ashlyn throws her hands up. “I’m literally drowning in the goo!”

“Yeah, woah, Javi… big stuff with the rifle talk there.” Ali pretend gags. “And Em is literally swooning! Please tell me we don’t look like that.” Ali appeals to Ashlyn.

“We don’t look like that. Ever.” Ashlyn assures her.

“Fuck off, you totally do!” Emily glares at them in jest and Rivera just laughs. “I’m going to get dessert ready. And you’re coming to help me so I can brag about how good the sex is!” She grabs Ali by the hand and pulls her into the kitchen.

“Wow, Rivera…just… wow. Like who even are you right now?” Ashlyn shakes her head.

“What?!! You started it first with this find the perfect girl thing. I’m just falling in line behind you like always, Sarge.” He shrugs.

“Right. So, perfect girl…but you haven’t asked her yet? What’s the hold up?” Ashlyn inquires.

“I have the ring. I just need to figure out how and when” Rivera tells her. “And now I can’t just go all grand romantic proposal because SOMEBODY swept my girl’s best friend off her feet in her fucking underwear with the perfect ring and a fucking green glow stick on Christmas morning!”
“How is that relevant?” Ashlyn questions.

“Because Em thinks it’s the sweetest thing ever and now I need to do something more meaningful like that.” Rivera half complains.

“Javier… do you love the girl?” Ashlyn levels with him, using his first name to get his attention.

“Absolutely.” Rivera replies easily.

“Want to spend the rest of your life with her?” Ashlyn asks.

“Sure do.” He answers.

“Can’t see yourself ever doing anything again without her by your side?” Ashlyn probes further.

“Well, yeah.” Rivera says like it’s obvious.

“Then just fucking ask her, Corporal. Pick any of the million moments that it feels like your heart is gonna beat right out of your damn chest, and just ask.” Ashlyn puts it plainly.

“Aye, Sergeant.” He salutes her with a smile. “Thank you.”

“Sure, bro. Always have your six… and apparently your twelve right now too.” Ashlyn jokingly shakes her head. “Gotta do it all.”

“Nah, I can handle my twelve by myself just fine thanks. Get ready to be outplayed at the ring game, Harris.” Rivera plays back.

“Bring it on, Rivera.” Ashlyn challenges, already hoping for him that he doesn’t just show her up, but that he knocks Emily’s socks off in the process.

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“You sure there’s nothing going on? You and Ashlyn just seem… closer.” Emily tries one more time as they get slices of apple pie arranged on plates with ice cream in the kitchen.

“Not really…” Ali chooses her words carefully. She doesn’t want to lie, but she’s not ready to reveal the truth either. “It’s just that I feel like I’m in a place where I’m beyond ready to settle in… like really settle into a life with her… and it’s really nice. I love that I’m there. You know?”

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t really know… not yet. But you look so happy and peaceful. I love it.” Emily nudges her.

“And what about you… look at you moving in with Javi! Em, I’m so excited for you. Are you ready for this? I mean, we all know what happens next.” Ali puts it bluntly.

“Ali, I feel like I’ve been ready for him since I was twelve years old. And then I gave up on it for what seems like forever, and now here he is to remind me that it wasn’t just some stupid twelve year old fantasy. That love like this actually happens.” Emily says almost dreamily. “It’s fast and maybe a little insane, but I could care less. I’m not letting it go.”

“Now that I understand perfectly.” Ali smiles. “Be sure to call me when he proposes in his underwear.”

“Ya think?” Emily giggles.
“Well, if he takes any tips from Ash...can’t be too far off the mark.” Ali shrugs with a smile. “At least you’ll know it’s coming when he starts tucking his thumb into his palm.” She adds with laugh as she pours coffee into mugs.

“So true! I’m really gonna need to sit down with your girl and get the run down on these tells.” Emily schemes. “Can you believe we ended up with two super-hero Rangers from the same unit? Like in any scenario we made up as kids, did you ever picture this happening?”

“Never.” Ali admits. “I think that’s what I love best about her though... everything with Ash is so unexpected and yet somehow exactly what I always wanted.”

“Amen to that.” Emily agrees wholeheartedly and holds up her coffee mug. “To love, marriage, and a whole mess of babies to come.”

“I’ll toast to that.” Ali smiles and clinks her mug to Emily’s. “Especially the last part.” Ali winks, not able to help herself, walking away quickly before Emily can really think about what she said any more deeply.

Wednesday, April 25th

“Hey, beautiful.” Ashlyn lightly runs her hand through Ali’s hair and kisses her forehead to gently rouse her. For the third day in a row, she’s come home from work to find Ali fast asleep on the couch. “You doing ok, love?” She asks as sleepy whiskey eyes open and meet hers.

“Hi.” Ali smiles groggily, trying to shake off the sleep. “What time is it?”

“Around 5:30pm. I just got home.” Ashlyn answers as she lightly rubs Ali’s back.

“Oh god, I’m sorry. I should’ve made dinner. I sat down to rest for like ten minutes and I fell asleep again. So sorry, Ash...you must be starving.” Ali says regretfully.

“Hey, relax baby. I’m fine. I’ll just order us something tonight. What do you feel like eating?” Ashlyn calms her.

“Honestly, I could just go for some soup and grilled cheese.” Ali replies.

“That’s easy. I’ll make it then.” Ashlyn smiles at her before looking her over more carefully and realizing just how drained she looks. “How are you doing really, Alex? You’ve looked really wiped out the last couple days.”

“I don’t know. I’m just so tired. And I feel like I’m hungover or something.” Ali confesses.

“It’s too early to be having any symptoms related to... right?” Ashlyn checks even though she’s pretty sure.

“Yeah, still too early. I’m pretty sure it’s from coming off the hormone injections.” Ali replies.

“You know, now that you say that...I kind of felt a bit like I was hungover afterwards too for a couple days. Makes sense. I mean, Dr. Baylor did tell me that the hormones can be a bit of a booster, so some sort of stepdown after the fact makes sense.” Ashlyn thinks out loud.

“Will you just hold me for a little bit?” Ali asks.
“Don’t even have to ask.” Ashlyn immediately lays down on the couch and pulls the brunette into her arms, covering her face in little kisses before leaving a soft, lingering one on her lips. She feels Ali bury her face into the crook of her neck and hugs her tight.

“Ash?” Ali whispers into the skin of the officer’s neck after it has been quiet for a few minutes.

“Yeah?” Ashlyn replies.

“I actually feel crampy…like I’m about to…” Ali can’t get herself to say the rest out loud. “I’m scared. What if…”

“Hey, honey… look at me.” Ashlyn holds Ali’s face in her hands, the two of them close enough to breathe the same air. “It’s ok. It may not be what we’re hoping for, but it’s completely ok. We knew going in that the odds are against us. We’ll try again and we’ll get there. I know it’s hard, baby. But we’ll give ourselves a little time to fall apart, then we’ll pick it all back up and go again. Together… always. Ok?”

“Thank you for not trying to pretend like it’ll be okay right away.” Ali says sincerely, comforted that Ashlyn is never anything less than completely honest with her.

“We went through a lot…it’s only realistic that we’ll be a little upset if it doesn’t work out this time.” Ashlyn fully admits. “But, we’re strong and we have each other… we’ll be okay and we’ll make our way through until it happens for us.”

“You’re right. We’ll get there…I know.” Ali pulls Ashlyn back in close to her.

“For now, let’s not get ahead of ourselves until we know for sure, ok?” Ashlyn suggests.


“I love you too.” Ashlyn leans down to kiss her sweetly before pulling back and holding the brunette against her chest. Only five minutes later she hears a light little snore and glances down to find Ali asleep again. She moves slowly to get up without waking her so she can make the grill cheese and soup before having to get Ali up again, hoping that the little smile on the brunette’s face right now means that she’s having sweet dreams.

Thursday, April 26th

“Alex?” Ashlyn calls loudly through the house for like the fourth time already since she got home from work. The brunette’s car is in the driveway, so she should be here. After locking up her gun in the safe, she tried the living room, kitchen, and Ali’s office, but didn’t find her in any of those usual spots. It certainly doesn’t help that the Newton house is so big.

“Baby?” She tries again as she heads upstairs to their bedroom, but finds it empty despite the fact that the bed covers are a bit messed up. She’s about to go check the laundry room when she catches a glimpse of Ali’s legs on the floor of the master bathroom as she walks by it. “Alex!” Her heart drops and starts beating furiously in slight panic when she sees Ali slumped against the bathroom wall by the toilet, her head a bit lolled to the side and her legs sprawled out on the floor. Her eyes are closed and she seems like she’s sleeping, mascara is streaked down her cheeks from crying.

“Alex… can you open your eyes? I’m here, baby…open your eyes.” Ashlyn strokes her cheek and tries to wake her up. She breathes an audible sigh of relief when Ali’s eyes open and she gets a half smile from the brunette. “Hey, are you ok? Are you sick? Are you hurt?” She asks, desperately
searching Ali’s face for some indication.

Ali just nods her head no and then pulls Ashlyn down into a tight hug, taking a few very deep breaths.

“Sweetheart, you’re scaring me. What’s going on? Please tell me.” Ashlyn pleads as she strokes Ali’s back, still squeezed in her tight grip.

“I got… my period.” Ali barely gets out in a choked whisper before she starts sobbing.

Ashlyn immediately drops down beside her and pulls Ali into her lap, holding her as tight as she can. “I’m sorry…I’m so sorry. It’s going to be ok, Alex. I promise, it’s ok. I love you and I’ve got you.”

The sit there for what seems like at least an hour, the room growing darker with each passing minute as the sun sets outside. It’s Ashlyn who finally breaks the heavy silence when Ali seems to be somewhat composed again. “We should call Dr. Baylor’s office. When did it start?” She does her best to be useful despite feeling lost at what exactly to do right now.

“Just before 3pm.” Ali replies flatly. “I called. Appointment is at 9am tomorrow morning to check my bloodwork.”

“Ok, good.” Ashlyn acknowledges. “Why didn’t you call me?” She asks gently, wishing she had known so she could have left work and been here as soon as possible.

“You were at work…I didn’t want to…” Ali trails off, her eyes looking teary again.

“It’s ok, honey.” Ashlyn assures her. “Did you throw up?” She tries to assess why Ali was in the bathroom like this when she got home.

“Yeah.” Ali answer quietly.

“How do you feel right now?” The officer probes a bit.

“Ok. Just… sad.” Ali says honestly, her head dropping further into the crook of Ashlyn’s neck.

“I know, love. I know.” Ashlyn kisses her forehead. “I’m going to move us to the bed, ok?”

“Ok.” Ali agrees and moves her arms so that they’re up around the officer’s shoulders as Ashlyn shifts to get up, easily lifting the brunette along with her and walking them both to the bed where she lays Ali down gently. “Thank you for carrying me.” Ali whispers as the bed dips beside her, Ashlyn’s arms already back around her protectively. “I love when you carry me.”

“Then I’ll carry you everywhere and always.” Ashlyn says sweetly, moving a few strands of hair away from Ali’s face.

“I know you would.” Ali gives her a little smile, never ceasing to feel anything but pure love from this woman. “I’m sorry, Ash. I’m really sorry. Are you disappointed?” She forces herself to ask the question she’s been dreading as a few more tears fall.

“Oh Alex… listen really carefully, sweetheart. Am I disappointed that it didn’t go our way this time and that life decided that this wasn’t our moment… of course I am. Like you, I’m sad it didn’t happen for us like we hoped. But am I disappointed in or upset with you... absolutely not. Never could be, never will be. You have nothing to be sorry for, nothing at all. You’re nothing short of amazing and I love you with all my heart, same as I always have. Do you understand?” Ashlyn explains sincerely.
Ali just nods and snuggles into Ashlyn even further despite already being practically half on top of her. “I love you too. Couldn’t handle this without you.”

“You don’t have to. We’re doing it together, baby. Every single step, good or bad.” Ashlyn reminds her before they lay quietly again for a while until Ali’s stomach gurgles.

“I know you probably don’t feel like it, but we should eat something.” Ashlyn says and gets another nod from Ali. “Anything in particular you’re up for?”

“Whatever gets me back in your arms the fastest.” Ali kisses Ashlyn’s chin. “Don’t want to be away from you.”

“What if I just order us a pizza so all I have to do is run downstairs quickly when it gets here?” Ashlyn suggests.

“Perfect.” Ali agrees.

“Pepperoni and pineapple?” The officer goes with their usual.


“Of course we can. Seems like a good night for deliciously spicy torture.” Ashlyn shrugs off the atypical request.

“My thoughts exactly.” Ali smiles.

“There’s my beautiful smile.” Ashlyn leans in and gives her a soft kiss before grabbing her phone to order the pizza.

“I ruined your uniform.” Ali runs her fingers over the mascara smudges staining the left shoulder and collar of the cadet blue shirt.

“That is the last thing I’m worried about.” Ashlyn assures her. “Okay if I run to the bathroom for a minute and change so that my badge isn’t pressing into your face?”

“Of course, sorry.” Ali replies, feeling bad that poor Ashlyn has been stuck in her uniform for the two hours she’s been home already.

“Nothing to be sorry for, honey. I mean that.” Ashlyn gives her a kiss and heads off to quickly change into some sweatpants and a comfortable t-shirt. She comes back just a couple minutes later with a make-up remover wipe and a warm washcloth. “Come here, let me clean your face for you.” She watches Ali close her eyes and very gently works the wipe over her eyelids and cheeks to get the mascara off before softly running the warm washcloth over her entire face.

“Thank you. That feels so much better.” Ali is surprised how such a simple action did so much to soothe and refresh her.

“I really love you.” Ashlyn lays down pulls Ali back against her after tossing the washcloth near the bathroom door.

“I know you do. You never stop showing me. I love you too… so much. Don’t know what I’d do without you.” Ali voices in complete truth. She has been nothing but fiercely independent her whole life, but now that she’s found Ashlyn Harris, she often wonders how she ever survived without her.
The pizza provides good distraction for a while. They eat in bed, laughing occasionally when one of them gets a particularly hot slice of jalapeno and has to down some water. Dinner only lasts so long though before the thick quiet settles back in.

“You ok?” Ashlyn asks when Ali winces and tenses a bit.

“Cramps.” Ali says and smiles a bit when Ashlyn’s hand immediately slips under her shirt to rub her belly gently like she always does when she’s crampy.

“Did you take some Advil? I can go get you some.” Ashlyn offers.

“No, I didn’t. I just… this is so stupid…” Ali replies shyly.

“You can tell me.” Ashlyn encourages her.

“Well you’re not supposed to take Advil when you’re...” She can’t get herself to say the word right now. “I didn’t want to, just in case for some reason tomorrow… even though I know… ugh, isn’t that stupid?” Ali stutters through it.

“It’s not stupid, Alex. Not stupid at all.” Ashlyn replies. “Prepare for the worst, but hope for the best, right?”

“Right.” Ali says quietly, feeling tired again.

It’s not long before Ashlyn hears another little snore that signals the brunette has fallen asleep again. She lays awake a while longer, listening to Ali breathe and still gently rubbing her belly… and that’s when it really hits her. Had this gone the other way, she’d be in this exact position right now with a smile on her face and a happy heart… holding Ali’s belly for a completely different reason. The tears flow down her face freely as she lets all of the emotions go, the sadness for what wasn’t and the fear of potentially more heartache to come.

Eventually the tears stop falling and her eyes wander the room, coming to stop on the moon that is mostly full and shining in through the large glass sliding door that leads out to the private roof deck. It’s a poignant reminder of where she is right now and a renewed sense of calm and peace begins to settle in, pushing away the sadness.

A year ago, she sat alone on the beach most nights and gazed at that same moon trying to convince herself that she wasn’t broken, that she deserved to love and to be loved. And just a year before that, she could see no moon at all… her entire being as dark and empty as the cell she was confined to. But tonight… right now, she’s holding Alexandra Krieger in her arms with more love in her heart than she ever thought possible. That alone will always be more than enough. Everything else, all of those extra bonuses that they will surely stop at nothing to make happen… they will come exactly when they are meant to.

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Friday, April 27th

“Hi ladies. How are we doing this morning?” Dr. Baylor checks in with them despite knowing the answer isn’t going to be a good one.
“Not feeling so great, honestly. But we knew this was a possibility, so we’re dealing with it as best we can.” Ali answers for them.

“I know this part of the process can be the hardest and most trying. As I said before, it’s not uncommon to have to undergo a couple rounds before being successful. I still feel very positive and optimistic, that hasn’t changed.” Dr. Baylor commiserates and does her best to reassure them before getting into the official results.

“Thank you, we can definitely use the reminder.” Ashlyn says appreciatively as she holds Ali’s hand in her lap.

“Ali, your bloodwork shows an HCG level of 5mIU/ml and we consider that negative for pregnancy. A pregnant result would be over 25mIU/ml. We’re at day eleven post transfer and usually by day ten that HCG indicates a reliable pregnancy result. We often wait until day fourteen to have more confidence, but between your low HCG level and your menstrual symptoms… unfortunately, I’m pretty confident in the assessment that this was not a successful IVF cycle.” Dr. Baylor explains straight-forwardly.

No matter how prepared they are for the official result, it still hurts. The last teeny tiny spark of hope now completely extinguished. Both of them nod their heads to signal that they’re following along while working to swallow the huge lump in their throats.

“As you know, you have 14 frozen embryos to work with going forward, which is phenomenal. While you have the option to jump right into the next cycle and try again, I am going to suggest that you wait and skip a cycle before the next try. There is evidence to suggest that there is a slightly higher success rate on the second try if the body is given a chance to sort of reset itself with a skipped cycle. So, it’s my professional opinion that it’s best give yourself this next cycle to mentally and physically refresh and then try again on the one following that. Thoughts?” Dr. Baylor suggests.

Ashlyn gives Ali a little nod and smile which signals that it’s completely up to her and the brunette thinks it over for a couple seconds before answering. “We trust and value your guidance on this, so even though I’m anxious to try again… we’ll wait and skip a cycle.”

“I think that’s a wise decision.” Dr. Baylor assures her. “And it seems longer than it is. Don’t forget that your next cycle actually starts in just about three weeks, so it’s really not so far away.”

“Oh right, forgot that it starts sooner than it seems like it would.” Ali remarks.

“You’ll be on the same injection schedule as this last time. So, why don’t I go ahead and schedule you for May 18th, three weeks from today. We’ll get your bloodwork done that day and have the nurse get you started with the injections again assuming everything looks good.” Dr. Baylor puts forth.

“Oh um… I actually have to be at work that Friday.” Ashlyn says as she looks at her phone calendar. “I have officer recerts that I can’t get out of that morning.” She tells Ali.

“It’s just bloodwork and a refresher on the injections with the nurse, right?” Ali asks Dr. Baylor.

“Correct. You won’t be seeing me that morning. It’s just a quick visit.” She replies.

“I’m fine coming by myself, Ash. Really, don’t worry.” Ali assures the officer.

“You’re sure?” Ashlyn hesitates.

“Positive, honey. Promise.” Ali kisses Ashlyn’s hand. “You can schedule me.” She says to Dr.
Baylor after Ashlyn nods at her.

“Alright, well then we’re all set.” Dr. Baylor smiles at them. “Let me just say one more thing…and please don’t take it the wrong way. It’s not a reflection of me seeing anything wrong here. It’s merely that I’ve worked with so many couples and done this so many times that I understand how high the highs can be and conversely how low the lows. Many people undergoing IVF find it useful to see a therapist either individually or as a couple. I have a few great ones that I am familiar with and I just want to offer you those resources if you think that’s something you might like to pursue.”

“No offense taken at all. I think I can safely speak for both of us by saying that we appreciate you caring enough to say that.” Ashlyn pipes up right away on their behalf and Ali nods in agreement. “No need to worry though, Doc. We’re frequent flyers on that airline. As I’m sure you know, we’ve been through a lot both individually and as a couple...so, we make it a point to go twice a month and more than that if we need it.”

“That’s excellent. I’m really happy to hear that.” Dr. Baylor says kindly. “Alright, so three week vacation and then we get right back to work, ok?”

“You know it.” Ali smiles. There’s definitely something a bit relieving about having something concrete on the horizon again.

“Thanks, Doc.” Ashlyn says appreciatively as they all make their way out.

“So, how are you feeling?” Ashlyn asks as they get in the car to go home.

“Mixed feelings I guess. Still sad, but also happy to finally know for sure and to have a concrete plan to move forward with. You?” Ali returns the question.

“Pretty much the same.” Ashlyn divulges.

“Alright, so…let’s do this.” Ali says as Ashlyn starts to drive home.

“Do this?” Ashlyn questions, not sure what the brunette is referring to.

“Yeah, let’s do what we said we’d do and get back on track.” Ali explains. “We take the rest of today to let it all out, let it all fall apart. Then at 5pm, we cook a nice dinner together and we start picking up the pieces. We hold each other up and we start over, fresh and strong.”

Ashlyn can only marvel at the strength of the woman beside her and pull the car over as soon as possible, quickly taking Ali’s face in her hands and kissing her deeply until they both pull away trying to suck in air. “You’re incredible and I love you. We got this.” She says with renewed determination.

“We got this.” Ali repeats, feeling her own fire reignite inside.

“Can’t believe you actually set a time.” Ashlyn can’t help but tease as she pulls the car back onto the road.

“Someone had to.” Ali shrugs with a smile.

“And that someone will always be you my feisty lawyer. Such a bad ass.” Ashlyn reaches over to squeeze her thigh.
“You know it.” Ali entwines their hands.

The afternoon is a perfect reflection of their mixed emotions. There are as many silent moments as there are honest conversations and as many tears as there are smiles, all shared within the bubble of love and security they have created together. But at 5pm, just like they agreed, everything shifts in a joint effort to gather momentum in only one direction…forward.

“That chicken was amazing, baby. So good.” Ali compliments the officer as they finish loading the dishwasher.

“Thanks. That salad you made was the star though. No idea what you did different, but you knocked it out of the park.” Ashlyn returns the sentiment.


“No kidding, really?” Ashlyn replies, definitely impressed.

“Really. Guess I’ll have to do that more often.” Ali smiles.


“I actually kind of just want to sit out on the private deck with you. It’s really clear out and we can put on the heat lamps out there. That ok?” Ali requests.

“That sounds perfect.” Ashlyn tosses the dish towel onto the counter and lifts Ali into her arms, getting a little yelp of surprise from the brunette. “Thought my queen might like a ride.” She chuckles.

“Your queen would most certainly like a ride. Carry on, my liebling.” Ali smiles.

“Oh, she’s pulling out the German. Careful baby, you know that makes my knees weak and we have stairs to climb.” Ashlyn winks and kisses her softly on the lips before swiftly carrying her upstairs.

“What are you thinking right now?” Ashlyn asks after they’ve been cuddled up on the outdoor chaise looking up at the night sky for a while.

“Actually… I’m thinking I want you to dance with me.” Ali replies with a smile.

“Well then, let’s cha-cha.” Ashlyn laughs and helps Ali to her feet, wrapping her arms around her waist and pulling her close. She closes her eyes when she feels Ali’s head find the perfect spot on her shoulder, the two of them just naturally swaying together.

“Sing to me.” Ali whispers into the officer’s ear, just wanting to be lulled by her voice.

Ashlyn just goes with the first song that comes to mind in the moment:

*I'll be your dream, I'll be your wish, I'll be your fantasy.*

*I'll be your hope, I'll be your love, be everything that you need.*

*I love you more with every breath, truly madly deeply do*
I will be strong, I will be faithful
‘Cause I’m counting on a new beginning.
A reason for living. A deeper meaning, yeah.
I want to stand with you on a mountain.
I want to bathe with you in the sea.
I want to lay like this forever.
Until the sky falls down on me
And when the stars are shining brightly in the velvet sky,
I'll make a wish, send it to heaven then make you want to cry
The tears of joy for all the pleasure and the certainty.
That we're surrounded by the comfort and protection of
The highest power, in lonely hours, the tears devour you
I want to stand with you on a mountain,
I want to bathe with you in the sea.
I want to lay like this forever,
Until the sky falls down on me
Oh can you see it baby?
You don't have to close your eyes
'Cause it's standing right before you.
All that you need will surely come...

Ali leans up and kisses her slow and sweet. “Savage Garden. Completely unexpected, but can’t say I ever realized how beautiful that song was until right now. Smooth as always, my cheeseball.”

“I’ve always wanted to love that song, but it’s kind of tortured me until now.” Ashlyn admits with a shrug.

“Really, why?” Ali inquires.

“It played on prom night and I sat there watching my shitastic date take swigs out of a flask with his loser friends, wishing I had someone who wanted to dance with me. Then it played at Chris and Bridget’s wedding. I had just been discharged from the army and I was kind of a lost mess at the time. Some girl who had been eyeing me most of the night asked me to dance and I said no, and then sat there wishing I had someone that I actually wanted to dance with. So, two strikes.” Ashlyn says with a crooked smile.
“And now?” Ali asks.

“Third time is definitely the charm... really glad I waited to dance with you. Torture over, I officially love the song.” Ashlyn barely gets it out before Ali pulls her into a heated kiss that makes her stumble a few steps.

“You’re too sweet for your own good.” Ali mumbles against the officer’s lips.

“You like sweet.” Ashlyn counters and captures Ali’s lips again.

“No... I LOVE sweet.” Ali emphasizes and walks Ashlyn backwards across the deck as tongues duel, pressing her against the sliding door to the bedroom. “Bed, Ash.” She breathes into the officer’s ear, licking just behind it for good measure.

They haven’t been intimate in almost two weeks and tonight it’s just instinct, a supreme act of pure love to overcome the hurt and begin to heal together.

For Ali, it means letting go of the feeling of failure and what she cannot control. Focusing instead on what is right here in her hands, loving life exactly as it is and trusting that her dreams will continue to become reality if she just follows her heart... the heart that belongs to Ashlyn Harris.

For Ashlyn, it’s making sure that Ali knows how loved she is no matter what life brings them. That even if things don’t go their way and nothing is how they hope or envision, that they will still have everything... they will still have each other. Tonight is about giving Ali Krieger every last piece of herself.

The kisses are slow and fervent, deliberate and dizzying as they both hit the mattress. Lips drag over warm skin being exposed swiftly as clothing is cast away only to be replaced by the heated touch of roaming hands.

“Ash...” Ali whispers when Ashlyn’s hand lands on her hipbone, her nipple held by gentle suction in the officer’s mouth. “Baby... hold on...” It takes everything in her to stop the moment, something she instantly regrets the second Ashlyn’s touch leaves her skin.

“You ok?” Ashlyn sits up in concern, her eyes searching Ali’s face.

“Yeah, I just forgot... I have my period...” Ali says a bit shyly.

“Oh... right.” Ashlyn hesitates for just a second before being honest. “Doesn’t bother me at all. Does it bother you?”

“I guess not. I don’t know... I’ve never... we’ve never...” Ali tries to get her hazy mind to think it through before settling her thoughts. “I love you, I want you, I don’t care.” She finally blurts out, pulling Ashlyn on top of her again and kissing her hungrily.

“I actually have something in mind.” Ashlyn mutters through kisses.

“Oh yeah?” Ali pulls away just enough to meet her eyes.

“Yeah... I...” Ashlyn immediately gives up trying to put words to it and reaches over the brunette to get to the bedside table drawer. Her hand feels around blindly for just a few seconds before she finds what she’s looking for.

“I like how you think.” Ali smiles seeing the strap-on in Ashlyn’s hand. “I need a minute to go take out my tampon... sorry.” She adds a bit bashfully. “I’ll grab a towel too.”
“No…wait…” Ashlyn tugs the brunette’s forearm when she starts to get up and lets out a quick breath when Ali’s eyes settle back on her. “We can do that too if you want…just…I was hoping you would wear it.”

Ali blinks a couple times as the statement registers. Her heart drums hard against her chest and it feels like a fire has just engulfed her from within. She drops right back onto the bed, taking Ashlyn’s lips in a gentle and reverent kiss before locking onto hazel eyes that are reflecting love and desire right now. “Really? You’re sure?” She does her best not seem as overeager as she feels, but she knows it must show even a little bit. She can’t help it, she’s wants Ashlyn Harris in every way the officer wants herself to be had, she always has. She didn’t think this way would ever be in the cards, but here it is, and she couldn’t feel any more exceptional and honored than she does right now.

“Never been more sure. So very sure.” Ashlyn replies in simple truth, the venerate gaze and gleam of anticipation in the whiskey eyes looking back at her making her break out into a smile. “But, I mean, if you don’t want to…” She can’t help but tease.

“I want you, Ashlyn. I want you always. I love you.” Ali doesn’t mince words, letting her lips ghost the officer’s but stilling there and patiently waiting for her to control the moment.

“You have me, Alex. All of me loves you. All of me is yours. All of me.” Ashlyn closes the practically nonexistent distance, feeling Ali’s tongue entwine with her own both delicate and demanding. She can only grip the back of the brunette’s head as Ali moves down her neck and across her shoulders, nipping and sucking her skin over and over again until she is squirming and desperately trying to get her to move down further.

“Ash…” Ali picks her head up and meets hazel eyes again, taking Ashlyn’s hand off her head and kissing her knuckles before pressing it down to the bed. “Let me…” She pleads to take her time.

“Ok.” Ashlyn concedes with a smile and tries to calm the buzzing energy running though body even though she knows it’s no use. “Please don’t make me wait too long.”

“Promise.” Ali kisses her softly and moves back down her neck to start the journey she’s made countless times already. She presses her lips to the still purplish scars on Ashlyn’s ear and eyebrow, working down to the deep gouging marks on her shoulder that stole away her intended career, to the tiny healed puncture on her chest that almost took her life, to the raised circles from bullets that once penetrated her thigh, to the thin surgical line that removed one of the keys to her freedom. She kisses them all tenderly with the utmost adoration for the person who bears them, admiring the strength it took not only for Ashlyn to survive them all, but to still love so purely and deeply after the fact.

Ashlyn just closes her eyes and lets herself relish in the careful loving touches… because only Ali can make the markers of darkness and struggle permanently etched into her skin feel like beautiful badges of courage. “Baby…ahhhh, so good.” She gasps when her nipple gets sucked in between Ali’s lips, the brunette working the other one with her fingers and alternating until they’re rock hard. “Alex, I’m going to explode soon if you don’t…” She’s cut off by Ali’s mouth on hers again.

“I got you, baby.” Ali smiles as she pulls away from the heated kiss that has left Ashlyn with closed eyes and heavy breath. She works the harness onto herself, eventually fumbling a little bit and getting some help from the officer. “Holy fuck.” She intakes a sharp breath when Ashlyn tightens the straps and the clit stimulation knob presses into just the right spot.

“Yeah, good luck with that.” Ashlyn says a bit smugly as the brunette lays down beside her and hovers over her a bit.

Ali runs her hand down Ashlyn’s body, down her abs, along her defined v-line, and between her
thighs. She runs her fingers through positively dripping wet folds and slips one deep inside the officer.

“Oh…fuck…” Ashlyn grunts at the feel of Ali’s finger pressing into her. “Oh god…Alex, I’m more than ready.”

“I can see that.” Ali kisses along her jaw, removing her finger and moving it up to Ashlyn’s clit, rubbing light little circles on the swollen bud. “I was going to make sure you were properly worked up and then ask if you wanted lube, but…”

“Please.” Ashlyn doesn’t let her finish the sentence.

“Ok.” Ali gives in and positions herself between Ashlyn’s legs which are already wide open for her. She leans in close to her face and kisses her romantically, pulling back to look into her eyes and run her hand softly through her short hair a few times. She reaches down between them and slides the dildo through Ashlyn’s wetness to get it amply coated, hearing a little whimper from the officer before she stills again. “Talk to me, guide me.” She requests in Ashlyn’s ear as she places the officer’s hands on her hips.

“I trust you.” Ashlyn husks in response, sliding her hands to Ali’s lower back.

“Talk to me anyway.” Ali insists, kissing her softly as she positions the tip at the officer’s entrance.

“Ok.” Ashlyn breathes out, her hands pulling Ali’s ass towards her, hearing “I love you, Ashlyn” as the brunette presses into her slowly. “Alex…oh god, Al…ex…” She lets out a long guttural moan as Ali bottoms out inside her, the brunette’s hips pressed flatly against her own.

“Mmmm, yeesss…” Ali moans right back at the friction on her clit the second her hips meets Ashlyn’s. “You ok?” She looks down to see Ashlyn’s head tilted back, her eyes closed and her mouth parted as long deep breaths pass through her lips.

“Amazing… you…Alex, unh…move, more please…” Ashlyn’s hands dig into Ali’s hips.

Ali complies immediately, pulling most of the way out and then slowly pushing back in to another loud moan. The pressure on her clit combined with Ashlyn’s pleasured face and the noises she’s making is almost too much and she’s finding it hard stay in control of herself. She moves her hips again, looking down between them to watch the dildo disappear into the officer and immediately loses some of her composure. “Ash…my god…so fucking beautiful.” She kisses Ashlyn hard, possessively, her movements picking up some speed now.

“Unnnnnhhh, like that… Alex…like that, fuck…harder.” Ashlyn pulls away enough to demand loudly before Ali’s mouth is hungrily back on her own. She pulls the brunette down tightly against her chest making them feel like one moving unit. Her hands grip Ali’s ass firmly, trying to help set the pace because neither of them can talk anymore. Their bodies are hot and sweaty, sliding against each other desperately amidst a room filled with nothing but loud moans, panting breaths, slapping hips, and the sound of sloppy kisses.

“Ash…baby, mmmmmmmm Ash!” Ali screams and loses her rhythm as her body tightens in a euphoric release that she couldn’t manage to hold off any longer. She works hard to refocus and get back to some kind of tempo, but realizes quickly that Ashlyn doesn’t seem to notice. The officer is shaking underneath her, completely lost in the moment with her arms around Ali like a vice and deep moans just blending one into the next. Ali can feel how clenched the officer’s body is and knows it’s only a matter of seconds. “Come for me, love… let go for me, just me.” Ali whispers in her ear and then sucks hard on her neck as she goes in deep and just circles her hips.
Ashlyn’s fingers dig hard into Ali’s lower back, her toes curl to the point of cramping. Everything spins even with her eyes closed, the orgasm so powerful that it renders her silent and unable to breathe. She clutches Ali so tight against her as everything spasms, so far gone that she can’t even make out what the brunette is saying in her ear for a minute.

“Ashlyn… breathe honey. Open your eyes for me… breathe.” Ali tries again to help the officer come down, smiling when she feels Ashlyn’s grip start to loosen a bit. “That’s it, love… let your body relax and breathe.” She strokes her face lightly and is rewarded when bright green, gold-flecked hazel eyes finally open to look at her. “Look at you…” Her breath hitches at the sight. “Beautiful… you’re beautiful.”

Ashlyn pulls her down into a slow, sensual kiss even though she’s barely even caught her breath yet. “Alex… never in my life…that was…” She tries to find the words through still heavy breaths.

“I know.” Ali smiles against her lips and kisses her languidly for a while, neither wanting to break the physical connection. The exhaustion starts to set in though, their lips barely moving. Ali uses whatever energy she has left to roll over and work the harness off before snuggling herself right back into Ashlyn’s arms, her head finding its usual spot on the officer’s chest as a large hand runs up and down her side.

“There is no love in the world like ours, I’m sure of it. I love you so much, Alex…epically.” Ashlyn whispers and kisses the top of Ali’s head, her eyes starting close as her breathing regulates.

“I love you too… all of you, with all of me.” Ali whispers back, fighting sleep for just a few more seconds to get out one last thought before tonight’s healing is complete and it’s time to move forward. “Hero…”

“Mmmhhmmm?” Ashlyn replies.

“I really thought… I was so sure we made a baby.” Ali confesses, her mind having often wondered over last couple days how she could have felt it so powerfully and yet been so wrong.

“Me too…I did too.” Ashlyn replies honestly and holds Ali a little tighter.

It’s the last thing either of them have left, falling deeply asleep just moments later.

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Friday, May 11th

“Here sweetheart, drink this.” Ashlyn hands Ali a cold bottle of Gatorade when the brunette wakes up in yet another cold sweat in the middle of the night. “I really think you need to go to the doctor.” Ashlyn says for what feels like the umpteenth time.

“I’m fine, really. I inevitably get the flu just about every spring. It’ll suck for a couple weeks and then I’ll be back to normal. Kyle can vouch for me, he knows the drill.” Ali insists like she has been for the last week.

It had started with the fatigue getting worse instead of better like it should have once the hormones wore off. Ashlyn had found Ali sleeping soundly most days when she got home from work, only to make it through dinner and maybe an hour later than that before she was out like a light again. Then the body aches and sore throat started just as she threw up one night and spiked a slight fever of 100.4. Ashlyn had been ready to take her to the hospital the second she saw the temperature on the
thermometer, but Ali had assured her that it would be gone by morning. Sure enough, it had dropped to 99.4 and has stayed that way since. Warmer than her usual, but not an outright fever by any means, which has been just enough to appease Ashlyn that she’ll get better in a few more days.

“What’s the big deal about just going to get checked out real quick and seeing if you need antibiotics or something?” Ashlyn tries again as she runs a cool washcloth over Ali’s face.

“I’ve just been through this so many times that it isn’t worth it. I just go in there and they tell me to keep drinking fluids and resting until it gets better. Trust me, it won’t change anything.” Ali argues.

“I do trust you. I just worry.” Ashlyn replies. “It’s been a week now.”

“I know, honey. If it gets any worse, I’ll go get checked. I have my appointment for bloodwork and to see the nurse next week anyway. I promise I’ll talk to the nurse about it then.” Ali assures her.

“Ok.” Ashlyn gives up, knowing Ali isn’t backing down just like every other day this week. “You’re due for more Tylenol now. Are you hungry?”

“Actually, yeah.” Ali admits shyly, feeling bad that it’s the middle of the night even though Ashlyn doesn’t seem to mind one bit. The officer has been incredibly sweet, making her anything she feels like eating at any time.

“What can I make you or get you?” Ashlyn asks.

“I could go for a grilled cheese.” Ali answers after thinking about it for a second.

“Easy enough. Hot pepper slices on it?” Ashlyn asks with a knowing smile. Ali has been sticking to all things hot both in temperature and spice level. She swears that the heat makes her throat feel better even if she ends up sweating by the time she’s done eating. It has meant endless cups of tea and bowls of soup that Ashlyn has kicked up with plenty of sriracha sauce.

“Yes please! You’re the best, baby.” Ali smiles widely at her. “Really the absolute sweetest. Thanks for taking care of me.”

“Always, Alex.” Ashlyn smiles back and kisses the top of her head. “Be right back.”

Friday, May 18th

“Come on, Cooper…you can shoot better than that!” Ashlyn teases him when she sees that only one bullet missed the center of the target.

“If I get it perfect on the next round, do I get immunity from having to square off with you in the self-defense section?” Cooper asks hopefully.

“Sure, why not.” Ashlyn smirks and watches him fist pump. With the weapon recertifications starting to wrap up for the morning, she has already overheard a few worried whispers amongst the officers about who might have to pair off with her in the self-defense recertification section coming up in the next hour.

She quickly checks her phone and tries to ignore the nervous feeling in her stomach. Still nothing from Ali. It has been almost two hours since the brunette’s appointment started and she feels like she
should have heard from her by now. The final weapon round is just about to start, so she shakes it off knowing that she’ll get a chance to call her in-between the two sections.

“Ha! Suck on that, Capt!” Cooper says proudly, holding up his perfect target.

Ashlyn is about to retort with “I’ll suck on nothing” but never gets the chance as the air fills with the sounds of cellphones and radios going off all at once. The alert is clear and everyone scrambles: ‘All officers report’.

“Come on…fuck!” Ashlyn shouts to no one in particular in frustration as she quickly gets her patrol vest on and speed walks to the nearest cruiser, waiting for any further details about the alert on her phone. This is a rare alert and it’s never good… even more worrisome now that it’s the second time in just over a month, virtually unheard of in this community. When her phone beeps with the follow-up, her heart drops into her stomach: Robbery in progress: Ipswich Savings Bank, 2 Depot Sq.

“You drive.” Ashlyn directs Officer Bailey who quickly gets into the driver’s seat and speeds off without any hesitation.

She closes her eyes as she presses the call button for the first number even though she knows deep down that no one will pick up. One ring. Two rings. Three rings. Four rings. “The person you have called is unavailable. Please leave a message.” The standard robotic recording comes over the line. She’s not home. Of course she isn’t home. Why would she be? She’s doesn’t miss a day unless she’s sick, she’s always there.

The officer takes a deep breath and dials the second number, the fear growing deep in the pit of her stomach. Ashlyn rarely calls this number and when she does, it’s is always answered. Doesn’t matter what she is doing or who she is with, she answers it… even putting clients on hold if she has to. One ring. Two rings. Three rings. Four rings. Five rings. Another standard robotic recording. “Fuck!” Ashlyn yells out.

“Hey, you ok, Captain?” Bailey questions in concern, his eyes glued to the road as he weaves through traffic with sirens blazing.

“Please just drive.” Ashlyn brushes him off. Her hands grips the phone hard as she calls the last number. It’s a pointless crapshoot… she already knows, but she dials it anyway just to be sure. One ring. Two rings. Three rings. Four rings. “Hello, you’ve reached the desk of Edith Harper at Ipswich Savings Bank. I am either with a client or away from my desk. Please leave your name, number, and a brief message and I will get back to you shortly. Have a good day.” The sweet, familiar voice sounds through the phone and settles deep into Ashlyn’s chest with an ache.

She switches her phone off and then methodically begins to flip the inner switches too, shutting off the emotion and fear that would normally rule this situation and letting strength, tactics, and strategy come to the forefront instead.

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“Chief, what do we have?” Ashlyn immediately finds him the minute she’s out of the cruiser. Officers are already positioned all around the outside of the bank, guns aimed and in position.

“Not a lot yet. Two masked suspects with guns entered 10 minutes ago and there’s 9 people inside with them, that’s according to a 911 call from one of the bank employees before the communication was cut off. Someone inside hit the silent police alarm which is what prompted the dispatch alert, I’m guessing one of the tellers. No shots fired that we know of, so looks like maybe a hostage situation right now. I have the techs pulling the video feed from the outdoor camera here… should have it in a
a couple minutes.” Chief Fulton briefs her quickly. “We’re trying to see if we can reach anyone inside by phone since there’s been no response to the bullhorn directions from outside.”

Ashlyn gives a quick nod to acknowledge her understanding of the situation. Her mind runs scenarios rapidly. She’ll wait for the confirmation of what she is already all but certain of, knowing exactly what the likely path forward will be. With that she walks a short distance away to get some privacy and hits the call button. She’s conflicted on whether or not she wants it to be picked up… desperate to hear her voice, but knowing it will only weaken the resolve that she needs to be no less than impenetrable. She gets the voicemail recording, ending the inner conflict and just leaving the message that she needs to.

“There you are.” Chief Fulton says as Ashlyn walks back over. “We just got the footage. Have a look.” He points her to the small laptop screen sitting on the trunk of the cruiser.

It only takes five seconds for her to see it and it’s all she needs to see: a TEC-9 held by one masked individual, a sawed-off shotgun by the other. She silently walks a couple steps away and calmly takes off her patrol vest, her uniform shirt, and her utility belt, placing them on the hood of the cruiser to her left. She takes her pocket knife out of her belt and shoves it far into her boxer briefs, wincing at the touch of cold metal against her folds. She then walks back to the Chief, who is too engrossed in the footage to have noticed, and hands him her gun and her badge.

“What the hell is this, Captain?” Chief Fulton asks almost impatiently at the odd action.

“I’m going in, Chief.” Ashlyn replies evenly.

“The fuck you are!” Chief Fulton yells back. “SWAT has an ETA of twenty minutes, we wait for them.”

“No. The second you hand it over, you give jurisdiction to the state. You do that and no one is walking out of there alive. I need to go in there and handle it one-on-one. We can’t have a showdown here, especially not with SWAT.” Ashlyn tries to explain it calmly.

“Harris, you shouldn’t even be here. You’re not making sense and I know it’s very personal for you…just, it’s not a good idea for you to stay, period.” Chief Fulton says with more concern in his voice than anything else.

“Give me 5 minutes to run it down for you. That’s all I need.” Ashlyn pleads with a steeled stare.

“Fine. Explain then.” Chief Fulton relents, they’re in a holding pattern anyway.

“Those are the same guys from the general store last month.” Ashlyn starts only to be immediately cut off.

“You can’t be sure.” The Chief points out.

“Like hell I can’t. You look at that screen, I don’t even need to.” She points to the looping footage that she hasn’t even had to watch more than a couple seconds of and sees him look as she talks. “Two suspects…black tactical gear with ski masks…medium build, likely male… one 6 foot, one 5’8” in height. shorter one slightly drags his left foot…weapons are a TEC-9 and a sawed-off shotgun.” Ashlyn unleashes the facts on him. “Go ahead and open the case file for the general store robbery….exact match. Same guys.”

“Alright, but so what? That doesn’t give us much more to go on.” Chief Fulton says as he recalls the details of the other case.
“You saw the footage from the general store, Chief. These guys are impulsive with little strategy or plan. Think about what you saw them do and it makes sense now… that wasn’t a robbery. That was a fucking test and we failed it big time. We didn’t show up for over 15 minutes, all the time in the world to rob a place and get away with it. But they had no idea that wasn’t our usual response time. They bet on that response today and instead they just got fucked when we showed up here in mere minutes. They’re in there with no plan and no way out. Two loose cannon loners with big guns, no clue, and probably not much to lose. If we go in there guns blazing, they’re not just going to harmlessly empty those guns into shelves today and you know it. Tell me I’m wrong.” Ashlyn challenges him.

“What alternative do we have?” Chief Fulton challenges back.

“Me.” Ashlyn replies simply. “I’m trained for exactly this. Targets with high-powered weapons holding hostages in enclosed spaces. No one is more equipped to handle it than I am and you know it. We need calm, time to try to negotiate, and if all else fails… a very stealthy attack. We need someone who appears non-threatening, but can drop the hammer if the time comes. That’s my jam. Once I’m in there, SWAT can’t just take over without going through you. You need to give me the time. I’ve got this. And if I don’t, I’ll find a way to signal you. It’s the only way to make sure those people get out alive.”

“So, I’m just supposed to let you go in there unarmed to try and diffuse a ticking time bomb with no tools and no help.” Chief Fulton looks at her like she’s out of her mind.

“Pretty much.” Ashlyn shrugs.

“Harris… I know what you’re saying, I do… but I can’t.” Chief Fulton levels with her.

“I’m not asking you for permission, Chief. I’m going in there. That explanation was just a respectful courtesy in hopes that you’ll buy me some time with SWAT.” Ashlyn gives it to him straight. “You want to stop me, you’ll have to shoot me yourself. That’s my family in there. She helped raise me and I’m not coming out without her.” She adds in resolute determination, knowing he fully understands her background and knows the people who live in this town as well as she does.

The Chief can’t find words, he just nods gravely.

“You’re not going to be able to keep Ali away from here, we both know that. Just take care of her and keep her safe.” Ashlyn says as she hands him her cellphone and wallet after pulling out one of her challenge coins. “Give her that for me, she’ll know what it means.” She tosses him the challenge coin that she knows will back the promise she made over phone. “Tell her I love her and I’ll see her soon.” With that she turns and begins making her way to the door, only turning around when she hears the Chief call her name.

“Godspeed, Captain.” Chief Fulton says solemnly, still in shock at what is happening and what he just allowed.

Ashlyn merely gives him a quick thumbs up before the last switch flips inside her, the one she hasn’t flipped in years, the one that means battle and that triggers it’s very own mantra: I will not tire. I will not falter. I will not fail.

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Ali throws her head back into the seat of the car and takes a few very deep breaths. Her heart is
racing, her mind is spinning, and she doesn’t know what to do with herself. “Get it together. Breathe. Calm down.” She coaches herself out loud.

Her mind immediately goes to Ashlyn. How is she going to tell her? She looks at her phone as that thought crosses her mind, seeing a missed call and a voicemail from Ashlyn along with at least five missed calls and two voicemails from Kyle. They both knew she had an appointment this morning and she knows they must be worried by now, she would be too. It has now been over two hours since she went in for a twenty minute appointment.

Bloodwork had led to a follow-up with the nurse which had then quickly led to a follow-up with Dr. Baylor and a whole battery of other examinations. The conversations and explanations from last couple of hours swirl around inside her head, the words “surgery” and “complication” standing out.

She turns the phone off and puts it down, message and calls going ignored for now. She can’t yet. She just needs a little more time to process, a little more time to compose herself. It’s only a twenty minute drive back to Newton, it can wait until then.

“One of course.” Ali lets out a deep sigh when she sees Kyle’s car in her driveway. She really could have used more time before having to face anyone, but that’s not happening right now. She takes a couple more deep breaths, glad that her heart has steadied a bit even if her head is still spinning. She’s not even fully out of the car yet when Kyle is already there beside her.

“There you are! What the hell took you so long? Why didn’t you pick up the phone?!” Kyle exclaims, his eyes wild.

Ali just looks at him in slight shock. He certainly looks worried, but not in the way she was expecting. “I…uh…” She stutters to respond, but it matters little because he’s already talking again.

“Have you heard from Edith? What about Harris? She’s there, right?” Kyle asks questions in rapid succession.

Ali opens and closes her mouth a couple of times, starting to feel overwhelmed at the confusion right now. “Edith? Ash? What the hell are you talking about?!” She manages to finally blurt out in an aggravated yell, her emotional stability all but gone now.

“Wait, you don’t know?” Kyle’s voice softens.

“Know what, Kyle? I’ve been at the doctor all morning. What is going on?” Ali questions, her heart back to racing again.

“Oh, I thought you would have been out of the appointment sooner. I guess you haven’t… Al, the Ipswich bank got robbed. Well, is being robbed… they’re talking about hostages. It’s all over the news. I thought you knew so I drove right over here.” He explains as quickly as he can, now trying not to get Ali more worked up than she already seems.

“Fuck. Oh god. When?” Ali can barely form a coherent thought, her morning forgotten in mere minutes.

“Just a little while ago, I’m not sure. Hasn’t been that long, it’s breaking news right now.” Kyle answers and watches her face blanch. “Come on, we can go inside and see what’s happening.” He supports her arm and helps her into the house.

“How do you know Edith is there? Did they say anything?” Ali asks a bit frantically.
“No. I just figured she might be. I called Harris, but she didn’t pick up. I really don’t know much other than what is on the news. I thought maybe you might know something.” Kyle says quietly, not sure what to do now that he has Ali in a frenzy right along with him.

Ali just shakes her head no, feeling a bit dizzy and like she’s going to be sick. She sits on the edge of the couch and just tries to breathe for a minute. She lets herself hope for few seconds that Edith is home and perfectly fine, but that thought passes as quickly as it comes. She knows better…Edith is always at work, always. And if Edith is in there, it’s a forgone conclusion that Ashlyn is there doing everything she can to get to her and whoever else is involved. That part of it actually makes her feel better in some ways…if Ashlyn is there, then it’ll be okay. Ashlyn always makes it okay. She does her best to hold on strongly to that security while she finally tunes into the TV that has been on this whole time.

If you’re just joining us, we have an ongoing situation in Ipswich this morning where two suspects are holding up the Ipswich Savings Bank here on Depot Road. As we reported here first, it is believed that there are at least nine hostages and this is currently an active scene. From what we have been told, there has been no communication with the suspects who are believed to be heavily armed. It is unknown at this time if there have been any demands made or if there will be any negotiations. We’ve heard reports that the state SWAT team has been called in and will be in place shortly. Let’s go live now to our correspondent on site, Hannah Klein. Hannah what are you seeing?

Hannah: The police department here is in place and has guns aimed at the bank. There really hasn’t been much movement since. About ten minutes ago, I witnessed what appeared to be a plain clothes, unarmed officer enter the bank. I’m not sure if that has been reported yet, Julie. It seemed like something planned because it happened with very little fanfare. Beyond that, not much has happened here. We have heard that SWAT teams should be arriving any minute and providing helicopter support from the air.

Julie: Hannah, did you say that an officer entered the bank?

Hannah: Yes, Julie. Again, about ten minutes ago we could see an officer getting out of uniform and then entering the bank. Again, there wasn’t much more to it. The officer just went in like any normal person would, didn’t seem to be carrying any kind of weapon or anything. We’re being told that the media will be briefed here in a few minutes. I’ll ask more about it and report back as soon as I can.

Julie: Thank you, Hannah. Breaking news here as our correspondent on the ground at the Ipswich Savings Bank robbery is reporting that an unarmed officer has recently entered the bank. We’ll have more on this soon as the situation unfolds.

Kyles eyes are wide, his stomach churning nervously because deep down he already knows the answer to the question he’s about to ask. “Alex, you don’t think…” He starts and turns to face her only to see Ali with her phone to her ear and tears in her eyes, her face like a ghost.

“I don’t think, Kyle. I know.” Ali barely whispers, choking on the words as her whole body trembles lightly. Ashlyn’s voice is still echoing in her head from the message she left. She’s the officer. She’s in there. Ashlyn is in there. And Ali knows immediately where she needs to be too. She takes one more deep breath to pull herself together as best she can and stands up forcefully. “Drive me there.”

“Alex, I don’t think we can…” Kyle protests her plan, but he doesn’t get to finish.

“Drive. Me. There.” Ali’s face is as uncompromising and unyielding as he has ever seen it. He quickly grabs his keys knowing that absolutely nothing will stand in her way.
Thoughts on what the heck is about to happen?
Guts

Chapter Notes

I worked hard so I didn't leave you guys hanging too long! That being said... we're still very much on a wild ride here. Will your questions be answered? Some of them. Will you have more of them? Count on it. Did I leave you hanging again? Guilty. Will I get you to the end in one contented piece? Of course I will, hang tight!

WARNING: Although I wrote this chapter in the way that it was always planned and intended, I'm sensitive to its timing and the fact that it can be triggering in light of real-life events. This is a robbery and hostage scene that does get graphic at one point. If that's something that you have a hard time with, I suggest not reading this chapter. I'd be happy to give you the important cliffnotes if you ask me.

As always, comment away and tell me what you're thinking...even if it's that I have a pitchfork aimed at me ;-)
“So, I probably shouldn’t ask for free checking then?” She asks with a smirk as the taller one presses the TEC-9 to her head so hard that it feels like it’s bruising already.

“Check her.” The taller one says coldly, almost in a grunt. Clearly he’s the leader of the two.

Ashlyn steels herself for what’s coming, knowing there’s no way she doesn’t get roughed up a bit here. The shorter one quickly pats down her arms and legs before roughly grabbing at her chest and pressing hard into her sides.

“Nothing.” The shorter guy confirms, squeezing her breasts again painfully and chuckling. “Yep, definitely nothing.”

“Check for a wire.” The taller one instructs, watching the shorter one lift Ashlyn’s plain white t-shirt up over her stomach. “What the fuck? You a tranny or something?” He remarks harshly at the sight of her abs.

“Oh is that your thing, sweetheart? Cause I can’t help you there, but I’m sure we can find a few people on Tinder that fit the bill and love a good ski mask.” Ashlyn winks at him.

“Cunt.” He knees her hard in the crotch.

It’s enough to elicit a soft grunt and some dull pain for a few seconds before Ashlyn quickly recovers. “Great. Well, now that we’ve made it past second base and established what’s between my legs… how about a second date?”

“Who the fuck are you?!” The taller guy says through gritted teeth, pressing the gun even harder into her head.

“Depends…I can either be Captain Ashlyn Harris of the Ipswich Police or some random ass chick that walked off the street. Whatever one will get you to ease up on my head faster, you’re giving me a fucking headache. I get bitchy when I have a headache, you don’t want that, trust me.”


“Yeah well she’s a fucking stupid cop if she walked in here with no gun and no back-up.” The taller one snivels, tapping the gun muzzle firmly against her head a couple times. “You fucking slow?”

“I’m not the moron who blew a bank robbery, but yeah sure, I’m the stupid one.” Ashlyn says sarcastically.

“You’re fucking pissing me off.” The taller one spits at her.

“I have a headache. I tried to warn you.” Ashlyn shrugs.

“What the fuck do you want, you dumb bitch? Why shouldn’t I just blow your fucking head off right now?” The tall guy yells at her.

“Might feel better than this damn headache, that’s for sure. I’d prefer some Advil, but beggars can’t be choosers, right?” Ashlyn shrugs off his threat. “Anyway… I just want to talk. Nice easy conversation so we can come to an understanding.”

“What makes you think we want to talk to you?” The shorter one laughs, poking her in the side hard with the sawed-off shot gun.

Ashlyn glances down at the weapon in his hand. *Lefty? Swore they were both right hand dominant.*
She wonders how she missed something like that originally and just stores the new information in her mind.

“I’ll give you three reasons: 1. I’ve been told I’m delightful to talk to. 2. You clearly haven’t gotten very far seeing as how the vault door is still locked and I don’t see any money bags. So, maybe you need a little help. 3. You’re not getting out of here unscathed unless you start negotiating something. I’m your ticket out of here. Unless of course this is a suicide mission, in which case… don’t let stop you, I’ll just see myself out. Have fun, I’m sure it’ll be a real bang!” She sends with a smile.

“Why the fuck would you help us?” The tall one asks venomously.

“It turns out that as a police Captain my job is actually to protect the citizens of this city from… well… assholes like you. Bummer, huh? At least the hazard pay is good.” Ashlyn says nonchalantly. “So, my ass doesn’t get to go home until I do everything I can to get those nine people you’re holding here back to safety. Pretty sure you’re not going to just let them walk out the door… I’m never that lucky. So, how about you tell me what the fuck you want so we can make this shit happen and I can go home to a cold beer?”

“You know…you might actually be kinda funny if you weren’t so fucking annoying.” The taller guy snickers and taps her head with the gun a few more times.

“Ouch. Well that’s not nice.” Ashlyn mocks offense. “I said nice conversation, remember?” There’s something about this taller guy that seems a bit unhinged, but she can’t quite put her finger on it yet.

“Alright. You want to talk…” The tall guy pushes her to walk backwards a few steps by pressing his gun hard into her head again. “Sit the fuck down and talk then.” The shorter guy shoves a chair under her so hard that her knees buckle.

“Cozy.” Ashlyn smiles tauntingly. “Well, can I at least get some names or something? I mean, I already told you mine and right now I’m calling you guys “taller fucknut” and “shorter fucknut” in my head, so might be nice to remedy that first.”

“Ghost.” The taller one says coldly.

“Tank.” The shorter one follows suit.

_Call of Duty video game character names, of course._ Ashlyn tries not to roll her eyes, happy that she’s pegged that part right: two inexperienced, reckless loners who have no idea what the fuck they’re doing because they think this is like a game. It definitely explains a lot. “I’m going to go out on a limb and assume that your parents aren’t jerks and those aren’t your real names. Silly me for giving you my real name, but hey since we’re doing aliases… I want to be ‘Shark’!”

“Say what you have to say before I walk you to the door and blow you away in front of your friends out there.” Ghost threatens.

“Easy there, Casper. I’ll have plenty to say once you and Dump Truck explain to me what exactly you were hoping to get out of this little adventure.” Ashlyn purposely mocks the names they gave her and watches Ghost’s jaw tighten before he connects his fist with her face hard enough to send spit flying out of her mouth.

“Not so funny now, is it Nemo?” Ghost says smugly.

“Actually it’s kind of funny how much you hit like a princess, Boo Berry.” Ashlyn cracks her neck and winks at him, ignoring the throb in her surely bruising left cheek. “We’re getting off track though. I can’t help you unless you actually came here for something that we can give you…it’s that
simple. What’s your objective here, I’m guessing money?"

“No, we came for the lollipops.” Tank says sarcastically. “We want the vault contents.”

“Of course you do.” Ashlyn rolls her eyes. “Did you even research this shit?”

“You are really pissing me off.” Ghost warns.

“Fine. Let’s get real before the politeness wears off.” Ashlyn says harshly. “If you’re smart, you’ll listen and realize you don’t want what’s in the vault. First, that door got time-locked the second the silent alarm was pulled. No one can get in there now for at least 48 hours, and I mean no one. Second, that vault door is so damn reinforced that you’d need something strong enough to take down this building’s infrastructure before you even so much as weaken it. I’m guessing you didn’t bring a giant cartoon box of ACME TNT, right? Welcome to Modern Vaults 101. Don’t believe me…take any one of those cellphones over there and Google it. You know, like you should have done before you even attempted this shit.” She raises her eyebrows at them.

They may not be the most prepared duo, but she knows they’re certainly intelligent enough that she can’t make false promises and hope they take the bait. They’re a bit too flippant and give off this almost crazed vibe. The only option she has is to stay real with them enough that they hopefully buy into her and cave in.

“Ok, Professor Butch Dyke. How do we get the money then?” Tank asks snidely.

“Butch Dyke? That’s really the best you got, Garbage Truck?” Ashlyn shakes her head. “The way I see it, you have two options.”

“We’re listening.” Ghost replies evenly.

“Option 1: You take what’s in the teller cashier boxes and the front small safe, cut your losses, and run. That’s probably somewhere in the neighborhood of $50,000 give or take. And let’s face it, you’re not running anywhere with that level of artillery waiting for you outside, money or no money. So, you’re gonna have to negotiate a way out. My best advice if you don’t want to be followed and busted… ask for an airport escort to a private plane flying out into a foreign country with no U.S. jurisdiction and hope for the best. Only way you’re getting that from those guys out there is if you let go of these people you’re holding. Plain and simple. Negotiate, tit for tat.” Ashlyn lays it out.

“$50,000? That’s bullshit.” Tank scoffs.

“Fuck that shit. We’ll demand more money.” Ghost says in an almost playful tone.

“Yeah good luck with that. You two geniuses picked a bank that also happens to be a Federal Credit Union. This is a federal case now and any demands you make will come from them. You can bet that every damn dollar you get will be trackable and fitted with GPS location thanks to the wonders of modern technology. Anywhere you go with it, you’re toast. Only way around that is if you had an untraceable offshore account for them to wire money into. I’m going to go out on a limb and guess that’s not something you thought of ahead of time? Too late to set one up now, it takes days for approval.” Ashlyn shoots down their plan.

“Then what the fuck is option 2? Enlighten us.” Ghost says impatiently.

“Option 2 is my best advice for you. Give it the fuck up, deal with the consequences, and get your life together. Simple as that. The chances of you walking out of here empty handed and getting away scot free are slim as hell…let alone with any money. If you give up right now, let these people go free, and plead that you were under some kind of stress… you get maybe 10 years max in federal
prison, and likely paroled way before that if you behave yourself. Look, I’ll level with you… prison sucks, but it is better than living your life on the run or getting killed trying. Trust me, I’ve been there and I’ve done it.” She tells them seriously. “You too can turn it around and be a police officer!” She adds with over-the-top cheer.

“You’re bluffing.” Ghost eyes her a bit curiously.


Ghost shoots Tank a look and the shorter guy puts his shotgun under his arm and pulls a phone out of his pocket. His tactical gloves have cutoff fingertips, so he starts typing right away. He looks at the screen for a few minutes before popping his head up. “No shit. She killed some millionaire guy she was having an affair with a few years back. Got sentenced to life.” He says in surprise. “So, you’re not a lesbo?” He adds with his head cocked to the side.

“Seriously, that’s your question?” Ashlyn raises her eyebrows.

“You served less than five years for a life sentence… how the fuck did you pull that off?” Ghost asks with a blank expression.

“Oh look at you with the basic math skills! Impressive.” Ashlyn taunts him. “As for how…get yourself a good lawyer.” She shrugs and smiles to herself at the thought, the first time she’s let herself think about Ali since she walked in here. “Like I said… take one on the chin and get yourselves out of this mess. It’s not that hard and it’s your best option. Or hey, don’t listen and risk it all for like $50,000.” She can only hope that the honesty has sobered them enough to think calmly and rationally. “I wouldn’t think on it too long though, that helicopter you hear out there is definitely the SWAT team and the only thing keeping them out of here is me. Not sure how long that will last. Plus… those ski masks have got to be brutally hot.” She adds with a smirk.

Ghost’s lips curl into a smile and he lets out a high pitched laugh that is shrill enough to make Ashlyn’s skin crawl. She watches him give Tank a look with a gleam in his eye that immediately tells her she isn’t going to like what comes next.

“Well thanks for the lesson. I’m so touched by how much you care.” Ghost pretends to wipe a tear, his demeanor almost jubilant now. “The thing is… I’m not really suited for prison. So, I think we’re going to go ahead and demand a few things. Might even use one or two of your suggestions.”

“How about starting by letting some of those people in there go free? Gotta show some goodwill if you want them to negotiate, trust me. Besides, I’m the only bargaining chip you need. That much I can assure you.” Ashlyn tries her best to gain some ground.

“Hmmmm… I don’t think so.” Ghost’s smile takes on an evil quality as Tank snickers.

“How about starting by letting some of those people in there go free? Gotta show some goodwill if you want them to negotiate, trust me. Besides, I’m the only bargaining chip you need. That much I can assure you.” Ashlyn tries her best to gain some ground.

“Why not? You’re not going to get what you ask for if you don’t let some hostages go.” Ashlyn tries to reason with him.

“Because we’re going to ask for some really big stuff.” Tank pipes up.

“Right. And it’s probably safe to say we won’t get it. I mean, it’d be fucking awesome if we did… but, I’m not betting on it.” Ghost adds icily.

“So then why ask for shit you won’t get?” Ashlyn asks, not sure where this is quite going.
“Because it makes Option 3 all that more grand.” Ghost grins roguishly.

“Oh right.” Ashlyn tries to stay cool and unaffected. “What’s Option 3 exactly?

“Our very own Wikipedia entry. I believe you called it a ‘suicide mission’.” Ghost gets close enough that she can feel his hot putrid breath on her face. “Enjoy the show Sharky, you’re gonna be lucky enough to have a front row seat for the feeding frenzy before you get eaten yourself.”

_Fuck_. It’s the last thing that runs through Ashlyn’s mind before Tank brings the butt of the shotgun down hard enough on her shoulder to register nothing but pain for a couple minutes.

“Put her with the other ones.” Ghost commands and Tanks complies, roughly pulling her up from the chair by her hair and binding her hands tightly behind her back with a zip tie. The shotgun presses hard into her back as he pushes her down the hallway towards the bank offices.

Ashlyn’s mind races yet again to run through everything. She had expected impulsive and desperate, but not the level of deranged that these guys are. It all fits now though… the lack of preparation, the weapon choices, and the bank they chose. It was never about money. It’s about taking a big enough risk to fail…to back yourself into a corner that forces you to act with reckless abandon.

They care so little about themselves that they want to be gone, but not without revenge for whatever has led them to this dark place. They want the show… the notoriety… to be the subject of the next Hollywood drama and the stuff of nightmares. That’s why you choose weapons that look menacing no matter how unwieldy and inaccurate they are to be all that effective for what you are doing. That’s why you choose a quaint small town bank and take sweet, unassuming hostages that make for a good plot. That’s why you half-ass a robbery knowing deep down you’ll fail… because it actually takes guts to create your own demise, so much so that even the most determined people can’t bring themselves to do it until there is no going back.

With such grave new clarity, Ashlyn knows she only has one objective left now…eliminate. _I will not tire. I will not falter. I will not fail._ The mantra repeats in her head as she’s shoved into an office so hard that she tumbles onto the floor, hitting the ground hard without hands to break her fall.

“Chief, you’re killing us! This is not proper protocol. My guys need to get in there NOW!” SWAT Head Officer Humphrey snaps at him.

“That’s my fucking Captain in there that I’m working to get out. So right now, you listen to me and hold back.” Chief Fulton replies back with bite, tired of this guy breathing down his neck for the better part of the last hour. He’s about to tell the guy to go get a coffee and get lost when he hears the commotion behind him, turning around to see none other than Ali Krieger giving the officers at the barrier a piece of her mind. “DiRusso, Keller… let her through!” He yells over to his officers and waves Ali towards him.

“Chief, tell me what’s happening. Please.” Ali says desperately and still a bit winded from having run from the car before it even came to a full stop, not even bothering to wait for Kyle.

“She went in there unarmed over an hour ago, Ali. We haven’t heard a peep from these assholes or from her since, but there’s also been no indication that shots have been fired. We’re working hard to try and get some kind of communication going right now, but that’s all I’ve got so far.” Chief Fulton admits and puts an arm around her shoulders. “Look, she went in there hell bent on the fact that she knew exactly what to do to get these hostages and herself out of there. She was confident, strong, and persistent. There’s nothing to make me think that she won’t achieve her objective.”
Ali can only nod for the time being, the lump in her throat too hard to swallow down enough to talk.

“She told me to….” Chief Fulton sighs. “She said to tell you that she loves you and to give you this.” He holds up the challenge coin Ashlyn gave him, the one he’s been clutching in his own pocket ever since she went into the bank.

Ali takes in and holds it tightly in her hand, her other hand unconsciously reaching to grab the dog tags in her shirt. Ashlyn’s voice rings in her head again:

*Alex, I don’t have a lot of time here…just... those guys from the general store robbery are robbing the bank. They have Edith in there and I don’t know who else. You tell me all the time to use my head, trust my gut. I’m doing that, baby. I just know that I’m the one to do this…I need to go in and get her out myself. I don’t see another way. Everything is telling me to go in there… except for my heart. My heart just wants to stay with you. :::::deep sigh:::::: Fuck this is hard. No matter where I am, my heart is with you, love. Always. I promise, Alex…I promise you… I am walking out of that bank with Edith. I promise. Believe in me. I love you endlessly and I’ll see you soon, beautiful.*

Ashlyn made her a promise. A promise made solid and real by the coin she now clutches in her hand like it’s a lifeline. Because it is a lifeline… an indestructible reminder that Ashlyn Harris will do anything and everything it takes to keep her promise. That alone allows her to breathe for the moment, gives her the strength to believe that everything will be ok. *Ashlyn always makes it okay.*

“You okay, Ali?” Chief Fulton questions her lack of response.

“I’m ok. I’m ok.” Ali says quietly, letting herself feel it. “She’s gonna do this. She’s going to come out of there.” She wills her voice to be strong because she needs to hear it out loud.

“She will. I have no doubt.” Chief Fulton says confidently. “You can stay right here near me, but if I tell you to get back or move…you have to listen to me no matter what happens, ok?” He tells her, doing everything he can to keep his own promise to the Captain.

“Thank you.” Ali says appreciatively, feeling Kyle’s hand land on her shoulder from behind.

“I’m going to get back into this here… we’ll get somewhere. Just hang tight.” Chief Fulton assures her and turns back to his officers.

“Anything?” Kyle asks hopefully.

“Nothing.” Ali sighs. “And everything.” She shows him the challenge coin in her hand, knowing he understands its significance.

“She’ll do it. She’ll be ok.” Kyle reinforces, his arms going around her protectively.

“I know. She has to.” Ali replies as everything really hits her. She had been so focused on the details this morning that the big picture had gotten away from her a bit and not fully registered. But it does now. *She has to…*because she can’t do this without her.

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Ashlyn rolls onto her side and starts to try and sit up, her body already feeling sore and battered from the hits she’s taken.

“Go home, Tin Man.” A familiar voice fills the office before Ashlyn even sees that there are other people in there.
Ashlyn whips her head around to see sweet blue eyes looking back at her with a piercing intensity. “Well hey, Edith! A little late for that, don’t you think? You know me, I hate to leave in the middle of a party.” She smiles at the older woman before her eyes land on the bleeding gash on the side of her head. “Shit, your head…you okay?”

“Fine. I have a thick skull.” Edith shrugs it off. “The stubby one didn’t like it when I shoved my pen through his hand.”

“You stabbed him with a pen?” Ashlyn asks incredulously.

“Her totally did.” A young brown-haired woman with glasses speaks up from near a desk. It prompts Ashlyn to really look around the room more closely, seeing all nine hostages in there with her. Seven are women including Edith, six of whom Ashlyn knows as bank employees. There’s also an older man that is likely just a bank customer and the bank security guard who Ashlyn’s eyes linger on for just a few extra seconds before she takes in the rest of the details. All are bound with hands behind their backs in zip ties just like she is. Edith is the only one bleeding, but they all look a little shell-shocked. The office is a pretty large interior space with no windows, a couple of desks, two file cabinets, a small table, and a few chairs.

“Damn fucking right I did!” Edith says proudly. “I would’ve used my letter opener, but it was too far away.” She laments.

“Which hand?” Ashlyn asks instinctually.

“I was on the line with 911 and he was trying to get the phone away when I stabbed him. He took the phone and hit me with it.” Edith recounts.

“I’m gonna have a look at that cut. Just give me a sec.” Ashlyn scoots her arms and hands under her butt to see if she has enough space to pull her arms under legs and work them so that they’re in front of her. It’s a lot easier to break these zip ties if her hands are in front because of the greater momentum one can generate. No such luck.

Instead she gets to her feet and rotates her wrists so that her palms are facing each other in tight fists. She pushes her butt out a bit so that she can use her lower back as a wedge and lifts her arms behind her as high as they will go. Ugh this is going to suck. She mentally and physically prepares herself for what she knows is coming thanks to her hostage survival training. This just hurts to do…there is no way around it. She lets the adrenaline build and then swings her arms down against her back as hard as she can. A loud grunt escapes her lips as the plastic cuts into her wrists a bit and eventually snaps to set her hands free. She gives herself a few deeps breaths and rolls her wrists a bit to ease the pain.

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“Ok, comfy cozy. Let’s get you guys all freed up.” Ashlyn quickly reaches into her pants and pulls the pocket knife out of her boxer briefs, making her way around the room and cutting the zip ties off of everyone else. “I just made a tiny slice in the locking mechanism so the zip ties will come off, but will still work without locking anymore. If those guys come back in here, put your hands behind your back again and slip them on loosely so it looks like you’re still tied up.” She instructs them and gets a round of nods before she goes to check on Edith.
“It’s actually not too deep, it’ll heal up ok without stitches.” Ashlyn says a bit relieved after having a better look at the wound. “How does your head really feel?” She asks now that the two are close together and far enough away from the others to have some privacy.

“It’s fine, dear. Little headache, but I feel fine.” Edith answers. “You shouldn’t have come.”

“Truth?” Ashlyn looks at her seriously.

“Of course.” Edith replies.

“Even if you weren’t in here…I’d still be right here. This is where I’m meant to be right now.” Ashlyn levels with her.

“And here I thought I was getting preferential treatment!” Edith teases.

“You wish.” Ashlyn plays back before getting serious again. “I’m getting you out of here, Edith. I promise you.”

“Well if anyone can…” Edith trails off with a smile. “I need you to promise me something else though.”

“What’s that?” Ashlyn inquires.

“You get everyone else out of here before me. And if it comes down to it, you leave me behind… you hear me?” Edith points a finger at her.

“I’m not leaving you behind, you old bat.” Ashlyn smiles at her.

“I’ve lived a good life, dear. Remember that in the grand scheme of things. You get those other people out first and if it works out, me last. Well, me and Buck over there… we’ll both be last.” Edith points to the older man in the room.

“Oh, and how does Buck feel about that?” Ashlyn raises an eyebrow playfully.

“Who the hells cares?! That’s the circle of life, he can deal with it!” Edith laughs.

“I only make one promise… I’m getting you out. I don’t give a shit what order it’s in, got it?” Ashlyn doesn’t cave.

“Always such a stubborn child.” Edith shakes her head in jest before locking eyes with Ashlyn. “I hate that you’re here, Tin Man…but I also couldn’t be happier that it’s you.”

Ashlyn leans in and gives her a quick side hug in response before refocusing and getting back to business. “That your private security guard?” She asks, eyeing the guy off by himself in one of the corners. He looks to be at least 6 feet tall with a pretty solid build. His brown hair is buzzed short, his face clean shaven, and she guesses he’s in his late twenties.

“Yep, Kevin Bryer. He’s a good boy. Think he’s a little bit upset with himself right now.” Edith remarks.

“Ya think?” Ashlyn says sarcastically. The guy looks like his puppy just died, his head practically drooping in dejection.

“He had no chance. Kelly had asked him to help her lift a heavy box of copier paper and bring it to her office. He had a gun in his face before he could even let go of the box.” Edith explains.
“Yeah that’s a tough day at the office to swallow.” Ashlyn feels for the guy. “I don’t know how much time we have, but I’m guessing not much. I’m gonna need to go have a chat with him.”

“What’s going on?” Edith probes at Ashlyn’s dubious tone.

“I don’t lie to you Edith, so let me just level with you here.” Ashlyn forewarns her and gets a nod. “You know when Chris and I would come over as kids and say we were helping to weed your garden… but then we’d really just end up eating all your raspberries and making a mess? And you’d always say that we were just there to cause a ruckus?”

“Oh I’ll never forget that. Like tiny devils.” Edith pitches the officer’s arm lightly.

“Well…these guys didn’t come for anything but a ruckus.” Ashlyn raises her eyebrows and gets a knowing look from the older woman.

“Oh.” Edith closes her eyes for a few seconds. “So…”

“It’s fight or die. The clock is ticking.” Ashlyn puts it bluntly, looking around to make sure their conversation isn’t overheard.

“Ashlyn…” Edith looks at her worriedly.

“Hey, I’ve been in much worse situations against smarter men with more powerful weapons. I’m still here, right?” Ashlyn reassures her.

“You sure are, Tin Man.” Edith smiles and pats her leg. “Just remember you’re not actually made of tin, ok?”

“Sure thing. Just remember you’re not actually that old.” Ashlyn winks at her. “I’m gonna go talk to Eeyore over there.” Ashlyn motions towards the security guard and gives Edith’s hand a squeeze before getting up.

“Hi. Police Captain Ashlyn Harris.” Ashlyn plops down next to the guy and holds her hand out.

“Security Specialist Kevin Bryer.” The security guard shakes her hand.

“Ex-military?” Ashlyn asks, knowing that many security guards often are.

“Yes.” Bryer nods his head.

“Same here. Army?” Ashlyn asks hopefully.

“Marines.” Bryer responds with a smile.

“Bummer. We can’t all be perfect.” She teases him. “Former Ranger Staff Sergeant, Task Force 88.” She elaborates.

“No shit?” His eyes go wide.

“No shit.” Ashlyn replies.

“Well that explains the ninja move with the zip ties.” Bryer chuckles.

“Nah, you haven’t even seen my ninja moves yet.” Ashlyn plays back before pressing more. “Did
“You get discharged?”

“Yep, one month into my first tour. Never even got past Private First Class… lame.” He says with a half frown.

“Combat injury?” Ashlyn asks, glad the guy has at least some experience to work with.

“Nope. Delayed diagnosis of Type 1 diabetes. Took a long time before we figured out a way to control it. It was too unpredictable in combat, so medical discharge for me.” Bryer explains. “You?”

“Combat injury from an IED explosion on my second tour. Messed up my shoulder enough that I couldn’t reliably carry a rifle for extended periods of time.” Ashlyn replies simply.

“Sorry to hear that.” Bryer sympathizes. “So… do you prefer that I address you by Captain or by Sergeant?” He asks respectfully.

“No need for either. Just go with Harris.” Ashlyn tells him and gets a nod in reply. “So, listen Bryer… whatever happened this morning, I’m going to need you to shake it off. There’s nothing you can do about getting taken by surprise, it happens to the best of us. All you can do is control what you do going forward. Can you do that?”

“Yeah. Just didn’t go the way I envisioned it might in my head if something like this ever happened, you know?” Bryer replies.

“Trust me, I know that feeling. It rarely ever goes the way we envision though.” Ashlyn shrugs and looks around again to make sure no one is listening to their conversation, seeing only Edith watching her. She leans in and lowers her voice a bit just in case. “So, we’re in a hell of a situation here and time is running out. I’m working on something, but there’s two of them and I’m going to need some help.”

“You got it.” Bryer agrees immediately, his confidence coming back. “What’s going on? Is negotiation not going well?”

“There really isn’t any negotiation and any that happens will just be for show. These guys came for a blood bath… a suicide mission… they’re pretty fucking messed up. I don’t think anyone is getting through to them right now. I see only three realistic outcomes. 1. These guys do what they came to do and we’re all goners. 2. SWAT comes in here and bullets fly with us all caught in crossfire. 3. We take those two fuckers down before any of that happens and get ourselves out of here.” Ashlyn lays it out for him bluntly.

“Well I pick door number 3 then.” Bryer smiles.

“Good. Me too.” Ashlyn smiles back.

“What’s the plan?” Bryer asks eagerly.

“It’s not much of a plan right now, but the goal is to surprise them just enough to get those guns out their hands and make it a fair fight. We’ve got to quietly sneak out of this office and find a way to get behind them so they don’t see us coming until we’re on them.” Ashlyn explains. “We have to move cautious, but fast. There’s no way we have more than an half an hour before SWAT is in here.”

“Ready when you are.” Bryer holds his fist out and smiles when Ashlyn bumps it.

“I’m going to get everyone ready. Look around and pull together anything you find supply-wise in this office.” She directs him before getting up.
“Ok everyone, Bryer and I are going to see what we can do to get us all out of here. We’ll be back as soon as we can. In the meantime, I want you to all to move over into the corner areas here behind the two desks and stay away from the door until we come to get you.” Ashlyn instructs the room, happy when everyone just quietly moves and doesn’t question her.

“What if they come in here?” A middle-aged woman asks.

“You take whatever cover you can and, honestly… all of you throw anything you can reach at them and rush them. They can’t handle you all. Understand?” Ashlyn doesn’t sugar-coat it. “The plan is for me, Bryer, or the police to be the only ones walking back through that door though. Stay strong in here, we’ll get you out.” She reassures them before going over to Bryer.

“What do we have?” She asks.

“A few ball point pens and markers, scotch tape, rubber bands, staples, binder clips, copier paper, a plastic coat hanger, and some file folders. Not much.” Bryer points to the pile he made on one of the desks.

“Plenty.” Ashlyn smiles to herself. She quickly stretches a thick rubber and across the two little hooks on the coat hanger that are usually made for thin clothing straps to slip into. She then pulls apart the markers and the pens, taping one of the empty marker barrels to the main hook. She attaches one of the small binder clips to the center of the stretched elastic and pulls it back a few times to test it before loading an inner ink refill from a ballpoint pen into the empty marker barrel. She pinches the back of the pen refill between the binder clip and pulls the elastic back as far as she can, finally squeezing the binder clip to let it go. It flies straight into the bulletin board she was aiming for on the far wall, penetrating at least an inch.

“Instant bow and arrow.” Ashlyn says proudly and hands the makeshift weapon and remaining pen refills to Bryer. “How’s your aim?”

“Not as good as Robin Hood I’m sure, but I’ll make do.” He jokes.

“Ok, let’s get ready to move.” Ashlyn says and then makes her way over to Edith.

“Love you, Edie. I’ll see you in a bit.” She leans down and kisses the older woman’s forehead.

“Love you too, Tin Man. Your grandma would be so proud of you. She’d rip you a new one for being so reckless, but she’d be proud. And so am I.” Edith smiles at her. “Go fuck ‘em up.”

Ashlyn just smiles and ruffles the woman’s short white hair beforeReminding everyone to be silent and going to the door where Bryer waits for her.

Only three minutes later, after what has to be the slowest she has ever opened a door before to ensure it didn’t make any noise, Ashlyn pokes her head out and looks up and down the main hallway finding it empty. Voices can be heard from the front of the bank, so she knows they must be near the teller counter again. She swiftly moves into the hallway with Bryer following after taking his time to close the door just as slowly and quietly.

She looks behind her to see a metal chair jammed under the back emergency exit door. There’s no way of moving that without making too much noise. She signals Bryer to check the office doors to their right, but as he moves along knob by knob, it’s clear they’re all locked.

She had a slim hope that maybe they could use an exterior office to sneak the hostages out through one of the windows, but that plan is quickly foiled by the locked doors. It makes sense now why neither man is guarding the hostages… they are trapped. The only way out is through the front door
where the two masked men wait. She slowly makes her way down the hallway in that direction, carefully placing her feet to avoid any noise and motions for Bryer to follow. There’s no going back now.

“Chief, they finally picked up a call! We have them on the line. Are you taking it or do you want the SWAT negotiator?” Communications Officer Haley holds a phone out to him hurriedly.

“I’ll take it.” Chief Fulton lets out a deep breath. “This is Chief Mark Fulton.” He says into the phone.

“You the guy we make our demands to?” The cold voice on the line asks.

“For all intents and purposes, yes. I’m going to need some information from you first.” The Chief tries to jump right in.

“Alright. You can ask. Doesn’t mean I’ll answer.” The voice replies mockingly.

“What’s your name?” The Chief asks. “How many of there are you?”

“Ghost.” The voice replies. “Let’s say there’s two of us, but I have been known to lie.”

“Ok, Ghost. Let me be honest with you… all we want out of this is for everyone you’re holding in there to come out safe and unharmed. The rest makes no difference to us. So, whatever it takes for us to achieve that… we’ll figure out how to make it happen. Ok?” Chief Fulton appeals to him.

“Sure, Chiefy.” Ghost continues to taunt him.

“How many hostages are you holding in there? Is everyone safe and unharmed as of right now?” The Chief ignores his taunting and keeps the conversation moving.

“Was nine until Captain Bull Dyke showed up, so let’s call it ten. Fucking annoying bitch that one. She’s gotta be rocking some nice bruises at this point, so I wouldn’t say unharmed… but hey, everyone’s safe. For now.” Ghost says amused.

The Chief winces a bit at what he said about Harris, but maintains his calm. “Ok, let’s keep it that way. What do we have to do to get you to let them go?”

“We want an encrypted account with 2 million bitcoins in it. An unfollowed, unmarked car that will take us to a private plane ready to leave for Andorra. One pilot only, we get access to the cockpit with him. Captain Bull Dyke comes with us until we land and then she can hop her ass back on the plane to lesbo land for all we care. Do all that and everyone else can go free.” Ghost demands. “You have twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes?! Come on man, you have to give me more time than that. I don’t even know what a bitcoin is!” Chief Fulton loses his cool a bit. “There’s no way to even fuel a plane in that time, let alone file an international flight path. I need a reasonable time-frame to work with if I’m going to be able to help you.”

“You have twenty minutes before we shoot the first one in the head at the front door. Better get moving, Chiefy.” Ghost reiterates with a menacing laugh and hangs up.

“FUCK!!!!!!” Chief Fulton screams and throws the portable phone so hard that it shatters on the ground. It’s an impossible demand, an impossible scenario. These guys aren’t here to negotiate, that
much is clear. He puts his hand on his forehead and tries desperately to think.

Ali overhears most of the one-sided conversation, her body starting to shake nervously because it’s clearly not a good one. A loud “fuck” cuts through the air and it feels like her heart is shattering right alongside the phone that just hit the pavement forcefully. She can only be thankful that Kyle’s arms are still around her, her legs shaking and threatening to give out as the Chief barks orders than are nothing short of ominous.

“Burnette, I need a full sniper unit setup and aimed at that front door from all angles, now!” Chief Fulton directs a bit frantically. “If they are going to do this in plain sight then we need to take any clean shot we can get. Hurry, get it set!”

“Cooper, get that media and those cameras as far back as you can in the next few minutes! No front door vantage points, you hear me?” He commands.

“Yes, Chief.” Cooper replies and pulls five other officers to help him handle the ever growing media presence.

“Humphrey, get your SWAT team ready to move on my command. We give it another ten minutes or so and wait for any movement before we strike. Got it?” The Chief makes his directions clear so that no one jumps the gun too soon.

“Fucking finally!” Humphrey smiles and runs to direct his squad.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Chief Fulton mutters to himself as his orders begin being followed. He’s bought all the time he can, but this has gone south faster than he ever imagined and his hands are tied. His thoughts are interrupted by a soft but demanding voice beside him.

“Chief… is she…tell me…” Ali asks, having found the strength to walk the few steps to stand beside the man after he finished directing his officers.

“She’s okay right now from what they told me. They made some demands that included taking her hostage until they were safe in another country, but the requests and timeline are so outrageous that it’s clear they’re not real demands.” Chief Fulton answers truthfully. He sees the fear in her eyes and wonders if his look the same right now. “This is some kind of game for them. They’re not going to do this easily. I truly have no idea what is going to happen in the next few minutes, but I’m putting all my faith in her and our team right now.”

“Thank you.” It’s all Ali can manage to choke out. All of her energy is focused on trying to stay positive, to believe that this is going to turn out okay, but it’s an arduous task with everything going on around her right now. The atmosphere is desperate and grim, there’s no hiding or denying it.

“We don’t know how this is going to unfold or what exactly they’ll do, so you and your brother please stay behind the armored truck until we can get an all clear, ok?” Chief Fulton says gently.

“But…” Ali starts to protest, knowing she won’t really be able to see what’s going on very well from there.

“Ali, please. I promised her.” Chief Fulton gives her a knowing look.

“Ok.” Ali agrees before she hears a soft “come on” from beside her as Kyle takes her hand and pulls her away. She feels helpless, but if all she can do is keep herself safe so that Ashlyn doesn’t have to worry about her on top of everything else…it’s still something.

“Kyle…” Ali feels her newfound resolve already starting to crumble as they stand behind the truck.
“I can’t lose her…not now.” Her body shakes again.

“Alex… you won’t, ok? You won’t. Not today, not tomorrow, not until you’re both old and gray and ready to leave this place all used up and spent. She’s walking you down that aisle and then you guys are gonna pop out like a million beautiful babies together.” His puts all own his fears aside and makes himself believe his own words.

“You promise?” Ali asks, needing to hear the words he just spoke more than he knows.

“I don’t need to promise, princess.” Kyle closes his hand around the one Ali has been clutching the challenge coin in. “She did.”

“She promised.” Ali says more confidently.

“She promised.” Kyle repeats and wraps his arms around her again.

Chief Fulton scans the scene, seeing the sniper unit just about ready to go and the SWAT team already in place. He looks down at his watch. Nine minutes gone. He’s doing his best to wait patiently, to not give the order too soon, but time is running out as his mind focuses on only one thought: Make a move, Harris, make a move.

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“You have twenty minutes before we shoot the first one in the head at the front door. Better get moving, Chiefy.”

Ashlyn is close enough to hear Ghost's voice and what sounds like a phone being slammed down. Shit. She cringes and points at her watch to signal to Bryer that time is short and slowly peeks her head around the corner for a quick look.

They’re both in the main part of the front lobby. Ghost stands a few feet in front the teller counter while Tank stands closer to the middle of the lobby to try and see what’s going on outside. Ashlyn turns back into the hallway and huddles in close to Bryer, knowing they’re still far enough away to be heard whispering.

“We go in this next door and slip in behind the teller counter. It’ll get us pretty close and behind them without being seen. Shorter guy with the sawed-off shotgun is yours. He’s injured and probably won’t be able to get a shot off or control that thing with his left hand. I’ll get the taller one with the TEC-9… I just need a couple seconds of him being distracted to disarm him. So, on my go… pop up and aim that pen refill at shotgun guy’s head, shoot quick and immediately charge him for the takedown. I’ll go at my guy simultaneously.” Ashlyn lays out the plan quietly.

“I can take the TEC-9 guy.” Bryer protests, knowing it’s much more dangerous battle.

“Hey, no, no. We do this my way. Clear?” Ashlyn gives him a stern look.

“Clear.” Bryer relents.

“Disarm and takedown whatever way we can once we go for it… but, if it’s a possibility… everyone stays alive.” She adds resolutely.
“You’re a better person than I am.” Bryer whispers back.

“I believe in justice, second chances, and getting help. These guys need major help.” Ashlyn shrugs.

“Okay.” Bryer nods.

“Ok, follow me and watch for my signal to move. Good luck.” Ashlyn takes her pocket knife out of her pants pocket and opens it, continuing the slow movement down the hallway.

“You too, Harris.” Bryer returns the sentiment and follows her silently.

They reach the door to the teller sitting area and manage to low crawl behind the teller counter undetected. Ashlyn pokes her head up just enough to see that Ghost and Tank haven’t moved much.

“What do you see?” Ghost asks.

“Looks like SWAT guys getting set.” Tank reports back.

“Well, if they want a full on fire fight we can do that.” Ghost says nonchalantly. “Tell me if they look ready to move. I want the hostages right beside us if those fuckers come in here shooting. How funny if they killed them for us, right?”

“Definitely! Talk about front page worthy.” Tank replies with a laugh. “Should I go get them?”

“Nah, not yet. I think they’ll still call back. Let’s see if they meet the demands. It’s gonna be fucking awesome to hear what they say when I demand another million and a second plane. We’ll make them scramble all over the place and believe they have a chance before we blow the first person away at the front door with no warning.” Ghost says excitedly.

“You’re sick, but I fucking love it!” Tank replies. “Who goes first?”

“Oh, the Captain. No question!” Ghost answers. “They’ll shit themselves when we off her. More of a statement that way.”

“You fucking wish, asshole.” Ashlyn whispers to herself. It’s time. She positions herself just near the opening in the counter that will easily let her get out, seeing that Ghost is maybe ten feet away. She looks back at Bryer who is crouched just a few feet to her left and ready to pop up. She gives him a nod and holds up three fingers to countdown.

3….2… I’m getting out of here, Alex… 1…Go.

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“AAArrgh…what the fuck?!?!” Tank screams and reaches for the back of his neck at the sharp pain. There’s a loud rumble sound and he sees something leap over the teller counter and come at him fast in his peripheral vision. He doesn’t hesitate, holding his shotgun with both hands like a bat and swinging with all his might.

Ashlyn sees Ghost’s head snap in Tank’s direction at the noise and she moves fast, throwing herself into his lower body and bringing her knife down hard in the spot between his pelvis and hipbone. It’s not a fatal blow, but it’s one of the most immediately painful and disabling. It’s the best she’s going to get with a pocket knife and the inability to be precise in her quick movement. The scream is instant, his left hand already grabbing at the area while the arm holding the TEC-9 swings loosely at his side.

Ashlyn leaves the knife buried right where it is, immediately grabbing his right arm with both hands and snapping it hard at the wrist earning another scream and the sound of the gun hitting the floor.
She keeps moving before he can even react to challenge her, using the hard edge of her palm to connect as hard as she can with the side of his neck right where the vagus nerve runs. He immediately collapses and drops to the ground at her feet, out cold for the time being just like she’d hoped.

She reaches for the TEC-9 on the ground before even thinking about assessing the rest of the situation, but she’s not even halfway to it before pain explodes across the back of her shoulders. The hit is so hard that it knocks her flat on her stomach. She rolls over quickly to see Tank almost on top of her. Her body moves almost as fast as her mind works, kicking up her foot hard to hit his injured right hand and sending the shotgun flying.

“What the hell is going on here?” Tank yells and clutches at his hand. Ashlyn just barely gets to her feet before he is charging at her again. All she has time to do is let him roll off her, watching him tumble to the floor as he trips over Ghost’s body. She watches him scramble to free himself from the tangle of Ghost and takes the short seconds to shake off the pain in her shoulders from the initial hit. She expects him to pop up to his feet and fight, but he stays on his knees and swings his hand hard into the side of her stomach below her ribs. The pain is sharp and takes her breath away unexpectedly.

She falls hard on her back and just holds her breath instead of trying to fight her body to breathe. Tank is right on top of her again and ready to swing a fist into her head, but she moves fast knowing this might be her only chance. She reaches up and pulls him down while rolling them so that they’re now on their sides with her positioned behind him. In two quick moves her arms are around his neck in a choke hold and all she has to do is hold strong and wait.

10 seconds.

Her arms start to shake as he flails against her. She tightens them harder.

18 seconds.

He kicks his legs hard into the ground to try and flip them, but she widens her legs to hold her frame strong and in place.

21 seconds.

Her stomach throbs and hot pain radiates up her side. Her arms shake violently and his fingers dig desperately into her forearm. Just a little longer, hold on.

26 seconds.

Her lungs burn, still not able to take a proper breath. He stills under her quaking grasp. Almost.

36 seconds.

His body goes limp and she lets go, only looking to put him out but not kill him. She immediately rolls onto her back and scoots away from him, exhausted and gasping for breath. It’s only a minute but it feels like forever before her breathing is slightly more even despite still being ragged. She lifts herself up onto her elbows and tries to sit up a bit, but a stabbing pain shoots though her right side again. That’s when she sees it... the handle of her own pocket knife sticking out of her stomach where it is firmly and deeply wedged. Shit.

The unmistakable reclaimed wooden handle protrudes from a sizeable tear in her once white but now blood-stained t-shirt. That explains the pain. Tank must have pulled it out of Ghost when he fell. She
makes sense of it all in her head and quickly looks around to see Bryer trying to get up a bit clumsily, a cut on the side of his head bleeding pretty good.

“Bryer, you good?” Ashlyn calls out to him and tries to sit up again only to feel the same horrid stabbing pain every time she moves.

“Yeah.” He calls back, still trying to slowly steady himself on his feet.

“Fucker, you have to go.” Ashlyn mumbles at the knife and reaches down to grab the handle, closing her eyes and bracing herself before pulling hard and letting out a guttural scream. “Mother fucking, fuck!” She takes a couple deep breaths to try and ease the pain before looking at the blade in her hand and seeing ‘Gehirn im Kopf’ engraved into the handle. “I did, baby. I did.” She whispers with a smile before closing it and shoving it into her pocket.

“I expected him to shoot….didn’t expect the asshole to swing that thing at my head like a bat. Knocked me out. Sorry, Harris.” Bryer says as he crouches down next to her.

“You did great!” Ashlyn assures him.

“Thanks…are you…holy shit!” He finally notices the blood soaked part of her shirt and pants. “Fuck, did you get shot?”

“No, got me with the knife. Doesn’t seem to be bleeding all that bad, just hurts like a motherfucker.” Ashlyn replies. “Listen, you have cuffs right?”

“Yes, think they’re on the table over there with all the other shit they took from us earlier.” Bryer replies.

“Go get them. Run the cuff chain through the handle of the vault and cuff one of each of their hands to it.” She motions to Ghost and Tank. “That way they’re out of the way if they wake up. Then go back into the office and get all those people out of here.”

“Harris, they’re all fine in the office. They can wait a little. You need help. Let me get someone in here.” Bryer argues as he quickly goes to grab the cuffs.

“For all we know SWAT is about to bust in here with a smoke grenade and start shooting anything that moves. Just please do what I said. Get out there to that front door with everyone… raise your hands up so they know you’re not armed and get everyone out and safe. Then you can come back for me, ok? I’ll be fine hanging tight in the meantime.” Ashlyn instructs him.

Bryer doesn’t like it, but he doesn’t argue further. He knows he’s not going to win and he doesn’t want to waste any more time. He drags Ghost and Tank to the vault as fast as he can and cuffs them before running to the back office and telling everyone to get to their feet and follow him.

Ashlyn manages to prop herself up against the teller counter doing her best to stay quiet and out of sight as Bryer and the others walk by swiftly.

“Edith!” Edith yells and starts to make her way towards the fallen officer.

*Of course she’s the last one in line.* Ashlyn shakes her head and starts waving Edith off. “I’m fine, Edith. I’m fine. Just a cut. They’ll send someone in to help me out in a minute. Just follow Bryer out.”

Edith isn’t convinced, standing half-way between Ashlyn and the front door where the others are gathering and trying to assess her further.
“The faster you get out, the faster they can get to me.” Ashlyn tells her with a smile and mouths “go.” Edith finally nods and turns to walk out the door with the others.

Ashlyn leans her head back against the counter and works on taking slow breaths. Just keep breathing, Harris.

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“Movement at the door!” One of the SWAT officers calls out and weapons get raised immediately.

“Fuck.” Chief Fulton mutters as his eyes narrow to try and make out the figure at the door. “It’s early.” He says looking at his watch and seeing they still had 4 more minutes to the deadline.

“Hands up! Hands up!” Officers call from all directions ready to jump into action, but it quickly becomes apparent that it won’t be necessary when the guy who walked out the door puts his hands up immediately.

“Kevin Bryer, bank security guard. Targets are down. Hostages are safe and right behind me. Don’t shoot!” The man yells twice loudly before guns start to point downward and officers make their way to him and the others.

Son of a bitch, she actually did it. “Ali!” Chief Fulton yells almost gleefully to get her out from behind the truck at the turn of events. “They’re coming out!” He informs the concerned looking brunette and points towards the bank door.

“They’re okay?!” Ali immediately questions, tension starting to leave her body. Kyle squeezes her hand tight as they get closer to the door and watch the scene unfold, following right behind the Chief.

“I think so.” The Chief calls back to her. “Everyone looks okay for the most part. She hasn’t come out yet though.” He remarks even though Ali can see for herself.

Ali isn’t surprised in the least. There isn’t a doubt in her mind that Ashlyn will be the last one out. She’s probably in there guarding the robbers and securing the scene until someone can take over. The thought makes her smile proudly, but it’s quickly wiped from her face when she sees Edith emerge with blood on her head.

“Edith!” Ali calls out as the woman is being shuffled over to an ambulance by a police officer and an EMT. She tries to get closer, but a wall of officers blocks her path. The older woman meets her eyes and smiles, giving her a quick thumbs up and mouthing “okay”. Ali let’s out a sigh and relaxes a bit again.

“This is so fucking intense.” Kyle finally says something. “Harris… that woman is a goddamn beast of epic magnitude!”

“Yeah.” Ali smiles a bit at his statement, but her eyes stay trained on the front door…watching, waiting…

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“Alright, Harris, everyone is out and good. How you doing over here?” Bryer is back the second he can be, crouching down by her side again. “Let’s get some pressure on this and get you out.”

“ Fucking hurts.” Ashlyn grunts out tiredly. It’s only gotten worse despite her trying to manage the pain with breathing.
“Let me see.” Bryer carefully lifts her shirt a bit. “Ooh fuck…oh man…” The words leave his mouth in a stunned whisper.

Ashlyn’s eyes travel down her body, finally falling on what he sees. “Well that can’t be good.” She says evenly, almost laughing at what she sees because it doesn’t seem real.

“Fuck, we need EMT. Sit tight.” He starts to get up.

“No!” Ashlyn yells at him and takes another breath. “Get me up.”

“What? Are you out of your fucking mind?!” Bryer yells back at her. “I’ll get a stretcher in here.”

“Just shut up for a sec!” Ashlyn says impatiently. “Listen, I promised the love of my life that I was walking out of here. I know she’s out there…I’m not breaking my promise. Get me up.”

“Seriously? I’m sure she’ll be a lot happier when you’re safely in an ambulance and on the way the hospital. Come on, be real.” Bryer pleads with her. “You can’t.”

“I can and I will.” Ashlyn’s stare is hard and unyielding. “You gonna help me up or am I gonna do it by myself?”

“Fucking Rangers.” Bryer curses under his breath.

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“Stop fidgeting, I’m sure she’ll be out soon.” Kyle tries to calm Ali a bit as the brunette literally bounces up and down anxiously beside him, her eyes glued to the door of the bank. “It’s only been like 10 minutes and the cops haven’t gone in to relieve her yet. I’m sure they’ll head in soon once all the hostage people are safe and secured out of the way.”

“I know.” Ali replies, not moving her eyes to look at him. “I just need to see her.”

“I doubt that’s all you’re gonna need once…” Kyle goes for a sex joke to make her laugh, but he’s stopped by her hands squeezing his arm like a vice.

“Here she comes!” Ali says excitedly, yanking him along as she pushes her way through the officers in front of her. Ashlyn hasn’t come out yet, but Ali can already make out her tall lean frame through the glass of the door.

“Ash!” Ali yells out as she sees Ashlyn emerge through the door, her feet moving quickly in her direction. Hazel eyes immediately look up to meet hers, a gorgeous dimpled grin blossoming right beneath them and aimed right at her. She beams back, everything disappearing but the most beautiful face in the world…until she hears Kyle’s panicked voice from beside her.

“She’s hurt.” Kyle say fretfully, already anxious by the amount of blood on the officer’s clothes.

“Ash!” Ali yells again more desperately now that she sees the rest, her feet moving even faster despite feeling like everything is happening is slow motion. The officer is leaning heavily on the guy who first came out of the bank earlier, the right side of her white t-shirt and pants are soaked in blood. She looks pale and tired. She’s walking. She’s walking. Ali repeats in her head, convincing herself that it can’t be that bad if Ashlyn is walking even if her feet are dragging a bit and she needs support.

“Hey, baby. God you’re beautiful.” Ashlyn says as soon as Ali reaches her side, her legs completely giving out now and Bryer lowering her to the ground slowly.
“We need EMT here now!” Bryer screams loudly to get quick attention. “EMT over here!”

Kyle feels the Chief rush past him and starts to move out of the way, knowing he needs to make space especially Ali isn’t leaving Ashlyn’s side.

“Ash… baby… what happened? What hurts?” Ali pleads, putting a hand behind the officer’s head so it’s not against the pavement and getting close to her face.

“It’s ok, Alex. It’s ok.” Ashlyn says softly, her voice raspy. “Just keep your eyes on mine. Please. Keep looking at me.”

“Ok, I’m here. I’m right here.” Ali reassures her and strokes her bruised cheek softly, her heart racing as her stomach churns.

“Edith?” Ashlyn asks.

“She’s fine. They’re all fine.” Ali assures her.

“Harris, you’re hit?” Chief Fulton says as he gets close, leaving room for the two EMTs starting to cut the away her shirt and assess the situation.

“Just a knife wound.” She answers him, her eyes still on Ali’s.

Ali feels a slight relief at Ashlyn’s answer, having thought for sure she was shot and beyond glad that she was wrong. She leans and kisses the officer’s sweaty forehead, finding it clammy and cool. “Are you cold?” She asks.

“A little.” Ashlyn replies, her eyes still locked on Ali’s.

“Can we get a bla…” Ali starts to ask for a blanket but is drowned out by the yell of one of the EMTs.

“I need sterile dressings soaked in saline NOW!!!” The EMT yells over to the nearest ambulance, his voice demanding and hurried.

“Jesus.” Chief Fulton’s eyes go wide when he sees it.

Ali forgets what Ashlyn told her, letting her eyes drop down. “Oh my god…what did they do to you?” She whispers and feels her body weaken at the sight, tears quickly making their way down her cheeks as her heart jumps into her throat.

It’s not the blood, it’s not the roughly 8 inch gash that runs from near her belly button and up her side… those alone would be horrific enough… no, it’s the fact that what appears to be intestines are spilling out of the wound… that’s what immediately stuns anyone who sees it.

“Don’t look, Alex. Don’t look.” Ashlyn pleads when she sees Ali’s eyes travel down and widen in terror. “Baby… stay up here with me. Keep your eyes on mine.” She desperately tries to get the brunette’s attention and finally sees fearful whiskey eyes lock back onto hers. “It’s ok. I’m ok.”

“You’re ok.” Ali repeats and tries to snap out of it. “You’re gonna be ok, Ash. I’ve got you. I’m here. You’re ok.” Ali presses their foreheads together, not sure exactly which one of them she is trying to convince. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Ashlyn whispers back, doing everything to push away everything that hurts so badly and focus on Ali’s soothing touch. “Kiss me.” She begs.
Ashlyn’s voice sounds so tiny and weak that Ali’s heart feels like it’s actually breaking off into pieces. “Always.” She whispers and captures the officer’s lips in a slow and gentle kiss that immediately makes everything feel warm, and good, and right.

“We’re gonna need a Med Flight to MGH for surgery.”

“Already called it in.”

“Pulse is steady at 98 BPM. BP is 92 over 60 right now.”

“I don’t see any arterial bleeding.”

“What’s the ETA?”

“Copter is 15 minutes out.”

The voices go on around them, but Ali’s lips stay against Ashlyn’s moving ever so slowly as the officer lets out short puffs of breath from her mouth and nose. “I’ve got you.” She breathes out into the kiss.

“Ma’am, we need to get her into the ambulance. We’re going to get her on a Med Flight to Mass General in Boston. They have the most equipped surgical unit. The helicopter landing area is about 5 miles away.” One of the EMT prompts Ali to finally pull away. Her eyes linger on Ashlyn’s closed ones for a moment before she looks at the guy who is talking to her. “I won’t leave her.”

“You don’t have to. You can ride with her in the ambulance and in the helicopter. We just need a minute here to get her secured and into the ambulance, ok? You can hold her hand.” The EMT directs her gently.

“Ok. Thank you.” Ali says appreciatively and leans in to place one more quick kiss on Ashlyn’s lips. “I won’t leave you, baby. I’m here.” She backs up a bit and holds Ashlyn’s hand tightly between both of her own, immediately feeling the wetness of the officer’s blood on her palms and trying to ignore it. She can’t keep her eyes from wandering down again, but luckily the area is covered up now with what looks like large wet gauze pads.

“Alex…I’ll meet you there. I’m going right there now. It’ll be ok.” Ali feels Kyle’s hand on her shoulder. “You got this, Harris. Make sure princess behaves on the trip.” He says in the cheeriest voice he can muster to bring as much levity as possible right now.

“You know it, Diva.” Ashlyn leaves her eyes closed, but raises her fist in a little pump as her lips curl into a tight smile.

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“Alex…” Ashlyn squeezes Ali’s hand hard as the ambulance goes over a small bump.

“I’m right here, sweetheart.” Ali leans in a bit closer, running her free hand through the officer’s short hair.

“It hurts bad.” Ashlyn admits opening her eyes for the first time since they loaded her into the ambulance. She’s trying so hard to stay strong for Ali, but she’s really scared. Before… the other times… everything had felt like it was slowing down… her heart, her breathing. It’s the opposite now with her heart racing hard in her chest and her breaths coming fast and shallow. It’s completely
opposite from before… before… when she had survived. It’s the difference that drives her fear.

“I know, Ash. They’ll make it better soon, honey. Just hang on, ok? Stay with me.” Ali tries to calm her.

Stay with me. The words make Ashlyn’s eyes tear up. That’s all she wants, but what if she can’t. What if her body is pulling her further away with every second that passes? She looks up at the most beautiful face she has ever laid eyes on and speaks her deepest regret out loud. “I didn’t get to marry you… but I love you.” Her voice cracks with emotion. “I do love you, Alex. So much.”

The reason behind the statement doesn't register right away and Ali is about to reassure the officer that they’ll have plenty of time to figure out the wedding…until her eyes land on hazel orbs that house a fear and sadness that she’s never seen before, and then the weight of it hits her like a ton of bricks.

Not in a million years would she have imagined doing it this way. Not like this. She never could have prepared for the moment in front of her right now. She hadn’t even been able to give it proper thought yet as to how it she would do it. She needs to tell her… needs her to know exactly what is at stake and what she’s fighting for.

“Ashlyn… listen to me, love. Listen really carefully.” Ali gets her face close and holds the officer’s cheek in her hands. “You’re going to be okay, Ash. You are going to marry me just like we planned. You have to, honey… because I can’t do this without you. It doesn’t work without you.” Ali lets her tears fall freely, but doesn’t dare blink as she holds the officer’s gaze.

“Alex…” Ashlyn feels herself getting tired and blinks her eyes slowly to try and refocus.

“I know you’re tired, love. I know it hurts. But I need you to fight. I need you to fight for us, Ash. Promise me.” Ali pleads with her and hears her take a slightly deeper breath. The officer’s breathing has only gotten heavier and shallower since they started the drive to the helicopter pad.

“I’ll always fight for you, Alex. I promise.” Ashlyn replies quietly.

“I know, baby…but I need more than that. I need you to fight for us…not just you and me us…” She scoots even closer and puts Ashlyn’s hand on her belly. “This us too. You… and me…” She presses Ashlyn’s hand more firmly to her belly. “And us.”

“Us?” Ashlyn asks softly, her face breaking into a smile and a tear leaking from her eye as she realizes.

“Yes, love. Us.” Ali smiles and leans in to softly lips. “You need to fight for us. I need you. We need you. Promise me.” She reaches into her pocket and pulls out the challenge coin, pressing it into Ashlyn’s hand and holding it there with her palm. “Promise me.”

“I promise, Alex. I love you.” Ashlyn wiggles her hand free and back toward Ali’s belly. “You too.” She smiles again, her heartbeat suddenly feeling even faster than it has been over the last few minutes. “Think I need to rest.”

“Oh, love.” Ali entwines their hands again and leans in to kiss her forehead. “I love you, Ash. We love you. I won’t leave you… and you won’t leave me. I won’t leave you.” Ali promises and watches the officer’s eyes close, immediately looking up at the EMT across from her who is getting a blood pressure reading.

“Pulse is still fast at 130 BPM, BP is down to 80 over 50. I need the epinephrine shot.” The EMT signals the other one sitting next to Ali before looking at the brunette who is staring at her worriedly.
“It’s a shock reaction. It’s common with trauma injuries and we can manage it. It’s amazing how long it took to happen, she’s really strong. We’re still okay here.” She reassures Ali.

“Ok.” Ali nods and watches her administer the injection that the other guy handed her.

“That’s an adrenaline shot. It’ll help get her blood pressure back up and regulate her pulse more.” The woman explains. “She’s doing ok.” She reassures Ali again before smiling at her and adding “Congratulations.”

“Thank you.” Ali gives the EMT a small smile in return before kissing Ashlyn’s hand and getting close to her face again. “I love you, Ash. I’m here… just stay with me. I won’t you leave you, baby.”

Ali keeps her promise, staying right near Ashlyn’s face in the helicopter and talking into her ear even though it’s loud in there and she can’t even hear her own voice. Still, she doesn’t waiver… professing how much she loves her, talking about what their wedding will be like, and telling her just how amazing of a mother she is going to be. She just keeps talking to her, feeling her chest rise and fall one breath at a time, and holding her hand until the last possible second when she is finally and literally pried away so they can take Ashlyn into surgery.

She watches the doors close and slowly follows the nurse who leads her down the bright and antiseptic smelling hallway and into a waiting room. The woman offers coffee and water, but Ali politely declines. She makes note of the time on the large wall clock, 2:53pm, before closing her eyes and working hard not to breakdown.

She hopes Kyle will get here soon because she can’t remember the last time she felt this alone. She can’t get the gruesome sight out of her head, wishing now that she hadn’t looked. Everything is replaying in her mind and she tries to focus on the slightly brighter things… their exchanged words…that kiss, which like all the others before it made her feel safe, and whole, and strong. She lets out a deep breath and clenches her hands together, feeling the challenging coin still against her palm. The reality hits her hard… she’s not alone.

Happiness tries to find its way through her fear as her hands go to her belly, one of them stroking it lightly while the other just rests there with the challenge coin clutched inside it. She promised them.

Chapter End Notes

Have I confused the hell out of you yet? Did you see Ali’s news coming?
Well, seems like I definitely have you all confused and worried. Perfect time for an update to right this ship and get this crazy ride back on course. This chapter should clear up a whole lot, and as usual, maybe surprise you a bit! This one is bursting with medical details. So if you like that sort of stuff, you'll hopefully enjoy this. If not, I apologize in advance for getting all Doogie Howser, MD on you (and now I'm giving away my age lol). Anyway, let's get all those questions I left you with last time answered!

Heads Up: It's really going to take me a while to get the next update out, at least a couple of weeks if not more. I'm headed into a busy period with my usual work and on top of that I'm dealing with something a bit challenging in my extended family that we didn't quite expect to be dealing with. So, please bear with me...I promise I'm not abandoning by any means. On the bright side, I didn't leave you hanging this time!

As usual, keep the comments coming...I love to read them! You all are the best and I sincerely appreciate all your feedback :-)
“Ali?” Dr. Baylor halts in her tracks when she sees the brunette sitting in the OR waiting room.

Ali pops up immediately, ready for whatever the news is, but relaxes again at seeing a familiar face. “Dr. Baylor! What are you doing here?”

“I work here, remember?” Dr. Baylor jokes a bit. “I’m the on-call OBGYN for emergency C-section and post-delivery surgeries tonight. The better question is what are you doing here?” Her face turns concerned. “Are you okay?”

C-Section, post-delivery surgery… there are those words again. “I honestly don’t even know if I’m ok or not.” Ali admits brokenly. “Any chance you saw the news today, the bank robbery?”

“Yeah, I heard about it. They got everyone out safely though, right…” Dr. Baylor responds trying to find the link and wondering if one of Ali’s relatives was a hostage.

“Yeah, Ashlyn got everyone out safe alright.” Ali gives her a knowing look.

“Oh… gosh… she’s the cop that…” Dr. Baylor puts it together.

“She’s the cop.” Ali confirms.

“I forget she’s on the North Shore, that she’s not part of the Boston PD. It didn’t even dawn on me.” Dr. Baylor sighs. “Can I sit with you?”

“Please.” Ali nods. “Especially since this is what I’m working with…” she rolls her eyes and motions her head towards the three guys sleeping in the room.

Dr. Baylor’s looks at each of them more closely. “Okay, based on looks alone…I’m going to guess your brother, Ashlyn’s brother, and um…her patrol partner?”


“Those two were easy. Genes run strong in your families, wow…they look just like you two.” Dr. Baylor comments on Kyle and Chris. “Can’t blame me on the last one, I only had the uniform to go on.” She shrugs her shoulders. “How long has she been in?”

“Almost 8 hours.” Ali replies, the worry in her voice evident.

“Hey Ali, she is incredibly strong. She’s healthy and fit. I’ve seen that all first hand.” Dr. Baylor assures her. “Plus she’s just so strong-willed and determined. Everything I’ve read about her past and what she did today…I mean, she’s got guts, you know? People like that really pull through well.”

The choice of words almost knocks Ali out of her chair, her first thought spoken out loud before she can even stop it. “Yeah she definitely has guts… I got a great up-close view of them.” She takes a deep breath.

“Oh… I thought gunshot…but… evisceration?” Dr. Baylor questions with wide eyes as she sees the look on Ali’s face and realizes what she means.

“I don’t know what that means.” Ali replies with a perturbed look.

“Sorry, doc talk… it means… well, you could see them coming out?” Dr. Baylor puts it as gently as possible.
“Yeah. It was… god…fucking horrific.” Ali buries her head in her hands.

“I’m sorry. I can’t imagine.” Dr. Baylor lightly rubs her back. “If you don’t want to talk about it, please don’t. But if you tell me some things, maybe I can tell you a little more information about what might be happening or what to expect.”

“I’d like that.” Ali replies and then gives her as many details as she can remember before working up the nerve to end with a question she’s not sure she wants the answer to. “Is it really bad when it takes this long?” She knows Dr. Baylor won’t sugarcoat it.

“Not necessarily. Abdominal injuries and surgeries are just complicated. As you can imagine, there’s a lot going on in there…a lot of organs and blood vessels that all have to be checked out and repaired if needed. With a knife wound like that, it’s likely that something was internally injured and needs some kind of repair or reconstruction. It’s often a two or three stage process of first stopping bleeding and any fluid leakage, assessing organ function and cleaning any bacteria or material that got into the space in there, and then working on repairing damage. It’s delicate and can really take a while even when it’s not severe.” Dr. Baylor explains as simply and bluntly as she can. “Sometimes natural swelling happens and they even have to let it all rest for a few hours or even a full day before getting back to repairing.”

“Ok.” Ali nods at the information. “So, I shouldn’t freak out?”

“You definitely shouldn’t freak out.” Dr. Baylor tells her. “And as your OBGYN, I’m going to remind you of what I said about trying to keep the stress low. I know this is tough, but do your best. Have faith in her.” She looks at her knowingly. “Did you get to tell her?”

“Sort of, just that I was pregnant…nothing else.” Ali replies and rubs her hands together, seeing that Ashlyn’s name and information are imprinted in red near the bottom of her thumb from holding the dog tags so tightly. “She seemed really happy, but she was starting to go in and out at that point… don’t know if she’ll remember.”

“Well, she’ll have some amazing news to wake up to no matter what she remembers.” Dr. Baylor smiles. “How are you feeling about it… are you happy? You seemed shell-shocked this morning.”

“I’m happy.” Ali replies right away, because she is…she truly is, positively thrilled. “It was just a huge surprise and then a bigger surprise, and then there was so much to take in. All the things we talked about… I think I was just overwhelmed.”

“Yeah, I could see that. You asked a lot more questions than I was expecting and I was trying to answer them all honestly… but you were really reaching, Ali. I probably should have cut you off sooner.” Dr. Baylor smiles at her. “Even if those complications happen, which we can’t be sure that they will even be a factor until a few more weeks from now… it’s all manageable. We deal with these things all the time. I know a C-section might not be what you had in mind. If that is what has to happen though, we get you through it.”

“I know… I know. The important thing is a healthy delivery.” Ali concedes. “I guess being a lawyer, I’m always focused on the details…the things that can go wrong. In my head, if you ask enough questions and hone in on what might be a problem, you can prevent it.” She explains.

“Pregnancy definitely doesn’t work like that.” Dr. Baylor gives her a playful look. “The body just does what it’s going to do and everyone is different. We control and adjust what we can, and we deal with the rest as it comes. And you know what, we’ve gotten pretty darn good at it.” She says confidently.
“Thank you. We really did get the best doctor out there.” Ali says genuinely. “I’m so, so happy… and stunned too… but really happy. I just… god…I need her with me. I can’t even let myself think about…I need her.”

“Don’t let yourself go there. She’ll be there.” Dr. Baylor says seriously. “I know you know this already, but that woman in there is something special. I would never bet against her.”

“Me either, and I’m not.” Ali says resolutely.

“Will you be okay for a few minutes? I’m gonna go attempt to snoop a little and see if I can’t find something out. No guarantees, but I’ll try.” Dr. Baylor says.

“Really?” Ali perks up a bit.

“Yes really. What good is the ‘best doctor out there’ if she can’t use her connections?” Dr. Baylor smiles.

“Thank you.” Ali practically tears up.

“You’re welcome, sit tight.” Dr. Baylor heads back into the OR.

It’s only ten minutes before Dr. Baylor is back even though it feels like at least an hour. Ali pops out of her seat immediately as soon as she sees her. “How is she?” She asks nervously.

“Geez Ali, what did I say about trying to stay calm?” Dr. Baylor looks at her pointedly even though she understands.

“Sorry, sorry, I know.” Ali sits back down and does her best to be patient.

“She’s doing good so far. I couldn’t get specific details…but just like I mentioned to you earlier was a likely possibility, there is a fair bit to repair in there. They got through the first stages of stopping leakage and bleeding problems and cleaning things up. She remained stable with good vitals, everything responding well…so, they’ve gone ahead and are pushing through the repair process now. That’s a really good sign.” Dr. Baylor elaborates.

Ali lets out a very long and deep breath. “Ok…ok…I can do this. She can do this. It’ll be ok. Right?”

“It’ll be ok.” Dr. Baylor tells her. “Recovery might be long and bumpy at times and take some patience, but it really will be ok. You have to go one day at a time with things like this. There can be setbacks with things like infection and sometimes more surgeries needed. But if you just go one day at a time, you’ll find yourself at the end of the tunnel before you know it.” She gives it to her straight like always.

“Thank you. You really are the best. Absolutely above and beyond. You’ve been a saving grace tonight.” Ali says appreciatively, feeling slightly more settled for the time being.

“Glad to help.” Dr. Baylor replies. “So, I yoinked us a few slices of chocolate chip banana bread from the staff lounge. You should eat something even if you don’t feel like it.” She holds up the small brown paper bag she brought out with her. “I could get called away at any time, but it’s been quiet so far tonight… how about I hang here with you until I either get paged or she’s out of surgery?”
“Should I tell you that you’re the best again?” Ali smiles.

“Nah…ok, yeah, go ahead.” Dr. Baylor jokes.

“You’re so totally the best.” Ali confirms with a little laugh that feels really good right now.

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Saturday, May 19th

“You know one of the sweetest things Harris ever did for me?” Kyle’s voice interrupts yet another repeat of the Nutri-Ninja blender infomercial playing on the TV.

“What’s that?” Ali replies. It’s 2:38am and Dr. Baylor got called away about half an hour ago, but at least Kyle is awake now while they still wait for news.

“I got brought here the night she saved me. Actually just a few hallways down from here… Room 8003, I’ll never forget it.” Kyle explains. “Anyway the next morning after we had a long talk and I agreed to let her help me get sober… she shaved my face for me. I hadn’t done it in days, maybe a week. She said I looked like a guy that liked to be well-groomed but maybe hadn’t invested in myself so much lately. She told me to just sit back and relax, and she shaved me.” Kyle smiles. “It felt so damn good… in that moment it felt like a clean start, you know?”

Ali smiles widely, her heart feeling that deep ache of love that it usually does when she’s close to Ashlyn or thinking about her. “That melts my heart. How come you’ve never told me that before?” She asks.

“I guess I just haven’t thought about it until now.” Kyle shrugs.

“I wouldn’t even know the first thing about shaving a guy’s face.” Ali muses.

“I was surprised she was so good at it too. Her grandpa was a military guy and was always clean-shaven. Apparently she used help him out when he wasn’t feeling good.” Kyle recounts.

“Alexandra Krieger?” A thin Asian man dressed head to toe in hospital scrubs calls out as he suddenly appears the waiting room.

“That’s me.” Ali is up and out of her seat in a flash.

“I’m Dr. Wei Tan. If you would come with me, I can fill you in on how Ms. Harris is doing.” He says kindly.

Ali nods and feels Kyle give her arm a gentle squeeze before she’s following the doctor just a few doors down and into a private room.

“As I said before, my name is Dr. Wei Tan. I’m the primary surgeon who operated on Ms. Harris along with a couple of others. Do you have a preference on how I address you, Ms. Krieger?” Dr. Tan asks respectfully.

“You can call me Ali.” Ali says politely, her heart racing a mile a minute in anticipation.

“Ok, Ali it is. Let me start by telling you that Ms. Harris came through the surgery very well. She’s stable, tolerated the long procedure wonderfully, and is in recovery.” Dr. Tan starts with the important part.

“Thank god… thank you.” Ali lets out a huge breath.
“I’m going to spend some time now going over the details, but I want to pre-warn you that there are a lot of them and I’ll do my best to explain it all. Please, stop me any time and ask questions… especially if I’m using terms that you’re not familiar with. And remember that you don’t have to think of and ask all your questions now or even remember everything I tell you. We’ll make sure that we put it all in writing and someone will always be available for you to bring up concerns and question as things go along. I know it’s a lot to take in and that this has been a very stressful day for you, so just do the best you can. We can go over it as many times as you’d like.” Dr. Tan says sincerely

“Yes.” Ali confirms, her mind still not able to avoid the horrible mental picture of the injury.

“Part of the danger of injuries like this is that the leakage from the perforated organs brings with it bacteria that quickly infiltrate the abdominal cavity and begin to infect the bloodstream and the surrounding organs. The rate of infection is very rapid and it presents one of the biggest surgical challenges for these injuries. We work to stop any bleeding and leakages and then must often make quick decisions about which organs are likely to be repairable based on their given level of inflammation and injury. Make sense?” Dr. Tan asks and Ali nods to signal that she’s following.

“In Ms. Harris’ case, the gallbladder perforation was significant and the organ did not appear healthy. Thus, we removed it. The good news is that there was no injury to the surrounding liver and the gallbladder is not an essential organ. In fact, many people live without one. Often it may only mean greater risk of indigestion when eating fatty or spicy foods, but many people don’t even experience that. As for the other large intestine perforation… that was repaired and, once healed, should be completely back to normal without further problems. Do you have any questions so far?” Dr. Tan checks in again.

“None so far.” Ali replies.

“So, the bacterial leakage from the organ perforations created a toxic environment in the abdominal cavity. As I said before, infection happens quickly as a result. When we began to check and clean the abdominal organs, we noted that Ms. Harris had a right fallopian tube torsion. What that means is that the fallopian tube was twisted and had cut off blood supply to the ovary, which causes the ovary to enlarge. We believe this likely happened either from the force of the injury itself or from the pressure and movement of the intestines following. Her ovary was quite enlarged and the uterus was highly inflamed as can happen from the high bacteria environment. One of the things we worry about in saving organs that are already infected is that they may then play a part in spreading the infection to more vital organs. Unfortunately this type of infection, which we call sepsis, is deadly if not treated and prevented from spreading. For that reason, we had to remove the uterus for the sake
“Oh…uh…ok. Wow…I…” Ali can only stutter at the implication of it and let out a couple deep breaths again. Ashlyn will never be pregnant. It hits her like a brick to the face, her hands dropping right down to settle on her belly. This almost wasn’t a possibility. If they had waited even just a few more weeks… the thought makes her stomach churn even as the relief of being pregnant settles in. And they have 14 more potential baby Ashlyns frozen for future tries. The news hurts deeply, but there’s joy at the now greater meaning of her pregnancy at the same time. All Ali knows right now is that she’ll never question their decisions on timing ever again.

“I know, Ali. This is a lot to take in, and process, and deal with.” Dr. Tan says sympathetically after the brunette is silent for a little bit.

“You can continue.” Ali signals that she’s ok.

“We also found one of her kidneys to be slightly inflamed as well. Being more vital, we cleaned it like the other organs and will keep an eye on it. It is functioning right now, though not at the optimal level. However, the other kidney is fine and completely capable of compensating. Given the level of inflammation we found in the organs and tissues, we are diagnosing her with being in a mild stage of sepsis. Any level of sepsis is not a good thing, but treated early and managed properly… it’s completely reasonable to think that we can prevent any greater spread of infection and blood poisoning that would put her survival at risk.” Dr. Tan tells her.

Survival at risk. The words make her want to throw up, but she works hard to remember what Dr. Baylor told her… don’t focus on the details that are unlikely. “So, what does that mean going forward?” Ali asks to try and understand better.

“Right now we feel confident in our cleaning and repair of the abdominal cavity and affected organs. We administered a high dose of antibiotics to clear up any infection and prevent spreading. That will continue for quite a while throughout recovery to ensure that we don’t run into any problems as things heal. Because of the fluid we introduced into the abdominal area and the fluid retention of the organs as a result of the prolonged surgery, we currently have a drain tube in her abdomen that will help remove fluid as she heals and avoid any pressure build up. We’ll also be able to monitor that drainage to be sure that there is no bleeding or further leakage that we missed. The good news is that there was no injury to any vital organs and no major vein damage, so bleeding issues were not a problem. Still with me?” Dr. Tan checks once more and Ali nods.

“Right now, everything is about rest and healing. If everything goes perfectly, she’ll be back to pretty normal function in about 2 to 3 months. However, we want to be very cautious with the risk of infection being elevated. It could mean future surgeries to go back and clean or repair if problems arise. It’s just very important right now that she goes slowly and day-by-day as we continue to monitor. More immediately, we will keep her intubated and on the ventilator until at least this afternoon. She’s been through a lot and we want her body to have time to rest and come down from the surgery gradually. She’ll be in the ICU until intubation is removed and she is fully breathing on her own, and probably a couple more days after that as we keep a close eye on infection. I would expect that she’ll be hospitalized at least two weeks and likely three. We won’t want to send her home until we see significant wound healing and a normal white blood cell count.” Dr. Tan explains and pauses to think about what else he can tell her.

“We’re also going to keep a nasogastric tube in for a couple days that will allow us to regulate stomach digestion and nutrition so that we can give her digestive system a restful period and a good start to healing. You’ll see that tube running in through her nostril and it causes minimal discomfort. Of course, we’ll stay on top of her pain management and get her up and moving in a couple days to
aid the recovery process. In terms of incision, given the size of the initial wound itself, we opted to extend it a bit and go in from that area rather than open a midline abdominal incision like we normally would. That way she only has one incision to heal and less chance for infection. She does have some bruising from the physical struggle...a large swath of bruising across the back of her shoulders and on the top of her left shoulder. Her cheek is a bit bruised and puffy and she also has some smaller bruises on her forearms. None of those are of any concern and we did not find any bone fractures. I think that’s everything.” Dr. Tan concludes. “Do you have any questions?”

“Just one right now… when can I see her?” Ali asks, having been wanting to ask that question from the moment she sat down.

“She’s in initial stages of recovery now. They’ll be monitoring her vitals closely as she comes off the anesthesia and then transitions into milder sedation while we have her intubated. Once she reaches stability with milder sedation, which should be in a couple hours, you can be with her. Just a couple of things about that…” Dr. Tan says.

“Ok.” Ali nods for him to continue.

“Because of her infection risk, we want to be careful about her environment. So, we need to be very sure that anyone in the room visiting does not have any active colds or illnesses. For the time being, we don’t need to have visitors wear any sterile coverings like a mask, but we will require immediate handwashing upon entering the room and again every hour or so after that. She will only be able to have one visitor while in the ICU. I assume that will be you, but just be aware that it will only be that one person for a couple days. And I will just prepare you that the sight can be a bit shocking at first… she’s hooked up to many machines, tubes, and wires. It’s also common for her to be pale and a bit ashen looking. She won’t be conscious until we bring her out of sedation and remove the breathing tube. And, as expected with pain management and recovery, she may be very spacey for a few days and mostly sleeping.” Dr. Tan answers.

“Thank you so much.” Ali says appreciatively with a smile.

“You’re very welcome. I am very pleased with the surgery and have high confidence in a good recovery with no complications. It isn’t all that often that we can perform damage-control and repair in one surgery session. She is very strong physically and I don’t doubt mentally as well. Please don’t hesitate to ask for me for any questions you have and I’ll be checking in on Sunday when I am back on shift. Of course, you’ll have plenty of others taking care of her in the meantime as well. Let us know of anything you need. And, as I remind all the loved ones of my patients… please remember that you can’t take proper care of her unless you are taking proper care of yourself first. Make sure you are eating, sleeping, and keeping your stress level low.” Dr. Tan says compassionately.

“Thank you, again. I am so, so appreciative for everything.” Ali repeats, not sure what else one can even say to thank a man who just spent almost 12 hours on his feet and elbow deep in abdominal contents to save the love of her life.

“You’re welcome. Just doing my job.” Dr. Tan smiles. “Have a good rest of the night and morning. The ICU nurse will come get you as soon as you can be with her.”

“You too, good night.’ Ali replies with a smile and heads back to the waiting area having no idea how she’s going to pass the next couple hours that will feel like an eternity until she can finally see her.

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Ali checks the clock for at least the hundredth time since she got back from the meeting with Dr.
T. 01am… or at least she thinks so. She feels physically and emotionally wrecked at this point, even her vision now a bit fuzzy. The first hour back in the waiting room went by pretty fast with taking time to explain everything to Kyle, Chris, and Chief Fulton. The four of them had spent some time Googling to better understand what some of it meant and what to expect. But everyone is quiet again now, the minutes just dragging on as they all sit there a bit dazed. Ali has told them to go home a few times already, especially since they won’t get to see Ashlyn for a couple days, but they refuse to leave until she gets called in.

“Ali, you can come on in now.” The nurse’s voice startles them all.

Ali is up and out of her chair, the adrenaline kicking right back in again as she looks around to grab her phone and purse.

“Tell her we love her. And really try and get some sleep as soon as you can.” Kyle kisses her on the forehead.

“Yeah and tell her that I’m bringing Curtis and Elsie to jump on her bed for making us worry all the time.” Chris hugs her firmly in his large arms. “Make sure you call us if you need anything, to check in, and as soon as we can visit.”

“I will.” Ali promises them both.

“And obviously make sure she doesn’t worry at all about anything job related. I know she will, but we’ll handle everything. I’ll be in to visit as soon as she’s ready to have a few more visitors. Oh and tell her that I said she’s a crazy son of a bitch and that if she ever does that to me again, I’ll wring her neck myself.” Chief Fulton gives Ali a quick hug.

“Thank you, Chief. Thank you guys for staying this whole time.” Ali says gratefully.

“Go, go.” Kyle shoos her in the direction of the nurse who is waiting.

“Hi Ali, I’m…” The nurse starts before Ali cuts her off.

“Diane.” Ali grins, immediately recognizing the sweet nurse from the time Ashlyn was in the hospital for knee surgery back while she was still in prison. “I remember you.”

“Wow, I’m officially impressed!” Diane says in surprise.

“You were so nice and treated her so kindly. I would never forget that.” Ali replies truthfully as they walk along.

“Well, like I said before…if it wasn’t for her, my son wouldn’t be here.” Diane replies in a gracious tone. “Gotta say I wished I wouldn’t be seeing either of you two in here again, but I’m glad I’m here to help get her all healed up. She just can’t help herself, can she?”

“Apparently not.” Ali frowns. “Our wedding is in September and I jokingly told her a couple months ago ‘no more scars for the wedding’… and look at where we are.” Ali shakes her head. “Should have made her sign a legal contract.” She jokes a bit.

“You should have!” Diana laughs and then pauses as they approach the room. “Congratulations on the upcoming wedding, by the way. You know, I could tell even back then that you two would end
up together. It was pretty damn obvious.” She adds with a smile before getting back to business.
“Ok, I’m going to have you wash your hands in this sink out here. You’ll want to scrub all the way up to your elbows for a full minute and then dry really well.”

“Ok, and thank you.” Ali rolls up her sleeves to get going.

“So, I just want to prepare you… she’s doing much better than she looks. There’s a lot that she’s hooked up to and it really will seem a bit scary, but it’s routine for recovery like this, ok?” Diane warns her.

“Ok, I’m ready.” Ali assures her and follows her into the room. The sounds are the first thing that strike her upon entering. There is a vibrating hum, a low beeping, the echo of a heartbeat, and what sounds like hissing air…it’s almost disorienting in a way. She makes the short walk to the bed and the tears immediately roll down her face. Hooked up to things is an understatement. There are more wires and tubes than she can count, it almost seems like the officer is drowning in them. She’s so pale, her face is puffy, her eyes are sunken in with dark circles under them, her chapped lips parted because of the breathing tube.

“Oh baby…” Ali whispers and leans in to lightly stroke her forehead, one of the few spots that is free of tape holding down some kind of tube. “I’m here, love. I love you, Ash. Still the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.” She finds the officer’s hand and holds it lightly so she doesn’t disturb the IV.

“She’s doing really well. Her vital signs have been excellent.” Diane tells her. “We’ve already started to lower ventilator support a bit, down to 85%. And it’ll keep getting slowly lowered over the next several hours as the sedation wears off. Once she’s awake and breathing unassisted, we’ll be able to remove the tube.”

“Oh god, you do that while she’s awake?” Ali cringes at the thought.

“It’s not as uncomfortable as it seems, I promise. It’s really quick and just creates a coughing sensation.” Diane explains.

“Oh, ok.” Ali replies. “Thanks for the heads up.”

“I can imagine you’ve been awake a long time now. I set up that cushioned chair next to the bed with a pillow and blanket for you. She’ll be sleeping for quite a while still. So, this might be a really good time for you to rest too.” Diane suggests gently.

“You’re probably right.” Ali concedes. She feels positively drained despite the worry still present inside. It’s a lot better now that she’s here beside her girl, but there’s still so much ahead and thought is scary.

“I’ll be in and out pretty regularly. So, anything you need, just ask. I’m here until this evening, so it’ll be me for most of the day.” Diane says as she checks the heart monitor and the reading on the blood pressure machine that just went off recently. “Here, let me lower her bed down and put that railing down too so you can be closer while you sit.”

“Thank you so much, Diane. I can’t tell you how happy I am that it’s you here right now.” Ali says sincerely as the nurse works to adjust the bed.

“Well aren’t you sweet. I’m very glad to be here. Get some rest so you can keep up with this firecracker when she wakes up.” Diane winks and heads out the door.
“I’m here, Ash. I promise I won’t leave you, baby.” Ali leans in close and nuzzles her face against the officer’s ear a bit. “You’re doing so good, honey. I love you so much. We’ll get through this, whatever it takes. You’re going to be okay…we’re gonna have a beautiful family together soon. You’re going to be a mom, baby. An amazing, wonderful mom.” A tear slips down Ali’s face and she pulls back a bit to wipe it with the back of her hand.

“I can’t wait to tell you all about it.” She strokes Ashlyn’s bruised cheek gently. “You’re my hero, Ash. Always my hero. Just keep resting… have beautiful sweet dreams for me in there. I love you and I’m right here. I won’t go anywhere.” She leaves a few soft kisses on the officer’s forehead and one at the corner of her mouth.

With that Ali finally sits in the chair, her legs too tired to hold her up much longer. The last thing she wants to do is close her eyes, but her body is fighting her and exhaustion is setting in now that the adrenaline has worn off. She pulls the chair as close to the bed as she can and leans her head so that it’s just brushing against Ashlyn’s shoulder.

Diane had been kind enough to turn down the sounds of whatever monitors she could, but the ventilator noise in and of itself is eerie and unsettling. It sounds like a sucked in hiss of air followed by a soft thump every few seconds. Everything about it is strange and it becomes almost deafening as Ali tries her best to block it out. She leans her head in a little closer, feeling a little warmth on her cheek from Ashlyn’s shoulder when the faint scent suddenly hits her. The barely there essence of bergamot, the citrusy woody fragrance that is uniquely Ashlyn’s. She breathes in as deep as she can and lets the familiarity of it soothe her. Unfortunately, the sterile hospital smell is too powerful for her to stay trained on the officer’s muted scent for very long.

As tired as she is, sleep eludes her with everything feeling so unnatural. The smell, the unusual pattern of Ashlyn’s breathing, the brightness of the room. She feels desperate for something familiar to ease her. Her head is pounding as the headache that had threatened to come on all night is finally raging. Eventually it’s the throbbing sensation in her temples that sparks the idea. She gently moves her hand to Ashlyn’s chest and onto a clear spot, careful not to touch or press on any electrodes attached there. It’s not the most comfortable position from the chair, but it’s exactly what she needs…the feel of Ashlyn’s heart, drumming strong and steady against her palm. Beating for her, just like always.

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“Ali.” The gentle voice and soft touch to her shoulder interrupt her peaceful slumber.

“Mmm, five more minutes, baby.” Ali replies groggily, her eyes still closed.

“Well I appreciate the sentiment, but I’ve got nothing on sleeping beauty over there.” The amused voice says more loudly and gently touches her shoulder again.

The foreignness of the voice and strange sounds of the room start to register as Ali’s eyes open slowly and blink a few times. She starts to shift a bit and finds her arm completely stiff and a bit numb, still stretched out with her hand on Ashlyn’s chest. For a second she forgets where she is, her eyes scanning the officer’s unconscious form in slight panic until she snaps out of it and remembers. She sits up and looks around, her gaze finally settling on Diane who is standing right beside her chair.

“Oh…sorry, Diane. Geez, what time is it?” Ali asks, her voice thick with sleep.

“That’s ok. It’s just past 2:30pm.” Diane replies.
“Oh my god, I slept like eight hours!” Ali says in alarm, her eyes darting around again as she wonders what she’s missed in the meantime.

“Relax…you needed it. Nothing much has happened while you slept. Promise.” Diane reassures her at the overwhelmed look on the brunette’s face.

“Hi baby.” Ali stands up and leans over to kiss Ashlyn’s forehead and look her over again. The officer’s face seems to have a little bit more color to it. “How is she?”

“Doing great.” Diane says cheerily. “We’ve been reducing the ventilator support all morning and it’s down to 10%, which means she’s pretty much breathing on her own. I’m about to cut it completely now and we’ll watch for the next hour. She should be starting to come out of sedation too since that was stopped a while ago. That’s why I woke you up. If all goes well, she’ll be awake for a bit and we’ll get that breathing tube out very soon.”

“That’s great!” Ali says, her body relaxing now after the initial spike of anxiety from waking up. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Yes. Start by eating that food I brought you. Nothing fancy, but it’ll get you through the afternoon. I went with breakfast even though it’s afternoon because the breakfast options are way better than lunch in this place.” Diane points to a tray on the counter nearby. “I wasn’t sure what you wanted to drink, so I brought it all. Water, coffee, tea, and juice.”

“You’re so sweet to do that. Thank you so much.” Ali says appreciatively with a smile.

“You’re very welcome.” Diane smiles back. “I would also suggest just maybe talking to her. As she wakes up, she’ll probably be very confused and disoriented. The breathing tube can be a little scary at first. So, we’ll want to try and keep her calm to the extent that we can. I’m sure hearing your voice and knowing you’re here will be the best thing for that. She’ll probably be cognizant of your voice before she visibly comes to.”

“Of course.” Ali replies. “Actually, any chance there’s a book or magazine around here I could borrow? She tends to relax when I read to her.”

“I’m sure we have something. Let me have a look and I’ll be right back.” Diane leaves the room.

“You already look a little better this morning, sweetheart. Can’t wait to see those gorgeous eyes of yours. I miss you… your voice, your smile, the way you look at me. Soon, love.” Ali strokes her cheek softly and then lightly runs her hand through her hair. “I’m gonna eat some of this breakfast so I have all the energy in the world to focus on you, Hero. Then I’m gonna read to you until I see my favorite smile. Love you, Ash.” Ali kisses her forehead again before going to grab the tray of food.

The food is better than expected, but it might be because she’s ravenous. She makes quick work of an egg and cheese croissant and some oatmeal with fresh strawberries. The coffee looks heavenly right now, but she pours it down the drain of the sink so she won’t be tempted. Instead she goes for the caffeine-free green tea and orange juice. Diane is back in no time with two books: *Matilda* by Roald Dahl and *The Mistress* by Danielle Steel.

“Well, that’s an easy choice.” Ali jokes and tosses the cheesy romance novel aside, opting for *Matilda*.

“Slim pickings around here, but you made the right decision.” Diane laughs. “I’ll be in and out every 15 minutes or so to check on her.”

Ali nods and leans in to kiss Ashlyn’s forehead a few more times before holding her hand and
settling back down in the chair to read.

“You seemed so far away,” Miss Honey whispered, awestruck.

“Oh, I was. I was flying past the stars on silver wings,” Matilda said. “It was wonderful.”

Those oddly significant words from the book are leaving her mouth when Ali feels the slight squeeze on her hand. She quickly looks at Ashlyn, who looks exactly the same as just a couple of minutes ago, and she starts to wonder if she imagined it. She waits another minute, but nothing happens. She’s about to continue reading when the next squeeze comes, this one a lot harder.

“Ash…I’m here, baby. Can you hear me?” Ali is up out of the chair and leaned in close to the officer’s face in no time. She gets no response, but quickly presses the nurse call button. “I’m here, sweetheart. Can you hear my voice?” Another squeeze. “That good, Ash. That’s so good. You’re ok. Just relax and wake up when you’re ready. I’m right here when your eyes open. You’re safe, you’re ok. Just follow my voice, baby.” Ali says calmly, remembering what Diane told her about trying to keep the officer relaxed.

“Well, I was coming to help out…but looks like you’re doing wonderfully.” Diane says from the doorway.

“Just doing what you suggested.” Ali smiles. “She’s been squeezing my hand.”

“That’s good. Her vitals are looking normal. I’m sure we’ll see those eyes open shortly. I’m going to let the doctor on staff known that she’s coming to. I’m sure she’ll just have us proceed as usual, but I want to make sure she doesn’t want to come in and have a look first.” Diane replies and leaves the room for a minute.

“I love you, Ash. I love you so much.” Ali presses a few kisses to Ashlyn’s forehead, her hand now being held in a consistent and firm grasp by the officer. “I’m here when you’re ready, sweetheart. I’m right here with you.” She continues to coax the officer repeatedly.

“We’re good for now. The doctor will come in to do a general check once we have the tube out and she’s more awake.” Diane says as she enters the room. “How are we doing?”

“Good, I think. She’s really holding my hand now, but not much else.” Ali answers.

“Ok, it might take some time to…” Diane starts to reassure Ali, but the almost grunting gasp that suddenly comes from Ashlyn startles them both. The officer is biting down on the tube and her arms are starting to move a bit.

“Ashlyn…you have a breathing tube in your mouth. It may feel a little odd and uncomfortable, but it’s completely normal, ok? You’re in the hospital after an injury and you’re doing great. Ali is right beside you. She’s holding your hand.” Diane says soothingly to try and calm the officer as she wakes.

“Hey, baby…try and relax.” Ali whispers near Ashlyn’s ear as she lightly strokes through her hair with her free hand, the other hand being squeezed tightly now. “That’s just a tube to help you breathe, it’s ok. I’m here with you.”

“I’m going to raise your bed so you’ll be slightly more upright, Ashlyn. It’ll help a bit.” Diane explains before adjusting the bed so it’s more inclined.
Ashlyn’s eyes flutter open and closed a few times before finally opening, looking around quickly, and settling on Ali. Her lips are still closing around the tube a bit.

“Hey, there you are beautiful.” Ali strokes her cheek and kisses her forehead. “My beautiful hazel eyes. I love you.” She says softly with a smile, but Ashlyn is still looking a bit panicked and dazed. “You’re doing great, my love. That tube is there to help you breathe, but they’re going to take it out soon. Just hang on a little longer and look at me, ok? Listen to my voice and relax. Can you do that, baby?”

Ali feels another squeeze on her hand.

“Ashlyn, can you try and wiggle your fingers for me?” Diane asks and watches the officer comply, letting go of Ali’s hand to do it, but then grabbing it right back again like it’s a lifeline. “Good job. Can you wiggle your toes?” Diane asks and again watches Ashlyn move her feet and wiggle her toes. She checks the officer’s eyes with a little flashlight and then presses the button to signal she’s ready for the other nurse to come assist her. “Are you able to lift your arms up, Ashlyn?” Diane requests. Ashlyn lifts her arms easily, this time not letting go of Ali’s hand.

“Look at you, Hero. My superstar.” Ali praises her, smiling when she sees the officer’s eyes looking less glassy and her face a bit more relaxed now.”

“You’re doing so well, Ashlyn. Now that you are sitting up a bit and are responsive, we’re going to go ahead and get that tube out for you, ok? Another nurse, Rachel, is going to be in here in just a minute to help me. We’re going to lay you back down, and I’m going to give you this little pillow to hug. We’ll let you know when we’re ready and we’ll take it out. You’ll just feel like you have to cough, and don’t fight it. Go ahead and cough if you need to. Rachel is going to help by suctioning any extra fluid and phlegm out of your throat. It’ll be really quick, ok?” Diane explains the procedure and get a puff of air sound from Ashlyn and a slight hand raise.

“I’ll be right here, honey. I won’t let go of your hand.” Ali promises, her stomach churning nervously at what is about to happen.

Once the other nurse comes in, the two of them move efficiently. They explain to Ashlyn one more time and then go right to it. Ali fights her own gag reflex as the seemingly never-ending tube gets pulled out while Ashlyn cringes and coughs, but she manages to get through it. Before she knows it, the officer is raised back up again and giving her a little smile, a new oxygen tube now under her nose.

“My favorite smile in the word. I missed you, baby. You ok?” Ali asks with her own smile, eyes locked onto hazel.

“Go ahead and try to talk, Ashlyn.” Diane suggests.

All that comes out is a few squeaky hiss sounds and Ashlyn looks a bit surprised.

“That’s ok, Ashlyn. It can take a while to get your voice back after the tube is out. Your throat is probably sore and you might be hoarse for a while even when you are able to talk. Just try again every couple minutes, ok?” Diane says calmly and gets a little head nod from the officer.

Ashlyn tries again, but this time the squeaking sound is just a bit louder with no real progress. She immediately gets frustrated and lets out a long breath.

“It’s ok, baby. It’ll come back soon.” Ali reassures her and gets a tight hand squeeze and what sounds like a breathy whimper in return. If anything, the officer is looking more desperate.
“Here. Try writing, Ashlyn.” Diane brings over a clipboard with a blank sheet of paper and a pen.

Ashlyn grips the pen as best she can and moves really clumsily, but she writes the same thing sloppily over and over again until she feels like the writing is clear enough before looking at Ali: Us?

Ali smiles at her immediately with watery eyes and kisses her lips really lightly. “Yes, Ash. Us.” She confirms with a nose crinkling grin. “You remembered.”

Ashlyn starts writing again, this time a bit more steadily: Not dream?

“Not a dream at all, love. So very real.” Ali takes Ashlyn’s hand and puts it on her belly, holding it there. “Real and wonderful.”

Ashlyn tries to say something again. It’s closer to sounding like actual words this time, but it’s really low and scratchy and still too hard to make out. The officer rolls her eyes and writes again, this time looking up with a smile and tear escaping her eye: Love you both.

“We love you too, Ash.” Ali smiles and wipes the tear on Ashlyn’s face before running her hand through her short hair lightly again.

“So… congratulations?” Diane pipes up, hoping she understood the interaction correctly.

“Yes, and thank you!” Ali replies with a grin. “I just found out yesterday morning and didn’t get to tell her until we were on our way here.” She explains.

“Oh wow, well that’s some amazing news to wake up to! I’m happy for you two…and my lips are sealed.” Diane pretends to zip her lip.

“Ash, do you remember Diane from your knee surgery?” Ali asks and gets a head nod and a thumbs up with a smile.

“Well, glad to know I made such an impression. Tell my boss, would ya? Maybe I’ll get a nice bonus this year.” Diane jokes with a wink and gets a laugh from Ali and a smile from Ashlyn. “Let me go get some ice chips to see if we can’t soothe that throat a bit, Ashlyn.”

“How are you feeling really, sweetheart?” Ali asks before adding “Just write for now until Diane comes back with the ice chips.”

Ashlyn writes three words: Pain. Tired. Hungry.

Ali frowns at the first two before shaking her head at the last one. “So sorry you hurt, baby. But you’re always hungry, Ash.”

Ali feels Ashlyn’s hand move in a gentle little circle on her belly before the officer writes again: Happy.

“Me too, love. Me too.” Ali leaves another tiny kiss on the officer’s chapped lips. “Hold on a sec.” Ali goes over to her purse that is sitting on the floor near the chair and digs around in it, finally pulling out a tube of chapstick. “Here, baby.” She applies some to the officer’s lips. “Better?”

Ashlyn just smiles widely and puckers her lips, doing a little air kiss in Ali’s direction. She then writes another word with a little arrow that points to Ali: Beautiful.

“You’re welcome, charmer.” Ali kisses the officer’s hand before entwining them together again. The two of them spend a couple minutes just gazing at each other until Diane walks back in with a cup of
ice chips.

“Here, Ashlyn. Try a couple of these and see how it goes.” Diane hands Ali the cup and the brunette puts two small ice chips into Ashlyn’s mouth.

Ashlyn immediately starts writing again: Heaven.

“I feel like I should be offended that I just lost to some ice chips. Should I be offended?” Ali teases.

“Nah, she’ll hate those in a few hours.” Diane laughs.

“So good.” Ashlyn’s voice finally comes out in a squeaky croak just a couple minutes later.

“Well hello there, Hero!” Ali says excitedly at the progress. “Want another?”

“Yes, please.” Ashlyn answers in a scratchy whisper this time and smiles victoriously as Ali feeds her another few ice chips.

“So, I asked her how she was and she said she was hungry, tired, and in pain.” Ali informs Diane and feels a little squeeze on her hand.

“All to be expected.” Diane reassures them. “The doctor should be in any minute to do a general check on everything. She’ll check your ab drain, your airway and lungs, and assess your pain level. Then we’ll do a tube feed which will help the hunger issues and then give you the routine schedule of antibiotics and pain medication.” She explains.

“No food?” Ashlyn pouts a bit.

‘Not for another day or so, but I promise that beige goop we put through the nasal tube is five-star delicious and will do the trick.” Diane winks to try and keep things light. “It’s just to let your digestive system get a good start after the surgery. If all goes well, we’ll try liquids and soft foods in another 24 hours.”

Before either of them can respond the doctor walks into the room.

“Hi Ashlyn, I’m Dr. Celia Forristall. I’m just going to have a quick look at everything before we get you setup with your next round of medication.” She introduces herself. “Are you able to talk at all yet?”

“Yes.” Ashlyn answers with her low raspy voice.

“Excellent.” Dr. Forristall replies. “Can you rate your pain level for me on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the worst pain imaginable.”

“7.” Ashlyn replies and feels Ali squeeze her hand.

“And what is hurting?” The doctor inquires.

“Pretty much everything from waist to neck. My shoulders.” Ashlyn answers.

“Yeah, you’re pretty bruised on the back of your shoulders. And you underwent an intense abdominal surgery, so a lot of soreness and tenderness is to be expected with that. You’re coming down from sedation, so the pain will be a bit higher now until we administer your next pain medication.” Dr. Forristall explains. “I’m going to have a quick peek at your abdominal drain and we’ll empty it out.”
Ali steels herself for the sight as the blankets and hospital gown get pushed aside to reveal the damage. However, there isn’t much to see as the area is well bandaged except for where a tube protrudes from Ashlyn’s bellybutton and ends in a collection bulb that is about half full with a pale yellowish liquid.

“That looks good and normal.” The doctor carefully empties the bulb into a sterile cup before replacing it. “We’ll have it tested for bacteria level, but it looks fine. I’m just going to listen to your lungs and check your throat and we’ll let you rest.” She spends another five minutes on her assessment and makes a few notes in Ashlyn’s chart before telling Diane she can go ahead with feeding and medication. “Your surgeon, Dr. Tan, will be in tomorrow morning to look at the incision and he can go over all the details of the surgery with you. In the meantime, make sure you get plenty of rest.” The doctor says before leaving.

Diane doesn’t waste any more time, getting the feeding done before starting the antibiotics and pain medication through the IV. Ashlyn doesn’t feel anything with the feeding other than the hunger going away about 5 minutes later.

“My hand and arm burn.” Ashlyn winces after a little while.

“Oh darn… that’s the antibiotics. Some of them cause a burning sensation in the veins for some people. I’ll see about getting the type switched to avoid that for the next time and slow down the drip for this one to see if it helps. Let me get an icepack for your hand too.” Diane sympathizes. “The pain medication will kick in soon and hopefully help. It’ll make you really sleepy too.”

“You ok?” Ali asks concerned at Ashlyn’s closed eyes and serious face as they wait for Diane to come back with the ice pack.

“Yeah, just really burns like hell.” Ashlyn admits, already started to feel exhausted.

“Sorry, baby. Anything I can do?” Ali asks.

“Keep holding my hand. I’m so tired.” Ashlyn replies before adding. “Tell me about the baby. How…how?”

“I have so much to tell you, love. And I will. Just rest and sleep right now, baby.” Ali leaves a few kisses on her forehead and another little one on her lips, already knowing by her breathing that sleep is coming soon. “I promise I’ll tell you everything when you wake up. I’ll be right here beside you. Sweet dreams, Ash. I love you so much.” Ali lightly strokes her cheek and watches the officer’s lips twitch a couple times before a tiny whispered “ok” leaves them, followed shortly by a little snore.

“Already out?” Diane asks, coming in and placing the icepack over the IV on Ashlyn’s hand.

“Yeah, happened fast.” Ali replies.

“Usually does.” Diane tells her. “Before I forget… I remembered her concern about strong pain medication from the last time. I spoke with the prescribing doctor and there is a plan in place to make sure we are using the lowest and least habit forming options we can. This first couple days is going to be on the strong side. She’s been through a lot and really needs to rest as comfortably as possible, but we’ll get it down to a much lower level once we move her out of the ICU.”

“Diane… you are just… seriously… a blessing. Thank you for everything.” Ali says in genuine appreciation and awe, not sure she can even adequately express her gratitude.
“Just doing my job.” Diane shrugs it off. “I’m going to get some dinner in here for you and then you should rest while she does. Dinner for two coming right up.” She smiles before leaving the room.

She’s back just twenty minutes later with a hot meal and spends a couple minutes introducing the nurse who is replacing her on shift for the night before checking one last time to make sure Ali is all set.

By 6pm, Ali has managed to eat dinner, freshen up a bit despite still being in the same clothes, call Kyle and Chris with an update, and send texts to everyone else she can think of to briefly fill them in. That’s about all she has left in her for the time being, finally plopping down in the chair next to Ashlyn and leaning in to rest gently near her shoulder like before. Unlike last time, the officer’s patterned breathing is familiar and her hand gently grips Ali’s hand back, quickly lulling the brunette into her own slumber.

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Sunday, May 20th

This time around, Ali sleeps more lightly and wakes up each time the nurse comes in to check monitors and administer medication. Her eyes open immediately when she feels Ashlyn stirring slightly around 1am. “Honey…I’m here. You ok?” She asks at the contorted look on the officer’s face.

“Alex… my side hurts.” Her voice is really rough and low again.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. They’ll be in to give you more pain medication in about an hour.” Ali tells her as she looks at the clock again, looking back at Ashlyn to see her eyes now open. “You want me to call the nurse?”

“No. I can handle it.” Ashlyn gives her a little smile. “Talk to me.”

“Of course. What do you want to talk about?” Ali asks even though she already knows.

Ashlyn just gives her a playful look before making her request. “I want to know all about the baby…and will you tell me what happened to me too?” She motions to her stomach. “I’d rather you tell me than the surgeon. Was it bad? It looked really bad. Feels really bad.”

“Hey… you’re doing amazing, ok?” Ali first reassures her, opting to tell her about the surgery before the cheerful baby news. “What do you remember?”

“Uh… I remember what happened and coming out of the bank. A lot of pain, blood. I remember you telling me about the baby. Not much after that. Was there like a helicopter ride? I remember something loud like that, but I’m not sure. That’s the last thing.” Ashlyn talks through it.

“Oh yeah… we got the Hero a first class med flight to the hospital.” Ali smiles.


“Edith is great. Just a little cut on her head, but she’s fine. She was here for a while during your surgery, but I made her go home to rest. Kyle, Chris, and Chief Fulton stayed with me waiting. They’re all worried about you, but I’ve been giving them updates. They’ll come to visit you when you’re allowed to have more visitors. The Chief said that the Bryer guy that helped you has a concussion, but he’ll be fine. Everyone else from the bank is completely unharmed….not sure what happened to the robbers other than being arrested. You did so good, Ash.” Ali tells her everything she knows. “You actually remember just about everything, so let me tell you about your injury, ok?”
“Ok.” Ashlyn nods and holds Ali’s hand tight.

“The knife made a hole in your intestine and your gallbladder. Those leaked fluid and created pressure inside… that’s why it pushed stuff out like that.” Ali tries to explain without being too graphic or bringing up any awful memories that Ashlyn might be harboring. “They couldn’t save the gallbladder and removed it with no problem. They fixed the intestine and stopped the leakage, but they had to clean whatever had already spilled in there. It caused a bacterial infection called sepsis and they are treating you for that right now with the antibiotics. One of your kidneys was infected and is not fully functioning, so they are keeping an eye on that.” Ali explains and takes a deep breath, not sure how to get through the next part.

“What else, Alex? I know that look… just tell me.” Ashlyn says hoarsely.

“One of your fallopian tubes was twisted and your uterus was infected. They were afraid of it spreading the infection… uh… god, this is hard… they, uh… they had to remove it, honey.” Ali just gets it out as best she can. “I’m sorry, baby.” She gets up so she can lean in as close as possible, pressing her forehead to the officer’s. “You ok?”

“Yeah… I… whew. Ok.” Ashlyn says quietly as she processes it all. “It’s a lot to take in, I guess.”

“I know.” Ali kisses her cheek. “Are you upset?”

“Yes… I don’t know. My brain is kinda fuzzy right now, but I’m ok. I guess I never expected to be pregnant necessarily, so it kinda doesn’t matter. Just not having the option anymore… or not being able to give any more eggs…it feels… disappointing. I think that’s the right word.” Ashlyn tries to explain her feelings. “But then again… I can’t be anything but happy. The universe was clearly on our side and we’re lucky enough that our timing was, well…everything. Makes this little warrior all that more special.” She reaches down to put her hand on Ali’s belly and smiles.

“It sure does. Right now, I feel like everything happened the way it was supposed to and I can’t bring myself to question it. I’m just happy.” Ali puts her hand over Ashlyn’s. “But…I’m gonna have to file an amendment on the ‘warrior’ part, Harris.”

“Oh come on! No way!” Ashlyn protests. “Are we really going to battle over the hero vs. warrior thing again? I just lost my uterus babe… I think I win on getting to call this one. The baby is officially a warrior, just like you.”

“Oh, already using the uterus card, are we?” Ali can’t help but joke a bit.

“Well it’s a pretty damn good trump card.” Ashlyn plays back. “I win.”

“Well, I didn’t say you didn’t win. I just said I had an amendment, baby…not a name change.” Ali says with a smirk.

“Well, fine. What’s your amendment?” Ashlyn concedes and narrows her eyes playfully.

Ali leans in close and looks right into the officer’s hazel eyes with a huge smile. “It’s not warrior, Ash… it’s warriors. Plural.” She puts extra emphasis on the ‘s’ and smiles widely.

Ashlyn just looks at her for a few seconds with a stunned expression on her face, her already grainy voice cracking and squeaking even more as she stutters. “Wait…what… there’s… more than… Alex?” She looks at the brunette hopefully.

“Two warriors. Twins. We’re having twins, Ash.” Ali beams, a sense of joy and relief washing over her now that she’s finally shared the news.
“Oh my god…” Ashlyn gingerly reaches up to put her free hand on the back of Ali’s neck and pulls her in so that their foreheads are together again. “There’s two… we’re having twins? Twins?!” A dimpled grin breaks out on her face, the first one since before this whole ordeal started.


“Happy?! Alex… I’m fucking elated!” Ashlyn’s voice cracks again. “Holy crap… this is like… it’s amazing, wonderful, freakin’ stupendous!” She lets out a little squeal before letting the news really settle. “I’m so excited. So in love with you, Alex. So happy… also a tiny bit terrified. But so damn happy.”

“I’m so happy too, Ash. I love you so much. And yeah, I’ll second the tiny bit terrified part… but I guess we have 9 months to prepare. Well, sort of.” Ali replies cheerily.

“Tell me everything. I’m so lost… maybe it’s the drugs… but… you got your period and the bloodwork. I don’t understand.” Ashlyn looks at Ali quizzically as the brunette pulls back just a bit so she can explain it all.

“So, turns out I’m just about seven weeks pregnant and the due date is January 7th, 2019. The last couple weeks that I’ve been sick… well, it wasn’t the flu.” Ali starts.

“But… they put the embryos in just over a month ago. How can you be seven weeks?” Ashlyn asks in total confusion.

“That part threw me off too. Apparently, in terms of development, they consider you two weeks pregnant on the day of the transfer. Weird, I know.” Ali enlightens her.

“Oh ok, that solves that.” Ashlyn replies as her brain struggles to work out the timing, but then finally gets it well enough for now. “So the bloodwork was wrong then?”

“Well, when I went in to get my bloodwork checked Friday morning, the HCG numbers were really high and the nurse immediately took another sample and ran it again to be sure. She asked if I thought I might be pregnant, and I said no and explained. She called Dr. Baylor right away and I went right into an exam room to be seen by her.” Ali recounts. “They counted back the days along with using the HCG levels and figured out that the embryos just implanted a bit later than average. Because of my initial blood results on day 11 and my menstrual symptoms, they felt fine not having me re-check after day 14 when it’s a bit more accurate. Turns out, had I gone back on day 14… it would have shown pregnant.”

“Oh wow. Ok… I get that part. But then what happened with your period?” Ashlyn tries to understand.

“It was just some implantation bleeding that happens sometimes, especially with twins. Nothing that unusual apparently.” Ali reveals. “Then my flu-like symptoms were just early pregnancy symptoms. My temperature and everything.”

“This is blowing my mind.” Ashlyn says incredulously.

“Blew mine too.” Ali admits. “So, then Dr. Baylor does an ultrasound and she starts looking for the heartbeat and doing some measurements…” Ali retells the story. “And then she’s like… ‘oh… wait a second.’” Ali pauses to look at Ashlyn who is listening with rapt attention. “Of course, I freaked out and thought something was wrong. And then the next thing I know, she is calming me down and showing me two little blobs on the screen and telling me that it’s twins. Want to see?”
“You have pictures?!” Ashlyn says excitedly, her body involuntarily moving a bit and gasping at the pain that shoots through her side.

“Oh Ash… easy, baby. Relax for a second.” Ali strokes her forearm. “You ok?”

“Yeah… god this hurts.” Ashlyn winces a bit and tries to breathe through it.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart. Want me to call the nurse in?” Ali checks.

“No, no… I’m ok. Just have to remember not to move, like ever.” Ashlyn smiles through another wince. “Now show me our babies already!”

Ali gives her a little kiss on the chin before reaching over into her purse and pulling out the three ultrasound photos. “There’s not much to see, but those two little blueberry looking blobs are them.” She says as she watches Ashlyn look over them carefully.

“Most beautiful and adorable thing I’ve ever seen,” Ashlyn smiles. “Except for their gorgeous mom of course.” She looks up and meets Ali’s eyes. “Wish I had been there with you.”

“I know, baby. But you know what… as much as I hate that you’re going through this right now… something inside tells me you were exactly where you needed to be.” Ali entwines their hands and squeezes.

“Yeah. Honestly… I got that same feeling before I went in there. It’s weird. Like I just knew that I would be able to go in there and do it.” Ashlyn tells her. “Can’t say I expected this, but I’m still here, right?” She motions to her stomach.

“You sure as hell are,” Ali puts a hand on her belly and looks down. “Well my little warriors, lots of kids consider their parents to be heroes. But your Mama takes it to a whole new level. She’s actually Batman.” Ali giggles a bit as she rubs her belly.

“Like you’re one to talk my feisty lawyer… why have one baby when you can ante up and have two?” Ashlyn plays back. “It so figures that you would crush this fertility thing. I guess Kyle was right about that.”

“Guess so.” Ali shrugs. There’s a comfortable silence for a minute before Ashlyn speaks again.

“Mama huh?” Ashlyn says in a soft raspy whisper. “I love that.”

“Yeah? Just kind of came out, but I love it too.” Ali admits with an emotional smile.

“What about you?” Ashlyn asks.

“I think I like Mommy.” Ali says thoughtfully.

“Mommy and Mama. Perfect.” Ashlyn smiles. “Hottest Mommy ever.” She says as she waggles her eyebrows and gets a little tap on the hand from Ali. “So… what are you not telling me?” Ashlyn looks at Ali expectantly.

“I should’ve known better.” Ali rolls her eyes. “What gave it away?”

“You’re smiling and obviously happy, but you’ve been biting your lip off and on. You only do that when you’re nervous… or when… well, you know.” Ashlyn snickers lightly so she doesn’t move her stomach much. “I’m guessing you’re not about to orgasm… I’m not that good and my hair must be a disaster right now. Sooo… what are you nervous about?”
“Geez Harris, even on heavy drugs…” Ali says completely impressed.


“Yes, yes, the babies are healthy and looking completely normal for being seven weeks.” Ali says right away. “I mean, we still have the typical risk of miscarriage until 12 weeks, but the risk is already really reduced by making it to 7 weeks.” Ali doesn’t hide the reality of it. They both read up on pregnancy and they both know this.

“Yeah, I remember that. So what is it then? Are you ok?” Ashlyn presses, getting more anxious now.

“I’m fine, honey. I promise.” Ali assures her and squeezes her hand again. “Dr. Baylor just noted a couple of potential complications related to the placenta and, you know me, I let the details overwhelm me.”

“Oh um… ok. Well, what did she say?” Ashlyn calms down a bit.

“One of the babies implanted in a spot that carries a higher risk for placenta previa. She explained to me that it just means that the placenta can drop down and cover the cervix opening either partially or completely. That would require a C-section delivery if it happened.” Ali explains.

“I’m sorry, Alex. I know that’s not what you want.” Ashlyn says with a little frown. She and Ali had talked about this a lot as they were reading things and the brunette had been set on a natural birth if possible.

“I know, just something I have to mentally get over and prepare for. The placenta previa thing isn’t a definite and the uterus can grow so that it pulls things up normally even past the twenty week mark. But… twins make a C-section way more likely to begin with since they both have to be positioned just right and are usually born a little early anyway.” Ali elaborates. “As long as they’re healthy… I just have to keep in mind that healthy is the important thing.”

“You’re amazing, Alex.” Ashlyn smiles at her resolve about it, nervous or not. “Is that it?”

“No, one more thing. She could see a tiny bit of fluid where the placenta is attached for the baby that is lower. That means there is a small bleed there. The bleed itself isn’t dangerous. But aside from the placenta previa risk there… there is also potential for placenta accreta.” Ali answers.

“Geez, who knew placentas were so complicated. What does that mean?” Ashlyn questions.

“That would mean that the placenta would sort of grown into the uterus tissue and would likely tear off and cause hemorrhaging post-delivery. In most cases, it requires surgery to stop the bleeding and, in the worst case…a hysterectomy. The babies wouldn’t be affected though.” Ali doesn’t hold back.

Ashlyn lets out a deep breath, not able to hide her own worry about that one. “Ok… I’ll admit that I feel nervous about that. Is the risk really high?”

“No worse than the placenta previa and probably a little less. It’s too early to tell anything at all yet… just that the particular implantation spot tends to carry a higher risk for those things as does the small bleed. We won’t know more until the baby anatomy scan at 18 weeks. That should give us a better idea of what is happening.” Ali explains it like Dr. Baylor told her. “Dr. Baylor said it’s really like a 50/50 right now…so, not to worry until there was something to worry about.”

“Well, that I agree with.” Ashlyn smiles. “I think we already have enough stress going on here without adding any more.” She adds guiltily.
“Hey, baby… it’s ok. We’re gonna get through this just fine. One day at a time.” Ali strokes her cheek. “You just keep kicking ass at recovery, Harris. And I’ll keep these little warrior babies all comfy cozy.”

“Deal.” Ashlyn puts her hand on Ali’s and closes her eyes for a few seconds. “This is gonna sound weird, but I just feel it in my gut that everything is going to be perfectly fine and we’re not going to have to deal with any of that stuff.”

“Really?” Ali says hopefully. “That makes me feel better.”

“Just a feeling…” Ashlyn reiterates. “Then again, could be all these stitches that I’m sure are in there.” She laughs lightly again.

“Yeah that…and the ab drain, and the bruises.” Ali shakes her head.

“You were right.” Ashlyn confesses.


“I’m so fucking injury prone.” Ashlyn rolls her eyes at herself.

“More like there’s a magnetic force between you and situations where injury is likely.” Ali laughs. “You know what though… I couldn’t be prouder and I couldn’t love you more.”

“I love you too, beautiful.” Ashlyn locks onto Ali’s whiskey eyes. “You really are so beautiful. There’s nothing like waking up to you, no matter what the circumstance. It’s a hell of a motivator to always wake up.”

“Ok, Harris… you’re the sweetest, but these hormones are no joke and you’re gonna make me cry.” Ali wipes at the tear threatening to escape. “Plus I have double the hormones to deal with. My poor mascara has been through enough in the last 48 hours, don’t you think?”

“You know, I should’ve known when you kept asking for hot peppers on everything.” Ashlyn shakes her head slightly. “We should have trusted how we felt. We knew we made a baby that day…well, two babies actually.”

“We totally knew!!! And the hot food cravings are still going strong. These little warriors like it spicy apparently.” Ali giggles.

“Babe…I’m so excited.” Ashlyn says with a huge smile.


“I know I look like hell and I’m all gross, but… can I get a real kiss?” Ashlyn requests shyly.

“You’re not gross!” Ali argues and immediately gets a raised eyebrow from Ashlyn.

“You’re not gross!!” Ali argues and immediately gets a raised eyebrow from Ashlyn.

“Ok, fine… the nasal tube is a little gnarly and you’re rocking some serious bedhead, but you’re as beautiful and handsome as ever, baby.” Ali confesses and leans in close. “I just don’t want to hurt you… but damn right you can get a real kiss.”

“You won’t hurt me.” Ashlyn whispers as they start breathing the same air and closes her eyes.

The kiss is soft and slow, emotional and soothing, fervent and relaxing all at the same time. It goes on for just over a minute before Ali pulls away to a slight moan from Ashlyn, not wanting to overdo it. The brunette leaves a couple more pecks on the officer’s lips before just smiling at her.
“Can I see them again?” Ashlyn asks, eyes still hooded from the kiss.

“Of course you can.” Ali gives her the ultrasound photos again and watches as the officer’s eyes look them over with a happy little twinkle in them.

“Such cute little blobs.” Ashlyn says sweetly.

“Mmhmm. I think that one looks like you.” Ali jokes.

“Funny, Krieger.” Ashlyn eyes her playfully. “I really hope they look just like you.”

“Well, I hope they’re just like you.” Ali counters. “Minus the reckless part.” She adds teasingly.

“Agreed on that.” Ashlyn cringes playfully. “My little squad… wait… do we know if they’re fraternal or identical yet?” She looks over the ultrasound again.

“Not for certain, but two placentas likely means that they’re fraternal. We’ll know that at 18 weeks too.” Ali replies.

“Baby A and Baby B, huh?” Ashlyn says as she sees the labels on the ultrasound. “We can do better than that.”

“Oh yeah, what do you suggest?” Ali inquires playfully.

“Hmmm…” Ashlyn thinks about it as she looks at the picture some more. “All I got right now is Warrior Tadpole and Warrior Pollywog.” She laughs lightly.

“We’ll work on it.” Ali laughs and shakes her head as Ashlyn hands the pictures back to her.

“I’m so tired.” Ashlyn admits, the excitement of the news definitely wearing her out.

“Close your eyes and rest, baby. We have lots of time to talk about all of this.” Ali reassures her and strokes her hair.

“I know. Just really hurting and not sure I can sleep.” Ashlyn confesses.

“The nurse should be here in like twenty minutes for your medication, baby. Want me to read to you?” Ali suggests.

“Yeah, ok.” Ashlyn tries to relax.

Ali gets back to reading Matilda, but just five minutes in and she can see it isn’t quite working. Ashlyn is wincing and breathing deeply as she squeezes Ali’s hand really hard. She wracks her brain for something she can do when the idea hits her. She can’t believe she even forgot to begin with.

“How about we listen to something else, ok?” She says softly and kisses Ashlyn’s now sweaty forehead before pulling out her cellphone.

“Ok.” Ashlyn whispers.

Ali doesn’t say anything else, she just finds the file on her phone and hits play.

Ashlyn opens her eyes at what sounds like a chugging freight train. “What is that?”

“That would be Warrior Pollywog as you so nicely called Baby B.” Ali smiles.
“Oh my god… really? That’s the heartbeat?” Ashlyn smiles widely.

“Sure is. Dr. Baylor let me record it on my phone. I just remembered it.” Ali confirms.

“That’s amazing… it’s beautiful.” Ashlyn tears up.

“It really is.” Ali agrees and they listen to the twenty second long sound before there is a brief pause and the sound starts again. “And that would be Warrior Tadpole… the second one was really tricky to find and Dr. Baylor was about to give up on it until the little one decided to finally show up. It’s pretty rare to hear both this early, but she kept at it for quite a while since she was sure there were two.”

“Well, then that one will definitely be just like you…always takes forever to get ready and emerge, but so worth the wait.” Ashlyn winks and closes her eyes again, listening to the next 15 or so seconds until it’s over.

“Funny, Hero.” Ali pinches her arm lightly. “Sorry, it’s kind of short.” She says as it ends.

“That’s ok. Play it again?” Ashlyn asks.

“How about I put it on repeat?” Ali puts her phone on the bed and holds Ashlyn’s hand and arm in both of hers, leaning her head against it as she sits back down in the chair.

“Perfect.” Ashlyn smiles as the sound starts again, the rhythmic noise relaxing and distracting her from everything else. “Our babies… our twins. Love you all.” She says groggily just a few minutes later, her eyes staying closed.

“Our twins…” Ali repeats and kisses Ashlyn’s arm. “Thank you for fighting so hard for us, Ash. We love you too and we’ll be right here beside you.”

It’s the last thing that gets said between them with Ashlyn falling deeply asleep just a couple minutes later. Ali stays awake until the nurse comes to check in and administer the next round of medication. It’s not long before she’s nuzzled back up against the officer’s arm and is nodding off too, finally having the same gut feeling inside that Ashlyn described a little while ago: *Everything is going to be just fine… these two little warriors having no idea yet just how special they really are.*

Chapter End Notes

Sooo... are you surprised at all? How are we feeling about the warrior two-pack?
Telling, Tooting, and...This

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay on this! It has definitely been really hard to find time to write lately and I really appreciate your patience as the updates take longer than usual. As usual, I hope this lengthy chapter makes up for the extra time it took to write it. There's all sorts of little things happening in this one, but mostly just moving along through recovery and the early stages of baby news. We're working up to a little bit of a surprise coming in the next chapter (can't keep myself in check too long, can I?)...but I promise it's a good surprise this time, so no need to white knuckle it on the ride haha. Enjoy and let me know what you're thinking in the comments! I love to hear your thoughts :-)  

*****WARNING: Minor mention of suicide attempt, but nothing graphic. Just wanted to put the warning here just in case.*************

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tuesday, May 22nd

“Alex… oh god, baby. That feels so good… mmmm.” Ashlyn moans loudly at the brunette’s touch.

“Ashlyn! I swear to god if you don’t stop moaning like that, I’m going to stop washing your hair. The nurse probably thinks we’re having sex in here!” Ali warns as she massages shampoo through the officer’s hair as best she can in the tight space of the hospital bathroom.

“Babe, I can barely even walk the few feet to this bathroom, my stomach looks like Frankenstein with a drainage bulb sticking out of it, and I haven’t properly showered in like four days… trust me, nobody thinks we’re having sex.” Ashlyn raises her eyebrows before closing her eyes again and relishing in Ali’s fingers gently running over her scalp.

“If anyone could find a way despite all that, you would Harris.” Ali plays back, but Ashlyn is too busy lightly moaning again to respond.

After getting transferred out of the ICU yesterday morning and losing the nasal feeding tube and catheter, the nurses have been getting Ashlyn up and walking a few feet to the bathroom or around the room every few hours. Now starting to get accustomed to the pain of moving around, the officer immediately asked this morning if there was any way she could wash her hair and brush her teeth. The nurse promptly got all of the needed supplies and took the opportunity to change the bed while Ali quickly set to the task with Ashlyn slightly reclined in a chair in the bathroom.

“Just about done, baby. You doing ok?” Ali asks as she holds a small plastic basin under Ashlyn’s head and uses a cup to rinse the shampoo out.

“Yeah. It definitely hurts to sit like this, but so worth it right now. Thank you, really feels so good.” Ashlyn smiles.

“You’re welcome. Just need to dry it with the towel.” Ali dries it as best she can before rummaging through the overnight bag in the corner that Kyle brought her yesterday. “Alright…fair warning that
this is not going to be anywhere near the usual Harris hair wave of perfection, but I’ll give it a go.” She says as she works some mousse into her hands and does her best to get Ashlyn’s hair styled into a wet look.

“Oh my god, really?! You actually have hair product for me?!” Ashlyn asks almost giddily, feeling even better than she just did a second ago as her eyes open to see Ali styling her hair.

“Duh. Kyle would have brought it even if I didn’t ask him to.” Ali replies with a loving smile as she works the comb through the officer’s hair and then uses her fingers to get it looking as best she can. “There… gorgeous as always.” Ali rolls the chair back just a bit so Ashlyn can manage a look in the mirror.

“Alex… you’re the best.” Ashlyn says a bit emotionally, feeling reinvigorated with clean hair and fresh breath. “I love you, woman. Get those lips on mine stat.”

“Love you too, Hero.” Ali leans down to place a chaste kiss on her lips. “I better call Keisha in here so she can get ready to remove your bandage like she said. You look a little tired, honey.”

“Yeah, who knew walking like 10 feet and getting pampered was so exhausting?” Ashlyn jokes as Ali goes to call the nurse in.

“Bed is all fresh and changed. How are we doing in here?” Keisha the nurse asks.

“Sooooo much better. That felt so good!” Ashlyn says with a chipper tone.

“So I heard.” Keisha laughs.

“Told you!” Ali blushing a bit as she points her finger at Ashlyn.

“Ha, don’t even worry about it. As a girl who once broke her femur bone and had her leg in traction for like 3 weeks… I can tell you firsthand how blissful that first hair wash feels. Moaning is practically a requirement.” Keisha says nonchalantly.

“See!” Ashlyn sticks her tongue out and Ali rolls her eyes.

“Alright, so let’s get you back into bed and get these bandages off so we can get that incision cleaned up.” Keisha instructs and helps Ashlyn gently to her feet, providing lots of support as the officer slowly shuffles her way back to the bed grimacing the whole way.

Having done this more times that she cares to think about with her military injuries, Ashlyn mentally prepares herself for how much this is going to suck as Keisha starts removing the tape from the large swath of bandaging covering the right side of her torso.

“Ali, we’ll show you how to do all of this before she gets discharged home…but, you don’t have to stay if you’re not ready to see it.” Keisha says gently after noticing the brunette biting her lip hard and looking a bit pale while she watches and holds Ashlyn’s hand.

“No, no…I’m staying!” Ali says resolutely, squeezing Ashlyn’s hand a little tighter.

“I win.” Ashlyn smiles at Keisha. “I told you there was no way she was bagging out no matter what. This one is feisty and actually tougher than I am.” She winks as she nods her head towards Ali.

“Alright, a bet is a bet. You win!” Keisha concedes.

“You two bet on me?” Ali asks with her hand on her hip.
“Yep, I officially owe her a blue popsicle.” Keisha laughs. “You know the deal though, Ashlyn…”

“Yeah, yeah… only water and chicken broth until I pass gas. Got it.” Ashlyn shakes her head. “I’ve never wanted to fart so badly in my life.”

Ali laughs and almost snorts while Keisha lets out a giggle but remains focused on her task, setting up a sterile area of supplies before lifting off the bandages she just removed the tape from.

It’s the first time either of them has really seen the damage post-surgery and Ali’s eyes go wide while Ashlyn just shrugs and whispers “add it to the dossier.” The incision runs from a couple inches under Ashlyn’s right breast to just below her belly button in an almost L-shape with a dangling end. The doctor wasn’t kidding when he said they had to extend the original wound a bit.

“Hey, it’s okay, Alex. You ok?” Ashlyn looks up at Ali to find her looking upset.

“Yeah... my poor, baby.” Ali whispers brings Ashlyn’s hand up to kiss it, focusing on holding in any tears threatening to escape and paying attention to what the nurse is doing. “Yet another one to love.” She meets the officer’s eyes and smiles.

“We should probably write your promised love for my disfigurement into our vows.” Ashlyn lightens the mood.

“Might as well… I mean, what are the odds that you stop here?” Ali raises an eyebrow.

“I’d like to say they’re really good, buuuut…” Ashlyn jests.

“We both know better than that, Captain Injury Magnet.” Ali shakes her head just as Ashlyn winces and gasps slightly.

“Sorry, Ashlyn. I know that hurts, but I need to get some of this dried drainage cleared away from the incision area. We won’t be re-bandaging it, so the skin will breathe more and it won’t accumulate like this.” Keisha says apologetically as she gently cleans the area.

“No worries, you just do your thing.” Ashlyn manages say through gritted teeth, grateful that Ali’s other hand is now softly stroking her cheek and neck.

“Alrighty, good to go!” Keisha announces a few minutes later, fitting Ashlyn with a fresh hospital gown and administering the next round of medicine. “I’ll be back soon to check in, try to get some rest. In a few hours, we’ll get you up again and maybe sitting in the chair for little while. And I know the doctor on duty today is scheduled to come to have a look at the incision at some point.”

“Thanks, Keisha.” Ashlyn says appreciatively as the nurse leaves the room.

“How are you doing, honey?” Ali asks at the somewhat glazed over look on Ashlyn’s face.

“Wiped out and really hurting.” Ashlyn admits, the drowsiness from the pain medication starting to settle in already.

“Close your eyes and sleep for a while. It’s going to be a long day with Kyle, Chris and Edith coming to visit.” Ali leans down to kiss her forehead. With Ashlyn being so out of it and sleeping a lot, Ali had done her best to buy them an extra day before anyone came to visit after the officer left the ICU. Still, they knew it would only be so long before the worried trio would eventually exert their will and show up at the door to visit.

“Mmkay.” Ashlyn concedes with a yawn. “But first… I haven’t said good morning yet.”
Ali smiles and shifts her body so that her belly is as close to Ashlyn’s face as she can manage, an awkward position she’s mastered over the last two days at the officer’s insistence.

“Good morning my little warrior lieblings… Mama loves you so much.” Ashlyn kisses her hand and puts it on the brunette’s belly, the best she can do now since she can’t lean over further without pain. “Do some kick ass growing in there today and be nice to your beautiful Mommy cause she’s my whole world.” Her eyes look up to meet Ali’s. “I love you, baby… all three of you.”

“We love you too, Ash…even more than yesterday, but not as much as tomorrow.” Ali replies and kisses Ashlyn softly, hearing a contented sigh from the officer as she pulls away. “Sleep, love… I’ll be right here.”

“Ok…” Ashlyn replies and closes her eyes. “Go shower…eat… Alex…please…take care...of you.” She adds in a drawn out groggy mumble as the medication knocks her right out.

“Hidee Ho sugar plums!” Kyle says cheerily as he walks into the hospital room around 11am carrying two large duffle bags and a big shark stuffed animal.

“Hey bro!” Ashlyn grins as she does her best to sip some chicken broth.

“Where’s princess?” He asks, surprised his sister isn’t glued to Ashlyn’s hip right now. “You didn’t get so hungry that you ate her, did you?”

“Funny. She had to pee, she’ll be out in a second.” Ashlyn motions towards the bathroom. “Soooo, what’d ya bring me?” She asks as she eyes the stuffed shark.

“Well obviously your room needs some bad ass decoration, so this epic great white ought to do the trick for now. Plus I figured it might make a nice side pillow when you need one.” Kyle says proudly and lays it on the end of the bed. “Also brought both you some clothes and stuff like that. I got you some really loose boxers and drawstring pajama pants with some loose t-shirts and button up shirts. I hope one of those options will work so you can get out of that wretched gown.” Kyle cringes.

“You’re the fucking best! Seriously… I want real clothes almost as badly as I want to eat.” Ashlyn motions for him to get closer and then reaches out to hold and squeeze his hand.

“Anytime, Harris.” Kyle smiles warmly. “Really though, how are you doing? That was some serious mangling and repair.”

“Still feeling pretty rough and can’t stay awake more than an hour or two…but, I’ve have the best company in the world and some pretty amazing people that care about me.” She squeezes his hand again. “Plus I didn’t get myself killed…so, all in all…I’m doing pretty damn good.”

“I’m really glad you’re ok. Well as ok as it gets right now anyway. You scared the fucking shit out of me though, so thanks for that you big jerk.” Kyle jibes her. “Not sure I’ll ever get used to all this super hero shit you pull, but… then I remember that if it wasn’t for that, I wouldn’t be here. Sooo, I’m just gonna keep the stuffed sharks and stylish pjs coming as needed.”

“What more could a girl ask for?” Ashlyn winks at him.

“That.” Kyle points to Ali as she walks out of the bathroom. “Damn honey, you are killing this bedside wifey look!”

“Awww, well thank you babes!” Ali tosses her hair over her shoulder and does a little twirl before
going over to hug him. She actually took the time to properly dry and style her hair and get a little
deep into her makeup routine since Ashlyn slept most of the morning.

“I was just telling Harris that I brought you two some more clothes and personal care items. There’s a
few more things in that other bag for you too.” He tells Ali vaguely. The bag is full of easy snacks,
but he doesn’t want to go into detail since he knows Ashlyn can’t eat real food yet.

“Oh, did you bring the sriracha sauce?” Ali asks excitedly. The food from the hospital cafeteria has
been far too bland for what she wants lately. Last night’s spaghetti and marinara had been a million
times better after she borrowed some tabasco sauce from the nurses’ kitchenette and she immediately
texted Kyle and asked him to bring her some hot sauce.

“Uh… yeah, you big weirdo. What is the sudden obsession with spicy?” Kyle looks at her like she’s
crazy.

“Oh, she just needs a little extra heat these days.” Ashlyn says with a knowing smile as Ali leans into
the side of the bed a bit and entwines their free hands, careful not to touch the IV. Given his role in
the process, the two of them had decided yesterday that they would tell him the news ASAP and
then wait until Ali was a bit further along before telling anyone else.

“Ok, what are you two not telling me? I hate being out of the loop. What’s your deal? Is this like
some hot sauce, hospital-bed sex kink thing?” He questions with narrowed eyes.

“What?! No!” Ali carefully reaches across the bed to swat him. “Why would you jump to that?!”

“Well excuuuuuuse me… but you two are looking at each other all giddy and googly eyes like you do
when you’re about to make-out. It wasn’t exactly a big leap on my part!” Kyle defends himself.
“Annnyway, are you going to tell me or not?”

“Hmmm…how come this never goes as planned with him?” Ashlyn says and pretends to think about
it deeply.

“Ok…alright, geez! Sorry, sorry. I’ll restart!” Kyle makes some weird faces to make it seem like he’s
rewinding and then relaxes into a nice smile. “My, my…you two lovely ladies are looking positively
happy and sweet. May I ask why?” He lays it on thick.

“So much better.” Ali says with a laugh before casually adding. “That’s exactly the kind of polite I
was looking for, Uncle Kyle.”

“Oh come on…I’m always polite, I just get carried away sometimes and…” Kyle starts to protest
before the last part of what Ali said catches up to him. “Wait, did you just call me…WHAT?!” Kyle
stands up and looks at them with wide-eyes, just now noticing that Ashlyn’s hand has gone to rest on
Ali’s belly. His hands immediately go to cover his mouth. “Wait… really?! Like you’re… really?!”
He asks a bit muffled by his own hands.

“Really.” Ashlyn confirms with a huge grin while Ali nods with a nose-crinkling smile.

“Oh my gosh… you guys! Oh my gosh! I’m so… everything!” Kyle’s eyes get a little teary as he
processes it all. “Wow…holy shit, this is… ahhhh, yeeees!” He starts to go in to hug Ashlyn, but
then realizes immediately that he can’t. He stands there sort of bouncing up and down on his feet for
a second before finally going around the bed to hug Ali tightly. “You’re having a baby…Alex,
you’re pregnant!”

“I’m pregnant… 7 weeks.” Ali confirms as she gets practically smothered in his arms.
“I’m so happy, so excited. I love you guys…I’m so happy!” Kyle practically sing-songs as he stands back to look at Ali. “I should have known. You’re definitely glowing.”

“We’re pretty damn happy too.” Ashlyn pipes up from her bed.

“How long have you known? I mean this didn’t just happen, obviously…7 weeks? Hold on, I’m so confused. I thought…what I am missing?” Kyle spews out questions in a ramble as his mind thinks through what has happened over the last month with the failed IVF news.

“Yeah so, you’re not missing much. We had no idea either. When I went to the doctor Friday morning, it turns out that the original bloodwork wasn’t accurate and I was pregnant after all. That’s why I was feeling so crappy.” Ali starts and then launches into the more elaborate explanation of everything, leaving out only the details about having twins and the potential complications they could face.

“Wow, this is unreal.” Kyle wraps his head around it. “I knew it…I told you that you would be a fertile turtle! Them Krieger genes be crushing it! Plus you’re an overachiever, sooo.”

“So totally an overachiever, but I’m definitely not complaining.” Ashlyn adds with a little smirk, knowing what is coming next.

“Well, she did have help getting knocked up…go team super embryo!” Kyle jokes and high fives Ashlyn. “Vain or not, I’m just saying right now that this is going to be the cutest kid ever.” He lets out a happy little sigh before reaching for both Ali and Ashlyn’s hands. “My two favorite people…now three.”

“Yeah about that…” Ashlyn smiles and looks at Ali. “Any chance you have room for one more favorite?”

“The shark doesn’t count, Harris.” Kyle rolls his eyes dramatically.

“I’m not talking about the shark.” Ashlyn shakes her head.

“Well I can’t be my own favorite.” Kyle sasses cockily and gets an eye roll from both women. “Kidding! But I’m lost as to what you’re saying here…” He shrugs and waits for clarification.

“Well, your math is a little off. Not your fault, we didn’t give you the right numbers yet… but, it’s four… not three.” Ali reveals and looks between her and Ashlyn before looking back at Kyle with a smile. “Four of us… four favorites.”

“Four?” Kyle’s brow furrows as he tries to figure it out, his mouth dropping open when it dawns on him. “Oh. My. Goodness! TWINS!!!!!!” He yells so loud that Ali is sure the nurse is going to come busting in at any second. He quickly leans down and kisses Ashlyn’s forehead before lifting Ali off the ground in another hug.

“Twins!” Ali repeats even though there is no need.

“I can’t even remember the last time I was this happy!” Kyle puts Ali down, tears flowing freely down his face now. “Actually, I think this is the happiest I’ve ever been.” He corrects.

“Me too.” Ashlyn says sweetly. “Well…minus the whole recently gutted like a fish thing.”

“Way too soon, Hero.” Ali gives her a playful warning look and gets an apologetic little smile from the officer. “So, are you ready for double the uncle duty?” She looks at Kyle.
“Of course I am!” Kyle says enthusiastically. “The question is are you two ready for double the diaper doody… and I mean serious doody, ewww!” He scrunches his nose.

“You would.” Ali shakes her head. “Ready or not, we’re getting it.” She adds with a laugh.

“Besides, that’s what uncles are for. Poopy diapers and early morning outings so the mommies can sleep.” Ashlyn teases him.

“You wish, Harris.” Kyle jokes back. “I really can’t wait. In fact, in like ten minutes I’m going to head right to the mall and get these little cuties their first matching onesies! These are gonna be the best dressed twinsies ever.”

“You’re leaving already?” Ali asks.

“Harris needs to rest and Chris, Edith, and I coordinated so our visits would be spaced out today and kept to about thirty minutes.” He explains. “You know I’ll be back tomorrow anyway.”

“You guys are sweet.” Ali replies appreciatively and Ashlyn nods in agreement. “Oh and Ky, we’re not planning to tell anyone else right now. There’s still the higher miscarriage risk until 12 weeks and we just want to have some time to enjoy it by ourselves. So, if you could keep it quiet…”

“You have my word.” Kyle promises and pretends to zip his lip. He wants to ask a million more questions about things like whether they’ll find out gender and how they plan to announce it, but he knows that there will be time to ask when things are a bit less stressful. Instead he spends the last ten minutes making sure they know how happy he is for them and how loved and supported they are.

“I better go and give you some peace and quiet.” Kyle stands up from the chair he was sitting in and leans down to give Ashlyn another kiss on the forehead. “Stay strong and heal up, Harris. She’s gonna need you more than ever. Love you. So glad you’re ok.” He whispers in her ear.

“I know and I will, promise. Love you too, bro.” Ashlyn whispers back. “Bring double the snacks next time.” She winks at him.

“Definitely will!” Kyle laughs and makes his way over to Ali, pulling her into yet another tight hug. “So happy for you, Alex, and so proud. Mom would be over the moon right now.”

“I like to think that somehow and somewhere, she is.” Ali replies back and hugs him tighter.

“You know it. Take care of our girl…she looks tough, but she can be a real pansy when they bust out the jello.” He teases loud enough for Ashlyn to hear.

“It takes the shape of any container it’s in and jiggles at the slightest vibration! How is that not gross?!?” Ashlyn contends.

“Whatsoever you say, pansy!” Kyle chuckles. “Love you both, call if you need anything at all! Eeeek, time to twin shop!” And just like that he’s out the door with a little squeal and a queen-like hand wave.

“Is it just me or was that really pretty thrilling to spill the beans?” Ali asks with a huge smile. “Like, it feels even more real now, right?”

“Completely agree. That was exciting and so fun.” Ashlyn confirms and looks at her in wonderment.
“What’s that look for, sweetheart?” Ali immediately catches the intently loving gaze directed her way.

“You’re just so beautiful, Alex. Kyle was right… you’re glowing and gorgeous. And I love you so much it hurts.” Ashlyn says softly. “Come here.” She tugs Ali’s shirt until the brunette’s lips are near hers and captures them in a romantic kiss that makes her heart rate pick up.

“You’re the absolute sweetest, Ashlyn Harris. And I love you too, baby.” Ali pecks the officer’s lips one more time before giving her room to breathe. “Just remember how beautiful you think I look right now when I’m a whale in a few months, ok?”

“You’re not gonna be a whale!” Ashlyn immediately argues. “You’re going to be the most beautiful pregnant woman in the world, honey. No doubt about it.”

Ali is about to joke about being the most beautiful whale in the world, but stops when she sees Ashlyn grimace before a loud fart sound fills the room.

“Fucking finally!” Ashlyn shouts excitedly. “Ugh, yaaaaaaas!”

“Well that’s one way to break the ‘we’ve never farted in front of each other’ ice.” Ali belly laughs. “Check that off the list!”

“I’m so damn thrilled to eat something other than fucking chicken broth that I’m not even a little embarrassed right now.” Ashlyn confesses.

“Nothing to be embarrassed about, honey. I’ve seen you talk to your hair, doesn’t get more embarrassing than that.” Ali teases. “Besides, I’m pretty thrilled myself. I sooo didn’t want to be the one to do it first, but it’s clear that I was running out of time before these little warriors crowded me out in here and forced it to happen. Now that you farted first, I’m definitely not gonna care when it inevitably happens.”

“Glad to be of service, Krieger.” Ashlyn rolls her eyes teasingly. “Now for the love of god, get Keisha in here with that popsicle!”

“Relax fart pants, I’m on it.” Ali can’t help but tease one more time before leaving a little kiss on Ashlyn’s chin and going to find the nurse.

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“That bedridden look does not suit you, Tin Man.” Edith says as she walks into the room.

“Edith!” Ashlyn says happily, her head popping up from the game of Uno she was playing with Ali. “You came at a good time…I just learned that Alex cheats at Uno.”

“I do not!” Ali protests.

“Whatsoever lets you sleep at night, baby. Still love you.” Ashlyn teases as the brunette puts away the cards.

“Ashlyn, you suck at just about every card game I’ve ever tried to teach you. Remember the Canasta debacle? Chances are you’re just playing wrong and Ali knows what she’s doing.” Edith shrugs.

“See!” Ali joins in.

“Well so much for being happy to see you… go home, Edith.” Ashlyn jokes.
“Nope. Consider it payback for when I told you to go home and you decided to stay and get damn near killed in the process.” Edith shoots the officer a look.

“Yeah, yeah. How’s your head?” Ashlyn asks with concern.

“My head is perfectly fine. This noggin took much more abuse from my grandmother’s wooden spoon as a kid, so this was nothing. The important question is, how are you?” Edith replies and sends the question right back to her. “And don’t give me any of that ‘I’m fine Edith’ bullshit. The last time you did that you were sprawled out on the floor bleeding all over yourself and giving me a thumbs up like it was a scratch and now look where we are.” She points an accusing finger at the officer.

“I’m still in a lot of pain, exhausted most of the time, irritated that I can’t move that well, fucking starved, and beyond frustrated that I can’t hold this beautiful woman beside me…but you know what, I’ve never been happier to be alive.” Ashlyn puts it bluntly.

“Well I appreciate the honesty.” Edith gives her a sympathetic smile. “You certainly look better than the last time I saw you, but that’s not saying much. Well…except that you look like you just had sex with a Smurf right now, but I’ll overlook that.”

“Smurf?” Ashlyn looks at her quizzically.

“Your mouth is blue, honey.” Ali enlightens her as she laughs hard.

“Oh, right. Well I finally farted and got to eat something other than nasty chicken broth and it happened to be a blue popsicle and it was delicious, so I could care less about a blue mouth.” Ashlyn explains in a bit of a ramble.

“Charming, dear.” Edith laughs.


“Oh shut it you two.” Ashlyn gives them playful glare.

“As much as I joke…I hate seeing you like this and I’ve been so worried. I couldn’t be more relieved that this wasn’t even worse than it is and that you’re doing ok.” Edith says truthfully as she settles into the chair beside the bed and reaches to hold Ashlyn’s hand.

“I’m going to slip out and go send out a couple emails I’ve been meaning to.” Ali makes the quickest excuse she can think of, sensing that Edith has more to say and not wanting to intrude.

“Nonsense, you can do that later. Anything I have to say to Tin Man over here is just as pertinent to you, so get comfy.” Edith sees right through Ali’s attempt at leaving.

“You’re not going to get all sappy on me are you?” Ashlyn asks the older woman in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“Maybe a little, but you can handle it. Besides, it’s not like you can run off anywhere right now…so, you’re stuck listening to me. Now stop interrupting.” Edith replies before getting out what she has to say.

“When I met your grandmother, I was in one of the worst places in my life. Randy, my husband, had just died about a year before after his boat capsized in a rogue wave near the grand banks. We never had kids…always had this grand vision that we’d be some well-off retired couple that traveled the country. And you know, I was always satisfied with that vision until he died and I had nothing. None of the plans we made mattered because he wasn’t there. I had put all my stock in him and
when he was gone, there was no one. Wasn’t long before I realized that I wasn’t where I truly wanted to be, that I had settled for whatever he wanted and not the things that I did.” Edith says with a shrug as Ashlyn and Ali listen quietly.

Ashlyn holds the older woman’s hand firmly in hers, already having learned more than she ever knew about Edith’s husband besides the fact that he was a fisherman. She has really never talked about him much and Ashlyn has never been one to pry.

“I’ve never clicked so quickly with someone the way I did with you grandmother. Eunice came in to open an account at the bank one day and the next thing I knew we were fast friends. I couldn’t have needed her more back then, and I think somehow she knew that. Watching her and your grandfather together made me question everything I had ever known about love. But that’s beside the point…I’m going off on a tangent here like an old floosy.” Edith tries to get down to what she really wants to say.

“Anyway… your grandparents made me feel like a part of their family. They became my family. You and Chris, the grandkids I never had and always wanted. The four of you always made me feel loved and a part of you, but my mind hasn’t always let me fully escape the feeling that I’m not really your family, and in many ways just an accessory.” Edith admits.

“Oh, Edith…no… absolutely not…you are family through and through.” Ashlyn pipes up only to be shushed by the older woman.

“Hush, I’m not done.” Edith stops her. “You and your brother have been such a part of my life, always looking out for me. I love Chris dearly, but he has always been more closed off with his emotions and his affection is more mechanical and protective. But you… you were always different, Ashlyn. You’ve been connected and open with me since you were a little girl, never once looking at or treating me any differently than your own grandmother. So much so that in my heart, you’ve always felt like my very own. Still, I’ve often wondered how much of that was in my own mind because I wanted it to be that way and not because it actually was.” Edith pauses for a second and looks up to meet Ashlyn’s eyes.

“Never again will I question. You walked into the bank the other day to come and save me…just like you would your own grandmother. And I couldn’t have been both more terrified that you were in danger or more happy to see you because I knew you were there for me. It shouldn’t have taken this to realize, but I know now that the feeling in my heart is what is right. Blood or not, you are my very own. I love you and I’m so proud of you and what a beautiful, accomplished woman you have grown up to be. Thank you… you’ve given me more in this life than I could ever explain.” She finishes with a smile and the same twinkling blue eyes that have always felt so much a part of home for Ashlyn.

“I’m going to keep it simple, Edith. Because it really is simple. Blood doesn’t make a family. The best family is the one you get to choose. The reason I’ve never looked at or treated you any different than Gram is because you’re not. You are just as much my grandmother as she was…the two of you like my mothers if we’re being real here. I love you and couldn’t be more thankful to have you in my life.” Ashlyn replies genuinely. “So, we about done being sappy now? Can I get my sailor mouth granny back?” She uses humor to get away from the heavy moment.

“You sure as fuck can.” Edith winks. “Besides, Ali’s makeup is never going to recover if we don’t stop.” She motions to the brunette who is sitting on the other side of the bed with tears rolling down her face.

“You ok, honey?” Ashlyn asks in concern.
“Yep, sorry… sorry, you two just hit me in the feels with all that.” Ali does her best to wipe some of the tears away without smudging her mascara too badly.

“Geez, Ali… when did you become the emotional one? We all know Tin Man over here is a crier when you get past the tough guy exterior, but you’re usually so composed. You’re crumbling like a cookie dear, was my soliloquy that moving?” Edith semi-teases her.

“Well yeah! You’re the one who said it pertains to me too, so I’m thinking I just gained myself a grandma and I’m beyond touched.” Ali says sweetly before adding “well that and the…” She catches herself just short of saying hormones and quickly inserts “lack of sleep.”

“You’re damn right you gained a grandma!” Edith replies adamantly. “Now how about we stop crying before this room floods and I have to build an arc. I’m too old for that shit and not nearly catholic enough. Instead, maybe Ashlyn can enlighten us about how exactly one cheats at Uno.”

“Grandma Edith…” Ali muses and she and Ashlyn exchange a look and a hand squeeze that communicates their next move perfectly.

“That does have a nice ring to it.” Ashlyn smiles.

“You’re not really going to call me that now, are you?” Edith eyes them playfully. “Edith works just fine and doesn’t make me feel like a dinosaur.”

“Oh well, damn… if you don’t like grandma… you’re really not gonna like what we plan to call you next.” Ashlyn smirks.

“Uh oh, are we moving right to fossil instead of dinosaur?” Edith tries to play into whatever joke they’re about to make.

“Actually, we were thinking something along the lines of great grandma.” Ashlyn grins and moves her hand to Ali’s belly to make the message clear.

“Get out! Really!” Edith pops up out of the chair. “This isn’t some prank to make me feel senile right?”

“Nope. You are officially going to be a great grandma, Edith. But we can go with fossil if that’s what you want.” Ali deadpans before breaking out into a laugh.

Ashlyn’s eyes go wide as Edith breaks out into some little Irish jig that she’s certainly never seen before. “Whew, go girl! What the fuck was that?” She does her best not to laugh because it hurts.

“That is my fucking happy great grandma dance! Don’t ask stupid questions, Tin Man!” Edith retorts happily before doing one more twirl as she makes her way around the bed towards Ali.

“Wow and it’s starting to feel like Charlie and the Chocolate Factory now… she’s getting all Grandpa Joe up in here.” Ashlyn continues to tease and Ali breaks out into a belly laugh at the whole scene. “I’ve got the Golden Ticket!” The officer sings to keep it going.

“If I wasn’t so happy and you weren’t in that bed, I’d whoop you.” Edith shoots Ashlyn a look before holding both of their hands in hers. “I’m so very happy for you. Two beautiful people becoming two wonderful parents.” She says sentimentally before going right back to her usual self. “The way little stars pop out of your eyes when you look at her…I’m shocked it took you this long to knock her up! You’re losing your touch, dear.” She teases Ashlyn.

“Oh, she definitely hasn’t lost her touch.” Ali smiles. “In fact, she’s so good that she knocked me up
twice in one shot.” She winks at Edith.

“Come on… now you’re just fucking with me?!” Edith says incredulously as she looks between the two of them.

“Please, when do you know me to ever not do things to the fullest?” Ashlyn chuckles before just putting it bluntly. “We’re having twins!”

“You look just beautiful, Ali. Twins… I can’t even believe it!” Edith says in awe as she stands back to look at the brunette with a huge smile. “I’ve been knitting for 25 years now without having a clue why because I actually find it tedious. Clearly I was just training for this moment… bring on the booties! I’m going to be a great grandma!” She yells excitedly with her hands in the air.

“Oh, so now you’re suddenly happy with the great grandma moniker?” Ali joins in the teasing.

“I sure as hell am… the number of times Ashlyn made a mess of my garden and broke my windows, I fucking earned it!” Edith declares. “Now spill it, tell me everything!”

The two women don’t hold back a single detail, recounting all of it and even confiding in her about the potential difficulties Ali may face. Edith is wonderfully reassuring in a way that feels sincere and comforting to both of them, just what they needed right now without even realizing. Not to mention that she’s elated and completely fascinated at the fact that the twins will be genetically linked to both women.

Edith kicks herself out just a few minutes later so that Ashlyn can rest, but not before she makes a promise that gets both of them teary all over again: “I’ll never be able to replace Eunice, but I promise I’ll be every bit the woman she would have been for these two angels of yours, you can count on that.” She kisses them both on the cheek and makes her way out, being sure to pop her head back in the door to add “Now stop crying and feed my grandbabies... I want some pudgy chunkers with smooshy cheeks just like Ashy was!”

“Ashy?” Ali smirks and raises an eyebrow.


“You are so lucky I love you enough not to torture you, Harris.” Ali taps the officer’s nose with her finger.

“Baby, I was lucky the moment you even looked at me… the rest is beyond luck, magic really.” Ashlyn lays it on thick.

“Overkill as usual, Hero. Close your eyes and rest, Prince Charming… cause you’re looking more like a hungover Sleeping Beauty right now.” Ali leans down and kisses her softly on the lips.

“Whatever you say, Rocky Raccoon.” Ashlyn smugly teases right back.

“Ugh, fucking Edith!” Ali groans and gets up so she can go fix her mascara.

“Hurry back.” Ashlyn requests with a little pout.

“40 seconds… time me.” Ali says as she heads into the bathroom quickly.

“Seriously? What is this… Nascar? Oooh Mascara! Like mascara, get it?” Ashlyn exclaims with a laugh. “And Krieger pulls off the track and into the pit for a touch-up… she’s cutting it close, Johnny. She better hurry if she has any chance of pulling this one out…” The officer pretends to
sportscast in a booming voice from the bed. “32 seconds…I don’t think she is gonna make it…” She barely gets out before Ali comes racing out of the bathroom and captures her lips in a gentle kiss that deepens for just a few seconds before the brunette pulls away.

“So, did I win the race?” Ali asks with a flirtatious smile.

“You won the damn Triple Crown, Alex.” Ashlyn replies with still hooded eyes, letting them close at the heavy sleepiness she suddenly feels.

“That’s horse racing, Ash.” Ali sits down in her chair and snuggles into the officer’s shoulder like usual.

“Mmhmm, you win it all. Horses, crowns, cars…” Ashlyn replies groggily.

“Nah, I’d rather just have you.” Ali says sweetly.

“Got me…love you.” The officer mumbles softly before drifting off.

“And you’ve got me, love. I love you so much.” Ali kisses her shoulder a few times before closing her own eyes for a little while.

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When Chris shows up around 3pm, Ashlyn has just made it into the chair with the help from Keisha and Ali after they managed to get her into a comfy pair of drawstring pants and a loose t-shirt that Kyle brought. Although it feels great to be in real clothes, right now all she can do is focus on trying to tolerate the pain that comes with sitting up.

“ Damn baby sis, you look rough. You ok?” Chris kneels down next to her chair and gently strokes her arm, noting how pale and sweaty she looks right now.

“Well don’t hold back, bro.” Ashlyn shoots him a look. “And yeah, this position sucks but apparently it’s good for me to get my muscles into different positions and breathe upright.” Ashlyn rolls her eyes.

“Well then, good thing I turned over a new leaf a while ago and didn’t come to deliver a lecture about your crazy death wish antics.” Chris gives her a half smile.

“Your new found wisdom is much appreciated at the moment.” Ashlyn plays back and takes a deep breath. “How much longer, Alex?”

“Keisha said to aim for 20 minutes, honey. You have 12 left… doing so good, baby. You can do it.” Ali encourages and shifts herself behind the chair to gently rub the officer’s shoulders. After telling Kyle and Edith, they both felt a little guilty that they weren’t going to tell Chris the pregnancy news yet. Ashlyn had reasoned that he hadn’t told her any sooner than other people when it came to Curtis and Elsie, plus Kyle and Edith would never tell. As fun as it had been to share the news earlier today, they felt better being cautious right now in not telling people. And seeing Ashlyn struggling to sit up at the moment, Ali couldn’t be happier that they’re not going to attempt to share the news under these circumstances.

“Hmmm… I could tell knock knock jokes…” Chris suggests with a knowing smile.

“Your knock knock jokes are the absolute worst. I’d rather spend another hour in this chair than listen to them…they’re that bad.” Ashlyn can’t help but mock him.
“I’m wounded, Ashlyn…deeply wounded.” Chris puts his hand over his heart. “Good thing I have something better.” He smiles and pulls out his phone, facetimeing with Bridget who immediately puts the kids on to talk to Ashlyn.

Curtis and Elsie have just gotten home from school and are a wealth of excited stories alongside an elaborate showing of their daily artwork. It’s exactly what Ashlyn needs, getting lost in their eager recounting of the day as the next few minutes seem to breeze on by. Keisha is there just a minute after they end the facetime call and the officer is gladly back in bed, her eyes already starting to close again. She barely manages to thank Chris and tell him she loves him before she’s out like a light.

“Wow… that was fast.” Chris says as Ashlyn immediately starts lightly snoring.

“Yeah, she doesn’t last long once the exhaustion kicks in.” Ali replies as she runs her hand lightly through Ashlyn’s hair.

“Are you doing ok? I know this is majorly rough. Are you going stir crazy in here yet?” Chris asks. “Any of us will gladly come be with her if you want to get out and take a break.” He offers.

“I hate seeing her suffering so much right now, but I’m actually doing just fine. It really doesn’t matter where I am, as long as I’m with her, that’s all that matters. Been that way since I first met her.” Ali divulges. “Ash could somehow even manage to make a prison visiting room feel warm and inviting.”

“You’re a love sick puppy, Ali…buuuut, I thank the universe for you every single day. Like a damn gold strike for this family.” Chris says truthfully with a smile. “I better get going and let you have some peace too. Call me for absolutely anything or even if she wants to facetime with the kids again! I’ll come back tomorrow or another day if she’s not up for it.”

“Promise I’ll call and keep you updated.” Ali replies and goes to give him a hug.

“Thanks for taking care of her, as always. You take care of yourself too and let me know what I can bring for you when I visit next, ok?” Chris says as he starts to make his way out.

“Actually, if you or Kyle wouldn’t mind bringing me one of those neck pillows, it would be much appreciated.” Ali requests. “Lord knows I’m doing damage over here.” She rubs her neck.

“Consider it done. I’ll drop one by first thing in the morning on my way into work.” Chris promises. “Night, night Ali. Tell her I said champagne wishes and boogeyman dreams, she’ll know what that means.” He smiles at the inside joke and makes his way out.

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“How’s my favorite patient?” Diane walks in as Ashlyn and Ali attempt to watch the Red Sox game on the tiny hospital room TV.

“Hey Diane! Are you my nurse tonight?” Ashlyn asks excitedly.

“Awww, I’m afraid not. I’m on an ICU rotation this month, but I thought I’d check in and say hello before my shift starts.” Diane replies with an apologetic little frown. “But I heard you graduated to soft foods, so I brought the best pudding money can buy… which also happens to be the cheapest pudding money can buy.” Diane giggles and holds up the 6-pack of snack cups she brought. “Nothing better than chocolate Snack Pack!”

“Oh my god, I haven’t eaten that since like high school. I forgot all about it…you are so right, best ever!” Ashlyn says happily. “Thank you so much!”
“You’re really sweet, Diane.” Ali adds with a smile.

“My pleasure.” Diane smiles. “So, how are you feeling?”

“Like a pained zombie.” Ashlyn confesses.

“I’m sorry. I know it must really suck, but you’re really doing great and making progress. Today pudding, next week filet mignon. They’ll have you off those heavy dose pain meds in no time and you’ll start to feel a lot less loopy and out of it. Just hang in there and remember it’s a slow process with little strides every day.” Diane says sympathetically.

“I know and I’m trying to remember to be patient… when I’m awake that is, so all of like an hour really.” Ashlyn jokes.

“Are you still sleeping in that damn chair?” Diane asks Ali with wide eyes while they’re still on the topic of sleep.

“Yeah, why?” Ali questions.

“Oh hell no. We can do better than that, especially since we all know you’ll be here as long as she is.” Diane scoffs one more time at the chair.

“I’m hoping I’ll get her to crawl into my bed like any day now.” Ashlyn says optimistically.

“Big talk from a girl who can barely sit up.” Ali teases a bit and Ashlyn pretend pouts.

“While I don’t doubt Ashlyn’s ability to win that argument eventually…I’ll have your night nurse get one of those chairs from the maternity ward that folds out into cot bed. It’s not much, but way better than that chair.” Diane promises.

“You’re too good to us.” Ali says gratefully.

“Just doing my job. Speaking of, I better get myself over to ICU and get going for the night. I’ll drop in before I go home tomorrow.” Diane starts to make her way out. “Enjoy that pudding, Captain, you earned it!”

“That woman is a saint.” Ashlyn says as soon as she’s gone. “We have to figure out something nice to do for her.”

“Well you already did plenty for her, honey…but, I’ll think of something.” Ali runs her hand lightly up Ashlyn’s forearm.

“I did? Did you send her something from us last time?” Ashlyn asks a bit confused.

“Oh um…” Ali pauses a bit at her lack of filter, not sure if she was supposed to reveal what Diane told her or not. “Well, if I told you her last name was Westaway, would that mean anything to you?” She responds vaguely in hopes that maybe Ashlyn will figure it out on her own.

“As in Todd Westaway?” Ashlyn asks after thinking about it for a few seconds.

“Um…I don’t know. Maybe. Depends on who Todd Westaway is.” Ali replies.

“He’s this college kid I talked off a bridge one night back when I was still a police lieutenant in Southie.” Ashlyn explains.

“Then yes, Westaway as in Todd Westaway.” Ali says as she squeezes Ashlyn’s arm lightly. “You
“Yeah, just thinking about how it’s such a small world.” Ashlyn muses. “I’m sure I talked to Diane at some point back then, but I don’t remember it. I remember Todd though. I haven’t thought about him in quite a while, but I used to wonder what happened to him and how he was doing every so often.”

“Well, maybe you can ask her.” Ali suggests.

“I think I will.” Ashlyn nods with a little smile.

They quietly go back to watching the baseball game together for a little while before Ali’s curiosity gets the best of her. “Hey Ash?”

“Mmmmm?” Ashlyn replies, her eyes shifting to look at Ali.

“You don’t have to answer… but, what did you say to him to get him off the bridge?” Ali asks.

“I don’t mind answering. That’s why I remember him so well actually, kind of one of the crazier things I ever did.” Ashlyn thinks back to it. “Let me back track so that it makes more sense. When I was in 7th grade, I hit this complete low point. I was beyond miserable one night with everything going on with my parents...I felt so alone and just wanted out. No one was home and I sat in my bedroom with a box cutter and convinced myself that no one would miss me, that I wasn’t needed or wanted. That it was the best thing.”

“Oh sweetheart...baby...I’m so sorry.” Ali whispers through the lump in her throat and holds the officer’s hand tightly. She knew about Ashlyn having a history of depression, but they’d never talked about this.

“It’s ok, Alex. Really. Just not my finest moment.” Ashlyn reassures her before continuing. “When I had just about worked up the guts to actually do it, I got interrupted by our cat scratching at my door. I got up and let her in like usual and she came in and curled up on my bed like she always did at night. Then I realized that no one would feed her if it wasn’t for me...and that was enough to stop me for that night. I just went to bed because of the cat. And then the next day, the whole thing felt so stupid when I thought back on what I almost did. I mean, it’s not like I wasn’t still miserable...but the idea of what I was going to do... I don’t know. It just seemed dumb and unnecessary after the fact. And I never forgot that all I needed was to wait one more day... to give myself the chance to think more clearly so I could see better, you know?”

“I honestly don’t know, love. I’ve never been in that place, but I completely believe it and can understand what you are saying.” Ali says truthfully. “Gotta say I’m not a cat person, but I love that damn cat.” She adds and gets a little smile from the officer.

“Anyway, so fast forward to me attempting to get Todd off the bridge after a few other cops and a crisis therapist had failed to do it. I tried to get him to talk to me about what was going on, but he wouldn’t open up. And then somehow I thought about myself and how I just needed to hold on until the next day to have better perspective. So, I just told him very briefly about how I had been in his shoes and how just waiting one more day had changed everything. I told him that he owed it to himself to see what tomorrow brought before he made this decision.” Ashlyn recounts. “He seemed like he was at least considering it for a few minutes and then he asked me how I knew that tomorrow would be any better.”

“What did you say?” Ali asks, now captivated by the story.
“I was honest and said that I didn’t know that, but that I knew it couldn’t get much worse than this moment on the bridge right now. That if he walked away tonight, tomorrow could be day one of a new life. Then I told him that if tomorrow came and I was wrong…if he still wanted to jump off the bridge, that I’d come right back there with him and he wouldn’t do it alone.” Ashlyn tells her.

“Holy shit…you really promised that?” Ali asks incredulously.

“I did. Told you it was crazy.” Ashlyn shrugs. “He didn’t say anything for a while and then I remember him saying ‘you’re that sure?’ And then I asked for his cellphone and put my number in it and said ‘yes, I’m that sure.’ We walked off the bridge together a couple minutes later and that was that. He never called me and I heard through the grapevine that he was in therapy, but that was the extent of it.” Ashlyn finishes, letting out a yawn as she starts to get tired.

“You never cease to amaze me, Ash…never. Just when I think I couldn’t love you any more, I’m so so wrong. You’re the best person I’ve ever known.” Ali places little kisses all over Ashlyn’s face.

“That goes double for you, my queen.” Ashlyn says with a dimpled grin.

“You look wiped out baby. Time for sleep?” Ali pulls back just enough to look into her eyes.

“Ugh, yeah…I’m already zoning out a bit. It’s time.” Ashlyn groans.

“Close those gorgeous eyes then and I’ll be right here beside you like always.” Ali strokes her cheek with her thumb.

“Ok. Can I get a goodnight kiss?” Ashlyn asks, her voice tired and little raspy.

“Don’t even have to ask. You can have a billion…if you can stay awake long enough that is.” Ali winks.

“Hmmm, well if that’s the criteria then I’m just going to have to settle for one really long one.” Ashlyn replies sweetly.

“Done and done, Hero.” Ali doesn’t wait to close the small distance between them, mouths moving in a lazy but passionate kiss that lasts a couple minutes before Ashlyn’s lips are barely moving and the brunette can tell she’s all but fallen asleep. She pulls away and leaves a few more soft little pecks before settling back into the chair and leaning over so her head is resting near Ashlyn’s shoulder.

“Can’t believe I get to be your wife and raise kids with you…I’m so lucky. Sweet dreams, perfect.” She whispers and closes her eyes.

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Friday, May 25th

“Oh holy fucking hell, uuuuuhhhh, fuck!” Ashlyn grunts loudly while squeezing Ali’s hand as hard as she ever has.

“Thought you said it wouldn’t hurt?!” Ali questions the nurse harshly as she stands there wide-eyed in complete shock at how long the drainage tube that the woman just pulled out of Ashlyn’s belly was, easily about two feet.

“It didn’t, just worse feeling ever. Like a fucking eel swimming in there and then like she was pulling my insides out or something. Ugh, that sucked.” Ashlyn explains before Ali can rip the nurse’s head
off, easing up on the brunette’s hand and taking a deep breath.

“Sorry, I know that isn’t pleasant. That’s what I meant when I said it would feel really strange, but it’s hard to really explain it to people until they feel it.” The nurse says apologetically as she cleans the area and puts a small bandage over it. “Doing okay now?”

“Yes, fine now. Thanks.” Ashlyn replies and feels Ali rub her shoulder lightly.

“The little opening in the skin will close up on its own in just a few days, no need to do anything else to it.” The nurse explains. “The doctor will be in soon to go over your recent CT scan and blood results.”

“Thank you.” Ali makes sure to give the woman a nice smile, knowing she must have looked like a bear ready to charge a few minutes ago.

“Easy tiger. Thought you were gonna maul her for a second there.” Ashlyn teases.

“Oh I almost did. You ok, baby? Your face when she did that… that looked awful.” Ali says worriedly.

“I’m fine, Alex. I promise. Just one of the weirdest and most unpleasant sensations ever, but it didn’t hurt.” Ashlyn assures her. “And look… no bulb!” The officer happily points down to her stomach.

Although there are more staples than Ali can even count holding the long incision together and the officer’s stomach is still pretty swollen with the usually defined abs nowhere to be seen, she has to admit that it does look a lot better without a bulb of yellow fluid hanging down from near her belly button. “Looking amazing, Ash.” Ali says sweetly.

“Liar.” Ashlyn shoots her a playful look. “I look like I ate twenty pounds of chocolate or something.” She says looking down at her belly. “Ugh, I wish I could eat twenty pounds of chocolate right now.”

“First of all, you always look amazing. Second, the doctor said that the swelling will go down in a couple weeks and you’ll be back to normal other than the incision. You’ll have your mega six-pack back in no time, baby.” Ali reminds her.

“Yeah I know… but until then, I have a snack pack.” Ashlyn laughs. “Oh which reminds me, hand me one of those chocolate puddings Diane brought!”

“Breakfast of champions.” Ali giggles as she grabs one from the little storage closet in the room.

“You know it.” Ashlyn digs right into it.

Ali just smiles, glad that something as silly as pudding is bringing a little cheer at the moment. It has been a rough few days to say the least. The officer started experiencing pretty awful stomach cramping and has thrown up a couple times from the high dose of antibiotics messing up the balance of healthy bacteria in her digestive system. The daily physical therapy sessions she started on Wednesday felt like torture and left her sore from even the light muscle tone exercises. And to top it off, her pain medication got lowered yesterday afternoon which has been nothing short of a bumpy transition so far. Ali has done her best to distract her and keep her spirits up, but she can tell Ashlyn is frustrated and hurting.

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“The incision itself looks really great with good healing so far. I’d say we’re on schedule to take the
staples out late this upcoming week which will make movement more comfortable.” Dr. Tan tells Ashlyn and Ali, helping the officer pull her t-shirt back down.

“Your CT scan looked really good too. I didn’t see any indication of bleeding at the repair sites with healing progress as expected, which is why I ordered the drainage tube removal. I’m thinking we can go ahead and start introducing a more normal diet now and that should help a bit with the digestive side-effects you’re experiencing from the antibiotics. Some daily yogurt will do you a lot of good and I’ll supplement that with some additional probiotic capsules.” Dr. Tan says, pausing to see if they have any questions.

Ali looks over at Ashlyn to see a little smile on her face and she can already tell the officer has only one thing in mind…cheeseburger. She smiles to herself at the thought and then directs her attention back to Dr. Tan as he continues.

“So, your blood results are where I still have some concern. Your white blood cell count is still pretty elevated, which means we’re still fighting infection somewhere. And it’s pretty clear that your kidney is where that infection is located. Your kidney function numbers are still much lower than they should be, so we know that the right kidney we found infection in during the surgery is still struggling to keep up. We’re not at a point of critical concern, but it does mean that we need to start making some adjustments to see what we can do to make more progress.” Dr. Tan gives it to them straight.


“For starters, we’re going to continue the antibiotics at high dosage through the IV. We’ll make sure to keep the IV fluids high and I want to add a diuretic medication as well to really get fluid movement going. Nutrition is going to be really important right now too. We’ll want you to be on a strict diet of raw vegetables and fruit, whole grains, and we’ll limit proteins. Low protein intake will be key while that kidney isn’t up to the task and you’ll want to stick to very lean proteins like fish and egg whites, definitely no red meat or processed foods until we see progress.” Dr. Tan elaborates.

Ali nods and squeezes Ashlyn’s hand at seeing the officer’s face fall a bit… so much for the cheeseburger.

“If we don’t see any improvement by Tuesday, we’ll have you undergo a dialysis session to really filter the blood completely and see if that can give you the boost you need to get that kidney functioning better.” Dr. Tan lays out the next step should this next plan not work.

“Alright, eat like a rabbit and pee like a million times a day. Got it.” Ashlyn says a bit flatly.

“Pretty much, but I’m confident that it will get you moving in the right direction.” Dr. Tan says with a smile. “You’ve already come a long way, Captain. You’re doing great and I expect it will only continue to go up from here.” He adds positively. “Any questions?”

“None that I can think of. Alex?” Ashlyn looks at Ali.

“I don’t have any right now either.” Ali replies.

“Well you can ask anything you think of as it comes up. Just let me know if you need anything.” Dr. Tan reminds them before making his way out.

“You ok, Ash?” Ali asks when the officer lets out a long sigh.

“Yeah.” The officer gives a short reply.
“Hey…you know better. You don’t have to pretend to be okay for me. You don’t have to be strong all the time and you’re allowed to be upset. What are you thinking?” Ali says gently and runs a hand through Ashlyn’s hair soothingly.

Ashlyn lets herself melt into the touch. “I know, Alex. It’s not that big of a deal. I’m just really irritated and sick of being limited, you know? I’m okay though. Having you here with me is everything, even if I get aggravated sometimes… you’re all I need.” The officer says truthfully, feeling herself calm down a bit. “Although, I have to admit that a cheeseburger would have really helped too.” She chuckles with a little huff.

“Oh I know. I could practically see the cheeseburger thought bubble appear above your head when he said normal diet.” Ali laughs. “Good to know I’m competing with a cheeseburger.”

“You’d always win, babe.” Ashlyn plays back. “Well, unless it was a burger from Shake Shack.” She adds with a wink.

“You’re so lucky I can’t tickle you into oblivion right now.” Ali jokingly glares at her. “You’re doing so good, Hero. Just one day at a time.” She adds seriously before bringing some humor back into it. “And before you know it, you’ll be at home…. with me feeding you that cheeseburger… in our own comfy bed… naked.”

“Mmmm, yes baby…talk dirty to me.” Ashlyn plays into it.

“Oh my god, stop it!” Ali lightly taps her on the nose.

Ashlyn is about to keep going with her cheeseburger fantasy to torture the brunette, but they’re interrupted by a visitor.

“Miss Scarlet, in the hospital bed, with the syringe!” Morris walks into the room holding a Clue board game box in the air.

“We meet again, Colonel Mustard. But I say it was you, in the x-ray room, with the scalpel!” Ashlyn grins, so happy to see him. “What are you doing here, bro?”

“Please, you couldn’t keep me away if you tried. Plus I brought back-up.” He sticks his thumb out and points to where Rivera and Porter are walking in behind him. “Rivera just got back from his Army consult trip and me and Porter flew in for the weekend. We’re all yours, Sarge.” Morris explains.

“This is amazing! I’m so glad you’re here!” Ashlyn smiles widely. “Now fall in.” She drops her voice into a commanding tone.

Porter goes for it and immediately stands at attention beside the bed, Rivera and Morris eventually following suit before Ali cracks up laughing.

“Oh wow, so this is what I missed out on all those years huh?” Ali says in amusements.

“Pretty much. She was such a dictator.” Rivera deadpans.

“Yeah, except that you were totally insubordinate.” Ashlyn narrows her eyes at him.

“And you loved every minute.” Rivera says proudly.

“Keep telling yourself that, Rivera. Meanwhile you were always the one that ended up carrying the heaviest pack, hmmm… wonder how that happened?” Ashlyn pretends to muse on it.
“You didn’t?!” Rivera’s mouth hangs open.

“Please, we ALL did. Extra ammo goes in Rivera’s bag…always!” Porter replies for them.

“Fucking traitors!” Rivera says incredulously. “Just when I think I got away with shit.” He shakes his head.

“You didn’t.” Morris and Ashlyn say in unison.

“Assholes, all of you. Just for that, I’m gonna crush you at Clue. Take no prisoners!” Rivera vows.

“Yeah, what’s with Clue?” Ali asks curiously and motions to the box that Morris put on end of the bed.

“Hospital tradition.” Ashlyn answers. “Morris and I spend a shit ton of time at Walter Reed Medical Center recovering together. That place was pretty damn depressing a lot of the time with not much to do. We started playing Clue to pass the time and then other patients there got into it. It became like this whole thing…we even created new scenarios and characters. All kinds of crazy shit.” She reminisces with a content smile.

“I’m not sure I want to know.” Ali teases.

“Oh yeah, it got really good when Admiral Butt-Funnel was the culprit in the strip club with the can of Spam.” Porter guffaws and the rest of them laugh.

“Yep, definitely don’t want to know.” Ali shakes her head.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Here, Sarge.” Rivera hands Ashlyn a small gift bag.

“Um?” Ashlyn looks at him quizzically as she pulls out a black snapback that says ‘I conquered the Aggro Crag’ on it.

“The Aggro Crag like in Nickelodeon GUTS…get it, guts?” Rivera smirks.

“You’re the worst.” Ashlyn rolls her eyes with a little smile, looking at Ali quickly and then turning back to Rivera. “I’ve been informed that it’s too soon.”

“Apparently not.” Ali can’t help but laugh, realizing she doesn’t stand a chance at not having a sense of humor about it when everyone already seems to. “On that note, I’m going to head out for a bit and do some laundry, reply to some emails, and grab a fresh set of clothes.” She announces. She doesn’t want to leave even for a second, but she already knows how good it will be for Ashlyn to have some time with the guys.

“From what I heard, you two have already seen each other naked…so, Luke you’re on bathroom duty if she needs to go. Nathan, you make sure to check in with her about resting if she needs to. And, Javi, you just focus on behaving yourself.” Ali lays down the law. “Oh and no matter what she tells you, she can only eat what the nurse brings her! No letting her convince you otherwise!”

“Yes, Ma’am.” All three guys reply in unison and give Ali a little salute while Ashlyn laughs at the scene in front of her.

“Damn, she’s worse than you.” Rivera whispers to Ashlyn.

“I heard that, Javi.” Ali raises an eyebrow at him before making her way over to Ashlyn and getting close. “Have fun baby and don’t overdo it.”
“I’m so happy you’re getting out of here for a little while.” Ashlyn says genuinely.

“What can I bring you back?” Ali asks her.

“Just you, beautiful.” Ashlyn replies sweetly. “And maybe a cheeseburger.”

“Always a charmer… and you wish, Harris. Promise I’ll think of something. Love you, baby.” Ali leans in and leave a lingering kiss on the officer’s lips before heading towards the door. “You bad ass Ranger kittens have fun and remember I have spies everywhere.”

“Okee, now that the Queen Bee has left the hive… run it down for us, Sarge.” Rivera requests as they all pull a chair of some kind over the bed and get comfortable. This is exactly why they’re here. Because it doesn’t matter whether it was one or all of them, they work through things together.

As usual with these guys, Ashlyn doesn’t spare any details at all about what happened at the bank… even going so far as to tell them what she was thinking and what the options were. It’s familiar routine that puts her at ease, a cathartic release she didn’t realize she was missing until now: recount, process, conquer, and let it go.

“Taking out a TEC-9 and a shotgun with a fucking pocket knife… so bad ass, bro.” Porter reaches out to fist bump her. “I taught you well, grasshopper.” He adds with a little bow.

“Some shit never changes, but there’s good reason I never bet against you. Just remember you’re not twenty-five anymore, you dink. You make me crazy, but you make me proud.” Morris says more seriously.

“Yeah, no, I think you’re flat out mental to have taken on those odds. You’re like one of those punching bag clowns that just keeps popping right back up no matter how many times you knock it down. You should come with a damn warning label. So damn glad you’re still here to watch my six, Sarge… never doubt you for a second.” Rivera adds and pats her leg carefully.

“So, we know the gist of it… but really, how bad?” Morris gets right down to it.

“You’re just trying to get me naked again.” Ashlyn jokes to lift the mood.

“Eh, maybe. Wasn’t so bad the first time.” Morris waggles his eyebrows.

“Speak for yourself, checking your junk for ticks after that sheep farm raid is not exactly on my highlight reel.” Ashlyn cringes. “At least you had a nice rack to look at.” She smirks cockily and frames her chest with her hands, making Morris let out a loud belly laugh.

“Um yeah, I got stuck with Rivera… so, I win worst night ever post-sheep raid.” Porter scrunches his nose and pretends to gag.

“Asshole! You’re just jealous that I have a good inch on you.” Rivera winks.

“Really right now? This many years later and I still have to remind you that no one cares whose dick is bigger? Cause really guys, no one cares… I definitely don’t.” Ashlyn mocks them.

“We know, Sergeant Lady Love.” Rivera makes a face at her. “Alright, now show us the goods.”

Ashlyn lifts her shirt to reveal the incision and all three guys stand up to have a good look.

“Yeeewww, that’s a battle scar and a half.” Porter remarks. “That’s gotta hurt.”

“Jesus, Ashlyn. Goddamn.” Morris reacts more personally, squeezing her shoulder a bit.
Rivera silently looks over the still angry looking wound before getting a little closer and sweetly ruffling Ashlyn’s hair a bit. “What are we all staring at? It’s just a scratch. You got this, Sarge.” He says with a meaningful smile.

“Hooah.” Porter and Morris reply to his statement.

“I got this.” Ashlyn nods in agreement and lowers her t-shirt.

“Ok then. Clue…let’s do this.” Morris gets things back on track, setting them up for a game session that lasts over two hours and brings enough banter and laughs that Ashlyn almost forgets where she is.

Before she even makes it to the room, Ali hears it… the laughter. Ashlyn’s genuinely jovial chuckle rising above the others like the most beautiful song she’s ever heard. Her heart flutters and lifts at the sound confirming what she already knew. These guys are so good for Ashlyn’s soul and she needed today more than she realized…to be around people who understand her without many words exchanged. Ali immediately makes a mental note to come up with a few more things to do tomorrow and Sunday so Ashlyn and the guys can have more uninterrupted time together.

Rather than go in right away, she stands outside the door just a bit longer, listening to her favorite laugh in the world and relishing the sound. She stays there as long as she can, until she knows that the strawberry banana yogurt smoothie she brought Ashlyn can’t wait any longer. Only then does she walk in and make her presence known, her heart feeling like it might burst at the bright smile that greets her as she enters.

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Sunday, May 27th

“I may be married, but I’m still gonna need to know why three of the hottest looking guys I’ve ever seen just walked out of your room.” Diane waltzes into the room Sunday evening with a devilish little smile. “Also, I brought you some healthy veggie fried brown rice from my favorite vegan place.” She holds up a take-out container. “It’s really good despite being health food, I promise!”

“That actually sounds really good, thank you!” Ashlyn says with an enthusiastic smile. “And those were the guys from my former Army Ranger unit…I chose them based on looks alone.” She deadpans and makes both Ali and Diane laugh.

“Come sit.” Ali smiles and motions Diane over to one of the chairs.

“I can only stay a few minutes.” Diane says as she plops down. “So, how’s it going?” She asks Ashlyn.

“Eh, it’s going.” Ashlyn replies with a shrug.

“Well, that’s not what I heard. Rehab staff says you’re a physical therapy superstar and kicking ass. Not that I expected anything less.” Diane shoots her a look.

“You tell her, Diane! Captain Modesty over here won’t believe us when we tell her she’s crushing it.” Ali lightly nudges Ashlyn’s arm.
“Just doing what I can to get better.” Ashlyn shrugs again.

“Oh cut the humble act and admit you’re a star!” Diane implores playfully.

“Never.” Ashlyn laughs and digs into the container of rice.

“It’s a losing battle.” Ali shakes her head.

“In that case, how are you doing, Ali?” Diane asks.

“Much better now that I can lay down to sleep.” Ali replies appreciatively as she motions to the fold-out chair that Diane managed to get for her. “Still not close enough for Cuddles over here, but much better.” She adds as she pinches Ashlyn’s cheek.

“It’s true. This is so good, by the way. Really, thank you.” Ashlyn says gratefully after a few bites of rice.

“You’re welcome. I was stopping there to get myself dinner, figured I’d grab you something too.” Diane waves it off.

“So, I have a personal question and you totally don’t have to answer.” Ashlyn just throws it out there before she can convince herself not to.

“Ask away.” Diane says with intrigue.

“I was kind of wondering how Todd was doing?” Ashlyn asks quietly.

“Ahh, you found me out!” Diane smiles. “At least now you know I wasn’t trying to bribe my way out of unpaid parking tickets or something.”

“Alex mentioned your last name and it clicked from there.” Ashlyn admits as she motions to Ali.

“Well I don’t mind at all. A little surprised you remembered after all these years, but I’m happy to tell you that he’s doing great. Took him a little while to get going again, but we found out that college was a big source of distress for him. He just wasn’t happy there and thought we’d be disappointed if he didn’t finish. So, we told him to just drop out and do whatever made him happy.” Diane explains before breaking out into a huge smile. “He’s a pretty amazing computer programmer now and he works for Google. Got married two years ago to a wonderful girl named Eva and this…” She takes out her phone and hands it to Ashlyn, “is my lovely 6 month old grandbaby, Emily.” She finishes proudly.

“Oh wow! That’s awesome!” Ashlyn looks carefully at the picture of Todd and this lovely looking brunette holding an adorable baby girl. She can’t help but notice how light and happy he looks. “I’m so happy to hear that. I’ve definitely wondered about him every so often. Just wow.”

“All thanks to you.” Diane pats Ashlyn’s arm.

“Nah, all thanks to him. I just gave him a push in a better direction.” Ashlyn says a bit shyly.

“Sure thing, Captain Modesty. But I’ll believe what I want.” Diane gives her a little look. “He hasn’t forgotten you, you know. Still has you in his phone under ‘Professor X’.” She divulges.

“Professor X? Like X-Men?” Ashlyn asks.

“Yep, he’s my little dork like that.” Diane laughs. “He’s never told me what you said to him and I’ve never prodded, but he says you’re his Professor X. His guide who had better vision than he did and
the only one who could get into his mind and break him free so he could see it for himself. That’s how he explains it.”

“That’s really sweet.” Ali pipes up from beside Ashlyn, only now realizing that she’s been holding the officer’s hand tightly this whole time.

“I think so too.” Diane admits. “And if anyone asks him who Professor X is in his phone, he answers ‘she’s my day one’. I haven’t got a clue what that means, but maybe you do.” She looks at Ashlyn.

“I do.” Ashlyn smiles, remembering what she said that night about tomorrow being day one.

“Well, not sure if you still have the same number…but, if you do…text him sometime. I know he’d love to hear from you even if it’s just a hello. I think he’s always wanted to reach out, but he’s still really shy. He was honestly pretty upset when you got put in jail…he didn’t believe any of it for a second and would rant to anyone that would listen. I’ll admit that I didn’t know what to think myself, but he was right.” Diane confesses.

“I actually do have the same number and I’ll definitely text him once I’m back on my feet.” Ashlyn says with a smile.

“I haven’t told him about being your nurse. I’m a real stickler about privacy. So, he’ll be really surprised.” Diane tells them. “And I haven’t said thank you because I can tell that you wouldn’t like that, but I really hope you know how absolutely grateful I am for you, Captain.” She says seriously.

“Well, we’re just as grateful for you.” Ashlyn replies honestly for both her and Ali. “So, we’ll call it even.”

“Hardly, but I’ll let it slide for now.” Diane replies and starts to get up. “I better get going before I’m late, but you know I’ll be back. Have a restful night and let me know if you need anything.”

“Thank you so much, Diane.” Ashlyn says and spoons more rice into her mouth.

“Have a good night!” Ali calls out as the woman leaves the room.

“You make quite an impression, Harris.” Ali smiles and leans in for a little kiss.

“As long as I make an impression on you, Krieger.” Ashlyn flirts.

“Ha! Understatement of the year, babe. Eat your rice, Hero.” Ali replies and goes back to sipping her tea as they watch a little TV.

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“Baby?” Ashlyn looks at Ali with a little pout as she pats the empty space she created next to her on the hospital bed by scooting over a bit. She has done this every single night so far, trying hard to get the brunette to cave and lay next to her. Ali has stuck to her guns though, too afraid to hurt the officer and refusing to give in, choosing to do the best she can to get close from the fold-out chair next to the bed.

Tonight is different for some reason and Ali finds her tenacity breaking immediately. Maybe it’s the hopeful look in the officer’s eyes. Maybe it’s the way Ashlyn’s sweet laugh from this weekend is still ringing through her ears after not hearing it for a week. Or maybe she just misses her… her touch, her warmth, the solid presence by her side. Whatever it is, tonight the request finally melts her resolve like an ice cream cone on hot pavement.
The brunette doesn’t say anything, choosing to just dim the overhead light before dropping the rail on the bed and very carefully climbing in, keeping any space she can between them until she’s sure her position doesn’t hurt the officer.

Ashlyn is stunned. “Really? Like really, really?” She asks in a squeaky little whisper with a goofy smile on her face.

“Really, love.” Ali replies with her own nose-crinkling grin as she watches Ashlyn fist pump. “But you know you have to promise…” She warns.

“I swear, I promise! Anything hurts too much and I’ll tell you and we can shift or something, just please stay.” Ashlyn says quickly before Ali can change her mind.

The officer’s eager and supplicant voice almost breaks Ali’s heart. “I’m not going anywhere, Ash. Is this ok?” The brunette asks, pressing her front softly into Ashlyn’s left side and resting her head on the officer’s shoulder.

“Perfect, Alex. So damn perfect.” Ashlyn says contently, feeling as free and unburdened as she has in days with the smell of Ali’s shampoo invading her senses and her body tingling in the spots where skin meets skin. “God, you smell so good. I missed you so much.” She closes her eyes.

“I missed you too, sweetheart.” Ali sighs happily and leans up to press a few soft kisses down Ashlyn’s jaw, hearing the officer’s breath hitch. “Easy, Harris or I’ll put a pillow between us.”

“Right, like I’ve ever had any control over how my body reacts to you.” Ashlyn opens her eyes and quirks an eyebrow.

“Fair point.” Ali concedes with a little giggle, her own body practically buzzing right now.

“Can we talk baby stuff?” Ashlyn asks, feeling like this is perfect time with them comfortable and close and the pain in her stomach far from her mind right now.

“I’d absolutely love to.” Ali smiles into Ashlyn’s shoulder. “Anything in particular?”

“Yeah, a couple things. First, how are you feeling, baby?” Ashlyn asks sweetly. “You’ve been so focused on me, you haven’t said much. Tell me everything. What are you feeling?”

“Surprisingly, not all that much. I have little moments of feeling really nauseated or dizzy out of the blue, but Dr. Baylor said that’s normal. I’m still spotting a tiny bit here and there, but apparently that’s pretty common with twins too. Other than spicy, I’m craving all the things I can’t have of course. I’d kill for a good cup of coffee, some sushi, or even a turkey club sandwich. I definitely feel emotionally hormonal like I did with the injections. Oh and I learned this weekend when I was home that our little warriors have already started making themselves comfy...all my tight jeans already don’t fit.” Ali replies honestly, only leaving out the fact that her sex drive is in the red zone because she doesn’t want to make the officer feel bad at all about the current situation. It certainly hasn’t been easy, even being this close to Ashlyn right now she can feel the wetness pooling between her legs. Her showers have certainly been cold and she knows she has a long road ahead if this keeps up while the officer is recovering.

“Awww, let me see.” Ashlyn moves her hand to lift Ali’s shirt a bit, running her hand over the very slightly protruding belly that no one else would really notice but her. “You’re so beautiful, Alex. Really, truly, beautiful.”

The awe in Ashlyn’s voice is enough to make Ali believe it, even though she feels more fat than pregnant at the moment. “Thank you, sweetheart. I’m not always feeling so beautiful these days, but
“you make me feel like I am.” She admits and kisses Ashlyn’s shoulder, letting herself get lost in the tingly warmth of Ashlyn’s hand on her stomach.

“So… do you want to find out gender?” Ashlyn asks the second question she had in mind.

“Do you?” Ali returns the question.

“I asked first.” Ashlyn smirks.

“But I’m having your babies.” Ali pouts.

“Ok, you win.” Ashlyn gives up. “As much as it would be so cool to experience one of the only pure surprises left in life…you know me, I suck at surprises. I think I’m too excited to not want to find out. But, I promise I can wait if you don’t want to know. What about you?”

“I think we both know I’m too much of a planner to wait.” Ali says simply.

“So, we’re finding out?” Ashlyn says giddily.

“We’re finding out.” Ali confirms and pecks Ashlyn’s lips. “Dr. Baylor said that we could maybe find out around 10 to 12 weeks with the blood test that checks for Down syndrome. Apparently it also detects Y-chromosomes in the mother’s blood to determine gender. The problem with twins is that the only accurate result is if there are no Y-chromosomes which means two girls. But if there is any Y-chromosome presence, then it’s not clear if it’s two boys or a boy and a girl. So, she suggested waiting until the big 18 week anatomy scan ultrasound to determine gender.”

“I’m game for that. It’ll be fun to wait a bit and have that to look forward to.” Ashlyn agrees. “Besides, it’ll be more exciting to see it on the screen than just opening some blood result envelope, right?”

“Totally!” Ali nods. “Ok, my turn. Thoughts on a nursery theme?”

“Oh geez… I don’t know. The possibilities are endless.” Ashlyn thinks it over a minute. “I can’t think of anything too specific right now, but regardless of gender, I really want it to be gender neutral. That’s all I really know right now.”

“Me too.” Ali completely agrees. “I actually had a bit of a vision this weekend, can I run it by you and see what you think?”

“Of course you can! Tell me.” Ashlyn replies enthusiastically.

“So, I was looking at the big guest room at our Ipswich house and I thought that might work the best given the layout and big space. I figure we can still have two other guest rooms by getting a nice pull-out couch for the office and making it a makeshift guest room if we need it.” She starts and watches Ashlyn’s mouth drop open. “You ok?”

“Yeah…you just…the Ipswich house?” Ashlyn gets out in a stuttered whisper.

“I think we both know that the whole two house thing we have going isn’t practical with babies.” Ali says matter-of-factly.

“Yeah, but Alex, we don’t have to…” Ashlyn starts but gets cut off.

“Hey, shhhh. Baby, I know you always try so hard to make this house thing fair between both places. In my heart though, Ash… Ipswich is home, our home. It’s been that way the moment I
stepped foot in that house and just felt your presence surround me. There’s no place that gives you a stronger sense of home than that house…and you are my home. So, it’s a no brainer for me. Besides, I’d much rather raise kids in a supportive quaint community than in pretentious Newton.” Ali lets it out unfiltered and keeps going.

“I know the Newton house means a lot to both of us too and I was thinking of just having Kyle get rid of his condo and live there fulltime. It’ll be a great space for him to have a salon setup at home and he would be spending much less money since I own the place and all he’d pay for is utilities. Plus, the stipulation would be that we’d always have it as a little getaway space close to the city. I know he wouldn’t mind. What do you think?” Ali finishes her thoughts.

“Wow…I… Alex… are you sure?” Ashlyn asks as she tries not to get overly emotional.

“Absolutely sure. I can’t wait to snuggle these little warriors on our little patch of beach.” Ali says dreamily.

“I’m so happy. Raising our babies in my grandparents’ home… I’m just so happy.” Ashlyn doesn’t even know what else to say as her heart pounds in her chest. She hears Ali whisper ‘me too’ and captures the brunette’s lips in a deep kiss that immediately gets a bit heated. Ali’s hands are squeezing her forearm firmly in a clear effort to prevent herself from wandering and she finally pulls back when she hears a husky moan leave the brunette’s throat and vibrate into her own. “Easy there, Krieger or I’ll put a pillow between us.” Ashlyn winks.

“Well then stop trying to distract me, Harris. I believe I was trying to tell you something.” Ali plays back, doing her best to hide how flustered she is after that kiss and trying to quell the fire overtaking her body.

“Oh right. Ok so, Ipswich, big guest room, nursery…go.” Ashlyn smiles and gets them back on track.

“So, I thought maybe we could get this round spiral yellow brick road rug that I saw on Etsy. You could use those artist skills of yours to do like an Emerald City mural on the wall. Then on along top of the wall, just below the ceiling, we could have a quote wrapping around the room. I was envisioning ‘You’ve always had the power my dear, you just had to learn it for yourself.’ And then we could maybe have a couple frames of other quotes and some stuffed animals or dolls of the characters. Oh… and hot air balloon crib mobiles to pull it all together.” Ali details it and then looks at Ashlyn in anticipation.

“The Wizard of Oz?” Ashlyn asks in a heavily emotional voice.

“Yeah. Do you like it?” Ali says softly.

“I could never ever think of anything more perfect than that. I love it. It means the world to me. I love it so much, honey. And I love you even more…you’re…god, there are just no words. I love you so damn much. You’re perfect, Alex. So, so perfect.” Ashlyn kisses her deeply again, feeling Ali take control of it this time and letting the brunette keep it sweet and romantic instead of fiery.

“I love you so hard, Ashlyn.” Ali mutters against the officer’s lips and leaves a few more soft lingering kisses before pulling away. “I think we made enough progress for one night. You need to rest. You look sleepy, honey.”

“Ok.” Ashlyn doesn’t fight it. She’s definitely feeling extra tired after a full weekend. “Sweet dreams, my queen.” She leans in for one more kiss. “Goodnight to you too, my little warriors. Can’t wait to feel you kick me.” The officer kisses her hand and puts it on Ali’s stomach before closing her
“Me either.” Ali smiles into Ashlyn’s shoulder. “We love you, Hero. Sleep tight.” She whispers near the officer’s ear before closing her own eyes.

Despite her insistence that Ashlyn rest, it’s Ali who falls asleep first. Ashlyn fights her own fatigue to watch the brunette sleep for a while, knowing that this right here is exactly what she needs. The weekend visitors had been great and done wonders for her mental state, but it’s nothing compared to this.

This…Alexandra Krieger lying beside her, pressed close against her body. Close enough that she easily turns her head and kisses along the brunette’s forehead, whispering “I love you, goddess” near her ear. Close enough that she can run her hand along a muscular thigh before moving up further to rest on the tiny belly swell that houses their whole future. Close enough to see each individual eyelash and the tiny little freckle on her throat even in the dim light. Close enough, and yet never close enough at the same time.

Ali’s warmth radiates into her skin, the brunette’s light puffs of breath tickle her neck. She closes her eyes and focuses on the rise and fall of Ali’s chest, the soft drumming of the heartbeat against her arm. All of it creating a rhythmic harmony that brings her more peace than she’s ever thought possible. It’s exactly what she needs to feel strong again, to know that no matter how difficult or frustrating recovery gets over the next few weeks, that she can do it. Because the truth is that she can do anything with this woman by her side. Because this right here is the most perfect thing in the world…this is theirs…and this is all she ever needs.

Chapter End Notes

Alright hit me with some guesses... what do you think the gender of these twins will be? And how do you think they'll announce it?
Thursday, June 7th

“Welcome home, love!” Ali says happily as she helps Ashlyn through the door of their Ipswich house.

Ashlyn can only beam and inhale deeply as she stands in the entrance area, taking in the sweet smell of home that she’s missed so much. “There’s no place like home.” She winks at Ali and jokingly clicks her heels together.

“Settle down there, Dorothy. The last thing we need is for you to topple over and have to go back to the hospital.” Ali warns her.

“Definitely don’t want that.” Ashlyn agrees.

“Come on, let’s get you settled in. Couch or bed?” Ali asks, wanting to get Ashlyn relaxing as soon as possible since she must be wiped out already from the hour-long drive.

“As much as I can’t wait to be in our bed, I think I’ve logged enough time in bed over the last couple weeks that I can wait until tonight. Couch please.” Ashlyn requests.

“Couch it is, gorgeous.” Ali takes Ashlyn’s hand to provide some support, but the officer is actually moving around pretty well on her own now.

“Want me to turn on the TV while I make us some lunch?” Ali asks after she gets Ashlyn reclined on the couch with a pillow under her head and feet up on the ottoman.

“Nope, this is perfect just like this.” Ashlyn replies and closes her eyes, enjoying the familiar sounds of home.

Two weeks and six days. It doesn’t seem all that long in the grand scheme of things, but it has felt like an eternity since the officer has been home. Although, she’s feeling a lot better now, it hasn’t been without effort. The physical therapy sessions got more challenging as her mobility and strength improved. The kidney function initially got better, only to drop down again when they lowered the

**The Here, The Now & The Today**

Chapter Notes

So, this chapter is a whopper! I find myself writing them longer and longer, so I hope you don’t mind and I’ll just warn you that it might take a bit to get through. There is truly a ton in this one...a little bit of everything including plenty of fluff, a gender reveal, some smut of course, and a little surprise at the end too. I’m anticipating there will be three more chapters left now, so enjoy the ride as we coast in to the finish.

Thank you to all of you that have left me comments, I appreciate it so much and love to hear from you. So, keep them coming!!!

***I apologize in advance for any typos and will work to clean them up over the next few days, but wanted to get this out for you ASAP***
level of antibiotics and had to go back to high dosage which caused more stomach cramping and vomiting. Luckily, the infection had cleared up shortly after that and the kidney returned to normal and stayed that way. The removal of the incision staples had been no picnic, but the compression binder they gave her to place around her abdomen ever since then has been a godsend, getting rid of the swelling and providing support that has made movement easier. She’s still plenty sore and achy, but the officer has come a long way already in the last couple of weeks, proudly beating the original estimate that she would be in the hospital at least three weeks even if it was just by one day.

“Bon Appetit!” Ali gently places a tray with Kyle’s tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich on Ashlyn’s lap as the officer opens her eyes.

“Thanks, baby. This looks great.” Ashlyn says thankfully. It’s the truth and she loves this meal, but she’d be lying if she said she wasn’t a bit disappointed that it’s not a cheeseburger. Although the doctor warned her before discharge to keep a mostly healthy diet through the rest of recovery, the food restrictions had been lifted and she had been given the green light to eat anything in moderation. She thought for sure there would be a cheeseburger in her hand by now.

“How are you doing, babe?” Ali asks as they both dig into their food.

“I’m good, really happy to be home.” Ashlyn says with a little smile only to hear Ali laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Ashlyn asks in confusion.

“I’m sorry, honey…but your face right now.” Ali says through laughter. “I don’t mean to laugh at you, but you’re so obvious. I know it’s not the cheeseburger you wanted, sweetheart.”

“Oh geez, I’m sorry Alex. I swear this is great, I’m not upset about it. I mean, yes, I really want a cheeseburger, but I’m really not complaining. I mean it.” Ashlyn scrambles to apologize, feeling guilty that Ali saw right through her.

“Ash, relax…you can be disappointed. I get it and I promise you there is good reason that you’re not eating a cheeseburger right now.” Ali smiles at her.

“Oh uh…ok?” Ashlyn still feels a bit lost.

“Everyone is really excited that you’re home and is coming over for a very low-key dinner tonight. We just didn’t tell you so that you wouldn’t stress about it beforehand. It’ll be really chill and no one is going to stay beyond having dinner together. Kyle is going to grill some burgers and make some homemade fries, really simple. So, cheeseburger later today, Hero…I promise!” Ali reaches out to squeeze the officer’s arm lightly. “That ok?”

“That sounds wonderful actually.” Ashlyn smiles, feeling more than ready to have some normalcy back. Dinner with family and friends sounds like a great way to get started. “Who all is coming?”


“Oh wow, that’s awesome! I just hope I don’t crap out on everyone.” Ashlyn says wishfully.

“Oh Ash, totally okay if you do. That’s the whole point of low-key and no stress, ok? No one is going to care one bit if you get tired and need to go relax and you have to promise that you’ll pay attention to how you feel and not overdo it.” Ali makes it clear.

“Promise, Alex. I’m actually pretty excited.” The officer smiles genuinely. “I’m a little disappointed that this cheeseburger feast won’t be happening in our bed with you naked, but I’ll take it just the
same.” She chuckles.

Ali clears her throat, trying to keep her out-of-control libido in check over even the mention of the two of them in bed naked together. “Rain check on that, Harris. Just try not to have an orgasm in front of our guests tonight, ok?” She jokes her way through it.

“No promises.” Ashlyn shrugs.

“Well, so much for low-key then.” Ali giggles and gets up to clear their dishes, not missing the little frown on Ashlyn’s face as she lifts the tray from her lap. “What’s the matter? You ok?”

“I’m fine. Just a little binned cause it shouldn’t be like this.” Ashlyn admits.

“Be like what?” Ali asks worriedly.

“You’re pregnant with our twins and I should be waiting on you hand and foot, but instead it’s the other way around. I’m sorry.” The officer says glumly.

“Nope, none of that.” Ali gets close and lifts Ashlyn’s chin up with her hand so the officer can look into her eyes. “First of all, you always wait on me hand and foot and take such good care of me…it’s my turn, baby. Second, there will be PLENTY of time for that when you’re feeling a little better and you know I’ll enjoy every minute being spoiled by you. Third, I love you and you being right here with me is all I need. Just focus on healing and feeling better and everything else will fall into place. Got it?” Ali says sweetly but firmly.

“Got it.” Ashlyn closes the tiny distance between them and kisses Ali softly. “Thank you…don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Ditto, Hero.” Ali pecks her lips one more time. “Now I have an important question for tonight.” She gets up and goes over to the basket of fresh laundry sitting by the stairs, pulling out an old hoodie of Ashlyn’s that has the sleeves cut off. She quickly pulls it over her head and then poses a bit in front of the officer. “Too obvious?” She asks, framing her belly a bit.

They’re not ready to spill the news quite yet, but it’s getting a lot harder to hide now that Ali’s belly has definitely popped a bit and she’s rocking a little baby bump. It also doesn’t help that the weather is getting pretty warm and she can’t just throw on a loose sweater to cover it up. It won’t be too warm tonight, so she hopes she can get away with the casual sleeveless hoodie over her leggings.

“Not at all. No one will know.” Ashlyn reassures her. “You look amazing as always, baby. I love you in my clothes.”

“Good, cause I’m sure I’ll be wearing a lot of it when all of mine stops fitting in like two days.” Ali says a bit dramatically and plops down so that her back is against the arm of the couch, stretching out her legs and slipping her cold toes under Ashlyn’s thigh.

Ashlyn reaches down and moves Ali’s feet so that they’re resting on top her thigh and then gently holds top the of each foot with her hands before looking over at the brunette. “Can I?” She asks and gets a little nod and smile from Ali before starting to massage her feet.

They both know that Ali is self-conscious about her feet and not usually one for foot rubs, but right now the moment between them is poignant. For Ashlyn, it’s the way Ali is so open and trusting of her, letting herself go enough to enjoy the simple action. It makes the officer feel wanted and, more importantly right now, useful and able to do something for her girl. For Ali, it’s the loving touch combined with the content look on the officer’s face at being able to pamper her… it makes her feel safe and cherished, and downright lucky that she has someone like Ashlyn who always finds a way
to take care of her even when the tables should be turned. It doesn’t go on all that long, maybe ten minutes, but it’s enough to put them into a state of complete relaxation and harmony with each other.

Thursday, June 14th

Ashlyn wakes up on the couch to the sounds of dishes clinking in the kitchen. She immediately knows that Ali must be making dinner and lets out a deep sigh before getting up and making her way into the kitchen. “Smells good, but what are you doing?” Ashlyn rests against the island counter a bit as she watches Ali stir something in a pot.

“Hey cutie. I’m making dinner.” Ali turns around and leans over the counter to kiss Ashlyn’s cheek before turning back to her task.

“I can see that, but I thought I said I was going to make dinner tonight.” Ashlyn replies a bit impatiently. “Just like I did last night.” She mutters under her breath so Ali doesn’t hear her. It’s now the second night in a row that she’s been ready to make dinner, only to find Ali doing it before she has the chance. It has been a week since she got home from the hospital… a full week of watching Ali do virtually everything and feeling pretty useless even though she’s feeling a little better and able to do things now. The boredom of sitting around the house is definitely getting to her and the officer has been trying to find ways to gain back some sense of independence only to have Ali thwart her at every turn with the exception of her required daily rehab exercise routine.

“I know, honey. You just looked so comfortable taking a nap and I thought I’d let you rest.” Ali shrugs as she continues to cook. “Dinner is almost ready, go get comfy on the couch and I’ll be right in with it.”

“Yeah, ok.” Ashlyn doesn’t bother to argue and just slinks her way back into the living room. She opens the small stack of mail from today while she waits, finding yet another media interview request along with the usual bills and junk mail. As has become typical now, they’ve gotten their fair share of interview requests with reporters trying to get the scoop after the incident at the bank. However, with Ashlyn being in the hospital for a couple weeks and Ali having Tim around whenever she goes out, it was pretty easy to avoid the whole thing this time and let the official story stand for itself. Since neither of them have released a statement and the incident is pretty much old news now, the attention has almost completely dwindled down at this point.

“Ok, whole wheat spaghetti and turkey meatballs.” Ali says proudly as she places a bowl down in front of Ashlyn on the coffee table and sits down next to her with her own bowl.

“Thanks, baby. This looks really good.” Ashlyn gives her an appreciative smile and digs in, making sure to tell her that it’s delicious after a couple bites.

“Where you going?” Ali asks when Ashlyn puts her food down and stands up.

“Just grabbing a drink.” Ashlyn replies and starts towards the kitchen only to see Ali shoot up off of the couch.

“Oh god, I’m sorry! I forgot to bring you a drink!” Ali apologizes as she immediately gets up. “I’ll get you one.”

“Relax babe, I’ll get it.” Ashlyn reassures her and only makes another two feet before Ali is walking past her.
“No, no, sit. I’ll get it.” Ali insists, waving the officer off.

And that’s the thing that finally pushes Ashlyn over the edge. “I said I got it! For fuck’s sake, Alex… I’m not a fucking invalid! I can get my own damn drink!” The officer yells harshly, making Ali stop dead in her tracks looking like a deer in the headlights. She regrets it the minute it’s out of her mouth and she sees the hurt look on Ali’s face, but it’s too late now.

“Ok. Sorry.” Ali says quietly with her eyes down and she turns right around and goes back into the living room. Her heart sinks and she immediately feels confused and hurt. Sure they’ve disagreed before, but Ashlyn has never flat out yelled at her so angrily like this.

Ashlyn lets her frustration fuel her for just a bit longer, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge and gulping down half of it before she calms down enough to feel like a total asshole. She groans and leans back against the fridge door, lightly knocking her head back against it a few times. “Idiot.” She mumbles to herself and slowly walks back into living room ready to grovel at Ali’s feet for forgiveness.

Much to her surprise, Ali isn’t in the living room when she gets back in there and Ashlyn knows she really fucked up huge. The officer plops back down on the couch with a sigh, playing with her bowl of food and debating what to do. Does she go look for her and talk or just let it be for a little bit until they both have a chance to compose themselves? The question is answered for her when she hears the soft sound of a fork scraping against a glass bowl coming from the dining room just a few feet away.

Ashlyn gets up, grabs her bowl of food, and immediately heads to the dining room to make things right. “Any chance there’s room in here for a total asshole who is really sorry?” She asks gently as she walks in. Her heart breaks a little more when Ali just gives a little nod and doesn’t even look up from her food. The brunette clearly isn’t eating, just pushing spaghetti around the bowl with her fork.

Ashlyn slowly lowers herself into the chair right beside Ali and puts her bowl down. Sitting fully upright like this still isn’t the most comfortable, but she couldn’t care less right now. She can only handle the heavy silence for about a minute before she crumbles completely.

“Alex, please look at me.” Ashlyn turns herself fully towards the brunette and reaches to cup Ali’s cheek so that she’ll look up. The sadness in the whiskey eyes that shift to meet her own is enough to make her want to throw up. “I am so, so sorry, baby. God, I’m so damn sorry. I know I’ve been really frustrated with this whole recovery thing, but I had no idea how bad it was until I just exploded in there. I didn’t mean to unleash on you like that, Alex. I swear I didn’t and I’m such an asshole for doing that.”

“It’s ok.” Ali whispers and leans her face a bit more into Ashlyn’s hand.

“No, it’s not ok.” Ashlyn replies quickly and strokes Ali’s cheek with her thumb. “For starters, there’s clearly more going on with me than I realize and I’m way overdue for a therapy appointment. You’ve been nothing but completely wonderful to me and I’m so thankful for the way you’ve been taking care of me, baby. I promise you that. It’s been really hard for me to be limited for this long. I’ve been trying to get back to doing some normal things now that I’m feeling better and able to do more…and I’ll admit that it’s been frustrating that you haven’t listened or let me do that the last few days when I’ve tried. But… that’s absolutely no excuse for me to have taken it all out on you like that. I’m really truly sorry, Alex. I love you so much and it won’t happen again.” The officer apologizes wholeheartedly.

“I’m sorry too.” Ali starts, but Ashlyn cuts her off.
“You don’t have anything to be sorry for, sweetheart. I mean that. This was all me.” The officer protests.

“No Ash, I do. You’re right that I haven’t been doing a very good job of listening to you or letting you do some things on your own as you feel up for them. You’re always taking care of me and practically treating me like I’m royalty all the time. I guess…well, it’s been really nice to be able to take care of you like that for once.” Ali tries to explain the realization she had after the officer exploded like that a little while ago. “And you’re not the only one that needs to talk things through. It kind of just hit me that part of my actions stem from the fact that I really almost lost you this time. I guess the more you start doing for yourself and the better you get, the closer you are to going back to work. And it’s not that I don’t want you to go back to work…I think I just need to take the time to work through how I feel about it. I promise to chill out and start being your partner again and not your parent.”

Ashlyn nods and processes what Ali said for a minute before summing it all up for them. “Ok so, we’re both really sorry. We’re both going to call and make therapy appointments tomorrow. And we both agree that I can make dinner tomorrow night.” She gives Ali a hopeful little smile and gets a smile in return.

“Right. And since you’re feeling so peachy, you can do the dishes tonight.” Ali says playfully.

“Burned.” Ashlyn laughs lightly. “But damn right I will. Are we ok?”

“We’re more than ok. I love you, my invalid.” Ali replies.

“I love you too, my coddling nanny.” Ashlyn leans in as much as her body will let her and then slides her hand to the back of Ali’s neck to pull the brunette in the rest of the way, capturing her lips in long sweet kiss.

“Come on, I know this is uncomfortable for you. Let’s go back to the couch.” Ali suggests as they pull apart.

“Thought you’d never ask.” Ashlyn lets out a sigh of relief and follows Ali back into the living room.

After finishing up dinner and doing the dishes together, they settle back on the couch to watch TV for a while before bed. They sit in the same position that they have been over the last week since it has felt the most comfortable for the officer. Ashlyn is a bit reclined with her feet on the ottoman and Ali is sitting with her back to the arm of the couch and her feet tucked under the officer’s thigh.

“Can we try something?” Ashlyn asks only ten minutes into the crime drama they’re watching. After the conversation they just had over dinner, she definitely wants to push herself a little bit.

“Of course. What do you have in mind?” Ali says curiously.

“Just stay right like you are and open your legs.” Ashlyn requests and watches Ali comply with a devilish smirk on her face. “Easy there, Krieger.” She teases and slowly scoots herself over to the brunette before gingerly lifting her legs onto the couch and settling between Ali’s legs so that her back rested against the brunette’s chest. “Much better.”

“So much better.” Ali grins and wraps her arms gently around Ashlyn’s shoulders, tilting her head down to kiss the officer’s cheek from behind. “You sure this is comfortable?” She double checks.

“Comfortable? Please, this is heaven right now.” Ashlyn says sweetly.
“Mmm, good… cause I don’t ever want to move.” Ali smiles into Ashlyn’s hair.

“Me either.” Ashlyn turns her head to softly kiss Ali a few times before closing her eyes and melting into the brunette’s arms.

After the way the evening has gone, the appropriately symbolic position is exactly what they both need without even knowing it. Ashlyn relishes in the sense of normalcy that comes with being closely snuggled up to her girl while Ali is content to protectively wrap her arms around the officer in providing comfort and care… both of them immersed in the security of feeling loved and needed by each other.

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Sunday, June 17th

“Wow, this might be the best chicken parmesan I’ve ever made.” Ashlyn says proudly as she and Ali sit down to dinner.

“Forget that, this might be the best chicken parm I’ve ever had, period. So damn good.” Ali piles on the compliments for the amazing meal Ashlyn just cooked them.

“Oh, period! No uterus means no period, and you know what that means?” Ashlyn says cheerily and waggles her eyebrows. She had managed to get a therapy appointment right away with Dr. Plume after another patient had cancelled their Saturday morning session. The way she’s been feeling a bit down lately with recovery, Dr. Plume had suggested during the session that she start trying to think about some positive aspects of her current situation.

“Um… a much lower tampon budget?” Ali replies with a little laugh.

“Well, yeah…but I’ll never have to worry about it when it comes to sex ever again. Definitely a positive!” The officer gives Ali a flirtatious smirk.

“Definitely.” Ali’s voice jumps up several octaves as she accidentally drops her fork and tries not to get flustered. Just hearing the word ‘sex’ come out of Ashlyn’s mouth right now is enough to necessitate a cold shower. Being increasingly cuddly with the officer as she feels better has been hard enough and she’s not sure how much more she can take before her hormones completely take over and she jumps her girl without warning. She’s never had this much trouble controlling herself before and it’s making her feel a little crazy.

“You okay, baby?” Ashlyn looks at her curiously, trying to figure out the odd reaction.

“Yes, just kinda jealous.” Ali smiles her way through it. “Then again, I have at least a few more period-free months of my own to enjoy. Maybe even a year or so if breastfeeding goes well.” She adds thoughtfully, steering them in another direction.

“Yay for a PMS free household! Guess we’ll have to find a new excuse for our monthly chocolate and ice cream binge though.” Ashlyn jokes and Ali nods enthusiastically in agreement.

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“I think I’m going to go grab a quick shower, that ok?” Ali announces as she and Ashlyn finish up an episode of House Hunters. She had gone for a jog while the officer made dinner so that she didn’t stay home and hound her in the kitchen. By the time she got home dinner was just about ready, so she just quickly changed into clean clothes and sat down to eat.
“Of course it is. I’ll just meet you upstairs in a little bit.” Ashlyn replies and runs her hand gently through Ali’s hair a few more times before the brunette lifts her head from where it was resting on her lap and sits up.

“Take your time, I plan to dry my hair so it’s not a total disaster in the morning.” Ali gives her a heads-up.

“Right, my queen. And apply perfect mascara too I’m sure.” Ashlyn replies with a knowing smile.

“Well duh.” Ali kisses Ashlyn’s cheek before heading upstairs.

Ashlyn gives it about twenty minutes before going up to the bedroom and hearing that Ali is still in the shower. She smiles to herself knowing that a long shower means the brunette is going to come out all warm, freshly shaven, and smelling amazing. It’s all the motivation she needs to change things up tonight and bring back their usual naked sleeping routine. Although she has been plenty naked herself with Ali helping her get dressed and shower at times, it has been weeks since she’s seen more than a quick flash of skin from the brunette as she changes clothes. Ali’s body is a work of art and she misses it dearly. Tonight she has every intention of holding her girl close and taking in every line and curve in an effort to properly reacquaint herself after much too long an absence.

The officer still has plenty of time to kill, so she takes her time stripping down and leaving nothing but the support binder that protects her abdomen. With that, she settles on top of the bed with her back propped up against the headboard and plays on her phone to distract herself from the fact that her body is already tingling in anticipation of Ali’s skin against hers.

Ali walks out of the bathroom about twenty minutes later with perfectly styled hair and a towel wrapped around her torso. She heads over to the dresser for some sleep shorts when she sees Ashlyn out of corner of her eye. “Hey baby, I’ll just be one more…” Her voice immediately gets caught in her throat, her jaw dropping open and her towel falling to the floor at the sight of Ashlyn naked and waiting on the bed.

“Well I was gonna say no need for pjs, but looks like you beat me to it.” Ashlyn smiles and shamelessly rakes her eyes over Ali’s perfect form. “God Alex, you are so incredibly beautiful. Just…wow.” She says in complete wonderment, already seeing little differences in the body that is mapped out so well in her mind that she could sketch it with her eyes closed.

Ali’s hips are just slightly curvier, the swell of her belly forms a perfect little bump, and her nipples are a much darker shade of pink…she’s gorgeous. Ashlyn’s eyes slowly move up the brunette’s legs and over her torso, her heart pounding with a rush of emotions at beholding the woman carrying her children…until she finally reaches the whiskey eyes that are darker and hungrier than she has ever seen them. Only then does it hit her all at once… the way Ali has been moaning and gripping her forearm tightly the minute their kisses get deeper, the way she gets flustered when there is any mention of anything sexual, the fully clothed state she’s been in most of the time even when helping the officer shower. “Alex…” She breaks the brunette out of the lustful stare.

“Sorry, you just caught me off guard there for a second.” Ali bites her lip and works to compose herself, giving Ashlyn a sweet smile. “Sooo, naked night huh? You sure that’s on the recovery approved list?” She adds playfully in an attempt to hide her fluster.

“Well it’s definitely on my recovery list and the doctor said I could dictate based on how I feel, soooo…” Ashlyn replies and pats the bed next to her. “Come here, honey.”

Ali picks up the towel to give herself just a couple more seconds to get herself under control before settling on the bed and curling herself into Ashlyn’s left side carefully like she does most nights these
days. The feel of the officer’s skin on hers is nothing short of electric and she quickly reminds herself to behave. “This is really nice… I missed you so much.” She whispers truthfully, resting her cheek on the officer’s shoulder.

“I missed you too, love. You’re so warm and you smell amazing.” Ashlyn wraps her left arm around the brunette’s shoulders and kisses her forehead. “Alex, why didn’t you tell me? How come you didn’t say anything?”


“I’m not even going to try to put this gently, babe… why didn’t you tell me that you’re hornier than a lesbian in a hardware store?” Ashlyn jokes a bit despite her serious question.

“Oh god!” Ali laughs at the joke before turning red in embarrassment.

“Oh sweetheart, I’m so sorry. I really should have realized. I mean, with having gone through all those hormone injections with you and knowing how hard it was for both of us not to be having sex like every damn second of the day. I should have realized sooner that pregnancy would be the same way for you and probably worse now that it’s twins.” Ashlyn says apologetically. “You must be ready to explode.”

“Oh geez, don’t apologize! It’s not your fault that you got hurt, Ash.” Ali says immediately. “It’s fine, I swear! Nothing I can’t handle.”

“Uh huh… and that’s why you looked at me like I was your favorite cupcake just now? “ Ashlyn raises her eyebrows with a smirk. “It’s just me. You can tell me.”

“Ugh, ok fine. It’s like twice as bad as it was during the hormone injections and I soak through a pair of underwear just about any time you touch me. I can barely keep myself from jumping you when we kiss or when I help you shower.” Ali admits and buries her face into Ashlyn’s shoulder.

“Yeah I probably should have noticed the other day when you soaped my chest up three times in one shower.” Ashlyn laughs. “Not that I’m complaining one bit, my nipples have never been cleaner.”

“Oh god, so embarrassing.” Ali buries her head even further into Ashlyn’s shoulder.

“Don’t be embarrassed. Really, I remember what the hormones were like and I get it. You’re beautiful and carrying our twins and dealing with everything that comes with it…you’re incredible, Alex.” Ashlyn says sweetly. “My poor baby. No wonder your showers have been so long lately.” She lightens the mood again.

“Yes, long and cold. It helped for a little while anyway.” Ali giggles.

“Wait…so… you haven’t been taking care of things on your own?” Ashlyn insinuates with a surprised look.

“Oh gosh no. I mean, I’ve certainly thought about it…but, I was kind of afraid to even go there for fear that it would open some kind of floodgate and then I’d really be out of control.” Ali explains.

“Right, because living like a nun has really done the trick.” Ashlyn says in playful sarcasm and feels Ali pinch her bicep.

“Showering, making out, and cuddling naked with your fiancée can hardly be considered living like a nun.” Ali plays back. “This feels so damn good by the way…even if I am a horny toad. Thank you.” She adds and softly runs her hand up and down Ashlyn’s arm.
“I may not feel the sexiest lately…” Ashlyn motions to her compression wrapped stomach, “but that doesn’t mean I haven’t missed you like crazy. Trust me, I’m pretty damn excited right now too.” She assures the brunette before adding “Guess we picked one hell of a time to go through our longest drought to date.”

“Indeed. I’m just happy you’re okay and doing better… that’ all that matters, baby.” Ali says seriously.

“Well, since we’re here…” Ashlyn smirks and lets her left hand run along Ali’s thigh. “I’m thinking we should make it rain.”

“Ash, you can’t.” Ali pops up a bit in concern.

“Technically I can’t, but you can. I promise you can trust me not to do anything to hurt myself. Let me take care of you tonight… close your eyes, baby…hear me, feel me, and just trust me…” Ashlyn says softly.

“Ash…” Ali protests, but the officer’s husky determined voice is enough to make her weak.

“Just relax and go with it…please…” Ashlyn pleads again running her hand further up Ali’s thigh and hearing the brunette gasp.

“Oh…ok.” Ali relents completely, not able to hold back anymore with the officer’s hand this close to where she desperately needs it.

“Ash…” Ali breathes out in some kind of whimper moan combination that she’s never heard come out of her mouth before. Ashlyn has barely touched her and she already feels herself trembling in pleasure.

Ashlyn lets out her own soft moan when she moves her left hand to Ali’s hipbone and feels the brunette cant up against it. That alone tells her just how worked up Ali is and she opts to move things along a bit. This is new territory for both of them and she wants to make sure her girl gets the release she needs before she can even think to be self-conscious about it. She slowly breaks the kiss and licks her way down Ali’s neck as best she can from this position before stopping to suck gently on her pulse point.

“Mmmmm…Ash…yes…” Ali acknowledges in a whisper and puts a hand behind Ashlyn’s neck, pulling her right in for a heated kiss and moaning immediately at the feel of it. She lets her hands wander like they want to, keeping them moving along the officer’s strong shoulders.

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“Put your right leg over mine, baby.” Ashlyn directs the brunette, moving her mouth to Ali’s ear and licking just behind it softly while she waits for her to comply. “Touch your nipples for me…” She whispers hotly as she nips Ali’s ear and works down her neck again.
Ali just goes with it, too turned on to worry about the fact that she’s never really touched herself in front of anyone before and this is clearly where things are heading. She moves her arms from around Ashlyn’s neck and runs her palms over her already hard and sensitive nipples before pinching them between her fingers and letting out a gasp. “Oh fuck…oh my god…”

“Fuck, baby… what I wouldn’t give to have those nipples in my mouth right now. You’re so hot, Alex…” Ashlyn husks before sucking on Ali’s pulse point a bit harder. “Keep playing with your nipples for me, beautiful… you ready for me?”

“Unnh, yes…” Ali replies through a moan even though she’s not exactly sure what she’s agreeing that she’s ready for. “Oh holy fuck…mmmm, Ash…baby, yes!” It takes everything in her not to let her hips lift off the bed and turn to straddle Ashlyn when the officer’s fingers start stroking through her folds. She keeps one hand on her breast, but moves the other to grip and hold Ashlyn’s forearm in place when the officer starts rubbing tight little circles on her clit. “So good….oooh god… Ashlyn, fuck baby, unnnh.” She screams through panting breaths, her entire body already tightening like a coil just waiting for release.

“You’re so wet, baby… warm and wet…I missed touching you, missed the way you feel on my fingers.” Ashlyn keeps her voice low in Ali’s ear and keeps stroking her now swollen clit until she feels the brunette’s leg start to shake against her own. Between that and the louder than normal moaning, she knows it won’t take much to put Ali over the edge. She slowly moves her fingers all the way down Ali’s soaked slit, just past her entrance and then back again before sinking two fingers inside her as far as she can manage.

“Oh my god…yes, yes, just like that…I’m so…close…don’t stop!” Ali screams out, moving to pinch her nipples again. Ashlyn can’t get very deep or even thrust at all from the awkward angle, but the officer’s fingertips are rubbing against the perfect spot inside and her mind is spinning as her body starts to come undone. “Fuck, don’t stop… don’t stop baby, I need you….Ash, yes, oh fuck…” She’s surprised at the loudness of her own voice reverberating through the room.

“You’re so damn hot, Alex… fuck, so sexy… rub your clit for me, baby. Help me make you come on my fingers.” Ashlyn sucks behind the brunette’s ear and feels her clenching and quivering around her digits. She feels the gush of wetness between her own legs when the officer rubs her clit firmly. “You’re so beautiful… so incredibly beautiful… let go baby… come for me.” She drags her teeth lightly up Ali’s neck and hears the brunette let out a keening wail as her whole body tightens and shakes. “I love you, Alex.” She whispers and kisses Ali as best she can while keeping her fingers moving slowly through the orgasm. Ali lets out more little moans and whimpers into the officer’s mouth before finally pulling away when she needs air.

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Ashlyn just smiles and nuzzles her face into the side of Ali’s, leaving a few more kisses on her jaw and cheek. She feels Ali let go of her and slowly removes her fingers, hearing another little whimper from the brunette. “Yeah, you definitely needed that.” She comments a bit surprised at seeing just how wet her hand comes away.

“Sorry, apparently this is one of those nice little pregnancy bonuses.” Ali says a bit bashfully at seeing the look on Ashlyn’s face and the amount of fluid covering the officer’s hand.

“Yeah no, don’t ever, ever apologize for that… absolutely not, this is sexy as hell.” Ashlyn can feel her own center throbbing. She knows she shouldn’t because it’s only going to tempt her, but she can’t help herself. “Mmmm.” The officer lets out her own deep moan as she licks her fingers and
tastes Ali’s sweet arousal. “Fuck, what I wouldn’t do to be able to…” She’s cut off by Ali kissing her hard, tongues dueling each other until both of them are out of breath again.

“So, I’m going to need you to trust me again… and we’re both going to need to trust those strong thighs of yours…” Ashlyn says a bit breathlessly, her eyes the dark and hungry ones now.

“Umm, ok… what exactly do you have in mind?” Ali asks, willing to trust and give into just about anything after what just happened between them, especially the way Ashlyn is looking at her right now.

“Stand up on the bed, face the wall, and put your legs on either side of my shoulders… hold onto the head board… and lower yourself down just a bit.” Ashlyn instructs and moves to sit up as much as she can against the headboard.

“Christ… we probably should’ve tried this before you made me feel like jello.” Ali says nervously as she moves into position. She’s a little scared that her legs won’t hold her up once Ashlyn gets going, but she wants this as badly as the officer does.

“If you really can’t, we’ll stop… but, I trust you and those gorgeous power thighs baby.” Ashlyn winks playfully before her mind goes blank when Ali’s perfect pussy is hovering just over her face. “Fuck, I missed you…” She husks before tilting her head up and running her tongue through dripping wet folds. “Mmmm, you taste so good… lower, baby…” It’s the last thing she manages to say before her whole mouth is pressed into Ali’s center, her tongue diving deeply into the brunette.

“Oooooh Ash… baby… yes, fuck me… your tongue, holy fuck… Ashlyn, unhhhhh!” Ali grips the headboard so hard that her knuckles are white, her forehead resting against the wall as she holds on for dear life. Ashlyn’s tongue is swirling and darting deep inside her entrance and she never wants it to end even though her legs are already shaking and her abs are tightening at the impending climax. It’s only a couple more minutes before she feels her legs dropping down a bit and her hips involuntarily start to buck. The worry that she’s going to hurt the officer is just crossing her mind when she feels Ashlyn’s hands go to the back of her knees to help support her a bit. The loving touch and deep moan from Ashlyn that vibrates through her core is enough to put her over the edge, her whole body clenching and shaking again as she writhes against the wall behind the headboard. “Ashlyn… Ashlyn… Ash…” She whispers squeakily over and over again as the officer keeps softly licking her and moaning.

Ashlyn relishes in the position every single second she can, lapping up every drop of sweetness Ali spilled for her. She slows down when she feels Ali come off the wall a bit and the brunette’s fingers weaving through her short hair. She looks up to find bright and shiny whiskey eyes looking down at her and smiles into Ali’s folds, allowing herself a couple more gentle licks before pulling away.

Ali uses every bit of energy she has left to slowly get herself out of the position she’s in and back on the bed against Ashlyn’s left side. “Did I hurt you?” She asks with slight concern.

“Not at all, beautiful.” Ashlyn turns her head and kisses her slow and lazily.

“Mmmm, good… cause that was so amazing. You’re incredible, baby.” Ali lets out another little moan at tasting herself on the officer’s lips. “And you’re absolutely covered in me.” She scrunches her nose at all the wetness on Ashlyn’s cheeks, nose, and chin.

“Just the way I like it.” Ashlyn says contently with a smile.

“You’re too sweet to me. God that really felt so damn good… now I feel bad that I can’t return the favor.” Ali laments.
“Yeah, no… I wish, but these abs are not nearly ready to clench in the throes of orgasm just yet.” Ashlyn laughs lightly and takes Ali’s and in hers. “But trust me, love… I’m plenty good right now after taking care of you.” She gently moves Ali’s hand between her legs so the brunette can feel just how wet she is.

“Oh wow, alrighty then.” Ali giggles and looks up to just now notice that Ashlyn’s eyes are the usual bright, gold-flecked green they usually are after sex. “You’re perfect and I love you so much, Ashlyn.” She says with so much emotion behind it that her heart pounds hard in her chest.

“I love you too, angel.” Ashlyn replies simply and leans in for another romantic kiss, pulling away when she feels Ali shiver slightly. “I’m gonna go get us a couple of warm washcloths to clean-up and you get under the nice warm comforter that we just ruined.” She chuckles.

“Ugh, sorry not sorry at all. I’ll bring it to the cleaners tomorrow.” Ali replies with a giggle.

“Good luck explaining these stains to the cleaners.” Ashlyn laughs and slowly moves to get up.

“Good point. I’ll put it in our washer first to rinse it and then take it to the cleaners.” Ali settles on a quick solution as she fights the urge to jump up and get the washcloths for them, knowing it’s one of those simple things that will make Ashlyn feel good about doing it herself. Not that it’s all that hard right now to hold back, her body is heavy and not wanting to move an inch. She closes her eyes for a minute until she feels Ashlyn running the warm cloth over her thighs and smiles as the officer gently cleans her up. “You’re so good to me.” She says in a soft purr at the gentle ministrations.

“Get under the covers, baby. I’ll be right back in a sec.” Ashlyn replies, quickly cleaning herself up and tossing the washcloths into the hamper before joining Ali in bed.

“I feel so good and so relaxed right now.” Ali mumbles as she tucks herself into Ashlyn’s left side more closely.

“Good. You have no idea how happy that makes me. I love you, Alex.” Ashlyn replies genuinely and kisses Ali’s forehead before moving her left hand to the brunette’s belly. “Good night my little warriors… try and disregard everything you heard tonight so that you’re not scarred for life. Mama loves you.”

“You would.” Ali giggles into Ashlyn’s shoulder. “We love you too, baby. So much.”

It’s quiet for a little bit, both of them melting into the warmth of each other’s skin as their eyelids get heavy and start to flutter closed.


“Mnhmm?” Ashlyn hums back.

“Thank you for always making me feel so beautiful and sexy…and thank you for tonight.” Ali says softly, the appreciation and love in her voice evident.

“It’s easy, Alex… you are beautiful and sexy. I just roll with it and feel lucky as hell.” Ashlyn leans down to peck Ali’s lips softly. “Sweet dreams, love. Rest up so we can do it again tomorrow.” She smiles into Ali’s hair.

Ali can only let out a little happy moan in reply and squeeze the officer’s thigh lightly as sleep takes over.
Tuesday, June 19th

“Excited? Nervous? What’s going on over there, baby?” Ali asks in amusement as Ashlyn’s leg bounces up and down while they sit in the waiting room chairs.

“Excited for sure! Ok maybe a little nervous…I have no idea.” Ashlyn shrugs with a smile.

“Relax, honey. You’re gonna start an earthquake in here with all that fidgeting.” Ali reaches for her hand and squeezes it lightly.

“Sorry.” Ashlyn makes a little pout face.

“Don’t be sorry. You’re really cute.” Ali nudges her lightly. “And here I thought I was the anxious one.” She can’t help but tease a bit.

“I’ll get it together, promise.” Ashlyn laughs at herself a bit. “How are you doing? That’s the important question.”

“Actually, I’m feeling really good. Excited and so happy that you’re here with me this time.” Ali leans to rest her head on the officer’s shoulder.

“Me too.” Ashlyn gives her a dimpled grin just as “Alexandra Krieger” is called out in the waiting room.

“Here we go.” Ali says and gives Ashlyn her arm to help her get up out of the seat.

“Lead the way, gorgeous.” Ashlyn says cheerily as she follows just behind the brunette.

It takes about fifteen minutes for Ali to get her blood pressure and weight taken and her blood drawn before they are brought to an exam room where they wait just another few minutes before being greeted by a very familiar face.

“Ladies! I’m so happy to see you.” Dr. Baylor smiles at them. “Ali, you’re looking fabulous… and Ashlyn, you’re looking a million times better than the last time I saw you.”

“Yeah, I’d say a few days after surgery probably wasn’t my best look.” Ashlyn deadpans.

“Never is.” Dr. Baylor laughs. “How are you feeling now and how’s recovery going?”

“Pretty good. I’m just really starting to feel more like my normal self in terms of mobility. Still quite a few things I can’t do, but I’m getting there. Plus, I’ve had the best personal nurse ever, sooo…” Ashlyn smiles at Ali.

“That’s excellent. And speaking of personal nurse…how are you feeling, Ali?” Dr. Baylor checks in with the brunette.

“Really good actually. The little bouts of nausea and dizziness are few and far in between now and there’s been nothing weird or unexpected. I can get really tired at times and I feel like I’m growing exponentially, but feeling good overall.” Ali answers honestly.

“Well that all sounds right to me based on where we are now, which is right at the 12 week mark. Any mood changes?” Dr. Baylor prods further.

“Not outside of the fact that I’m ALWAYS in the mood.” Ali shakes her head with a little giggle as
she looks at Ashlyn. “And emotional at times of course, but that’s nothing new.”

“All normal… just wait until it blends and you start crying during intercourse. Just giving you the heads up now.” Dr. Baylor puts it bluntly like usual.

“Oh god…” Ali scrunches her nose at the thought.

“It’ll be just fine, sweetheart. I’ll be sure to have the tissues handy.” Ashlyn reassures her and entwines their hands.

“Ok, so we have an exciting 12 week ultrasound today! I think you’ll notice a big difference from the last one and we should be able to see a lot more feature formation if these two little ones cooperate.” Dr. Baylor explains. “And equally as exciting is that we should be able to do it with a normal belly ultrasound and not a vaginal one.”

“Wooo!” Ali gives a little fist pump and Ashlyn matches her enthusiasm by giving the brunette a high five.

“See now this is why having a female partner who actually gets it is so nice.” Dr. Baylor declares with a laugh. “I just need a couple minutes to get this ultrasound machine up and going, so you can get comfy on the exam table in the meantime, Ali.”

“You can sit, babe.” Ali tells Ashlyn as she lays back on the table and notices the officer standing right beside her as she holds her hand.

“Absolutely not. I’m right up here with you.” Ashlyn says resolutely and sees Ali smile at her lovingly.

“I’m actually surprised I haven’t seen you in for an appointment yet, Ashlyn. Though I’m sure you haven’t exactly been in a rush to get in the car for an hour to come down here.” Dr. Baylor says casually as she gets the ultrasound machine going.

“Appointment?” Ashlyn asks in confusion and then looks at Ali who looks just as lost. “Um… should I have made one? I thought I was all done after the egg retrieval.”

“Oh no, not for that. You’re right that you’re all set there. I meant a post-surgery appointment for the hysterectomy.” Dr. Baylor clarifies.

“Oh… I didn’t know I needed to see you for that. I’ve gone back to the surgeon twice for check-ups, but they didn’t tell me to make one with you.” Ashlyn says in an apologetic tone.

“We had no idea.” Ali says with some concern at the fact that they missed something.

“Of course they didn’t.” Dr. Baylor rolls her eyes. “Surgeons drive me mad sometimes. I mean they’re literal lifesavers, but they’re so focused on the damn repair sites and incisions that they forget the stuff that comes with it…especially for women. While technically they’ll handle making sure that everything is healing as it should be, they really should have told you to schedule a hormone replacement therapy consult with your OB-GYN.”

“Hormone replacement?” Ashlyn asks, still unsure what she’s missing.

“Yes, you had a full hysterectomy… which means that your body has immediately gone into a state of menopause and your estrogen levels drop down dramatically. It affects people in different ways and some more than others, but I’m sure you’ve probably experienced some changes in mood at least. Hormone replacement therapy is a way to help you keep your hormone levels at a more normal
“Oh…” Ashlyn takes it all in before a lightbulb practically explodes in her head. “Oh! Geez… I never thought… I’ve been to my therapist a couple times now and have definitely struggled with feeling a bit down and depressed over the last couple weeks. I didn’t connect it, but yeah… I guess I feel pretty much like I did the few days after I came down from all those hormone injections.”

“I can’t believe they didn’t warn us about that!” Ali says a bit angrily, already making a mental note to give Dr. Tan a piece of her mind at the next appointment.

“Easy, Mama Bear.” Ashlyn tries to calm her down. “I’m sure the surgeon was just more focused on infection and stuff. But… we know now and we’ll figure it out.”

“It’s no excuse, but this happens a lot, Ali.” Dr. Baylor jumps in. “But that’s what your awesome OB-GYN is for!” She jokes a bit to lighten things. “I’m all over it. I’ll have them draw your blood before you go today, Ashlyn. And then I can put a prescription in for you to pick-up near home.”

“Ugh, does this mean more injections?” Ashlyn practically groans.

“No, no, definitely not!” Dr. Baylor immediately assures her. “It’s either pills or skin patches. Both are just a low dose, so it won’t be anything like the injections. The pills can have risky side effects like blood clots and stroke, so I prefer to stay away from them. I can give you all the information about both options and you can decide, but my recommendation is for the patches.”

“I’ll take the information to read it, but I trust your judgement completely. Patches it is.” Ashlyn replies after looking at Ali who nods.

“Perfect. Like I said, they’re low dose. Some people get minor side-effects to start like breast tenderness and hot flashes, but it’s mild and goes away fast. You put the patch anywhere on your lower stomach, hips, thighs, buttocks or lower back…and you can always change the site each time. You leave the patch on all the time and just change it out weekly. Pretty easy and low maintenance. I think you’ll see some mood improvement fairly quickly. We’ll reassess your bloodwork every two weeks to start and then move to monthly and bi-monthly after that if all goes well.” Dr. Baylor finishes explaining.

“Wow, ok. Easy enough. Thank you for helping with all this.” Ashlyn says gratefully.

“Yeah, I’m glad we have you to be on top of it all. Thank you so much.” Ali adds, feeling a lot more relaxed but still a little miffed about not being told by the surgeon.

“Oh course, it’s my job.” Dr. Baylor smiles. “Speaking of… are we ready to check in on these babies?”

“So ready!” Ashlyn says excitedly and Ali just nods enthusiastically with a huge smile.

“Ok, here we go. Ali if you’ll just lift your shirt up and lower the waist of your pants a bit. The gel is warmed up, so it shouldn’t feel cold.” Dr. Baylor describes what she’s doing as she starts moving the ultrasound probe around Ali’s belly and watching the screen.

Dr. Baylor is quiet for a minute, intently looking at the screen as she keeps moving around on Ali’s belly. Ashlyn feels herself getting more and more nervous with every passing second. “Is everything ok?” The officer finally blurts out anxiously.

“Totally fine, Ashlyn. I promise you. These little ones are about the size of a lime right now, so it’s tricky to find the right angle.” Dr. Baylor reassures them.
“It’s okay, baby.” Ali squeezes Ashlyn’s hand.

“God, I’m such a wreck. Sorry.” Ashlyn frowns a bit, trying to focus on being calm for Ali.

“It’s ok, honey. I was a wreck last time.” Ali says sweetly.

“Ah, here we are!” Dr. Baylor declares and turns the screen for them to see better.

“Oh my gosh, so cute! Look at them!” Ali squeals in delight as Dr. Baylor turns up the volume so that a chugging-train sounding heartbeat fills the room.

Ashlyn just stares at the screen in complete awe, her heart is beating wildly and she feels like she might pass out. Her hand goes up to her open mouth and tears leak out of both eyes as she feels Ali squeeze her hand tightly before letting go and moving to her hip to pull her in closer to the exam table.

“Ash?” She hears Ali’s voice, but she can’t tear her eyes away from the screen or find her voice yet. This is nothing like those first ultrasound pictures that she’s looked at hundreds of times already. They’re not two little blobs anymore… everything about them is completely baby… head, nose, arms, legs and even what appears to be tiny toes. They’re both on the screen in what looks like their own little spaces, lounging one above the other. It’s just a heartbeat sound and a black-and-white fuzzy image on a screen, but for the second time in her life, she’s completely and unconditionally in love.

“Ash?” Ali says again a bit worriedly and grips Ashlyn’s hip a little tighter. Ashlyn finally looks away from the screen and down at her. Ali immediately relaxes and smiles at what she sees… she’s seen this look on Ashlyn’s face before and she knows what it means. It’s the exact way Ashlyn looked at her after they pulled apart from their first real kiss… it’s etched in her mind forever because it was the look of pure love, the first time anyone ever looked at her that way. “I know baby. Me too.” Ali says softly and kisses the officer’s hand. “Come here.” She tugs Ashlyn shirt gently.

Ashlyn bends her knees so she can get close to Ali without hurting her stomach, wiping the tears on her face while she’s at it. “Alex… I… they’re so beautiful.” She finally finds her words just as her lips find Ali’s. The kiss is short but full of love and emotion, the two of them pulling back to smile at each other.

“I love you so much, Alex.” Ashlyn says is a heartfelt whisper.

“I love you too, Hero. You okay?” Ali reaches up to hold Ashlyn’s face in her hands.

“I’m so beyond ok.” Ashlyn grins widely. “I can’t believe it. They’re perfect. Just like you.” Her eyes go back to the screen.

“Actually honey, they’re just like you. These are my little Harris babies, amazing like their Mama.” Ali pinches the officer’s cheek.

“Everything looks really great. Both babies are measuring normally for twelve weeks.” Dr. Baylor finally breaks the moment so she can give them the information. “We’re hearing Baby B’s heartbeat right now. You can actually see the little moving area on the screen right here, that’s the heart pumping.” Dr. Baylor points to the chest area of the little baby on the top of the screen.

“Wow…” Ashlyn whispers, totally mind blown.

“Warrior Pollywog.” Ali whispers back and giggles a little.
“And if I just shift a little bit…” Dr. Baylor moves slightly and the heart beat sound goes away for a few seconds before returning again. “That is Baby A. Same thing, we can see the heart pumping right here.” She points to the screen again.

“And not to be outdone… Warrior Tadpole.” Ashlyn says proudly and feels Ali kiss her hand again.

“I’m going to be cautiously optimistic here because it’s still on the early side to know what will happen, but right now the placenta attachment looks normal for both babies.” Dr. Baylor informs them. “I’m not seeing any sign of placenta accreta right now and that’s a really good thing. No more bleeding happening at the attachment site either.”

“That’s the more dangerous one?” Ashlyn asks.

“Correct.” Dr. Baylor confirms. “And, everything seems to have shifted up a bit now that they babies have grown a little more. That’s exactly what we want to see happening in terms of avoiding placenta previa. Again, things will shift a lot still and we really can’t be sure for a few more weeks at least. But I feel really good about how this looks today.”

Ali and Ashlyn share a little smile. They’re not out of the woods yet, but they both feel like a little weight has been lifted off.

“Soooo… how badly do we want to know gender?” Dr. Baylor asks with a playful little smile.

The two women look at each other wide-eyed for a second before smiling and nodding at each other. “Pretty badly.” They reply in unison.

“Really?” Ali follows it up, looking at Dr. Baylor in surprise.

“Well kind of. I have a really clear and perfect positional look at both babies right now. This doesn’t happen all that often, especially with twins. But before I say anything else… this is not absolute. We really can’t tell for sure before around the 15 to 16 week mark or later. Genitals don’t fully form until 13 weeks, but there is a pretty reliable thing we call ‘nub theory.’ So, what I’d be telling you would be my 90% guess based on that.” Dr. Baylor explains. “Really up to you if you want to hear it.”

Both of them look at each other again, but nothing really has to be said. “Keep talking, Doc.” Ashlyn smiles and answers for them.

“Ok then, here we go.” Dr. Baylor starts pointing at the screen. “First, these are very clearly fraternal twins and not identical… we have two separate embryotic sacs and two placentas, which means all the gender options are on the table here. So, right now each baby has the same exact little nub in the genital area right here.” She points them both out. “See that?”

“Yeah. So, boys?” Ashlyn asks and feels Ali squeeze her hand again.

“You’d think so, but not exactly.” Dr. Baylor keeps going. “Girls have the same nub until the week 13 formation. However, the research finds that the nub tends to point differently before 13 weeks depending on gender. For girls, it stays more horizontal to the spine and for boys, it tends to point up about 30 degrees or more from the spine.”

“Ok, so…” Ali studies the screen trying to figure it out.

“So…Baby A right here… that’s sticking straight up at least 50 degrees. I’m pretty sure Baby A will be a boy.” Dr. Baylor smiles at them as she sees their faces light up. “And… drum roll please…”

Ashlyn is holding Ali’s hand with both of hers now, the excitement almost overwhelming. Ali is
gripping back just as hard.

“Baby B is perfectly horizontal and will likely be a girl. My 90% estimate is that you’re having one of each. Congratulations, ladies.” Dr. Baylor says kindly, truly happy for them. “How are we feeling?”


“What she said.” Ashlyn can’t wipe the smile off her face.

“Exactly what I like to hear. Just remember that you probably shouldn’t be planning a gender reveal party just yet. Never know if I’m wrong despite the odds. We’ll know for certain at the next appointment. With twins we do it on the earlier side, so I’m scheduling you for 16 weeks and we’ll get that anatomy scan done and repeat it again at 20 weeks to make sure we didn’t miss anything. And that’s it for today.” Dr. Baylor tells them.

“Thank you so much.” Ali says appreciatively and Ashlyn nods in agreement.

“Of course. Oh and Ashlyn, I’m going to have the phlebotomist get ready to do your blood draw, so don’t leave without doing that. You’ll get a call from the pharmacy when the prescription is ready and the instructions will come with the patches. Call me anytime for anything.” Dr. Baylor reminds them. “Congratulations again, ladies. I’ll see you in about 4 weeks.” She gives them one last wave and slips out of the room.

“Oh my god, that was…” Ali sits up on the exam table and pulls her shirt down, pulling Ashlyn to stand between her dangling legs, her arms going around the officers hips gently.

“Yeah…” Ashlyn replies, the huge smile still on her face, her dimple more prominent than ever.


“I’m so in love, Alex…with you, with them… so, so in love.” Ashlyn says in complete truth.

“Me too. I love you more than I even know what to do with, Ashlyn Harris.” Ali tilts her head up and Ashlyn closes the distance for them with a romantic kiss. “Look at our babies.” She says and looks down at the printed ultrasound picture next to her on the table.

“Glinda and the Mayor of Munchkinland.” Ashlyn lets out a little laugh.


“I’m a genius, you can say it.” Ashlyn teases.

“Ok genius, let’s go get you squared away here so we can have a late breakfast before we have to go home to meet Kyle.” Ali gets off the table and kisses Ashlyn soundly one more time before leading the officer out of the room.

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After an amazing breakfast at Ashlyn’s favorite diner near home, the two women grab a quick shower just in time for Kyle to show up and start fussing over their hair and make-up. In typical fashion, that’s not the only thing he fusses over. They spend the afternoon with Kyle obsessing over lighting and positioning, snapping photo after photo until he finally declares proudly that he nailed it.
One look at the picture and they both agree… it’s the perfect photo to share their news tonight. They just have one more matter to attend to. While Kyle excuses himself to go home and make sure the photo is properly edited, the two women head to the kitchen to make a special dinner.


“Hey big guy, dinner will be ready in just a bit.” Ali says with a smile.

“Where’s Bridget?” Ashlyn asks.

“Just trying to pry the kids away from that stupid gnome in the front garden.” Chris rolls his eyes.

“Yeah that thing is hideous, but Gram loved it. Can’t bring myself to get rid of it.” Ashlyn shrugs.

“Hi gals!” Bridget comes in just behind him with both kids trotting happily alongside her. “Hey kiddos, go easy on Auntie Ashlyn, remember?” She makes sure to remind them.

“Hi my littles!” Ashlyn says cheerily as both kids hug her legs gently and then go give Ali a big hug too.

“Aunt Ashwyn still has a boo boo?” Elsie asks curiously.

“Yep, but it’s much better now.” Ashlyn answers.

“Can I see?” Curtis chimes in.

Ashlyn looks over at Chris and Bridget who both nod and shrug. “Sure, if you want to. Just remember that it’s a lot better now, ok?” She warns them a bit and watches both kids nod before lifting her shirt and the compression binder a bit.

“Ouch. How do you cover that with a band-aid?” Curtis inquires and Ali can’t help but giggle at the innocent question.

“Well I can’t really, so that’s why I have this that covers it for me.” Ashlyn explains and shows him how the compression binder covers her torso.

“Els?” Ashlyn looks at the little girl who is just staring at it.

“Looks like a pretty cool drawing to me.” Elsie cocks her head to the side and gives a little shrug.

“Well thank you, my little artist.” Ashlyn laughs and pulls her shirt back down. “That was easy.” She says to Chris and Bridget.

“And cute.” Ali smiles. “Alright, dinner is ready I think.” She motions to the dining room where everything is set up and carries the last tray of food in as everyone heads that direction.

“So, what’s the occasion for this special dinner?” Chris finally asks, knowing it’s very odd that Ashlyn and Ali asked them to dinner on a random Tuesday night.

“Well, it’s definitely a special dinner. But have a look and maybe you can tell us…” Ashlyn motions to the food and squeezes Ali’s thigh under the table.

“Uhhh, ok…” Chris looks everything over. “Baby-back ribs, baby carrots, baby corn, and baby
roasted potatoes. So… you wanted to torture a guy with a big appetite with tiny food?” He asks with raised eyebrows. “But, at least you put out double of everything… one for me and one for everyone else.” He laughs.

Ashlyn just shakes her head at his response right as Bridget lets out a little gasp and covers her mouth.

“Really?” Bridget asks excitedly, getting it right away.

“Really.” Ali confirms with a smile.

“Really what?” Chris asks with a confused look.

“You see no theme here?” Ashlyn shoots him a look.

“Uh, tiny food?” Chris replies.

“It’s baby, Daddy.” Curtis says like it’s obvious even though he has no idea what it means either.

“Baby what?” Chris says impatiently.

“Wow…” Bridget sighs and shakes her.

“Ok, back-up plan.” Ali laughs. “Chris, go check out what’s in our oven.”

“Uh, ok.” Chris gets up hesitantly and makes his way back into the kitchen before eventually popping his head back into the dining room. “So, there’s two burger buns in your oven? What does that mean?”

“Dear lord.” Ashlyn throws her hands up in defeat.

“Were you really this dense when I married you?” Bridget asks in disbelief.

“Oh my god, someone tell me what the hell is happening!” Chris finally loses his cool.

“Christopher… the theme is baby… there’s two buns in the oven!” Bridget points to her own stomach and then motions to Ashlyn and Ali.

“Oh! Holy fuck! Which one of you? Oh damn, wow!!! Seriously?!” Chris goes right over to them and puts his arms around both their shoulders.

“ Took you long enough, you dodo… and yes, seriously. Ali is pregnant with twins.” Ashlyn puts it bluntly before there can be anymore misunderstandings.

“Congratulations! I’m so excited and happy for you! This is the best news ever!” Bridget pipes up and goes over to hug them.

“This is amazing!” Chris agrees. “Dang, two of them! Wow…I’m shocked. In a good way, just woah. You guys are gonna be the best damn parents ever… I mean it.” He says sweetly before ruffling Ashlyn’s hair. “So proud of you, baby sis. The love is just so real right now!” He bellows jovially before turning to the kids. “You’re going to have a new cousin, kiddos! Well, two actually.”

“Cool. One for each of us?” Elsie asks matter-of-factly.

“Something like that.” Ali replies with a laugh.
“Can I hold them?” She asks curiously before adding “like my baby dolls?”

“We’ll have to help you, but yes, you can hold them.” Ashlyn answers.

“Ok. Can we come tomorrow to hold them?” Elsie inquires.

“They actually have to grow in Ali’s belly for a few more months, Els. Just like you and Curtis did. Remember when we talked about that?” Bridget jumps in.

“Oh…yeah.” Elsie appears to ponder it. “So when do they come?”

“Well, we don’t know the exact day because the babies come when they are ready. But, it’ll be sometime right after Christmas probably.” Ashlyn replies and watches Elsie nod and dig into her food, apparently satisfied.

“Does that mean you will be a Mom?” Curtis asks Ashlyn.

“Yeah, buddy. And Ali will too.” The officer responds.

“Cool. You should be, you are the best aunties.” He replies with such innocent honesty that it makes Ali tear up a little. “Can I teach them to skateboard?”

“It’ll be a pretty long time before they’re ready to skateboard, but I promise I’ll let you be the one to teach them.” Ashlyn assures him with a smile.

“Awesome!” Curtis says with finality.

The two couples smile across the table at each other, the joyfulness in the room evident and not needing any other words right now. Instead, everyone enjoys the meal together while Chris and Bridget regale the women with stories from when Curtis and Elsie were babies.

When the kids are busy watching TV, Ashlyn and Ali divulge the details about the process and how they are Ashlyn’s babies with Kyle’s help. Ashlyn expects at least a few teasing comments from Chris, but none come. He just sits there listening respectfully, only saying one thing when they’re done: “Uncle Chris… I freaking love it!”

As soon as Chris and Bridget leave, Ashlyn and Ali plop down on the couch next to each other with phones in hand and the photo Kyle emailed them up on their screens. “Ready?” Ali asks.

“Let’s do it.” Ashlyn replies as the two of them set to texting the photo and a personal message to each of their little groups:

Rivera, Porter, Morris: Hey boys, got us some new recruits.

Rebekah: Hope you don’t mind being called Grandma.

Liz, Jess: Think the world is ready for another Harris or two?

Emily, Amber: So, I’ve been meaning to tell you…also, FIRST bitches!

Tim: Think we might need a little extra security detail…you up for a promotion?

Edith: Thought you might like to see the official announcement, Fossil.

Chief Mark Fulton: You can officially plan for my maternity leave now, Chief.
Kyle: This photo is total perfection. We love you, bb. We owe you the world, but you still have to babysit ;-)

With that done, they spend the next two hours fielding happy text replies and a few phone calls. Everyone is so thrilled and excited for them in their own unique ways… they’ve never felt more loved or lucky to be bringing their twins into a world with such wonderful people surrounding them.

“Ok, I guess we’re ready to make our phones explode?” Ashlyn looks over at Ali.

“Yes.” Ali agrees before one more thing strikes her. “Actually, maybe we should send one more text first.” She types a quick message and adds the photo to it before showing Ashlyn.

Ellen Degeneres: Can’t say that we blindsided you on Instagram this time ;-)

“Perfect.” Ashlyn laughs and Ali hits send.

They each get everything ready on their phones and then meet each other’s eyes again.

“One?” Ali smiles and Ashlyn nods.

One…two… three…

The picture is posted on their social media sites and the Harris twins make their presence known to the world. The two women sit and admire the photo for a minute, both of them agreeing that it truly is perfect.

It was taken on their little patch of beach, the ocean behind them. Ali is wearing one of Ashlyn’s cadet blue, long-sleeve police uniform shirts… the Harris nametag visible on it. The buttons are completely undone and the shirt is open with Ali wearing a just black sports bra, her belly on full display with her hands placed gently framing it. Ashlyn stands just behind her and off to her right side a bit, wearing just a black sports bra herself and a pair of jeans. The officer’s arms encircle Ali from behind, her hands covering the brunette’s hands that frame her belly. Ashlyn’s face is leaned in close to Ali’s and Ali’s is turned back towards Ashlyn’s. Their eyes are closed, their lips curled in content little smiles just a hair away from kissing each other. Along Ashlyn’s right arm, starting at her shoulder and ending at her elbow are the words ‘Every hero needs’ written in black marker on her skin… on the top of her right hand on Ali’s belly is written ‘backup…’ to complete the sentence. Above Ali’s bellybutton written in the same black marker are the words ‘2 Enroute’ and underneath her bellybutton is ‘ETA: January 2019’.

They keep the caption for the photo very simple, using just three emojis: a heart, a world, and an upside down smiley face.

As soon as it’s done, they both turn off their phones for the night and stay cuddled close together on the couch for a few minutes looking at the ultrasound pictures again.

“They’re so damn cute.” Ashlyn smiles at the pictures. “Damn, I wish I thought to record the heart beats on my phone like you did before. I got caught up and forgot.” She laments.

“They’re so unbelievably cute. And I got you, babe… I recorded it on my phone, already a copy in your email box.” Ali replies and kisses Ashlyn’s shoulder.

“You did? I didn’t even notice.” Ashlyn says in surprise.

“You were a little focused, honey.” Ali says kindly.
“Right, ‘focused’…or a complete wreck… but we’ll go with focused.” Ashlyn chuckles.

“Today was amazing.” Ali says happily.

“One of my best days ever.” Ashlyn agrees.

“One of the best days? Ali asks curiously.

“Mhmm. I have a few favorite days.” Ashlyn reveals.

“Oh yeah?” Ali pries a bit.

“Yep, but rest assured that you feature prominently in every single one of them, with one exception.” Ashlyn answers.

“Want to tell me about the exception?” Ali asks gently, but not pushing at all.

“Of course, we’re in the perfect spot anyway.” Ashlyn smiles. “It was when I was in 8th grade and my grandparents took me and Chris in for good. We visited them a lot growing up and spent a lot of time here because my parents weren’t capable most of the time, but it was different that day because guardianship had officially been handed over to them. Anyway…I remember walking through that door right there…” she points to the front door entrance from the couch, “and my Gram saying ‘welcome home, Ashlyn’…and it was the best feeling in the world.” She finishes with a smile.

Ali tilts her head up and kisses along Ashlyn’s jaw. “I’m really happy this is home.” She says sweetly.

“Me too, baby.” Ashlyn agrees. “Come on, beautiful. Let’s get to bed and relax.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Ali replies, a yawn leaving her mouth as she stands up and helps the officer to her feet.

“You know…I gotta say that I really miss you carrying me to bed.” Ali admits as they climb the stairs.

“I miss it too, but I’m totally working on it, babe. Just give me another month and I’ll be carrying all three of my warriors up the stairs.” Ashlyn promises.

“We’re gonna break your back, but I’m holding you to that, charmer.” Ali winks.

“Count on it, Baby Mama.” Ashlyn flexes her biceps for effect.

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Wednesday, July 4th

“Alex… baby… god that was incredible…” Ashlyn’s chest heaves as she tries to catch her breath. “Damn, I missed you so much. So good.”

“Mnhmm, so fucking good.” Ali agrees, her own breathing still out of control as she rests her head on Ashlyn’s chest.

The two of them are sprawled out naked on the private roof deck of the Newton house in one last romp before they officially move all their things to the Ipswich house next week and Kyle moves into this one. Even though Ali is keeping her office space here and even though Kyle is so grateful
for the essentially free house that he promised to keep the master bedroom as their space for anytime they want to use it (even if he does use the deck occasionally)... both of them know that with the twins coming soon enough, there won’t be many more nights like this one. So, they enjoy every single second of it, not caring one bit that it’s pretty hot and humid outside even for a July night.

The plan had been to make dinner and then go for a nice walk before heading home to watch the fireworks from the deck. But then Ashlyn went upstairs to change her shirt and Ali followed to get a pair of flip-flops... and then Ashlyn’s shirt was off... and then Ali’s hormones took over at the sight... and then Ali was kissing Ashlyn’s neck... and then Ashlyn was whispering ‘I’m ready for you’ in Ali’s ear... and then clothes went flying in every direction... and then lips and tongues were dragged over every single inch of skin in a steamy makeout session that lasted well over an hour and led them to the deck... and then Ali was buried between Ashlyn’s legs until the officer was shaking in orgasm for the first time in almost two months... and then Ashlyn was between Ali’s legs feasting until Ali couldn’t breathe anymore... and then together they slowly stroked, pumped, and thrusted their way to this breathless, sweaty, and sated moment right here.

“Sure you’re ok?” Ali asks one more time.

“I’m amazing. The tiniest bit stiff, but no pain. I feel really good, really damn good.” Ashlyn replies honestly with a big grin.

“Mmm, good...cause I’m addicted.” Ali presses more kisses across Ashlyn’s chest when she’s interrupted by the sound of fireworks going off. She groans a bit before resting her head back down.

“Want to get up so we can watch?”

“Nope, the view is perfect just like this.” Ashlyn replies.

Ali smiles into the officer’s skin, knowing damn well they can’t see the fireworks in this position and that when she looks up, she’ll undoubtedly find Ashlyn looking at her. She lifts her head and sure enough bright green eyes are looking down at her. “Happy one year anniversary, Hero.” Ali beams.

“Happy anniversary, beautiful.” Ashlyn returns the sentiment and holds Ali a little closer. “Best year ever.”

“And the next one will be even better.” Ali says confidently.

“You know it, love.” Ashlyn agrees and pulls Ali in for a passionate kiss.

Lips and tongues move against each other with all the love in the world behind it as fireworks boom in distance... just like the very first time, but certainly not the last.

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Friday, July 27th

“Well ladies, you have two very healthy twins!” Dr. Baylor declares as the 16 week appointment wraps up.

“Healthy is all we need.” Ashlyn says with a grin and Ali nods in agreement from the exam table.

Both of their faces hurt from smiling as they’ve spent almost an hour now watching the ultrasound screen in happy awe as Dr. Baylor got views of each and every body part for each twin and explained it all in detail as she went along. They saw perfectly-formed and beating little hearts, noses, tiny lips, spines, hands and feet, even counted every little finger and toe.
“So, I was of course right on the money with gender.” Dr. Baylor says proudly. “Baby A is definitely a boy and Baby B is a girl. And your little girl is just a little bit bigger than your baby boy right now and sitting lower and closer to the birth canal. Things change a lot in terms of growth and position between now and delivery… but, if I had to wager a guess, I’d put my bets on your little girl being born first if the delivery happens vaginally.”

“Our strong little princess. Hmmm, sounds just like someone I know.” Ashlyn winks at Ali, who lightly swats her arm.

“Speaking of delivery, we’re going to be re-assessing constantly as we go along here. Right now, I can comfortably say that the placenta attachment looks normal for both babies and placenta accreta is no longer an issue to be concerned about from what I see here.” Dr. Baylor explains.

“Thank god.” Ashlyn says in relief.

“What she said.” Ali smiles.

“Things are still moving in the upward direction away from the cervical opening and assuming that keeps going like that, I don’t see placenta previa being a problem either. We’ll be more confident about it at the next ultrasound with more growth.” Dr. Baylor makes sure to address everything thoroughly. “Right now the babies are pretty much head down and one lower than the other, which is what we want for vaginal delivery to even be a possibility….but these little ones will start to move around a lot soon and positioning can change right up until labor. So, I can’t make any predictions about it until we’re much closer.” She warns them.

“Well I appreciate all the information nonetheless and I’m really starting to come to terms with not caring what happens as long as everything goes well and the babies are healthy.” Ali says appreciatively.

“What she said.” Ashlyn smiles.

“You two crack me up.” Dr. Baylor laughs at their coordinated responses. “Well, I guess we’re done here. I’ll see you again in four weeks and we’ll see what these two little ones are up to then.”

The two women head home to spend more time with Kyle snapping photos on their little beach again. Since they’re mostly trying to recreate things this time, it only takes about an hour before Kyle is happy with the final product.

This time there is no texting and revealing the news to anyone beforehand with the exceptions of Kyle because he helped them with the photo and Edith because she doesn’t do social media. Instead, they just post the photo and let it speak for itself.

The new photo is pretty much the same as the last one in terms of what they are wearing and the general positioning. However, they each only have one hand on Ali’s belly now… Ashlyn’s right and Ali’s left. Ali’s right arm is now reaching up behind Ashlyn’s neck and Ashlyn’s left hand is placed on Ali’s hip. There are no words written on them this time, just colors…each of them wearing nail polish on the fingernails of the hands on Ali’s belly. Ashlyn’s nails are blue, Ali’s are pink.

Kyle made it more prominent by making the photo black & white with just their fingernails left in color. The photo caption reads: Just a little update on what kind of backup we’re expecting ;-)

“So...what should we talk about now?” Ashlyn teases and pretends to think about it hard as they lay in bed after replying to another round of excited texts and phone calls. She knows Ali is about to
explode over it.

“You know exactly what I want to talk about, you giant tease.” Ali sticks her tongue out.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, babe.” Ashlyn feigns innocence.

“Well then I didn’t bake cookies this afternoon for you as a late night snack.” Ali plays back with a shrug.

“You don’t play fair, Krieger!” Ashlyn replies and gives in immediately. “Ok, so names…let’s do this!”

“Finally!” Ali exclaims victoriously. She’s been dying for them to talk names for the babies, but they both agreed that they wouldn’t do it until they knew gender for sure. “So, we have some pretty amazing people in our lives past and present… are you thinking we should start there?” Ali puts the feelers out to begin with.

“Definitely.” Ashlyn agrees. “What are you thinking?”

“Well, my first thought was your grandma.” Ali says honestly. “Is there a reason Curtis is named after your grandpa, but Elsie isn’t named after your grandma at all?”

“Sort of. I mean Chris was closer to my grandpa, so Curtis made sense. Then when they had a girl… the name Elsie came from Bridget’s grandmother, which made things fair. Plus, there was definitely agreement that Eunice is just one of those names that you don’t torture your kids with. And I have to admit that as much I love my grandma, that name is awful.” Ashlyn replies earnestly.

“Hmm, yeah, makes more sense now.” Ali thinks it over.

“What about you… your mom?” Ashlyn asks.

“Oh well… I’ve been thinking about that. Truth is that my mom absolutely hated the name Debra and her middle name Francis too. She actually once made me and Kyle promise to never name our kids that, sooo…” Ali shrugs.

“Hmmph, well what if we try to find variations of her name? Would that work?” Ashlyn suggests.

“I actually have something in mind, but I think it’s definitely a middle name and seems better for a boy.” Ali divulges.

“Oh, tell me!” Ashlyn sits up a bit more.

“Well, my mom originally started in the MA state Probate and Family court as a judge and a couple years before she died, she was appointed to the top of it, so she was the Chief Justice of that court. It was the thing she was most proud of. So, I was thinking…Justice.” Ali says and watches Ashlyn’s face for a reaction.

“Alex…I love that! I love that so much.” Ashlyn says wholeheartedly.

“I really like it too.” Ali admits. “I think it’s a bit odd as a first name, but I like it as a middle name.”

“Agreed. What a great way to honor her and also what you do too, baby. I really love it.” Ashlyn replies before adding “Oh and I have no doubt that being a justice was the second thing your mom was most proud of… you and Kyle were definitely the first.”

“You really always know what to say, don’t you?” Ali leans in and kisses the officer softly.
“I sure try, but truth is truth.” Ashlyn says simply.

“Well the truth is that you’re the best.” Ali pecks her lips one more time. “So…the Mayor of Munchkinland has a middle name. Can I take a shot at his first name too?”

“By all means, I have nothing right now.” Ashlyn says and sees the little smile grow on Ali’s face.

“In light of canning the name Eunice… something else just dawned on me a few minutes ago. How about Gram?” Ali offers it up a bit timidly, not sure how Ashlyn will feel even though she’s already in love with it.

“Gram.” Ashlyn repeats in a whisper. “Gram Justice Harris.” The tear leaks out of her eye before she can even try to hold it back.

“Do you like it?” Ali probes, not sure how to gauge her reaction yet.

“Our son… named after the two strongest, most amazing women in our lives.” Ashlyn says almost awestruck. “Alex?”

“Yeah?” Ali replies softly.

“I love you so much.” Ashlyn says with so much sincerity that it makes Ali’s heart feel like it just popped, her stomach filled with butterflies when she’s pulled in by the officer for a deep kiss that makes her feel like she’s floating.

Ashlyn only slightly breaks away once to mutter ‘it’s perfect’ against Ali’s lips, the two of them staying locked in the heated kiss for quite a while until Ali hears the officer moan and pulls away.

“Easy there, Hero… poor Glinda still needs a name.” She says playfully and taps Ashlyn’s nose as the two of them try to regulate their breathing.

“Right. Your naming prowess has actually inspired me… mind if I give this one a go?” Ashlyn requests.

“Let’s see what you got, Harris.” Ali challenges playfully, already amused that she was the one to come up with the boy’s name and Ashlyn is going to attempt the girl’s name.

“I’m thinking… Harper Kai.” Ashlyn says with a smile.

“Oh my gosh… Edith’s last name… and…” Ali pauses and waits for Ashlyn to say it.

“A variation of Kyle’s name. It also means ‘ocean’ in Hawaiian, seems fitting.” Ashlyn explains. “So?”

“I couldn’t love it more. Harper…what a great name. Strong, unique and feminine without being overly girly. It’s perfect! And having it be after Edith and Kyle…I absolutely, completely love it.” Ali is the one tearing up now.

“So, Gram Justice and Harper Kai. Did we really just do that in under an hour?” Ashlyn says a bit bewildered at how much they love the names and how easily they agreed on them.


“Only because you are, Krieger.” Ashlyn returns it.

“I’m so in love with these names.” Ali sighs happily and settles on Ashlyn’s chest. “And with you…
“Right back at you, beauty…tenfold.” Ashlyn replies and kisses the top of Ali’s head before running her fingers through the brunette’s hair.

They lay quietly for a long time, just enjoying the peace of each other and everything that happened today until Ashlyn’s phone starts beeping and startles them.

“What was that?” Ali asks as Ashlyn silences it.

“That… was my 12:00am alarm. Happy birthday, Alex.” Ashlyn kisses the brunette tenderly before pulling back to see Ali looking at her intently. “What’s that look for?”

“Ashlyn…promise me that if there is ever any point at which you find yourself unhappy with our relationship that you’ll tell me right away. Cause I swear to you that I will kick my own ass if I ever fuck up what we have together. I love you.” Ali says boldly.

“I promise. Ditto. And I love you too, baby.” Ashlyn smiles at her adoringly. “But those are some heavy thoughts right now for a girl who should only be thinking about cake, presents, and birthday sex.”

“Oh, I am definitely thinking about birthday sex.” Ali counters with a devilish smile.

“Good.” Ashlyn goes right in for another kiss, lighting a fire between them that doesn’t dampen in the slightest until around 2am when neither of them has any energy left.

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Saturday, July 28th

“Heeeey-O! The princess is back and we done got her hair did!” Kyle announces gleefully as he walks in through back door near the kitchen with Ali in tow.

After being spoiled by Ashlyn all morning with breakfast and a little cruise on the yacht, Kyle had whisked his sister away for some afternoon salon and shopping time. The brunette had finally decided to change her look and go shoulder length with her hair, keeping it a bit wavy and fun.


“UGH! I need a Harris of my own. Like yesterday…so damn suave, girl.” Kyle pats Ashlyn on the back. “What’s for dinner?”

“Everything the birthday girl was craving, of course… buffalo wings, BBQ chicken grilled pizza with jalapenos, Caesar salad, sweet chili meatballs, and garlic mashed potatoes.” Ashlyn replies.

“Oh my god, I already have heartburn! That’s a preggers menu if I’ve ever seen one!” Kyle says dramatically and earns a slap on the arm from Ali.

“Thank you, sweetheart. That sounds amazing and I’m so hungry.” Ali slips her arm around Ashlyn’s waist and smiles at seeing a fresh bouquet of sunflowers in a vase on the counter. She thinks back to last year when Ashlyn filled the house with them and smiles even wider. It’s only a few minutes later when she realizes that there might not be any sunflowers this year, but there are little pictures placed all around the dining and living room.
Ali walks around excitedly finding pictures that she somewhat remembers Ashlyn taking. The officer is always adamant about taking a selfie or some kind of artistic photo of their hands or feet or something else interesting to remember when they do something fun or interesting together, which is almost always. As she flips over each one, Ashlyn’s handwriting is there giving a little detail about the moment and what she was thinking at the time.

Her personal favorite is no surprise given their current situation, but she doesn’t even recognize the picture at first… it’s a dim selfie of the two of them in bed, Ali asleep on a smiling Ashlyn’s chest. She finds it dated ‘Thanksgiving night 2017’ with the caption:

*On this night you thought I was asleep and told me that you couldn’t wait to have a family together and that you couldn’t wait to be my wife. I’ve never felt so loved and wanted in my entire life. I wanted nothing more than to wake up and blurt out right then that I desired those same exact things with you…but you don’t deserve rushed promises my love, only beautiful moments that happen naturally and exactly the way they are supposed to. I love you and I love our life. You are beautiful, our life together is beautiful…and I’m glad I waited to show you rather than tell you.*

“Dear lord Harris, you’re like a Greek Adonis and Romeo all wrapped into one!” Kyle holds his heart and fans himself as he looks over Ali’s shoulder reading some of the photo captions. “Seriously…find me your twin…with a penis please. I beg you.”

“Okaaay and let’s get to dinner before it gets cold!” Ashlyn rolls her eyes and ignores him.

The trio enjoy the low-key dinner together, having ice cream cake afterwards and watching Ali’s requested Cinderella just like last year before Kyle leaves for the night.

Of course, it doesn’t end there. Ashlyn has the bedroom all ready for a proper birthday massage, spending over an hour gently rubbing and kneading every inch of Ali’s body until the brunette feels so relaxed that her body is practically putty.

“Mmm, baby… I feel so incredibly good right now. Pregnant woman’s dream right here. You’re amazing. Thank you.” Ali practically purrs as Ashlyn continues lightly rubbing her back.

“Only the best for my birthday girl.” Ashlyn kisses in between her shoulder blades. “I actually didn’t think this through properly. I need you to get up to be able to give you your gift.”

“Well hopefully my rubbery legs will hold me up, cause I can never say no to a gift.” Ali rolls over and smiles. “Where to?”

“The guest room.” Ashlyn replies simply and helps Ali up before leading the way.

Ali grins as they head down the hallway toward the to-be nursery wondering if it’s a baby related gift or just a surprise that had to be hidden. Kyle had helped them empty the room at the beginning of the month, but neither of them has really been in here since to her knowledge.

“So… last year I made you a special sketch. This year I kinda tried to stay along those lines and hope it’s okay that you kind of have to share this gift.” Ashlyn prefaces before opening the door and turning on the light.

The bright colors are what strike Ali first as she enters the room and almost feels like she’s been transported into another world. The walls are painted in beautiful rolling green hills and tall trees, the far wall has a yellow brick road that leads to a flawless Emerald city in the distance with a rainbow overhead. The top of the walls feature a brilliant blue sky and the perfect quote wrapping along the walls just below the ceiling in stylish black letters: ‘You’ve always had the power my dear, you just
“Oh, My. Gosh!” Ali’s hands are over her mouth in disbelief. “When on earth did you do this?”

“Remember when I started adding a third workout to my recover routine a couple weeks ago? Yeah, I didn’t really need a third one.” Ashlyn shrugs with a smile.

“So sneaky!” Ali keeps looking around in complete amazement. Not only is it perfect, but the fact that Ashlyn did this while not feeling her best makes it mean even more. She quickly pushes the thought of her recovering fiancée at the top of a ladder near the ceiling out of her head before she unnecessarily worries herself.

“What do you like it?” Ashlyn asks quietly.

“Ashlyn… this is beyond anything I ever could have dreamed of for this room. I love it more than I can even tell you… perfect doesn’t even come close.” Ali watches Ashlyn smile shyly at the compliment and she doesn’t even think. Before she even knows what she’s doing, she’s jumping into the officer’s arms and wrapping her legs around her waist, kissing her deeply. It’s only when she feels Ashlyn’s arms under her hips and hears the officer moan that she realizes what she’s done.

“Oh shit… oh my god, I’m so sorry, baby! Are you ok?” The brunette tries to lower herself to the ground, but Ashlyn just holds her tighter.

“I’m excellent actually.” Ashlyn gives her a dimpled grin, seeming a little surprised herself.

“You sure?” Ali checks again.

“Positive. I feel great. Told you to give me a month… she’s baaaaack!” Ashlyn winks.

“And with only two workouts a day instead of three… bad ass.” Ali kisses her again and nuzzles into her neck. “Baby… can I ask for one more thing tonight?”

“Anything you want, love.” Ashlyn replies easily.

“Carry us to bed?” Ali smiles with a nose-crinkle and moves a hand to her belly.

“Try and stop me, birthday girl.” Ashlyn shifts Ali into a more bridal style position and walks them out the door.

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Saturday, August 4th

“Ready for the adventure of a lifetime today?” Ali wraps her arms around Ashlyn’s waist from behind after finding the officer outside looking at the ocean from the front deck of their private luxury cabin.

“Alex… this place is in and of itself is the adventure of a lifetime. We don’t even have to leave the house. Wow… just holy crap, I’m blown away.” Ashlyn says still in shock at where she is right now.

With the realization in early July that Ashlyn would be going back to work around mid-August and that their lives would be changing dramatically with the twins before they knew it, Ali had decided that it was time to cross something off the bucket list.
Her mind had swirled with different ideas for days until everything hit her all at once and she knew exactly what she wanted to do. It was the perfect place that both of them wanted to travel to—a combination of their favorites: ocean, mountains, and forest all in one. It didn’t require any extremely long travel that might be still be uncomfortable for Ashlyn or even for her own ever-growing belly. Plus it was ideal for a week of easy-going adventures that they could take at their own pace. With a lot of planning help from Kyle and a few other people, she had surprised Ashlyn with the trip… and here they are in Big Sur, California.

Ali had spared no expense, reserving them the private luxury Post House at the Ranch Post Inn. The lavish cabin is perched on an ocean cliff, but they had flown in late last night and couldn’t get a proper look at the view. Instead they had excitedly toured the spacious open-layout of their home for the next week before going to bed, amazed by how beautifully rustic and extravagant it was with its massive king bed and master bathroom suite, full kitchen, dining room, and living room with a huge stone fireplace. But it was nothing compared to this morning when they woke up to warm sun streaming in through large-pane glass windows and a view beyond compare. They were literally on a mountainside, the ocean in front of them and more mountainous landscape behind them.

“Well I’m glad you love it, Hero. But you’re going hiking with me today. Can’t come to Big Sur and not hike.” Ali kisses the back of Ashlyn’s neck and hears the officer’s breath hitch. “Hey now, plenty of time for that later tonight, baby… we need to get going if we want to get through a good trail. Promise we’ll go easy today and see how it feels.”

“Sounds wonderful.” The officer turns around in Ali’s arms to face her. “Thank you for this… it’s beautiful. Nowhere near as beautiful as you…but, beautiful.”

“Your charm will never be wasted or lost on me, Harris.” Ali smiles widely.

“You’re my heart, Alex.” Ashlyn kisses her romantically.

“And you’re mine, Ash.” Ali steals one more kiss. “Now get a move on and into those sexy hiking boots I got you.” She smacks the officer lightly on the ass and heads back into the house.

Less than hour later, they’re only about a half mile into the easy trail through the deep redwood trees that Ali selected for them when brunette stops them.

“Hold up a second.” Ali tugs on Ashlyn’s hand.

“Well now…are my three warriors tuckered out already?” Ashlyn teases a bit.

“Funny, Hero.” Ali shoots her a playful look.

“Really, honey… you ok?” Ashlyn asks a bit concerned.

“Never been better. I just need to tell you something.” Ali says a bit mysteriously.

“Ok. Talk to me, baby.” Ashlyn holds both of Ali’s hands in hers.

“I can’t wait to marry you, Ash.” Ali says softly.

“I can’t wait to marry you either, love.” The officer puts a hand on Ali’s cheek, enamored by the look on the brunette’s face right now. “Lucky for us, it’s just over a month away.” She smiles widely.

“I know you really do mean that, honey. But Ash… I really, really mean it. I actually can’t wait to marry you.” Ali leans her face into Ashlyn’s hand a bit more. “After everything that has happened in
the last couple of months… I can’t wait. Not another month, not another week, not another day, not even another hour…”

“Alex… I love you so much, beautiful. What are you trying to say here?” Ashlyn asks, a bit lost as to what is happening.

“I’m saying…” Ali’s thoughts start slipping away from her in the nervous anticipation of it all. She takes a deep breath to collect herself before trying again. “What if I told you that just down the trail about another two hundred feet and then just over the little hill beyond that…” she points down the wooded path in front of them, “that everyone truly important in our lives is waiting for us, sitting around a little altar under a canopy of redwood trees and expecting a wedding.”

Ashlyn blinks a few times, her mouth opening and then closing again as the information sinks in. “You’re serious?”

“I’m serious.” Whiskey eyes gaze deeply into gold-flecked hazel. “Ashlyn Harris… love of my life and everything that is my future… will you marry me today? Right here, right now?”

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts on the gender of the twins and names? And what do you think about a little impromptu wedding for these two?
At Last...Always Been You

Chapter Notes

Without further ado, I give you a wedding! I hope I did it justice for you. There are only two chapters left to go on this long, crazy ride! Also, smut warning...cause you gotta consummate the marriage, am I right?!

As usual, let me know what you thought of the chapter and if there's anything you hope to see as I wrap it up. I love hearing from you and sincerely appreciate all of your wonderful comments along the way.

***Please forgive any typos as I just wanted to get this out for you ASAP. I'll work on cleaning them up over the next couple days.****

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Saturday, August 4th continued…

“Wow…” Ashlyn smiles so that Ali knows it’s a good reaction and then pauses to recover enough from the shock for a few seconds. “Alexandra Krieger, I will marry you anywhere, anytime. Which means… I won’t just marry you today… I’ll marry the fuck out of you today.” She uses the words from the day they proposed to each other and gives the brunette a dimpled grin.

Ali lets out a huge sigh of relief. “Good. Cause if you didn’t, I was gonna be so pissed.”

Ashlyn doesn’t reply. She gently takes the brunette’s face in her hands and kisses her deeply, letting the fire that flares up inside at the mere contact of their lips to burn out of control and using it to fuel the emotions she’s pouring into the intimate gesture.

“Whew…” Ali barely whispers out as they slowly pull away from the kiss that just literally took her breath away. “Yep, I definitely want that for the rest of my life… and beyond. I hope you saved one like that for the ‘you may kiss the bride’ part.”

“Al, I’ve got an endless supply of those for you and I promise they’ll only get better.” Ashlyn replies sweetly.
“You’ve never called me that before.” Ali’s heart rate picks up at the shortened name.

“What?” Ashlyn asks in confusion.

“Al… you just called me Al. You’ve never called me that before. You always call me Alex… Alexandra in important moments… Ali if you’re introducing me or all business… but never ever Al. Why did you just call me Al?” The brunette questions in a soft but demanding tone.

“Uh…I…I didn’t realize that I was… I’m sorry, Alex.” Ashlyn stutters out an anxious apology at the brunette’s reaction, feeling like she just ruined the moment. “I don’t know why I did that. It wasn’t conscious, it just came out that way. I’m really sorry.”

“No, don’t be sorry. I’m not upset, Ash…just…” Ali lets out a deep sigh. “Ugh, ok this is kind of heavy…in a good way. I’m just not sure how to say it.”

“Ok…” Ashlyn sits down right there on the floor and pats the ground between her legs. “Come here. We’ll do this our way. There’s no ocean right now, but there’s a perfectly good redwood right there.” She points to the big tree in her line of vision and smiles sweetly.

Ali nods with a little smile and settles herself between the officer’s legs with her back pressed to Ashlyn’s chest, closing her eyes contently the second she feels strong arms wrap around her protectively.

“Just talk, love. Say it in any way you can and I’m right here behind you. I got you.” Ashlyn coaxes her.

“One of the things that I struggle with most when it comes to my mom having died sooner than I ever expected is that she isn’t here for things I thought she would be.” Ali just dives right into it. “Especially the big things, the milestones. And sometimes I feel angry about it, other times I’m sad… you know?”

“I know, sweetheart.” Ashlyn responds, remembering how Ali had felt angry over the fact that she would be meeting Ken and not her mother.

“Our wedding is one of those things. Something I’ve done to try and not feel so sad about it is to involve her in my own way. When I picked out my dress or when we chose colors and invitations…I stopped to put myself in her shoes and think about what she would have said about it. And that would help me on the decision and make me feel like she was a part of it. Sounds silly saying it out loud.” Ali shrugs.

“It’s not silly at all. I think it’s touching and sweet, and I’m glad you did that.” Ashlyn reassures her.

Ali lightly squeezes the officer’s forearms appreciatively and leans her head back a little more to get as close as she can. “Growing up, everyone called me Ali. My parents and Kyle called me Alex. And oddly, no one ever really called me Al…except my mom. And she didn’t do it a lot… it just happened in special little moments when she was excited or cheery, especially when she was happy for me. Like when it was my birthday, or I scored a goal in a soccer game, or when I got into college, or anytime I achieved something I was proud of. It seemed almost subconscious, like she was giddy and it just came out because she loved me and she was so happy for me.”

Ashlyn hugs Ali a little bit tighter and kisses the top of her head, now wondering what her use of the nickname felt like for the brunette, but waiting patiently to hear it.

“Our wedding would have been one of those days… she would have called me Al.” Ali reaches her hand back and puts it behind Ashlyn’s neck, gently pulling her in even more from behind. “I love
you so much, Ash. And I feel just how much you love me in return. It’s in every little thing you do, the way you look at me, the way you say my name…it always leaves your mouth with such love. You say my name like it’s sacred.”

“I do. I love you above all else.” Ashlyn says softly even though Ali just said she knows it...not because she needs to say it, but because she’ll never pass up an opportunity to.

“I know, baby. I do.” Ali smiles. “Here I am asking you to marry me today… telling you that today is our wedding day. It’s our wedding day… and out of nowhere you call me Al. And you’ve never done that. And it came out with so much love and happiness in your voice… just the way it would have come out of her mouth, but in your own unique way.” Ali pauses for a second to take a breath.

“Ash, it feels like a sign to me. I’ve struggled with her not being here…and that completely spontaneous moment just now, it feels like in some way she is here. It felt like finding the missing piece to a puzzle…I don’t know. Ugh…this is weird, right? I don’t even believe in this kind of stuff…it’s weird.” Ali shakes her head.

“Honey, it’s not weird. Not even a little weird.” Ashlyn runs her hand lightly up and down Ali’s arms. “Alex, when you think of or feel your mom in important moments, for whatever reason… it means she’s in your heart and in your mind. And that means that she is here with you because you carry her memory. Whatever happens after death…we may not be physically here anymore, but I like to believe that we’re forever present in the love we gave, in the way that we impacted and changed other people. That doesn’t just go away. She’s so much a part of who you are…she’s always here. It’s not all at weird to feel that more strongly sometimes.”

“Thank you for saying that.” Ali whispers at feeling understood and validated.

“Of course.” Ashlyn kisses the top of her head again. “I know I couldn’t have known, but I’m sorry for having sort of intruded on something so personal and special to you.”

“No, Ash…not at all.” Ali immediately turns around in the officer’s arms. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. When you called me Al, it felt like it filled a void I didn’t quite realize was there. To have it happen today of all days was everything…I’m happy, I loved it.”

“Well then…” Ashlyn leans in close and ghosts Ali’s lips with hers. “Al…I love you and I’m so pumped that you’ll be my wife when we go to bed tonight.” She closes the distance and kisses the brunette slowly.

“Tell me what it sounds like.” Ali says in Ashlyn’s ear once they pull apart.

“What what sounds like?” Ashlyn asks quizzically.

“The way my heart pounds when you whisper my name.” Ali replies with an over-the-top smile.

“Ooooh, look at you with the big time charmer lines! Geez, Krieger…surprise wedding, cheesy romantic sentiments… pulling out all the stops today. Stealing my thunder!” Ashlyn teases. “But, to answer your question…sounds like the most beautiful song I’ve ever heard.” She winks and pecks Ali’s lips.

“I’ve got nothing on you, Hero.” Ali giggles.

“Soooo, speaking of surprise wedding… you know what’s weird?” Ashlyn asks playfully.

“Nope, what’s weird?” Ali replies.
“When your hot fiancée drops a surprise wedding on you and gives you zero details.” Ashlyn chuckles.

“Not my fault that you agreed to it blindly without asking the terms, Harris.” Ali shrugs in jest.

“Damn, should’ve consulted my lawyer first.” Ashlyn shakes her head with a dimpled grin.

“Good thing your lawyer is the one you’re marrying and that she can’t resist that damn dimple.” Ali kisses it. “What do you want to know, Harris?”

“Hmmm…gee… I dunno…EVERYTHING!” Ashlyn rolls her eyes jokingly. “For starters, who/what exactly is through the woods over there?” She asks in a playful tone. “Oh and what about our originally planned wedding? Was I just getting Punk’d? Is Ashton gonna pop out like any minute now?” She pretends to look around.

“Mmm’kay, sooo… let me give you the cliffnotes. Shortly after you got hurt and we found out about the twins, I realized there was no way in hell I was waiting until September to marry you. I brainstormed a ton about how to make it happen faster, even trying to move up our date at Castle Hill. Of course, there was no way that was gonna happen with the way they were booked solid. I was still trying to figure something out when I realized it would be a really good idea for us to take a trip once you were better and before you had to go back to work. Bada-bing Bada-boom… destination wedding popped into my head! I’ve gotten a ton of help from Kyle and our family and friends over the last two weeks and here we are, making it happen.” Ali explains.

“Two weeks?! I don’t even know what to say… this is incredible.” Ashlyn says still awestruck by it all. “So who all is here and how is it all working?”

“Our close family and friends are all here… Kyle, your brother and his family, Edith, the bad ass Ranger kittens and their lovely wives…well, Emily in Javi’s case. Tim and Julie are here, Rebekah and her boys, Liz, Jess, and Amber. Nathan and Luke didn’t bring their kids given the long flight, but they’re the only ones missing.” Ali reveals proudly.

“I can’t believe they are all here…that they came all this way on not much notice.” Ashlyn says emotionally.

“We have some pretty amazing people in our lives, baby. They didn’t even think twice about it when I told them.” Ali tells her. “And as for everyone else, we paid for our Castle Hill wedding and we’re keeping it. I figured we’d get married today and then just have a sort of post-celebration party with everyone on the wedding date we planned in September….everything is already setup anyway.”

“You’re brilliant, Alex.” Ashlyn kisses her softly. “Can’t believe you did all this.”

“Me either. I wasn’t sure it was even possible.” Ali admits with a smile. “So, how about I tell you how this is going to go and then we get this show on the road?”

“Absolutely. I’m all ears and all yours.” Ashlyn replies happily.

“Well I wasn’t kidding about it being literally just down the path and over the little hill. I’m going to leave the setup as a surprise, so you’ll have to wait for that.” Ali winks. “We got a company to put two small temporary cabins nearby. You’ll get ready in one and I’ll get ready in the other. Kyle is all over hair and makeup and he made sure my dress and your suit are here and ready to go.”

“So, you’re telling me I’m not getting married in these sexy hiking boots?” Ashlyn laughs and points to her feet.
“For what I paid to fly our photographer out here… absolutely not.” Ali giggles.

“Geez, what didn’t you think of?” Ashlyn says incredulously.

“Hopefully, nothing. This day is going to be everything we ever wanted it to be, I promise.” Ali says confidently.

“Honestly Alex, as wonderful and amazing as this all sounds…my only criteria is you. I’d marry you in a mud pit, honey.” Ashlyn voices in complete truth.

“You’re adorable, but if you think this princess is getting married in a mud pit…” Ali shoots her a playful look.

“Ha! I’d never really let you do it, baby.” Ashlyn chuckles.

“And that’s why I’m marrying you, Harris.” Ali plays back before telling her the final piece. “And once I’ve officially married you… we have a nice outdoor terrace dinner and dancefloor setup back at the Ranch Post Inn for everyone so we can celebrate properly with those unbelievable ocean cliff views.” She finishes with a nose-crinkling grin.

“Baby, you sweep me off my feet. Everything good and beautiful in the world is right here…” Ashlyn strokes Ali’s cheek with her thumb and places a gentle lingering kiss on her lips. “I truly love you more than anything. Now… let’s go make you a Harris.”

“I love you too, Ash.” Ali closes her eyes and presses her forehead to Ashlyn’s. “I really can’t wait.”

“I think we’ve established that.” Ashlyn laughs softly. “Me either.”

“Well then let’s go… ready?” Ali gets up and gives Ashlyn her hand, watching the officer take it and smile up at her.

“For you…always.” Ashlyn kisses the brunette’s hand and gets up to start a day that she’s already mentally added to her short list of best days ever.

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“There you two are! It’s about time!” Kyle says dramatically as Ashlyn and his sister emerge on the wooded path.

“Seriously, how did you possibly take that long? What more had to be said than ‘I’m madly in love with you, surprise, let’s get married today! Woohoo, hell yes, let’s do it!’?” Chris adds and starts making kissy faces. He and Kyle having been standing there to intercept them for about half an hour already. “Did you really make out for that long?”

“It takes a while to walk down this trail slow enough to not sweat in this weather. We’re not getting married smelling like a gym!” Ali exclaims before turning to Ashlyn. “Not that I wouldn’t marry you sweaty, babe.”

“Why thank you, honey…but I get what you’re saying.” Ashlyn gives her a goofy grin. “I’m just glad you talked me into showering before we left.”

“Yeah there was no way I was letting you not shower. I’m just glad you gave in so easily.” Ali smiles.
“You were naked and waiting for me in the shower…what’s not to give into?” Ashlyn waggles her eyebrows.

“Oooookay TMI, and it’s officially time to separate you two.” Kyle points between them. “We have an hour to work with people, let’s get a move on!”

“Say your goodbyes lovebirds, keep it clean.” Chris teases them.

Ashlyn shoots her brother a look before leaning in close to Ali. “Just so you know…you’re already the most beautiful bride in the world. You don’t have to change a thing.” The officer says sweetly, running her hands softly down Ali’s sides and letting them settle on her little baby bump. “To GN-Z11 and back, queen of my heart.” She whispers in her ear and gives it a little kiss.

“Right back at you, Hero. Except the hiking boots… definitely change the hiking boots.” Ali leans back slightly to wink at the officer before leaning in and kissing her hard, surprising Ashlyn who lets out a soft little moan.

“Break it up, break it up! Don’t make find a stick!” Kyle harasses them playfully.

“Plus you have all night for that when everyone is like miles and miles and miles away from your honeymoon love nest.” Chris adds as he tugs Ashlyn’s shirt.

“Love you, my dream come true.” Ali pecks Ashlyn’s lips one more time before Kyle drags her towards the left and Chris leads Ashlyn towards the right.

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“Damn baby sis, what the hell have you been eating for breakfast? Cause I need it.” Chris comments as Ashlyn puts on her white dress shirt. “Unless it’s Wheaties. Please don’t say Wheaties…that shit is like cardboard.”

“It’s that healthy kidney diet I’ve been keeping up with for a while. I definitely cheat occasionally, but mainly lots of veggies and fruit, fish and chicken protein only, low carbs and low dairy. Plus the low-weight and high-rep workouts twice a day…it’s actually popping out muscles I didn’t have before when I was just working out with heavier stuff.” Ashlyn replies with a shrug.

“Bummer. I was hoping you were gonna say like spinach or something. That’s waaaay too much effort, so I’ll just keep this nice fuel tank for my love machine.” He pats his gut.

“It suits you.” Ashlyn teases him.

“If it wasn’t your wedding day, I’d dope slap you.” Chris flicks her on the arm. “Here, let me do that.” He moves her hands away from the tie she is trying to knot when he sees how much they’re shaking.

“Thanks.” Ashlyn drops her arms down and lets him take over.

“Windsor knot for Gramps?” Chris asks knowingly.

“Is there any other kind?” The officer smiles. One of her fondest memories is that her grandpa always included her in everything he taught Chris, no matter how masculine it may have seemed. She loved him dearly for that, for never making her feel different.

“Nope.” Chris starts working the fabric through the proper loops. “You’re nervous?” He states more than asks.
“Actually…yeah.” Ashlyn admits.

“How come? It’s Ali. She thinks you invented wonder bread. What is there to be nervous about?” Chris prods.

“Exactly. It’s Ali. God…I’m about to marry Ali Krieger.” She lets out a deep breath. “It’s hard to explain… she’s light in the darkest place. She’s beauty, she’s fire, she’s peace, she’s passion… she’s finding the way after you’ve been lost, she’s the smell of home, she’s Gram’s mac and cheese, she’s Christmas morning, she’s…perfect. And I’m just…well…me.” Ashlyn tries to put it in words. “Of course I’m fucking nervous…the question is why aren’t you nervous for me?!”

“Because you are too, ass hat.” Chris says simply.

“I am too what?” Ashlyn asks perplexed.

“Perfect.” Chris puts his hands on her shoulders. “Ashlyn, you know I’m not big on sappy speeches… but you are everything I wish I was. If there is one person I strive to be like every day, it’s you. You’re strong and loyal, intelligent and fearless, honest and compassionate. You love bigger, better, and more wholeheartedly than anyone I have ever known. And yeah, Ali Krieger may be one of the most amazing women on this planet, but she’s found her match with you. You deserve her and she deserves you. Each of you shines so bright on your own, but together….you’re a fucking supernova. Clear?”

“Clear.” Ashlyn wraps her arms around him, not having hugged him this tightly since the day he walked out of rehab clean and sober. “You picked a damn good moment for that speech, thank you.”

“Yeah?” Chris stands back and smiles. “Wasn’t too Full House era Bob Saget?”

“Maybe a little.” Ashlyn shrugs in jest.

“Eh, just let me have my moment and while you’re at it…stop shaking like a virgin with a vibrator. Chillaaaax.” Chris goes with humor to try and calm her.

“Oh yep, I see him now… there’s my real brother. Welcome back.” Ashlyn teases him as she pulls on her vest, followed by her suit jacket.

“Look at you, stud muffin!” Chris stands back to look at her. “Damn, Ali is gonna have her way with you behind one of those big ol’ trees before we can even marry you off.” He adds with a chuckle.

Ashlyn is dressed in a fitted navy blue suit that Kyle helped her pick out months ago. Underneath is a tweed vest over a white dress shirt with a wine colored tie and matching pocket square. The colors are simple but elegant and paired with brown wing-tip shoes to complete the look.

“You don’t look too shabby yourself.” Ashlyn nudges him, still surprised that both he and Kyle are dressed in dark gray tuxes with navy bowties in the middle of the woods on a warm day.

“Thank Kyle for that. Ali said we could wear anything, but Kyle vetoed and said we were all going formal and making the pictures ‘fabulous enough for a bridal magazine feature’.” Chris shakes his head.

“Sounds about right.” Ashlyn laughs.

“You’re missing one little thing to pull it all together though.” Chris reaches into a bag in the corner and pulls out a small box. “Happy wedding day, baby sis.”
Ashlyn opens the simple black box to find an antique Longines silver pocket watch that she’d know anywhere. Her grandmother had given this watch to her grandfather before he went off to war, the engraving inside reading ‘I love you more every second, the best is yet to come’. “Chris…I… are you sure?” Ashlyn asks, knowing her grandfather had given this to Chris shortly before he died.

“Of course I am. You make it look better than I ever could.” He smiles at her. “You have Gram’s wedding band, so I thought this would bring it full circle.”

“This means the world… thank you.” Ashlyn says emotionally, hugging him again.

“Don’t mess up your suit, Kyle would kill me.” Chris warns her just as there’s a knock at the door. “Speaking of…”

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“Oh hoooonhy… yes, yes, yes, and hells fucking yes! Whew girl, turn around!” Kyle looks Ali up and down approvingly, having just spent half an hour on her hair and make-up. “Harris is gonna pass right the hell out when she sees you.”

“Yeah?” Ali asks a bit coyly.

“Let me put it this way…expect to find your wedding pictures all over Pinterest. You look all levels of gorg right now! Like other brides are gonna be piissed when they realize you look like this while your three months pregnant with twins, just sayin’!” Kyle assures her. “Sooo, how are we feeling?”

“Excited, happy, little nervous and antsy. In other words, like I just found out magic was real.” Ali gives him a beaming smile.

“Oh babes, one look at you and Harris together and anyone can see that magic is real.” Kyle says like it’s obvious.

“Really? I mean, that’s how it feels for me. But then sometimes I think about what happened with mom and Ken, and I question if I’m just seeing what I want to see and not what’s real, you know? And then like half a second later, I know better… I could never not believe in something this powerful inside and how she makes me feel.” Ali says thoughtfully.

“Really. I meant that completely. I’ve never seen two people love each other so deeply and intensely. You two love like the world was ending tomorrow. You complement each other in every way and, simply put, you make each other the better. I’ve always believed that everyone has a soulmate like that, but that so many of us just aren’t lucky enough to find that person. Just seeing you and Harris… it makes me want to put my best into every single relationship that comes along, just in case I finally find that love.” Kyle says in complete sincerity.

“Oh Ky…” Ali starts only to be immediately stopped by him.

“Noooo! Absolutely not!” Kyle immediately starts fanning her face with his hands. “If I even see one tear ruining my flawless make-up job, you’re in so much trouble, Alexandra Blaire! You promised you were done after I put mom’s pearl earring and necklace set on for you!”

“Sorry, sorry! It’s your own fault!” Ali defends herself.

“Yeah, yeah… okay, bring it in princess.” Kyle opens his arms and hugs her close. “I’m positively over-the-moon happy for you, Alex. I really am.”

“You’re the best.” Ali hugs him tighter. “Thank you… for trusting and believing in me to save your
“Oh darlin’, that part was easy. It’s watching you two eye-fuck each other every few minutes that’s hard.” Kyle sasses in an effort to keep her from crying.

“We do not!” Ali pulls back to see him giving her a skeptical look. “Ugh, ok fine…we do.”

“Yes, and I’m thrilled for you. Just remember that it’s gonna be pretty gross when you’re still doing it at 70, which I have no doubt you two will be.” Kyle laughs. “And on that note, I have to go get that hottie of yours all eye-fuckable for the altar!”

“Well, then you won’t have to do a thing at all.” Ali winks.

“STAAAAAHP!!! Save it for your vows, princess.” Kyle shakes his head. “Any messages I should pass along?”

“Just give her this.” Ali grabs a small white gift bag in the corner and hands it to him.

“Oh geez, gonna have to give her this before I do her make-up.” Kyle whistles after looking in the bag. “See you in a little bit, princess bride.” He gives her a quick kiss on the cheek and makes his way out.

“Knock, knock, time to turn you into a prince, Harris!” Kyle sing-songs as he walks into Ashlyn’s cabin. “Oh HELLO! Well aren’t you just the portrait of sex appeal?! Damn girl, you are hotter than a pot of boiling Tabasco inside a volcano in the middle of July. Nice suit by the way, who picked that out?” He winks as he looks her up and down.

“Thanks, bro.” Ashlyn smiles at his antics. “Let’s hope your sister thinks so.”

“Ha! Please, I’ll be trying to keep her from climbing you like a tree when she sees you.” Kyle laughs before adding “Although, I suppose I’ll be trying to hold you back for the same reason.” He raises his eyebrows. “Alright, we don’t have all that long. Your hair looks pretty fab already, but I’m still gonna use some do-over shampoo spray and re-style it so I can put in some stronger product that will last the whole night.”

“I’m all yours.” Ashlyn declares and sits down on one of the chairs in the room.

“That’s my cue to make sure everything else is ready and check on Ali.” Chris announces.

“No need to rush, she’s being entertained by her mother hens.” Kyle replies.

“Mother hens?” Ashlyn asks.

“Emily and Amber.” Kyle clarifies.

“Any messages for your future wifey?” Chris asks.

Ashlyn thinks about it for a second, wishing she had the wedding gift she planned to give Ali with her. Of course, having no clue that this was happening today, the gift is sitting at home. She debates sending Chris with a sweet little message, but then realizes that she wants to wait for their vows. Instead she grabs her wallet from the little table in the room and pulls out the challenge coin that Ali put back in there after she walked out of the bank alive with Edith just like she promised.

“Here. Give her this and tell her that this one is hers forever, specific promises still to come.” Ashlyn
presses the coin into Chris’ palm.

“Will do. See you in a bit.” Chris claps her on the back lightly.

“So I start… Alex wanted me to give you this. I’ll put it on for you once we’re done.” Kyle hands Ashlyn the bag.

Ashlyn looks at him curiously before pulling out a small clear plastic box with a boutonniere in it. She smiles right away seeing that it’s a sunflower and a calla lily, her eyes falling on a small silver charm with a little chain that holds the flowers together. She opens the box and flips the charm in her fingers, a light gasp leaving her mouth when she sees it. It’s a photo charm, holding a tiny picture of her grandparents.

You sister is just…” Ashlyn says with an emotional smile, trying to find the words.

“Sweet, beautiful, thoughtful, passionate, one of a kind…” Kyle starts filling in.

“Among a million other things… perfect.” Ashlyn finishes the statement.

Kyle nods and takes out his phone. “The one sneak peek you get today…” He shows her the picture of Ali’s bouquet.

Ashlyn looks it over carefully. Of course, like everything else when it comes to Ali, it’s perfect too. The bouquet is a mix of sunflowers and calla lilies just like her boutonniere. “Of course she found a way to keep these with her somehow.” Ashlyn grins when she sees that the bouquet is held together by her dog tags, a small charm holding a picture of the brunette’s mother along with them.

“Yup, surprised she hasn’t tattooed them on her forehead yet.” Kyle laughs.

“Me either.” Ashlyn jokes. “You should see when we go through airport security. She makes security put her through the intense scanner or has a pat down because she refuses to take them off. Takes us like an extra 15 minutes every time.”

“That’s our girl.” Kyle rolls his eyes playfully.

“Yeah…” Ashlyn gets serious at his words. “Kyle, I promise you I will love her and protect her always. I will never let her down and always do right by her.”

“Oh, Harris…I know you will. Heck anyone who has ever looked at you two together knows you will.” Kyle takes her hand and crouches down near the chair she’s sitting in. “Honey, we made babies together and put them in my sister.” He lightens the moment a bit before he completes his thought. “I know exactly who you are… my hero, my guardian, my family. And you are all of those and more for Alex. If I could have created the perfect person for her… you would still beat it by miles. Now as I said to her… save it for your vows and let’s get to blowing the roof off your level of sexy.”

Ashlyn squeezes his hand firmly in hers and nods, knowing there’s nothing left to say to anyone but Ali. “Ok, let’s do this.”

“MAKEOVER!” Kyle yells flamboyantly and waves his arms.

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“Mind if I interrupt for just a sec?” Chris asks after knocking on the door to Ali’s cabin.
“We have to go check that the photographer is ready anyway, so we’ll be right back.” Emily says as she pulls Amber away.

“Hey big guy, how’s my fiancée holding up?” Ali asks with a smile.

“Excellent…she’s not nervous at all.” Chris deadpans before cracking a smile.

“Well that’s completely adorable.” Ali puts her hand over her heart. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little nervous myself… but, I’m just gonna call it anticipation.” She winks.

“You look really beautiful, Ali. Ashlyn is a lucky fuck.” Chris says sweetly before getting to his task. “She told me to give you this and tell you that it’s yours forever with the specific promises still to come.” He holds out the challenge coin in his palm.

Ali takes it in her hand and sighs happily, closing her palm around it briefly before tucking it into her bra near her heart…a physical marker that she knows will cement whatever promises the officer makes her today for always. “She is just…” The brunette tries to find the words.

“Good luck, I’ve been trying to come up with a way to finish that sentence my whole life.” Chris smiles.

Ali nods before she settles on what she does want to say. “You know… I love her beautiful and her broken, equally and unconditionally. I always will.” Her statement is purposeful and poignant, knowing that having lived much of it himself, Chris understands Ashlyn’s struggles and successes better than anyone.

“Ali, we had this conversation a long time ago. No need to do it again.” Chris smiles at her. “So, let me just say this…in roughly thirty minutes, you’re going to be a Harris. And once that happens, you’ll be the best one of us there ever was and ever will be.” He says sincerely. “Well, except for maybe when those twins are born and the world is blessed with these little blended superhuman versions of you two.” He adds with a grin.

“Can’t wait to be a Harris.” Ali beams back at him.

“Good. In that case, time for me to make my way back to go get your girl!” Chris starts to make his way to the door. “Oh and prepare yourself, cause she looks goooood.” He adds with thumbs up as he leaves.

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“There’s a door… in the middle of the woods.” Ashlyn says a bit amazed as she takes in the white door frame and door just freestanding there in front of her. Chris had escorted her out of her cabin and told her to look at the ground, walking her not too far to this white door which she now stands really close to. There’s a cluster of three massive tree trunks to her right, but the door is angled such that she can’t see much more than that, especially the way Chris has her standing so close to it.

“Very observant.” He teases her a bit.

“So, what exactly are we waiting for… someone to open the door or like some music? Ashlyn shifts her weight from leg to leg, feeling a bit antsy now and just wanting to get to Ali.

“Uh, something like that.” Chris smiles knowingly.

“Oh god, what are you not telling me?” Ashlyn asks nervously.
“Nothing. Ashlyn…relax, it’s your wedding day. Ali is standing at a door on the opposite side of these trees just like you are. Does anything else really matter?” He quirks an eyebrow.

“Noat all.” The officer replies with a smile, feeling herself settle.

“Bingo. So chill and go officially promise her all that gooey crap we both know you already have in private like a million times.” Chris laughs lightly.

“Yeah about that…” Ashlyn feels the nervousness creep back in, just recently realizing that this surprise wedding has left her no time to prepare her vows.

“Hey, just speak from here and whatever comes out will be perfect.” Chris pats the middle of her chest.

Ashlyn lets out a deep breath and is about to thank him, but the sound of a violin interrupts the moment.

“And that’s our cue.” Chris holds his arm out for Ashlyn to loop hers through it.

It takes her a few seconds before she realizes what the song is. “Seriously?” She eyes Chris.

“Apparently.” Chris laughs. “Come on.” He opens the door and leads her through. It’s just a few feet around the huge tree trunks on their right before the entire scene is laid out in front of her.

“Wow…” Ashlyn whispers softly. Whimsical… it’s the first word that comes to mind. The first thing she sees is their family and friends sitting in a cluster of white chairs in a small clearing amongst a mix of enormously tall and also small trees. Antique lanterns hang down in various spots from the branches of the smaller trees, the manila rope holding them lined with small white flowers. Off to her right, in front of the trio of huge redwood trunks is an altar arch made of birch branches with white roses weaving through it. A thin white looking fabric is draped over it stylishly, creating the appearance of a little fort under the dominating trees behind it. White flower petals dot the path at her feet, stopping at Elsie who is in front of the birch arch sprinkling more of them from a little basket in her hands.

The officer only manages to take it all in for a few seconds before three unmistakable voices start singing. She looks over to see Rivera, Morris, and Porter standing up in the front row, sunglasses and white silk scarves on, belting out the lyrics to K-Ci and JoJo’s ‘All My Life’ with playful exuberance just like they had so many times in the desert together to entertain themselves…only this time it’s to the melody being provided by a violinist and cellist seated behind everyone else. She can only shake her head at them and laugh, trying to imagine how they managed to talk Ali into this. Still, the whole thing settles her…the moment seeming exactly as it should be in a mix of fantasy and familiarity.

The officer sees a few eyes shift and feels Chris tug her a bit. She follows his lead and takes a couple steps forward until she follows everyone’s eyes and looks back towards the altar. Her feet stop moving…hell, everything in her world stops moving and she’s sure she can’t breathe.

Ali walks a similar path towards her, one of her arms looped through Kyle’s and the other clutching her bouquet. The brunette is in a long white sheath style dress with a few lace embellishments along the sweetheart neckline. A simple string of pearls adorns her neck with earrings to match. Her make-up is flawless, her face almost sparkling in the sunlight that is filtering through the trees. Her dark brown hair is down and styled to one side, draped over her right shoulder in loose natural waves. Her eyes gleam and her smile is blinding, tongue poking through her teeth as her nose crinkles. The word beautiful was invented for this very woman in this very moment, and yet, it is far from adequate.
“One foot in front of the other.” She hears Chris’ voice in her ear and feels his tug on her arm again. A much needed breath of air finally fills her now stinging lungs and her feet start moving again, her eyes locked onto the bright whiskey ones getting closer every second on the opposite path.

“Go get her.” Chris whispers in her ear again and lets go of her arm, the petals now feeling thicker and softer under her feet, the music fading away into silence. And then she is there…Ali is right in front of her, looking every bit a fairytale as Kyle kisses her cheek and takes her bouquet, walking away to go join everyone else like Chris just did. Everything around them seems to disappear and it doesn’t matter whether she’s in the middle of the tranquil woods or in a dance club filled with people, she wouldn’t know the difference because all she can see in this moment is Ali Krieger standing just a foot away.

_Say something._ Her brain practically screams at her nearly stopped heart and tied tongue. “Alex…I…there aren’t even words for how I feel right now.” Ashlyn says softly, her mind struggling to find something meaningful to say to the vision of a woman in front of her. She slowly reaches out to take Ali’s hands in hers, not able to stand not touching her for another second. “You look…” She tries again. “God…you look like little birds helped you get dressed.” It’s the first thing that comes to mind.

Ali smiles impossibly wider and blushes a bit at the candid sentiment that so innocently compares her to a fairytale princess, certain that it must be the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to her.

“And you look like a dream my sweet, beautiful, handsome, Hero.” Ali squeezes the officer’s hands in her own, feeling just how much they are shaking.” She steps closer until they are breathing the same air between their lips. “It’s just us, baby. You and me…like always.” Ali whispers.

Ashlyn smiles at the loving statement meant to soothe her. Of course Ali would be the calm one right now when her own normally smooth-under-pressure self is shaking like a leaf. “I know… I just really love you.”

“Good. Cause we’re about to make it forever.” Ali leans in and kisses her softly, the usual electricity feeling more prominent than ever. “Just you and me, love.” She repeats again.

Ironically following that statement comes a throat clear from just behind them that breaks them out of their spell.

“Ellen?” Ashlyn asks in surprise at seeing who is under the arch with them and then looks back at Ali who just nods with a little smile.

“So caught up you that didn’t even see me there, huh? What, you thought she’d get someone random to marry you? Not when it’s so easy to get temporarily ordained in the state of California.” Ellen smiles at them. “Thanks for making me cry already by the way…I didn’t even cry at my own wedding.”

“I am so blown away right now.” Ashlyn admits, her grin seeming to grow bigger every minute as she struggles to breathe normally.

“Me too. That’s the whole idea, baby.” Ali squeezes her hands again.

“Excellent! We’re all blown away and feeling the love, right on schedule. I run a tight ship, ladies…so no more kissing until I say so.” Ellen playfully warns them. “I hear the bears around here get hungry at about 2pm, so how about we get started?”

“So ready.” Ashlyn says enthusiastically.
“What she said.” Ali winks as the two of them put a little more space between them so that Ellen is visible, but neither drops their grip on the other’s hands.

“What everyone.” Ellen greets the joyful little group. “We are gathered here today in the great American wilderness to not only unite this beautiful couple in marriage, but also to learn about love. Everyone knows love in some form, right? Whether it’s among family, friends, children, spouses, even pets… we all love. Still, no matter how much we already love and are loved, we can always be inspired and motivated to do it greater. And that’s what I invite you to do today...to not just celebrate Ali and Ashlyn’s union, but to be inspired by their love.”

Love. Ali hears the word leave Ellen’s mouth and it hits her just how powerful it really is. Her eyes hold the gaze of gold-flecked hazel and absolutely nothing could tear her away. Her heart pounds, her stomach flutters, her mind works to etch every single detail of Ashlyn’s face into her memory. Because in those beautiful eyes and that dimpled smile directed only at her, that’s exactly what she sees…love. Love that is kind, understanding, unconditional, honest, prevailing, wholesome, fervent, and endless… a love that is for her alone. And she knows in this moment that no matter what life brings them, their love will always find a way to triumph. It brings her the greatest peace she has ever felt inside and for the first time she truly understands why people say that love is the greatest force on the planet.

“I personally believe that all love is wonderful.” Ellen continues on. “But sometimes, we are lucky enough to witness a love that shines a bit brighter than the rest. And we know it when we see it because it’s pure and tangible, and it makes us better people just to be around it. I know I’m preaching to the choir here, but when I see Ashlyn and Ali together…that’s what I see, a love that stands out from the rest.” She pauses briefly before delivering the rest.

“These two women love loudly without sound. They love openly and with conviction. They love with every bit of who they are, so much so that it isn’t confined to the two of them… but permeates to those of us who are privileged enough to be in their lives as well as those who benefit from their good hearts. Their love is one with the power to not only stand the test of time, but to inspire all of us who see it. To move us to love harder, without expectation, and without limits. So today as we celebrate the legal union of their love, let us also be cognizant of just how special and rare it is and allow it to guide our own hearts.” She pauses again.

“And after that fabulous introduction… let’s see what you’ve got, ladies. No pressure.” Ellen ends the opening lightly, getting a little laugh from both women as well as everyone else before moving to their declaration of intent.

“Ashlyn, do you take Ali to be your wife? To love and protect her, to treat her as your equal, to remain true to her in whatever life may bring as long as you both shall live?”

“I do.” Ashlyn replies and squeezes Ali’s hands.

“Ali, do you take Ashlyn to be your wife? To love and protect her, to treat her as your equal, to remain true to her in whatever life may bring as long as you both shall live?”

“I most definitely do.” Ali says eagerly, squeezing Ashlyn’s hands right back.

“Now that you have declared your intentions, I invite you to share your vows with each other.” Ellen gets through the formality before cracking a smirk and rubbing her hands together. “Okay, so who’s up first?”

“That’s your cue, baby.” Ali winks before Ashlyn can even think to respond.
“Oh really?” Ashlyn raises an eyebrow at the prodding to go first.

“Yep. Knock my socks off, Harris.” Ali says playfully and hears a collective laugh from their guests.

“Challenge accepted, Krieger. You’re not even wearing socks, but I’ll knock them off anyway.” Ashlyn smirks as a few more laughs and ‘ohs’ cut through the air.

The officer takes a couple of deep breaths to collect herself, trying to pull together the words to express what’s in her heart. She starts by finally breaking the gaze between her and Ali to look at their family and friends. “As you all know because you all had a hand in this somehow, today was a complete surprise for me. I didn’t have time to properly prepare what to say right now, so I’m just going to speak from the heart. And if it ends being some jumbled mess that makes no sense, I’ll just say right now that it all boils down to this… I love this woman more than anything in the world and I promise to spend every single day of my life showing her just how much, until the very last breath I take. With that being said…” Ashlyn turns back to lock her eyes on Ali’s and takes another deep breath.

“Alex, if someone were to ask me why I love you… I would ask them why they breathe. Undoubtedly, they would answer that they breathe to live. And that’s my answer too…I love you to live. Loving you is like breathing. There is an automaticity to it, an ease, a natural simplicity that just is. And yet, it’s so crucial to my existence. You are have become my air, everything in my life that I never knew I needed and now can’t live without. I can’t breathe without you and I never want to try. Which is exactly why it’s so easy for you to walk in looking like you do right now and completely leave me breathless and gawking like a fool.” Ashlyn smiles and hears everyone laugh lightly, but Ali’s eyes stay right on hers, looking a little watery despite the radiant smile underneath them.

“You are my whole world. Every single thing I need to not just live, but to actually feel alive inside. I give myself completely to you, just like I have from the very beginning. And today I vow to you that it will be that way forever. I promise to always be honest with you, to treat you as my equal, to value our differences as much as our commonalities, to encourage your passion that I admire so much, and to always watch in awe as you kick ass and take names.” Ashlyn squeezes Ali’s hands tightly as she sees the first tear drop down from the brunette’s left eye.

“In giving you all of me, I also want all of you. Not just the good, but your worst too. Give me your bad hair days, traffic nightmares, burnt coffee, lost keys, ruined shoes, chipped nails and lost receipts. Give me your heartbreak, your tears, the secrets you bury deep and are afraid to speak out loud. Give me your everyday and I will give you my unwavering love to make it okay. You are my fortress, my strongest ship with which I can weather any storm, my champion of good, my Paladin, the woman of my dreams, and the queen of my heart. I vow to grow old with you and to walk by your side through whatever life brings us, until death itself takes me away. Which brings me to just a few a more promises. Alexandra Blaire Krieger…I will never let go of your hand long enough to lose our spark, I will never let you go to bed without knowing how loved you are, I will not fail to grab your ass every chance I get, I will support your every dream and work to make your every wish come true, and I will always, always carry you in these arms my love. I love you so much that I might explode, but I’ll still love you more every single day.” Ashlyn brings Ali’s hands up to her mouth and kisses each of them softly before letting them go just long enough to wipe away a few tears on the brunette’s cheeks with her thumbs.

“Can you get mine too?” Ellen asks as she wipes her face with a tissue. “Wow, okay. That definitely didn’t disappoint.” Everyone laughs as Ashlyn pretends to wipe Ellen’s tear and Kyle can’t help but yell “Yaaas, girl!” as he dabs his own eyes with a tissue.
“Well, Ali… you’re up. Good luck!” Ellen nudges the brunette playfully.

“Little hard to dive into your vows when you still can’t breathe.” Ali giggles nervously.

“Just you and me, baby.” Ashlyn reminds her and takes her hands again.

“Right.” Ali lets out a deep breath. “Okay, so everyone here won’t be the least bit surprised to know that I hardcore prepped for this moment. Like bar exam hardcore. And somehow I feel like I just showed up to the test naked after forgetting to study the night before. I have no idea how I’m supposed to follow that, but I’m sure gonna try.”

Ashlyn feels Ali’s hands trembling slightly now and she brings them up to her mouth to kiss them again, seeing her girl smile back appreciatively and immediately look more confident.

“Ashlyn, not too long before I met you I was just starting to gain some direction back after my extremely structured life took a turn I hadn’t expected. I was still trying to get my feet fully planted again when you came into my life like a tornado.” Ali starts and hears a laugh from everyone and a loud “sounds about right” from a voice that is clearly Javi’s.

“I mean that in the best way possible.” Ali clarifies with a shy smile and gets an encouraging grin back from the officer. “In no time at all I was completely swept up in you, everything swirling in a way I’d never experienced before. And even though it was unpredictable, I’ve never felt so settled amidst chaos. As we navigated a road that was completely new for both of us, I discovered parts of myself that I never quite realized were there. Although they were always in there somewhere, you were the one that brought them out in me…and you make them shine like they never have before.” She pauses to be sure she gets her words right.

“The first is true courage… the courage to know you and to let you know me. To wander into the deepest darkest parts of your soul and to open myself up to let you into mine. To find bravery in being afraid, knowing that I can be vulnerable with you and always be safe. The second is wisdom… the wisdom to follow my heart and forget the rest. To stay true and act on what I feel even if it seems impractical. To understand that I don’t have to be two-steps ahead because whatever step we’re on together is exactly the one we’re supposed to be on. The third is love… a love like I never knew I was capable of giving or receiving. A love so deep and so intense that it consumes me and makes me feel whole. I love the broken parts of you as much as I love the whole ones and know that you feel the same in return. In your love, I have learned to love myself…which has only made me capable of loving you all that much more. And finally, the fourth is home.”

Ashlyn puts together the components of what Ali is saying…tornado, journey, courage, brain, heart, home… and the Wizard of Oz metaphor the brunette has chosen becomes clear. The simultaneous meaning of what Ali is saying and the honoring of her grandmother is enough to send her heart into a wild beating pattern, her legs feeling a little weak at the intense love inside right now.

“Home…” Ali keeps going before the tear she sees starting to form in Ashlyn’s right eye makes her cry again too. “I used to think that was a place. When I met you, I quickly learned that it’s not a place at all, but a feeling. It’s feeling safe, secure, familiar, comfortable, settled, and happy…all the things I feel when I’m with you. For me, home is a person…my home is you. I’ve come to realize that where you go and what you encounter doesn’t matter at all, it’s who you meet along the way. It’s who walks beside you and who you share it with that matters most.” She takes one more breath before finishing.

“Ashlyn Michelle Harris…I promise to always do whatever it takes to ensure that you are the one beside me on the journey, to love all of you without exception and with every ounce of my being. You are my horse of a different color, my somewhere over the rainbow, my no place like home…
and so long as my presence exists, in physical form or otherwise, it will forever belong right here.” Ali takes her hand and places it on the officer’s chest, right over her heart. “I love you for all time, Hero.”

The tears have no chance of being held back after that and Ashlyn uses her free hand to wipe them away from her eyes before they can blur her view of the most beautiful woman in the world. Ali is so close now, palm against her heart… close enough to breathe her in despite feeling breathless for the umpteenth time today, close enough to feel her warmth emanating through their clothes, close enough to see the varied brown hues in her striking whiskey eyes, so very close but not nearly close enough.

“Whew…” Ellen lets out a little whistle, breaking them from the moment. “I think I’m gonna have to call that a draw. What do you all think?” She asks and gets a loud round of clapping and whistling from everyone.

“Ellen?” Ashlyn pipes up through the joyful noise.

“Yes?” Ellen replies with slight concern, not able to read the intense look on the officer’s face.

“I have no doubt that you have a few more hilarious and witty things to say that at any other moment, I would absolutely love to hear. But right now… I really, really need to kiss her. As in you have like 30 seconds before I practically die of a heart arrhythmia from not being able to. So…” Ashlyn moves her hand in a very clear speed it up motion.

“Right-O! CURTIS…get on up here with some hustle, little man!” Ellen immediately moves things along. Curtis gets a gentle shove from Chris and quickly makes his way over to them with ring boxes in hand.

“Ali, please put Ashlyn’s ring on her finger and repeat after me.” Ellen instructs in a hurried voice.

“Ashlyn, I give you this ring as a symbol of the promises we have made on this day. I pledge you my love, my respect, my laughter, my tears, my heart, my whole. With all that I am, I honor you.” Ali pushes the simple silver band onto the officer’s finger with a beaming smile.

“Alex, I give you this ring as a symbol of the promises we have made on this day. I pledge you my love, my respect, my laughter, my tears, my heart, my whole. With all that I am, I honor you.” Ashlyn puts the brunette’s diamond infinity band in place, cheeks hurting from smiling widely as she steps in even closer.

“By the power vested in me by the state of California, I now pronounce you spouses in love and life! Ashlyn, you may kiss your whole world… Ali, welcome home!” Ellen finishes quickly and backs up a bit to let them get to it.

Ashlyn doesn’t waste even a fraction of a second, immediately closing the distant and taking Ali’s lips in hers. It’s deep and deliberate, passionate and electric, romantic and even a little bit heated. It feels just like the first time and yet has a power all its own that makes it one of their most memorable. Ali lets out a tiny involuntary moan and Ellen who is close enough to hear it starts a round of applause in an attempt to keep everyone else from hearing it. The brunette feels like she’s floating and when she finally pulls away with her chest burning from lack of air, she realizes it’s because she actually is. Ashlyn has her wrapped up in her arms, lifting her just enough so her feet are hovering a couple inches off the ground…stunning green hazel eyes practically smiling at her.
One second Ashlyn is staring into Ali’s eyes, the next she’s being pulled by the hand through the little aisle between the chairs of their guests, getting patted on the back and pelted with something she soon realizes is some kind of wild bird seed as they make their way through. It’s mere moments before Ali has them absconded behind another massive tree trunk just few feet away from their guests but completely out of sight. It’s their first few minutes of being married and Ali wants it for just the two of them. The photographer is right there to capture it, but neither of them notice at all.

Ashlyn looks at her wife who is positively glowing, the look on her face as jubilant as she has ever seen it and the first thing she can think to say is “I love you, Harris.”

“Baby… I love that so damn much.” Ali whispers out a bit squeakily. “I’m yours. Your mine. We’re Harris, both of us.” She says in complete wonderment. “I love you too, wife.”

The kiss that follows this time is nothing short of scorching and leaves them both flustered when it’s interrupted a few minutes later by Kyle popping up beside them and yelling “Okaaaay, you have all night for that. At least eat something first so you guys don’t cramp! Come on now, we have a feast to get to you dirty birdies! I was promised dancing!”

Are you doing okay, baby? Sure you’re up for this?” Ashlyn stops to check in with her wife before they head inside to the post-ceremony celebration where everyone is waiting. She knows Ali must be wiped out already without her usual midday nap and all the excitement on top of it all.

“I’m great, baby. Promise. That little walk was actually a great refresher. How are you doing?” Ali returns the question as she leans into Ashlyn a bit more and kisses her shoulder. After easily knocking out the group photos that the couple had requested, their photographer took them on an easy little walk through the woods that eventually led them right to the car taking them to the inn. She had told them to just walk and do their thing, taking candid photos of them and only stopping in three spots that she had previously mapped out to take some posed photos. It had only taken about an hour and there was no doubt the woman knew exactly what she was doing.

“Elated is completely inadequate for how I’m doing, but I’m just gonna go with that.” Ashlyn tilts her head down to get a proper kiss. “I’m ready if you are, gorgeous.”

“I’m ready. Just one more thing first.” Ali says and points towards the smaller side door that leads out to the terrace. “We’re supposed to let the DJ know we’re here so he can announce us. And, we’re gonna get our first dance in right after that. He’s setup right by that side door, so just head over there and let him know we’re here. And…” Ali smiles slyly, “go tell him what song to play for us.”

“But we never picked a song.” Ashlyn says a bit dumbfounded by the request.

“I know. It’s only fair that you get to surprise me today too, right? So…pick one and tell him. Surprise me.” Ali gives her a soft kiss and then a gentle shove towards the side door. “I’ll meet you at the main door.”

“Oh sure, go pick our first song… no pressure at all.” Ashlyn deadpans nervously.

“Whatsoever you pick will be wonderful, honey. I trust you.” Ali reassures her before she jokingly adds “well, unless you pick the Electric Slide…in which case, I’m filing for an annulment.”

“Funny.” Ashlyn shakes her head. “The Hokey Pokey it is.” She winks before heading off.
“We good?” Ali asks a few minutes later when Ashlyn rejoins her at the main door to wait to be announced.

“I hope so.” Ashlyn smiles.

“So, FYI… Kyle picked our entrance song. I have no idea what it will be.” Ali scrunches her nose.

“Oh god, probably something RuPaul would catwalk to.” Ashlyn laughs. “Oughta be interesting at least. Probably no worse than me having picked the Hokey Pokey for our first dance though.” She teases.

Ali doesn’t have time to reply as the DJ’s voice suddenly booms. “Everyone get on up and let’s get ready to hoot and holler up in here because the newlyweds have officially arrived!!”

“Beyonce… there’s a surprise.” Ashlyn laughs and Ali giggles when they hear the opening of ‘Crazy in Love’ and loud whistling from their guests.

“Ladies and Gentleman… for the first time as a married couple… please give the loudest, rowdiest welcome to Mrs. & Mrs. Harris!!!!” The DJ bellows loudly and everyone practically roars as the door opens to reveal the two women.

Ashlyn grins with a slight blush as she escorts the brunette onto the terrace, but Ali completely gets into it, stopping right where they are and pulling the officer close to playfully grind on her as she gives everyone a thumbs up. That fires everyone up even more, another round of whistles and whooping filling the air until Ashlyn pretends to faint and everyone stops to laugh before dropping into a low ‘awwww’ when the two women kiss.

When they’re just about in the middle of the little dancefloor, the DJ starts fading the music into the song Ashlyn chose.

The first few notes of ‘At Last’ by Etta James start to play and everything gets quiet, Ashlyn wraps her arms around Ali’s waist and anxiously watches her face for a reaction. She calms immediately when Ali gives her a nose-crinkling, megawatt smile before burying her face into her neck, feeling the brunette’s lips kiss the skin there a few times.

Ali leaves little kisses up Ashlyn’s neck until she gets to her ear and whispers “You really were put on this earth just for me.” She pulls back just enough to peck the officer’s lips before pressing her cheek to Ashlyn’s and losing herself in the moment.

At last my love has come along
My lonely days are over
And life is like a song, oh yeah
At last the skies above are blue
My heart was wrapped up in clover
The night I looked at you…

“Can I ask what made you pick this song?” Ali whispers when it’s about halfway through, the two
of them swaying gently.

“Outside of the fact that it’s beautiful and one of the best songs ever, it’s one of only five songs you have programmed on your satellite radio to give you an alert beep when it’s on. Two of those songs are related to us, one is related to your mom, the fourth is ‘Straight Up’, and then there’s this one. I have no idea why this one, but it must mean something… and it fits today, so I went with it.” Ashlyn explains.

“My mom always said that this was the greatest love song ever written. I happen to agree with her.” Ali reveals. “And… she always told me it would make the best wedding song. And… I told her if I ever got married, I’d dance to this one.”

“Alex… oh my god… why didn’t you tell me?” Ashlyn pulls back enough to look at the brunette, slightly shocked. “I had no idea… what if I didn’t pick this one?”

“Wouldn’t matter… but, you did.” Ali smiles.

“But what if I didn’t?” Ashlyn presses again.

“Ash, I already knew you would. And you did.” Ali replies resolutely, making it clear that there was never any doubt in her mind… that they know each other that well.

“How could you know I’d…” Ashlyn asks with a smile before she feels Ali’s finger on her lips.

“The same way you knew to pick this song. Now shut up and kiss me, Harris.” Ali says lovingly and feels Ashlyn’s lips on hers just as the last line of the song plays and clapping starts up around them again.

For you are mine at last.

“Club soda with lime for my beautiful wife.” Ashlyn says charmingly as she returns from the little bar in the corner of the terrace, handing Ali her drink just as Rebekah walks away to give them a quiet moment together.

“I’ll never get tired of hearing that.” Ali smiles. “Except for the club soda part. At least one of us can enjoy that champagne.”

“So…#LawfullyWeddedHarris huh?” Ashlyn holds up the little white cocktail napkin that features the social media hashtag in black lettering.

“Well it was that or #HarrisBeyondAReasonableDoubt, but that was bordering on way too long.” Ali giggles.

“Very fitting.” Ashlyn chuckles. “And perfect…just like you.” She leans in for a quick kiss.

“Mmmm.” Ali moans lightly as she tastes the champagne on Ashlyn lips. “Your mouth tastes so good right now. Ugh… that champagne even smells amazing.” She says as she sniffs the officer’s glass. “You better drink enough of that for both of us.”

“It actually is pretty damn good. I’m drinking one for you, one for me, and then I’m joining you on
that club soda… I want all my focus for you tonight, my queen.” Ashlyn kisses the top of her head.

“You are seriously the best person ever for a pregnant girl to be married to… sweet, sensitive, and sexy as hell.” Ali tilts her head up for a longer kiss when they get interrupted by the loud dinging of a glass. They pull apart and both jokingly roll their eyes, knowing something like this was coming soon since they’ve just been mingling with everyone so far over the little cocktail hour.

“Hear ye, hear ye!” Kyle yells.

“Attention!” Chris bellows simultaneously from beside Kyle and everyone quiets down.

“So, it’s traditional to have some kind of speech before we sit down to this delicious smelling feast.” He motions to the long table behind him all set up with food. “Chris and I talked about it and we decided that we’re going to save that for September though. Now that you two pretty much ran off and eloped, we’re gonna need something to keep all those guests entertained at your wedding-turned-party next month…am I right?” Kyle says sassily.

“Exactly!” Chris chimes in. “So, no grand speeches tonight. We’re here to celebrate the two of you and we’re also all here because each of us is important in your lives. But, you’re just as important in ours and we want you to know just how much you mean to us all.” Chris elaborates and then lets Kyle finish.

“So, we’ve decided on a special toast to you two marvelous, wonderful, stupendous women who have taught us so many things. And here is what we’ve learned from you… I’ll go first.” Kyle raises his glass toward Ali and Ashlyn. “Always be kind and honest. These two simple things can open someone’s eyes, heal their heart, and save their life.” He looks to Chris on his right.

“Give your love wholeheartedly. Loving a person for their struggles as much as you do their successes is the key to true compassion and understanding.” Chris says as he and Bridget both hold their glasses up, giving Elsie and Curtis each a little squeeze on the shoulder.

“You should marry your best friend so every night is like an awesome sleepover.” Curtis gives them a thumbs up and a quiet little “aww” fills the air.

“Princesses are just as strong as princes and usually better!” Elsie declares confidently, making Ashlyn and Ali laugh hard along with everyone else before she yells “your turn Edith!”

Edith raises her glass to the women with a meaningful smile. “Blood maybe thicker than water, but water amongst true friends is as good as family.”

“If you always do right and good, when one door closes then another one will open.” Tim and Julie follow.

Porter and Kristen raise their glasses as he speaks for them. “No matter what life throws at you, you hold the power to be better and stronger than you were yesterday.” He looks over at Morris.

“You can only fail if you give up. Live with everything you’ve got because stars and diamonds are only born with pressure.” Morris toasts with his arm wrapped around Jamie.

Rivera’s lips curl into a playful smirk as he raises his glass. “Amazing people attract other amazing people. So when your amazing best friend finds an equally amazing life partner…you let them hook you up with their amazing best friend and never look back.” He winks at Emily as everyone laughs lightly.

“Exactly what he said.” Emily adds from beside him, blowing Ashlyn and Ali a kiss.
“Never compromise and keep moving forward, you’ll always find your way to where you’re supposed to be.” Amber follows them with a smile.

Liz raises her glass up. “You can walk through hell without burning if you just use all that fire to make yourself shine brighter when you come out the other side.” She playfully nudges Jess beside her whose eyes are watery.

“Sorry, this is all just so sweet.” Jess composes herself before raising her glass. “Always be open to the next moment even though you have no idea what’s coming and trust that you’ll always find a way through whether it’s on our own or with the help of those around you.”

“Approach everything without judgment or expectations because the greatest things in life can come from the darkest and most unusual circumstances.” Rebekah does her best to raise her glass with her arms around Josh and Jameson.

“Oh wow, I get the last one.” Ellen says in realization as she stands there leaned into Portia a bit. “Well, I say this all the time, but I’ve never seen a better example than the two of you.” She raises her glass to the couple. “Love always wins. Here’s to you and the greatest love I’ve ever seen.”

“To the beautiful couple and to forever.” Portia adds as they all start to walk forward and bring together the little circle they were all standing in.

“Whoop whoop!!” Kyle yells playfully as everyone gets ready to clink glasses.

“Wait!” Ashlyn yells to stop them.

“Yeah hold up!” Ali agrees loudly and everyone comes to a pause, glasses still up. “Go ahead, baby.” She kisses Ashlyn’s cheek.

“Alex and I wouldn’t be who we are or where we are right now if it wasn’t for all of you. To our family who made all of it possible. We love you.” She and Ali raise their glasses.

“Yeeeew!” Chris gets the cheers going again.

“Hoooah!” The Rangers shout and glasses start clinking all around.

“Okay, let’s FEEEEAAAASST!!!” Kyle shouts happily and gets everyone moving to sit at the table.

And feast they do. Dinner is presented in a family-style arrangement that is cozy but takes nothing away from the elegance of the food itself: prosciutto wrapped filet mignon, cedar plank grilled salmon with truffle butter, roasted potatoes and root vegetables, mushroom risotto, mixed green salad, and loaves of rustic bread. There is no cake to cut, another of Kyle’s ideas to save some traditions for their celebration in September, but no one seems to notice when a decadent turtle cheesecake dessert covered in salted caramel is served with a side of fresh strawberries. The meal is delicious, but the company is even better with everyone engaged in boisterous conversation with laughter ringing out every few minutes. People rotate where they are sitting every so often so that everyone gets some time with Ashlyn and Ali over dinner. While nothing about the night is hurried or rushed, it all goes by in a blur just the same and the happy couple finds themselves wrapped up together on the dancefloor once again when the DJ announces the last dance of the night.

Ali presses herself in as close as she can to her wife, hands going to play with the soft stubbled hair on the back of the officer’s head as ‘Falling Slowly’ plays. The little flutters that have been present in her stomach off and on today start right on cue and she smiles against the officer’s neck, appreciating
just how happy and light she feels in this moment.

I don't know you
But I want you
All the more for that

Words fall through me
And always fool me
And I can't react

And games that never amount
To more than they're meant
Will play themselves out

Take this sinking boat and point it home
We've still got time
Raise your hopeful voice, you have a choice
You'll make it now

“Thanks for always being my steady ship.” Ashlyn’s warm breath tickles Ali’s ear.

“Thanks for always pointing me home, love.” Ali pulls back enough to put her hand over Ashlyn’s heart, giving herself just a couple seconds to get lost in beautiful hazel eyes before kissing the officer slow and deep… leaving her hand just where it is so she can feel the heartbeat under her palm steadily pick-up speed as it always does without fail at her touch.

Falling slowly, eyes that know me
And I can’t go back…

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“Wait, baby.” Ashlyn stops Ali before the brunette can go inside their private cabin. 

Ali looks at her in slight confusion until the officer quickly scoops her up into her strong arms. “Oh, right! Geez, of all times to forget.”

“Yeah this might be my most important carry ever. Gotta let me have my moment, babe.” Ashlyn smiles as Ali wraps her arms around her shoulders.

“Carry on, Hero.” Ali nuzzles into her.

“I really love you, Al.” Ashlyn says softly, her eyes conveying depth that her words can’t.

Ali feels her heart start to hammer at the shortening of her name, just like before. “I really love you too, Ashlyn.” She kisses her soft and slow, every little touch between them right now too electric to be rushed.

“Come on, beautiful. Let’s go get comfortable.” Ashlyn finally pulls away long enough to carry her wife into their cabin. She walks them right into the bedroom, putting Ali down gently as they get to the center of the room.

Nothing is said as they slowly undress each other and steal kisses, both of them enjoying the mix of euphoria for what has transformed between them in the last few hours and comfort in what hasn’t changed at all.

Ashlyn feels Ali shiver slightly and quickly reaches for one of the cotton robes hanging near the bathroom door, just now realizing they had left the AC cranked up earlier because the brunette had been too hot.

“You’re so sweet.” Ali smiles as she feels the soft cotton cover her naked body and Ashlyn’s hands rubbing up and down her arms to warm her. She kisses the officer deeper this time and presses her tongue into Ashlyn’s mouth. “I could kiss you forever.” She mumbles against her lips as she pulls away breathless a couple minutes later.

“You better.” Ashlyn gives her one more lingering kiss.

“Can I have a few minutes to freshen up?” Ali asks shyly.

“You can have anything you want, beautiful.” Ashlyn smiles at her. As much as she wants some part of her to be in constant touch with Ali the rest of the night, she knows how self-conscious the brunette has been feeling lately as her body changes.

“I’ll just be a couple minutes.” Ali promises and pecks Ashlyn one more time.

“Take your time, baby.” Ashlyn reassures her, letting her eyes trail Ali until she slips through the bathroom door and closes it.

“Ash?” Ali calls out a few minutes later as she opens the door that leads out to the private deck.

“Out here, love.” Ashlyn’s voice cuts through the night.

“There you are.” Ali sees the officer’s outline in a white robe identical to her own, leaning against the railing of the deck and looking out into the darkness. “Whatcha doing out here, baby? I’d say enjoying the view, but it’s pitch dark. Not even a star out.” Ali observes as she looks up into the
cloudy black sky.

“Just enjoying the quiet and thinking.” Ashlyn replies.

“What are you thinking about?” Ali inquires.

“Just letting today sink in. I married my soulmate, my best friend, and the most beautiful woman in existence… a pretty unbeatable and incredible day if you ask me. It definitely deserves a moment of reverence.” Ashlyn replies sincerely.

“Definitely does.” Ali says practically swooning as she lays down on the oversized chaise on the deck and pats the space next to her. “Why don’t you come on over here so you can keep charming the hell out of me, Captain?”

“No place I’d rather be.” Ashlyn cheeses and lays down facing Ali, gently taking the brunette’s face in her hands. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Ali whispers back with a content smile before feeling the strong flutters in her stomach again, the strongest so far today. “Oh.” Her hand drops to her belly.

“You ok?” Ashlyn asks in concern.

“Yeah, I’m great. Our little warriors picked today to make themselves known.” Ali strokes her belly.

“Really?” Ashlyn asks happily, putting her hand over Ali’s.

“Yep. First time was when you were in the middle of your vows. I thought it was all that emotion making my stomach flutter like this. It hit me later when we were dancing and it happened again that it was exactly what Dr. Baylor said I would feel when they moved…these weird little flip-flop flutters in there. It actually has only happened when you’re close to me today. I don’t know if they can feel the warmth from you or maybe it’s your voice since it’s 18 weeks now and they can hear… but they sure love their Mama.” Ali kisses the officer’s cheek. “Can’t blame them one bit.”

“So you’re saying I had help giving you butterflies with my vows?” Ashlyn narrows her eyes playfully.

“Yep, but you have the cutest back-up ever.” She pats her belly.

“I totally do.” Ashlyn smiles and enjoys the serene quiet for a couple minutes before trying to put words to what is swirling in her mind. “When I was 5, Chris and I accidentally broke a basement window playing with a baseball too close to the house. Given our parents’ less than forgiving nature, we decided to run away. We grabbed some backpacks with snacks and a couple flashlights, some blankets. Chris walked us about a mile over to Peters Park in Southie… do you know it?”

“Uh, yeah. The one with the playground and the dog park, right?” Ali asks, still trying to catch up to the sudden story.

“Yep. One of the only places in Southie with a couple of trees clustered together.” Ashlyn explains. “We settled under these two big oak trees and Chris built us a blanket fort. It was the first night that I could remember feeling completely safe and secure as a kid.” She feels Ali’s hand entwine with hers and continues.

“The cops found us early the next morning and brought us home…and there was hell to pay of course. Chris never went back there, but I did. Anytime something was wrong, I’d haul a couple of blankets and walk that mile. I’d build that fort under the same two trees and look up at the sky.
Something about being so small under those big trees felt so protective. I used to daydream about growing older and finally getting away…living my own life and being happy. I dreamed about a lot of things under there. And although the person had no distinct face or gender, that was the first place I ever thought about what it might be like to get married someday. I didn’t even remember that until today, standing beneath that little blanket fort arch under those massive redwood trees and marrying you. Everything inside me feeling safe and secure. Exactly like the first time I ever pictured it.”

Ashlyn divulges and meets Ali’s eyes.

“How is that possible, Alex?” She questions in wonderment. “How on earth could you have picked something so perfect when I didn’t even remember it myself until today?”

“It’s not coincidence, Hero.” Ali runs her hand through Ashlyn’s hair softly. “You told me…I just listened.”

“What do you mean?” Ashlyn asks befuddled.

“When you were coming out of the sedation after the egg retrieval procedure…you called me your wife and thought we were married.” Ali explains. “After I told you that we weren’t married yet, you insisted that we had gotten married in a ‘tree fort under the big redwood trees’.” She smiles and kisses the officer’s forehead.

“I said that?” Ashlyn asks.

“You did.” Ali nods. “And I’ve learned that some of your deepest, most innocent and genuine thoughts come out in those moments when you’re vulnerable, but feel safe with me there. So I listened, Ashlyn. If that’s where you married me in your head, then I knew that that’s where I wanted to marry you in reality. Even if I had no idea why…I trust your heart and what it tells me.”

“You’re gonna make me cry again.” Ashlyn whispers emotionally.

“No more tears today…just kiss me, baby.” Ali presses little kisses all over Ashlyn’s face, working her way down to her mouth when she feels another strong flutter in her stomach that makes her jump slightly.

“Again?” Ashlyn asks with a dimpled grin when she sees Ali’s hand go to her belly.

“Right on cue.” Ali giggles.

“Can’t wait until I get to feel them too.” Ashlyn lets her hand wander under Ali’s robe and presses her palm to the brunette’s hipbone, thumb running along the edge of her baby bump.

The touch is sweet at first and Ali frames Ashlyn’s cheek with her hand, lightly stroking her jawline with her thumb. They’re breathing the same air, completely caught up in each other’s eyes like a hundred other times today when it finally feels real and settles in deep… they’re married, they share a name. She realizes just where the officer’s hand is…right over the inked skin that symbolizes her permanently. And suddenly Ashlyn’s loving touch ignites a fire that can only be quelled by more of her.

Ali’s hand moves to the back of Ashlyn’s neck, pulling her into a hungry and impassioned kiss and hearing a little whimper of surprise. Tongues mingle and fingertips press into soft skin, leaving no room for anything but the growing inferno between them.

Ashlyn can’t breathe anymore, but she also can’t stop. Her lips pull away from Ali’s and drag down the brunette’s neck, sucking in gasps of air between open-mouthed kisses and soft nips. The air is thick and humid…she can feel herself sweating and tastes the saltiness on Ali’s skin too. “Take it
off.” She hears Ali’s husky voice near her ear as her hand starts running along the tie of the robe. She wastes no time complying, slipping off both their robes with ease and leaving them underneath their bodies in a crumple.

“Need you so bad.” Ali gasps as the officer’s chest presses against hers, skin hot and damp in the heavy air.

“There is absolutely nothing in this world more beautiful and stunning than you are, Alex.” Ashlyn slows the moment, running her fingertips across Ali’s cheek, down her neck and shoulder before dragging them lightly down her side and thigh, eyes following the path of her hand. “Nothing could ever compare.”

“It’s yours alone.” Ali’s voice quivers in anticipation. “Only you.” She takes Ashlyn’s hand and puts it on her breast, closing her eyes and moving her hand behind the officer’s neck again to take her lips in another intense kiss. “Please.” She mewls softly into Ashlyn mouth. Time stands still and speeds up simultaneously as the officer moves to lick and suck her nipples while hands wander every inch of skin within reach. Ashlyn’s mouth follows with wet reverent kisses that leave Ali’s body writhing and trembling against the chaise, trying desperately to hold on longer.

“Alex… baby…” Ashlyn moans as the brunette suddenly moves to hover over her a bit and works across her neck and collarbone possessively, leaving a couple little marks in her wake. Ali’s fingertips feel like they’re everywhere on her torso and her eyes practically roll back into her head when the brunette sucks her nipple into her mouth. Her body throbs and tingles all over, all of Ali’s fiery touches blending together on her skin until she distinctly feels the brunette’s tongue drag from her hipbone to her inner thigh. “I’m so close, baby.” She breathes out raggedly, the wave of pleasure inside starting to crest.

Ali climbs back up Ashlyn’s body and kisses her slow and deliberate before lying down to face her and pulling her in close. “With me, gorgeous… together.” She takes the officer’s hand and moves Ashlyn’s fingers over her clit. “Mmmm… together.” She repeats and moves Ashlyn’s hand lower, pushing the officer’s long digits inside her before moving her own fingers to the officer’s entrance and pressing them in slowly.

“Alex… I love you.” Ashlyn breathes out before her mouth is consumed by Ali’s and filled with moans.

Sweat mingles as their bodies move together, matching each other stroke for stroke, thrust for thrust, becoming one synchronized whole that has no beginning and no end. Neither of them notices when droplets of water splatter lightly over them until it’s a soaking rain plinking off their hot skin as they move deeply inside each other. There’s no flinching, no stopping as everything spins and comes undone…the distant flashes of lightening signaling the impending storm are no match for the one about to unleash inside them.

The taste of Ashlyn’s mouth mixes with the cool crisp water dripping down their lips and Ali’s body tightens in orgasm just as she feels the officer clench around her fingers and spasm against her. “Yes Ash…let go with me, baby. I love you. Yes…unnnh.” She lets out a wail as everything quakes, barely hearing Ashlyn’s loud grunting moan over the booming thunderclap that cuts through the air.

“Alex…Alex… you’re amazing…Alex…” Ashlyn repeats in a mantra through sucks of air, pressing her wet face against the brunette’s as water streaks down their cheeks.

“Don’t stop please… please, baby…keep going. Don’t stop, Ash.” Ali begs, her entire being lost in Ashlyn Harris and not nearly ready to emerge. Before she can even be sure her body can withstand another round, the officer is moving inside her again and she restarts her own ministrations.
This time it’s slow and sensual, fingers staying buried deep and pressing rhythmically against the hot silken walls that envelope them. It’s mere minutes before they’re tumbling over the edge together again to sharp intakes of breath between passionate kisses as water continues to stream down their skin in rivulets.

They hold each other tight as their chests heave from exertion until Ali finally finds the energy to flip herself on top of Ashlyn in the quest for the final piece she needs to quell her desire. She lowers her mouth to the officer’s folds and gently licks through them, feeling Ashlyn’s arms curl around her thighs before a warm tongue flicks lightly over her swollen clit and down around her entrance. “Feels so good.” She mumbles into the officer’s soaking core and feels a soft moan vibrate through her own center in return. They’re both too sensitive for anything more, but this isn’t about taking it further… it’s the blissful pleasure that comes with tasting the familiar sweetness of passion spilled for each other.

Tongues stroke lazily to clean each other up, growing slower every minute until Ali finally collapses down onto the officer in that very position, her head resting on Ashlyn’s thigh while her hand lightly strokes over the scars on the other. Ashlyn rests her head back in exhaustion, not daring to close her eyes and miss even a second of the beautiful intimate view in front of her.

The two women lay there for a few minutes spent and drenched in every way as rain continues to fall on them. Their bodies are shivering now with the cool water and drop in air temperature, the thunder and lightning alternating in shorter waves now as the storm gets closer and the wind picks up.

“Come on, love.” Ashlyn squeezes Ali’s thighs gently and helps her roll over onto the chaise. She scoops the brunette up into her arms and swiftly carries her into the house, gently placing her on the couch and wrapping her up in the thick blanket that was draped over the back. She hustles over to turn on the gas fireplace before laying back on the couch and pulling Ali against her.

Ali sighs contently adjusts the blanket so it covers both of them, laying half on top of Ashlyn and settling on her chest. She shuts her eyes and listens to the drumming heart beat against her ear, relishing in the feel of the muscular arms holding her close. The flutters deep in her belly start up again and she smiles against the officer’s skin. “That was by far the most erotic thing ever…wow.” She breaks the silence.

“You’re not kidding. That was… there aren’t words.” Ashlyn immediately gives up trying to describe it, knowing there’s no need. “So glad we saved sex in the rain for our wedding night.” She adds playfully.


“Totally.” Ashlyn jokes back before they fall into another comfortable silence.

Ali absentmindedly traces random patterns across Ashlyn’s skin with her fingers for a while until her eyes fall on the dog tags lying against the officer’s chest from where they are draped around her own neck. She picks her head up slightly to meet Ashlyn’s shining hazel eyes before letting her gaze fall back to the tags, knowing the officer’s eyes will follow hers. She brushes her fingertip across the “Harris” etched into the black metal.

“This is me now.” Ali whispers in peaceful awe.

Ashlyn smiles and cups Ali’s cheek with her hand, whispering “It has always been you, Al” before softly capturing the brunette lips.
Chapter End Notes

So, how was it? What you expected for an impromptu wedding?
Another long chapter for you... and only one more left! There's a lot packed into this one and it spans more time and jumps more than in other chapters, so you may want to pay a bit closer attention to the dates to follow along. Little bit of smut warning here too. I definitely want to hear how you're feeling as we come to the end... wouldn't want anyone to feel cheated out of something if I can help it. So, please leave a comment and let me know! Enjoy and thanks for reading :-)

****Again, please forgive any typos until I can take the time to clean-up anything I missed in the initial proofing.*****

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Wednesday, August 15th

“Hard at work?” Ali finds Ashlyn seated at the kitchen counter, putting her hands on the officer’s shoulders and kissing the top of her head.

“Yep, figured I’d get a jump on things so I wasn’t scrambling tomorrow night.” Ashlyn motions to her gun all laid out in pieces on a soft towel in front of her. “I want to get my weapons recert out of the way first thing on Friday…figured a good cleaning can’t hurt.”

“My superstar.” Ali says sweetly and massages her shoulders a little.

“Speaking of superstar…how was your call?” Ashlyn inquires and pulls Ali into her lap.

“Really great actually. This team really seems to fit with my vision of things. I think I’m going to go with them.” Ali says with a smile.

Even though Ali plans to take quite a long while away from her work with the twins on their way, she’s staying on top of the idea to turn her podcast into a web series. With her sponsors enthusiastically on-board, she’s been scouting out potential production companies that know more about this type media and the process. It’s going to easily take a year to set everything up enough to even get underway and she knows now is the perfect time to put in this kind of leg work so that when she is ready to return, it’ll be to actually start filming something.

“I’m so proud of you.” Ashlyn kisses her soundly. “I already know that it’s going to be amazing when you get it off the ground.”

“Thanks, baby.” Ali smiles at her wife’s keen ability to always be her biggest fan without even trying. “Can I help?” She points to the table.

“You want to help me clean my gun?” Ashlyn clarifies with an eyebrow quirked in disbelief.

“Yeah…I mean, if it’s not something that’ll end up causing you more work for me to help. You mentioned before about me learning how to handle your gun. Now is as good a time as any, right?” Ali shrugs.
It’s only just past noon, but it has already been a long and big day for both of them. Ashlyn had her last visit with the surgeon this morning and was officially cleared to go back to work in two days as expected. And then Ali got on the phone with the most promising production company thus far as soon as they got home. All of it has the brunette’s head spinning a bit, but her stomach is mostly in knots over Ashlyn going back to work on Friday. Getting herself involved in the preparation of it, particularly in the care of the weapon that protects her wife, seems like a good start to getting back some of the calm that has eluded her since they got back from their Big Sur wedding/honeymoon trip on Sunday.

“Now is a perfect time.” Ashlyn tilts her head up and pecks Ali’s lips, still not sure where all of this is coming from, but knowing enough not to question it. “So, I already got through cleaning it, but it still needs to be lubricated with a little oil. We can start with the barrel.”

“Ok, what do I do?” Ali asks as Ashlyn hands her a piece that looks like a small metal tube.

“There’s a little oil on this tiny cloth and we’ll use this tool to help work it inside the barrel.” Ashlyn explains and hands Ali a tool that looks almost like a crochet needle with a cloth threaded through the end. She holds her hand over the brunette’s and helps guide her.

Ali can help but smile at the officer’s warm hand on hers, directing their movement together, and she feels tingly inside at the intimacy of it. “Is it weird that this is kinda turning me on?”

“Little bit… and also not at all.” Ashlyn smirks. She helps Ali lubricate and polish the rest of the pieces, making sure her touches linger. “Nicely done, you’re a natural.” She praises the brunette. “Now we put it back together. So, put the barrel in the top slide like this.” She continues to direct.

“This is actually kind of fun. This part reminds me of snapping together legos or something.” Ali remarks as she pops the barrel into place followed by the recoil spring like Ashlyn instructed her.

“Next time I’ll time you.” Ashlyn nudges her playfully on the arm with her forehead. “So, we just have to slip the top slide back on….yep, like that. Now pull it back until it clicks and let it come forward into place. Good. So, now the trigger is reset and we need to test it. Here’s where you learn to handle this thing. Let’s stand up.”

“Oh uh, ok.” Ali says a little nervously.

“Just hold it naturally in your right hand, index finger goes by the trigger but not on it yet. Now wrap your left hand around it too for support and point it away from us. I know that it’s completely empty and no bullet magazine is in there… but, you always keep it safe no matter what. So, I suggest pointing it at something in the kitchen that you’re not attached to.” Ashlyn jokes a bit.

“It’s heavier than I expected.” Ali comments, noting that it actually takes a little effort to hold it up. She feels Ashlyn’s arms wrap around her and help her hold it.

“Alright, so you would aim it and hold it like this. You want to brace your arms nice and strong to prepare for the kick-back. It won’t kick-back at all with no bullet in there, so don’t worry… I’m just walking you through it for instructional purpose.” She drags her hands down Ali’s forearms slowly and puts her hands over the brunette’s. “Ok, finger on the trigger now.”

“You sure this thing isn’t loaded?” Ali feels silly asking, but even knowing it’s empty she’s still a little nervous.

“I promise you, sweetheart.” Ashlyn assures her. “Now, when you’re ready… pull the trigger smoothly.”
Ali lets out a deep breath and readies herself before finally pulling the trigger and hearing a hollow click, her body instantly relaxing. “I did it!” She says with a sense of accomplishment.

“You sure did, baby. And now I’m the one who is turned on.” Ashlyn kisses the back of her neck and feels Ali’s arms drop a bit. “See… now you know why you shouldn’t maul me with kisses when I get home before I put my gun away.” She teases, helping Ali lower the gun and laying it back down on the counter.

“Speaking of… we about done here?” Ali bites her lip, her eyes darkening.

“Easy, tiger. I have to get this stuff back into my patrol belt and locked up.” Ashlyn snickers and grabs the belt, taking the pepper spray and extra bullet clip from the counter and putting them away in the proper little holders. “I’ll just be a couple more minutes.” She tells the brunette as she tosses the dirty polishing cloths into a bag. When she gets no response, she looks up to find Ali looking down at the counter, her face contorted into a deep frown.

“Alex, what’s wrong?” She asks in concern, following Ali’s eyes and seeing her pocket knife that had been sitting under the polishing cloths.

“I’ll… I have enough of that deck wood left…for a new one. I’ll get you a new one made…you can use your older one for now.” Ali stutters, her eyes never leaving the knife whose wood handle now has dark brown splotches stained into it… Ashlyn’s blood.

“Come here. Look at me.” Ashlyn gently takes Ali’s face in her hands to get her attention. “It’s ok, honey. That knife is perfectly great as is. You gave that to me…I’m keeping it. You ok?”

“I… Ash, that thing almost killed you.” She lets out a shaky breath. “Your blood is… why would you want to keep that?” She asks a bit exasperated.

“Sweetheart, I know you look at that knife and see my busted stomach.” She looks deep into Ali’s eyes. “But I look at it and see nothing but good luck. Yes it ended up lodged in my gut, but before that… it saved my life. If it wasn’t for that knife, I would’ve been shot in the head execution-style and probably right in front of you. Because of that knife and because of you, I survived. There is no way in hell I am not keeping it on me at all times.” It’s a blunt statement and they haven’t talked about details like this, but it was bound to come out at some point.

“Oh god…” Ali’s legs feel weak and she feels Ashlyn support her. “Is that what they were going to…” She utters before she can chicken out, but she can’t finish the question.

“Yeah, that was the sick plan.” Ashlyn openly admits. “But, I’m right here, baby. Because of you and because of that knife, I’m right here.”

She’s right. Ashlyn is right here and nothing else really matters now. Ali nods and settles a bit. “And you… you’re here because of you too. You’re incredible. So brave… and strong… and…mine.” She kisses Ashlyn hard, making the officer stumble back a bit into the counter. She needs to feel her, get lost in her, let Ashlyn consume her and make it all okay. “Take me upstairs. Just take me.” She mutters into the officer’s mouth and immediately feels sturdy arms lift her off the ground effortlessly.

An hour later, they’re in a winded sweaty tangle of limbs, sheets strewn all over the bed after some pretty intense love making.

“Talk to me about Friday.” Ashlyn whispers now that Ali has spent the last ten minutes absentmindedly tracing along the still reddish incision scar on her torso.
“Sorry, I know I freaked a bit back in the kitchen… but I promise there isn’t much to talk about. Am I a little nervous and anxious about you going back to work? Yes.” Ali answers honestly. “I’ve talked to Margie about it a lot in our therapy sessions and she made me realize that it’s nothing outside of how I normally feel when you go off to work. It’s just amplified because of what happened and having gotten used to you being at home and taking care of you. Plus it’s paired with all these extra pregnancy fueled emotions right now. It’ll be okay once I get back into the routine of it. I know it will. Plus… you’re so good at what you do, Ash. I trust in that completely. I trust and believe in you. I’m honestly okay.”

“Okay. But it’s okay if you’re not feeling good about it. You can tell me and talk to me and ask me things. We’ll work through it together. You’re not going to upset me by talking about it.” Ashlyn reminds her.

“I promise I’ll always tell you and talk to you about it. How are you feeling about going back?” Ali asks, wanting Ashlyn to get out her emotions about it too.

“Actually, I feel fine. I’m not nervous or worried. I feel really good about going back. For me, going back is the final piece of recovery…it always has been. It’s the part that reminds me that I made it through to fight another day, the way I close the door on the demon so to speak. It kind of takes away the power of what happened. Does that make sense?” Ashlyn divulges.

“It makes a lot of sense. I never thought about it that way.” Ali considers, the officer’s resolve making her feel more at peace with it too. “Is that why it was so hard when you got discharged from the Army?” She probes a bit as she’s thinking on it.

“Yeah. Not being able to get back…took a long time to find a new routine and figure out how to close that door.” Ashlyn replies.

“I understand a lot better now. Thank you.” Ali runs her hand through Ashlyn’s hair sweetly, completely in awe of her resilience.

“I also just want you to remember two things. First, we live in an extremely low crime town. This is the first time anything like this ever happened here and usually the worst I deal with are belligerent drunks and trespassers. I’m not saying dangerous things don’t happen, but I think we both have to remember that this was statistically like a lightning strike and the odds of it ever happening again are almost non-existent. And second, I won’t be on another patrol for at least a couple months…there’s a lot of time to ease back in.” Ashlyn lets the facts bring a bit more reassurance.

“I know and I feel better… truly.” Ali scoots up from her spot on Ashlyn’s chest and kisses her softly. “I love you, Ash. You really are an amazing human being, you know that?”

“So are you… and beautiful too.” Ashlyn holds Ali’s face in her hands and pulls her in for another kiss. “And completely wiped out. I can tell you’re exhausted. Nap?”

“You couldn’t make me move if you tried.” Ali smiles and pecks the officer’s lips again before settling back on her chest.

“Challenge not accepted. Nap it is.” Ashlyn chuckles and holds her close. “I love you so fierce, Alex. Sweet dreams.”

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Tuesday, August 21st

“Knock, knock little warriors. I hope you’re in there getting all spiffy for another big appearance. No
pressure, but feel free to throw in some toe wiggles, maybe a hand wave, or hey, throw me up a peace sign if you’re feeling fancy.” Ashlyn kisses Ali’s belly as the brunette dries herself off from the shower. “And if you’re getting frustrated with all that prodding, a good ol’ middle finger is a perfectly acceptable response. Mama can’t wait to see you.”

Ali lets out a loud laugh and runs her hands through Ashlyn’s short damp hair as the officer stays crouched down by her belly another few seconds. Ever since she told Ashlyn that the babies could hear, the officer talks to them constantly. She should be getting used to it by now, but it’s the most adorable thing ever and she feels more in love with her wife every time. “Did you really just tell them to flip us off?” Ali raises her eyebrows.

“Just making sure they know they can be honest and keep it real with us.” Ashlyn shrugs with a smile and stands up.

“You really are going to be the best parent ever.” Ali lightly kisses her lips. “I’m just going to throw my hair into a bun and do my makeup, so that leaves you about thirty minutes to get your hair wave perfect, get all sexy in your uniform, and make us breakfast so we can get out of here.”

“I only need like fifteen minutes for all of that, baby.” Ashlyn says cockily.

“Show off.” Ali lightly taps the officer’s bicep. “If you make it breakfast to-go, we might have time to makeout before the appointment.” She winks.

“Now you’re talking! Breakfast sandwiches in the car it is, we’re out in 20 minutes!” Ashlyn races out of the bathroom.

“Your Mama is ridiculous…but I hope you two are exactly like her.” Ali gives her belly a little rub before rushing through her morning routine.

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“Good morning, ladies. How are we doing?” Dr. Baylor comes in shortly after the ultrasound technician finishes up and starts looking over the ultrasound images and report on the computer.

“We’re doing great.” Ali replies as she gets off the exam table and goes to sit in the chair next to Ashlyn.

“Excellent. The technician said everything looks perfect and completely normal for the 20 week mark. I agree with that from what I am seeing here. We still have good placental growth in the direction away from the cervix. I’m pretty comfortable now that we won’t see any placenta related problems. Wow, we certainly have some movement going on now…I can see that even from the positioning shifts on these films. Are you feeling them yet?” Dr. Baylor inquires.

“Oh yeah, I feel them a ton. Just like you said, lots of weird flutters.” Ali replies with a smile.

“Now if we could just get them to kick a little harder.” Ashlyn pipes up.

“Soon enough, Ashlyn. Usually they start to be felt externally around the 24 to 30 week mark.” Dr. Baylor tells her.

“Then I’m betting 23 weeks for these little mighty warriors.” Ashlyn says playfully.

“Seeing as how they’re your super babies…I’d bet that too.” Ali laughs.

“Probably!” Dr. Baylor plays back before getting down to business. “These two little ones are
looking very healthy at 20 weeks, so this is where we really start to talk about some important future things. Probably the most important thing that I want you to be aware of are some of the upcoming developmental milestones. The next really big one is at 24 weeks when we consider the babies viable.”


“Different kind of viable. Yes, they are viable now in terms of being in the womb. But at 24 weeks we consider them viable for survival if they are delivered early. Now… survival is very difficult at that stage, but it’s possible. So, the 24 week mark is an important one. However, ideally we want these little ones to get to full term. Full term is considered 38 to 40 weeks.” Dr. Baylor explains.

“Got it.” Ali says and Ashlyn nods to signal that they’re following along.

“However, twins are often a special circumstance since there is less space for growth in the womb with two babies. While most first pregnancies with single babies are late and close to 40 or 41 weeks, most twins are born a little early around 36 to 38 weeks. That’s not always the case, but you should prepare for that. Our aim is really to get to 34 weeks with twins and any further we get beyond that is a bonus.” Dr. Baylor elaborates further.

“Okay, so 24 weeks and 34 weeks are big development steps.” Ashlyn repeats to make sure they have it down.

“Exactly.” Dr. Baylor replies with a nod before moving on. “Now Ali, I know you’re hoping for a vaginal delivery and there is nothing right now that makes me think it isn’t possible, so we’re going to go forward with that scenario unless I see something to the contrary. Is that still the case?”

“Yep, still my goal.” Ali says confidently.

“Great. I think the first thing you should know is that it’s very likely that you’ll be pressed to have an epidural unless you are vehemently opposed. The reason for that is because twins can be complicated and emergencies can arise fast and unexpectedly. We want to have the ability to move you to a c-section immediately if need be. Having the epidural line already in place is a huge safeguard for that reason. What are your thoughts on that?” Dr. Baylor inquires.

“Well as much as the grand vision of a completely natural birth is a nice thought…honestly, I’m not so opposed to an epidural that I would risk the babies in any way. We go the safe route.” Ali replies and feels Ashlyn hold her hand reassuringly.

“That’s good… a healthy way to approach things and we can get into more details about it as you get further along.” Dr. Baylor smiles. “One of the things that can really help a vaginal delivery go smoothly is some preparation. The first thing I recommend to all of my patients is to do Kegel exercises early and often. Do you know what that is?”

“I do...it’s essentially just contracting the muscles of the pelvic floor, right?” Ali replies.

“Right, that’s pretty much it. Having control of those pelvic floor muscles helps you have better control and makes for more productive pushing. It also helps the muscles in that area relax in a way that allows the vaginal wall some more give when it gets stretched.” Dr. Baylor says. “Which brings me to the very important perineum. Do you know what that is?”

“The skin between your vaginal and anal entrances.” Ashlyn says matter-of-factly when Ali looks a bit puzzled.

“Winner!” Dr. Baylor points at Ashlyn with a smile. “Yes, it’s that thick area of skin. And it’s also
the most likely area to tear during vaginal delivery.”

Ali cringes and feels Ashlyn squeeze her hand tighter.

“I know, terrible visual.” Dr. Baylor commiserates. “But, two important things to note here. One, twins tend to be smaller in size, so that helps avoid tearing. And two, you can do yourself a world of good to prevent tearing with daily massage. I’ll say it a million times if I have to… get up close and personal with your perineum and massage, massage, massage. Take five minutes or so every day and massage that area. Seems simple, but I assure you it can be really helpful in preventing tearing and lessening pain during delivery. It brings blood flow to the area and gives it nice elasticity. Do whatever you can to work Kegels and perineum massage into your day. And I’ll add that many couples find ways to work it on together and even build it into sexual intercourse. There are lots of resources online, but if you have trouble finding them, I can help point you in a good direction. Questions? Concerns?”

“Nope, I’d say ‘give your vagina a boot camp workout’ is pretty straight-forward.” Ali giggles and hears Ashlyn let out a belly laugh.

“Lovely, honey.” Ashlyn shakes her head.

“Thought you might appreciate that one, Captain.” Ali winks.

“Well in that case, I’m tasking you with making sure she gets through boot camp.” Dr. Baylor points at Ashlyn with a laugh.

“I’m all over it!” Ashlyn salutes with a smirk and gets a light elbow from Ali.

“Alright, so next visit is not an ultrasound. You’ll just come in at 24 weeks to do the test for gestational diabetes. Pretty much just involves you drinking this sugary drink and then taking a blood test an hour later. If we see any signs of diabetic issues, we’ll do a more comprehensive test and then treat your blood sugar from there if necessary. Nothing to worry about right now though. I’ll have the nurse give you the information packet about it before you go.” Dr. Baylor informs them.

“Ok thanks, I already read a bit about it.” Ali replies.

“Good. It’s pretty simple, nothing to really prepare for.” Dr. Baylor assures her. “And, last thing… how are you doing, Ashlyn?”

“Oh, I’m good. Just went back to work this past week and getting back into my routine. I’m feeling pretty much back to normal. My mood is a million times better and the estrogen patches are easy… thank you so much for that.” Ashlyn says gratefully, the hormone patches having done wonders after only a couple weeks.

“You bet. I’m really glad you’re doing well and things are falling back into place.” Dr. Baylor smiles. “Which reminds me… I see that congratulations are in order! I’m very happy for you both. Weren’t you getting married in September or am I confused?”

“Nope, you have it right. This one just couldn’t wait to take me off the market and surprised me with a very romantic destination wedding in Big Sur.” Ashlyn beams.

“Yep, had to lock her down in style ASAP.” Ali laughs. “But how did you know that?” She asks quizzically.

“I noticed the status change on your medical chart this morning.” Dr. Baylor replies simply. “Really, congratulations… that’s wonderful!”
“I appreciate that you don’t miss a thing, Doc.” Ashlyn smiles approvingly. “And thank you, we’re still pretty excited about it too.”

“Well, I appreciate that you appreciate it.” Dr. Baylor replies kindly. “We observant folks have to stick together.” She adds with a smile as she logs out of the computer in the room. “So, I guess that’s it for now. I’ll see you in 4 weeks for that diabetes test and a quick check on the heartbeats.”

“I’ll be there.” Ali smiles.

“Take care of yourself and massage, massage, massage!” Dr. Baylor reminds them as she walks out the door.

Thursday, August 23rd

“Harris!” Ashlyn hears her name called as she walks through the hallway and turns back to pop her head into the door it came from.

“Chief, I thought you didn’t get back from vacation until tomorrow. Figured I’d have one more day before you reamed me out for recerting on my first day back. Guess not.” Ashlyn gives him a quick salute.

“Welcome back, Captain. Really great to see you back…you look good. And I would never ream out an officer for getting back into patrol-ready form. Even if said officer is more aggressive in her approach than a piranha in a feeding frenzy, but hey, as long as you’re on my side.” Chief Fulton raises his eyebrows with a smile.

“Just hear me out.” Chief Fulton starts and gets a nod from the officer. “What you did in that bank, Captain… that was above and beyond. To call it heroic would actually cheapen the true selflessness of your actions. I have never been prouder and more in awe of an officer under my command. You are an incredible asset to this department, our community and our state. And it’s no surprise that I am not alone in those thoughts. The state has awarded you the top Medal of Honor and you are expected to attend the George L. Hanna Awards for Bravery ceremony at the statehouse in early October. I don’t think I need to tell you how rare and exceptional it is to receive this decoration, let alone still be alive to accept it.” He doesn’t mince words.

“Chief, I…” Ashlyn groans a bit. “I’m honored, I really am. But you know me… I was just doing my job. I did what I was trained to do and I don’t love the idea of getting a prize for that. I know I don’t have much say in the honor itself, but can’t I just accept it on a more low-key basis rather than at the ceremony?”

“I understand where you are coming from, Harris. I really do. But please believe me when I say that this is by far the most deserved awarding of this decoration that I have ever seen. You truly deserve
the honor, Captain. And you know I’m not one for pomp and circumstance. The governor and mayor are in complete agreement with that sentiment. The recognition of your actions that day is warranted.” Chief Fulton impresses upon her.

“Ok, Chief. I appreciate you saying that and I can appreciate that I’m getting this award and let myself be proud of the accomplishment. But… do I really have to do it at that massive ceremony?” Ashlyn implores him.

“Ordinarily, I would say that you didn’t have to go… but, there’s more going on than an award ceremony that requires your attendance.” Chief Fulton says a bit mysteriously.

“Like what?” Ashlyn asks a bit befuddled by his odd demeanor.

“Like an installation.” Chief Fulton smiles knowingly.

“An installation? Oh my god, Chief are you going statey on us?!?” Ashlyn asks excitedly, surprised he hasn’t mentioned making a move to the state police level but knowing he is one of the most qualified police chiefs in the state to do it given his years of experience.

“No, no!” Chief Fulton waves his hands. “I fully plan to retire in Ipswich. Not my installation.”

“Then…” Ashlyn questions even more confused than before.

“Yours, Captain.” Chief Fulton smiled again.

“Mine?” She isn’t sure she heard right.

“Yours.” Chief Fulton confirms.

What follows next leaves Ashlyn’s mind spinning, barely able to focus on the paperwork pile on her desk that she’s been diligently trying to burn through this first week back.

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“Geez baby, really right now? After you learned about handling my gun?” Ashlyn mumbles into Ali’s hair as the brunette sucks on her neck, using her hand to hold Ali’s thigh from sliding up into the holster as her wife practically grinds on her.

“The uniform does things to me, Harris. You know that.” Ali leaves a few more open mouthed kisses on Ashlyn’s neck before finally realizing she needs to get herself under control so dinner doesn’t go to waste.

“Apparently.” Ashlyn chuckles and pecks Ali’s lips, making her way to the gun safe. She just walked in the door from work and had barely gotten out “something smells amazing” before Ali had her pinned against the kitchen wall. “But I don’t get quite this level of enthusiastic greeting all the time, soooo… wanna fill me in?” Ashlyn inquires playfully.

“I got dinner prepped early and just had to put it in the oven, so I figured I’d do a little research on different web series by scoping out a few random ones. I ended up finding this sexy Brazilian lesbian drama called RED… yeah… got a little worked up.” Ali admits with a blush.

“Now that I can believe.” Ashlyn laughs and leans close to the brunette’s belly. “Go easy on Mommy’s hormones little warriors, cause Mama is gonna need some fuel first.” She teases.

“Cute, Harris. Now go get out of that uniform before I rip it off with my teeth. Dinner in 5.” Ali
gives her a sultry look.

“Dear lord.” Ashlyn’s mouth goes a little dry at the way Ali is looking at her. “Hope you made
eough carbs so I can keep up.” She clears her throat.

“I got you covered for the whole night, Hero.” Ali jokes over her shoulder as she heads to go plate
dinner.

“Damn, baby…” Ashlyn whispers at watching the brunette’s ass sway slightly as she makes her way
back into the kitchen. She shakes her head, realizing that the celebration of her news is clearly going
to come before the actual announcement tonight.

“Jesus fuck… fuck… Ash… oh my god….yeeesss….unnnhh… fuck yes…baby!” Ali is raggedly
screaming, her head thrown back into the pillows, eyes shut, toes curled, and legs as wide open as
they will go. Fingers are deep inside her, creating an amazing pressure she hasn’t quite felt before
while a soft tongue licks patterns on her clit. “Holy shit, baby…fuck Ash, don’t stop… don’t ever
fucking stop, oh my god…”

“You taste so damn good, Alex…” She moans into soaking folds with a smirk as she continues to lap at Ali’s swollen clit,
both of her thumbs buried inside the brunette and thrusting slowly inward while simultaneously
moving in an outward circular motion against her walls. One of Ali’s hands is tightly fisted in her
hair while the other grips the sheets so hard her knuckles are white. The brunette’s body is writhing
against the bed, her mouth parted as she screams out the officer’s name between gasping breaths. Ashlyn’s eyes take it all in from where she is feasting between strong thighs, so close to coming
herself just from the sight alone.

“So fucking good… ahhhh… shit… uuuunnnh…ohhhh, Ashlyn! Ash…Ash…baby, ohhhh…” Ali’s
back arches off the bed as her vision goes black for a few seconds, everything shaking and clenching
simultaneously in euphoric release. “Unnnh … oh wow… Ash…mmmm.” Her voice drops down
into a husky whisper as her chest heaves, her body tingling all over as the officer’s warm tongue
continues to gently stroke her. “Wow…” She repeats again, starting to tug Ashlyn up.

Ashlyn spends another minute cleaning Ali up despite the tugging on her hair, thoroughly enjoying
that the brunette literally just gushed wetness all over with that orgasm. “You taste so damn good,
Alex…” She moans and hears Ali whimper above her, reluctantly pulling her mouth away before the
brunette can get too sensitive and trailing little kisses up her wife’s sweaty body. “You’re beautiful.”
She drags her hand over Ali’s swollen belly and kisses her deeply.

“Baby…what…on earth… was… that?” Ali asks still trying to catch her breath as she hugs Ashlyn
tightly against her.

“Good?” Ashlyn picks her head up from where Ali has it pressed into her neck.

“Incredible. Unbelievable. Fantastic. Think I’m still orgasming a little… amazing.” Ali presses their
lips together again. “Goddamn, honey. Talk about bringing it.”

“Glad to be of service.” Ashlyn laughs lightly.

“Unnh, baby… that felt so good. What were you doing?” Ali asks again.

“Oh… well, um… massage, massage, massage.” Ashlyn laughs a little and gives the brunette a
pointed look.
“Huh?” Ali doesn’t have a clue what Ashlyn is talking about until the officer gives her another look with eyebrows raised. Only then does she remember Dr. Baylor’s words. “Oh my god, really? That’s what you were doing?”

“Uh yeah… sorry, I didn’t mean to take you by surprise with it. I know you said it felt good, but I hope that was ok.” Ashlyn says hesitantly.

“Ok? That was way more than ok. Fuck, surprise me all the time!” Ali still feels her core twitching. Ashlyn laughs before elaborating. “I read up a little after our appointment and found a few strategies for couples. I know neither of us is big on masturbation, so I knew you’d probably read about it too and then not love the idea of doing it yourself. And I guess knowing how you’ve been feeling about your body as things change… I figured it would be a while before you even considered approaching me about it and that you’d feel weird about it when you did. So, I had initially planned to bring it up myself…but then you were already so worked up tonight and I thought maybe it might be best to just go for it.”

“Highly accurate…I read about it, tried it on myself and couldn’t even reach properly with my belly in the way. It was nothing short of uncomfortable and awkward. I absolutely love how well you know me.” Ali practically purrs and pulls the officer down for another kiss, holding her tight again. “So, really what you’re saying is that I can have that mind blowing touch of yours every night and make my delivery easier too?”

“If you want.” Ashlyn smiles into Ali’s shoulder.

“Oh I want. You are a golden goose, Hero.” Ali rakes her hands down the officer’s back. “Give me like 10 minutes to feel my legs again and I am so going to reward the hell out of you for that.”

“Good, I probably need about ten minutes myself… can I talk to you about something?” Ashlyn props herself up on her elbow. Naked in the afterglow of Ali’s orgasm isn’t quite what she pictured for delivering the news, but knowing what is coming next tonight, she’d rather get into it now before the brunette scrambles her brain and exhausts her body in pleasure.

“Everything ok?” Ali tries to read the look on Ashlyn’s face.

“Yeah…well, I think so anyway.” Ashlyn replies, pretty sure she’s figured out how she feels but knowing a lot will depend on Ali’s reaction too. “So, Chief called me into his office today and told me I need to be at the Hanna award ceremony at the statehouse this year to receive the Medal of Honor for what happened at the bank.” She just throws it out there unceremoniously.

“Ashlyn, oh my god!” Ali pops up excitedly. “Baby, that’s incredible!” She takes Ashlyn’s face in her hands and kisses her soundly. “I’m so so proud of you.” She pulls back to see the officer looking a bit indifferent, knowing that look all too well. “Hey, this is a big deal and you earned it…you earned it with blood, sweat, tears… with your body…” She runs her fingertips along the still fresh scar, “and almost with your life. You deserve to be honored.”

Ashlyn nods, having Ali say it makes her believe it slightly more.

“You know, I actually attended that ceremony a few years ago.” Ali’s mind goes right back to a single moment that night that didn’t really mean anything to her back then, but means a lot more right now.

“You did?” Ashlyn inquires.

“Yeah, the cop who heard me out and went in and saved Thomas Hamilton from the guy who
kidnapped him… he got a Medal of Valor that night and took me with him because he refused to accept it without me.” Ali recounts.

“Smart guy. You should’ve been the one rewarded.” Ashlyn says genuinely.

“Well, I’m not a cop… Besides, I was rewarded the second that kid went home to his parents.” Ali shrugs it off. “Anyway, I was standing next to former Mayor Tom Menino when they presented a Medal of Honor to a Worcester police officer who saved a little girl from a kidnapping when he noticed something was off during a traffic stop. He ended up getting shot six times by the kidnapper, but he got the little girl to safety.”

“I remember that story.” Ashlyn remarks.

“You know what Menino said to me as that cop went up to receive that medal?” Ali says quietly.

“What?” Ashlyn asks.

“He said ‘I can’t recall the last time I saw someone other than next of kin accept that award, tough as nails that guy.’” Ali traces Ashlyn’s face with her thumb. “I’m not even going to let myself think on that any further, but I’m just going to say that this is a big deal. You’re amazing and we are going to celebrate the hell out of you and what you stand for, Ashlyn Harris. We’re going to that ceremony... got it?”

“Got it. Thank you for always being my greatest supporter, honey.” Ashlyn leans in for a kiss. “But… I should tell you that I am just about resigned to the fact that I pretty much have to be there anyway. Believe it or not, the medal is not my big news tonight.”

“It’s not?” Ali is confused now. “What on earth is bigger than that?”

“Well, it turns out that the ceremony would double as an installation for me.” Ashlyn answers.

“I have no idea what that means.” Ali looks at her expectantly.

“An installation is pretty much an official appointment for high ranking police officer positions.” Ashlyn clarifies.

“Ash, are you getting promoted?!” Ali sits up even more.

“That’s what it boils down to, yes.” The officer replies, the excitement in her voice obvious now. “After everything that happened, apparently the governor sat down with the Ipswich mayor and Chief Fulton and went over some possibilities. They settled on creating the position of Deputy Chief for me. Usually only much larger police departments have that position, and it would be the first time ever in Ipswich. And the purpose of it is two-fold. First, it changes my role in the department a bit and would lock me in as Chief Fulton’s replacement when he retires. And two… the real reason for the change would be so that I could be appointed to head a defense and preparedness committee under the MA State Police Division of Homeland Security. The ceremony in October would serve as my installation to Deputy Chief and appointment to that committee on top of the medal, if I accept.”

‘Ash!’ Ali hugs the officer so tight in her arms. “I don’t even know what to say! I am just so happy and proud… I’m so damn excited for you, love. Congratulations! Baby… I…” Ali pulls back to look at her smiling and slightly blushing wife, trying hard to find words to convey how ecstatic she is. “Can’t believe I get to be married to you… fucking legend.” She kisses Ashlyn hard.

“Thanks, Alex… it was a big day.” Ashlyn says humbly once Ali pulls away from the kiss.
“Wait… did you say ‘if’ you accept? IF?” Ali says incredulously, the words finally catching up to her. “Why if?”

“Well it means a lot of good changes. Better pay and benefits for one. And while it pretty much takes me away from patrolling, which isn’t a bad thing now that we’ll have kids, it also brings things to a level where it’s not just me using my training to perform my job anymore. It means using what I know to show others how to do it too. It’s taking everything I’ve trained to do my whole life and finding ways to pass that forward… to strategize, anticipate, and make sure our local and state police departments are literally prepared for anything. Kind of a dream really.” Ashlyn explains.

“You don’t even know how happy you look saying that.” Ali can’t help but beam at the childlike exhilaration on Ashlyn’s face. “So what’s the hesitation?”

“I guess it also means more pressure and stress sometimes. And I would be handling a lot of the more political things Chief Fulton does, which puts me, and by default you, in the spotlight and under scrutiny more.” Ashlyn reveals the reality of it.

“It’s nothing we haven’t handled before and can’t easily handle in the future. Is that really holding you back?” Ali questions.

“Well, no. I’m excited about it and honestly couldn’t think of a better way to shift my career going forward. But, I’m also perfectly happy with what I do now if nothing was to change. And, no matter how excited I am… I would never accept or consider something like this without talking to you and knowing you’re onboard with me. Honestly, Alex, you’re what matters and I go with what you and I decide together. Doesn’t matter what choice it is, I’ll be happy with it.” Ashlyn lays it out.

“Oh, right.” Ali replies to the matter-of-fact statement, knowing she would do the exact same thing if she was in Ashlyn’s shoes. They do everything together, the thought of that alone is incredibly freeing despite the reality of it technically binding them.

“So, now that you know the news and what my feelings on it are. What do you think?” Ashlyn asks point blank.

“I think…” Ali starts before suddenly flipping Ashlyn onto her back and pinning her arms down by her head as she straddles her. She stares deep into green hazel eyes and smirks devilishly “…that it’s my turn, Chief Harris.” She crashes their lips together in a hungry and dominant kiss that leaves absolutely no room for interpretation.

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Wednesday, September 29th

“Uggghhh, oh god.” Ali dry heaves for the second time in the last minute as Ashlyn lightly rubs her back from the chair next to her.

“That bad?” Ashlyn asks sympathetically.

“It tastes like syrupy Sunny D with like 20 packets of sugar added to it.” Ali cringes. She has a bigger sweet tooth than most people, but it certainly isn’t helping her right now as she desperately tries to guzzle down this bottle of orange Glucola within the 10 minute required timeframe for the gestational diabetes test. Not much has made her feel nauseated throughout the pregnancy and she hasn’t felt that way at all since the first trimester, but for some reason this overly sweet liquid has her gagging all over the place.
“I’m sorry, honey. What can I do to help?” Ashlyn asks a bit desperately.

“Outside of drinking it for me, not much…but I appreciate you trying.” Ali leans her head into Ashlyn’s shoulder for a few seconds, cringing again when she sees that she’s only managed to drain a quarter of the bottle and 4 of the allotted 10 minutes are already gone. “Just have to suck it up.” She tries to pull it together.

“Be right back, baby. Sit tight.” A light bulb goes off in Ashlyn’s head at the brunette’s words and she races out of the room and over to the nurses desk.

“Everything okay, Ashlyn?” Ginger the nurse asks when the officer suddenly appears at her desk.

“Depends… what exactly would happen if I drank one of those gluco orange things?” Ashlyn asks cryptically.

“Not much if you’re not a diabetic. Just a little sugar rush… about the equivalent of downing a couple sodas and maybe a donut. Why?” Ginger replies.

“Think you can hook me up with one?” Ashlyn inquires hopefully.

“Um, well that would be against policy. But why on earth would you want to drink that?” Ginger eyes the officer curiously.

“Cause my poor wife is about to barf that crap all over the floor in there… which means a failed diabetes test, a really cranky pregnant woman, and a whole lot of mopping up for you to do. Come on, you gotta hook me up.” Ashlyn pleads.

“Oh geez, I should go check on her.” Ginger starts to get up. “And how on earth is you drinking it going to help? You can’t take the test for her.”

“I know that. Just… you’re going to have to trust me on this one. I know my wife.” Ashlyn gives her the best puppy eyes she can. “Please.”

Ginger sighs before looking around to make sure no one else is around before going over to the fridge and grabbing another bottle. “Can’t believe I’m doing this. Here…I’ll say I dropped one on the floor and the bottle cracked.”

“That’s exactly what I saw. I’ll back you up.” Ashlyn assures her. “You’re the best Ginger, thanks! Be right back with two empty bottles.” She winks and rushes back to Ali.

“Oh god, I have to drink another one?! I can’t!” Ali exclaims loudly when Ashlyn sits down across from her and puts another full bottle on the table.

“Relax, baby… that one is for me.” Ashlyn says calmly.

“You? I’m so lost.” Ali looks miserable, barely any more of her drink gone with only 4 minutes left to go now.

“Alright, beautiful… it’s you and me. First one to drain their bottle gets to pick whatever they want to do for the hour we have to wait to come back for the blood test.” Ashlyn raises her eyebrows suggestively. “Winner picks anything they want… and I mean anything.” She reaches under the table and runs her hand up Ali’s thigh, knowing she can count on two things: Ali’s ravenous hormone-fueled sex drive and her highly competitive nature.

“You’re serious?” Ali asks with intrigue.
“So serious. You got this, baby. Clock is ticking.” Ashlyn holds up her bottle and opens it. “Cheers!”

It’s extremely saccharine and pretty nasty, but the officer manages to gulp down two thirds of it before she hears a thud on table and looks up to see Ali smiling smugly with an empty bottle in front of her.

“You’re all mine, Harris.” Ali winks and blows the officer a kiss, feeling triumphant with her stomach starting to settle already.

“I was counting on it, gorgeous.” Ashlyn winks back before pouring the rest of her drink down the sink nearby and hitting the plastic bottle on the edge of the counter hard enough to put a crack in it.

“What are you doing?” Ali looks at her curiously.

“Making sure Ginger doesn’t get it trouble for handing me an assist.” Ashlyn shrugs.

“I don’t even want to know.” Ali shakes her head as they walk over to check in with Ginger and then head out to kill time before coming back for the follow-up blood test.

“Baby…” Ali stops walking as they reach the parking lot and gets close to the officer. “Don’t know what I’d do without you. Thank you. You’re absolutely the sweetest. Even sweeter than that damn drink and that’s saying something. I love you so much.” She kisses Ashlyn softly.

“I love you too, my queen. I always got you.” Ashlyn smiles at her and steals another kiss. “Sooo, where to my victorious beauty?”

“Over to the Liberty Hotel across the street to be totally sketchy and get a room for an hour.” Ali waggles her eyebrows.

“Oh yeah?” Ashlyn smirks.

“Yes. Definitely can’t have the to-be Deputy Chief get caught going to town on her wife in the backseat of her car, in a public parking lot, in her uniform.” Ali kisses up Ashlyn’s jaw.

“I’ve never been so excited to lose.” Ashlyn quickly takes Ali’s hand and leads her towards the hotel. “Time to burn off all that sugar!”

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Saturday, September 22\textsuperscript{nd}

“Come on, Hero. Dinner is about to start and we have a couple of speeches coming our way.” Ali finds herself pulling Ashlyn away from the kids play area for the third time now. With so many of their guests having kids, the couple didn’t want to make their wedding kid-free despite the fact that it would mean the little ones would inevitably get bored and start running around a very expensive setup. Instead they had decided on having a large play area on one of the nearby lawns and hired a few babysitters to staff it so that both the adults and children could relax and enjoy the day.

“Coming!” Ashlyn comes barreling down the inflatable slide and then quickly slips her shoes back on.

Ali can only laugh at the sight, already having been asked ‘are you ready for three kids all at once?’ plenty of times in the last hour. “Your Mama is the absolute best. She’s gonna be your best friend and show you the world in ways you never imagined. Probably while she eats all your candy.” The brunette holds a hand on her already basketball-sized belly.
“Were you this beautiful when I met you?” Ashlyn sidles up to her wife as she fixes her navy bow tie. “Cause I’m gonna say it’s official…you’re more beautiful every single day.”

“If the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man is beautiful, then sure. I definitely get puffier every day.” Ali shrugs, feeling ever more bloated and just all around large these days. As nicely as the off-white sundress she’s wearing frames her body, she’s beyond happy that they got married sooner than today and she wasn’t quite this big a few weeks ago.

“Hey now…” Ashlyn takes the brunette’s face in her hands. “You are carrying our babies and you’re glowing, and stunning, and absolutely gorgeous. I can’t take my eyes off of you. I love you, Al…so much that we had to have two weddings to fit it all in.”

“Thank you, love. Knowing that you truly believe and mean that is what has completely kept me from having a total meltdown over this whole transformation. And also why I’m not even going to flinch when it comes to wolfing down a huge piece of our delicious looking cake after nailing that diabetes test this week!” Ali smiles.

“Yeah you did, my feisty bad ass!” Ashlyn joins in her excitement and gives her a little high five, the two of them relieved after just getting Ali’s results back yesterday afternoon.

“You look incredibly stunning and handsome yourself, Hero.” Ali looks over her wife’s outfit of fitted gray dress pants with a white collared shirt neatly tucked in and highlighted by navy blue suspenders and a bow tie to match. “If we didn’t have like two hundred people waiting for us, that outfit would be crumpled up on the floor of that mansion by now.” She smirks and points up to the Crane’s Estate overlooking the Castle Hill lawn they are on.

“I’m definitely taking you up on that later.” Ashlyn closes her eyes as she feels Ali’s hand drag up her side and soft lips capture her own. She gets completely lost in the kiss, her arms wrapping around Ali’s waist until she feels a tug on her pants and looks down to see Curtis.

“Does getting married mean that you have to kiss your wife like that all the time?” Curtis asks with a furrowed brow.

“Absolutely.” Ashlyn replies with a playful grin.

“I’m never getting married.” Curtis grimaces and runs back to the play area.

“I am so telling him he said that at his wedding someday.” Ali says through a chortle, the two of them laughing hard when they hear a loud whistle and look over to see Kyle waving them over.

As promised at their Big Sur wedding, Chris starts the dinner toasts off with a heartfelt speech about how he grew up believing he was Ashlyn’s bodyguard big brother. How he had always saved her from their parents when she got into trouble constantly, watched her tattoo his name into her skin as the guardian of her heart…all the while believing he was her loyal protector. That it wasn’t until he straightened his life out that he realized she had been the one protecting him all along…getting into trouble to take the heat away from his own wrongdoings, doing everything to make sure he stayed out of jail and had whatever he needed to be successful. That every year on his birthday since then, his only wish was that Ashlyn would find someone who could be the person for her that she has always been for him. At that, he simply toasts Ali and ends with “To my birthday wish finally coming true, welcome to the family, Ali. I’ll forever maintain that you’re the best Harris there is. Love you both.”
It’s sweet and touching, and the two women hug Chris tightly afterwards…but, it’s Kyle who leaves everyone laughing and in tears at the same time.

My relationship with Alex can be summed up nicely in one little Christmas story. When I was 7, Alex was 6…each of us opened gifts from our very conservative Aunt Betty who, of course, purchased the most stereotypical gendered toys she could find. Alex got a Barbie doll with an evening gown dress accessory set. I got a lego army truck kit. I remember just kind of tossing my gift aside and not paying much attention to it. But Alex nagged me all day long about it…she wanted to trade.

What you have to know about Alex is that she was absolutely that little sister that did everything bigger and better than me despite being younger. So, even though I couldn’t have cared less about that stupid toy, I was pretty defiant about it. She never gave up though…argued with me the whole day about why I should trade with her as I repeatedly insisted that she didn’t even like legos and that I certainly did not want a Barbie doll. I even made her practically wait on me and foot that day because I knew she would do anything to persuade me. She wanted those legos so badly….girl was like Gloria Allred on a patriarchy takedown mission. And, as we all already know because she’s Alex and eventually grew up to be one of the best lawyers on the planet…she totally got me to trade by the time we went to bed that night. Shocker, I know!

Eleven years later, when I was packing up to leave for college…I found that Barbie doll in my closet. I remembered how many times I played with it late at night when no one was watching. How much joy I felt at brushing its hair and changing its clothes repeatedly… even cutting up old clothes of my own to try to make new clothes for it and occasionally stealing our mother’s make-up to try it on Barbie. Oh don’t you even look at me like you’re all surprised that I secretly worshipped a Barbie doll in my room at night and whacked off to shirtless guys in men’s fitness magazines during my teen years! Moving on! Playing with that doll was among some of the most comfortable and liberating moments I had ever had with myself growing up.

And as I sat there with that Barbie in my hand thinking about it…it finally hit me that Alex hadn’t given a crap about those legos at all and hadn’t even played with them once. She did that for me… because she knew me better than I knew myself, and she always has. She saw my true self before anyone else and she protected it fiercely before I so much as acknowledged its existence. Girl saw my inner diva coming from a mile away and pretty much built a runway for it.

She’s always been the wiser, stronger, more perceptive one…story of my life. I quit soccer, Alex became an all-American and went to Penn State on a soccer scholarship. I dropped out of college, Alex graduated summa cum laude. I went to rehab, Alex went to and graduated from one of the top law schools in the country. I cut people’s hair, Alex saves people’s lives. And yeah…I sure felt sorry for myself an awful lot back in the day. How shitty to have a sister that always outshines you, right? Took a real wake up call for me to finally see that I was the luckiest person in the world. For me to understand that Alex did all of those amazing things and shined as bright as she could, not just for herself. Not so that she could annoy the hell out of me for life. But so that she would always have the means and capability to drag my ass back into the light with her.

I hate to admit it, but it took pushing Alex completely out of my dark life and hitting rock bottom before finally getting that wake up call. And let me tell you about that wake up call… I think you all know her better as Ashlyn Harris. The woman who literally saved my life… who held my sweaty hands when I trembled through withdrawal… who cleaned my bodily fluids off of her floor when I couldn’t make it to the bathroom in time… who got me back on my feet and cheered me on every step of the way… who made me gain back enough belief in myself to feel worthy enough to be back in Alex’s life again. And who then, on top of all of that, swept my sister off her feet, gave Alex her beautiful heart, and made her happier than I have ever seen. Seriously…like not even after she won the lego/Barbie battle was her smile this big! I mean, geez look at these two cheeseballs… they can’t
even hide those big ol’ goofy ‘I’m totally getting laid tonight’ grins right now. Annnnnyway…as I was saying.

My best friends, my guardians, my heroes, and the two most amazing people I know…fell in love with each other, got married, and are having babies. I can’t think of anything better in life than that. Their love has struck my heart and made me a better person just by witnessing it. To my favorite people in the world… may your fire always be as flaming as I am.

With that done, food is served and glasses ding throughout the night in requests for the couple to kiss. So much so that they are often pausing to find each other in the crowded space to fulfill all those kissing requests even as they try to catch up with people they haven’t seen in a while. Cake is served and sweetly fed to each before Ali holds true to her promise and eats both of their slices. Before they know it, this wedding celebration has passed much like the first one… in a blur of great company, dancing, and love.

Still, in true Ashlyn and Ali style, the most memorable moment of the night comes at the very end of the celebration and has nothing to do with them at all…just like they planned it.

“Ok, I had another bouquet made just for the traditional toss! Wouldn’t want to deprive anyone of being the next newlywed.” Ali announces loudly from the dancefloor. “All you single ladies get on over here! You too, Kyle!”

With everyone in place and Ashlyn right beside her, Ali tosses the bouquet over her head. And, in a perfectly coordinated move, everyone steps away except for Emily who reaches out to snag it.

“Ha! Oh my god, Ali! Wait until I find Javi and tell him I’m next!” Emily waves the bouquet and shouts excitedly when Ali and Ashlyn turn around and smile at her.

“Maybe turn around, Em.” Ashlyn gets her attention and points behind her.

“Ok…” Emily turns around to find Javi on one knee with a ring box in his hands.

“Javi already knows, baby.” Rivera winks and proposes, to which he receives a resounding ‘fuck yes’ and a kiss that literally leaves them both sprawled out on the dancefloor to loud claps and wolf whistles.

After a toast and dance for the newly engaged couple, Ashlyn and Ali take advantage of the distraction to slip out and make their way back to the honeymoon suite of the estate for the night. They only get a third of the way up the hill before Rivera and Emily catch up to them.

“Whoa, whoa, freeze Harrises!” Emily calls out to them. “We’re gonna need a couple more hugs.”

“Awww come here, my Thing 1.” Ali pulls Emily into a tight hug. “Congratulations, you guys. I’m so thrilled for you.”

“Of course you are, you helped make it happen! It so figures.” Emily laughs, before she and Ali roll their eyes at the ‘bro hug’ between Ashlyn and Rivera.

“About time, Corporal. So happy for you, even if I did have to carry you again.” Ashlyn teases him.

“Thanks for having my six, Sarge. You too, Ali.” Rivera says appreciatively after all the help they gave him in planning it.
“Always.” Ashlyn replies and Ali nods.

“And we’re gonna return the favor by having both of your sixes right now.” Rivera and Emily share a laugh.

“How is that?” Ali asks with her head cocked to the side.

“By not telling anyone that you two just snuck out of your own wedding party to go fuck like bunnies.” Rivera puts it bluntly.

“I’d try and deny that, buuuut… she’s just too damn hot.” Ali kisses Ashlyn cheek.

“No worries, we got ya covered.” Emily winks at them.

“My sista!” Ashlyn reaches out to fist bump Emily before putting her hand on the small of Ali’s back and leading them back in the direction of the estate.

“Almost forgot…” Ashlyn turns around and tosses Rivera a key. “Burnham suite on the far side of the estate is all yours tonight.”

“Bro!” Rivera says excitedly and Emily joins him with a squeaky “you guys are too much!”

“Congratulations! Try not to break the bed, it’s expensive!” Ali adds with a smirk before leaning into Ashlyn’s ear “now let’s go break our bed.”

“Alex, you ok? What are you doing?” Ashlyn asks groggily with her eyes still closed. Ali is pressed up against her right side and lightly tapping on her stomach near her incision scar. The area doesn’t hurt anymore, but the light tapping isn’t exactly comfortable either and pulls her from sleep.

“Honey?” She finally opens her eyes and adjusts enough to the darkness to realize they’re in the honeymoon suite. The large clock in the corner reads 2:20am, only about an hour since they fell asleep after a few hours of slow and sensual lovemaking.

“Baby?” She tries again, but just gets a tiny sleepy moan from the brunette. Only then does she realize that both of Ali’s arms are wrapped around her arm and nowhere near her stomach. “What the…” She blinks a few times and looks down, seeing only Ali’s belly against her side and almost resting on her own stomach a bit. Another tap and her eyes go wide.

“Oh my god!” Ashlyn scoots down as stealthily as she can to avoid waking her wife and puts both hands on the brunette’s belly. The taps she feels against her palm a few seconds later are unmistakable. “Oh my gosh… hi my loves. Hi!” She whispers excitedly and relishes in the wonderment of the tiny little thumps against her hand, the first time she’s feeling their babies. She kisses Ali’s belly softly a few times and then feels a particularly firm kick against her fingers. “Hey now… I’m excited too, but go easy on your Mommy my little warriors. Don’t wake her up, she needs all the rest she can get to keep up with you two.”

The little thumps slow down and stop after a minute, so she rests her face near her hands on Ali’s belly and just whispers to them for a little while. “So, this is how it’s going to be from now on, huh? You two stealing the spotlight from me and Mommy on our special days? I wouldn’t have it any other way. I love you both so much and can’t wait to meet you and hold you.” The little thumps start up once more, right against her cheek this time. “That’s right, Mama is here. I’ll always be right here. I’ve got you.” She kisses Ali’s belly a few more times before resting her head back down. “I’m so in love with the three of you.” She reaches up to entwine her hand with Ali’s and stays curled up right there against her belly.
“Ash?” Ali says sleepily when she opens her eyes and doesn’t immediately see the officer next to her. She squints from the bright morning sun streaming in through the windows and tries to stretch her stiff body a bit only to feel some resistance against her hips. She looks down to find Ashlyn sound asleep with her head resting on her belly, the officer’s arms wrapped around her waist and a tiny little smile on her lips… and she knows immediately what happened. “We love you so much, Ashlyn.” She runs her fingers gently through her wife’s messy short hair and closes her eyes again, surrendering herself completely to the tranquility of the moment.

Friday, October 5th

“Hey beautiful, you must be wiped out. How about we get out of here?” Ashlyn wraps her arms around Ali’s waist, pulling her away from the crowd for a quiet minute together.

“No, I’m actually great. Can we stay a little longer?” Ali smiles widely and lies through her teeth. Her back is on fire, her legs ache, her feet are bloated and cramping in her suddenly way too tight heels, the underwire of her bra is digging into the sensitive skin under of her now double-sized breasts, she has to pee every 10 minutes, and she could probably close her eyes and fall asleep standing up right now. She knows Ashlyn knows she’s lying too, but it doesn’t matter. She’s not ready to end tonight yet.

“Sure, if that’s what you want.” Ashlyn says skeptically and kisses her forehead.

“That’s what I want, Hero. Love you.” Ali presses a little kiss to the officer’s jaw and pushes her gently towards the crowd of people that all want a piece of her wife, signaling that the conversation is done for now. They’ve been at it for over 6 hours already, a lengthy award ceremony followed by a fancy buffet-style dinner and cocktails to celebrate and rub elbows with state’s most powerful officials. It’s exhausting in every way possible, but she still can’t get enough.

She can’t get enough of Ashlyn in her dress uniform, the first time she’s ever seen her wear it. She looks handsome and fierce all at the same time, ruggedly beautiful with her defined jaw further accentuated by the way the jacket outlines her strong shoulders in perfect symmetry. The dark navy blue brings out swirls of gray in the officer’s green hazel eyes that no one else would ever notice but her. She’s nothing short of a vision.

She can’t get enough of watching the way Ashlyn humbly and modestly accepts the accolades being bestowed on her. The way her golden heart and good nature shine through like she doesn’t feel the pressure of the extra star and stripe on her uniform patches or the weight of the silver medal cross now pinned to her chest. The way she handles it all with an attentive and confident ease that makes everyone else around her feel important in her presence.

Mostly she can’t get enough of the feeling… the endless love she feels for this amazing woman and the pride in being the one who gets to stand by her side today and always. It’s so clear how much everyone respects her wife, all of them practically tripping over themselves to commend her accomplishments, to get even a mere minute of her acknowledgement. But no matter how many people fawn over the officer today, it’s the small of her back that Ashlyn’s palm is pressed against and her fingers that Ashlyn’s fingers are entwined with every possible second they can be. Every single person in the room’s eyes are glued to Ashlyn and yet, Ashlyn’s eyes are constantly darting to find hers.

Proud is an understatement. There are simply no words to describe the level of adoration she feels
right now. And despite the fact that everybody already knows and it’s probably annoying, she still finds herself repeating the same three words to virtually anyone that will listen today…that’s my wife.

Friday, October 19th

“Thank you so much, Alex. This is exactly what I wanted and needed tonight.” Ashlyn happily leans into her wife on the couch as the two of them sit there in comfy sweatpants and each dig into huge slices of homemade funfetti cake.

“Happy birthday, love.” Ali clinks together their large glasses of milk with a smile. After their two wedding celebrations, the police medal ceremony, and the surprise baby shower Emily threw them just last weekend, Ashlyn sat her down at the beginning of the week and pleaded for a low-key birthday. Her exact words had been “Babe, I know you’ll want to celebrate my birthday, but I honestly don’t know if I can handle another night of being celebrated. The only thing I want right now is a quiet night alone with you on the couch… and funfetti cake…you and funfetti cake. That’s it.”

Ali had of course obliged, not particularly keen on going out or even being around too many people lately either as she gets increasingly uncomfortable, clumsy, and easily frustrated with her exponentially growing belly and constantly changing body at 28 weeks. So instead of a night on the town or a house full of people…it’s just the two of them tonight, enjoying each other’s company after cooking a nice dinner together and feeling closer than ever.

“So, what should we do with our sugar high? Movie? Dance party? Opening all those shower gifts?” Ali asks as Ashlyn trails little kisses down her shoulder.

“Hmmm…seems like a good day to open gifts, even if they’re not for me.” Ashlyn chuckles and points to the pile of cardboard boxes in the corner. Quite a few people had been unable to travel for their baby shower and instead mailed gifts that have been piling up all week and that they haven’t had a chance to open yet.

“Let’s do it.” Ali heads to get a box cutter from the knife drawer while Ashlyn moves all the boxes near the couch. It takes them just over an hour to plow through them and just about all of them are items from their registry with two notable exceptions.

The two women spend almost twenty minutes on just one box alone, a package that starts with two matching Ellen onesies sitting right on top once they open it. Underneath that are fifteen more sets of fashionable matching baby outfits from Ellen’s new ED clothing line along with some adult sized apparel for the two them as well.

The second is a small box that gives its origin away immediately from the Arabic postage stamping on the outside. “What do they say?” Ali asks as she looks over the two tiny matching gold bracelets with Arabic characters etched into them that Aasera and her husband Ali sent. “Warrior.” Ashlyn smiles at the sweet gift and makes a mental note to get another Skype session in with Aasera before the twins get here. “Of course it does.” Ali kisses Ashlyn’s shoulder.

“So, I know you didn’t want me to do anything major tonight and I promise to hold to that…but I do have a present for you.” Ali reveals. “It’s really nothing big.”

“Can’t say no to a present, especially one from you.” Ashlyn says and watches Ali grab a long, thin rectangular gift from beside the couch that is obviously some kind of picture frame. She’s carefully peels back the wrapping paper and finds what looks to be black audio waves against a white
background, one above the other with the date May 18, 2018 below them. “Is that…” Ashlyn starts to ask the question.

“Their first heartbeats.” Ali finishes for her. “I had the audio file turned into soundwave art.”

“Baby…I love this so much. It’s perfect, completely and totally perfect.” Ashlyn traces the glass frame with her fingers, her face a mix of awe and delight.

“You like it?” Ali asks.

“I’m already obsessed with it.” Ashlyn says genuinely. “In fact… this is it.”

“This is it what?” Ali doesn’t understand.

“You know how I’ve been trying to think about a tattoo for them?” Ashlyn reminds her.

“Yeah.” Ali replies.

“This is it. I want this.” She points to the soundwaves.

“Oh I totally love that!” Ali says excitedly. “Where?”

“Right here above yours, in two full bands around my arm…I’ll put their names and birthdate right between the two sound waves.” She points to the area just above the crease of her elbow on her right arm, where the top tip of the rose from the tattoo symbolizing Ali stops. “Their hearts, the first moment I fell in love with them right there for me to always look at… nothing more perfect. I love it and I love you.” She kisses Ali deeply.

“You make my heart race, Harris.” Ali whispers with her eyes still hooded from the romantic kiss until she feels a strong thud against her belly, quickly followed by another. “And you make our babies kick.”

“Nah, that’s the funfetti working it’s magic.” Ashlyn laughs. The babies always get active not too long after Ali eats or drinks something sugary. “Come here. This is a dance party I definitely want in on.” Ashlyn lays on her side against the back of the couch and spoons the brunette from behind, holding her belly to feel the twins kick. “Whew, happy birthday to Mama!” She laughs after feeling several firm thumps against her hands and forearms.

“Of course they love funfetti cake… it’s in their DNA.” Ali giggles. They lay quietly for a while, just enjoying the moment until Ashlyn hears Ali’s unmistakable snore. “Best birthday ever, my three loves. Thank you.” She whispers and presses a few soft kisses to the back of Ali’s shoulder. “You’re my world Alexandra. I love you so much. Sweet dreams, angel.” She buries her face into the crook of Ali’s neck and holds her close, letting the slowing taps against her hands lull her to sleep.

Thursday, November 15th

“Alex?” Ashlyn calls up from the bottom of the stairs, before getting no reply and making her way up. Usually Ali’s smile is the first thing that greets her when she walks in the door from work. If not, it’s because the brunette is napping on the couch or busy in the kitchen. After locking up her gun and finding Ali in neither of those places, she immediately gets a little nervous.
After a quick look into their bedroom, Ali’s office, the nursery, and the guest room all turn up empty, the officer’s search gets more frantic as she looks into closets and calls Ali’s name even louder.

“ALEX! Fuck!” Ashlyn’s heart falls into her stomach in fear when she finds the brunette naked and sitting on the floor of their bathroom, her back leaned against the wall, eyes closed and her neck in an awkward position. Ashlyn immediately drops down and takes Ali’s face in her hands, looking her over carefully. Her eyes look puffy and her cheeks are tear stained, but she’s warm and breathing.

“Baby…Alex, please wake up. Please.” Ashlyn pleads desperately and shakes her slightly. She breathes a slight sigh of relief when Ali’s eyes open.

“Ash?” Ali says groggily, trying to remember where she is.

“I’m here, baby. What’s wrong? Talk to me, what happened? Are you okay? Is it the babies?” Ashlyn rattles off questions, trying to stay calm but failing.

“Huh? No…I’m okay.” Ali tries to process, just now registering where she fell asleep and that Ashlyn must have just gotten home. “I fell asleep.”

“Come here.” Ashlyn lets out a deep breath and sits down on the floor next to her wife, pulling her close and practically into her lap. “You scared me.”

“Really sorry, Ash. I’m okay.” Ali assures her, but her voice squeaks.

“Physically maybe, but obviously not otherwise.” Ashlyn sees through it immediately, especially having seen those tear stained cheeks. “Please talk to me.” She hugs her tighter.

“It’s so stupid and I just scared you over it. I’m so dumb.” Ali replies in embarrassment. She knows it’s absurd that she’s so worked up over this. It’s just bad timing. They learned at the 32 week appointment yesterday that their baby boy is now in a breech position even though their baby girl is still head down and lower. And although Dr. Baylor assured them that both babies are healthy and there is still lots of time and space for the breech baby to turn head down, it drops the chance of a vaginal delivery down to 50%. Pair that with her being too uncomfortable to get much quality sleep over the last week, and it doesn’t take much to put her over the edge.

“Sweetheart, you know better… nothing you feel is dumb or stupid. You can tell me anything.” Ashlyn appeals to her gently.

“It’s like I knew it would happen…but then it didn’t until now…and I thought…” Ali’s lip quivers a bit as she tries to get it out. “I shouldn’t be this upset. I guess being so religious about using the cocoa butter and going so long without it happening…” She looks up at the ceiling, feeling too ridiculous to look Ashlyn in the eye. “I got kind of sweaty after doing some pregnancy yoga poses and wanted to shower before you got home… and I just noticed them…” Her hand drops down to the side of her belly.

Ashlyn is completely confused until her eyes follow Ali’s hand and she sees it too…a few faint stretch marks along the side of her belly and almost underneath it.

“I’m so stupid… I shouldn’t be this upset.” Ali whispers with a couple tears rolling down before the officer can even say anything.

“Oh Alex. It’s completely okay for you to be upset about it.” Ashlyn takes the brunette’s face in her hands again, but she can tell Ali isn’t buying into it. “I’m sorry, love.” She searches her mind and heart for the right words. She wants nothing more than to tell her wife how beautiful she is in as many ways as she can, but she already knows that is not going to cut it right now. And just as she
realizes that nothing she can say right now can change how Ali feels about it, it hits her that maybe
the brunette just needs to believe in her own words.

“Ash?” Ali looks at the officer quizzically as she suddenly gets up and unbuttons her uniform shirt,
tossing it to the floor before getting rid of her undershirt, sports bra, and pants in the same fashion.
Only then does she plop back down next to Ali on the floor in nothing but her boxer briefs.

Ashlyn takes Ali’s hand and kisses it before putting the brunette’s fingertips over the scar on her
eyebrow and then on the little one from her once split ear. She then runs Ali’s hand over the top of
her shoulder and down her shoulder blade, pressing her fingers into the deep gouges there before
bringing them to the little circular divot in the middle of her chest. The scar journey continues as she
drags Ali’s fingers along the still red incision down her abdomen, over the bullet marks on her thigh
and finally down to the surgery scar near her knee. “Tell me about my scars.” She requests and
kisses Ali’s hand again.

“What do you mean?” Ali questions quietly.

“How do I feel about them?” Ashlyn rephrases.

“It’s complicated. They’re both a curse and a cure in your eyes.” Ali answers thoughtfully as she
recalls all the conversations they’ve had about them. “A cure because they give you closure and
strength by reminding you of all you’ve endured and survived, but a curse for the same reason…
because they remind you…of heartache, of pain, of horror. And you don’t like people to see them.
Not because you’re self-conscious or vain, but because they make it clear that you’ve suffered and
you can’t stomach when people look at you with pity.”

“Nailed it. It’s okay to be upset about the things on your body that you don’t like to see.” Ashlyn
gives her a little smile, followed by a soft kiss. “Tell me how you feel about them?”

“I love them.” Ali doesn’t even have to think about it. “Despite what they symbolize, they are part of
you. Part of your story. They remind me how strong and resilient you are… how much you have
battled through. How exceptional you are for being such a loving and compassionate person despite
all that pain, heartache, and horror. They remind me of just how much you withstood to get to me
and also to protect me. They make me feel safe and lucky. They are you. They are beautiful. They
are mine and I love them.”

“Thank you.” Ashlyn says a bit emotionally and runs her hand over the little stretch marks on Ali’s
belly. “I’m seeing these for the first time today and I already love them. No matter how they change
over the next few weeks or over the course of your life, I will always love them. They will forever
remind me of how strong and completely miraculous my wife is for having carried and brought our
children into this world. That you went through so much to make it possible for us to have a family.
They are the symbol of one of the most enchanting and challenging life battles there is and they will
always make me feel lucky and loved to be part of that battle with you. They are you. They are
beautiful. They are mine and I love them.”

Ali can’t speak and just kisses Ashlyn deeply, letting her body say what her words can’t right now.
Even though it lasts a few minutes and makes both of them tingle, it doesn’t get heated…just a mix
of passion and comfort that speaks volumes in silence.

“You are just…” Ali trails off and studies her wife’s stunning angular features, her warm hazel eyes.
“You were doomed to fail just now. In my mind, there was absolutely nothing you could say that
was going to make me feel better. I was wrong.” She admits. “Thank you for loving me so much, all
of me…to the point that I can even begin question or doubt it for even a second.”
“Ooohhh, sound the alarms! Alex Harris was wrong for once!” Ashlyn brings some lightness to the moment and earns a little nudge from the brunette. “I love you to GN-Z11 and back, beautiful. And boy do I mean that last part… so damn beautiful.” She kisses Ali again. “Come on, you… my back is already stiff from sitting here. Can’t imagine how you feel right now.” She helps Ali to her feet.

“Ugh, so stiff and sore. My neck is screaming at me.” Ali confesses.

“Give me just a couple minutes.” Ashlyn rushes out of the bathroom before Ali can even respond. She’s back in no time with the stool from their bedroom closet, placing it in the middle of the shower, putting a folded towel on the seat, and turning on the hot water.

Ali can only smile widely as Ashlyn helps her get seated on the stool and adjusts the shower head so that the soothing warm water is streaming against her back. If that isn’t enough, the officer then spends the next half hour massaging every inch of her neck, shoulders, and back until all of her muscles are completely relaxed.

“How do you feel, baby?” Ashlyn trails a few kisses down Ali’s neck.

“So damn good.” Ali leans back into Ashlyn’s body and closes her eyes. “Heavenly… hungry… also horny.” She smirks and hears a little chuckle from Ashlyn. “Seriously don’t know what would get me to an orgasm faster right now, you or a pizza.” She giggles.

“Tell you what, let’s start with the pizza and work our way to me.” Ashlyn suggests in amusement, a little surprised since Ali’s sex drive has all but disappeared over the last couple weeks with the increasing discomfort.

“Yes, please.” Ali purrs.

“I’m gonna go call the order in right now and then set you up on the couch before I go pick it up. It’ll be faster than delivery that way.” Ashlyn plans it out.

“You’re the best. What did I ever do to deserve you?” Ali says sweetly.

“You were born, babe.” Ashlyn winks and wraps her up in a robe before giving her a little kiss.

“Smooth. Save some for the pillow talk, Chief.” Ali smiles and gives the officer a gentle push towards their bedroom. “Now go get my pizza, sexy.”

“Yes Ma’am.” Ashlyn playfully salutes her and hurries off.

Thursday, November 22nd

“Happy Thanksgiving, goddess. Whatcha doing?” Ashlyn wraps her arms around Ali from behind. She was surprised she slept so late without realizing, finding the bed empty and hearing clanging sounds in the kitchen.

“Making you breakfast, Hero.” Ali says simply, turning her head to kiss the officer’s cheek before starting to break some eggs in a bowl for omelets. “In my first trimester I ate one dozen eggs, to help these babies grow large. And now in my third I eat three dozen eggs, so I’m roughly the size of a baaaarge!” She jokingly sings some altered lines from Gaston’s entrance scene in Beauty and the Beast, trying to have a sense of humor lately ever since her stretch mark meltdown.

“You are so not a barge. If anything, you’re the Amerigo Vespucci.” Ashlyn says charmingly,
naming what is universally considered the world’s most beautiful tall ship.

“Always gotta be smoother than a glass palace, huh?” Ali leans back into her wife.

“You know it.” Ashlyn smiles. “Also, if anyone is Gaston in this relationship…it’s me. You are definitely Belle.”

“Gaston is a conceited asshole. You are so not Gaston.” Ali declares.

“Guess that makes me Beast then.” Ashlyn teases with a pout.

“Nope, not Beast either...or that awful looking prince that Beast turns into who actually looks worse than when he was Beast.” Ali scrunches her nose.

“Well, then who am I if you’re Belle and I’m not Beast or Gaston?” Ashlyn inquires playfully.

“You’re the incredibly hot and romantic lesbian that came along and showed Belle that she sure as hell doesn’t need a man in her life.” Ali laughs. “Who said I was going with the Disney version?”

“Ha! Is there really a lesbian version?” Ashlyn asks with a laugh.

“Yep, Roses and Thorns. Give it a read, so much better.” Ali enlightens her.

“Why am I not surprised that you know that?” Ashlyn nuzzles into Ali’s neck. “Can I help with breakfast?”

“Nope. You just sit over there and look pretty. I made you coffee.” Ali motions to a mug near one of the counter stools.

“Thank you. How come you didn’t wake me up?” Ashlyn inquires and feels Ali turn in her arms.

“Baby, you’re running yourself ragged. You need to sleep. We’re gonna need you at full capacity soon enough.” Ali strokes her cheek.

Ashlyn has been nothing short of a beast over the last month. She’s been practically working two jobs, trying to learn and execute her new position as Deputy Chief while she works to launch the new state committee she is heading up. She’s doing everything she can to be able to take the two months of maternity leave she’s entitled to once the twins are born without having to deal with work issues. As if that wasn’t enough, she’s been taking care of everything at home… cooking, cleaning, running errands, assembling cribs and baby toys, installing car seats and gradually crossing off everything on their long list of preparations. And she’s done all of it without a single complaint or indication that she’s as exhausted as she clearly is.

“I know. And I promise I will be. I just wanted to make sure we’re ready.” Ashlyn assures her.

“And thanks to you, we are.” Ali says appreciatively and hugs her wife tightly. Everything is in place, even a complete set of identical hospital bags are packed in each of their cars. There is literally nothing to do now but wait as 34 weeks approaches in just a couple days.

“You’ve done far more than I have, honey.” Ashlyn says sweetly as she strokes Ali’s hair.

“Ash?” Ali pipes up after a quiet minute of them just hugging in the middle of the kitchen.

“Yeah, love?” Ashlyn replies.

“I am so fucking scared.” Ali whispers, the deepest secret she’s been harboring for weeks suddenly
“It’s okay, Al.” Ashlyn holds her impossibly closer and kisses the top of her head. “I am too.”

“You are?” Ali pulls back to look at the officer in surprise at the confession.

“Yeah, of course I am.” Ashlyn says matter-of-factly. “I’m about to watch you go through one of the most amazing, but also physically hardest experiences ever. And I have to just essentially sit on the sidelines while my wife and our babies, my whole damn world, battle through this thing together. I’m scared about how I’ll react to seeing you have to go through that and how I’ll feel about my pretty limited ability to help you. Add that to the fact that one day it’s just us and the next day we’re parents…of twins no less, and yeah…I’m terrified.”

“I thought it was just me.” Ali lays her head back down against Ashlyn’s shoulder, feeling a bit relieved now. “I’m freaked out about what it’s going to feel like and I’m scared I won’t be able to do it. I worry about it going well and the babies being ok. What if they don’t breastfeed or I’m bad at it? And oh my god, yes…so fucking terrified that we’re about to be parents of twins and have no idea what we’re doing. I don’t want to disappoint you.”

“Baby, you could never ever disappoint me. You’re going to be the best Mommy ever.” Ashlyn promises and kisses her forehead.

“Why do you seem so much calmer than I am?” Ali questions.

“Because I remind myself that I’m not alone. I have you and we have each other. We’ve been through so much, Alex…we’ve literally faced death together, more than once. And we’re still here and we’re beyond great. I know it’s going to be a challenge, all of it, but we’ll start by taking it one hour at a time and then one day at a time, and so on. And before we know it, we’ll have this thing on lock. Together. I’ve got you, and we’ve got this.” Ashlyn replies like it’s the simplest thing in the world.

“We do. We got this.” Ali can’t help but be lulled into security by her wife. So many emotions are stirring right now, but one suddenly stands out as she feels Ashlyn’s fingertips just brush the bare skin near the hem of her sweatpants. She tilts her head up and kisses Ashlyn heatedly, her hands gripping the officer’s lower back. “Mmmm, fuck.” She mumbles against the officer’s lips.

“What the matter?” Ashlyn pulls back in concern, not sure how to read what is going on right now.

“I just need your tongue on me so badly.” Ali puts it bluntly with a slight blush at realizing just how out-of-the-blue and bizarre it is. “Do we have time?” She asks even as she starts nipping as Ashlyn’s neck. As grateful as she is that Emily and Javi agreed to host Thanksgiving for everyone today, that still means they have to get ready and drive over there.

“We’ll make time. Everyone else can wait.” Ashlyn husks followed by a little gasp when Ali sucks her pulse point firmly, her mind still spinning at how they just went from spilling secrets to foreplay. Pregnancy is so weird. She thinks to herself in amusement.

“You sure? They’ll never stop teasing us if we’re late.” Ali protests with absolutely zero conviction behind it. “Ugh I don’t even care. Need your mouth on me…really bad.” Her center throbs almost painfully as Ashlyn’s hands slip under her shirt rake up her sides.

“Of course I’m sure. What’s Thanksgiving without a little gobble, gobble first?” The officer winks and kisses Ali hungrily. “Come on, gorgeous…no time to waste.”
“Hold on… crap… your breakfast.” Ali remembers as she quickly runs over to the stove to make it isn’t on.


“I’m coming.” Ali scurries back towards the officer.

“Not yet, but I promise you will be.” Ashlyn smirks and scoops the brunette into her arms, heading right for the bedroom.

Friday, December 7th

“Good morning, ladies! 35 weeks in and well over that 34 week hump!” Dr. Baylor greets them cheerily. “You look really good, Ali. But…hit me with reality, how do you feel?” She asks knowingly.

“Ugh, is it supposed to feel like an alien species is using me as a host? I seriously don’t even know my own body anymore…something is always swelling, moving, leaking, cramping, and whatever the heck else.” She answers a bit grumpily while Ashlyn just holds her hand with a sympathetic little smile.

“Sounds exactly right. The miracle of life is so far from glamorous as you get close to labor. Twins are particularly hard on the body, but you’re really doing excellent. Like a million times better than most of my patients who are just having one baby.” Dr. Baylor tries to be real with her while offering some encouragement. “Are you sleeping?”

“Not very well. Usually an hour at a time before waking up and having to get myself back to sleep again. My back and hips really hurt and of course I have to pee constantly.” Ali says honestly.

“She’s not.” Ali answers before Ashlyn can give her usual reassurance that she’s fine.

“Which I’m sure means you’re not sleeping that well either?” The doctor looks at Ashlyn.

“I’m not sure how the two of you usually sleep, but try with your back to Ashlyn and lean back against her if you can manage to get comfortable that way. Almost using her like a wedge for your back. And maybe try a pillow between your knees in that position. It really helps some people.” Dr. Baylor suggests and gets a nod from both women. “Have you had contractions at all?”

“Yeah, but just the Braxton-Hicks ones that they told us about in baby class. I can tell they’re not real ones yet.” Ali answers.

“Good. I’m impressed. Most first-time pregnant women run to the hospital or call me when they feel their first Braxton-Hicks.” Dr. Baylor smiles.

“Yeah well I kneed poor Ash so hard in the thigh the first time it happened that she still has the bruise.” Ali cringes a bit. “Hopefully that’s no indication of how this is going to go, but if a real one hurts more than that… my poor wife.”

“Can’t be any worse than Ranger training, right?” Ashlyn shrugs it off.

“You’d be surprised. Tell me that again later when she’s crushed the bones in your hand.” Dr. Baylor plays a bit and watches Ashlyn’s mouth drop a bit. “I’m kidding. Really, you two are going be fine!” She puts them at ease before continuing. “The babies are moving around and you’re feeling
them usually at least once an hour?”

“Yep.” Ali nods.

“Ok then, let’s have a peek at these little ones and see where we are today. We’ll have you back in to be checked every 3 to 4 days from now until week 38. If you hit week 38, then we’ll have you in everyday at that point.” The doctor explains and gets Ali ready on the exam table.

No matter how many times they’ve done this, the effect never lessens. The second those heartbeats sound through the speaker and those tiny bodies appear on the screen, the two women visibly relax and grins take over their faces, any stress completely melting away as they squeeze each other’s hands tightly. Dr. Baylor just smiles at the scene in front of her, one that she sees play out so many times a day, letting them have a few minutes to enjoy it before explaining what she sees.

“The babies both look great and strong. Your amniotic fluid level is good and we’ll keep watching that closely now. Your baby girl is head down and definitely starting to drop just a bit. That’s exactly what we want to see at this point because she’ll drop down right into that birth canal as you go into labor. There’s no question in my mind that she’ll be born first with this positioning.” Dr. Baylor explains as she points at the screen. “Your baby boy is a different story. He’s still holding strong in that breech position. Things will only get tighter from here, but he’ll still have room and time to flip in theory.”

“But you don’t think he will?” Ali addresses it head on.

“My guess is that he won’t, but I really could be wrong.” Dr. Baylor answers truthfully.

“So, am I scheduling a c-section?” The brunette asks it as bravely as she can, just wanting to hear the answer she’s dreading to get it over with. Still, she can’t stop the little sigh that leaves her mouth and she feels Ashlyn lean down and kiss her forehead.

“Well…” Dr. Baylor pauses for a second. “You’re still set on this vaginal delivery, right?”

“Very much, if possible.” Ali answers immediately.

“When we have a single breech baby, we often attempt to try and turn the baby by pressing on the stomach externally and almost trying to massage them into place in the days prior to labor.” Dr. Baylor explains the process. “With twins, we really can’t do that because of there being two of them and the tight space. But… since your baby girl is head down and clearly being born first, we can deliver her and then attempt to turn your baby boy once she’s out.”

“Really?” Ali asks hopefully.

“You can do that?” Ashlyn adds.

“We can certainly try. I’ve done it several times before with mixed success. I’ll warn you that it only works about 60% of the time and it’s really not very comfortable for you when you’re in labor. I’m willing to attempt it if you want to try it.” Dr. Baylor leaves it completely up to them.

“I want to try it.” Ali says adamantly before immediately pausing. “I mean… if you’re ok with it too.” She looks at Ashlyn.

“I’m with you on whatever you want to do, Alex.” Ashlyn smiles reassuringly. “It’s safe for the baby, right?” She checks with the doctor.

“Completely safe with no discomfort for him.” Dr. Baylor replies.
“And what if it doesn’t work?” Ali asks as she starts to question if she’s making the right decision.

“If it doesn’t work, we have a couple options. If he doesn’t turn head down, then he may drop down into the birth canal feet first and try to push through that way. If I’m not concerned about any umbilical cord problems where his air supply is cut off, then I’ll let him do his thing and deliver him breech. Again, not ideal, but we definitely do it. The risk of that is mainly that he might get an arm caught and sort of get stuck. Alternatively, he might not drop down at all in breech position and stay right where he is. In either of those cases, we’ll have an epidural line already placed for you and we can take you right into c-section to get him out fast if we need to.” Dr. Baylor outlines the plan.

“So it wouldn’t put him at risk to do this?” Ali asks.

“No more than any other vaginal twin delivery. And I feel comfortable taking this approach.” Dr. Baylor informs them.

“Ok. We trust your judgment. Sign us up for that.” Ali says after getting a nod from Ashlyn.

“One baby-turning massage special coming right up…well, assuming he doesn’t surprise us and turn it around himself.” Dr. Baylor smiles.

“He won’t. I can already tell… that one is all stubborn Harris. We do everything the hard way. At least we usually land on our feet, maybe that’s what he’s going for.” Ashlyn jokes with a shrug, making Ali and the doctor laugh.

“So, a couple of specifics. As you know, there are ten OB-GYNs on call in this labor and delivery unit. We all have two 14-hour days of being on shift per week, so any one of us could be the attending doctor when you go into labor. When we have patients with special circumstances, like twins…we are allowed at our own discretion to agree to be paged to come in to deliver the baby. I have already gone ahead and done that so that I can do everything in my power to be the one that delivers your babies.” Dr. Baylor divulges.

“Thank you so so much.” Ali says gratefully even as Ashlyn is saying the same thing.

“Of course! I’m just as excited for these two Harris babies to get here as you are.” Dr. Baylor waves it off. “The only hard rule is that once we’ve been on for a 14 hour shift, we have to be off for at least 5 hours before coming back on. So, there is always the very slim chance that you would deliver when I couldn’t be here. Chances are that even if you were in labor on my off-time, you would be in labor long enough for me to get back in time for the delivery. However, Dr. Kelly Moore agreed to be my back-up and she’ll be paged and come in if I can’t. She has the same expertise as I do and we share the same birthing philosophies. I’ll brief her on everything of course and maybe I can introduce you before you leave today so that you’ll feel more comfortable if for some reason things don’t go our way?” Dr. Baylor offers.

“That would be wonderful. Really… thank you so much for all you’re doing for us.” Ali says almost emotionally, always feeling so taken care of by this kind and thorough woman.

“You really are the best, Baylor.” Ashlyn grins, seeing the way Ali looks a million times more at ease than when they came in.

“It’s my pleasure. Alright, well… we have a plan and everything is looking good. Doesn’t look like anything is going to happen over this next week. And that’s a good thing. The longer these little ones stay growing in there between now and 38 weeks, the better. We’ll reassess again in four days.” Dr. Baylor smiles.
“I’ll be sure to keep them comfy in here.” Ali rubs her belly.

“I’ll give you two a few minutes and be right outside for when you’re ready to go meet Dr. Moore.” Dr. Baylor says before making her way out.

“How’s my girl?” Ashlyn helps Ali button her shirt.

“Feeling a little better about things now that we have more of a plan.” Ali smiles. “But you know me, I’m sure I’ll find something else to worry about in the next hour.” She rolls her eyes at her own dislike of not being in control of things.

“It’s my day off, so how about we stop for ice cream and a mani-pedi session together on the way home? That way all you have to worry about is flavor and color choices.” Ashlyn brushes a few stray hairs from the brunette’s face.

“Ashlyn…you have been the most unbelievably fantastic and wonderful partner through this whole thing.” Ali says with every ounce of feeling she has, suddenly worrying a bit that she hasn’t told the officer enough times how great she is. “I appreciate you so much, honey. Me and these warriors are so lucky to have you. We love you so much, Hero. I just love you so damn much, Ash.” She slips her arms around the officer’s waist and pulls her in tight.

“I love you more than anything in the world, love. I’ll always give you my everything.” Ashlyn leaves a lingering kiss on her lips. “So, is that a yes to ice cream and some pampering?”

“That’s a hell yes, Harris.” Ali kisses her one more time and pinches her dimpled cheek.

Monday, December 24th

“How’s she doing?” Kyle asks hopefully when Ashlyn appears in the kitchen.

“A little better after that nap. I just wish she could sleep better, it would really do wonders.” Ashlyn replies. “She’s just so crampy and her back has been killing her the last couple of days. She just kicked me out so she could finish doing her makeup, so I’ll take that as a good sign.”

“I thought for sure she was going to have them by now. She looks ready to pop.” Kyle remarks as he stirs a pot of simmering sweet chili meatballs that Ali requested.

“Please don’t say that to her face.” Ashlyn warns him, knowing Ali isn’t just close to the edge right now, she already has one foot over it.

“Well duh.” Kyle rolls his eyes.

“Thanks for doing all the cooking and handling things today…and well, these last couple of weeks too.” Ashlyn says appreciatively. Being so close to potentially going into labor and having to go in for appointments every few days, the two women have been staying at the Newton house with Kyle to be closer to the hospital. They’re spending Christmas Eve and Christmas Day all together with Chris and his family just like last year, and Ashlyn feels bad that Kyle is handling all of the prep and cooking for them.

“Oh stahhp, I’m happy to do it!” Kyle assures her. “Chris said he’d be here around 2pm and they’d help set up for dinner, so we’re good to go.”

“Still, thank you.” Ashlyn repeats before they are interrupted by Ali.
“Merry Christmas Eve! Muah.” Ali blows Kyle and Ashlyn each a kiss as she slowly makes her way into the kitchen. “Ugh, I totally lied… no more keeping it comfy for them, I’m serving these kiddos an eviction notice!”

“You look festive and beautiful, sweetheart.” Ashlyn smiles at the brunette in her comfy maternity leggings and oversized green sweater with a gold floral pattern down the sleeves.

“I look like a waddling Christmas tree, but thanks anyway my sweet liar.” Ali smiles back.

“Oh honey, the cute pregnancy waddle was gone like two weeks ago. This is more of a ‘I just rode a horse for a week straight’ kind of walk.” Kyle can’t help himself and Ashlyn immediately shoots daggers at him with her eyes.

“Well gee, thanks.” Ali tries not to feel hurt by the teasing, but her face definitely gives her away.

“Oh princess, I’m sorry!” Kyle immediately goes over to her. “I’m just being my typical dramatic and sardonically bitchy self. I promise I was just teasing you in good fun. You really do look beautiful, Alex. And your outfit is the cutest ever!” He hugs her tightly and kisses her forehead.

“And now you’re just being over-the-top. Quit while you’re ahead, ass.” Ali smacks him on the butt before suddenly feeling an odd sort of jolt in her belly. “Oh shit…”

“What’s wrong?” Ashlyn is beside her immediately at the look on her face while Kyle merely pulls back from the hug just enough to look down at her.

“I think my water just broke.” Ali says in an eerily calm voice given the moment.

“Oh my god!” Kyle jumps back like he’s been burned. “I actually popped her!” He shrieks.

“You just go over there.” Ashlyn points Kyle to the other side of the kitchen and tries to take some control over the situation before Ali can freak out. “What do you feel, baby?” She holds Ali’s arm gently and supports her weight.

“Kind of felt like a tug or snap or something… and I feel like I peed.” The brunette explains with the same calm.

“Ok.” Ashlyn looks at the front of Ali’s pants but doesn’t see anything. “Let’s go over to the bathroom and check it out.” She suggests and leads the way, helping Ali walk.

“You’re sure your water broke and it wasn’t like a cramp or something?” Ashlyn asks gently when they’re in the bathroom, finding that the underwear and pad Ali was wearing are a bit wet, but her pants are dry. From everything she has read and heard about, she was expecting a lot more.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Ali says confidently.

“Ok. I just figured if it did, there would be more fluid.” Ashlyn says a bit perplexed. Ali is sitting on the toilet and there isn’t even so much as a trickle right now.

“I think I know when my own water breaks, Ashlyn.” Ali huffs in annoyance at being questioned.

“Ok, love. Sorry. I’m going to go get you a new pair of underwear and another pad so we can change you and call Dr. Baylor to figure it out.” Ashlyn quickly rights her attitude. “Are you in pain?”

“Really crampy and tight in my stomach, but not really that painful.” Ali replies. “I can get up and go
with you to change.” The brunette says resolutely and grips Ashlyn’s hands to stand up, liquid suddenly flowing all over the floor from between her legs as she does.

“Oh holy fuck. Yeah, okay…your water definitely broke.” Ashlyn says with wide eyes, her heart racing a bit.

Ali shoots the officer an impatient ‘I told you so’ look, about to follow it up with a snippy reply when her belly tightens like a vice and pain shoots through her mid-section. “Oooohhh uuuuuugh, FUCK!” She screams out and doubles over trying desperately to breathe. Her legs start to give out, but Ashlyn is right there to catch her and help her sit back down on the toilet.

“Squeeze my hand, Alex. Try and breathe deep, baby….remember what we practiced. Slow deep breaths.” Ashlyn coaches, immediately breaking out of her stunned daze as her mind races to remember what to do. Her stomach drops when Dr. Baylor’s instructions register in her mind:

*If you start having contractions, call us and we’ll help you monitor when to come in as they progress. If your water breaks, especially if you’re having contractions with it, don’t bother calling and just get yourself here right away.*

“Alex… love…I’m right here. Keep breathing,” Ashlyn tries to stay outwardly calm even though she’s definitely not calm inside. “Hey, there you are. You ok?” She asks, seeing Ali’s eyes meet hers. The fearful look in them makes her re-double her efforts to stay composed.

“Yeah.” Ali takes a deep breath. “Think it’s over now. Fuck that hurt…no question that was a real one.”

“I’m going to go get you some new underwear and pants. I’ll help you change and then we’re going to the hospital, ok? It’s time.” Ashlyn says softly.

“Yeah, it’s definitely time.” Ali agrees in a shaky voice, already frightened to feel the next contraction. She closes her eyes when she feels Ashlyn gently cup both of her cheeks, melting into the soothing touch.

“Al…we’re going to meet our twins so soon. You’re so strong and amazing, baby. You can do this.” Ashlyn places little kisses all over her face. “I love you so much. I’m right here with you and I’ve got you. I’ve got you…”

Chapter End Notes

Sooo...any thoughts/predictions on how this will go?
Also, something in this chapter and also in the next one come straight from my real-life experience of my wife having our son. Guesses on what it was in this chapter lol?
Wow, so we're here... the last chapter. And very fittingly, the longest one in this story. Enjoy and please let me know what you think. Thank you so much for coming along on this ride with me, I have appreciated every single one of your very thoughtful comments. There are some important notes at the end, so please read them and respond :-) 

With that said, away we go...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Monday December 24th, continued...

“Sit tight for just a minute, baby. I'm going to grab what we need and I'll be right back. Stay right where you are and just yell out if you need me in here.” Ashlyn kisses Ali’s forehead after getting a little nod. She quickly rushes to find Kyle in the kitchen where he’s pacing around nervously and looking like he might cry.

“Harris…what…” Kyle starts but Ashlyn just gets right to it.

“Hey bro, I know…little scary, but everything is fine and I’m gonna need you to stay chill with me right now.” Ashlyn levels with him. “She’s okay, but this is happening. So, we gotta get going. In the back of my Jeep is a small tarp and some blankets. Put the tarp over the passenger’s seat of Alex’s car and then a blanket over it. Recline it a bit too. Then leave me another extra couple of blankets cause I’m not even going to attempt to put a coat on her right now. Then pull the car up as close to the door as you can.”

“Ok, ok. I can do that.” Kyle seems to settle with having something very specific to do and immediately rushes off.

Ashlyn blows out a quick breath and then runs up the stairs to grab a pair of loose sweatpants and the package of Depends underwear she had bought and hidden in the bathroom cabinet weeks ago.

“Hey, love...how are we doing in here?” The officer is back in the downstairs bathroom in no time.

“I'm okay. Nothing else yet, but I'm feeling the tightness slowly building up again.” Ali stays sitting on the toilet and holds her belly, trying to steel herself for when the next contraction starts.

“Ok, I'm going to help you get underwear and pants on. Then I think we should ride out the next contraction right here so it buys us some time to get you out to the car and on our way after that.” Ashlyn lays out her plan.

“Um, pretty sure those are Edith’s and not mine.” Ali motions to the Depends underwear in Ashlyn’s...
hand with a raised eyebrow.

“Can’t get anything past you, baby.” Ashlyn smiles at her. “I’m well aware that these aren’t the usual sexy and cute panties that perfectly frame that phenomenal ass of yours, but I did my research. Turns out that 87% of pregnant women agree… this is the surefire and preferred way to get to the hospital without looking like you peed yourself.” She holds up the Depends. “But I brought your normal underwear too, we’ll do whatever you want.” She holds up Ali’s underwear in the other hand.

“If you ever tell anyone that I wore Depends…” Ali points a finger at her.

“I’ll take it to the grave.” Ashlyn promises and crosses her heart. “And I’ll put these in my pocket and ask the nurse for a minute when we get there…we’ll change them out and no one will ever know but us.” She winks and puts Ali’s normal underwear into her pants pocket before helping her get the Depends on.

“Ash…” Ali puts her arms around the officer’s neck and holds her tight. “Before I start screaming in your face and damaging your hands… I just want to tell you how much I love you and how wonderful you are. Thank you my sweet, thoughtful, absolutely perfect wife.”

“I love you too, my queen.” Ashlyn kisses her softly. “I promise I won’t take it personally when you start calling me awful names.”

By the time the officer gets Ali’s sweatpants on, the brunette is back to being doubled-over and grunting in pain again. This time she’s less vocal, just scrunched up with her face contorted in agony. *Fuck this is hard.* Ashlyn does her best to stay calm and remind Ali to breathe even though a piece of her heart feels like it’s breaking off at not being able to do anything else to make it better.

“Ok…ok… think it’s over.” Ali starts to breathe more normally after a minute and feels Ashlyn wipe her forehead with a cool washcloth. “I can do this. I can do this.” She tries to give herself some confidence.

“You can totally do this.” Ashlyn repeats in reassurance. “That was thirteen minutes since the last one, doing great baby. Do you want to walk to the car or want me to carry you?’

“I think it might feel good to walk a little.” Ali replies and lets Ashlyn do most of the work in getting to her feet.

It’s slow going, but after a quick hug with an emotional Kyle and a promise to call him and keep him updated, they’re in the car and on their way to the hospital.

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“Fucking Boston, fucking pothole mecca of the world.” Ashlyn grumbles through gritted teeth as she swerves what has to be the tenth huge pothole in less than two miles and just winds up hitting a smaller one anyway.

“Baby, are you gonna swear at every single pothole? Cause this is Boston in the winter and that’s a lot of fucks.” Ali has to laugh a bit at how Ashlyn’s anxiety has chosen to manifest itself. “Just wanna know so I can prepare to hear one or both of our babies yelling ‘fuck’ as they come out of the womb.”

“Sorry, Alex. Just don’t want to make you any more uncomfortable with all the bumps.” Ashlyn lets out a sigh.

“I promise that you can hit every single one of them and I won’t feel any more uncomfortable than I
already am. Just don’t fuck up my chrome rims, Harris, or you’ll be the one who’s uncomfortable.” Ali ties to lighten things just as they get stuck at a red light. She takes the opportunity to take one of Ashlyn’s white-knuckled hands off the steering wheel and brings it up to her mouth for a kiss, immediately feeling just how much it’s shaking. “Look at me for a sec.”

“Sorry baby, I’ll tone it down.” Ashlyn promises, mentally chiding herself for losing her cool as she meets warm whiskey eyes.

“You don’t have to tone it down, sweetheart. I meant what I said before. You’re wonderful. And as much as I’m going to need you today, Ash… you don’t have to be a hero. Just be my wife. Be you… you’re all I ever need. Whatever you’re feeling, let yourself feel and show it. Today is about you too. Everything is going to be okay. We got this.” Ali smiles at her. “Now give me one of those kisses that makes my heart explode and then get back to driving like your normal cocky Masshole self.”

“I love you, Alex…more than…” Ashlyn tries hard as usual to find something strong enough to convey it right now, “literally everything…I just love you so much.”

“Just kiss me.” Ali requests again and this time it’s fulfilled immediately with Ashlyn’s warm, soft mouth taking hers in a deep kiss that makes her brain foggy. “I love you too.” She gets out with her lips still ghosting the officer’s just as a loud horn startles them.

“Yeah alright! Easy.” Ashlyn groans at the broken moment, hands going back to the steering wheel as she sees that the light is green now. The car behind them beeps again. “Fucking, prick. You in that much of a rush? No problem, asshole.” She glares into the rearview mirror as she barely lets the car roll towards the intersection, only punching the gas to go through the light at the last second before it turns red again. She smiles triumphantly when she sees that the guy got stuck at the light. “Ooohh, sucks when that happens! Later fucker!”

“See now that’s what I’m talking about… that’s my girl right there.” Ali reaches over and squeezes the officer’s thigh.

“Can’t believe they lost our paperwork.” Ali grumbles as they sit in the waiting room after managing to get through two contractions in the car. They are coming at around 10 minutes apart now and she is hoping she doesn’t have to deal with more than the one that is already threatening while in the uncomfortable waiting room chair with zero privacy.

“I know, baby. Ridiculous.” Ashlyn tries not to lose it even though she absolutely seething, They had spent almost a half hour two weeks ago pre-registering and doing all the paperwork ahead of time like Dr. Baylor suggested so that they wouldn’t have to wait to check-in. Now here she is doing it all over again while digging to find insurance cards and hurriedly filling out pages of questions that took the two of them to deal with last time.

“Ugh, fuck. Uhhhh.” Ali lets out a grunt before practically curling up into a ball in her chair as the next contraction hits.

Ashlyn drops the pen and clipboard on the floor, immediately wrapping her arms around Ali to support her as best she can. “Slow breaths, love. Just listen to me breathe and try to do the same. You’re doing great, Alex.” She rubs Ali’s back soothingly as the brunette squeezes her bicep so tight she can already feel the bruises forming.

“Don’t wanna be out here anymore.” Ali whispers as the contraction starts to subside.
“I know, baby. I’m gonna do everything to get us in that room before the next one.” Ashlyn wipes her wife’s sweaty forehead with her sleeve and kisses her cheek before getting back to the task at hand. She holds up her end of the bargain, getting through the paperwork in a fury and practically running over to the check-in desk. “Her contractions are about 10 minutes apart and her water broke about 45 minutes ago already.” The officer reminds the in-take receptionist behind the desk who casually takes the paperwork and tells Ashlyn that they’ll be called in when everything is ready.

Ashlyn tries to distract Ali with small talk about some of the ideas Rivera has for his and Emily’s wedding, but her eyes are constantly darting to the check-in desk where their paperwork sits untouched. She does her best to keep her calm, but when Ali goes into another contraction in the waiting room, the officer sees red. As soon as the contraction eases up and Ali is back to sitting normally, the officer stalks over to the desk with a determination like none other.

“Hi…Deputy Chief Ashlyn Harris. Former Army Ranger taskforce Staff Sergeant and current head of defense and preparedness for the Mass Department of Homeland Security.” She holds her hand out to the woman at the desk with a steely gaze.

“Uh, hi.” The woman shakes Ashlyn’s hand, looking perplexed at the odd introduction and quickly looking over to the other receptionist beside her.

“For the record, I have never once in my entire career used any of my titles to throw my weight around or exert influence…but, I hope you understand now that you definitely don’t want to be on my bad side. And when there is literally no one else in here for you to process and my wife is sitting there having contractions on a crappy plastic chair while our paperwork sits here untouched as you two chat about your holidays plans…after your department already messed up by losing our original paperwork to begin with…you sure as hell aren’t on my good side.” Ashlyn’s voice is low, cold, and unyielding. “There’s about 8 minutes left before her next contraction. I suggest you pick up the pace.”

“Sorry officer…uh...Chief Harris. It’ll just be a minute or two.” The woman recovers from being slack-jawed and grabs the pile of paperwork, getting right to typing as Ashlyn nods and walks away.

“Just a few more minutes, baby. I’m sorry, love.” Ashlyn says softly as she sits down and wraps an arm around Ali’s shoulders.

“I heard that. Like a fucking shark.” Ali smiles and presses her face against the officer’s cheek. “God I love you. Thank you.”

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“You’re 5 centimeters dilated, Ali. That means you’re well into active labor now and we’re going to move you into a labor and delivery room. Were you having contractions before your water broke?” Amanda the in-take nurse asks as she finishes the required initial check.

“I guess so. I thought it was just bad cramping and back pain.” Ali explains.

“It never ceases to amaze me how some women have no idea they’re in early labor and others are in here begging to be admitted.” Amanda shrugs with a light laugh.

“And you call me a bad ass.” Ashlyn squeezes Ali’s hand from beside the bed.

“The babies’ heartbeats are strong and everything is looking good. We’ll wheel you right over to your room in just a few minutes and you’ll meet your labor nurse who will get you set up with an IV and explain everything in more detail.” Amanda tells them before typing a couple notes into the
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“Your babies are kicking my ass…and everything else in here.” Ali lets out a deep breath, feeling the tightness starting to build again. “But so far I suppose it seems better than I imagined it would be in my head.”

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“Of course they’re my babies when they’re being difficult.” Ashlyn smiles with a quirked eyebrow. “You’re so damn incredible, you know that? You’re crushing it, Mrs. Harris.” She presses her forehead to Ali’s and gives her a quick peck.

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“Only because I have the best support in the world.” Ali smiles back.

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“No way. Don’t you dare give me credit right now. This is all you, Al.” Ashlyn says in genuine awe of her wife. “I’m just your cheerleader, baby. Anything you need and it’s yours…I’ll even put on a cute mini-skirt and pom-poms if it’ll help.”

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Ali starts to laugh and is about to press Ashlyn to make good on that offer when pain shoots through her mid-section. “Uuuugh, ahhhh, oh god… fucking, fuuuck!” She screams out and just grabs onto whatever she can.

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Ashlyn desperately stifles a yelp as Ali grips her shoulder so hard that she knows the brunette’s nails just broke skin even though her shirt. “You can do it, love. You got this, Alex. Breathe…deep and slow.” She tries to encourage her even though she feels completely useless.

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“Thank you. This is getting intense really fast.” Ali says still trying to catch her breath, realizing that the breaks in between have gotten shorter and the duration much longer within just the hour that they’ve been here.

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“Our warriors just can’t wait to meet their beautiful Mommy.” Ashlyn says sweetly before leaning close to the brunette’s belly. “And we can’t wait to meet you either, loves. Go easy on your Mommy though, cause it breaks Mama’s heart to see her in pain.”

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“It’s ok. I’m sorry for being pushy with you. This is just our first time doing this, so…” Ashlyn gives her an apologetic look, knowing how intense she can be when she’s upset like she was. “Really it’s fine.”

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“No, no. You were right. Sometimes we get so caught up in the bustle of day-to-day that we forget what it’s like for the people coming in for such a huge life moment.” The woman replies. “Anyway,
I just wanted to bring you this.” She holds a blueberry muffin out for Ali. “Not sure if you’re hungry, but they won’t let you eat once you officially check into labor and delivery.”


“Yeah, that’s really nice of you. Thanks.” Ashlyn agrees.

“No problem. Sorry again for before and good luck!” The woman flashes them another smile and quietly slips out.

Ali quickly scarfs down the muffin in record time, leaving Ashlyn a bit wide-eyed. “Geez, hungry much?”

“Yeah well, we never got to that late lunch Kyle was cooking up.” Ali’s stomach rumbles at the thought of it. “You should eat too.”

“Promise I will once we’re settled.” Ashlyn assures her.

“Ok, we’re rolling.” Amanda says cheerily as she comes in with a wheelchair to get Ali to her new room.

“I am so not going to miss flopping around like a beached whale.” Ali jokes a bit as she relies heavily on Ashlyn and Amanda to get into the wheelchair.

“Whales don’t fit in wheelchairs, love.” Ashlyn plays off of Ali’s humor. “Also pretty sure they don’t flop much once they’re beached. You’re zero for two…who are you and what have you done with my facts-only asshole lawyer?”

“Wow, did you just call your pregnant and in-labor wife an asshole?” Amanda blurts out in surprise as she pushes Ali down the hall with Ashlyn beside them carrying their bags.

“Relax, that’s just my sexy idiot’s way of flirting.” Ali winks with a little giggle.

“Well clearly I’ve been doing it wrong for years then.” Amanda shrugs at their exchange and smiles, noting how Ashlyn is holding Ali’s hand as they move along despite having to walk a bit awkwardly to do it while she carries two bags in the other one.

“Obviously.” Ashlyn deadpans and gets a laugh from the nurse.

“Okay, this is your room from now through delivery.” Amanda says as they reach their destination.

The room is exactly as they expected it to be from the tour they took of the maternity wing during their baby preparation classes at the hospital. It’s a mix of looking both homey and comfortable while still being filled with state-of-the-art medical equipment.

“Feel free to get comfortable. There are a couple of hospital gowns right over on that chair for you to change into. You’re also welcome to wear anything you brought with you. I’d just make sure it’s about as accessible as the hospital gown so you don’t have to fight with taking it on and off every time we have to check you. You labor nurse will be in really soon.” Amanda adds before making her way out.

“Thanks, Amanda.” Ashlyn replies and Ali smiles as the nurse leaves. “Hospital gown? Pssssh... amateurs.” She winks at Ali and opens one of their bags to take out a gown that the brunette ordered on Amazon a few weeks ago. It has snap buttons on the back and along the shoulders for easy access, but is made of a comfortable cotton and fits more like a summer dress. It’s also a nice light
blue color with a soft yellow floral pattern.

“No potato sack gown for me.” Ali jokes and points to the hospital gowns on the chair.

“Of course not my queen.” Ashlyn gently lifts Ali up out of the wheelchair and helps her lean against the hospital bed a bit. “You ok standing like that while I help you change?”

“I’m good, honey.” Ali smiles at how over-the-top careful Ashlyn is being with her. And it’s not just that, it’s the way the officer is looking at her right now too. Ashlyn is being quick to get her changed, but her wife’s eyes are simultaneously studying her figure with complete adoration…like she’s trying to memorize it. In this moment when her body seems so foreign and she’s never felt so disconnected to herself, the loving gaze is everything. “Eyes up here, Harris.” She moves her hand to Ashlyn’s cheek with a teasing smile.

“Nope, sorry. Absolutely not…you’re too beautiful.” Ashlyn kisses her forehead with a grin. “Plus your nipples are like little beacons right now, kinda hard not to get drawn in.” She adds playfully.

“Right?! Who knew nipples could even get this dark brown. These little warriors will have to be blind not to find them! I’m counting on that part of breastfeeding not being an issue at least.” Ali laughs. “Well babe, better enjoy it all now before I look like a deflated balloon.” She shrugs.

“I’ll enjoy you in every single state you’re in… you’re perfect, Al. End of story.” Ashlyn says sincerely as she holds Ali’s gaze.

“And you deserve a Medal of Honor just for being such an incredible wife.” Ali declares as the officer finishes putting the gown on her and snapping all the buttons closed. She starts to lean in for a kiss, but the tightness in her belly builds fast and she’s doubled-over in pain before she even knows what’s happening.

Ashlyn jumps into action, using her foot to bring a yoga ball that’s nearby closer to them. “Here, baby…sit on this.” She gently lowers Ali down onto it and crouches down so she can hold her steady on it. “Breathe, love. You got this… almost over.” She whispers into the brunette’s ear as Ali grips the back of her shoulder’s tightly. “Doing so good, Alex.”

“Uggghfhh.” Ali lets out a low grown amidst panting breaths as she recovers. “How…long?”

“Still seven minutes since the last one and about 58 seconds long that time.” Ashlyn answers. “Just stay right there, give yourself a couple minutes to relax.” She says as Ali tries to get up, moving her hands to rub the brunette’s back lightly and keep her in place.

“Well, looks like you two are doing perfectly great without me!” A red-haired woman says as she enters the room. “Hi Alexandra and Chief Harris, I’m Amelie and I’ll be your labor nurse for the next 12 hours.” She has a sweet smile and appears to be in her 40s.

“Hi, you can call me Ali.” Ali introduces herself.

“And Ashlyn is good for me.” The officer adds with a smile, reaching out to shake the woman’s hand while keeping the other on Ali’s waist to help her stay stable on the ball.

“Ali and Ashlyn, that’s easy. I just didn’t want to presume.” Amelie tells them. “So, looks like we’re pretty well into active labor here from what the check-in nurse noted on your chart and I see you’ve already gotten changed into a gown…that looks fabulous by the way. So, would it be okay for me to give you a rundown of details?”

“Absolutely.” Ali replies with Ashlyn still kneeling close and rubbing her back.
“Dr. Baylor was paged and updated on your status. Since Dr. Moore is the current attending physician on staff, Dr. Baylor is planning to come in once you reach 7 centimeters of dilation. That is considered the transitional aspect of labor where you progress towards delivery and it tends to happen a bit more quickly than the earlier stages. It gives her more assurance that her 14 hours on shift are enough to be here for the delivery. Of course, she wants to confirm that you are okay with that approach.” Amelie explains and waits for their response.

“Perfectly okay, we’ve met Dr. Moore and know she understands our plan.” Ali confirms and Ashlyn nods.

“Great. I’ll call Dr. Baylor back to let her know. She lives less than ten minutes away, so she can be here very fast if anything changes.” Amelie assures them. “So, what I’ll do now is get an IV started on you so that we can keep you hydrated. We can start an epidural at this point too if you’d like us to go ahead and do it already. However, we can also wait until the 7 centimeters dilation point. The downside of doing it now is that once you get the epidural, you won’t be able to walk around. It’s really about what you are comfortable with. Our goal is to help you labor in the way that is easiest and most comfortable for you.”

“You think it’s okay if I wait?” Ali looks at Ashlyn in trying to decide.

“Of course I do. We’ll do this however you want to try it, honey.” Ashlyn supports her. “She can change her mind at any point, right?” She checks in with the nurse.

“Right. We can have the anesthesiologist up here at any time and get it going pretty quickly. So, if you want to try without for a while and it gets to be too much, just let me know.” Amelie replies.

“Ok. Let’s wait a bit then. I like the idea of being able to move around right now.” Ali says more confidently.

“Great, you just let me know what you need. We have various chairs, yoga ball sizes, pillows, and even a bathtub. I am going to strap two small monitors around your belly that will keep track of your contractions and the babies’ heartbeats. It’s wireless and on battery, so it shouldn’t be in the way too much. We’ll have Dr. Moore come in to check you every hour to keep an eye on your progression and I’ll be in every 5 to 10 minutes or any time you need me.” Amelie lays out the plan. “The only thing we can’t do now is let you eat because of the epidural on the horizon. Unfortunately I can only offer ice chips.” She adds with a sympathetic frown.

“Well, thank god for blueberry muffins then.” Ali smiles knowingly at Ashlyn before looking back to Amelie. “Ready when you are.” She jokingly puts out her hand.

“I’ll go get that IV kit.” Amelie smiles. “The bathroom is fully stocked with sanitary pads and towels and there are extra blankets and pillows in the little closet over there. Remember, the point is to be as comfortable as possible, so don’t be shy.” She reminds them before writing her name down on the little white board in the room and walking out.

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“Baby, will you be okay if I just quickly eat something?” Ashlyn asks as Ali comes down from what has to the millionth contraction now. With the way things had seemed to move so fast as they got to the hospital around 1pm, the officer was sure they’d be holding their twins by dinnertime. It’s now past 7pm and Ali is still at only 6 centimeters dilation, battling minute long contractions every 3 minutes for the last few hours. And the brunette isn’t the only one battling.

Ashlyn can’t remember the last time she felt so exhausted both mentally and physically, but she can
only guess that it was probably during Ranger training. If anyone had told her before today that her most intense army training could rival being a pregnant woman’s support during labor, she would have laughed at them. But here she sits just trying to find the energy to keep going and beyond flabbergasted by how well Ali is managing this.

The last few hours have been a combination of dealing with the emotional aspects of seeing Ali in pain and the physical effort of moving her wife every few minutes. With all the internal pressure, Ali has felt like she has to pee at least every ten minutes, which has required Ashlyn to practically carry her to bathroom every time. The rest of the time has been filled with moving Ali into various positions, massaging anything she asks for, and letting various parts of her arms, shoulders, and torso get squeezed in a vice grip when the brunette is working her way through the pain. Time has passed both slowly and in a flash, her grumbling stomach being the first thing to clue her in on just how long it’s been since they’ve got here.

“Oh god, you haven’t eaten yet!” Ali practically screeches in concern when she realizes. “Ash, I’m sorry, honey. Sit, eat. Can you just help me get onto the bed to lay down a little?” She requests from her current seated position on the big yoga ball.

“It’s totally okay and of course I can, beautiful.” Ashlyn smiles and lifts Ali into her arms, laying her gently on the hospital bed.

“Love you.” Ali whispers, kissing the side of the officer’s neck as Ashlyn slowly lowers her down. She’s completely physically exerted at this point and, knowing she’s not even close yet, starting to question whether she can actually do this.

“Want me to go in the hallway or over to the corner?” Ashlyn asks after she pulls out a few sacks from one of their bags, feeling guilty for eating in front of her likely very hungry wife.

“No way. Sit right beside me.” Ali replies adamantly as she motions to the chair beside the bed, not wanting Ashlyn to be more than a foot away right now.

Ashlyn just nods and sits down, doing her best to eat fast.

“You are the absolute sweetest, Harris.” Ali says adoringly even as another contraction builds, her lips curling into a little smile at what the officer has in her hands. A package of strawberry pop-tarts, a peanut butter and raspberry jam sandwich, and a quinoa protein bar… all things the brunette would never ever eat. She knows immediately that it’s no coincidence. “I’m starving, but… no appetite. Feel free to eat something… ugh… better.” She barely grunts out as the contraction takes hold.

Ashlyn immediately drops the pop-tart she was eating and stands up to hold Ali’s hand only to get yelled at.

“EAT!” Ali uses any breath she has left to shout and wave her off before just groaning through gritted teeth.

“Oh.” Ashlyn replies apologetically and slinks back into the chair, doing her best to wolf down food even though it’s like trying to eat sawdust right now with her stomach in knots over Ali’s pain. The mix of feelings is overwhelming. On one hand, she’s in complete awe of her wife and happy that the babies are on their way. On the other, it physically hurts to see Ali going through this and she feels a bit useless even knowing deep down that she’s doing everything she can.

Despite having to choke it down, the food works like a charm and Ashlyn immediately feels more energized. And it’s just in time too. After hours of things being static, the contractions suddenly start ramping up over the next thirty minutes, now being two minutes apart and almost a minute and a half
long. Ashlyn’s arm is being squeezed into oblivion every couple of minutes and she’s running to get cold washcloths to wipe Ali’s sweaty forehead in between. She had initially kept up her encouraging words, but Ali quickly stopped talking when things got more intense and shortly after put her hand up to signal that she just wanted silent support.

“Hi ladies. Ali you’re doing great. Let’s have a quick look to see where you are now that things are changing.” Dr. Moore encourages as she takes a couple minutes to check everything. “You’re at 7 centimeters.”

“Oh thank god!” Ali says in relief, her first words in nearly twenty minutes.

“Looking really great. This puts you officially in the transitional labor stage and things tend to move along more quickly now. At 10 centimeters, we’ll have you start pushing. So, we’re getting there and I would estimate within the next couple of hours if not sooner. The babies’ heartbeats are strong and everything looks good.” Dr. Moore says positively. “I’m going to go ahead and page Dr. Baylor as well as have the epidural team come up to get that going for you. You’ve done amazing getting to this point without it.”

“Thank you so much, Dr. Moore.” Ashlyn says gratefully as Ali goes right into another contraction.

“You’re doing wonderfully too by the way, Chief.” Dr. Moore smiles on her way out and Ashlyn just nods before her attention goes right back on Ali.

“I’m…so…fucking…tired…Ash.” Ali gets out through panting breaths when the contraction eases up.

“I know, baby. You’re crushing this, Alex… positively crushing it. You’re amazing and you can do it…almost there.” The officer brushes some hair away from Ali’s face. “I love you so much, beautiful. You’re such a warrior.”

“Almost there. Almost there.” Ali repeats in a whisper with a little smile as she locks onto Ashlyn’s eyes. “Your babies are gonna kill me, but I love you so fucking hard, Harris.”

It’s only about ten more minutes before Ali starts to tremble uncontrollably from the contraction intensity. Ashlyn calls the nurse in immediately, but Amelie just assures her that it’s completely normal for this part of labor. Before she knows it the officer finds herself trembling a bit too, the emotions inside seemingly intensifying right alongside Ali’s contractions.

“Dr. Baylor should be here any minute now and the anesthesiologist will be here within about 30 minutes to place the epidural. I’m just going add Dr. Moore’s notes to the online record, but let me know if you need anything while I’m in here.” Amelie explains as she starts typing away at computer in the room.

“Thanks.” Ali says softly, just trying to rest in the little time she has before the next contraction. The back of the bed is inclined so that she’s pretty much sitting up in the most comfortable position at the moment. She closes her eyes, thinking to herself how lucky she is as Ashlyn maneuvers to massage her shoulders as best as she can in the tight space. She can’t imagine how any woman ever does this alone. The thought is fleeting as the next contraction hits and white spots pop behind her eyelids with everything clenching so tightly that she feels like she might snap. Wordlessly, hands stop massaging her shoulders and a strong forearm is suddenly placed in her grasp to squeeze as she battles through the agony; it’s as if she and Ashlyn are of one mind.

Ashlyn takes a deep breath and wipes the beads of sweat from Ali’s forehead again as the brunette comes down from a really strong 90 second contraction. There’s a nervous flutter in her stomach and
she feels her legs trembling a bit.

“That was a particularly strong one. That’s good, you’re doing great, Ali. They really don’t get any worse than that.” Amelie encourages as she sees the peaked lines on the screen of the contraction monitor.

Ali just nods and tries to catch her breath, opening her eyes when she feels Ashlyn’s arm slip from her now loosened grasp.

“Alex, I’m gonna sit for a sec.” Ashlyn mumbles, feeling slightly dizzy. And then it’s complete bliss… some of most restful sleep that she can ever remember having. It feels so good right now when she needs it most and she hopes more than anything she can have a couple more hours of it, just like this.

“ASH!” Ali screams out as her wife suddenly slumps down against the railing of the hospital bed before her eyes roll back and her legs give out…her body falling back onto the floor with a thud, her head just missing the hospital tray table by a couple inches.

“Shit.” Amelie quickly presses the emergency call button in the room when she sees Ashlyn down on the floor, rushing over to the fallen woman. "It’s okay, Ali.” She tries to reassure the frantic brunette who just keeps shouting her wife’s name. “What happened?” She asks, having not looked over until she heard the unmistakable thud.

“I don’t know. She started to say something about sitting down and then she fell.” Ali desperately explains as tears stream down her face. “Please help her! Ash, get up, baby.” She pleads in sobs.

“It’s ok, Ali. I think she just passed out.” Amelie tries to simultaneously calm the brunette and check on Ashlyn. “Ashlyn?” She lightly shakes the officer’s thigh. “Ashlyn, can you open your eyes?”

“Mmm.” Ashlyn groans softly as voices pull her from the wonderful sleep that she’s so hesitant to leave behind. ‘Ashlyn’ the voice is louder and more insistent, a tug on her leg. The officer begrudgingly opens her eyes expecting to see the ceiling of their bedroom, instead her brow furrows in confusion when she sees a bright fluorescent light and three faces looking down at her. “What…” She immediately tries to get up.

“No, no. Stay down and still.” Dr. Baylor instructs and gently holds Ashlyn’s shoulder down. “Can you hear me?”

“Yeah.” Ashlyn replies at the odd question, her brain still trying to process what is happening.

“Good. Do you know who I am, Ashlyn?” Dr. Baylor asks.

“Of course I do, Baylor. What’s going on?” Ashlyn shoots a question right back as it dawns on her where she is and why. “Where’s Ali?”

“She’s right there, don’t worry. She’s fine. Just answer a couple more questions, ok?” Dr. Baylor says gently. “Do you know where you are?”
“At the hospital, our twins are coming.” Ashlyn replies easily.

“That’s right, good. Do you know what time it is?” The doctor questions, knowing how easily spouses of women in labor tend to lose track of date and day of the week, but are usually attuned to the time.

“Was like around 8pm last time I checked.” Ashlyn answers.

“Good. She’s ok.” Dr. Baylor announces more for Ali’s benefit than anyone else. “You just fainted, Ashlyn. Does anything hurt at all? Your head? Your back?”

“I did? Fuck.” Ashlyn tries to remember, vaguely recalling now that she was getting dizzy and going to sit down. “Nothing hurts. I feel completely fine.” She tries to sit up again and this time Dr. Baylor lets her. Her eyes immediately go to Ali who is leaning over the rail of the hospital bed, tears running down her cheeks with a terrified look on her face. “Oh Alex… I’m okay. I’m sorry, honey. It’s okay, baby.” She tries hard to comfort her wife while feeling completely embarrassed about what just happened.

“Should I get a BP and pulse?” Amelie asks.

“No. Well not unless Ashlyn wants it.” Dr. Baylor looks at the officer. “Ashlyn if we do any kind of treatment in here, take your blood pressure, check your pulse, any of it… we legally have to admit you. Which means you’ll have to go down to the emergency room to get checked out and I have no idea how long that would take. I know you don’t have a concussion and my professional opinion is that you just passed out from an emotional stress reaction. Happens more than you think in these situations. But I’ll leave it to you to decide how you’re feeling and if you want to go get checked.” She explains.

“God no, I’m fine.” Ashlyn gets to her feet only to be directed into the chair by Amelie and Dr. Baylor.

“Easy there, killer.” Dr. Baylor says lightly. “Give yourself a few minutes. Amelie, will you grab some orange juice and get me a disposable glucose monitor?”

“Al, I’m okay baby. I promise. I actually feel really good.” Ashlyn reassures her still sad and scared looking wife.

“Promise?” Ali asks with her lip quivering, her heart still racing. “Will you get checked?”

“Honey, I swear to you… I’m fine.” Ashlyn scoots her chair over a few feet and reaches out to take the brunette’s hand. “If I wasn’t, I’d go get checked. But I’m really okay.”

“Shouldn’t she get checked?” Ali appeals to Dr. Baylor.

“I think she just fainted, Ali. It’s a normal thing, especially in stressful situations like this one. She says she’s okay and I believe her.” Dr. Baylor tries her best to find a compromise between both women just as Amelie comes back in.

“Good timing.” Dr. Baylor takes the orange juice and glucose monitor and places them on the tray table near Ashlyn before wheeling over the blood pressure machine. “I can’t officially check you if you don’t want to be admitted, Ashlyn. But I can’t stop you if you happen to use the equipment in the room to check yourself when we step out for a few minutes. I mean, anyone could easily slip on this blood pressure cuff and press this button right here…or put the glucose monitor against their index finger like this and push this button, holding it down for 30 seconds. It’ll give a little finger prick, but I’m sure there are band-aids on the counter over there.” Dr. Baylor says nonchalantly and
then gives Ashlyn a determined look. “Do we understand each other, Chief?”


“Good. I’ll be back in a just a couple minutes to check on you, Ali.” Dr. Baylor says as she and Amelie purposely leave the room.

“Thank you.” Ali breathes out in relief as the women head out the door. “Hurry, Ash.”

“Alright. Alight.” Ashlyn concedes and decides to get the blood test over with first. “Sure, make the woman who just fainted and hates needles stick herself.” She grumbles under her breath and closes her eyes as she presses it to her finger and pushes the button. It takes less than a minute for the monitor to show a result and then the officer moves to take her own blood pressure, all the while repeatedly telling Ali that she’s fine.

“What were the numbers?” Dr. Baylor asks casually as she walks in a few minutes later.

“Blood pressure said 119 over 82. The blood monitor said 91.” Ashlyn replies.

“Perfect. All normal. With your blood sugar so stable, I’m guessing you ate recently and you just fainted from a stress reaction.” Dr. Baylor explains. “She’s fine, Ali.” She assures the brunette before telling Ashlyn to drink the orange juice anyway.

“I thought contractions were coming about two minutes apart?” Dr. Baylor questions Amelie as she looks over the monitor log for the last half hour.

“They were.” Amelie replies, looking perplexed. “Well until…” She motions to Ashlyn.

“Hmmmm.” Dr. Baylor continues to look things over with a furrowed brow, noting that it has been about 15 minutes since Ashlyn fainted and Ali hasn’t had a single contraction in that time, the usually peaked lines are all completely flat.

“Is everything okay?” Ashlyn immediately gets concerned.

“Fine. Everything’s fine.” Dr. Baylor assures them. “Babies’ heartbeats are strong and Ali’s vitals are good. Just no contraction activity right now, which I think is just a reaction to being upset a few minutes ago. We’ll give it a little bit.”

“I have never seen anything like this.” Amelie muses, never in her 18 years of being a maternity ward nurse seeing a woman’s contractions completely flat-line during either active or transitional labor.

“Neither have I.” Dr. Baylor admits, in awe of the whole thing herself. “But you haven’t been around these two long enough yet.” She smiles at the two women. “They practically share a body. So, I can’t say this surprises me all that much. I’m sure everything will pick back up again soon. Just try to relax, Ali.”

“Great, we’re a medical marvel.” Ashlyn tries to joke a bit before leaning in close to kiss Ali softly. “I’m so sorry, baby. I’m okay…I didn’t mean to freak you out. I don’t know what happened.” She stokes the brunette’s cheek.

“Don’t apologize, not your fault.” Ali reassures her. “God, watching you just slump and fall like that…scared the hell out of me. You almost hit your head so badly on that tray table.” She entwines her hand with the officer’s. “Love you. So glad you’re okay.”
“I love you too, beautiful. What can I do to help relax you?” Ashlyn asks sweetly.

“Well, as much as this probably isn’t good….I’m thankful for the break.” Ali jokes a bit about the lack of contractions. “Will you sit next to me and just hold me a little? I’m pretty tired.”

“Anything you want, Alex.” Ashlyn immediately scoots to sit in the bed as best she can and pulls Ali against her chest. She looks down to see Ali close her eyes and take a few deep breaths, clearly inhaling in her scent. “I got you, sweetheart. Always.” She whispers and rubs Ali’s back with her hand.

Unfortunately, the peaceful moment only lasts about five more minutes before the anesthesiologist arrives with the epidural. Dr. Baylor immediately suggests that Ashlyn step out while it gets placed, but the officer is adamant that she’s staying. She’s not allowed to touch Ali or even be closer than ten feet while the anesthesiologist works, but she still feels better being present. It only takes about 15 minutes and even though she knows a huge needle is going into Ali’s lower back, she’s in front of the brunette and can’t see it happening. The whole thing goes by pretty fast, especially with Ali still not having any contractions to work around, and it doesn’t faze her at all like she thought it might.

“Interesting. If you were gonna pass out, I would’ve bet everything that this would’ve been the moment.” Dr. Baylor comments to Ashlyn as the anesthesiologist wraps things up.

“Me too.” Ashlyn laughs in amusement. “Go figure.” She shrugs before taking the opportunity to check in with the doctor while Ali is still occupied. “So this no contraction thing…”

“I’m not sure. Can’t say I’ve ever seen it happen quite like this…you two really are pretty remarkable in how you connect to each other.” Dr. Baylor admits. “We’ll give it a little longer, these babies definitely want out and I’m sure things will start up again. The body is amazing and knows what it’s doing. I have a back-up plan if we don’t see something soon.”

“God, I feel so dumb for going down like that.” Ashlyn shakes her head, still embarrassed. “I don’t understand. I’ve never fainted in my whole life. I’ve passed out from shock and blood loss before with injuries… but just randomly passing out like that, never. Not even close.”

“Don’t be ashamed. Seriously, it happens all the time in these delivery rooms.” Dr. Baylor tries to reassure her as she thinks over what the officer just said. She immediately gets a doubtful look from Ashlyn that clearly conveys she’s not the average person, especially with what she has endured mentally and physically in her past. “Well… let me ask you this then. In your whole life, have you ever cared for or loved someone like you do her?” She motions to Ali.

“Never.” Ashlyn replies without the slightest pause.

“There’s your answer.” Dr. Baylor smiles. “And I’m sure hers is the same…which is why we have no contractions.” She nudges Ashlyn’s arm with a little laugh and then goes to sign off on the paperwork required by the anesthesiologist.

How does it feel?” Ashlyn asks, having resumed her place beside Ali on the bed after being very careful not to touch the tiny taped down epidural tube going into her back. It has been about an hour since she fainted and everything stalled, but still no contractions.

“It doesn’t.” Ali giggles a bit. “I can’t really feel anything below right here.” She points to her ribs. “It’s so weird.”

“Then it’s working perfectly.” Amelie says from beside them at the computer station.
“At least I feel a little less exhausted now.” Ali shrugs. “I just want them here.”

“I know, love. Me too…but they’ll come when they’re ready.” Ashlyn kisses her forehead and then puts her hand against Ali’s belly. “Come on you two. We’re so ready to hold you, and kiss you, and love on you. Just go easy on your Mommy. In fact, maybe just come gliding right on out of there like little penguins on an ice slide.”

“That’s cute and kinda gross, Harris.” Ali laughs and then pauses immediately when she feels her belly tighten. “Oh…”

Ashlyn feels it too against her hand, searching Ali’s face for a reaction and only seeing one of confusion.

“I don’t feel anything but tightness.” Ali says after a few seconds.

“It’s definitely a contraction.” Amelie announces with a smile. “Just no pain now with the epidural, so all you feel is the muscle movement and pressure.

“Why did I wait to get the epidural again?” Ali questions with a little chuckle, still shocked that she’s able to talk through a contraction.

“Cause you’re a feisty, bad ass warrior princess who never would’ve had it any other way.” Ashlyn reminds her with a smile.

“Right. Thanks, baby.” Ali leans her head against the officer’s shoulder.

“Well, that was a pretty mild one and the tightness will still feel intense when they get stronger again, but at least the pain won’t be there. I’m going to go tell Dr. Baylor that contractions seem to be restarting…this is good.” Amelie explains before leaving the room.

“Alright you two little warriors…bring it.” Ashlyn gently rubs Ali’s belly again.

“Correction…she meant bring it gently. Well, within reason anyway.” Ali plays back, rubbing her own belly. “Of course the second you tell them to get a move on, the contractions start again. I’d say coincidence, but they always seem to respond to you.”

“They just like my jokes… let’s see how long that lasts.” Ashlyn shrugs.


“Harsh.” Ashlyn playfully taps the brunette’s cheek.

“I’m kidding, honey…I give it two months.” Ali winks just as her belly tightens again.

“Let’s see here.” Dr. Baylor walks in just as the contraction is about halfway through. “Alright, looks like we have some action back. Five minutes in between… not particularly strong, but they’ll build back up hopefully. I’m going to give it another half hour and then check you again.” She explains. “This might be the most comfortable you’ll get for a while. So, I suggest taking advantage and trying to get a little sleep.”

“Good idea.” Ashlyn agrees, seeing that Ali still looks wiped out despite saying she feels less tired.

“That means you too, Ashlyn.” Dr. Baylor looks at her pointedly.

“Yes, General Baylor.” Ashlyn salutes her playfully.
“I could get used to that.” Dr. Baylor laughs and walks out.

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Ali manages to fall right to sleep and is having a good nap right through the contractions. Ashlyn closes her eyes, but the little sleep that comes is anything but restful. The officer stays as still as possible since Ali is resting on her shoulder and just does her best to relax. As promised, Dr. Baylor is back just half an hour later and gently rousing Ali so she can check her.

“So, good news is that you’re at 8 centimeters.” Dr. Baylor declares in an upbeat tone.

“Which means there’s bad news.” Ali immediately hones in on the doctor’s facial expression.

“Really didn’t think you were gonna slip one by the wonder attorney here, did you?” Ashlyn quirks an eyebrow at the doctor.

“Of course not! And it’s not bad news.” Dr. Baylor assures them. “Your contractions have gotten to be three minutes apart now over the last half hour, but not much difference in the strength. There’s no way that these contractions resulted in this dilation progress. So, I’m thinking you made this progression to 8 centimeters with those intense contractions you were having before they completely stopped.”

“So what does this mean? Level with us.” Ali demands softly.

“I am going to give it another hour to see if your contractions naturally strengthen on their own, but my guess is that they might not at this point. With twins, the uterine muscles can really struggle to generate strong enough contractions to begin with because they are so stretched. While you were doing well before, I think the interruption might mean that they don’t come back as strong as we need them to be now. I could be wrong though, which is why I’m going to give it a little more time.” Dr. Baylor explains.

“And if you’re right and they don’t get stronger?” Ashlyn asks, the guilt sitting like a rock in her stomach.

“Then the plan is to start you on Pitocin. It’s a safe medication that we put through the IV to produce contractions. We use it all the time to safely induce labor. I’m pretty sure that will give you the boost you need to get those contractions back to where they need to be. It tends to result in unnaturally strong contractions, but you’re on the epidural now so it shouldn’t be a problem in terms of tolerance. Does that sound like an okay game plan for you two? The alternative would be to head right to a c-section.” Dr. Baylor lays it out for them.

“Oh hell no, I didn’t go through all this to not do everything possible before that c-section.” Ali says resolutely. “We do the Pitocin. C-section is still the last thing I want.”

“What she said.” Ashlyn just completely defers to Ali.

“Ok, plan in place then. We’re still going to give it another hour though, so get some more rest if you can.” Dr. Baylor suggests before leaving again.

“You’re doing so great, honey. Think you can sleep a little more?” Ashlyn smiles at her wife.

“I’m going to try. But how about you talk to me first…I may be in labor, but I’m not blind.” Ali gives the officer a knowing look. When Ashlyn’s smile doesn’t reach her eyes, it’s always a dead giveaway that she’s upset about something no matter how hard she tries to hide it.
“Here I am lecturing Baylor that she can’t slip one by you…” Ashlyn shakes her head, knowing she should have counted on Ali being just as perceptive as usual.

“Exactly, so just tell me.” Ali presses her.

“Obviously I couldn’t really control it and didn’t do it on purpose, but I feel so stupid and guilty for fainting on you. I’m so sorry… it made you upset and your contractions stopped because of me. Now you have to go through all this extra crap because of it. I feel so bad about it.” Ashlyn says sadly. “Maybe I should’ve eaten more or rested more, I don’t know.”

“Alright, Hero…listen real close.” Ali reaches to hold the officer’s face in her hand. “First, our warrior twins are going to get here eventually and however that happens to be is exactly the way it was meant to. After everything we have been through, you should know that better than anyone.” She pauses as another contraction tightens up her midsection and gives herself a minute.

“You okay?” Ashlyn asks.

“Yeah, it’s passing now.” Ali nods and gives it a few extra seconds before finishing her thought. “Second, I couldn’t be more proud. Yes you fainted and yes I got upset…and yes, everything got stalled. But you know what… I couldn’t be any damn prouder of that fact that we just completely baffled a whole slew of medical professionals because we’re that connected to each other. I love you so deeply, Ash…and you love me the same. And we have a whole ward of doctors and nurses that can back that right up with the physical evidence of what just happened. It’s so real that it’s science, baby.” She pulls Ashlyn’s face towards hers and kisses her slow and deep.

“I love you so much, Al. God, if I ever lost you…” Ashlyn says emotionally.

“Hey now… nobody is losing anything but sleep right now.” Ali kisses her chin. “You okay?”

“I’m great, promise.” Ashlyn smiles at her.

“Good.” Ali smiles back at seeing the officer’s smile reach her eyes this time. “Think I can go back to being the needy one now? Cause I’m gonna need my big tough Hero back to get me through this.”

“You sure can, beautiful. I’m right here and I’ve got you.” Ashlyn pulls Ali gently into her shoulder again. “Try to sleep.”

“I know you do.” Ali closes her eyes and settles into the crook of Ashlyn’s neck as best she can. “You’ve always got me and I’m so damn lucky.”

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“Uuuuughhh, fuck… I need to push so bad!” Ali screams out as she squeezes Ashlyn’s arm tightly.

“Don’t do any pushing. I know it seems counterintuitive, but not until we tell you.” Amelie immediately warns her gently. “I’m going to get Dr. Baylor to come have a look.”

Dr. Baylor had woken the couple up around 9:30pm to check in again, but nothing had changed in terms of contraction strength or dilation. She administered the Pitocin as planned and it only took about 30 minutes after that for Ali’s contractions to come on fast and furious.

Despite not feeling the pain of it, the intensity and pressure the brunette feels is incredible. Each contraction takes her breath away, she’s shaking and sweaty just like earlier in the day and completely wiped out already after an hour of it.
“You’ve got this, Alex. You can do it, baby.” Ashlyn talks Ali through yet another contraction, her forearm pretty much numb at this point from being squeezed all day and likely to be purple by tomorrow. It’s now just past 11pm and she has completely lost track of what day it is, just that the hours have been both endless and a blur.

“Fuck, I feel like I just need to poop or push or something.” Ali groans. “So much pressure.”

“I’m sorry, honey. Can I do anything?” Ashlyn asks sympathetically.

“No, I don’t think so.” Ali says defeatedly, knowing she just needs to keep going. “Just…if I poop in this damn bed while giving birth, don’t tell me. Like don’t ever, ever, ever tell me. Not even like 20 years from now. I’ll die of embarrassment.”

“Promise I’ll take it with me to the grave, baby.” Ashlyn assures her, unable to keep the little smirk off her face knowing that Ali must be really out of it right now to even be talking about poop. She would normally be mortified to have this conversation.

“God, I hope I don’t poop.” Ali mumbles anxiously.

“Honey… just stop saying the word poop… stop thinking about it… and just focus on the babies. Forget all about the poop, ok?” Ashlyn tries to redirect her.

“Yeah, ok. You’re right. Who the fuck cares about poop? We’re going to hold our babies soon… I can’t wait.” Ali barely gets out a little smile just before another huge contraction hits and her face contorts.

“Wow that is a big one. Doing so good, Ali… really, really great. Just hang in.” Dr. Baylor says as she walks in and sees the peaked lines across the screen. “This is definitely going the way I hoped, maybe even better.” She waits for the contraction to pass before checking the brunette.

“She says she feels like she needs to push and there’s a lot of pressure.” Ashlyn informs the doctor since Ali can’t seem to speak right now.

“That’s a good sign!” Dr. Baylor responds as she checks. “Okay you’re definitely over 9 centimeters, but not quite at 10… so close. I’d say in like 30 minutes or less, you’ll be pushing. I can feel the top of the baby’s head, she’s right there. Just hang on and don’t push at all until we tell you to… pushing early can cause the area to swell and tighten up.”

“No pushing.” Ali confirms, her eyes still shut with her hand coming up to give a shaky thumbs up.

“I’ll have Amelie empty your bladder with the catheter again and that will help alleviate the pressure just a bit hopefully.” Dr. Baylor says, heading off to get into a proper set of delivery scrubs since it can be any time now. “Be back in like 10 minutes to check again.” She adds before walking out.

It only takes another 13 minutes and a quick check by Dr. Baylor for the action to start. “We’re at ten and ready to go… she’s coming down already, I can see her head.” The doctor says excitedly. “She certainly won’t be bald… got some good hair going on. Want to see, Ashlyn?”

“Oh uh… sure… I mean, if you’re okay with me…” Ashlyn looks at her wife.

“Go.” Ali smiles at her, even in this moment appreciating the officer’s penchant for all things science.

“So, right in there.” Dr. Baylor motions with one hand as her other hand parts Ali’s vaginal lips a bit.

“Oh wow… she really does have hair!” Ashlyn says happily with a tight smile, her emotions a bit
conflicted because this is both one of the coolest and yet most terrifying things she’s ever seen. Oddly, she can’t seem to peel her eyes away even though she wants to.

“Eyes…up here…Harris.” Ali finally snaps her out of in, her breathing labored again as another contraction starts.

“Right here my queen.” The officer resumes her spot next to the bed and places her arm back in the brunette’s grasp. “She’s right there, Al. Beautiful…you can do this, baby.” She says in Ali’s ear as the next contraction rips through.

Amelie takes up residence on the side of the bed opposite Ashlyn and Dr. Baylor sits on a stool at the base of the bed. “Okay, Ali…on the next one, we push. I want you to reach down and grab the back of your knees and pull them towards you… then you’ll push as hard as you can for ten seconds. It’s almost like doing an intense crunch. Then you’ll rest for ten seconds and then push for another ten. We want to get in 2 to 3 good pushes with each contraction. Let’s aim for two right now, ok?” The doctor instructs.

“K.” Ali barely gets out, feeling out of breath still.

“Ashlyn… you help her keep count with Amelie. Support her leg on that side.” Dr. Baylor directs.

“Got it.” Ashlyn nods and does everything she can to prepare herself. The next few seconds are almost eerily quiet as everyone just looks at the monitor and waits for the next contraction to build. What happens next is something she never could have prepared for.

“Ok and push!” Dr. Baylor shouts.

Ali does everything just like she was told and Ashlyn eyes go wide. The brunette’s face goes completely red, veins popping out on her forehead and neck as she trembles through pushing with all her might. She looks like her head might explode, her teeth gritted together and her expression completely scrunched tight. Ashlyn helps hold her leg up but forgets to count until Amelie says “count with me, Ashlyn.”

Intense. Powerful. Extreme. Insane. Those are the first words that come to mind as the first fifteen minutes of pushing pass. All Ashlyn can do is try to support Ali is best she can while she stands there in complete and utter awe of her wife’s strength…already sure there is no way in hell she could ever do this.

“Fuck…can’t do this…anymore….can’t.” Ali says through ragged breaths. She feels like she just ran a marathon and like her body can’t physically do any more.

“Her head is just start to poke out, but let’s rest for the next couple of contractions and try to get you back a little energy.” Dr. Baylor suggests.

“I can’t, Ash…I can’t.” Ali pulls Ashlyn in closer by the arm, her face panicked and desperate.

“Maybe let’s try a more helpful position.” Amelie offers.

“Good idea. Maybe get some gravity working for us a bit. Can we sit you up more Ali?” Dr. Baylor asks and gets a nod from the brunette.

“Alex, you can do this, love. I know you can. You’re killing it… just a little longer, baby. You can do it.” Ashlyn encourages her as the nurse adjusts the bed so Ali is sitting up more, her knees bent with feet planted on the bed.
“Perfect.” Dr. Baylor remarks. “Easier for you to reach your legs now too. How are you doing?”

“Exhausted.” Ali says dejectedly.

“I know…you’re doing perfectly, Ali. You really are. We’re almost there.” Dr. Baylor tries to bolster her confidence.

“You really can do it, Alex. I know you can.” Ashlyn reiterates.

“Need you.” Ali holds Ashlyn’s arm tightly, her eyes pleading.

“Oh…” Ashlyn’s mind races to figure out what on earth she can possibly do to make this better.

“Ready to push again, Ali?” Dr. Baylor presses a bit.

“Wait.” It hits Ashlyn like a lightning bolt. “Can we scoot her forward a little and can I get in behind her? Al…is that okay?”

“Yes… yes… I want that.” Ali says emotionally, desperately looking at Dr. Baylor for confirmation.

“Oh yeah, we can definitely do that. Just be really careful of that epidural hookup back there, ok?” Dr. Baylor replies and hears Ali let out a relieved sob. “Don’t be shy Ali, you can tell us what you need.” She reminds the brunette.

Ashlyn doesn’t hesitate and takes off her shoes and pants, carefully slipping in behind her wife after Amelie helps scoot her forward. “Is this good, honey?”

“So good… need you.” Ali presses herself back into the officer.

“I’m right here, beautiful. You got me…and I’ve got you. Let’s do this.” Ashlyn whispers into Ali’s ear.

“Alright, here we go…” Dr. Baylor resets them.

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**Tuesday, December 25th**

The feel of Ashlyn wrapped around her changes everything. Her body feels protected and warm, and most importantly, not alone. It physically feels like her completely spent body has help now, that they’re doing this together. It gives her all the strength she needs to keep going.

“Push! Hold it, hold it, hold it…come on, Alex! Keep it going…hold it, longer…come on, you can go longer…push, baby, push!” Ashlyn doesn’t even recognize her own voice, letting Ali do the work but reaching to put her hands over the brunette’s in helping her pull her legs back. She’s suddenly this weird mix of loving wife and commanding drill sergeant, leaving Amelie do the counting and just egging Ali on in whatever way that seems to be working.

7 minutes and three rounds of pushing is all it takes before the breakthrough.

“Her head is out!” Dr. Baylor says cheerily. “One more good push and she’ll be out, Ali. One more!”

“She’s almost here, baby. You can do it…one more!” Ashlyn’s heart races wildly.

“One more.” Ali confirms as she feels the contraction building.
With a loud grunt from the brunette, their baby girl is in Dr. Baylor’s hands, a huge gush of fluid releasing along with her. “And that would be baby number two’s water breaking. He won’t be too far behind.” Dr. Baylor remarks even as she works to quickly suction the little girl’s mouth and nose, wiping her face too.

And then the most beautiful sound in the world as the two women stare wide-eyed at the tiny, blue, slimy body placed on Ali’s bare chest….crying, loud and strong.

“Whew, she’s got lungs! Looking great so far, ladies.” Dr. Baylor says as Amelie makes notes on the baby’s appearance and movement to eventually tally an Apgar score that rates her health.

“Ash…” Ali’s trembling hands go to immediately hold their daughter against her chest.

“She’s perfect…look what you made, Alex… perfect.” Tears stream down the officer’s face as puts her finger against a tiny little palm and watches their baby girl grip it.

“She’s so beautiful. You made her too.” Ali’s tears start to fall too, completely unable to take her eyes off of the tiny little girl with an ample tuft of matted brown hair still wailing loudly on her chest.

“So beautiful. Just like you, Al. She looks just like you.” Ashlyn says happily and strokes the baby’s head, taking in miniaturized versions of Ali’s nose and lips.

“She’s doing excellent.” Amelie assures them as the baby’s skin starts to pink more and her movement and reflex reactions look normal.

“Hear that, baby girl…you’re excellent. You’re wonderful.” Ashlyn says softly, kissing Ali’s head as she continues to stroke their daughter’s head lightly. It has a clear lulling effect, the baby starting to settle and the crying dying down to soft little cooing.

“Look at you, Mama.” Dr. Baylor smiles at them.

“She had this effect well before now…best Mama ever and one incredibly lucky Mommy too.” Ali lightly nudges Ashlyn’s cheek with the side of her head.

“Okay, so I’m satisfied that the two cords aren’t tangled up or causing any problems…think you can use those long arms of yours to reach and cut her cord?” Dr. Baylor asks Ashlyn.

“Oh uh, yeah. Just let me wipe my eyes.” Ashlyn uses one of her hands to wipe her tears, terrified she’s going to mess something up. “The pressure right now, geez.” She breathes out as Amelie hands her scissors and Dr. Baylor clamps the cord in the right spots.

“Relax, idiots do this.” Dr. Baylor jokes to calm her down. “Right there.” She points to the spot.

“Well, I am an idiot, sooo.” Ashlyn smiles and lets out one more quick breath before reaching out from behind Ali to complete the task. The cord is white and almost rubbery, nothing like she expected and she actually has to put in a little effort to cut it. Still, it’s over in seconds and her focus goes right back to Ali and their daughter.

“Do we have a name?” Amelie asks as she starts to type out a hospital tag for the baby’s foot.

“Harper Kai?” Ali checks with Ashlyn to make sure they are still in agreement now that she’s here.

“Absolutely.” Ashlyn smiles.

“That’s a beautiful name, so strong.” Dr. Baylor comments. “She’s definitely bound to be a kick ass
woman just like you two.”

“Doesn’t matter… she can be anything she wants. She’s perfect…she’ll always be perfect.” Ashlyn says softly, her tone emotional again.

“Babe…love you.” Ali reaches her hand back to hold Ashlyn’s face and pull her closer.

“Love you too, Alex.” She nuzzles into Ali’s hair and just keeps watching their little girl wiggle around a bit on Ali’s chest.

“I’m so going to remind you that you said that when she’s a teenager, Chief.” Dr. Baylor chuckles as she moves an ultrasound probe over Ali’s belly.

“Ughhhh.” Ali suddenly tenses with a soft grunt.

“Alex?” Ashlyn says worriedly.

“It’s okay, just a stronger contraction. They’re building quick again…forgot about baby boy, huh?” Dr. Baylor says playfully.

“Kinda…dear god, I hope we don’t do that again.” Ashlyn half jokes, moving her hands from their sweet baby girl so her arms can hold Ali close again. “You okay, love?”

“Yes you can, Alex. Look what you already did baby… she’s amazing.” Ashlyn puts her hand over the one Ali is using to hold their daughter. “You can do it again… our baby boy is waiting to meet us. We’re so close. I’m right here just like before…together, ok?”

“Ok.” Ali agrees. Ok.” She repeats a bit more determined. “I don’t think I can hold her though…can you…” Ali starts, but Dr. Baylor jumps in.

“Actually, we need to completely focus on this little guy. So, this is the perfect time for Susan the assistant labor nurse to take her to get cleaned up a little and get her official weight and height, ok? She’s not leaving the room, just going right over there on that little table under the warming lamp… you can see her the whole time.” Dr. Baylor explains.

“Ok.” Both women say unison, but still have a hard time letting go a couple minutes later when Susan comes to take their daughter.

“Let me quickly tell you what’s going on. Baby boy’s water broke when Harper came out, so he’s ready to go. He’s turned on his own to some extent in the extra space now… he’s transverse, so horizontal with his head slightly lower. I don’t see any signs of him being tangled in either of the umbilical cords. So, I’m going to press hard on your belly and reach inside at the same time. I’ll try to see if I can help guide his head down with my hand. You’re going to feel a lot of pressure, so just do your best to hang in there.” The doctor explains calmly. “Let me know when you’re ready.”

“You got this, love.” Ashlyn tries to pep Ali up a bit and holds her securely, using her arms to envelope her as much as possible.

“Ok, ready.” Ali prepares herself as much as she can.
Pressure is an understatement and Ali feels like her whole midsection is being squashed like a grape as she yelps. The sensation is horribly unpleasant despite not really being painful because of the epidural.

Ashlyn’s eyes are like saucers when she sees just how far Dr. Baylor’s arm appears to be inside her wife and she can’t even see it all because of the way the blanket is draped. Ali is sweating buckets and she just does her best to keep talking to her while wiping her forehead frequently with her sleeve.

It feels like forever, but is only just over a minute before they hear Dr. Baylor’s voice excitedly yell “Yes!”

“Did he…” Ashlyn starts to ask, but the question is already being answered.

“His head came down right against my palm and followed into the birth canal.” The doctor announces proudly. “We’re a go. Let’s get this little guy delivered.”

Dr. Baylor waits through a few more contractions before she’s satisfied that they’re strong enough again to be productive and then directs Ali to push.

“There you go, baby… that’s it, hold it, hold it… come on… longer… go, go, you got it Alex!”

Ashlyn goes right back into drill sergeant mode again while Amelie counts. She presses herself further into Ali’s back, trying to be physically more supportive when she feels that Ali’s body isn’t able to push as hard this time around. “Little more, love… I know you can push a little harder on the next one. I know you can.”

“His head is already right here, Ali. Just a couple hard pushes.” Dr. Baylor encourages her.

Even though she feels like she might pass out, Ali fights with everything she has left, pushing with every ounce of strength on the next one with her fingernails digging into the back of her knees.

“That’s it, that’s it! Keep pushing, don’t let it go!” Dr. Baylor yells as the baby’s head is halfway out. “Just a little more… keep going… keep pushing… head is out!”

“Breathe baby, get some air… he’s almost out. Just one more.” Ashlyn rubs the brunette’s arms. “I love you, Alex… he’s almost here. You’re doing it, baby.”

“Fucking burns.” Ali’s face takes on that same agonizing look from much earlier in the labor process.

“Epidural is starting wear off, it’s normal.” Dr. Baylor tells a worried looking Ashlyn. “It’ll feel better when he’s out, Ali.”

“Ooo… k.” Ali’s whole body is shaking uncontrollably and she desperately tries to find it in herself to do this, her body and mind completely in doubt that she can. “Alex…” She hears Ashlyn’s soft voice in her ear, the officer’s warm breath against her face.

“Remember the Museum of Science on our first date… your favorite exhibit… it’s amazing, isn’t it? You made that green light blink with a perfect baby girl… you did that. One more time, honey… do it again. One more push, make the green light blink again for our son.” Ashlyn keeps her voice steady and even despite feeling shaky herself.

The words are like magic, Ali’s mind visualizing that little green light and suddenly feeling like she can take on the world. She feels her stomach clench, a sharp ache accompanying it this time, and she quickly grabs her legs with Ashlyn’s support. Her vision goes black for a few seconds and her ears ring a bit as she literally gives it everything she has left. Everything fuzzy and muffled as she hears a
loud cry and feels a warm weight on her chest.

“Alex? Baby… you okay?” Ashlyn holds the brunette’s face, seeing the glazed over expression and starting to panic. “Alex?”

“Yeah…” Ali whispers hoarsely. “Yes…” her voice comes out more strongly as Ashlyn’s face comes into focus now. “Is he…”

“He’s right here.” Ashlyn puts Ali’s hands on the tiny baby boy on her chest. “You did it. He’s perfect, just like her.”

Ali immediately looks down to see a similar sight as before… a squirmy, bluish baby, covered in goo and screaming.

“This great…both strong and healthy. Might wanna invest in ear plugs though.” Dr. Baylor smiles widely, feeling her own relief now as the baby pinks up pretty quickly and is moving well.

Ali just takes their baby boy in for a few seconds, a beaming smile breaking out across her face when she sees the little pointed nose, a prominent chin, pouty lips and an angular jaw that actually surprises her, not knowing that baby faces could be anything but round and chubby until now. He’s long and lanky… he’s a little Ashlyn. “Ash… look at him… he’s a mini you. So beautiful…he’s beautiful.” She says joyfully even though her voice is low and tired. “Those skinny little legs.”

“Sorry little man, I have to tell you from experience that you’re never going to be able to skip leg day.” Ashlyn tries to joke through her happy sobbing, literally crying her eyes out right now as everything inside unleashes. “He’s amazing, Al. Perfect, wonderful, amazing. I love you so much. I’m so in love with all of you.”

“We love you too, Hero. You’re everything to us.” Ali reaches back to pull Ashlyn’s head against hers again. “Pull it together back there, Mama… you’re gonna have a cord to cut soon.” She tries to soothe her wife, feeling how hard Ashlyn’s heart is beating against her back.

“Geez, can’t a girl have a moment? I mean…have you seen my beautiful family?” Ashlyn says sweetly and wipes her eyes. “I got this, promise.” She starts stroking their son’s head lightly and, once again, the crying fades to quiet.

“Baby whisperer.” Dr. Baylor says in amazement as she clamps the cord.

“They love their Mama.” Ali agrees with a tired and content smile, her eyes glancing over to see Susan holding Harper in a little bundle.

“Personally, I think that they just love being against that perfectly comfy boob. Trust me, I know how easily one can find peace there.” Ashlyn shrugs with a grin.

“Really, babe?” Ali shakes her head.

“I only speak the truth.” Ashlyn kisses Ali’s head, her crying finally easing up a bit. “So proud of you… you’re amazing.” She whispers in Ali’s ear.

“Okay, we’re ready for your expert cord cutting again, Chief.” Dr. Baylor hands the officer the scissors and points to the spot.

This time Ashlyn is much less nervous, confidently completing the task with a smile.

With that done, Dr. Baylor turns her attention to Ali again. “How are you feeling, Ali?”
“Wiped out, a little nauseated. I ache pretty bad, but it doesn’t burn as bad down there anymore.” Ali answers, becoming attuned to her body again after being too distracted to notice with their son in her arms.

“Ok, all normal. I need to go ahead and deliver the placentas now.” Dr. Baylor explains, seeing that at least one of them is low and ready to come out. “You might feel a little pressure or tugging sensation, but it shouldn’t hurt.”

Ali nods and just says focused on their little boy, who is now gripping her finger firmly and looks to be pretty much napping on her. She can’t get over how strong his features are, feeling overjoyed that he looks so much like Ashlyn given that their little girl is definitely more Krieger. “Still okay back there?” She checks on Ashlyn.

“I’m beyond great… just speechless.” Ashlyn admits quietly, her eyes constantly darting between their son and daughter.

“Ugh…” Ali grunts lightly at the feel of the placenta coming out, a wetness sensation between her legs.

“You okay?” Ashlyn asks.

“Mmmhmmm, just feels weird.” Ali replies as she feels another light tug. “Am I bleeding?” She can’t help but ask at the feel of it.

“It’s normal, Ali. Just fluid and normal blood from the placenta. Both out now. Actually, no tearing at all… doesn’t get any better than this. Someone clearly massaged like I told her to.” Dr. Baylor says with a smile. “Speaking of, I need to massage your stomach now to make the uterus contract and stop the bleeding from placenta detachment. Might feel a bit rough and crampy, ok?”

“Yep.” Ali replies, knowing it really can’t be any worse than what she just went through twice.

“We’re going to switch these two for a few minutes and get him cleaned up and measured, ok?” Amelie says as she comes over with their daughter wrapped up in a blanket, a little red and green striped hat on her head.

“Come here little princess. We missed you.” Ashlyn helps Ali hold her, loosening the blanket so their daughter can rest right against the brunette’s skin. She lets out a tiny little cry, but then immediately settles. Her eyes are now covered in an antibiotic ointment just like they told them to expect during baby classes.

“Hi baby girl.” Ali smiles down at her, really noticing the softer features and slightly chubbier body now that she was just holding their son who is the opposite. She feels the tight cramping in her belly and the pressure from Dr. Baylor’s pressing, but it’s easy enough to ignore while she hones in on the softness of their baby girl against her skin.

“I assume this little guy already has a name too?” Amelie asks from across the room as she cleans the baby boy who is back to crying again.


“What a cool name!” Dr. Baylor pipes up as she works to put fresh towels under Ali. “Another strong one… unique, but solid and not weird. Now I have to ask how you came up with them.”

“Gram for my grandmother who raised me… and Justice for Ali’s mom who was a head judge on one of the high MA courts.” Ashlyn explains.
“Harper is the last name of our dear friend and Ashlyn’s grandmother’s best friend, Edith. Kai is a variation of my brother’s name.” Ali fills in the rest.

“So creative…you two are good at this.” Dr. Baylor is impressed.

“We tried.” Ashlyn smiles.

“All right so let’s see what we have here.” Dr. Baylor finally finishes up with Ali and goes to look over the notes about the babies. “Harper… 12:13 am…5 lbs. 10 ounces, 18.5 inches long. Great Apgar score, completely healthy.” She looks over the next set of notes. “Gram… 12:41am… 5 lbs. 6 ounces, 20 inches long. Another great Apgar score, also healthy. They’re excellent, ladies. Two perfectly healthy babies. They’re on the small side in general, but that’s pretty normal for twins. The important thing is that they’re above the low birthweight mark and are breathing and moving normally, so no need to have them in the NICU as of now.”

Ashlyn breathes a sigh of relief, having completely forgotten about the high possibility of the babies being required to go to the NICU until right now.

“I heard that, Hero.” Ali moves to squeeze Ashlyn’s arm lightly, feeling her own sense of relief.

“Just don’t ever want to let go.” Ashlyn admits, still so completely mesmerized.

“I know, love.” Ali understands completely. “And you won’t…we have strong little warriors.”

“Brought into the world by the greatest warrior of them all… you were… beyond words, Alex.” Ashlyn says warmly, admiring her wife in this moment more than she ever has, and that is saying a lot. “I could never ever do this like you did… I love you so much, Al…just… you’re magnificent and wonderful… thank you.”

“Well I could never ever have done this without you… you have no idea. I love you too, Hero. Our sweet, supportive, completely perfect, Mama.” Ali replies lovingly. “Now give me that ‘holy shit we actually did this’ kiss I’ve been waiting for, gorgeous.” She smiles and turns her head, her lips immediately captured by Ashlyn’s in a passionate kiss that easily ranks right up there with some of their best ever. She lets herself get wrapped up in it, until the movement on her chest breaks the moment. “Woah there, baby girl…whatcha doing?” She looks down to see their daughter bobbing her head up and down vigorously, her mouth opening and closing.

“She’s hungry.” Amelie says with a smile from beside them.

“Oh!” Ali replies and immediately grabs the closest breast in attempt to get her nipple closer.

“Hold on…she can find it. Give her a few seconds to do her thing.” Amelie directs gently.

“So cute.” Ashlyn says adoringly, watching their daughter’s somewhat frantic search as she starts to almost whine cry. It’s only another 30 seconds or so before she finds Ali’s nipple and immediately latches on. “There you go, princess. Oh damn… she’s going to town…”

“Yeah…that feels so weird.” Ali jumps a bit at the strong sucking. “Hurts a little.”

“It takes some getting used to, but it’ll help if she gets a deeper latch. So break the suction a little bit with your finger and then really shove your nipple into her mouth as much as you can. She can handle it.” Amelie suggests.

Ali follows the instructions, earning a little cry of frustration from Harper before she latches right back on again.
“How’s that?” Amelie asks.

“Still weird, but a lot better. Hurts less.” Ali answers.

“That’s exactly what you want it to look like, nice deep latch like that. You’re a natural.” Amelie compliments the brunette.

“So amazing.” Ashlyn whispers, completely transfixed by the whole thing. “Alex, you’re beautiful.”

“Thank you, love.” She leans her head back into the officer and lets herself relax into it.

“Ok, I think this little man is ready for some loving from his moms.” Dr. Baylor brings a bundled Gram over to them, his hat matching Harper’s.

“Oh…uh…” Ali isn’t sure what to do with Harper sprawled our across her chest and still eating. The reality of juggling two babies at once finally hitting her.

“It’s ok, I got him.” Ashlyn pipes up from behind her, maneuvering to get her shirt and bra off so he can rest on her skin like he’s supposed to…the whole thing a bit comical since it leaves her in just boxer briefs behind Ali who is already stark naked after losing the gown hours ago. Both Morris’ and Porter’s wives had told them about how quickly both your self-consciousness and sense of dignity get lost in the labor process, but she couldn’t quite understand until now. A few different nurses are in and out of the room at the moment, but she could care less about who sees what. Nothing matters but the babies and Ali.

Ali can only smile widely as she watches Ashlyn scoot to the side just enough to hold their son against her chest, her heart pounding and her stomach fluttering at the sight of the goofy happy grin on the officer’s face.

“So tiny.” Ashlyn whispers, Gram practically fitting right in the palm of one of her hands. He makes a little whimper sound and curls right up comfortably in her hands, his eyes goopy like Harper’s from the ointment.

“To be fair, your hands are huge, babe.” Ali jokes before leaning over to kiss the little boy’s back. “I feel you little sir… I know just how good it feels to be secure in those hands. Safest, best place ever.”

“Little sir…I like that.” Ashlyn muses. “Goes perfectly with little princess.”

“I think so too.” Ali replies just as Harper comes off her nipple with a little popping sound. “Guess we’re done. Do I burp her?” She asks Amelie, feeling a little stupid at having to ask.

“Yes, just rest her on your shoulder there and nice gentle taps on the back. She might not burp, but always give it a try for a few minutes after feeding.” Amelie explains and nods as Ali does it correctly. It’s not long before a pretty loud burp comes out.

“Ha! Oh baby girl…looks like there is some Harris in you after all. Think we just found it.” Ashlyn laughs just as Gram’s head pops up with a little cry, his mouth suctioning to her chest. “Hungry too, little sir? Trust me, I am not the one you want for that. Lesson one…not all breasts are created equal, buddy. You want these beauties right over here.” She gently scoots him over to Ali and reaches around to take Harper.

Ali lets out a laugh at Ashlyn’s antics and shakes her head as she tries to put Gram in a spot where he can succeed at finding her nipple.

“Direct him a little to the other breast…the one Harper fed on is probably a bit empty still.” Amelie
offers some help again.

It takes Gram a couple tries and a little more help from Ali, but he eventually gets a good latch just like his sister and sucks vigorously.

“Easy little man, it’s not going anywhere.” Ashlyn says and gently reaches to stroke is head after seeing Ali wince a bit. “You okay, baby?”

“Yeah, just gonna take some getting used to.” Ali admits, too happy that she’s successfully breastfeeding to care how much it actually hurts.

“Only takes a few days before it gets better and more routine.” Amelie assures them.

“Ok… well… I think my job is done here.” Dr. Baylor chimes in, having quietly watched the little family interact for a couple minutes after finishing all her required notes. “I’ll be back to check in a little later, but looks like Dr. Moore needs my help with another delivery that just got underway. So, I get to go do it all over again.” She smiles at them. “You did so well… both of you. I’m so happy for you. Congratulations, ladies.”

“Wait… Baylor.” Ashlyn gets her attention. “Come here.”

The doctor walks over to the bed with a questioning look.

“Sorry we’re a bit indecent, but bring it in… gonna need a hug, lady.” Ashlyn smiles at her and Ali nods, both women freeing an arm and holding it out.

“Doesn’t faze me one bit, story of my life.” Dr. Baylor laughs and leans in to hug them both at the same time.

“Thank you so much…I can’t thank you enough.” Ashlyn gets a little emotional again and squeezes the woman as tight as she can without smothering the babies.

“Just doing my job.” Dr. Baylor waves it off.

“I say that all the time… and now I realize why Alex always gives me that look when I say it. Total bullshit, Doc…this was above and beyond. I’m so grateful for you. Thank you for taking care of our family.” The officer says adamantly.

“What she said, times like a million. You’re the absolute best. Thank you.” Ali adds to it.

“Really, really happy for you two. They’re truly beautiful…and I see a lot of babies. Congratulations! I’ll come see you later once you’re settled into your maternity suite.” Dr. Baylor promises before she makes her way out, turning back one more time to look at one of her favorite families ever.

The next hour passes in a whirl of instructions and paperwork, the nurse making sure that the women know how to properly change diapers and keep a breastfeeding log to make sure the babies are eating well. Before she knows it, Ashlyn finds herself lying next to her wife in the wider bed of the maternity suite, holding both babies in her arms after they ate again and Ali went out like a light in the middle of eating a sandwich, falling asleep hard from the utter exhaustion.

“There we go… everybody’s full and happy.” Ashlyn whispers, watching both babies sleeping soundly on her chest, Ali against her shoulder. “You two are so cute that they gave you only the
finest accommodations.” She jokes, finally taking a good look around the room that they just settled into about an hour ago. Having twins had automatically gotten them placed in one of the larger deluxe maternity suites and the officer has to admit that she’s impressed by it. The bed fits her and Ali comfortably side-by-side. There’s a nice little couch, a big TV, a large bathroom with a shower and tub, and the décor feels more like a hotel than a hospital room.

“Never gonna let you go.” The officer says softly as she eyes the two bassinets that the nurse left for the babies and practically scoffs at the thought of putting them down for even a minute. She’s completely and totally in love, obsessed really… her eyes still scanning them carefully to take in any little details that she might have missed.

Her eyes start fluttering closed in the peaceful moment, her own body completely spent and sore even though she wasn’t the one that gave birth. “I love you so much, Alexandra… so much.” She turns to kiss Ali’s head before kissing each of the twins. “Love you too, my littles.”

Ashlyn is just really starting to drift off when the sound of voices floats into the room. The officer frowns with her eyes still closed at the disruption of the quiet moment. It sounds like just a couple of hospital staff members talking, and she immediately wonders why anyone would be having a conversation loud enough to be heard through a closed door in the middle of the night, in the maternity ward no less. She can hear something being discussed about dinner plans and she tries to ignore it even as her irritation grows. And then she hears two words that make her eyes shoot open and her heart pound, any annoyance now long gone:

‘Merry Christmas’

The officer’s mind races to process what day it is and what has happened in the last 24 hours. It was Christmas Eve…like 1pm when we got here…around 8pm when I fainted and Dr. Baylor got here…past 11:30pm when Ali started pushing… 12:13am, 12:41am birth times. “Oh my god, no way.” Ashlyn whispers and carefully moves to check the date function on her watch, seeing the 25 in the little white box. She cranes her neck in disbelief, squinting her eyes to see the birthdate on the bracelet around Gram’s ankle…December 25, 2018. “It’s Christmas morning… Christmas babies.” She whispers in complete wonderment, now truly appreciating their little red and green striped hats that match completely with the exception of the little white bow on Harper’s.

She desperately wants to wake up Ali and tell her because she knows there is no way her wife kept track of what day it was either in all that chaos, but she doesn’t have the heart to do it knowing exactly how much she just went through. Instead, she settles for looking at her perfect little family all snuggled together and letting it all wash over her.

In this moment it truly hits her how in just three Christmases, Ali has given her everything she ever wanted and needed… hope for a future, forever love, and family. Those perfect Christmases she dreamed of her whole life are finally a reality of her own. It makes her realize why during all those years of horrible Christmas after horrible Christmas, she still woke up every Christmas morning hoping for her dream to come true. Because this feeling right now… even the tiniest little spark of possibility that this feeling would ever exist inside her like it does in this very instant… it was enough to keep her hope alive all of that time, it was worth wishing for forever.

“Merry Christmas, Harper. Merry Christmas, Gram. Best gifts ever.” She kisses each twin on the head softly before leaning over to lightly press her lips to Ali’s. “And Merry Christmas to you, queen of my heart, my whole world, my forever.”

Ashlyn immediately wakes up to Gram starting to softly cry, her eyes going to the clock in the room
to see 4:26am… just under an hour since she fell asleep. Given that the nurse said the babies eat roughly every two to three hours, she figures they have at least another twenty minutes before Ali has to wake up to feed them and she wants to make sure the brunette gets every second of that twenty minutes. She uses every core muscle she has to slowly and gently get out of the bed with a twin in each arm, trying not to wake Ali.

“Shh, shhh, shhh…” She walks around the room slowly and bounces them a bit in her arms, seeing both of them with eyes open and trying to look around. “Hi loves… let’s keep it down, okay? Mommy really needs to get some sleep and we don’t want to wake her up, right? Right. You probably already know, but she’s an amazing woman your Mommy. She worked so hard to get you two here all beautiful and perfect… for months and months really. She’s tough as nails, but be sweet and gentle with her anyway, ok? She deserves that more than you know.” The officerwhispers to them, her voice keeping them seemingly satisfied for now. “And while you’re at it, maybe go gentle on me too… cause Mama has no clue what she’s doing. I just love you endlessly and hope that’s all it takes.”

Ali is sure she’s a completely melted puddle of goo on the bed right now, awake and hearing every single word… her heart feeling so full that her chest actually aches like it might explode. Her legs tingle, her muscles are screaming at her, her crotch burns and throbs painfully, but none of it matters right now as she watches Ashlyn softly pace the room with a baby in each arm. And just when she thought she couldn’t be any more in love… she is. She’s absolutely more in love than she ever thought possible with these three people… her people.

Ali’s couldn’t pry her eyes away if she tried… Ashlyn with her messy short hair, in gray sweatpants and an open flannel shirt, a baby pressed to each side of her sports bra clad chest and held securely in those muscular arms that she knows so well. As a feminist, she’s always rolled her eyes at women who talk about how incredible it is to see their husbands hold their newborns… scoffing at the notion that men being tender is such a novel concept that has to be so specially beheld. But watching Ashlyn now, she actually gets it.

There’s something about her tough, strong wife being so over-the-top careful and gentle with their babies, her normal confidence obliterated as she nervously rocks them and yet, still looks so natural doing it. And it’s not that it’s novel… Ashlyn is gentle and sweet with her like this all the time, but the thing is that she never gets to see it from an outside perspective. And that is what makes it so remarkable… to experience this side of her wife in the way that others see it in how Ashlyn treats her, only more intensely because she’s watching it happen with their tiny little babies. It’s an indescribable feeling that makes everything feel right in the world.

“Merry Christmas, Ash.” Ali finally alerts the officer to the fact that she’s awake.

“Hey, there you are… so beautiful, Alex.” Ashlyn turns to take in her wife, a huge dimpled grin on her face. “Al, it’s Christmas morning!” She blurts out excitedly just before her brain actually processes what Ali just said. “Wait… you knew?”

“Honey, I carried these two around for almost a year and then squeezed them both out of my vagina thinking my body was just gonna die on me the whole time. You’re damn right I kept track of the exact date and time they were out of there.” Ali giggles.

“Of course you did my feisty lawyer.” Ashlyn laughs. “How come you didn’t tell me?”

“Because I knew how great it would be when you figured it out for yourself.” Ali smiles knowingly.

“You know me too well.” Ashlyn gets close to the bed and sits down carefully, leaning over to kiss Ali sweetly.
“Mmmm…one more please.” Ali requests with her eyes still closed.

“Anything you want, baby.” Ashlyn smiles and leans in for another one.

They’re interrupted by Gram’s fussy cry again, followed by Harper’s just a few seconds later. It’s a pattern they’ve noticed already in their short time with the babies…when Gram cries, Harper seems to immediately follow more loudly. It almost seems like she’s trying to tell them that Gram needs something because she settles quietly as soon as Gram does.

“Don’t worry princess, Mommy is gonna feed your brother and then you too.” Ashlyn soothes Harper as Ali takes Gram and gets him over to her nipple. “Yep…like clockwork.” The officer notes as Harper quiets down the second Gram is happily breastfeeding. “You’re such a good big sister, little princess. And don’t ever let anyone tell you that Gram is supposed to protect you because he’s a boy… that’s some total bullshit right there. You two will always protect each other…but trust me and Mommy when we tell you that no matter how strong your brother may seem, he is always going to need you, baby girl. Just ask Uncle Chris and Uncle Kyle when you meet them.”

Ali shakes her head at how much she feels like a swooning schoolgirl right now. “Your level of adorable is practically killing me right now, Harris…take it down a notch, Chief Perfect.”

“Says the total goddess with the wonder breasts feeding our perfect babies right now. How about you take it down a notch?” Ashlyn winks before adding, “Nah, actually don’t.”

----------------------------------------------

By mid-morning, Ashlyn has managed to call or text everyone in their immediate circle of family and friends to tell them the news. By mid-afternoon, their room is already filled with balloons and stuffed animals from those very people. Combined with little periods of sleep here and there, all the loving messages of congratulations make them feel loved and a bit more refreshed than they were early this morning.

In just a few hours, they’ve already learned that the twin bond is alive and well. The babies definitely prefer to be held together or very close to each other and tend to settle more easily that way. If they are put down together, their hands make their way towards each other, even managing to wiggle out of a tight swaddle to do so. When one cries, the other is quick to follow…especially Harper who is seemingly more patient and will settle quietly while Gram eats or gets changed before she does.

By late afternoon, their first visitor arrives in the form of a blubbering Kyle who completely loses it at his first glance at the babies. He can’t even say anything for a while as he holds both twins on the small couch in the room, Ashlyn wiping his tears for him every so often. After about twenty minutes and Gram’s first very smelly and tarry-black poop diaper… he manages to pull it together and go sit by Ali, still holding Harper while Ashlyn changes Gram. It leads to a playful and spirited debate about whether Harper looks more like him or Ali. Of course he totally loses it again when Ali can’t keep her own emotions in check and whispers in his ear: “Look at the perfection you helped create… thank you.” To which Kyle can only reply “Mom would be so proud and happy.” Ashlyn walks over with Gram just a moment later and immediately smiles at their teary faces, only needing one look at the two them to know the gist of what was said.

Edith is the next one through the door shortly after Kyle leaves. “Give me my grandbabies” is out of her mouth the second she walks in. Just like Kyle, she wants to hold them both together, saying “what good are twins if you can’t love them both up at once?!” Of course she brings a bag full of knitted baby booties in all sorts of colors and sizes. Ashlyn immediately works to get a pair on each of the twins while Edith talks to them.
“Oh yeah… Harper is a good name for you. You sure are cute…you’re gonna be hot stuff, just like me.” The older woman looks up and winks at Ali. “And you…you have your great grandpa Curtis’ nose. Of course you do, it’s your Mama’s nose too. You have quite a name to live up to, little man Harris… but you look up to the task… she really was something special.” Edith trails off a bit sentimentally, prompting Ashlyn to sit down next to her and rub her shoulders sweetly.

It’s quiet for a few minutes before Edith speaks up again, looking Ashlyn right in the eye. “You did so good, Tin Man.” She smiles and looks up at Ali. “You too, Dorothy.” And just like that she completely shifts the mood, telling a few stories about Ashlyn as a baby…including a particularly good one about how Ashlyn once pooped on her legs while she was trying to help Eunice change her on the beach. It leaves them all laughing just as the twins fall asleep and Edith insists that she leave and demands that the two women sleep too. “You have to take care of you to be able to take care of them.” She leaves them with one last word of advice and promises to come see them and bring dinner when they’re home.

The sleep doesn’t last long though when Gram is hungry again just half an hour later, but it turns out that the timing is excellent when Chris pokes his head in the door while Ashlyn burps the little boy so Ali can feed Harper.

“Oh…uh…sorry, we can come back in a little bit.” Chris stutters and turns red, looking down at the floor.

“Nope, now is great. I think we all know that anyone around us is going be seeing a lot of both sets of twins for quite some time.” Ali laughs and motions to her chest with her free hand. “So, let’s just throw all the awkwardness out the window right now.” She says resolutely, determined a long time ago to not let herself feel self-conscious about something so natural…not that it matters much anyway because Harper is pretty much covering everything up as she eats.

“Come on in.” Ashlyn encourages him, happy to see that Bridget and the kids came too.

Bridget and the kids immediately fawn over how cute the babies are as Ashlyn and Ali work to get them ready to be handed off. But the officer notices immediately how quiet Chris is… he seems almost overwhelmed. “You okay, big bro? Ashlyn comes over to stand next to him.

“Yeah…just… look at you Ashlyn … damn…just… you’re a parent. My baby sister is a parent… such a good one too.” A cheesy grin takes over his face and he wraps her up in a hug, careful not to make it too tight since she’s holding Gram on her shoulder.

“Crazy right?” Ashlyn nudges his head with hers.

“Little bit.” Chris lets out his signature deep laugh.

“Gram, this is your ding bat Uncle Chris.” Ashlyn hands the little boy over to him, smiling at how visibly her brother’s brawny body adjusts and relaxes as he holds his nephew.

After the very emotional visits with Kyle and Edith, this one is lighter with Curtis and Elsie providing some much needed fun distraction as everyone helps them hold the babies. Their excitement over their cousins is nothing short of adorable and at times funny, especially when Elsie declares that they’ll be special guests at her tea party next week.

By 6pm, both women are starving and work to practically inhale the trays of dinner the nurse brought in with one hand as they each hold a baby.

“Guess this is the new normal, huh?” Ashlyn can’t help but pause to laugh when she sees that she’s
dropped a bunch of pasta in her lap and Ali has a smear of ketchup on her cheek.

“Guess so. I kinda like it” Ali laughs right along with her. “Scratch that…I love it.” She corrects just a second later.

“Me too.” Ashlyn reaches over to clean the brunette’s face with a napkin. “Team Harris.”

“Team Harris.” Ali agrees with a smile.

By 7:30pm, they’re both settled in the bed after the twins are fed and changed into fresh diapers. Everyone is cuddled up close, Ali holding Harper while Ashlyn holds Gram.

“How is my girl feeling?” Ashlyn asks, making sure to check in with Ali every so often in the bustle of everything.

“A little rough. Definitely like I just squeezed a couple of twins out my cooter and then let them crack my nipples open for good measure.” The brunette replies truthfully. “But, I did manage to get some fresh mascara on with that last trip to the bathroom, so all in all…not so bad.”

“I noticed that.” Ashlyn shakes her head with a smile at Ali’s eye make-up. “I’m sorry, love. Anything I can do?”

“You’ve been so great, Ash. Just keep those amazing ice-pack maxi pads coming and I’ll be fine… those are my happy place right now.” Ali jokes.

“You’re wonderful, Alex. I love you.” Ashlyn says sweetly.

“I love you too, Hero.” Ali replies with a yawn.

“Allright babe, give me one of those gorgeous smiles of yours.” Ashlyn takes the opportunity to take their first family selfie with her phone before one of them falls asleep. Satisfied with the picture, she posts it to all of her social media accounts along with one of just the twins from earlier in the day where they are holding hands while they sleep:

My back-up has arrived and they couldn’t be any more perfect. Meet Harper Kai (5lbs 10oz, 18.5in) and Gram Justice (5lbs 6oz, 20in). Moms and babies are all doing great (my wife is a goddess like no other). Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night. – The Harris Family :-)

“Perfect.” Ali smiles as she reads over Ashlyn’s shoulder and then drops her head down onto it.

Ashlyn just kisses Ali’s head when the brunette falls fast asleep just a couple minutes later and moves to put a pillow under her arm so that Harper is supported properly as Ali’s body relaxes more. Dr. Baylor walks in just as she is finishing doing that and getting herself comfortable with Gram.

“No, don’t wake her.” Dr. Baylor whispers as she sees Ashlyn going to nudge Ali. “She really needs to sleep so she can heal up.”

“She’s gonna be bummed she missed you.” Ashlyn replies quietly.

“I’ll see her in a couple weeks at her post-partum check-up.” Dr. Baylor assures her. “Sorry, I didn’t come in sooner… got caught up taking over that delivery for Dr. Moore and it ended in an emergency c-section.”

“I can’t even imagine doing what you do every day…today was mind blowing.” Ashlyn says still awestruck by all of it.
“I can say the same about what you and Ali do.” Dr. Baylor shrugs. “Life is funny like that. So, how are things so far?”

“Totally amazing… little crazy…also scary, but amazing.” Ashlyn divulges. “They’re eating well, peeing and pooping already, and crying…plenty of crying. They’re perfect.”

“Exactly as it should be.” Dr. Baylor laughs quietly. “They’re beautiful babies…you’re a beautiful family.”

“Thanks. So… I meant what I said earlier. You have been an absolute lifeline for us in so many ways through all of this. It means everything to us and I wish I had better words than thank you, but I mean it from the bottom of my heart. Thank you for taking care of our family…none of this happens without you.” Ashlyn says sincerely.

“Just doing my job.” Dr. Baylor uses the same response as earlier.

“Stop using my own modest one-liners on me and just say ‘you’re welcome’, Baylor…geez.” Ashlyn rolls her eyes playfully.

“Fine. You’re welcome, Chief.” Dr. Baylor laughs.

“Better.” Ashlyn smiles. “I hope your wife knows how lucky she is.”

“How did you know I had a wife? I don’t remember mentioning that…maybe I did.” Dr. Baylor asks in slight surprise as she tries to think back, usually not bringing up her personal life at all with patients.

“You probably did at some point, no idea.” Ashlyn shrugs not really sure why she knows that either. “But even if you didn’t… I think we all know family when we see it.” She adds with a chuckle.

“So true… there’s like a lesbian aura or scent or something.” Dr. Baylor jokes.

“Totally.” Ashlyn agrees in jest.

“Well anyway, I like to think she knows how lucky she is.” The doctor winks. “You’re pretty lucky yourself.” She motions her head towards Ali.

“Girl, you don’t even have to tell me…there has to be a permanent horseshoe up my ass with this amazing wife of mine. I wake up every morning now and wonder how the hell this is my real life.” Ashlyn says happily while trying to keep her voice down.

“Gonna be one hell of a morning tomorrow then.” Dr. Baylor smiles and motions to the twins.

“Sure is.” Ashlyn smiles back.

“You need to sleep too. Get to it.” The doctor goes right back into professional mode.

“Yeah, I know. Merry Christmas, Doc.” Ashlyn replies kindly.

“Merry Christmas to you too.” Dr. Baylor makes her way out the door before poking her head back in. “Hey, Chief.”

“Yeah?” Ashlyn whispers back.

“All three of them….” Dr. Baylor points to Ali and the twins. “They’re incredibly lucky too.” She smiles and closes the door softly.
Friday, December 28th

After a three day whirlwind of getting used to being parents and learning how to take care of the twins, lots of visitors, and little sleep… Ashlyn almost feels shell-shocked when she pulls the car up to the hospital entrance and sees Ali waiting just inside the glass door with the twins strapped into their carseats next to her.

The officer busies herself with getting everyone settled into the car, checking the carseat buckles at least 3 more times even though she already checked them at least 10 times before they even left the hospital room. Ali can barely stifle a laugh when Ashlyn checks her seatbelt too, but holds it in and doesn’t say anything. She can tell Ashlyn is anxious, seeing how stiff her body language is as she loads their bags into the trunk.

Anxious is an understatement. Normally, Ashlyn is the epitome of a Boston driver… confident and cocky, assertive and bordering on a little bit reckless at times. This is not that Ashlyn. In fact, they’re not only driving in the slow lane of the highway where the officer usually spends less than a minute unless she’s merging or getting off of an exit ramp… they’re also doing 40mph at best in a 65mph area. The officer is leaned forward and gripping the steering wheel so hard that Ali can see how white her hands are from the backseat were Ashlyn insisted she sit in case the twins needed anything. It’s completely quiet and Ali can’t even remember the last time they drove without the radio on in the car.

“Doing ok up there, baby?” Ali asks sweetly, trying hard not to be so amused by this whole thing. She’s a little nervous about getting home too, but not nearly the level Ashlyn seems to be right now.

“Uh yeah, just need to focus. Tell me if we need to pull over.” Ashlyn replies briefly, her eyes not even glancing into the rearview mirror to look at Ali like they normally would in this situation.

“We’re good, honey. Just keep doing your thing.” Ali replies reassuringly with a little smirk.

Ashlyn lets out a huge sigh of relief when she eventually pulls into their driveway and parks, the smell of the ocean already hitting her nose and her body relaxing. It’s only then that she realizes how cramped all her muscles are from the drive. “Home sweet, home.” She says before hurrying around to open Ali’s door and help her out.

“You made great time, babe… only 1 hour and 34 minutes for a 50 minute drive.” Ali looks at her watch with a shit eating grin on her face, not able to hold in the teasing now that Ashlyn looks more like her normal herself. “Can’t wait to tell the twins this story when they’re old enough to appreciate it.” She adds with a laugh.

“Thanks a lot, asshole.” Ashlyn leans in to kiss her softly.

“You are seriously the absolute cutest, my idiot. My heart is just…” Ali makes a little explosion gesture with her hands near her chest. “Love you so fierce… now let’s get the warrior squad inside.”

Ashlyn nods and takes a carseat in each of her hands, putting one of her arms out further so Ali can use it for support as they walk up to the door.

“Is it bad that I’m a little jealous that I’m not the one being carried right now?” Ali pretend pouts as they get to the door and Ashlyn unlocks it.

“Hold that thought.” Ashlyn uses her foot to push the door open and places each of the carseats on
the floor just inside before turning back and lifting Ali into her arms, walking them inside the house. “Welcome home, fam bam.”

“There’s no place like home.” Ali adds with a giggle and kisses her wife’s cheek.

Friday, January 25th

“Can’t believe they’re already a month old.” Ali says a little tearily as Ashlyn snaps a picture of the twins in matching onesie’s that Ellen sent. The outfits are navy blue with white lettering, Harper’s says ‘Buy one’ and Gram’s says ‘Get one free’…behind them is a set of kids’ blocks that says ‘1 month’.

“It’s going too fast.” Ashlyn agrees. Which is in complete contrast to the fact that hours often feel really long. It’s not until they hit these milestones that it dawns on them how quickly it went. And what a month it has been.

Their first few days were completely terrifying, both of them constantly getting up to check that the twins were still breathing as they slept. They happily rang in their first new year as a family, although Harper wasn’t too pleased when Ali forgot she was breastfeeding and pulled Ashlyn into a passionate kiss at midnight.

Days went by pretty fast at first with visitors constantly in and out, bringing food and helping them with errands. After that, things got quieter and it was a learning curve to settle into a routine together. What was once completely organized quickly became organized chaos, both women soon coming to grips with the fact that sometimes just getting through the day and nothing else is completely acceptable. Ashlyn has been taking on the lion’s share of diaper duty as well as waking Ali and the babies up to breastfeed every 2 to 3 hours and settling them afterwards so that the brunette can get the rest she needs to heal.

And it hasn’t just been the babies or new routines, but they’ve had to relearn each other too. There are constantly new emotions to deal with along with the simple fact that they aren’t the only ones in the center of each other’s worlds anymore. There’s so much now to differ in opinion about and even more things to compromise on, but they’ve found a way to stay close and connected through it all despite the major effort needed to do it. Sometimes even managing to communicate with each other when they haven’t slept well in days is a major challenge. Not to mention that as soon as they seem to find something that works well, it often changes just a couple days later. Still, even though they’ve never been this exhausted before…they’ve also never been happier.

“They’re so damn cute.” Ali smiles down at the twins wiggling around next to each other on the carpeted floor. Over the last few weeks their features have become a little more prominent. Harper still looks very much like Ali, but has lighter brown hair like Ashlyn and her eyes have only gotten lighter over time. While both babies have pretty colorless gray eyes and it’ll be a year before the true color starts to show, Ali is sure Harper is going to have Ashlyn’s hazel. Gram’s eyes are a dark gray with a ring of brown at the center. Harper’s however are very light gray with tiny yellowish gold swirls in spots…a yellowish gold that Ali knows all too well. And while Gram is still long and lanky with angular features like Ashlyn, his hair is dark brown like Kyle and Ali’s and his eyes are all Krieger to match it.

“They totally are. We made such beautiful babies.” Ashlyn agrees.

“Come here, you.” Ali pulls her wife in by her shirt and kisses her passionately, taking the opportunity while the twins are happy on their own right now. Although it still hurts to go to the
bathroom, she’s more self-conscious of her body than she has ever been in her life, and the thought of anyone coming anywhere near her nipples makes her cringe, she still wants Ashlyn as much as ever… craving every little touch of her skin. “Mmmmm.” She moans into the officer’s mouth and parts her lips for Ashlyn’s tongue to join hers. She feels Ashlyn’s large hands rake up and down her sides and slides her own hands behind the officer’s neck to pull her in closer… thoroughly enjoying the heated moment that has been a rarity this last month, her heart racing and the familiar tingle building between her legs.

“I miss you.” Ali says breathlessly as they both pull away in desperate need of air.

“I miss you too, Alex.” Ashlyn rests their foreheads together. “How about you, me, and a jacuzzi bath when these two go to bed tonight?” She says sweetly.

“That sounds wonderful, Hero. Yes, please.” Ali leans in for another deep kiss only to be interrupted by Harper’s cry.

“They miss your boobies too.” Ashlyn jokes.

“I feel like a milk cow.” Ali laughs and gets settled into the rocking chair in their bedroom. “Bring her over.”

Ali feeds the little girl and hands her over to Ashlyn to burp her while she takes Gram to feed him too. A loud squishy farting sound fills the room just as Gram gets a good latch onto Ali’s nipple.

“Whoop… looks like someone ate well, huh little princess?” Ashlyn laughs.

“You always get the worst of it, sorry babe.” Ali can’t help but feel bad at the fact that the officer has now been pooped on by both twins and that Gram has peed on her face twice.

“It’s my calling.” Ashlyn jokes back. “No worries, I got this.” She heads to the nursery to change Harper.

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“Wheew, little princess!” Ashlyn scrunches up her nose at the smell once the diaper is open. “How can someone so cute makes such a serious stench?”

“Don’t worry baby girl, your Mommy is a beautiful queen and she can stink up the bathroom like you wouldn’t believe.” Ashlyn laughs. “Don’t you ever tell her I said that though. Unless of course you want Mama permanently living in a dog house in the yard.”

Ashlyn quickly gets a new diaper on her and then pokes Harper’s bare belly softly a few times while making kissy faces at her, knowing it brings the closest thing to a smile the little girl has right now. She watches her daughter’s nose scrunch as her mouth opens and her lips curl slightly, a happy little squeal coming out of her mouth as her gums show. “That nose-crinkle kills me little princess…” Ashlyn practically melts at the facial expression that is completely identical to Ali’s.

“That smile… and just wait until you have teeth… that smile is gonna light up the whole world… just like your Mommy’s.” Ashlyn kisses her face a few times and then re-buttons her outfit.

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“You’re Mama has such a good heart. I hope that whoever you end up with someday, that you’re as sweet to them as your Mama is to me. It’s the best feeling in the world.” Ali talks softly to Gram as he continues eating. “Except for that line about me stinking up that bathroom, she’s gonna pay for
that one. For the record, it’s not true.” Ali shakes her head, having heard every word through the baby monitor that Ashlyn clearly forgot about, her mind already plotting revenge. Suddenly Gram pops off her nipple, making a very serious face.

“What’s the matter, little sir?” Ali asks with a furrowed brow just before he lets out a little fart. “Oh well…there we go. Better?” She coos at him and watches as his face lights up in a smile that she knows is just because of the gas, but melts her heart anyway. And then she sees it…

“Ash!” Ali calls out in an automatic reaction, just like any other time either of them notices or sees something new with one of the twins.

She’s captivated…completely mesmerized as she looks at, trying to memorize it before it goes away... a beaming smile on her face because it’s something she hoped for right from the beginning… and here it is now, completely undeniable.

“What’s up, buttercup?” Ashlyn walks in grinning, lightly bouncing Harper in her arms.

“Oh uh…” Ali watches it disappear from the left side of Gram’s mouth as he yawns, her eyes going up to look at its match on her wife’s face. “I love you, Ash.” Ali covers, knowing she wants to be able to show her wife and not just tell her.

“I love you too, Al.” Ashlyn blows her a kiss just as Harper yawns. “I think she’s ready for nap time. I’m gonna put her down and come back for him. Nap with me after?”

Ali nods and watches her walk out, putting Gram against her shoulder and starting to burp him while she rests her cheek against his. She can’t help but smile to herself, knowing that for the second time in her life…. a single-dimple has completely stolen her heart and turned her world upside down in the best way possible.

Chapter End Notes

So, how do we feel?
A couple of things...

1. With my life being beyond busy at the moment, I am definitely taking a good break from writing and decompressing a bit. But, I'm not going away. So, now that we're at the end...would you like me to write a long epilogue to this story and leave it at that, or would you like me to do a sequel? I'll leave it up to the majority vote. Also, if you do want a sequel for this...I have also promised a sequel on my other story (Ruck Me), so which one would you like to see first?

2. At the very beginning of this story, a few of you commented on how much you liked this fictional version of Ali. And I promised to reveal at the end where my inspiration for this character came from. As I always say, I write what I know and just get creative with it. So, the personality behind this Ali character is very real... although she is actually a lawyer and a very good one, she doesn’t do exciting podcasts or take on crazy cases. Still, she's pretty much the way you read her in this story. She's as feisty as she is kind, really intelligent while still making everyone around her feel like they're on the same level, funny but knows just when to be serious, passionate about literally everything she does (like she even brushes her teeth with some fire), and the owner of the biggest heart I've ever known. For that reason, and like a million others (not the least of which is our
beautiful son that she gave birth to)... I married her. She is my very own wife. Sorry if I gave you any hope of snagging her when I said she was real...this is one is mine. And yeah, she's just as observant as in this story... which means I get away with literally nothing! Many of you have commented that the emotions here feel so real sometimes despite the fiction...and it is simply because they are in many ways. For the record, I did actually faint for the first time ever during our son's birth just like it is written in this chapter and my wife's contractions stopped completely for over an hour much to the total bafflement of the medical staff...yep, we're that connected and I am so damn lucky :-) 

Thanks again for going on this journey with me and don't be shy...
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Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!