### Ashes to Ashes

*by ChapstickLez*

**Summary**

The last three years had been beyond hard. The hits kept coming and Gail kept falling. Failed daughter, failed Peck. Maybe the answers, all of them, were at the end of her fall. Maybe she could find her place in the ruins of what was left of her life.

**Notes**

Everything that happened in the series has happened here. The only change is before the wedding, Gail decided to tell IA that her parents wanted her to lie about Steve. The drama from that is the basis of this.
"They're all still worrying about Traci," said the cop, sullenly.

Lisa eyed the number of shot glasses strewn around the woman who had dated her best friend, albeit briefly, with curious fear. Gail wasn't tiny, but she wasn't a big girl. That much tequila should have laid her out. "Wasn't she living with him?"

"No, he had a key to her place. Not like we need it," Gail downed another shot. "Whose turn is it?"

They'd been trading rounds for a few hours, ever since Lisa had stumbled on the woman. Seeing Gail at a bar was not actually something she'd expected, and she'd tried to avoid her. To her surprise, Gail had lifted a glass in recognition and then went right back to drinking. Even Lisa's date … whatever her name was … noticed something was wrong, and told Lisa to take care of her friend.

They weren't friends. They weren't even frenemies. But she went anyway.

"Mine," said Lisa, getting up for another round.

She'd already heard about how Gail had given up on adopting Sophie. The other family had indeed sounded perfect. And Lisa had listened through a very disjointed story about how her family was all doomed to failure and so was she, which was why she'd screwed up with Holly.

"The problem is, Boobs, the problem is that I'm stuck." She sighed and gestured with her mostly empty glass.

"How are you stuck, Blue?" They'd decided that calling each other Botched Boob Job and Blue Collar took too long. Lisa was Boobs, Gail was Blue, and they were both okay with that. Of course, that might have been the booze talking.

Gail sighed. "I can't stop being myself."

It took a moment. "Because you're a Peck."

"Exactly," she muttered. "And now Peck means shit ... Now what do I do?" She folded her arms and put her head down.

She was past drunk and into fully wasted. "Maybe it's time to go home."

"Can't," mumbled Gail. "Don't have a home anymore."

Lisa frowned. They'd gotten a little metaphysical. "Vacation?"

"Can't. Trial's going on."

Maybe the blonde had been under-exaggerating how bad things were. "Okay, you need to go somewhere. Come on." Lisa took hold of Gail's upper arm and hauled the cop to her car. That Gail didn't really complain told Lisa what she needed to know. The woman was a mess.

Back at her place, Lisa wrangled Gail into her spare room, got her shoes off, and left her to sleep it off. The thought of calling Holly crossed her mind, but Lisa knew that would probably upset both of them. They had not ended things well, to say the least. Not that anyone in Toronto was very
pleased with Holly skipping the country.

In the morning, Gail looked miserable and hungover. But it was her phone, not her hangover, that seemed to be the source of her mood. "I know what I said, Noelle," she sighed into the phone as she walked out of the guest room. "Hang on..." Gail looked up. "I will pay whatever you want for coffee."

Lisa smirked. "Espresso? Trade for the real story of what the hell was going on last night."

The blonde frowned. "Fine." She turned back to the phone. "What do you need me to do?" Gail walked back to the guest room and came back with her shoes in hand. "That's fine. I can be there-what? No I thought McStupid was getting married in December... Huh. Hell, I doubt I'm even invited, Noelle." Gail tilted her head. "I'll be there this afternoon. Thanks."

Watching Gail hang up, Lisa slid the coffee over. "So. You're working on a Saturday?"

"No... Lisa, can I trust you?" Gail held the coffee and looked so incredibly serious, it was shocking and sobering.

She'd been called by her name. "You know, we got off on the wrong foot," decided Lisa. "Yes, you can trust me."

"I mean no telling Rachel, or whoever you're fucking, or Holly." Gail paused. "Actually, especially Holly."

"Jesus, I won't tell your ex-"

"Not because of that," Gail groaned, rolling her eyes. "Just... This... I don't have anyone I can talk to."

Lisa blinked. "No friends? Not even the idiots you work with?"

Gail shook her head. "They'll all be involved." She sipped the coffee. "What did Holly tell you about me?"

"Mostly that you were hot. And you're terrible at communicating."

"Nothing about my job? Okay..." Gail exhaled. "I'm... I was kind of... Peck was a big name. In policing. My family is all over."

Lisa frowned. "Was?"

"My brother... Yesterday I was at court to testify about my brother. He set a bomb and blew up half the division a few months ago."

Blew up? Lisa put her coffee down. "He blew up... On purpose?"

Gail nodded. "He was working for the mob. The number of people in on it is... It's big. Steve's rolling over on them because he didn't... He didn't want me to lie on the stand."

Okay, Gail wasn't kidding about this stuff being serious. "Lie. You were going to lie on the stand?"

There was a strange heaviness to the air. "I don't know," admitted the cop. "My dad... My dad's a cop. Inspector. And he asked- he told me to lie for Steve." She sighed.

"Which is why you got shit faced," realized Lisa. Gail's father wanted her to lie on the stand for
her brother. Lisa suddenly felt horrible for the way she'd spoken about Gail at the Penny. The self-esteem issues you had to have, growing up like that. Even when the brother was on the take, they put him above her.

"What? Because my parents love my brother more? Nothing new," she shrugged. Lisa was pretty sure she was lying. "Steve was the only one who wanted to help me with the adoption."

Oh. "Did you decide... About Sophie?"

Gail nodded. "I called this morning. LauraLee said she'd talk to them about letting me visit," she said softly. "It's the best thing for her."

This was turning out to be one of the more serious conversations Lisa had on a Saturday morning with anyone. "And all your friends are cops. Christ."

"Yep," sighed Gail. "Fewer soon. I just told IA that my dad tried to coerce me. Which means they'll dig into him. Steve'll do a year, maybe. I'll be a pariah. My one real friend there can barely look at me anyway, so that leaves Chris, and he just needs me because he's an addict." She swirled the coffee around and sipped it again. "Peckspectations are a bitch."

"Yes... Cute word by the way. Did you notice that you seem to be the only one not involved in that shit?"

Gail nodded again. "Which either means they thought I was worthless or I was too stupid to notice."

Lisa snorted. "Please. You have a degree in criminal justice." When Gail looked surprised, Lisa waved a hand. "Holly. My point is you're not stupid, or uneducated. You're doing a bang up job of acting blue collar, though, which sure as hell fooled me. And I bet it fools your family."

"What good does any of that do me?"

"Depends what's more important. Your family or what's right?" And, if Lisa understood that enough, Gail wasn't fully sure where she stood on that.

The cop looked at her empty coffee. "My family... Right... My brother wouldn't let me lie for him," she sighed. "Him... Him I love. He's always protected me." She looked up at Lisa. "Doing what's right might help him. And... And God, it's what's right, and now I sound like stupid McNally."

"Don't know who McNally is, don't care."

"I could like you for that alone," admitted Gail. "But now what?"

Holding up a finger, Lisa smiled. "One, you play patsy and get information to prove the other Pecks are evil. Two, you turn over everything. You're already going to IA. Three, you accept the fact that you'll be hated for years."

Gail frowned. "That sounds like the voice of experience."

"It is. And it's why Holly's my friend." Lisa finished her coffee and started making two more cups. "When we were in school we worked at the hospital for credit. One of the doctors was nicking drugs. Holly caught him, told him to stop or she'd turn him in, so he blasted her on her review. She was going to have to leave medicine, which can you imagine?" Gail shook her head, somewhat shocked. "Rachel and I, we didn't really know her then, but... We knew of her. So we did a stupid, stupid sting, caught the guy red handed, and got Holly back in the program. Looking
back, we were so stupid." Lisa shook her head but smiled at the memory.

The blonde looked at her, surprised. "You know... The last time I tried to do the right thing, not a single one of my friends backed me up," she whispered. And then she told Lisa about a man who died in lockup because she hadn't searched him.

As Lisa listened, she heard Gail make no excuses for her own actions, nor for anyone else's. But it was clear that everyone had made mistakes that day. But it was Gail who was on the chopping block. "Why didn't they fire you? Did your parents..."

Gail snorted a laugh. "No. No, I was a key witness in a trial and that story needs a hell of a lot more tequila before it comes out. Hell, I didn't even tell Holly."

That was something Lisa understood. "Well. How about this. Since Rachel is head down in her trials and we are the best bitches on the planet, you talk to IA and we'll have dinner?"

"What about the date you blew off to fish me out of a bottle?"

Oh, so she had noticed. "I never thought I'd say this, Blue Collar, but you're more fun."

Everything was supposed to be perfect. She had a casual sex, no strings, friend. She had a promotion and a rookie of her own, the annoying Fox. She had her friends at the station still.

But every morning when Gail woke up, she looked at herself in the mirror and felt sick.

She kept the smile on her face, the old look that scared the hell out of the babies they called rookies. She did her job and she did it well. And she kept a secret. Not even Dov or Chris knew the secret. Gail hadn't even told Oliver, and she was his Noelle these days. Or maybe she was Frank's Oliver. Anyway. They talked a lot and she was hiding this from him too.

How could she tell them she was spying on her own family? Not them the family, her blood. She was collecting evidence, slowly and surely, about how the Pecks had been involved in the corruption. Because, as Noelle had put it, no one believed that Mama Peck hadn't known about Steve.

"If I didn't know you were banging that detective, I'd ask if you were pregnant."

Gail shoved Chris, reaching up to squeeze his face. "Don't be gross. Make me coffee."

Her friend laughed and poured her a cup. "Where's Frankie?"

"Dunno." That was a lie. Gail had last seen Frankie four days ago when a couple conversations clicked in her head. She'd voiced her suspicion to Noelle who checked. Frankie had worked with Santana as well. Frankie had worked with Steve a number of times on cases that were under review. Frankie... Should never have been let back into Fifteen.

And Gail? Lucky, lucky Gail had been sleeping with the woman who set up her own brother for the fall. Not that Steve was innocent, but Frankie had been a part of the scandal.

"You should call her. Double date," suggested Dov, who actually made the coffee while Chris made muffins.

"We're not dating," sighed Gail. That was true. "She's just a friend with benefits." That was ... Well she was with benefits. The sex was a bit overrated. Frankie pitched herself as god's gift to lesbians and, at best, she was pretty good. Maybe that was because Holly had been mind blowing,
or because Gail was still hung up on her...

That much they'd been open about. Gail flat out said she'd had her heart broken and was not over it, so this was not going to be girlfriend territory. And Frankie accepted that deal. No strings.

Gail felt sick again and put her head on the counter. No strings. Except the handcuffs.

Her phone beeped and she peered at it. Noelle was asking if she was ready. Tapping her reply, Gail swallowed the bile and fear.

\textit{Ready as I'll ever be.}

"Something’s up," Dov said seriously, pushing a mug of black coffee over.

"Stop fantasizing about me," replied Gail, acerbically. "Snow White will get jealous."

"I'm never jealous of you," sang Chloe, hugging Gail from behind.

Gail froze and flipped her phone over. "There is a bug on my back."

The apartment was getting too cramped. Four of them. Well. If this all played out the way that Noelle predicted, it would be less cramped.

They piled into Chris’ truck and drove to the station. Gail chewed a muffin in lieu of her fingernails, trying to quell the terror in her gut. It didn't help when she saw two people she least wanted to see today, chatting.

Her father was talking to Frankie.

Jesus. What the hell had she done to the universe?

"Gail, come here," ordered her father.

"Yes, sir," she replied reflexively and handed Chris the muffin box back.

"You didn't say you knew Det. Anderson."

Gail hesitated. "Yea- yes. We've worked on a couple cases." She gave Frankie a half nod.

"Well, she should come to dinner tomorrow."

Yeah, okay, Gail had somehow pissed off the universe entirely. "Tomorrow?" Peck family dinner. She'd worn a wire to the last one. "Uh, that's not, not up to me, Dad," she pointed out. "Mom's got a pretty strict invite list." And you never brought someone to surprise Elaine Peck.

Her father waved a hand. "I'll tell her I invited Frankie. It'll be nice to have four at dinner again."

Because Steve. Steve was under house arrest, pending possible jail time. Because \textit{he} hadn't done what Gail was about to do. He had sacrificed no one but himself, and only in order to save Gail. The awkward tension hovered.

Frankie eyed Gail. "I'll... I'm supposed to go back to ThirtyFour this week, Inspector, but, uh, I'll see, I'll see if I'm free."

Bill Peck nodded. "Do that." Then he looked at Gail with a vaguely disappointed expression. As if asking her if it would kill her to take some initiative. "Gail." And he went upstairs.
Exhaling, Gail watched her father leave. "I wouldn't go," she warned Frankie.

The woman scoffed. "It can't be that bad."

Her parents hadn't yet mentioned Gail's promotion to TO, and elevation in responsibilities helping Oliver. "Honestly, I'd rather be kidnapped by a serial killer again, than spend 3 hours with my parents," she said blithely. "But hey, you're the masochist."

As she headed into the locker room, Gail heard Traci mention that the dinners really were the most painfully awkward things she'd ever experienced. God. Traci. Was she going to hate Gail for this? The storm was going to land on her too, no doubt. And rookie D Dov, and Chris. Her roommates. Ugh. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against her locker.

"Hey, you okay? Dov said you looked sick," chirped Chloe.

"Go away," grumbled Gail, unlocking her locker. After the confusion with the new rookie, Chloe had gotten her locker back and Gail found herself wishing she could shoot the woman.

"I've got some ginger, which my mom says is the best for an upset stomach. I mean, it's an upset stomach, right? I've seen how you eat, which is crazy to keep your figure. I'm totally jelly by the way. You're just hot and sexy and it's like you don't have to try—"

Gail reached over and pinched Chloe's mouth shut. The woman babbled like Holly, but it was somehow nowhere near as attractive. "If I take the stupid ginger, will you shut up?" Nodding, Chloe mumbled a 'yes' around the fingers holding her mouth closed. "Fine."

The tiny, annoying, creature just looked at her for a bit, though. "You aren't feeling well," Chloe said, her eyes widening more than normal.

Cautioning her with a glare, Gail changed into her uniform and took the ginger pills. They didn't seem to help much, but they didn't help the burn and churn in her gut. She probably should be chugging antacids, but that would give everything away. Taking her usual spot up front with Oliver, Gail crossed her arms and concentrated on looking stern and unyielding. The faking it was easy.

She half listened to Oliver rattle off everything he'd emailed her with that morning (seriously, Dov had to teach him how to email from his phone?) until Oliver diverged from the script. "Aaaaand, Price. Come here."

Chloe popped up and looked worried. "Sarge?"

Oliver brandished a pair of scissors. "This was too long." He reached over and snipped her tie.

Frankly Gail hadn't known it was possible for Chloe's eyes to get wider. She stared at Oliver and then her severed tie. "I'm loose?"

"Shoulda been before all the…” Oliver waved a hand. "Congratulations Price, you're cut loose." Handing her the severed tie end, he shooed her back. "Go. Serve, protect, don't…"


Oliver blinked and looked at Gail who shrugged. "Right. On that awkward note… Serve, protect, don't get your ass in trouble. Price, take Fox."

Shoving her hands in her pockets, Gail followed Oliver and the others out to Oliver's office,
where Noelle was waiting for them. Yeah, there went her stomach again. There was only one real way to do this, Noelle had pointed out. The only way to do it and get them all was to go all the way.

At least her parents weren't there yet. Gail was sure that was about to come.

"Badges," said Jarvis, his voice dark and angry.

"Sir?" Traci looked shocked. "My … badge?"

"You three are suspended, pending investigation," explained Jarvis.

Noelle coughed. "There are accusations of your conspiracy in the abuse of public trust that resulted in the arrest of former Chief Santana and Steven Peck." Her eyes flickered to Gail as a warning.

Right. She protested, "I had nothing to do with—"

Noelle cut her off. "Your father was just arrested and your mother's about to be. You're under suspicion of perjury, Gail." It was a curious mix of gentle and stern.

Gail had never seen Oliver's face crumble like that before. All the love and trust he had for her just washed out. Elaine and Bill were arrested. She'd gotten her parents arrested. Now she had to play her part and make this look real. She had to make it look like she was on their side. "But—"


This part hurt. Gail took her badge out and handed it to Jarvis. "I want a lawyer," she said carefully, trying to keep her face firm. She had to sell it, make it look like maybe she did this and maybe she too was in on it all along. Selling out her brother to get a promotion. It was her cover.

Traci stared at her. "Gail… We didn't—" And she stopped, eyes widening. Good. Traci was having doubts. What if Gail did it. What if Gail was in on it. She slowly unhooked her badge. "I didn't," she said more firmly to Jarvis, though her eyes flicked to Gail.

All that was left was Frankie. She was stock still. All the snarky fight seemed to be forgotten. Without a word, Noelle held out her hand. "I want a deal," said Frankie, putting her badge in Noelle's palm.

Poor Traci looked like her world was shattered.

Gail tried to feel sympathetic, but the realist in her knew it wasn't Traci's life that was destroyed, it was her own. And she'd done it on purpose.

She hadn't expected to come back to Toronto so soon, but Juliet had to admit it was nice to be back. It was nice to see Nick again, spend some time with him, before meeting up with Noelle. The majority of Fifteen hadn't had much to say to her, which Juliet understood. She'd spied on them, betrayed them, and turned their world upside down. They hated her.

"You're late," announced a voice she really hadn't expected to hear.

"Gail," blinked Juliet as she walked into Noelle's office. The once blonde was sitting on Noelle's couch in street clothes, her hair a dark brown. The scowl was all Gail though. "I ... Didn't expect to see you."
"Few people do," she grumbled, stretching out her legs.

Noelle coughed. "Gail, don't bite." Rolling her eyes, Gail stopped. Far more polite than Gail, Noelle got up and hugged Juliet. "Thanks for coming all this way."


The older officer looked at Gail. "The big house is pretty dirty," sighed Noelle.

"Still?"

"We didn't have any evidence, you know that."

And Juliet stared at Gail. They hadn't had evidence on the other Pecks. But even Noelle said she had a hard time buying that Mama Peck didn't know what her son was up to. "But..." The last she'd heard from Nick, who was in ETF now and working to get a transfer, Gail was still a TO. Actually that was interesting. Nick had been very quiet about Gail.

Noelle gestured to the empty chair. "What did you hear about the re-org at Fifteen?"

"Not a whole lot," admitted Juliet, slowly sitting. "I mean, you told me about the TOs." She looked at Gail.

Raising a hand, Gail spun a finger in a 'whoopee' move. "Suspended."

Juliet blinked and looked at Noelle. "You linked it to the—" She stopped, at a loss of where to go with her sentence.

"Pecks. The word you're looking for is Pecks," sighed Gail, nonplussed.

Shaking her head, Juliet asked, "How did— Why did— Okay, someone better unpack this shit. Because Gail... You didn't, you weren't in on it. I know that."

Gail arched her eyebrows in mild surprise. "Well that makes one person. My father tried to coerce me into lying on the stand to get Steve out of it."

"The adoption? No. Shit on Gail Days like to hit everything. All it really needed was for my ex to waltz back in, married with a kid," she sighed and leaned back, draping her arms over the couch. "Not Nicholas. I actually don't care about him like that. Too male."

That sounded like Gail. Noelle sat down at her desk. "Gail's been collecting evidence of all the Pecks for us, as well as most of their associates. It's... It's going to be messy and loud."

Gail snorted. "You already arrested my parents, Noelle. How can it get messier?"

They'd arrested the Pecks? And Gail was still in the clear. Good god. "Where do I come in," asked Juliet, finally taking a chair. "They all know I'm IA now."

Noelle shook her head. "You said you needed someone for the sting in Vancouver. Someone who could, legitimately, play a cop no one wanted?" She pointed at Gail.

The blonde-brunette flicked two fingers up in a salute and a smile. That too was unexpected. "Won't be too much of a stretch, huh?" Gail's self-deprecating joke hit a bit close to home.
"How bad is it here?" Juliet was fairly sure with the darker hair, Gail could pull it off. If she was half the liar her brother was, though, it might be a bad idea.

Gail shrugged. "Let's just say they found someone to hate more than you."

"She did it right," cut in Noelle. "She called me first, explained what Bill did, and then wore a wire to her own parents' house for dinner." The look of sympathy on Noelle's face was startling.

Gail snorted. "Noelle heard what my parents think of me, which is nothing new."

The senior officer went on. "Then she figured out that Det. Anderson was in on it."

"That was because of what Nash said," pointed out Gail. "The week after Steve was arrested? I got stuck with Anderson who spent most of her time screwing with my head. But she knew a lot about Steve. Which... Didn't jive with what Traci said happened when she met her at a crime scene." Gail shrugged.


Noelle shook her head. "They transferred her after Steve, so it's not like you could have known."

From the couch, Gail muttered, "The sex wasn't even that good." When Juliet looked surprised, Gail added, "I put it together after. I didn't sleep with her to get intel. Even I have limits."

"But," Noelle started and paused. "It highlights the problem."

"How could you piss off everyone?" Juliet marveled at that. "There are a lot of Pecks, I get that, but—"

"I turned in my parents, Juliet. Every single person named Peck is suspended or arrested right now. Including me."

Juliet swiveled and stared at Noelle. "Every one?" The woman nodded. "Jesus. How far down the rabbit hole does it go?"

Gail ticked off on her fingers, "Anderson and Bibby, my brother's partners—"

With a cough, Noelle shook her head. Apparently she'd heard the list before. "Suffice to say, every Division, except Oliver, hates Gail right now. They think either she's in on it or she betrayed everyone."

"I'm either an idiot or a genius or both," beamed Gail.

Juliet looked at the Peck up and down. "Yeah? How's that feel?"

The blue eyes met her own and Gail said, grimly, "I can see myself in the mirror at least."

Ah. So that's how it was. Juliet sighed. "Nick might be a problem."

When Noelle looked confused, Gail explained, "Nicholas is in love with her. Went out to Vancouver last month to see her. And he wants to transfer."

"Did he tell you that?" Juliet was amused. It wasn't a secret.

"No," shrugged Gail. "Turns out nearly marrying him gave me insight to his stupid brain." When
Juliet opened her mouth to express her shock, Gail added, "Don't worry. 100% gay here, and you're not my type."

Noelle pursed her lips. "We can handle that for now. But this... You said you need three to six months. Think you can work with Gail that long and not kill her?"

Six months working with Gail. "Yes," said Juliet with a slow nod. "People who go to the line for the right thing I can work with."

And so, three days later, Juliet found herself on a plane headed back to Vancouver, with a very quiet, suspended TO Gail Peck beside her. That was nice at least. Gail really didn't feel the need to fill the world with useless chatter. When Noelle told her that Andy McNally had considered the spot, Juliet had cringed. Andy chattered. A lot.

By contrast, Gail was silent the entire flight. She'd spent the three days boxing up her things and putting them in storage, though she'd really not had a lot of stuff. Saying only that she hated helping people move, Gail borrowed Chris' car to haul her one load. The cover story was simple. Gail was benched pending the investigation with her brother and family. She handed in her badge and gun and was told not to leave the country.

Blithely, Gail had asked if that meant she could rent a cabin in the middle of nowhere and avoid people, because after everything if this was how they were going to treat her, they could do without her. She'd even broken Oliver's heart, telling him that this was also his fault, for not staying as their sergeant. Juliet had seen Gail be mean before, but she'd never seen her vicious.

The last day in town, they'd established the cover story. Juliet, a dirty cop, had met Gail, a disgraced cop, and brought her into the gang. It would be a few weeks of prep work in Vancouver, but her boss seemed fairly excited about having this level of depth. The reality of what had gone on in Toronto just put layers of validity to the game.

On the other hand, Nick's transfer had been squashed. Temporarily. Once the case was over, Gail would go back to Toronto and return to her job as TO, and Nick would be told the truth. For now, he was told couldn't come because the chances were it would blow her cover. Juliet's cover, that was.

Neither Nick nor anyone else in Fifteen knew where Gail was going. The fight with Oliver about how he had to suspend her (he didn't know it was fake) was epic. And the insults to Det. Epstein and Sgt. Nash... Juliet suddenly felt like she understood why everyone was a little scared of Gail.

"Your phone's off, right?"

"And in the box with everything in Noelle's office," replied Gail, her eyes closed. She'd studiously watched the ground during takeoff but, since the drinks were not free, opted to sleep. Or seem to sleep.

Juliet sighed. "Look. I actually really like that you're not chatty and that you want to do this. But we're going to work together for months, so we need a rapport."

Not opening her eyes, Gail asked, "Can it be that I'm angry and bitter and sullen, and you put up with it because I do my job well?"

She had to smile a little. "You say that now, and after we spend time in the same apartment..." Gail opened an eye. "I did think of a different aspect to the cover story."

The wheel in Gail's head spun and then she opened both eyes to stare. "Ugh, really?" Juliette shrugged and Gail sighed. "Better than McNally... Oh, yeah, Nick used to date her too."
"Well there's a perfect story. You hate McNally, so how about Nick cheated on both of us with her?"

That made Gail smile. "And we both coincidentally became lesbians?"

"You can be gay, I'm bi. There's a B in LGBT after all."

The smile stayed on Gail's face and looked rather real for a change. "You're like Chloe, without all the annoying bits." Gail closed her eyes. "So did I come here because I have a thing for you or for the job?"

"Job. We can let the romance thing simmer. May be helpful later." Making an agreeing sound, Gail settled back into the seat. "So... In the interest of our story. What happened with you and Nick?"

"Which time? The marriage was ... He left me at the altar and bailed for the Army." Gail sighed. "The second time was a mistake all around, and he fell in love with McNally when he bailed on me and went undercover." She hesitated. "And I cheated on him. Pre-emptive revenge."

They both digested that. "This... This could work," mused Juliet. "Really, McNally?"

"Yeah, I don't know. Something about her earnest girl guide blah blah blah," Gail grunted. "I don't like her. I did... I thought she was my friend. Turns out only one of those I have is Botched Boob... Shit." Gail opened her eyes.

"Botched Boob...?"

"One of ... One of my ex's friends. I ran into her at a bar the night after the trial." Wincing, Gail admitted, "I may have drunkenly told her my parents were evil."

Juliet frowned in thought. "Think she'll give you away?"

"Mostly worried she'll come looking."

"No, that's okay. Adds to the story."

Gail looked skeptical. "If you say so."

Smiling, Juliet leaned back. "Trust me, Gail. It'll work."

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"I have to go back to Toronto?" Holly looked up from her microscope, surprised.

"A mess of cases are under review, some of yours. They asked us to borrow you for up to three months."

Holly grimaced and eyed her boss. "My cases? There are no inconsistencies in my cases, Rick."

Her boss sat down on the neighboring stool. "No, it's not you. Looks like a whole precinct up there was upturned. Corruption, murder, the whole nine yards."

"Division," she corrected. "They call them Divisions. Which one?"

"Uh, Fifteen? Yeah." Rick re-read the paper. "I guess they transferred half the people out, too."

Fifteen? Her blood ran cold for a moment. "What happened?"
"I told you, corruption, murder. Went all the way up to the brass, too. Lucky you moved here."
Rick shrugged. "Two IA investigations. Took down a whole mess of people named Peck."

Now she was panicking. "Can I see the list?" She tried to be calm.

The look on Rick's face told her she was anything but. "Holly, I can't show you-"

"Rick, I used to date a cop from Fifteen. If she's on there, I have a big problem."

Rick snorted. "Why? You fudge a report for her?" When Holly glared he nodded. "That's my point." He looked at the file in his hand. "What's her name?"

"Peck." Holly pressed her lips together. She hadn't said the name in months. Not since she'd left Toronto. It still hurt to say it.

He looked up at her, surprised. "Holly..."

"Gail Peck. Please, Rick. Just let me know."

"Yeah, there are like a dozen Pecks on here. Is that weird?"

Holly shook her head. "Pecks are policing royalty in Toronto," she said quietly. "G. Gail Peck."

Her boss slowly read the page and shook his head. "Nope. I've got a Steve, but no Gail- wait, she's listed as a witness." Rick hesitated and handed the paper over. "You look like you saw a ghost, Holly."

Reading the paper did not help her feel better. "I think I did." There were the names of all of Gail's family. Holy crap. Her brother? Gail's brother was one of the primary suspects? Thank god she was sitting down. "That's her," she said, reading the badge number. 8727. She'd memorized that.

There were two cases. The first was where Steve had pled guilty to corruption. The second was where Bill and Elaine, Gail's parents, were on trial for covering up the corruption. Or attempting to. The key witness? Gail Peck.

Who was currently suspended.

And missing.

Though Holly wasn't probably supposed to know that.

She'd been chatting with Lisa a few months ago when her plastics friend complained that Gail really was a runner. After sorting out that Lisa hadn't been dating Gail, Holly had to ask why Lisa knew that. And how.

According to Lisa, she'd run into Gail at a bar, drunk off her ass, because she'd given up on the adoption of Sophie. After letting Gail sleep it off in her guest room, they'd found some things they had in common. But then, a month later, Gail was suspended and vanished without a word.

Lisa hadn't told her why Gail was suspended. She'd said she hadn't known, and all the force had told her was that that Gail was too close to the drama. Suspended. And currently anywhere but Toronto. The home Gail said she couldn't bear to leave. The town she said she was born in and would die in.

And she'd apparently left.
And apparently Holly was headed back to Toronto. In December. Merry Christmas.

"I'll be damned," muttered Traci as she watched the lawyers walk through the room, trailed by six of the forensics experts. Beside her, Chris was just as shocked. Fifteen was a completely different beast from the last time they'd seen the woman, but there was Dr. Holly Stewart. Gail's Holly.

"Wow. She looks good." Traci smacked Chris on the arm. "What? I know she's gay! I'm allowed to dream," he hissed.

Traci rolled her eyes. "She's going to ask about Gail."

"Oh." Chris rubbed his arm and looked worried. "But …"

"Yeah. Exactly." Maybe they'd luck out and Traci wouldn't come looking for them.

Of course, she'd been serious about men there times in her life. Dex, the druggie who hit her. Once. Jerry, who died on the trail of Gail Peck and managed to save her life. Steve, Gail's brother who was as dirty as they come. Luck had rarely been on Traci's side, and especially when it came to Pecks and Peck adjacent people. Their orbit could be dangerous, like circling the sun. You'd get burnt.

Seeing Holly brought the memories back. Traci felt terrible, but the last five months had been a relief. She really did like Gail. The woman was loyal to a fault, but she was a good cop. Steve's betrayal, while not Gail's fault at all, had made it hard for Traci not to see her as a Peck.

That hadn't been the case when Jerry had died. Then, Traci had seen Gail as the representation of Jerry's work. His death had not been in vain. And Gail had become a close friend after that, standing by Traci's side even when Andy got all stupid with boys. The six months they'd spent together, while Andy and Nick were undercover, had built a friendship that Traci thought would never break.

But it had when Steve betrayed them all. It hurt to look at Gail because she'd trusted so much and wanted so much to see the good things in Steve that she saw in Gail. Maybe if she'd been gay, she and Gail could have solved that particular problem, but she wasn't. Instead she looked at Gail and no matter how hard she tried, Traci saw everything that she was: a Peck.

And Gail had tried. She'd reached out to Traci, they'd started to make their way as still friends, and then Gail had turned on everyone. All her claims that she wanted to be a better person seemed suspect when she ripped her own family apart and turned them all in. Traci couldn't remember the last time she'd seen someone named Peck running around. Rumor had it they were all in jail or under house arrest, and so were their partners. Every last one was suspected and suspended. But everyone at Fifteen had been impacted, especially because they'd all worked with Gail for so long.

Being a Peck really wasn't Gail's fault at all. She certainly hadn't asked to have been born into that family anymore than Traci had wanted to be a fourth generation teen-mom. That was the hand life had dealt. Gail would always be a Peck, and she'd always be painted— no tarred by the stain Pecks had left on policing. Gail, who'd tried to keep the friendship with Traci no matter what, was someone Traci couldn't bear to look at anymore.

"Go back to work, Chris," she sighed and turned back to her office. Luck. She could pray for that, right?

The cough by her desk a few hours later told was luck just laughing at her. "Hi. Traci— I mean Detective Nash." Holly had an awkward smile on her face, a quirk to the side. Once, Gail had
drunkenly described that look as endearing.

"Dr. Stewart," she replied automatically. "It's actually Sgt. Nash now."

"Congratulations. Holly held up a cup of coffee. "I hope I'm not imposing… I wanted to, ah, well." She sighed. "This is awkward. I couldn't decide if it was worse, asking you or Chris or Sgt. Shaw."

Traci smiled reflexively. Awkward Holly was kind of cute. "About Gail? It's pretty much a crap shoot," she admitted. But she pulled a chair over. "You're here about Steve's old cases?"

"All of mine with Fifteen, actually," explained Holly, sitting and handing over the paper cup. "They cleared me."

That was surprising. "You were suspected?"

"I guess the corruption was pretty widespread." Holly sipped her own coffee. "Fifteen …" She looked around.

"Was stripped down, salted, and burned. Welcome to the new Fifteen."

"You stayed, though."

"I was … Steve's replacement turned out to be in on it," sighed Traci. "His old partner. Classmate. Whatever." She knew she winced when she said Steve's name. It was hard not to.

Holly nodded. "And Gail turned him in?"

"Her." Traci was surprised. "How did you know that?"

Tilting her head, Holly gave Traci a look. "Really?"

Traci laughed a little. "Sorry. That was stupid." She sniffed the coffee. "So… I haven't seen, or heard, from Gail in five months."

The doctor nodded. "No one has. But … You know."

"I have an idea," admitted Traci. "There was a job, a UC job in Vancouver, with Internal Affairs. I'm betting Gail took it and her suspension was the cover."

Holly exhaled slowly. "She hates undercover."

Wondering if Holly knew exactly why Gail hated undercover work, Traci nodded. "It hadn't been exactly easy for her here. IA was about the only place that could look at her."

"You mean you," remarked Holly in surprise. "You couldn't look at her?"

Traci looked away for a moment. "No. Not really. Do you… Do you really know how bad it got? Holly, all the Pecks. They ripped into all of them, everyone associated."

Dryly, Holly pointed out, "I know. I'm not just here because I worked with Fifteen."

Oh. Right. "Sorry." She sighed. "You, uh, handling all this okay?"

"Well. Having every one of my cases reviewed because half the detectives are gone, and the other half because I dated Gail for less than three months is … I've had better days." Holly frowned. "I just… I just want to know what the hell really happened."
Traci shook her head. "I really don't know, Doc."

"Oh crap, just call me Holly. We both got Pecked." Holly leaned back. "Sorry. I've been stressed. They've been poking my whole life. Why I left. Was I covering for something. Why did I break up and then try to get back together."

She'd heard about that from Gail's perspective. According to Gail, Holly had asked her to move to San Francisco with her, to leave it all behind. "I wonder if she wishes she'd gone with you," sighed Traci.

Holly laughed softly. "She ran away from Toronto in the end." Then Holly looked worried, "Wait, she was trying to adopt that girl. Sophie?"

Traci nodded. "She … the day of Steve's trial, she gave up. She was relying on him, and me, for support and …" That hurt. She'd failed her friend there.

"Yeah," sighed Holly. "I can see that being hard." She closed her eyes. "If … if you hear from her, could you call me? I don't— I don't have to talk to her. God, I don't even know what I'd say. But … I just… I want to— I need to know she's okay."

Promising to do so, Traci walked Holly out.

How strange it was. Holly had only know Gail for a few months, but she cared so much. She worried so much. Holly needed to know how Gail was, even though it clearly hurt her deeply. Gail had cut her to the bone, leaving her, and yet she still cared so very, very much.

What was it like to love someone like that, wondered Traci. And did Holly even know that's what was going on?

It snowed a lot in February in Toronto. More than Vancouver for sure. Juliet turned and looked at her seat-mate. "Happy to be home?"

Gail looked out the window as the plane turned toward the landing strip, the sun peeking over the city at the end of their Red Eye flight. "Home," she said thoughtfully, as if she was tasting the word and finding it not to her liking. "I don't know."

"The offer stands, you know. Hayes really liked you."

Nodding, Gail didn't answer. She'd grown more and more silent as they'd wrapped up the case. For five months of undercover work, Gail had been spectacular. Astoundingly so. Juliet had worked with a lot of people like that, and Gail was the most reluctant natural ever. But damn she was good. The case had run long, but that was just the nature of those things.

Hayes, Juliet's boss, had sent her back with Gail for two reasons. First there was some debriefing that involved Noelle's team back in Toronto. However the second reason was that Hayes wanted to keep Gail and Juliet needed to woo her.

Whatever it took.

Gail informed him that adults should not use the word 'woo.'

Before their jaunt, Juliet would have said it was impossible to pry a Peck out of Toronto. Gail was clearly not your normal Peck, though. Gail had not lived like your normal Peck. She'd certainly not left like a normal Peck.
Noelle met them at the airport, picking up their luggage. She hugged Juliet and then, to her surprise, hugged Gail. Even when they'd been deep in their role as girlfriends, Gail hadn't been much for touching. It suited her, she didn't need to act all clingy, and in fact it made her reputation with some of the seedy underbelly. But the nights they'd ended up in the same shitty apartment, in the same bed, Gail had scrupulously kept to her own space.

"Look at you, Gail. Couldn't you get any sun?" Noelle held her at arm's length.

"It was Vancouver, not LA," sighed Gail. But she did look better. Still pale, but less sickly. Like life had been breathed back into her. It was being sucked back out of here from the moment they deplaned.

Noelle smiled, as if this was expected. "Come on. Let's get you debriefed and then home."

The shallow 'yay' from Gail was understood by all. Juliet knew Gail hadn't put any thought in where she was sleeping that night. She still had no family contact, not even when they'd had their weekends off and Juliet had called Nick to explain she was deep undercover and she missed him. And he told her about ETF and how he loved it.

No, even on those days, Gail just waited. Surprisingly patient, she pointed out there was no one to call whom she could tell. Nick was safe because he was a cop. But he didn't want to hear from her. So she let Juliet gather the gossip from Toronto and half listened to how Dov and Chloe were doing. How she missed Oliver's wedding. How McNally was pregnant.

The one time Noelle came out to see them, Gail had asked nothing. Not even about her brother, who was behind bars. Noelle had told her anyway, but Gail just wouldn't ask. She simply ignored Toronto.

And here Juliet was, pushing her back into it.

At Fifteen, it felt different. Andy was still there, stuck at a desk, and she startled to see them walk in. "Holy crap."

Those two words sent a ripple through the officers. There was no cheering. When they'd come back to Vancouver, they'd been welcomed with hugs and cheers and whoops and immediate offers to have drinks bought. Here there was silence. And the silence echoed the more people looked at her. At Gail.

No wonder Gail had left. It must have been brutal. "Oliver wants to see you, but we're debriefing with Jarvis first."

"Fine," said Gail, the absolute indifference of tone making the words seem like a slap to all those who overheard. They recoiled. Visibly.

Except Oliver. Oliver ran from his office. "Peck!" They all stopped and watched as the man threw his arms around her and squeezed Gail close. "I knew it was an act," he whispered, not very quietly.

To Juliet's surprise, Gail hugged him back. "Not really," she sighed.

"You. You, my darlin' girl, you say things I need hearing." He sighed and let her go. "We're talking. You and me. After they debrief you. Okay? I have photos of the wedding."

Gail nodded. "Okay." And they watched him all but dance away,

"He missed you, Gail," said Noelle, very carefully.
"Yeah," sighed Gail. "Just him." She shoved her hands in her pockets and walked to the stairs.

The debriefing on this end was much the same as it had been in Vancouver. The only difference was, at the end, instead of an offer for a permanent position, Gail was handed her badge back.

"If you want it," Jarvis noted. "Hayes called and said he wants to fast track you to the Ds there. I'd ... Toronto would miss having a capable officer like you." He sighed. "But me? I'd understand."

Gail picked up the badge and turned it over in her hands. "Where would you put me?"

"With Williams for now," he jerked his chin at Noelle.

"Because I'm still persona non grata." Gail didn't ask that, she just seemed to know.

Jarvis looked uncomfortable. "It's not you, Gail... It's..."

And again, Gail understood. "It's the name." She tightened her grip on the badge. "How many are left?"

Questioningly, Jarvis asked, "How many-"

Noelle cut Jarvis off. "You."

Gail nodded slowly. "Me. Right." The badge was clipped to her belt. "Well then. It's me."

The door opened and the new commissioner walked in, along with a lawyer, and someone who was probably from SIU. "Excuse me," said the commissioner, a thick mustached, Tom Selleck look-alike. "Peck, we need to go over your statement."

"Now?" Noelle protested and started to stand.

"It's fine. Let's get it over with." Gail got up and waved a hand for Noelle to stand down. "Does it matter that I haven't decided about this yet?" She tapped her badge.

Fake-Tom-Selleck shook his head. Carter. That was his name. Greg Carter. "Maybe I'll make a better pitch than Vancouver, eh?" He held a hand out as Gail walked up to him. "Nice to finally meet you," he said, an insincere smile painted across his face.

As the door closed behind them, Juliet heard Gail reply, "Mutual, I'm sure."

She laughed. "Oh that poor man," smiled Juliet.

"He has no idea," grinned Noelle.

Jarvis looked confused but shrugged. "Well. That's all I have. Anything I should know, Ward?"

Sighing, Juliet shook her head. "No, sir. Gail was... Amazing. She put her life on the line for people she barely knew."

With a nod, Jarvis got up. "I don't think that will make her feel any better here." He left the room.

"That was perceptive of him," muttered Noelle.

"Was she ever really chatty?"

"Gail? No. Not like Andy, at least." Noelle smiled sadly. "I was hoping she'd feel normal,
though."

Juliet smiled. "What? Bitchy and cold? I thought that was normal for Gail."

Even Noelle had to admit that it was normal for Gail. They went back downstairs and Juliet heard her name. She turned and saw Nick in cargo pants, boots, and a grey shirt. "Juliet!" He ran across the room and swung her into his arms. "You're here! Noelle said you might be, but you are."

It felt like home, being in his arms again. Except for the smell. "Oh my god, Nick. You reek," she tried to be serious, but found herself smiling too much. Six months without seeing him, touching him, had really made her realize that she did like him. Maybe loved him.

"I ran here," he smiled back. "I mean literally."

Wrapping her arms around his neck, Juliet shook her head. "Shut up, Nick." She drew his head down for a kiss.

"Oh god, stop sucking face," groaned Gail, walking past them.

Nick startled. "Gail?"

"Surprised?" She smiled grimly at him. "Have fun, you two." And she walked to Oliver's office. "I'm going to say hello to someone who wants to see me."

Nick stared after Gail. "You were... With Gail? But I thought- wait, that was all an act?"

Nodding, Juliet leaned into his chest, soaking up his strength. "It was and it wasn't. It wouldn't have worked as well as it did if you all hadn't..." She trailed off as Nick stiffened.

"If we hadn't been, yeah." He looked after her. "We should talk."

Juliet leaned back. "Is that code for breaking up? Because I just spent six months undercover."

The taller man shook his head and leaned in, kissing her. "No. Not breaking up. I want to hear about your case. Can you tell me?"

"I can." She smiled at him and then looked at the office. Gail was sitting in the chair, her back to the squad, and Oliver looked very, very, serious. She could text Gail, she decided. It would be good for them both to be apart. Give Gail time to make a decision on her one, "When are you off shift?"

"Now," said Nick. "Sue said I'd be worthless."

They held hands as they walked to his truck, Nick carrying her suitcase. And hours later, after showers and takeout and sex and more takeout, Juliet remembered to text Gail.

_I'm staying with Nick. Let me know if you need anything._

The reply came back quickly.

_The less I know about your sex life, the happier I'll be._

Juliet smiled.

"Who's that? On the phone?"

"Gail." She tapped back that she wouldn't tell Gail anything.
Nick sat down beside her. "Six months with her as your partner. That must have been ... Interesting."


Her boyfriend (is that what they were?) looked surprised. "You like her?"

She turned the phone off and put it down. "I know you two went out, Nick. That you were engaged." He looked surprised. "Six months, Nick. We talked a lot."

They had talked a lot. There was a lot of downtime, time they had to be in persona but not necessarily doing anything, so they'd talked about people they dated. It had taken a lot of cajoling, but Gail finally opened up about Holly. Juliet had heard of her, never worked with her, and had been interested to hear Gail tell her that Holly was probably the love of her life and she'd screwed it up.

Gail talked about her own insecurities of being a Peck, and how ironically they'd all come home to roost. They'd seen her as the least able Peck, the least worthy, and yet. It was, she admitted the only time she'd had someone to talk to about it, someone who wasn't tied into the mess of Fifteen too much.

Of course they'd talked about Nick and the failed wedding (Gail admitted to attacking Nick's motorcycle with a baton and taking out the lights and mirrors). They talked about Nick leaving her three times, and never giving her a second chance, which Juliet took as a warning to herself. Shit that would not be stood for. But then Gail noted that Nick went after Juliet. He never went after Gail. So they should follow up. See what they'd be.

And now it was time for her to talk to Nick and see what they'd be.

So she told him about the six months with Gail. It had been Gail's suggestion to be honest and up front about how they'd acted as lovers for the benefit of the part. In their time together, Gail had told her about Nick and Andy, how that went and ended for all parties. Juliet was prepared for Nick's fears and concerns. His doubts that six months apart, at the beginning of their relationship, where she was pretending to love someone else, would destroy them.

But they weren't Gail and Nick. Or Andy and Nick. Juliet was well versed at the lies of being undercover. And Gail was .. Well Gail was Gail. She made her own rules. Yes, they'd kissed. Yes, they'd shared a bed. Yes, she'd seen Gail naked and, frankly, been a little surprised when that had happened. Gail didn't seem to have modest streak about walking around naked after a shower.

It also meant she had to explain that Nick's transfer had been iced because they'd worried he'd blow Gail's cover. Nick accepted the reasoning. The fewer people who knew about a plan, the better. He accepted it all, swore he wasn't jealous, and asked if that meant he could re-apply now.

Because Nick trusted her. To Nick this was a simple situation. He still wanted her. He still wanted to be with her.

"Yes," she laughed and kissed him again. "Yes, you should come."

When Traci called, it made Holly's heart hit the bottom of her stomach.

"You're going to want to get to Fifteen. Gail rolled back in town."

She didn't make it that day. She couldn't. The last of the cases to go over had to come first. The
last ones were done two days later and she texted Traci to ask her if Gail was there.

*She's in a meeting with the brass.*

So Holly bundled herself up and drove to Fifteen for the first time since she'd been back. The first time, the only other time she'd come to the station, she'd been in an SUV with lawyers. Now she was an ambassador without portfolio, unsure of what she wanted to even tell Gail.

The only thing she knew for sure was that she wanted to see her. To see with her own eyes that Gail was still Gail. Because everything else she'd heard had been hard to stomach. That Gail had betrayed the force? That she'd turned in family and friends. That didn't sound like a woman who once told her how she'd taken the fall for her classmates.

Yes, she had to see Gail. She had to burn the memory into her brain that Gail was still Gail.

She found Traci first, using her temporary access to let herself in. "Hey," she said nervously. 

"Hey," replied Traci. "She's still upstairs. They're trying to get her to stay."

Holly blinked. "Stay?" Gail not being a cop was against the very grain of her soul.

"Apparently Vancouver wants her. A lot."

Sitting down at the empty chair, Holly blew out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. "God. Leave Toronto?"

Traci nodded. "It's ... Well. You'll see."

She waited quietly for an hour before she heard Gail's voice. "I'll think about it," she said to a detective Holly vaguely knew. Swarek.

"I think you could be good," he said to her, and Gail nodded.

"That's not the issue, Sam," she pointed out, bitterly.

He looked away for a moment. "Yeah, I know. Just give it some thought, kid."

Gail nodded, not looking into the Bullpen. Not seeing Traci or Holly. "I will." She walked down the stairs.

Standing, Holly finally got a look at Gail. She was thinner, more worn. Her hair was a soft shade of brown, almost black, but not starkly so. She walked with a confidence in herself that Holly didn't quite recognize. It wasn't the self assured swagger that had melted Holly's heart a year ago, it was something else.

Mature.

"Gail," said Traci, passing Holly to stand at the railing. "Gail, wait. We should talk."

"Really? Three days later?"

Traci flinched. "That doesn't mean I don't want to talk."

"Well." Gail looked up but didn't seem to spot Holly. "I don't."

Frustrated, Traci started for the steps. "If this is because of what everyone said-"
"Oh come on, Trace, it's not like I expected a heroes welcome," sneered Gail. "None of you can even stand to look at me anymore."

Traci looked equal parts exasperated and guilty. "Gail, it's not like that."

"Oh, don't. Just. Don't, alright? I've had enough people lying to me." And then Gail's eyes caught sight of Holly, standing there hind Traci. "Oh." She blinked and shook her head, heading to the back of the station. "Of course." Not even a hello. It burned.

"Gail," called out Traci. "Where are you going?"

"To clean out my locker? Unless someone stole my clothes in the last six months, which they might. I mean, they had to be getting pretty rank."

Traci shook her head. "No. Oliver made us leave it alone." Then she asked. "Are you... Leaving?"

"Jesus, I don't know, Traci. Okay? I just want to do my damn laundry. Is that a crime?"

"No," said Traci quickly.

Swallowing her fears, Holly asked, "And... after?"

"Today? I'm going to get drunk and then sleep for a couple days in a bed that isn't in a low rent apartment," she grumbled. "Are we done with Twenty Questions?" Without waiting for an answer, Gail stomped off.

Traci cleared her throat. "I'd hoped she'd calmed a bit," she muttered.

"She's been like that the whole time?"

"No," admitted the detective. "It's... been very odd." Traci frowned. "She was fine for a while, made TO, and then she was angry. She was really mean when she left. Called Oliver a failure."

Holly startled. "She likes Oliver."

"Yeah. She does. It's funny. Oliver said that was why he kept the white shirt back on." Traci looked at Holly. "And she called me pathetic taking my time getting back in the game. Said Jerry would be disappointed."

That sounded like Gail trying to get people off their asses. "She played you," realized Holly.

"Yeah," Traci said sadly. "She did." Traci stormed back to her desk. "Come on. She'll be at the Penny."

Holly didn't think so. "I wouldn't. I'm not sure... maybe we should let her process."

"No, she's had three days. She's just being a child." Traci was firm.

Reluctantly, Holly pulled her coat on and followed Traci down the street to the Penny. No Gail. While Traci interrogated the bartender, Holly pulled her phone out and called Gail. No answer. Then she called Lisa.

"Hi, Lisa..."

"Hey, missy back in town," laughed Lisa. "Feeling guilty because it's been three weeks and you still haven't hung out with me?"
Holly hesitated. "Okay, it's not that... You said you'd gone drinking with Gail?"

"Seriously? I told you she skipped town."

"She's back in town. I just saw her at Fifteen. She's been undercover in Vancouver."

Lisa was silent for a moment. Long enough for Holly to think she was about to lie. "For half a year, and you think she wants to talk to you?"

That meant Lisa knew something. "Listen, I'm at the Penny with Traci but Gail's not here. What bar did you meet her at?"

Silent for a while, Lisa sighed. "I'll call you back, okay?"

Holly grimaced. "Lisa."

"Don't. Look, I promised Gail... I need to talk to her first. Okay?" Lisa with a promise was not someone to mess with. That was why Holly was still her friend, after everything.

"I understand," sighed Holly. "Just... Tell her... God I don't know. Tell her I'm sorry." Lisa said she would and hung up. "Lisa's going to... Look for her. God, I need a drink."

Traci patted her arm. "Coffee. We can figure out what's next in a bit."

They walked down the street to a tiny coffee bistro that Holly partly remembered. Gail had brought her coffee from there before. "You know what's the worst part? We only went out for two and a half months," sighed Holly. "How can she have messed with my head that much in less than three months?"

Smiling, Traci looked at her hands. "I felt that way about Jerry."

"I miss talking to her."

"Me too," admitted Traci. "She's... She's a storm, Holly."

Exhaling loudly, Holly looked away. The storm of Gail Peck had battered her shore, tearing her apart, breaking her down. Gail had, like the forces of nature, forever changed her landscape. She had never been the same since Gail blew into her life.

"I'm not... I'm not trying to get back with her, Traci. I just need to know for myself that she's okay. She's important to me."

And Traci gave her a strange look. "Aren't you mad?"

Holly blinked. "At Gail? I forgave her about the fight ages ago."

"I meant... She threw everything into an uproar and bolted! You've had to spend Christmas here."

Shaking her head, Holly nibbled her muffin. "And I got to see my parents, on the government dime. She did the right thing, didn't she? She stood up and... She said you guys never understood that."

Traci looked stunned. "What?"

"She told me about the guy who died in lockup." Holly gestured with a hunk of muffin. "No one backed her up."
Traci opened her mouth and then closed it. "Huh. Yeah. And then Nick bailed." She slumped in her seat. "I wonder what would have happened if they'd all taken the blame."

Holly nodded. "And then this? You're all blaming her for something I bet she didn't know anything about. Someone who does that, who takes the hit, she doesn't turn on them. She does what's right."

The detective mulled on that in silence until Lisa texted back with an address of a bar. They didn't talk any more as Holly drove them over. Gail and Lisa were seated at a table and Gail had a line of shot glasses.

"They get the next round," said Gail, as if that was a reminder of a deal.

Lisa looked apologetically at Holly. "Tequila," said Lisa, gesturing at her drink.

"Not Jim Bean?" Holly smiled and caught a smirk from Gail.

"No, I like this haircut."

Holly wrinkled her nose. "If you say so. I'll hide the scissors."

There was a pause and Gail gestured with her shot glass. "I remember why I like you," she told Holly. It was the first time she'd spoken to Holly in months. Almost a year.

Holly sat down next to Lisa, giving Gail space. "I've got this round," she told them, and ordered a beer.

"Not joining me in drunk-ville?"

"No, I drove."

"So responsible," sighed Gail. "What about you, Super Mom?"

"White wine," she ordered.

"I'm still working on this one," said Lisa, holding up a margarita. It was a virgin, and Holly wondered if Gail had noticed.

The conversation was stilted and uncomfortable. Gail answered most questions with as few words as possible. She refused to talk about what things were like and why she was considering leaving Toronto. Holly knew why she left, but Gail was so much more of a Toronto entity.

Finally Holly pushed. "Gail… why won't you talk to me?"

"We're talking," muttered Gail. "These are words."

Holly snorted. "You just got back from being gone half a year and now I keep hearing you're leaving. You love it here. That's what you told me a year ago."

Her ex stared at her. "No. No, you do not get to throw that at me."

Because that was what they'd argued about before Holly left. "I'm not," she said softly. "I'm not throwing anything, Gail. I just want to know. I'm your friend."

"Yeah? Great friend. You left me." She then pointed at Traci. "You see Steve when you look at me. Andy sees all her friends changing and moving on. Dov, God knows what's wrong with him
and Chris. Chloe... Is annoying. I don't *have* friends, Holly."

"That's not fair," started Traci.

Gail scowled. "Really? Tell me again who came to see whom after *my* brother, the guy I grew up with, turned out to be a traitor?"

"I was dating him," Traci said, defensively.

"Brother. 27 years of lies, Trace. *Years.* I'm so sorry," she said insincerely. "So sorry your boyfriend turned out to be a traitor. At least you have a mom and a dad and a kid, right?"

Traci flinched. "This isn't a one-up game, Gail," she said slowly.

"Oh believe me, it's not a game. This is my life. My reality. And please, who was it that backed me up when I told them about my parents?" Gail put a hand to her ear. "Crickets!"

Looking away, Traci admitted, "We were all too close, Gail."

"Yeah, well thanks a lot. Worked out great for you. Glad you're moving on. You have a future here."

Holly cut in. "Okay, can the pity party, Gail. Yes, it sucks that your family doesn't have your back and are corrupt. And yeah, Fifteen clearly dropped the ball, but you're still a damn good cop."

Snorting, Gail asked, "Where?"

"Jesus, you don't have to stay at this Division."

Gail laughed. "Really? What Division do you think wants me?"

Frowning, Holly blurted the only thing that came to mind. "What?"

"Oh my god Holly, you don't get it? You really don't..." Gail grimaced. "Let me explain it, in simple terms so you and Botched Boob Job here can follow along." Gail dug into her pocket and pulled out a name tag. PECK. "This name? This name used to be police royalty. This name used to mean that the person would give their life for the city. For the force. Now? Now it means liar. Cheater. Corrupt."

"Gail—" This was sounding like 'cut your hair off in the bathroom' levels of manic.

"See? No. You don't get it. I turned in my father, Holly. And that meant my mother too, and right now there is one, and only one, Peck left in Toronto policing."

Even Traci looked surprised. "Gail, that can't be right." But she didn't sound certain. She sounded fearful.

"Couldn't bear to look, huh?" Gail shrugged. "Can't blame you. That's why Noelle had to get me out of the way. Me and Juliet got to play disgraced cops. Fun times." She snorted. "That, by the way, is Steve's."

Traci stared at the name tag in a little horror. "You kept it?"

Gail nodded. "Reminds me how bad things get." She downed a shot of tequila. "Oh, and Frankie. Can't forget I turned in the girl who was trying to date me. Because my stellar track record with love just has to keep going."
Frankie? It couldn't be... Holly eyed Lisa who was making a surprised sound of understanding. "She was in on it?"

Nodding again, Gail sighed. "She was. Did you miss that part, Trac? My brother had a backup plan to get his old friend to hit on me. Distract me. So I'd testify for him and not think deep enough. But oh... See, he's an idiot. Because Traci told me that she hadn't realized Frankie and Steve-o were friends. They didn't even act like they knew each other when she met them." Gail smirked sadly. "How'd'ya like that?"

Traci started to reach over to touch Gail, but stopped part way. "I'm sorry, Gail."

The pretty drunk Peck shook her head. "No, you're not. You're feeling guilty because everyone was giving a shit about poor McNally and Marlo, or poor you and Leo, and I was just getting what I deserved, being a Peck." Gail picked up the last shot before her, stared at it, and put it down. "Fuck it. I'm going."

"Where? You know Chloe moved in with Dov?" Traci looked apologetic.

Looking blearily confused, Gail asked, "So?"

Lisa cleared her throat. "She's been at my place."

"Really, you had to tell them?" Gail frowned.

"Oh shut up, Blue Collar."

"Screw you too, Boob Job." But Gail seemed to relax a little. They seemed to banter like friends.

Traci looked surprised, "Holly's... Holly you're not staying there?"

Holly shook her head. "No, I'm in a hotel. But... Gail, don't you have any family to stay with?"

"No," sighed Gail, her voice forced into lightness. "My parents, my brother, most of my cousins, are in jail or under house arrest. Plus side, no more Peck dinners." She toyed with the last shot and downed it anyway. "Oh and I'm still a pariah at Fifteen. Nick won't even talk to me. Which is fine, since he's boning Juliet."

Very quietly, Traci pointed out, "I'm talking to you."

Gail snorted. "You really want me to crash at your place? What'll McNally say?" At least Traci winced. "Come on, Boobs. Drive me to your place. I want to sleep."

With an apologetic look to Holly, Lisa helped Gail up and out of the bar, stopping only to pay the tab. "I didn't think it was that bad," whispered Holly.

"I tried to lie to myself that it wasn't... She was... She wasn't that bad at the wedding."

"Who got married?"

"Sam and Andy. Oh, and Marlo had Sam's baby." Traci looked at her wine for a moment and then told Holly everything she'd missed. From Chris and drugs down to Duncan getting transferred. Everyone was split up. That was why Fifteen had felt so empty and weird.

And that was why everything with Gail was so weird. Now what?

Could she help Gail? Should she?
"Peck, visitor."

Steve looked up at the guard. "Me?"

"No other Pecks here."

That was true. All the other Pecks were under house arrest or locked up in other prisons. Worse prisons. He lucked out in minimum security lockup for now. Wait his time, serve his time, and go back into the world by spring.

Of course, in the five months he'd been there, no one had visited him. At all. He followed the guard down the hall to the waiting room. Sitting at a table was a woman with dark hair and a slouchy sweater, reading a magazine. Steve stared. "Gail?" He hadn't seen his sister for half a year. Since before he'd been sentenced.

Actually he thought Gail had been avoiding him. But he knew his sister. The hair was different, the body posture was different. She'd been gone. Not avoiding him, just gone.

His sister looked up at him and frowned, "Well you look bad."

Steve touched his face. He was sporting a few bruises from being roughed up. "They're not very keen on Guns and Gangs behind bars." He sat down across the table. Minimum security didn't mean that it was any safer for him, but he had his time to bide. "I thought you were avoiding me, but you were... Gone."

"Yeah, I was in Vancouver," replied Gail.

"What's in Vancouver besides not enough snow for an Olympics?"

Gail smiled briefly. He remembered that smile. "It was more what wasn't in Vancouver. I was working with IA on a sting there. Keep me out of Toronto."

That made some sense. "I'm sorry." He had tried so hard to keep the shit from splattering over his baby sister.

She shook her head and looked down at her hands. "What did they tell you? About the... Pecks?"

Steve sighed. "Not much. Just that I shouldn't expect to see Mom and Dad anytime soon."


What? Steve looked at her. "You... You mean when Dad...?" He trailed off as she nodded. Jesus.
Steve leaned back. "Gail. Why..."

Gail shook her head. "No, no, Steve you don't get to do that. I know what you did."

He winced. "You didn't have to do that, though."

"Yes I did," she said firmly. "Because you didn't. Because you, Steve, you protected me. But that was it." Gail was bitter and angry. Mad.

Steve hung his head. So. She knew. "I couldn't let them do that to you." Because the truth was that it hadn't been Santana who turned him. It had been long ago. Longer ago. When his parents told him to take the deal. To do the work. Because they'd told him what to do in school, in college, and in the academy.

And Steve had always listened to his parents. He was the loved son because he did what they wanted. Gail did anything but. She studied literature in college, and as long as her criminal justice classes didn't suffer, their parents didn't stop her. They made dinners a living hell, but they didn't stop her. When she didn't get into the academy (Steve was sure she'd failed the test on purpose), they'd used her godfather to grease the wheels. Sure, Gail graduated top of the class, but it was the defiance. The principle of the defiance.

She looked away. "Do you remember when I was 7 and I cut my leg up at the cottage?" Without looking back at him or waiting for a response, she went on. "I was bleeding all over, and you carried me back."

"I remember," he said softly.

"You were always doing that. Protecting me. Helping me." She spread her hands on the table and stared at them. "Was that what Frankie was for?"

He winced. "Oh. I didn't ask her to ..." Steve stopped and sighed. "Yes, I tried to set you guys up, but I didn't — she did the whole cover up on her own."

Gail studied his face for a while and then nodded. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry, Gail," he whispered. Again. He was so sorry. "You didn't..."

"Sleep with Frankie? Actually... Yes. Twice. She was not as good as advertised, by the way. You're about as good as Mom for picking dates."

Steve smiled sadly. "It wasn't... You know I actually didn't know she was in on this too. I didn't know about most of it."

His sister nodded. "I know. It's weird. You were all isolated, which I guess is why it took someone who could see it all from the outside to figure it out." She sighed. "How... Um. How are you?"

"I'm okay. Weirdly. I get tossed into walls a lot. It's like high school." The ginger kid had been picked on a lot. "Am I going to get to see you more often?"

Gail's eyes flickered back at him. "I don't know how long I'll be here for," she told him. "They're still going over all your cases and I really can't be around for that."

"Still?"

"They have to check with forensics because one of them used to date a Peck," Gail grumbled.
No one had dated a lab nerd. Except Gail. "Holly's in town," he realized.

"Yeah, I'm hiding out until she's gone." She lapsed into silence.

Steve looked down. "I'm sorry. For everything Garbage Pail."

Gail shook her head. "I thought you'd be out by now. How long is 'slap on the wrist' anyway?"

"Another six months probably. I may get out early for good behavior." He watched her think about that. "Mom and Dad still on house arrest?"

She snorted. "I don't think they'd survive in prison. Do you?"

Steve shook his head. "And you? Are you surviving Toronto?"

For a moment, Gail didn't answer. Then it looked like she was going to say everything was fine. But in the end, his sister shook her head. "No," she whispered. "It hurts. Everyone hates me."

"It won't be any better when I get out, Gail." She nodded at him, sadly. "You knew that."

"I did," she admitted. "What else could I do, Steve?"

He frowned. "You could have let it die, Gail. There was no way they were going to get that started up again. Santana was never going to turn on them."

Gail scowled. "That's so fucking stupid," she snapped. "It was wrong. That was against everything they told us to be growing up. Be better than everyone else! Know who you are! Don't screw up! How the hell could you look at yourself in the mirror?"

Honestly? He didn't. Steve couldn't remember the last time he looked himself in the eye in the mirror, literally or metaphorically. "Don't pin this on me, Gail. You made the choice."

"Yeah, I did. And I'd do it again. Because I'm loyal, Steven. I'm not a lot of things. I'm not a good person. I'm not nice. But I'm loyal." She took a deep breath. "And I'm not a liar. I can't be... I can't just let that be."

It wasn't naïveté in her words. Gail was dead serious that she knew what the right thing to do was, and she took what came with it. Just as he took his lumps and paid for it in jail, she was letting people hate her to do what was right. "I wish I was as brave as you," he sighed.

Gail looked down at his hands. "I wish you had been too."

They were at dentate. Steve changed the subject. "Tell me about Vancouver."

So she did. She told him how she'd been undercover with Juliet, the IA spy Noelle brought in. They'd worked on catching dirty cops smuggling evidence and selling it. And Gail had really enjoyed it. She lit up telling him about it, about how she'd been herself, the disgraced cop. But then they'd come back, a success, and in Vancouver, she'd been welcomed.

"They were happy, Steve. They were happy to see me. They're still losers, but... They had my back. They went to the wall for me. They barely knew me."

He leaned back and smiled. "You should go."

"What?"
"Vancouver. They obviously want you. You should take the job."

Gail shook her head. "Steve, I'm not going anywhere."

"Why not? What the hell's keeping you here?"

She stared at him. "Steve... I'm a Peck. I'm... I'm literally the last one in Toronto policing."

Steve rolled his eyes. "And what has that ever given you, Gail? Or me? It sucks our lives away. It's always treated us like shit." He pointed at her. "You don't owe anyone here anything. Not even me."

Gail blinked and then looked away. "Steven..."

"Look. Let me do this, please? This one thing. Because I can't make anything better. But I can make you stop doing the wrong thing." He leaned forward. "Do this for you, Gail. Forget Pecks, forget everything, forget me. Do this for you."

They looked at each other access the table, Gail's eyes wide and a little wondering. At last, he'd finally managed to do something right. He'd given her an idea. He'd given his sister hope.

It had been a strange day, her last day working with everyone in Toronto had wrung Holly out. Probably because it had been the first and only day she had to work with Gail. One last, 'we forgot about this one' case to review. Vinnie the Quitter. A case Guns and Gangs had been in charge of.

They'd sat on opposite sides of a table, with IA on one side and lawyers on the other, and ended up going over the two cases they'd worked together. Two. Gail had freely admitted to her attempt to get Rodney to rehydrate the thumb in their second case together, but also explained she'd been avoiding Holly since their breakup. The older officer on Gail's side, Inspector Williams, had sighed a little at that and given Gail a scolding look. But they'd both been dismissed quickly. Robbie Robbins was barely a blip.

As Holly was leaving the station, she'd bumped into Gail again. Innocently. She hadn't meant to. Actually she'd been trying like hell to avoid Gail, who clearly had no interest in reconnecting even as friends.

But surprisingly, it was Gail who smiled awkwardly as she pulled on her coat. "Listen. I'm sorry I was such a brat the other night," she said earnestly.

"It was a bad night," agreed Holly. "If I was living with this, I might be a bitch too."

Gail snorted. "You? No, you'd smile and just prove them wrong with your big brain and science."

The smile that crossed her face was spontaneous. "Probably."

In the reflection of the smile, Gail flushed a little. "I'm, uh, I'm done. For the day."

Holly had not forgotten how to read between the lines when talking to Gail. She would never really ask for help. "Do you... need a lift back to Lisa's?"


Shaking her head, Holly started to walk to her rental. "You need to stop saying sorry. It sounds like you're a pod-person."
"I'll work on that," laughed Gail quietly.

They ended up lapsing into silence on the drive to Lisa's townhouse. In a surprising moment, Gail asked if she could buy Holly a coffee to say thank you. They walked to the nearby hipster shop and then back in near silence. It was nice to just be around Gail again without the oppressive weight of policing sitting on them.

Again, Gail spoke first, "So. Traci yelled at me."

Holly wrinkled her nose. "Oh?"

"Yeah… after she told me off for not warning her about all this, she mentioned you... Apparently you said you needed to know how I was?" There was a look of confusion on Gail's face, as if not sure why anyone would be concerned with her wellbeing.

Nodding, Holly admitted, "I did… I do." She paused and asked, "How are you?"

"Fine. I think." Gail pulled her badge out of her pocket. "Got this back. Officially and everything. They promoted me and want me to be a detective."

Holly nodded. She wanted to know if Gail was staying or not, but she just couldn't bear to ask that. She was afraid the answer was no and then she'd never see the woman again. "Good. You look good. Except the hair. I don't know about the hair," she smiled.

Gail touched her head and laughed. "I'm going back to my natural color in a bit."

"I meant the cut, actually. The color's kind of... um. It suits you in a weird way." Holly grinned and was rewarded with the real kind of smile from Gail. The ones she'd missed. "Why did we stop talking?"

Looking up, the cop exhaled sadly. "I think you said we were at different stages in life? And I needed to grow up and I wouldn't around you."

It hurt to have her words thrown back at her like that, but it was fair. "You also said I was running away instead of dealing," Holly noted.

"You were."

"I was."

"And... so was I," sighed Gail.

Holly studied her face. "What happened with Sophie?"

Her friend (friend?) winced. "After Steve... I didn't have any support. Everyone was so wrapped up in their own drama..."

"And you suck at asking for help," noted Holly.

"That. Yes."

Holly reached over and put her hand on Gail's shoulder. "She's with a good family?"

Not shying away from the touch, Gail nodded. "Great family. Great people."

"You should see her. Now that you're back." And Gail winced. Ah. Holly squeezed the shoulder.
Now Gail twitched away. "Maybe."

They both contemplated their coffee, and Holly changed the subject. "So. You went out with … Frankie?"

"God you would hold on to that." Gail sighed and leaned back. "Yes, I did sleep with her, if that's what you're asking."

It was, but Holly didn't exactly want to admit that. "No." She paused. "Yes."

And Gail laughed softly. "Did you?"

Holly turned bright red. "How the hell—" She stopped and stared at Gail. "She told you?"

Nodding Gail sipped her coffee. "She did. We were talking about ex's and she mentioned most of hers tended to skip town or be in love with someone else." Holly grimaced. "She also said something about how you missed out on the best sex of your life—"

"Oh my god," laughed Holly, shoving Gail's shoulder. "I did not sleep with her."

Gail smiled softly. "That would have been awkward." Then she asked, "It's wrong that I'm happy about that, isn't it?"

Rolling her coffee cup between her palms, Holly shook her head. "No. No. That would way too weird." She paused. "I did kiss her." Frankie had been a very, very, brief, two date fling, before Holly had even met Gail.

With a shrug, Gail went on, "What about Lisa? We never had that conversation, did we?"

Holly blinked. "The one about who we slept with. No." She smiled though. "I have not slept with Lisa or Rachel." Then she added, "I did make out with Lisa. Once. We were drunk and twenty."


"You're the one who slept with her."

Laughing at herself, Gail remarked, "God it wasn't even that good! You didn't miss out on anything special. You were way better."

Holly blinked. "Wait a second. She said…" Her eyes went wide as Gail rolled hers. "Wow. Talk about failing expectations. Why did you sleep with her?"

"Tequila was involved," sighed Gail. "And I needed… something uncomplicated."

The words felt like a blow. "We weren't uncomplicated," Holly admitted.

Gail made a wry face. "She wasn't either, in the end. I mean, hey, I got her arrested, so I win… something on the loser crown. But it wasn't Botched Boob Job, so there's that."

"Why do you call her that," laughed Holly. "Same reason she calls me Blue Collar. It's how we communicate."

Holly took a deep breath. "So … truth. How bad is it?"

"Well. I don't go to Peck Family Dinners anymore." When Holly snorted a laugh, Gail smiled.
"I meant now that you're back. Not the ... Not your family. Fifteen."

"Oh. It's fine. Lonely." That sounded like a total lie, too.

"Why aren't you staying at the Frat House?"

"I don't want to talk about it, Holl." Gail closed her eyes.

Holly watched Gail's face for a while. Then she asked quietly, "They're still mad at you?"

The other woman didn't open her eyes. "No. It's not that. They've moved on, Holly. And maybe I should too."

"You're leaving," realized Holly. "Vancouver." Because after all they'd been through, Holly still understood what Gail didn't say. She didn't want to rekindle friendships with people only to leave them again.

Gail was quiet for a while. "Probably."

"They'll miss you."

Snorting, Gail looked over. "They can't stand me, Holly. And it's mostly mutual. They see everything that broke up the band in me."

Holly hesitated. "Steve will miss you."

"He might," allowed Gail, sadly. "There's nothing for me here, Holly. No one. Nothing. Sophie's happy with her family. I can't talk to my relatives even if I want to."

"What about Chris?"

Shaking her head, Gail sighed. "He's happy to see me, but he has enough problems." Then she added, "Oliver might."

Quietly, Holly said, "I would."

Gail's lips turned into a slight smile. "You would." She looked up at the sky. "You would. I did. I did a lot, Holly..." Gail's voice got softer. "I did."

She did. "I missed you too, Gail."

"But," sighed Gail. "Not enough to stay. And you had the right idea. Not staying."

Holly hugged her knees and looked at Gail carefully. She didn't see the broken person who'd fallen apart in her bathroom. She didn't see the bitchy cop who'd called her lunchbox. She saw someone else. She saw a mature and confident woman on the edge of a hard choice.

"I think," said Holly. "I think you should do what's right for you."

"Whatever makes me happy," Gail said a little snidely.

"That's not what I mean, Gail." But she smiled.

Gail smiled too. "I know, Holly. I know." With a loud sigh, she stood up and dusted off her jeans. "How long are you in town for?"

Following suit, Holly got up. "They closed the last case. I haven't booked a flight back yet."
"I have to tell Juliet by Monday." Gail looked at Holly. "It was... It was good. To see you again."

"Yeah," nodded Holly. "It was good." She hesitated, her arms slightly out to the side. "I know it's not how you communicate." But Gail smiled and nodded, stepping in to hug Holly warmly. "I know you'll do the right thing, Gail," she whispered. She tried to put everything she felt into that hug. The love she still felt for the cop, certainly, but more it was the thing Gail needed most right now. She needed to know that her right choices wouldn't loose all her friends.

The hug tightened for a moment. "Thank you." In those words, Gail said everything.

Promising to see her at least once before she left, Holly went back to her car, back to her hotel. She knew Gail would do what was right for her. Gail was different than she'd been. It was amazing to see the changes. Holly could love all over again Gail for the changes she undertaken, the changes that fused into who she was, making her someone new.

A phoenix rising from the ashes.

Six Months Later

"Ward, Peck. You've got a case."

Gail kicked back from her desk and grabbed her jacket. It felt right to be back behind a badge. It felt right to be back in blue. It felt right to be in Vancouver. She felt better than she had in a long time. Since before Perik. The last five months had been better than good. She finally felt right.

The first month back, they'd sent her to school to catch her up on how they did things in Vancouver. Then she'd had on the job training as a pseudo-rookie (sans tie) in uniform. But before long, she found herself working with vice undercover, working with IA, and finally, now, a detective. In Homicide. With Juliet.

She had found a welcome home in Vancouver. They liked her. They respected her for the work she had done, for the sacrifices she'd made. And Gail found she liked most of them. Unlike the forced camaraderie with the officers in Toronto, this felt like home. Gail was finally home.

"What've we got?" She took the papers from Hayes and skimmed, committing much to memory. A woman found dead in a river. Messy.

"By the way, the new coroner started early," warned Hayes. "Mac broke his ankle."

Handing the papers to Juliet, Gail drove them over to the scene. "I wonder if it's the guy from Manitoba," mused Gail. "The medical examiner." One of the Regional Chief's had up and retired early that moth, leaving a hole in the chain of command. They were borrowing Mac from the next region over, but the interviews had been interesting. Dr. Manitoba had a lazy eye that creeped Gail out.

"Coroner," corrected Juliet. "They're Coroners here. Why does that not stick in that blonde head of yours?"

Gail snorted. She'd dyed her hair again, feeling a whim to return to something more familiar, and cut it to chin length. Juliet teased her that it was because of the quick and ill fated fling she'd had with the sign language teacher. "Because I studied medical jurisprudence," she told Juliet, smirking at the memory.
"You're such a nerd, Gail," laughed her partner.

"Watch it, or I leave you with the body again."

Juliet had the weaker stomach. "Bitch."

"Liar."

They both grinned. "Did you read this?" Juliet waved the papers. "Dead in a river."

"Could be a suicide," mused Gail. "It's downstream from that bridge." They bantered about that as they pulled up to the scene and Gail remembered feeling good about her job and her life. She took a deep breath of the air at the scene, committing the smell of Vancouver in July to memory.

The lab tech called over to the new coroner, squatting by the river in a blue jumpsuit with Wellies on. "Hey, Doc. The detectives are here."

"Well they can wait till we have a good sample."

The words made Gail freeze. No, not the words. The voice. Juliet looked startled and stared at Gail. "Was that..."

Gail cleared her throat. "Dr. Stewart?" How she managed to keep her voice calm, Gail would never know.

"Pestering does not make science work faster," came the reply.

"Far be it from me to impede on medical jurisprudence." And Gail waited. It only took a second. The head popped up and turned.

Holly fucking Stewart. At least she looked abashed. "Detective Peck... And Ward. Of course."

The lab techs were clearly confused. "We met in Toronto," smoothed Juliet, smiling broadly. "I did not have the chance to work with you, though, Dr. Stewart. If you're half as talented as Gail said, we'll have this solved in no time."

"It's probably a suicide. Initial trauma indicates that, at least," said Holly. And she went into science babble mode. Gail couldn't help the smile on her face. "I'll need X-Rays to confirm, but her legs and pelvis certainly seem shattered. Unless there's evidence of foul play, that would be my preliminary call."

Gail scratched her nose. "There's a bridge a couple miles upriver, popular for jumpers. It's at the high point. Can you tell how long she's been in the water?"

"Based on the water retention and the lack of fish nibbles, I'd estimate at most a week. Gross tissue damage is at a minimum, so predators haven't had a bite yet."

Juliet mouthed 'fish nibbles' at Gail, clearly amused, and asked, "If it was a suicide, will it look like a drowning?"

"Most likely." Holly stood up, mud smeared one knee of her jumpsuit. Then she looked at Gail. "Femur's intact."

Yeah. She had to smile. "Got your water sample in your lunchbox, huh?" When Juliet made a confused noise, Gail explained. "They'll check the water for diatoms. If there are any, she can match them to the ones in the bone marrow. It'll show if she died in the water... How does that
"work with a body that isn't greasy bones?"

"Less well," admitted Holly, her lips curved in a side smile. "You remembered."

"What can I say? Never too late to brush up on things. Who found the body?"

The uniformed officer pointed to where a shell shocked fisherman sat. He'd been out having a little fun with catch and release. "Doesn't sound like fun for the fish," muttered Juliet. "How about you take that, Gail, and I'll keep with the doc? I seem to need a refresher."

"Suit yourself. Just watch out, she likes to throw big words at you."

Juliet snorted. "What's that supposed to mean, Peck?"

"Means I saw your crossword answers, Ward," she sassed. "Purgatory doesn't have an I." She heard Juliet and Holly both laugh behind her. Gail grinned.

It was a momentary relief not to have to talk to Holly just yet. She wasn't mentally ready. That never seemed to stop life though. She hadn't been ready for the Academy and botched her entrance exam. The only reason Gail had gotten in at all was because her Godfather was the then Chief, and he gently leaned on things for her. She missed him. He'd had a heart attack the same year she'd met Holly, replaced by that idiot Santana.

Gail shoved that out of her head and talked to the shaking fisherman who told her how he'd found the body. Thought it was a big one. It just wasn't the big one he'd thought it was.

They all ended up back in the morgue, though, and the verdict was suicide. Pending blood work confirmation of course.

As Holly started to clean up, Juliet elbowed Gail and raised her eyebrows. "I'll just leave you two," smirked her partner.

Gail could have throttled her. "You don't need me to file the paperwork?"

"No, you won the bet in the car," Juliet reminded her, and vacated.

Holly looked amused. "Bet?"

"It's not... We like to guess in the car, why someone died before we get any evidence. We had a moose attack, which is the weirdest one I've won on."

"Moose." Holly laughed softly and Gail's heart thudded. She'd missed that laugh. "That makes sense in a weird way."

Gail sighed. "So," she looked around the morgue. "First day huh? How's it going?"

The brunette nodded, almost shyly. "Last minute thing. Story of my life." She looked up. "Did not expect to see you today."

"I could tell," Gail smirked. "You babbled. You do that when you're nervous."

Holly looked amused. "I don't even... Are we in the same region?"

"Yeah, I'm literally right upstairs. Fifth floor." They both shared an awkward smile. "Nick's here too. In ERT, so thank god I rarely see him."

"Detective, though." Holly gestured at Gail. "That... You said Homicide was boring."
She had. And of course Holly remembered. "It's lazy work," Gail shrugged. "And you know me. Lazy."

But Holly smiled. "Liar."

"Sometimes." Gail looked around. "It's usually pretty boring, and then you just showed up."

Holly looked momentarily guilty. "I did. It was … I didn't take the job because of you. I mean. Not just because of you. Or at all..."

Nodding, Gail shoved her hands in her pockets. "But you did. You came here. And you knew I was here."

Holly's head bobbed a little. "Lisa told me." They both still talked to Lisa, of course.

"It was probably a last second ask," sighed Gail. "I don't think anyone expected Dr. Gates to retire."

The smile on Holly's face was warm and friendly. "No. They sounded pretty shocked when they called me." She looked back down. "I did come here for the job, Gail. But knowing you were here... it helped make the decision easier."

Gail looked at her quietly. "Lot's changed, Holly," she said slowly. It was all she could trust herself to say.

"I know. A lot changed for me too," replied the doctor, pulling her gloves off. Holly looked up. "I didn't come back to try and win you back. I ... God this sounds stupid. Can I start this over?"

And Gail laughed. It felt good to laugh. "I don't know, nerd. Do you think you can get it right the second time?"

Holly looked miffed, but it was a look Gail had seen before. Amused irritation. "It's easier, less scary, to move to a new place if you know friends are there," smiled Holly.

A friend. Holly wanted a friend. A strange mixture of relief and disappointment washed through her. Relief that Holly really wasn't chasing her. Disappointment that she wasn't more than a friend. Gail swallowed the feelings. "Yeah, yeah it is."

Her friend smiled awkwardly. "How... Are you liking it here?"

That was a safer topic, realized Gail. "I do. I like it a lot. They... They're good people here. Even if Nick moved out here." She made a face and Holly laughed. "Juliet's happy, though."

"How's that? You two are partners."

"For now," Gail sat on the desk. "Until I'm all dialed in at homicide. Then Hayes said he'll cut me loose."

"And then?"

"Then we'll see. But I think we work well together." She smiled. Talking with Holly was easy. Comfortable. Familiar. "Too soon to tell for you, huh?"

Holly nodded and leaned over to close the body away in the drawer. "I'm still unpacking," she laughed a little. "I got here last night. Can't even find my coffee maker."
"And Mac had to break his ankle," chuckled Gail. "Surprise."

Taking off her lab coat, Holly sighed. "Well. Hell of a first day."

"I didn't try to arrest you this time."

"You still called it a lunchbox," teased Holly.

The banter was easy. Too easy. "Look. Holly..." She stopped and looked at her hands. "This is not the place to... This isn't the place to talk. About us."

Holly sucked in her breath. "Do you want to talk about us?"

Tough question. "We should... We should figure out what we are. Even if we're just going to be people who work together and know each other." Intimately. She knew Holly in a way that had changed her life. "I don't really have a lot of friends."

"That happens when you hate people," smiled Holly gently.

"They generally suck." She smiled back.

Holly picked up her bag. "I could use a friend, Gail. I know, it's a lot to ask."

Nodding, Gail gestured for her to follow. "Well, I'm not helping you unpack, but I happen to know some killer coffee shops and where the batting cages are."

The brown eyes brightened. "Oh, have you gotten any better?"

"I'm actually on the softball team, and that's your fault."

They both laughed. That felt right too.

"Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship," drawled Holly as she opened the door to leave the lab. "I'll buy dinner."

"Yeah you will," smiled Gail. Friendship. She could do with one of those.

Watching Gail and Holly work their way around each other was like watching the worst lesbian romcom ever, decided Juliet.

There was no comedy, to start with. There was tension and awkwardness and teasing that was too much and too little both at the same time. But there was no real laughter. It was like they both were aware of the possibility of romance and neither was willing to take that first step.

If it was driving Juliet crazy, though, there was no doubt in her mind that Gail was being driven even more mad. The woman had abruptly put her love life (if sleeping around once in a blue moon qualified as a love life) on ice the moment Holly rolled into town. She stopped cold turkey. She positively mooned over the woman.

Juliet had known Gail for eighteen months. She'd worked with her incredibly closely for just about a year. She felt she knew Gail pretty well, probably better than Nick, who was still a bit weird about her. But she knew one thing really well about Gail. You couldn't attack her head on about all things. Somethings, sometimes, you could. But she was so freaked out and skittish about Holly that the method had to be different.

So Juliet asked Holly first.
They were working on a case, just the two of them, Holly was pestering Juliet to elaborate on her notes and had mentioned that Gail was better at understanding medical jurisprudence, which seemed to be a joke between them. And, since Gail wasn't there, Juliet just asked. "Hey, you're still into Gail, right?"

Holly nearly coughed coffee out her nose. It was sort of cute. "What?"

"You? Gail? Not over her? I mean, I heard about that story. But that was a year and a half ago."

"Almost two," muttered Holly as she mopped up her shirt. "Damn it…"

Getting more napkins, Juliet pointed out, "Because she's still totally into you."

The doctor looked up, surprised. "She went out on that date."

"Set up," corrected Juliet. "You set her up with that woman, and she went on a date, and came back grumpy. Trust me, she's measuring them all against you."

Holly sighed. "Why are we having this conversation? I don't even know you that well."

"Gail's my friend. And partner. And… I'm basically her work wife. Which is cool. I like her."

Juliet watched Holly blot her shirt. "Is that weird?"

"That you like Gail? I don't think so, but…" She gave up and sighed. "Thank god I wore a dark shirt."

Juliet snapped her fingers. "You unbutton your shirt more if Gail's around."

The other woman flushed dark. She didn't deny it. "It's good Gail has a friend," managed Holly. "I… How did you meet her, actually?"

That surprised Juliet. "Gail didn't say?"

"We haven't talked about it. She's still…"

"She's still a bit Gail about it," smiled Juliet.

With a sigh, Holly nodded. "She's still upset at… everyone."

Not that Juliet could blame her. Some of the Toronto sort had come around, like Traci and Dov (and Chloe) and Chris. They'd all come to understand what she did and why she did it. Traci was still a little pissed that she'd had to come under fire because of it, but that had somehow worked out. Their friendship was tenuous at best, though, rough and pained, and Gail was still reluctant to let it grow. But other people, like Andy, couldn't fathom why Gail would go that far without asking them for help.

When Juliet had asked Gail why she'd done it without their help, she'd admitted she didn't want them to be hurt. It was easier to let them hate her, to be the bad guy. They had someone to despise, to make them feel better, and it didn't change any of the facts. Gail had turned in her family. People were allowed to be aghast at that. But still, it hurt her to know even the ones who forgave her now saw her differently. And not necessarily in a good way.

"She gave up a lot," Juliet said quietly. "This life, the job where you make people trust you and then you betray them, it's hard enough when you don't really know or care about them. She had to do it to people she liked."
"I don't think she actually liked Andy," mused Holly. "Or Chloe."

"Chloe's a lot to stomach."

Holly stared at the small pile of paper napkins on the table. "It's complicated," she finally sighed.

That was something Juliet understood. "I met Gail when I was undercover at Fifteen, trying to find out how bad the corruption went. I ... I was there when they arrested Steve. And at his trial. Really, she should hate me. Nick did."

Surprised, Holly pointed out, "And now he's living with you."

"Yeah. Sometimes complicated works out okay," she smiled. "I think you two should try it."

The body beside her was soft and arm in the cool autumn air. An arm was draped casually around her shoulders, giving support and comfort as they watched the end of the movie. It made Gail feel unbalanced to sit this close with Holly, especially when Nick and Juliet were just beside them.

Because they weren't dating.

Holly had been in Vancouver for just over three months now, Gail for almost a year, and they were very much not a couple. They had fallen back into their easy friendship, where they hung out and did things. They spent long nights at each other's houses, especially after rough cases, and they talked. A lot.

But all they did was talk. They talked about everything, from Gail dealing with the continual fallout from her family down to Holly's problems getting the lab to listen to her. Her predecessor had been beloved, after all. Holly was the new girl who'd bounced between three jobs in three years. They didn't trust her.

Of course, Gail trusted her. It was Holly who conspired with Juliet to set Gail up on a series of dates, none of which had panned out. And Gail had retaliated by finding women for Holly. But nothing worked out. They seemed to forever be circling each other in an irregular orbit, forever dancing on the edges of a friendship that had once been more and now was just simple.

Not a damn part of it was simple.

If Gail had been a man, they'd all have known how very not simple it was and exactly how she felt about Holly. Because there were things she knew about Holly that she'd never get out of her mind. Because those years ago, Holly had stolen her heart. There had been other women, some dating around, but nothing was like the lightning that was Holly Stewart.

Everything had changed irrevocably in the moment she'd kissed Holly in interrogation. That was the day she'd known, without having a single doubt, that she was not who she thought she was. Gail had the same feelings when she'd realized her place was here in Vancouver. It all clicked. It made sense.

Nick had spotted her lovelorn status weeks ago and hadn't even teased her about it. He'd just looked at her sadly and pointed out that it was obvious. She'd asked him not to tell and Nick had agreed, but suggested she tell Holly soon.

Which she hadn't. And that was why she was sitting on a blanket on a lawn, watching a stupid movie, while Holly was leaning in really close and sniffing.

So Gail did what she did best. She bit. "I can't believe you're crying," she teased, quietly.
Holly wiped her eyes. "Shut up."

Gail smiled. "You're crying over *Some Kind of Wonderful,*" she whispered.

"You have no soul," hissed Holly, shoving Gail. When Gail laughed, loudly, the audience around them shushed her.

Even Nick told her to be quiet. "Gail, come on, stop it."

"Tool," she told Nick.

Holly reached over and pulled Gail back to her blanket. "Be quiet," she laughed quietly. "You're still a child."

At least they weren't lying in each other's arms, which was a little easier for Gail. Stretched out, side by side, they watched the end of the movie quietly.

But love, unrequited, was painful. Love when the other person was your best friend, hurt. She couldn't look at Holly without being absorbed how she felt. It was the Penny all over again. It was looking at Holly on a date and realizing she wanted to be there. It was feeling it under her skin, in every way, every day, that she wanted to touch Holly.

It was maddening.

Even Juliet had noticed. "You should just tell her," mused her partner over lunch a few days later.

"What?"

"Holly. Tell her you're still into her."

Gail felt her face turn red. "We're not having this conversation."

"Well you should have the conversation with someone. Did you tell your therapist?"

"Hey, that's privileged information!"

Juliet held her hands up. "I didn't tell Nick! And you keep flirting with her."

"I'm not flirting with Holly!" Gail threw a fry at her partner. "God."

She was though, and she knew it. She'd learned how to make homemade pasta for Holly. Because Holly loved pasta and hated the dried stuff. So after spending beaucoup bucks on it at a farmers' market for a month, one of the sellers took pity and asked her why. The blush on her face had been a giveaway and he'd given her a recipe.

So she could lie all she wanted, but yes, Gail was totally flirting with Holly and hoping to turn her eyes because god, she would give up everything just to see that smile again. Especially that sleepy, early morning, smile, before alarms went off, that was quiet and private and tender. And also the smug smile, looking down at her, promising things that made Gail wonder if she'd ever known herself at all.

Ugh.

"You keep telling yourself that," snorted Juliet.

"I am not," grumbled Gail. "We're friends."
"Really, Gail? You sat through the gayest Mary Stuart Masterson movie this side of Fried Green Tomatoes in Holly's arms? Friends?"

Gail frowned. "Wait, what's gay about Fried Green Tomatoes?!"

He'd known Gail a long time. Longer than anyone at Fifteen had. Longer than anyone in Vancouver did by far. He had almost married her after all. Probably best that he didn't. But all that time with her meant Nick could tell that Gail was actually in love.

She'd never looked at him like that, that was for sure.

They were all at the softball field for the last game of the year, Gail and Holly were all standing in a circle with some other players, chatting over by their dugout. From this distance, Nick could see Gail's constant, semi-covert glances at Holly. The way she kept eying her with a look Nick would call 'longing' was strange.

She'd never looked at him like that. Or anyone. Ever. This was what Gail in love looked like.

Nick wondered what Gail would say if he told her that Holly kept checking her out. What would Gail think to learn that Holly had turned down serious dates because her heart was somewhere else?

"You should girl-talk Gail," he said to Juliet, tying her shoes beside him.

Juliet looked up. "Nick, sweetie, I love you. Has Gail ever girl-talked?"

He had to think about that and remembered a day when Gail had made snide 'braid hair' comments to Chloe. "Yeah, okay, fine.

"Besides, she knows." Juliet stood up and took her mitt from his hands.

"What? She knows Holly's into her?"

Kissing his cheek, Juliet shook her head. "You're an idiot, Nick."

Nick frowned. "Okay, you're hanging out with Gail too much. Next you'll start calling me Nicholas."

"Why does she do that?" Juliet looked amused.

"I don't know. She likes using peoples full names to annoy them."

Juliet smirked. "She calls me Jules and Holly Holls. Maybe we're just better kissers."

As his girlfriend walked over to Gail and Holly, Nick shouted, "Yeah, you're hanging out with Gail too much!"

Predictably, she shouted back in a chorus with Holly and Gail. "Shut up, Nicholas!"

All things annoyingly Peck aside, Nick smiled. He liked being here, in Vancouver, and he liked his real chance for starting over with Juliet. That had worked out so much better than he thought it might have. It had all the earmarks for an absolute disaster when he looked at it properly.

First of all, they'd only barely dated. So moving in together that soon seemed incredibly stupid. Second of all, his ex, whom he'd dated excessively, was working with his new girlfriend. A lot.
Admittedly, Gail identified as a lesbian now (and boy did that make a lot of sense), it was still really, really weird. Really weird.

Of all things, though, Gail had called on him when she'd been in Toronto for a deposition about her parents. She made him buy her dinner, which she was really good at, and told him to stop being an idiot and apply for the job. Because Juliet wanted him to be there.

Nick felt like he should return the favor. It felt weird owning Gail a favor. Usually she made people pay their dues right away, preferring not to be in karmic debt to anyone, and never believing anyone would eventually pay her back. Man, the Pecks had done a number on her.

When Gail got called to go back to Toronto for something related to the various Peck cases, and both Holly and Juliet got caught up in work, Nick showed up to drive her to the airport.

"I can take a cab," Gail pointed out.

Nick tossed her suitcase into his truck. "I brought you a donut."

"See now you're sucking up. Are you going to propose to Jules and you want my approval? Because ew." But Gail got into the truck and took the coffee and donut.

"I'm not proposing."

Gail nodded, "Good, you're bad at it."

He laughed. "You said yes."

"I was also drunk off my ass on tequila," she pointed out, acerbically. Nick glanced over and saw Gail's smile. That was the fake-mad voice.

"You make real bad decisions on tequila."

"Tell me about it. McNally's wedding? Yech." Gail made a disgusted face.

Nick frowned. "Is that why you're not sleeping with Holly? Because you and Frankie—"

"Whoa," Gail cut him off. "What the hell? Holly and I aren't dating, you idiot."

He sighed. "You should be."

"Oh my god, stop the car, I'm going to walk to the airport." She didn't reach for the door and he didn't slow down. Instead, they drove in silence for a little while. You had to wait Gail out sometimes and let her simmer. If she was going to tell you anything, it would come at her own pace. "I hate this car," she finally muttered.

"Really? That's not what you said last time."

"Uh, loser. Last time I was in this car you dumped me, because you're a dick."

He blinked. Was that really the last time she'd been in his car with him? "Point taken," sighed Nick. "I'm sorry. For how I … How I handled that. I was an ass."

Gail looked out the side window. "Fine." She bit into the donut, clearly saying no more about it.

"We have a lot of shitty conversations in this car, don't we?"

"Yep," drawled Gail. "This one is included." She made a circle with her finger, indicating both of
Nick smiled. "You should ask Holly to go out again."

The blonde muttered, "So not your business, Nick." He opened his mouth and she asked, pointedly, "How's your brother?"

And he stopped. "That was low."

"Hey, I didn't tell the kiddies at Fifteen about him," she noted and put her feet on his dash. "Just be done with this conversation."

Sensing he was at his limit for how far he could push Gail in any one day, Nick nodded. They said nothing more until Gail got out at the airport. "Hey, Gail..."

She slung her bag to her shoulder. "Thank you for the ride," begrudged the woman.

That was Gail alright. Getting a thanks was like pulling teeth. "Holly's still totally into you."

Gail looked at him for a long moment. "Nick... You know how I'm really awesome at blowing up relationships?" That had the sound of Gail in an honest moment of introspection. They were rare. He nodded. "Right. I don't want to do that anymore. So don't... Just don't push, okay?"

"Sure." He nodded at her. "You won't, though."

"Yeah, you think?" She frowned. "I don't know. And ... Until I know, I don't want to think about it."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. Just ... Don't do the other thing you're really good at. Don't get in a tree and make up some excuse or drama."

Gail nodded at him. "I'll keep that in mind."

He watched her walk into the airport and realized all he could do was hope his ex, his friend, could get it right.

She was moping and she knew it.

In the months since she had moved to Vancouver, Holly had spent most of it in Gail's pocket, one way or another. Rarely did a day go by without them talking or hanging out or just being goofy. She liked hanging out with Gail, and here she was, three days into her best friend being gone for dealing with a trial and Holly was mopey.

"It's stupid," she muttered into the phone. "I mean, we both moved on. We've dated people. So I shouldn't be all teen drama about this."

Rachel sighed across the line. "Not that I mind you blabbing all this to me, Holl, but that's usually Lisa's job." There was the clink of a wine glass.

"Gail's at Lisa's. Apparently they're bitchy friends together."

With an 'ahhh' of understanding, Rachel admitted, "I should go see her. Lisa I mean. It's been forever since we hung out. I think you were our glue."

That was sweet. And sad. "You two were friends before you saved me from failing," smiled Holly.
"True! But you stopped me from dropping out. And you helped Lisa pass our boards."

Holly sighed and closed her eyes. "I miss you too."

Echoing the sigh, Rachel also yawned. "I'm beat, Holls. I love you like a sister-"

"You hate your sister."

"She's a tool," agreed Rachel. "But I need to sleep."

Holly glanced at her clock. It was nine here, which was midnight there. "Sorry. I just... I don't know."

"You needed to talk to a friend who gets being in love with someone unavailable." Rachel sounded sympathetic. "You never got over her."

With a deep sigh that felt like it came from her marrow, Holly admitted, "No. I never got over her. She just blew into my life and ruined me. How the hell does that happen?"

"You're lucky, Holls. You need to get off your ass and tell her how you still feel. Okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, okay. Go to sleep, Rachel."

"Love you, Holls."

"Love you too, Rach." Holly hung up and rested her forehead against the refrigerator. "Shit." She was still in love with Gail. That was the big problem.

It wasn't news to Holly. She'd woken up a few times in the last year, since she'd seen Gail again in Toronto, with her blood burning and wisps of an erotic dream that was a bit more memory than fantasy. The most recent one was definitely a fantasy, peeling Gail out of a red dress on the landing at her lovely little house. She'd just been cupping bare breasts when her alarm went off. The dream had been so damn real, Holly swore she could feel them in her hands when she woke up.

She knew what they felt like, too, which made it worse. It wasn't just a raw fantasy, like the dreams she'd had about actresses in her confused teen years. This wasn't a wondering of if someone else felt like her, liked what she liked, reacted like she did. No, this was knowing that Gail had liked those things but not others. This was remembering the feeling of Gail's fingers digging into her back, tangling in her hair, holding her close.

And it was driving her mad. Holly was pretty sure she was actually going to become insane. Any time she wasn't working, she was day dreaming. When she complained to her father that she was having trouble concentrating, he suggested she start drawing again. Sketching, really. So Holly started carrying a small notebook around and sketched.

Page after page, if anyone had looked, was Gail. Real moments, like sitting at a booth at a diner with Juliet and Nick. But also memories. The smile Gail had when she was happy, really happy, was soft and gentle. That smile was in the notebook. There also was the laughter, or just the eyes. God, those eyes.

It wasn't helping her in the slightest. All it did was make her remember the way those eyes had looked up at her before, full of surprise and delight and trust. She remembered the bleary, bedroom eyes, full of reluctance to get out of a warm bed. And she definitely remembered the
dark, bright, eyes that were full of want...

Yeah. Not helping.

Holly finished her glass of wine and took a cold shower, hoping to subdue the dreams for one more night.

Instead, she ended up awake at five am and pounding pavement under her feet. Running didn't actually help shut up the voices in her head that were arguing about Gail. Running just gave her something to do. It exhausted her and wore her down and she hoped that maybe, maybe it would quiet things enough.

But it never did.

"How was Toronto?"

"That's your start of casual conversation?" Gail buckled in and shook her head.

"What? You were gone a week. Can't I miss you?" Juliet grinned.

Gail grunted, "It was fine. My ex tried to kill me with her mind, my brother thinks I should try to explain things to Fifteen, most of Fifteen still thinks I'm a bitch, and my parents still aren't talking to me."

Startling, Juliet looked at her partner. "In a week? Damn you fit a lot in." Her ex had to mean Frankie Anderson, though, since none of the others Juliet knew about were a 'she'. "Anderson? Did she give you a death glare or something?"

"Yeah, if looks could kill, I'd be dead as a door nail." Gail looked and sounded a little sad. "How about you?"

Juliet sighed. "I was going to try and parlay this into telling you that our coroner was a mopey as a teenaged girl dressed in black and armed with a purple pen."

Her partner snorted. "Bad timing. Story of my life." But then she asked. "Is that why you're picking me up?"

"She thought she'd babble."

A smile crossed Gail's face, as if she liked when Holly babbled. "She does that." Gail yawned.

Juliet was used to Gail lapsing into long periods of silence and drove her home in the comfortable quiet. While she and Nick had a nice apartment, Gail had actually bought a house. It was small but it had a killer view of woods and a river. When asked, Gail said it reminded her of her family's cottage. Glancing over, Juliet smiled to see that Gail had dozed off.

She slowed as she turned up the gravel road, the sound of the crunch under the tires stirring Gail into awareness. "I'll bring your bag in," offered Juliet, parking in front of the garage.

"Thanks. I've got to pee," sighed Gail, heading to her downstairs bathroom and ignoring the pile of mail.

Juliet picked up the mail and sorted through it. Junk. Junk. Junk. She raised her voice, "Do you ever get real mail?"
From the bathroom, Gail called back, "Does anyone?" There was a flush and water and Gail walked out with a loud exhale. "I hate flying."

"Do you ever use the bathroom on planes?" They'd flown together three times. Twice to Vancouver, once to Toronto. All three times, Gail had tucked herself into the window seat and not gotten up.

"God no. Someone always pisses all over the seat."

Smiling, Juliet held up the junk mail. "Recycling?"

"Blue bin under the sink. Drink?"

"Got a fizzy water?" Juliet kicked the cabinet closed as Gail pulled out a can of sparkling water and a beer. "So really, as your partner and best friend, how are you?"


"At least I rank above Nick."

"Everyone ranks above Nick."

Juliet shrugged. "Speaking of Holly, Nick thinks you're still in love with her."

The blonde hesitated and then grumbled. "Please tell me something I don't know. Like maybe Nick broke his nose? I can fix that story…"

It was a moment of self awareness that Juliet hadn't expected. Gail was all but admitting it now. "You should do something about it."

Gail turned around and leaned against her counter. "Jules, I'm still a mess."

"Why do you always say things I'm not expecting?"

"I hate being predictable," sighed Gail. "I'm self-destructive, I can be a total brat, I make really bad choices when I drink tequila. Jesus, I slept with someone who was trying to play me for a fool and save her own ass. Which makes me feel incredibly slutty, and I cheated on Nick once with a really hairy asshole."

Juliet had gotten used to Gail hitting herself, metaphorically. It just meant she was scared, and since it rarely popped up with regards to work, she was more than happy to help her friend sort through things. You just had to use humor. "He was hairy? No wonder you're a lesbian."

The smile on Gail's face told her it worked. "No, sleeping with women made me a lesbian."

"Which isn't the point," agreed Juliet. "Look. It's simple. You like her, you tell her, you get her."

Gail narrowed her eyes. "That works for men, but you can just show up and they're in." She sipped the beer in her hand. "I don't want to just get her, Jules," added Gail very quietly.

They'd reached step one of getting Gail to deal with her personal problems. Admit they were real.

"What do you want?"

"No," grumbled Gail. "No, we're not having this conversation."

And there she went back to avoidance. Alright. "Sex. Pretty sure you want that, I mean … it's been since whenever you broke up with that nurse—"
"Karla, with a K. And I didn't sleep with her."

"See? That's part of it. You need to get laid. But you don't want Holly to be just a lay."

Gail frowned. "If … I don't want to screw it up a third time. I … there's not going to be a fourth chance."

"Third? Did I miss— Oh you count the thingy? When she asked you to go to San Francisco?"

Nodding, Gail looked at her beer bottle. "Maybe I should have… But no, I stayed and got my heart stomped by everyone else. What if... What if it's me? I mean, the constant here is me. Nick's happy."

She looked so sad, it was almost cute. "Gail. You're afraid." Step two to pushing Gail was to state the obvious and get her to agree.

"Yeah," admitted Gail sadly.

Step three time. Get to the truth. "What happened in Toronto?"

Gail took her beer over to her couch. "Can we not do this? I'm jet lagged."

"Fastest way to get over it is to stay up. Besides, it's Saturday and I'll just crash here and we can do brunch." When Gail hesitated, Juliet tried, "How about we watch something shitty on TV and talk over food?" Food always went well with Gail.

The blonde nodded and then startled when her phone rang. "Order me comfort food," she commanded and picked up her phone. "Hey, Holls."

Oh! Juliet beamed and ordered from their favorite Mexican place, carefully eavesdropping on Gail's conversation. It sounded like Holly was checking in to make sure Gail got in safe. Unlike Gail's reaction to Juliet's questions, Holly got real answers. Like it had been stressful and unpleasant. And yes, Gail was free Sunday afternoon, but did it have to be sports?

Gail was lighter when she talked to Holly. As if the burdens of the world were washed away and she could be free. It had been similar when they were undercover, like being anyone but herself was easier. Personally, Juliet had liked that Gail a great deal. She was funny and witty and forgot she was a Peck. But Gail wore her name like a badge of honor. Like a survivor. She wanted to be the Peck that people remembered, even if she'd yet to admit that.

When she hung up, Gail grimaced and leaned over until her face hit the arm of the couch. "Anderson is pissed off because I took everything away from her," mumbled Gail into her couch. "Oliver's trying to get everyone else to see I'm amazing, but Oliver loves everyone so mostly they just think I'm a great liar and I don't care about them. And you know it's easier to just walk away and let them hate."

"You have to stop thinking of it like that," warned Juliet. That had been the hardest part of working undercover. The betrayals. Getting someone to know you, to like you, and then to burn it all down. "They don't hate you, they hate themselves for not seeing it, for not following through."

"I know," Gail sighed. Picking up her head, she hugged a pillow instead. "And I don't hate them. I just... I lost everything too."

That was true. Juliet sat down on the other end of the couch. "You did. But you, I thought you were doing good here."
"Eh," shrugged Gail. "I feel like if I start thinking of it as home, someone's going to pull the rug out from under me."

Juliet looked thoughtful. "Well. You don't have any more family to betray. You haven't been here long enough to earn everyone's ire, though you sure pissed off Tomás in drugs, and remind me to buy you a round for that. He's such an ass."

With a biting smile, Gail nodded. "Noted."

"What's left to lose?"

A serious expression crossed Gail's face. She held her tongue for a long moment. Finally... "The one thing I think would break me if I lost again." She looked sad. "I never stopped being in love with her, which is so... It stupid. Right? We went out for barely three months."

It was stupid. It was also what happened. "Given how I met and fell for Nick, I don't think I can really argue that point."

"Nick falls in love like a girl," grumbled Gail.

Nick was always creeped out that they talked about him so causally. They had no issues talking about him in bed, or habits they hated. It was the result of their undercover stint. They just felt comfortable sharing their information. Which was why Juliet knew Gail would listen to her now.

"Gail. You're going to lose her if you don't do something. Because she'll find someone acceptable and you'll hate them both forever. At least if you try, you have a chance."

"Please stop making sense. You know I hate that," Gail complained, but not seriously.

"You should give up hating me, Peck. You know I'm awesome."

But she did let it go after that. Juliet couldn't make Gail do the right thing, and even Juliet didn't know for sure what that was. At least she could nudge.

If she could stop having sex dreams about Holly, that would be great. In general, Gail slept better out in Vancouver, and that was nice. The problem with deep sleep was that it brought out deep dreams and that meant dreaming about Holly. A lot. In ways that were inappropriate now.

It was her own fault. Gail had told Holly that she wanted to be friends. She desperately needed a friend. That was how she and Holly had stuck together in the first place, too. Her old friends were idiots and she'd been in need of a new one. And now she was bereft of friends, and that meant she hung out a lot with Holly.

And that meant she'd had a dream that was half memory and fully realistic. It was here in her bed in Vancouver, but Holly was sitting, straddling her hips and looking down, biting her lip just so with her lips curved to one side. And the sleep shirt, some sports team, was so slowly being pulled off. Gail half realized it was a dream as she reached for Holly's waist, eager to pull her down.

A dream she was ripped out of by a ringing phone. "Peck," she mumbled and squinted at the clock. Two in the morning. It was dispatch with a case. A dead body at a school. Gail took down the address and rolled into a cold shower before driving out to meet an equally sleepy looking Juliet.

"Not sleeping again?" Juliet held out a coffee.
"Weird dreams. Who's dead?" She sucked down half the coffee in one go. It was helping.

"A teacher. I just got here, and Yung coffee'd me." They both looked over at patrol officer Yung. "I love him. If Nick leaves me, I'm taking him."

Yung was a child. "He's twenty two years old," smirked Gail. "Thanks for the coffee, Yung." She hefted the cup as a salute and the child turned pink. "Also I think he likes me best."

Laughing, Juliet lifted the tape for Gail to pass under. "Lesbian."

Gail smirked and walked down the hall to the dead body. Her heart thudded when she saw that Mac was their coroner, not Holly. That was probably best for her sanity right now. "Hey, Mac. How'd you get stuck here?"

"Payback for the broken ankle. Stewart conned me into covering nights for the month." He smiled up at them. "Dead art teacher. Stabbed with a paint knife."

Frowning, Juliet leaned over. "Math teacher I could understand. Art teacher?"

She had a point. "PE teacher maybe."

"French teacher."

Gail scowled. "What's wrong with French?"

Ignoring her, Juliet asked Mac, "Can you really kill someone with a paint knife? Heck, what is a paint knife?"

"Technically, not a knife," yawned Gail. "Use 'em instead of a brush to paint with. They're like skinny, flexible, trowels." Both Juliet and Mac looked at her. "What?"

Juliet cleared her throat. "I didn't know you painted."

"I don't." Gail had not been blessed with a lick of artistic skill, except singing. Which she rarely did. Holly painted. Kind of. She dabbled. Her father was the artist, as Holly had told Gail on more than one occasion.

Wisely, Mac didn't mention anything about it. "Well. Anything with a pointed end can be used to stab, just takes a bit more strength."

Gail took a good look at the blood on the ground. "Got the jugular, huh?"

"Lucky shot?" Juliet touched her own neck. "Didn't Mythbusters prove you could do it with a drone?"

That Gail did not know. Holly would. Yeah, she was just not going to escape that tonight. "Maybe we'll luck out and get prints off the knife," she sighed.

By eight, they'd interviewed the security guards, gotten the videos from the security camera, and even managed to squeeze in breakfast. Instant oatmeal counted as breakfast, right? Gail had folded her arms and used them as a pillow on her desk while Juliet stuck everything up on the board.

"Okay," muttered Juliet. "We have an art teacher, been at the school ten years- sorry, Eleven. Generally beloved. Rumors like usual. All teachers are messed up individuals. He was accused of making a pass at a student, unfounded. Student later recanted. Yung is getting the student now. Prints off the knife are empty, but that could mean a lot of things. Not everyone's prints are in the
system. There was a push here, about fifteen years ago, to get kids printed. Doesn't exclude students of course."

A second voice joined in. "Talking to yourself?" It was the warm tones of Dr. Holly Stewart. Gail almost looked up, but frankly the idea of moving was currently untenable. She let Holly's voice comfort her instead, like a warm blanket.

"She's awake." Juliet yawned. "That's her thinking pose. To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"Tox screen was positive."

Gail spoke up. "Opiates, shrooms, LSD, or weed?"

The rich sound of Holly's laughter warmed her. "LSD. Classic Tim Leary, here."

There was a squeaking sound as Juliet wrote on the board. "Drugs. Were there any on him?"

"Negative," replied Holly. "The paint in his wound matched the paint on his hands, though."

Grunting, Gail lifted her head. "Hoisted by his own petard."

Holly's dark eyes smiled at her. "More or less."

Butterflies danced in her stomach. Gail firmly told them to shut up. "Alert area hospitals and dispatch for anyone on a bad trip," yawned Gail, putting her head back down. "Any word on his car?"

"Not yet," sighed Juliet. "APB still coming up zero."

"Did we check all the plates in the lot?" There was silence. Gail peeked up again and saw Juliet's flummoxed expression. "Hey, Yung! C'mere."

The earnest young man looked incredibly serious. "Ma'am?"

"Need you to go back to the school and check all the cars in the lot. See if they have our dead teacher's plates." Weirdly, Yung was excited about the grunt work and ran off. "Rookies," she sighed and closed her eyes.

"Some people will have left," mused Juliet. "If he comes up short, he can check with AV and the security cameras."

Holly laughed softly. "I'd say you two are mean, but that's what rookies are for. How early did they call you?"

"Two," complained Gail. She really wanted a nap.

"Ah." The sound was one Gail remembered. Holly understood how tired and frustrated Gail was and was trying to think of a way to help. "You're running the prints. I'm going to go back over the clothes, see if there's any possible transfer."

"Like what?" Juliet sounded confused.

Gail got it. "Paint that wasn't oil based?"

"For example," replied Holly and Gail could hear the smile. "Did you do a background check? What kind of media did he work in?"
"Oils by preference," Gail yawned and picked her head up, supporting her chin on her hands. "He
did a bit of plaster, but not stone. Murals. He died in front of one of his murals. Jules?"

Her partner hesitated and then pulled out the photos. "He did the ugly swirly thing?"

Holly perked up. "It's an homage to Van Gogh!"

"Juliet's an uneducated plebeian," yawned Gail.

"Hey, I went to college," Juliet laughed. It had been an ongoing joke. Juliet liked very simple
things. Which explained Nick. "But that doesn't look like his stuff."

"Hence homage, not copy. I'm on that." Holly hesitated, looking at Gail thoughtfully, as if she
was on the cusp of saying something more personal. But in the end, she gave a slight nod and
walked out.

Juliet whistled softly. "I'm telling you, Peck."

"Shut up, Ward," grumbled Gail, and she put her head back down.

"Why do they have to run? I hate it when they run." Gail was cursing as she followed Juliet down
the alley.

"You hate running," grumbled Juliet. They were both hustling, not running, guns out, looking for
their art teacher killer.

The break had come from not Holly but Yung, who found the license plates had been swapped.
Technically that meant the break came from Gail, but she'd subcontracted the work. They hadn't
really bantered about that, though, because the break was big. They had a suspect and his name
and motive, though they both felt it was stupid. The best art student in the school had been
declined a letter of recommendation because of his attitude.

Frankly if he'd killed the teacher, Juliet thought the call was justified. Gail had disagreed and
pointed out that you didn't have to go to college to become the next best artist.

Damn it, there he is!"

The patrol officers had spotted the car hours ago, empty and by an abandoned warehouse. Of
course they'd checked out the building. It was filled with art. Creepy art. Which explained the
other reason he'd not gotten that letter. The kid was a good artist, but he had a twisted imagination.

Also an obsession with guns, which they learned when he took a shot at them with a rifle.

"Gail, how many shots does that rifle have?"

"Ten or fifteen. Depends on the clip."

Juliet trusted Gail on matters of guns. "I counted eight shots. Assume it's fully loaded?"

"Safe bet," Gail agreed. She slowed down. "I like this less and less."

They both stopped as they got to the turn. "Bad feeling?"

"I'd be waiting for us."
So would Juliet. She drew her gun but Gail stayed her hand and picked up a piece of brick. That would work. Juliet took her shooter's stance, ready to cover her partner. Nodding, Gail wound up and threw the brick down the turn.

Nothing.

"Crap. We lost him." Gail poked her head around.

There was a flash of black and the solid crack of a rifle stock hitting Gail's head echoed down the alley. "Freeze," shouted Juliet, hoping to god that the boneless crumple of her partner wasn't as bad as it looked.

Chapter End Notes

I never said I was beyond cliffhangers.
No Broken Hearts

Her head hurt worse than it looked. At least she hoped so, since other than the bruise on her forehead and the stitches, she didn't have much of any visible damage according to the nurse. The gunstock had nailed her right above the eye, on the same spot as her scar from Perik. Touching her forehead, Gail felt the lump and the string, or whatever the hell they used to stitch her up. Cat gut?

The curtain opened as she mused over how to escape and get some sleep at home. "Jules, I'm fine-
"

It wasn't Juliet. It was Holly. A frantic Holly. "Gail, there's ... Oh my god. Juliet said you were in the hospital." Her eyes circled around Gail's head. "You're all bloody."

"Oh. Head wounds bleed a lot, you know that." Gail winced as she sat up on the hospital gurney for inspection by her best friend. Her shirt was covered in blood, which was probably scary to look at. "I'm okay."

Holly frowned. "What happened?"

"Guy with rifle. Ran out of bullets. Used my head as a backstop or whatever..."

"Did you just try to make a sports joke?"

"Not working, huh?" Gail smiled tiredly.

"I think you have a head injury," said Holly, gnawing her lower lip.

Watching Holly worry about her made Gail feel warm. That may have been the pain medication, "I'm fine. See? Five stitches on my head." Gail pushed her bangs up to show off the work.

Holly reached over and ran her fingers over the bump. "It looks horrible, honey," she whispered. "You're going to have an X on your forehead."

Gail sighed. "Is that ... Great." The stitches were going across the scar from Perik and the door. She hadn't yet looked at them and now decided she didn't want to. In a weird way, she was happy to be so pale. No one would notice the scar.

The warm hand on her forehead paused. "Does it hurt?" Holly's voice was tight and soft. Scared.

"Yeah," she admitted. "I have a raging headache. But I'm okay. Nothing sleeping twelve hours won't fix."

The doctor frowned. "Are you sure you're okay?" Holly eyed Gail up and down. It was making her a little dizzy.

Gail nodded and winced. "I've had worse, Holly."

But Holly was discombobulated. Flustered. It was really cute to watch, if exhausting. "Good. Okay. Because I worried. I mean, I worry but I really worried. When they called, they just said you were hurt and needed a ride home. And ... And I kept thinking about that guy, back in Toronto, who shot at you, and-"

"Holly," winced Gail, the headache starting to break through the non-opiate painkillers.
It was hard to stop Holly when she was in babble mode. "Sorry, I know. This isn't that, and it's not like you were running away from me when, whatever, and that's fine. It's me. God, I'm being a total spaz."

The fears Gail had been having, the worries about repeating the past started to fade. Juliet and Nick were right. Not that she'd tell them. "Holly," she tried to cut in again. Why had Gail been so scared before? She knew exactly where this level of anxiety came from. She'd feel the same way if it was Holly sitting there and while she doubted she'd run at the mouth, Gail understood the feeling.

But the doctor in full on spaz mode was not to be stopped. "It's just when I heard all I could think was its really not fair of life to lose you again. Not that I lost you lost you, I just really missed us when we weren't us. And us was pretty good, wasn't it? Aren't we? I thought, I don't know, you're one of the most important people in my life —"

Gail cut her off the only way she knew how. She reached over and cupped Holly's face, pulling it towards her and kissing her. "You really babble," she muttered into the stunned silence before kissing her again.

And Holly melted into the kiss like it was secretly what she'd wanted all this time. It was not, perhaps, the most polite way to calm her down, but it was effective. The point, and there was one, was that she couldn't figure out how to tell Holly that she was still the most important person to her, and all that stupid worrying about ruining a friendship and losing Holly was, well, stupid. They were always headed to this. They were endgame.

"Gail," Holly sighed when they finally stopped, reaching up to touch the bruise again. "Why do you have to do that?" Her voice was tender, though.

"Well. You were saying all those words, and I remembered what they meant." Another soft touch of her lips to Holly's started to warm her in ways that had been lonely for a long time.

"Oh, good," whispered Holly, her fingers touching the edges of the stitches on Gail's forehead.

The words, what they were, didn't matter. Their meaning, though. That was the moment Gail had realized she wasn't the only one making something out of nothing, back in Toronto, back in that interrogation room. That there was a thing between them and it was stupid to deny it. And here they were again, still caring, still having a thing, and it was just stupid. "I'm sorry I scared you," Gail said quietly.

Holly sighed and wrapped her arms around Gail's waist. "You're so much trouble," she told Gail, holding her close. "You take so much looking after."

"You knew that a long time ago." Gail rested her head, the not bruised side, against Holly's. "I missed this," she whispered.

"Me too," replied Holly, just as softly.

The curtain moved and Juliet looked at Gail, a bit surprised. "Oh. Hi, Doc."

With her back to Juliet, Holly replied wetly, "Hi, Juliet."

"You … don't need a ride home, huh?" Juliet gestured at Holly and mouthed 'nice work,' complete with thumbs up.

Gail flipped her partner off. "I think we're okay, yeah."
"Well. Okay. Hayes said to take the rest of the week off. And good work. But, ah, next time don't stop a rifle with your head, okay?"

"Better the gun stock than the payload," mused Gail.

Holly's hold tightened for a moment. "That's not funny yet, Gail," she cautioned, and then let go to wipe her eyes. "I'll get her home," Holly said to Juliet.

"Remember to take away her keys," Juliet teased. Reaching around, she squeezed Gail's shoulder and mouthed 'Call me' before heading out.

Rolling her eyes, Gail winced. "Okay, why does that hurt?"

"You got hit in the head," sighed Holly, taking a hold of Gail's face to give her a better look. "Did they clear you for a concussion?"

"Yeah."

Holly nodded. "Okay. Let's get a bandage on that and get you signed out, honey." When Gail smiled, Holly eyed her. "What?"

Picking up her jacket and purse, Gail walked out of the curtain room. "You called me honey," she grinned. "Come on, Lunchbox. Take me home."

Back at her house, a simple two bedroom with yard, Gail found herself being cosseted and pampered by a fussing Holly. She had tea and cookies, but was listening to Holly complain about Gail's austere style and lack of adult food. The style had been a thing for the last year. Gail hadn't really decorated since moving in, though in her defense, she'd left everything but her video games, books, movies, and clothes in Toronto. The less the better. She'd even sold off most of her gun collection.

"I know you can cook, Gail. How is your fridge empty?"

"I go shopping every day," she yawned. "Can you please order a pizza or something and come sit with me?"

Holly put her hands on her hips and stared. "You? Shop every day? How did I not know this?"

Gail smiled. "Small markets. How do you think I made that awesome pasta for you?"

"You made the pasta... Gail, how long have you been wooing me?"

"Don't call it wooing, Holl, that's horrible," she groaned. But Holly just stood there, tapping her foot. "A while. Okay? Happy?"

The pathologist leaned down and kissed Gail softly. "Happier. Chinese food?"

Smiling, Gail nodded and tried not to wince. "Beef something, please."

"Take another pain killer, honey." Holly gently brushed her thumb over the lump on Gail's forehead. "Please."

The please did it. Gail watched Holly as she walked to the kitchen for the take-out menus and sighed. She picked up the bottle of painkillers off the end table and popped one. "They're going to make me goofy, Holly."

"Tell me something new. Hi, yes, I'd like to make a delivery order? Thank you." Gail closed her
eyes and leaned back on the couch. She must have dozed off because she came aware of the smell of beef and vegetables with noodles and the feeling of someone playing with her hair. "Hey, wake up," said Holly softly. "You need to eat."

"Yeah," yawned Gail. She sat up. "I'm hungry." Looking at Holly and her quiet smile, Gail redirected her reach for the food to kiss the woman again. "And there needs to be a lot more of that," she added.

Holly made a face. "Your breath is terrible, Gail. And how high are you?"

"Not very. It's non narcotic." She smiled. "Do we have to have a talk now? Like how I'm still in love with you? And you're into me, so we should try this whole dating thing again, only with less stupidity, and maybe we can do things like kissing?"

Rolling her eyes, Holly made Gail a plate. "I'd like that," she said, the half smile on her face.

Gail blinked. "Wait what?"

"What?" Holly looked confused.

"That's it? That's all we have to talk about?"

Smiling, Holly kissed Gail's cheek. "Yes. Because I have been wooing you for a while too, Gail."

"Mmmmm no, no, don't call it wooing. That's not something a grown-ass adult should say."

"Shush," smiled Holly. "Look. Are you going to run if we have a fight?"

"No. Are you?"

"No. So. We don't do what we did last time." Holly looked very pleased with herself. "Except the part where friends become girlfriends. I was a fan of that last time."

Gail smiled. "No drunken hair chopping either."

"I did like that haircut," sighed Holly, reaching over to run a hand through Gail's bangs fondly. She leaned in and very softly kissed the bandage. "Eat." And she sat just far enough away to prevent Gail from easily making a move. The brat.

That night, though, Holly spent the night. Unlike all the other times in the last year, it wasn't in the guest room. This time, Holly went in there to find the clothes she'd left and came back to slide into bed with Gail. It was comfortable and familiar, having Holly's arm wrap around her waist.

"If I hit my head again, will you sleep with me?"

Holly laughed quietly. "I won't have sex with you if you hit your head again."

"Noted," yawned Gail, snuggling back into the little spoon spot. Finally she felt like sleep would be easy.

The sunrise always hit her face in the morning at Gail's, even in November. The woman didn't have good blinds, that's all there was to it. "God, Gail, don't you own this place?"

Behind her, a sleepy voice replied. "I do." Lips touched Holly's bare shoulder and she shuddered.

"Please invest in some blinds," Holly sighed.
Gail made a noise. "I have to get up early." Gail moulded herself against Holly's back, bare skin pressing against bare skin.

"On Saturday?"

"When it's worth it," whispered Gail, the air from her words curling around the shell of Holly's ear. Holly sucked in her breath as Gail's hand ran down her side and across her stomach.

Their date Friday had ended exactly how Holly had hoped it would. They'd gone out to a nice dinner by the water, romantic as hell, and then a little walk before Gail suggested they go back to her place. The taxi ride back had been quiet. Gail held her hand, smiling. Holly had run her thumb over the back of Gail's hand, feeling as nervous as she had been the first time she'd brought Gail to her bedroom with this intent.

That first time had been so unexpected. They'd been at Holly's townhouse binge watching Eureka, which Gail had not seen but quickly decided she liked. And at a pause between episodes, Gail had turned off the TV and taken Holly's face between her hands, kissing her. Holly hadn't even babied. It had just been a moment of undisguised want in Gail, a demand to have Holly now.

It had been the build up of a week of frustration. A week of kissing and first base finally inching it's way into second. Hands under shirts, touching the soft skin at the small of Gail's back, gently setting Holly on fire. It had been eight days where, every free chance Gail had, she was at Holly's townhouse.

And then Gail, finally, finally, was in her bed. Holly was in Gail's arms, and all of the fears about being a straight girl's experiment had fallen away. Sure, Gail had been a little tentative and nervous the first few times they'd had sex. Most of the time you were a least on edge when you were with someone new, and that was totally understandable. Holly had been worried about being someone's first, which was a first for her. All of Lisa's jokes about her being into straight girls aside, Holly had always balked at that. Kissing was one thing. Sex was much bigger.

Sex with Gail though... It was like how they started dating. Slowly, carefully, accidentally, and then suddenly all at once. First they were just being friends. Then Holly felt an undeniable ache, an actual pain when she saw Gail. She had a need crawl from under her skin, a demand to find out what that pale skin felt like, tasted like. Having the need reciprocated just made her burn more.

Since moving to Vancouver, the need had built up again. It had never really gone away. Holly doubted it ever would. Gail had left an indelible mark on her heart, carving a space for herself and leaving a vacuous hole when she'd gone. Nothing had filled it since, not even having Gail now.

That had been the problem. Gail wasn't the same person who'd broken her heart, which was good. She was better in a lot of ways, more reliable and more mature. But it meant she didn't fit into Holly's life and soul quite the same way. And all the unplanned moments that had led to them being a them again shored up the shattered pieces but it didn't fill her the same way.

Holly decided that was okay. They weren't the same and that was okay. They could be better. And better was working. Better talked about their feelings. Better confessed to fears. Better planned dates.

Well, they planned to as much of a degree as a fairly new detective in Homicide and the newly appointed head of field forensics could plan anything. There had been two murders and one accidental drowning in a hockey rink that ended in canceled dates before they'd finally managed this one.
And that night had brought them to this wonderful, very naked, morning. A bit bright for Holly's taste, especially after how long that night had been, but Gail was definitely proving that early mornings with her were worthwhile. The pale fingers traced circles on Holly's thigh and then up. Oh god.

"Gail," she sighed, torn between arching her back into Gail, to feel more skin, or her hips into the hand that was really doing a good job at drawing her attention. The hand was winning right now.

"I really, really, missed this." Gail's voice was low and sultry. Her fingers were teasing Holly, barely touching her and still lighting her on fire.

Hand. Had to be the hand. "Don't stop," pleaded Holly, and she reached back to pull Gail closer. Gail didn't stop. Thank god she didn't stop. Holly squeezed her eyes closed and groaned. She had missed that too. There had been other women since the last time she'd been with Gail. Some women were more experienced certainly. But there was a chemical reaction with Gail that was different.

Gail quickly, confidently, brought Holly over the edge with that hand. God that hand. She fell apart under the hand and it felt so good and so right. "Morning," said Gail, and Holly could hear the smirk.


A soft kiss to her shoulder prefaced Gail's reply. "Go back to sleep." Gail snuggled up, bringing the blanket to their shoulders.

Sleep was the furthest thing from Holly's mind, though. She shifted in Gail's arm, facing her. Smiling at her. "In a minute," she replied, running her hands up Gail's arms and nudging her onto her back. "Was that an apology for your lack of proper blinds?"

Gail smiled and lay back. "I like the sun. Sets my body clock."

"Circadian rhythm," corrected Holly, running a finger down the valley between Gail's breasts. "You sleep better here," she realized.

In Toronto, Gail had slept irregularly at best. She often woke up in the night. She'd had nightmares. And she'd never wanted to talk about them, which made it a terrible idea to bring up right now during sexy times. Well done.

With a loud exhale, Gail tucked her hands under her head. "I left my heart in San Francisco," she sang softly. Avoiding the topic.

"Sorry," whispered Holly, kissing Gail's shoulder and then collar. "I missed this too." Gail smiled and started to pull her hands out to touch Holly's back. "No. Keep 'em there," murmured Holly against Gail's skin.

Gail did. Mostly. At one point, she did reach down and tangle her hand in Holly's hair. Considering what Holly was doing at that moment, she could forgive that. Considering Holly was taking her sweet, sweet time, it was understandable that Gail was impatient and vocal. It was lovely to hear her vocal. God, she'd missed that too.

Maybe they finally were getting it right. She hoped so.

When Holly suggested they keep their relationship quiet, Gail was surprised.
"You get how Nick and Juliet have been conspiring to get us back together, right?" And in fact Juliet had seen them hugging in the hospital in a more than just-friends way.

"I do." Holly fixed her hair in the mirror, tying it back into a bun. "Does this look okay?"

Gail's eyes roamed Holly up and down. She was wearing a dark grey pantsuit with a purple shirt. "Buttons," sighed Gail. "I mean, I appreciate the cleavage, but lawyers like us ladies to look a little dowdy."

Holly sighed and looked down, buttoning up all but the topmost button. "Better?" When Gail nodded, Holly exhaled nervously.

She was always a little skittish before court, which Gail found endearing. She found almost everything about Holly endearing. "Put on a lab coat and you're about five seconds from one of my fantasies."

Her girlfriend rolled her eyes. "You're not helping."

"Sorry." Gail pushed off the doorframe where she'd been watching Holly transform into the judicially scrumptious Dr. Stewart. This was an aspect of the woman she'd not known she'd liked. Quirky field Dr. Stewart and sassy lab Dr. Stewart were wonderful. The Dr. Stewart headed to court was like the sexy librarian times a hundred.

Yeah, totally gay.

"Stop looking at me like that," muttered Holly.

"Stop looking like that. Seriously, not telling other people ... I get it, Holl. I do. The only person who needs to know how serious I am about you, is you." Gail crossed the room and took Holly's hands.

The warm brown eyes smiled at her. "You're serious about me?" Holly looked shyly delighted.

"I've always been serious about you," Gail said quietly. "Stupid sometimes, but always serious." She leaned in and kissed Holly long and slowly.

Holly melted into her for a moment. "How is this helping me with my court case?"

"Relaxes you." She grinned. "Running around your car a few times also helps. But it might get you a little sweaty."

"Hmm." Holly rested her hands on Gail's shoulders. "Okay, that helps." She closed her eyes and leaned into Gail.

Holding Holly close certainly made Gail feel less stressed. "If it makes you feel better, we can keep it quiet." Whispering a thank you, Holly kissed her cheek and let go.

Of course, they'd been so much in each other's pockets for so long as friends, it changed very little to keep their relationship change quiet. They had been flirting with each other and giving each other meaningful looks for months. So really all that changed was what they did after the dinners and the jobs and the sports games.

They didn't even change how they set up their dates. One or the other would swing by after their shift, hang out, and they'd figure out what they wanted to do. Gail was pretty sure that Juliet was on to them, though, given the looks she kept shooting on her way out at the end of the day. Still, all she'd seen in the hospital that day was hugging.
More often they ended up at Gail's little house. Her family had money, but with all the various corruption suits, Gail doubted she'd ever see a dime. Of course, having lived cheap with Dov and Chris, and then at her parents for most of her life, she'd socked away the first three years of her salary and spent next to nothing. When she moved out to Vancouver, it had all been on a whim. Including buying the house.

At the time, it had been a fixer upper. The half year undercover had given her a weird skill set of construction, which wasn't a lot but it was enough to Home Depot her way through making the place livable. The floors were a mess with nasty shag carpet, so Gail ripped that out and found decent hardwood that just needed a weekend of sanding and then another of staining. The walls needed paint, and the appliances, well... By the time she'd made detective she had all of those. Police auctions were wonderful things for tools, appliances, and everything in between.

The first time Holly had seen it, she'd been astounded. The doctor had moved into a small condo apartment and joked it felt palatial after San Francisco. But Gail's house was an actual house, with bedrooms and a back yard and greenery. So they spent their time at the nicer house, and Holly started to help with the odds and ends of home repair Gail had never gotten around to.

It already felt like 'their' place before they were dating, so it was logical that it stayed their place after. Before they'd starting dating, Holly had a key. After, that key meant some nights when Gail got in late, there was a beautiful woman waiting in her bed.

Like tonight.

Gail had gotten a call about a suspect in their horse trampling case near the end of the day, which led to her to four different stable before the one in North Vancouver came up gold. Of course, lockup and paperwork had her home at a little after three. She was surprised to see Holly's car there. She was more surprised to see a dinner left out for her and the house was clean. Dishes were done, laundry was folded and in the basket on the dryer, the trash was out and ready for pickup.

When she got upstairs though, Gail was convinced the universe had finally decided to pay her back for everything. Holly was asleep, dark hair swept back into a braid, the thick winter quilt Holly had bought for her tucked up to her chin, leaving her shoulder visible. And bare.

God. If this was an apology from the universe for Perik, the shooting, her brother, and everything else, Gail would take it. She took a quick shower before fixing the blankets over Holly's shoulder, sliding in the empty space and watching Holly's sleeping face.

This moment, this little bit of quiet in the gloaming hours was worth it. This was the answer to all the questions before. Why had things gone wrong with Chris and Nick? They'd both wanted her to change and be someone else. There were never allowances made, there were never moments where they just did what she needed, or chose her.

And Holly. Holly chose her. Holly took care of her quietly and dependably. Back when they hadn't dated, Holly listened and did what Gail needed even if she couldn't find the words to ask for it.

"I am in love with you," Gail whispered into the night. Her girlfriend didn't twitch, sleeping deeply. "I need to tell you that when you're awake."

For the first month, Holly was on cloud nine. She and Gail were comfortable in that part of their relationship. The sex was good. The dates were good. They were great. They so easily fell from 'just friends' into lovers again, Holly worried about making the same mistakes.
Was she making a mistake by wanting to keep things quiet? Was it inviting other Penny type incident? They'd told Lisa, who said it was about time. Gail didn't really have anyone to tell but Nick and Juliet. And maybe her brother. Holly had her siblings, her parents, and a bevy of friends across two countries now.

Gail had been bad at making friends before and she was worse now. Trusting people didn't come easy to the blonde. After all the betrayals in her life, Holly couldn't blame her. And yet it was Gail who pushed, lightly, for them to tell people. The safe people first, ones who wouldn't judge them. Though that did put Lisa into question, the woman was a friend to both of them.

After Lisa, Gail told her brother. Holly sat on the couch, nestled under Gail's arm, and listened to Gail explain things to her brother. Apparently she'd not mentioned Holly moved out there, which made it a little more awkward. "Well, Steve, she did... Look, hang on."

The phone was pressed to Holly's ears. "Hello?" The word came out reflexively.

"Hello?" It was a male voice. Steve. "Hi, Holly?"

"Yes," sighed Holly. "Gail is being... Gail." Behind her, Gail muttered that it was faster this way. Holly pinched Gail's thigh. "Hush. What do you want me to tell him?"

Gail leaned in and tilted the phone so they could both talk into it. "Tell my brother you didn't move here because of me."

"Oh, no, nothing to do with Gail. The money and the promotion. I didn't know for sure she was here until after I accepted."

That surprised Gail. "What, Boobs didn't tell you?"

"Who's boobs?" Steve was confused.

"Lisa, friend of mine from med school," explained Holly.

"Oh," muttered Steve. "I'm... Okay, I'm just... Gail, get off the phone and let me talk to Holly privately."

When Holly hesitated, Gail replied, "No. Steven, you don't get to be worried about my wellbeing right now."

There was a grumble. "Gail. I do."

"I know you do, Steve, but... This isn't something stupid like Holly moving back to Canada for me. This is... This is God apologizing for everything and giving me a chance with the most wonderful person I've ever met. So you get to say okay, and you're happy for me, and tell Holly something useful."

The man on the phone laughed. "Useful. Okay. Holly, she actually is allergic to tomatoes. She snores when she's drunk. And she is the most loyal woman you will ever meet in your life."

Holly tilted her head and looked at Gail. "I know all that. But it is useful. Thank you, Steve."

"Okay, happy Garbage Pail?"

"Yep," smiled Gail. "I'm hanging up now. I'll call you later." Without waiting for a reply, Gail hung up and tossed the phone onto the coffee table. "There. Now we've told people." She slid her arms around Holly and settled into the couch.
Holly laughed and tilted her head, kissing Gail's jawbone. "Do you feel better?"

"I do. I do," she said happily. "If Nick or Jules asks, can we tell them?"

"It's not a secret," agreed Holly. "I just don't want to parade everything. I want to ... I like being us. That's all."

Gail nodded. "I know. I just... Last time I didn't tell anyone and then I didn't know what to do when I was an idiot."

It suddenly made sense. For Gail, being public was a safety net. It was her gut check. "I'm sorry," she said and turned around to face Gail. Of course Gail needed to be open about it. She'd lived in nothing but secrets and lies for so long, she needed a bit of honesty in more things. "I'm not trying to hide anything."

"I know," nodded Gail. She grew silent, though. A sure sign she was at a loss for how to explain herself.

Holly cupped her face with her hands. "I understand, Gail. I do." She leaned in and kissed Gail slowly. "No secrets."

They kissed again, Holly inching her way until she trapped Gail against the couch. As she started to push Gail's shirt up, the blonde gently pushed her back. "Holl. If we're doing no secrets, I have to tell you something."

Blinking, Holly shifted her weight to sit back. "Okay." That was nervous making.

Gail wriggled into sitting up and took Holly's hands. "I'm ... I'm in love with you."

Holly stared for a moment. Of all the ways she'd wished for that to be said, making out on the couch after telling some friends they were dating was not on the list. She'd had the fantasy of Gail showing up at her place in San Francisco, announcing she couldn't live without her. She'd had the dream of being in Toronto for a case and Gail stopping her from leaving at the airport. Or Gail showing up with a boombox here in Vancouver.

This felt better though. This felt like them.

Smiling, she squeezed the hands. "You love me."

"I do," nodded Gail. "I love you." She lifted Holly's hands and kissed the knuckles. "You're the best thing that has ever happened to me. You make me better. And I want to be better. I want to be worth having you here-"

"No," Holly cut her off.

Gail faltered. "N- no?" She looked terrified, like the world had come apart.

Taking a deep breath, Holly nodded. "No. You don't have to be- become worthy of me or anything, Gail. You never have."

The blonde blinked and hesitantly said, "But I'm a brat-"

"Oh, honey, yes, you are incredibly bratty, and childish. But you are so damn brave. You- God, you know when I knew I was in love? That moment you said you had to go back out there even though some psycho was shooting at you." Holly shook her head. "God, be worthy of me? Gail. I
don't know if I'm good enough for you."

Gail's expression wavered between terror, relief, and confusion. "You? Holly, you're the best person I know!"

"And you, Gail, you are the strongest, bravest person I've ever met. You gave up everything to do what was right." Holly let go of Gail's hands to take a firm hold of her face. "You are incredible. And if I have to tell you that every day for the rest of our lives for you to believe it, then I'm going to be very happy."

Frowning, Gail gave up. "You've completely lost me."

Holly smiled and leaned in, resting her forehead to Gail's. "Because it means I'll spend the rest of our lives with you, honey."

"Oh," exhaled Gail.

They stayed like that for a moment. Then Holly asked, "Can I punch Nick?"

"Sure." Gail readily agreed to that. "Why?"

"For ... For whatever he did to make you doubt yourself."

Gail laughed. "Oh. Holl, that was way before Nick. I was raised to be self-destructive." Though she grew thoughtful. "It makes sense. If I have no one else to rely on, I'd have to lean on the Pecks, right?"

Cringing, Holly let her hands fall to Gail's shoulders. "I hate your parents."

"Get in line." Gail kissed her lips softly. "Come back here?" She started to lean back and Holly quickly followed, settling against her chest. Listening to Gail's steady heartbeat. "Thank you," Gail said slowly, carefully, as if the two words might bite.

"I love you, you know," replied Holly.

"I do. I know. It's why you babbled."

Holly laughed into Gail's shoulder. "That is sadly very true."

"I love that about you, though. The babbling." Gail squeezed her close.

Smiling, Holly closed her eyes. "I know."

"They're doing it," Nick said, looking out the window.

Juliet looked up from her crossword puzzle. "What?" She followed his gaze, spotting Gail and Holly in the parking lot. They were holding hands, hunched against the December wind. "Doing it? Are you twelve?"

Hiding behind his coffee, Nick muttered, "Its weird to say that my ex is having sex."

"Gail doesn't share that prudish streak," mused Juliet and she went back to her puzzle. Late one night, when they were undercover, they'd talked about sex. It was after more drinks than Juliet felt were sane or safe, after Gail had won the trust of the gang boss, and the criminals they'd integrated with asked Gail when she was going to bang Juliet.
Quiet clearly, and more soberly than Juliet felt, Gail had leaned in and told the men that you didn’t go into those things drunk with the idea of banging. You had to really know a woman, to feel her skin on yours, her scent and her flavor, and you had to make love to a woman properly. Banging, a quick fuck, was transient. But sex... Sex could be transformative.

Of course Juliet had found herself blushing, and the men teased Gail, telling her to kiss. Gail had shaken her head and told them she might, but not in front of them. Because the best thing about being a lesbian was not having men involved in things.

That was what won them over, the gang. They loved Gail for her saucy romantic nature, her ability to drink with them, and her bitchy humor. And on their walk back to the seedy apartment, being trailed by someone, Juliet had pulled Gail in for a kiss. They had to make it look real.

Gail was a good kisser, she had to admit. That was not something she was about to tell Nick or Holly, though.

"Did you order yet?" Gail slid in to the other side of the booth.

Without looking up, Juliet rattled off the order. "Vegetarian omelet for the good doctor, french toast and bacon for the monster. Orange juice and coffee. Gail, seven letter word for precarious place, metaphorically."

"Thin ice. That upon which Nicholas stands." Gail picked up a water and sipped it.

The diner was a place Gail and Juliet had started to go to on the weekend, after Gail moved out. Juliet didn't see much of Gail in the beginning and realized she'd not come to hang out with the gang much. Sunday morning, Juliet showed up at Gail's and took her out for breakfast.

Over time, that became a thing. Sundays they did a breakfast and caught up on the week. When they became partners, Juliet thought about asking if they should stop, but then Sunday rolled around and they met at the diner as usual and chatted as usual. It was just a thing that friends did.

When Nick moved out, he hadn't come at first until Gail said he should. It confused him, watching Juliet do her crosswords and Gail just thinking. They picked up random threads of conversations, said a few words, maybe a sentence, and went back to their own world. Even now, nearly a year later, Nick was still confused about the general silence.

Holly fit in better faster. She came with a notebook and busied herself with whatever she was writing, covertly sneaking glances at Gail. That was last month. This month there had been hand holding and more overt, open looks. Gail was still often lost in thought but, when Holly looked at her, she would turn and smile back.

They didn't come every week, the plus ones, but they came often enough that it was comfortable to have them both there.

"Holly, what are you writing?" Nick had been guessing for months and now, finally, seemed to have the courage to ask.

"Sketching." Holly flushed and slid the notebook over.

It was more interesting than the crossword, which Juliet handed over to Gail to finish. The page had a rough sketch of a pensive Nick, looking off to the side. "Hey, this is good," Juliet marveled. "May I..." She hesitated at turning a page.

"Yeah, go ahead." Abashed, Holly sipped her coffee and leaned into Gail's shoulder.
There were pictures of coffee mugs and pens and pencils, things that Holly must have been looking at when she took the time to sketch. Some pages were ideas for articles. Doodle notes, where the ideas were represented in picture form. But then there were people. The form of the back of a waitress, in shadows, which Juliet recognized as the woman who served them grits at the southern restaurant they went to in winter. There was Nick, from Sunday breakfasts. Juliet and her crosswords. And Gail.

Sketch after sketch of Gail. Sometimes she was smiling, sometimes she was lost in thought. The sketches had dates in the corners and Juliet realized how long Holly had been drawing the detective. There was one from softball, where Juliet was sure she'd not seen the notebook around. Glancing up at Holly, Juliet raised an eyebrow and got a flushed nod in return. Holly had drawn Gail from memory.

"Wow," exhaled Nick. "Gail, did you know she could do that?"

Gail glanced over. "Oh, yeah. She has water colors too." Giving Holly a smile, Gail went back to the crossword. "Juliet, you spell worse than a child."

Even though Gail hadn't made a fuss, Holly looked flattered and shy. Juliet handed the book back. "I didn't know you were artistic," she told Holly, impressed.

It was Gail who answered. "Her father's the artist. He does landscapes in pointillism, like Seurat. I liked the impressionist stuff better, though. Feels like the paint flowed onto the canvas." She didn't look up as she spoke, reaching over for her coffee. "That's the sea in a storm painting you liked, Jules. The one in my dining room."

Juliet had been impressed by it, but all Gail had said at the time was it was a present. "It matches your eyes, which is weird."

Nodding, Holly held her notebook close. "It's why I gave it to her. I was surprised she kept it."

That made Gail stop. She pushed the crossword back over. "Of course I kept it." Gail looked a little confused.

"I'm with Holly," mused Nick. "You threw my things out."

"You left me at the alter, you dick," smiled Gail. "And fell in love with someone else. And ditched me without saying goodbye. Twice. I think it was justified."

Holly took Gail's hand with a soft smile. "It worked better than the pasta," she said quietly, and Gail grinned.

"See?" Nick gestured.

Narrowing her eyes dangerously, Gail asked, "What?" But she asked Juliet, not Nick.

"He thinks you guys hooked up." Juliet shrugged and raised a hand to the waitress. "S'cuse me, can I have more coffee, please?" Her boyfriend looked mildly appalled, but he was always on eggshells around his ex.

Gail called it a rational fear. "Yes, Nicholas, we're having sex. That's what people who date do, or have you forgotten." She turned to Juliet, "Are the crosswords because he's not satisfying you?"

Smiling, Juliet shook her head and made room for their plates and more coffee. "No, we're just fine."
"Oh, hey, I've been dying to know who's the better kisser," Gail said abruptly. "I mean, you're the only person who's kissed both of us."

Holly's voice sounded a little like a warning. "Gail."

"What? You're not about to kiss him to find out! That'd be like me kissing McNally. Bleck." Gail made a face. "I have to wash that thought out of my mouth." And she downed some coffee.

Juliet pointed at Gail with her fork. "You two've known her longer. Is she always like this?"

As one, Nick and Holly sighed. "Yes." Gail looked a little offended.

"I like Nick's kisses better, but that's a really subjective question, Gail. I mean, we were making out because of a case."

Gail looked thoughtful. "Okay, that's fair."

The conversation stopped at that point, on some mutual understanding that (based on his face) Nick still didn't quite understand. But Gail did, and so did Holly, and that was enough for Juliet. She liked how things had worked out.

Glancing over at Gail, Juliet smiled and lifted her cup. Gail returned the motion and leaned back in the booth.

This was a good life.

When Holly came over for their pre-planned date night in, Gail was making dinner. "Hey, no take out? I thought the cooking was just to impress me."

Gail smiled. "Take out and sex? I could stop, but the pasta's nearly done." There was something behind the smile. It was a look Holly had seen before. Tension. Gail had a bad day it seemed.

"No no, please woo me." She put her boots and jacket by the door and walked into the kitchen.

"I thought we agreed not to use that word?"

Holly wrapped her arms around Gail's waist and rested her chin on her shoulder. "How was work?"

"Bad," sighed Gail, rolling out the dough with a rolling pin that had no handles.

That was sudden. "I'm sorry." Holly frowned and asked, "Can I do anything?"

Gail paused in her rolling. "Um. Listen?"

That was a new request. "Of course." Holly let go and sat down at the breakfast bar.

Her girlfriend kept rolling out the dough. Then she cut it into sections and finally started to tell Holly about a case. A year and some before they'd met, Gail had gone undercover as a high priced call girl. Someone had been killing blondes and Gail went to smoke him out. She went on a date with the suspect.

Holly knew the story. She'd autopsied the girl that Dov and Chris had found in the woods. It had been her first solo autopsy. She'd still been at the lab, having worked through the night, when the building had been thrown into an uproar. A police officer had been kidnapped by a serial rapist and murderer.
And that officer was the woman standing in front of her. The woman Holly was in love with.

When Holly had told Gail she was brave, she'd had no idea. Gail had gone back to work after being kidnapped by a serial killer. She hadn't died, or been raped, but she'd probably had little or no hope. And then, after, she went back. And when the crimes started again, she went back and did what had to be done again to save them.

It cost her Nick.

"Today," said Gail slowly. "Today we had a call girl murdered."

Which meant today had been a hard day. An impossible day. "Gail," she said softly. Holly couldn't begin to fathom how that must have felt. "Does... Does Juliet know?"

Gail shook her head. "Nick does, obviously. But I don't... I never really talked to him about it. I didn't talk to anyone about it. Except my therapist."

That was good. Well. Better. "Do you want to talk to me about it?"


"You don't have to," Holly said as gently as she could.

"Except I do. The ... The time I freaked out, in your bathroom, I had a, um, a flashback." Gail waved a hand. "See. Oliver was kidnapped and put in the trunk of a car. And so was I. So ... It really screws with your head." She exhaled slowly, as if breathing would help calm her down. It probably would. "And I'm probably not going to sleep much tonight. So if you just want to have dinner and hang out a while, I get it. I just... I don't want you to think I'm running away, or up a tree or anything."

The entire time, Gail hadn't looked up from her cooking. Instead, she'd made and hung the pasta. "Okay," said Holly softly. "Can... May I ask something?" When Gail nodded, she asked, "Where did you learn to make pasta?"

Gail blinked and looked up. "I... Okay, this is embarrassing." She blushed and looked down. "You really love pasta."

"I know," sighed Holly. "It's soooo good when it's fresh."

"Right. So .. We went to that restaurant where they made the ravioli by hand and you lost your mind over the egg inside." She sighed. "I wanted to impress you, so I taught myself."

"It's working," smiled Holly. She caught Gail sneaking a look back and they shared a smile. "Can you make ravioli yet?"

"No! It comes out too thick." Gail shook her head, disappointed.

But Holly was impressed. "Do you know how to make home made pasta sauce?"

Shaking her head, Gail toyed with the pasta. "No. That's why I just do butter and lemons."

Holly walked around to the fridge and opened it up. "How about I do that. I mean, pasta this good should have sauce worthy of it. Besides, it's the one thing my mom can really cook."

Smiling almost shyly, Gail watched as Holly made the sauce and told her about her mother's lack of cooking ability.
In the end, Holly stayed the night. She sat up on the couch until she dozed off in Gail's arms. Then they went to bed and Holly held Gail, caressing her hair. And when Gail woke up with a nightmare, a memory, she sat up with her, talking about things. They talked a little about the dream, but then about the things they liked about Vancouver. They talked about things they'd like to do together. Things to do in summer or winter.

And as the sun came up, Holly watched Gail slowly drift into sleep. And she thought that she could do this. She could be here for this woman forever.

One day Gail would figure out why the universe liked to crap all over her. Maybe she'd been a murderer in a past life. That was the only explanation for why her mother was calling her.

"Hello, Mom," she said carefully, wondering if the woman was about to round the corner. Juliet's head snapped up from her lunch to stare at Gail. When Gail nodded, once, her partner winced.

"Gail." There was a pause of uncomfortable tension. "How are you?"

"Fine," Gail replied. "You?"

"I've been better," admitted her mother, which was weird.

"Oh." Gail looked at Juliet and mouthed 'help.' Her partner shook her head. Bitch. "How... How's Dad?"

"He's ..." Elaine stopped. "He's alright."

Gail drew up her face into a sneer. "Doesn't want to say hi, though."

"No, no he does not," admitted Elaine. "He does not know..."

"I just a pale fail, Mom. I get it." And she really did. She got why her parents were angry and hurt. They deserved it, but she understood their feelings.

Her mother didn't counter the statement. "Your brother... Steven said you were seeing someone."

Gail blinked. That's what she was calling about? "Why am I not surprised this is why you're calling?" She shook her head.

"I don't have much else to talk with you about."

"You mean to me. You're just gearing up for a lecture about ... What? Embarrassing the Peck name?"

Her mother sounded exasperated. "Gail."

"No, no, wait I know this one. See, I'm the only one who's still a cop, and I made detective, which hey, thanks for calling about that, Mom. You can't be ... You won't call for that, or anything. But the fact that I'm dating a woman? Hey, that gets a call. Awesome. Do I get to add homophobe to the reasons we don't talk?"

"I could care less that Holly's a woman," sighed Elaine. She sounded honest enough that it tripped Gail up. "I didn't think it was appropriate to talk about work, all things considered."

Gail blinked. "Oh."
"Must you always make the worst assumptions of me, Gail?"

"Apparently," she muttered. "Are you really calling to ask me about my love life?"

"No, I was calling to try and strike up a conversation and this is the excuse."

"Oh. Well... I have work, Mom."

"Ah. Of course... You... You can call me. Gail. I would like to talk to you."

"I'll... Keep that in mind."

"Alright. Have a good day, Gail."

"You too." She hung up and dropped the phone. "God. Talking to her makes me feel dirty."

Juliet refilled Gail's water. "I thought you weren't taking."

Gail tapped her phone. "That's the first time she's called me in two years, Jules."

"Except the time she yelled at me about you moving out here."

Smiling, Gail swept her phone into her pocket. "That was an interesting moment." Elaine had screamed at Juliet, accusing her of sleeping with Gail, which was nowhere near the truth.

"You never told me how she got my number."

"If I knew..." Gail paused and winced. "Shit. She said Holly's name." Gail hadn't. She'd made sure not to. Pulling her phone back out, she quickly texted her girlfriend to warn her.

"I used to think people were joking when they said Elaine was psychic."

"She has a lot of spies." Rubbing her face, Gail sighed. "She wants something. There's no other reason to call me."

Juliet swirled her iced tea. "She could just be being a mom."


"Neither do you." Juliet arched her eyebrows and sipped the tea.

Given how well the last time Gail had met any of Holly's close friends went, it was understandable that she was nervous when Holly dropped the bomb that her brother and parents were coming to town.

But all Gail asked was, "Exactly how much younger is your brother?"

"Drew's 13 years younger," she smiled.

"Man, and I thought the years between me and Steve were a lot." Gail shook her head. "When are they getting here?"

"Next weekend. Drew's looking at maybe teaching out here."

Gail made a face. "Are you both super smart intellectuals?"
"Our parents are so disappointed." Holly's parents were artists and hippies and frou-frou nuts.

Hesitating a moment, Gail asked, "Is there a reason you don't talk about them much?"

Holly pursed her lips. "We didn't do a lot of talking the first time we went out," she temporized.

"True," grinned Gail. "But I ... I want to know more." She hopped off the counter and took hold of Holly's waist, pulling her close. "I don't want to run up a tree."

Closing her eyes, Holly leaned into Gail, sucking up her warmth. "I'm adopted," she started, covering the pale hands with her own. "We were fostered first, me and Drew and Alicia. She, Alicia didn't get adopted. She didn't want to be. She had blood siblings, and me and Drew didn't."

That part, in broad terms, Gail had known. The adopting at least. "How old were you?"

"Ten. I lived with them since I was seven, though." She squeezed Gail's hand. "Not my first foster family." It wasn't something she'd hidden from Gail or even tried to. It just didn't come up as much as people thought it did.

Gail gave Holly another squeeze and let go. "How did two died in the wool hippies end up with scientists for kids?"

They walked over to Holly's couch and looked out over the city. "Its their own fault," smiled Holly. "Every summer we got into this ratty old van and went driving around the U.S. and Canada, meeting people and just ... Just seeing stuff." Holly settled into the safety of Gail's arm, easily cradled against her. "The second year I lived with them, we were over in the Maritimes, Acadia, and we went to see the old Leper Colony."

"Okay, that's officially ew."

Holly laughed. "They wanted me to not be afraid of different people. Except..."

And Gail laughed. "Except you got totally interested in dead people?"

"One of the exhibits showed the difference between an infected skeleton and a normal one," sighed Holly. "Dad was teaching me to sketch, so I drew them in my notebook. And ..." She shrugged.

"And you kept drawing dead things, you nerd," chuckled Gail. "That's kind of cool, though. What did your parents think?"

"Dad thought it was cool. Mom still thinks it's creepy and wanted me to go to more therapy in case I'd been locked in a closet or something with a dead body."

"Yeah, I can see that..." Gail started to play with Holly's hair. "And Drew?"

Closing her eyes again, Holly relaxed as the fingers in her hair managed to soothe and ease out tension. "He was a baby when he was adopted, so he just wanted to do whatever I did." Unlike Holly, Drew was a teacher. He taught Forensic Anthropology at McGill and was looking for a permanent position. Holly thought his papers were really good, but she knew she was biased.

"They sound way more interesting than my family," mused Gail. "Cooler." But then she quieted.

Holly didn't have to ask why Gail got worried. She knew her girlfriend didn't want to talk about her family with Holly's family. "You don't have to tell my parents anything," Holly cautioned.
Of course, even after Holly told her parents please not to ask Gail about her family, and really shouldn't adoptive parents be more sensitive about that, her father did at dinner. The first dinner was just Holly and family. They were all staying at a hotel and Holly met them there to drive them to dinner. It was a really nice, relaxing, catch up. Of course they asked about Holly's move and her job and the girlfriend. Her parents knew it was Gail and, while they'd been skeptical about it, trusted Holly to know herself. Drew had not known it was Gail and was surprised but, as always, supportive.

The next night, Drew had a meeting with the school and Holly's parents went to a dinner on their own. Night three was with Gail. Holly primed her parents multiple times, making them promise not to poke about why Gail had left Toronto. Her mother seemed to get it. It was hard to say how her father would react.

Gail met them a little late at the restaurant, mostly dressed for the day. Her hair was slicked back as if she'd washed her face but not showered. "Hi, sorry I'm late. We caught a counterfeiter." She leaned in to kiss Holly's cheek.

"Aren't you in homicide?" Drew frowned.

"He killed his partner," grinned Gail. "You must be Drew."

Her little brother grinned back and held out a hand. "I can't believe Holls only has my baby pictures up."

"I liked you better when you were cute and small," sighed Holly, wistfully. "Gail, my annoying brother Drew. My parents Maya and Dieter."

Shaking each hand in turn, Gail sat down. "It's nice to meet you. Holly's told me a lot about you."

"You have us at a disadvantage," drawled Dieter.

"Not much to tell," shrugged Gail. "I'm a cop, I do cop things. Holly showed me your art, sir. I really liked the impressionist stuff better than the pointillism."

Maya laughed loudly. "He doesn't do art because people like it, he does it because it calls to him."

"Well that explains Sunday on the Hudson River," muttered Drew. "Have you seen it Gail? It's hideous."

The blonde grinned. "No. Is it as bad as the clowns? Seriously, I have no idea how you didn't get nightmares from that."

Drew groaned, pulling up a photo on his phone. "The clowns were terrifying. Here, he has a picture of it on his website." Taking the phone, Gail made a disgusted face.

"Dad, when did you get a website?" Holly had her own phone out. "What's the URL?"

"DieterStewart-dot-art," grinned her brother. "He made it on his own. It's terrible."

"No one asked any of you," growled Dieter, but he was laughing.

Teasing Dieter about his art was a family hobby, though, and Holly was happy to see Gail fit right in. She knew enough about art, having seen Monet and many other famous paintings in person when she'd been in Europe.

She started to think they were in the clear when a Dieter asked, "So Gail. What do your parents
do?"

While Holly froze, wondering which way her girlfriend would jump, Gail just looked surprised. "Oh. Nothing right now."

"Are they retired?" Her father's tone was innocent.

"In a manner of speaking."

"In a manner of speaking." Gail looked at Holly who shook her head. She had not told her parents anything. "They're under house arrest."

That was not where anyone, not even Holly, had expected Gail to go. Maya cleared her throat. "Arrest? And you're a police officer?"

"So were they. I'm eighth generation Peck in policing," she mused. "But. They were arrested for conspiracy charges, cover ups, the sort of stuff they make TV shows about." Gail reached over for more bread. "Holly told you not to ask about Toronto, huh?"

Only Drew had the tenacity to answer. "She said it was touchy. She didn't mention the, er ... "

"The part where I turned my family in, yeah, generally it's a conversation stopper." Gail shrugged.

Maya sighed. "I'm sorry. That was ... inconsiderate."

But Dieter shook his head. "I wish you'd warned us, Holly."

"It's not my story to tell, Dad," sighed Holly, giving Gail an apologetic look.

"It's fine," insisted Gail, actually smiling. A little sadly, but she was indeed smiling. "It's been a couple years."

"Years." Maya looked surprised. "Holly, I'd adopt her as one of our strays if you weren't dating her."

Holly smiled and looked at Gail fondly. "That would be awkward."

But maybe the rest of her parents' visit wouldn't be.

Yawning, Gail woke up in the middle of the afternoon, feeling thick headed and heavy limbed. Napping was so tricky. You had to sleep just enough to get to where you could stay up until your normal sleep time and then sleep through the night. She was bad at sleeping. Or she had been bad at sleeping. Now, once she'd moved to Vancouver, she'd gotten better.

There was a noise downstairs and Gail sat up, suddenly clear minded and wide awake. Easing out of bed, she crept over to her closet and pushed the door open. Her gun safe was tucked in by her shoe collection, and she opened it as quietly as possible.

"Damn it," said the voice downstairs and Gail relaxed. Holly. Who was supposed to be out with her parents. Gail closed the gun safe and went downstairs.

In her kitchen, doing her dishes, was her girlfriend. "Hey," she greeted from the stairs.

Holly jumped out of her skin. Gail had actually never seen that happen before and smothered a laugh. "Jesus! Shit!"

Shaking her head, Gail padded barefoot over to her kitchen and got a glass of water. "Not that I'm unhappy, but ... Why are you here? Aren't you supposed to be shopping with your mom?"
"Yes," breathed Holly, pressing a hand to her heart. "Why are you home?"

Gail blinked. "Uh. This is my house, you nerd." Her eyes drifted to her kitchen table where a bag was seated. "Oh, you snuck in to give me presents!"

Getting in between Gail and the table, Holly wrapped her arms around Gail's waist. "No peeking!"

"Is this because you missed my birthday?" Gail craned her neck to read the bag. It was a plain one, no labels.

"Yes, and stop peeking. It's wrapped anyway."

Pouting, Gail stopped and studied her girlfriend's face. "You know I hate surprises."

"It's a present," sighed Holly and she kissed Gail. "Why are you home?"

"Because I was out all night for work?" Gail tilted her head. At the end of the dinner with Holly's parents, she'd gotten called about the counterfeiter case.

"Oh," frowned Holly. "Is that what that was?"

"Yes, that thing I do for work." Gail wormed her way free. "Let me deduce." Holly rolled her eyes but said nothing. "You and your mom got me a present. And she wanted to rest after a hard day shopping before your dinner, which I'm now invited to I see. She feels guilty about the whole parent thing last night?" At Holly's nod, she went on. "And you, who do not need a nap, came here to leave my present for me, thinking I'd be at work all day and... Oooooh is it a dildo?"

Blinking a few times, Holly burst out laughing. "What?"

"Dildo? Something for just us to play with when we get back from dinner?"

Her girlfriend kept laughing. "It's a dress, you goof," she wheezed. "Really? You think I bought a dildo with my mother?"

Gail huffed. "I don't know. Your parents are all free love hippies!"

Cupping Gail's face, Holly kissed her in that toe curling way that stopped Gail from thinking about anything at all. Soft, tender, gentle, and inspiring. It was a moment that made Gail understand why Paris kidnapped Helen and why Menelaus launched a thousand ships to bring her back. She knew why Odysseus would do anything to get back to Penelope. It was something beyond simple beauty.

Her eyes closed without Gail even noticing. She didn't realize her hands were gripping Holly's waist until her girlfriend drew a sharp breath. Gail's fingers had found the small of Holly's back, under her shirt.

"Hey," sighed Holly, her voice light and high. "We don't have to be at dinner until seven."

Opening her eyes, Gail smiled. "I'm done with my case," she replied, running her thumb along the top of Holly's pants.

Warm brown hands moved into her hair, pushing it back and out of the way to kiss again. "Good." She started to nudge Gail backwards towards the stairs.

They did make it to the dinner with time to spare, Gail wearing her new dress and her hair swept
back. She'd made Holly go home and change and then come back and pick her up, which Holly said was ridiculous. There was no way Holly was going to drive an extra thirty minutes just to pick Gail up. Then she'd texted Holly a photo of herself in the dress, and Holly promised she was on her way.

The real point was, with Holly as her ride, they'd have to come back to Gail's. And that meant Holly would probably stay the night. Those were Gail's favorite nights, the ones where Holly stayed over. She loved waking up with her in the house, with her in the bed, with her in Gail's arms.

Gail wanted that every day, every morning, every evening.

At work the next day, she filed her last report and then turned to Juliet. "Hey, coffee?"

Juliet didn't look up but replied, "Muffin?"

"We haven't fake kissed for over a year, Jules. Give up." But Gail grinned and got up. "I'm buying."

"Ooooh, something's on your mind." Juliet grabbed her purse and followed Gail out and down to the tiny coffee shop they frequented.

In so far as partners went, Gail was actually fond of Juliet. The undercover spy knew who she was and didn't shy from hard choices. She was like a non-annoying version of Chloe. "Okay, so Nick moved in with you right when he moved out here, right?"

Juliet blinked. "Geeze, you never beat around the bush, do you?"

"Waste of time."

Her partner smiled. "That's why I like you so much," Juliet laughed. "You're thinking of asking Holly to move in before you finish the downstairs bathroom?"

Gail's downstairs bathroom currently had no sink. "She can help. She's a hands on lesbian."

"Romantic. Move in with me and help me finish my home repair." Juliet rolled her eyes. "What's holding you back? Need to rip out a toilet to be sure you appeal to her home repair skills?"

She punched Juliet's shoulder and picked up their coffee. "Bran muffins? Bran? You're disgusting."

Juliet stuck out her tongue. "We can't all eat sugar 24/7 and stay fit."

Smiling, Gail sat at a table. "How'd you know Nick would say yes?"

"Uh, well he's a dude. They're stupid and simple and uncomplicated." So true, realized Gail with a sigh. Then Juliet cleared her throat. "You're afraid Holly won't say yes."

Gail nodded. "Terrified. We've only been going out a few months."

Juliet frowned. "You messed up already, Peck. Second date is the U-Haul rental."

Groaning, Gail shook her head. "Why am I talking to you about this?"

"I'm your only girl friend," smiled Juliet. Then she faltered. "I mean friend that's a girl... I mean..." Deadpan. Gail kept her face perfectly still as Juliet turned pink. "You are," she sighed. "I mean,
Holly doesn't count since I'm sleeping with her."

"You suck," laughed Juliet. "And you're supposed to marry your best friend, Gail."

Oh. "No wonder it never worked out with Nick."

Smiling, Juliet sipped her coffee. "The penis probably didn't help either."

"Not his," smirked Gail.

Juliet paused for a moment and then laughed. "She's crazy about you, Gail." The woman smiled. "She’s the smartest person I know. She's going to say yes."

You really never could tell from the inside. Gail thought it was the case, that Holly was in love with her. But when someone out there saw it too. "Okay," she exhaled. "Do I try to make it romantic?"

"Do you know how to do that?" Juliet sounded sincere, not like she was teasing. "Holly's not the flowers and Barry White kind of girl."

"Barry White? Nick used Barry White? See, this is explaining everything wrong with him," snarled Gail. They both laughed though.

She waited until Holly's parents and brother had gone home. It seemed like the kind of thing you didn't spring on a girl with her parents around. Not that Gail could claim a whole lot of familiarity with the idea of what one's family might or might not worry about.

The thing was, Juliet was right. Holly was not a flowers and romantic music kind of girl. She was a scientist who loved art. She thought sports were fun to watch. She liked running and swimming. Dancing. And Gail. She liked Gail.

That was promising, right?

So asking Holly to move in should be easy. You make a nice dinner, you get a nice bottle of wine, you compliment her, and you ask her to move in. Simple, right? "Move in with me," Gail said to herself, and made a face. She sounded 'cool' which really sounded totally dorky and stupid. "Holly, I love you. We should live together." Ugh! No, she wanted Holly to move in with her, she had to say the 'with me' bit.

And none of that sounded romantic. It sounded dorky and awkward. Was it hard for men? They had always done the asking in her life. There had never been asking with Holly. They had known each other, understood each other. They were on the same page and wanted the same thing at the same time. It didn't matter if it was sex or dinner or whatever, they knew. They wanted. They got.

This was the first time Gail felt that maybe, just maybe, they weren't on the same page.

Her front door opened and her girlfriend hooted a greeting. "It's snowing. I thought it never snowed here." Holly stomped and shook herself. "I actually think I missed bodies under snowdrifts," she mused.

Gail looked over and smiled. "Only you," she shook her head.

"Hey," huffed Holly, shaking her coat off. "You look all lost in your cloud. Catch a good case?"

"Nothing entertaining," Gail tossed the dish towel over her shoulder. "I'm not good at romance, Holly."
Holly blinked. "Luckily I think romance is a modern contrivance based on money and media?"
Her girlfriend kissed her cheek and opened the fridge for a beer.

Gail smiled, the worried feeling fading. Holly was like her. Holly loved things that were weird, devious, abnormal. Holly hated normal. Holly barely tolerated perpetually happy people like Chloe, and preferred realistic optimism. Holly loved her. "Stay here," she said, leaning on her counter.

The brunette looked surprised. "What?"

"Stay here. With me."

"I was planning to," grinned Holly. "I mean, have you seen the snow? No way would I try driving home in this."

Gail shook her head. "No, I mean always." She was saying it all wrong, but that weirdly felt okay. "Don't go home. Be home."

Brown eyes stared at her, wide and a little confused. "Be home?"

Why was this so hard? "Here. Be home here."

"Gail, honey, I already feel like this is home."

Frowning, Gail looked at her hands. Okay no, this wasn't going well. This wasn't going anywhere near her plans. "I mean this should be your home. Our home."


"Yes? I mean, you're pretty much always here. And I like you. I like you here. I want... I want you here. In the morning and the night and... Okay, I suck at this," whined Gail at length.

Holly put the beer down and picked up her hands. "Start over," she said quietly, rubbing her thumbs over the backs of Gail's hands.

"I... Where?" Gail stared at the hands on hers.

Looking at their hands, Holly suggested, "Start with the simple part. You say 'Holly, I want you to move in with me.'"

Gail swallowed. "What will you say?"

"Gail. Look at me," said Holly quietly.

It was frightening, this new and unsteady ground. She swallowed and looked up. Holly was smiling at her. "I don't know what I'm doing here," whispered Gail, feeling the terror claw at her.

Holly shook her head. "Yes, Gail."

She blinked. "Yes?"

"I'm going to say yes," smiled Holly, her voice serious. "I'm going to say yes, Gail. I will move in with you and live here with you." She squeezed Gail's hands and leaned in. "I want to live with you."

Sucking her lower lip between her teeth, Gail nodded. "I want you to move in with me," she
whispered. "You... You should move in with me." Holly quirked that smile and Gail breathed.
"Holly. Will you move in with me?"

Holly tilted her head and kissed Gail softly. "Yes," she replied, as promised. Yes.
Hero

Chapter Notes

Gail and Holly have worked it out, but Toronto is a different matter. There are things left unresolved and leaving those out there only ends in pain. So what would bring Gail back to Toronto? Come on, you know this one.

Warning. Talk about rape happens in this chapter. None happens actively.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first dead girl that spring gave Gail Peck a horrible feeling in her gut.

It was a blonde, which was crazy common, but the dress and the hair bothered her. The hair looked like she used to wear her hair, just after the drunken attack with Holly's scissors in a bathroom years ago. Was that really years? Her hair was back to the length it had been when she'd graduated the Academy, though undyed. She'd had to cut it short again to get the brown out.

The dead woman had the pixie cut Gail found familiar. She'd once sported it, suffered through as it grew out, after loosing her mind in Holly's bathroom. And it was bleached blond, just like she used to do. She ran a hand through her naturally red-blonde with hints of brown hair.

"Any ID?" Gail's partner, Juliet Ward, stood by the body, frowning.

"No, but her breasts are silicone, so I should be able to get an ID off them." Gail's girlfriend, Dr. Holly Stewart, was also by the body.

Gail stayed by the tape. She swallowed thickly and spoke up, "Check her neck."

Tilting her head, Holly didn't question the remark and squatted, looking at the neck carefully. "Injection site." Holly looked up at Gail, eyes dark and concerned.

Juliet swiveled and stared at Gail. "What the hell? You psychic?"

The coroner shook her head. "No such thing." But she did frown a little. Holly was smart and was probably putting things together right away.

It made Gail feel a little better, momentarily to be right. That always felt good. "She's probably been beaten. Maybe assaulted. But she would have been treated." Taking a deep breath, Gail turned and walked back to the car. "You're doing the autopsy, Ward."

"Sure..." Juliet sounds skeptical and confused. Even before Gail and Holly were going out, even before Holly had moved to Vancouver, Gail did the majority of the autopsies for their partnership. She was simply better at them than most detectives. Gail was incredibly better than most cops. She liked the quietness of the morgue and the simplicity of cause and effect.

This. This she couldn't be there to watch. Not unless she had to. Copycats. Fucking copycats. Or maybe it wasn't that rare to kill blonde sex workers. People loved blondes. Blondes went for higher rates. "Ketamine. Look for ketamine on your blood work."

What she wanted to do right now was drive the hell away. Drive hours and avoid everything. That
would be a bad idea right now. Pulling out her phone, Gail texted her therapist and made an appointment for the next day. The two options she had were that she was over reacting or she had a copycat. Either way she would need to unload.

Instead of driving off, Gail got in the passenger side and closed her eyes. Breath in and breath out. Breath in, two, three. Breath out, two, three.

The car door opened and Juliet sighed. "You need anything?"

That was code for if Gail wanted to talk about it. And that answer was no. Not at all. Not once. Not ever. "No," she took another breath.

"Okay."

She didn't have to say anything. Juliet would ask, she wouldn't press. And yet. Gail had to have a relationship with her partner. They had to trust. The one thing being a Peck had never prepared her for was what she needed most right now. So Gail took a deep breath. "Three years before I met you, I was kidnapped by a deranged taxi driver who took blonde prostitutes, shot 'em up with ketamine, fixed 'em up if they were hurt, raped 'em once they were better, killed and dumped them."

Juliet started the car. "Yeah, you stay the hell away from the autopsy."

"Thank you," sighed Gail, buckling in.

"Just for the record, we go after drug dealers who slit throats? You take it."

Gail opened her eyes and looked at Juliet's profile. "You got it."

She didn't want to know what Juliet's bad case was, but she'd known her partner had gone undercover a few times with drug lords. And Gail remembered the day, back when they'd been undercover together, that one of their drug running cohorts had threatened a mark with a switchblade. It had been Juliet who woke up shouting that night, hands flying to her neck.

Gail didn't ask then. She made a pot of coffee and sat next to the woman, turning on a bad movie, and they stayed up the rest of the night. Because everyone who had been undercover had a story like that. Everyone had nearly died, or felt like they did. Everyone had scars. It wasn't to be asked, it was to be shared if and only if the other person was ready. No. Gail did not ask then and Juliet did not ask now.

The drive was silent until they pulled into their lot. "I wasn't kidnapped," Juliet noted. "I was just held hostage."

"Works out about the same," mused Gail.

"Sitting in the dark, waiting." They shared a nod.

"But we walked away, right? That's the thing. We walked away and we came back and we're here."

"Sounds like something a therapist said."

Gail snorted. "She'll probably say it again tomorrow."

Juliet nodded. "Good. I was going to ask... You going to be okay? I don't have to do the autopsy if that's gonna all be too close... Hell, we can toss the case over."
It was a good question. Gail sighed. "If it's related, you need me. If it's not, I'll be fine."

"Why... Why do you think it might be related?"

She got out of the car. "He had a copy cat once. Ask Nick. He remembers."

Gail certainly remembered. How do you forget being strapped to a table for hours? Could someone set aside memories of being drugged to the point where you couldn't tell the difference between reality and hallucination? She doubted there would be a year or even a week where that horrible night didn't settle around her and remind her how dangerous her life was.

No. No, she would never forget Ross Perik.

As soon as she asked Nick, Juliet regretted it. Her boyfriend's face lost the smile he nearly always wore. He looked like when he'd learned she was in IA. His face went slack and then tight. "Why? Why are you asking that?"

She sighed. "We have a case that matches the same methods."

"We." Nick swallowed. "You mean you and Gail? Jesus... Are you ... Is it the same? The same MO?"

"Ketamine mixture, healed bruises." And the rest. It was nearly something Sex Crimes was going to take over when Gail spoke up. "And yes. Me and Gail."

The day had not gone well after the morning's discovery. Seven dead women across the country, all matching the profile. Everywhere, including Ontario. Hayes had blown a gasket, not at Gail but at the Mounties who were supposed to handle this sort of thing. They, of course, brought a dandy in and their case was being combed over.

Holly had been the coroner on record, so she was stuck for hours working on the case, rushing as much as possible to get an ID. The dead woman was Kara Spencer, aka Destiny, an escort who spoke four languages and according to her Madame, Helen White, didn't put out. At the interview with the Madame, Gail had been silent until the end.

As Madame Helen stood up to leave, Gail asked, without looking at her, if people knew Destiny was a lesbian. The Madame had startled, but admitted most people did know. Since there was no sex involved, however, it hardly mattered to business.

The Mounties started background checks on all the dead women. Not all were lesbians, just the ones in the past two years.

It was days like this that Juliet hated her job.

Nick exhaled loudly. "Are you okay?"

Nodding, Juliet stepped into his chest and was relieved that Nick wrapped his arms around her. She needed his solidity, his stability. "I'm okay. I have no idea how Gail's not a fucking mess."

"She's strong," he murmured into her hair.

"That's what scares me."

How strong did you have to be to take everything that life threw at you when life threw a damned serial killer?
Later that night, Juliet texted Holly just to check in on things. She couldn't ask Gail if she was alright, not directly. The text was replied to within minutes.

We're okay.

We. It was good that Holly had moved in with Gail. It was good Gail wasn't alone. Holly had a remarkable ability to get Gail's head out of her ass and actually deal with things. Juliet hesitated and tapped a reply.

If you need anything, anytime. Call.

This time, Holly's reply was fairly prompt.

She ripped out the downstairs toilet and is currently cursing at the new one.

That sounded like Gail, smiled Juliet.

Don't let her deflect all night.

And this reply was right away, complete with a photo of Gail lying under the toilet with a wrench.

Just letting her wear herself out first.

Juliet laughed.

There are more fun ways to do that, Doc.

The only reply to that was some vaguely offensive emoji.

The next day, Gail was already at the building by seven and looked hungover, except without the fun part first. "Jesus, Peck. Did you get any sleep?"

"Nope," muttered Gail. "Got a connection."

It took Juliet a minute to realize Gail meant the case. "Seriously? You stayed up all night going over the case?"

"No, I was up anyway. Figured I might as well do something useful."

"Useful." Juliet shook her head and counted the coffee cups. "Did you eat anything?"

"Kind of, Holly plied me with a granola bar."

Juliet scowled. "Come on, you need a break from caffeine. Get up."

Gail hesitated and then nodded, getting up. "Yeah. Yeah I do." She swept the paper cups into the garbage and followed Juliet down and out to a nearby restaurant.

It wasn't Sunday but it was the same idea. Juliet pulled her crossword book out and sat down, starting to fill in various answers. They ordered food, Gail sticking with bland oatmeal and fruit, which told Juliet far more about her partner's status than anything else.

She'd read up on the case that night too, so she couldn't say Gail was the only one obsessing over it. Once the tea came (Gail's was decaf herbal, something Juliet was always surprised to see she liked), Juliet asked, "You want to talk about it?"

Gail shook her head, but added lemon to the tea as she replied, "He didn't rape me. We screwed
up his timetable."

Juliet stared at Gail. She hadn't asked that. She hadn't wanted to. "I didn't read your case."

"Everyone else has," sighed Gail.

"I'm not everyone else, Gail. I'm your partner."

The blonde smiled thinly. "Yeah." She sighed. "Why didn't you ask that?"

Juliet screwed her face up. "People seriously ask?"

"Everyone always wants to know that. How screwed up am I, kinda thing. The only person who didn't ask was Holly."

"Does she know?"

Gail nodded. "Everything."

Nodding back, Juliet wondered, "Does it help? Telling her about it?"

"I don't know... But there are nights, like last night, where I'm just not... You know, I'm not all here? Because I'm there?"

God. Yes. Juliet exhaled shakily. "But you have Holly now."

There was a soft smile on Gail's face. "I do," she agreed.

"And you had... Nick before?" The smile went away. Okay. Now she had to ask, because there were things that Juliet should tell him. "How... How did Nick take it?"

"He was there," she shrugged. "But we never talked about it. Oughta say a lot, huh?"

It did. It said nearly everything. "I want to tell him. And I don't. I mean, it was terrifying and it was four hours and they got the guy."

Gail studied her face and then did something that was rare. She opened up. "It wasn't him, Jules. It's me. Isn't... I don't talk about it. I still feel lucky as hell that Perik didn't like his women to be banged up." She swirled the sugar into her tea. "About a month before I met Holly, that's when we had his copy cat. I went and talked to Perik in prison."

That was the part of the story Nick told her. The part where he found out Gail cheated on him. From Nick's perspective, the stories were dark and daunting. He'd been there when Gail was rescued, thinking she'd need him, but all she did was close him out. And then when she'd taken the hit for the death of a prisoner, he'd left.

Nick admitted he'd been a terrible boyfriend for Gail, more concerned with himself and feeling wanted than what she really needed. It made him a better boyfriend now, but it had only cemented what Gail had told Juliet about being raised by the Pecks. No one was trustworthy. No one was reliable.

Except.

That wasn't what Gail was like in Vancouver. That wasn't what Gail was like with Holly. That wasn't the Gail that Juliet knew. Her Gail was bitter and jaded and cynical. But she wasn't as defensive.
"I was undercover, as a dealer. There was a little using." Juliet twisted the empty packet of sugar in her hands.


"I had a drop, my contact, and they caught us talking. In his car. They shot him right then. I actually ... Sometimes I feel his brains all over my face. When it's muddy or that time we did paintball? It's ..." Juliet waved a hand. "Anyway. They dragged me out and jammed a knife under my chin." She stopped, remembering the feeling of the cold metal and the sound of the shouts. They screamed at her, threatening her. Was she a cop?

With a sigh, Gail touched her forehead almost absently, like she wasn't sure she was doing it. "Jerry. Traci's fiancé. He found me. But he got stabbed. Died... I watched him, saw him bleeding out on the floor."

Knowing her partner knew death like that made is easier. "They were real pissed off I was a cop." Juliet arched an eyebrow.

Gail nodded. "Oh yeah, he was terrified when he found out, said I should have told him."

"What a sick fuck," muttered Juliet and Gail laughed.

"They all are," the blonde pointed out. "He tossed me in the trunk of his taxi. I'm not real fond on small spaces."

Juliet shuddered. "You know, everything you've told me about your parents, I get the feeling they would have locked you in a closet to help you get over it." When Gail didn't reply, looking at her tea, Juliet felt herself shudder. "Are you fucking joking?"

"I was in my twenties, it's not child abuse." She shrugged.

"Jesus. You should have put them in jail years ago."

Gail smiled. "Yeah. Well. Then you wouldn't have met me."

"I think you mean Nick," teased Juliet. "Unless you're suggesting you and me and Holly."

"Nah, she kisses better."

The angst of their similar(ish) trauma faded with the joking banter. But. "Do you really think it's a copycat?"

"I'm thinking we found the first fresh death," sighed Gail. "The timetable is ... We have three cases out here that match the profile. Oldest body dates to when Perik came back from Doctors Abroad."

Juliet stared. "That was ten years ago."

"Yeah. And Perik didn't do it then and he didn't do this now."

"What?" Juliet swallowed the fear the jumped into her heart. She knew what Gail said, what she meant, and what it meant. "Perik is the apprentice?"

Gail nodded. "Looks like. MO is similar, but the ..." She pushed her hair out of her face and touched her forehead. "He did the butterfly sutures, Perik did." She was referring to the little x scar on her forehead. It used to just be a faint line, something you could barely see in the sun.
Their idiot with a rifle had made it an x.

"Kara didn't have the same level of care."

"She did not," confirmed Gail. "None of them did. Until Toronto."

Juliet shuddered. "Someone taught him how to do this."

"Everyone but Kara's been dead longer than I've lived out here." She sipped her tea. "Someone taught him how to do it, and now he's back."

There was a balance to being a girlfriend and a coworker that Holly found hard. She had never planned to work in the same building as Gail, she'd never planned to fall back into a relationship. But here she was, living with Gail, working with Gail, and most definitely in a relationship with Gail that crossed all the lines she'd always invented for herself.

And there was one more line to be crossed. One Holly had never imagined was even there. She'd never really thought about the idea of Ross Perik coming back into Gail's life as more than a memory, after all. He was in jail. He was locked away, waiting for his own death. He was going to die alone in a cell.

Except before that could happen, before it could be more than a passing thought, Holly found herself and Gail being called into a room with four Mounties and a stack of papers. Files.

"I like it better when you ask me to come into a room with a file," muttered Gail, defusing some tension.

One of the Mounties, an officer with grey hair and authority, jerked his chin. "I'll take care of it." The others nodded, leaving them alone. "You were right," said the man. "It's not an apprentice. It's older." The officer sat down. "Fourteen dead women and counting. They go back eleven years, to when Perik came back from Somalia."

Holly frowned. "And the last three have been in the last eighteen months. Unless someone let Perik out, he didn't do this."

The officer nodded. "He didn't. But the last three were lesbians. And two were in Vancouver. Which means someone who knows his MO knows Peck, and knows she's here."

Gail stiffened. "So ... Toronto to hide me?"

"Hardly. Toronto to pick his brain."

The detective sighed. "Oh. You want me to talk to him."

That was not something Holly liked at all. "But we already know the MO matches the early killings. The drug mixture isn't as precise and exact as Perik, more rough. It's a doctor, but someone who isn't as educated."

The Mountie waved his hand. "Which means it's probably someone he met before he lost his license and came back. Do you know why he lost his license?"

"Unauthorized treatments," replied Gail, her voice flat and dull.

"He was working under another doctor, Richard Ford. From Alabama in the States. He lost his license and dropped off the radar."
Holly cleared her throat. "By unauthorized treatments, you mean he killed them. After he..." She trailed off. The Mountie nodded. "And they lost him?"

"The actual nature of the crimes didn't come to light until after Perik was arrested," Gail said, as if by rote. She crossed her arms. "Why me? If Ford vanished, why would Perik have any information?"

"Because the body they found in Toronto last night." He put a photo down. It wasn't a blonde. The woman had reddish blonde hair, just like Gail. The cut was very close to the style Gail had now. "Perik's obsessed with you," he explained. "This killer. He's close to Perik. Enough to know and care what you look like, Peck."

Picking up the photo, Holly frowned. "The dye and cut were done post mortem." There was a sound of surprise from the Mountie and amusement from Gail. Holly glanced up and saw her girlfriend smiling. "The dye on the scalp didn't set in the way it would on live flesh. He probably did this and washed the body, so no trace evidence except soap. Who's doing the autopsy?"

"You," said the Mountie.

Holly blinked. "Me?" She turned to look at Gail.

Taking Holly's hand, Gail cleared her throat. "We're living together," Gail said to the Mountie. The officer looked unsurprised. "We know."

"Okay. Because you just said you want us to go to Toronto." Gail gestured at Holly and then herself. "And you just asked my girlfriend to do an autopsy on a woman who looks like me, and was killed as a calling card to get my attention. There's so much wrong with this..."

"It's not optimal," agreed the Mountie. "However Dr. Stewart was the only one to notice the medical treatment was different. And she was the one who identified it was the same as the original murders, which you tracked down. As unpleasant as this is, you're the pair we need to send."

Gail frowned. "What if I say no?"

"Gail," sighed Holly. She couldn't say no. Neither of them could.

"No. No. You don't have to do this. Pearson is a great coroner-medical examiner. He did a great job taking over after you left. And Traci is a damn detective sergeant. So they don't need us. They want us."

The blonde was at her most stubborn. She was hurt and angry and scared and she was shutting herself down. Holly squeezed Gail's hand. "They do, you're right."

Gail shook her head and tugged her hand free. "You want me to go back to Toronto, where they hate me, to question a serial killer who has a sick fascination with me?"

At least the Mountie looked chagrined. "She makes it sound like we're assholes."

"You kinda are," shrugged Holly.

"Thank you," grumbled Gail, getting up. "Why? Why me?"

The Mountie sighed. "And not a profiler?"
"For starters." Gail was pacing.

"Because it's not a profiler we need. It's a serial killer and the only survivor happens to be a detective. You know him."

Gail's voice was dry and angry. "I wouldn't call eight hours of being strapped to a table and drugged a shortcut to knowing anyone." She shook her head. "No."

As Gail went for the door, Holly stayed the Mountie with a hand gesture. She waited for the door to slam shut. "How many other people have you sent to talk to Perik?"

"Four," sighed the Mountie. "He won't talk to any of them. He just sits in the room and waits."

Holly nodded. "I'm not going to make her do it. She has to want to on her own." She stood up and walked to the door. Gail was waiting halfway down the hall, pacing. "Hey," she said softly.

"I'm pissed," the blonde grumbled as she stomped up to Holly, pivoted, and stomped back down the hall.

Sitting on a bench, Holly watched her girlfriend thud up and down the hall. "You don't have to go. You know that."

Gail stopped walking, standing in front of Holly. "Yes I do."

"Honey, every reason everyone wants you to do this is just an excuse. Anyone can talk to him and solve this case."

The blonde shook her head. "God, I wish that was true. I know this sick bastard, Holl. He won't talk to anyone else. He's a control freak. He knows about me now. Holly, I don't want that fucker or his mentor anywhere near you, okay? So no. You're going. I know you are, and I'm going with you."

Taking Gail's hands, Holly leaned into her personal space. "If you don't want me to go, there are hundreds of other medical examiners-"

"Holly." Gail leaned in and rested her forehead against Holly's. "I don't want to go. I don't want you to go. I don't want to have to go. I want to lock you up in a box and keep you far away from any of this." Her voice got quieter. "I want this never to have happened."

Holly sighed. "I can't make that go away."

"That's the thing," whispered Gail. "If it goes away, then I don't meet you. I don't break up with Nick, I don't ... I don't get to be here." The hands in hers squeezed tighter and Holly smiled.

"I'm here too," she reminded Gail.

Gail nodded. "I know."

"I'll be with you the whole time."

"Shit," muttered the blonde. "I really don't want to go to Toronto. God, I'm going to have to work with Price and McNally."

"And the truth comes out," laughed Holly softly.

Making a face, Gail stepped back and held one hand. "You suck. You know that, right?"
Smiling, Holly walked down the hall with Gail. "I do. But we suck less together."

Without thinking, Gail walked to the door expecting to be buzzed in. "Whoa, ma'am, I'm sorry, I need to see your ID before you can come in."

She turned and blinked at the puppy at the desk. "Rookies," she muttered and pulled out her badge. "Detective Gail Peck, Dr. Holly Stewart. We're from Vancouver… supposed to meet Sgt. Nash."

"Man you're a Peck?" The rookie was delighted and practically vibrating as he took the badge and tapped into the computer. "Wow! You're the Peck! Holy shit! Uh yes, ma'am! I'm sorry, ma'am. Here." He thrust the badge back and looked like it was Christmas.

The door buzzed and Gail pushed it open, eyeing Holly curiously. "I have no idea," murmured Holly as she walked in, wheeling her luggage behind her. What the hell did 'the' Peck mean?

But they both heard the rookie hiss at someone else that the blonde was 'the' Peck. And Gail found herself being watched by four wide-eyed rookies. "Yeah, this is weird," she muttered to Holly. "Come on. Guns and Gangs is upstairs."

"We should see Oliver first," cautioned Holly, pointing over at the office.

A young man Gail remembered popped up. "Officer— Detective Peck! You're really here!"

"Fox?" There was no tie on the rookie. Her rookie. Her ex-rookie. But it had been two, almost three years. Of course he was cut loose. "Is, uh, Sgt. Shaw around? We're early but—"

"Yes ma'am! Hang on, I'll get him!" He bounced, looked like he was about to hug Gail, and then dashed off down the hall.

The rookies were still watching them. Gail frowned and arched an eyebrow. The rookies shoved one of their lot forward, a young woman. "Uh— Um, excuse me, ma'am. But.. You're Gail Peck?"

Gail glanced at Holly. "Yes."

"Fox's TO?"

"I was, yes," frowned Gail, not following this.

"Wow… I … It's a— I never thought I'd— I mean, you're a legend." And the girl stuck a hand out. "It's— It's such an honor to meet you."

The eyes on her clicked a memory. That was hero worship. What the hell? Gail had never been the recipient of hero worship. At a nudge from Holly, Gail took the hand and shook it, sure the rookie was about to pass out. "If you say so," demurred Gail, still confused.

"Okay, rookies! Stop harassing my Peck!" The cheerful voice of Oliver Shaw echoed and the room went silent.

Here it came. The hate.

"Gail!" No… that was the delighted squeal of Chloe Price. Chloe, who shoved her cuffed perp into Andy's arms and ran over to throw her arms around Gail's neck. "Oh my god, you really came! I missed you so much!"
Gail knew her eyes were wide. It didn't help that Holly was an inch from giggling. Oliver cleared his throat, "Price, please let go of Peck before she decides to hurt you."

Giving one last squeeze, Chloe bounced and hugged Holly. "You two have to come to the Penny for drinks. Don't worry, we're buying, Gail." And Chloe hustled back over to McNally, who was looking a bit less excited.

The white-shirted Shaw smiled broadly as he came over. "My Peck." He was beaming. "Rookies! Go back to work!" The quartet scattered. "Sorry, they've been like puppies ever since they heard you were coming."

Gail frowned. "To… burn me in effigy?"

Holly smacked her arm. "Gail."

"What!? They don't —" She wanted to say they didn't like her, but frankly even Andy was looking over with an expression of intimidation and respect.

"Hello, Oliver," smiled Holly, accepting a hug from the man. "It's nice to see you again."

The man smiled. "You look good, Holly. See? Gail you can get tan in Vancouver."

"She started that way," grumbled Gail. "What the hell is going on, Ollie?"

Oliver led them to his office. "Trace will be right down. Gail… Do you talk to Steve ever?"

"Not lately," she admitted. They'd had a bit of a fight the last time she'd called him. Nothing new. He wanted her to consider talking to their parents, she wanted her parents to fuck off. Then he'd asked if she'd maybe speak up for him at a thing, and since the implication was that it was related to her parents, she'd said no. That was sounding like a mistake.

Sitting down, Oliver pulled out a file Gail recognized. It was a class information file from the academy. "We have a new special instructor. He talks about understanding orders and how to know when one's illegal."

Oh. Gail sat down, silent. That made sense, actually. Holly also looked surprised, "What has he been telling them?" Gail skimmed it and saw that Oliver had spoken up for Steve in this.

"The truth," said Traci as she came in and closed the door. "That Pecks used to rule the roost here, but they fell to corruption. And one of them was brave enough to step up and do the right thing, but it came at a cost. She lost her friends, got chased out of Toronto because no one trusted her. And it took them a couple years to realize that she'd been right all along." Traci exhaled. "Hi."

"Hi," replied Gail, looking up. "He makes it sound like I'm a hero."

Holly rested a hand on Gail's shoulder. "I keep telling you that you are," she said softly.

Gail turned to Holly. "You weren't here," she pointed out, wearily. They'd had arguments around that a few times and Gail finally held on to the simple fact that Holly hadn't been there and couldn't know objectively what had happened. After fuming, Holly finally agreed to that point.

"That doesn't mean I don't think it was brave and heroic to do the right thing," she replied. Which was her point. And Gail agreed to that.

"The point," smiled Oliver. "The point is that there is an entire division of people who feel guilty, my little Peck."
Gail looked from Holly to Oliver to Traci. "I don't like it. It's weird."

It was uncomfortable, like pants that were too tight. What had Juliet said? You can't go home again. She'd warned Gail that things would be different now, that she would feel like she didn't fit.

How right she was. Everything was off.

"How about we talk about the case," offered Holly. Gail could love her more just for that alone.

"I never thought I'd want to talk about Ross Perik more," she admitted, and pulled the files out. "But we have a serial killer, national, and the Mounties tapped me to work the case."

Traci stiffened. "So it's true."

Gail nodded. "Ross Perik was a copycat killer. And his master is still out there."

The hotel was nice. Gail had immediately fallen onto the bed while Holly wandered around. After the day going over case notes and files, Holly had ended with an autopsy prep. It was exhausting, but she felt weirdly more awake. Wired. Gail was just drained.

From the bed, Gail groaned, "Do we have painkillers?"

Holly smiled and pulled a bottle out from her purse. "Why don't you shower and we can order room service."

"Is that code for sex? I could do that." Gail propped herself up on her elbows.

"You have a headache," cautioned Holly, tossing the bottle over.

Gail popped two tablets. "Sex is good for headaches."

Holly paused. "Who told you that?"

"My hot girlfriend." Gail held her hands up to Holly, her lower lip jutting out just a little.

The pout face. It tended to make Holly do what Gail wanted. She stepped out of her shoes and took Gail's hands, letting her be pulled down into Gail's arms. They lay on the bed, feet dangling off the end for a while. It had been a long day going over the files and confirming everything they'd suspected. The autopsy would be tomorrow. Gail would interview Perik tomorrow. They would try and find the mentor tomorrow.

Tonight though was one more night where they could be friends and families and lovers. Where they didn't have to consider the oppressive weight of life and death and the horrors out there.

Holly caressed Gail's face. "Want to know what I think?"

"Cheese puffs, champagne, and sex?"

Smiling, Holly kissed her cheek. "I think you should wash your face, brush your hair, and we can meet Traci for dinner." Gail frowned. "Or."

"I like or already," noted the blonde.

"Or we can order in. Room service. Shower. Get in our jammies and watch some Netflix." Holly gently kissed Gail's cheek, her nose, and then her lips. "And sex. Either way." She kissed Gail
again, letting herself melt into the comfort of kissing.

They stopped when the room's phone rang. "That's Traci," sighed Gail.

"I know." She kissed her again and got up, answering the phone. "Hello?" The front desk explained that there were police here to see them. "Yes, I work with the police," laughed Holly. "Tell them we'll be down in five."

Gail propped herself up on her elbows. "I don't remember agreeing to that."

"With your lack of opinion besides sex, I made a choice for us," smiled Holly. "Come on. I'm hungry. You're hungry. Traci's buying."

Like the drama queen she could be, Gail dragged herself up and over to bathroom. By the time they met up downstairs, though, she was in a somewhat more agreeable mood. And the dinner was alright. It was just Traci and Oliver, two people Gail tolerated more than anyone else, and they were happy to talk about simple things.

Oliver wanted to know about Holly moving to Vancouver. Traci quickly sussed out they were dating and wanted to know about that. They both asked about Juliet and Nick in round about ways. And they caught Gail up on gossip. Like how Chris was still sober. Andy was pregnant (Gail snorted at that). Luke Callaghan had showed back up to run homicide, much to Sam's annoyance (Gail had laughed, unkindly, at that one). Chloe and Dov were still together. Duncan had finally gotten his shit together over at TwentySeven.

But they didn't talk about Pecks. They didn't talk about cases. They talked about Leo and Izzy, sports and music. They talked about normal things that everyone else talked about. The weather, the lack of snow in Vancouver, was something that made the Toronto cops wistful. The fact that Gail's house was a few miles from her nearest neighbor was interesting.

"Wait a second, Gail. You live in the sticks?" Oliver looked delighted.

"No, I just ... Not a lot of houses there, that's all."

Traci shook her head. "Doesn't it take a long time to drive to scenes?"

"Not really," shrugged Holly. "And it's nice and quiet. I like it."

"You like it," Traci smiled. "How did that happen?"

Gail sipped her coke. "I asked her."

Holly smiled and leaned into Gail's shoulder. "You did." She reached up and touched Gail's cheek, turning her head so they were facing. "You did." She kissed her softly and Gail smiled a silly, happy grin.

Shaking her head again, Traci smiled. "I can't believe you two found each other again."

"It's fate, Nash," said Oliver firmly. "Celery told me, at Frank and Noelle's wedding, that they were intertwined, gonna be together in the end."

"Wish she'd told me that," Gail sighed.

"Well. Well, Gail, where's the fun in that? It's the journey, not the ending."

Holly kept smiling. "This isn't the end of anything, Oliver. It's just the start."
"It's a good start," agreed Oliver. "You two are good?"

Nodding, Holly patted Gail's knee. "Very good."

After dinner, after showers and an argument about the hotel bed and pillows, Gail sat and watched Holly braid her hair back. "Why do you encourage my antisocial tendencies?"

"Is that what your therapist said?" Holly glanced over at her girlfriend.

Gail nodded. "I don't like shared experiences, I don't wish people things, I hate weddings and people who are all... Happy. I hate happy people."

Tying her braid, Holly crawled across the bed and sat in Gail's lap. "I know all that, honey." She looped her arms around Gail's neck. "I don't like those things either."

Screwing up her face, Gail settled her hands on Holly's waist. "Yeah but I ... I'm not a good person."

Holly kissed her. "Yes, you are. You are good and smart and brave, Gail."

Sighing, Gail leaned against the headboard, keeping Holly close against her. "This is not the right romantic time, but I love you."

Unwillingly, Holly stiffened. "What?" She leaned back and eyed Gail.

"You. I love you." Gail's fingers toyed with the hem of Holly's t-shirt. "I do. I love you. And I know, I should tell you this over a romantic dinner or something, but... I just had a dinner where you told people we were good, and ... I ... I love you. Do I need a reason?"

"No." Holly shook her head and fiddled with the soft hairs at the back of Gail's neck. "No reasons. I just... I didn't expect it." Sucking her lower lip, Holly asked, "You love me?"

Gail nodded. "Very much."

It was hard not to kiss her just then, but Holly held back. "You're doing this a lot better than when you asked me to move in," she noted.

"I had a good coach," smiled Gail, and she leaned forward to kiss Holly. "I know I was all about sex earlier, but I just want to cuddle and ... God that sounded needy."

Holly laughed and got off her girlfriend. "That's okay. You can be as needy as you want, honey." They settled into the bed and turned the lights off, the glow from the city casting a soft haze on the room. As Gail's breathing evened out, her head nestled on Holly's shoulder, Holly asked, "You know I love you too?"

"I do," replied Gail, her breath warm.

"Good."

Closing her eyes, Holly smiled and let sleep take her away.

"Hello, Ross," said Gail as she walked in to the room.

Ross Perik looked paler than the last time she'd seen him four years ago. Smaller. "Detective Peck." His eyes drifted to her badge and he frowned.
"It's funny," Gail said, not sitting down. "We never bothered to look into your life before Toronto. Our mistake. We thought a dozen dead girls here, no way was this something bigger." She turned and looked in the mirror, ostensibly at herself but also at Perik in the reflection. Gail waited until he was about to speak and then went on, keeping him off kilter. "You're a man of patterns and habits, Ross. You like things the way they are, the way they should be. The way you want them. But you learned things and improved. You don't like broken women. You want them whole so they can be scared of you with their whole being. You want them healthy." Gail turned to look at him. "Your meticulous nature. That's how we found you, you know."

The man stared at her. "You left us."

Gail tilted her head to the side. "I'm not yours, Ross."

"You left Toronto."

Bingo. "Who have you been talking to, Ross?"

"And men. You left men for women."


"Somalia."

"Somalia," repeated Gail. "Doctors Abroad in Somalia. Where no one would miss a dead whore or two."

Ross winced. "It's not... It wasn't like that. You know that."

"I know that," Gail said thoughtfully. "Because you beat me and drugged me and you would have raped and killed me, Ross. Is that how I know it?"

"You're angry," he said softly.

"Yeah, you're right I'm angry. I'm angry that we were sloppy. We screwed up. We should have had you and your master-"

"He's not my master!" Ross snapped, surging up and catching himself as the chain on his cuffs stopped him. The abrupt snap of metal threw him back down.

Gail smiled dangerously. It was the smile that made men cower and run for cover. The smile that insisted she was a bad girlfriend. "He's better than you, Ross. He's been doing this for ten years. You lasted, what, three? Too many girls, Ross. Too many in the same location. He is your master. Your better."

The prisoner stiffened. "I know, I know what you're doing."

"I'm sure you do, Ross. You're not stupid." Gail turned and walked back and forth. "Here's how I see it. He's still out there. A doctor. Who comes to see you. We're going to run the records on every single doctor who comes here, find someone who worked with Doctors Abroad, or had vaccinations matching the ones required to visit Somalia." She paused and looked at Ross. "And we will. And when we do, we will find him."

Now she waited. She took her time picking up the papers. She didn't look at the man cuffed to the table. He had the information. He had the seed of the idea. Because as much as Ross Perik loved
keeping secrets, he loved flaunting them more. Perik wanted to show off his ego and his intellect. He wanted to have an upper hand. "Linus."

Gail swallowed her smile. "Linus."

Ross whispered, "I taught him. How to care for them. How to love them."

"You mean how to rape them," she said flatly.

Slamming his hands down, Ross roared. "No! No, no. I loved them. I love you."

It was revolting. It made her skin crawl. And Gail said nothing about it. She showed nothing. She revealed nothing. "You took care of them."

Ross exhaled. "Yes!" He looked relieved. Like Gail finally understood him.

Disgustingly enough, she did. "And he taught you how to hurt them. Linus did. Linus..."

"Carter. But that's not the name he used here." Ross looked around. "I made him! I did that. I showed him how to hide, how to work here. How to ..." He trailed off. "It's me. It's my ... My ... Mine. You're mine."

Gail leaned forward. "I'm not yours, Ross."

He looked away, pained. "You left."

"Linus tell you that?" When he nodded, Gail suddenly knew what to say. "Did he tell you why?" Ross shook his head and Gail smiled. "I dismantled a crime ring, Ross. I took down corruption and deceit and lies going back a hundred years here in Toronto." She stood up straight and lowered her voice. "I destroyed them, Ross. I ripped them apart. I salted the earth so they would never grow again."

His eyes widened. "Who?"

"The Pecks, Ross. I tore down my entire family." It was something to make a serial killer looked shocked, but Gail had done it. "And when they were all gone, yes I left. I left because there was no more challenge left for me here, nothing worth staying for." She eyed him carefully. "Nothing. No one." Not even him, she implied. And she knew he understood. "But. I came back." She pursed her lips. "For Linus."

The hit was perfect. Ross cringed and looked agonized. "For me."

"No. No, anyone could talk to you, Ross," she sighed. "In there?" Gail pointed to the glass. "That cop you killed, Jerry? He had a fiancé. She'd love to tear you apart, Ross. Shred your soul, flay you, lay it bare. No, we don't need you." Gail leaned back against the glass. "We could do all this without you. But something bothered me."

Ross looked up, confused. She'd kept him off kilter this entire time. Just like she was supposed to. "What bothered you?"

"Well. You know I've left. You know I'm a lesbian. But you don't know why, or when. So obviously Linus left Kara as a message. Telling me he knew. You knew." She exhaled. "I know and inside job when I see it, Ross. Who's the guy?"

Pressing his lips together, Ross shook his head. "What do I get?"
There it was. "You seem to already know my secrets, Ross."

"True," he admitted. And then he whispered, as if his voice was caressing the word, "Holly."

Gail stiffened and felt her entire body heat up. She fought the anger, the absolute hate pounding in her veins, and tried to calm down. Keep her voice calm. Even. "What do you want?"

"How did you meet her?" Damn it, he knew he had a hit.

Shaking her head, Gail went for the door. "No." She rapped and the door clicked. Gail stepped out and let the door close on his cries for her to come back.

"What the hell?" Traci looked horrified. "He knows who Holly is?"

"Just wait," Gail replied, closing her eyes. "He knows Holly. That means his guy, his contact, knows not just cops, but staff. Did you get details on Linus?"


"Where is he now?"

"Kent Institution. Juliet's headed there now."

Kent. That was the only maximum security prison in BC. "He'll be gone," she sighed and squeezed her eyes shut tight. "It's got to be a woman."

"What?" Traci sounded stunned.

Gail opened her eyes. "Holly doesn't have any guy friends. She wouldn't tell a guy about moving to Vancouver and getting back with me."

Her old friend looked confused. "What if it was from you?"

Shaking her head, Gail pointed out a fact. "I don't have any friends. As Traci opened her mouth, Gail shook her head again. "Traci, the only people in Toronto who knew I was dating Holly again are Steve and my mother."

"Both are under surveillance."

"They'd have been noticed," agreed Gail. "Lisa knows, but she loves Holly. She'd never talk about it. She's trustworthy."

"No one in Vancouver knows?"

Well. Gail frowned at that. "Everyone in Vancouver knows."

"What if ... He would have had to know you moved out there." Traci sighed. "Someone here. Do you think, God I can't believe I'm asking this. Do you think you missed anyone in your IA work?"

Shit. It was possible. Gail blew out a breath. "Possible. Pissed someone off so much they flipped to a serial killer?" Gail smirked. "If anyone could make people that mad, I could."

Traci laughed at the morbid joke. "Okay. I'll get Noelle to look into that." They both looked back at Perik who was muttering to himself. "What about him?"

They could walk away. Leave him hanging. Gail watched him start to fidget. "He looks like he's
"going to snap any second now," she mused. "You feel up for going in?"

"Me? Gail, I ... He killed Jerry!"

"He did," she nodded. "But go in. Sit down. Ask him for the name. Don't say anything else. No matter what he says, just wait."

"Gail..."

"Traci. If we don't do this, he'll think he owns us. He'll know, no matter what, that I'll come here for him. And he can't have that. We can't give him that power."

Traci looked at Gail for a long, long moment. But in the end she nodded and went in.

Right away Perik asked for Gail. Traci shook her head and asked for the name. And waited. She waited while he said he was never going to tell her, he would never tell anyone except Gail. He would only tell Gail. He shouted her name, wailed it, screamed...

It took longer than Gail thought it would.

It took almost two hours. But Traci was a trooper. She sat and waited in silence, staring at him.

"Naomi Hilton," he said quietly. Gail felt her blood go cold. Son of a bitch.

Traci glanced back at the glass and Gail rapped her fingers on it. As soon as she walked in, she asked, "Who the fuck is Naomi Hilton?"

"She's a guard at Pine Valley Correctional," sighed Gail. "Warden, we're done. Let him stew for another ten, twenty minutes. If he asks, tell him I went back to Vancouver and was talking about how Perik was a waste of time."

Without waiting for an argument, Gail opened the door to the hallway and tilted her head at Traci. "You ... Have a plan?"

"Yeah, but it means we have to talk to someone who won't be happy to see me."

Before today, Gail would have thought that number was much higher. Should she be happy that it was so small? Somehow she didn't think so.

"How come you know where to find her?" Traci didn't argue when Gail said she knew where to go but that didn't mean she understood it either.

Gail glanced over as she pushed the door to the bar open. "Trade secrets."

Scowling, Traci trotted behind. "I'm a detective too." She stopped in her tracks when she looked at the inhabitants of the bar. They were at a lesbian bar. And at the bar was the hunched form of a long-haired brunette.

Okay, so it was that kind of trade secret.

Gail sat at the empty stool beside the woman who looked rather familiar. "Hello, Frankie."

Oh! It was that kind of trade secret. Traci quickly took the stool on the other side.

Frankie looked left and right and then groaned. "Look, can you fuckers please stop hassling me?"
"Who's hassling?" Traci was surprised but Gail looked like she expected it.

In fact, Gail pretty much accepted and deflected it. "Not my jurisdiction, Frankie," shrugged Gail. "What are you having?"

"Their tap beer. It's okay."

Gail gestured to herself. "I'll pay. Table?"

"Oh it's that kind of talk. You know, you know I don't like you, Peck." The way Frankie said the name, the bar rippled.

Looking around, Traci saw a number of people turning to stare at Gail. And the blonde shrugged again, letting it flow off her back. "Tell me something new. I said I'd pay." She pulled out her wallet and put down a small stack of bills. "Remember, I'm the Peck with a badge still." That made the crowd give her a different look. Fear.

Without seeming to look, Frankie took the stack and finished her beer. "My office," she said firmly. The bartender nodded, pouring two glasses, and Frankie got up.

"What are we doing?" Traci frowned after the former detective.

"You're playing bodyguard. I'm buying a round and paying a PI for her work," shrugged Gail, putting down money for the drinks and taking them over to the table in the corner where Frankie was making herself at home.

"PI? Is that what she is?"

"Yeah, it was part of her plea deal. You didn't follow the case?"

Traci shook her head. "They asked me to keep out of it."

"Idiots. Frankie got out light, since she just fed information. Steve got time for the bomb and some other stuff. Bibby is still in jail for murder. They can't pin a death on my parents, so they just get to be under house arrest for ... Well forever."

Her head spun. How was Gail keeping tabs on all that? Why was she? "And we're working with a known traitor because...?"

Gail snorted. "Because she knows her shit. Come on. Don't you contract out?"

"Yeah but not... I mean..." Traci frowned, getting a coke, and followed Gail. Frankie was a reminder of things in a different way than Gail had been. Where Gail rebuilt herself from the fire of her family's crash landing, Frankie had been a willing agent of the evil that had filled Toronto policing. Frankie reminded her of Steve.

The blonde seemed to navigate this world, the slightly greasy underbelly of the law, without much concern. Maybe that was from the half year she spent undercover with Juliet. Maybe it was just that Gail didn't give a damn what people saw her as, Peck or not. Maybe it was hurting Gail as much as it did Traci, but she was better at hiding it.

"You know I'm not into threesomes with straight girls," drawled Frankie, eyeing Traci unhappily.

"Neither is my girlfriend," agreed Gail.

"And how is the doc? Happy to hear you're here with your ex?"
Gail shrugged. "She asked me not to punch you." Taking her phone out, Gail tapped and handed it over.

"Naked pics? I feel like I missed that." But Frankie took the phone and frowned. "Well there's a face I haven't seen in a while."

"She's working with a serial killer."

The snark and aggressive humor washed off Frankie's face. Once a cop, always a cop it seemed. "What? She's... What?"

Gail took the phone back and swiped. Traci caught a glimpse of Perik. "Recognize him?"

"Yeah." She looked up at Gail and then Traci and back to Gail. "Yeah, I know who he is." The asshole behavior faded. Frankie leaned forward and asked, seriously, "What do you need?"

Swiping again, Gail showed a third photo. The photo of the dead girl. "Her."

"Tried looking in the mirror?" Frankie frowned. "That's fucking creepy."

"Picture her a natural brunette," suggested Traci. When both Gail and Frankie looked up, she explained. "Her eyebrows."

Gail smiled at her, pleased. "She was a sex worker."

"Is that a dig at my love life?" But Frankie had her own phone out, tapping through something. "Kathy Michaels. Goes by... Starshine. Works at the strip club out on the edge of town. She's one of my... She was one of my tipsters." Frankie frowned. "How can I help?"

"We're going to need a lot more information," sighed Gail.

Frankie gave them everything she had. And, in the end, it was good police work that did it. There was no luck, no stumbling on the right person, no more death. Traci held her breath when ETF burst in on Naomi's house, arresting her and finding a basement that clearly gave Gail a bit of a flashback. But no one was hurt.

The Mounties picked up Linus at the airport with little fanfare in Calgary. There was no evidence on him, but the trace he'd left at Naomi's was enough to connect him to the death in Toronto. His flight patterns associated him with the other deaths.

Once you had the right information, everything else often clicked into place. Everything just made sense.

Traci ran the interrogation for Linus, who was not told about Gail's presence or involvement in the case. That had been Gail's demand. If he knew she'd left Vancouver, fine, but she had family in Toronto and that would be their cover if he mentioned it. As Gail had predicted, though, Linus did not. When showed the photos of the dead girls and asked why he'd died the hair, Linus said it was a gift to his protégé.

When asked why now, Linus shrugged and said that since Ross had failed to draw his angel back, it was something he could do. It was not surprising that Linus knew they'd figured it out, his relationship with Perik. He was smart. He'd been under the radar for years. He was surprised they'd found him at all, but weirdly did not ask how. He seemed to accept that his luck was up.

Linus' life sentence in Canada wouldn't be a question. All that was really left was to argue what country got dibs. Since the United States still had the death penalty, there was no chance they'd
extradite him. Gail muttered that it was for the best, since they didn't know if there were more. How many people had Linus trained? How many were still out there?

While everyone stared at her in horror, it was Holly who mused aloud that at least the odds were that any more apprentices would lack Perik's obsession. Traci opted not to point out that they might hate Gail because she'd helped take their mentor down. After all, it had been a group effort, and Gail had not been front and center for much on purpose.

After the case was handed to the lawyers, the rounds at the Penny came from everyone to everyone. Even Frankie found herself hugged by Chloe and forced a few beers by Oliver. The gang was happy to have Gail around, happy to see her and Gail, and happy to celebrate with her. For the most part, Gail stayed in a seat beside Holly, talking when people talked to her, but not much else. Holly was far more gregarious and chatty, happy to talk about everything including how much she liked the West coast.

It took another two days to finish all the paperwork, and Traci found herself wishing Gail would stay. "Are you sure... I mean, you could come back."

Gail looked around, hitching her purse up on her shoulder. "I don't think so, Trace. I don't fit in anymore."

"Gail," she sighed.

"No, not like that," smiled Gail. "I think. I think I could fit in here. If I wanted. It's not that though."

"Then... Why? We miss you." She paused and admitted, "I miss you."

The blonde looked away. "God, don't get all sappy on me, Trace. I miss you too. Sometimes I miss Andy, but I swear if you tell her, I'm buying Leo a drum set."

Traci laughed. She looked at the evil smile on Gail's face and she laughed. "I promise."

Gail smiled. "It's... It's like a snake trying to get back into its shredded skin, Trace. I don't fit. I'm different. But. It's okay. It's really okay."

And Traci understood. "Yeah. Yeah it's okay." She hesitated and then hugged Gail close. "Please don't let the fact that you're 3000 kilometers away be an excuse not to visit, Gail."

"Four thousand five hundred."

"What?" Traci let go and eyed Gail.

"It's four thousand five hundred kilometers- look, I live with a nerd," laughed Gail.

Traci hugged her again. "You are a secret, Star Wars loving, nerd loving, geeky woman, Gail. And you're one of my best friends."

"I'm going to tell Andy you said that," teased Gail. But she hugged Traci back. "I have a plane to catch. But it goes both ways, okay? Bring Leo out. We have a ton of awesome stuff out West."

The hugs were passed around to Oliver and even Chloe before Holly and Noelle arrived to whisk Gail off to 'one last thing' and a flight home. Traci watched them leave and sighed. A comfortable arm wrapped around her shoulder. "Hard to say goodbye, isn't it?"

"I didn't think I missed her as much as I did." Traci leaned into Oliver. He was safe. Stable.
Comfortable.

"Yeah. Me too."

"I wish she’d come back."

Oliver shook his head. "She can’t, darlin’ Nash. She can’t." He squeezed her shoulders. "What do you see when you look at her?"

"My friend. The rookie I came up with. The snarky bitch I used to hang out with."

"That’s the problem, Trace. She’s not just that anymore." Oliver let go and leaned against the railing. "She’s not the Peck we knew. You know that story about the ugly duckling?" When Traci nodded, Oliver nodded back. "All she needed to be that swan was to leave the nest."

Traci frowned at Oliver but then realized he was saying the same thing Gail had, with the snake metaphor. And Traci knew what it meant. "She outgrew us."

"She did, she did," sighed Oliver. "I’m proud as hell."

When you put it that way, Traci was too.

Their one last thing before leaving Toronto was not something Noelle would have guessed. But she and Holly sat outside the office waiting. They had driven to the big building right after leaving Fifteen, watched Gail walk into the office, sat and waited. Holly pulled a small notebook out and started writing.

A few moments later, three other people named Peck walked down the hall and into the office with a suited individual and a uniformed officer.

After half an hour, Noelle blurted, "Why aren't you in there?"

Holly looked up. "I would probably say some very unkind things." She nudged her glasses up and went back to her notebook.

"Do you know what they're talking about?"

"I know what Gail wants to talk about." Holly brushed at the notebook. "But that’s her business, Noelle. I’m not about to betray her confidence."

That was fair. Noelle frowned and leaned over. "What are you doing?"

"Drawing. It calms my nerves." She held the notebook over and Noelle saw herself. "Your hair is a pain in the ass," sighed Holly, massaging her hand.

The drawing was stunning. It was just a simple sketch but Noelle thought it was better than a photograph. "That's amazing."

"Thank you," smiled Holly. "The other pages are Toronto and Gail, mostly."

"May I?" When Holly nodded, Noelle flipped through the pages. They were mostly Toronto. The Penny, Fifteen Division, a squad car. All moments and places Noelle recognized. But then there were people. Oliver laughing with a cup of coffee. He was holding the DAD mug that Gail used to steal. Chloe smiling at something.

And Gail. Gail looking pensive and frowning at a computer at Fifteen. Gail eating a meal. Gail
lost in thought. Gail, sleeping at what was probably their hotel, curled up around a pillow with shadows hiding her face. But that didn't feel embarrassingly intimate. No, that feeling was reserved for the unobtrusive sketch, barely a roughed in outline, of Gail laughing.

There was something light and free about it, something open that Noelle hadn't seen in Gail before.

Noelle blushed and handed it back. "You draw a lot from memory?"

"Gail doesn't sit still often," smiled Holly, tearing out the page with Noelle. "Here. Frank might like it."

"You know, I forget you came to our wedding."

Holly grinned sheepishly. "Gail and I stole a bottle of champagne and got drunk in the coat closet."

Laughing, Noelle carefully put the sketch in her purse. "That sounds like Gail."

"It was my idea." She shrugged. "I wanted to ... I don't know. I wanted to sit with her. She was so pretty and funny and goofy." Holly looked up. "I liked her. A lot." A pause. "I like Gail a lot. I want to be here for her."

They both looked back at the door. "But sometimes the ones we love have to do things like this on their own."

"She does," sighed Holly. "Perik was easy. He's just deranged."

Noelle leaned back and shook her head. "He's evil. I don't know what her parents are."

That was a lie. Just over two years ago, she'd heard what the Pecks thought of their daughter and Noelle had been appalled. Gail had worn a wire to her own family dinner. Twice. She'd done two dinners with just Bill and Elaine followed by a family barbecue with most of the Pecks in attendance.

They all saw her as lazy, indolent, and apparently average. She wasn't reliable. She wasn't loyal. They called her Gail the Fail. According to Gail, it had been like that her whole life. It got worse after she failed the entrance exam, and her (now deceased) godfather had to get her into the Academy. To Noelle, Gail admitted she'd thrown the exam on purpose. She'd hoped that by failing, maybe she could get out of the obligations and weight of a Peck.

Her godfather had apologized for pushing her before he died, but that was before all this happened. Gail admitted she'd wished he'd been alive still so he could maybe say something like he was proud of her in front of her parents. Because no one had ever done that. Not anyone her parents respected at least. If it hadn't been so sad, the idea would have been delightful.

That trial was the last time Gail had spoken with her parents in person. She'd seen and talked to Steve a few times, telling Noelle about each one, and the siblings apparently had come to a peace. The same was clearly not true of her parents, though.

The door slammed open and the senior Pecks stormed out, followed by the lawyer and the officer. It was another moment before Gail and Steve came out. "Well, that went better than dinner," mused Steve. He was gaunter than the last time Noelle had seen him. Haggard. Steve was exhausted and drained.

Gail sighed. "It could have been worse," she replied, and looked for Holly.
The quiet doctor smiled. "No spitting?"

"Nope." Gail reached over and Holly took her hand to stand up. "You remember Steve?"

"It's been a while." Holly shook Steve's hand. "I heard you were teaching classes at the Academy?"

Steve nodded. "Ethics and morals. I did some guest classes at some of the local universities too. How to know an immoral order. Army may even want me to speak at their officer training." He looked a little embarrassed. "Use what they gave you, huh, Garbage Pail?"

With a thin smile, Gail shrugged. "Something like that. Mom and Dad are being sued, meanwhile. Civil cases over the criminal ones. They wanted me to speak up for them. Character witness."

Holly frowned. "You said no, right?"

"I said I didn't think they'd want me to." Gail shook her head, disappointed.

Steve chimed in, "That's when they stormed out. We're blood traitors."

"They didn't really say that, did they?" Noelle wasn't sure if she was surprised or not about that. But Gail's brief nod confirmed that they did. "Gail, if you and Holly get married, take her name. Your family are idiots."

And suddenly Noelle saw the laugh that Holly had drawn. The bright, happy, full of joy expression. The smile. "No way," laughed Gail. "Where's the fun in being the last Peck standing if I'm not the Peck?"

"Long may you reign, sis," smiled Steve.

Steve did not come with them to the airport, making his goodbyes at the building and heading back to whatever he was doing to reclaim his life. As Noelle dropped the couple off, she watched Gail take Holly's hand and walk to the check-in line together. It was a small moment, something people did every day, but not something she'd seen much from Gail when she'd lived in Toronto.

It was Oliver who said Gail was a fledgling bird, finding her wings and exploring who she was. At least Noelle could take comfort in knowing that part of the person Gail became was who she'd helped make.

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Chapter End Notes

One more chapter to go. It's shorter. And no Perik. I'm intentionally leaving it a little open ended, that they did catch the master, but there could maybe be more apprentices. Leave room for a sequel, always.
Last Peck Standing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Walking back into the dining room with her paintbrush, Holly asked, "Gail, do you ever think about marriage?"

Gail looked up from staining the baseboard and squinted. "Maya called?"

Holly blushed and picked up the other brush. "She says hello."

"I like your mom," smiled Gail. "I'm nearly done on this side."

"I should catch up," Holly sighed and knelt to apply the wood stain to their new baseboard. Theirs. After getting back from Toronto, Gail had gotten a new mortgage drawn up on the house and put Holly's name on it. Her reason was that it was stupid not to, and she was in love with Holly, so there.

Holly had decided that, if it was her house too, she was going to help modernize it. The HVAC and the new on-demand water heater were her contributions so far. She wanted to do more with the electricals, but they were deemed 'good enough' so she settled for stringing internet cable through the walls. Which was how she found the dry rot in the baseboards. Which was why they were replacing and staining them.

It wasn't fun work, but it was weirdly fun to do.

"I do, you know. Think about marriage." Gail stood and stretched. "I mean, I almost married Nick, the dick."

"Charming." Shaking her head, Holly eyed her work. "Why did you say yes?"

"To Nick? Tequila was involved. And I thought it would piss my mom off."

That sounded just like Gail. Holly smiled. "Did it?"

"Oh yeah," laughed Gail, and she cleaned out her brush. "Are you thinking about it? Marriage I mean."

"A little," admitted Holly. "Not in a McNally way though." She'd heard about Andy enough times to find it amusing.

Gail laughed. "I like how she got engaged to Luke by mistake."

"This is why I don't look in your gun's lock box," teased Holly, finishing the last bit of wood on her end.

"That's not where I keep it. You kissed a spot."

Cursing, Holly went back and re-applied the stain. Then her brain caught up with the full comment. "Sorry... What?"

"You missed a spot, but you got it now."

"Gail," she scowled.
But the blonde was headed upstairs and missed the look. "One more pass and we can let it sit till Sunday. Thank god. This smell is getting to me."

Holly rolled her eyes. Any time Gail avoided the question, you may as well give up. She could evade like no one's business. While she certainly talked about things a lot more, she was still ... Gail. And Gail did not trust easily. The universe had scalded her too many times, beaten her down, bashed her in for putting her faith in mortal men. So she didn't. Except she trusted Holly.

And in truth Holly forgot about the conversation, and the implication that Gail had a ring stashed somewhere, shortly thereafter. Marriage was an interesting concept, but she wasn't in a rush to get there or anywhere else. Holly liked the life she had with Gail. Everything that had fallen into place by accident was welcome and warm and safe. Even taking down a serial killer. Even suspecting that there was more to it than just Linus out there.

But even without those fears, there was enough to worry about. There was crime to solve. Like Holly's first vehicular manslaughter involving alcohol, a moose, and a Zamboni. That was so Canadian, it turned a popular meme which Gail found hilarious and would regularly print up and stick around the precinct. Gail and Juliet caught a bizarre murder of a banker found dead in the locked vault with no trace of how he got in there. That was less funny, but exceptionally time consuming.

At home, there was enough little stuff to fix at the house that they really were going non-stop for ages. The downstairs bathroom and the dining room needed modernization. The second bedroom needed to be an actual guest room and the den was turned into a full blown office.

And then.

Holly came home and found the Christmas lights up in August. The front of the house was twinkling with brilliant joy. She smirked as she walked inside. "Gail, are you bored and getting an early start on Christmas?" There was no answer. The back porch had lights on as well. "Gail?" No answer. "Please confirm existence!"

"Hey!" That was the voice of an annoyed Gail. That was the same sound as Gail made when she hammered her thumb or accidentally dropped the new window pane. "Uh, be right there."

Laughing again, Holly put her bag down. "I'm coming out, Gail."

"Can you get the car instead?"

Holly paused with her hand on the doorknob. "Gail, seriously."

The blonde showed up at the back door, holding her hand wrapped in a filthy towel. "No, seriously, I think you need to take me to the ER."

Holly looked at the towel, which was covered in blood. "What the... Honey, come here." She dragged Gail to the sink and stuck her hand under the faucet. Gail had a jagged cut on her palm and looked a bit green. "What happened?"

"I was hanging the lights and I cut my hand on the gutter..." Gail leaned forward and put her head on the edge of the sink as the water washed her cut out. "Crap, I feel nauseous and dizzy."

"Yeah, not surprised. You might need stitches." She totally needed stitches, realized Holly, getting a good look at the filthy cut. It was going to need to be picked clean.

Gail groaned. "Least it's my left hand."
Gently brushing the hairs on the back of Gail's neck, Holly sighed. "Okay, can you stand here without me for a bit?" Gail mumbled a yes so Holly ran to get a stool. "Sit. Keep your hand there. I'll be right back."

They kept a surplus of various bandages and ailment cures upstairs in the master bath. Holly had called Gail a hypochondriac once, and right now was blessing the fact that her girlfriend was so neurotic about injuries. There was gauze, absorbent pads, alcohol, and an Ace Bandage. She'd worry about Neosporin at the hospital. Snatching a towel, she headed back downstairs.

Gail hadn't moved. "Tell me we have Percocet upstairs."

If Gail was asking for the good drugs, it had to be bad. "No, and this is going to sting like hell." Holly put her kit down on the counter and then went to get an ice pack. "Okay. I'm going to pour alcohol on that, then wrap it up with the pad and the gauze."

"I hate it already," groaned Gail. But she nodded and gripped the counter. "Do it." To her credit, Gail only cursed a little as Holly poured the alcohol on the cut.

"I can't see any muscle or tendon," noted Holly, trying to be comforting. "That's a good thing."

Gritting her teeth, Gail asked, "Are you sure?"

"Well it means no surgery. Just stitches and a cast to stop you from bending your hand."

Walking into the ER with an ice pack wrapped around a towel wrapped hand covered in blood, they were bumped up in the line. When Gail put her badge down, she was kicked to the front. Holly would have chastised her, but frankly waiting for hours for treatment would have been horrific.

"Was this case related?" The young resident had out a long, thin, needle.

"No," sighed Gail. "I don't like... Holl?"

Holly took her right hand and squeezed it. "Just look at me, okay? Relax."

The resident shook his head. "Everyone hates hospitals," he said dismissively.

Gritting her teeth, Gail remarked, "I spent a week and a half in one after a serial killer locked me up in his basement."

As the resident turned pale, Holly demurely noted, "Perhaps you might try sympathy. As a conversational method."

The needle went into Gail's hand without any further commentary. "Uh, yes, yes, that's a good idea Mrs..."

"Dr. Stewart," snarled Gail. "She's a doctor. Holly, seriously, you have shitty bedside manners. He's worse."

Holly shook her head at the young man. He really wasn't bad, Gail was just in a mood. Totally understandable. "I know, honey. Can you still feel your hand?"

Gail shook her head. "My whole hand is... That's weird and I don't like it."

The way Gail's pupils were reacting, Holly wondered if she was having a mild flashback. "Gail, look at me, okay?" The blonde nodded and fixed her eyes on Holly. "I'm right here. Dr. Junior
here is going to clean your hand out properly and put antibiotics in it. You just look at me and tell me something."

Gail blinked. "Tell you? What?"

"Something... Anything." Holly noted Gail's frustration. "Tell me about how you found the house?"

"I didn't tell you?" Gail looked surprised but started to calm down a little. "When I was sleeping at Lisa's, after we talked about stuff, I thought I should. You know, take the job and move out here. So I started looking around for apartments and shit..." Gail darted a glance at her hand, swallowed, and looked back at Holly quickly. "And. Uh I couldn't find anything. They put me up in a hotel kinda place, I think it was an old safe house, until I was done with retraining. But you know me, I get bored. The second or third weekend I was there, I went to the police auction. Kinda wanted to see what everyone was getting there. The auction runner and I got to talking and he told me he had houses. He's a realtor on the side I guess. Anyway, he found it. Said it was perfect for people who hate people."

Holly smiled. "It is. I love it too. Thank you for letting me move in with you."

Blushing, Gail smiled shyly. "I like waking up with you."

"All done," said the resident. He had a small basin filled with bits of rocks and what looked like leaves. She'd rinsed it out but there was clearly ground in dirt.

Holly eyed them and frowned. "Gail, did you fall off the ladder and land on your hand?"

"I may have?" Gail winced. "It was sort of a rush."

With a sigh, Holly envisioned how the back of their house looked like a crime scene now. "Does she need surgery?"

The resident eyed them both. "No. It's shallow enough that we can just stitch it up. But... we have a plastics guy — surgeon on staff tonight. I was going to ask him to do this so you could have, uh, well. You're a cop. You know. Need your hands?"

Arching her eyebrows, Gail asked Holly, "Did we scare him?"

"We did," confirmed Holly. "The plastics guy would be great, thank you."

Like all surgeons, the plastics guy was a little egotistical, but he swooped in and decided he could totally make it look like nothing happened. Gail was a little disappointed and asked if she could have a cool scar at least, which made the doctor laugh and promise to try and make it cool.

It wasn't until the nurse came in to set up the tray that anyone actually asked what Gail had been doing. "How on earth did you fall off a ladder at six at night?"

Gail sighed. "I was hanging Christmas lights."

The nurse burst out laughing. "Child it is August. Why the hell were you putting up lights now?"

Gail glanced at Holly. "If I said I was trying to beat the rush, would you buy it?"

Both Holly and the nurse said, "No."

Groaning, Gail leaned back. "Okay. Fine." She squirmed and reached into her right pocket. "I
was trying to be romantic, but I'm just a total failure at that." Gail held out a small velvet bag to Holly.

She took the bag without thinking. "You should have known that from the whole moving in debacle," noted Holly, and she opened the bag. Metal glinted up at her.

Her heart thudded loudly. Surely Gail could hear it. Surely the nurse was about to get an EKG to check her heart. Surely ... 

Gail cleared her throat. "Marry me."

The first thought that popped into her head is what she said. "You're proposing to me in the ER?"

"I was trying to propose to you in our backyard," sighed Gail.

The nurse leaned over and looked at the ring. It was a set of four princess cut diamonds, in a grid, flanked by two sapphires. "That's beautiful," the nurse oohed.

Holly nodded. "It is." She slipped the ring on. It wasn't surprising that it fit. "This is perfect, Gail," she sighed and kissed the blonde's forehead.

Gail smiled. "Yes?"

"Yes," nodded Holly, kissing Gail's lips softly. "Yes, I'll marry you, idiot." She took Gail's right hand and squeezed it. They were still holding hands and smiling a little stupidly as the doctor came back in.

At home, their home, Holly got Gail cleaned up and tucked into bed with another icepack on her hand, which had a brace and not a cast. "This wasn't how I saw my night ending," pouted Gail wozzily. "I was hoping for some rewards."

Holly slid into the bed and kissed Gail's forehead. "When you're feeling better, I promise to show you a good time."

"I'll hold you to that," sighed Gail, snuggling up to Holly. "I love you. And not just because you took me to the ER."

"I love you too," smiled Holly, carefully hugging her newly minted fiancé close. "And not just because you proposed." As the evening darkness settled around them, Gail stifled a laugh. "Do I want to know?"

"Just wait," giggled Gail. "When we retell this story, you're going to point out I proposed in the ER."

Holly laughed too. She would. But it seemed a fitting way for their life to move on. "Not exactly a fairytale," she agreed. "But I wouldn't have you any other way."

Gail stared at the phone in her hand. Her index fingered hovered over the little phone icon beside the name "Elaine Peck" but she couldn't press the button.

It had been so much easier to talk to Holly's parents about this. Maya had been delighted and promised not to ask about grand babies for at least 4 years. Dieter said he was going to ask about them now, because if they were adopting, he wanted to paint the kid something special. As long as it wasn't the damn clown thing, Gail said she didn't mind what he painted.
But calling her own parents? No. That felt insurmountable.

It had been so much easier to send the invitation, which had not yet been returned. Just go to the mailbox, drop it in before your nerves kicked up, and try to ignore the nagging doubt. That doubt she was feeling right now.

Her finger shook as she pressed the icon.

One ring. Two rings. A pause. "Hello, Gail."

"Hi, Mom." Silence. "How are you?"

"As well as can be expected," said Elaine tightly. "We received your invitation."

Okay. There was that. "Oh. Good. You didn't reply so I wondered."

"Married." Elaine made it sound like a horrible thing.

"We already went over the blasé accusations, Mom. I thought… I mean, I know you probably can't come. Short notice, legal crap." She exhaled. "I'm trying not to think horrible things."

Her mother breathed across the line. "What do you want me to say?"

"Congratulations?" Gail looked over her backyard. Why did she think this would go differently? The only times her mother had called her in the last few years was when she wanted to curry a favor.

Elaine hesitated. "Are you happy, Gail?"

Gail chewed her lower lip. "You mean... With Holly or ...?"

"Holly. Does she ... Does she make you happy?"

It was, Gail decided, a surreal conversation to have with her mother. "Yeah. Yeah she does." Gail couldn't help but smile at that. "Mom... I know this is weird, but I love her."

Her mother was quiet, just her breathing. "Back when you were a rookie, I worried I wasn't pushing you enough. Pushing you to be everything you could."

"I remember," noted Gail, not kindly.

"You seem... You seem to have found some success. Professionally."

Of course Elaine would rather talk about that. "Yeah, yeah. Doing okay." She was doing more than okay. That year, Juliet had made corporal and Gail was likely to make the rank herself soon.

"Hold on ..." There was the sound of a door closing. Then another opened and closed. "Bill ... Your father is driving me to drink," admitted Elaine.

Gail eyed her phone. "Dad?"

"The kindest thing he's called you is blood traitor, sweetheart," sighed her mother. "There's no way I could come to the wedding."

I. Not we. "He won't come." Gail closed her eyes. "And ... You won't without him?"

"No," Elaine admitted. "For better or for worse, Gail. This is my life. I won't leave him."
That hurt in a new way. "You know... Once, just once..." Gail squeezed her eyes tightly. "You never picked me, Mom. You never cared about me or what I wanted or... You know, I always wanted to hear you say you were proud of me, or I'd done a good job, or that you'd take my side when Dad or someone called me a Fail Pale. But... You won't. You never do." Gail inhaled thickly and wetly. "It hurts, Mom."

Elaine's voice was small. "I'm sorry."

"I wish you really were, Mom," sniffed Gail, struggling to keep from crying. She didn't want to give her mother the satisfaction of tears over the phone. "I wish you were sorry. I wish you would change."

"I wish I would too." Elaine sounded honest in that moment. "I... I'll talk to Bill, sweetheart."

"Don't bother. He won't change any more than you will, Mom." Gail rubbed at her nose and winced, looking down at the bandage on her left hand. The stitches were out, but it itched and tugged. "Bye, Mom."

She barely heard her mother's quiet goodbye.

Was that it? Gail covered her mouth as she cried. This was her life. This was her relationship with her parents, which was to say not at all. Her father was mad she wouldn't lie for him. For them. Her mother stood by her father. No. This had always been her life. She was always the lesser Peck, the failure. The one who strolled through life without a goal. The one who never heard 'good job.'

Her parents wouldn't call when she was promoted to Detective. They wouldn't call when she was engaged. They wouldn't come for her when she lay in a hospital bed, having nearly died. They wouldn't come now for a moment where she was going to say 'I do' to the most wonderful person Gail had ever met. They would never meet Holly. There might be kids down the line, and they were never going to know the Pecks.

And it hurt. It shouldn't hurt to have people who always let you down let you down again. But God, it cut at her chest, flayed her liver open, and left her chained to the rocks for the birds to eat her soul.

She let the pain swallow her for a time, crying on her back porch like a sad, lonely woman. The hurt of being the unwanted settled around her shoulders. She knew this pain. She had grown up with this kind of agony, the kind that sunk in and made every breath hurt.

By the time Holly got home, she'd stopped crying but she couldn't speak. The kitchen door opened. Without saying anything, Holly crossed the deck and sat down next to Gail, holding a box of donuts and two cups of coffee. She settled the donuts on the step between them and leaned into Gail's shoulder.

Eventually Gail found her voice. "How'd you know today was an eat my feelings day?"

Holly pulled her phone out. "I have a very disturbing apology text from your mother, whom I didn't know had my number by the way, telling me she was sorry and to get you a Hawaiian donut."

"Malasada. It's Portuguese," sighed Gail. She opened the box. "I didn't give her your number."

"I know," Holly handed over a coffee. "It's that sugar fest latte crap you love."
Gail sipped the coffee and closed her eyes. "You're going to be a really awesome wife, Holly," she whispered.

A warm brown hand wrapped around hers, holding the coffee with her. "I hope so."

"They're not coming," she told Holly. "And I'm ... I'm mad, and sad, and it hurts a hell of a lot more than I thought it would... And ... I just spent the last couple hours crying because I really don't know what else to do."

Holly sighed. "I don't know either, honey. But. If you want to tear out a toilet or eat tons of donuts... Or cut off all your hair and make me try to salvage it, I'll do it." She pressed her cheek to Gail's head.

Smiling, Gail reached down and pulled out a donut. "Bite." She held the chocolate old fashioned, Holly's favorites up for her. Obligingly, her fiancé took a bite. Gail took a bite next, and they shared the donut.

"How are you feeling?" Holly wiped her face off with a napkin.

"I hate my name," she muttered.


"No, no, Peck. I hate that I'm Gail Peck, the Pale Fail."

Holly frowned. "You're not a failure, Gail."

"Tell them that."

Her fiancé sighed and kissed her cheek. "Do... Do you want to be a Stewart?"

She did. In so many ways Gail would love to shed the skin of Peck, tear the snake off her back and become someone new. But she wanted the other thing too. Gail swallowed and admitted the truth. "I want to make them regret it," she whispered. "I want to make them look and see me, the last Peck, the one who is better than they are, and I want them to hurt."

Holly nodded slowly. "They should," she agreed. "Because they're missing out on the best Peck out there."

"You're a little biased," smiled Gail.

"Doesn't mean I'm not right."

The wedding was going to be small. That had been her idea.

Holly didn't feel the need for a large wedding, and as long as Gail agreed not to try and hang the lights on her own, she was perfectly happy having it in the back yard. But it had to be small. They could invite five people each, and Nick and Juliet were a freebie for them both. Gail called it a punishment.

Since the lights were, mostly, strung already, Nick helped Gail get the rest set up and they mailed the invitations out by the end of the week after the proposal. Small wedding, quick wedding. Juliet had teased them, asking who was pregnant. Gail had punched Juliet's shoulder and told her to hang the damn lights.
It all came together though. They had less than five weeks to sort it all out and, by the end of week three they were all on track. Even with Gail's mini breakdowns in the middle, freaking out about not being sure she was going to be a good wife and then having her mother kick her while she was down, they managed to get it all in order. Friends, family, a Justice of the Peace, and a pretty as fuck backyard.

There was just one more thing Holly needed to do for herself and for Gail to make it perfect. She told Gail and got a surprised look from the blonde. It was clearly not something Gail had been prepared for. After asking if Holly was sure, and being informed that she was, Gail agreed to help out and get things done. It took them days to get there, but they did.

Holly's parents had been pretty whatever about it, though Drew had been shocked. It hurt him the most and Holly knew it would, so when he came out to help them prep for the last week, she made sure to sit him down and explain. Because just as it had been important to him and her when they were children, this was important to her and Gail now.

If anyone understood the ties that bound you beyond blood, it was her family. Over the years, their parents had helped more than a dozen foster children. Even now, if someone needed a home, theirs was always open. Official, unofficial, it didn't matter. Children were loved and treasured. Alicia, their other most serious foster sister, was still a sister in their hearts.

But Gail, Gail was different. Holly had clung to her parents like a drowning man, a sense of stability and peace in her turbulent life. And in turn they had supported and carried her through a rocky childhood, a tumultuous teenhood, awkward adolescence, and finally now into a stable adulthood.

Maybe it was their fault, their free spirits and lack of what others called 'normal,' that had made Holly so willing to move across the country time and again. Maybe the wanderlust they instilled in her was the cause for her rootless life. Sometimes Holly wondered if she could be stable, stay put, and keep Gail out of a tree.

Then she thought of her time in med school in Toronto. She thought of the years she spent with Lisa and Rachel. The work and the drive. And Holly realized the truth of it all. When she wanted a thing, when she loved it beyond measure and compare, she would change the essence of her very being to keep it.

And that was the love she had for Gail.

She had to be there for her strange, skittish, prickly, Peck. No one, not even her parents, had changed her as much as Gail had. No one had made her want to change as much. No one touched her head, heart, and soul like Gail did.

Her hope was, one day, Drew would find someone like that too. Someone who made things feel complete. Not perfect, because what ever was? No. But good, and right, and proper.

Once Drew was on board, and still miffed he couldn't be her best man (that went to Lisa, who won the bet with Rachel about who proposed), she knew all was well. Her family, blended and weird as it was, was going to be exactly what she'd always needed, if perhaps not what she'd wanted as a child.

The night before the wedding, their house was empty. Everyone told them to stay in separate rooms, make it more special, but near midnight Holly came in from the guest room where she'd spent so many nights before. It had been lonely and empty. Gail, not opening her eyes, lifted the sheet of their bed. Holly slid in, taking the big spoon spot, and sighed.
Everyone else's myths and superstitions could shove it. This was theirs. This was how they'd always lived. Gail, the Peck who did things her own way without shying away. Holly, the doctor who loved puzzles and art and softball.

"Tomorrow," whispered Gail.

"Tomorrow," replied Holly.

And they said no more.

Tomorrow would be the first day of what was next.

The wedding was small.

Holly's parents, her brother, Rachel, and Boob Job came in the week before. Gail's brother came, with Traci and Leo. Not together together, just on the same flight. Steve also came with a parole officer. Nick and Juliet were there, but they were local. Oliver and his wife Celery made it as well, at the last minute.

Twelve people. That was small, and Gail was okay with it.

The build up to the wedding was stressful enough, with having to tell everyone that they were getting married. For all Holly had been reluctant to tell people they were dating again, she'd updated her Facebook status to 'Engaged' while they were still in the ER. There was no hiding anything. The entire universe knew they were engaged by the time Gail came down from her ER high.

But that was good. It felt right that their world learned about it in such a boring, normal way. It was like everyone and everything took the moment to make Gail normal. She never felt normal. It was really nice.

She'd never wanted the big weddings her parents had pushed at her. That was probably why she'd accepted Nick's proposal to run off to Vegas. Of course, that had ended wonderfully badly (his motorcycle was the victim in the end), and Gail had felt jaded about relationships ever since. While he was the one who skipped out, she always worried it was, in some small part, her fault.

It didn't help that he told her she wasn't exactly girlfriend material later on. Shit like that hung on and around you. It was like tequila, encouraging you to do bad, wrong, things just to feel a little alive and like you existed.

Gail knew she hadn't been a saint. The whole mess with Fifteen flipping and thinking she was suddenly a hero had been hard to stomach because she'd done some fairly bad things. She'd intentionally shoved them away, hurt them, and left them just because it was so, so much easier to be hated. She couldn't stand them loving her for the exact same reasons they'd hated her.

For years, they'd never had her back. And for years, she'd bitten them and intentionally hurt them before they could hurt her. It was a savage relationship that Gail had with Fifteen and it was her own fault. She'd let herself lash out at them the feelings she'd had for her family for her entire life. Always, Gail had been left out and cut out of the family. She'd been treated the same by Fifteen and she'd reacted the same.

The closer they got to the wedding, the more the old fears of inadequacy and failure bit at Gail. It nipped her heels like a yapping puppy, demanding her attention and punishing every misstep. Just like being a Peck. Was she going not be able to be a good wife? Was she she a bad girlfriend for Holly? Gail lived a much more dangerous, risky, life than many people. Didn't Holly deserve
That nagging doubt and fear grew worse every day they inched closer to the wedding. Every moment that passed, Gail became obsessed with the idea that she was going to fail this, fail Holly. She was just sure that everything was going to fall apart and be worthless. That Holly would wake up and realize how much better she could do, and leave. Again.

But she knew she wasn't the Gail who'd stupidly walked out on Holly at the Penny. She wasn't about to self-sabotage herself into losing the best person, the best thing that had ever happened to her. She loved Holly. She had to tell her. Because if they were a pair, a partnership, then this came with that.

They'd been lying in bed listening to the rain on the bedroom deck on a beautiful, grey, morning, when Gail found the courage to say something. Holly was awake and absently toying with a frayed thread on the quilt Maya had made them. Gail swallowed and said she wanted to talk about something.

She started by telling Holly about her childhood, growing up under Steve's shadow. The golden boy. Steve did everything right. And Gail? She was the Pale Fail. She was always doing it wrong. Nothing was the way her parents wanted her to be. At a certain point Gail just stopped trying to meet their expectations. She tried to be herself. But her revolution never went far. Even failing the entrance exam hadn't worked. So she'd fallen into life with no plan and no direction and no gusto. And then... Then there was a smart, funny, weird, woman and she liked her.

The smart, funny, weird, woman hugged her close and said that she never wanted something uncomplicated. Holly whispered fiercely that one of the things she loved about Gail was that she went back out there. She loved that Gail did the right thing. She loved that Gail hated liars and fake people. And she loved that Gail fought back.

Gail couldn't remember other people saying that. There may have been tears.

The boost of confidence made dealing with wedding prep easier. They kept everything as small as possible. There was no priest for their wedding. Just a simple legal ceremony at the courthouse with their friends and then a dinner party at the couple's house. Traci and Maya cooked the dinner while Gail listened to Holly tell the story about how Gail sliced her hand open and had to propose in the ER. Yeah, she knew that story was going to go around. Leo wanted to see the scar, as did Boob Job, who admitted the plastic surgeon did a good job.

Things with Steve and Traci were awkward and uncomfortable. Neither knew how to behave around the other, which Gail really understood. She wasn't sure where she stood with her brother either. It was clear though that Steve didn't know where he stood with himself. How strange to be the one who liked what she saw in the mirror. But she did. Gail really liked who she was and what she did.

Especially when, that morning, she'd studied her own face in the mirror and noticed her fiancé covertly eyeing her from the other end of the bathroom with that silly smile on her face.

Juliet had been right. It was a lot easier to look at yourself in the mirror when you respected yourself and the choices you made. Gail had never been able to stomach liars, except in herself. She'd been phenomenally good at lying about everything, from wanting to be a cop to not being in love with Holly. Thank god she'd stopped.

It was so much easier to be yourself when things didn't hurt all the time. There were still rough times, but they were survivable.
When Oliver showed up, the day of the wedding, he pulled her aside to chat and said he'd noticed.
He saw the difference. And while he apologized for making her a bit of a her in Toronto, he
wanted her to know how proud he was. He'd watched her make the impossible choices, the hard
choices that pushed everyone and everything away from her. And he respected her for it.

Better than being a hero by far was that feeling. Respect. Even stupid McNally sent a wedding
present because she respected Gail.

It was a feeling Gail had never had before, but she liked it. It started to patch up the gaping maw
of agony her parents had left her with.

The lack of her parents in attendance didn't bother Gail, and she actually felt that way. Beside the
fact that they weren't permitted to leave Ontario, they hadn't replied to the invitation Gail sent
about the wedding. Not even to say no. She hadn't hoped for anything. If there was one thing
she'd learned, they wanted her to follow the Peck party line. Still. And she wasn't going to.

But even so, Gail kept her name. She and Holly talked about that for hours, if they should change
their names or not. In the end, Gail had gone with Peck and Holly had gone with Peck as well.
Which frankly was a little weird but totally hilarious. They were absolutely not the Pecks that
Elaine and Bill wanted.

That was the point though, felt Gail. They were different Pecks and they weren't Toronto Pecks.
They were the Pecks left standing who could start everything new and build everything back up.
If they wanted to. Or they could just be a married couple named Peck. A name that meant nothing
in Vancouver.

When Oliver had asked Holly why she took the name, given all the grief it could cause, Holly had
smiled that silly, quirky, smile. "I took the name," she said softly, taking Gail's hand and
squeezing it. "I took her name because I didn't want her to be the last Peck standing."

Chapter End Notes

The End.

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