

~ America's Sweetheart ~

by Catherine Burke

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Author's Note: This is my first story posted on The Athenaeum. If all goes well there will be more to follow.

Category: Orig. Uber Alt.

Rating: R / NC-17

Summary: Retired Olympian Gwen Lerner lands in Detroit and comes face to face with her former girlfriend. Still questioning the reason they separated, Gwen wants answers and to get a friendship back. Keegan Garry left the Olympic team under a cloud of mystery and intrigue. Since then she has struggle to get her life back on track. Just when she thinks she's done that, Gwen shows up and derails. Can two women who once loved each other find way to heal their broken hearts and love again?

Comments/Disclaimer(s): This is an original story. The story and characters belong to me. They are not to be used or reproduced without my express written permission. This is my first time posting to the website. An early version of this story was posted but the current is much better :!

This story depicts a love/sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it.

Special Thanks: To J Brownell for ideas suggestions and getting me to actually post this. Also to Kerrie who was able to beta and get this story back to me a very short time. Living half way around the world does have its advantages. Time differences worked well for us.

This work has progressed over the years and is very close to my heart. The two characters helped me through a tough time in my life. I am posting in parts but will have the entire story finished soon. As I continue to work on it, I really need to have some feed back. You can reach me at

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Prologue

Miami, Florida

"What do you mean she's gone?" Gwen Lerner huffed as she paced the airport gate. Her anger buried in her words. She didn't want to confront the coaching staff in public. Her question meant to challenge them about the absence of Keegan Garry, her girlfriend and teammate. Her hands shoved deep into the pockets of her team jacket, Gwen's fingers brushed over the box. Feeling the soft velvet texture against her finger tips, the ring was secure in her possession. Silently she wished she'd done things differently last night. Something was wrong with Keegan. Gwen didn't press even though she knew her girlfriend was holding back.

Rising before the sun, she went to look for Keegan. Instead she found an empty room. Gwen panicked and began to search the property asking the staff about Keegan's whereabouts. The front desk attendant answered her question. A woman matching Keegan's description left in a cab just after five.

Standing in the middle of the airport waiting to board the flight to Greece, Gwen checked her watch. Why would Keegan leave? Why didn't she tell her last night? The feeling of abandonment overwhelmed her. She thought she had pushed her issues with her mother out of her life. Instead, she stood in disbelief that her girlfriend would leave her. Gwen turned hardened brown eyes to stare at Coach Brian Curtis. She waited for an answer or explanation.

"Keegan went to Michigan." *Michigan?* Gwen's brain began to spin and her knees slightly gave way. San Jose was their home. Some one needed to tell her what was going on.

"Is she coming back?" Gwen demanded.

Coach Curtis stared at the tall blonde pacing in front of him. The team was heading to the Olympics. He didn't need his star suffering an emotional break down and he promised Keegan. No matter the outcome, he would honor that promise. Deep down, he hoped Keegan spoke to Gwen, but from the stiff posture and clamped jaw, Gwen didn't have any idea.

"I don't know and I hope so." Curtis turned away from the piercing brown eyes throwing daggers his way. He heard Gwen unclip her phone from her hip and place a call. Watching her out of the corner of his eye, he saw her close her eyes and groan as she whispered into the phone.

Gwen hung up the phone and set her hands on her hips. She stared at Curtis waiting for the head coach to give her more information. A fine gleam of sweat formed on his brow. The team avoided her as soon as they learned Keegan's absence. Since this morning, she had left over ten messages for her girlfriend.

"She wouldn't just leave Curtis." When Gwen set her mind on something, she would not give up until she had what she was after.

"Gwen..." His voice rose for a moment. She was wearing on his patience. "You need to talk to Keegan. I can't help you. Now, get some of that funky tea you drink and leave me alone."

Dismissed...Curtis dismissed her. Playing for the man for over eight years, he had never treated her this way. She needed to talk to Keegan and find out what the hell was going on. Gwen pulled out her phone scrolling through the numbers she pressed the number for Keegan's parents in Michigan. When the answering machine picked up, she lifted her brown eyes to the popcorn ceiling. "Bill, Sarah, it's Gwen. Kee's gone and I can't reach her. Please have her call me. I really need to speak with her." Gwen closed her phone and fought back the tears she could feel forming. She would not cry. Just like when her mother dumped her at her great aunt's house, she refused to let anyone see her break into tears.

Chapter 1

The carpet between the bar and the master bedroom was beginning to show a traffic pattern. Gwen Lerner walked across the plush olive fibers. She stopped at the wall of windows overlooking the ocean. Her soft brown eyes watched as angry waves of mucky water slapped against the hard packed beach and jagged rocks on the shoreline. The view of Half Moon Bay from Bobby's home was breath taking. February turned the Pacific Ocean angry. Gone were the blue skies and soft rolling waves of summer. Winter started to rear its ugly head. Gwen leaned her forehead against the cold pane of glass, trying to ease the pounding in her head. The full glass of scotch was held in her shaking hand. She took a sip of the stiff drink in hopes of fighting off the sadness surrounding her heart. She just couldn't get warm. Since she arrived, she a chill sank deep in her bones like the fridge temperatures of the Rockies during December or the Great Lakes in March. She felt as if she was attending a funeral, yet no one had died.

Inside, she was dying. Bobby was leaving and moving cross country. He was leaving her. Closing her eyes, she wished the nightmare would just end. Rolling the small glass across her forehead, the condensation wetting her skin, she inhaled deeply and let the breath out slowly. She knew she needed to put her game face on. People were counting on her. She would make his transition as seamless as possible. Putting on the camera ready smile, she continued her way to Bobby's bedroom.

Pushing a loose strain of long blonde hair behind her ear, the sound of thrashing hangers pulled her attention to the far corner of the bedroom. Standing in the middle of the walk in closet was Bob Finch, professional hockey player for the San Jose Ice Breakers. He was packing. He had been traded to the Detroit Motors late last night. He was leaving tonight. She mentally added his name to the list of people she loved who had left her. Molly and Christopher, her great aunt and uncle and closest family she had, passed away within six months of each other. Her father, Jeff Lerner, she never met, but heard his short relationship with Connie was over within three months.

Bobby was the latest person in her life to leave her. Being traded to Detroit wasn't his idea and from the sound of banging drawers and hangers, he was upset about it. Connie, her mother, had left her a countless number of times with relatives while she chased man and money. Connie seemed to have mellowed with age. Her divorce, from husband number five, had left her in a nice financial position and after her plastic surgery she began to claim Gwen was her sister. Connie could no longer surprise or shock Gwen any more. As of late, she hadn't posed a new business venture for Gwen to invest in. Gwen constantly questioned her mother's motives. Then there was Keegan, her girlfriend who left her without a word just before the Olympics. After three years, of what Gwen thought was a perfect and loving relationship, Keegan left, cleaned her belongings out of their home and moved to Michigan. It still hurt Gwen to look at photos of

her. Keegan's departure from the team created a media sensation. The press hounded the women trying to find out information about the missing player. Unconfirmed rumors claimed Keegan was in the hospital for an emergency appendectomy.

Gwen had no explanation for the sudden disappearance of her girlfriend. She was lost in a state of confusion regarding Keegan. Gwen used every means known to try reach her, even leaving the team days before the games started to find Keegan. Their meeting still caused Gwen's chest to hurt. According to the last conversation, she had with Keegan, she was not wanted. Period. After, three years, Keegan wanted nothing to do with her.

Gwen left, bitter and angry. On the night she led her team won gold, Keegan called. Gwen was out celebrating the victory and purging the pain from their breakup. She took intoxication to another level. Crawling out of a bed and from under three naked women, the next morning, she listened to the voice message from a Detroit number. The message was from Sarah, Keegan's mother, asking Gwen not to contact Keegan again. Five years since Keegan left her had passed without as much as a Christmas card. Keegan didn't just leave, she cut Gwen out of her life.

"Fuck!" A deep curse filled the air drawing her attention back to her latest relationship. Bobby would be on a plane to Detroit tonight. Alone again, at the age of thirty, Gwen thought she'd have her shit together by this point in her life. She had her life planned out. A couple years of playing soccer at the world level, another Olympic medal, then she'd settled down with Keegan, retire and make a home. Travel would be for pleasure only, actually going to Europe to sightsee, not to play soccer. Life still seemed to be throwing her curve balls when she thought she would get a fastball down the middle of the plate.

Pieces of ice clunked against the glass as she walked to the bedroom door. She leaned her long lithe figure on the doorframe. Bobby cursed, flipping through hanger after hanger of suit jackets. When he stomped in front of her towards the large bed, Gwen raised her eyes to the handsome man. For a brief moment, he stood proud, then his shoulders slumped and head lowered. His clothes were wrinkled as if he had just pulled them out of his gym bag or the hamper. Normally perfectly styled, his midnight locks were mussed and out of control. The small amount of gray that highlighted his temples doubled over the past week. Dark circles marred his green eyes. Two days worth of stubble on his jaw hide his angular face. He was tired. Late night conference calls and waiting for a decision to be made weighted heavily on him. Facing an unknown future, he was heading to Detroit.

Still holding the scotch, Gwen watched his jerky motions as he mumbled about a lost black Armani jacket. He was running through a gauntlet of emotions; denial, anger, acceptance. Gwen had witnessed many teammates dealing with the emotions of being traded or cut. He needed to reach acceptance, as did she. Their lives were about to change.

Bobby shook his head in frustration, as he walked between the closet and the open suitcase on the bed. A pile of discarded clothes on the floor grew each time he passed. The warmth of the alcohol caused the ice snap making a cracking sound. Bobby turned his attention to Gwen. She raised the glass to him. He shook his head, his drama over for the moment.

Gwen placed the tumbler on the nearest piece of furniture and waited for the next explosion. It didn't take long. Bobby slammed the closet door behind him causing the windows to rattle and Gwen to jump. "Bobby." She called to her best friend and according to the latest tabloid reports her fiancé. He threw a few more articles of clothing in to the suitcase then lifted his green eyes to her. "Everything will be okay."

According to the media, Bobby Finch and Gwen Lerner represented the perfect couple. The professional athletes with movie star looks matched the story of a fairy tale romance. Gwen, an all American California girl was the girl next door, tall, blonde and beautiful, America's Sweetheart, she represented the perfect combination of athletic grace and feminine beauty, like a lioness. Bobby was a ruggedly dark and handsome lumberjack with a beautiful smile that turned heads. An occupational hazard of aggressive play on the ice had cost the hockey player a few of his teeth. He replaced the missing pearly whites with a beautiful expensive set of veneers. The extensive bridgework fooled the public and the cameras. On the ice, he would tease the crowd by showing his missing teeth.

From her career of being on multiple national and Olympic teams, Gwen was well versed in media exposure. The games in Athens focused the spotlight on the US Women's Soccer Team. When Keegan disappeared, Gwen was deemed team spokesperson. Keegan, a media and fan favorite ever since she led the "Cinderella" Weston Mustangs to the NCAA National Championship was the most popular player. Small in statured, Keegan played like a powerhouse on the field. The fiery player spoke effortlessly with the media. Her fun loving personality was contagious. Keegan's bright smile and sky blue eyes lit up a room. When she left the team, reporters swarmed the women's soccer team for the reason. The team was hounded about the disappearance of their star defensive player. For the first time in her life, Gwen felt as if the media was exposing a piece of her life. She loved Keegan. Even before she met her, Gwen was drawn to the little fiery brunette with the big smile. When Keegan left, Gwen's heart went with her.

An off the cuff interview she did with Dale McKnight, the seasoned commentator from Sports National Network, gave her the first indication of how the media could hurt. Caught off guard by the commentator as she came in from the practice field, Gwen was ambushed by Dale, who waited with camera rolling and microphones recording.

"Gwen, can you give the fans some insight on Keegan Garry's absence? I know you're close with her." Dale's head nodded to the crew as the camera zoomed in tight on Gwen's profile. Gwen began to jog through the arena, but the reporter ran next to her. She tried to escape into the locker room, but was blocked by a large man hoisting a camera.

"Keegan's missed." She finally replied to the microphone thrust at her. "There are things we can't control. Would we like her here with us of course, but that's not going to happen. Right now, we need to stay focused and play like a team."

"Rumor is emergency appendectomy. Can you confirm?" When Gwen shot Dale a look of disgust, he changed tactics. "Do you have a personal message for Keegan as she watches the games with her family in Michigan?" McKnight asked.

"Anything I have to say to Keegan has already been said. She knows how I feel and how the team feels. Thanks." Her brown eyes turned hard as they stared at the lens. Quickly Gwen ducked through the barricade of the restricted area, leaving the media behind. The still shot SNN captured of her intense gaze was used to promote the determination of the team to win gold. Days later, Keegan's story faded as Gwen's was pushed in to the spotlight.

"America's Sweetheart Wins Gold!" The headline ran in newspapers across the country along with a picture of Gwen being mobbed by her teammates. Her last second flick of the ball into the back of the net scored the gold winning goal. From that moment on, her life was no longer her own. The public and press wanted to know everything, from her favorite food to her love life. Adding to the media sensation was the release of the poster she posed for to promote the National Women's Soccer League. The lay-out for the poster used the tag line from the Olympics, America's Sweetheart. Scantly draped in an America flag with four inch red stilettos, a soccer ball in the foreground and an apple pie in the background with the words "*Come get a piece!*" printed between her wide spread legs. The flag was wrapped strategically to cover her breasts and loosely hung around her waist so the stripes tickled the tops of her thighs. Her muscle structure and a good airbrush gave her the appeal of what the league wanted, sex and soccer.

The National Women's Soccer League, NWSL housed teams in ten major cities across the US. Including, the San Jose Tide whose franchise player was hometown hero, Gwen Lerner. Her popularity continued to spread around the country as fans wanted to get to know the Olympic hero. As part of her contractual commitment to the Tide she was designated player spokesperson. Her popularity increased as the league officials asked her to step into the league player media representative. Her name recognition ratings went through the roof. The league began to compensate her for the additional appearances on talk shows to boost ticket sales.

Gwen was the player fans wanted to know everything about. Her presence on the field had the Tide as the league leader for ticket sales. Even other teams cashed in when the Tide was in town. Gwen was the David Beckman of women's soccer. Her name drew crowds around the world. The networks wanted to interview her, companies wanted her to endorse their products and the talk shows wanted her as a guest. The soccer star's light heartedness and sense of humor made her enjoyable to watch. Her career was rising, while her love life plummeted out of control. Media speculation began to swirl about her personal life. Gwen tried her best to keep her private life out of the media. She kept her dates out of the limelight by asking her Great Uncle Christopher to escort her to many events. When whispers of homosexuality began to circulate, her agent, Hannah Marshfield, started damage control before Gwen's career suffered.

Look magazine was first to attack her "Sweetheart" image by running a cover-spread of Gwen kissing another woman. The headline's large bold letters read "America's Sweetheart Loves Women!" The rumor mill began to run, spreading rapidly and weaving a web around Gwen and her sexual preference. Tabloid after tabloid released the stories, detailing juicy gossip about the gold medal winner. Friends, teammates, college classmates were all approached to dish some gossip. No one she knew fell for the temptation of fast cash.

Gwen knew the photos printed in *Look*. She knew them well. They captured private moments

between her and Keegan while they vacationed in Provincetown years earlier. The front cover was a clear photo of Gwen locked in a steamy kiss with the smaller dark haired woman. Thankfully, the photos were darkened to obscure their faces. Their arms were wrapped around each other in a loving embrace. Gwen had abided by the Garry family's request to leave Keegan alone. Even after the *Look* story ran, she heard nothing from the family. Gwen assumed Keegan needed money and sold the photos. She went as far as to hire a private investigator to see who sold the pictures to the tabloid magazine.

Everyone wanted to know who the woman in the photos was. Hannah never asked because she knew about Gwen's relationship with Keegan, even how Gwen fought the attraction to her teammate. She refused to become involved with a teammate. She didn't want to create issues on the team. Finally after months of watching Keegan date loser after loser, she couldn't sit by and watch Keegan date other women. Every time the fiery player went out with someone, Gwen felt her heart breaking. She didn't want Keegan to be with anyone else. When Hannah questioned what happened to Keegan, Gwen couldn't answer her. She didn't know. Keegan Garry disappeared from her life. Her name never surfaced in the media. It was as if the player never existed. Even teammates refused to mention Keegan's name anywhere near Gwen. Her closest friend, Shannon dared to approach the subject a few times, but Gwen wanted no part of a person who shut her out.

The spread in the *Look* opened the floodgates. The NWSL came under attack, receiving bad press for "harboring the deviant lifestyle of lesbianism" as the Christian Conservative Press wrote and released through the association circuit. Her sexuality became the only topic the press wanted to talk about and she chose not to discuss. Never giving an answer to reporters other than she preferred not to discuss her personal life. Hannah coached her well and brought in the solution. Enter Bobby. Robert Finch, star defensive player for the Elite Hockey League was her savior from negative press. Hannah managed the athletes and introduced the couple just after the NWSL finished its first season. Gwen knew she found a kindred spirit. Bobby was everything she was looking for. Intelligent, articulate and he understood what a professional athlete's life was like. Pairing the couple served to benefit their careers. Bobby escorting Gwen around began to boost his press exposure. Magazines wanted photos of the couple. Bobby suddenly found his popularity on the rise. A new fan base of young teenage girls became infatuated with the hunky hockey player.

The Canadian born hockey player stood a few inches taller than Gwen's five nine frame. His chiseled features, square jaw, regal nose and curly raven locks brought women to their knees. A twelve year veteran of the EHL, Bobby was a diamond in the rough. A power house of muscles and handsome looks, his deep voice carried the refinement of a politician. Bobby could have his choice of women, but the dark raven haired man hung to Gwen's arm. Burned early in his career by a former lover, he became selective in his companionship. Women flocked to him, but he was turned off by their greed or shallowness. From Ontario, Bobby studied at Northwestern University on a hockey scholarship. Graduating top of his class with a degree in finance, he wasn't just a dumb jock. Drafted by the Washington Seals in the second round, he was traded to the Ice Breakers after two seasons. His career was winding down and he could retire on the investments he established. Gwen sought his financial advice after Connie's broker began to siphon large amounts of cash out of her accounts. With Bobby's guidance, she was sitting on a

nice investment portfolio. Not in a cell like her former advisor.

Hannah spun the wheel of fortune dropping gentle hints to the media that the couple would soon be exchanging nuptials. The press was on them. Everyone wanted to catch Gwen and Bob out on the town. They were seen at every event, hot restaurant and a dinner date on the show "Hell's Kitchen." They were popular with the men, women and the advertisers. Offers for endorsements flooded Hannah's office. Companies wanted them to represent their products since they appealed to most demographics.

Home was San Jose. Gwen attended every home Iceberg game she could. During the NWSL season, Bob stood on the side line or paced the stands while the Tide took the field. He traveled to Germany for the World Cup Games. The press around the couple was a promoters dream. They were photographed at every time they went out even after three years of dating. With the Ice Breakers trading Bob to the Detroit Motors, break up rumors would be the next big seller.

"Can you fucking believe it?" The muscular built man threw random pieces of clothing in the suitcase. Sharp features tensed his jaw clenched in anger. Gwen placed a gentle comforting hand on his shoulder. He stopped his frantic movements and looked at her. His eyes softened as his jaw unclenched. "What am I going to do?" His bright green eyes usually danced like the sea water under the sun when he was in a playful mood, but they weren't dancing. His mood was dark and his eyes the color of pine trees nestled deep in the forest where the sun couldn't reach. *Could she reach him?* Hannah called her as soon as Bobby was told. He would just have to deal with the change. There was no alternative.

"Move to Detroit." Her matter of fact tone camouflaged her fear. Bobby was her safety net, her go to guy. What was she going to do when he moved half way across the country? "It's a playoff year for them. The Motors need veteran players." She ran her hand along the side of his head, smoothing the dark locks into some type of order. When her amber colored eyes settled on his green, they both gave a little smile.

"Veteran? That's very political. Why not old, washed up, over the hill? Hang up the skates Finch!" The professional hockey player knew he was on the downside of his career. San Jose did not want to renew his contract and Detroit needed his help to make the playoffs. "Detroit. At least I'm closer to my folks. Good or bad, whatever way you look at it."

"It's not a bad place to be traded. It could be Cleveland and no chance of playoffs. Don't you have friends on the Motors?" She stopped mid-sentence. "Denny plays the Motors, doesn't he?" Bobby's former rival was now going to be a teammate. This was the underlying issue for his discomfort. She moved back to the rocks glass on the dresser, taking a small sip of the scotch to settle her nerves.

As she handed the glass to Bobby, she could see the play of emotions on his face. He was struggling with the situation just as he had struggled when his former lover left him to marry a high school sweetheart. She searched for a way to support him. Playing along side Denny Newsome could be disastrous. The men hated each other. "I'm scheduled for a banquet in Detroit just after St. Patrick's Day. So you won't be by yourself for long." Gwen leaned her backside

against the closet door.

"That will look good. You visiting me. When did Hannah set that up?" Bobby flipped a pair of pants into the suitcase.

"Last fall, I think." Gwen nodded.

"She knew this was in the works. Why didn't she at least warn me?" He talked out his frustration. "That's why you are scheduled in Detroit. She just didn't know when, but she knew." Gwen moved towards him wrapping her arms around his waist and gave him a hug. She leaned into his warmth for a moment. They were friends, best friends. With Hannah representing them, it was easy for their schedules to cross. Both professional athletes had a lot to lose if the truth came out about Gwen's sexuality.

"Fuck!" Bobby brought her back to the present as he pointed to a picture of himself on SNN. The network had switched to a split screen of Denny Newsome and himself.

"How are the former rivals, now teammates on the Motors going to get along?" The network ran footage of the Breakers versus Motors game from two seasons ago. Bobby's face bloodied and a front tooth missing the other player being led to the penalty box and screaming obscenities at Bobby. Gwen laughed at the frozen frame of Bobby holding his tooth in his hand.

"Jesus, what am I going to do if he starts shit?" Bobby roughly sat on the bed. The large mattress bounced under his weight. "How come you are never the center of negative press?"

"Do you even remember why we met? That picture of me in the rags just after the league was formed. What was the headline?" Gwen raised her voice. She loved Bobby but sometimes his self centered focus made her question how he really felt about her.

"Oh Jesus. That was ...? What's her.." He snapped his fingers together knowing his friend never got over the woman in the photograph. Gwen still had a few pictures of her ex-girlfriend which she kept stashed in her house somewhere. If she was having a really bad day, she'd pull them out and look at them. When Christopher passed away, she stayed in bed crying. It wasn't until she collapsed from exhaustion that Bobby discovered a velvet ring box and the picture of Keegan. "Keegan? What kinda of name is that?"

"Gaelic." Gwen took a seat across from him in one of the plush chairs. Taking a long sip of the bottled water she left on the table earlier. "It means fiery little one." Her voice softened.

"Was she?" His smile was genuine as his dimples stood out prominently on his cheeks.

"Absolutely." She never admitted she loved the photo of her kissing Keegan. It was one of her favorites. She denied everything to the press, to everyone, except for herself. She knew where the photo was taken. Gwen never denied her preference for women. Yet there was a large financial impact to her if her public image was tarnished. She had the league looking at her for exposure to the masses. Fame changed who she allowed into her private life. Her life was about

image and what the sponsors wanted. Just go with the plan, just like Hannah coached. Stick to Bobby like glue. Don't let the press get the upper hand. Deny everything. *Who was the woman with her?* I don't know, since that isn't me. She learned to lie very well over the years, the practice of self preservation. The media didn't care about her. They just wanted to make money.

"Did she release the photos?" He asked, not remembering the specific details that propelled the blonde athlete into his life. Gwen shook her head.

"I never found out. I hired a private investigator but no answers." Regret quickly filled Gwen's heart. She never found out how *Look* obtained the photos. The confrontation she had with Tara Washington, Keegan's best friend, minutes before the NWSL game between San Jose and Atlanta game still haunted her. Seething would be the term to describe her emotional state as she stepped into the center circle to confront Tara Washington, Keegan's best friend and college teammate. The outcome of the fight still had Gwen reeling to this day. Her pattern of self destruction continued on, following her in every situation, blaming her troubles on someone else. Her mother for her issues with relationships. Keegan for her issues with trust.

When brown eyes met green, Gwen sighed and nervously touched the Claddagh ring on her finger. The one reminder of the relationship with Keegan she kept in the open. The ring she bought for Keegan sat buried deep in the drawer of her dresser. When the press asked about her engagement to Bob, she thought about wearing it to add fuel to the fire. She thought about selling it, but she couldn't part with it. It reminded her of happier times.

"Gwen?" Bobby called her to when she saw him staring. "Where did you just go?"

"Traveling down the path of my mistakes." Her voice was quiet as her disheartened mood surfaced. She didn't want to lose her best friend.

"Keegan was from Michigan wasn't she?" Bobby questioned as he sat on the side of the bed surrounded by a sea of pants, shirts and jackets, his mind made up as to what he was taking with him.

"Yes, and you're cleaning up the mess you're making. I'm not your mother or your maid!" Gwen called as she walked into the bathroom. She didn't see the smile on his face as he watched her walk away. Bobby knew her well enough to know she still loved the woman who walked away from her years ago.

"Are you taking me to the airport?" He called after her.

"I thought the Motors were sending a car for you." Gwen came back into the room. His shaving kit and attaché bag in hand. "You really should shave. You're looking scruffy."

"Scruffy!" He jumped to his feet and gripped Gwen by the waist throwing her over his shoulder. Her screams and laughter could be heard outside. Bobby spun her around a few times before promptly depositing her on top of the clothing strung across the bed. He jumped on the bed next to her sprawled form. "Never call me scruffy!" He smiled and touched her face. "Sorry for being

such an ass."

Gwen kissed his palm and smiled back at him. His hand warmed her cheek. "It's okay, but we are definitely not getting married this week." Teasing him was her favorite past time.

"Gwen," His voice deepened but came out softly. "I'm scared and you're not going to be there. What if I screw up? What if this is the worst move I make in my career? I've got to be smart, I don't have many options left."

"Well, I think you turning down the deal with New York the year they went on to win the championship was your biggest mistake, but I'm not perfect either."

"What mistake did you make?"

"I let Keegan get away and then I proceeded to screw up any relationship I've had."

"You've got me and Shannon." Bobby reminded her of the support she had.

"Shannon, I should call her. You know Chuck is not going to be happy with you leaving the west coast."

"Why?"

"No more tickets to games."

"Well Mr. Abbott can get over it. Besides, with all those girls in the house, he is better off going to the ballet."

"Did you go to the ballet?" Gwen was wondering where his thought pattern was.

"Of course. Didn't you?" He stood up and grabbed her hand. "Now get off my clothes. You're holding up my progress." The tension was eased. They would get through this. One way or another, they would survive.

Chapter 2

"You stubborn, pig headed pain in the ass!" Ashley Whitmore's loud irritated voice echoed through her kitchen. Pacing back in forth in front of the sliding glass door, the strawberry blonde glanced out the door to check on the figures in the yard. She ran her hand through her long hair in frustration the turned to lock eyes with familiar striking ice blue ones. Eyes the same color as hers stared back, the battle of wills had begun. "Give me one good reason why you don't want to go?"

"I can give you a hundred!" Keegan Garry shot back at her sister. For the last month they had argued with each other about attending the Emerald Foundation's annual fundraising banquet. Keegan, the oldest Garry sibling sat at the kitchen table tapping her finger tips across the wooden surface. Hidden under the table, her leg bounced wildly. *Why couldn't Ash just drop the subject?* Queasiness assaulted her stomach causing a roller coaster of emotions as she watched and listened to her sister rant. Silently, she prayed the dry piece of toast she ate this morning would stay down. Her movements became more frantic as Ashley's patience was coming to an end. The angry motion of her sister caused her sickness to escalate. "Sit down. You're making me ill." Ashley stopped moving and quieted her voice.

"It's the foundation."

"I understand, but I'm not going." Keegan pushed back her chair as she stood and moved to the kitchen sink. Her hands automatically went to the swell of her stomach. Twelve weeks of the pregnancy down, twenty four to go, she mentally calculated. Every morning was a new adventure as to what her rebellious body would surprise her with. Today, her feet were swollen to the point she couldn't get on her regular shoes. Instead, she wore soft brown leather moccasins. Her clothes were getting tighter and snugger. She didn't know what she was going to do by the time the ninth month came around. Dressed in her favorite pair of jeans, well worn thread bare Levis were tight, but she was able to fit into them. Soon, she would have to resort to elastic waistbands and she wasn't looking forward to them or wearing granny panties. Being pregnant and wearing a thong just didn't seem right. Her navy ribbed t-shirt was tucked into her waistband pouched a little at the waist and she wore an untucked and unbuttoned long sleeve white shirt over it. Absently, she ran her hands under the cold water as she worked on taking her rings off her swollen fingers. She removed the Claddagh ring she wore on her right ring finger and examined it before she carefully set it on the windowsill above the kitchen sink.

"You could."

"You've heard my reasons. Why do you think I would want to go?" Keegan countered her sister's reasoning. Gwen Lerner was the celebrity guest at the banquet and she didn't want to go. Keegan's eyes fell on the ring Gwen had given her, a match to the one she gave Gwen. They vowed never to doubt the importance of how they felt about one another. Not any more, Keegan sighed at her thought. Wiping her eyes as the tears of pain threatened to fall. She was going to get over Gwen.

Today...tonight....she was going on a date. A real actual date with no Tony in sight. Although she loved the big puppy dog of a man like a brother, she needed time away from him. Her date should be interesting. Regina Parker and Carrie Micah were heavily pursuing a relationship with her. Both women were colleagues with her at the hospital. Gina, a former college classmate, worked as a nurse in the Oncology unit. Carrie was a doctor, an OBGYN in the practice Keegan went to. Keegan's job as a Physical Therapist had her in a different section of the hospital so she didn't cross paths with either woman often. Yet Gina had tracked her down a few times to ask her to meet for coffee in the hospital cafeteria. The nurse finally got up the nerve to ask Keegan to dinner and a movie. Keegan thought over the offer for a week before agreeing. There must have

been a full moon because as soon as she agreed, Keegan ran into Carrie in the hallway and the husky blonde doctor asked her to dinner. Feeling a little off kilter about dating an OBGYN, Keegan made the doctor wait a few days for her answer. She agreed to the dates because Ashley, Danny and Tony were on her case to get out of the house and find a social life. Neither woman set off sparks as far as Keegan was concerned, but she needed to start somewhere. If any thing, maybe the dates would lead to friendship. It wasn't as if she was looking to get involved in a committed relationship. She just needed to get out of the house.

Deep down, Keegan didn't want to go on either date. She wasn't even sure why she agreed, but she did, and Gina was scheduled to pick her up in a few hours. Tomorrow night, she was going out with Dr. Micah.

"Keegan, you have to..."

"Drop it. I'm over it. Jesus Christ, I have two dates this weekend. What else do you want me to do to prove I'm over Gwen?" Keegan rung her hands together, trying to ease the discomfort she was feeling and turned towards her sister. At five foot four she was the smallest in her family, her slightly wavy chocolate colored hair hung just past her slight shoulders. She had the build of an athlete. Although she was thinner and lankier in comparison to the days she played soccer in college or for the national team. At times, she barely recognized her reflection in the mirror. Her muscle mass decreased dramatically since she left the national team. She no longer had the shoulders of linebacker. While playing at Weston University, she had been so heavy Coach Redding actually put her on a diet and training regimen. They laughed about it now, because with the exception of the small pouch at her mid-section, she was too skinny. In an effort to stay in shape, each morning she ran or did yoga. Nothing too stressful as Jonathan Sparks, her trainer and friend, guided her back to a healthier lifestyle. She only did as much as her body would allow her to do. Lately, her body was telling her to stay in bed for the next six months.

Matching blue eyes locked again, in a soft understanding. "Go with Danny. Stay in the hotel. Make it a girls weekend and I'll take care of the little man." Keegan glanced out the window into the backyard where a small raven haired boy and a tall slender cinnamon haired woman playing in the freshly fallen snow. Rapping lightly on the glass, Keegan got the pair's attention. Quickly the woman grabbed the small boy's gloved hand and helped him wave towards the house. A bright smile appeared quickly as Keegan waved back. Danny Martin, Ashley's best friend and business partner was a beautiful woman, but she and Keegan would never be more than close friends. As hard as Ashley tried to push the two women together, there were other factors at work.

Ashley moved to her side wrapping an arm around her sister's waist and leaning her head on Keegan's shoulder. They watched Danny lie down in the powdery fluff and make a snow angel. With a light snow falling, the sun shone down on the pair, casting a halo around them. It was the warmest day they had had in awhile and no one was complaining.

"He's spoiled rotten." Ashley commented.

"He deserves to be spoiled." Keegan said as she nodded her head, agreeing with her sister. When

Ashley announced she was expecting a child, the family was very surprised. With her divorce from Jason Whitmore finally settled, Ashley decided to have Andy, a choice that Keegan was forever grateful for.

At twenty nine years of age, Keegan questioned her decisions and if she would make the same choices. She picked up her ring from the window sill and tried to put it back on her finger. Ash held her hand out for it. Hesitating for a few seconds, Keegan placed the ring in her sister's hand.

"You still wear this." It was a statement, not a question. Keegan was rarely seen without the band. "Maybe you should reach out to her. Circumstances are different. I heard she retired and got some deal with Sports National Network."

"I can't Ash. I just can't." Keegan willed away the tears began to form. An overwhelming feeling of guilt pained her whenever Gwen's name was mentioned. She always had Gwen's best interest at heart, but she continued to struggle her decision. She pushed Gwen away. There were so many things she could have done differently. If she told the truth, maybe she would still have a relationship with Gwen.

"I suppose you know she's the celebrity guest at the banquet and that is the real reason you don't want to go?" Ashley watched her sister's reaction closely. She knew her older sibling had a bond with Gwen. The connection her sister had with the now famous soccer player haunted her to this day.

"I just don't want to see her. Plus I'm fat and getting fatter by the minute. I don't want to be in front of the audience. That's why you and Danny are going besides your company won the award." Keegan knew her excuse was lame but she didn't care. There was no way she was going to the banquet. Her physical appearance had little to do with her choice. Emotionally, she wasn't certain she could even be in the same room with Gwen. Every time she saw her former lover on the television, she had a hard time watching. Keegan knew her feelings for Gwen ran deep, but she also knew the blonde had gone on without her.

"Thanks, thanks a lot. Maybe you should go and try to talk to her. At least make peace with her. Maybe this way you can move on. Seriously Kee. When is the last time you went out with someone more than once?"

"I went out with Sandy for a couple months. I've got dates lining up at the door." Keegan threw her hand towards the front door.

"With Gina?" Ashley asked as her eyebrow quirked up.

"Yes."

"Really...that's interesting. I thought you said there was no spark and she was stalker like material?"

"I never said that. You called her a stalker. There isn't any spark, but I couldn't think of a good

reason to turn her down. Besides, you, Danny and Tony are on my case about dating. Why is there such an interest in my love life?"

"You compare everyone to her." Ashley sighed, the last thing she wanted to do was hurt her sister. "Do you remember the promise you and Meghan made Thanksgiving weekend?" Keegan smiled and nodded her head. Keegan promised not to date Danny. In turn, Meghan promised Gwen would never be on her dance card. "Gwen hit on Meg when she was visiting DC." The painful expression on Keegan's face made her pause. "I never told you because I...I wasn't sure how you would take it." Ash hoped the truth would make Keegan realize she needed to get over Gwen.

"Did anything happen?" Stunned by her sister's confession, she couldn't picture Meghan with Gwen.

"She was lucky Meg didn't deck her." The sound of laughter in Ashley's voice brought a reassuring hug from her oldest sister. "She's not a fan." Ash ruffled Keegan's hair. The sisters knew their sibling had a fierce temper and tremulously large crush on Danielle Martin. They also knew Danny would never cross the line with Meghan out of fear of losing her relationship with the Garry family. The older girls constantly teased Meg about Danny until finally Meg broke into tears. They never teased her again.

"Should we order pizza?" Keegan asked, trying to change the subject even though her stomach was still queasy. Breaking her gaze away from the backyard to her sister, she smiled at her sister, knowing she had won the argument.

"I'm sure Andy won't object. Don't ask me where he puts it at. I swear he is getting taller and skinner every day." Ashley said as she looked out in the backyard.

"When is your doctor's appointment?" Ashley grabbed the cordless phone and looked at the list of numbers posted on the refrigerator.

"Which one? I have blood tests this week. OBGYN next week and Dr. Wiley at end of the month." Keegan rattled off her appointments as if she was looking at her calendar. She knew immediately when and where she needed to be. So far she had been in remission twenty months of remission. With her check up with Dr. Wiley, she planned on increasing the number.

"Do you want me to go with you to see Dr. Micah?" Ash sat at the table. She knew her sister would never ask.

"You want to go the OBGYN with me?" A nod from Ashley produced a teasing smile. Keegan flashed her younger sister a toothy grin. "Sure, you want to try out the stirrups first?" A gentle smack on the arm and a chuckle was Keegan's answer. "I'm seeing Doctor Dev Simpson. She's in practice with Carrie. I hope she'll send me to get a sonogram." Keegan touched her belly.

"Oh, you are going to be one of those mothers who take their kid to get pictures every month?" Ashley pointed at her belly as she remembered Andy's trips to the photographer. "Wait until

mom gets on your case about new photos."

"Have you talked to mom?" Keegan moved towards the sliding glass door leading into the backyard. Their parents retired and moved to Florida just over a year ago and the couple was enjoying their retirement and sunshine. Distance was not an issue. Daily phone calls and visits kept the family close.

"This morning. She mentioned something about us going there for Mother's Day. Do you think you will be able to go?"

"I think it will depend on this one." She rubbed small circles on the roundness of her belly. "Tara and Judith have been after me to visit. I could make a trip of it. Stopping in Atlanta and driving to Panama City. I haven't done a road trip in awhile."

"The last road trip I recall is when you were sick and took off without anyone knowing." Ashley's anger got the better of her as her voice raised an octave. Keegan looked at her sister. She had tried to explain that she needed to get away from everyone she knew. She needed to get lost in order to find herself.

"Still pissed about that." Keegan walked towards her sister and kissed the top of her head.

"Not as pissed as mom or dad." Ashley reminded her of the time she took off and didn't tell anyone. Her sister showed up on Meghan's doorstep one night in Washington DC. "If I had known about what you did, I'd be just as mad."

"Yeah, well sometimes you got to do what you got to do." Her hand skimmed across Ashley's shoulders in a loving gesture.

"Well next time you do what you got to do, take someone with you!" Ashley said as she dialed the pizza parlor.

"Yes, Mom!" Keegan's immature answer was followed by sticking her tongue out.

"Prime example of how to act your age." Danny said as she opened the sliding glass door, carrying three year old Andy. "Do I even want to know what you are arguing about?" Her best friend and business partner Ashley Garry-Whitmore gave an innocent shrug.

"No."

"Yes." Ashley looked Danny. "I'm telling her no more surprise road trips by herself."

"I'm gonna have to agree with her on that Keegan." Danny said as she set Andy down in a booster seat. "The big guy here wanted something to drink."

"I'm just ordering pizza."

"Peezzza!" Andy shouted and smiled at his family.

"Exactly." Ashley said as she proceeded to order a small cheese pizza for Andy and a large veggie pizza for the adults.

"I need to get stuff done around the house." Keegan said as she stared at her sister's back yard, mentally going over the tick list of her projects. She thought about the late storm which had leaves and twigs sticking out of the snow drifts covering the flower beds.

"I thought we agreed that you would take Redding up on the offer of having the team come over and do the landscaping this year. Keegan, you can't keep over doing it." Ashley expressed her concern for her older sister's health.

Keegan turned to her and mouthed the word "MOM."

"You're lucky mom isn't here because she'd haul you on to her lap and give you a swat." Ashley wagged her finger at the dark hair woman, giving her a grin.

"Don't worry about it. I called Ted and took him up on the offer. And with your sister's help, we can probably get the softball team over to help do spring clean up." Danny placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "And you, quit being an over protective hen." Finding a common ground between the stubborn siblings was becoming a full time job. "The team will be over on Saturday morning for a breakfast meeting, we can ask them. Carla still has her landscaping company."

"Okay, it was my idea in the first place." Keegan went to the refrigerator and got the milk out for Andy. She started to slide a chair over to the cupboard to reach for a sippy cup.

"No way." Danny said as she gently pushed the chair back. With little effort, Danny's five ten frame easily grabbed a cup from the third shelf. "You should rearrange your cupboards before you get..."

"Too big and a short joke great, thanks Danny. By the way, you're going to the banquet. I'll take care of the little man." Keegan watched the redhead's reaction. When Danny glanced over at Ash, she shook her head.

"You had to go there." Danny looked at Ashley. "I'm sorry, if I'd known what she was up to, I'd never have left the kitchen. In her defense, she just wants to see you happy." Danny said as she slid out a kitchen chair to sit.

"I am happy." Keegan smiled as she lied. Her life was better but happy she wasn't quite sure.

"You're a liar." Ashley got up and went into the other room. "Don't listen to her Danny. She's full of s...h...i...t!" Keegan smiled. Since Andy's ability to learn new words was quickly becoming full of colorful adjectives, the family had started to spell words out.

"Maybe you just want to fulfill some unsatisfied fantasy!" Keegan called to Ashley who was

now in the family room. The sounds of angry hurried footsteps in the hallway were followed by a frazzled strawberry blonde's head popping into the kitchen.

"Gwen Lerner has never been in a fantasy of mine!"

"Good to know Ashley." Danny nodded to the red faced woman standing in the doorway. "Quit picking on her. I'm gonna have to listen to it for days." Her remark directed at the elder sibling.

"As if you can't handle one of Ashley's rants, besides, what's she going to do? Take away the company check book?" Keegan went to the pantry to get a package of hot chocolate. She held one up as an offer to Danny. When the red head nodded, she grabbed a second one.

"So, what is this road trip talk?" Danny asked as she took the warm mug of coco from Keegan.

"We were talking about mom wanting everyone to go to Florida for Mother's Day." Keegan turned to find her sister smirking. "Did mom say anything about Meg coming down?" Keegan let her gaze wonder to the red head across the table from her. She noticed Danny's posture straighten up.

"No one has heard from her, the little brat. She's probably out with some chicky for Valentine's Day. It must be nice to have a job that requires you to be on a golf course all day." Ashley sent her sister a wink as she left the kitchen. Her best friend's discomfort was not unnoticed as they discussed Meg's personal life.

"I'm not sure Dr. Dev will let me fly. I could drive down and stay with Tara for a day or two. I haven't seen them in awhile. I'll check with Carrie when I see her tomorrow."

"You're going out with Dr. Micha?" Danny shivered visibly. "I just couldn't image my OBGYN asking me out on a date."

"No and don't say things like that. She's not my primary doctor. I felt bad, she was calling me all the time. She a nice woman but I just...I just."

"She's not Gwen Lerner!" Ashley said as she came back into the kitchen

"Shut up!" Keegan snapped.

"The sooner you realize that the only person you want is..."

"It's not going to happen. So quit baiting me." Keegan slid out of her chair and went to Ashley's side. "I'm happy honey. I am. I'll be alright." She wrapped her arms around her sister's waist and hugged her close. "It's a choice I made and I'm not changing anything. Gwen and I are two completely different people." Keegan stepped back and looked into the pair of matching eyes. "For Christ sake, she's engaged to a hockey player....a man. I doubt I'll fit in that picture."

"You know that has to be a cover. Gwen was always open about her preference." Ashley laughed

as she took a seat. "Who are you to talk? You're carrying the rocker's baby."

"People change." Keegan stepped forward and kissed her forehead. "Gwen Lerner is no exception to that. And Tony is not a rocker, he's a teacher."

Chapter 3

Gwen set the itinerary she was reviewing down on her desk. Tomorrow she was leaving for Detroit. Her trip had two purposes: visiting Bobby and to be the Emerald foundation fundraiser and celebrity guest. When Christopher lost his battle with prostate cancer a few years back, Gwen made fund raising a priority.

When she heard the front door bell chime, she wasn't certain she actually heard it. She wasn't expecting a visitor and the guard house hadn't called to announce a guest. For a moment, she stood at the top of the stairs until the impatient person at the door rang the bell again. Maybe it was Maria from next door. The neighbor was always asking for something. The woman didn't drive and her husband could never bother with the store. She had purchased the four bedroom house after she signed an endorsement deal with Battle Wear clothing line. Keegan lived with her in the gated community. For the first year of their relationship, the small defender lived in Michigan with her parents. Gwen almost broke down in tears asking Keegan to live with her. She couldn't go through another six months of separation. Today, she scoffed at the thought. She went through an emotional hell when Keegan left her. Bobby moved. He didn't leave. If anything, their relationship got stronger with the separation and the changes he was going through. It was as if he still lived across town.

Gwen took a quick peek out the sidelight of the door. "Shit." She hissed through her teeth. She was going to kill whoever was manning the guard post. Connie Sherman stood on the cement apron, dressed in a Donna Karan jacket and skirt outfit. Gwen was pissed because she almost bought the same outfit until her financial sense got the best of her and she left the boutique empty handed. Her mother's blonde hair was pulled back in a French twist, with a pair of Jee Vice sunglasses perched on her nose. Gwen leaned her back against the door, preparing for the onslaught she knew would happen once the door was opened. She closed her eyes for a moment and wished she had flown out a day early.

"Connie." Gwen greeted her mother as she swung open the heavy mahogany door. Connie brushed by her and into the house. "Come on in." Gwen commented as she bit the inside of her

cheek.

"It's about time." Connie whipped off her sunglasses as let her eyes rake over Gwen and her outfit. The red cutoff USA t-shirt showcased her tight abdominal muscles and her flat tan stomach, the pair of navy wind pants covered her legs and finishing off with just a pair of white socks. "Dear Lord you look like a homeless person. What if I was the press?"

"The press can't get pass the guard. How did you manage that?" Gwen asked as she moved from the foyer into the kitchen. She gave Connie no other choice but to follow her. Gwen knew Connie thought it rude to entertain guests in the kitchen so she purposely led her there.

"There was this fine young man, a little on the chunky side but once I told him I was your sister."

"You're not my sister, Connie." Gwen felt her temples begin to pound. Her mother's actions no longer surprised her. Connie began pulling the sister routine while Gwen was in college. Her mother was in her late teens when she married Jeff Lerner and had Gwen seven months later. Her parents' union was dissolved within a year and a half. Like most children of divorced parents, Gwen spent most her childhood being shipped between homes. She would stay at Jeff's house once a month and for the most part, she lived with her Great Aunt Molly and Uncle Christopher. Her extended family served as parental figures for her. Molly and Christopher let her make their home her home. Besides finding her aunt and uncle's house, she found peace and solace on the soccer field. Connie hated her playing such a "boy's" sport. Yet Christopher or Poppa as she grew to call him, loved the fact he could teach her the game he loved.

"No one needs to know that. Why are we in the kitchen?" Connie placed her well manicured nails on the granite counter top.

"Because this is where the drinks are." Gwen opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of sports drink. "Would you like something?" Gwen said as she lifted the orange liquid to her mouth.

"Gwen, where are your manners?" Connie huffed as she watched her swallow.

"Don't worry mother, I learned from the best. I would never drop in unexpectedly on someone." Gwen put the plastic bottle back in the icebox. "What do I owe this pleasure to?" The sarcastic tone of Gwen's voice went unnoticed by her visitor. Gwen leaned her backside against the countertop and she shot her mother an icy glare.

"I wanted to see what is going on with Robert. I know you must be heart broken." Connie made no move to comfort her daughter. It wasn't in Connie to see to anyone else's needs but hers.

"Bobby and I are fine. I'm going to see him tomorrow." Gwen could have smacked her forehead like the V-8 commercial. Last time Connie knew she was out of town her entire Waterford crystal collection disappeared. She noticed Connie beginning to fidget under her glare. "What do you need mother?" Gwen decided to cut to the chase. Her mother rarely showed up at her doorstep without a reason.

"Well," Connie began as she walked towards the kitchen table. She let her fingers graze across the top of the table as if she was checking for dust. "I'm running a little short on funds this month." The words floated out of the elder woman's mouth. Gwen found her eyes searching for the date on the wall calendar. It was the middle of the month and her mother had run through her monthly stipend. What did the woman do with her money? Gwen wondered. Of course, the new outfit she was wearing cost close to the amount of her allowance.

"Then take back the outfit you have on!" Gwen snapped. Since making the National and Olympic teams, she made a good deal of money off endorsements. After a tour of Europe, she came home to a pile of debt Connie had compiled under her name. Gwen's accountant set up a monthly stipend to be sent to Connie's account the first of each month.

"This isn't paid for. I went to that little boutique in San Francisco last week. The one you are fond of." Gwen knew exactly how her mother purchased the outfit, her credit line. As soon as Connie was out of the house, Gwen planned on calling the store and giving the manager specific instructions regarding her credit line. "Please Gwen, it's just this one time." Gwen felt her insides turn. How many times had she heard this phrase? It was never just once. "Reginald is ready to get in on the ground floor of a new IPO."

"Do you even know what an IPO is?" Gwen cupped her hands and rubbed them over her face.

"Don't be such a bitch!" Connie turned on her. "You have no idea what you put me through."

"Four husbands and an endless number of boyfriends," Gwen shouted back. "That is what you put me through." Gwen knew her mother was trying to guilt her into giving her more money. "I'm not giving you any more money this month." Gwen folded her arms across her chest. "Connie, you need to leave." Gwen watched her mother contemplate her words. Previous warnings regarding totally severing ties with her mother seemed to resonate with the elder woman.

"If you change your mind, please let me know. I can have Reginald send the proposal to Hannah for review if you would like."

"I have enough investments right now." Gwen felt a stabbing pain of guilt for a moment. "Thank you." She whispered quietly, wishing the woman in her kitchen would act more like a parent than a petulant child.

"Gwen, can you think about it please?" Connie's voice dropped to a softer tone. Her mother looked defeated. "I know I haven't been the best mother in the world, but I'm the only one you have." Connie snapped open her Coach bag and pulled out a lacey handkerchief. She dabbed at her eyes, careful of her makeup.

"Send the information to Hannah." Gwen said as she fell into step behind her mother. She bowed her head as she watched the three inch heels click against the marble floor.

"Thank you Gwen." Connie smiled warmly at her daughter as she walked out of the door. Gwen closed the large door behind her. Getting a sense of déjà vu, she went to the second floor to the end bedroom. From the side window there was a panoramic view of the neighborhood. She saw the slick black Mercedes pull out of her driveway and round the corner and pull up behind a sand colored BMW. Once Connie parked, a tall African American exited the BMW and went to Connie's window. Gwen was unable to make out the words the man was exchanging with her mother. His movements were sharp and agitated. From the distance, Gwen knew the discussion was not friendly. Picking up the phone handset, she called to the front gate to report suspicious activity. As soon as she hung up, the Security SUV rounded the corner. She wondered what Reginald's involvement with Connie really was. Her mother's track record for attracting the wrong man appeared to be continuing. Gwen absently rested the telephone against her cheek. She needed to clear her head. She needed release. Tapping the phone against her cheek, she suddenly smiled and dialed Hannah's number.

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The large sleek black limousine pulled up in front of Gwen's home. The chauffeur came around to the back passenger door to let the client out, a tall slender red head with her hair piled high on the top of her head, exposing the feminine curve of her alabaster neck.

"Miss, would you like me to wait?" The chauffer inquired as he took her slim hand in his. Six months ago, Patrick Rider took over the contract for the New Castle Agency and was still in shock with the luck of his assignment. His duty was to escort the models to their assignments and take them home. Sometimes the assignments would last an entire shift and the next shift would pick up the model. Tonight, he saw the excitement oozing off the woman when he picked her up. He knew her name was Bridgette. The emerald colored Saint Laurent Rive Gauche jacket and skirt brought out the color of her eyes, which danced over his face.

"No Patrick. I will call you when I'm finished." Bridgette Sommers scanned the front of the gorgeous white stucco bi-level home nestled in a secluded neighborhood. She knew this house. She had been here once before, surprised by the client but not disappointed. Elite clientele of the New Castle Agency paid a hefty price for their anonymity. Bridgette knew the special consideration the agency put forth for their clients needs. She would not disappoint her employer or the customer.

Gwen was waiting in the study as the soft sounds of the fire burning in the hearth lulled her. In her hand, she held tight to a glass of wine, a rich burgundy from Napa. The sound of the front door opening and closing reached her ears. The instructions never varied, enter the house and come to the study. Tonight, she wanted to forget. The episode with Connie this afternoon and the pending trip to Detroit had her wound like a top. She needed to relax. She wanted to lose herself in the soft and velvet touch of a woman. No strings attached consensual sex. She wasn't specific about the woman's looks. Just that she be beautiful and willing to abide by Gwen's wishes.

"Can I refill your glass?" The voice was a like Legato, smooth and flowing music to Gwen's ears.

She studied the woman entering the room and was not disappointed. Tall and slender with a curvaceous figure, the redhead sent a dazzling smile her way. This woman could easily be a model, maybe a little too heavy for the current trend of runway models, but perfect for Gwen. She felt a tightening in her stomach and a twitch in her groin. This was exactly what the doctor ordered, or at least Hannah arranged for her.

"That isn't necessary. If you would like something to drink, please help yourself." Gwen gave an absent wave to the red head, directing her to the bar. She seemed vaguely familiar. She didn't want attachment. She wanted to feel nothing but release. She felt her center ache at the profile of the escort pouring a small amount of wine into her glass. She will do, do very nicely. Gwen stood up her taupe colored Gianfranco Ferré pants suit hanging against her body. She crossed the room to the bar. She placed her hand on the escort's wrist. "What do you like to be called?"

"Bridgette." The woman said touching her red colored lips to her glass as she took a sip of the wine. Gwen carefully studied Bridgette for a moment. "The wine is very good." She said as she set the glass back on the glossy black tiled built in bar. "But you take my breath away." The woman whispered as she lowered her lips to Gwen's. The tanginess of the wine mixed with the sweetness of her lips. Her scent was a blend of wild flowers and citrus like a tropical paradise, reminding Gwen of the trip to Hawaii she and Keegan had taken. Gwen placed her hands on Bridgette's waist and pulled her closer.

"Thank you." Gwen murmured against her lips. Bridgette traced her fingers down Gwen's neck to her shoulder. Loosening the top couple of buttons, Bridgette placed small kisses on Gwen's skin, along her neck and down to her clavicle. She could definitely lose herself in this woman. A few hours of a lovely woman's company was just what she needed. "Come with me." Gwen said as she moved the woman towards the guest room at the end of the hallway. She never took a guest to the master suite. Her bedroom was their bedroom and she didn't want to share the space with just anyone. Maybe if she found someone to fall in love with, they could free her from Keegan's memory, from Keegan's love. Gwen unbuttoned Bridgette's jacket and slipped the garment from her shoulders. Her lacy black bra was in sharp contrast to her pale skin. Gwen ran the tips of her fingers over the material covering her breasts. She saw the reaction her touch caused. Bridgette's nipples jumped to attention and Gwen lowered her fingers to touch them through the sheer material. Grasping the front clasp, she opened her bra, freeing the escort's breasts from the confines of the material. Gwen lowered her mouth and tasted the pebbled skin. She felt Bridgette shiver as her lips touched the sensitive skin. Her hands roamed the expanse of the woman's back, running along her waist to the zipper at the back of her skirt. Slowly lowering the zipper, Gwen let all the material covering her pool at Bridgette's feet. She let her lips travel across Bridgette's breasts, down her stomach and towards the apex of her thighs. Her hands explored the flesh of her ass, across her hips and down her thighs. Exploring the contours of Bridgette's body, she let her warm soft hands smooth the landscape. It had been a long time since she indulged in the comfort of a woman. Nuzzling the coarse amber hairs between the woman's thighs, Gwen breathed in the scent of arousal. She pushed her thighs wider and gazed upon the pulsing flesh before her. She swiped her tongue against Bridgette's center, hearing the red head whimper as her tongue touched the quivering flesh. A hand gripping her hair returned her to a position against Bridgette's center. "Like that?" Gwen question came out a slight chuckle.

"I don't know if I can stand." The model's voice quivered as she spoke.

"Then don't." Gwen said as she backed the woman to the edge of the bed and gently pushed her onto the mattress. "Tell me to stop if you're uncomfortable."

"That won't happen." Bridgette confessed as Gwen continued to kiss her skin.

When she returned to her position between the woman's thighs, Gwen smiled as she heard. "Not a chance in hell."

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The morning after was always the worst. Huddled in the corner of the shower, Gwen leaned against the cool tiles, her arms wrapped around her knees as she sat crying. The hot water ran out over ten minutes ago, but she sat hating where she was in her life. She took comfort in the arms of a woman who meant nothing to her. She should have never slept with the women in Greece after the games. If she hadn't, maybe she and Keegan would still be together. The guilty feeling always followed the next day. It wasn't as if she was cheating on Keegan. She had never technically cheated on Keegan. They were broken up. She didn't cheat on her last night either, yet every time Gwen slept with someone she felt as if she had.

"You've got to get over this." Gwen chastised herself as she scrambled to her feet. The cold water numbed her from head to toe. Slowly, she stretched her muscles trying to get some feeling into her limbs. With shaky hands she turned off the water and grabbed a bath sheet. Her teeth chattered slightly as she rubbed the soft towel over her skin. Why was Keegan popping into her thoughts lately? She went months without a thought of her former girlfriend but lately, the small fiery player was haunting her. Maybe Bobby's move to Detroit sparked her subconscious. After the games in Greece, she avoided Michigan at all costs. A few months ago when Hannah approached her about the Emerald event, she agreed without asking where it was. When she learned the event would be in Detroit, she gave Hannah a look but didn't argue with her manager. The function and purpose paled in comparison to the geographical location. This morning she would travel to Detroit and tomorrow, she would be the guest of honor at the Emerald fundraiser held at Weston University, Keegan's alma mater.

Gwen shivered and pulled her robe off the door and put it on. She grabbed a towel, wrapped her hair in it, then flipped it over her head out of the way. She looked into the steamed mirror, tired brown eyes reflected back at her. She assumed her late night activities with the escort had something to do with the dark circles under her eyes. Gwen examined her body as she ran her fingers along skin to a spot just above her breast. A light bruise was visible against her tan skin. Here was the proof of her guilt laughing at her. She shouldn't be guilty. She was a grown woman with needs. She answered to no one. She wasn't committed to anyone. Her thoughts got the best of her. At one time, she and Keegan did commit to each other. Was she the one to break that commitment? Gwen didn't know the answer to that question. Maybe Shannon did. Shannon Abbott, the captain of the Olympic team had a front row seat during Gwen and Keegan's break up. She'd called Shannon to get her opinion. Gwen ran her fingers through her wet hair, trying to loosen the tangles. She shut Shannon out when the mother of three asked her to talk about

Keegan and about what happened between the women. Looking back on the situation, she should have done a million things differently. Her stubborn personality always got in her way. Afraid Keegan would blame her for the break up, Gwen made certain anyone important in her life knew Keegan left her. By the time the team left Greece, they knew not to mention Keegan Garry in front of Gwen. Gwen should have taken the high road and listened to her friends and teammates when they wanted to talk about Keegan. She fell in love with the feisty player who led a small Midwestern university to the Division II championship. Keegan was put in the spot light after winning the NCAA women's soccer championship. The goal she hit from forty yards out still ran on highlight reels year after year. Weston University won the championship against Adams College, a real David versus Goliath match up. Not many experts gave Weston a chance against the Colorado school. By the end of the match, every soccer fan in the United States knew of Weston University and their sparkplug player, Keegan Garry. Gwen was at the match and sat in awe as the small dark haired fiery player took control of the game. No matter how many defenders Adams put on her, Keegan pulled out of the pack and streaked towards the goal. Gwen had never seen anything like it in her career. She wished she had a game as fantastic as Keegan did. By the end of the ninety minutes, Keegan scored twice and had three assists. The final forty five seconds were still engraved in Gwen's memory. The score tied, the teams battled back and forth. Uncertain at the amount of stoppage time on the referee's watch, the Weston Mustangs trudged down the field. The forwards played the ball into a defensive trap. The Adams defender cleared the ball out but it landed in front of Keegan Garry. The five foot four senior sent the ball sailing towards the goal. The goalie leaped to knock the spinning ball out of the way. Instead, the ball grazed the tips of the goalie's fingers and went into the back of the net. The entire stadium erupted as Keegan's strike scored. Gwen remembered getting to her feet and grasping Shannon's forearm as they watched the underdog Mustangs win the national championship. The Cinderella team pulled off the win of the century. She remembered the tears of joy she cried as the team celebrated. These women deserved the win and the respect they received after winning. Gwen felt a little misty eyed as she remembered. She had yet to meet Keegan, but Gwen felt drawn to her. Three months later, the recent college graduate was trying out for the National team and Gwen met Keegan face to face. She wasn't a person to fall in love at first sight, but the intensity of instant attraction to the dark haired woman scared her. Gwen recalled the electric feeling sparking between them. Like the energy in the air when a lighting storm was happening. Keegan appeared cool and collective. Later, she confessed she was nervous and ready to puke the second Gwen extended hand in meeting. Feeling the sting of tears in the corner of her eyes, Gwen sat down on her bed, their bed. She played the game of denying her feeling towards Keegan for a year. She had a self imposed rule never to have a girlfriend on the team. She didn't want to have a relationship that straddled her personal and professional life. Keegan drove her insane by being her friend and continually dating loser after loser. Finally, one day after working out and running from the practice complex to Gwen's apartment Keegan apologized saying she had to go and get ready for a date. Gwen felt her heart breaking every time Keegan went out on a date. She couldn't let it go on.

"Don't go." Gwen looked into Keegan's sparking blue eyes. "Please don't go." Gwen continued. She lifted her fingers to tilt Keegan's chin towards her lips. "I can't handle it any more." Gwen confessed as she lowered her lips to Keegan's for the first time. Gwen's mouth covered Keegan's without hesitation. The energy that Gwen felt through her body was overwhelming. She had never felt such elation. Sweetness exploded as Keegan's tongue touched hers. Gwen pulled her

closer as her hands investigated Keegan's body, caressing the smooth slopes and curves of Keegan's back. Her fingers skimmed and fondled lightly as she slowly explored Keegan's backside. Downwards, her hands glided across the small of her back and backside to the smooth slanting slope of her hips. "Thank God!" Keegan moaned as she leaned into Gwen's body.

"Why?" Gwen curdled into a ball on her bed. "Why did you leave me?" She questioned the ending of their relationship.

*

Keegan walked along the heavily polished hospital corridor. The high sheen tile reflected the over head florescent lights as her boot cover feet squeaked. After a tough day at work, she just wanted to go home and elevate her feet. Today her patience was exhausted. Most of the time, she worked with patients who followed her instructions or at least attempted to. For the last two hours, she battled with a high school basketball player who just didn't understand why he couldn't move like he used to. Her extremities hurt and especially her lower back hurt. As small as the baby was, it still caused aches and pains to surface quickly. Hiding her swelling middle with a white cardigan sweater, she took to wearing the garment over her standard work scrubs. Dressing and eating was becoming a daily adventure as her body rebelled. Everything she'd put on was tight and binding. Anything she ate would come back up with the exception of a peanut butter and banana sandwiches.

"Keegan!"

Turning towards the voice, she hoped she did not visibly cringe at the sight of Carrie Micah walking towards her. Keegan waved at the small round woman with the blonde pageboy hair style. Their dinner date a few weeks ago was, in a word, disastrous. At the end of the date, as Carrie walked her to the door and tried to kiss her, Keegan had immediately put the kibosh on any romantic plans the doctor was having, telling the blonde she wanted to be friends. Carrie continued to shamelessly flirt with Keegan while at work and during her visits to the practice. The sexual overtures bothered Keegan so much she changed her appointments to days where Carrie was off. She thought of changing practices but she wanted to stay with Dr. Simpson, the high risk and insemination specialist. She found Carrie's behavior a bit unnerving.

"Keegan, I have two tickets to the Motors game next weekend. Bob Finch is playing his first game against his old team. Come with me." Carrie voice held a convincing tone.

Just hearing the name Finch and any news about the newest Motors player made Keegan's mind swirl. Gwen was now associated with the organization putting a damper on her enjoyment of the hockey season. A fact she hated. Offering Carrie a small smile, she tried not to sound rude. The doctor was a charismatic woman, but she wasn't Keegan's type and the line of professionalism was close to being crossed. The OBGYN was not taking no for an answer.

"Carrie, thank you but I really don't feel like going to a game. There's the crowd and the drinking. Besides, I'm not a big hockey fan." Keegan bit the inside of her cheek knowing she was a huge Motors fan. She smiled politely at Carrie and continued towards the elevator. Carrie fell

into step beside her.

"Are you off work?"

"My shift just ended." Keegan pressed her hands against her back trying to ease the stiffness. "God, my back hurts." She wanted to go home take a long hot bubble bath and fall asleep in her bed.

"Are you up for dinner?" Carrie lightly touched the sleeve of her sweater. "Keegan...I know." Carrie looked at the surrounding staff members and patients and gestured for Keegan to follow her in the staff lounge. Keegan nodded, knowing the doctor wanted privacy. Carrie walked into the break room which was empty. The only noise came from the television propped on wall. A local news station was interviewing Gwen Lerner at DET. *I can't win*. Keegan cringed as she watched the screen flip to a shot of Bob and Gwen at the Good Will Games in Washington, DC a few years ago. Maybe it was at that time when Gwen hit on Meghan. Maybe Ashley was right about the relationship between Gwen and the hockey player.

"Look at that. Funny." Carrie said as she glanced at the screen. A bright toothy smile covered her face. "You used to play with her on the National team didn't you?"

"Ironic, isn't it." Keegan said as she sat in one of the hard plastic chair. "Carrie," Keegan started. She could feel her pulse in her ankles throbbing. "I'm really tired."

"I know. I just want to spend some time with you. I think you are a great person. Funny, intelligent, sexy." The doctor was grasping at straws.

"Pregnant doesn't have anything to do with sexy." Keegan argued. Carrie laughed, her eyes wrinkled at the corners.

"Just think about it. What harm can a dinner do? You are eating?" The care taker in her came out.

"Does peanut butter and banana sandwiches count?" Keegan tried to keep the conversation light. "Carrie," Keegan huffed her voice sounded harsher than she intended. Taking a calming breath, she spoke. "I'm going through a major life change here and I don't see any relationship in my future." She watched the doctor's face fall in disappointment. "If you want to go out as friends, I can do that. If you are looking for a romance, I'm afraid you're barking up the wrong tree." Keegan got to her feet. She smiled at Carrie. "Thank you for asking though." Her eyes went to the television set. They jumped back to the live shot from the airport. "Have a good night."

Taking the elevator to the parking garage, Keegan shivered as she walked into the covered area. Grateful for the fact the "Mother to be" parking was close to the elevators. The garage protected her car from being covered in a pile of snow. Sliding behind the steering wheel of her black Jeep Liberty, she took a deep breath and released a sigh. *Why couldn't she just get over the woman on the television?* There were plenty of women who found her attractive and asked her out. She just didn't see the point in pursuing a relationship with someone she wasn't interested in. Her date with Gina revealed the nurse was potential stalker material as Ashley predicted. Her sister was

right about Gina from the start. Ashley didn't trust the fine featured porcelain skinned nurse as far as she could throw her. Not athletic by nature, Ashley couldn't throw that far.

Flipping on the radio, she listened to the news reports on the weather as the winter storm rolled across the Detroit metro area. Sitting at the wheel she contemplated going back into the safety of the hospital. Go back and say yes to a date with the OBGYN. "Ha!" Keegan laughed at the thought. What type of relationship starts off in stirrups and latex gloves? Not the kind she was looking for. Pulling out of the staff garage, she braced for the long slow ride home. To keep her mind occupied, she thought about the long hot bath she would take once she got home. She'd round out the evening with reading a good book. She just needed to make it home in one piece.

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The news reporter shoved a large microphone in Gwen's face. She smiled politely but continued to walk through the airport.

"Are you moving to the Detroit area?" The reporter continued to follow her. "When's the wedding?" His lanky figure was blocking her escape route when an airline employee noticed her dilemma. She stepped forward and took Gwen's arm.

Wrapping her jacket tighter, Gwen nodded and slipped into the airline's private cubby just off the main terminal. The elderly gray haired woman loosened her grip on Gwen's elbow.

"Are you okay Ms. Lerner?" The woman asked as she stepped away and walked to a white courtesy telephone.

"Yes, thank you."

"Don't worry. I'll get that idiot out of your way. It must be a slow news day if he is camping out at the airport." She picked up the handset and was connected to the terminal operator. "Hi Carol. It's Alexis from Select Air."

She stopped to listen and smiled sweetly at Gwen, who was quietly wondering if she had practiced the smile or if it came natural. Like the "good-byes" the attendants announced as passengers departed the aircraft.

"It seems a news crew has breached the terminal security. Can you send Tim or one of the guards this way?" A few moments of silence and she continued. "Yes, thanks Carol. Of course, I'll stop by later this week." Replacing the handset in the cradle she turned her attention to Gwen. "If you give them a few minutes, security will clear the terminal. It's a slow snow day so they will be eager to ruin someone's day." Gwen saw the twinkle of amusement in her eyes.

"You've been very kind and after the day I've had, I'm thankful." Her flight was awful. Her plane was delayed getting into Chicago and the layover lasted an additional three hours because of snow. She was four hours late and the storm which held her up in Chicago was now pounding the Detroit metropolitan area. Bobby had a game at home tonight which she was supposed to go

to, but with the delay she would miss majority of it. There was supposed to be a car to pick her up but, she wasn't sure if that was still going to happen. It was looking like she was going to have to find a ride. Maybe the news crew would give her a lift, what a joke that would be. Maybe renting a car was an option but she wasn't an expert driving in the snow. On prior visits to Detroit during the winter months Keegan had driven, since she had grown up in the snow and could drive through the wet sloppy mess. Gwen, to this day, was amazed at the nonchalant way her former girlfriend got behind the wheel during a winter storm. "Snow's nothing, it's the ice that will get ya." She repeated the words Keegan had told her during a visit.

"I think my luggage is sitting in the O'Hara terminal. They just barely got me on the connection. I'm grateful I've got my carryon." Gwen's brown eyes studied the small woman in front of her. After years of receiving this certain look, she knew. She knew she had met this woman before, but had no idea where. Her career took her across the globe. Meeting thousands and thousands of people as the years went by. Winning the gold medal just fueled the public to just get a little closer. Sometimes too close. The woman in front of her didn't appear to be an avid groupie, but who could tell?

"You probably don't remember me, but I met you years ago." Alexis started as she smoothed down her uniform. "My son Ted coaches the women's soccer team at Weston University. You came over during a holiday with one of the players." Gwen nodded. She knew Ted Redding, Keegan's college coach. They stopped in to his house for a few minutes during the holiday open house.

"I've met your son a few times. I was in town with Keegan Garry for the holidays."

"Yes. Oh Keegan, such a bad run of luck. Oh, when was it?" The older woman tapped her black pump against the low loop carpet with the Select Airline logo printed on it. As she sought through her memory bank for the information she was about to convey.

"Alexis, there is an emergency at Gate 18." A tall clean shaven bald man ran past them on his way towards the gates. Catching the worried look in her co-worker's eyes, Alexis turned to follow him.

"This door will lead you to the employee lounge, if you make a right, you will be back in the main terminal. Welcome to Detroit, Ms. Lerner." With haste the woman disappeared through a door.

Gwen stood looking out the window at the snow pounding towards the earth's surface. The fluffy white crystals fell in waves on to the tarmac. A yellow bubble light on top of the enclosed tractor was flashing as the operator made pass after pass across the roadway trying to clear the way for airport traffic. The environment was such a contrast to the soft beaches and rolling waves of San Jose. Hannah hinted at the issue of relocating to Detroit to be closer to Bobby. Her career would benefit from being on the east coast. SNN, the Atlanta based network was probing the former pro athlete to sign a contract for commentator. With more college programs developing on the eastern seaboard, a centralized location would be a great career move. Bobby sold his home in San Jose and vowed never to live in a town where he was traded from. There wasn't anyone left

in the city she was close with. Shannon lived in San Diego, but being a mother to three children and a wife didn't leave the former professional soccer player with much time on her hands. Gwen opened her cell phone and saw the eight missed calls, one from Shannon and Hannah and the rest from Bobby. Thumbing through the menu on her cell phone, Gwen read the digital read out for Shannon.

"Helloww." A small voice answered after the second ring.

"Hi! Is your Mom there?"

"This is Missy." A childlike sing song voice came through the receiver. Gwen smiled as she thought about the curly-brown haired child with two missing teeth.

"Missy, hi sweetie. Is your mommy or daddy around?" Like most adults talking to a child, Gwen's voice mimicked the singing tone of the child on the other end.

"No." And the line went dead. Gwen stared at the receiver for a moment. *You've got to be kidding me. No wonder Shannon never returns calls.*

Taking a deep breath she redialed the number. After the third ring, Shannon picked up. "No don't. I've got the phone honey...Hello."

"Hey there mom...want to trade one away?" Gwen smiled as she heard the squeal in the background as a child ran away.

"Would I be considered a horrible mother if I said yes? Missy's got this new thing of answering the phone. It wouldn't be bad if she didn't hang up on everyone. Solicitors are fine but Chuck's boss is another thing. Hey you, I thought you were traveling?"

"Oh I am....in the middle of a Midwestern snow storm but at least I got to Detroit. From here I'm not sure what to do."

"Detroit?" Half way across the country Shannon Abbot held the cordless phone tighter. She moved from the kitchen out the sliding glass door to the backyard seeking privacy. "Gwen, why are you in Detroit?" Shannon's heart pounded against her chest. This was one of those moments in life she hoped she would never have to face. If Gwen knew what the whole story, she wasn't sure if her friend would forgive her.

"Hannah scheduled some banquet dinner for Emerald Foundation. Plus Bobby is here now. Well, not here with me, but playing for the Motors."

Shannon felt the wave of relief wash through her. "Oh, that's right Chuck told me a couple of weeks ago. He said it was a good move for the Motors. Not sure how Bobby views it."

"You know Bobby. He'll put on a smile and wave. Than he'll take out his teeth and smash someone against a board." They laughed at the visual Gwen created. "You know what's weird, I

keep thinking about Keegan. I'm not sure if it's because I'm here."

"Gwen." The motherly tone carried through the line to the small handheld device. "You never wanted to talk about her. Shoot, the team couldn't even bring up her name with out you freaking out and putting a stop to the conversation. What was it you'd say? If you're talking about that b..i..t..c..h, you better do it somewhere else." Gwen chuckled at the spelling of the curse word. As Shannon kids grew, she began to spell out more words.

"I didn't." Gwen denied what she knew was true. She was livid that Keegan had completely closed her out of her life. Any time Keegan's name was brought up in conversation she would turn in to a royal bitch. If the person didn't stop the conversation, she would walk out of the room.

"You're a liar. Jesus, Gwen, you jumped on my case that day I wanted to talk about her, about you and her."

"It seems like so long ago. How after three years together do you suddenly decide that you want to end a relationship? If we were having major problems I could understand. We weren't."

"Gwen, do you really want to revisit your relationship? Even if you didn't break up, your career took off and the public image you have would have hurt the relationship." Shannon knew Gwen had changed since the break up and winning the gold medal. Always a very private individual she was now on every talk show, in the spot light for commercials, always on the cover of the latest sports or fitness magazine. That stupid America's Sweetheart poster threw her into the national spotlight.

Gwen Lerner was America's Sweetheart and the public loved her. Her shining personality came through the camera and in her photos. There were a few moments of bad press when the tabloids began to run articles surrounding her sexual preference. To Gwen's credit, she came through the media frenzy on the arm of Bobby Finch. Even Shannon was jealous. Bobby was a rugged handsome man. They made a stunning couple selling, lots of papers and magazines. "Keegan didn't strike me as the type of person to hide who she is."

"I don't." Gwen stopped her denial. "You're right. I've got to find a ride or rent a car out of this mess. I'll call you after the banquet. I have an appearance in San Diego a couple of weeks away."

"You know you're welcome to stay with us." Shannon smiled at the memory of Gwen's running shoes floating in the large seventy five gallon fish tank in Chuck's office. "They've learned their lesson."

"I'll let you know. Bye."

Gwen flipped her phone shut and headed back into the main terminal. There were not many people milling about. The snow storm must have closed the airport since it appeared that no more flights were arriving. Making her way to the baggage claim she wondered if by some minor miracle, her bags arrived. "Shit!" The expletive spilled out, causing a few angry parents to shoot

unappreciative looks her way as she realized, her outfit for the banquet was still in Chicago. If her bags didn't make it, she needed to go shopping. First she needed to figure out where she was staying and how she was getting there.

Taking the blackberry from its holster on her hip, she accessed her planner. Not being very computer or technology savvy, Bobby programmed her blackberry and she was able to sync up with Hannah's schedule events. With a few key strokes, she found she was staying at the Weston Inn, the same place where the banquet was being held. Things were looking better when she found a contact number and instructions to call when she landed so a car could be sent to pick her up. Dialing Bobby's number her call went into voicemail. She knew the Motors game was on tonight. With the delay in her arrival, there was no way to catch up with him until late tonight. When she flipped the slim phone shut, the melody informing her of a voice mail chimed.

"Hey sweetie, it's me. I see your plane is stuck at O'Hare. I really hope you make it. I've sent a car for you so you can at least get to the hotel. I had Hannah program the reservation in your blackberry. You probably can't get it." His rich laugh filled the rest of the message. He teased her nonstop about her challenges with technology. She went to the baggage area. By some small miracle, her bag appeared on the luggage carousel and she was on her way towards the valet on the main course. May be this trip would be worth all the hassles so far.

Standing against the pillar in the main concourse of the airport was a tall slender woman with black hair pulled loosely under a chocolate brown floppy hat. In her hands was a sign with the name, "Rita Miller." Gwen began to laugh. She immediately knew Bobby had sent the woman with the sign, using her alias from the movie Ghost. "I believe you're waiting for me." Gwen flashed a smile at the attractive woman with the sign.

"It's my lucky night." The seductive smile and movement of her hips was not missed by the retired soccer player. Silently she questioned Bobby. Maybe this was exactly what she needed after her experience in Chicago and the memories of Keegan floating freely in her brain. "Welcome to Detroit. The game is still going on. We could get there for the third period but with the weather, who knows?" The woman said as she reached out for Gwen's carry on bag. "Let's get you out of here before the media spots you." The dark haired woman led her through the concourse away from the main gates and populated areas. "First time here?"

"No, I've been here many times. It's just been some time."

"Don't fret Ms. Lerner. Sonja will take care of you." The raven haired woman referred to herself in the third person as her tongue snaked out to wet her lower lip. "So what do you want?" The greeter asked her as they traveled towards the valet service. Gwen nearly tripped as her imagination ran wild with the woman's question.

"Excuse me?" She creaked out as she caught her balance.

"Hockey game or somewhere to freshen up?" Gwen caught her cryptic message. The hockey game would be safe and public. Maybe too public with the night she was having. She'd probably rip someone's head off and a camera would capture the moment.

"The hotel is fine." Bad...bad...you're an idiot. Just as bad as a man. You are twenty minutes on the ground and already thinking about getting this woman into bed. *What was her name..Sonja?* Why did he have to send a brunette? She was taller than Keegan, but most people were. She could close her eyes and image it was her former lover, just as she had done so many times before. "So Sonja, do you work for the Motors often?" They exited the warm terminal to be encased in the negative temperatures of the great lakes. Grabbing Gwen by the hand, Sonja hurried her to the waiting limousine. The driver opened the door as they escaped into the warmth of the back seat. The privacy glass was up so when the driver got into the car, they were protected from the elements. Sonja slid a hand over Gwen's thigh as she leaned her body completely over the blonde and reached for the telephone.

"George, Weston Inn, by the University. Yes." Sonja cradled the phone and slowly slid her body over Gwen. Making sure every pressure point was felt. When the woman returned to her seated position she smiled sweetly at Gwen. "I work for the organization in a liaison role. Would you like a drink?"

Gwen shook her head and felt her body grow warm with every word and movement Sonja said or did. Closing her eyes she thought back to the last time she was with Keegan in Miami. Keegan always turned her on. Her brown eyes popped open when she felt a warm finger lift her chin.

"Tired?"

"Yes." Gwen responded sharply. She didn't know exactly what type of liaison Sonja was but she had an idea. She slid across the back seat to the opposite side of the limo. Sonja noticed the distance and nodded as she poured an ample amount of the amber liquid into a rocks glass. With a quick flick of her wrist, Sonja emptied the glass and returned it to rest on her knee. Gwen did not like the flash of hunger in the woman's eyes. "How long until we get to the hotel?"

"It's close to a half hour, but in this weather, it could take an hour." Sonja slid across the distance Gwen created and placed her hand on Gwen's arm. "You're a very beautiful woman. Bob is a lucky man."

"Sonja, I appreciate the compliment but." Gwen rejection was cut off as Sonja leaned closer and touched her lips softly to Gwen's earlobe.

She whispered "They said you'd take my breath away." Her tongue traced lightly over her skin. Gwen released an audible sigh. Her body was singing and this woman was her conductor. "You're beautiful, sexy." Sonja traced her fingers down Gwen's neck to the nape of her shoulder. Loosening the opening of her overcoat and the blouse she wore Sonja kissed the bare skin at her collar bone. "I want to fuck you."

"Enough." Gwen pushed her away. She didn't want this woman anywhere near her. "Either you stay on that side of the car or I'm going to get out of this car now." Gwen warned the liaison.

"I'm very disappointed. I heard..." Sonja began to explain as she slunk over to the opposite side

of the car.

"You heard wrong." Gwen's commanding tone let the woman know the conversation was over. Wrapping her coat tighter around her waist, it was the longest twenty minutes of her life. The assumptions people made about her may be true but she wasn't going to add fuel to the fire by sleeping with every woman who hit on her. Sonja was doing her job, but Gwen wanted no part.

Fleeing from the limo as soon as it pulled into the Weston Inn, Gwen was greeted by the manager and shown her room in record time. She didn't even look back to the car that dropped her off. She was to take a long hot bath and fall into a deep sleep for the night.

Ring... Ring... Ring...Ring...a hand reached from beneath the covers to the phone closest to the bed.

"Good morning. Did you get in okay?"

"Yes, but your team's liaison is a little much." Gwen's sleep filled voice replied. A deep laughter filled voice reached her ear. She woke with a terrible headache and her temples pounded. She slid the clock radio closer to read the numbers. She didn't want to play with Bobby this early and in this time zone. "Oh, I bet she was disappointed. You should have seen her face when she picked me up."

"Jesus, what is it with this team? Is she on the payroll?" Gwen groaned as her body rebelled against her. Her thighs were tight and her muscles sensitive to her movement.

"I think its part of the team's recruiting program." Bobby hummed in her ear.

"Sending hookers?" Gwen closed her eyes and thought about the roller coaster she was on. Yesterday she talked to Ted Redding's mother and Shannon about Keegan. Twenty minutes later she was fighting off the advances of a woman the Motors arranged for her. "That's not my type of program." She hung up the phone and buried her face in the pillow wishing the headache to disappear.

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Catherine Burke's Scrolls
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~ America's Sweetheart ~
by Catherine Burke

America's Sweetheart

Author's Note: This is my first story posted on The Athenaeum. If all goes well there will be more to follow.

Category: Orig. Uber Alt.

Rating: R / NC-17

Summary: Retired Olympian Gwen Lerner lands in Detroit and comes face to face with her former girlfriend. Still questioning the reason they separated, Gwen wants answers and to get a friendship back. Keegan Garry left the Olympic team under a cloud of mystery and intrigue. Since then she has struggle to get her life back on track. Just when she thinks she's done that, Gwen shows up and derails. Can two women who once loved each other find way to heal their broken hearts and love again?

Comments/Disclaimer(s): This is an original story. The story and characters belong to me. They are not to be used or reproduced without my express written permission. This is my first time posting to the website. An early version of this story was posted but the current is much better :!

This story depicts a love/sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it.

Special Thanks: To J Brownell for ideas suggestions and getting me to actually post this. Also to Kerrie who was able to beta and get this story back to me a very short time. Living half way around the world does have its advantages. Time differences worked well for us.

This work has progressed over the years and is very close to my heart. The two characters helped me through a tough time in my life. I am posting in parts but will have the entire story finished soon. As I continue to work on it, I really need to have some feed back. You can reach me at burkcatherine@aol.com

Part 2

Chapter 4

With both hands steadily placed at the ten and two positions on the steering wheel, Keegan drove her SUV through the snow-covered streets to her home. Normally the drive from the hospital to her house took less than twenty minutes. Today with the weather, she was looking at an hour and forty minutes drive through sheets of falling snow. When her small Liberty turned on to the street she spent most of her life on, she was grateful Ben Wilmington had plowed her driveway. Ben, her next door neighbor and one of Bill's golfing buddies, kept an eye on the Garry girls. Keegan hit the button for the garage door to rise and pulled into the two-car garage attached to the house. Relieved from wondering how she was going to ever get her car in the drive was welcoming. A light blinking on the answering machine beckoned her as she entered the kitchen. Her cell phone had rung a couple of times on the ride home, but she wasn't about to attempt to answer it. Dropping her coat on one of the wooden kitchen chairs, she grabbed the tea kettle and filled it with water. The gas burner of the stove lit with a whoosh and she set the kettle on it to

heat. Pushing the blinking button of her machine, she went to check the thermostat of the furnace.

"Call us when you get in." Sarah's voice echoed in the quiet empty house. "I heard you have a nasty storm up there. Your father asked Ben to plow your driveway. Hopefully the old guy doesn't forget." Beep...

"Keegan, Ben Wilmington. I got your drive early but I am going to go back over it in the morning. DO NOT try to shovel it. I'll tell Bill." The neighbor's friendly but stern voice brought a smile to her face.

The last message made Keegan a little sad. She knew Ashley was teasing but sometimes the teasing hurt. "Guess who I saw on the news tonight?" Her sister's voice taunted her. "Check in when you get home. I tried your cell but I know how you are."

Keegan slowly removed her scarf from its secure wrapping around her neck. She could feel the weight of the depression coming down on her. The house was quiet and empty, just like her life. Her parents and her sisters were in her life but she craved having an intimate relationship with someone special. She could date but she didn't want to have a relationship with them. She wanted to be with someone but for the right reasons, because she liked them, they had common interests and she was attracted to them. Eventually, she hoped, loved them. She didn't want to be with someone because she was lonely. Being lonely was not a reason to get into a relationship. She wanted to share her life with someone she cared about. There were a number of willing parties who wanted to be in her life. She didn't have a connection with them. She wanted what she had with Gwen, what her parents had. A relationship was built on love. Anyone could see the way her parents cared for each other by the way they interacted. During quiet moments she would watch how they cared for each other. Just a small touch between them conveyed their love. The way she and Gwen used to touch, used to love. She missed having a relationship, but she wanted the real thing.

Keegan went upstairs to her bedroom and began to pull off her scrubs. She was relieved scrubs came with an elastic waist, she wouldn't have to purchase a new wardrobe. She stepped into the bathroom just off the master bedroom. She leaned over the garden tub to turn on the faucets. One of the luxury items she indulged with during the renovation of her parent's house. The spray of water steamed into the bottom of the tub. She went to the cabinet, pulling out an assortment of salts and bath oils. Picking up the jasmine oil, she unscrewed the lid to smell the refreshing aroma. Pouring some of the green gel into the water, the liquid instantly changed the water's color and scent.

When the teakettle began to whistle in the kitchen, she wrapped her white terry robe around her body and tied the slash tight over her growing midsection. Matching slippers covered her feet as she headed downstairs to the kitchen. She turned off the burner and the kettle's singing quieted. In the cupboard, she selected Sleepy Time tea and poured hot water over the bag in a large ceramic mug. Since caffeine was no longer allowed in her diet, she switched to different flavors of decaf tea. She craved a warm beverage on cold stormy nights. Carrying her mug of steaming liquid and the cordless phone, she went into the steam filled bathroom.

Turning off the faucets, she removed her robe and turned to look at her reflection in the full length mirror. Like the twins of the Gemini, she felt as if she was two people, Keegan before illness and the one looking back at her. Before she was sick, she had always been a healthy person. Her muscle tone gave her five foot five frame the bulk of a size ten. She used to be considered the life of a party, full of fun and energy. Prior to the illness, she was quick to laugh and have a good time. She took risks and voiced her opinion, regardless of the outcome. The Keegan looking back was a small framed person who drowned in a size four. She was a person who took the time to watch the leaves change colors. To tell her family she loved and cherished them. She spent the some off days reading to sick children or to visiting with them. Each breath she took was a gift and she'd never take life for granted again. She no longer worried about her weight, or if she would make the team. There were more important things to do. Like take care of the child growing inside her.

In truth, she liked the weight gain from the baby. She actually looked healthier than she had in a long time. Instead of the gaunt look with her cheeks sunken, there was substance to her face, with a bit of color. Taking the vitamin supplements Jonathan suggested made her feel better, as if her body had missed the nutrients it needed. Such changes she had gone through her hair falling out in clumps, her skin changing in color and texture from the chemotherapy, her face being sunken and gaunt with such a change in weight loss. Her breasts, which she thought had always been too large, shrank with the weight lost to a pre-pubescent teenager. Being pregnant did have some positive effects on her body, as the size of her breasts increased to a reasonable and likeable size. Her hair darkened to a chocolate brown color and was growing full and lush. Wearing her hair short when she played soccer because it was easy to manage, she had left it that way for most of her life, she had changed to wearing it longer, growing it so it hung just past her shoulders. She liked feeling the soft strands on her neck and shoulders. When her hair fell out, she became very self conscious. For almost eighteen months, she was completely bald. Leaving a heavy psychological effect on her, she never wanted to have short hair again. Thankfully, Sarah suggested getting a wig made before she started chemo. Although it cost a lot of money, the investment was well worth it. The covering gave Keegan a sense of normalcy. Trying to limit the number of people she came in contact with. Although most people left her alone, she always thought she could hear whispering and mumbling from strangers. Some glances she received seemed to pass judgment.

When Ashley gave birth to Andy, Keegan made a vow that after one year of remission she would try to have a child. With warmed hands she ran her fingers over her stomach. A person could view her decision as being selfish. She didn't care. She always wanted to have children. She and Gwen spoke about the possibility of having a baby after their soccer careers were over. Keegan hoped one day she would be pregnant, but she didn't realize all the mountains she'd have to climb to get there. Then everything fell into place. Her recovery and the goal of a year in remission accomplished. Keegan was healthy enough to try the fertilization process to get pregnant. When she was diagnosed with leukemia, the doctors told her of the risks of conception after radiation and chemotherapy. Sarah suggested her daughter have her eggs harvested or cryopreservation in case she wanted children at a later time. The odds were stacked against her. Her body had gone through years of serious doses of radiation and regimens of preventative chemo. Carrying the baby full term and having a healthy child was her top priority. After that, she would make certain he or she was the happiest child in the world.

Slowly, Keegan tested the temperature of the water. A little hot, it felt good compared to the raging storm outside. A nice fire and a bubble bath would be the perfect companion to the snow storm. Keegan lit the fireplace in her bedroom which shared the wall with the master bath. She could enjoy the comfort from the tub or the bed. She continued to create a cozy atmosphere by lighting the candles lining the vanity and along the tiles of the tub sides. She dropped the terry robe next to a large fluffy towel. Slipping into the heat of the water, she gingerly stretched out her feet and ankles. They were still swollen but the water soothed the ache. Letting the buoyancy of the water carry her body, she closed her eyes and drifted away in thoughts of her child. She smiled as she thought about Tony and how great he had been through the entire process.

Two years Tony Best walked into a physical therapy session. Keegan had to do a double take. Tall, with shaggy blonde hair hanging in his big brown eyes, she thought he looked like a male version of Gwen. He was gentle and asked her a number of questions about his rehabilitation. It wasn't until his third week of therapy she noticed a number of female staff members showing up in the therapy. She never paid much attention to hospital gossip, but her curiosity got the best of her. Finally, she asked Maurice, a coworker, about the handsome patient. Tony Best was the youngest tenured profession in the Weston English Department. Some of the hospital staff was aggressive in trying to attract the professor's attention.

"So why are these woman showing up here?"

"They're groupies." Maurice told her when she rolled her eyes at the appearance of Kim Taylor, a nurse from the pediatric ward who suddenly became interested in the PT unit.

"Groupies? He's an English professor." Keegan argued with her coworker. The coffee colored man's smile twinkled in his eyes.

"He was in that grunge band from Seattle, The Mudmen. Tony was the drummer. I thought you would know that." He rolled his eyes as he grabbed the chart from the rack. "He's got quite a following."

"I can have her removed." Keegan told her patient as he lightly squeezed on a soft rubber ball. Her eyes were on the large breasted blonde at the doorway waving at Tony.

"I'm not worried. Are you jealous?" The former musician chuckled. In her initial meeting with the teacher, she found his gentle eyes watching patiently as she explained the exercises he would to increase the strength in his wrist. After a few sessions, they fell into an ease with each other.

"No!" Keegan laughed. Her blue eyes danced over Tony's face, wondering if he was serious. "I want your attention on your recovery, nothing else. I can see your fan's blaming me for your inability to hold your stick properly." Big boobs and no IQ, she let the thought run through her head as she looked at the large chesty blonde milling about the doorway.

"Would you go out with me?" His brown eyes gave her that innocent look of a child.

"No." She laughed. "You're a patient." She thought he was a nice guy. Good looking, a few years older than her but not at all her type. She never changed her preference for dating women, unlike Gwen, who was all over the media with her relationship with the hockey player. The Gwen she knew stayed away from cameras and focused on the team. It seemed as if her ex-girlfriend was now the spokesperson for all of women's soccer and in a very public relationship with a man.

"What if I wasn't your patient?" He continued to probe. A dark blonde eyebrow quirked upward and a sly smile appeared on his face.

"Ha! You are and if you weren't." She bent down to whisper in his ear. "She's got a better shot than you would." His eyes darted to the blonde at the door way. Leaning back in his chair, his smile gone, he checked to see if she was lying. He winked at her and let a deep chuckle loose.

"My, don't we all have our quirks?"

"Oh, it's not a quirk." She winked back at him and threw the rubber ball at his head. From there a great friendship formed.

Last summer, just as Tony was heading out of town for the summer break, he asked what Keegan wanted for her birthday present. Not giving him a direct answer, she invited him to dinner. Normally, they had dinner together at least once every two weeks during the school year. This dinner she wanted to be special. Making him homemade lasagna, she knew she was trying to butter up the man. Sarah always said the way to a man's heart was through his stomach, except Keegan didn't want his heart. When the doorbell rang, Keegan wiped her sweating hands on the dish cloth before she tossed it on to the counter. If she was going to do this, she had to make sure her relationship with Tony wouldn't change.

As soon as she opened the door, she smiled brightly at the sight of the man in front of her. Such a familiar presence about him, it made her open up to the ex-drummer now granola college professor.

"Why is it you always look like you want to jump my bones? Then this reality comes over you to back off?" He said as he stepped into the foyer and began to take off his spring jacket.

"Something smells good." He smiled and placed a kiss on her cheek. "Oh you're trying to get something out of me." He wagged a finger at her.

"Come in and let me get you drunk first before I explain."

"And she's drinking!!" Tony mocked her. Knowing the most he had ever seen her drink was a single glass of wine or a beer. Hanging his coat in the hall closet, he followed her into the kitchen.

"Red or white? Zin, merlot, Chianti?"

"Chianti as long as you don't have fava beans." He joked as the frown appeared on her face. "Oh you are much better looking than Anthony Hopkins."

"Thanks I think." Keegan moved nervously around her kitchen like a skittish colt. Her hand shook as she took two glasses down from the cupboard. When she felt Tony's presence behind her, he took the glasses from her hands.

"Hey what's up? This is your birthday dinner and you're all over the place. Plus you cooked for me. Take a seat, I'll get the wine." Tony watched her sit at the kitchen table although the dining room had the formal place setting arranged. He poured the burgundy liquid into the stemmed glassware. He absently swirled the wine in his glass. Placing the very full broad bowl of wine in front of her, he sat across from her cocked his head and said. "Spill it."

Taking a generous drink, Keegan closed her eyes and began. "First, I will always be a lesbian." She opened her eyes to see the man across from her nod. "You know I've always felt this connection to you."

"Yesss." He snaked out trying to get her to continue her explanation.

"It's. That first day. Every time. You remind me of someone." Keegan finally blurted out.

"Really?" He smiled as he sipped his wine. "Someone you cared about?"

"Yes, I loved her very much. I'll tell you about her someday, but not tonight." Keegan turned her glass absently. "I've been through a lot. You know about the leukemia." His nod confirmed her statement. "And my obsession with accomplishing goals."

"Yes. The skydiving one still scares the hell out of me." He chuckled quietly as her eyebrow quirked.

"I made a vow or promise of sorts that once I was a year in remission, I would try to get pregnant." Keegan grabbed the glass stem and poured a mouthful down. Tony began to laugh.

"You want to have sex with me to get pregnant?"

"Hell no!" Keegan shouted before she could catch herself. She smile and took a calming breath. "I want to have a baby, a child. I can't do that on my own for obvious reasons. I was wonder if you would think about being the father. Donating sperm so I can." Keegan felt her body relax after she finally got her message out.

"You're serious?" Keegan nodded as she continued to bore into him with her blazing blue eyes. "You know I have my own issues."

"Yes, but you were raised in a loving family who is expecting you home for the next couple of weeks." Keegan paused folding her hands on the table. "I'm asking you to think about it. Don't answer me tonight. Take your time and when you get back, you can tell me your decision. I think you should talk to your folks and whoever you need to about it." Keegan began to feel antsy and started to rise from her seat. Tony quickly covered her hand.

"You know I was adopted. I've no record of my real parents. If I do this, I want this child to know about me and if needed, I would be part of their life." Tony's eyes teared over as he spoke. He had shared his story of being abandoned in San Francisco at Glide Memorial Church, a well known for the homeless. There was no note, no explanation, just left on the door steps with the hopes of someone to find him.

"I couldn't imagine my life without my mom or dad. I wouldn't want that for my child. Tony, take your time think about this. This is what I want for my birthday. If you don't agree or choose not to do this, I understand."

"Can I ask one thing?" When blue locked with brown, she nodded. "Why me? You could go to a clinic, you have doctors, lawyers, and professional athletics as friends or friends of friends. I'm a teacher with a checkered past. A musician who spent too much time in a bar with too many women or I dare say barely legal women." Keegan looked at the table top and nodded her head.

"I've always wanted to have her child." Her voice cracked. She didn't want to be so emotional but she was. "Things didn't work out between us and I'm not sure if it's just a fantasy of mine or the fact I compare everyone I date to her."

"She sounds special." Tony moved to the seat next to Keegan.

"You remind me of her in many ways. I guess that's the reason for the look you get from me. You're like her. Guarded when you think you're being watched. Free spirited when you are happy or doing something you love." Keegan leaned back in her chair. "I loved her very much and I can't change the past. She's gotten on with her life. I need to get on with mine." She could feel the sting of tears but she refused to cry over Gwen.

"Sounds like you still love her." Tony covered her hand with his. The musician didn't care if Keegan was gay. A little shocked the small dark haired beautiful woman enjoyed the company of women rather than men. There were many women who had been in his life, but Keegan was different. She didn't want to date him, she only wanted friendship. He was happy to find such a good friend.

"I think part of me always will. She's a different person. Engaged to be married. I don't know her anymore." Keegan felt the warm of Tony's hand on hers. She turned her fingers over to interlace with his. "Too bad you aren't a woman."

"Well, I've got to say I've never wanted to be a woman. Moodiness. Crying." He wiped a lone tear from her cheek. "Besides I like being able to pee standing up." They laughed.

They talked and ate dinner. Keegan walked Tony to the door just before midnight. "You know you could make everything much simpler if you were straight." Tony kissed her forehead.

"If you know me by now, I don't like simple." Keegan leaned into his tall frame hugging him. "Have a great time. Call if you can." He smiled and strolled towards his car.

Feeling the water's temperature falling, Keegan smiled and ran her hands over the mound of her stomach. She was expecting a child. Tony's gift to her with a few agreed upon conditions. Reaching for the large bath sheet, she got out of the tub as she wrapped the fresh towel around her torso. She'd call Tony tonight. She hadn't talked to her friend in a week. She needed to hear the reassurance in his voice.

Chapter 5

Pacing the small side room, Gwen was not enjoying her visit. Between the weather and their schedules at odds, she was unable to meet up with Bobby. The Motors left for the game in Cleveland early this morning. The team should be back late tonight, but not in time for Bobby to accompany her to the banquet. Emerald's event was being held at the Weston Inn. Hannah arranged the details months ago. Gwen didn't do well with details. She just wanted to do as much as she could for the organization. Emerald was a foundation whose mission was to raise funds for cancer research and assist families of those in need.

The representative from Emerald had asked Gwen to wait in the Weston Alumni room. Gwen didn't think anything about it until she saw photographs of Keegan plastered on every wall. Gwen turned her deep soft brown eyes to a full faced photo of her ex-girlfriend. Tentatively, she traced her finger over a photo of Keegan's laughing smile and dancing eyes. She knew the smile and look. She knew the photo was taken on one of the most important days in Keegan's life. In the background, the scoreboard showed the Mustangs beating the Raiders. Keegan scored the winning goal and led Weston to the Division II National Championship. Gwen's stomach ached, her head hurt as the threat of a migraine was brewing. The trip was turning into a very emotional journey. Not only did being in Detroit remind Gwen of Keegan, the run in with Ted Redding's mother at the airport and now at the banquet, she was waiting in the university's sports alumni room. She thought of the brunette every where she went. The wave of emotions she was riding felt like a roller coaster.

The sound of a door opening behind Gwen brought her out her musing. Gwen turned to see Mrs. Preston enter the room. The elegant older woman approached with a slight limp. Gwen greeted her.

"Ms. Lerner, thank you for coming. Is there anything you need?"

"Thank you, but I am fine." Gwen answered. "I just hope that we are able to make the goal." The foundation had a goal of five hundred thousand dollars for tonight's dinner.

"We are a success so far, Danny Martin and Ashley Whitmore of Helping Hands Corporation are here. They are wonderful women and have quite a story. They donate time and resources to assist with donors and transplants."

"I look forward to meeting them." Gwen smiled and gestured towards Mrs. Preston's limp. "Old injury?"

"No arthritis. It's the weather. One of these days, I'm going to convince Mr. Preston to move to Florida for the winter months."

Eve Preston took in the attractive woman standing in front of her. She had seen Gwen on television shows, commercials and magazine covers. The cameras loved her smile and her personality bubbled over making her a favorite of the public. The photos and television did not do justice to actually seeing the woman in person.

"Where are the other guests?" Gwen asked feeling strange that she was the only person waiting in Alumni Room.

"They are gathering in the back stage area."

"Then why am I in here?" Gwen wondered why she stood alone in the waiting area.

"Oh, I thought we would give you a grand entrance for the celebrity that you are." Her voice an octave higher as she waved her arms enthusiastically.

"Mrs. Preston, I'd rather join the others, if you don't mind." A small frown appeared on Mrs. Preston's face. Gwen knew she had just taken the wind out of her sails. "I don't consider myself a celebrity. I love coming to fundraisers like this because I can be just Gwen."

"Gwen, you're America's Sweetheart." Her hand fell across her heart. "I was concerned for."

"First off, I'm from San Jose. The only concern I have is raising enough money."

"Then come with me. I'll introduce you to the other guests." The excitement was back in the gray haired woman's voice. They made their way to the door of the reception area with an even, steady gait. As soon as Eva Preston gestured for Gwen to enter, the attention of the room focused on the tall blonde. There were dozens of people mingling and chatting as they awaited the start of the banquet.

Through the glass doors and sheer curtains, the banquet room could be viewed. Heavy white linen cloths covered each circular table. Elaborate sprays of pink and white bouquets served as centerpieces, professionally set up tabletops with silver place settings and pink linen napkins waited for each guest as the doors opened to the fundraiser. At the front of the room was a raised stage for the head table where the speakers and special guests were being led. As each special guest exited the waiting room, the master of ceremonies announced each person's name to the sold out crowd. This year's dinner banquet sold out immediately when Gwen Lerner was announced as the celebrity guest.

The former Olympian stood quietly in the small alcove, waiting for the announcer to introduce her. Like she did when she was about to take the field, she flexed her fingers nervously. Playing in front of a stadium full of people as they watched her kick a ball into the back of a net, was never as nerve racking as the intimate settings like today's event. Up close and personal, people felt as if they knew her because they shared her tears as she stood on the podium accepting a

medal. She flexed her fingers again, willing her body to relax. She blew out a deep breath and checked her reflection in the mirror. Dressed in a chocolate colored Giorgio Armani pants suit with a rich silk camel blouse underneath, her long blonde hair curled freely to her shoulders and was pulled loosely back by a clasp at her nape from her heart shaped face and sun kissed skin.

With Mrs. Preston at her side, Gwen was introduced to a majority of the guests.

"This is Danny Martin, one of the women who I told you about earlier." Mrs. Preston introduced the tall slender woman with the athletic build. Gwen took a moment to stare at the smoky gray eyes. She had to take a moment, as Keegan's face flashed in her mind. The photos from the other room were playing tricks on her. Danny, or Danielle, Martin was attractive, her reddish brown hair was pulled away from her face and held back in a simple French twist. Her makeup light, and stylish, gave her a natural appearance. Wearing a tailored gray tweed suit jacket and matching wrap skirt with a sheer pink blouse, Danny stood as tall or taller than Gwen's five nine frame. Just below the surface in her silver eyes there was sadness. On her lapel, like each person in the room, was the green ribbon pin to symbolize supporting the efforts of the Emerald Foundation.

"Hello, Ms Lerner. It's a pleasure to meet you." Danny held out her hand.

"Please call me Gwen. I'm not use to the formalities. Frankly, it makes me uncomfortable." Gwen shook her hand. Danny noted the Irish wedding band ring Gwen wore on her right ring finger.

"Okay, Gwen. Call me, Danny."

"Absolutely. Do we know each other, you seem so familiar." Gwen couldn't place the face but the eyes she had seen before.

"Actually we met a few years ago at O'Hare. I think you were traveling back from the World Cup." Danny flushed. Gwen guessed her age to be a few years younger than her thirty-one. "I was traveling with Ashley Whitmore, my business partner."

Heading to Phoenix for a conference, she and Ashley ran into Keegan and the national team as they flew through Chicago on their way back to the West Coast. Ashley arranged to meet her sister in one of the private rooms during the layover. Danny spent most of the time drooling over the gorgeous women of the national team. Staying to herself and keeping out of the way, she wanted her best friend to have a private visit with her older sister.

"I don't recall but it's not like I'm not in an airport. It's nice meeting you again. Mrs. Preston says your company works with a database of donors." Danny nodded. "I find the name is quite interesting. There has to be a story behind it. Do tell."

Danny's silver eyes fluttered across the room looking for Ashley. She was bad about lying. She knew who Gwen was. She had been there during the party the hospital held for the Olympics. The Alumni association rented a big screen TV and prompted the local cable provider to hook up

HD and all access channels for coverage of the games. Not sure how much information to share with Gwen, she took the road of ignorance is bliss. In order not to get in the middle of a bad situation, she wanted bliss.

"Our company develops software. As a special project, we have created a network for donors and their families. We do everything from finding organ and marrow donors to making sure the entire family is cared for. We try to focus on kids giving other kids a chance." She smiled and thought about the company name. "Our friendship inspired the name. We knew there was a need for some type of network." Danny smiled and lifted her wine glass to her lips. Danny failed to inform her audience that she and her best friend had been drinking heavily when the inspiration came over them. "Ashley and I were friends in college. We went into a partnership with a software development company. Our involvement with Emerald started when her sister needed a bone marrow transplant. When we realized that there were a limited number of people registered as living donors, especially bone marrow, we wanted to find a match but we wanted to create a way for other families to find donors. The process is not hard on the donor. The patient has a hard time as their body adjusts to the donated marrow. It can be very painful, but it is what they need to continue living."

"What happened with her sister, did she ever find a donor?"

"That's where Ashley started to think outside the box. You'll hear the story tonight." Danny watched for the name to register with the former Olympian. "We try to encourage people to get tested because there is a need. There is just such a need for healthy donors. Getting the word out and making people aware of the options out there. Plus we will do anything we can do to help Emerald raise money. It's a great organization that has helped our families immensely over the years." Trying to steer the conversation from the Garry family to a safer ground, Danny thought about Gwen's contribution to the organization. "Are you doing the Emerald public service announcement this year?" At Gwen's nod, Danny continued. "You've been doing them for close to ten years now. Haven't you?"

"Since being on the National team. The early ones are pretty funny...my hair and outfits. Ten plus years....wow I never thought of it like that. Mrs. Martin you've succeeded in making me feel old."

"It's Danny and I'm sorry. I'm too blunt." Danny smiled at the blonde who was beautiful. She could see how Keegan could easily lose her heart to this woman in front of her.

"Is Mr. Martin joining you this evening?"

"There is no Mr. Martin." Danny winked at her as she turned to find Ashley.

Jesus Christ. Gwen thought watched the tall redhead walk away. What was going on? Women were hitting on her left and right first the woman at the airport and now Danny Martin.

"The Emerald Foundation is pleased to announce this year's recipient of Emerald's Company of the Year, Helping Hands Corporation owners Danielle Martin and Ashley Whitmore!" The

announcer introduced the woman with bright silver eyes and a small reddish blonde woman. Gwen assumed it was Ashley Whitmore. Danny Martin waved to the crowd as she stood and lifted her hand to her business partner. Ashley Whitmore stood pushing back her seat and lifting her blazing blue eyes to meet Gwen's. Her gaze lingered for a moment on the soccer star. As the woman smiled and locked eyes with her, Gwen could not shake the familiar feeling of knowing her. The strawberry haired woman with the sky blue eyes carried the same sad emptiness in her eyes as her business partner. When Ashley reached the podium, she seemed to struggle for a moment taking a deep breath before speaking.

"We all have stories of loved ones lost and loved ones saved. In some way, cancer has touched our lives. It could be family, friends, someone at your church, a neighbor or even a co-worker. If we go around the room and tell our stories, I'm sure none of us would have a dry eye. The story I'm going to tell you deals with my son, Andy." Ashley beamed proudly when she spoke of her child. "My son Andy is what I would call a planned pregnancy. It wasn't because I was quickly approaching the dreaded third decade of my life. He wasn't planned because I needed a child to save my marriage. In fact, by the time I was pregnant, my divorce was final. You need to understand, that my beautiful loving sister was diagnosed with leukemia. There were treatments she endured with the hope to cure her illness. Between the radiation and chemotherapy her entire immune system was wiped out. She was very fragile and her doctors advised her only hope for survival was to find a bone marrow donor. As easy as this may sound, my family and I realized that finding a donor to match was like finding a needle in a haystack. The odds were stacked against us. We called in every favor to ask people to be potential donors. We tested family, friends, teammates, and the majority of the students at Weston University but the closest match we found was with me. By all rights, my marrow was not perfect match and would not help my sister survive. She needed a specific marrow, or at least a closer match than we could find or I could be. 100 billion people on the planet and we couldn't find a match with the resources we had." Ashley paused as she smiled shyly at Danny. "I became pregnant with the hopes that my child would be able to serve as a donor for my sister.

She paused for a moment. "I gave birth to my son, Andy." She stopped speaking letting the audience register her words. "My son was a perfect marrow match for my sister. The doctors were able to harvest the umbilical cord and the stem cells. The cells provided enough marrow start the transplant process. It was during this time Emerald came into our lives. My family and I were able to travel and to stay with my sister through her treatment. She didn't have to worry about her bills because anything that wasn't covered by insurance, Emerald took care of." Ashley stepped back and began to applaud the Emerald board members. "Through the use of radiation and drugs, my sister's immune system was closely monitored so her body would not reject the donor marrow. Isolated in a private room, her visitors and caretakers were required to go through a lengthy process of sterilization before they could enter. There was no guarantee her body would accept the donor marrow. We just prayed."

"This is when time felt as if it stood still. We waited and waited. The doctors needed to see if the marrow would be accepted and if it would begin to generate new cells. Six weeks after the transplant, her body was accepting the donor cells and began to create new marrow. A successful procedure, but she still needed to continue treatment. She followed doctor's instructions and went through preventative measures so her body would continue to accept the donated marrow. As

maintenance for the leukemia, she regularly visits her specialist. She continues to be concerned for her health and will never quite be completely cured."

"From experience, I do not advise getting pregnant to find a donor." The remark got a slight laugh from the audience. "Four years ago, my business partner, Danielle Martin, and I decided to use the resources our company, Helping Hands Corporation to develop and maintain a donor data base for Emerald. You heard me state earlier that there are over 100 billion people on the planet. At this time, our database contains over 400 thousand files on possible donor matches. The database assists in matching donors with patients. We maintain information on bone marrow, on organ donations and a network of resources available in cities around the world. So if you are in Detroit or Dallas, our company allows you to find information on that city. If you're in Des Moines and your children want to go to school, we provide a network of educational institutions, which are willing to assist. For those families who need the support in a strange town, we offer assistance on what hotel to stay at or where to find extended living accommodations. Emerald was there for my family in a time, of need, we wanted to be there for other families when they needed the support."

"Andy was two months old before he was ever held by his aunt. His birth saved my sister's life. We have had a few bumps in the road, but Andy is a rambunctious three year old. I'm happy to report my sister is a year plus in remission and moving forward with her life." The crowd broke out in a round of applause. "So tonight is about raising money to make sure those who need receive the care, funds and support they need. So open up your check books folks and help Emerald provide that assistance." A cheer went up from the audience along with an array of claps and whistles. The speaker reached for her water glass with a shaky hand. Her eyes landed squarely on Gwen. Their gazes locked for what felt like minutes but totaled a few seconds.

Gwen struggled to hold back the tears as Ashley Whitmore's story touched her deeply. As the speaker returned to her seat, Gwen stood to greet her with a hug. The emotions of one family's struggle with the disease echoed so many of the audience member's lives. Watching and listening to the story of Ashley Whitmore and her sister's battles with cancer brought the audience to tears. Gwen struggled to hold her composure as her heart went out to the woman at the podium and her family. "I just wanted to give you a hug." Gwen confessed as she approached the speaker. Her eyes were filled with tears. "Is your sister here with you?"

"She is actually at home with Andy." Ashley's voice was hollow as her eyes locked with Gwen's.

"That's too bad. I'd like to meet her. She sounds like a remarkable person." Gwen said lightly. Watching the play of emotions on Ashley Whitmore's face revealed just how much her family had sacrificed.

"Do you have a moment afterwards, I'd like to talk with you about an idea my business partner and I have." Ashley said as a genuine smile appeared on her face and the sadness from earlier was gone.

"I've met Ms. Martin. It would be a pleasure to get a little more insight on what you do. I've had a few friends that have been screened for donors, but I haven't." Gwen thought about

conversations with Shannon and former teammate Carol Edwards. Carol actually donated her marrow to a young mother in Texas. "If you don't mind, I'm staying at the hotel. We could meet in the main bar or restaurant."

"Not a problem. My sister is keeping Andy for the night." Ashley hunted in her purse for a business card. She wrote her cell phone on the back. "Let's say ten o'clock at the restaurant. That way, we can tie up loose ends here besides, its time to mingle and hit them in the pocket book. If something comes up, just call the number." Ashley gave her a quick wink just like Danny did earlier. "Folks don't forget why we are here!" Ashley called. "Open those checkbooks!"

Stepping off the stage, Gwen flipped the business card over and read the tri-colored print. The company name and logo showed two little girls holding hands. It read: Helping Hands Corporation, President and CFO, Ashley Garry-Whitmore. Gwen grabbed the nearest table. She knew the speaker looked familiar. She stared into the same blazing blue eyes of her ex-girlfriend. Except it wasn't Keegan Garry, it had been Ashley. Ashley Whitmore was Ashley Garry, Keegan's sister. The woman who had just spoke of her sister's battle with leukemia. Was it Keegan? Or Meghan? Gwen felt the queasiness in her stomach as it rolled, remembering the harsh words she exchanged with Tara Washington on the soccer field. Like a ton of bricks, ***much more important things on her plate***, Tara's words echoed in her head. Keegan had been battling cancer at that time. How long ago was that? Four years ago? When did the league form? Christ!

The room began swimming as an endless number of faces passed in front of Gwen. The surge of well wisher's and fans who wanted to meet and have their photo taken with the former Olympian. With every ounce of strength she possessed, Gwen put on the public image her fans knew well, although inside, her emotions were about to erupt in chaos. The knowledge of Keegan being sick threw her off balance. Her brain raced through past events trying to figure out what she missed. They were together in Miami. Keegan got hurt in practice earlier in the day and came to Gwen's room as soon as she could. They spent the evening together, talking, laughing and making love. The pain she felt when she found out her girlfriend had left without telling her. When Keegan left her room, Gwen knew her girlfriend was holding something back.

Tonight she learned Keegan battled leukemia for a number of years. Why didn't anyone tell her? Surely one of her teammates knew about Keegan being ill. Not just an illness, leukemia. Trying to rack her brain about the well know ailment, Gwen knew the disease affected a person's white blood cells. Standing in the middle of a banquet room, she felt as if she was getting crushed. The protective shell of the security staff surrounding her shrank as the fans tried to get closer. On more than one occasion, Gwen had to deal with an over zealous crowd. Tonight, she didn't want to feel exposed, wanted to escape. She needed to escape. Retreat to her room and digest the information Ashley Whitmore-Garry recanted. The middle Garry child opened the lid of Pandora's Box.

When Keegan left the team, her family released a statement to the press stating she left team for an emergency appendectomy. After the team won the gold medal, the speculation surrounding Keegan faded away. The fiery player dropped out of the soccer world. There were no stories, no information from the family or from the National Team. Gwen looked at her watch. She'd have to wait until ten to find the answers to the questions running through her head. She went over

Ashley's speech. Recalling the sibling speaking of her sister's struggles with leukemia, her heart went out to the strawberry blonde. When she realized the sibling was her former partner, she felt her heart break. She should have been there. Ashley's word replayed over and over, like a top forty song the DJ couldn't play enough. Around her, the crowd of people stood gawking as if she was a side show in a carnival; whispers and comments about her being taller, skinner, wrinkled, was all filtering into her auto-sensory system. She needed to find some inner peace for awhile.

A surge of anger cascaded through her body, making her limbs shake, her blood pressure rose and her heart pounded violently against her chest. She didn't know who made the decision not to tell her. Was her attitude towards Keegan so distant that people thought she wouldn't care? Hurt by the thoughts that kept Keegan out of her life, she needed to find a way to connect with her. She wanted to remain calm when Ashley told her the story about Keegan's illness. Tonight created a whole new crop of questions regarding Keegan. Where was she, how was she doing, was she happy? She'd talk to Bobby or Shannon. Shannon! Did her friend know? Five years of separation and no one told her Keegan could possibly be dying. What would Keegan think of her today? She knew she made mistakes. The biggest one was hitting on Meghan Garry, while in DC. She blamed Bobby for the incident.

In DC promoting the International Games, Gwen and Bobby were invited to a golf excursion at the country club in the DC suburb. Bobby, an average golfer, accepted the lessons to prevent embarrassment. During the first nine holes, he teased Gwen endlessly about the "hot pro" at the club. At the turn, Gwen followed Bobby to the pro shop. He wanted to let "Meg" know his game was going well and introduce Gwen to her. Gwen immediately caught sight of the beautiful pro whose hand rested lightly on Bobby's forearm as she gently maneuvered the limb into position. From behind, Gwen took her time admiring the long tan legs that disappeared under a camel color wrap around golf skirt. Her gaze continued over the well shaped gluts to her narrow waist. Her shirt was the color of blue bells and was neatly tucked at the waist. The sports shirt clung to her body running tautly across the shoulders. A muscular arm was wrapped around Bobby's side as she led him through his practice swing. She coached the hockey player on his approach.

"Mr. Finch, I would suggest loosening your grip. Remember you're not on the ice. No one is bearing down on you to take the puck away."

"I think all the green has got him confused." Gwen said as she strolled to Bobby's side flicking the brim of his hat.

"Ha! Ha!" He swiped at her antics. The gesture was fleeing as he never came close to hitting her.

"Having fun?"

"Yep, kicking your butt is always fun. This is Meg. The golf pro I was telling you about." Bobby gestured to the dark haired woman next to him. Gwen openly admired the pro's body from the front and was not disappointed.

"Would you be available for a private lesson later on Miss..." Gwen purposely dropped her voice to a sweet contralto drawing out her words so her message was received clearly. She didn't do this often in public, but Bobby didn't care. Hell, he encouraged it through out the first nine holes of play.

"It's Garry. Meg Garry." The introduction drew Gwen's attention to the fine lines of the woman's face. The last time she had seen Meghan was during visit to Michigan. Meghan was nineteen at the time. "I'm not available for any type of lessons. If you ask for Marty Bloom, the other pro, he may have a time open." Gwen lifted her eyes from Meg's chest to her eyes and she knew. She was looking at twins of blue, a trait of all the Garry sisters. But this was the wrong Garry. This one wasn't the sister who held her heart. With a quick nod, Meghan stomped off.

"Wow, I read that completely wrong. I'm sorry. I really thought she'd be your type."

"Oh I think she is." Gwen looked at the surrounding shop. To the displays of clubs, racks of clothing and over to the wall behind the cashier where the pictures of the club pro's were hung. There she was Meghan Garry. "It's just I used to date her sister. We didn't part on best terms."

"Try to keep it in your pants for the rest of the visit." Bobby snickered as he sorted through a rack of golf shirts.

"Jerk. I wouldn't even be in this position if you hadn't suggested it." She punched him in the arm. She wondered if Meg would mention the meeting to Keegan. She knew it would go over like a lead balloon.

Gwen took a page out of Ashley's play book and began to work the crowd if she was going to have to mingle among her fans, she might as well solicit donations for Emerald.

#

A quick stop to her room and with a small favor from the concierge, Gwen arranged for a table in the quieter section of the restaurant. As she entered the restaurant foyer, she spotted Danny and Ashley sitting at the corner table. A bottle of wine sat chilling on the table. Both women sipped leisurely on the beverage. Her eyes held tight to the strawberry blonde as she walked through the crowd trying to ignore the whispers following her appearance. Her stomach had been doing back flips since she learned of Keegan's sickness. Ashley came to her feet and greeted Gwen with a powerful hug. As they broke apart, Ashley found her voice and whispered,

"Are you okay?" Flash bulbs went off as a fan snapped the moment. Gwen flinched knowing she would be a headline tomorrow.

"There is so much I want to talk about." With a nod of her head, the offer to talk was accepted. Maybe she could get the answers she was looking for. "I don't know if I'm upset or angry." Gwen confessed as she poured a generous amount from the bottle of Chablis. The blonde wishing she had a strong drink in her hand. "Keegan will she see me?" Gwen asked. Her heart pounded against her chest. Her emotional roller coaster settled for the moment.

"I'm ... not sure. She hasn't been much for company. She didn't want to come tonight because you were here. Lately her emotions have been all across the board." Ashley said. Sensing the blonde's disappointment, she continued. "She still has a connection to you." Ashley and Danny stole a cautious look at one another.

"She hates me." Gwen spoke her thoughts out loud. The women shook their heads in disagreement.

"She loved you. She has gotten past a relationship that ended. She has a good life. She has family and friends." Ashley spoke softly as she squeezed Gwen's hand lightly.

"I am glad for her." Gwen's voice shook a bit with her answer. "I would still like to see her. Is there anyway? Can you give me her number? Take my number." She opened her purse scrambling for a pen and paper to write down the number.

"Gwen," Danny's reservations were evident. "She has gone through a lot. She's not the same person."

"I'm not either." Gwen looked at the dimmed lights hanging on the wall behind Danny. "We had something special." Gwen raised her water goblet to her lips. Her hand shook as she attempted to quench her parched throat. Her words were labored and sincere. "I thought we would be together forever. I should have never walked out of that hospital room." Gwen took a closer look at Danny.

Ashley sat back in her chair. She had watched her sister struggle over the years to cleanse Gwen from her system. They had been through a rough time with treatment. Through the chemotherapy, Keegan would say things that didn't make sense. In one session, she remembered her calling out for Gwen to make the pain go away.

"I'm not going to make any promises." Ashley spoke softly and prayed that her sister would not be angry. "She'll be at the house tomorrow to drop off Andy."

"Your son right?" Gwen asked.

"My little man." Ashley smiled as she reached for her purse to show a picture of her son. She handed the photograph to Gwen. She took in the small boy with the curly black hair and bright blue eyes. She traced her finger over his facial features seeing so much of the Garry family resemblance.

"He's got the eyes." Gwen said unaware of the smile that had appeared on her face as a memory of holding her naked body over Keegan's and looked into the bright blue eyes and told her she loved her ran through her head. Gwen felt her cheeks flush and she put her glass on the table.

"I don't even want to know where you just went." Danny said to the blonde as she Gwen fidgeted under her gaze.

"Tell me what time to be there." Gwen demanded. She was not letting this opportunity pass her by.

#

As soon as Gwen got back to her suite, she called Bobby. The Motors played in Cleveland but the team was scheduled to be in town tonight. Her call went directly into voicemail. Leaving a message, she could hear the quiver in her voice. How could Keegan be ill and no one tell her? If she was in a remission for a year, how long was her ex-girlfriend sick? Even if they weren't romantically involved someone should have told her. The majority of the people in her life knew what Keegan meant to her or means to her. What did the woman with the blazing blue eyes really mean to her? She hadn't seen her in years, but Keegan still held a large piece of her heart. Who was Gwen kidding? She never dated anyone seriously after Keegan. With the exception of Bobby which really wasn't dating him.

Grabbing a pair of cotton sleeping pants and an over sized sweatshirt, she entered the bathroom. Turning the taps of the shower on she pulled back the curtain letting the steam build. Catching her reflection in the mirror, she studied the muscular structure. When she and Bobby became a couple, they started to train together including a weight training regiment. Her arms were defined and cut. Her flat abdomen had visible muscles from the daily routine of crunches. Probably in better shape now than she had ever been when playing for the national team. Unsnapping her white silk bra she let the smooth garment slid to the floor. Her breasts were still shapely, they held their weight and gravity was not a factor. Most women who were over thirty feared the effects of aging on their bodies. Gwen was embracing her thirties. For the first time in over a decade, she didn't have to be at 6 a.m. practices. Retirement from soccer meant more time for her. It also meant she needed to figure out what she was doing with her life. An evening full of cancer survival stories made Gwen grateful for her health.

Feeling a bit paranoid, Gwen thought about the preventative measures message drummed into her head all night. She placed two fingers on the honey brown aureole and began a breast exam. When had her last check up been? She was young and healthy. Keegan was younger. Shaking the negative thoughts from her head, Gwen stripped her panties off and got into the shower. The hot water and steam cleansed her body and cleared her head. Lathering the shampoo in her hair she thought about the commercial she had done years ago for the product. On a set with twenty crew members she was thrown into a shower stall with a flesh colored body suit which only covered the essential parts. She never quite understood why she had to give the illusion of being nude. Nor did she understand the need for every male member of the crew to be ogling her. In fact, she had asked Bobby to come to the set to alleviate the tension. Of course Bobby found a cute Grip and never set foot on the set. One of the many times Bobby disappointed her. In fact, she conformed to Bobby's life more than he had to hers.

After rinsing her hair and body, she turned off the hot water and climbed out of the shower. The steam still lingered in the air and the mirror was covered with the condensation. She dried off with a towel then wrapped her hair in another. Putting on her night clothes, she began to relax and tried to shut her brain down. Pulling down the heavy down comforter, she crawled between the sheets. As if every molecule in her body was sapped of its energy, she felt drained as she lay

on the king size bed. Emotions she didn't know existed or had buried deep, surfaced this evening. When Ashley stood at the platform telling her story, Gwen had tears in her eyes. What the Garry family had been through. When she realized the siblings were the Garrys, small bits of conversations made sense, Ted Redding's mother at the airport with the comment about the run of back luck. Tara's pissed off behavior on the field in Atlanta. Thoughts rumbled through her head like a herd of elephants. When did Keegan know she was sick? What about Shannon, she should call her. She glanced at the red digital numbers of the clock. It was too late to call Shannon.

There were facts she knew for sure. Keegan was sick and survived cancer. From the looks on Ashley and Danny's faces, her battle had been extremely difficult. How long was Keegan sick and in remission? What happened to sever their once close relationship? After a night of celebration and booze in Greece, she received a call from Keegan. At a time when Gwen was angry and hurt, she took it out on the first woman or women she could hook up with. What a mistake. All of it a horrible mistake that continued to get worse and worse.

Her cell phone squeaked off, "I'm Bossy" by Kelis. Bobby was finally calling her back. She scrambled to the side table and grabbed her phone. She almost fell off the bed. After gaining her composure she said a breathy, "Hello."

"What in the hell are you doing? Or do I even want to know." She could feel Bobby's smile radiating through the phone.

"Get your mind out of the gutter. Are you in town? I need you." Her voice was quiet. And she did. She needed to cuddle against his broad shoulder and ask for his advice.

"Open your door." Gwen scrambled to her feet and flung the hotel door open. Standing in the hallway with a bouquet of flowers was the dark haired hockey player.

"Oh, you are so what I need right now." She flung her arms around his neck and placed a chaste kiss on his lips.

"Please tell me you haven't turned straight." He whispered in her ear as he spied a man standing by the elevator. Gwen laughed and took the flowers from him. "Nice PJs."

"I wasn't expecting any company. Come in here." Gwen held open the room door and Bobby followed behind her. The bed was mussed a bit, mainly from where Gwen had fallen trying to answer the phone. She set the flowers down on the table by the window. Bobby came to her side and wrapped his arms around her from behind. He placed his chin on her shoulder and hugged her.

"I saw Keegan's younger sister tonight. She was a presenter at the banquet." She turned in Bobby arms to look him in the face. "She's sick. Was sick, still is sick."

He held her at arms length for a moment. "What do you mean she was sick?"

"God Bobby, she has leukemia. Or she had it. According to Ashley, she's in remission." Gwen walked away towards the edge of the bed and sat on the corner of the mattress. An elbow on her knees her chin resting in her hand, she felt helpless. Of all the things she could wish on her ex-girlfriend being ill was not one of them. In fact, she never wished anything bad on Keegan. Maybe a little ill will but nothing this serious.

"So what are you going to do?" Bobby squatted in front of her, his big green eyes trying to hold hers. His hands gently rested on her knees. He nudged her a little when she didn't answer. "I know you want to see her." He smiled as he rose to his full height lifting her chin from her hand as he stood. "Is she pretty?"

"She's beautiful. No matter what she looks like she'll always be beautiful to me." Gwen confessed. She didn't care if Keegan put on a hundred pounds and was missing her teeth, she would always be beautiful.

"She has your heart Gwen. Why did you break up?" Bobby settled his weight on the bed next to her. Gwen leaned back with her hands sliding along the comforter behind her until she rested on her forearms and elbows.

"That's the strange thing about it." She told him the story of how Keegan was on the Olympic team and heading to Greece for the games. "She left Miami without telling me, without telling anyone." Bobby watched the hurtful emotions play across her face. He knew her heart had been broken. Trust was a major issue with Gwen. Her mother crossed the line by stealing from her while she was out of town. "And Curtis was lying through his teeth when I asked him about it." Bobby sat back his body next to Gwen's as she turned and cuddled in his arms. "Out of my mind for a couple of days, I left the team and came here to see her. At the hospital, I found her in a bed. Her sister Ashley and Washington were there. Tara Washington, play's goalie for Atlanta. She's Keegan's best friend." Gwen knew Bobby would recognize the name but not the reason behind it.

"Right before the Olympics you left your team?" Bobby questioned. This was the difference between men and women. Neither he nor any member of the hockey team would ever even attempt to approach a coach about leaving for a personal matter. She shot him a look that would stop a train.

"Yes. My girlfriend left me. She didn't answer my calls or return a message. I was trying to keep it together, but I couldn't. Curtis gave me two days to get there and back. I paid an arm and leg for the flights and when I got here, Keegan broke up with me." Gwen wiped an errant tear away. She still to this day couldn't figure out why. She didn't want her there, that was what Keegan said. In all the years Gwen had known Keegan, she had never spoken to her like that. Never spoken like that to anyone.

"It sounds like she didn't want you there at that time Gwen. She was on the team, an important part of the team. If she's not there and you're not there what about the team."

"It wasn't about the team, it was about our relationship." Gwen argued with him. "The Olympics didn't matter."

"To you maybe." He ruffled her hair and felt her stiffen in his arms.

"You're right. She wanted me with the team. She knew I'd stay with her." She rubbed her index and middle finger against her forehead. Her eyes slid shut as the consequences of her actions came to light. "I'm an idiot." Gwen confessed.

"Why would you say something like that?" Bobby asked as he moved so he could see her face. The unshed tears were glistening in the corners of her fawn colored eyes.

"She knew I'd stay. She sent me away because she wanted me back with the team. And I screwed up by sleeping with someone. I was mad at her for breaking up with me, so I got drunk and slept with a couple of women in Greece."

"A couple?" Bobby chuckled. He could imagine Gwen getting drunk and sleeping with someone she just met, but not two or three.

"Three." He laughed harder. She slapped his stomach. "God! I don't remember anything about it except for the next days untangling myself from under these women and a message from Keegan's mom."

"Jesus." He whispered. "What happened next?"

"Nothing...no communication...nothing. She cut me off or out. Ironically, I had planned on proposing to her that night. Instead, I ended up doing Connie proud and had sex with unknown multiple partners."

"What are your plans now?" He asked as he let out a yawn.

"Get her back. I'm going over to Ashley's house tomorrow. I hope that it will be a start." Gwen winked at him. "You know this could mean us breaking up and me coming out of the closet. One thing I know about Kee is, she's never hidden who she was or what she is."

"That could hurt your career. What about SNN?"

"I don't care. I want to be happy. If she'll take me back, that would make me happy. What about you? Are you okay to go solo or at least single for awhile?"

"Single, retired, and still well off, I think I could handle that. If we make it to the playoffs, I'm going to retire. There are a couple of schools in Ontario who have contacted me to come and coach for them." Bobby pulled the pillows from under the covers and handed one to Gwen.

"Sounds like a good plan. I just wish you could find someone to make you happy." Gwen rolled on to her back and let Bobby spoon up against her.

"You make me happy, just in a sister like way." He smiled into his pillow at the small chuckle he heard. "Get some sleep so the woman doesn't think you're a hag tomorrow."

Chapter 6

Sitting in her rental car in front Ashley Whitmore's home, Gwen gripped the steering wheel tightly. Her stomach felt as if it were in knots. Using every breathing exercise she had learned to calm down She changed her outfit three times before getting Bobby's approval on her choice of a worn pair Levi's, a blue v-neck sweater over a white blouse and soft brown boots. She checked out of the hotel early. Following Bobby, they went to his townhouse for an early breakfast and a brainstorming session.

The possibility of seeing Keegan always made her nervous. Actually seeing the woman after a five year separation had her on edge. She jumped at everything Bobby said even if he agreed with her. She wondered if she and Keegan could pick up where they left off. They hadn't spoken in such a long time. She wondered how to break the ice. Maybe the surprise appearance was a good idea. Although deep down, if she was in Keegan's place, she would like to know what she was walking into. As Shannon reminded her, she wouldn't let them say more than three or four words about Keegan. She would stop the conversation, cutting Keegan out of her life like she had done to her. The last time she actually talked to Kee was in the hospital room. Kee was going in for appendix surgery. Some how she got Curtis to agree to let her leave the team. The trip to Greece was horrible. She remembered the moment she finally broke.

The sun beat down on the open field. A pressure cooker of heat wafted over the players as they tried their best to get the ball in the back of the net. Gwen stood at the twenty-yard line, sweat soaked her jersey and the waist band of her shorts. God knows why they wanted the team to wear the navy uniforms today. The hottest day of the summer, they were on the first game of the exhibition matches before the actual games. Gwen ground her teeth, annoyed that she couldn't go home for a few days before the Olympics started. Keegan left. Not one word was heard from her.

Gwen pushed off on the smaller opponent as she tried to break free for the ball. A whistle against her had Gwen screaming at the referee in Spanish. Hanging out at the Santa Cruz pier, her education for swearing in Spanish had paid off over the years.

"Rulacho! Ciegue puerco!"

When the referee began to reach for the penalty cards in his pocket, Gwen looked over towards the bench. Curtis was pacing. His hands moving wildly as she watched his mouth moving without hearing his words. She knew she would be in trouble if the card came out. Quickly she flashed a smile and shrugged her shoulders at the Italian official. Gwen knew she could get away with more than most players. Her looks, her pearly smile and an apologetic gesture usually calmed the referee down. A nod to the German player and all was forgiven on the field. Curtis would be another story. She watched as he signaled for substitution. She wasn't surprised to see her number placed on the plaque. The crowd gave her a standing ovation. Two assists and a couple of shots on goal, they got the show they wanted.

"Lerner, what the hell was that all about?" Curtis asked as she took a seat on the bench. Draping a towel over her head she hid her tears from the coach. "We don't need every official in the world pissed off at us. The Olympics are in less than a week." Curtis was well aware officials from the international playing circuit disliked the United States teams since some idiot representing the team released a comment about third world countries giving more attention to the soccer teams than their education system. Needless to say the representative was no longer with the organization. "You know that. What's going on with you?"

All week his star player was short tempered. He pulled her off Shannon Abbott, who with three kids and a husband, he thought was the most patient woman in the world. When he asked his top two players what the issue was, neither of them came clean. Abbott said that they had cleared it up. Today the forearm to the German defenders head was a bit excessive since they were up by three goals with ten minutes to play. Germany had only shot twice on goal the entire game. Gwen was walking a line to be carded for a stupid foul. The whole situation was unnecessary.

"Keegan!" Gwen got to her feet and stood toe to toe with her coach. The man who had all the answers. The man who knew why her girlfriend left the team and returned to Michigan. "It's about how my life is coming apart at the seams. How the one person in the world I love won't talk to me." She took a step away and stared up at the blue sky. She knew the cameras were zooming in on her. She could feel the heat from their lens. Such a personal private moment as she cried about missing her lover was going to be slapped across the airways and headlines as frustration over a game. "I need to go and see her Curtis. You won't tell me and she won't talk to me. I have to find out what is going on." Gwen knew her face was red and tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"You done?" Curtis asked as Gwen sat down hard on the bench. Her arms crossed over her chest. She just wanted to talk to Keegan get things patched up between them.

She felt sick. "I need you back in two days...got it?" He held up two fingers. "And when you return I don't want to hear about Garry. As far as the press is concerned, she had an appendectomy and is unable to make the trip. Are we clear?"

"Crystal!" Gwen lifted her chin in challenge. She was tired. Tired of not knowing why Keegan wouldn't talk to her. She was tired of the team and staff whispering and looking her way when any mention of Keegan was brought up. She needed to go to Michigan.

Somehow she managed to get tickets out of Barcelona and was in Detroit less than twenty-four hours later. She needed find out where she stood with Keegan and why.

Her first stop was to the Garry house. Parking her rental car in the empty driveway, she thought it odd. The driveway always had a car in it. Either Ashley's car or the beater Meghan drove around. Her knock on the door was answered by a tall red head she thought looked familiar.

"I'm looking for Keegan. Is she home?" Gwen could see in the woman's gray eyes she recognized her. "I'm not a reporter."

"You're Gwen Lerner. We just watched." The red head gestured towards the television set in the room behind her.

"Please just tell me where she is...I need" Gwen pleaded with the woman at the door not giving her a chance to send her away by putting a foot in front of the open door.

"I'm not certain if it's a good idea you're here."

"I've got twenty four hours and I need to get back. Where is..."

*When Gwen's rant began to tumble from her lips, the red head put up her hand and said.
"Keegan's at the hospital."*

"Thank you." Gwen didn't need to ask which hospital. Keegan would also be a part of Weston University and if she was in for an appendectomy, she would be at Weston. Keegan went to school and finished her clinicals at the hospital. One of the best characteristics of the University was that it took care of its own.

Physically ill, she walked down the polished tile of the corridor. The elder woman manning the hospitality service desk gave Gwen a double look as she asked for Keegan Garry's room number. As the woman typed, she looked at the blonde in front of her.

"Do I know you sweetie?"

"No, Ma'am." Gwen answered, trying to be as polite as possible. People recognized her and thought they knew her because she pushed some product on the television.

"Well you look like that young woman in the commercials." Gwen nodded. Her agent had signed multiple deals for Gwen to appear in endorsements. Gwen had to approve of the deals. McDonald's was the hardest to pass by. She just didn't agree with the type of message the restaurant sent the public. Their food was not the healthiest. After haggling with the sponsor, Gwen agreed to appear in a commercial for salads and the healthier food the chain offered.

"I get that a lot." Gwen leaned on the desk and offered the biggest smile she could. "Do you have that room number for me?"

"Oh, he's in a restricted area. Family only, I'm afraid." The white haired woman shook her head slightly. Gwen keyed in on the "he" reference. Keegan could get away with the unisex first name and Gwen was going to use that to her advantage.

"I'm his fiancée." The lie she offered to the representative seemed to push through the red tape. With a nod of her head, the woman wrote down the number on a hospital business card.

"I wish you all the best." The woman grabbed her hand in comfort as she slipped the card into Gwen's hand. The sensation of fear mixed in with the uncertainty she would even get to the eighth floor. Gwen went to the elevators and waited for the next car.

One foot in front of the other as she approached the nurse's station on the eighth floor. Her head was down as she watched the brown tips of her Doc Martins touch the tiles in front of her. Dressed in a pair of faded jeans and short sleeved navy Henley, she lifted her head and her blonde hair hung in her eyes for a moment before she swept it away. Something was seriously wrong. As Gwen got closer, a slim alabaster skinned woman with black hair intercepted her approach.

"Miss you are not allowed on this floor." Regina Parker immediately recognized the tall blonde walking on to the isolation floor of Weston University Hospital. The dark haired nurse looked over her shoulder to see if any of her co-workers were in the area.

"I need to see Keegan Garry." Gwen saw the nurse in her way and was not going to stop until she actually saw Keegan.

"You need to leave or I will call for security." The nurse feared this moment. She knew eventually Gwen would come, but she didn't expect her to be here so soon. While working her shift, she had stood outside Keegan's door listening to her cry and call out Gwen's name. Braving her fears, Gina opened the door to see Keegan's face pressed into the gray sweatshirt.

"You better call because I'm not leaving." Gwen made the famous swim move with her arm which allowed her to slip pass defensive players. The china doll nurse was no match for the quick side step Gwen put on her when she broke into a sprint down the hallway. She heard the call for security to be called to the 8th floor. Her feet flying on the tile, Gwen looked at the open rooms looking for any sign of the Garry family. Skidding to a stop she spotted Ashley with her head down biting her fingers as she sat in a waiting room chair.

"Ashley..." Gwen's voice was horse. What was happening and why hadn't anyone told her?

"Jesus, Gwen you're supposed to be in Europe or something?" Ashley got to her feet. She saw the dark circles under Gwen's eyes. As a family they watched the game against the German team from Keegan's hospital room. She wasn't sure if it was the travel or the stress of not knowing what was going on with Keegan was the cause of Gwen's haggard state.

Ashley stood up and wrapped the tall blonde in her arms. She knew that Gwen loved her sister. Their relationship was something Ashley hoped she have with Jason. Stubborn as she was Keegan was convinced everything would work out. "I'll tell her after the games. Just give me the time I'm asking for." Keegan talked to her family about her reasons for not letting Gwen know the seriousness of her condition.

"Why Gwen? You have so much going on. You're needed by the team."

"I can't do them any good if I can't function. My life is falling apart and the only thing I need is your sister. Please Ashley I need to see her." Her brown eyes swimming in tears, Gwen did her best not to let them fall freely.

Ashley held her tongue. She wanted to let Gwen know what her sister was facing. The test results came back two days ago. It was confirmed, her older sister was diagnosed with Chronic Myelogenous Leukemia. The family came together to support Keegan and her choices. One of her biggest choices was not to tell Gwen what was going on until after the Olympics.

"Come with me." Ashley held the strong woman's hand like a child. As she led the soccer player to the doorway of her sister's room. "No matter what she says..." Ashley pushed back a fallen strand of Gwen's hair out of her eyes. As a nervous gesture, she bit her lip. "Remember she loves you."

Gwen shook out her hands as she stood in front of the hospital room door. She was going to finally get the answers she was waiting for. With a reassuring smile from Keegan's younger sister, she had a little more confidence in her visit. Pushing open the door, her brown eyes immediately went to the figure lying in the bed. The head area of the hospital bed was pushed to an upright position, as Keegan's form was sitting up talking to her best friend and college teammate, Tara Washington. The women's eyes widened as Gwen stepped across the threshold. Keegan's hands neatly folded on the sheet which covered her body from the waist down. Gwen noted the foot bouncing furiously back and forth. Relieved she wasn't the only one nervous about this meeting.

"Hi." Gwen said as Tara stood glancing nervously between the women. The dark skinned woman leaned over the hospital bed and whispered in Keegan's ear. With a mumble Tara made an excuse to leave. Tara gave Gwen a weak smile as she exited the room.

Together for the first time in weeks, neither spoke. When brown eyes met blue, Gwen sighed and nervously touched the Irish wedding band on her finger. The rings they had exchanged. Why was this so hard? She wanted to rush the bed and give Keegan a hug. Tell her how much she loved her and offer her the engagement ring.

"Why are you here?" Keegan asked as she shifted her weight off the bed and flexed her toes under the light sheet.

"I want to make sure you are okay." Gwen leaned a hip on the bed.

Closing her eyes and shaking her head, Keegan bowed her head. "Gwen you are supposed to be in Greece."

"No Keegan. I need to be here with you. I can't be anywhere else." Gwen sat on the side of the bed. She reached her hand out to touch Keegan's forehead. When Keegan flinched away, she pulled her hand back. Gwen had never witnessed Keegan physically repulsed by her.

"I don't want you here. Jesus, it's like you don't get it." Her words were tearing a path through Gwen's pounding heart. "Go away Gwen. I don't want you here. You don't belong here."

"What is it Kee? Why are you doing this?" Moving closer, Gwen leaned in to press her lips on Keegan's. A firm hand on her chest stopped her midway.

"Stop! Just don't touch me." Keegan pulled her hand back and put it on the bed. "I've decided I don't want to be your sidekick any more." Keegan's voice never wavered. "Always in your shadow, if this appendix thing didn't happen, Curtis was going to cut me, but you had to step up and be my savior. I don't want a savior Gwen. And I don't want you."

With a need to defend her actions, Gwen tried to look into those bright blue eyes for any sign of hope or understanding. She only found a sad emptiness. How did Keegan know of Curtis's concerns with her playing ability? She knew Curtis wouldn't say anything. She never mentioned the conversation she had with the coach over three months ago.

"Go back to the team. Where you're needed. I don't want you here." Keegan hit the call button at the side of her bed. When Gina's form filled the door way, Gwen glanced down at her hand.

"I don't understand why you are doing this Keegan. I thought we had something special I thought you loved me as much as I love you." Gwen twisted the ring on her finger. She felt the tears pooling in her eyes. Never one to cry she found that she was doing it quite often since Keegan left. She got to her feet, straightening her shirt out and brushing invisible lint from the front of her jeans. "If you want to find me, you know where I'll be. Maybe I'll understand this some day but I can't right now." The blonde turned and walked towards the doorways. Stopping half way across the room she turned and stared at Keegan's eyes. Hoping to see into her soul. "You know if I did something or if I wasn't concerned for you, I maybe able to comprehend why you are doing this. But for the life of me, I don't get it."

Slowly coming back from memory lane, she eased the door of silver SUV open and walked to the front door. Before Gwen could ring the bell, Ashley greeted her.

"Good afternoon, come on in." Ashley welcomed her into the artistically decorated foyer. The two-story colonial stood at the end of a cul de sac. There were houses on each side but at a large distance between neighbors. Between the décor and the furnishings, it was obvious that Ashley did well financially.

"Your home is beautiful." Gwen said as she gazed across the artwork and the warm colors that filled the rooms. The sunlight created a homey feeling that so many other new homes lacked.

"Thank you. Come in to the kitchen, Danny just made a pot of coffee. She is hanging just a little today. The house is a little quieter than normal. We were able to take our time this morning." Ashley walked behind Danny and placed a hand on her neck. "How we feeling Jose?" Danny groaned and slapped her best friends hand away.

"Like crap." She looked at the other women. "Why don't you feel like I do?"

"It's called shots." Ashley smiled and headed towards the stove. "We stopped at a bar on the way home last. Ms. Martin indulged in one to many shots of a Mr. Jose Cuervo. Andy and Keegan are not here yet."

"Thank God. He's a great kid, but he tends to be loud especially on days when I'm not feeling good." Danny put a hand to her forehead wishing the pounding to subside. "Do you want kids, Gwen?"

"Danielle." Ashley called out immediately. "Stop it. Gwen don't answer that question."

"It's okay. I haven't thought about it in a long time. When we were together, we talked about the possibility, but my childhood was pretty unpleasant. I wouldn't want to bring a child up in that type of environment. I could consider it if I had the right person and a good relationship. Some people just want kids to hold on to a relationship that has gone bad." A picture of her mother immediately popped into her head. Gwen wandered towards the picture frames lining the walls between the kitchen and the dinning room. Setting her purse down on the dinning room table, she looked at the snapshots of the Garry family. Seeing for the first time small glimpses of what the family had evolved into.

"How are your parents?"

"Good, they retired to Florida last year. Dad thinks he can whip Meghan in golf since he's playing every day." Ashley handed Danny a ceramic cup of coffee. Gwen continued to study the family photos and a much younger Danny with a brighter shade of red hair stood out.

"You've been around awhile." Gwen backed up two steps to look at the redhead in the eyes. She remembered every aspect of her trip to Michigan prior to the start of the games in Greece. She stopped at the Garry family home looking for Keegan. Danny was the woman who answered the door. A little older not quite as shocked, yes....this was the woman who answered the door. "You were at the house when I came looking for Kee."

For a few moments Danny paused choosing her words wisely. "Yes, it was me." Danny took a breath. "I didn't know too much about the family at that time, in fact it was the second time I'd been to the house." She looked over at Ashley, remembering the day the news came out. When Ashley cried on her shoulder and shared the news of her sister's illness, Danny came along to offer support.

"So you were here during Keegan's illness?" Gwen asked bring her back to the present. When the red head tilted her head to the side and slowly comprehended her question.

"For a period of time. It was hard to be there all the time. Plus Keegan went to so many specialists." Danny stated keeping an eye on Ashley who began to shift uncomfortably. They had agreed earlier to let Keegan tell Gwen the details of her battle.

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The small figure with black curls held tightly to Keegan's hand as he scooted out of the car seat and on to the driveway. Ashley had been a bear lately and she hoped her sister was able to get some of her frustration out. Maybe she met some nice handsome man and got lucky. Keegan sighed. She knew Ashley wanted nothing to do with any type of romantic relationship. It was

probably the reason her sister hung on to the close relationship with Danny. Jason, the bastard he was, ran her sister through the emotional wringer through out the course of their marriage. He actually tried to ban his wife from seeing her family, especially Keegan, because of her life style. Keegan hoped never to see or hear from the asshole again.

"Up, up" Andy gestured to his aunt. Keegan brushed the small beads of sweat from her brow. She hadn't felt well this morning, just like the previous twelve days. She brushed her jacket down over her stomach and wished the queasiness would pass. Getting bigger and bigger, she wore a pair of bib overalls with a thermal shirt underneath. She just couldn't seem to keep warm. A trip to Florida was looking better and better each day.

"Not today...Aunt Kee doesn't feel the best." She pulled his small arm when his small red boots took a misstep, righting the three year old. A cold March afternoon breeze pushed her shoulder length chocolate brown hair into her face and she combed it back over her ear with her a finger. There was a sterling colored SUV with a small green sticker parked in the driveway. Recognizing the rental car symbol, Keegan wondered who was visiting. Half dragging the precocious three year old to the front door, her breath was ragged and a wave of nausea passed through her again. Last night she could feel the start of a cold coming. With the morning sickness, she expected to be ill and she hoped her body would begin adjusting soon. On Monday she had an appointment for a sonogram. Tony said he wanted to go with her and she was happy to have him along. Having the grizzly looking educator with her seemed to deter Carrie's advances. Maybe with Tony by her side Carrie would understand she wasn't looking for a second parent. She would be the main support and provider for the child. Tony understood his donation did not give him legal rights. He would have no obligation to the baby unless something happened to her. If Keegan were to pass away, Tony could gain custody if he wanted. Otherwise, she was planning on naming her sisters as legal guardians. Her last appointment with Dr. Devon confirmed everything was normal, but she had heard the same diagnosis before. Feeling like crap everyday was not something she bargained for when she started this journey. Neither was getting ill. She needed to boost her system. More vitamin C and whatever else would help her fight off the cold that was trying her senses.

"Looks like you've got company big guy. Ready to see Mommy?"

"Moommy? Miggy? Daaa?" Keegan opened the front door of the Gross Point lakefront two-story colonial. Laughing because Andy's rhyming of Meg's name with a famous Muppet by Jim Henson. For Christmas she bought him a Miss Piggy ornament which Meg found highly offensive.

"No Miggy." Keegan chuckled, knowing her sister would have her hit her if she knew she coached Andy on calling Meghan the name. Ashley bought the house a year before she had Andy. As soon as she was separated, her sister went about the process of eradicating Jason Whitmore from her life. It was the only home Andy had ever known. The front storm door screeched as Keegan opened the full glass door. The heavy front door opened wide as she led her nephew to the foyer. As soon as Andy's toes touched the polished hard wood of the entrance hallway, he ran shrieking with glee into the kitchen. He stopped in the doorway jabbering at the occupants of the room. Keegan undid her scarf and took off her Gore-Tex jacket. She wasn't

certain what would happen first, spring in Detroit or purchasing a larger coat. If all else failed, she could borrow one from Danny and swim in it.

"Careful your feet are wet!" Keegan yelled at the speedster whose shoes squeaked across the oak planks. The sound of the front door opening and small feet running across the hardwood filled the house.

"Speaking of." Ash said as the conversation in the kitchen ground to a halt. She placed her hand on Gwen's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "Where's my man?" Ashley called out as she headed towards the doorway. Every fear ran through her body as Gwen followed Ash into the kitchen. Danny remained seated at the table. Ash squatted at the kitchen entrance as a small dark haired unruly boy with curls that did not stop jumped into her arms and hugged her.

"Were you a good boy?" She greeted her son with a kiss to his forehead.

"He was a perfect gentleman." Keegan's voiced echoed through the kitchen. Gwen felt her heart in her throat as the sound of Keegan approaching. In the center of the kitchen, an island counter top gave her the security and support she needed. Her hands gripped the edge as Andy pointed at her and mumbled something.

Keegan followed her nephew into the kitchen at a slower pace. Her stomach rolled from queasiness. Her head pounded as the sweat rolled down her brow. She wondered if she should have left the house. Maybe her decision to have a baby was too much. Could she handle the responsibility? Ashley did it. She had a baby for her. Keegan could endure the same nine months of prenatal. Andy's rambunctious personality was a handful and had her questioning the possibility of her child being the same way. Her nephew overnight stay took a toll on her. The small boy stopped talking when Keegan stood next to her sister and pointed at the island. He looked back at Keegan and let out a giggle.

"Who?" The three year old held his hands over his mouth.

"Whose car is that?" Keegan set her hands on the doorway praying the queasiness would pass. Ashley placed her hands on Andy's waist. She picked him up and set him down in his kitchen chair, next to Danny. Turning back to her sister, she gave her a gentle squeeze on her shoulder.

"There is someone who wanted to see you." Ash said as she blocked Keegan's line of sight. Andy tried his best to get the attention of the stranger at the counter. A frown instantly appeared on his face as he made a racket. Ash placed her hands on the shoulders of her older sister. Keegan's small pouch made contact with her sister's hip. Keegan tried to back up a step to avoid contact with her sister's body. She wiped at her forehead as the beads of sweat appeared.

"What's going on?" Keegan sounded a bit worried but tried to keep it light. Just starting her second trimester of pregnancy, her emotions and her patience were off the charts. "Dear God. Who is it? Mom?" Ashley shook her head and looked at Danny. Keegan tried to peer around her sister's taller frame. "What's going on?" Her battle with leukemia held her at death's door on more than one occasion. Her main concern was her health and the health of those close to her.

Once during a chemo session, she needed a reason to go on. Uncertain if it was a dream or a way of coping with the burning sensation filling her body, she closed her eyes and prayed to God to take her away. Immediately she felt at peace. She found herself in a field with blue skies and wild flowers surrounding her. Lying on a soft yellow blanket, she felt whole. A small girl sat next to her, twirling a daisy between her hands. Blue eyes mirroring hers stared at her with a smile and touched the flower to Keegan's nose. The little girl lifted the flower towards a kite flying high in the sea of clouds. Keegan followed the string from the bright red and green kite as it filtered towards the ground. Her eyes strained as they followed the string to its owner but she was brought short by a light touch on her face. She fought through the fog to look upon the pilot of the contraption. Another touch on her cheek brought Keegan out of the trance and face to face with eyes as blue as her own. Her father stared at her as she woke up. Bill's tear filled eyes danced over her face as he lifted a finger to wipe away a tear. "Sweetie, don't leave us."

"I'm going to beat this Dad." Her voice whispered as she closed her eyes and fell back to sleep. She wanted a reason to live and her dream gave her one. A baby, she would have a child once she beat cancer. She thought of Ashley and how the birth of Andy helped her survive. How much love could a sister have than to offer a possible cure to her? When the bone marrow donors didn't match Keegan's blood type, the family was at the end of their rope. Ashley announced she was pregnant. Keegan was confused, since Ashley and Jason were separated for such a long time and the divorce finalized over six months ago. She didn't question her sister. Andy gave her a second chance at life.

"Is it Dad?" Her voice broke mid-sentence. When Ashley didn't answer quickly, Keegan roughly grabbed her arms. "Tony?" Her voice seemed to tense as Ashley refrained from answering.

"Hello Keegan." Gwen took a step closer to the sisters. Concerned with Keegan's panic filled reaction, she stepping forward. Ashley turned to look over her shoulder, then moved out of Keegan's way. For the first time in years, she saw Keegan face. "I wanted to see you." Gwen pushed out the words. Her expression changed from one of hesitation to one of amazement as her gaze traveled from Keegan's shocked expression to the swell of her belly. Biting her lower lip, she bent her head to hide her reaction. Keegan had moved on. She was with someone, in a relationship, having a child with them. Gwen knew she was too late to salvage a relationship.

Numb from her feet up, Keegan stood in the middle of her sister's kitchen gazing into the face that haunted her. The one person who she shared precious memories with, the person who broke her heart, Gwen stood in front of her. There wasn't a stadium full of people between them, nor was she on the television. This wasn't a dream. Gwen was standing in front of her. Older and a little heavier, she still was a beautiful woman. Gwen came to her.

What does she think of me? Keegan thought as she unconsciously placed her hand on her stomach, suddenly feeling fat, bloated and foolish. Why on earth would the blonde be attracted to her? She was pregnant and not a man. After all Gwen was engaged to a pro hockey player. Which would mean she probably wanted to reconnect because she would be moving to the area? "Gwen." Keegan's voice shook. Her insides trembled and her knees threatened to give out. "I..." She stammered. "I don't know what to say." Keegan wanted to cross towards her and put both hands on her face and kiss her. "Wow, I'm."

"Pregnant." Gwen smiled as she saw the swelling belly. "Congratulations." No wonder Ashley hesitated with Gwen seeing Keegan. She was trying to protect her sister from getting hurt and her questions from earlier rang clear. She looked at the woman who seemed to want to disappear from the situation. Danny rubbed a comforting hand along Andy's arm.

"Thanks. I'm due in late August." Keegan grasped the back of the chair as her fingers dug into the hard wood. Her heart was beating rapidly as she took in her former lover. Up close for the first time in years, she could see the honey brown eyes taking her in. The faint scent of jasmine hung in the air. One of her favorite scents, she hadn't realized why until now. Gwen wore it often and it seemed to permeate around her. "How are you doing?"

"I'm a bit embarrassed. I didn't mean to intrude on you but I recognized Ashley last night." Gwen confessed. Her chest felt heavy like a weight pressed on her torso. The closeness of Keegan being in the same room sapped the common sense right out of her. She fought against her instinct. She wanted to cross the kitchen and enclose the smaller woman in her arms and tell her she made a mistake. Instead, she found her self moving across the floor to the table closer to Keegan. She could see the vein in Keegan's neck quicken as she approached. Her own body was on fire. The attraction she felt when she first met Keegan was still there. Her hair was longer and hung to her shoulders. The azure eyes danced over her face. She wasn't the only one having trouble dealing with this meeting. Memories came flooding back of kissing this woman in front of her, of crying on her shoulder, of the love and support they shared. Keegan hurt her and in turn she caused Keegan pain.

"Keegan," Gwen began to speak, her words catching in her throat for the second time in less than twelve hours. "Would you like to go to dinner with me?"

"No. Oh no." Keegan answered quickly. Gwen stepped closer and Keegan could feel the blood pulse through her veins. Her body ignited by the tall blonde closeness. She cursed her body and hormones for letting Gwen have such an effect on her. "No. What are you doing here?" Keegan backed away from the kitchen chair to the other side of the room away from the blonde who was studying her every move. "Why are you here?" Her words echoed the question she had asked Gwen years ago in a hospital room. She saw the recognition of the question as the blonde's eyes turned dark for an instant. It wasn't anger. It was pain, the hurt from the memory of being questioned for caring.

"Foolish me." Gwen smirked to hide the hurt. She bit her lower lip and rubbed her face. "I just thought it would be good to see you again Keegan. I'm sorry I hurt you, but you hurt me too."

Danny began shifting uncomfortably in her seat and started to leave. "You stay right where you are at." Keegan directed her words to her sister's best friend. "I have a feeling that you may be behind this." Danny began to protest and stopped and looked at her Ashley. Ashley leaned against the sliding glass door waiting for Keegan to turn and take a bite at her.

"You show up here after all this time. Why Gwen?" The one person she was afraid to hurt, but in the end hurt her. The person she wanted to share her life with when she had one to share. The

person she set free and broke her heart. She looked at Gwen. For the first time in a long time, she could see the freckles on the bridge of her nose and the small mole on her shoulder.

"I'm in town for a couple of days." Gwen glanced at Keegan's hand for a ring and saw the matching Irish wedding band on her finger. "And I've been thinking about you and I wanted to see you. I've thought about you. We used to be really good friends at one time." Gwen was struggling. She envisioned this meeting going so much better in her head.

"Friends. Is that how you view it? We were partners....or at least I thought we were. You slept with those women? Now you're engaged to what's his name?"

"Bob Finch." Ashley supplied from the doorway. Both women turned to give her a look.

"Shut up Ash! Don't think I don't know who is behind this?" Keegan's deadly stare was aimed directly at her sister. "We'll talk about that later. Count on it!"

"Are you and your partner expecting this baby together?" Gwen asked as her hand reached out to touch the ring on Keegan's hand. Keegan looked at her sister and Danny. A light mist of sweat was visible on her forehead.

"That's none of your business." Keegan pulled her hand away and started towards the door. Gwen followed hot on her heels.

"You always were stubborn." Gwen ran her hands through her hair in frustration. Finally she raced in front of the retreating form and grabbed both of Keegan's hands. The once familiar jolt of electricity shot through their body when contact was made. Taking Keegan's hands in her, Gwen brought them to her chest.

"I made a mistake. I was young and I made some bad decisions. I want." Her words faltered. "I want to get to know you again."

"Gwen, I'm pregnant. I'm going to have a baby. I'm not in the mood. Maybe I don't want to know you. The Gwen I knew would not be engaged to a hockey player." Keegan could feel Gwen's heart pounding underneath her hands. "Go back to California, to your life and your fiancé." Keegan could see Gwen trying to fight the threat of tears in her soft brown eyes. She flattened her hands against Gwen's chest and pushed her. "You can't come in to my life and assume I'm going to forget everything that happened. Not remember the accusations, the way you dealt with the separation."

"We were broken up!"

"Keep thinking that Ross, maybe it will make everything feel better." Keegan shot another dig her way referencing the Friends sitcom character.

"God Kee, will you give me a break for a second?"

"I'm pregnant. The only one who deserves a break is me." Keegan resumed her trek out of the house, escaping her sister's house, escaping from Gwen.

"Don't Keegan." Gwen chased after her quickly catching her before she got to the door. "Are you with someone?"

"What?" Keegan asked confused by the question.

"Are you with someone? Do you have a partner?" Gwen placed her hand on Keegan's arm to halt her progress.

"Again, none of your business, besides you're the one engaged to be married to a very handsome man. Does he know you're here?"

"He does. He even offered to drive me here. I thought it would be a little awkward." Gwen smiled just a bit as Bobby made a scene wanting to come and meet Keegan. He jumped up and down on the couch trying to get her to agree. She pacified with the promise that if all went well, she would introduce them.

"You think!" Keegan's sarcastic remark cut hard through Gwen's confidence. "You don't think putting me on the spot in a place I'm comfortable isn't awkward?" Keegan pulled her arm from Gwen's touch. "You don't even know me. You've got no clue what my life has been like or what I want or need. Go away Gwen." Keegan continued her escape. The echoing words returned.

"I know. I know. You don't want me here!" Gwen finished Keegan sentence. "I've heard this before. And I left. I left." Gwen stopped for a moment and formulated her words carefully. "I walked away from you because you didn't want me there. I left because you told me to." She lifted her hand and gently cupped Keegan's chin. Lifting it slightly she made sure blue eyes locked with brown. "That was a mistake I'm not willing to make again." The pad of her thumb traced Keegan's jaw line. "I'd like to know you again or at least try. Keegan? Tell me you are willing to try." Keegan relaxed for the first time since realizing Gwen stood inches from her. She felt her skin tingle where Gwen touched her. Looking into the soft tawny eyes that haunted her dreams she sighed. She may not have been prepared for Gwen to come back into her life. There was a hope they may be able to salvage a friendship.

"You can't hurt me anymore, Gwen." Keegan shook her head as she backed away. She needed to think clearly. Separate from Gwen so that her brain was steering the boat, not her heart. "I need to think about it. I can't do this now. If you want an answer now, it's no. One of us needs to leave, because I'm uncomfortable."

"I'm sorry to intrude on you and your family. Stay, I'll go. I'm in town 'til Thursday. I'd like to see you." Gwen said as she walked out of the house.

"I can't." Keegan shut the door behind her.

Keegan walked back in the kitchen. Danny immediately greeted her with a full on bear hug. Andy watched out of curiosity. Ashley tilted his head back kissed him on the lips. She could see the anguish in her sister's body as she tried to fight off the feelings for the tall blonde. Andy placed a chubby hand on her cheek as she smiled at him and kissed his nose. So many things had gone wrong in Keegan's life. She hoped this was not a mistake.

Pulling out of Danny's comforting arms, Keegan wearily sat in a kitchen chair. She held her head in her hands. There were no tears. She wasn't sure why. After a few moments, she felt a small hand touch her arm.

"No sad..." Andy stroked his small fingers across her arm. She felt drained. There was part of her that wanted to follow after the blonde. Yet her brain wasn't going to let Gwen waltz back in. A small shiver went through her body.

"I'm okay honey." Keegan flashed a quick smile her nephew's way. Her heart was pounding and her stomach upset but not from the morning sickness. She cleared her throat and raised her eyes to meet her sister matching pair. "What am I going to do?" She said aloud.

"What do you want to do?" Danny spoke quietly her fingers laced together.

She sat with her elbows resting on her knees and her overall bib plunging to reveal the white thermal top underneath. "I don't know." Keegan answered. "What the hell were you thinking telling her who you were?"

"She knew. The damn eyes, it's a give away."

"She is so right. Once you look into those baby blues you're." Danny was cut off by Keegan's groan.

"Stop it. I'm the one getting action from a syringe. She looks good." Keegan let a little smirk shine through.

"No Keegan, she looks great." Ashley smiled as she hoisted Andy to her lap.

"She's a beautiful woman. Didn't you have a massive crush on her?" Ashley teased Danny.

"Never. That was Meghan." The redness of Danny's face told the truth. Keegan stood up and began to pace. Her stomach settled a bit, but her mind was whirling with thoughts and images. "Have you talked to her since the original hospital visit?"

"No. I left her a message once. The last time we talked was in the hospital room." Keegan shook her head. She thought about all the conversations she had with the blonde in her head over the years. The Gwen she knew was one she talked to in her head. Not the woman who was just standing in her sister's house. What a strange twist life threw her way, she broke up with Gwen, she thought it would be for a few weeks. She'd let Gwen compete in the Olympics and she'd tell her the truth after. Except Gwen moved on and never looked back.

"Keegan, it's a start. At least she is trying to get in touch with you. It's obvious she wants to reconnect." Ashley said as she watched the silver SUV back out of her drive and head down the street.

"I'm not sure I even want a start." Keegan hugged her torso and she thought she felt a fluttering sensation. "Can I lie down? I'm not feeling good." Ash nodded and offered her a hand as she led her to the guest bedroom. When Keegan settled on to the queen size bed, Ashley made sure she was tucked in.

"Are you feeling okay?" Ashley asked as she put her hand to Keegan's forehead. She was burning up with fever. "Keegan, when did this start?"

"Last night, I was feeling run down but I thought it was from Andy being over." Keegan confessed. The meeting with Gwen seemed to heighten the fever.

"Did you call the doctor?" Her sister scolded. Keegan shook her head and rolled over to sleep.

Ashley turned to leave the room, taking one last look over her shoulder at the resting figure, she started to worry. Danny was cleaning the cups and coffee maker, when a pale looking Ashley appeared at her side. "What's wrong?"

"She's running a fever."

"Stubborn son of a gun. How long?"

"She says since last night. And before you asked, she didn't call the doctor." Ashley looked at the numbers posted on the frig. Keegan had a number of doctor's she saw on a regular basis. Sarah emailed an updated contact list a few weeks ago.

"Oh shit!" Danny said as her eyes fell on the purse sitting on the dinning room table. Her expletive was immediately followed by Andy repeating her swear word.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" Andy said as he drank from his sippy cup. Ash chuckled under her breath.

"Nice Danny. Now you can explain that to Grandma and Grandpa." Danny put her hand on Ash's chin and pointed it so her line of sight fell on the purse. "Shit!"

Andy continued repeat the word until Danny told him to stop playing with his drink and not to say the word anymore

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~ America's Sweetheart ~

by Catherine Burke

America's Sweetheart

Author's Note: This is my first story posted on The Athenaeum. If all goes well there will be more to follow.

Category: Orig. Uber Alt.

Rating: R / NC-17

Summary: Retired Olympian Gwen Lerner lands in Detroit and comes face to face with her former girlfriend. Still questioning the reason they separated, Gwen wants answers and to get a friendship back. Keegan Garry left the Olympic team under a cloud of mystery and intrigue. Since then she has struggle to get her life back on track. Just when she thinks she's done that, Gwen shows up and derails. Can two women who once loved each other find way to heal their broken hearts and love again?

Comments/Disclaimer(s): This is an original story. The story and characters belong to me. They are not to be used or reproduced without my express written permission. This is my first time posting to the website. An early version of this story was posted but the current is much better :!

This story depicts a love/sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it.

Special Thanks: To J Brownell for ideas suggestions and getting me to actually post this. Also to Kerrie who was able to beta and get this story back to me a very short time. Living half way around the world does have its advantages. Time differences worked well for us.

This work has progressed over the years and is very close to my heart. The two characters helped me through a tough time in my life. I am posting in parts but will have the entire story finished soon. As I continue to work on it, I really need to have some feed back. You can reach me at burkcatherine@aol.com

Part 3

Chapter 7

"Danny, she's burning up." Ashley said as she pressed the cold compress to Keegan's head. When Ashley used her full name, Danny frantically called another number on the list and got another doctor's answering service. Sunday's were not the best time to get a hold of a doctor.

"I can't reach anyone. I keep leaving messages." Danny quickly redialed Keegan's primary care physician, Dr. Walters.

"What about the ER? We could take her there." Ashley knew her sister would be pissed off. The last thing Keegan wanted was to go to "Emergency Room Butchers" as she so eloquently referred to residents at Weston. "I could try Dr. Micah. I'm sure she'd call back. I think this is her personal number." Ashley thumbed through her sister's cell phone entries.

#

Suburban homes flew past the windows as Gwen sped through the suburb towards Bobby's townhouse. Bobby arranged the rental car for her. He figured a SUV would be the best thing for Gwen to drive in the snow. She pulled the rental to a stop at an intersection. Slowly she let out the breath she realized she was holding. Instinctively, she loosed her grip on the steering wheel and flexed her fingers in the cold air. Visible puffs of her breath swirled through the air around her. She was freezing. How could people live in here all year round? She was in agreement with Mrs. Preston. She'd seriously consider going to Florida during the winter months if she lived here. She rubbed her hands together trying to gain some feeling back in her fingers. The temperature was dropping as evening approached. Remembering the pair of gloves Bobby gave her, she reached for her purse. Where the hell was her purse? She flipped around in her seat looking for where she put her purse. There was nothing on the passenger's seat. The back seats were bare as well. She sat for a few moments at the green light until a car behind her honked its horn in annoyance, then pulled through the intersection and into a driveway. She left her purse at Ashley Garry's house. She needed to turn around and go back. Maybe she could have Bobby send a courier for it. Keegan asked her to leave and she didn't want to upset her further. Her cell phone was in her purse. She didn't know Bobby's new phone number.

The first thing Gwen noticed was the open driver's door of the red BMW sedan parked at an angle in Ashley's driveway. She looked at the digital read out on the dashboard clock. She'd been gone for forty five minutes, an hour tops, what the hell was going on? The front door was ajar and raised voices could be heard. Getting out of truck, she walked to the open door. She knocked but knew there was no way the occupants of the house could hear her. Pushing in the front door, she entered and waited for a moment in the foyer. Silently, she debated whether to follow the voices and make her presence know or just walk in to the dining room to retrieve her purse. Earlier, she over stepped her bounds with Keegan, if she really wanted to build a relationship with her ex-girlfriend, she would have to take it slow. She quickly walked through the house and into the dining room. Her purse was right where she left it, grabbing the bag she started walking towards the front door when Danny came down stairs. Voices filtered from the second floor.

"Sorry...I knocked." Gwen said as she raised an eyebrow when voices were heard. "Can I ask?" Gwen raised a finger pointing towards the upstairs.

"Pig headedness." Danny answer was exasperated. "You want to help?" Gwen slowly nodded, not sure what she was agreeing to. "Do you need to be anywhere tonight?"

"I'm free." She had not made any official plans with Bobby. His schedule changed often depending on what was going on with the team.

"Follow me." Danny turned around and head back up the stairs. Tentatively Gwen placed her foot on the first step. She looked up the stairwell to see Ashley pacing in the hallway. She was mumbling under her breath. Another voice filtered into the air, annoyed and loud Gwen did not recognize it.

"I'm an adult. May I remind everyone of that fact?" Keegan's voice was soft and reasonable. Gwen knew her tone too well. The woman was digging her heels into the dirt and not budging.

"You can't do that." The heavy set blonde with the pixie hair cut countered. Her hands were set on her hips as she scoffed at Keegan sitting in the bed. Gwen took in her mussed hair and rumpled clothing and thought Keegan looked beautiful.

"I can do whatever I want." Keegan's blue eyes shot towards the doorway when Danny and Gwen entered the room. "You want to get in on this?" Keegan threw the venomous remark towards Gwen.

"Keegan, what do you want?" Gwen said passively. She knew if she fed into the argument the dark haired woman would become unreasonable.

"To go home." Keegan folded her arms on her stomach and stared at the large blonde in front of her.

"Not by yourself." Carrie scolded the woman who dared to defy her instructions.

"I didn't ask for your opinion, professional or personal, Carrie." Keegan began to get out of the bed. Her face was flushed and sweat was visible on her forehead. Her sister's concern for her health had the OBGYN barking orders at her from the end of the bed. When soft brown eyes met hers, she caught her breath. "I'm going home to my bed and I will take care of my health as I see fit."

"You shouldn't be by yourself." Carrie's voice rose a bit.

"I'll stay with you." Gwen's comment turned the focus in the room away from Keegan and to herself. When Gwen saw the dark angry stare of the doctor, she recognized the threat. Carrie was fuming. She wanted to take care of Keegan. She wanted to spend the night and become closer to the pregnant woman.

"Who the hell?" Carrie realized at that moment the tall blonde woman in the doorway was America's Sweetheart. "Oh." Her gaze went between Keegan and Gwen trying to measure the familiarity between the women. She knew they were teammates at one time, but Keegan never elaborated on any relationship.

"Gwen Lerner." Gwen extended her hand to the pixie blonde whose mouth still hung slightly open.

"Carrie Micah, Doctor Micah." The blonde's cheeks flushed as she realized she was trying to impress the soccer star.

"Wow, you make house calls? I didn't realize that still happens." Gwen stated as she saw the amused smirk on Keegan's face. "I forgot my purse so I came back." Gwen felt the need to explain her presence. "My schedule is open, so if you want to go home, I'd be more than happy to stay with you. It may give us a little time to talk."

"What she needs is rest!" Carrie insisted as she stepped towards Keegan as if she was going to see her back into bed. "I should call the paramedics and have you admitted."

"You're over stepping your bounds, doctor." Keegan stood on shaky legs. Her head ached. She wanted Carrie to stop yelling at her like she was a four year old. The sympathetic look in Gwen eyes showed understanding. "Gwen, I'd appreciate it if you took me home. And I will decide on whether or not I need a babysitter." She made sure she had everyone's attention.

"Let me get the car ready. Do you need anything from your car?" Gwen saw the surprise in Keegan's eyes.

"Yes, there is a bag in the back and the garage door opener. Thank you." Keegan watched as the blonde left without an argument. Ashley stood at the door jam her head hanging low. "At least someone here thinks I can make my own decisions. And you..." Keegan singled her sister out. "I'm pissed at you!" She grabbed her coat as she slowly exited the room. Danny followed closely behind her. Gwen returned to the house and was waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

"There was a bag of Andy's things in the car. I brought it in. Keegan, do you need help to the car?" Gwen handed the overnight bag to Danny. A small smile was exchanged. Keegan stood at the bottom of the steps and shook her head. Gwen held open the door. A quick turn to Danny with a nod sent some reassurance that she was not going to leave Keegan alone.

Grateful for Gwen's presence at the moment, Keegan felt the cold winter breeze against her face. She wanted to go home and curl up in bed and sleep. Feeling a slight brush against her shoulder, Gwen stepped in front of her and opened the door of the green Envoy. Keegan grabbed the door handle and lifted herself into the front seat. She closed her eyes as she felt the warmth of the heated seat beneath her. At the sound of Gwen shutting the door, Keegan raised her eyelids to watch her cross the front of the truck. Gwen jumped into the cab quickly, trying not to let the warm air escape. She set her hands on the wheel and began to flex her fingers out.

"What are you nervous about?" Keegan asked as she stared at Gwen's hands. She loved her hands. Strong with tendons popped off the backs, the long fingers she was once touched by, held with.

"You." Gwen confessed as she put the truck in gear and backed out of the driveway. Once in the street and heading towards the main road of the development, Gwen cleared her throat and asked. "Where is home?" She thought about how they used to drive together all the time. When

the plane would land in San Jose, they would take turns driving from the airport to their home. Anger began to return as she navigated the subdivision.

"My parent's house." Keegan said quietly. "If you get to the main road, make a left and..." She looked over at Gwen who seemed very quiet. "You may remember once you get close. You were always good with directions."

"It's been a while and to be honest the last time I was there isn't the fondest memory I have." Gwen's words were a bit harsher than she intended. "I'm sorry." She immediately said. "I didn't mean..."

She glanced at Keegan and noticed how pale her passenger was. Reaching a hand out to touch her forehead, she felt the raised body heat. "I'll get you home so you can rest, ok?" Keegan nodded. For the first time, Gwen was concerned but she knew trying to tell her passenger what to do was out of the question.

The landscape became familiar as they passed the church where the Garrys worshipped. Never part of her childhood to go to church, she attended Christmas service with the Garry family at the large stone church on corner of Main Street and Fleet Street. She slowed the truck down as she approached the cedar sided split at the end of the cul de sac. The driveway was freshly plowed and the sidewalks cleared. Gwen pressed the button on garage door opener. Keegan appeared to be asleep. Easing the Envoy into the two car attached garage, Gwen noticed the motorcycle covered in the corner. The garage was very neat. Tools were hung on the wall and a lawnmower was tucked into the corner. Just like her dad.

#

As if in a dream world, Keegan lifted her head to see Gwen's face close to hers. A warm blanket covered her forming a warm cocoon as she slept in a comfortable safe place. Feeling better, she let a soft sigh escape when a cool cloth was placed on her head. In this world, her life was as it should be. Cracking an eyelid open, she saw Gwen at her side. The blonde spoke soothing words and placed small touches to her forehead and cheek. Opening her blue eyes wider, Keegan stared at the shadowy figure at her side. A tan hand reached out with the damp cloth and touched her throat, wiping away the sweat.

"Are you really here?" Keegan asked as she freed her hand from the covers to touch Gwen's arm. Gwen leaned forward and pressed her lips to Keegan's brow than a bright smile appeared on her face.

"For as long as you want me here." Gwen whispered in her ear, letting her lips lightly brush over the lobe.

"Good." Keegan snuggled in the covers and nestled her head on the pillow near Gwen's form. She had had this dream before. Gwen sitting with her, holding her hand as pain coursed through her body. Each time the chemo drip sent a burning sensation in her veins she prayed for the pain

to go away. The calming cadence of Gwen voice lulled her to a peaceful sleep, just as she had done in her dream world.

Sitting in a high back chair next to the bed, Gwen continued to touch Keegan. Her fever broke not long after she fell asleep. When Gwen had pulled the truck into the drive, Keegan was fast asleep in the passengers' seat. Not able to wake her fully, Gwen ended up carrying the small woman into the house, placing her gingerly on the queen size bed in the master bedroom. Keegan was burning up, so Gwen went into preventative mode. She got cold water and a towel. Placing ice in the bowl with the water, she continued to press the damp cloth to Keegan's skin. Only leaving Keegan's side for a few seconds, she understood why the others were so concerned. A fever usually meant infection. The immune system was the first defense to fight it off any infection. Was Keegan's immune system strong enough to fight off the infection? Any sign of infection was a concern for leukemia patient. Gwen was doubly concerned because of Keegan's pregnancy.

Gwen studied the figure on the bed as she continued the regiment of the cold compresses. When the fever broke, Keegan turned and looked at her with hazy blue eyes. Asking the strangest question of if she was actually there took Gwen by surprise, not sure if the line of questioning was the result of the fever or if Keegan actually knew what she was saying. Gwen ran her hand along Keegan's arm for reassurance. Standing up, she leaned in and pressed her lips to a now much cooler forehead and let her lips linger a little longer than necessary. She missed this woman. In the short period of time seeing Keegan, Gwen knew wanted her back in her life. Taking a few steps away from the bed, a feeling of regret and guilt washed through her body, she should have known something was wrong. Their last night together in Miami, she had asked Keegan and in typical, stubborn fashion, Keegan denied anything was wrong. She thought back to that night Keegan came to her room.

A knock on her door sent the paperback, Gwen's entertainment for the evening face down on the mattress. Gwen had been waiting since the early afternoon to see what was happening with Keegan.

"Hey." Gwen smiled brightly at the woman who held her heart. A surge of relief that washed over her as she looked over the harsh damage Shannon's elbow inflicted. The large bruise running across the bridge of Keegan's nose did not take away from her classic features. She had a slightly up turned nose, high cheek bones and well chiseled jaw line. A small dimple at the clef of her chin showed only when she was worried and it was prominent now. "Are you okay?" When Keegan shook her head the spiky cropped brown hair on her head moved slightly. Gwen grabbed her hand and pulled her into the room.

Safe behind the closed door, Gwen wrapped her arms around the shorter woman trying to ease the worried look that marred Keegan's stoic face. "Want to talk about it?" Knowing Keegan like she did, she knew the stubborn Irish blood running through her girlfriend's veins would never open up, but she needed to try. Gwen led her lover to the single bed pushed against the wall and sat down. "Sure you don't want to talk?" Gwen asked, giving her another opportunity as she ran her fingers along her jaw, lightly over her bruised cheek to push a loose piece of hair behind her ear. Curling her fingers in Keegan's hair, she pressed a soft kiss on her lips.

"No. Can you hold me for awhile?" Keegan's soft vulnerable response sent a shiver through Gwen's body.

Gwen could hear the fear in her voice. Keegan was scared. Her body trembled slightly as Gwen sat down on the bed leaning back and pulling Keegan against her chest. Her fingers ran soothingly through the dark short hair. Keegan's cheek pressed against her breast as Gwen's arms wrapped around her, holding her close. Kissing the top of the brown hair, Gwen tried not to show her concern. She had seen changes in her girlfriend over the last few months. Small things at first, like their morning runs. Keegan would set a steady pace usually with Gwen by her side. Her pace became slower and slower. The day came when Keegan didn't want to run any more. The morning run was too much along with the six hour practice and weight training afterwards. Gwen didn't even want to go into the physical part of their relationship. Frustrated, she had taken matters in to her own hands. She knew Keegan loved her but there was something off.

On the field, Keegan's game began to slip. Playing on the same team for the last three and a half years and watching her in matches for years prior, she knew the level of play her girlfriend was capable of and it wasn't there anymore. Her movements were slow and sluggish.

Gwen ran her other hand along Keegan's back in a soothing motion. She held her tight and whispered words of encouragement as she felt a shiver run through Keegan's body.

In her head, she cursed herself for not asking Keegan about it or at least trying to open the line of communication. Instead, she felt like they were drifting farther and farther apart. It wasn't about lack of time together. It was about lack of time away from other people, coaches, teammates, staff, and Keegan's family. The Garry family was always around. Gwen had never seen a family so close. Either her parents or one of the sisters were always calling. She knew Keegan loved her family, but Gwen couldn't understand how they could talk on the phone for hours at a time. Never close to her own parents or their new significant had others, Gwen had basically grown up on her own as a latch key child with the exception of Christopher and Molly, the closest family she had. She leaned forward and placed a loving kiss on Keegan's lips. "Everything will work out, sweetie. You're just having a rough day." Keegan snorted as closed her eyes and squeezed Gwen's waist. Gwen tightened her grasp. "I just wanted to hold you." Gwen confessed. "You've been gone all day and I was worried. I thought you'd be back before now. I even cornered Curtis to see what was going on. He just shrugged his shoulders and mumbled something about doctors. I tend to agree with him on that." Gwen kissed her ear lobe.

"We have until curfew." Keegan turned and kissed Gwen on the mouth. "I want to make love. It feels like such a long time since we have." Keegan's voice faltered between kisses.

Sensing something was off with her girlfriend, Gwen kissed her neck as she ran her hands down Keegan's back. She felt a firm grip on her ass as Keegan pulled her closer. When Keegan kissed her ear, Gwen let out a soft moan. Keegan's touches were intense. Gwen took care to avoid the injured nose and the bruised eye. She moved to straddle Keegan's waist, pinning her to the mattress.

"What are you doing?" Keegan laughed as Gwen ran her index finger along her jaw and over the bruised skin.

"Examining you! If those doctors can take their time, so can I." Gwen said as she took Keegan's hands and pulled them over her head. She captured her wrists and held them. Gwen continued to kiss her lips. Tracing a path of kisses along the sensitive skin by her ear and down her neck, Gwen released her hands as she moved to touch Keegan's face.

"You're much better looking than the doctors." Gwen kissed her on the lips for the compliment. Keegan put her hands on Gwen's waist. "The nurse may give you a run for your money." Keegan teased as she kissed Gwen back. She lifted her hips to push against Gwen's bottom.

"You better be kidding Garry, or I'll have to torture you." Gwen laughed as she lifted her shirt off. She looked at the clock. "We've got time." Her words brought a sad look to Keegan's eyes. "Come on off with this. Unless you're cold?" Gwen said as she pulled Keegan's shirt and sports bra off. Keegan removed the hair tie from Gwen's blonde locks. She ran her fingers through the thickness as she sat up and pulled Gwen closer to her. She could feel Gwen's sports bra rubbing against her chest. She lifted Gwen's bra over her head. Their breasts touched as each moaned from the sensation of the contact and nipples tightened into hard points. Gwen's knee went between Keegan's thighs. Keegan wrapped her legs around Gwen's waist. Gwen dipped her head to kiss Keegan's breast. Keegan held her breath as Gwen kissed and nuzzled both her breasts. When Gwen took the peak into her mouth, Keegan released a strained groan. Holding Gwen's head tight to her chest with one hand, the other hooked on the waistband of Gwen's shorts, sliding the mesh material over her hips and on to the floor. Gwen's hand replaced her mouth as her fingers pinched and fondled Keegan's sensitive flesh. Gwen pushed the peaks together as she kissed each.

"God, I love you." The pink tips hardened under her touch. Gwen continued to kiss and touch Keegan as her lips began to move lower. She lifted Keegan's hips to slide off her shorts. Keegan's stomach convulsed as Gwen's tongue traced a line to her belly button. Keegan began to laugh as Gwen tickled her. Keegan moved her fingers across Gwen's bottom. She slipped her hand lower to touch Gwen's wetness from behind. Gwen shot up with Keegan's touch. She smiled as she held on to Keegan's waist as she continued to trail her kisses lower. Keegan held her breath as she felt Gwen's hot breath on her center. Gwen's kisses continued. She spread Keegan's legs. Gwen's tongue tasted Keegan's nectar. Gwen's fingers slipped into Keegan's center as her thumb caressed the sensitive nerves making Keegan call out her name.

"Oh oh.." Keegan screamed as Gwen pressed against her tongue on her clit. Keegan pushed Gwen's head deeper. Her legs wrapped around Gwen's body and urged her deeper. Keegan grabbed at the headboard as Gwen sucked at her clit and her fingers slipped in and out of her. Warm honey flowed as she fought to hold on to the release building. She let out a scream as a white light filled her head. Gwen continued to feed on her, stroking, touching caressing her body. Slowly the tension eased from Keegan's body as she loosened her grip on the sheets and Gwen.

"Stop. Stop." Keegan said as she tried to settle her reaction to Gwen's touch. Gwen smiled as she wiped the milky sheen off her face as she climbed up Keegan's body. Keegan tried to catch her breath. Gwen kissed her and settled into the crook of her arm. Keegan's chest rose and fell as she tried to calm herself down. Amazed, as each time they came together their love making became more and more intense.

Keegan didn't speak as she moved on top of Gwen. Although her breathing was still labored, she kissed Gwen on her lips and her face. She could taste her release on Gwen's skin. She smiled and continued to kiss her girlfriend. Keegan moved her hand between Gwen's legs and felt the wetness at her center. Gwen moved against her hand. Keegan dipped deeper, touching Gwen as she felt the heat from her body and the wetness of her desire. She moved two fingers inside of her and began to push against her clit with her thumb. Gwen reacted to her touch immediately. Keegan's thumb circled the enlarged nerves, fondling and stroking her as her lover did. From the noises Gwen made Keegan knew Gwen was close. She kissed Gwen passionately and trailed a line of kisses from her lips to her breast. Keegan began to increase the cadence of her motions as her mouth captured Gwen's breast. Each peaked and popped against her tongue as she stroked. Gwen's legs wrapped tight against Keegan's back. Faster and faster her body pressed into Gwen's. She focused on Gwen's pleasure and release. Gwen held fast as she continued to rock with her.

Against her fingers, she felt Gwen's muscles constrict and her upper body convulse as Keegan wrapped her in her arms and held her tight. Gwen muffled a cry as she kissed Keegan's neck. They lay on the bed wrapped in each other's arms for a moment. They're breathing labored as sweat beaded on their flesh. Gwen rolled to her side and pulled Keegan to her chest, snuggling close. They continued to cuddle on the hotel bed. At ease in holding each other, as they had done endless times. Close to eleven o'clock, Keegan rolled away, needing to return to her room before curfew. Just before she left, she leaned towards Gwen and whispered "Be great." She brushed a light kiss across Gwen's lips. The honest genuine touch of Keegan's lips against hers left Gwen wanting more. She wanted to be at their home, making love in their bed. Waking up in each other's arms, instead a quiet goodbye was said and the small dark haired woman left the room.

Remembering, their last time together brought tears to her eyes. Why did she stay away for so long? Was she too late? Although it had been a few years since she had been in the house the set up was still the same. Eventually, she found the cordless phone on the countertop in the hall bathroom. A number of floatable toys were strung throughout the bathroom and tub. She took this to be a clear sign of Andy's fondness for playing while bathing. A slight feeling of guilt over took her for a moment when she began scrolling through the caller Id menu. She didn't have the sense to grab Ashley's or Danny's number. She recognized Dr. Micah's name and wondered what the relationship was between the women. Finally, seeing A. Garry, she pressed the send button.

"Keegan!" The voice on the other end was filled with worry. Ashley answered the call an immediate. "I'm so sorry."

"Easy there Ash. It's Gwen." She heard the quick exhale of breath and the side conversation to Danny.

"How is she?" Ash asked. "I really didn't mean to piss her off. I just wanted to make sure she is okay."

"Her fever broke about a half hour ago. She's sleeping." Gwen waited for a moment on the line as she listened to Ash relay the information to Danny. "Ashley, does your sister talk in her sleep?"

"Sometimes, especially when she's sick. With the leukemia, she'd say strange things and talk to people who weren't in the room." Ash stopped for a moment. "Do you want Danny or me to come over?"

Gwen looked around the homey kitchen with the nooks and crannies Keegan had decorated with. "No, if you don't mind, I'll stay. I don't have anywhere to be. I have to call Bobby yet, but I think he'll understand."

"He sounds like a great guy." Ashley added.

"He is. I'll call you in the morning unless something comes up." Gwen hung up the phone and searched the house for the charge cradle. Like Ashley's house, family photographs hung in every room. The décor had been updated since she last visited. Sarah and Bill moving gave Keegan the perfect opportunity to purchase the house where her childhood memories were experienced. Gwen's childhood was a series of rental apartment with a sparse weekend at her father's house every couple of months. If she would ever label a specific location as home, it would be the Madden house. The elder couple gave her the only solid home she had during her childhood. She thought she and Keegan shared a home. Even the Garrys welcomed her making her feeling comfortable in their home. Standing in Keegan's home, she was hoping to find that feeling again. Keegan had put significant effort into changing her parents home hers. The tastefully decorated living room with a soft blue paint on the walls and a off white shade of carpet. A multi colored fabric covered couch and loveseat placed in the center of the room created an area to socialize. Oak tables matched the windowpanes and the baseboards that ran through the room. Family photos and little knick-knacks lined the end table and the television stand. She liked the new looked and feel to the room.

She made her way to her favorite room in the Garry house, the den. She wondered what Keegan did with it. The room where she spent many of her visits in front of the fireplace, watching movies while lounging on the couch, sharing kisses. The multi color brick fireplace was intact but the bricks were painted white to brighten up the room. A mushroom colored paint covered the walls to accent the beige carpeting. The large brown brush suede leather sectional filled the center of the room. Photos lined up on the mantle grabbed Gwen's attention drawing her towards them.

The family portrait from when the girls were in high school and grade school made her laugh. Keegan's smile was still bright although she had braces on. Meghan still carrying baby fat and Ash was sporting a hair cut that was a fashion faux pas in any other era. The photos moved along in years, as Gwen touched the one of Keegan holding the national trophy for the NCAA

championship. There were a few of the national team in Japan and out in the public. She stopped to admire the one of herself and Keegan.

The photo caught her full front and Keegan's side profile as the dark haired woman placed a kiss on her ear. It was from Provincetown. Just like the photo that appeared in the tabloid magazines. She picked up the frame tracing her fingers over Keegan's face. The woman had to have hundreds of photos of them together in many different settings. Why was it that only a small number made it to the press? She had hired an agency to investigate the photos in *Look*, for the story they ran. According to Connie, the photos were not a big deal and Gwen should take advantage of the publicity. Gwen wanted to know who gave *Look* the information. Someone was profiting from selling the pictures to the tabloids. Up until Saturday, she really thought it had been Keegan. She and Connie had a different opinion on many things as Gwen's career rose. Gwen's childhood was marred by her mother's relationships with men. Some stuck around for a year or two. Most were there for short stints. Either Connie tired of them or their money ran out. Through the years, Gwen was lucky she could stay with Aunt Molly and Uncle Christopher. The elderly couple had no children of their own and Christopher doted on Gwen. He taught her how to ride a bike and introduced her to the game of soccer. By the time she reached the sixth grade, she was being recruited by every traveling team in northern California to play. Christopher was at all of her games. The same could not be said for Connie. She showed an interest in their daughter's "hobby" until Gwen led her high school team to the state finals her sophomore year. During her junior year, the national team invited her to compete at the international level. All the achievement she had on the field led to a full ride scholarship with Northern California University. She had offers to go to schools in Texas, Florida and on the east coast, but she wanted to stay close to Molly and Christopher. By the time she graduated from NCU, Christopher no longer drove and Molly's health had declined. Molly died after they won the silver medal in Australia. Christopher passed away late last year. She still wished she could talk to the brown eyed soulful man. He gave her advice on everything from money to women. He even told her to "get that little girl back." He referred to Keegan. He was right. She should have.

Shaking the negative thoughts of her mother from her mind, she turned towards Keegan's bedroom. She didn't know how things were going to play out between them. Looking at the clock on the mantel she needed to call Bobby. Picking up the hand set as she walked back to the bedroom, she made a quick call to her friend. Stopping at the doorway for a moment, she looked at the small vulnerable pregnant figure sleeping in the bed. Silently she asked Christopher for guidance. She really needed to understand what she feeling towards Keegan.

Chapter 8

Rays of sunlight cascaded through the curtains shining brightly on the figure lying beneath the bed covers. Keegan welcomed the warmth of sun spreading over her body. She felt renewed. A good night's sleep was exactly what she needed. Slowly she lifted her eyelids to adjust to the brightness. Small dust particles floated in through the air, visible from the light reflecting off them. She silently wondered how she got home and into bed. Yesterday was a giant blur or a dream. Gwen! She had she actually seen Gwen, physically touched her? Had her former girlfriend really been in the kitchen at Ashley's yesterday? Her mind still fuzzy with remnants of dreams and details, she wasn't sure of anything. She had experienced too many previous

conversations with the blonde that in actuality were dreams. During treatments, her dreams seemed so real that she wondered about the reality.

Yesterday was no different. In the past she questioned if Gwen could really hear her or if she had actually been there. She had a history of running a high fever and imagining the blonde at her side. With the palms of her hands she rubbed the remnants of sleep from her eyes. Moving into a sitting position, she let a gasp out, startled by the figure asleep in a chair close to the bed. Silhouetted by sunshine, golden light bounced off Gwen's hair, surrounding her with a halo. Once again, Keegan questioned if she was dreaming.

Drawing her knees to her chest she continued to ponder the events of the last forty eight hours. She remembered Ashley and Danny dropping Andy off before the banquet. Ash did her usual teasing about Gwen. Since Finch's trade to the Motors Ashley brought Gwen up more often. Danny scolded her about it on more than one occasion. Saturday afternoon, she and Andy spent the day putting together puzzles, playing games and coloring. Dinner was grilled cheese and tomato soup. Andy was extremely fond of his aunt's trick of floating Fritos on the top of the soup before eating them. As Keegan, explained the tradition was something his mother and aunts did as kids. Andy was happy to keep the family tradition going.

A quick bath after dinner, they both got into their jammies and settled in the den to watch a movie. Keegan lit a fire and turned off the lights with the exception of the hallway bathroom. Andy snuggled up close to his aunt for warmth as the Clown fish adventure began. It never failed Andy was scared in all the same places, still waiting for Bruce, the shark to catch Dory or Marlon. Giggling endlessly as he said the word "dude" over and over as Crush and his fellow turtles made their way along the current. They fell sound asleep on the large sectional couch before the movie ended. Keegan woke to find a very hot little boy kicking her in the side and thigh. Asleep with his thumb in his mouth, she tried to wake the three year old up and direct him towards the bathroom. She debated for a moment whether or not to pick him up. It seemed as if he was getting bigger and bigger by the day. Waking him just enough to put one foot in front of the other. She really didn't want to have to carry him. Once she got him settled in his bed, Keegan retreated to her own room and curled up between the cool cotton sheets. The red digits on the clock pointed out it that it was barely nine o'clock on a Saturday night, she was wiped out.

Sleep escaped her as her mind whirled in thoughts of the banquet. She wondered if Ash would see Gwen. She doubted Gwen wouldn't recognize her sister. Jason didn't allow Ashley to have much of a relationship with her family. There was a bit of a strained relationship and it seemed as if Ash didn't care about the distance. Keegan came to understand the hell Ashley went through. Her husband controlled her every move and would not allow Ash to be with her family. Ashley wasn't allowed to socialize with her "dyke sister" as Jason liked to refer to Keegan.

On Sunday morning she knew she wasn't feeling well. Her morning started with a routine rush to the toilet as a wave of morning sickness took over, followed by a nasty headache. It didn't help that Andy banged his spoon on the table, adding to the pounding. The whining three year old finally got dressed and they made their way to Ashley's. Sunday was not a peach of a day. She was greeted by the large photo in the morning paper of Gwen in Bob's arms. She argued with Andy about getting his things together and into the car. She recalled driving to Ashley's. Like

flashes from a movie, the events came back to her. There were bits and pieces of conversations that took place at Ashley's she tried to remember. Seeing Gwen less than five feet from her sister, it was obvious that Ashley had connected with her ex-girlfriend. Gwen stood in the kitchen talking to her and touching her. Gwen invited her to dinner so they could reconnect or something of that nature. Keegan turned her down. She remembered Gwen leaving Ash's house when she asked her to. After Gwen left, Keegan went to lie down. Danny led her to the spare bedroom. Waking up in her bedroom with Gwen sleeping in a chair, something definitely had happened but she couldn't recall.

Slipping quietly from her bed, Keegan gathered some clothing and went into the bathroom. Tony was stopping by for breakfast and to take her to an appointment for a sonogram. After a shower and cleaning up Andy's toys from the hall bathroom, Kee dressed in a heavy pair of khaki pants and a heather gray cardigan with a white tee-shirt under it. Hearing a car pull up in the drive, she went to the mudroom and pressed the button to lift the garage door. A beat up yellow rusted Volvo pulled in to the garage next to the unfamiliar green SUV. Silently, she wondered where her Jeep was.

"I heard you were a bad patient." Tony said through the thick golden brown beard covered his face. Growing a beard between Christmas and Easter had become a tradition he liked to do each school year. Reminding him of John the Baptist, he told his students. Keegan knew the real reason was because he didn't want to shave when it was cold outside. "I see you still have company." His smile brightened and his eyes danced between Keegan and the truck. "Did you get lucky?"

"Ha!" Keegan couldn't stop the response. The laugh was out before she knew it. If she did get lucky, she didn't remember. When Gwen touched her, she usually remembered. "Get in here and make me breakfast. You owe me that!" And he did. She cooked dinner for Tony's department chairman and his wife a few weeks ago. Having Keegan on his arm at Weston seemed to open more doors for the young English professor. His tenure at the university secure, he still maintained a great relationship with his department head. His latest published work on American families as depicted in twentieth Century literature was a success.

Tony followed her into the kitchen after shedding his coat and boots in the mudroom. He looked at the empty coffee pot and groaned. A frown appeared under his whiskers as he reached for the pot to fill it with water. His regular ensemble of thick corduroy sports coat over a solid dark colored t-shirt complete with a leather belt and faded well worn blue jeans oozed earthy tree hugger personal.

"I don't drink coffee. Seattle boy! Tea, nice, warm, soothing, tea. There is hot water on the stove if you want to make a cup." The growl under his breath was a definite no.

"Don't even go there." He held up his hand knowing the distaste he had for the king's brew. He was a Seattle man, the world capital of coffee and grunge rock. No rock star would be caught drinking hot tea. "It's probably green too." The sandy hair of his beard was a shade lighter than the top of his head and made him look older than thirty five. "Am I making breakfast for three?"

"Sure." Keegan wondered about her visitor and for the tenth time tried to recall the events of yesterday. She supposed she could call Danny since the red head would tell her more than she needed to know. "What bird called you this morning?"

"Danny." He pulled the waffle mix from the top cupboard where he placed it on purpose so Keegan would never have waffles without him. He didn't know about the small step stool in the pantry. "Ashley said that you were probably still pissed off at her." He went about the kitchen making the waffles and filling her in on some of the blanks she had. When he came to the part about Dr. Micah, she felt the heat rise to her face.

"Oh!" She was angry at Ash. "She's right. I'm pissed."

Tony tested the heat of the waffle iron with his finger, pulling it away quickly from the heat. He turned and found a pondering Keegan next to him. Wrapping his arms around her waist and looping his arm over her growing midsection, he rubbed his whiskers against the sensitive skin of her cheek. "So, no action last night? You're slipping." Keegan giggle and tried to break free of his embrace.

From her position in the doorway, the sight in front of her made Gwen's heart plummet. Keegan was looking quite comfortable wrapped in this man's embrace as he tickled her and whispered something sensitive in her ear. Without even asking, she knew he was the father and it disappointed her. Keegan had moved on. She was in a relationship with this man. Having a child together was much more than she and Bobby had. She could see Keegan smiled with genuine affection for this man. Her face shone with happiness.

Squeezing away from Tony's arm, Keegan ran right smack dab into Gwen. Caught off guard by Gwen's sudden appearance, Keegan screamed and then started to laugh. "You scared me." Placing a hand over her heart, she could feel the organ thumping hard under her fingers. "Good morning." Keegan said quietly as soon as she was able to decipher the look on Gwen's face. "We didn't wake you up did we?"

"No." Gwen lied. She woke as soon as she heard a man's voice in the house. Alone in Keegan's room, she felt the cold sheets and knew her host had been up for awhile. Still trying to adjust to the time change, she quietly got washed up and changed into a rich mocha cable sweater, a pair of black jeans that hugged her body like a glove, and a pair of black leather boots, grateful for the fact she remembered to grab her bag from the car last night after she put Keegan to bed. When she heard Keegan laughing in the kitchen, she thought back to times they had lived together and she woken to the laughter. As the laughter continued, she went to investigate. Keegan had a great laugh which was very contagious.

"Are you feeling better?" Gwen was about to reach for Keegan's forehead then decided against it.

"I'm good. I finally got a decent night sleep. To be honest with you, I don't remember a lot about yesterday." Keegan moved past her to the sideboard and pulled down a ceramic mug. "I've got hot water, or Tony's making coffee." Keegan lifted her mug a little higher.

Tony... this was Tony. She remembered Danny mentioning the name on Saturday. "Tea, thanks." Gwen tried to find a spot in the kitchen where she was out of the way.

"I'm not even sure how I got home, but I can put two and two together. And that's not my car in the garage." Sensing Gwen's uneasiness, Keegan glanced towards Tony who was mouthing words to her. "What?"

"Introduce us you knucklehead." Tony finally said turning to greet the infamous ex-girlfriend who had rattled Keegan for the past month. He wiped his hands on the hand towel hanging from the stove door and moved closer to the two women.

"Oh...I'm sorry. Tony this is Gwen. Gwen, Tony." Tony smiled brightly as he reached to shake the woman's hand. His brown eyes took in the figure in front of him.

"You're the soccer player." He didn't realize that when Danny was talking about Gwen, that it was actually Gwen Lerner, America's Sweetheart, her picture had been all over the news with the trade of her boyfriend to the Motors. "Wow, I didn't know you guys knew each other." His brown eyes were gazing into eyes the same shade as his own. It hit him. Keegan said that he reminded her of someone special. Someone she lost and wanted to remember her coloring, the shape of her face, the color of her eyes and hair. This is the one Keegan lost. The one he reminded Keegan of. "Great to meet you. My parents love you. Big fans. I never saw them support any sport as much as women's soccer after you hit that goal in Greece."

"Keegan was on that team." Gwen said casually. "We met while playing on the National Team. How did you meet?"

"I didn't realize that. We met during PT. I screwed up my hand playing in-line hockey over at the university. After four months of following her direction, and being told what I was doing wrong, I asked her out."

"Oh." Gwen waited for him to continue his story. He seemed nice and familiar. His face and voice was soothing almost melodic.

"She told me I didn't have a chance in hell. And still don't."

"Oh really, what's wrong with you?" Gwen asked as she crossed her arms over her chest. This was not what she expected this morning. If Keegan did have a boyfriend, she really didn't expect to like him.

"Wrong kind of equipment." Tony bluntly told her. "I'm not her type. So fill in some gaps. I didn't know Keegan played in the Olympics."

"I didn't." Keegan defended herself. She had been very vague about her soccer career. Her eyes met Gwen's and her heart lurched. *God, how could being in the same room with this woman bring back all these thoughts and feelings?* "It's in the past. There is no point dwelling on the past."

"Sometimes we should question the past and it's good to talk about it." Gwen slid her hand from Tony's grip and thought it odd that an English professor had rough calloused hands.

"Sometimes we know what happened in the past and would rather not bring it up." Keegan countered as she handed the warm mug to Gwen. The challenge in her bright blue eyes was evident. With close regard, she watched the play of emotions dance across Gwen's face. She had seen her self-assurance falter on more than one occasion and it usually had something to do with Connie. "I'm sorry." Keegan raised her eyes to Gwen's swimming brown ones. She knew Gwen's past was a montage of unanswered questions. "If you don't have plans today, I'd like for you to meet someone. And I don't mean this big lug." Keegan smiled when Gwen accepted with a nod. "Maybe we can do lunch instead of dinner, if the offer still stands?"

"It does. I'm open today. I've got dinner plans later but I'd rather spend time with you." Gwen accepted the cup of tea. Their fingers lightly brushed and both locked eyes with the other. "I really think we need to talk."

"Sit down, so I can repay my debt." Tony raised the platter of waffles high in the air over the two women. Keegan pushed Gwen towards the kitchen table to sit.

"Gwen, whatever he says don't believe it." Keegan said as she pulled a waffle from the bottom of the pile. Gwen did the same thing. Tony watched the interaction as if these two women were reading each others mind.

"Miss Garry you are ruining my reputation." Tony scoffed.

"It's already ruined Mr. Best." A coughing Gwen caught them off guard. She held her hands in the air as Tony lightly patted her on the back. Taking a small sip of her tea she looked at the tall lanky man standing next to her.

"You're Tony Best the drummer for the MudMen."

"Someone has good taste in music."

"That's because you're both old." Keegan shot. When she had treated Tony, she had no idea who the MudMen were. Maurice had to fill her in about the band and Tony. When curiosity got the best of her, she looked up the band on the internet. A successful Seattle grunge band had a few top 100 hits. Tony still played his music but it was limited to an acoustic guitar and usually at an open mic night at the Badlands. A few local musicians were trying to get him to join their bands but he didn't want to be in a band.

"Hey! He's not that old." Gwen gave Keegan a look. "I'm only a few years older than you."

"Yeah, well you'll always have a few years on me." Keegan smiled as she put her fork into the waffle. She knew being younger than Gwen was a great way to tease her. Tony brought his coffee and a fresh stack of waffles to the table. As he sat down across from Keegan, he smiled and winked at her.

"How long you in town for Ms. Lerner?" He knew that would get a rise out of the blonde.

"Okay, stop with the formalities. I hate when someone calls me that, especially after they have cooked for me." Wiping her mouth with her napkin. "Thursday, then I head back to San Jose."

"You lived in San Jose." Tony pointed his fork at Keegan.

"Yes I did. Now stop it." She shyly glanced at Gwen. They lived in San Jose together. "Still in the same house?" She tried to sound nonchalant, but curiosity was getting the best of her. Did she live with Bob in the house or someone else?

"Yeah, your alarm code is still active." Gwen watched as her confession registered with the dark haired woman at the head of the table.

"Good to know if I want to clean you out." Keegan tried to lighten the atmosphere that seemed to get heavier by the minute.

"I think you've already taken my most valued possession." Gwen muttered under her breath. "*My heart.*" Gwen thought she was silent.

"What was that?" Tony asked. He had heard the blonde's whisper but wanted to make sure he had heard her correctly.

"Nothing. Not sure if Keegan gave you the run down on my family, but let's just say if I pressed charges, my mother would be doing some serious time." Gwen's mouth turned upward for a moment as if she were joking.

"Connie still up to her tricks?" The thought of Gwen keeping the same alarm code, warmed her heart. *Maybe one day.*

"Oh, she's pulled out a whole new bag since you've...." Gwen stopped talking. Her mother was never her favorite subject. Realizing Keegan would never understand the new bag of manipulation her mother pulled out after they were separated. "Seen her." Gwen was proud of her cover.

"Hey look at the time, we need to get going or we'll be late." Tony said shoving an entire waffle in his mouth. "Pluuus I've go..t aaa 'ass."

"Ewww!"

"Nice!" The reactions of the women echoed their distaste for the open mouth chewing going on at the table. "And you teach the next generation."

"Whhhh...aaaa...ttt?" Tony continued to chew.

"Can you take me to get my car after?" Keegan directed her question to Tony.

"How about if you don't mind...we grab lunch and I'll take you to get your car?" The shocked blue eyes turned to stare at her. "Tony has a class." Gwen gave a reasonable explanation. "Didn't you hear him?"

Still chewing, Tony nodded his head. A stab of fear ran through Keegan as she thought of Tony's DNA merging with hers. What exactly was she thinking when she asked him to father her child? *Gwen..* Sitting side by side, the resemblance was unnerving. That was exactly what she was thinking about when she asked Tony.

Tony drove the Volvo out of the drive and waited for Gwen to pull on to the street. When the SUV pulled up behind him he gave the driver a wave. His passenger drummed her fingers on the arm rest.

"Gwen Lerner is your ex-girlfriend? I didn't think she was gay. God there are so many men that are going to be totally bummed out."

"She's dating a man, a very manly pro athlete." Keegan reminded him.

"There were always rumors." He continued on ignoring her comments. "And that photo spread in paper." He pulled on to the main road and head towards Weston Hospital. He waited for a moment. "Fuck me! It was you. You're in the photo." Tony turned a flashing smile to his passenger. When Keegan ignored him, he quietly stated. "She's the one isn't she?"

"What?" Keegan came to her senses. Realizing Tony wasn't teasing her any more, but questioning her about something serious.

"It's a little uncanny the resemblance. It's like looking in the mirror at a female version of me. I never noticed it until meeting her."

"She's the one. I haven't seen her in person in a few years, but you do look alike. In a way if she grows a beard, I could really see it."

"Ha! Ha! I don't think it would do her justice."

"No it wouldn't." Her voice was flat like her mood. *What am I doing?* She sat at the table inviting Gwen to come to her sonogram appointment. *For what?* She hadn't seen nor heard from the woman in almost six years. When she did hear about her it was usually in a negative way. She knew nothing about her any more. Yet, she spent last night making sure Keegan got what she wanted and was taken care of. She never asked for anything in return. This morning in the kitchen, there wasn't the tension that she felt at Danny's house. It was them reconnecting. *Reconnecting?* Is that what they were doing? In the years they were together, it took a long time for Gwen to open up and to trust Keegan. With how her mother treated Gwen over the years, Keegan knew why those fears were very real.

"You're freaking out aren't you?" Tony glanced at his passenger as they waited at a red light. When Keegan answered with a nod, he put the car in park and wrapped her in a hug. "Things will work out Kee. They always do. We might not think it at the time, but they do."

#

"Okay this is going to be a little cold." The sonogram technician said as she squeezed the clear petroleum substance on the swell of Keegan's abdominal area.

"Jesus." The jelly substance was freezing and instantly Keegan hissed out as it hit her skin. "I'm going to have to pee soon." She squirmed on the exam table.

"Cold?" Tony chuckled as Keegan nodded her head. She glanced to her right where Gwen stood at her shoulder. Her brown eyes open wide in excitement as the wand was placed in the coated area. "Have you ever seen this before?" Tony asked Gwen.

"Only on the Discovery Channel." Gwen's hand covered Keegan's shoulder as the technician began to get locate the fetus and get her bearings. When she left Keegan's house this morning she had no idea who she was about to meet. Granted she had met millions of people over the years, but this was definitely someone she would remember for the rest of her life. "Thank you for asking me." Gwen bent down and whispered in Keegan ear. She could feel the heat under her hand and from the closest to the expecting mother.

"You're welcome." Keegan answered softly. The technician looked at the group in the room but could not figure the relationship between the threesome. The woman on the table was definitely the mother. The man seemed to be the father and the person standing behind the patient could be hid sibling. When she walked into the small exam room, she was really surprised to see the celebrity sports figure there. A huge fan of the Motors, she knew the woman at the head of the bed was Bob Finch's girlfriend. She smiled sweetly at her and wondered what it was like to be with a hockey star.

"Let's take a look." The tech commented as she began to move the wand like piece of equipment over Keegan protruding belly. Her hazel eyes drifted from the abdomen to the grainy monitor picture on the left side of the bed. "If you look here." Her index finger pointed on the screen. "The ultra scan produces a two dimensional image." The picture was blurry and appeared to be nothing. "At this stage, you can see the fetus." She stopped and realigned the monitor. "Here is a profile of the head." With that, three sets of eyes focus on the dark outline of a small human skull. "The eye socket."

"Wow..." Gwen leaned closer to Keegan her hand squeezed lightly on her shoulder as she watched the grainy image clear into the perfect profile of a little baby. "Look, there's a hand and fingers."

"You're about sixteen weeks?"

"Seventeen." Keegan corrected the technician. Seeing her child on the monitor was overwhelming. Its fingers sticking in the air spread out like Gwen did when she was nervous. Tony's eyes were riveted on the screen as the shape continued to clear. He glanced back at Keegan wearing a toothy smile.

"This is who I wanted you to meet." Keegan told Gwen as she covered the hand squeezing her shoulder. "Isn't she beautiful?"

"Yes." Gwen moved closer to whisper in her ear. "Do you know the sex?"

"Only what I feel in my heart." Keegan thought back to the dream she had of the little girl flying the kite. "A little girl came to me in a dream when I was sick." Keegan could feel the stinging of salt in her eyes. The memories she had during the illness were hard for her to discuss. There were too many times, when she thought she'd never see this day. She covered her melancholy feeling with a half smile. She didn't want to rehash bad memories.

The image on the monitor moved as the baby began to move. "Looks like it's swimming." Tony cried out as he jumped closer to the screen. "A little alien with those big giant eyes." The full front image of the fetus turned to them at that time.

"Tony!" Keegan yelled at him and bumped him with her foot. "Don't say that. I think you are getting scolded already."

"Definitely female." He sighed as the three women in the room laughed.

"We can look to see what sex the baby is if you want?" The woman asked Keegan who shook her head. She would find out soon enough. Bill desperately wanted another grandson. Probably all those years surrounded by females. Sarah was like Keegan, she didn't care as long as it was healthy. "Would you like some new photos for the family?" The technician asked.

"Absolutely. My mother would never forgive me if I passed up a photo opportunity." Keegan laughed thinking of Sarah's reaction to the new photo of the baby. As the technician took still photos of the baby, the dark room glowed from the light of the monitor.

"This is so amazing." Gwen voice filled the room like a quiet lullaby. Her heart thudded against her chest when Keegan leaned into her a bit. Seeing the image on the screen was like nothing she had ever experienced before. "Thank you again. It's amazing."

"Doctor Micah will have the films in a day or two and she can go over the results with you in a little more detail." The technician turned to Gwen when she heard the sharp gasp that escaped the celebrity at the mention of Dr. Micah's name.

"I'm still with Dr. Micah office, but I am seeing Dr. Simpson." Keegan corrected the tech.

"Dr. Dev? I'll make a note on the order to have them sent to her." The tech let the wand slip and hit a sensitive spot on Keegan's stomach. Keegan quickly pulled away causing the screen to

bounce around. Re-positing herself of the table, she looked at the technician. With a desperate look on her face, Keegan tried to get off the exam table.

"If I don't find a bathroom, we are all in for a treat." The brunette scrambled off the table and made a bee line to the small bathroom.

Chapter 9

Tony rushed off to his afternoon class leaving Keegan and Gwen on their own for lunch at *McKenna's*, a family owned restaurant just off the hospital campus. The restaurant was a favorite of the hospital staff and visitors. Keegan ate lunch there at least once a week. Riding in Gwen's rental, Keegan directed her to the restaurant. The place was in full swing trying to pacify the lunch crowd. They waited quietly as busy bus boys and the wait staff made their way through the throngs of customers and a maze of tables. Finally a college-aged hostess called Keegan's name and smiled warmly at them as she led them to a booth towards the back.

"Working today?" Knowing Keegan as a regular customer, the girl chatted as she led them across the dinning room to a booth in the corner.

"Doctor's appointment." Keegan explained as she unwound her scarf from around her neck and tried to shrug off her coat. Gwen immediately stepped up behind her and sliding the coat from Keegan shoulders as her hands ran along her shoulders and down her back removing the covering.

"Thanks." Keegan's weak breathless answer sent shivers down Gwen's spine. Taking the coat and hanging on the hook at the edge of the booth, Gwen removed her own and placed it on top. Keegan's frame slid uncomfortably across the faux leather seat. She was grumbling to herself about being the size of a truck. Her belly brushed against the side of the table.

The hostess did a double take as Gwen slid into the booth opposite Keegan. "Is that Gwen Lerner?" The employee quietly asked Keegan. When she didn't receive an answer, the hostess set down the menus and walked away. She wanted to have a quiet lunch with Gwen.

"So what is good here?" Gwen asked as her eyes lifted from the menu to the woman who sat down across from. Her gaze focused on her former lover. She waited until Keegan's eyes met hers before turning her attention back to the menu.

"Everything...I'm starved." Her stomach rumbled loudly for anyone in ear shot to hear. "How can that be? I just ate before the appointment and now I feel like I can eat an entire pizza by myself." The chuckle from across the table was the only answer she received. "I know, don't say it. I'm eating for two. The baby needs its strength."

"I didn't say a thing." Gwen thought about the Philly Cheese Steak with a side salad. She'd have to hit the gym soon if she did get it. "You work at the hospital?"

"For a couple of years, I'm a physical therapist."

"I remember. Do you have to work today?" Gwen knew her answer came out a little harsh. She knew what Keegan had gone to school for. The first year they dated, it had been a long distance relationship so Keegan could finish her degree.

"Not today. I try to work ten hour shifts, that way I have three days off. I work usually every other weekend. This upcoming weekend I'm working."

"Well, if things work out with SNN, I will probably be working weekends, too. Not many sporting events happening during the week." Keegan fell quiet as she looked at the menu. Stealing glances at her companion, she wondered who Gwen had plans with later this evening. Probably Bob or someone from SNN. She silently cursed herself for still finding Gwen attractive. There was definitely chemistry between them. There always had been. When she looked at Gwen again, a huge grin was plastered across the Californian's face. "What are you grinning about?"

"Your baby is so little."

"Not so little when the bugger is sitting on my bladder."

"Thank you for this morning. It was amazing." Her smile widen as she thought about the small fists the baby clenched at its side just watching the profile come into place on the monitor. "Do you have a preference of a boy or girl?"

"No, it doesn't matter. I just want a healthy baby." The baby kicked her side. "Ouch." Keegan rubbed the side of her stomach. She wasn't sure if it was because she was physically fit or if it was great genetics, but she still had her figure as her stomach continued to grow. From behind she barely looked pregnant. "Bill is going crazy. He wants another grandson bad. I think it was all the women he was subjected to." Her father had been the only male in the house for such a long time until Ashley's disaster of a marriage to Jason, the asshole who made her sister's life hell. When Ash finally decided to leave the jerk, everyone supported her decision.

Gwen fell quiet as she looked at the menu, stealing shy glances at her companion. Now that they were at lunch what was her plan? *Hey sorry you were sick and I decided to drown my misery by having meaningless sex. I just wanted to get back at you for hurting me. By the way, I still love you and I want to get back together.* Is this what she wanted? To get back together with Keegan, to have the life they used to have together. The attraction was definitely still there. Had Keegan changed so much or was it Gwen? Keegan hadn't changed, she stayed the same. She still maintained her sexuality, she lived in her parent's house, she worked at the university she went to school at, her family was still in close contact with. Maybe she was a bit more cautious with how she approached life, or who she let into hers. Whose life she was part of. The Keegan she knew years earlier would talk to everyone. Keegan was the life of the party, funny, quick with her laugh and never beating around the bush. This Keegan's demeanor was as if she was walking on egg shells with other people, especially Gwen. She had let her defenses down a of couple times, this morning in the kitchen with Tony, and at the appointment. She still had the fiery temper which came out last night in the battle of wills with Dr. Micah.

The murmur of the lunch crowd got louder and Keegan was certain she heard whispers of Gwen's name passing over the patrons' lips. She took in the occupants of the restaurant. When they spoke to each other leaning across the table or into one another, their focus would shift to the blonde sitting with her.

"What's wrong?" Gwen asked ignoring the noise and stares.

"Is this always like this for you?" Keegan asked as she took in the attention her companion was receiving.

"No this is pretty quiet. You should see it when Bobby is with me." Gwen watched the scowl appear on Keegan's face at the mention of Bobby. She needed to have her understand the relationship and soon. "I want you to meet him." Gwen voice sounded desperate when she saw Keegan withdrawing.

"That would be nice, but I have to work the next couple of days. I doubt he would have time before you leave." Keegan smiled as she unfolded her napkin and placed it on her lap. The last thing she wanted to do was meet the man who converted Gwen to the hetro lifestyle. Plus, anywhere the two of them were the spotlight was bound to be bright. Gwen chose to live her life in the spot light. If she showed up without the hockey player, the news would print trouble in paradise.

A young college aged man came up to the table and introduced himself. "Good afternoon ladies, I'm Zack." He faltered for a moment when he actually looked at Gwen. Here was the woman he had dreamed about nightly during his senior year in high school. The poster of her wrapped only in an American flag was hung on the back of his bedroom door. The first sight he saw in the morning and the last thing he saw at night. Her body was sculpted with defined lines in her abdominal muscles, but still held the feminine as she held the ends of the flag across her breasts. Wondering exactly how the photographer got the material to stay in place without revealing too much. There was a vixen like quality to the poster as she stood with her feet spread far apart in red stiletto heels. The flag draped like a toga over one shoulder and wound around the soccer star's body. Ending as the edge hung just low enough to cover the apex between her thighs. "Your server.." He cleared his throat. "Would you like to hear the specials?"

"I'm ready." Keegan said as she took in the flushed face of the young man at the table side. His pen bounced nervously as it was posed over the pad of paper. He nodded. "Tuna salad plate with whole wheat toast on the side and a glass of milk."

"I thought you hated milk?" Gwen questioned knowing full well that Keegan was not a happy camper when the National Team was asked to do a "Got Milk" commercial.

"I do but what can I say some times you have to adjust." Keegan shrugged her shoulders as she handed the menu back to the pimply faced server.

"Miss?" He directed his question to Gwen.

"Well what would you suggest, Zack?" Gwen's voice dropped into the sexy tone she used when she wanted something. *Should she play with him?* Gwen knew the look he was giving her. She would bet the kid had a poster of her in his room. He was practically drooling as he fidgeted.

Keegan watched the guy's face flush the color of a fire engine. When he began to stumble over his words and shifted from foot to foot. Gwen let him off the hook. "I'll take the same but hold the milk and add a hot tea."

"That wasn't nice." Keegan said after the server left the table. Gwen smiled and winked at her. "Why, did you do that?"

"Please, that first look said it all. He was one of those horn dogs who are looking for nude photos of me on the internet. He is the reason I don't have privacy."

"Maybe it's your publicist's fault." Keegan commented quietly. She had seen Gwen's photo plastered across the media. Everywhere she turned after the Olympics, a picture of Gwen haunted her. To top it all off with a great big cherry was the America's Sweetheart poster of Gwen clad in the stars and stripes. The poster was almost as popular as the Farah Fawcett red swimsuit shot.

"Well, I see yesterday's little reunion has spilled over into today." Standing next to the table was Dr. Micah. Gwen clenched her jaw. She meant to ask Keegan if she was dating the doctor, but to bring it up in the exam room was not the best idea. The broad shouldered pixie cut blonde rubbed Gwen the wrong way. Granted she didn't know the doctor, but she didn't want to either. If this was who Keegan choose to see, maybe she could learn to live with it.

"Hello Carrie." Keegan gave no indication of whether or not the doctor's presence was welcome. "How are you this afternoon?"

"You know after last night's meeting, I did a little research on Miss Lerner's background." This small intrusion on Gwen's life made her raise an eyebrow towards the doctor. "I found some interesting reading and photos." The doctor stared back with her flat gray eyes as dull as a winter sky. "I'm sure a few people would be interested in the insight I found."

"Carrie, I played soccer with Gwen a lifetime ago. We haven't seen each other in a very long time and I asked her to lunch." When the doctor's face remained stern, she added. "People do have to eat." Gwen tried to stifle the laugh that slipped out. Keegan shot her a warning.

"How are you feeling?" Carrie squatted next to Keegan and placed a thick paw on her thigh. Gwen actually felt a surge of anger towards the doctor and tried to contain it.

"I'm fine. Thank you for your concern and for last night. Ashley and I disagree on the necessity of your visit. It was good to know I can count on you. My sister was put at ease." Keegan continued to pacify the woman at her side. The pressure of the doctor's hand on her thigh was becoming very uncomfortable. The appearance of Gwen at her sister's house seemed to spur the doctor into a new mode of courting.

"You know I wanted to make sure you're okay. Even if it seemed that I was being a little precautious." Keegan politely removed Carrie's hand from her thigh as she nodded to the doctor. Carrie looked at her with what was her attempt at puppy dog eyes trying to win some type of prize from her. "Glad to know you're feeling better." Carrie stood to her full five foot seven height. Turning to the threat in Keegan's life she asked. "How long are you in town for?"

Gwen was caught off guard by the doctor addressing her. She didn't expect the woman to make small talk with her. "Thursday."

"Good. I'm sure Mr. Finch appreciates you coming to support his career, always a sign of a good relationship. The support couples give one another, especially during the tough times." Carrie's underlying meaning was caught. Keegan could see the deep furrow form on Gwen's forehead. Carrie was referring to Gwen leaving Keegan to battle through the leukemia alone, gloating on the Olympian absence during Keegan's illness.

When Carrie finally moved aside, "Keegan, I'll let you to your lunch. Stop by soon. Ms. Lerner, always good to see an old friend of Keegan's tell Bob good luck for Wednesday's game. The Motors could really use a win. Maybe you should try to motivate him." Carrie's voice was loud enough so the entire dinning room heard the reference to the hockey game. Keegan cringed as people's heads swung towards their table. If they weren't sure if it was Gwen before, they were now. "Enjoy your lunch." Carrie winked at Gwen before turning to leave.

"You're dating that woman?" Gwen hissed through gritted teeth.

"I told you yesterday it's none of your business who I am seeing." Keegan stopped speaking when Zack came back to the table with their order. A nod to the discombobulated server sent him on his way. "Besides what does it matter to you? You moved on pretty damn quick if I remember correctly."

"You broke up with me." There was a growl as Gwen responded. Her anger at the doctor was now vibrating in her words. Brown eyes clashed across the table with blue.

"And it took you what a week to find someone to replace me? Fuck." A family in the center of the dinning room close to the couple's booth heard the curse. "Sorry." The pregnant woman apologized for the vulgarity. Keegan took a bite of her tuna but her appetite totally gone. Her stomach and heart hurt. She should have never let Gwen close. Seeing the blonde again brought up too many bad memories and too much pain.

"Why didn't you tell me you were sick?" Gwen quietly folded her hands on top of the table. She took out her anger and jealousy of the doctor out on Keegan and she didn't deserve it. The question haunted her since the night of the banquet when Ashley told the story of her sister being ill.

Keegan looked at her former girlfriend. Taking a few moments to formulate the answer to the question she had not looked forward to answering. Her plan was to never have to answer the

question if she could help it. Now she was forced to tell the one person who deserved to know what really happened.

"Excuse me Ms. Lerner." A small girl appeared at the side of the table. "Hi! My name is Ann Marie Baker and I," The young girl faltered and looked to her mother and grandmother for encouragement. "I play soccer too and I wanted to tell that I think you're a great player. Can you?" The small brunette held out a pen and piece of paper for Gwen to autograph. Gwen smiled at Keegan and shrugged her shoulders. As soon as Gwen reached for the pen, the flood gates opened and the table was surrounded by adoring fans.

Feeling trapped, Keegan slipped from the table and escaped to the bathroom. She looked back and saw the large crowd closing in on the space she had once occupied. When she walked past the hostess stand she stopped the young woman, who sat them.

"Can you call me a cab?" The young lady nodded and watched as the regular made her way to the restroom. The woman refused to acknowledge if her companion was Gwen Lerner, now the hostess knew why. The once semi-calm restaurant was now in the mist of chaos as patrons huddled towards the back booth where the celebrity sat. She understood completely why Keegan wanted a cab called.

Keegan stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. She looked the same in a way. Her hair was longer and thicker. Her face took on more of an angular look than it had in her early twenties. Since the chemotherapy, she had gained and lost weight so much she forgot what a struggle her weight had been before the illness. Scrambling to get a pen and piece of paper from her purse, she quickly scribbled a note down. Fixing her hair with her fingers she finally gave up. Stepping into the waiting area of the restaurant she was greet with a buzz of excitement. If it was possible, the crowd had grown. She glanced at the hostess as a taxi pulled in front of the restaurant.

"Please give this to the woman I came in with." She handed the note to the young woman. Taking some money from her wallet she handed it to the now puzzled Zack as he tried to make his way out of the crowd.

"Do you want change?" He asked, hoping not because it meant a very large tip. A shake of her head and Keegan disappeared through the door and slipped into the waiting taxi.

The swarm of people surrounding Gwen was getting out of control and quickly. Keegan had gone to the restroom at least fifteen minutes ago and was now no where in sight. She had no idea where all these people had come from, but the crowd seemed to be growing. Catching the eye of the manager, she motioned for assistance.

"Folks, please let Miss Lerner have some breathing room." The fatherly figure of a man, appealed to the patrons' good nature. Soon the graying middle aged man led Gwen to a small office area out of the main dining room. Always one to think about the kids and how she wouldn't have gotten as far without the help of the fans, Gwen wished she had just signed the one

and gotten to eat her lunch. Poor Keegan, she hoped she wasn't mobbed by the group. Just what she needed was to have a pregnant woman jostled by crazed fans.

Clearing the way, the manager offered her a small back room off the bar to reorganize. "Have you seen my friend?" Gwen was now nervously searching for Keegan.

"Miss Lerner, your friend gave me this to give to you." The hostess stepped forward handing Gwen the note. *Christ...* Gwen thought as she took the note. Quickly scanning the short sentences, she read.

Gwen,

I had a nice time reconnecting. Enjoy your visit. My regards to Bob.

Keegan

"Did you see where she went?" Gwen questioned the hostess.

"She asked for a cab and left in it. Sorry Miss Lerner."

"Shit!" Gwen ran a hand through her hair. She was not going to let Keegan out of her life again. She was feeling a little desperate to get to know the expecting mother.

#

Ashley watched the yellow taxi pull in front of the HHC office complex. She was surprised to see her sister get out of the back. Keegan, bundled against the March weather, paid the driver then hurried into the building against the harsh wind. Ashley noticed the downward turn of Keegan's face immediately. She knew it was not from the cold, but from something else. She had seen that look before. The look of disappointment and depression had been a constant companion of Keegan's during her illness. The kind of mood she got in when her life spun out of control. Ashley took a deep breath and wondered if her sister would ever learn. She couldn't control everyone or everything. She would have to let go. The more Keegan tried the more things slipped out of her grasp.

When Keegan walked into the doors of the office, her eyes were swimming with tears. Holding it together as best she could she let loose when Ashley's arms wrapped around her in a protective shield.

"Hush. It will be alright. Shssss." Ashley cooed in her ear and held her tight, letting Keegan settle for a moment. Getting her breathing to a normal level, Ashley led her to her office. Danny's office next door stood dark and unoccupied. Taking Keegan by the hand, she had her sit on the small wheat colored sofa against the wall. Bright hues of gold and red warmed the office. A few of Andy's original art works hung on the filing cabinet behind Ashley's shiny clean as a whistle desk. Empty except for the two silver Cross pens lying neatly across the desk set. A

small oak conference table which could fit four to six people comfortably sat in the corner near a floor to ceiling matching bookshelf.

After making her older sister sit down, Ashley went to the large desk and picked up the hand set and dialed her secretary. "Linda, hold my calls." Ashley grabbed a couple bottles of water from the small mini frig behind the desk and came to sit next to Keegan.

"What happened?" Ashley began. She already knew it was Gwen. The blonde had a way of throwing her sister off her game since they had first met. When she talked with Gwen on Saturday, she thought the best thing for Keegan would be to let the blonde back into her life. Since the reunion on Sunday, Keegan not was as receptive as Ashley would have liked her to be. Shock was the emotion that rambled through her, Danny, and Dr. Micah when Keegan took Gwen up on the offer to take her home. When Gwen called the house to let her know she planning on staying the night, Ashley wasn't sure what to make of it or in what detail the over night stay entailed. Ashley didn't assume to know anything and she was sure her sister would never say.

"God I don't know. We went to my appointment. Oh.." Keegan started the story then switched gears so fast Ashley wasn't sure what happened. When Keegan handed her a shiny new black and white photo of the baby she smiled. "It was like there was no separation. We were us. Does that make sense?" Keegan could still feel the warmth of Gwen's hand in hers, the feel of her back against Gwen's front like they had been.

"Yes." Ashley knew she was walking a fine line. Her sister and Gwen's relationship was everything she ever wanted. Love, commitment, sharing, compromises, trust, or at least when there was trust.

"We went to lunch and everything just fell apart."

"Where did you go?"

"McKenna's." Keegan knew her sister was familiar with the restaurant near the hospital.

"Did Tony go with you?" Ashley knew she had to go slow with Keegan in order to get the whole story. Keegan shook her head. "Was it crowded?" A nod. "Did Gwen get recognized?"

"Yes, but she blew it off at first. There were so many people staring at us and talking about her. Plus Carrie showed up next to the table." Keegan wiped her sweaty palms on her khakis.

"Oh, that's bad." Ashley stood up and began to pace. "Did Gwen know Carrie was your doctor?"

"No, and again it's none of her business. Don't go there." Keegan put her hand up when Ashley open her mouth to argue. "I told Gwen it was none of her business who I'm seeing."

"Did Tony like her?" Ashley knew what Tony's impression of Gwen was. As soon as he got to the car, he called her screaming about Gwen and why didn't anyone tell him who Keegan's ex-girlfriend was.

"I think. She's a fan of the MudMen." Keegan put her hand on her stomach as it rolled a little. "I was teasing them about being old." Biting her lower lip she looked at her sister. "She's why I asked Tony to be the father. They are so similar. Their coloring, smile, and features. I told him he reminded me of someone special."

"Good to know. I never thought about it but you're right. They do look a lot alike." Ashley sat back down and opened her water bottle. "So what did Carrie say?"

"It was weird. She threatened Gwen in a way. I think something to effect of telling Bob about her taste for women or at least for me in particular. The one thing I'm grateful for is never listing the San Jose address as my home." When Gwen asked her to move in, they thought it best if everyone thought she still lived in Michigan. There was no record of the two years she lived in California. All of her personal information, mail and taxes went to her parents' house. Sarah would ship her important items. Her cell phone had the 313 area code. "Reporters would've jumped all over that."

"Do you think Carrie would do that to Gwen? Out her or at least try to out her? Did she say she's still gay?" Ashley paused. Keegan knew about Gwen hitting on Meg a few years ago. "That is so stupid, still gay? Can you even be still gay? Either you're gay or you're not. Gwen never struck me as the type of woman to go "straight." Do you understand what I am trying to say?"

"Again, it was like it was us...as a couple. We held hands." Keegan looked at her ring. "It was like she'd always been there."

"She has always been here." Ashley touched Keegan's heart. "You shut her out. She tried to get through to you but you didn't want her with you. You wanted her at the Olympics and she moved on." Ashley knew the risk her sister took. She and Tara tried to warn Keegan. Gwen's mother had abandoned her so much as a child as man after man came into her life, the blonde had deep fear of being alone or left. When Gwen put up walls to protect herself, there was no way to get through. "She did what she had to survive. Deep down you know that. Think about all the crap she went through with her mother. If Christopher and Molly weren't there I really think Gwen would be a messed up individual."

Keegan nodded. Her tears fell quietly. "I left her again." Her voice cracked as she realized the mistake she had made by leaving Gwen at the restaurant. "There was this little girl." Keegan took the tissue offered by Ash. "Thanks." She wiped her eyes and her nose. "The little girl came up to the table and started to say things about soccer and asked for an autograph. Before I knew it we were swamped and I had to get out. I went to the bathroom asked the hostess to call a cab and left. That's why I'm here."

"Did you tell her you were leaving?"

"I left a note with the hostess for her." Keegan wiped her nose again. "What do I do?"

"Keegan, I want you to think long and hard about this." Ashley placed a warm hand on her sister's knee. "You don't need to answer me but answer this for yourself." A nod confirmed she had her sister's attention. "What do you want? Do you still love her enough to put yourself out there again? Do you think you would be happy being a couple? And it's not going to be the same. She is a famous celebrity, who is on talk shows and magazine covers. That poster of her is slapped up in every mechanic's garage. She's America's Sweetheart." Ashley let her words digest. "You never told her you were sick, do you think she'll forgive you for that?"

"I tried one time." Keegan confessed. The sisters stared at each other for a few moments. Ashley wondered what their lives would be like if Gwen had known about the leukemia before the Olympics. What would have happened? Would Keegan and Gwen still be together? The rate of divorce was sky rocketing to the point where no one wanted to get married. Her relationship with Jason was just a mistake. Andy on the other hand was not. She loved her son with all her heart. His birth gave her sister a chance to continue her life.

"Call her." Ashley said quietly. "You owe her that after all these years. Don't close her out again. At least not like the last time." Keegan nodded wiping her nose with another tissue.

"I will." Her blue eyes studied the artwork of her nephew. Soon, she would have her own little Picasso running around doing crayon master pieces. This morning at the appointment, everything seemed so right. Gwen at her side holding her hand as the small form of her child appeared on the screen. The expression of joy that covered Gwen's face as the baby held its hands tight in fists raising them high above its head. She had made a mistake and it cost her. She'd call Gwen tonight and see if the dinner invitation was still on the table.

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~ America's Sweetheart ~

by Catherine Burke

America's Sweetheart

Author's Note: This is my first story posted on The Athenaeum. If all goes well there will be more to follow.

Category: Orig. Uber Alt.

Rating: R / NC-17

Summary: Retired Olympian Gwen Lerner lands in Detroit and comes face to face with her former girlfriend. Still questioning the reason they separated, Gwen wants answers and to get a friendship back. Keegan Garry left the Olympic team under a cloud of mystery and intrigue. Since then she has struggle to get her life back on track. Just when she thinks she's done that, Gwen shows up and derails. Can two women who once loved each other find way to heal their broken hearts and love again?

Comments/Disclaimer(s): This is an original story. The story and characters belong to me. They are not to be used or reproduced without my express written permission. This is my first time posting to the website. An early version of this story was posted but the current is much better :!

This story depicts a love/sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it.

Special Thanks: To J Brownell for ideas suggestions and getting me to actually post this. Also to Kerrie who was able to beta and get this story back to me a very short time. Living half way around the world does have its advantages. Time differences worked well for us.

This work has progressed over the years and is very close to my heart. The two characters helped me through a tough time in my life. I am posting in parts but will have the entire story finished soon. As I continue to work on it, I really need to have some feed back. You can reach me at burkcatherine@aol.com

Part 4

Chapter 10

Pellets of ices sprayed off the frozen surface as the pair of skates held the puck. Sticks locked in combat as the players battled for it against the board. Bobby tightened his shoulder anticipating the impact from his teammate. The scrimmage match was quickly escalating into an all out attack.

"Umph!" The deep moan came from the diaphragm as a body slammed against Bobby's chest. Again, his opponent stick slammed against his feet. From behind another player tried to gain control of the puck. His stick lowered to fend off the attacker's quest. When a stick was jammed into his ribs, he pushed hard against his opponent gaining the space needed to clear the puck. His foot kicked the puck out to a team mate.

Bobby shoved Denny Newsome hard against the boards. His teammate was going full throttle during scrimmage play. As if his league rival forgot Bobby was now a member of the Motors. Obviously, Denny was not thrilled to have him on the roster. Newsome was even less thrilled that his new bride was a huge fan of Bobby's. When she met the newest addition to the Motors, Mrs. Newsome gave him a huge bear hug upon introduction. As Bobby learned and became accustomed to the Motors' game plan and set plays, his time on the ice increased. By adapting to the teams game plan, he quickly moved from the defensive second line to first line replacing

Newsome, another reason for his teammate to give him a cheap shot in the ribs. Bobby would hit back when the time was right. He was still trying to fit in with his new teammates and coaches.

"Fucker! Save it for the game." Bobby called after the retreating skater.

"Retire old man!" Denny shot back. The exchange of words was not missed by the coaching staff, the goal keeper nor the lone observer in the stands.

"He pulls this crap on everyone." Brady Sullivan the goalie commented as Bobby skated back into his position to the right front of the net. "Usually lasts about a month, but with you, it might be a little longer. Newsome's still pissed about getting throw in the box for the high stick penalty last year."

Bobby gave the goalie a half cocked grin as he remembered Denny screaming and swearing at him as they carted him off the ice to the box for the foul. He lifted his head to see Gwen move to a seat half way up the lower section of the area on his side of the ice. As soon as she entered the building, cat calls sounded from the back storage room to the ice. Special permission was granted to allow her into to see practice. Very few visitors were allowed to watch the team practice. Lessons learned from the organizations after wives and girlfriends of the same player showed up. Victor Eisenmann, the VP of Operations consented to Gwen attending the practice sessions on a couple of conditions: a meet and greet and photo session with his eleven year old daughter, accompanying Bob to a public relations visit to Weston Hospital Pediatrics ward tomorrow afternoon and attending dinner at the country club with the entire team and their spouses. Most of the staff was looking forward to meeting Gwen.

"Man you're one lucky son of a gun." Brady Sullivan whistled through his mask as Gwen waved to Bobby.

Skating past the goalie, Bobby smiled and said, "I know!" When the team got word that Gwen was coming to town to visit, they decorated the entire locker room with Gwen's photo. Pinning a life sized poster of Gwen in her "sweetheart" pose over Bobby's locker. An American flag was draped over his uniform as it hung in his locker. "You know I'm Canadian, but I still love America's Sweetheart." Bobby teased as he kissed the poster. The team laughed, except for Denny who just stared at him from across the room. Bobby's image of being a man's man was in tack. He knew rumors of being gay could kill his career. He needed to be seen with someone who would boost his appeal. Gwen was a great option. He was too close to retirement to have some women screw with his head and career. "Thank you." Bobby said with a smile as he rolled up the poster. Gwen's visit was just in time. He was going crazy. He knew a limited number of people in Detroit. Most were his teammates and he didn't trust them with the details of his life. So far Gwen's visit had been a drama. Her ex-girlfriend had her head all over the place. Gwen was feeling guilty because of the illness. What did the woman have? Leukemia?

"Sullivan, do you know what the chances of surviving leukemia are?" The goalie's father was a doctor at Cedar Sinai in Los Angeles.

"Depends on a lot of things health, age, matching a donor." Goalie flipped his mask around on his fist. "The odds are better. A lot of research is being done. The actor with Parkinson's disease is fighting for stem cell transplants and research."

"Thanks." Bobby watched the action at the other end of the ice. The last time he saw Gwen was yesterday morning. She talked to him about meeting up with Keegan Sunday afternoon. He could see the excitement and worry she had about the reunion. When they opened the morning paper, they were surprised to find a picture of them on the front page of the Metro section. The photo was taken late Saturday night when Bobby got to her room, but he didn't know how these journalists were getting so close to them. He talked with her last night when she let him know she was staying the night at Keegan's. Bobby wished her luck and called her a dog. He didn't think the reunion went well since she was sitting in the stands with a worry line between her eyes. The line only reared its head in times of stress. He wondered what happen.

"Heads up!" Sullivan yelled as the action on the ice began to work its way back to their side.

Gwen spayed her fingers out and flexed them. The Motors management had "allowed" her into the practice session on a couple of stipulations. One had been an autograph picture. Easy, but when the daughter of one of the executives stood next to her father with her best friend in tow, Gwen realized an actual photo shoot was on the agenda and probably more than one autograph. The nightmare of a child, Emily Eisenmann was spoiled rotten. The meeting with the offspring started off badly and ended with Gwen wondering why anyone would want a child.

"What's your team's name?" Gwen asked the devil's spawn who was posing as an eleven year old with curly blonde hair and lip smacker smeared across her lips.

"The Monarch's, like the butterfly. Not like royalty like Prince Harry. He's so hot." Emily stood with her gum smacking against her lips, designer jeans that cost a small fortune covered her legs and a sweater Gwen had thought about purchasing until she saw the price. Emily handed Gwen photo after to photo to sign for her BFF's. Next to her stood a taller darker version of a growing young woman who happened to be the latest recruit on the Monarch's traveling team. This girl was a ringer if Gwen ever saw one. The young woman was ten according to the voice that spoke softly as Emily's rambling drowned out other details. Gwen had once been in this girl's shoes. Grown ups wanted you to play on their kid's team so the team would win and make the team look better.

"Last one." Gwen held up the photo. The anger in her voice was hidden well but the message was sent. The pouting lip Emily slung at her was just about as much as she could handle from the spawn. "What is your name again, I didn't quite hear? Someone else was talking." Emily went to answer but snapped her mouth closed.

"Nickie Kristovich." The lanky girl stated as she stuttered a little.

"Nice to meet you Nickie." Gwen held out her hand. "Do you want an autographed picture?" The girl nodded her head. Big blues eyes looked right at Gwen.

"How, how come you quit? Emily says it's because you're getting married."

"Ha...hardly." Gwen looked at the dejected eleven-year old who thought she knew everything. "I've been playing for a long time. Since I was your age or younger. I got hurt a couple of years ago and as time goes on, my body doesn't do what it used to do. I just thought it was better to go out with a good record than trying to keep playing when I know I can't keep up." She roughed up Nickie's hair. "Not to get married. And if I did get married, I would want someone who would let me still play a sport I loved. You don't have to quit something because you're getting married."

"So are you marrying Finch?" The spawn spoke again.

"No comment. Good luck next season ladies." Gwen said as she stood up her eyes never leaving the VP of Operations. Victor Eisenmann was going to have his hands full in a few years.

"Thank you Miss Lerner." The quiet man spoke as she exited the room and headed to the arena where she was going to meet with the Public Relations official for the Motors.

Settling back in her seat, she watched Denny slam Bobby up against the boards. It was little funny to see such a small statured man try to move Bobby. When the stick came down against his ribs, she knew Bobby would be pissed. The puck cleared out and she heard the pleasantries exchanged between players. She had a number of run-ins with the opposition but rarely had there been an exchange during practice with her teammates.

As the practice progressed, she saw a large black man enter the arena and head her direction. Taking the stairs two at time, he approached her. His hand extended in a gesture of greeting. "Ms. Lerner very nice to meet you, I'm Phil Novak, Public Relations officer for the Motors. I appreciate you making time during your visit to help out the community." Gwen took in the tall man dressed in a classic blue navy suit with a pink shirt under it.

"Mr. Novak, nice to meet you. I love the shirt." Gwen thought it odd that a man in this type of industry was brave enough to wear pink.

"I just flew in and when I wear a white shirt with this suit, everyone assumes I'm an airline employee. I learned the hard way to set precedence with the other travelers." Phil confessed, being asked to carry other passenger's bags one too many times. He saw the amused look in the professional soccer player's face. He followed her career. She was a great player, not too bad on the eyes either. But when the poster came out with her dressed only in a flag, he thought she was a sex goddess just right for the picking. Gorgeous seemed to fall below a standard she had set. "It's great to finally meet you. Your photos don't do you justice. You are much more stunning in person." The PR dragon was rearing its ugly head. Gwen smiled and responded accordingly.

"I doubt you'd say that if you saw me first thing in the morning." She got the typical glazed over male response to her innocent comment. As the unprofessional flash of her image registered in his gray matter, Phil shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"So tomorrow, we are asking you and Bob to visit the hospital. Go to the Peds unit see the kids, kiss a few babies, and shake a few hands with the employees. There are some sick kids that are big fans of Bob's and yours. It's good press to have you in a community setting. Sorry about the photo in the Herald. Not sure where they camped out to get that one." The PR rep stated confused as to when a photographer snapped the couple.

"Outside my hotel room, when Bob got back from Cleveland. Someone may have followed him." Gwen remembered seeing a man by the elevator when she hopped into Bobby's arms. She was happy to see him and the photo conveyed the message. Her limbs were wrapped around his neck and waist as he carried her into the hotel room.

"Again, my apologies if your privacy was invaded." Phil's eyes wandered to the ice. The team was having a great season. The move to add Finch to their roster was paying off. Ticket sales were up for the first time in five years, the team was finally gelling. Finch had finally found his rhythm with the Motors. It took a couple of games, but the veteran player was worth the money. To top it off, he was a fan favorite. His jersey was the top seller in the pro shop and with word on the street Gwen Lerner was in town to cheer on her boyfriend, Wednesday's game was sold out. For the first time in a regular season, the Motors sold out on a week night. "I heard you're in town until Thursday." Phil turned his attention back to Bob Finch's girlfriend. Gwen nodded as she watched the coaches gather all the players at the far side of the arena. "Any chance a move maybe in your future?"

"Nothing in stone, I live by the never say never rule."

"It's a great community. Great medical facilities, universities, close to Bob's parents. That could be a negative." The man chuckled as if his jab at the in-laws was funny. This was one of those times, she hated being politically correct, she wanted to say *none of your fucking business*, like Keegan told her.

"Bob will let you know if anything changes." Gwen gritted her teeth as she smiled. She felt like a beauty queen all she need now was to wave to the crowd and blow kisses.

"The organization thinks it's great that you support The Emerald Foundation." Phil put his PR hat back on. "I think the visit to the hospital will be great. It's a gesture of good will, our newest player and his fiancée visiting the children."

"Bob loves kids." Her statement was true. She liked them too, but after the monster she just met in the executive offices, Gwen was having second thoughts. Emily Eisenmann was a product of her environment, probably her mother more than likely. She thought about Keegan and the small child growing inside her. Keegan would place others in front of her own needs, unlike Connie who thought only of herself. Gwen knew her mother had concerns for her, yet she questioned her mother's motives. She recalled a tiny fist held tightly as the baby stretched its arms on the monitor. She knew what a good mom Keegan would be. She would sacrifice everything for her child. A genuine smile came over her as she thought about the baby.

"Wow!" Phil said breaking her thoughts. The smile on the woman's face lit up her face, her whole body conveyed the happiness she felt. This was the real smile, not the fake one she had learned over the years to give the media. "I wish my wife would smile like that at the mention of kids."

"I'm having a whole new view of them." Gwen replied, her professional pose back in place. Clasp her hands together, she looked at the ring on her finger. "Phil, I'm not sure if you can help. I really hate when people do this to me but, here it is. I have a few friends in the area and I was wondering if it would be possible to get some tickets to the game Wednesday."

"I can pretty much guarantee it. In fact you are invited into the owner's box. The VanKuren's are in Miami and won't be back until the weekend. Here is my card. Just call that number and let me know the names of your friends and we'll get them the VIP treatment."

"Thank you, I greatly appreciate it." When sprays of ice flew over the protective wall on the end lines, she shifted her attention back to the ice.

"Looks like they're calling it a day." Phil stood and extended his hand to Gwen. "Again lovely meeting you. I'll see you tomorrow at the hospital. The hospital liaison is Lilia Holiday. Just ask for her if you don't see me."

"See you tomorrow." Gwen stood up from her seat and tried to work the kink out of her back. She was used to running through a three to four hour practice session, not sitting through one. The rink gate opened as the twenty plus men on skates made their way towards the locker room and offices. The thin blades of metal under their feet sank into the protective mat covering the floor. Gwen could never figure out how such a small thin piece of metal could hold the weight of a man. She had a hard enough time walking in stilettos let alone putting blades on her feet and taking on the ice.

"Hey Sweetheart!" The cattle calls started again.

"American as apple pie, you know Finch is Canadian."

"Where's the flag! Finch you're a liar."

"Sure you can handle her old man."

"Zip it!" Bobby called out to his teammates as he skated to the side board and came over the wall. "Hey." He smiled at her. Sweat poured down his face and she could smell him from the parking lot. His helmet matted his hair as it stuck out in a hundred directions. When he went to kiss her, she back up a couple of rows.

"No way!" Putting her hands up to shield him away.

"Oh come here..." He took a step into the stands and grabbed her hand. He looked at her and back to the ice where Denny was talking with an assistant coach. "I'm kidding. Let me take a shower and get presentable. Sorry about the guys. They've been riding me pretty hard."

Gwen stepped closer and whispered in his ear. "And you want me to feel sorry for you? What's happened to you?" Bobby let a gut wrenching laugh out. He pointed his finger at her and headed to the locker room. Gwen laughed at his retreating figure, wondering if he could actually walk in stilettos. She'd have to bet him on it and find a pair of shoes big enough.

"So when's the wedding?" A voice called from behind her.

What was this the question of the day or the last four hours? A gapped toothed Denny Newsome stood on the ice next to the retaining wall. Gwen walked down the last two steps of the stands and came to stand next to Bobby's teammate. He was a good looking man if you got past the missing front tooth. Like most players, there was not always a full set of teeth left.

"Denny." Gwen greeted him. They had not been formally introduced but there was no secret to their identities. "Are you a reporter now?"

"Just curious." He glided along the board and turned back towards her circling like a shark on its prey.

"You and the rest of the country." Gwen quipped back at him.

"How's your visit going?"

"Good so far. No major disappointments. Of course the photo in yesterday's paper was a little unflattering."

"Are you looking for a more permanent residence here?" His circles on the ice were getting tighter and tighter.

"Again with the reporter questions. If I didn't know you were married, I'd think you were hitting on me."

"Maybe I am." Cool hazel eyes looked back at her then he skated to the far side of the rink. He looked comfortable on the ice as if it was part of him. Younger than Bobby by seven years, Denny was very young and new to the world of professional hockey. Drafted right out of high school, he started with the New England Schooners at seventeen. He bounced around the league trying to get his bearings. When he landed in San Jose, he met Bobby, who took the young player under his wing. They forged a bond until Denny took Detroit's offer. He signed the deal as a free agent and had been with the Motors for the past five seasons. On opposing teams, they were engaged in brawl after brawl on the ice. The fights between the two players were a spectator favorite.

Gwen watched Denny work on the other side of the rink with an assistant coach. Taking shot after shot on the goal, Denny hit the netting on most of the slaps. When all the pucks were gone, the player and coach gathered up the rubbery black discs and continued to practice shots on goal for the good part of an hour.

"He does that every day after practice." Bobby stood at the wall near Gwen watching his teammate take extra time to work on his shot. "Some of the guys say he's here a couple hours after we are all gone. Word is home life is not that homey. Is that even a word?"

"He came up to talk with me after you left. It was more or less a flirting session. Seeing if I'd take the bait." Gwen elbowed his ribs, forgetting about the stick he took. She regretted it instantly as he winched. "Sorry."

"Did you?"

"I gave him a little nibble then stole the worm off his hook."

"Good girl. Where are we heading?" Gwen had not spent a large amount of time at his new residence. "I figured home for a bit and maybe grab some food out."

"Sounds like a plan. I need to follow you to the condo."

"Shhh, it's a townhouse." Bobby helped her with her coat as they left the arena. "Just follow me that way you won't get lost. And please tell me you have your purse."

"Shit!" Gwen said as she ran back into the arena. Bobby's laugh haunting her.

#

Bobby's rented townhouse served its functional purpose. The design was basic. The kitchen was small, a nook, as some people could describe it. A small table with two place settings was positioned under the window. A microwave and coffee maker sat on the neutral Formica counter top. Cupboards with faux oak finished brass hardware knobs and molding were the most decorative items in the townhouse. The living room had a lumpy couch and loveseat along with a couple of book shelves that balanced each side of the fire place. A large television was placed in the corner of the room with a massive amount of movies piled to the side.

"Someone really likes beige." Gwen commented about the neutral colors through the entire living space. Wall to wall beige carpet ran from the front entrance to the sliding glass door that opened on to a wooden deck.

"It appears to be the case." Bobby took her bags and put them in the second bedroom. He had set up the room with a bed and a make shift office with his computer. "One of the guys on the team hooked me up with this real estate agent who specializes in short term rentals. Most of her clients are here for the big three. Car people usually visiting from Japan for an extended period of time." He moved her suitcase to the end of the bed and placed her garment bag in the empty closet.

"Once the season's over, I'll see what options I have. Cost of living is a hell of a lot less than San Jose. I can see my folks. My brother and sister have brought the kids down to see some games. God, plus the travel time is so much less. We can get to Cleveland, Columbus, Pittsburgh, Indianapolis, and Chicago in less than six hours. Hell, it was more than that to get to LA."

"Are you trying to get me to move? I swear I was asked that question a hundred times today." Gwen touched the southwestern style comforter on the bed. "She's pregnant." She said as she sat on the bed. She thought about her reaction to Keegan's expecting. She knew Keegan wanted children when the time was right. Gwen never thought much about having children. Connie treated her as if she was an inconvenience for most of her life. Until she was rich and famous.

"Who's pregnant?" Bobby looked a bit confused. After a moment he realized who Gwen was talking about. "No way. I thought she was a lesbian."

"She is." Gwen ran her fingers along the pattern on the covering. "I went with her this morning to the hospital. She had a sonogram scheduled and asked me to go." Gwen flushed a little when she remembered the feeling of Keegan holding her hand and leaning against her as the baby came to life on the monitor.

"Fill me in on this dirt. I so love drama that's not mine." Bobby plopped down on the bed like a teenage girl listening for the latest gossip. "I thought she was sick."

"She is...was. Last night was awful. Keegan was running a fever. She was fighting with her sister and her OBGYN, who was at the house. I think they're dating."

"She's dating her OBGYN? That's like me dating an urologist. Ewwh."

"I'm not sure. Keegan's very vague about some details. Her love life was none of my business as she reminded me a number of times." Gwen continued to fill him in on the details of Sunday and Monday's events. "If she is dating the doctor, Keegan's taste has gone down hill. She was such a bitch to me. We saw her at lunch and she actually threatened to tell you I was a lesbian. Ha! Shocker!" Gwen rolled on to her stomach and faced Bobby. His green eyes were wide and playful. "You missed me?" She tapped his nose.

"Yes, you heartless B! Who won't tell me if she is moving here or not? So go on with the Baby Momma Drama! What about this B doctor? Is she good looking? Maybe she feels threatened by you. You do put women on the defense." Bobby rubbed his hand along her back. "Gwen, you don't realize that people, men and women find you attractive and their mates get defensive."

"I'm not into breaking up relationships."

"Some people are. I know you honey, you're a nice friendly person. Some times that quality is taken as flirting."

"I don't flirt with just anyone."

"Did you flirt with Keegan?"

"Maybe a little, but she's cute. I'm still attracted to her." She smiled at the shocked face Bobby was faking. "Guess who the father is?"

"George W. Bush!" He chuckled and the bed shook. Gwen hit him in the arm.

"Tony Best from the MudMen. I met him this morning."

"I thought he was dead, drug over dose. Man what was that song they used to sing?"

"No, that was the other guy, the lead singer. He's the drummer. *When It's Right* was the name of the song." Gwen filled in the missing information. Her cheeks were hurting from smiling so much. She was happy. Just being able to talk with Keegan was an ultimate high. She looked forward to building a relationship with her former girl friend.

"So let me see if I have this down." Bobby sat up, resting his head against the wall. "Your former girlfriend, who kicked you out of her sister's house, almost died. Now is now pregnant by a grunge musician and possibly dating her OBGYN. You're smiling like a fool because she left your ass at a restaurant?"

"No, you make it sound...so"

"Fucked up." Bobby voiced his thoughts. Gwen slapped at him. "Oh honey it is! Run away and do it fast!" Bobby jumped on top of her and started to playfully knocking her head into the mattress.

"She left me a message apologizing about leaving the restaurant. She said she got freaked with all the people." Gwen hugged a pillow, a smile plastered across her face.

"You're hooked aren't you?"

"I don't know. We just click. Even though I haven't seen her in years its like bam...we are back at that place."

"What about SSN?"

"What does SSN have anything to do with Keegan and I being friends?" Gwen asked.

"You don't hide your feelings well. SSN is in Atlanta, the bible belt owned by a conservative group. Hell, Kirk Lane is the biggest homophobic man in the country." Bobby's comment made her smile falter. She was interviewing and hashing out a deal with SSN. She was signed to be a correspondent for a handful of soccer games. Hannah was working with her attorney, Michelle Patton, negotiating a possible on air position with SSN. There were a few more details to work out, including an in-person interview with Kirk Lane. Gwen received a note from Dale McKnight, senior desk anchor at SSN. Over the years she and Dale developed a special

relationship. Their on air relationship came across as a good clean fun and was enjoyed by fans of all ages. During the promotion for the NWSL, she teased the anchor endlessly until he challenged her to an impromptu soccer game. Gwen's skills had McKnight huffing and puffing during the segment. The anchor barely touched the ball. When the superstar kicked the soccer ball through the anchor's legs and into the goal, the reporter conceded. The segment was SNN's top spot for that year. After the interview, executives at SNN began to court Gwen into joining the network as a correspondent. She backed away, stating she wasn't ready to give up her day job. She was ready now and gave up her day job, but wanted to make sure her second career would be lucrative and successful. Hannah had a number of offers on the table, but Gwen wanted to make sure the one she selected was the best option for her. Many retired sports figures were successful in making the transition from the field to the broadcast booth. Gwen's career plan was to join their ranks.

"There are no gay commentators on the air." Bobby reminded her.

"There are no "out" gay commentators on the air. Hell, we both know that there are a few media personnel who ride the fence."

"No comment. I'm not outing anyone." Bobby held up his hands. "You need to be careful of how you handle this. There are mortality clauses in most contracts. If you are serious about making a career at SSN, you need to watch your personal life."

"You're my personal life."

"Not forever. We both know that. Gwen, you need to make yourself happy, not rely on a game or person."

"You're one to talk. Are you happy?"

"I'm happy with my job, but I know where I'm going after the EHL. Then I hope to find someone who I love and love's me back. I haven't had that in a long time." He touched her face. "You know what it is like to be in love."

"Yes, it's great and it sucks in the same breath." Gwen covered her head with her hands. She thought about what a great day she spent with Keegan.

"I'm jealous." Bobby confessed. Gwen lifted her head to look at her friend. "You're look like you're in love."

"I wouldn't say love."

"You don't have to say anything. It's written all over your face." Bobby waggled his eye brows at her. "Come on, let's get food. I'm starved."

"Let me jump in the shower." Gwen got off the bed and grabbed her things. "I know just the place we can go to. If you behave, maybe I'll take you to meet Keegan." Gwen said as she flipped a towel over her shoulder and closed the bathroom door.

"She's so whipped." Bobby chuckled and went into the living room. He had a game tape to study.

Chapter 11

"Oh my God, I feel like a tick!" Gwen patted her stomach. Bobby inhaled his lasagna and asked for a second piece. *Mamma Rosa's*, a small Italian restaurant in Bloomfield Hills, the suburb Keegan lived near. In this part of town, Italian immigrants would run bad restaurants out of business on sheer principle. Although Rosa has passed away years ago, her family still ran the restaurant. Tonight, her cousin Sophia was running the front of the house. When they walked through the front door the immediate odor of garlic and spices pleasantly teased their senses. The older hostess gave them a quiet booth in the back near a window. Their table was out of the way and the other patrons seemed not to notice the striking couple enter the dining area. In fact, no one approached their table or bothered them as they enjoyed their meal and conversation. "How did you know about this place?" Bobby said as he folded his napkin next to his plate. He liked the atmosphere. Throughout the restaurant there was framed artwork of vineyards and country sides. He felt as if he had been transported to a small village in northern Italy. A large bar stood near the front with bottles and bottles of wine ready for the restaurant's needs, the dark wood wine racks and glass holders gave a historical feel to the restaurant.

The members of the family were perched near at the bar speaking fluent Italian, their conversation wavered from the upcoming confirmation of one of the younger family members to the Motors making the playoffs. "Keegan, she and I came here a lot. I used to make her bring me her when we in town." Gwen and Keegan had frequented the restaurant. They never had a bad meal. Gwen swore she gained ten pounds every time they came to visit. "We're taking her dessert." Gwen had that little twinkle in her eye. "I want you to meet her and not at a game or event. No show, no flashes, no boyfriend crap." Gwen huffed out.

Bobby rested his elbows on the table. He understood her reasons too well. He was caught in the same Catch 22 she was. His career was based on his ability to play a game and his popularity with the fans. Like Gwen, his public and private lives were completely different. He was able to be himself with Gwen. They shared secrets. His plight was a little different than hers. She found someone and was trying to reconnect with her ex-girlfriend without exposing the relationship to public scrutiny. "Does she live close?" He finally conceded.

"A couple of minutes from here, she bought her parents house when they moved to Florida." Gwen smiled, thinking in a few minutes she would see Keegan again. The excitement she felt was bubbling over. She had just seen Keegan yet, she wanted to see her again and again. It had been a long time since she felt this way about someone.

"Does she have any idea we are showing up at her door step?"

"Nope, I only have until Thursday. I want to get to know her again. I wasted enough time."

"Don't push her Gwen. You could do more harm than good."

"Are we all set here?" A portly older woman with grayish black hair approached their table. She smiled sweetly at the couple.

"Can we get some cannoli to go?" Gwen's voice was almost gleeful. She was happy. Bobby rarely saw this side of Gwen. Usually, she looked as if she had the weight of the world on her shoulders. Between Connie, his relocation, and the deal with SNN, Gwen had been pretty down. Keegan must be very special to have her flashing an easy bright natural smile. The waitress came back with a small box tied up with white butcher's string. She put the bill in Bobby's outstretched hand. Gwen tried to fight him for the bill.

"Ease down there. I haven't seen you and I want to treat. I'm not stepping on your toes or bringing you down. You can get another night, because I'm sure as shit not cooking in that kitchen."

"Home sweet home, huh!" Gwen teased him knowing his living arrangements were driving him crazy. Getting to her feet and grabbing her coat off the rack the pasta she ate rolled in her tummy. She wondered if Keegan felt like this with the baby. She slipped her arms into her coat and caught Bobby looking at her.

"Stop it. You're making me sick."

"What?" Gwen got defensive immediately. When Bobby plastered a smile on his face so big his dimples showed. For emphasis he place his index finger under each one pointing them out with his little kid motions. "I'm not that bad."

"Want to bet?" Bobby handed the waitress the bill with cash and a hefty tip.

"Have a wonderful night, Mr. Finch, Ms. Lerner." Sophia beamed with pride that such famous people would patron her family's restaurant.

"We'll be back." Bobby gave her a hug in appreciation of enjoying a quiet dinner without interruption. Gwen held on to the small box of pastries as she watched Bobby hug the older woman.

"We watch on the TV Wednesday. Good to have with us! You come again, yes?" Sophia's face was flushed and her broken English made Bobby's dimples show.

"Come on Prince Charming. We have an errand to run." Gwen tucked her arm in his as they left the restaurant. "That was nice. They knew who we were yet treated us like regular customers. Want me to drive or do I give you directions."

"Directions, do you have your purse?"

"Shit!" Gwen spun on her heel heading back to the restaurant. Before she could get across the parking lot, Sophia came out of the restaurant without a coat on holding Gwen's purse over her head.

"Miss Gwen." She called out as Gwen caught up with her quickly. A quick thank you and Sophie hurried back inside.

"I'm gonna staple that to your arm." Pointing to the Dolce and Gabbana bag he bought her last Christmas. "Thank you Sophia." Bobby mumbled. His experience with Gwen and her misplaced items was long and expensive. Connie always seemed to have a hand in the matter when things disappeared. He never voiced his suspicions to Gwen. Gwen could get frustrated with her mother, but she would never accuse her of stealing from her.

Bobby navigated his BMW through the streets of Troy. They laughed at the billboard close to the highway with Bobby's mug on it. As he drove, Gwen began to recognize the neighborhood. When he turned down the familiar street, she pointed the house at the end of the cul de sac. Keegan's yard butted up against Firefighter's park. They had walked through the woods a few times, even going to watch a soccer match. Gwen reached over and gripped Bobby's arm.

"Stop."

"Jesus, what's wrong?" Bobby said as he pulled the car over.

"I'm scared." She finally said. She couldn't catch her breath. Her heart pounded against her chest. The sound of her labored breathing filled the car. Did she really want to do this? There were a lot of things going on in Keegan's life. Maybe just stopping by was not the best idea. "I'm having second thoughts. What if her girlfriend is there?"

"Gwen, do you really want to try to have this relationship back?"

"Yes, we were friends before anything else. I miss her."

"Then tell her." Bobby eased his BMW sedan from the curb. He pulled in the driveway and got out of the car walked around to Gwen's side. "Come on chicken." He pulled open the door and pointed to the door. He took the box of pastries from her afraid she would mash the sweet dessert before she got to the door. Bobby leaned on the sidelight and waited for her to ring the bell. When she didn't he leaned over and rang it twice quickly.

"Stop it!" Gwen hit at him. She could hear footfalls on the other side of the doorway as the small curtain was pulled back just a little and quickly replaced.

Shit!! Keegan stood in her foyer wiping her wet hands on the thighs of her jeans. She was busy cleaning the kitchen and just finished a minute ago. She was antsy. Her mind running a hundred miles an hour as thoughts of Gwen filled her head. She attempted to settle her thoughts by pulling out her grandmother's china and washing the delicate pieces by hand. She finished putting the dishes back in the hutch. Her brain calmer and all thoughts of Gwen disappeared.

That was until the doorbell rang. Gwen stood at her front door. Keegan called Gwen's phone to apologize about the crowd and freaking out at lunch. Checking her hair in the entrance mirror, she posed herself calmly and opened the door.

"Hi." Keegan greeted her guests. Not sure what to do from this point on she stood paralyzed. She stared into brown eyes waiting. She didn't want to blink in case her mind was playing tricks on her.

"Hi. Umm, I'm, I don't mean to barge in on you, but we were in the area and we brought..." Gwen looked for the small box Sophia had given her. When the box appeared between the two of them, it was dangling from a pair of large fingers.

"We brought cannoli." Bobby said as the woman on the inside of the house realized who she was looking at. "Are you Keegan?" Neither woman said anything they continued to stare from each other to the man.

"Yes..." Keegan snapped out of her trance. Bob Finch was standing on her front stoop. "Jesus. Where are my manners? Come in. And if that is from Momma Rosa's I'll do anything you want!"

"Sure about that?" Bobby said as he opened the door and ushered Gwen inside. Bobby took in the home owner noting the small bulge at her mid section. If he didn't know, he would never guess she was pregnant. "I'm Bobby. It's nice to finally put a name to a face. I've seen your picture but some how you don't look the same."

"I guess that's what cancer does to you?" Keegan turned and hit the heel of her hand to her forehead. Why did she say that? Gwen probably thought she was making fun of her. "I was just about to make some tea. Would you like some or coffee?" She tried to casually call over her shoulder. Stopping she turned around to her newly arrived guests. "I'm Keegan. It's nice to meet you Bob. Bobby." The name felt weird as it rolled off her tongue. "Gwen's got me up against the ropes here. I'm a little shocked. It's typical Gwen to jump in with both feet when she's set her mind to it."

"My friends call me Bobby. Bob is for the ice or media." Bobby turned to look at the very pale Gwen. "What's wrong?"

"I just envisioned this meeting so differently in my head." Gwen squeaked as she walked a few steps behind Keegan into the kitchen. She was suddenly hit with the feeling of déjà vu she had with Keegan and Tony in the same location hours earlier, funny how the tides had turned in her favor. Keegan was probably wondering what was going on.

"I hope we didn't interrupt any plans you had tonight." Gwen inquired as she moved to Keegan's side noticing how jumpy the brunette was. "I'm sorry about this afternoon."

"No, it's my fault I just freaked out a little. The past couple of days have been over whelming."

"Just a little." When Keegan lifted a hand to her brow, Gwen mimicked her movement. Gwen touched Keegan's forehead to make certain there was no fever. Her fingers brushed against Keegan's skin, her fingers warmed but not from a fever. Just touching her sent off sparks of attraction.

"I'm feeling fine. I think I got a little bit of a bug from Andy." Keegan's face flushed. Gwen lowered her hand slowly, knowing she felt the heat.

"Let me help you." Gwen made an excuse to focus her attention on something else. "Where's the coffee? Bobby you want coffee right?" Keegan turned towards Gwen as Gwen turned towards her. Arms and legs got a bit tangled as they both started to laugh. As they got caught up in each other, they looked into each others eyes. Gwen felt the hole in her heart being filled. "God, I missed you so much." Gwen said as she wrapped her arms around Keegan and held her tight. When the small brunette held fast to her, Gwen's world righted itself. Pulling back a little, she held Keegan at arms length. "Since it's none of my business who you're dating, I want you to know whatever this leads to, if it's friendship or at least speaking terms, I just want you back in my life. I've wasted enough time without you." Bringing her close again, she pressed her face against Keegan's hair. Feeling the light brush of Keegan's hot breath against her neck gave her heart a small leap for joy.

"What about Bob?" A confused Keegan lifted her eyes to the twinkling green ones of Bobby Finch.

"Bob is more than happy." He moved through the kitchen. "Where is the coffee? You guys seem dangerous in the kitchen at this point." Keegan pointed to the cupboard far out of her reach above the refrigerator. "How?"

"Tony thinks he's funny. It's his private stash." Bobby raised an eyebrow towards her. "For you, he'll allow it. I guarantee it." Keegan gave her permission as she felt Gwen reach for her hand. Their fingers intertwined as each held on tight. Confused for the moment about the couple's relationship, Keegan tried not to over think. She held fast to Gwen's hand. Thinking they fit perfectly together.

"Okay, both of you sit." Bobby ordered. The woman took seats at the oval kitchen table next to each other. "I can boil water and make coffee on my own." Bobby moved around the kitchen with ease. "Keegan, your home is very pleasant. It's got a good vibe."

"Thank you." Keegan watched the hockey player work his way around her kitchen. He was very at home in the kitchen. She unsure about the nature of the relationship between Gwen and the hockey player, but she could tell they were very close. They looked good together. Photographs of the couple appeared often in magazines. The photographers snapping photos of the happy couple embraced or touching, but never full blown make out session. Keegan had photos of them embracing or a kiss on the cheek, never a full on lip locking kiss between the couple. Sunday's paper was proof of the press' interest with the couple. "So are you still engaged?"

"No, it's a media thing. Our relationship depends on the playoffs." Bobby asked Gwen, as if they had a secret between them.

"If the Motors make the playoffs, we break up."

"So until the end of April or early May, we are still together." Bobby started to explain as he made the coffee and tea. "You see if Gwen breaks up with me, the opposing team thinks my head's not in the game and tries to use that against me. So your answer is we are still together. Not engaged."

"By the way he has never asked me to marry him and this is a loaner." Gwen held up her hand with a two carat diamond ring on her left finger. "We have an understanding."

"Do you trust her?"

"I do." Gwen answered softly as she shifted her gaze from Bobby to Keegan. She lifted her eyes to meet Keegan. Although she hadn't seen Keegan in almost five years, she knew Keegan would never hurt anyone. Her brown eyes went from Keegan's bright blues then back to Bobby. As he nodded, Gwen felt her heart surge with love for him. She would always love him no matter what. "Bobby and I are what you would call an arranged couple. My preference is not viewed by the sporting industry as a wise career move. We have an agreement, and so far neither of us has any reason to break up our relationship." Gwen smiled as Bobby began to snicker. *Until now*. She thought.

"Keegan, can you imagine what would happen if I announced I was gay?" Bobby held her eyes with his. His most powerful secret was now out to this perfect stranger who Gwen trusted and loved. She did love this small dark haired woman, even if she didn't admit it. He could see it in her eyes and feel it in his heart.

"You're gay?" Keegan turned in her chair to view the handsome man looking over her selection of tea. This was not expected. The man who every woman drooled over was not even interested in female companionship. "You've been seen with models and actresses."

"Yep." He confessed as he placed the water on to boil.

"Oh, you should have seen him at the restaurant charming Sophia." Gwen saw the realization cross over Keegan's face.

"So this whole time, you knew about each other and it doesn't bother you to hide in the closet?"

"It bothers me when he picks up twink and isn't as careful as he should be. The relationship works for us." Gwen explained. "We met through our agent a few years ago. I was getting some heat when those pictures came out in the tabloids." Gwen felt the guilt from her thoughts towards Keegan at that time. "Of us in P'town." Gwen's eyes pooled for a moment as she remembered the ugly accusations she threw out about Keegan. "I'm sorry. I accused you of selling the photos."

"I know, Tara told me." Keegan felt the heavy silence fill the air. After pulling Gwen's hand, she got her attention and looked into the sad brown eyes. "I did enjoy watching you get your ass kicked that game." When Tara called Keegan after the game, her best friend let her know about the confrontation in the middle of the Atlanta Rhythm soccer field. Keegan was watching the game at home but didn't realize the confrontation in the center circle was about her.

Pre-game warm ups were usually a time she enjoyed as she went through drills with her team. Today was different as she walked towards the tall slim African American woman in goalie attire.

"I heard you wanted to talk to me." Washington pulled her goalie gloves off shoving them under her arm as she entered the center circle of the soccer field. Her brown eyes met the dark look Gwen was throwing her way.

"Did she do it?" Gwen demanded. "Since she broke up with me and won't talk to me and you're her best friend. I need to know." Gwen was still trying to come to grips with the way their relationship ended. She silently praised her wisdom not to offer Keegan the ring.

"Listen Lerner, I don't know what number Clarion product you've been using but it's affecting your ability to communicate." Tara glanced towards the Atlanta Rhythm bench. With the formation of NWSL, the popularity of women's soccer was at an all time high mainly because of the woman standing across from her. Gwen had little girls excited about playing. Her sex appeal skyrocketed with the release of the flag poster. Yet, the hottest player in the league stood in the middle of the field worried about her image.

"Don't play games with me Tara. You and I both know who's in the photo." Gwen ran her hands over her face.

"What? You think Keegan sold them?" The goalie took an intimidating step towards the league superstar. The accusations the blonde was throwing out about her best friend were pissing her off. Tara lifted her head and looked Gwen firmly in the eyes and said "Keegan has much more important things on her plate than outing you as a lesbian." Tara looked at the bench and then to the clear blue sky above. "I don't get you. Keegan was dealing with some hard stuff. Not only was she not able to play in the Olympics, her girlfriend waits a whole month before having an all out orgy. You know one of them took a picture with your phone and sent it to her. Maybe you should be checking with them on who gave the rags the photos."

Gwen never gave the other women a second thought. She just wanted to get out of that room and on safer ground. "I didn't." She never knew the camera on her phone was used that night. She was trying to forget about Keegan.

"You don't deserve her. You never did. For once, this isn't about the almighty Gwen Lerner, soccer great! She'd never do anything to hurt you. For you to accuse her, makes me think she's did the right thing." With that the goalie began to walk towards her team's bench. Stopping abruptly she looked over at the woman placing blame on Keegan. "You know I never agreed with what she's done, but after this conversation, she was right to block you out of her life. You never

knew what you had." Tara turned and continued her trek to her bench and spoke to her teammates.

"I knew what I had and it was crap!" Gwen shouted at the retreating form. "Son of a bitch!" She muttered under her breath. She thought for sure Keegan was trying to make a fast buck off her growing popularity. Instead of getting the answer she wanted, she had just pissed off the only connection she had to Keegan. She watched as defiance set in Tara's shoulders as she spoke to her teammates. Her arm lifted and she pointed at Gwen, who still stood in the center of the circle. A release of moans and groans from the Atlanta team let Gwen know it was going to be ninety minutes of hell on the field. Gwen shook her head and went to the San Jose bench. Designated as the captain of the team, she took a long hard look at Coach Curtis as she approached the side line. She was tired of not knowing what happened. Curtis and Tara knew what was going on with Keegan. The only one out of the loop was Gwen.

Coach Curtis watched the argument at center field unfold. He paced the sidelines, his arms akimbo, debating whether or not to go out there. Lerner and Washington in a heated discussion before the game was not a good sign. When Lerner stomped across the grass to sit on the bench, he confronted her.

"Want to explain why you just pissed off one of the best goalies in the league?" Washington could be seen at the bench her arms in motion, her head bobbing up and down as a loud rumble slowly moved through the team and the entire team was staring at Gwen.

"I asked her a question about a mutual friend and some pictures in the press."

"Tell me you didn't think Keegan did that?" When she lowered her head, Curtis ran his fingers over his thick salt and pepper full mustache. "Wow Lerner you take the cake. How about you try to keep your pants on? You wouldn't have to worry about your picture showing up in the paper."

"Fuck off Curtis!" Gwen was on her feet ready to go toe to toe with the coach. What he had said was hitting too close to home.

"You're walking a fine line Gwen. I don't give a shit whose sweetheart you are. Got me. You walk around like you did nothing wrong."

"She broke up with me!" Gwen shot back. If the press was filming this, they would have some good footage for the highlights tonight. Curtis could feel his anger rising. There was so much blame he could put on Keegan but he knew her reason. Lerner was just pissed.

"You're right, she did." He slapped the clip board against his thigh. "Do you ever wonder why she did what she did?" Curtis let his words sink in. The blonde cocked her head to one side and focused on what he was telling her. "The night the pressure is over, you get a call from the one person who has never let you down. The one person who has been more family to you than those idiots you call blood relatives. And you let her down. Don't blame Keegan for your mess. Blame yourself because you created it." Curtis turned away because he knew he would crack and tell the blonde about Keegan. Gathering his composure, he turned back to his captain. "You'll play

today. Tomorrow you're doing every press junket we have for the next six weeks. Every single one of them and I don't care what time they are scheduled. And you're suspended for the Chicago game. I'd suspend you for this game, but I am going to enjoy watching the Rhythm kick your ass all over this field. Don't expect to score." He gestured towards Washington who was blocking shot after shot during pre-game warm ups.

The argument died on Gwen's lips. In the years she had played for the short stocky Italian man, he had never suspended a player for pre game antics. Of course none of his players had ever told him to fuck off. His words hit deep. She did blame Keegan for their relationship ending.

"Are you okay here?" Keegan asked Bobby as the distressing look came over Gwen's face. When he nodded, she looked at Gwen saying. "Come with me." Keegan stood up and held a hand out for Gwen. Keegan led her into the den where pictures of the important people in her life her covered every wall. "This is my room." Her blue eyes searched the walls, taking in her life and those who she cared deeply for. "If I feel sad or down, I come in here and think about the great things in my life."

"I know." Gwen had felt Keegan's decorative touch in the room. "I mean, I could tell. I came in here last night when you were sleeping." Gwen took the framed photo of them off the mantle and held on to it. "You still have this out like we are still together." Gwen wiped a tear away. "I'm so sorry for what happened. I was angry. I wanted to stop hurting and stop thinking about you. Instead I fucked up everything."

"I want happy memories around me Gwen. You are a happy memory." Keegan ran her finger over a photo of her and Meghan in the hospital. Her hair was gone and her face blotted from the chemo. Meghan had a book in her hand. Reading aloud became habit the family started when Keegan was going through pain. Meghan's voice reading sonnets and poems were like a security blanket, a feeling of warmth would fill her body when her youngest sister's rich timbred voice would fill her head with Dickenson, Emerson and Keats.

"There was more than one occasion I was completely out of it and I would talk to you as if you were sitting in the room. This morning, I wasn't sure if I was dreaming or if you were real." Keegan became a little melancholy, walking towards the mantle as she wrapped her arms around her waist. "When I got really bad, I'd jabber away. It drove everyone crazy. They weren't sure who I was talking to. I knew it was you. I talked to you all the time." The room seemed to shrink as Gwen moved closer. Not sure what to do, she wanted to reach out and hold Keegan in her arms. Yet a part of her didn't want to scare her. "I tried to hate you, but when you're not sure if you have another day left, there is no room for hate in your heart." Keegan turned placing a hand on Gwen's cheek wiping away the rolling tear. "I forgave you a long time ago."

"Why didn't you call me?" The pain Gwen felt left her voice trembling.

"I did once. It was late and it was after the donor drive in Atlanta. I left you a message after I talked with Shannon."

"I never got a message. Shannon? Shannon knew this entire time?" Gwen felt the surge of anger towards her best friend.

"I asked her not to say anything unless...unless I wasn't going to make it." Keegan felt the large tear fall as she sniffed and gathered her composure. "But I'm here and you're here so that's what counts."

"When did she find out?"

"The NWSL did a bone marrow donor drive. Carol matched the mother in Texas. Shannon was there along with most of the team."

"I had a press conference I couldn't get out of." Gwen recalled.

"Yeah, Curtis arranged to have that on the same day to get you out of the picture." Gwen went to argue her side. "I didn't want you to know. I didn't want you to feel sorry for me because I was sick."

"How could you think that?" Gwen was taken back by the fact Keegan thought so little of her. "Keegan, I would never look at you with pity. I wish I could have been with you to support you. Hold your hand, make you laugh or smile. I thought we were friends. God knows I tried not to get involved with you."

"Involved? Is that how you referred to our relationship?" Keegan laughed.

"Don't laugh. I blame it all on you. Do remember how crazy I drove myself because I didn't want to date you because you were on the team? I was the captain. I didn't want to like you. I wanted to keep our relationship strictly plutonic. And what did you do?" Gwen teased.

"Dated every woman you hated until you cracked." Keegan raised her eyebrow as she confessed. "I had to do something. It was stupid. Your self imposed rule about keeping work and personal separate."

"I resigned as captain."

"And the entire team reinstated you regardless of the relationship between us. Besides you were fooling anyone about how you felt. I felt bad for Abbott who had to deal with all your tyrants." They both were flooded with memories of their first season together on the National team. "I didn't think you wanted to know."

"Why did you think that?"

"No one could talk to you about me. I was scared, scared that you hated me."

"Angry, yes. Hate, no." Gwen stepped closer and pulled Keegan in her arms.

Gwen dipped her head to place a soft promising kiss on Keegan's forehead. Arms fell into the familiar position as Keegan held tighter to the blonde. Gwen's hands held tight on Keegan's waist, not wanting to waste a moment of contact. She breathed in Keegan's scent, getting lost in the memories they shared. She knew she would have to take things slow. Bobby was right, if she pushed Keegan would back away scared. This was about reconnecting with a very good friend. Gwen pulled back slightly, not wanting to over step her bounds. Still small touches passed between them as they held each other. She would have to tell Keegan a few things about her life before they could move forward.

"If you don't get back out here, I will not be responsible for the number of cannoli I eat." Bobby's booming voice carried across the house.

"Oh no you don't!!" Gwen shouted as she held on to Keegan's hand and led her back to the kitchen. The threesome sat at the kitchen table. Bobby spoke about his family coming down from Ontario to watch the games. Keegan laughed as Bobby told the story of his nephew selling his autograph at school, knowing Andy would be just as big a handful when he reached his teen years. When Keegan yawned, the couple began to get going. Gwen stood up first.

"We should let you get to bed. I'm still on west coast time so it's still early for me." Gwen placed her hand on Bobby's back. "Come on mister." She gave him a push. Bobby got the hint and stood. He towered over Keegan for a second then wrapped the smaller woman in a hug.

"It was great to meet you." Bobby said.

"I'm glad you stopped by. My dad is going to be so jealous." Keegan hugged him back. "It was great to meet you. If you need a tour guide, let me know." Keegan said as she stepped away.

"I will probably take you up on that. Gwen, let me go warm up the car." Bobby put on his coat and headed out the door.

"Okay. Umm, thanks for the coffee. Tomorrow, we are visiting the pediatric ward at Weston. Would it be alright if I stopped by and saw you at work?"

"Sure. I'm booked most of the day so I should be there." Keegan said as she walked with Gwen to front door.

"Good. Also, I think I may have some tickets to the game on Wednesday night. If Ashley and Danny want to come I'm sure I'll have a few tickets. At least I had to work for them earlier tonight."

"Devil child?"

"Exactly." Gwen hesitated for a moment. "Thanks for letting us barge in on you."

"You didn't do that besides, I'm a big fan. He's a great guy. It's good to know you have a close friend like that."

"He's a special guy." Gwen wasn't sure what to do as they stood at the front door. Bobby had brushed the snow of the Beamer. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yes. Stop by." Keegan smiled. "Give me a hug." Keegan pulled Gwen close wrapping her arms around Gwen's shoulders. They held tight to each other neither wanting to let go.

"Keegan." Gwen voice was soft and close to her ear. Keegan felt the chill tingle from her ear through her entire body. She quickly stepped away.

"Good night Gwen. I'll see you tomorrow." Keegan rubbed her hands along her forearms as she stood next to the door.

"Good night." Gwen nodded and stepped into the March evening. The air got colder and the wind bitterly bit at her cheeks. She settled into the car.

"Things go okay?" Bobby asked.

"Better than I ever expected." Gwen snuggled in the warmth of the car seat.

"And it feels great."

Chapter 12

The activity in the therapy room was at a morning high. Most of the patients were getting a session in just before the lunch hour. The Weston Physical Therapist group worked Monday through Friday, twelve hours a day. Keegan worked the split shift, some days she would open and others she would close. She started working at the PT lab during college and continued when the National team was off for the season. She tried to work some while battling with leukemia, but only wrote reports and advised interns.

Sitting at her workstation, Keegan held a pen against her cheek and stared blindly at the screen, her thoughts a thousand miles from work and the patient's chart she was reviewing. Tuesday was the start of her four ten-hour days and she knew it was going to be a long week. The snowstorm on Friday created a cause and effect on the patient load. A new crop of slips and falls, sprains and strains and the classic broken limb *let's learn to use crutches* to the patient log. Of course, she had her regulars, which she did like. Tony had been a regular until their friendship grew outside the lab walls.

"All the big wigs are heading towards the Peds Unit." Maurice said as he wheeled his office chair next to Keegan, peering over her shoulder at her monitor. He noticed her mouse hadn't moved in the last five minutes and the pen was forming a slight indentation on her cheek.

"What?" She responded, rubbing the area of her face where the blue ink dotted her skin.

"I said all the big wigs are heading to the Peds Unit. Word has it Bob Finch is here visiting the kids." He waited to see if he got her attention. "You do know who he is right?"

"Yes, hockey player, Motors." *And by the way Maurice he was at my house last night drinking coffee and told me he was gay.* Placing a hand on her forehead, Keegan closed out the screen she was viewing. There were no new exercises she wanted Mrs. Farmer to do at this time. The elderly woman was having a hard enough time adjusting to the walker. Breaking her hip at Christmas time had slowed her down for awhile. She started seeing Keegan the first week in February and they were progressing.

"That's right. You know about sports. How about Gwen Lerner, did you ever play against her during your day?"

"It's been a number of years, but yes I played on the same field with her a few times." *And a few times off the field.* At one time, Keegan had been a big name in the soccer arena, but she was rarely recognized outside of Weston. No one remembers the non-participant on the Olympic team, or who ran the third leg of a relay. They remember the big names that continue on. The Gwen Lerner's, Lisa Fernandez's of their sport. Shannon Abbott played on three Olympic teams just like Gwen, but she wasn't mobbed at the grocery store or in the airport. Funny how the public forgets the supporting staff but not the stars.

"Is she pretty?" Maurice's big expressive brown eyes looked at his co-worker. She had been distracted all morning. Something happened to her over the weekend and he wanted to know.

"God yes....she's absolutely beautiful." Keegan spewed out before she could check herself. Maurice's full belly laugh had her shaking her head with embarrassment.

"Tell me how you really feel!" He squeezed her shoulder and rolled back to his station his shoulders still shaking with laughter. "How did the ultra sound go?" Maurice glanced at her. He hoped *Dr. Get-a-clue* didn't crash the appointment. He worked with Dr. Micah a couple of times and she had always been very professional. It was something about Keegan that had the doctor forgetting her Hippocratic Oath.

Co-workers for the better part of three years, Maurice knew Keegan's sexual preference on her first day, she never hid it. When Brian, another therapist hit on her, she held nothing back. There were always patients who tried their best to get the pretty dark haired woman to accept their offers. Mothers and Grandmothers wanted to set her up with their offspring, claiming they were such a nice boy. Keegan snickered, a few times asking about any single female family members. Most accepted her preference, but there was always the one moron in the world, who wanted to change her mind because she hadn't been with the right man yet. She hadn't been with any man and she didn't care if she was missing anything.

Tony tried to ask her out, but she shot him down like a clay pigeon. From that day, they just seemed to bond. Keegan kept to herself most the time. Tony was the closest thing she had to a boy friend since her friend Michael in junior high school. She needed someone outside her family to be friends with.

"Do you still talk to her?"

"Who?"

"Gwen Lerner."

"A little. Why?" Keegan didn't want to give up to much information regarding Gwen. She wasn't even sure what last night meant. Were they going back down the road of a relationship or friendship? The whirlwind of Gwen and Bobby stopping at her house last night still had her heart pounding and her head spinning. Did she want to start a relationship with Gwen if she lived on the West Coast? They had tried that once and it was extremely difficult. If she were to break up with Bobby just before the playoffs, would she still move to Detroit? There was no way Keegan was pulling up roots to live in San Jose. The climate and ocean were the most appealing memories she had of living there. She missed her family. In Detroit, there was always someone close. Maybe too close as far as Ashley was concern.

"Keegan?"

"What?" Her annoyance with all of his questions showed in her voice. Maurice had been chattering about Gwen and Bobby but Keegan wasn't really paying attention.

"She just walked into the lab." Maurice stood so he could get a better look at the woman whose poster hung on the back of his son's bedroom door. Keegan was right. The woman was drop dead gorgeous. "And you're right."

"Jesus." Standing next to Maurice, they watched as Gwen talked with Kay the appointment scheduler at the front desk. The matronly woman gestured excitedly with her hands and pointed towards the back room that served as workstations for all the therapists. The large glass window ran the length of the room so the therapists could observe the patients working out on the floor. The open floor plan was normally loud and noisy but today, when Gwen walked into the open area, all activity stopped. The professional smile in place, she gave a few patients a polite wave and made her way to the office. Wearing a royal purple blouse opened to the swell of her breasts with a soft fawn colored jacket over it, the bottom of the jacket came to the top of the snug hip hugging matching slacks Brown leather heeled boots encased her feet making the size eights appear slender. Keegan looked over to Maurice's open-mouthed expression. "Are you trying to catch flies?" He immediately snapped his mouth closed.

"Hello." Gwen approached to office greeting the two occupants. "Am I interrupting?"

"Hi! No. We were... I was doing some research on options for strengthening a patient's hip area. It's for an older patient and some times the ones we usually use don't work well." Keegan felt as if she was rambling on. "I didn't think you'd stop by." Keegan got the same tingling in the swell of her stomach. It was either butterflies or the baby moving. She used to get this feeling when Gwen was around, before they started dating. She was in awe of the professional player and could never quite comprehend she was on the same team. Her heart was hammering against her chest and she felt a little lightheaded. Last night in the den, when Gwen pulled her into her arms and kissed her forehead, she felt as if she was twenty again and it was the first time they touched. They had shared hundreds of kisses, but last night was the first time in five years their physical

bond had been rekindled. Slowly, her hand floated upwards and touched her forehead as if she tried to see if there was some brand or mark Gwen left behind.

"I said I would. Hi Gwen Lerner." She extended her hand to Keegan's co-worker.

"Sorry, Maurice Rice. Maurice and I were just talking about you."

"Something good I hope." Gwen gave Keegan a quick wink and turned back towards the open floor and the patients. "What goes on out there?"

"This is where we have the patients go through the exercises. Each area has a station and with the therapist, they monitor progress. Either strength, flexibility or range of motion, depending on the injury." Maurice moved to Gwen side as he pointed to a patient and explained the exercise.

"Weren't you hurt a few years ago?"

"Yes my knee, but I did rehab at the training center in San Diego by myself with a PT. This seems more like a gym atmosphere."

"We try to make it fun so that the patients are comfortable instead of worried." Keegan chimed in. She stood close enough to Gwen to smell the jasmine scented perfume she wore and fragrance of flowers from her shampoo.

"Can I borrow you for a little bit?" She looked at the watch on her wrist. "I need to be at the Pediatric Unit in about twenty minutes if you have the time?"

"My next session starts in a half hour. So I can be borrowed." Keegan grabbed the white cardigan sweater off the back of her office chair and swung it over the maroon scrubs she was wearing.

"Page me if you need anything Maurice." Keegan fell into to step next to Gwen. Their arms brushed lightly as they went through the waiting area through the large glass doors and into the hallway.

"Now that I got you out of class, I don't know what to do with you?" Gwen confessed. She wanted to walk into Keegan's office shut the door and plant a passionate kiss on her luscious mouth. "This has been driving me crazy all night so I need to ask." Gwen surveyed her surroundings and slipped into the chapel. Taking Keegan by the hand, Gwen led her to a bench in the far corner of the place of worship. Sitting close enough that their body's touched from hip to knee, and shoulder to the hands that held each other. "What did we agree upon last night?"

"I'm not sure. I do know that we agreed to have a relationship, friendship." Her mood plummeted at the thought. Did she really want to just be friends with Gwen? She felt Gwen's fingers tighten on her hand.

"I think before we go any farther, you need to hear some information from me. Not the tabloids. I want a clean the slate with you. If you need to make a decision, I want you to know everything."

"Gwen, do you really have the time to do this?" Keegan tried to pull her hand away. "Is this the place?" Keegan looked at the empty chapel with lit candles.

"Yes, where else should I confess my sins that would be more appropriate?" Gwen gazed over towards the chapel's altar. Rows of blue and red candles sat burning in answer to someone's prayers. Never one to go to church or have a religious upbringing, Gwen found the chapel soothing. She felt at peace for the moment. Lacing her fingers with Keegan's she smiled at the strength she felt there. Small but mighty a reported dubbed her when she played for the National team. There were so many questions answered with the fact Keegan's illness prevented her from playing.

"We have time to talk." Keegan thought about how quickly the time they had was passing by. Soon, Gwen would be back on a plane and heading home.

"No, we don't. And I want to do this in person. Tonight I have this dinner at the country club with all the Motors staff. Wednesday I'm going to be in a VIP suite watching my "boyfriend" play hockey in front a large crowd." There was sadness in her voice that conveyed the frustration of being closeted. "I can get you tickets if you and some friends want to go."

"You're leaving at what time on Thursday?"

"Seven am." Gwen could feel the withdrawal from Keegan just like she felt in Miami. She knew the woman next to her was going to separate quickly.

"Oh." This was the reality. Gwen came back into her life like a flash in the pan quick, hot and bright. There would be no time tonight or tomorrow. "I guess you have your life to get back to." Keegan opened her hand and scooted away from Gwen.

"Keegan..." Gwen bit her bottom lip. "I have some events lined up. I'm heading to San Diego, New York, Boston and Atlanta. I may be back around Mother's Day."

"We're heading to Florida for Mother's Day. Mom and Dad are buying Ashley's mini van. Dr. Dev doesn't want me to fly. So we are driving down."

"You can't fly?" Gwen suddenly felt as if the invitation she was about to extend to Keegan was for naught. If Keegan couldn't fly to visit her parents, there was no way she would be able to fly to California.

"Umm, it's just a precaution. I just prefer not to." There were too many details and too little time to tell Gwen the entire story of her journey to be pregnant.

"Kee, I need to say some things, clear the air. First and I didn't know at the time, but I propositioned Meghan when I was in DC. It was a few years ago and she may have told you. At the time she was not very fond of me and let me know it." The need to be honest with Keegan was her number one priority. "There is also talk about Bobby and I having an open relationship. It's true to a point. He'd start to see someone and I'd start to see someone, it was easier if these

people were viewed as a couple and we could be seen double dating. I know it's a lame excuse, but there was never anyone that I really wanted to get involved with." She looked into the wide sky blue eyes staring expressively at her. This next one would leave her wondering if she should confess or not. It was a physical need that she wanted and a way to stay safe and out of the public. "On occasion, I've used services which specialize in being discreet. Do you understand what I'm saying? I'm not proud, but I'm not going to deny it."

"Like an escort service?" Keegan voice whispered out. How could Gwen need an escort service? She could have her choice of women and men if she wanted.

"Yes. I needed to protect myself. Sometimes cash goes a long way to the right people."

"And when was the last time you utilized this option?"

"Just before I left." Gwen hung her head. She wasn't proud but she didn't want to randomly pick a woman and take her home.

"How can you live your life like this? You're a fraud. You flaunt this perfect relationship with Bobby but its fake. Don't you understand that little girls look up to you as a role model? They want to be just like you. What about the kids who have different choices, you are saying it bad, hide how you feel because it's not accepted by main stream America."

"It's a financial issue."

"Anything else?" Keegan questioned still upset about Gwen's reason for being in the closet. She was in shock and having a hard time understanding why Gwen would hide her sexual preference. As Gwen rolled her shoulders and flexed her fingers, Keegan knew. She knew it had been recent. "Tell me Gwen."

"When the photos hit the tabloids, I had you and your family investigated."

"What? Why?" The words hissed out of Keegan's lips and she jerked her hand free from Gwen's.

"I thought you sold them. There was no proof. The investigator didn't find any connection." Gwen felt a bead of sweat run down her back between her shoulder blades. Connie suggested Keegan be investigated. Who else would have access to the photos? She even gave Gwen a name the investigator. "Nothing ever came of it."

"As if anything would, Jesus Gwen, why would you think I would do that?" Keegan sat back on the bench. She crossed her arms over her stomach. She felt as if she had just been punched in the gut.

"It was hard to understand. The photos were a few years old. I thought you may want to make some easy money. Connie thought the same thing."

"Your mother hated me. She never thought I was good enough for you."

"Bullshit, you were great for me." Gwen felt the anger. "Connie's just hard to accept things." Gwen reached for Keegan's hand. "I'm sorry. I am, really, really sorry."

"So if you have this guy investigating me, why didn't he let you know I was sick?" Keegan let Gwen hold on to her hand. When brown eyes shot up at her question, Keegan knew Gwen didn't get all the information she paid the investigator to find out.

"That's a very good question." Gwen agreed. "Maybe I should look into that." They sat lightly holding hands. Gwen wasn't sure what would come from the conversation, but she had to lay her cards out on the table. She was about to ask, when the pager at Keegan's hip vibrated. The PT looked at the read out and got her feet.

"I've got to go." Keegan whispered.

"Are you okay?" Gwen asked wanting to know what Keegan was thinking. The brunette's expression gave nothing away. When Keegan didn't answer her right away, Gwen stood up and lightly touched her arm. "Don't leave things like this Kee. Don't run from me again?" The comment got the fire burning in those blue eyes.

"I'm not running Gwen. I have to go back to work and I need to think about this conversation." Keegan stepped away and started out the chapel doors.

"Are you going to the game tomorrow?" When Keegan didn't answer and stepped into the hallway, Gwen followed. "Can you let me know if you are so I can get the tickets?" Gwen watched the small figure walking away. Suddenly, Keegan turned around and nodded.

Dazed from the conversation that had taken place in the chapel, Gwen made her way across the hospital campus to the office of Lilia Holiday. Ignoring the noticeable stares and looks she got as she followed the colored lines on the floor that mapped the direction to the Pediatric Wing of the hospital.

As she approached the office of the Public Relations representative, Bobby and Phil stepped into the corridor. With them was a thin unhealthy looking woman with her raven hair pulled tightly into a bun on the back of her head. A navy scarf tied tightly around her neck and hung tactfully over her shoulder. The cream colored suit and navy blouse hung loosely as the haughty anorexic figure turned on her three inch high heels to take in the Gwen as she approached.

A challenge gleamed in her lifeless brown eyes. Gwen felt an odd sense of fear course over her as the slender spokesperson shifted her dark gaze back to Bobby. She didn't know this woman from Eve but like a number of females she met over the years, they were ready to challenge her when Bobby came into the picture. They all thought they should be on his arm when the cameras were flashing. Connie was a pro in the act of stealing men away from other women. Miss Holiday wasn't even in the same league as her mother. After four years with Bobby she knew there were "want to be's" at every event. They all wanted to be on Bob Finch's arm. Once the playoffs came, they could be.

Keegan words rang true. She was a fraud. Hiding who she was because of the financial impact. Ellen came out, she was doing well or better. Rosie came out but seemed to cause most of her own negative press. Would it be career damaging or would it be beneficial. Greg Louganis wrote a book and came out on Oprah. She didn't need the announcement of who she was. She needed to make things right with the fiery woman who made her heart soar and her brain melt.

"Sorry I was running a little late." Gwen leaned on tippy toes to give Bobby a kiss on the lips. He eyed her sharply, knowing she had gone to see Keegan in the PT department. He knew the kiss and lean in was for effect and had grown used to it over the years. She didn't need to tippy toe in her heels but she did as she placed a possessive hand on his lapel. Something was wrong and the deep wounded look in her eyes told him all he needed to know at this time.

"Miss Lerner, this is Lilia Holiday." Phil's light touch on her arm brought her turning to study the hospital staff member. *Yes, there was that look of dismissal Connie often gave her competitors.* This woman was just like her mother.

"Please call me Gwen." She reminded Phil. "Ms. Holiday, what a wonderful opportunity for us to visit the children. Isn't that right, honey?" Bobby confirmed with a nod as she tucked her arm in the crook of his arm.

"They are looking forward to it. It is an honor to have a professional athlete such as Mr. Finch." The hospital representative gestured towards the elevator and the foursome shuffled towards the lift.

"Gwen is a pro athlete too, Ms. Holiday. In fact her two gold and silver medals outshine my silver any day of the week." A small smile turned upward at the corners of his mouth as the representative stiffened a bit.

"Why I forgot about that especially with all that, business with the poster." There it was, a jab to the ribcage. This woman was trying to focus negatively on Gwen. The woman squeezing the life out of his arm did not miss the silent chuckle that coursed through his body.

The decorative stainless steel doors of the elevator slid open as Gwen and Bobby entered. As arranged by the Motors and approved by Hannah, Detroit's newest hot couple were at Weston Memorial Hospital to visit the pediatric unit. The hospital spokesperson smiled politely at Bobby, who graciously let the women enter the six-foot by ten-foot cubby first. Pressing the button for the eighth floor, Lilia turned towards them after the number lit up. A smile plastered on her tight gaunt face, her lips covered in ruby red lipstick created a striking contrast against the pale skin of her face.

"The 8th Floor specializes in Children's Cancer treatment and research. Although we have a separate Pediatric Unit, the Oncology Pediatric Unit is laid out close to the main treatment center. We can't thank you enough for coming and visiting. Especially the children, we have a couple of big hockey fans." Lilia was thrilled at meeting Bob Finch, the Motors defensive player. The professional hockey player was handsome with his chiseled features and a soft twinkle in his green eyes. A day's growth of beard showed on his face and she couldn't help but wonder what it

would feel like against her skin. As to his choice in women, she could care less for Gwen Lerner, who in her opinion was the Britney Spears of women's soccer. America's Sweetheart...what a load of bullshit, some publicist was behind that poster. Some publicist made a career off that one deal... *Hey, I'm the sick bastard that wrapped the soccer player up in a flag and you suckers fell for it.*

Her rant after the photos of her with another woman appeared in the tabloids was sickening. The woman was a publicity hungry want to be who was trying her best to move to the broadcasting arena. Her retirement from the National Team was announced just before Bob was traded to Detroit. The lengths this woman would go to in order to hang on to her man. God only knows how she got her hooks into Bob Finch. Lilia set her brown eyes against the fawn colored outfit Gwen was wearing. She just couldn't understand what Bob Finch saw in this woman.

Lilia's gaze moved between the couple. Bobby's arm wrapped loosely around Gwen's waist as she leaned in and whispered in his ear. "This chick gives me the creeps."

"Totally agree." He tugged on her waist for a second letting his hand drop protectively to the small of her back.

The noise level on the Peds ward was deafening. There were groups of children lined along the hallway. Some had IV's in their arms attached to a wheel base bag holder. Gwen felt her heart breaking as she looked at the wide-eyed innocent children who were in the hospital for various reasons. Bobby, Phil and Lilia moved along the ward talking to child after child. Gwen hung back, looking into the rooms where curious children lifted their heads towards the doorway in hopes a visitor would stop by. When a nurse turned to find Gwen sticking her head into the room she was just finishing up in, she didn't know what to say.

"Hi. I'm Gwen Lerner..."

"I know who you are Ms. Lerner the kids are all excited today for your visit and Mr. Finch. Not all of them can get out of bed."

"Miss Evans." Gwen began reading the gold plated name tag over the woman's right breast. "Is it okay to say hello?"

"Sure, Lee Ann just had a chemo drip and is a little out of it. She's been excited all week to meet you. She's a soccer player." With a nod, Gwen understood that some of these children were battling for their lives. At such a young age, she couldn't imagine what it was like to think about dying.

Making her way farther into the room, Gwen noticed the numerous drawings and homemade cards lining Lee Ann's bed and wardrobe. Classmates and teammates had made cards wishing the young girl well. A great big sun shined down on two small girls bouncing a soccer ball between them. A banner above them hailed the Mustangs. *Must be her team.*

"Hi." Gwen said as she slipped into the hard plastic chair next to the bed. Sweet silver eyes studied her for a moment. "I just wanted to stop and say hello. If you are tired, I can let you rest." Eyes blinked a few times as the girl tried to chase a dream away.

"I play you." A soft voice filled the room. Turning her head in interest towards the girl she leaned closer to hear her comments. "When I'm on the field, I pretend I'm you shooting the winning goal against China."

"Really, that's good to hear. Do you make it?" Gwen often wondered if she would be where she was at if she missed the goal.

"Sometimes....not every time." Eyes fluttered shut as the young girl fought to stay awake. A smile was on her face but a light sheen of perspiration covered her forehead. Gwen wondered if it was from the treatment she just received. The nurse stepped back into the room and approached the sleeping patient.

"Will she remember I was here?"

"Hard to tell. Sometimes, the treatments make them forget what is happening. I've heard patients say they go to a different place where there is no pain." The nurse pulled up the girls blanket and touched her forehead. "She's a little warm."

"Can I leave her this?" Gwen dug in her bag to retrieve a photo from the day with the spawn child. She wanted for this little girl to know she had been at her side. Scribbling a quick note, Gwen set the photo on the table.

"I'm sure she'll appreciate it." The nurse looked at the small note and smile.

Lee Ann,

I hope you and the Mustangs have a great season. Look forward to you playing China.

Best Wishes,

Gwen Lerner

Gwen walked out of the room thinking about Keegan and what she had gone through. She wished she had known. She would have been at her side, supporting her, loving her. She quietly rubbed her eye as tears threatened to spill. She was tired of crying. She wanted to turn the clock back five years so she could be there for Keegan. Seeing Bobby ahead surrounded by a group of small children, she realized there was nothing she could change. She couldn't go back in time and change a thing. Even if she could, would she and Keegan make it as a couple? They were young and in love. That did not always translate into a solid relationship. She needed to fix the gap between them first. After that, she would see where they would land. Even if it meant friendship, she just wanted to have Keegan back in her life.

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~ America's Sweetheart ~

by Catherine Burke

America's Sweetheart

Author's Note: This is my first story posted on The Athenaeum. If all goes well there will be more to follow.

Category: Orig. Uber Alt.

Rating: R / NC-17

Summary: Retired Olympian Gwen Lerner lands in Detroit and comes face to face with her former girlfriend. Still questioning the reason they separated, Gwen wants answers and to get a friendship back. Keegan Garry left the Olympic team under a cloud of mystery and intrigue. Since then she has struggle to get her life back on track. Just when she thinks she's done that, Gwen shows up and derails. Can two women who once loved each other find way to heal their broken hearts and love again?

Comments/Disclaimer(s): This is an original story. The story and characters belong to me. They are not to be used or reproduced without my express written permission. This is my first time posting to the website. An early version of this story was posted but the current is much better :!

This story depicts a love/sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it.

Special Thanks: To J Brownell for ideas suggestions and getting me to actually post this. Also to Kerrie who was able to beta and get this story back to me a very short time. Living half way around the world does have its advantages. Time differences worked well for us.

This work has progressed over the years and is very close to my heart. The two characters helped me through a tough time in my life. I am posting in parts but will have the entire story finished soon. As I continue to work on it, I really need to have some feed back. You can reach me at burkcatherine@aol.com

Chapter 13

The conversation with Gwen haunted Keegan most of the afternoon. She couldn't come to grips as to why Gwen would hire a private investigator to check on her. Did Gwen think Keegan would try to make a profit off their relationship? Did Gwen turn into a person who no longer knew how to trust? When she knew Gwen, she trusted people, trusted Keegan with all of her secrets. Add on the information regarding using an escort service. Did she live so far in the closet she had to pay someone for intimacy? The Gwen she knew would never hide who she was. Were sponsors and endorsement deals so important to Gwen, she would deny who she was?

Keegan struggled to understand why someone would live their life based on others' opinions. She had gone through too much to ever hide who she was or who she loved. She had to give Gwen credit. She was very up front regarding her choices and let Kee know. The revelation about hiring a private investigator made Keegan's heart ache. No matter how desperate for money she might have been, selling private photographs to the tabloids would have never been an option. If an investigator did come to Detroit snooping around, why didn't Keegan know? It wasn't as if she would have known someone was investigating her. She was in the middle of treatment if her memory served her correctly. Her movements between the house and the hospital were not hard to track. Sarah took her to most of her appointments. There were a number of occasions where she was admitted to the hospital. Guessing the amount of money Gwen spent to keep her private life out of the papers, the investigator hadn't been worth a dime if they never informed Gwen of Keegan's illness.

Dropping her head, Keegan rubbed the tips of her fingers against her temples. She was tired of thinking of Gwen. Silently vowing to let the matter drop, Keegan opened a book of baby names. She looked through the lists, trying to determine the best name for a boy... Blake.... Ryan.... Stan. Bill was a William. Irish names ran through the family. Liam was another possibility. John was another good solid name. The small fire burning in the hearth warmed the den. She stopped reading and glanced towards the door when she thought she heard the door open and close. Looking at the clock, she knew Ash would be at home getting Andy ready for bed. The throw blanket wrapped around her lower body fell to the floor as she got to her feet. Not as swollen today, she shuffled her moccasin covered feet towards the front of the house. Just as she was about to turn the corner, a tall figure with curly hair the color of midnight stepped in front of her.

"Jesus Christ!" Keegan stepped back her hand over her racing heart. Standing in front of her dressed to the nines in an emerald colored jacket and skirt with a black silk blouse underneath was her youngest sister, Meghan. "What the hell Meghan? Are you trying to scare me to death?"

"Sorry, I didn't think you'd be home. I thought you were working." Meghan pulled the three-inch black leather heels from her feet. "God, I hate heels."

"Be thankful you are tall enough not to need to wear them all the time. What are you doing here? I didn't know you were coming home? Does Ash?"

"No, I wanted to surprise everyone and see you." Her blue eyes flashed down to the sweatshirt-covered belly. "You look normal."

"I am normal, you ass." Keegan hit her sister's arm. "What is going on Meg? Last week you were off somewhere." Keegan waved her hand in the air. Trying to keep track of where Meghan was took a full time secretary.

"Let me change and I'll bring you up to speed on what is going on. I can stay here right?"

"Of course, but your old room is a nursery. Use Ash's." Keegan watched her twenty six-year-old sister take her overnight bag and the wardrobe carrier up the stairs.

Opening the door to Ashley's old bedroom, Meg expected to see posters of the Backstreet Boys, Tom Cruise and Johnny Depp on the walls. Instead, Keegan had transformed the room into a suitable guestroom. There was no trace of Ashley's teenage angst remaining. Rose colored wallpaper decorated with a pattern of flowers and greenery covered the wall. A light gray carpet covered the floor where Meghan had spilled an entire bottle of red Gatorade to Sarah's horror. There were small touches of potpourri bowls on the dresser and side table, filling the room with the fresh scent of spring hyacinth. This room felt like more of a home than her tight fitting two-bedroom condo. This was her home.

Her interview with Highland Woods Country Club was nerve racking. Although she was employed by the same parent company, her name was well known in the Detroit area. The interview panel questioned her for hours regarding her game, her philosophy, her family, decisions she had made and the ever present why she did not attend Weston University like her famous sister. Her famous sister was the reason she did not attend Weston. Keegan was a legend at Weston. There was no way Meghan wanted to be compared to her sister. Accepting a scholarship from University of Maryland, she left some of Michigan's universities disappointed. She couldn't follow in Keegan and Ashley's footsteps and attend Weston. Besides, she needed to get away to find out who she really was.

Hanging up the wardrobe bag in the closet, Meghan unzipped it and pulled out the suit she would wear tomorrow for the second round with the club's board of directors. For once she just wished there was a female on the board of a country club, not the stuffy old senior citizens she had been dealing with for the past eight hours. A nice looking female wouldn't be bad either. Although Meghan appreciated her family and friend's attempts to find her a perfect match, she only had eyes for Danielle Martin. The strange turn of events at Christmas changed her relationship with her sister's business partner. A shared kiss under the mistletoe led to their current status of three months of avoidance. Danny stayed clear of her at any cost. She even bypassed a weekend skiing with the company because Meghan was going to be there. Meghan hoped a move home would prompt Danny to at least acknowledge the attraction. Her plan was to secure a new position in Michigan before spring, just as the golf season started. She should have told her family of her plans earlier, but she didn't want to disappoint them.

Smoothing wrinkles on the black brushed silk jacket and skirt, she wanted to make certain she didn't have to touch it up with an iron. The red blouse she brought to wear with it was a bit bold, but she wanted to be perceived as bold and making a statement. She wasn't going to let the club or its members rule her life. She would make no qualms about who she was. When Keegan announced she was pregnant, Meghan vividly remembered spitting the water she was sipping

across her kitchen while she talked with her sister. The once gloomy cloud that had hung over Keegan's life was looking as if it was finally dissipating.

When Andy was born, Meghan knew living out of state she would miss most of his firsts. First rollovers, crawls, steps, birthdays, she didn't want to have that again. She wanted to establish a relationship with her sisters and their families. Of course, Jason held Ash away for a number of years and now, her sister was living on her own and running a thriving business with Danny. Jealousy plagued Meghan regarding Ashley's relationship with Danny. It was another reason she left Michigan. She liked Danny, yet there was always this feeling that Danny was pining after Ashley. If Danny and Ashley's friendship developed into a romantic relationship, Meghan knew she would be devastated. Danny Martin was instantly adopted into the Garry clan when Sarah and Bill learned her own family had disowned her once they discovered Danny was a lesbian. The tall redhead's acceptance into the Garry clan was almost as quick as Gwen Lerner's. Gwen if Meghan ever caught that no good SOB she'd give the blonde exactly what she deserved. She knew Keegan could find happiness if she would let the Olympian go and get on with her life.

Throwing on a pair of jeans and a soft cinnamon colored Henley she quickly brushed her teeth and ran a comb through her wavy raven locks. Growing her hair long, it hung at her shoulders. Pulling her hair back was the easiest solution on the golf course and it didn't blow into the eyes when putting. She fixed her hair in the mirror than went downstairs in search of her sister.

When a more relaxed Meghan appeared at the bottom of the stairs dressed in white socks, jeans, and comfy shirt, she looked more like her sister than the imposter with the suit on. Every time Keegan saw her sister, she was usually dressed in a polo shirt and shorts looking like she just stepped off the course.

"That's the Meg Garry I know." Keegan sent the sable hair sibling a teasing smile. "Although you look very nice, you looked very stuffy."

"Stuffy? Thanks. You look great. If I didn't know, I wouldn't guess you were expecting. Nothing but a little bulge. How are you feeling?"

"Me?" Keegan went to the living room couch and sat on it. "I'm feeling good." The living room was rarely used when her parents owned the home. When Keegan took it over, she wanted to make sure every square inch of the house felt comfortable. The room no longer looked like a picture in a magazine. It was bright and cheery. The heavy window treatments were replaced with white sheer material to let the sun shine in. A light blue covered the walls combined with the light oatmeal colored carpet. A soft cushioned multi colored couch and love seat placed in the center of the room created a social area that had never been there before. A large oak coffee table matched the windowpanes and the baseboards that ran through the room. Family photos and little knick-knacks lined the end table and the television stand. A stereo unit was housed under the TV with a speakers system hanging in strategic places through out the house.

"This room feels different. The whole house feels different. Not bad but not mom and dad's."

"Well, I wanted to make it my home. And yet, I still want a piece of the memories we had growing up here. I always remember those horrible couches mom got from grandma."

"With the plastic on them and none of us even sat on them. They smelled."

"My point, we never used this room. I want to use every room in the house. So what's going on? And why didn't you let us know you were coming?" Keegan sat facing her little sister, their positions mirrored each other, a foot tucked under a leg and leaning against the blues, greens, grays, and browns of the couch.

"I've been interviewing. I'm getting to the final stages with Highland Woods. I didn't want to get anyone too excited over the idea until I was farther in the process."

"Oh my god, you're moving home." Keegan reached out and touched Meghan's face with the palm of her hand. "That would be the best thing in the world."

"So you wouldn't mind a roommate for a while if this all pans out?"

"Never. As long as you wash your own clothes." Keegan admonished her sister for acts she tried to pull off as a teenager. "Oh Meg, I hope you do well. Do mom or dad know?"

"I didn't tell anyone. I got in last night and stayed at a friend's." Meghan cleared her throat. She remembered dreaming about spending the night in Danny's bed wrapped in her arms. Instead, she woke up alone in the freezing weather. She would have much rather been engulfed in the warmth of a beautiful woman. "Not the best weather, but hell I can get use to it again. Do you think you can handle me three hundred and sixty five days a year? "

"You'll look for your own place right? And you have to take a vacation sometime during the year." Keegan let her thoughts wander for a moment. When she looked at the mirroring blue eyes, she smiled. "Without a doubt. I've wanted you home for a long time. I'm finally glad to know you are trying to come back to us."

"Enough about me. What about you and this one here?" Meghan leaned over and placed a hand on Keegan's belly. The baby gave a small kick as its mother's space was invaded. "Territorial one, isn't she?"

"It's not a she for sure." Keegan smiled knowing her sister recalled the dream she had when she was under treatment. "Oh, wait a second." Keegan scrambled to her feet and went in search of her purse. "I had a sonogram done yesterday. Gwen and Tony went with me." Keegan handed the black and white photo to her sister. She had stopped by the post office and sent one to her parents earlier.

"Did you say Gwen?" The hair on the back of her neck stood on end as her eyes locked with her sisters. "Please ...please tell me it's a different Gwen than the one in the paper?" Meghan saw the photo in a discarded newspaper at the club.

"Meg, you know that there is only one Gwen and blame it on Ashley and Danny they thought about setting up a reunion." The overwhelming feeling of Gwen being at her side was still hard to believe. Keegan craved the warmth of her hands and the reassurance of her strength. When Gwen leaned into her and kissed her on the forehead, Keegan felt as if she was the awe struck young woman again. The attraction for the blonde had not faded over the years of separation. Taking Gwen to the restaurant was a mistake, she should have taken her somewhere quiet and out of the way. Some place where they could talk and get to know each other again. Gwen remembering Momma Rosa's was a restaurant Keegan loved and brought her dessert. It was pretty obvious that Gwen was reaching out to patch their relationship.

Meghan got to her feet and went to the table where a number of unread papers sat. She knew Keegan's weakness for the blonde and didn't want her sister to fall into the web Gwen was weaving around her. Before the sickness, before the Olympics, Meghan loved her sister's girlfriend. She loved how they interacted, how they shared things, how they disagreed but found a common ground. She always wished one day she would be able to have a relationship like that. Then the walls came tumbling down when Keegan got sick and Gwen left her to go on to the glory of the Olympics and play her little games. This sick cover she had with Bob Finch just added to the lengths Gwen was willing to go to in order to have her cake and eat it too.

"Here! Metro cover." Meghan said flatly as she handed her sister Sunday's paper. Watching the reaction of Keegan's eyes, Meghan wanted her sister to realize Gwen and Bobby's relationship was a manipulation. A candid photo of a very private moment between them was published in the paper.

"I know she came to visit him. I also know about DC and you. Bob Finch was here last night and drank coffee." Meghan raised her eyebrow, wanting to give Ashley a good talking too. "We talked a little about them. Meghan, you don't know what I feel and I don't expect you to understand. I barely understand it myself. But she is in my heart, good bad and ugly. There will always be a part of me that will love her. Right now, we are just starting to talk." The scowling look she received from Meg made her repeat. "Talk Meg, that is all. You just don't understand what it's like to love someone with everything you have to give. I had that with Gwen at one time. Because we were stupid, we are separate. I don't want to lose any more time with the woman I considered my best friend and partner at one time." Keegan knew her sister was trying to protect her just as she had during her illness. "Don't hate her Meg. She means a lot to me and so do you."

"I don't want you hurt again Kee. After the Olympics, you were crushed. And not to say what she does is her choice, but she isn't an innocent woman being exposed to wilds of the world. She is a predator who picks out and uses women. She finds the weak ones, has her way and is gone without a scratch."

"Meghan, I don't know who she is now, but I know how I hurt her. I failed her. I turned her away when all she wanted to do was support me. I told her to go away. So if you think she isn't wounded, you're wrong. She is hurt. She's so worried about getting to close or hurt again." Keegan felt as if her energy was sapped out of her system. She wondered what Gwen was doing

at this moment. Just coming back into her life just less than seventy two hours ago, Keegan knew if Gwen hurt her this time, she would never recover.

#

In the middle of the room was a huge mound of food set out as appetizers. Shrimp and other former ocean creatures were piled high on top of ice as a dazzling blue lights cascaded down each side of the display. An ice sculpture of an engine was glistening under the ballroom lights. The condensation dripped off the work and was routed away from the cream cheese filled pasty puffs and Italian cheeses. The displayed of gluttony inspiring finger foods was enough to cause the Motors' trainer to scold the younger players about their diet. Gwen knew the temptation of gourmet treats and the pain of working them off the next day. Everything from mini quiche to raspberry tarts were sitting upon raised silver platters on a maroon colored tablecloth would have them running three extra miles in the morning. She didn't need the extra calories and had better things to do in the morning than put in extra road work, especially in the snow. Members of the Detroit Motors surrounded the ballroom. The players were starved. After a grueling practice, they attended the mandatory meeting at the country club with the promise of meal. So far the Highland Woods Country Club only provided them with appetizers. Gwen sipped the Virgin Bloody Mary as her amber eyes searched the room. The spouses who were comfortable in their roles, sat idly in the massive stuffy chairs close to the roaring fire in the intimate sitting area. The girlfriends battled for their men by their enhanced features, implants and latest trendy hairstyles. Some plastic surgeon was reaping the benefits of their work. Closer to the men, but not quite as close as the insecure newly weds. The players talked loudly and boasted about their latest victories, glancing occasionally at their other half to ensure peace at the house when they retreated for the night. Gwen turned to catch Bobby's multimillion dollar smile of as he walked across the room with a couple at his side. The smaller reddish haired man was familiar, but Gwen couldn't place him. At his side was a heavyset woman with blonde-brownish curly hair hanging to mid should in length. The laugh she let cackle loose filled the air and sent Bobby and the other man blushing. Gwen immediately felt the smile form on her face. Their laughter was contagious as the group headed towards her.

"Dear God, I thought this was a dinner?" Brady said as he swiped a piece of shrimp off the monstrosity of a pile. "Looks like Bubba Gump Shrimp Company landed here." Popping the pink crustacean in his mouth, he wiped his hand on his pants before he extended it to Gwen.

"Brady! Where are your manners?" The woman pulled his hand away before the goalie actually touched Gwen. "You can take the Neanderthal out of hockey, but you can't feed him shrimp." The sharp-witted woman responded. "Sorry for my husband, he only gets out a few times a year. Dana Sullivan." She extended her hand. "That beast is Brady. He's not a bad guy, forgets his manners. Not like your guy over here."

"Hi! I found them in the bar." Bobby tucked his arm around Gwen's waist. "I didn't mean to leave you stranded that long."

"Just remember pay backs." Gwen said as she turned her attention to her woman at her side. "It's pleasure to finally meet you, both of you. Bobby talks about you all the time. It's good to put

faces with names." The group made their way over to one of the eight top tables and staked their claim on seats.

"The food better be good and get here fast." Brady said as he took a sip of his drink. "Bob says you're here until Thursday morning. Any plans on another visit? This guy was getting awful homesick the last month or so. I really don't think it was for San Jose."

"You are right on that assumption." Bob touched his drink to his lips. "They could have told us what time the food is coming. Heck, we ran from practice to here just to eat."

"Men, all they think about is food and sex!" Dana waved her hand dismissing Bobby and Brady. "What about you Gwen are you staying in San Jose for awhile?"

"San Jose has always been my home. When I get back, I'm heading to southern California than I'm in Boston after that. Ending with trip to Atlanta some where around the beginning of May."

"Such a busy woman. My head is spinning already." The goalies wife sympathized with her. Her head was spinning but it wasn't from her schedule. The last few days had taken her through an emotional roller coaster. The peaks and valleys had her stomach turning, plus the additional pressure the Motors placed on her to appear at tonight's social gathering and yesterday's stunt with the Eisenmann child. She would never complain about the trip to the hospital. The Motors were using her presence to their advantage. If it got the teams name publicity, the Motors were happy. Gwen sighed. She loved the kids and it broke her heart to see them in the hospital. She wished she and Bobby could have gone to visit without all the media hype.

"Wait until you have kids." Dana continued her slew of questions to Gwen. "You do want kids don't you?"

"I haven't given it much thought until recently." She spoke the truth, knowing she was excited about Keegan having a baby. She recalled the feeling of elation she got on Monday morning standing next to her former girlfriend watching the monitor reflect the image of the baby growing in her womb. Later that afternoon, her interaction with the Eisenmann heir was making her question how a child could turn into a total bitch by age nine. There were just some people who should not multiply.

The kids in the hospital were wonderful. Each one of them battling some illness, they were excited by Bobby's presence. When Gwen read the younger children a story, she was fascinated by their reactions to The Diggist Dog. The parents sat and listened, watching their children find some joy in the presence of the athletes. Gwen wondered how hard it would be to watch your child suffer through an illness. She pondered over what it had been like for Keegan to be in the hospital for treatment. The tomato juice in her hand was not going to be enough. She needed to let out some steam and not think about Keegan for a few hours. She turned and winked at Bobby. She wanted to dance at a club and have some fun. Maybe he would be up for it.

#

The bass line was pumping, filling the air with that heavy beat which made your chest cavity vibrate. The Triangle Club or the Angle as it was referred to by the patrons was an exclusive club for the upper echelon of the community. Doctors, lawyers, politicians, and pro athletes who did not want to go to the main stream gay clubs. Angle guaranteed its patrons that their identities would be concealed. Bouncers heavily monitored the doors and membership was by recommendation or referral only. A former college roommate who frequented the establishment while in Detroit on business referred Bobby. The doorman greeted the couple with a large smile as he opened the door. Gwen swore she heard the man groan as Bobby passed by. "You just made his night." Gwen smiled as she took in the nightclub.

Gwen pulled Bobby on the dance floor, a large area that had recessed lights in the floor. The dynamic light show turned from fast flashing strobes to blinding neon blues, reds and greens. When the black light was turned on, Bobby's teeth turned a bright white as did Gwen's ribbed tank top. For a Tuesday, there were a number of patrons on the dance floor and spread throughout the bar and sitting areas. A section of tables cascaded between the bar and the dance floor. On the far side of the dance floor was a raised DJ booth with two people manning the controls.

They danced together to most of the fast songs, with a few breathers between sets. When they walked to the bar together, Gwen felt eyes on her. She knew someone was staring. She had had this feeling too many times before to be mistaken. She lifted her eyes to across the bar and saw the penetrating gaze of Dr. Carrie Micah staring at her. *This was not good.* Attached to the doctor's arm was the familiar figure of Sonja. *Really not good.* She tugged on Bobby's sleeve. When he leaned his ear closer to her mouth, she said. "We need to go." Bobby pulled back quickly as he wondered what had changed her mind so quickly. They had been there for close to two hours after the stuffy dinner at the country club and the montage of bullets Dana was sending them about children, houses, PTA and college entrance essays. He agreed with Gwen's need to blow off some steam and get out of the breeder world for awhile.

"Come on G..." He started to admonish her attitude and party pooper life style. "What's wrong?" His eyes landed on Sonja and the large bull doggish woman next to her. "Oh I see." He sensed her uncomfortable state as she spayed out her fingers on the bar.

"No you don't." She corrected him. Seeing Sonja didn't bother her. The woman was good at what she did and had an exclusive clientele. Having Keegan's pseudo girlfriend slash OBGYN throwing daggers her way from across the bar did. "The blonde is Keegan's doctor. The one she is dating or whatever." Gwen threw her hand up in a dismissive manner. Keegan had never said if she was seeing anyone or not. If she told Gwen it was none of her business one more time, Gwen was going to make it her business. Tired of the guessing game Keegan was putting her through.

"You're kidding." Bobby let his eyes gaze over the doctor. She wasn't harsh on the eyes, but there was an underlying storminess her body held. The rigid hold of her head, the hard look in her eyes, this woman's body language expressed anger. "I don't like her." His matter of fact tone brought Gwen's attention back to him.

"You don't know her." Gwen corrected.

"I don't need or want to." Bobby set his drink on the inside lip of the bar. "Let's go." Bobby placed a protective arm around Gwen's waist as they moved towards the club's exit. Just as they were about to hit the door, a clammy hand dropped down on Gwen's shoulder.

"Lerner, didn't think I'd see you here, at least not with Mr. Finch." Dr. Micah's hand slid over Gwen's shoulder to linger a little longer than necessary on her back. "I'm glad to see he is accepting of your choices."

"Carrie. I'd say it was nice to see you but it's not. Come on let's go." Gwen cringed from the feeling of the paw the doctor placed on her. As soon as they cleared the door, Gwen wrapped her arms around her body. The cold March air whipped through the heavy corduroy shirt she wore. She didn't want to bring a coat into the club. Bobby shivered as he opened the door of the BMW for her.

"That was interesting." Bobby said as he slid into the driver's seat.

"You don't even know the half of it. She's going to tell Keegan I was there and make up something so Keegan ends up hating me again..more." Pulling her coat from the back seat, she pulled it on trying to ward off the coldness.

"Gwen, you did nothing wrong. If Keegan doesn't see that, maybe she is not the person for you." He held up his hand to silence the argument that was about to spew from her. "Listen to me. You haven't seen her in years. When you finally do, you find out she was ill. So sick she almost died. I think you're feeling guilty about not being there for her. Guilty for getting on with your life."

"I don't..."

"Yes, you do. If she doesn't trust you, than I don't think this is a healthy relationship for you to be in."

"I'm just trying to be friends with her."

"Who are you trying to kid? Me or yourself?"

#

The smell of sweat mixed with deodorant and disinfectant soap hit Keegan's senses as soon as she walked into the exercise room. Her stomach turned and flopped as if she were on board a boat on the choppy waters. Being pregnant put her senses into hyper drive. If the smell was Momma Rosa's cooking versus the morning work out of the Daves, she might be able to keep from getting sick. Her yoga session on Wednesday mornings followed the work out of Dr. David Vincent and his lover, Dr. Dave Ford. She worked at Weston with Dr. Vincent while Dr. Ford ran his own private dental practice across town.

Wiping off his brow with a fluffy white towel around his neck was her friend and yoga guru, Jonathan Sparks, or Sparky, his nick name from the staff of O'Connor's Gym. Keegan took up

mediation and the use of yoga during her illness. When her body was too weak to take on a vigorous workout, she found a substitute.

"Good Morning!" Jonathan waved to her as she walked across the matted floor. "My gosh you are glowing..beaming." He wrapped her up in a hug careful not to get any sweat on her. "You look almost a bright as the Daves when they walked in here this morning."

"Which one of them is pregnant?" She got a vision of Ford with a protruding belly.

"Neither, but Ford looked like he was about to have kittens. I guess they were at the Angle last night and ran into our newest hockey star." He stretched his arms over his head to loosen the joints. "With the wife in tow." Jonathan's smile brightened. "Gay men all over Detroit are rejoicing this morning. Can you imagine..." He stopped and looked at his client. "Sorry I'm as bad as Bingo night at the church hall." He didn't like to gossip but the thought of Bob Finch being gay fulfilled his every fantasy.

"No, I find this very interesting." Keegan rolled out her yoga mat as she sat on the bright orange colored padding. "Were they interacting with anyone?"

"From what Dave said." He sat down next to her on his own mat. "They stayed to themselves. Although they danced together. They didn't make a public display of affection." Placing his legs straight out, Jonathan bent at the waist as he touched his toes.

"Show off." Keegan muttered as she continued to stretch out her muscles. She could touch her toes still but choose not too. She started doing yoga when she couldn't do the over exerting exercise regiment she had been use too. "So maybe they went there to get out of the lime light. God knows the press and media have been swarming around them since she got here."

"America's Sweetheart...she is drop dead gorgeous. Even you have to admit that." He noticed the smile brighten her face. He had been her yoga instructor for a couple of years. Keegan never gave indication she found anyone attractive or even pursued an interest. Class after class, a woman would try to woo the Physical Therapist out on a date. Keegan turned them down with a smile and extended an invitation to be friends. They never really talked about her past or her relationships. He knew she had survived cancer, was close to her family and had a great work ethic. When she told him she was expecting, Jonathan wanted to have a baby shower at the gym for her. Instead, in Keegan fashion, she didn't want the attention and was more interested in private sessions so she would make certain the baby was not harmed. So every Wednesday morning after the Daves, he reserved an hour of time for her.

"She's hot." There was a slight blush creeping up her cheeks.

"Well it's about time you acknowledged some one was attractive." He smiled at her and positioned her shoulders into a straight line. Not that she was that far out of alignment, he wanted to make sure she wasn't slouching and her lung capacity was at its highest potential. "I was starting to worry about you. Vince said that the big dyke OBGYN was trying to hit on her."

Jonathan chuckled. "She didn't have a chance Dave said. After they left Dr. Dyke just fumed and slammed a couple of shots."

"Dr. Micah?" Keegan felt the familiar flip of her stomach as if this kid was doing cartwheels. "That's interesting." She needed to relax and let go of all the outside interference. Let her stress disappear. If Carrie saw Gwen last night, odds were favorable that she would try to create some type of friction between them. "So they weren't with anyone else? Just like a couple dancing and having a night out?"

"That's what the Daves said." He shrugged his shoulders. "Okay, start with relaxing and watch your breathing. I can feel the tension oozing out of you." Jonathan let a long deep breath out as he encouraged Keegan to do the same. The tension in the air eased. As he let his limbs turn to jelly.

"Jon, whatcha doing tonight?" Keegan had that playful gleam in her eye. The look was rare but he had witnessed it before.

"Going to Rock's to watch the game. Why?" Rock's, the armpit of the gay bars in the area but it was close to his house and he didn't have the platform cable station carrying the game.

"Would you like to go to it instead?" Keegan watched his composer of Yoga instructor slip to that of a young child on Christmas morning.

"Are you kidding?" The game was sold out and the team was on a hot streak. Their win over Cleveland on Saturday was still running through his head.

"A friend of a friend knows someone at the Motors and offered me tickets for tonight. It's going to be the girls." The "girls" was reference to Danny and Ashley because they never seemed to doing anything without the other. "My sister, Meg is in town as a surprise and Tony. You remember him?"

"God yes I'll go. And Tony ...hunky Tony with the long hair and."

"Ssssh.." Keegan scolded when he started to describe her best friend. "I'm mediating."

"Omm....omm" The chant filled the training center as the tension released from her body.

#

"Okay. Are you sure?" He paused a moment listening to the voice at the other end. "I'll tell her. Thanks." Bobby smiled as he flipped closed his cell phone. The smile on his face was priceless. "Guess who that was?"

"Your mother?"

"No, your girlfriend. She asked if it was okay to get six tickets for the game tonight. I don't what strings you pulled with Phil but I'm glad you're with me."

"Is she coming?"

"That my dear is all in your hands." He laughed as he turned the wheel towards the house he was scheduled to view.

Chapter 14

A sea of silver with splashes of navy and emerald floated from the parking lots, through the tunnels and into the sports complex. Public transportation brought thousands of excited fans to the home of the Motors hockey team. Packed like sardines, fans tried to create space, vying to find their seats. The image of Mikey Motor, mascot for the team was everywhere. The bright silver V-8 engine adorned sweatshirts and childrens' faces. Overzealous fans chanted for victory as they tromped through the massive corridors on their way towards center ice. Parents held tight to their children's hand, trying their best not to lose them in the masses while still trying to avoid the expensive souvenir shops and overpriced concessions stands. Who in their right mind would purchase a hot dog for \$8.50? The prices the public paid to be at a sporting event. The world of professional sports carried a high price tag. Outside the gates, standing in the *will call* alcove, Keegan and Meghan waited. Keegan's teeth chattered like castanets every time the outside door opened. Since most of her clothes were tight, she resorted to borrowing a pair of jeans from Danny. They were a bit long, which had her wearing a pair of Timberland boots with a hardy heel. Under her winter jacket she had on a Motors' jersey with Brady Sullivan's number on it with a white turtleneck under it. Jonathan had given her the jersey as a gift for Christmas. She never thought she would actually wear it to a game. She shuffled her work shift with Maurice to give her a little more time between work and the game. Meg was at the house by the time she got home and was confident about her interview. Another gust of winter air was released through the concourse causing Meghan to groan.

"Damn. Is it always this cold in here?" Meghan complained dressed in a turtleneck, sweater, jeans and a heavy barn coat huddled in the corner where the outside air still reached her. "I'm going to have to get a new wardrobe."

"You'll get used to it again. It's in your blood." A big smile formed on her face as she thought of her youngest sister moving home. "There are the boys." Keegan commented as she waved frantically at Jonathan and Tony as the pair walked towards them. "Hey! Did you guys ride together?"

"I took the People Mover and saw this guy. I'm Jonathan." He extended his hand to Keegan's very cold looking companion. Eyeing the huddled figure, he decided that she definitively not a date. He chuckled at the defensive position of her arms or was she freezing? He could see the similarity between Keegan and the dark haired woman huddled in the corner. "The younger sibling?"

"Meg Garry." Meg extended her hand to Keegan's friend. He was very attractive. His chin was covered with goatee a little darker than the brown hair that covered his head, cut in a short attractive style that set off his bright blue eyes. In sharp contrast was the mongrel looking Tony with his John the Baptist look in full swing. Her sister really knew how to attract the men. Now she just needed to put that effort towards the women. "Nice to meet you." Meghan greeted the trainer. "Tony, I see Lent has hit your congregation. I'd really like to see you without all this hair." Meg pulled a lock that hug over his shoulder.

"I'm not a preacher and you should visit in the summer." He said as he wrapped her up and rubbed her face with his whiskers. "What kind of a job is a golf instructor any way?"

"One that pays the bills and gives me ungodly tan lines." She jabbed him in the ribs slightly until he loosened his hold. "Jealous?"

"Of course." He said as he scraped his stubble against the smooth grain of Meg's cheek again.

"Is that a ritual greeting you have or am I missing something?" Gwen asked, standing to the side behind the velvet ropes with a security guard at her side. Tony's head lifted as he hit Gwen with a laser of a smile. He felt Meghan tense as soon as she saw her sister's former girlfriend.

"Ease down tiger. She's important to your sister." Tony murmured in Meg's hair. Kissing her lightly, he let his arms drop and approached the soccer player. "I can give you one if you want?" Tony called to Gwen. He approached her with arms extended and pulled the blonde off her feet and into a bear hug rubbing his beard on her face. Gwen squirmed and laughed.

"Stop..stop it." Gwen called out as she playfully hit him before he set her back on her feet. She took in the party standing in the lobby area. The rangy looking man with the goatee stood close to Keegan. He was dressed impeccably, with a Motors T-shirt over an oxford and fashionable pair of jeans with a heavy leather belt. He looked a little like one of the guys from Queer Eye, the dark haired one who gave men grooming tips. Meghan's appearance was quite a surprise. Gwen didn't realize she would be in town visiting. "You guys ready?" Gwen felt the heavy stare of Meghan on her. When the dynamic duo of Ashley and Danny were escorted to the loge, they didn't mention Meg visiting. The business partners asked to come before the crowds so they could see some of the pre game warm up. Andy was being babysat by a neighbor.

"There's two more." Keegan searched the growing crowd for Ashley and Danny. She tried to avoid looking directly at Gwen, but couldn't help notice the outfit she was wearing. The woman knew how to dress, wearing a black dress jacket over a cranberry colored blouse that was open to reveal the same amount of cleavage as yesterday's outfit. Brush black slacks with a low waist and silver tipped black belt. Silver accents on her ears, her neckline, and wrist. Black leather boots with a full heel finished up her outfit. Keegan felt her heart begin to pound and her body temperature rise. Southern regions which had been dormant for a long period of time were raging. There had been an immediate attraction to the blonde when she joined the national team, even before she made the team. She needed to get her emotions under control. Gwen was a beautiful sexy woman, with a great body. No one would fault her for reacting to that. They were two different people with a history of a relationship. She needed to move forward, not backward.

She would not open her life to Gwen so she could be hurt. Gwen would be gone in the morning and Keegan could go back to the way her life was.

"They're already here and in rare form." Gwen assured her as she took in the scowl on Meghan's face. The other man with the ultra bright smile was looked as if he would jump up and down like a Jack Russell. "If you've got the tickets, come on I'll take you up."

With tickets scanned, they were lead into the inner workings of the arena. Keegan had been to games before. This was the first time she had to take a private elevator and be escorted to a suite. She didn't tell Meghan Gwen extended the invitation. She didn't have the energy to argue with her sister. In fact, she hadn't wanted to deal with the situation, so she took the easy way out by calling Bobby instead of Gwen. Inviting Jonathan was a good choice. She knew he was a big hockey fan and would appreciate the invitation. The expression on his face when Gwen called out to Tony was priceless.

"I didn't know you knew Gwen Lerner." Jonathan whispered in her ear as they stepped into the elevator. "Wow...thanks."

"Just have fun Jonathan. I think this is going to be better than Rocks."

"I'm sure it is." The personal trainer's smile lit up his face. He was definitely going to have one up on the Daves. Now if he could meet Mr. Gwen Lerner his fantasies would come true.

Standing next to Tony, Gwen could feel her heart beating against her chest as it echoed in her ears. Her attraction to Keegan had always been there. She was yearning to be in her presence. When they met while on the National Team, Gwen fought the feelings she had towards the fiery player from Michigan. Her number one rule was never ever get involved with a teammate. So instead of acting on it, she fought against it, letting Keegan tease her mercifully with a string of women she dated. Tony gave her a comforting smile. She hadn't seen nor spoken to Keegan since the meeting in the chapel. Bundled up in a winter coat with a faux fur collar, Gwen thought she looked gorgeous. Her hair was pulled back in a long thick ponytail. Gwen wanted to feel the soft long locks with her fingers. A light coating of makeup gave her a classic look. Her blue eyes widened at the comment of the slim man standing next to her. Gwen spayed her fingers nervously, feeling Meghan's glaring blue eyes. She needed to clear the air with the youngest Garry, otherwise there was no moving forward. She wanted to put the past behind them but it seemed at every turn there was roadblock or a detour.

"I heard she bites, but I know her shots are current." Tony whispered in the soccer player's ear as the elevator door opened.

"Ha! Ha! Remind me to call you when I need backup."

"Oh no, you're on your own. I only take a small portion of responsibility for the actions of the eldest. Not the rest of them." As they passed through the doorway to the loge, Ashley came into sight. "My point made." Tony pointed to the awful outfit worn by Ashley. She was decked out in head to toe Motors gear, from the silver pompoms in her hands to the green and blue ribbons

braided in her hair. Small silver engines hung from each ear. On one of her cheeks, she had Bobby's number 44 painted with silver glitter, the other was decorated with a green goalie mask. "Who let you out of the house?" Tony's voice boomed as the women stood at the top step of the seating area.

"Look what the cat drug in!" Danny said as she turned to the group entering the loge, her heart leaping into her throat as Meghan came in. Danny was usually prepared to see the youngest of the Garry clan. Tonight, she was totally caught off guard. Her chest pounded, she could feel the blood pouring into her loins. If she had known Meghan was coming, she would've canceled. After three months, she was still not ready to face her. Normally, she held her libido in check, but since Christmas, that wasn't the case. Keeping her feelings for Meghan in check had been a challenge for the past couple of years. The attraction to the raven haired woman hit her like a freight train the first time they met, yet the need to hold tight to the relationship with the Garry family outweighed any attraction. On her own since she was nineteen, Danny's strict Irish Catholic family disowned her. Since the Garrys took her in, she never wanted to be without the support of a loving family again

The last time she saw Meg was over the Christmas holiday and the kiss at Ashley's house. Because of a business dinner Ashley had with a client, she had asked Danny to drop Andy off for Meghan to watch until she got home, Andy, the innocent little boy, tore through the house and into Meghan's arms. Danny followed cautiously behind, dropping his book bag in the foyer. Andy mumbled something and Meg kissed him. Stepping close to Meg, Danny felt the heat rise in her cheeks as blue eyes danced over her face and down her body.

"Kiss! Kiss!" The cry was from the small boy jumping up and down at their feet, pointing at the archway above. Danny looked at the bouquet of mistletoe hanging above their heads. Her gray eyes must have widened as she heard Meg chuckle.

"It's a tradition." Meg's voice was a soft whisper.

"Kiss!" The scream of the toddler filled the air. Danny looked at the curly haired boy who smiled at her with a crooked smile. She lifted her face to Meghan's. Taking in the expressive blue eyes, Danny ran a finger under Meg's chin and tilted upward.

"It's a tradition." Closing her eyes, she lowered her lips to Meg's. Engulfed in the sweet softness of Meg's lips, she touched her hands to her waist and pulled her closer. Unsure of who sighed first, Danny felt Meg's mouth open under her caresses and their kiss deepened. She had dreamed of this moment many times. Meghan's arms wrapped around her neck and held on tight. At this moment, she didn't care about keeping her feeling inside. *Carpe diem*, she seized the moment and let Meghan know how much she wanted her. Later, she would regret her actions. This emotional connection with Meg had her heart pounding, her stomach tingling and her brain trying to memorize every moment. They conveyed their attraction not through words but through touches. Their bodies pressed closer. Meghan's fingers pulled lightly through Danny's hair. Danny listened to the message Meghan was sending her and it was very clear, the attraction was mutual. Teasing and touching continued as the women went back and forth with their caresses.

Listening to the small voice in her head, Danny eased back as the kiss came to the end in the form of small lingering touches.

"Danny," Meghan's voice broke the silence. Danny pressed a finger to her lips preventing any words to be passed between them. Instead, Danny held tight savoring the feel of Meghan's body pressed tight against her. She let her eyes linger in the sea of blue staring back at her questioning. Danny knew she could not let this happen again. She wouldn't be able to survive losing her adoptive family. Danny let her hands fall away from Meg's and stepped away from the warmth that beckoned her heart.

"I'm sorry." Danny murmured as she fled the house leaving an astounded Meghan speechless. Now, ten feet from her, Danny watched as blazing blue eyes took in her figure from head to toe. Heat rose to her face as Danny cleared her throat and threw an unappreciative look Meghan's way.

"MEG!" Ashley's scream caused every canine within hearing distance of the arena to howl. "Oh my God!" The sibling engulfed her sister with tears welling in her eyes. "When did you get in? Why didn't you tell me?" Ashley pulled her younger sister into her arms and squeezed.

"It's called a surprise. You should've seen Keegan last night. I scared her to death!" The words were cut off immediately as both siblings turned to look at their older sister. The room became deathly silent.

"Better!! Remember, no more cancer." Keegan filled the awkward air. She shrugged out of her jacket with some help from Jonathan. "I didn't want to be a buzz kill." Keegan mumbled under her breath.

"It's hard for them. They almost lost you." Jonathan ran a soothing hand down her back for comfort. "I think you're healthier than both of them. But Meg's got a nice tan." His smile twinkled.

"Job requirement. Ask her to show you her tan lines." Turning to take in the loge, she smiled at the fully stocked refrigerator and bar. Spread across the counter was an array of food from chicken wings to a veggie platter. The focal point of the room was two large open picture windows where center ice could be viewed. In front of one of the windows were four stools at a bar overlooking the additional twelve seats cascaded between two rows outside the suite. They were in a private box with enough seats for sixteen people on the second level of the area. The zamboni machine circled the ice, smoothing the surface to a glassy finish. Fans filled majority of the seats as the teams began to make their way back to the benches. Television monitors hooked up to the internal cable system were tuned to the announcer's booth where the Motors play by play person, Huey Carmichael and Sean Mullins droned on and on about the first weekday sell out.

"This sure beats Rock's. How do you know Gwen?" Jonathan asked as he put her coat in the closet near the door.

"We played together awhile back. I'll introduce you." Keegan wished she had a mirror or could discreetly make her way to the bathroom. The winter weather did a number on her hair. Smoothing back the brown locks with one hand, she placed her arm through Jonathan's as she led him towards the couple engaged in a discussion. She checked on Tony, he was at Danny's side teasing the redhead about something in the crowd and she looked a bit frazzled.

"What's up with Danny? She looks like she just got caught with her hand in the cookie jar." Jonathan whispered to his client.

"Meghan, but it's a long story." Keegan commented as she searched for their hostess.

Gwen stood near the bar, speaking to the Motors' Public Relations representative. Phil's clean-shaven head reflected the recessed lights, causing a slight glare off his head. Like most of the Motors management, he was dressed in a crisp black suit and bright green shirt with a Motors button on the lapel. Her week dealing with the front office of the hockey team had been very trying, unscheduled events and press junkets were not what she had bargained for. Phil had just informed her of her payment for the loge, an interview during intermission after the first period.

"You understand our position on this Gwen?" The deep voice thundered in her head. Phil Novak and the Motors had pulled another fast one on her. This time at least it wasn't a spoiled child. Instead it was the adoring public of Detroit, all of Bobby's new fans. "You know you are quite a draw with the fans as well. Our latest demographic shows young women are developing an interest in the Motors and you have eighty-five percent name recognition in the Detroit area."

"That's not in the agreement Phil." Gwen ran her hand through her hair. She hadn't planned on appearing on the air tonight. She wanted a quiet night at the game with her friends. At least in San Jose they treated her with respect. The Motors seemed to be exploiting her. Just as the thought entered her head, the announcing team came on screen.

"We understand that Gwen Lerner is joining our group at the intermission. I can't wait for that interview. Our camera operators have been searching the arena trying to sneak a shot in of the Olympic soccer player. There are even a few signs in the rink proposing marriage to her."

Gwen shot the sweating man a burning look that made him understand that she was not happy about the way this was being handled. The television picture flashed to an adorable little boy holding a sign saying "Gwen marry ME!" As Phil took out his handkerchief to dab the moisture off his brow, he mumbled an off the cuff apology to her.

Gwen's uncomplimentary reply was interrupted by Keegan and Jonathan's presence. Instead, Gwen flashed a cordial smile and softened her words. "You need to speak to my agent." She turned her attention to Keegan and her friend.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Keegan said as she sensed the tension between the pair. The black man flashed a big toothy smile. "I just wanted to thank you for the invitation and introduce Jonathan Sparks."

"Phil Novak, Motors Public Relations Manager." The charismatic man interrupted the conversation by extending his hand to Keegan and then to Jonathan. "We are happy to have any associates of Bob's. We are expecting big things out of him this season. It would be best if his friends and family are close to support him." The man's gaze lingered a little longer than necessary on Keegan's face. "Do I know you?"

"No, I think I would remember." Keegan shuffled her feet. "Keegan Garry."

"You're the appendix player from the Greece games. Every reporter in the world was trying to get an interview with you. I got call after call from contacts trying to get a statement from you. You, my dear were not very co-operative."

"Never have been." Keegan responded automatically. She had dodged call after call from every reporter and sports representative.

"Nice to finally put a name to a face. I forgot that you were teammates for a couple of years. Good to see you have friends in town Gwen." Phil commented as he took in the women. "We'll expect you between the first and second period. I'll send a runner for you so you don't get lost." Phil turned to leave when her photo flashed again on the television screen.

Keegan, sensing the conversation was one Gwen didn't want to extend any further than necessary, excused herself. She did not want to talk to the PR manager any longer than necessary. "Come talk when you're free." Keegan nudged Jonathan towards the outside seats.

"If this little inconvenience happens again, when the press asks why I'm not moving to Detroit, I'm going to refer them to the Motors management staff. Am I understood, Mr. Novak?" Phil tugged at his tie trying to get a little more air and nodded leaving the loge. "Fuck." Gwen said as she hung her head. This was not what she bargained for. Tonight was the last night she would have to deal with the Motors front office. Her life was complicated enough. She didn't need the management of the Motors pulling political favors. She stepping into the suite's bathroom she locking the door quietly behind her. Turning on the water taps, she let the stream run for a moment before taking a towel and wetting it. Lifting her head to stare at her reflection in the mirror, she was tired of the games, of the façade she was part of. Her eyes reflected the quiet exterior she wanted to present.

Inside, she was scrambling to figure out how to break down her opponent's defenses without getting burned. *Get your head in the game.* The reunion with Keegan had her struggling. Even Meg's appearance had her on the defensive. And who was the guy with Keegan tonight? It didn't seem to bother Tony that Keegan showed up with another man. He was a cutie. About the same height as Gwen, he appeared to be fit, not skinny and not overly muscular, very sturdy. She needed to have a heart to heart with Keegan. After her confession in the chapel, she sensed she was loosing ground quickly. If she took a chance and told her how she felt, or if she came on too strong, she may never get another chance. Feeling as if she was robbed of a piece of their relationship, Gwen wanted to know the entire reason behind the breakup. She could not be held accountable for her actions. She didn't have an obligation to Keegan once they broke up. As a single woman, she could do as she pleased. If she didn't know, how was she supposed to act? She

did what Keegan asked of her. She left to go play soccer, to win the gold and sleep with whomever she pleased.

The knock on the door brought Gwen out of her train of thought. "Just a moment." Gwen sounded as professional as she could as she patted her face dry.

"Gwen, are you okay?" Keegan's voice called from the other side of the door. Taking in a deep breath, Gwen opened the door and motioned for the small dark haired woman to enter.

Keegan saw the tired and irritated look Gwen's face. A towel was grasped tightly in one hand as the other tried to tame her blonde hair. Her eyes were expressive and for the first time in a long time, Keegan knew her guard was down. "Is there anything I can do?"

Gwen tilted her head to the side and took in Keegan's reflected image. There were a million things she wanted to say. "Not anything at the moment. It's just selling my soul to the devil one more time." Seeing Keegan's eyes widen in shock, Gwen explained farther. "The Motors want me to interview between periods. I have to act like the good little girl and play nice."

"You don't want to play nice?" Keegan's voice dropped an octave as she teased the soccer player. A smile reached Gwen's eyes as she shook her head. Keegan realized she was flirting with Gwen. It had been a long time since she had flirted with anyone, or wanted to.

"Keegan." Gwen turned to face her former girlfriend. She wanted to talk but it never seemed like the right time or enough time. In a bathroom at the Motors arena was definitely not the place or time. "Tonight, after the game, can we talk? Really talk." Reaching a hand out to touch Keegan's arm, Gwen watched as her touch put Keegan's arm hair on its ends. "I leave in the morning and I don't think we've had a chance to really talk."

"Meghan is staying with me. I'm pretty sure neither of you is comfortable with the other." Keegan looked over her shoulder to the closed door. If they didn't exit soon, a discussion would start. "What if I sneak over with you to the interview? Give Mr. Novak a little more to chew on. I can't stand those people."

"What people?" Gwen asked.

"Publicists, journalists." Keegan turned to the door and began to open it.

"You know that is what I'm planning on doing. My interview with SNN is to be a correspondent."

"Gwen it's your life." Keegan opened the door to the glaring eyes of her youngest sister.

"Done?" Meghan's cold voice asked Keegan but her eyes were fixed on Gwen. Keegan slid past her over protective sister.

"Not even started." Gwen challenged back. She wasn't going to let Keegan slip through her fingers again. Even if it took groveling or begging, she would try to get Keegan back in her life.

Jonathan felt as if he was watching a tennis match between the interaction of Keegan, Gwen and Meghan, sensing as if there was a contest going on without anyone knowing the rules. Danny, Ashley and Tony sat at the edge of the divider watching the game having a quiet conversation. An outsider in this family unit he had grown to know over the past couple of years. That is how he thought of the Garry sisters and their group of friends, as a unit, united behind each other, no matter what. He had a feeling Gwen Lerner was a bigger part of this group than he even thought. Keegan had been a shadow when he met her, rail thin with wisps of dark hair starting to grow back. Her workout sessions began slowly. He coached her and let her take the time for rebuilding muscle groups and toning of her body. He had seen pictures of her from college and playing for the National soccer team. She had been stocky if that was possible to imagine. The leukemia and treatments sapped the life out of her. She was a good pupil, trying to understand the concept of yoga and how it could help her recovery. There were times during quiet meditation sessions, he would see tears rolling down her cheeks. He never asked. If she wanted to talk about it, she would. As he shifted from instructor to friend, he knew Keegan kept her feelings guarded, having a quiet way about her that was far removed from the professional athlete she once was. Jumping on a pile of teammates or pumping her fist in high the air, Keegan was a superstar player at Weston. Occasionally, that fiery player would return. As he watched her glare at her youngest sister, he could see traces of her competitive side.

Leaning back in his seat, he concentrated on the game. Sitting in a private suite at the game was much better than the thin padded bar stools and secondary smoke filling his lungs at Rock's. So far a scoreless effort as the Motors took on North Cats of Calgary. Bobby's line was just about ready to come back on the ice when he felt someone sit down next to him. To his surprise, it was Gwen.

"Hello." Gwen smiled as she turned to the left quickly trying to stay out of the camera shot. "Sorry about earlier, I'm just trying to set some boundaries with the Motors. It doesn't seem to matter to them." Gwen explained as she leaned back in her seat.

"But it matters to you." The trainer asked.

"Yes, I try to keep my private life out of the spotlight as much as possible, if you can believe that." Gwen smiled at him. "Most of the public appearances I do are scheduled and planned for a purpose. The Motors are not my favorite at the moment." She leaned forward as a camera swung its lens towards her. Jonathan on her left side blocked the cameraman's angle and the Garry girls blocked the right angle. It was strangely funny to see them sitting together sharing a plate of food. All different shades of hair color, different heights, Keegan being the shortest and Meghan the darkest, yet they had similarities.

"You know if I didn't know they were sisters, I would be able to see it with them sitting together." Jonathan commented as the women laughed at the fifty something vendor trying to hock his "hot nuts" to the section of fans just to the right of the loge.

"They are sisters alright. Piss one off, and you got the whole group on your ass." Gwen sighed, as she knew what it was like to be ganged up on by the siblings. Ash was very receptive to Gwen re-entering Keegan's life. The battle with Meghan was just beginning.

"You know Ashley actually referred Keegan as a client. She and Danny hired me to help whip their employees into shape. IT people get soft middles sitting at the terminal all day. I met Kee during her recovery. She wanted to work out but she couldn't do anything strenuous. So we got together and started a program for her." Jonathan watched the play of emotions over the soccer player's face. "I just met Meghan outside."

"Well, I'm not real high on Meghan's list. You may want to distance yourself from me." Gwen stole a quick glance at the sisters.

"Oh I don't think so. Keegan was smart not to tell me about you and the loge, I would have never shut up." Jonathan began to blush. "I'm a really big fan of your fiancé." He looked at her for a moment. "Really big."

"Stalker like?" She asked. Jonathan laughed as he shook his head. "Good. Keegan has a habit of not giving specific details." Gwen heard the bitterness in her voice and immediately regretted it. "I'm sorry Jonathan. You see I just found out about the leukemia this week. No one told me."

"Ouch." Jonathan offered her some of his wings. "I shouldn't be eating this crap."

"So you offer it to me?" Gwen laughed.

"Always looking for new clients." Jonathan shrugged his shoulders. "That guy said something earlier about Keegan having her appendix out. What was all that about?"

"Keegan and I played on the Olympic soccer team together. She wasn't able to compete in the Greece games because of her appendix."

"She never had her appendix out." Jonathan blurted out then looked at her questionably. He looked at the empty green bottle in front of him. "Do you need anything?"

Gwen shook her head slowly. She was still digesting the fact Keegan did not have her appendix out. Surely Jonathan was wrong. That was the reason she left the team. Her appendix was why she was still in the hospital when Gwen came to see her. The leukemia came later. Jonathan stood up and asked the same of the Garry siblings. Ashley and Meghan took him up on the offer to play waiter.

At the top of the stairs, Tony stood with Danny the pair watched the puck fly across the white surface and into the Cats goal. Horns and buzzers echoed through out the arena.

"Crap, I missed the goal." Jonathan turned back to the ice. His eyes were on Gwen who seemed to be taken back about the appendix. "I'm on a beer run. Need anything?"

"Sure, but I'll get my own and give you a hand." Danny followed the slightly taller man into the loge to the counter area. "Having a good time?"

"You bet. I told Keegan this beats Rock's anytime." After pulling four beers from the mini frig under the counter, Jonathan looked at Danny for a moment. "Danny, I don't mean to pry, but I said something to Gwen about Keegan not having her appendix out." He saw the slight grimace the red head gave. "I didn't mean anything by it."

"Don't worry about it. Keegan and Gwen need to clear the air and maybe it's just what Gwen needed to hear." Danny took the opened beer and tilted it back against her lips. "There are too many things unsaid between them." Danny felt the cool liquid soothe her throat.

"I haven't seen you at the gym lately, avoiding me?"

"Avoiding life." Danny grabbed another beer and settled into the seat behind Ashley and Meghan, handing her business partner the beer over her shoulder. Tonight, Meghan was sitting three feet away. She could smell the Envy perfume she usually wore. Danny wished she could ignore the perfume. If Ashley hadn't gotten Meg a bottle for Christmas, Danny would have never guessed the Gucci product. Yet each time she went shopping, she would stop at the counter to smell the sample. Purposely, Danny avoided seeing Meghan, talking to her or even talking about her. When the topic of the Garry girls turned to their younger sibling, Danny retreated to her quiet corner, not wanting to hear about Meghan's. The truth was she was jealous of the women Meghan dated and had a hard time not getting angry. She made a promise never to jeopardize the relationship she had with the Garry family. She had already lost her own family. She couldn't chance losing the relationship with the people she considered her family. She never wanted to be alone again. Her dating history was extremely bumpy. Her relationship with Dory lasted close to sixteen months. The college professor was the last in a long line a women who complained about Danny's inability to commit, the amount of hours she worked and her odd relationship with the Garry family. There wasn't a lack of women vying for her attention. There were a number of women in the community who were trying to pursue and land the wealthy business owner. The latest in the hunt was Robin Frost, an attorney whose firm represented Helping Hands. Danny roused from her thoughts about the raven haired women sitting in front of her. She didn't see the sense in trying to analyze her feelings towards Meghan. She knew she would never act on them. The price was too high to pay. She looked towards Gwen. The blonde had paid a high price without even knowing it. Feeling bad for the soccer player, Danny waved for Gwen to join her.

The blonde stood up to move and immediately the arena spotlight flashed onto her. Followed by a loud cheer and clapping as the cameras flashed her picture on the jumbo screen at the center of the ice. Gwen felt the professional persona take over as she lifted her hand in a wave to the fans and plastered the camera smile on her face. Ashley jumped up and began waving like a freak as her image appeared on the large television in the center of the ice.

"You okay?" Danny asked as the sullen mood emanated from Gwen.

"Sometimes, I just wish I was able to go to the game and enjoy it. I feel like the center ring of the three ring circus." The irritation in her voice rose. "The Motors want me to do a spot during the first intermission."

"Not liking that?" Danny took a long drawn out sip of her beer. Gwen shook her head. "Take Keegan with you. Get her out under Meg's watchful."

"You know, I used to be really close with her." Gwen said as she stared at the back of Meghan's head. "Now she won't even give me a chance to explain."

"She's trying to protect Keegan. She doesn't want to see her sister hurt." Danny whispered. "No one wants to be hurt. What's the saying, life isn't fair?" Danny said as she took a long pull off her beer. Gwen saw the look in Danny's face soften for a moment before it quickly disappeared.

Chapter 15

Bright hot lights illuminated the small commentary area in the Motors broadcast booth. The camera operator pulled back to block the shoot of the three figures being prepared for air. Gwen shifted slightly as the production assistant tried to place a microphone on her blouse. From her spot against the wall, Keegan could see how the young man's hand shook. His fingers reached for and receded as he tried to figure out where to place the microphone near Gwen's cleavage. In frustration, Gwen took the audio unit from him and clipped it to her blouse between her breasts.

As the frightened Production Assistant stepped away to ready the earpiece, Gwen looked up to find amused blue eyes watching her. Keegan leaned against the half wall of the control room, her booted feet crossed at the ankles. Her jeans were a bit long but still fit her well. The Brady Sullivan jersey covered her waistband. Gwen thought it was cute how she attempted to cover her expanding midsection. Gwen smiled back, knowing Keegan found her annoyance with the production crew entertaining. In fact the wet clammy hands of the PA gave Gwen the creeps, but Keegan flashed a reassuring smile that calmed her. She let out a sigh when the man came back and touched her behind the ear.

"You finished?" Gwen snapped the fumbling man. Why do they always send the one who looked like they want to tear her clothes off? His startled face gave a small nod as he handed her the IFB. He quickly moved away from the guest.

"Play nice. He is just trying to do his job." Keegan said as she stepped forward squatting next to Gwen's chair.

"Easy for you to say. He was looking at me as if I was a piece of meat." Gwen argued back. When Keegan flashed a lopsided grin, Gwen felt her cheeks flush. She had seen that grin before and she knew exactly where Keegan's mind went.

"No comment." Keegan laugh out loud at Gwen's uneasiness.

"Laugh it up." Gwen noted as she brushed her hair out of her eyes. "Do I look okay?" They both stopped breathing for a moment as memories came flooding back. Transforming them to an earlier time when Gwen asked Keegan the same question. Over the years together, Keegan's answer had never wavered.

The response "*You look beautiful*" was on the tip of Keegan's tongue, because she knew it to be true. Gwen was always beautiful. Today, there were too many production people milling about. The Motors' front office was very present in the appearance of Phil Novak and Victor Eisenmann. Instead, Keegan nodded, holding Gwen's soft eyes with her own. At that moment, Keegan knew she was in trouble. She couldn't let Gwen get close. There were too many feelings between them, too much time lost and too many differences that needed work to be resolved. She conceded the fact she would always love Gwen, no matter what. But there were too many changes and too many outside factors to have a relationship with her again.

"How are you enjoying the game, Miss Garry?" Huey Carmichael, long time Detroit area sports announcer leaned towards the women and asked.

"I'd like a bigger lead, but I'll take what we have so far." Keegan shyly answered. She had done multiple interviews with the silver haired announcer over the years. He and a crew from Channel Seven actually went out to San Diego to do a piece on her making the National Team.

"Well, Mr. Finch is a prize addition to the team. Wouldn't you say so?" Huey's sharp eyes were working overtime. "Ms. Garry are you going to join us for the interview?" His deep baritone voice had a way of swaying the audience to his point of view.

"Now Huey, you know I don't do interviews any more." Keegan crossed her arms over her chest closing the subject.

"That my dear is a shame. So is this a reunion of sorts, former teammates?"

"Just friends, Huey." Keegan gave him an award-winning smile. "I no longer play so therefore there is no reunion, not teammates, just friends. Besides, Gwen retired."

"Clamming up like always Miss Garry, but your fans would like to hear from you someday. You're safe, I'll quit with the questions this time." Huey waved a dismissive hand towards Keegan as she faded into the distance as the announcer turned his focus on the retired Olympian.

"Sorry." She said softly to Gwen as she listened to the crew scrambling to figure out what Huey was rambling about. She had kept out of the spotlight on purpose. She was no longer a public figure. Because the university employed her, she still gave her time to Weston when they asked, but they knew better than to push too hard. Her only claim to fame was she had brought home the Division Two - Women's National Championship. She had a few CAPS as she played in International soccer games, including a World Cup, but she never played an Olympic game. She never won a medal. She wasn't America's Sweetheart.

"After one period, the Motor's lead the Cats by a score of one to nothing. Detroit's latest acquisition, Bob Finch has caused quite a stir on and off the ice. We are pleased to be joined by Gwen Lerner, gold medal winner and a close acquaintance of Bob's." Huey waited as the cameras switched to wide shot of the group. Gwen smiled and waved into the camera. "Enjoying the game?"

"Absolutely." The camera flashed a close up of Gwen. "Glad to be here cheering on the Motors. I'm hoping we can hold on to the lead. There is still some time to go before it's over." Gwen let her eyes slip over to Keegan as her words echoed in her head.

"How's your visit to Detroit been?" Sean Mullins the second announcer asked.

"So far great! The people are wonderful, the team has been terrific. The weather on the other hand, what can I say, I'm a California girl."

"I see you have some friends with you in the suite." The loge came on to the screen as Ashley, Jonathan, Tony, Danny and Meghan waved frantically at the camera.

"I've got a few friends in town. They have been kind enough to play tour guide and keep me busy. This past week has been very busy for Bob and I though. The Emerald Banquet at Weston Inn raised over \$500,000 for the foundation. We were at the Children's unit at Weston Hospital visiting the facility, children and their families."

"Any children in the future for you?" Huey slid the remark in before Gwen knew it.

"Children?" Gwen leaned back and placed her hand on her chest. She smiled. A week ago, her answer would have been a resounding no. She laughed and said, "Never say never Huey."

"So what is Bob's take on living in the Midwest?" Sean piped in trying to steal any attention from Huey.

"As you should know, Bob is from Hamilton, Ontario and went to university in Chicago. He knows more about the Midwest and winter than I do."

"Still making your home in San Jose?" Huey's eyes studied her closely.

"If I move here to be with Bob, you'll be the first know." Gwen winked at the older announcer who blushed profusely.

"Good to know." Huey chuckled lightly as his shoulders shook slightly. "So what does the future hold for America's Sweetheart since you've decided to retire from professional soccer?"

"There are a few irons in the fire. I want to enjoy my time off. Actually visit places I travel to, not just the airport and the soccer stadium.

"From our vantage point, I see that you have met up with your former teammate and one of our hometown heroes, Keegan Garry." Without warning, the camera turned to Keegan as she leaned against the wall. Keegan felt nauseated as her form was projected on to the screen. The screen was split to a photo of her scoring a goal for Weston. "Do you think she'll honor us with few words?" Huey smirked at the camera irritating Gwen to the fullest.

Gwen had played this game for too long and she wasn't about to let Huey Carmichael bully Keegan into doing something she didn't want too. Leaning forward across Sean Mullins lap, she got everyone's attention as she smiled sweetly at Huey and said. "No." Huey and Sean laughed at the antics.

"Understand, I had to try." Huey held his hands in the air. "So, I mentioned earlier the reference to America's Sweetheart. I'm going to ask the questions we are all wondering. How did you get that flag to stay in place?"

Dirty old man, Keegan thought as she had wondered the same thing many times before.

"Let's just say its amazing what industrial strength double faced tape will do." Gwen stated as the crew began to flash the wrap up signs.

"Thanks for joining us tonight Gwen and we look forward to seeing you in the future." Sean Mullins took the wrap lines.

"Great to be here. Sean, Huey....Go Motors!" Gwen smiled as she shook both men's hands.

"Clear..." Someone in the production crew yelled.

"Nice Huey..." Gwen shot him an off camera look that wasn't so pleasant. "She doesn't do interviews. Don't be surprised if you hear from her attorney for that stunt with the spilt screen." Gwen's hackles rose to protect Keegan from the press. She didn't want her presence to cause Keegan any stress.

"No hard feeling Keegan?" Huey tried to get the former Weston stand out to agree with his actions.

"No feeling at all Huey." Keegan looked at the jumbo screen in the middle of the arena. Plastered on all four sides was a photo of Keegan and Gwen from the national team.

"You look good, slimmed down a bit." His comment was followed by his eyes roaming over her body. "I'm free for an interview."

"There's no such thing as free. There's always a price to pay." Keegan said then followed Gwen's storming figure out the door. Half way back to the suite, Gwen turned to face her.

"I'm sorry he tried that with you." Gwen ran her hand through her hair. "I shouldn't have asked you to go with me." She placed her hand on Keegan's forearm. "I'm really sorry."

"Gwen, you can't control what people do." Keegan studied the worried look in her brown eyes. "Besides, I was wondering about the flag." Keegan continued walking. "Double faced tape, interesting." Gwen fell into step next to her.

"You should have been there when I tried to remove it. Let's just say, I didn't need a bikini wax for quite some time." Keegan stopped her eyes immediately went to Gwen's crotch and shuttered.

"TMI! Ouch!" Keegan grimaced just thinking about the removal from a person's skin.

"Ouch is on the right track, but not even close." Gwen's laugh filtered through the air as she left Keegan standing in shock behind her.

#

White knuckles gripped the steering wheel as the roads with covered with a half foot of freshly fallen snow. The team was held for special closed-door meetings after they let a three-goal lead disappear in the third period. Bobby was off the ice for two of the goals but the Cats got the offense running and tied the game. Neither the coach nor the team was happy. The glaring look Keegan received from Meghan, showed her sister's displeasure when she offered to drive Gwen home. The night was enough to send Keegan in a tailspin. How could she get her sister to understand her connection with Gwen, if she barely understood where they stood? When Bobby got stuck at the arena for an undisclosed amount of time, Keegan didn't want to leave Gwen there alone. Not knowing what time the team would be released and scheduled on an early flight in the morning, Gwen happily accepted Keegan's offer. A pouting Meghan asked Ashley to spend the night at her place so she could spend time with her sister and see Andy first thing in the morning.

Keegan pulled her small SUV into Bobby's drift covered driveway. Releasing the breath she did not realize she was holding. Turing to her passenger, she gave her a wary smile.

"Here you are."

"Was it me or was that just a little scary?"

"Road crews should be out now." Keegan looked at her tire tracks in the blanket of drifts and snow covering the street. Her tire prints were the only ones cutting through the snow. Since leaving the crowd of the arena, her truck was the only vehicle on the road. No signs of any movement as they came into residential areas, no plows or other vehicles appeared as the storm got worse. She looked over her shoulder at the drift forming across the street. She still had a twenty-minute ride back to her house. In these conditions, it would take her at least an hour.

""Keegan." Gwen called waited until her friend turned to face her. "Stay here. There wasn't a plow out. I'd feel a lot better." Gwen could just feel the stress of having Keegan drive out in the blizzard.

"I'll be fine." She said just as her cell phone chimed. Ashley's house number came up on the caller id. "Hello." Keegan answered as she flipped open the phone.

"Where are you?" Meghan's voice demanded.

"Gee, Mom just dropping off my date now." The sarcasm was evident. Covering the mouthpiece, she formed the word "Meghan" to Gwen.

"Funny. Listen we just got home. The roads aren't even touched. Stay at Gwen's-Bobby's whatever. Just stay there, please."

"What?" Gwen asked as Keegan's eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"Can you repeat that?"

"Stay with Gwen." Meghan's voice huffed out.

"Who is this? Surely this isn't Meghan Garry who glared and sent evil scary looks towards her host all night is it?"

"Ha! I love you. Put Gwen on the phone." Meghan demanded. She didn't like being called out on the carpet and having to eat crow at the same time.

"Hang on." Keegan pulled the phone away from her ear holding it out for Gwen. "She wants to talk to you." Gwen was taken back by the request but placed the phone to her ear.

"Hello."

"Gwen." Meghan's voice rang clear. "I want you to listen to me carefully." Controlled anger was just under the surface as Gwen braced herself for the onslaught of Meg's temper. "Keegan is to stay with you. Do Not! Repeat, Do Not let her drive home."

"I agree." Gwen fidgeted in the passenger's seat.

"Good, if she leaves, I will find you and kill you. Am I clear?"

"Meg, I will do as requested, but remember she is just as stubborn as you."

Meghan listened to Gwen's answer as she stood in the middle of Ashley's kitchen. They made it home but the roads were horrible and she was grateful for the Lexus LX570 Danny drove. The luxury SUV had no problem getting through the snow covered roads. Meghan was relieved she didn't have to drive and Gwen was keeping Keegan off the roads. She hit the button on the phone and hung it up.

"What?" Meghan asked as she saw Danny staring at her. "I'm worried about Keegan." Meghan's tongue felt thick. She had managed not to be cornered by Danny all night.

"I am too, but you realize you just threatened to kill Gwen." Danny's auburn eyebrow rose questioningly.

"Not the first time." Meghan shrugged her shoulders. "Won't be the last." She stared at Danny, putting her hand over her heart. "Are you talking to me again?"

"I never stopped." Danny lied.

"Please, you are still freaked about Christmas." Meghan shook her head. "Don't worry I won't interfere with whatever weird thing you and Ash have going on." Meghan stepped closed and whispered. "I won't tell Ash about the kiss." She let out a warm breath on Danny's ear lobe and neck.

Danny felt the heat from Meghan's closeness and wanted nothing more than for her lips to touch her, to brand her skin. She closed her eyes for a moment and imagined Meghan kissing her neck, sucking on her ear, whispering words of passion. Danny quickly pushed the thoughts away as she gently pushed Meghan a few steps back.

"Ashley and I have nothing but a close friendship. Period! As for me not speaking with you, I think your actions here tonight show why I chose not to make conversation with you." Danny started to wrap her scarf around her neck to venture home. "Why don't you cut Gwen a break? She just found out about Kee being sick and she's trying very hard to understand and make sense of the whole thing. We've known this would happen. I didn't think it would take five years for Gwen to walk back into your sister's life, but I knew it would happen. Why can't you be happy for them? At least for Keegan, I haven't seen her happy in a long time." Danny was seething. Meghan was acting like a petulant child.

"Now what are you fighting about?" Ashley came in with a sleeping Andy in her arms. She handed the three-year-old to Meghan. "You're acting like sisters."

"We're definitely not sisters!" Meghan said as she hoisted Andy higher in her arms and took him up to his room.

"Finally something I can agree with you on." Danny called after Meg. Her arms crossed tightly over her chest.

"And get your coat off. You're staying here even if you do have a monster truck. Guest room one." Ashley pointed to Meghan as she came into the kitchen. "Take the blue room." She said to Danny. Mumbling something under her breath she went into the pantry and came back with a bottle of Crown Royal. "Who wants a shot?" The women looked at her for a moment. "I swear you are driving me to drink. Both of you." Ashley pour three shot glasses and slid them towards her overnight guests.

"Jesus.." Gwen shook her head as Meghan's venomous threat echoed in her head. "Stubborn all of you. What is it with your family?" Gwen gathered herself together as she flipped the phone shut. Handing it to Keegan, she purposely let it slip to the floorboard. "Oops."

"Shit." Keegan repositioned her body to gain access to the floorboard, being pregnant and in a winter coat was not an easy task. When she leaned down to grab the phone, Gwen snatched the

keys from the ignition and held them tight in her hand. "Hey..." Keegan reached for the keys. Holding the keys above her head in tight in her right hand, with her left Gwen grabbed Keegan's hand.

"Listen to me. You're crazy sister just threatened me with bodily harm if I let you leave. Crazy as she is, I do agree with her. I really don't want the guilt on my conscience if something happened to you, so drop it and get in the house." Gwen opened her door, quickly stepped on the frozen ground, slipped and landed on her back in the snow. "Fuck." Gwen scrambled to her feet as the icy substance slid under her clothing. She felt a piece slide down her back. "Man, that's cold." Taking small steps she made her way to the front bumper and waited for Keegan. "Come on, it's cold and slick."

"I'd rather be home." Keegan stepped from the truck and slipped slightly as she shut the door. No keys had her bending to Gwen's antics.

"Not by yourself." Gwen grabbed a hold of her arm and escorted Keegan to the front door. Sliding the key in, she battled to unlock the front door. Finally the cylinder gave and she pushed it open for Keegan to enter. The townhouse was warm compared to outside temperature.

"I could call Carrie." Keegan regretted the flippant comment as soon as she made it. Gwen looked crushed but she nodded and shut the door.

"If that's what you want to do." She shed her coat and hung it up in the entrance closet. She was not going to get into Keegan's choice of relationships. If Keegan wanted to spend time with Carrie, that was her business. Gwen would not allow it to bother her, yet she was steaming from the comment. How could she like that woman? "The place is pretty empty." Gwen commented, trying to change the subject as Keegan took in the open space of Bobby's home. Slipping off her boots she left them on the rug to catch the melting snow. "He's renting this for the season." Gwen explained as she checked the thermostat. Bobby hadn't done much except for getting a deal on rental furniture that filled the bedrooms, the living room and the kitchen. The walls were painted a stark white with a couple modern cubist paintings hanging the walls.

"It's very...very." Keegan searched for the polite thing to say.

"Unlived in." Gwen blew on her hands trying to gain some warmth. "We went and looked at a house this morning. It's closer to yours. I think Bobby likes the area."

"Oh yeah. I bet he's lonely." Keegan slipped off her coat and boots taking in the open space of the living room. Stacked on the floor next to the television was a stack of DVDs. Keegan felt the cold seep into her veins. She suddenly felt guilty about the comment she made about Carrie.

"Gwen, I didn't mean what I said. I don't want to go home. I don't want to be with Carrie either."

"Then why say something like that, Keegan? I'm just trying to establish some type of friendship with you. If that is jeopardizing a relationship you are in." *With your gynecologist.* "Then I will stop."

"I'm not in a relationship with Carrie or anyone else." Keegan sank on to the couch. She said it to make Gwen jealous. "I'm not sure what you want from me Gwen. You dropping back into my life set off this ticking bomb and I'm not sure what you want." Keegan looked at the digital clock on the cable box.

"A friend back in my life." Gwen said as she sat down on the couch one leg tucked under the other as she faced sideways looking directly at Keegan.

"In a few hours, you'll be back in California and I won't matter any more." Keegan felt the sting of tears in her eyes, just like she hadn't mattered five years earlier. Gwen would just move on without her once again.

"You've always mattered to me Keegan. I'm not sure where our wires got crossed but one day, we're living together sharing a future. The next, you're back in Michigan without telling me, refusing to talk to me or to return my calls. Finally, when I do see you, you break up with me. How am I supposed to feel?" Gwen thought back to hospital visit. The last conversation she had with Keegan.

"Go back to the team where you're needed. I don't want you here." Keegan hit the call button at the side of her bed. When a nurse's form filled the doorway, Gwen glanced down at her hand.

"I don't understand why you are doing this Keegan. I thought we had something special I thought you loved me as much as I love you." Gwen twisted off the ring on her finger. She felt the tears pooling in her eyes. Never one to cry she found that she was doing it quite often since Keegan left. She got to her feet, straightening her shirt out and brushing invisible lint from the front of her jeans. "If you want to find me, you know where I'll be. Maybe I'll understand this some day but I can't right now." The blonde turned and walked towards the doorway. Stopping half way across the room she turned and stared at Keegan's eyes hoping to see the reason in her soul. "You know if I did something or if I wasn't concerned for you, I may be able to comprehend why you are doing this. But for the life of me, I don't get it."

"Why did you come? You had everything on the line, the Olympics." Keegan's question brought her back to the present as she tried to hide her tears with her hand.

"Because I loved you. You were my life and you left me." Gwen got up and paced the room. She needed a drink. Rubbing her forehead with her fingers she felt the migraine coming on in full force. "Do you want some tea?" Gwen said as she turned to the kitchen, trying to occupy her mind with a mundane task.

Keegan closed her eyes and leaned her head on the back of the couch. Loved was what Gwen had said. Not I love you, but I loved you. She knew the mistake she had made was coming back to haunt her. Tara and Ashley wanted her to be truthful with Gwen. Instead, she thought could control the situation. Maybe that was her downfall, she had just told Gwen tonight she couldn't control the actions of others. Why was she trying to do the same thing? Placing her hands on her thighs, she wiped off the nervous sweat. She stood up and went into the kitchen. She found Gwen standing next to the counter, watching the teakettle as it heated. Keegan wrapped her arms

around Gwen's waist from behind, clasping her hands together across her stomach. Leaning her cheek against Gwen's spine she felt Gwen's hands covered her own. "I thought I knew what I was doing. I didn't want you to know about the leukemia until after the Games. Gwen, I didn't want you to miss the Olympics. I thought if I could just keep avoiding you, we could talk after the Games. Fuck." Keegan sighed deeply and pulled away from the warmth of Gwen.

"Tell me what happened. Tell me why you left my room and hopped on a flight to Michigan without one word." Gwen turned to face her former lover. "Not a word. I knew something was wrong. I even asked you." Gwen ran her hands over her face trying to gather some semblance of composure. She waited five years for this conversation and now she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

"After the collision with Shannon." Keegan began she pulled out a wooden chair scraping the legs across the tile floor with a heaviness. "They couldn't get my nose to stop bleeding. Suddenly, Dr. Seng was there and Curtis." She sat down and told Gwen the truth of why their relationship changed.

When the familiar face of Dr. Seng entered the drab white tiled, sherbet colored examination room, Keegan became concerned. The team's doctor of over twenty years, the small Asian woman could intimidate the majority of the team and coaching staff. The silver tuft of hair on the doctor's head stood out against her raven mane. Her uniform white jacket and the rose colored blouse under it were in severe need of ironing. The dry cleaned black slacks were crumbled and the normal pleats along the front were not as prominent. Her ruffled appearance seemed out of place along with the nervous play of eyeglasses hanging from a gold chain around her neck. Very out of character for the stoic doctor, her professionalism seemed to be left on the West Coast. In the years Keegan had been on the National Team, she had never seen the team doctor appear mussed or disheveled. When the doctor pulled a chair along side of Keegan's, she realized something was seriously wrong.

"Keegan," She placed a sun spotted soft hand on Keegan's thigh. "How have you been feeling?"

"Fine." Keegan continued to lie. She did not want the doctor to report to the coaching staff any doubt of her ability to play.

"Any issues with being tired? Loss of breath?" Moving her hand away from the soccer player, she began to flip the papers on the chart.

"Dr Seng, I'm a soccer player. I'm always tired and the traveling has my system out of sorts." Keegan straightened up in the leathery office chair. Purposely avoiding looking at the physician, her eyes went to the wall, taking in the pastel painting on the wall. A nice seascape that looked similar to the view from the rental home she and Gwen stayed in Provincetown two years ago for vacation. The waves appeared to be crashing against the sand. The small trolling boat bobbed with the waves as the flags on its masts and lines flapped furiously against the wind. The white starboard side gave way to the red painted bottom showing its color as the artist captured the motion of the ocean.

"In some of the tests performed, there were some abnormalities with your blood cell count. The doctors at Jefferson and I recommend further testing." The Asian woman spoke softly tearing Keegan's attention away from the painting.

"What does that mean? Abnormalities? Further testing? I'm getting on a plane in the morning to head with the team to Rome. The Olympics are weeks away. The Olympics." Keegan's voice was rising as she spoke. When she tried to stand up, the doctor placed a firm grasp on her forearm.

"At this time, we can not allow you to continue with the team." Keegan's world stopped. She had been dreaming about this since was eight years old. Her skills on the field landed her on the national teams recruiting radar when she was fourteen years old. Able to attend the Weston on soccer scholarship, she led the university to its first national championship. Making the national team four years ago, she was looking forward to going to the next step, playing in the Olympics. Achieving the ultimate goal of winning a gold medal. The hard work she had put in all these years seemed to be slipping away in front of her eyes.

"You need to see your doctor as soon as you get home." Dr. Seng continued to speak but the shock of information left Keegan's brain swimming. "We can transmit what we have found to Weston University's staff. You are going to go back to Michigan?" The doctor's questioning words echoed in her head.

"Stop!" Keegan held up her hand to the petit Asian woman. "It's just a fucking bloody nose!" As her voice elevated, Coach Curtis walked into the room. His hazel eyes went looked into Keegan's crystal blue ones. "What's happening?" Keegan asked the man who coached her in international play and the world cup.

"Keegan," Curtis took off his hat and ran his large tan hand through the grayish black strands. "Your blood tests came back with extremely high white blood cell count. The medical staff and coaches are not allowed to let you on the field until you are released."

"So you're cutting me?"

"Not cut, medically inactive." Watching the information register on her face, Curtis continued. "You're a fabulously talented player. As policy, you need to be medically cleared in order to continue playing. The staff can't clear you." Curtis watched her face as the realization sunk in. She wasn't going to Rome or to Greece. Her dreams of playing in the Olympics were ending.

"When am I leaving?" She asked, her voice quiet.

"We'd like you to go tonight, but there are no flights. Keegan this is serious. Your health is much more important than any soccer game." Curtis admonished her in a fatherly way. She nodded her head slowly. Feeling as if her heart was stuck in her throat she tried to swallow.

"Are there other tests?" Her question was answered by Dr. Seng nod. "If this is nothing..." Keegan waved her hand absently in the air.

"You join the team. You're part of this team Keegan." He smiled and started to leave.

"Curtis," She called to the exiting figure. "I don't want anyone to know about this. I have that right."

"People will know what you tell them." The coach nodded as he left.

"Ms. Garry an abnormal blood count isn't always what it appears to be." Dr. Seng ran her finger over page as she read the numbers. "Sometimes heavy physical stress or infection."

"It wasn't an infection, was it?" Gwen's voice lifted tear filled blues eyes to her face.

"No, they ran test after test. The leukemia was confirmed a few days before you came to the hospital." Keegan wiped her tears away. "I didn't want to tell you in Miami because I didn't know."

"And when you did know why didn't you tell me?" Gwen leaned a hip on the counter, her arms crossed over her chest waiting.

"The Olympics, I knew how disappointed you were when you brought home the silver. I wanted you to have a chance to win the gold. After the team won the gold, I was going tell you. I just needed time."

"And in the mean time, you break up with me. Hurt me. Scratch that. Devastate me. You knew how much I loved you! Us. We were a couple, a couple who shared everything. But I guess we didn't share everything." Gwen grunted.

"If I had told you I was sick, I knew what you would have done."

"And what would I have done?" Gwen huffed out and let out a squeak as the tea water came to a boil. She quickly turned off the burner and poured the steaming water into the cups with tea bags. "If you knew me so well Keegan what would I have done?"

"You would have given it all up to be at my side." Keegan stared at Gwen's back, her slumping shoulders heaved slightly.

"Since you didn't give me the opportunity to make my own choice, I guess we will never know what I would have done. Instead, here we are. It's hard to make the right decision if you don't have all the information." Gwen straightened up and brought the cup of tea to the table. She set it in front of Keegan and sat down next to her. Her hands neatly folded around the hot ceramic coffee mug. "Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

"I never had my appendix out. It was a way to have the press out of the way without bringing too much attention to the situation." Keegan confessed.

"Thank you but Jonathan told me that factoid earlier tonight." Running her hand through her hair, she took a moment to breathe. To take in the information Keegan was telling her. "Would you do it again?"

The question took Keegan by surprise. She cleared her eyes and stared at Gwen. "No." Keegan realized withholding the truth from Gwen cost their relationship. She wished she hadn't. "I can't change what happened."

"If you could would you?" Gwen was now facing Keegan her back pressed against the cabinets.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I never wanted to lose you." Keegan felt the warmth of Gwen's hand slip on to her forearm. With the slight reassuring squeeze from Gwen, the tension released from her body. She had held on to the burden of losing Gwen because she didn't tell her what was happening. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you." Keegan wiped a tear away.

"You're forgiven. Can we move forward from here? I'd like to be friends again Keegan. I've missed you." Gwen confessed.

"I'd like that too." Keegan covered Gwen's hand with her own. There were no promises, no complications, just a willingness to be friends again. The clock on the wall clicked towards the one o'clock hour. "I'll take the couch."

"Absolutely not." Gwen began to protest when her cell phone rang. "Hang on." Gwen flipped her cell open. "Hey there did he finally let you out?"

"Out yes...home no. They are keeping us here or at the hotel attached to the arena. Did you make it home okay? Is Keegan okay?" Bobby's voice was full of concern.

"We are at your house as we speak. I was just protesting to her offer to sleep on the couch."

"Tell her I'd advise against it, from personal experience. I'll be home as soon as I can. Gwen, I don't think you are leaving anytime soon or at least not this morning. They cancelled the Cats flight out."

"Great. I'll call Hannah in the morning to see what I need to do. Stay warm and I'll talk to you tomorrow." Gwen saw Keegan watching her. "He's stuck at the arena and staying at the hotel there. Flights out tomorrow are already cancelled."

"Will that mess up your schedule?" Keegan stood up and took her cup to the sink and poured out the remaining lukewarm contents in the sink. She placed her hands on the small of her back and tried to massage some of the ache away.

"No, I don't have anything to go home to. I have to be in San Diego next Tuesday, but I should be able to get out by then." Gwen followed Keegan's action by dumping her tea in the sink. "Is your back hurting?" She rubbed small circles on Keegan's lower lumbar. "Bobby said not to even attempt to sleep on the couch. I'll sleep in his room." Gwen made sure the house was secure and turning off the lights. Keegan waited for her in the hallway. "The spare room is where I've been staying." She wanted to make sure Keegan didn't have the idea of her sharing Bobby's bed. Gwen opened the spare room and stepped. "I just wanted to grab something to sleep in."

"That's a change." Keegan blurted out as her face turned red.

"It's cold Keegan." Gwen took a pair of sweats out of her suitcase. "I should get you some clothes. Do you want something or are you sleeping in the buff?" Gwen cocked an eyebrow up as she smirked at Keegan's discomfort.

"Like you said, it's cold out." Keegan repeated, her face still burning. She took in the tight lipped grin on Gwen's face.

A sleeping outfit in hand, Gwen stood up to explore the closet and dresser. "Bob's sisters and kids came down a few times maybe they left some clothes that will fit you." Gwen found a pair of sweats for her. "I think it pays to have siblings."

"No kidding. These are Danny's." Keegan pointed her jeans.

"I always thought you wanted to get into Danny's pants." Gwen teased her again and Keegan's face lit up. "You need to relax. I'm kidding." Gwen stepped out the door and gestured to the door across the hallway. "Holler if you need anything."

Keegan gave her a nod and held up the very large sweatshirt with the Canadian Maple Leaf. Grabbing the hem of her jersey she lifted the garment off. Just as the shirt reached her face, a string of profanity came from across the hallway.

"That little shit. What a pig sty." Gwen stood with her clothes still in her hands. The sight before her was pure chaos. The room was littered with clothing from the mound spilling from the closet, to multiple layers covering the floor. "I can't even see what color the carpet is." Gwen complained. Her eyes went to the bed, which was a pile of disarrayed sheets and blankets with pants, underwear and shirts covering every inch.

"Wow...." Keegan stopped at the sight before her. "Guess you didn't expect this."

"I'm not cleaning it." Gwen put a hand on her hip. "Want some company? It will be like old times, but not exactly." They stared at each other for a moment. The fear that gripped Keegan earlier that night came back full force.

"Not exactly." Keegan let out a nervous breath as she headed to the bathroom. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, she felt old. Her face had aged and wrinkled. Her body was slimmer, but still wasn't as toned as she would like. "You can do this." Keegan spoke brave words. Inside she

was scared. She should just leave. Run away like she always did. She had left Gwen in Miami and in the restaurant. Things got uncomfortable and she was off and running. She pulled off her clothes and put on the sweat shirt. She smoothed down the material which hung to the tops of her knees. The pants were enormous so she didn't bother with them. Splashing water on her face, she studied her reflection in the mirror. She and Gwen were both adults. They had shared the same bed hundreds of time before. This was not a big deal. So why was her heart pounding against her chest and her hands sweating? She finished up her preparation grateful for the new toothbrush Bobby had in the cabinet. Drying her face, she gathered her courage and left the bathroom.

Stopping abruptly at the doorway to the bedroom, she watched Gwen sitting in the bed waiting for her to return. Her back against the headboard, a magazine opened in her lap as she flipped through the pages. Her blonde hair framed her face and pair of glasses perched on her nose. She had chosen the side of the bed she was familiar with sleeping on.

"I didn't know you had glasses."

"I got them about a year ago. For reading mostly." Gwen set the magazine on the nightstand watching Keegan as she approached the bed taking in her outfit and the absence of pants. "Little big?"

"A little. Look at this." Keegan stepped back to show her how long the shirt was. "Don't even ask about the pants." Gwen chuckled as Keegan slipped into the bed beside her. "I have to work tomorrow so I maybe gone when you get up." Keegan adjusted her pillow.

"Promise me you'll say goodbye before you leave." Gwen whispered. Keegan looked into her eyes and saw the hurt.

"I promise." Keegan lean towards her and touched her lips lightly to Gwen's. "Never again. Okay. I promise. Good night." Keegan nervously sputtered. She settled down and closed her eyes mentally chastening herself for doing what came naturally. She leaned over and kissed Gwen goodnight. Her heart was pounding in her ears and she waited for Gwen to say something. Instead, she heard the light click off and Gwen settle on the bed. A few minutes of Gwen flipping and flopping, she felt the blonde body press against her from behind.

"Keegan, let me hold you." Gwen whispered in her ear. Keegan nodded and shifted in to the familiar spot of her back against Gwen chest. Gwen wrapped arms around her and held her securely. With their legs intertwined and a soft breathe caressing her cheek.

Keegan felt the emptiness in her heart recede. Just breathe, she thought, letting the mantra ran through her head until she fell asleep.

[\(Continued\)](#)

~ America's Sweetheart ~

by Catherine Burke

America's Sweetheart

Author's Note: This is my first story posted on The Athenaeum. If all goes well there will be more to follow.

Category: Orig. Uber Alt.

Rating: R / NC-17

Summary: Retired Olympian Gwen Lerner lands in Detroit and comes face to face with her former girlfriend. Still questioning the reason they separated, Gwen wants answers and to get a friendship back. Keegan Garry left the Olympic team under a cloud of mystery and intrigue. Since then she has struggle to get her life back on track. Just when she thinks she's done that, Gwen shows up and derails. Can two women who once loved each other find way to heal their broken hearts and love again?

Comments/Disclaimer(s): This is an original story. The story and characters belong to me. They are not to be used or reproduced without my express written permission. This is my first time posting to the website. An early version of this story was posted but the current is much better :!

This story depicts a love/sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it.

Special Thanks: To J Brownell for ideas suggestions and getting me to actually post this. Also to Kerrie who was able to beta and get this story back to me a very short time. Living half way around the world does have its advantages. Time differences worked well for us.

This work has progressed over the years and is very close to my heart. The two characters helped me through a tough time in my life. I am posting in parts but will have the entire story finished soon. As I continue to work on it, I really need to have some feed back. You can reach me at burkcatherine@aol.com

Part 6

Chapter 16

Gwen had the car service pull on to her street and just as they approached the cul de sac she lived on, she noticed Connie's black Mercedes parked in her driveway. Gwen felt her stomach tighten. She wasn't in the mood to deal with her mother and her latest get rich quick scheme. The week in

Detroit had been good for her. Reconnecting with Keegan had her on cloud nine and seeing Bobby doing well was an extra bonus.

In the back of her head, she feared her mother maybe going through her valuables. She wished she could turn back the clock to a time when she used to enjoy her mother's company. When Gwen's career was just taking off, she and Connie would go shopping and talk about the future. Connie's third husband introduced her mother to the country club scene and she had a lot of high profile connections in the country club crowd. She punched in the alarm code and opened the door. The driver set her bags in the foyer. Gwen tipped him and set out to find her mother.

"Richard, she isn't home yet. I can't ask her if she isn't here." Connie huffed in the cordless phone as she sat in Gwen's office chair, her blonde hair swept back from her perfectly made up face. Gwen stood in the doorway, waiting to see what else her mother was plotting. Her arms akimbo across her chest, she could feel the anger swelling. She didn't need this. Seven hours ago, she woke up with Keegan in her arms feeling happy. The happiest she had been in a long, long time. Keegan had called in sick and driven Gwen to the airport for the early afternoon flight she was able to get on. Leaning in the car window, Gwen promised Keegan she would call as soon as she got home. Her flight was delayed in Chicago, which was a normal event for anyone who dared to connect through O'Hare. Gwen leaned against the door jam of her office when she realized she didn't want to be here, nor did she want to deal with her mother's latest scheme. She wanted to be in Detroit with Keegan. As soon as she got rid of Connie, she'd get Hannah on the phone and see what her schedule looked like and if another visit to the motor city was a possibility.

"Oh she's here. I have to go." Connie set the phone on top of the desk top. "Honey!" She called out in greeting as she maneuvered around the desk to engulf Gwen in a hug. Gwen stiffened at the embrace.

"Connie, what are you doing here? And how did you get in?" Gwen knew she had given strict orders to the security company and the gate guards not to allow her mother in her home if she was out of town.

"Marlene was kind enough to let me in." Connie said with a sweep of her hand. Gwen rolled her eyes. Her cleaning lady had known Connie for years and would not hesitate to allow her *madre* to enter the home. "Oh, tell me about your trip? How is Robert?" Connie rambled on as she led Gwen to the office twin leather covered chairs. "There are a number of calls for you. That Dale McKnight from SNN. Hannah called a few times."

"Connie, why are you listening to my messages?" Gwen held her breath. Had her mother always done this? Listened to her messages while she was away and filter out the ones she wanted to? Keegan said she left a message to let her know she was sick.

"With your schedule, you are always busy. I thought I'd save you some time.."

"Was there a call from Keegan?"

"What?" Connie was caught off guard. She quickly picked up the half empty martini glass sitting on the desk.

"Keegan? Was there a call from her?" Gwen knew her voice was rising. Connie downed the rest of her drink. "Did you erase a call from her mother? Maybe not this time, but a time before? An important message?"

"I'm sorry dear. Who is that?"

"Keegan Garry, the woman I lived with for a number of years." Gwen knew Connie was tempting fate. Her mother hated Keegan and despised the fact they lived together.

"I thought she was dead." Connie turned to look at Gwen. Her expression was stone cold. "Cancer, if I'm not mistaken." Connie crossed her legs and turned her glass between her fingers. "She wasn't much. I knew you could always do much better. That woman was like a piece of gum stuck on your shoe. Always hanging on clinging to whatever she could." Connie's brown eyes were dead, soulless as she looked at her daughter. "Not that I would wish cancer on anyone, but I'm relieved she is out of your life."

Gwen got to her feet and went to the window. She was ready to pummel her mother. She needed to get a grasp on the situation. "The private investigator you referred me to for the pictures in tabloids, what was his name?" The details which her mother had kept from her were now piling up in front of her.

"Oh dear, that was a number of years ago, how am I supposed to remember something like that?" Connie stood and held up her drink. "I need another. Do you want one?" Connie didn't wait for Gwen to answer as she exited the office in search of alcohol. Gwen followed her and entered the game room. On the far side was an elaborate bar for entertaining. Connie stepped behind it and grabbed the bottle of Kettle One and poured a hefty portion in her glass. Lifting the glass to her lips, she took a swallow. "Did you want one?"

"No." Gwen came to stand across the counter top. "What was the name of the investigative agency that you encouraged me to hire and pay a fee of five thousand dollars? Do you remember this? Half up front, half afterwards? The agency that to this day still is unable to tell me who sold the photos to the tabloids."

"I told you he said it was that woman." Connie had years of practice in the art of deception. Unfortunately, Gwen learned to read her mother. Until now, there were pieces of information that were conveniently forgotten or just left out completely. "You have the photos of her with no hair and going through the treatments." Placing her glass down on the bar, Connie placed her hands on her hips. "Why are we talking about a dead person?"

"God damn it Mother! She's not dead. I spent the last week with her in shock that she was even sick. She's not dead. And I'll tell you what old woman, I'm tired of your games. You crossed the line with Keegan. If I ever find out that you purposely withheld information from me, I'll make

sure the rest of your life is living hell." Gwen watched as her mother paled and faltered as she picked up her drink. Connie's hand shook as she took a sip.

"Gwen," Connie walked from behind the bar smoothing down her Dolce & Gabbana satin blazer pulling at the hem to straighten the line of her shoulders. The black and tan striped shirt beneath it revealing cleavage and the satin skirt landed mid thigh. An outfit a fifty year old woman should not be wearing. "I need to speak with you on a financial matter." Connie wanted to present her business side as the topic of conversation was changed.

"I'm not giving you money. You can tell Richard to shove it up his ass." Gwen almost reached for the bottle of Kettle One to take a swig from it. She stared at her mother. Connie just didn't get it. "Connie, you need to leave right now."

"But Gwen this business venture..."

"Out! Now!" Gwen grabbed the glass from her hands. "I'll call the police and have you arrested for unlawful entry and trespassing." Gwen could feel her blood pounding through her veins. She had never been this angry with another individual. Connie was sucking the life out of her. She didn't realize how manipulated she was by her mothers actions. She had seen Connie work her ways on others, but Gwen thought she was smart enough to recognize her mother's schemes.

Connie took a step back and jutted her chin out holding her head high. "When you begin to act like a reasonable person, you can call me and apologize for your behavior."

"Don't hold your breathe, mom." Gwen's sarcastic tone emphasizes the last word. Connie pounded into Gwen head never to call her mom. Connie breezed past her daughter and out the front door. For a moment, Gwen feared she would fall on the driveway and bring a lawsuit against her.

Dumping the rest of Connie's drink down the sink, Gwen fell into the routine of returning home after a trip. Dragging her suitcase into the laundry room, she sorted through the worn items putting them in piles for wash or dry cleaning. She hung her suits up near the dry cleaning pile. She didn't have someone who did her laundry or run her errands like Connie did or pretended to have. She had a strong work ethic which Christopher and Molly taught her from the summers of living with the older couple. She was running from school to practice to games. Molly made sure she had all her uniforms and practice jerseys cleaned and ready to go. Molly's lessons of being responsible for what was important to her always rang true. She could only blame herself if she had the wrong jersey or socks. She started a load of laundry and headed to the master bed suite.

Walking through the home she had lived in for ten years, she felt how empty it was. This was just a place she had her things in. There wasn't that home feeling she got when she sat at Keegan's kitchen table. Her house was a shell, empty on the inside, no warmth, no love. It was just a place to store her things and sleep. She put her makeup bag in the bathroom and went into her bedroom. The soft butter colored maple bedroom furniture set off the tans of the carpet and maroon accent colors. Keegan picked out the furniture with her just after they started dating. This was the only room she felt any warmth in. Hanging her garment bag in the closet, she picked up the cordless phone from off the side table. She paged through the calls noting who

actually called verse the Connie version. There was a Michigan number on the digital read out. Hannah called numerous times. When was the last time she spoke to her agent, a week ago? A great number of changes had happened during the past week. Gwen went to the tall chest dresser across the room. Opening the middle drawer, she pulled out the small hidden half drawer on the inside. Light green velvet covered the bottom of the special drawer for jewelry or items of importance. She pulled the small crush velvet black box from the back corner of the drawer. She put the box there when she returned from the games in Greece. The lid screamed as she opened in it with a bit of force. Nestled in the warmth of its bed sat the diamond ring she had intended to give to Keegan. Touching the platinum setting, she wondered about the possibilities of Keegan actually accepting it. Quickly, she closed the box and put it back. She had barely skimmed the surface of the issues she and Keegan had to deal with. If Connie interfered with their relationship now, who was to say her mother didn't do the same thing years ago or worse.

Gwen didn't want to think of that possibility. She wanted a hot shower to get the airplane grit off her. She needed to wind down. Her head was reeling with possibilities. She'd check her messages and call Hannah later. She'd have to wait until later to call Keegan. She hoped she'd catch her awake. The time difference was a factor. She didn't want to call to late.

Fresh from a shower and dressed in a pair of nylon shorts and sweat shirt, Gwen sat in her office chair. Pushing play on the machine, she listened to her messages as she towel dried her hair. A total of twelve messages survived Connie's editing, three from Hannah, one from Bobby, another from Shannon asking about next week, Danny left two and the rest were from her attorney, a store in the city and SNN. The last message from Hannah had the hair rising on her arms. There wasn't a message from Keegan. If she did call, maybe Connie erased it. Gwen picked up the phone and called Hannah.

"Where have you been?" Her agent scolded in her ear.

"It was a blizzard. Snow everywhere. I couldn't get out." Gwen smiled. She really didn't mind being stuck in the snow or at least with Keegan.

"Who is Danielle Martin?" Hannah was tapping something on her end of the line. Gwen could hear the faint flutter of paper.

"A woman I became reacquainted with at the Emerald fundraiser. Nothing too special about it." Gwen was wondering why Hannah was asking about Danny.

"Well,, you made an impression on her and she has sent an invitation to attend a dinner party at her home for a tasting menu for Detroit's newest restaurant." Hannah paused. "It looks intriguing. What will your answer be?"

"I'd like to go. What's my schedule look like?"

"You can swing it if De-Con goes on schedule." Hannah thumbed through the calendar on her desk. "You never know with the show when you'll be done."

"Send it back as accepted and I will call Danny and let her know if there are complications." Gwen looked at her PDA. The dates for the De-Con shoot were just about three weeks away. The HGTV television series showcased celebrities assisting local groups to use recycled materials from homes or building which were scheduled for demolition and find new and creative ways to use the materials in other spaces. The show was one of Gwen's favorites and she had elated that she was asked to be part of the production. "What else is happening?"

"Your mother." Hannah began.

"Don't even go there. She was at the house when I got home erasing messages and asking for money."

"I thought you changed the locks."

"I did. She came in with Marlene this morning."

"Get a new service."

"I'd rather get a new mother." Gwen sat in her office chair spinning it slightly with the foot that rested on the floor. "Can you arrange that for me?"

"That, Gwen, is one miracle I can not pull off." Hannah laughed in the phone. "SNN is hot and heavy trying to get you to sign the contract with them. They are even mentioning Dale McKnight as a mentor for you."

"Well let's see what the money and the clauses state. The guy still gives me the creeps."

"Dale?"

"No. Dale is a sweetie. The heavy guy who is sweating all the time."

"Kirk Lane." Hannah supplied the name. "Also a name from your past has surfaced over the past week." Hannah hesitated. Gwen could hear the strain in her agent's voice. "Keegan Garry. Funny thing is most of the calls were asking if I represented her." Hannah waited for the usual attack that came after mentioning Keegan's name to her client. "In fact, I received a number of requests for Ms. Garry to do interviews." She still waited for Gwen to rip into her. "Gwen, what's going on?"

"What do you mean?" Gwen smiled, just the sound of some one saying Keegan's name gave her goose bumps.

"I can't usually get past saying Kee and you're jumping down my throat. I've said her name at least twice and you're being passive about it."

"I saw her Hannah. We actually talked."

"And?" Hannah was pressing. She had a number of options to consider if Gwen was coming out of the closet.

"And we're talking. She's been through a lot. Stuff I never knew about. Come to think of it, the private investigator I hired, do you have his name?"

"I told you not to use that guy your mother recommended. I'll have to dig. That was a few years ago. He didn't come up with squat regarding those photos."

"He didn't give me any information regarding Keegan either. If he had been doing his job, there should have been some information on her."

"SNN mentioned the assignment they want to give you." Hannah waited for a minute. "They want you to interview Keegan Garry as your first assignment."

"Did they get her consent?" Gwen asked knowing full well Keegan would never agree to an interview. "Shit, they want me to get it her consent and do the interview. Bastards!"

"Gwen, you don't work for them and you are under no obligation to take the assignment." Hannah reassured her. "How is she doing?"

"Keegan?"

"Yes Keegan. I always liked her. She made you smile." Gwen smiled despite the anger she felt towards SNN.

"She still does. She's stubborn as ever. Maybe worse."

"Sound's like she doing well."

"She is." Gwen hesitated. "Hannah, I want to think about spending time Detroit." Gwen felt a weight lift off her shoulders. She didn't want to be in California. She wanted to be in Michigan with Keegan.

"Missing Bobby that much?" Hannah teased. "I'm teasing. Take things slow Gwen. You're not in the same place you were five years ago. You have two gold medals, a league and a money generating poster now. People know who you are. The public may think it a little odd to see America's Sweetheart mowing the lawn and setting up house in Detroit's suburbs especially if Bob is no where to be seen."

"Can't I be happy? For once I find the one thing I know that will make me happy and I have to slow down."

"Gwen, just think about it. Don't forget you're not the only person that is affected by your decisions."

"You have a point." Gwen huffed. The natural high she was riding on was falling fast. "I just want to give it a try. Being twenty four hundred miles away is not going to help. I want to... I've got to give it a try."

"Be careful Gwen. It's not just your career. Think about Bobby also. He has a chance at winning the championship. That means a lot to him. He doesn't have the medals and endorsements that you do. Plus, his circumstances are not as understanding if things would get out." Hannah knew Gwen would never do anything to jeopardize Bobby, but she wanted to remind her client there was much more at stake.

"Understood."

"Okay with that out of the way, do you have your PDA?"

"Yes." Gwen groaned.

"Let's go over your schedule." Hannah said knowing it would be another forty minutes before they would finish for the night.

As if the magical spell was cast over them, the phone conversation wound down forty minutes later. Hannah was just about to hang up when she asked. "Are you going to speak to Keegan?"

"I planned on calling her after we were finished."

"Let her know if she needs an agent, I am willing to represent her."

"I'll pass the message along." Gwen chuckled. "I doubt she'll go for it."

"Just ask her Gwen. Have a good night. San Diego next week and don't let Shannon's kids drive you crazy."

"Just Missy...." Gwen growled in the phone.

"Yes, but you can leave and come home. Shannon has them forever." Hannah said laughing as she hung up the phone.

Gwen smiled knowing her agent was right. Once a child was born, there was no turning back. Even at the magical age of eighteen, they still clung to their parents. Keegan would have a baby and the responsibility was past the age of eighteen. Then there was college, careers and weddings to think about. Gwen felt uncomfortable for a moment. If she and Keegan would get back together, she would soon be a parent. To a child who depend on them for everything. Was she ready for that? Was she even ready to have a relationship with Keegan? She wasn't ready the first time they got together, why would she be ready the second time? Probably not, but she didn't care.

Gwen went to her bedroom and grabbed the receiver from the cordless next to the bed. She punched in Keegan's house number and waited. After three rings, she heard a breathy "Hello." Keegan voice on the other end.

"Hi!" Gwen said a smile on her face as soon as she heard Keegan's voice. "Am I interrupting?"

"I was just getting into the house." Keegan said as she could be heard closing a door. "Snow has been falling most of the day. You were lucky to get out."

"I got stuck in Chicago for a few hours." Gwen said. "If I was to get stuck somewhere I'd rather it be in Detroit with you."

"O'Hare or with friends, I'm glad we rate." Keegan laughed on the other end. "Did you get in okay?"

"Yes. My mother was at the house when I got home. I wasn't happy about that." Gwen explained. "Did you happen to call and leave me a message?"

"I did. Did you listen to them?" Keegan had call Gwen as soon as she stepped inside the terminal. She dialed Gwen's house to leave her a message about how great it was to see her and how she hoped they stay in touch. The second message was to see if she made it home alright.

"No, Connie erased them. You said you left me a message about being ill. Do you know if I was out of town when you did that?"

"You played in Atlanta that afternoon so I will say I believe you were out of town." Keegan paused. "What's going on Gwen?"

"Connie erased your messages." Gwen huffed. "And I don't think it's the first time, she has done it." Gwen thought about what else her mother could have done.

"I wouldn't worry about Connie, she is harmless." Keegan never got along with Connie. Gwen's mother tested her patience. Christopher and Molly were the best parental figures Gwen had. Keegan loved the older couple. She learned from Shannon they had both passed a few years ago.

"Hannah says hello. Also, umm..." Gwen hesitated. "She's been calls for you. People have been asking about you. Hannah's says if you would like her to be your rep, she would sign with you."

"No thanks. I'm not into interviews."

"SNN wants me to get an exclusive with you." Gwen said as she leaned against her headboard and crossed her feet at her ankles.

"I don't do interviews."

"I know. I know." Gwen replied. "I just wanted to give you a heads up in case they come a knocking."

"Thank you." Keegan said. "But I'm not doing an interview. I'm old news Gwen. No one cares what happened to me."

"You are so wrong." Gwen shook her head and wondered if Keegan even knew what an impact she had on people's lives. "Wrong on so many levels Keegan."

Chapter 17

The lights from the two story colonial home illuminated the neighborhood. The large circular driveway was filled with car after car. BMWs sat next to a Nissan 4x4. When the rented black Lexus pulled down the street, Gwen knew immediately what house the party was at. She looked for Keegan's black Jeep Liberty but did not see it. The invitation to attend a formal dinner party at the home of Danielle Martin was received by Hannah three weeks ago. The event was a sampling of the menu from Velocity, a soon to be opened restaurant. Danny was close friends with the chef and owner. Apparently, the women who owned Velocity were a couple, Deb was the chef and Hope ran the business side of the restaurant. Not sure why Danny sent the invite to Hannah, but it was smart of the CEO of Martin Industries. If the invitation went to her home, it could be weeks before Gwen even saw it, let alone opened the mail. She left Detroit two weeks ago traveling to San Diego for an appearance then back to Boston for an appearance as a guest on the HGTV show "De-Construction Homes." The home segment had the crews refurbishing a burnt out house. Celebrities assisted in salvaging pieces and parts from old homes and giving the material new life in another home. Gwen earned a few splinters and got a healthy dose of hard work. As part of the construction crew, she removed window frames, cupboards and doors from the partially burnt out home. With a little elbow grease and a coat of paint or varnish the materials were restored into useable resources for another house. Her proudest movement was when she took a solid oak interior door which had been charred in a fire and restored it to a beautiful showpiece which the designer placed as the front door.

The physical labor kept her busy and she needed that. Since reuniting with Keegan, her brain had been swirling with thoughts of the brown haired blue eyed woman. Memories of the morning after the game still gave her the warm feeling in the pit of her stomach. She woke with Keegan wrapped in her arms. It wasn't the first time she had work with Keegan in her arms, but it was the first time she felt as if she had come home. Her heart pounded against her chest. When they settled in the bed and Keegan leaned over kissing her good night, she didn't know what to do. She didn't want to scare Kee, but she didn't want to the moment to go by unnoticed. After debating with her internal voice, she flipped and flopped for a few minutes. Finally she pulled Keegan into her arms and held her through the night. In the morning, she found she was afraid to move, afraid to let the dark haired woman go. When Keegan did stir, Gwen loosened her grasp and waited for the fall out of the morning after. Instead, Keegan gave her a little smile and murmured something about a dream. She cuddled closer to Gwen and let her hand rest lightly on Gwen's stomach. She wanted to pull Keegan to her kiss her soundly on the mouth and put the past behind them. Yet, if she did that, she had the chance that Keegan would totally reject her. There was too much to lose. She didn't want one kiss, or one night of Keegan sleeping in her

arms. She wanted a million kisses and a million nights with the woman cuddling next to her. She wanted the relationship back and was willing to take the time and make the effort to get Keegan in her life. Small steps, as Bobby advised. She needed to let Keegan take the lead. She didn't want to scare the Physical Therapist away.

Talking on the phone with Keegan on an almost daily basis she knew what her schedule was. Keegan talked about her plans to attend the dinner party Danny was hosting. After a couple of references to the Saturday night dinner party, Gwen knew Keegan was excited about attending. Still not sure of her schedule, Gwen had hoped shooting would wrap before Saturday. When she told Keegan she was going to Boston to be on the HDTV show, the brunette seemed a bit jealous.

"Next time, I promise you can be on the show with me." Gwen had confessed as she lay across the hotel bed. They had fallen into a routine since reconnecting. Sharing daily phone calls almost mirroring their early dating years when Keegan lived in Michigan. They talked for hours about their days, about what they found as personal joys. An interesting turn was Keegan's perspective on life. Keegan had always been in a hurry. Her life was rushed and there wasn't enough time. The Keegan of today spoke of simple things, like the flowers blooming in garden beds of her yard or the progress of one of her patients. Gwen could hear the smile in her voice as the therapist talked her work. She was seeing a different side of the partner she once had. She had become a patient, caring woman who took time to enjoy life. A prime example was Keegan taking Andy to the Museum of Natural History for the dinosaurs exhibit. The story about the little boy being scared of the large T-Rex exhibit had Gwen in tears.

Circling the rented Lexus, Gwen found a parking spot on the street across from the large home. A quick glance at her reflection in the rearview mirror made her sigh. She had stopped at Bobby's to freshen up before she went to the Danny's. Bobby was out of town for a weekend game in Baltimore and in Washington DC. There was a note sitting on the kitchen table.

Gwen,

Sorry I missed you. If things go well I expect you'll be moving soon. Remember what I said small steps. Little victories. She loves you. She needs to trust you again. Keep me posted.

Love,

Bobby

She knew the hockey player was right. She wanted this so badly, she would push until she got her way. This wasn't her decision. Keegan had said they needed to get their friendship back. They had been friends. Great friends before Gwen would let the relationship escalate to the next level. Once she caved to her desire to be closer to Keegan, she was even willing to forgo the captain of the team role. Their teammates knew what had happened between the two players and agreed to have Gwen continue to be captain of the National team. The couple never let their relationship travel on to the playing field. On occasion, a celebration could have been

misconstrued as being a bit more touchy feely, but there was nothing more than an instant high from scoring a goal.

Flipping down the vanity mirror of the rental car, Gwen checked her make-up and her hair. Dressed in a gold and brown toned blouse, with a pair of oatmeal color chinos wrapped with a decorative belt and brown boots, she slipped from the car and tried to brush the wrinkles out of her outfit. The front door was open with the glass storm door letting the lights filter out on to the cement apron. Gwen stepped up to the front door and debated to knock or just walk in. The loud noises coming for the home's interior confirmed that a knock would not be heard. Just as Gwen entered the foyer, Danny appeared in the hallway. A large toothy smile lit up the red heads face.

"You survived." The red head took in the freshly pampered blonde. She smiled, happy that Gwen took her up on the invitation.

"Yes, but it was grueling hot and sweaty."

"That sounds promising." A tall dark haired woman appeared behind Danny. "Holy.."

"Please Robin, shush. I need this to be a very discreet." Danny commented as she turned to the tall woman who stood at her shoulder. "There isn't any need to blow this out of proportion. Deb and Hope don't know." She turned her attention back to Gwen "I didn't tell anyone."

"Neither did I. The schedule for DeCon was a little off. I knew I wanted to be here, but I have to pay the bills." Gwen moved forward and gave Danny a hug. "Is she here?" Gwen whispered in her ear. She wanted to see Keegan badly. Her quick stop at Bobby's let her primp to look her best for Kee. She knew her slacks hugged her body and purposely left the buttons on her blouse open to reveal more cleavage than normal. She was now having second thoughts as the woman behind Danny was checking her out.

"Yes. Meg is here too."

"Really?" Gwen watched her redhead closely for any reaction to the youngest Garry girl being in town.

"Seems like she is here every weekend." Danny blushed slightly. "She's moving home soon. According to Ash, she is transitioning between clubs."

"Good to know." Gwen smiled a little brighter as the red head nodded. "Are you okay with her moving back?"

"It's complicated." Danny glanced over her shoulder to the woman standing a few feet away. "Let me introduce you. Robin Frost...Gwen Lerner." Danny let the women exchange hand shakes. "Robin is an attorney. So you are warned."

"So what are you doing now?" The attorney asked, giving the red head a smirk. She was obviously not happy that Danny had given away her occupation.

"Good question." Gwen said as she pondered her current employment situation. The burden of what her next career move would be weighed heavily on her. "I'm figuring that out." The look the attorney gave the hostess made Gwen a little leery of who was attending this dinner.

"At least let her in the door before you start cross examination." Danny pushed Robin into the other room giving her directive to. "Go bother someone else." Gwen breathed a little easier when the tall dark haired attorney left them alone.

"Good trip?"

"This is the best part of it so far." Gwen nervously pushed a piece of her hair behind her ear. She felt the wave of butterflies swarming in her stomach. She wanted to see Keegan. She glanced nervously over Danny's shoulder.

"She's in the den." Danny gave her a small smile. "She doesn't know you were invited." Danny took Gwen by the elbow and led her further into the house. Gwen felt the beads of sweat run between her shoulder blades. Stretching her fingers out on at her sides, she let the stress go for a moment. As she walked into the den, her brown eyes were immediately drawn to the dark haired woman with azure eyes. Keegan's figure was silhouetted by the fire as fingers of light flickered over her bright blue blouse and black slacks. Gwen took a tentative step in the room, interrupting the group's conversation. A mousey haired fair skinned woman stopped speaking as Gwen entered. From her vantage point, Gwen watched as Keegan's attention turned from the woman to the doorway.

Time stood still for Keegan as the familiar figure entered the room. She had been fooled many times before by the same apparition. If Nancy hadn't stopped talking, she would wonder if she wasn't dreaming again. A bright smile crossed Gwen's face as she continued to move towards Keegan. With her heart in her throat, Keegan realized Gwen was actually here. As soon as the blonde got close enough, Keegan felt cocooned by strong toned arms wrapped around her neck and waist. The warm from Gwen's body permeated her senses. She leaned into the warmth. The greeting she had meant to utter was caught in her throat.

"Surprise." Gwen whispered softly as her lips grazed closely to Keegan's ear. "I didn't want to say anything because I wasn't sure I'd make it."

"Gwen." Keegan let the name slip from her lips. Her body temperature was sky rocketing and an involuntary shudder ran through her limbs. She wasn't prepared to see the blonde. She didn't have time to prepare. Taken totally off guard, she took in Gwen's scent, the sweet smell of jasmine and savored the feel of her body pressed lightly against her.

"Hey." Gwen pulled back to look into watery blue pools. "Are you okay?"

"Surprised." Keegan stepped back and swiped at her eyes. "Pregnant, emotional." Keegan offered a lame excuse. "I can't believe you didn't tell me. Where is Danny? Wait 'til I see that."

"No, I made her promise." Gwen's eyes danced over her body. Keegan immediately felt the weight of the baby and feeling large. She knew she looked horrible. The expression on her face must have conveyed her insecurities. "What?"

"I look atrocious." Keegan confessed as her hand passed over her womb.

"You're glowing and I've never seen anyone more..." Gwen never finished her thought as she was suddenly aware of the audience around them.

"You're being nice." Keegan said, then abruptly turned to the women she had been speaking with. "Let me introduce you. Gwen this is Hope Summers and Nancy Masters." Both women extended their hands in greeting. Keegan felt the heat on her face as Gwen's arm gently brushed against her breast. She knew she needed to keep a safe distance if she wanted remain in control of her emotions.

The small frown on Keegan's face made Gwen question if her presence was welcome. Maybe she had brought a date. The two women she was speaking with were pleasant, but neither looked as if they were on a date with Keegan. The large diamond ring sitting on Hope's finger and Danny mentioning the name in connection to the restaurant let Gwen know this was not a romantic interest. The other woman seemed a bit taken back by the greeting they exchanged.

"You and your partner own the restaurant." The personal knowledge Gwen shared had Hope beaming with a smile. "Danny says the food is superior."

"Deb would be on cloud nine if she knew you were here. She is such a fan. Oh we have to have you and Bob to the restaurant opening." Hope's ideas flew from one promotion to another. "You can't let Deb know, she'll burn the food."

"I'd love to be there. I can't speak for Bobby." Gwen was suddenly aware of the physical space Keegan created between them. "What do you say Keegan, do you think you could accompany me to the opening of the restaurant?"

"We'll see." Keegan felt the blood rush across her chest, up her neck and to her face. She tried to avoid looking Gwen in the eyes but she knew she was being watched by fawn colored eyes.

"How was the shoot?"

"Fun, but a lot of work. I got a few splinters." Gwen held up her hand for Keegan's inspection. There were at least half a dozen cuts and scratches. An ugly splinter was still festering under her finger nail. "I tried to get it out a couple of times, but those worthless plastic twisters were too big to fit under my fingernail."

"Gwen, that needs to come out." Keegan grabbed her by the hand and tugged her to the second floor.

Keegan reached the master bedroom and walked into the master bath. "Danny probably has some tweezers in here. The other bathrooms are pretty empty." Keegan stopped short having Gwen run into her backside.

"This house is huge for one person." Gwen said as she took in the multiple rooms on the second floor. She had been into the den and in the foyer. She really wanted to see what the kitchen and dinning room looked like.

"Danny is from a big family. She wanted to make sure she had enough room in case her parents needed to come and live with her. She designed the house also." Keegan pointed to the commode and made Gwen sit on the closed lid. "Danny leaves her self open to people to use her. Sometimes I wonder how a person can be so smart yet so dumb."

"I met the lawyer downstairs." Gwen said as she watched Keegan search through the medicine cabinet. "Are they dating?"

"If you are referring to Frosty, I don't think dating is in her vocabulary. She has acquaintances. Danny's been spending time with her, but I wouldn't categorize it as dating." Keegan pulled out what she found, a pair of metal tweezers, a bottle of peroxide and needle.

"See if there are matches in that drawer." Keegan set the items on a clean towel for a moment and stepped into the master bedroom. Bringing a small seat back into the bathroom with her, Keegan set it in front of Gwen. "It's a little cozy." She settled on the seat and pulled Gwen's hand into her. "I can't believe you didn't have someone look at this."

"I was in a hurry. I wanted to get here." Gwen winced as Keegan touched the infected area. "Ouch."

"No kidding. It's infected." Keegan placed a towel under Gwen hand and poured the peroxide on to it.

"Damn." Gwen tried to pull her hand away. "That stings. I think you are enjoying this a little too much." She saw the corners of Keegan's mouth turn up in a small smirk. The chocolate haired woman was enjoying the pain she inflicted. "Just remember, pay backs."

"Can you light a match?" Gwen did as instructed. Keegan held the end of the needle in the flame for a few seconds. "Don't burn yourself?" Gwen pulled back the match and blew it out just before the flame licked her fingers.

"Would you kiss it if I did?" The blush that crept into Keegan's cheeks was the only answer Gwen received.

"Are you staying at Bobby's?" Keegan knew the Motors were out of town for a weekend series.

"I was wondering if I could stay with you." Gwen whispered quietly. "Unless, you don't have room with Meg in town and all." She fidgeted nervously she should have just stayed at Bobby's.

Pushing Keegan was going to have the brunette putting the brakes on. "I'd like to spend time with you." Gwen lifted her brown eyes to meet Keegan's wide open sky blue ones.

"I'd like that." Keegan said quietly as she let the needle cool down. "This is going to be gross. So if you are still squeasmish, look at the wall."

"I'd rather look at you." Gwen reached up and touched her uninjured hand to Keegan's face. "What would you categorize us as?" Gwen felt her stiffen.

"We're friends Gwen." With that, Keegan lanced the infected area. She heard the hiss from her patient as she cleaned away the infected cells. She poured the peroxide on the wound. "We're friends who are trying to get to know each other again."

"Will you tell me if we get beyond that point?" Gwen smiled. Keegan nodded her head. She didn't want to answer aloud. She was afraid that her voice would reveal her feelings. She thought they were beyond that point now, but she didn't want to change the dynamic of their relationship. She needed to make certain Gwen was serious about having a relationship with her. She wasn't about to open her heart and get hurt by the blonde again. She flushed the cut and dried it with a part of the towel.

"You may want to have it air out or put some Neosporin on it with a band-aid." Keegan slid the seat back and stood up. "I think you'll make it."

"Thanks." Gwen held up her finger and stared at the ugly mark. "So how many people are here?"

"You're nine, but Deb doesn't eat. She cooks and lets us enjoy. I think she samples as she cooks just to make sure everything is perfect."

"That good?"

"That great."

Returning to the main floor, they mingled and socialized for awhile. Gwen was getting the majority of the attention. When Keegan saw the busty blonde approaching Gwen, she knew Kelly Davis had set her sights on the soccer player. Kelly flashed Gwen her brightest smile. The blonde had been thrilled to meet Gwen and let her know it at every turn. Keegan realized she was becoming jealous as Kelly laid her hand on Gwen's forearm. She actually felt the hair on the back of her neck rise. Catching her reaction before she did something stupid, she excused herself from the group and sought the solitude of the sunroom. She sat on the davenport for a moment, watching the lights from the house dance on the spring lawn. This was her favorite place in Danny's house. She would sit here for hours letting the sunlight warm her body.

"Are you hiding in the dark?" Meghan didn't bother with the lights as she stepped into small room.

"Kinda." Keegan said as she sister sat down next to her. She knew she should give into her feelings for Gwen but there was something nagging at the back of her mind. She didn't want a few days here and there with Gwen. She wanted what they had had. If she could step back in time and call Gwen back into her hospital room and forget about everything else, they wouldn't be in the situation they were now.

"She's not interested in Kelly." Meghan quietly said as she touched her sister's thigh. Keegan leaned into her sister's shoulder. "I thought you wanted to get back together with her. She seems to be trying. Or she likes visiting Detroit. This is the second time she has been here in a month."

"I thought you were against me getting back together with her." Keegan felt the sting of tears in her eyes.

"You know when you were with Gwen, you were so happy. I was jealous of your relationship. I wanted to find that. After the leukemia, I thought Gwen was the most selfish person in the world to walk away from you." Meghan wrapped an arm around her sister's shoulder. "She's back Keegan. She's back and I don't think she is going away."

"I'm scared she'll leave me. If I let her in and she leaves, I can't take that Meg." Keegan confessed.

"Can you handle her being with someone else? And I'm not talking about Bobby." Meghan ran her hand along her sister's back. "It's not easy to see someone you care about with someone else. Believe me I know." The heaviness in Meghan's voice was evident. "Give her a chance Kee." From their vantage point in the sunroom, they were able to see across the house and into the living room. Danny was standing close to Robin, the attorney's arm casually draped around her waist. "Don't do what I've done."

"What have you done?" Keegan asked wondering what thoughts were going through her sister's head.

"Nothing and everything. That's the problem." Meghan's cryptic answer hung in the air for a few moments. Keegan was about to push her sister to answer.

"Ladies, dinner is served." Danny announced as a server appeared from the kitchen's swinging door. The siblings looked at each other.

"We'll talk about it later." Meghan elbowed Keegan's side. "Come on let's eat." They stood up and started towards the dining room.

"Meg, Gwen's staying at my place." Keegan wrapped an arm around her sister's slim waist wondering when Meg has lost weight.

"But there is nothing going on between you." Meghan mirrored her sister's hug.

"We're friends."

"Keep telling yourself that and maybe you'll believe it." Meghan said as she squeezed her waist.

The large table was covered with a white linen cloth. Eight china settings were set-up as the guests began to gather in the dinning room. Noticeably absent was Ashley. When Gwen asked Keegan about her sister, mischievous blue eyes looked at her. "Did you read the invitation?" Gwen shook her head. Hannah had received the invitation and passed the information along. Keegan laughed a little. "Ashley isn't here because this is a lesbian only party. You maybe able to get away with the "bi-thing" but believe me you'll have the Detroit lesbian community talking for awhile."

"I only care about what one person thinks in this community." Gwen said as she pulled out the chair for Keegan. Taking the chair next to her, Gwen settled down. "Besides, I am a lesbian. You should know that." Gwen leaned closer so her statement was for Keegan's ears only.

"I'm sure there are a number of women who would like to verify your status. You look like you may have a few offers tonight." Keegan referred to the earlier flirtations of Kelly as she lifted her eyes to the blonde seated across from Gwen.

"Again, I only care about what you think." Gwen sat down and scooted her seat closer to the table. Keegan avoided the comment as she turned to her sister at the head of the table. Meg sat on the opposite end of the table, directly across from Danny. She could see a flicker of sadness in Meghan's eyes. One day, she would get the story behind what was happening between Meghan and Danny.

"Tonight's service will be a five course meal. At each of these small sittings, we are trying out different menus. It will give us an idea of what works and what doesn't." Hope explained. A female server appeared with eight steaming bowls of a warm summer squash soup as the first course. Hope continued as she portioned a spoonful for consumption. "We had a service at Doctor Ford's house. Different menu but the group gave us some good feedback."

"I talked to Jonathan and he was raving about the food." Keegan said as she lifted a spoonful to her lips. "God, this is great." She heard a small chuckle at her side. Knowing Gwen was making fun of her, she elbowed her in the side.

"Hey." Gwen said as she eyed the spilled dollop on the table cloth. Each guest enjoying the savory soup as spoons clanked against the dish.

The first course was cleared and the second course of a cucumber radish salad with a vinaigrette dressing was served. Gwen relished the third course, a seared sea scallop with a black truffle pudding sauce. She scraped her plate, not wanting to let any of the creamy sauce go to waste.

"Do you advertise as a gay restaurant?" Gwen asked bringing the table to a stand still.

"I wouldn't say a gay restaurant but we are trying to cater to people who are like us." Hope stated. "Have a restaurant where every one is welcome. Some place where everyone can feel comfortable with the surroundings." The door swung open and a tall curly haired woman walked

in with a white cap on the top of her head. The white uniform she had on had small smudges of color across it.

"Okay, Tami keeps saying Gwen Lerner was here and I told her she was full of it." Deb Logan declared. She stopped in her tracks as her gaze settled on Gwen. "Oh."

Gwen pushed her chair out and walked towards the chef.

"You have a very honest employee. It's a pleasure to meet you." Gwen extended her hand. "I was told not to let you know I was here because."

"You'd freak out." Hope finished her thought.

"Thank you. I hope you enjoy. I hope you all enjoy, but I want honest feedback. We need to know." Deb nervously wiped her hands on the apron. "I guess the tabloids were right. You're a lesbian, right?"

"She didn't read the invitation." Keegan added with a small smirk.

"My agent did." Gwen explained. "Yes, I am." She smiled as the Melissa Etheridge song title came out unexpectedly followed by an awkward silence around the table. The women at the table digested the declaration from the former Olympian until the main entrée of pan seared duck with Clementine and Tomatillo sauce and a wild rice risotto came out of the kitchen. Moans of satisfaction came from around the table as the course was savored by all the guests.

"God, I am stuffed." Gwen leaned back and placed her hands on her expanding stomach rubbing small circles.

"There is still dessert." Hope grinned as she looked at the satisfied grin on Gwen's face. Tami came in with the last course, Crème Brûlée. Kelly broached the subject of Gwen's relationship with Bobby.

"What about Bob?" Kelly asked as a rumble of laughter was emerging from around the table. "I know 'What about Bob'?" Kelly knew the group was laughing about the Bill Murray movie.

"Bob and I are friends, very good friends." Gwen said as she tried to look at the baby blues, but Keegan looked else where. She turned to see Meghan staring at her intently.

"Who was the woman in the photo?" Robin asked as the focus of the room turned towards Gwen. Keegan shifted nervously in her seat. The picture from Provincetown was sore subject with her. She had always thought the tabloids stole a part of her memory by creating a media sensation around the darkened photo. She remember their vacation together as long walks along the beach, a few careless jaunts down Commercial Street and nights of making love under a star filled sky.

"It was my girlfriend." Gwen quietly said. She dared not to look towards Keegan. She knew if she did her expression would reveal too much.

"Really, I find that interesting. Since you were in total denial in the press, why didn't you admit that it was your girlfriend?" Robin's inquiry sounded like a cross examination.

"We weren't together when the photos came out. They were a couple of years old." Gwen started she put her hands on her thighs to rub away the sweat. "There was no need to cause her unwanted publicity."

"So you did it to protect your ex-girlfriend or yourself?" Robin challenged again.

"Why don't you leave her alone Frost?" Meghan raised her voice in objection to Robin's picking on Gwen. A shocked Gwen looked over at the younger Garry. "She was aware of who was in the photo. What business is it of the press to push someone to out themselves?"

"The entire night, you've been mopping around and bitching. Now you are defending Gwen." Robin took a drink of her wine. "You're a piece of work, Meghan."

"Robin please let it go." Danny interjected trying to defuse the situation. Danny noticed the vein pulsing at Meghan's neck line. She knew the stubborn woman would bait the attorney into a corner. "Please for me." Danny slipped her hand on to Robins and gave a light squeeze.

"I'm sorry if I over stepped my bounds." Robin apologized to Gwen. Danny lifted her silver eyes to Meghan's. When Meg's shifted to Robin, their eyes met in a silent battle, assuring each other the war was not over. Suddenly Keegan pushed her chair back and excused herself from the table.

"I didn't mean to upset Keegan." Robin said as the truth dawned on her. "Keegan is your ex."

"Come on Frost." Meghan began to rise when Gwen placed a hand on her arm.

"Let me go." Gwen's voice calmed the younger sibling for the moment. "Give us a few minutes." Gwen set her linen napkin on her seat. Her brown eyes caught the surprised blues of the attorney giving her a hard look.

"I would have never guessed. Keegan never talks about her relationships." Robin's guilty conscience had her speaking out loud.

"Did you ever think there was a fucking reason behind that?" Meghan got up from the table. She threw her napkin down on the table. Lowering her head for a moment, Meghan lifted her eyes to meet Danny's. "Danielle, I'm going to leave now before I do something I regret. Ladies, have a pleasant evening." Meghan walked towards the front entrance.

"Damn it Robin." Danny said as she got up and followed Meghan outside. The night air had turned cooler. Trying to stop a fleeing Meghan was a task. Danny ran half the block to catch up with her. Her heavy puffs floated in the night air as Danny reached the van Meghan was escaping in.

Meghan stood for a moment at the door of Ashley's van. She was over dealing Robin Frost for the evening. When Robin turned her sights to scrutinize Gwen, Meghan had enough. The attorney spent most of the evening bragging about her latest victory or placing a possessive hand on Danny every time Meg walked in the room. Danny sent out invitations to all the women. It wasn't as if Robin was asked as a date. The attorney received the invitation just like the other guests.

"Meghan wait!" Danny was running down the sidewalk towards her. Meghan lowered her head and waited for Danny to reach her. "I'm so sorry."

Meghan sat silent for a few moments then turned her tear filled blue eyes towards Danny. "How can you date her?" Meghan asked in frustration. Robin made certain Meghan was aware of her plans for Danielle later that evening. The slick attorney stood behind Meg as she watched Danny from a distance. *"You can look Garry, but remember I'm the one she'll be fucking later."* Frost had hissed in her ear, then went to Danielle side placing a possessive arm around her waist. All night long, Frost's words invaded her thoughts. Maybe if she moved home, she'd have a chance to explore the attraction. Her plan was ruined if Frost was already seeing Danny.

"I'm not. Why do you ask that?"

"All night long, Robin's been baiting me, making small comments to me about being with you." Meg looked up at the stars shining down on them in the dark sky. "I can handle her picking on me, but not Keegan and Gwen. My sister has done nothing to deserve the shitty hand life has dealt her. The last thing she needs is a pompous lawyer rehashing old shit." Meghan put her hands to her face. "I'm sorry Danny. I'm sorry." Meghan leaned against the door. She felt the load of emotions fall on to her shoulders.

"Meghan, come back to the house." Danny reached up and touched Meghan's upper arm.

"Why Danielle? Why should I go back in there and be nice to a woman who is purposely trying to bait me and Gwen and hurt Keegan? Let alone watch her grope you all night as if you were some prize." Meghan lowered her voice. The lawyer didn't let Danny out of her sight for more than a minute.

"She isn't groping me." Danny defended Robin, knowing full well, she was annoyed by the attorney's constant touches. She felt Meg's eyes on her all night. Every time she met Meg's eyes, she was transported back to Ashley's house and the kiss they shared. She thought about that kiss many times. She thought about where it would lead and what it would feel like to be intimate with Meg.

"Danny, stop defending her." Meghan went to open the car door and found it locked. In frustration, she blurted out. "I can't believe you're sleeping with her."

"What? I'm not sleeping with Frost." Danny looked stunned.

"Than why did she tell me she was going to fuck you tonight?" Danny cringed and stepped away. The sting of Meghan's comment hurt. Meghan wiped a tear away and turned towards Danny. "Do you know what that does to me? Inside," She placed a hand on her chest. "To know that you are sleeping with Frost?"

"Meg, I'm not sleeping with her." Danny reached out and placed a hand on Meghan's cheek. Guiding Meghan to meet at her eyes, Danny continued. "I haven't slept with anyone since Dory." Danny confessed. She hadn't been interested in anyone since she shared the kiss with Meghan under the mistletoe. "I've gone to dinner with her but it was a work related dinner. Not a date."

"Then why? Why would she say that?"

"Maybe she wants to date me. I invited her because she is thinking of investing in the restaurant. Hope and Deb are looking for investors. Frost can help them." Danny was stepping closer to the line she said she would never cross. Meghan's presence tonight was driving her crazy. She followed her with her eyes all night. Every time Robin touched her, she was jostled out of her dream state. "She's probably jealous."

"Jealous?" Meghan's voice hitched.

"Yes jealous." Danny's voice dropped to a whisper. "Jealous because I can't keep my eyes off you tonight. I'm tired of fighting my feelings for you Meg. I'm tired of being jealous of the women you are seeing."

"I'm not seeing anyone." Meghan's eyes went to Danny's mouth, her full lips the color of roses and as soft as petals.

"What about Valentines Day?"

"I went to Denver to see my friend Sky. We went skiing and that was about it. We're friends Danny." Meghan gave a small shy smile. "I didn't tell my sisters on purpose."

"Trying to make me jealous?"

"Did it work?" Meghan felt Danny's hands slid on her waist. "You didn't look happy to see me at the hockey game." Danny's proximity was throwing her system into havoc.

"You need to understand that I wasn't expecting to see you. You threw me for a loop." Danny chuckled. "I can intimidate the hell out of CEO of Fortune 500 Company. Meghan, you scare the crap out of me."

"Good." Meghan slowly lifted her lips to met Danny's. A sweet simple kiss, small touches of lips against lips. Meghan wrapped her hand in Danny's hair and pulled her closer as she deepened the contact. When Danny's mouth opened against her probing tongue, Meghan felt as if she were whole again. Danny's body pressed against her as the kiss deepened. Meghan felt the hard coldness of the van on her back. She must have jumped from the cold because Danny backed

away quickly. Their laughing eyes met quickly. "It's cold." Meghan rubbed the spot which touched against the vehicle. Her blue eyes danced over Danny's face. "Can I see you tomorrow?"

"Come back to the house Meg."

"No." Meghan shook her head. "I'll do something stupid." The small smile was back. "If you want Frost to invest, you better not have us in the same room."

"Then come back after everyone leaves."

"Are you sure?" Meg asked. The answer Meghan got was Danny pressing their lips together again. Meghan placed her hands around Danny's neck and pulled her closer. Under her hands she felt the muscular shoulder shiver. She realized Danielle had followed her out of the house without a jacket. The silk blouse she wore was thin. Ending the kiss, she rubbed her hands up and down Danny's back. "Go back to your guests. I'll be back." Danny nodded as she backed away.

"Can you tell Keegan to call my cell if she needs a ride?" Meghan started her car. As she was about to pull away she rolled down the window. Danny stood on the sidewalk her arms wrapped around her torso for warmth. "Danny, I..." Meg's voice faltered for a moment. "I'll see you later." She drove off leaving Danielle standing on the sidewalk on a cool April evening.

The back door had just closed as Gwen entered the Great room. She followed quickly through the closing door. "Keegan!" She hollered causing the brunette to pause. "Please Keegan." Gwen quickly ran to catch up with her. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?" Keegan wiped the tears away. Her frustration with Robin and Kelly boiled over until she didn't know what to do.

"Because you're upset and it's my fault." Gwen felt the chill of the night air. She knew Keegan had to be freezing.

"Did you publish the photos?"

"No!" Gwen nearly shouted.

"Then there is nothing you should apologize for. I hate..." Keegan paused as she tried to compose her emotions. "Our trip, our vacation, was so much more to me than a photo. Every time I see or think about the tabloids I hate that it ruins that memory."

"What do you think about?" Gwen's voice dropped as she suddenly remembered the week they spent on the cape. She remembered walking along the beach, searching the bay at low tide for interesting creatures, and dancing close with Keegan under the stars. When tear filled blue eyes looked up into brown eyes, Gwen knew she was thinking of the same memories. She wanted to take Keegan in her arms and take away her pain. "I never wanted to hurt you."

"You didn't hurt me." Keegan quietly said as she rubbed the cold away from her arms. "For the first time, I understand what you did and why." Keegan lifted her head to get a better look at the stars. "I was really sick at that time." Keegan paused as she remembered the treatment regiment she was enduring.

"I wish..." Gwen started. She pulled Keegan into her arms and she pressed her lips to Keegan's. Gwen's lips were soft and caring. Their meeting was full of the need to comfort. Keegan melted into Gwen's body bringing the couple into full contact. Their lips met again. Gwen let her mouth open slightly. She wanted to be back with Keegan. This was her home. Keegan held her heart. She wanted to taste and savor Keegan's essence. Her memory of previous kisses faded in comparison to this kiss. Gwen wanted more, so much more.

"I can't." Keegan pulled away quickly, afraid to let Gwen know her feelings. Keegan pressed her face into Gwen's shoulder. She was scared of feeling too much for Gwen. Scared Gwen would leave her. She knew her heart would break again and this time, she doubted she would survive.

"I'm not going away." Gwen sighed into her Keegan's hair. "I'll never make that mistake again." Her hand gently stroking Keegan's back. She wanted to protect the smaller woman.

"We should get back." Keegan stepped away from Gwen. She needed to separate. Get some distance between them. Gwen nodded. When Gwen reached for her hand, Keegan did not protest. She felt their fingers intertwine and loved the strength she felt between them. Settling back in her seat, Keegan lifted her eyes to the table.

"My apologies." Keegan said in a soft voice. "Where's Meghan?" Her blue eyes sought out Danny's silver eyes.

"She left." Danny's voice quickly responded. "If you need a ride, she said to call her cell later." The redhead looked down at her plate for a moment. Keegan had the distinct feeling that there was more than going on than Meghan or Danny would tell her.

"Well, I'm intrigued about your relationship." Robin stated as she took a sip of Chablis. "Seriously, I had no idea that you even dated." The smug look that flashed across the attorney's face did not sit well with Keegan. "What happened?"

"Nothing to be intrigued by Robin." Keegan said quietly. "Things just didn't work out." The attorney was going to push. The thing about Frost was she never let anything go.

"I was unfaithful and I fucked up." Gwen stated bluntly. The table was quiet for a moment. Gwen held the eyes of the attorney. "You may think you're playing this game with me, but I'm too old for this shit. I fucked up a great relationship and I missed out on five years of Keegan's life. I'm not going to let someone like you belittle what I once had. If this is how you find enjoyment, I feel sad for you." Gwen squeezed Keegan's thigh in reassurance.

The tension in the room was broken when the chef, Deb, entered the room. Her presence was greeted by a standing ovation. Sweeping her hat from her head, she bowed gracefully. She went to Hope's side and kissed her partner on the mouth before settling in Megan's chair.

"How can you do this? If Keegan cooked like this I'd be huge." Gwen grinned knowing she was walking a thin line.

"Are you back together?" Kelly asked knowing her chances with the Olympian were demising by the minute.

"No." Keegan said.

"Yes." Gwen corrected her ignoring the blazing blue eyes boring into her. Gwen leaned back in her chair and caught the amused look on Danny's face.

"That's as clear as mud." The hostess said as she ate the spoonful of her Crème Brûlée. Gwen laughed at her comment and was immediately slapped on the thigh. "Tonight is definitely an interesting night."

The table was cleared and the invitation for wine was extended. Most of the women declined. Kelly and Nancy mentioned heading to The Angle for some dancing. Deb, exhausted from cooking and scribbling notes all evening, was looking forward to some down time with her partner at home. Danny walked her departing guests to the door. She watched as Gwen helped Keegan with her jacket. The pair was still a mystery to her. She had seen them interact and with the curve ball of a conversation echoing in her head, she wasn't sure what to make of them. Were they a couple or were they just friends? All night long, she was waiting for someone to yell April Fool's. Instead, Meg left annoyed. Frost was clinging to her like a dryer sheet. Gwen and Keegan had different answers to the question of if they were dating.

"Thank you for the invite." Gwen said as she gave Danny a hug and a kiss on the cheek. They held on to each other for a moment. "Everything will work out." Gwen whispered in her ear.

"You don't know the half of it." Danny said as she pulled back. "What about you, mommy did you enjoy your evening?"

"The food and company were fabulous!" Keegan's face turned scarlet. "I have to stop hanging with Sparky. He's wearing off on me. If you see Meg, tell her I got a ride."

"I think she was going to drown her sorrows in a beverage or two." Frost piped up from the opposite side. Danny felt Keegan's frame go tense.

"Robin, have we offended you in some way? Threatened you? Caused you grief in any way?" Keegan's voice was calm and direct. Gwen and Danny both began to fidget nervously.

"No, Keegan." The attorney shot her one of her courtroom smiles.

"Then I suggest you keep your commentary to yourself. If I know my sister, and I can honestly say I know her much better than you, she found a driving range and is hitting golf balls until her hands bleed. Unlike some people, if she is upset or frustrated, she doesn't enjoy targeting other people." Keegan moved to the door and felt Gwen's hand on the small of her back. "I know you are a very smart woman Robin, but you need to wise up as to what is really important in life."

"What is that Keegan?"

"Having people love you unconditionally." Keegan gave Danny a small smile then left. Gwen followed. They walked in silence until Keegan stopped in the middle of the drive. "Please tell me you have a car." Just as she said it, Gwen hit the button of the Lexus' lights flipped on. "Nice car. Someone is traveling in class."

"That's the only way you should travel." Gwen held open the door for Keegan then ran around the front to get in. Keegan smiled as Gwen slipped behind the wheel. "What?"

"You were a nice surprise. Thank you for that." Keegan's heart pounded against her chest. She reached across the counsel and laced her fingers with Gwen's.

"You're welcome." Gwen squeezed her fingers against Keegan's but didn't let go as she drove the car away.

Danny watched from the foyer as Gwen helped Kee into the car. Her heart soared at the sight of the building relationship between the women. It was a comfort that Keegan had found the one person in her life that was missing. When the car pulled away, she turned to look at Robin. The attorney had a strange look on her face as if she was still trying to digest Keegan's comments. "Robin." Danny got the attorney's attention. "You need to leave. I'll call you next week."

"Come on Danny. I didn't do." Robin stopped talking as silver eyes cut her way. Danny was a strong woman who challenged her in many ways. If she was going to try to salvage this night with Danny, Robin thought it best to change her tactics. She moved closer to Danny and placed her finger on her chin and lowered her lips to Danny's. Danny turned her face to receive a kiss on the cheek.

"Robin, I asked you to leave." Danny waited to see what the attorney's reaction would be. Blue eyes studied her face for a moment. After a moment a slight nod of her head and then Frost smiled.

"You really like her, don't you?" Robin ran a hand through her black hair. "I thought it was one sided, but you..." Robin waggled her finger. "If you can't get Ashley, you might as well go after the other one." The sound of Danny's hand slapping Frost's cheek echoed through the house. An angry red hand print could be seen as soon as Frost lowered the hand she had placed there.

"Good night Robin." Danny turned on her heel. Leaving her last guest on her own to leave the house. Robin rubbed her face and closed the door behind her.

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"Why did you say we are back together?" Keegan asked as she pulled the comforter of her bed back. She had been resorting to wearing Meg's t-shirts to bed. Her clothing seemed to be restricting. Tonight's attire read, *Golfers do it on the green*.

"Because I want to be." Gwen said as she came into the room. She had changed into a pair of gray flannel boxers and black tee shirt. She took in the curvy female in front of her.

"Just because you want it doesn't mean it will happen." Keegan replied. She had been on the other side of that request too many times. Carrie had expressed the same desire.

"Maybe I wanted to let Kelly know she didn't have a chance." Gwen said as she slipped into the opposite side of Keegan's bed. She waited until Keegan looked at her. When blue eyes locked with hers she smiled. "She doesn't you know."

"She can hope." Keegan climbed into bed. Turning off the light, she settled against the mattress. Trying to find a comfortable position, she turned and tossed until she felt Gwen reach for her. Scooting her back against Gwen's front, she let herself become engulfed in the blonde's arms again.

"Comfy?" Gwen whispered in her ear. A tan muscular arm was draped across her waist and lightly touched her stomach. Keegan sighed and nodded. She was very comfy, cozy and safe. "Can you tell me about your treatment?" Gwen brushed her face against Keegan's soft dark hair.

"What do you want to know?" Keegan felt her heart start to pound.

"All of it. The leukemia. What you went through? How sick you were." Gwen wiped a rolling tear from her cheek. "I missed out on five years Kee. I want to know what it was like for you during that time." Keegan pulled Gwen's fingers between her own as she turned to face the blonde. The moonlight filtered through the window to silhouette the two figures lying side by side on the bed.

"It started with a lot of tests." Keegan said softly. She watched Gwen's eyes close slowly. "I didn't know at the time what type of leukemia it was."

"What did they do to test your blood? Did they draw blood or other things?" Gwen traced the side of Keegan's face with her finger tips.

"They poke you." Keegan kissed the bandaged finger. She ran her hand along Gwen's throat. "Check the lymph nodes."

"I wish I had been there for you." Gwen could hear the pain in her voice. Being excluded from her former partner's health was hurtful.

"I didn't want you to miss out on the most important thing in your life." Keegan saw the pain her answer caused Gwen.

"I did miss out on the most important thing in my life. I missed out on you." Gwen ran the pad of her thumb over Keegan's soft sensual lips. Pools of water formed in the corners of Keegan's eyes. "I'm sorry that wasn't fair."

"Life isn't fair Gwen."

"No it's not." Gwen pulled Keegan closer and tucked her chin on top of Keegan's head as the brunette continued to fill in the details of her illness and treatment. She missed this closeness they once had. Tonight, tonight was the night, they turned the corner and put the past behind them.

Chapter 18

The downtown Atlanta skyline shimmered under the afternoon sun. A pleasant May afternoon had flowers blooming and spring in the air. Gwen had arrived in plenty of time to meet the 2 o'clock appointment. It was a shame the party she was meeting was late. For the better part of an hour, she sat staring over the city of Atlanta. The conference room sat at the top of the home of Sports News Network building located in the heart of Atlanta. The twelve story building could be seen from Interstate 75 close to the former site of the 1996 Olympic Celebrations. The structure had housed numerous companies and business over the years. Currently, it had three hotels and eight restaurants and a multitude of stores.

The administrative assistant showed her to the large conference room on the tenth floor and provided a bottle of water and a glass. She tapped her finger along the glass as condensation dripped down its side. She wondered if the executives at SNN treated all of their appointments this way. She let her mind wander to Keegan. Their future looked promising.

Unofficially, she was back with Keegan. Gwen remembered waking to the familiar feel of Keegan wrapped in her arms, their bodies pressed close together and their legs entangled. Her nose nuzzled against the dark strands of Keegan's hair, breathing in the flowers and citrus scents of Keegan's shampoo. Her hand absently stroked over the fine hair on Keegan's arm and across the rounded contours of her abdomen. Inhaling deeply, she let out a sigh of contentment, she was falling in love.

The small red-headed assistant entered the room. In her arms she carried a stack of manila folders, her curly hair rudely falling into her eyes no matter how many times she tried to push it back. "Miss Lerner," She began. "Mr. Lane will be here momentarily. I apologize for the delay." She stepped away and looked back for a moment as if she wanted to say more.

"Are you alright?" Gwen asked the woman who looked as if she had just lost her best friend.

"Yes, I just wanted to say I was sorry to heard rumors of your relationship ending. You make a very dynamic couple." The red head said quickly, conveying her sympathy. Gwen nodded.

Hannah was instructed to slowly leak information to the press regarding the couple's relationship troubles. By the time the Motors made it to the playoffs, Bobby and Gwen's relationship should be officially over. Odds makers were quickly stacking the opponents with an advantage. The bookies had the odds at 10-1 Motors would make it to the championship series. The rumors circulated about Bob going into a bout with depression.

As the redhead exited, a large balding man who had sweat pouring down his forehead entered from the hall. He barked a few words to the red head and dabbed his brow with a silk handkerchief. "I just got here." He hastily set his briefcase down on the teak finished conference table, then began to shed his blue suit coat. Swinging it off his frame and on to the back of a chair, he mumbled an apology. "Sorry to keeping you waiting, Gwen." The large man approached the blonde, extending his hand. Gwen took hold of the clammy palm and forced herself not to wipe it on the thigh of her slacks.

Kirk Lane was the Vice President of Operations for the Sports branch of SNN. The former head coach of Southern Christian Mississippi men's football program had invested in SNN during its conception and served on the board of director's for the past several years. "Jane..." He bellowed. The administrative assistant appeared at the doorway. "Diet Coke, lots of ice." He turned to Gwen. "Anything for you Miss Lerner?" Gwen shook her head and gestured towards the ice water in front of her. Kirk took a moment and settled his large frame into one of the leather high back chair as the bearings and frame squealed under his weight. Folding his hands on top of the table, Kirk took in Gwen's presence. "Let's start over." He declared extending his less offensive hand to Gwen. "Kirk Lane, Vice President Operations. Welcome to SNN. I hope you are finding our weather tolerable."

"Thank you, Mr. Lane." Gwen pulled her hand back for the second time, wishing she were able to wipe the sweat off. The man across from her had not seen the lower portion of the three hundred pounds for some time. His ragged breathing and red flush face made her want to check her own blood pressure. Obviously, being the VP of the Sports division had nothing to do with what type of shape you were in. She wondered if the man was aware of his risks. Offering a small smile, she set her concerns aside. "The weather is a little humid for my taste. I'm sure July and August are little worse."

"You're right on that one." The doors opened and in came his request for a Diet Coke. Taking it off the tray before the assistant could set it down almost caused a small disaster. With great poise, the red head was able to settle the tray and set it within reach of Mr. Lane. "So how are you holding up?" His puffy red hands made a swiping gesture across the table, leaving a sheer trail of condensation in their path.

"Excuse me?" Gwen asked, slightly confused by his question. This was her final step with SNN, her previous discussions were with department heads for broadcasting and development. The final interview with their boss, Kirk Lane, the VP, was not what she had expected.

"Holding up?" He downed the contents of his glass in a millisecond. Jane had been smart enough to have a back-up waiting on the tray. "The odds makers are banking on your boyfriend to fall apart during the game."

"I'm fine. Bob is fine." Gwen shifted in her seat for a moment. This was not the line of questioning she had been expecting. Where was the discussion about her career aspirations, her goals for working with the network? Instead she was being questioned about her love life at least her public love life.

"A woman of your age," The executive coughed slightly as he opened the second Diet Coke. Beads of sweat formed on his upper lip and he began to tug on his collar. "I would think this would concern you. Wanting to get married and settle down. Have a family."

"Excuse me?" Gwen felt the blood rush to her face. The 1950's had come and gone decades ago and this man was trying to make a June Cleaver out of her.

"Are you a *Christian*?" The VP continued his interview.

"Mr. Lane, with all due respect, I believe the questions you are asking me are a direct violation of a number of employment laws." Gwen spread her fingers and felt the vein pulsing in the center of her forehead. All she needed to top the day off was a migraine.

"Surely Miss Lerner, you understand with my background, I need people on my team. People who reflect the same integrity and morality I do. I need a team who is on my side. Not flapping for the liberals and heathens. The morality of SNN is at stake with every hire." "Morality or your version of morality?"

"We're talking about you joining the SNN team." He cleared his throat. "You're loved by the public. Your name alone draws an audience. Add to that your athletic ability and looks. You are an attractive woman." He leaned back in his chair and leering at Gwen. "You are well aware of how your presence draws a... an..attraction." As the word rolled off his fatty lips, Gwen knew this guy was a pig. He had one thing on his mind and it wasn't morality. "Your agent..." He began again, taking his glasses off his face to clean the lens on a hanky from his pocket.

"What about my agent?" Gwen was well aware of Hannah's position on accepting the offer from SNN. The deal would wrap her into a contract for over fifteen years and gave SNN the rights to nullify any offers outside their realm. Her work with charities and foundations could be stopped. She would no longer be able to speak at universities or events. SNN would have to approve it all and on top of that take a percentage of Gwen's earning. Yet, Gwen still wanted to see what the network had to offer. She wanted to have some stability. Names of athletes came and went with the times. Where were the Bo Jacksons? The Carl Lewises? Fame was fast and fleeing. She wanted to have some type of career with a stable income.

"She seems to have some hesitation with our offer." Kirk tapped his finger on the smooth face of the tabletop. He moved his arms slightly and made a small grunting sound.

"I have hesitation. Including the fact I've been waiting forty five minutes, the line of questioning you've taken with me, which let me assure you is very illegal. As for the mortality of this company, I question that greatly by the way you've conducted yourself here today." "You should be honored we're considering you at all for this position."

"I think not. Have a good day." Gwen stood up abruptly and began to gather her belongings. She didn't need to listen to this executives crap. She could go the route they planned. It was the idea of working for a prestigious network like SNN that had her sitting across the table from sloth.

"You walk out that door, you can say goodbye to any chance of working for SNN. If it wasn't for the fact that every man on this planet think you're a gift from..." He stopped suddenly and grasped at his chest. She lifted her eyes to his face. His breathing was shallow. His face redder than it had been. His right hand was clutching at his chest.

"No ...no...you son of a bitch." He was having a heart attack right in front of her. She should have seen the signs. Running to the door, she flung it open and screamed to the assistant. "Call 911, he's having a heart attack!" Gwen went back into the room to the slumping figure in the chair. She pulled the chair back and tried to loosen his tie. His body odor was over whelming and she tried to lift him so that he was lying on the floor.

The red head appeared at her side. "Do you know CPR?" Gwen asked the assistant. It had been a long time since had been trained and she really did not want to perform on Kirk Lane.

"No, but we have Paramedics on staff in the building." The administrative assistant offered just as three EMTs entered the boardroom. Gwen felt relief course through her body as the paramedics took over the situation. Kirk was lying on the floor, shirt wide open. The rolls of fat hanging from his chest bounced as the compressions were administered.

On shaky legs, Gwen got to her feet and made her way into the hallway. The assistant was at her desk speaking rapidly into the telephone. Gwen tried to compose herself as she adjusted her suit jacket. Her hair was pushed in all sorts of directions.

"Gwen." She turned at the sound of her name. Dale McKnight stood at the corner of the receptionist area. He gave her a slight smile. "Are you alright?" A friendly touch on her arm as her old friend offered some comfort. "Were you meeting with Lane?"

"Final interview." She glanced at the gurney being wheeled out. "I think I made an impression." The seasoned reporter did not miss her sarcastic tone.

"I think it was the blocked arteries, high blood pressure, the extra 150 pounds and the smoking. You know the south, tobacco is king." Dale gave her some tell tale signs that Kirk Lane did not take care of himself. "Do you need a bathroom to freshen up? There's one just down the hallway."

Gwen nodded quickly afraid she would cry. Not that she had any ties to Kirk Lane but watching a man die was not anything she wanted to do again. "That would be great, thank you." Gwen let the man lead her to the women's facilities. She had known Dale McKnight for over a decade. The reporter seemed to have a soft spot in his heart for her.

"I caught that spot of you and Keegan Garry in Detroit a few weeks ago." Gwen lifted her eyes ready to do battle. "If you see her, please tell her hello for me. Its good to see.." He hesitated. "Differences worked out."

"I'll tell her." Gwen whispered as she entered the facilities. She wondered just how much Dale knew. The nightmare interview with Kirk Lane meant her chances of signing with SNN were nil. She stepped in front of the sink and mirror. Her reflection showed how she felt, panicked. She had just blow the interview for her dream job. She had nothing to offer Keegan. She was unemployed ex-soccer players whose biggest income generation was a poster that boarded on pornographic.

"Fuck!" She yelled at the reflection. "I gave the VP a fucking heart attack." She shook her shoulders as if to shrug off the vision of Kirk Lane's flabby body on the floor. "There was no way I was giving that guy mouth to mouth." She smirked at the fact she was talking to herself and thought that Lane probably faked it to see if she would do it. Calling her hot one moment then dropping like a sack of potatoes the next.

"Sh...it!" The word came out like the old Electric Company skit. The entire experience with Kirk Lane was a nightmare. Her interview had been horrible. The fact he suffered a massive heart attack just as she was about to leave. Lane would have never offered her the job. Gwen was pretty sure she would hate working for a high and mighty bible-thumping bastard that he was. At least he wasn't dead. Gwen wanted to get home to Keegan. Leave Atlanta and the memory of Kirk Lane.

#

A shiver ran through her body as a flash of lightning skimmed across the darkened sky. Keegan felt the hair of her arms rise as the smell of burning ozone filled the air. She wrapped her arms tightly around her body for warmth. Stormy nights like tonight worried her. Especially when she knew Gwen was flying out of Atlanta. According to the latest report off The Weather Channel, a storm covered most of the country from the Midwest to the Rockies. The winds and lightning had grounded planes from Washington DC to Denver. Unless the pilot wanted to fly over or around, most chose not to. Gwen's flight connected through Dallas. Looking at the updated national map, Keegan hoped the pilot grounded the plane. The television flashed to the latest Detroit Metro area map. DTW grounded all flights. There were a few desperate planes allowed to seek refuge from the storm.

The morning after the dinner party, Keegan woke up wrapped in Gwen's embrace and savored the feeling. Through the night, they spoke about their lives. Keegan talked about her family, about Ashley and Andy and her sister's decision to have a baby after she was divorced. Her meeting Tony and the friendship that developed from there. Keegan told her of the women she dated and the limited relationships she had since they broke up. Gwen spoke of Christopher's passing, her mother's antics, and how she and Bobby found each other when they needed a friend. They spent the next day together, taking a picnic lunch to the park close to Keegan's house. They sat by the lake and enjoyed the day. Keegan read aloud from a book of poems with

Gwen's head resting on her thigh under the sun filled sky. Keegan became a little depressed, because she knew Gwen would return home.

A little smile crossed Keegan face as she reconnected with Gwen on so many levels. Yet, Gwen was still living in California and she was in Michigan. She silently wondered if Gwen could adapt to life in Detroit. Her life wasn't glitz and glamour, but maybe Gwen could become accustomed to it. Keegan wasn't going to leave Detroit. She wanted her child to grow up with a support system in case her fear of the leukemia returning happened.

When a representative from SNN contacted her to do a cover piece, she thought it was a joke. She declined, stating the past was in the past and she didn't need to rehash something she could never change. The strange twist in the matter was Gwen's agent, Hannah, wanted to represent her. Keegan laughed when Gwen told her, but a few conversations with Hannah had Keegan thinking about representation. Gwen was wheeling and dealing with SNN, but kept most of the details out of their conversation.

Keegan couldn't change time lost with Gwen but the renewed friendship felt like old times. Every time the phone rang, she would get the same nervous queasiness in her stomach. She tried to blame it on indigestion or the baby, but she knew the cause was the thought of Gwen on the line. Disappointment washed through her when the person calling wasn't Gwen. Her disappointment was so obvious when Sarah called one afternoon, her mother questioned if she had the baby blues. When Keegan confessed about Gwen calling, Sarah told her she always liked Gwen, no matter if she did make a bad choice. They fell into a routine of late night calls just as Keegan would slide between the cool cotton sheets, the phone pressed to her ear, listening to the events of Gwen's day or telling the blonde about what the baby did or how her doctor's appointment went.

Standing next to her bed, she leaned her forehead against the windowpane, watching the sheets of rain fall from the sky. In the back of her mind, Keegan always thought they would get back together. Her heart ached for Gwen. She carried a physical pain that coursed through her body for so long, subsiding only when Gwen came back into her life. Another bolt of lightning lit up the night sky. She wished Gwen would call soon. The idea of her traveling on a plane in the middle of a storm was unnerving. She was worried. Isn't that what friends did, they worried about each other's well being? Who was she kidding? Ever since Gwen showed back up in her life, she was whipped. The feelings she was having were stronger and deeper than before. She knew she had loved Gwen before, but now she was in love with her, totally and completely in love with her. There was no second-guessing, no jealousy with Bobby, no insecurity with other women. It was just Gwen.

When they were younger and had so much going on in their lives, they were all about fun, playing soccer and being there for one another. Now, it was different. Maybe because of the leukemia, she wanted something real and feasible. Like the child growing inside her, this was serious. If she ever got involved in a relationship, she wanted it to be one where there was a need between herself and her partner and a dependency they would have on each other. She wondered if Gwen was feeling the same things or if it was her hormones playing tricks on her. At night, she tried not to dream of the blonde kissing her or holding her tight. Yet she did. Each time, the

dreams seem to intensify. Just like it had been during the chemo treatments. Gwen was always there with her supporting.

Entering the master bathroom, she decided a bath was what she needed to unwind. Turning the taps of the garden tub on, she let the hot water run for a while before turning it down a bit and opening the cold water valve. Testing the water with her hand, she adjusted the temperature to where she wanted it. With a lighter in hand, she went through out the bathroom lighting candles and setting the mood. She wanted to feel the warm and soothing atmosphere she dreamed she would create if Gwen were coming home to her. She wanted to feel the blonde against her. She needed to be touched, wanted by her. The scented oil she dropped in the water reminded her of the fragrance Gwen wore on the night of the dinner party. She ran her hands down her forearms and imagined Gwen making love to her by candlelight. She wanted that so desperately. In fact, she had approached the subject with Dr. Simpson during her appointment last week. With her face flushed and her ears burning, the doctor smiled, stating that people had been doing it for thousands of years. If there were a concern, she would let her know immediately.

Lighting the last candle in the bathroom dressing area, she began to strip out of her sweatshirt and running pants. Her waistline was expanding so quickly she had limited her wardrobe to scrubs and elastic banded pants. Naked in front of the full-length mirror, she could see the dramatic changes in her body. Her breasts were fuller. Her stomach was still a small pouch but it was pushing farther and farther out. From behind, people could not tell she was expecting but from the side, it was obvious. She ran her hands over the expanse of her belly, smiling at the small kick she felt. Cold hands might have woken someone up. Quickly, she grabbed the soft midnight blue terry robe from behind the door and put it on before she checked the water level in the tub. Still needing more water, she went to the bedroom window and looked out over her back yard. A nice big back yard with a swing set and sand box where her child would play. The sound of the phone ringing made her jump. With a smile, she looked at the clock. Close to ten o'clock, Gwen was on the ground.

"Hello." She said as she picked up the cordless from the cradle.

"Hey. I'm glad I caught you. I was hoping you weren't sleeping yet." Gwen's static filled voice came over the receiver. "Are you busy?"

"Just filling the tub." Keegan thought she heard Gwen groan, but with the bad connection she wasn't sure. "Are you on the ground?"

"Finally. I've got to tell you, that was not a fun ride. Now I'm in a taxi." Gwen held her hand over the phone and gave the cabby directions. "Not sure which one was worse but at least I'm closer to the ground." She looked at the darkness closing over the familiar looking neighborhood. "I wanted to hear your voice. I've had a really bad day."

"How did the interview go? I miss you." Keegan told her, hoping Gwen didn't hear the need in her voice. The thoughts that had been running through her head minutes before were still reverberating in her brain.

"I don't want to talk about the interview." Gwen's voice was flat and the subject not to be discussed.

The storm outside went up a notch as the trees blew sideways and loose debris hit against the window. "We're having a really bad storm here." Keegan changed the topic as she sat on her bed pulling the robe down against her thighs. She thought about Gwen, and how it would feel to have her hands on her thighs. Caressing them softly and slipping her fingers into her. She closed her eyes tight as she visualized the blonde touching her, taking her to climax. A clasp of thunder filled the air and brought her back to her room. "Did I lose you?" Keegan got up and turned off the water in the tub.

"No, but can you hold on while I get my bags?" Gwen's voice was strained and the wind whipped around her. She spoke to the cabbie about his fare.

"Okay." Keegan took a lit candle with her as she cradled the phone under her chin. The front doorbell chimed just as the power flicked off. "Shit." Keegan said as she stared at the dead phone and tossed it on her bed. The bell chimed again. Not electrical, battery powered. Who the hell would be out in this weather? With the candle in hand, she headed to the front door. Taking her time down the steps, she pulled back the curtain but only saw pitch black. She set the candle down on the entrance table. When she opened the door, she stepped back in shock as Gwen stood on the front porch soaked head to toe.

"I wanted to see you." Gwen stood under the overhang out of the rain. Her hair flattened against her scalp. The light windbreaker she had on drenched. "Keegan, I need to tell you something." She crossed through the doorway and into the foyer. Candlelight illuminated their silhouettes. Droplets fell into Gwen's face as the rain dripped from her hair. Her body shivered from the drop in body temperature as she stood staring at Keegan. "I can't be friends with you."

Fear immediately grabbed at Keegan's heart, she didn't want to hear what Gwen had to say. Her mouth dropped slightly. She was not expecting Gwen to be at her front door. Nor did she expect the woman she loved to voice a declaration to deny friendship. Since reuniting in March, they had become very close. So close, Keegan wanted to confess her love for the woman standing in front of her. "What?" Keegan's initial shock wore off. "Get in here." She grabbed Gwen by the arm and pulled her into the living room. Keegan stepped into the side bathroom to retrieve a towel. Returning to Gwen's side, she began to dry her off. The blonde stood shivering in a light cloth wind breaker, jeans, and a white cotton shirt. "What were you thinking?"

"I can't be friends with you Keegan." Gwen's chattering teeth stunted her words. The towel was placed over her head as Keegan began to dry her hair. "Keegan, stop." Gwen's shaking hand halted Keegan's frantic movements. Finally getting the shorter woman's attention, Gwen held on to the warmth of her hands. "I can not be friends with you." She repeated.

The words registered in Keegan's brain. Gwen was leaving, pulling away. Maybe this was why she didn't want to talk about the interview. The job with SNN had finally come through and she was moving to Atlanta. Keegan stepped back. She tightened the sash on her robe. From the phone conversation she was having with Gwen, the last thing she expected was for the blonde to

give up on their friendship. She felt the joy she had been experiencing a few minutes ago slipping from her fingers.

"I don't.." Gwen began.

"It's okay Gwen." Keegan spoke with held her head high. She feared this moment, she was ready to confess her love and Gwen was leaving her. Keegan felt the tears pooling in her eyes. Turning away quickly, she would not let Gwen see her cry. She started to head her bedroom. "Did you come here to tell me this?" Keegan asked as she looked at the ceiling of her living room.

"No." Gwen's voice was in her ear and her wet body pressed against Keegan's backside. "I came to tell you I can't be friends with you because..." Gwen turned Keegan's teary face towards her. "I love you." Gwen wiped the tears from Keegan's cheek. "I want to be so much more than your friend Keegan. I want to be your lover, your partner, the woman who helps you raise your child. I want us Keegan. Us." Gwen repeated softly as she lifted Keegan's face and lowered her lips to cover Keegan's. She hesitated inches from Keegan's lips. "I want to be with you in every way, to be by your side in good times and bad. Tell me you want the same."

"I want the same." Keegan placed her hand behind Gwen's neck and closed her fingers in her wet hair, bridging the gap between them. Lips touched and hearts soared as time stood still. Their bodies leaned against each other savoring the heated attraction. The nervous tingling in Keegan's stomach disappeared as small exchanges of touches of lips against lips melted into a full blown kiss. As if in a trance, Keegan felt all time recede as if they had never been apart. Her mouth opened under Gwen's as their tongues touched. Every molecule in her body screamed for Gwen's touch, to be with her. Keegan felt the cold wet clothes press against her. Pulling away from the blonde slightly, Keegan opened her eyes to the searching doe eyes. "I love you." Keegan whispered as her fingers danced over Gwen's face. "I've always loved you."

"I never want to be away from you." Gwen felt salty tears mix with the rain water.

"We need to get you out of these wet clothes." Keegan uttered as she pulled on the wet material. Gwen's teeth chattered and her lips were turning an unbecoming shade of blue as she grabbed the hem of the windbreaker and pulled it over her head. Keegan stepped forward, fisting her hand in the wet mass of Gwen's shirt. She pulled it loose from the waistband and began to work the buttons open.

"Just rip it." Gwen growled as her hands were working her jeans down her hips. Keegan did. Buttons went flying as Keegan tore the shirt from Gwen's torso. The bluish hue of flesh warmed under her wandering hands. Keegan stepped closer, letting her lips kiss the frozen skin of Gwen's chest. She heard Gwen groan and lifted her lips to Gwen's. Pressing hard against Gwen's mouth, Keegan stepped into the wet arms of her visitor. Cold wet hands wrapped around Keegan's waist, pulling her closer. There was a moment of perfect completion as their bodies came together. Keegan was trying to gather herself. If they didn't stop now, they would be making love on the living room floor. She stopped at the intense gaze Gwen was giving her.

"What do you want?" Keegan's voice dropped to a soft sexy whisper. She twisted her hand in Gwen's soaked hair.

Standing in the living room, bathed by the light from the candle and a flicker of lightening in the background, Gwen knelt in front of her and spread open Keegan's robe. She placed her hands on Keegan's hip and pressed her face against her womb. Kissing the warm flesh, Gwen explored the expanse of Keegan's body. Her lips warming from the heated body she held. When pressed her lips lower and breathed in the scent of Keegan's need. Her lips touched softly against Keegan's upper thighs. "You." The answer was harsh and breathy.

"I've dreamed about you for so long." Keegan confessed as her knees buckled. Her hand settled against the dampness of Gwen's shoulder. Gwen's arms held tightly to Keegan's waist, as if she was afraid the moment was a dream. Keegan felt Gwen's lips explore her body as she pulled her close. She rubbed her hands against Gwen's naked back as Gwen pulled the robe from her body. Slowly, Gwen lowered her body to the floor until she lay in front of a kneeling Gwen.

"I want you."

Keegan felt the surge of desire through her loins as Gwen's brown eyes devoured her body. When Gwen lifted her once frozen flesh to cover Keegan's warm body, both women let out a groan, then laughed. "God, you're freezing, but you feel good." Keegan kissed the hollows of Gwen's shoulder. Her lips found Gwen's neck and she planted small kisses along the flesh. Gwen's head went back, giving Keegan better access to her throat.

"Love me." Gwen's request was the only prompting Keegan needed as her mouth covered Gwen's without hesitation. The energy Keegan felt through her body was overwhelming. She had never felt such elation. Sweetness exploded as Gwen's tongue touched hers. Keegan pulled her closer as her hands investigated Gwen's body, caressing the smooth slopes and curves of her back. Keegan's fingers skimmed and fondled lightly as she slowly explored Gwen's backside. Downwards, her hands glided across the small of her back and backside to the smooth slanting slope of her hips. Keegan wanted Gwen since the meeting in Ashley's kitchen. She ran her fingers over a small mole on Gwen's shoulder as she reacquainted her hands with Gwen's body. She needed to touch flesh again to know this was her Gwen. This was real, not a dream. She heard herself cry out as Gwen's hand stroked her breast. Still kissing, Gwen guided Keegan's hand to the top of her center. Lightly, Keegan grazed the hair covering her center. Keegan moaned louder as she moved her hand against Gwen's sex. She wanted to touch her. She needed to touch her.

"Touch me." Gwen's voice crackled with desire as Keegan slowly cupped her hand over the soft curls. As she pressed lightly on the softness, her fingers curved gently and intimately probed the smooth silkiness of her sex. Her fingers slid easily through the valley. Gwen moaned as Keegan's fingers grazed over her clit. Keegan had never felt anything so sensuous. Her pleasure at touching Gwen was evident by the soft moans she expelled. As Gwen's hand went to her waist, she moaned, urging the blonde to touch her. Gwen's mouth found her breast and her tongue moved in sensual circles over her nipple. When Gwen's mouth broke the contact, Keegan cried out. When her mouth moved to the twin, Keegan held her head tight against her breast. Keegan's

breathing was labored by the overwhelming sensation of Gwen touching her fulfilled her dreams. Keegan opened her eyes to see Gwen nuzzling her breast.

Lifting her mouth from Keegan's breast, Gwen leaned on her forearms, straddling Keegan's body. "Is it okay if I touch you?" The concern in Gwen's voice was evident. Keegan nodded as the tears of joy threaten to spill. "I love you Kee. I never stopped." Keegan pulled Gwen to her and kissed her fully and completely on the mouth. Tasting, touching, and teasing as Gwen's hips fell into a natural rhythm against her, moving her fingers to follow the rhythm they fell into. Keegan studied Gwen, her eyes were closed and her mouth held in a tight painless pleasure. Keegan did not want to quit touching her, but she stopped abruptly as Gwen's finger reached the place that sent her over the edge. Suppressing a scream of climax, she bit down on Gwen's shoulder. Keegan heard herself cry out as her arms wrapped around Gwen's neck. She opened her eyes and found Gwen's soft brown eyes staring down at her. She had never seen her look like that before. She kissed her fully on the mouth. The kiss was soft and sweet. Gone were the kisses of hastiness and want. These shared kisses spoke of love and commitment. Of a future they wanted together.

After catching their breath, Gwen got to her feet and reached for Keegan's hand. After a shared kiss in the middle of the living room, Keegan took the lead by guiding Gwen upstairs to the master bedroom. She had Gwen sit on the mattress. Leaving the blonde for a moment, Keegan went about the room gathering candles from the bathroom and placing them around the bedroom. Gwen watched, her eyes never leaving Keegan.

"You're beautiful." Gwen said as Keegan moved towards her. Holding a hand out to her, Gwen took Keegan's and pulled her close. With her other hand, she ran the back of it over Keegan's breast. Letting her knuckles graze her nipple. Gently, she retraced the path of her hand with her lips. She tugged Keegan gently down on the bed. Delicately planting kisses over Keegan's body. She always loved Keegan's breasts. She loved the weight and the feel of them in her hands. They were a little larger than she remembered, but they were firm and peaked under her touch. Gwen's mouth touched each one with reverence and her hand slipped between Keegan's legs. Gwen's fingers touched her lightly at first, her finger running the length and back. Wetness seeped from her body. Keegan moaned out loud as Gwen pushed her hips against her harder. Gwen's movement increased as she dipped a finger into Keegan filling her. Keegan's legs automatically wrapped around Gwen's waist trying to bring Gwen closer, deeper inside. "More." Keegan panted. Gwen slipped another finger into her and pressed her thumb against the bundle of nerves.

"Oh God!" Keegan screamed out as she threw her head back. Gwen sucked at her neck. Keegan pulled at her long hair, holding on as she rode the euphoric high. She ran her fingers down the wet mass, over the muscular shoulder, across Gwen's ribs to cup her smooth tight ass. Tightened her hands around Gwen's round bottom urging her on, she was going to come again. Keegan pulled Gwen towards her as her body jerked once again bliss running through her body. The blonde leaned on an elbow and kissed Keegan on the lips.

"I wanted to feel your body against mine." Gwen confessed. Keegan switched positions so Gwen lay under her now.

"I have been fighting the urge to do this." Keegan made small circles with her tongue on Gwen's breast. Suckling at one until the nipple hardened in her mouth, then moving to the other, giving each breast the same reverence. Her knee spread Gwen's thighs and she could feel the nectar spilling freely. She kissed her ribs and her belly, bringing her mouth to Gwen's center. Keegan's fingers touched the damp valley. She continued the kissing barrage on Gwen's body, finding the other small mole on her hip. Lowering herself on the bed, Keegan placed her mouth on Gwen's mound. Spreading her legs wider, she used her shoulders to leverage her position. Her hands pressed down on Gwen's hips, urging the pleasure as a deep and deeper contact was made with her elongated clit. Gwen squirmed and cried out Keegan's name. Keegan spread the valley with her tongue. The taste was invigorating. She couldn't get enough as she lapped her lover's juices. Probing in the cavity with her tongue, she felt Gwen's muscles began to spasm. She continued to focus on the spot, which made the blonde's hips lift off the mattress. Gwen lurched off the bed, screaming Keegan's name. She pulled Keegan up and begged her to stop. Keegan straddled her and continued the pleasure with her fingers. Their bodies moved in motion as they rode the waves. Keegan felt Gwen shudder and explode against her hand.

"I'm dreaming." Gwen said out loud. She lay next to Keegan with her arms wrapped around her. She ran her finger over Keegan's temple. "Wow." She stopped. "Are you okay?"

"We should have done that the night of the dinner party." Keegan laughed.

"The first night would have been better. God, I love you." Gwen confessed. "Keegan," Gwen turned towards Keegan and held her tighter in her arms. Keegan waited for Gwen to finish her sentence. Gwen's lips whispered against her hair. "I love you Kee. I wish I could go back and change what happened, but I can't. I can only promise you are the only one I care about. The only one I want. You're person who I want to share my life with." Gwen placed a finger under Keegan's chin so their lips could meet. Slow, soft gentle caresses of lips against lips led into probing tongues dancing together as they once had. When Keegan moaned aloud, Gwen pulled back, smiling.

"I missed you. I've been thinking about you all night." Keegan burrowed her face against Gwen's neck. "I was worried." Her skin, no longer cold, had a rosy color to it. "Come on, let's get you cleaned. I know how you hate airplanes." Keegan pulled Gwen by the hand into the bathroom, revealing candles and the water filled tub. Turning on the hot water tap, she waited until steam was coming from the faucet.

"Am I intruding on you?" Gwen saw the flush in Keegan's cheeks.

"I told you I was thinking about you tonight. I wanted to feel you, so this is how I was doing that. You're much better in the flesh." Keegan stepped forward and lowered her lips to a pert nipple. She looked at Gwen as her pink tongue contacted the rose colored nipple. "You're beautiful." Running her hands against the small of Gwen's back, she worked her way across the broad expanse. She feasted on the sight before her, kissing her way from one nipple to the other. She felt Gwen catch her breath. "I've wanted to do this since you walked into my sister's kitchen."

"I wish you had, it would've saved me time and frustration." Gwen said, as her breath hitched when Keegan's fingers grazed softly across her pulsing sex.

"You were frustrated?" The teasing was back and Gwen knew it well. She loved this about Keegan. The playfulness as they made love. She'd watch the dark haired woman straddle her hips and press light kisses over her body as Gwen begged her to take her.

"Yes." The answer hissed out of Gwen lips as she tested the warmth of the water. Keegan knelt in front of her, pressing her lips to Gwen's body. "Keegan." Gwen called out as the brunette's lips began to kiss a trail from her calf to her inner thigh.

"Yes..." Keegan could feel the tension in Gwen's body, taut like an archer's bow ready to fire. She was ready to soar free if Keegan would let her. "I've dreamed about you for so long." Her face rested against the springy hair between Gwen's thighs. "The way you smell, the way you feel." Keegan's fingers spayed the apex running lightly over her core as she continued her journey over Gwen's body. "Are you ready..." Keegan touched her lips to Gwen's willing the blonde to open her eyes and look at her. When Gwen did, Keegan smiled and finished her thoughts. "For your bath?"

"You're an evil woman." Gwen's eyes widened. "You're joining me, right?" Her hand went to the smooth creamy skin of Keegan's body. Her hands explored the plains of her stomach resting lightly on the small budge. A slight kick was felt. Gwen dropped her hand, having a moment of hesitation.

"Don't freak out." Keegan warned.

"Probably could read the thoughts I was having about its mother." Gwen placed both her hands on the baby. "And didn't like them."

"What are you planning on doing to me?" Keegan's voice dropped to a soft slow purr as she whispered in Gwen's ear. Gwen brought her mouth down hard against Keegan's, taking her with the passion that erupted in her veins. Her hand roughly cupped her breast, tweaking the nipple until it pebbled against her palm, touching her as the shivers ran through Keegan's body. Her thigh pushed between Keegan's, feeling the wetness pooling. Keegan's hands tightened on her waist, drawing her closer. Their mouths battled for dominance until the need for air drew them apart.

"Make love to you until you beg me to stop." Gwen eyes were blazing into the dancing blue eyes in front of her. "And then I'm going to cherish every moment we have together. I want forever. You're not getting away from me again, Keegan."

"I don't want to be anywhere else." Keegan let her lips roam freely over Gwen's neck and shoulder.

Hannah handed Gwen the cancelled checks from Leonard Investigations, along with the information she dug up on the agency.

"He's legit." Hannah said. "And very reputable."

"Then why did I only get a minor report from his investigation?"

"That, my dear, is an answer I don't have." Hannah let her eyes roam over Gwen. Something had changed. Her client looked relaxed, gone was the defensive posture and the chip on her shoulder. She was happy. In fact, Gwen had been smiling since she walked in the office dressed very casually in a pair of worn Levi's and a soft peasant blouse. Her hair was down and the worry line on her forehead had disappeared. Not that Gwen always dressed up, but she looked great.

"What's going on with you?" "What?" Gwen smiled the question back. She had Keegan back and she wasn't letting go. She didn't care if she took a loss on her house she was selling and moving to Detroit. The older woman with the hot pink lip stick sitting across the desk from her didn't know it, but Gwen was about to change plans on Ms. Hannah Marshfield. "Can't a person be in a good mood in your presence?"

"Yes, but you usually are not." Hannah flipped through her notes. SNN hadn't pulled the deal but they did revamp the offer. Gwen would never agree to give up her charity work, so SNN made the change. Kirk Lane was off on a leave of absence recovering from a triple bypass and Dale McKnight was acting VP. She let the smile reach her face as the realization dawned on her. Keegan Garry's name echoed in Hannah's head. She reached her hand across the table and touched Gwen's. "You're back with Keegan." The heavy blush in Gwen's cheeks had the agent slapping the desk top. "You're in love."

Gwen turned her expressive brown eyes towards Hannah. "I'm in love."

"Are we instigating the real break up plan?" Hannah asked as the wheels of the public relations began to spin her head. "Bob on board?"

"Yes, he adores her." Gwen replied as she thought about Bobby's smiling face when she finally told him they were officially back together. "I'm putting my house on the market and moving to Detroit."

"Are you sure Gwen? You just started talking to her in March."

"I missed five years Hannah. I'm not missing a second more." Gwen watched as Hannah's argument died on her lips. "Start the process. Home base is moving to Michigan."

"What are you going to tell Connie?" Hannah watched the play of emotions cross Gwen's face.

"She's a big girl. She can be on her own. God knows, she dumped me off enough times."

"What about the house in Redwood?" Hannah saw Gwen's face fall. The house Christopher willed to her was currently being rented by Stephanie Wheaton's family. Gwen sponsored

Stephanie in the youth soccer program. She wanted to make sure the house was filled with the children Molly could never have.

"The Wheaton's are still renting. There is no need to sell the rental property. I still have the property management company taking care of it."

"I just asked Gwen. I don't think your aunt or uncle would frown down on you renting or even selling the home." Hannah walked over to the small refrigerator she had in her office and pulled out spring water. When she lifted one towards Gwen, the blonde nodded.

"I think the management company is doing a fine job." Hannah handed her the bottle.

"That is the only one of your mother's recommendations with which I would agree."

"I was young and Connie had the contacts I needed. Attorney, brokers....." Gwen waved her hand towards her agent. "Thank God you met Bob, otherwise that crook of a financial advisor would have you in the poor house." Hannah knew the broker was serving time in jail for insider trading. "Do you want to look a bit further into this PI? He was one of Connie's referrals."

"When is the last time we cut him a check?" Gwen picked up the canceled checks.

"About four years ago." Hannah said as she peered over her desk at the pieces of paper.

"I want to see what he did in Michigan, if he knew about Keegan being sick." Gwen said as she touched her signature on the contract looking at the date.

"And if he did?"

"Find out why I wasn't told." Gwen shrugged her shoulders. "Okay, what do I need to do so I can get my butt back to Keegan?"

"You're not going to like it but, you're going to have to change all of your travel plans and schedules. You're going to have to pay me back for this one."

"I always do." Gwen smiled as she leaned back in the chair. She didn't care if it got her back to Keegan quicker, she'd do it.

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Gwen double checked the address in her PDA. She circled her pearl BMW Z4 around the two story stucco office building. She stopped at the corner and scoped out the neighborhood. The professional building and area had her second guessing her theory of Connie's private investigator being seedy. When she returned from Detroit, Hannah gave her with the name of the private investigator and the multiple checks that were cashed. When questioned about the multiple checks, Hannah stated an agreement with half up front and half when the job was completed. Glen Leonard was a highly respected private investigator and Gwen was questioning

why the contract she had wasn't fulfilled. Hannah told her if the issue bothered her so much, then she was better off going to the source instead of driving herself crazy speculating. When she contacted Leonard's office on the pretense of being a client, his assistant had scheduled her for an appointment the following afternoon. She checked her watch and noted she was a little early. She spayed her fingers and let out a breath. The last week had been a whirlwind of events.

She stayed at Keegan's for the weekend and they talked about the SNN job interview. The mess with Kirk Lane and the comments from Dale McKnight.

"He is so family." Keegan said as she rolled away from Gwen's embrace.

"No he's not." Gwen argued. She had never seen Dale outside his work environment. He was always working.

"Plus look at the rug he wears. No straight guy would pay that much for a hair piece." Keegan sat up pulling the bed sheet around her breasts.

"You're stereotyping." Gwen said as she leaned over and planted a kiss on Keegan's shoulder. "He's in television, he needs to look good."

"When will you hear from them?" Keegan said in a half laugh as Gwen pulled the sheet away and covered Keegan's naked body with hers.

"Do you really want to talk about SNN?" Gwen ran her tongue against Keegan's ear lobe and blew a hot breath in her ear.

"Do you think that is working?" Keegan said as she squirmed from the feeling.

"Yes." Gwen said pushing Keegan on her back and covered her body with her own. They spent the rest of the weekend at Keegan's house. Taking time to watch the Motors reach the playoffs, plan for Keegan's upcoming visit and to make love every chance they had.

SNN sent a revamped contract to Hannah. The new agreement would give Gwen a contract for four years on the stipulation she could deliver the interview with Keegan Garry. They wanted a full twenty plus minute segment to air on their "What ever happened to?" segment. Plus there was to be a full four page article in the SNN Magazine after the television interview aired. Gwen would have a full time position as the commentator for all college and international soccer games, including the upcoming World Cup games in Australia. SNN was even willing to waive the professional morals clause. Gwen had the deal weighing heavily on her shoulders. She never wanted to push Keegan into doing something she wasn't comfortable with. Keegan's story was hers to decide whether or not to tell. Gwen got a little teary eyed thinking about the struggles her lover had been through. The decisions Keegan made were hard and she was one of the few people who had survived and was having a baby. Keegan didn't need that kind of pressure on her.

Gwen flipped open her phone and dialed Keegan's number. She knew Keegan was at work but wanted to hear the familiar voice asking her to leave a message. "Hey baby, it's me, just wanted to say hi. I miss you. Call when you can. Love you." Gwen shut her phone. She pulled her car around the block and pulled into the parking lot of Glen Leonard's office.

Stepping out into the California sun, she grabbed her bag and headed into the white building. The office was tastefully decorated and the receptionist greeted her with a smile. Gwen saw the moment of recognition on the woman's face.

"Aren't you?" The receptionist began as she looked between the appointment book and Gwen.

"I have a 2 o'clock appointment with Mr. Leonard. Marshfield." Gwen used Hannah's name as she set the appointment.

"I'll let him know you're here." The woman gestured for Gwen to sit in the waiting room as she quickly went down the hallway in search of her boss. Gwen nodded, taking a seat near the large aquarium. She chuckled as she thought about the scene in "Finding Nemo" as the fish plotted their escape. She had watched the movie with Keegan. As Keegan confessed, nephew and aunt watched the movie every time Andy spent the night.

In a few moments, a clean shaven older gentleman with salt and pepper hair appeared. "Miss Lerner, I didn't expect you." He offered his hand. Gwen took it noting the firm grip he gave. He wasn't trying to woo her with a soft limp shake. "Please come into my office. Is everything alright?" He said as he offered her a chair in front of his cluttered desk. Gwen cocked her head to the side and wondered what the man was refereeing to. Settling behind his desk, soft gray eyes studied her face. "Your sister usually acts as the liaison, so please forgive me for being a little off here."

"Connie?" Gwen's eyebrow rose slightly as she watched her question register with Glenn Leonard. "My sister sometimes oversteps her bounds Mr. Leonard, which is why I am here." Gwen noted the man's agreement with her assessment. "Please excuse the false name, sometimes I need to have pseudonyms to protect my privacy."

"Of course." He set back in his office chair. "What can I do for you today? The other project is going according to schedule. I hope everything is to your satisfaction." Glenn watched as brown eyes danced across his desk and over his face. He had never expected Gwen Lerner to actually come to his office. After the number of dealings over the last couple of years, he wasn't surprised. She had paid him a healthy sum of money to keep the transactions discreet.

"Mr. Leonard," Gwen began. "Since we have worked together, would you mind if you pulled the records on all the projects I've hired your services for?" Gwen got to her feet and walked behind her chair. "You see, I've run into a few issues with my record keeping and I want to make sure we are on the same page."

"Understood, but Connie always keeps the original contracts. What I have is the copies we negotiate in case the IRS audits the agency. You understand that although our transactions are legitimate, I will not falsify records."

"I would not do business with you otherwise." Gwen quipped she moved to the window, hiding her expression from Glenn Leonard. Her mother had another scheme working. This one seemed on a large scale and involved a lot of money. She gazed out the window at the parking lot below. She had earned every penny of her money. She worked hard. She was not about to let her mother manipulate her career for financial gain. She heard Leonard pick up his phone and ask his assistant to pull the Sherman files. Gwen could narrow down the time frame by her mother's last name. Connie married Matthew Sherman about seven years ago in a whirlwind Vegas wedding. They were divorced in less than six months, but Connie kept his name and a quarter of a million dollars of his money.

"Mr. Leonard, have you and Connie been close?" Gwen turned to see the scarlet color spreading up the man's neck. Surely he did not expect Gwen to question his relationship with Connie.

"We have gone out a few times, nothing that would jeopardize your anonymity, Ms. Lerner. I know that our agreement is to be extremely discreet, and I hope you visiting my office will not change our relationship."

"Let's go over the file first." Gwen didn't like toying with the man, especially since he seemed genuinely concerned for her well being. There was brief knock on the door and the woman from the front desk swept in with multiple bulging manila folders.

"Set them on the table Audrey." Glenn said as he moved from behind his desk to the table where a number of his case work files sat. "It may be easier to go through these at the table. You don't mind do you?"

"No." Gwen said as she settled in the seat across from the pile of files. "Can we start with the first case?"

"Of course." He smiled a bit. He was so taken aback at the jobs he had with the soccer player, the term "easy money" came to mind. "Needless to say, this one always makes me question what the tabloids are thinking." Glenn opened the file and flipped back the cover page. There were the photos of Gwen and Keegan in Provincetown. They were blown up and distorted, but she knew the photos. "Your sister received the negatives back of course." Glenn said as he watched in fascination as the woman known as America's Sweetheart flipped through the photos of her and her former lover.

Gwen was in shock. She knew the negatives were still in her office. She kept her emotions under control until about half way through the file. She came upon the signed contract with Look Magazine. Although the names on the page held no significance, Gwen knew her mother had made a deal to sell the photos to the tabloids. "Can you remind me, what percentage did you get?"

"Twenty. I'm not one to follow celebrities, Ms Lerner. I was quite surprised that you would put yourself out there for the tabloids. Most people are trying to stay out of them. Instead, you used them and took the money for yourself. It's genius." Glenn steeped his fingers together and pondered the woman in front of him. Connie Sherman was a beautiful woman on the outside, the ugliness he discovered on the inside was what caused him to steer the relationship back to a professional one. Gwen, on the other hand, seemed a bit miffed at the file in front of her.

"Do you have photos from Michigan?" Gwen knew her voice cracked for a moment. She had bad days before but this meeting was turning into a nightmare. If the tabloids actually paid out the amount in the contract, Glenn Leonard received over five hundred thousand dollars for brokering the deal.

Glenn slid a second file towards the blonde at the table. He heard the quick intake of breath as she paused on the photo of her former girlfriend. He remembered coming back from the assignment and calling his doctor. He wanted a full physical. The photos of Keegan Garry revealed a shadow of an athlete struggling to live. He had seen many people fall into the world of drugs and destroy their lives. This was the first time he witnessed a person going through the ultimate hell of battling a disease like leukemia. When tears freely flowed down Gwen's cheeks he retrieved the box of tissues from his desk. He usually reserved them for the spouse after he confirmed the actions of a cheating husband.

Gwen took the tissue without thinking. She let her finger trace over Keegan's face. Hollow like a victim of starvation, she was a shell of a person. Frail like a child, her hair was gone as her bald head gleamed under the hospital lights. There was photo of the familiar smile as she donned an Atlanta Rhythm ski cap. The date stamp in the corner confirmed it was the day she and Washington argued in the center circle. Gwen closed her eyes and whispered Keegan's name.

"Those photos are what we sold to Look Magazine." Glenn watched as his comments registered in his clients head. "They are waiting to see if interest in Ms. Garry increases before they run the story." Glenn rubbed his chin. He never liked this part of the job, but it was what he was paid to do. He took pictures and what the client did with them was not his concern. "I'm really surprised she recovered." He cleared his throat as brown eyes lifted to his face. Anguish would be the term to describe the look Gwen was giving him.

"My god Connie, what have you done?" Gwen said aloud. Her mother had found a way to make money, a lot of money without even getting her hands dirty. She'd watch from the sideline as people's lives were destroyed.

"Miss Lerner?" Glenn questioned his client. "You are aware of the deal with Look Magazine?" When the woman didn't answer him, he continued. "This won't affect the search for your brother?"

"My what?" Gwen stared at him for a moment. She needed to get a grasp on the situation. "I need copies. I need copies of everything, Mr. Leonard." Gwen felt as if she was suffocating. She needed a few minutes to collect her thoughts and to get her attorney on the line. She didn't know

how big Connie's net was. As she stood, the private investigator looked at her a bit confused. "If you have copies of the payments you've received along with any contracts we've agreed to."

"Miss Lerner, that is not a problem, I am concerned though with what's going on?" Glenn stood and gathered the files into order.

"Again, Mr. Leonard, Connie sometimes oversteps her bounds." Gwen placed her hand to her head as the migraine hit full bore. "If you give me a few minutes, I need to contact an associate." Gwen walked towards the office door. "I'm not holding you up am I?"

"Miss Lerner, there is nothing I have for the rest of the afternoon. I was actually planning on going to San Francisco to work on your pending case." Glenn tucked the files under his arm and walked Gwen to the reception area. "Take your time. If I'm not here, just have Audrey page me." Glenn nodded to his assistant as the tall blonde walked out the office door. Turning back to the woman behind the desk. "Pull everything we have on the Sherman file. Checks, receipts, dates, phone calls.... contracts, if you can think of anything I am forgetting, put it in there. Get Allen Winter on the line, I need to speak to him asap." Glenn wanted his attorneys involved with this in case things went bad. There's no such thing as easy money.

Gwen felt violated as she slipped into her car. Tears were spilling from her face. Her mother had taken her private memories and sold them for profit. Connie was slick. The negatives were back in place as nothing looked disturbed. Connie hired this competent man to do a job and he did. He took the photos, doctored them a bit and sold them to the tabloids under the pretense he was doing working for Gwen. The photos of Keegan during her treatment felt as if someone had hit her in the stomach over and over. Each photo was gut wrenching. Keegan looked empty, like death was just around the corner. How could have no one have told her? Gwen hit the heels of her hands against her steering wheel and screamed. Tears flowed freely. Her mother had caused all of this. If Connie had never sold the photos, Gwen would never have been angry with Keegan. She would have gotten the message Kee left for her if Connie hadn't erased it. Connie, acting on her behalf had sold the photos of Keegan to Look. The tabloids like Look did not mess around, once a contract was signed, the magazine held on to the rights.

Her concerns turned to Keegan. Connie sold the story. Keegan's story was going to be printed, like it or not. Her mother was no longer going to control her life. What had Leonard said, the latest case, a brother? She didn't have a sister, let alone a brother. She needed to remove all traces of Connie Sherman from her life.

Gwen pulled out her phone and dialed Hannah's number. The receptionist put her right through. "Gwen. I didn't expect to hear from you so soon." Hannah said.

"Call Michelle and free your calendar, my mother has reached a new low." Gwen said as she flipped her vanity mirror down and checked her mascara. Crying usually gave her raccoon eyes. "I am at Leonard Investigations. Apparently, my sister has been acting on my behalf for a number of years and if I don't do something, Keegan is going to get hurt."

"You're kidding me?"

"Hannah, it's bad. Really bad." Gwen felt the anger swell in her chest. "I need to see Keegan as soon as possible. Can you get me on a flight?"

"As soon as we hang up, I'll get Michelle on the line and see what flights are open. Are you coming back to my office?"

"Yes, I need to get some files copied first. I should be there in the next couple of hours." Gwen looked at the afternoon sky. She didn't expect this. She didn't think her mother would actually stoop this low.

"Gwen, I am so sorry."

"It's not your fault Hannah, she's my mother." Gwen hung up the phone and went back into the agency. She wasn't going to let Connie ruin Keegan's life.

When Gwen got to Hannah's office, her attorney Michelle Patton and Hannah's administrative assistant were waiting in the large conference room. Gwen carried in a banks box full of files from Leonard. They were going to go through it all. There would be no more surprises for Gwen when it came to Connie.

"If I didn't before, it is official. I hate my mother." Gwen said as she placed the box on the conference table. "There is just so much I didn't know." Her head hurt as a full blown migraine hit with gale force. She sat at the table and eyed her attorney and agent. They were two very powerful older women who cared about her. She paid them but they genuinely cared for her well being. While her own flesh and blood manipulated and sucked cash right from under her nose.

"Gwen, come on deep breaths. We'll see what we have before we jump to any conclusions." Hannah touched her hand gently.

"Did you get me on a flight?"

"Not until tomorrow morning. You should be in Detroit by seven." Hannah knew by the look on Gwen's face she wanted to get there earlier. "Sorry all the flights were booked."

"It's okay. It will give me time to explain to Keegan why her picture is going to be in Look Magazine."

"Keegan?" One of Michelle's eyebrows perched upward. The attorney was well aware of Gwen's former relationship. "Someone want to fill me in?"

"It's good Michelle. Very good." Gwen smile widened at the thought of Keegan's body pressed up against hers. "Connie's little stunt may throw a monkey wrench into the mix, but I think we can get past that. I hope we can." Gwen said her confidence fading with the setting sun.

"Ms. Lerner! Ms. Lerner!" The reporter continued to follow the tall blonde through the terminal to the luggage carousel. In the back of her mind, Gwen had hoped her appearance at the airport would go unnoticed. "Rumor has it your home is on the market. Are you moving to Detroit?" The heavyset reporter sighed as he dabbed the sweat from his brow and thinning hairline. He had been huffing after her ever since she cleared the security checkpoint. "Any comments?" His pen stood poised above a small pad of paper.

"No." To Gwen's relief her brown eyes were hidden behind a pair of dark Oakley's. There was no way the press had already gotten hold of her house being on the market. She hadn't even told Keegan yet. The private broker she hired signed a confidentiality agreement. Her foot tapped impatiently on the hard surface as she waited for her suitcase. At least this trip she didn't have to content with snow.

The weatherman promised clear sunny skies all across the country. She was grateful for the pleasant forecast. Keegan's parents changed their plans and were heading to Michigan to pick up Ashley's van. This was the next step in bringing Gwen back into the family. Meghan had come around after the dinner party at Danny's. Ashley was the cause of the reunion and wanted Keegan and Gwen together. Keegan's parents were another story. Sarah seemed happy for Keegan. Bill on the other hand, never voiced an opinion. With their three girls living in Detroit, it was easier for Bill and Sarah to travel north. From the conversations she had with Keegan, Gwen knew Bill was excited about meeting Bob Finch and going to a playoff game. The Motors made the playoffs and Bobby was playing great.

"Ms. Lerner, are we looking at a June wedding?" Now this guy was searching for a needle in a haystack. Gwen's eyes darted towards the offices of Select Air. She prayed someone would see this idiot bothering her and remove him from the terminal. When the tall clean shaven man in the Select Air uniform approached her, she let go of the breath she was holding.

"Ms. Lerner, on behalf of Select Air, we like to invite you to wait in a private office." This was the man that had run past her on a way to an emergency her first visit to Detroit. When was that, two months ago? Two months since Keegan came back into her life. She was the happiest and the most miserable. She didn't want to lose Keegan. She needed to have a hard conversation with her. She hoped the idea she and Hannah planned would work. The key was Keegan, she needed to agree.

"Thank you." Gwen turned her back to the reporter who wasn't certain if he should follow her or not. The hand on his arm halted his steps.

"Sir, are you authorized to be here? Can I please see your credentials?" The airline employee waved security over.

"You've just saved me a whole bunch of frustration." Gwen smiled at the employee who escorted her to the Select Air office. He smiled out of the corner of his mouth as if he enjoyed watching the reporter scramble.

"Not a problem the boss asked me to rescue you. Here you are." He opened a door and revealed Alexis Redding sitting behind a desk with Keegan lounging in the visitor chair. Gwen's eyes immediately lit up at the sight of her lover in the office.

"Oh you are such a sight for sore eyes." Gwen walked in dropping her coat on the empty chair and embraced Keegan tightly. She never wanted to be away from her. After talking with Hannah and Michelle, they came to a consensus that it would be best to tell Keegan in person.

"I know you hate flying." Keegan said used the arms of the chair to lift herself up. Her belly was growing.

"Look at you." Gwen touched her protruding stomach. Keegan had taken to wearing baggy shirts to cover her midsection.

"Don't. I feel fat and I don't want to hear anything else." Keegan groaned as she covered Gwen's hand with her own. "I'm as heavy as I was when I played in college. I'm not happy about that."

Keegan's touch immediately sent Gwen's senses into hyperdrive. Gone less than a week, she had missed the small woman at her side. Things could get strange this visit. After the meeting with Michelle, they agreed Hannah should fly to Detroit and meet with Keegan as soon as she could. If *Look* was going to exploit Keegan, Gwen wanted to make she had representation. She contacted Danny to get Robin Frost's number. Keegan needed a good attorney, a great attorney. If Frost wasn't interested, she could recommend someone in the area. The bottom line was, someone was making a lot of money off both of them. Gwen didn't understand her mother's decision to make a profit off her personal life. Her mother had no scruples when it came to money. When Gwen went back into the agency, she asked to look at the latest service she was paying for. Her eyes almost popped out of her head when she saw the contract and photos of Keegan attached. Connie sold the story of Keegan's illness to *Look*. Although she covered most of her tracks with system loop holes, Connie was guilty of forging Gwen's name on the contracts. She and Hannah would leave the digging to the attorneys and try to maintain Gwen's innocence. The last thing either woman wanted was to have Gwen's name dragged through the mud.

Gwen wrapped Keegan in her arms. Her face press against her hair, she whispered "You're beautiful." She felt Keegan arms tighten in appreciation of her comment. "How is the little girl behaving?"

"Kicking like a true mid-fielder."

"You know the sex?" Alexis was immediately on her feet looking at Keegan suspiciously.

"No. I don't want to know but the family is set on it being a girl. Except for Dad. I think it's a guy thing."

"I vote for healthy." Gwen lifted her head to meet Alexis. "Thank you for your help with the reporter."

"Still on you about your hockey player?" Alexis had known Keegan too long to know which way the wind blew with the fiery player who her son coached through college. She was a bit taken back when she saw Keegan was expecting.

"That and everything else." She explained to the helpful woman as she lifted Keegan's chin so she could look in her eyes. "We need to talk." Gwen saw the concern in Keegan's eyes.

"At home.

Outside the terminal, the moonlight danced across the sky, casting shadows and bouncing around the parking garage. Gwen piled her two suitcases in the back of the back hatch of the black SUV and hung her garment bag on the inside hook. Keegan started the car and waited for her passenger.

"Ready." Gwen said as she slipped into the air-conditioned cab. Keegan sat there for a moment.

"What's wrong?" Keegan was almost crying, her hormones were running wild and she didn't know why Gwen was being short with her. "Are you breaking up with me?"

"No....no. God, no Keegan." Gwen groaned, she had run scenario after scenario of how to tell Keegan about her mother. She could hardly believe the deception of her own flesh and blood. Keegan would hunt Connie down and kill her. "I love you. I'll never leave you." Gwen leaned towards her placing her hand on the back of the driver's seat. She touched her lips to Keegan and let all her doubts go out the window.

"You can do that again." Keegan smiled as Gwen pulled back.

"At home." Gwen ran her finger up Keegan's arm watching the hair rise. "I get to tease you the entire way."

"That's frustrating." Keegan said through gritted teeth. She had forgotten what it was like when they traveled with the National team together. Sneaking touches, waiting until the room door was shut. She was almost thirty and going to be a Mom. She didn't want to hide who she was. "I'm sorry." Keegan apologized and pressed her lips against Gwen's. Letting the kiss linger for a moment she savored the contact. "Hi." She said as she pulled back and smiled at her passenger. "Be warned, I've been a bear."

"I heard." During her absence, Bobby and Danny reported Keegan's moodiness. Both explained how Keegan was jumping on everything they did. Even Andy could do no right. "I was told to get my butt back here asap."

"Damn right." Keegan kissed her again. This one full force, pedal to the floor letting all her frustration out through the contact. She ended by nipping at Gwen lower lip as the blonde moaned reflecting their desires. "We need to get home now."

Whatever clothes they had on were quickly discarded somewhere between the front door and the bedroom. They lay in Keegan's bed as the moon light shone in through the curtains. Gwen slowly ran her fingers along Keegan's side and over her hip. She smiled as giggled as she cupped Keegan's butt in her hand.

"You do have a very cute bottom." Keegan buried her face in Gwen's chest.

"Stop." Keegan begged as she settled against Gwen. "Are you going to tell me what's wrong?" Keegan knew the blonde tried her best to stop the trip to the bedroom. Gwen wanted to talk as soon as they got home. Keegan had other plans.

"Now you want to talk." Gwen suppressed a giggle. She tried to decline Keegan advances as the walked into the house, but the small woman was hard to resist. "Don't I get a rest period?" Gwen's stomach bounced a little as she let out a laugh.

"You had four days away, that counts as a rest period." Keegan traced her finger along Gwen's ribs. "I missed you."

"I'm glad and I missed you too." Gwen leaned forward and kissed the top of her hair. She thought about the photos of Keegan bald from the chemo. She felt the sting of tears in her eyes. "Kee, I met with the private investigator while I was in California." Gwen let her fingers stroke Keegan's dark lush hair. "There are some things that happen that I can't change. Hannah is coming here. She needs to get some stuff settled, but she needs to meet with us."

"I'm not signing with Hannah. I'm not doing any frickin' interviews, Gwen." Keegan felt the surge of anger course through her body. She felt the hesitation of Gwen's hand as the soothing motion halted for a moment.

"I'm really sorry." Gwen's voice cracked as tears started to fall. She pulled her hand away from Keegan's hair. Turning on her side, Gwen curled into a fetal position. Keegan leaned on her hand and wondered what had just happened. Gwen turned away and started to cry.

"What is it?" Keegan draped her body across Gwen trying to look into the dark quiet soulful eyes she knew well. "Talk to me Gwen."

"I love you." Gwen said and pulled Keegan into her arms. "I'd never do anything to hurt you." Gwen looked away in shame. "I found out who sold the pictures to the tabloids."

"Who?" Keegan felt the stress radiating through Gwen's body. If she didn't relax, she was going to have another migraine. "Turn over." Keegan rolled Gwen on her stomach and began to massage her tense muscles. "Try to relax and talk to me. I'm not going anywhere." Keegan whispered in her ear and dropped light kisses along her neck as she pulled the blonde hair to the side. "Better?" She felt Gwen nod before she continued to work the knots out of her shoulders.

"My mother." Gwen said in a matter of fact tone. Keegan's hands stilled for a second. There was no changing the outcome, her mother had taken private moments and sold them for big bucks.

"She was pretty sneaky about it, getting the trail off her by convincing me to have you investigated. I signed a contract with Leonard Investigations." Gwen huffed out. "On paper it's all nice and neat. Leonard sold the photos to the magazine and was given a percentage to act as a middleman."

"Your mother is a piece of work." Keegan growled. "How much did she get?"

"Since I was the hot celebrity at the time, the contract is for close to two million dollars." Gwen let the number roll off her tongue. She had seen the contract, she knew the amount of money that Leonard took and what was given Connie in a number of certified checks.

"Fuck!" Keegan yelled as she pushed hard on Gwen's shoulder. The groan from Gwen stopped her motion. "I'm sorry. What the hell did she do with the money?"

"I'm not sure. Blew it, off shore accounts. This is my mother we are talking about." Gwen rose up and looked over her shoulder at Keegan. "There's more and you're involved."

"Gwen I didn't even talk to a reporter or a private eye." Keegan sat back and looked at Gwen's tear streaked face.

"I know, but Leonard did come to Michigan." Gwen's voice faltered. She reached a hand out to Keegan and gathered in her arms. They lay on the bed wrapped in each other's arms. "He took photos of you when you were sick. Really sick Kee." Gwen stopped to wipe a tear away. "I saw them." Biting her bottom lip she felt helpless. She could do nothing to take away Keegan's pain. "I didn't know. If I did, I would have been at your side. I wish I could have been there."

"I'm better." Keegan touched her fingers to Gwen's face trying to push away the distress. "I'm here with you." She wiped a lone tear. "Tell me Gwen. What ever it is, we can get through it."

"Connie made a deal with *Look* and sold the photos of you during your illness to them. They are going to run the story and there is nothing we can do." Gwen watched as the blue eyed woman registered her burden. Gwen stroked Keegan's back with her finger tips.

"Is this the reason for Hannah's visit?" Gwen nodded. "Anything else I should know?" Keegan asked as she lowered her lips to Gwen's torso. She snuggled against Gwen's belly. She slowly trailed kisses lower and lower until Gwen caught her breath. "I don't." Keegan kissed her belly. "Love." She continued the trail of kisses. "Your mother." Keegan finished as she kissed Gwen's center and showed her who she did love.

#

The early morning sun filtered through the windows of the master bedroom, the occupants of the bed cuddled closer. Clothing discarded carelessly around the room. There had been no further discussion of Connie and tabloids. She needed Keegan to touch her, love her as if nothing else mattered and she did. Keegan snored softly as Gwen quietly watched her sleep. With Keegan's head resting on her shoulder, it was easy for her to lean over and kiss her lips. Her heart soared.

She had not felt this happy in a long time. She smiled as Keegan cuddled closer. Her fingers absently stroking her arm, feeling the fine downy hair covering it. Keegan face tilted up towards the warmth of the sun. Her bare stomach pressed against Gwen's hip. She was amazed as the skin flicked up and down quickly. Scared at first, she realized the baby was pushing against Keegan's skin. "Definitely a mid-fielder." Gwen whispered as she kissed the spot where the baby kicked. She knew they would be busy for most of the day. If Keegan could sleep as long as possible, she might not be crappy. Kissing the baby one more time, Gwen pressed her lips to Keegan's and slipped quietly from the bed. They were meeting with Frost today to discuss a course of action and possible retain the attorney. Hannah would be in by Thursday. The worry line in her forehead made an appearance. She promised Keegan she would make things right. Connie wasn't going to get away with this one.

#

Gwen placed box after box was placed in the back of Ashley's mini-van. Bill and Sarah were coming in this weekend. Per Sarah's request, she wanted the van packed and ready to go with the boxes they still had stored at Keegan's. Gwen just checked on a sleeping Keegan a few minutes ago, but swore she heard noise in the kitchen. Pulling the last box out of the storage closet, Gwen carried it down to the garage. As Gwen set the box in the van, she walked back into the mudroom and ran into a tall sandy haired man with a crew-cut.

"Shit!" She screamed at the stranger in front of her.

"Shut up. You'll wake Keegan." She recognized Tony's rich voice. Her hand covering her heart, she took in the crisp cut and clean shaven teacher.

"Clean up nice huh." Tony's smile twinkled at her. He did. Gone was the John the Baptist forty days in the desert look and in front of her stood the cover of GQ magazine. Dressed in a nice cream colored button down oxford, a pair of worn Levi's and deck shoes. His hair cut in the style Christopher wore, the military high and tight.

"Man, you had me fooled with all that hair. I didn't know what Keegan was thinking until now." She took in his deep brown eyes and the crooked smile he was giving her. He looked like a younger version of her great uncle. The eyes, the smile, the slight bump in his nose, these were all familiar features Christopher had.

"That's gonna be one good looking kid. Don't ya think?" He blew on his fingernails and rubbed them on his shirt as if he were polishing them. "You look a little spooked?"

"A little. I didn't know it was you at first." Gwen stepped closer and pulled Tony into the light of the kitchen. "You look a lot like Christopher."

"Who's Christopher?"

"My adoptive grandfather of sorts. He was married to my great aunt. He was the closest thing I had to a grandfather."

"He was this good looking?" Tony teased as he motioned his hand across his torso.

"Better looking than you." Gwen slapped him on the arm. "What are you doing here?"

"Making breakfast for you guys. Don't want my best girls hungry after a night of playing." Tony teased as he quickly turned and ran for the kitchen. On the counter was the start of waffles, water was on the burner and the coffee maker was pumping away. He had been trained to put the water on for tea. Gwen moved towards him and punched him lightly on the arm. She stood by the phone and gazed over the list of numbers. Tara's number and address were listed along with Dr. Dev and Dr. Micah. Keegan hadn't said too much about Carrie lately. Gwen hoped the good doctor had gotten the hint. She noticed Bobby's number written on the list. Since moving to Detroit and meeting the Garry clan, as he referred to them, he was happy. He had friends he trusted and people who cared about him. The move to Detroit had been good for both of them.

"Want me to wake her up?"

"As if your scream didn't do it already." Tony challenged. "You're the one sleeping with her. Please tell me she is in a better mood."

"I'm in a fantastic mood." Keegan stood dressed in her robe barefoot in the kitchen doorway. "Hi." She pulled Gwen down by the back of her neck and kissed her fully.

"Ewww. Not in front of the help." Tony waved a spatula at them. "Did you hear her scream?"

"Yes, but your smart ass voice followed, so I figured she didn't recognize you. I've got good taste." She kissed Gwen again. Running her finger along the buttons of Gwen's shirt, she played with the one in the center between Gwen's breasts. "Don't I?"

"Yes." Gwen hissed in her ear. "Are you wearing anything under this?" Her fingers touched the dark robe at her waist. Keegan's answer was to run her tongue along the sensitive part of Gwen's ear. Gwen physically sagged at her touch. Keegan smile and withdrew from the room saying something about a shower. "It's going to be a long day." Gwen mumbled under her breath.

"I've never seen her like that." Tony leaned his backside against the counter. "You're good for her." Tony lifted the coffee mug to his lips. "Not like the other ones she dated." He studied the tall blonde woman in front of him, wondering if she colored her hair or not. Washington said she did. He wanted to be a fly on that wall when Keegan's best friend and girlfriend had their reunion.

"What are you smirking about?" Gwen asked as she moved to the stove to pour a cup of tea.

"You and Washington in the same room." He chuckled.

"Shit." Gwen leaned against the counter mirroring Tony's pose. Mugs in hand they stared at each other. "I'm in so much trouble."

"It's funny." Tony hid his smile with his cup. "You know your Mr. Finch has a big following at the Badlands. It's the bar I play at during open mic night." Tony explained. Keegan had mentioned going to see Tony play, but not the name of the establishment. "Business is booming with people who think they might catch a glimpse of him. You're welcome to join us one night." Tony explained. Keegan had mentioned going to see Tony play but not the name of the establishment. "Business is booming with people who think they might catch a glimpse of him. You're welcome to join us one night."

"I feel like I've missed out on this big experience everyone has had. I hope to change that soon."

"There are lots of students that hang out there now. I heard a female student telling her friends that she was out on date with him the other night." Gwen raised an eyebrow at him. "It wasn't a date. He was at one table and she was sitting at the next one over. I think he asked for a napkin."

"People do strange things." Gwen said as Tony turned his attention to the waffle iron. "Including family." Gwen expelled a breath as she thought about her mother.

"Speaking of strange." Tony motioned his head to the front window where a silver BMW pulled up. The sun reflected off the windshield, preventing her from seeing the driver. "You better make sure Keegan has clothes on."

Gwen saw Dr. Micah exit her car, dressed for the links, awful plaid pants and bright pink shirt. She let out a groan. Although Keegan was friends with the doctor, Gwen still had a hard time being nice to the woman.

"I'll go check." She said a little faster and harsher than she intended to. The last thing she wanted was Keegan standing in the kitchen dressed only in a bathrobe with Carrie in the house.

Gwen moved upstairs and knocked on the bedroom door. She slipped inside when she got no answer. Was this appropriate? Should she walk in on Keegan showering? With a slight bit of hesitation, she tapped on the bathroom door and called out. "Hey you decent?"

"You're late, I'm done. I really wanted you to join me." Keegan tugged her into the bathroom and wrapped her in arms.

"You're getting me wet."

"That was the idea." Keegan nuzzled her face against Gwen's shoulder.

"You have a visitor." Gwen rubbed her hands up and down Keegan's wet back. She picked up a towel and started to dry the shorter woman

"Who?" Keegan turned to look Gwen in the face.

"Carrie's here." Gwen put the toilet lid down and sat down on the seat. She watched as Keegan ran a brush through her hair. "Looks like she is heading to the golf course." Gwen put her chin on her hand and leaned on the vanity.

"Can you tell her I'll be down in a couple of minutes?" Gwen nodded and got to her feet. "What time do we need to be at Frost's office?"

"Ten." Gwen felt Keegan's hand on her arm stopping her from leaving. Keegan pulled her back and kissed her.

"I love you."

"Thank you for last night." Keegan pushed her hair behind her ear, her face coloring at the memory of making love to Gwen.

"I'm glad you're home." Gwen nodded. Keegan framed her face with her hands. "Home Gwen. I want this to be your home. If you'd rather Carrie not be here, I'll ask her to leave."

"I'd rather she not wear the pants she has on." Gwen smiled at Keegan's shocked look. "They're different." She kissed Keegan. "You are my home Kee. Not a house. I'd live with you in a van.."

"Down by the river." Keegan finished her thoughts, a line from a SNL skit they used to laugh about.

"Exactly...I'd like to get out of here in the next hour. Tony can do the dishes."

Gwen kissed her again and headed downstairs.

At the bottom of the steps, Carrie stood staring up at the blonde. Gwen put on her best camera smile. "Good morning Carrie."

"I was looking for Keegan." The doctor noted the familiarity of the blonde in the house. Dressed in a pair of khaki shorts and a stone denim short sleeved shirt, shoeless stocking feet, Gwen came down the steps.

"She'll be down in a few minutes. Would you like some breakfast or coffee?"

"I've got a few minutes, coffee would be great." Carrie pushed the visor on her head back a little. Her tee time was at ten. "Do you golf?"

"A little. Meghan has something planned when the Garrys get into town. I'm sure I'll get my ass kicked."

"You're going golfing with Mr. Garry. Why don't you just move in?" Carrie snipped.

Gwen took her mug from the countertop. She grabbed another cup from the cupboard. Filling it, she passed it to Carrie who sat at the table. "I plan on it." Carrie's face registered the shock. Gwen snickered as settled at the table and snagged a hot waffle from the bottom of the stack Tony had piled on a plate.

"You're moving in." The anger in Carrie's voice was evident. Gwen raised her brown eyes to the burning hatred in the doctor's hard gray ones. "What kind of game are you playing here?"

"Carrie." Tony stepped up to defend Gwen. He could see this meeting was not of a friendly nature.

"It's okay Tony." Gwen touched his arm. "Carrie, this is not a game. At least not for me." Gwen folded her hands on the table. "I've been in love with Keegan since I met her."

"You're engaged to Finch." Carrie practically screamed the accusation across the table. She pushed her chair out and stood up. "I love her. I love the baby. Everything was going great until you showed up." The blonde hair above her visor flopped back and forth. "I'll tell her about your little side dishes."

"She knows." Gwen said as she looked at the bright red face of the doctor. "I told her. I told her about hitting on her sister and using escort services."

"What?" Tony blurted out. Gwen shot him a look that this was not the time to discuss the subject.

"She's mine. You need to back off. Go back home." Carrie's blood pressure had to be through the roof. Her eyes bugged out of her head. The veins in her neck were sticking out. "You're not wanted here."

"No Carrie." Keegan's soothe voice drew the room attention. "She is home. I want her here." Keegan walked behind Gwen and placed her hands on her shoulders. "I love her. I've never loved anyone else. No one." Carrie's mouth dropped open slightly. "I've told you that the only relationship I can have with you is a friendship." She felt Gwen cover one of her hands and squeeze. "If you can't accept that, then I need you to leave."

"Keegan, understand she'll use you." Carrie tried to twist the information she had and use it against Gwen. "She uses women and throws them away."

"Carrie, you need to leave. I appreciate you trying to look out for me, but I don't think your intentions are honorable." Keegan watched as her words registered with the doctor. "I'd like you to leave." Keegan leaned over and kissed Gwen's forehead. She heard Carrie retreat through the house her slamming the front door behind her. She heard Carrie retreat through the house, slamming the front door behind her. The squealing of tires echoed through the house.

"That went well." Tony said as he slid into the chair across from Gwen. He quirked an eyebrow up at the couple standing across from him. "You asked Meghan out?"

"Shit." Gwen said and threw a napkin at him. Tony gave her an innocent look. "You're a shit." She repeated as Keegan wrapped her arms around her waist and hugged her from behind.

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~ America's Sweetheart ~

by Catherine Burke

America's Sweetheart

Author's Note: This is my first story posted on The Athenaeum. If all goes well there will be more to follow.

Category: Orig. Uber Alt.

Rating: R / NC-17

Summary: Retired Olympian Gwen Lerner lands in Detroit and comes face to face with her former girlfriend. Still questioning the reason they separated, Gwen wants answers and to get a friendship back. Keegan Garry left the Olympic team under a cloud of mystery and intrigue. Since then she has struggle to get her life back on track. Just when she thinks she's done that, Gwen shows up and derails. Can two women who once loved each other find way to heal their broken hearts and love again?

Comments/Disclaimer(s): This is an original story. The story and characters belong to me. They are not to be used or reproduced without my express written permission. This is my first time posting to the website. An early version of this story was posted but the current is much better :!

This story depicts a love/sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it.

Special Thanks: To J Brownell for ideas suggestions and getting me to actually post this. Also to Kerrie who was able to beta and get this story back to me a very short time. Living half way around the world does have its advantages. Time differences worked well for us.

This work has progressed over the years and is very close to my heart. The two characters helped me through a tough time in my life. I am posting in parts but will have the entire story finished soon. As I continue to work on it, I really need to have some feed back. You can reach me at burkcatherine@aol.com

Part 7

Chapter 21

Gwen's eyes stared aimlessly at the opaque glass doors of the conference room at Frost, Pittman, Darby and Associates. In front of her lay three piles of files from Glenn Leonard. She had reviewed the file with Keegan's photos in it before she hopped on a plane. The contracts were reviewed and scrutinized by her attorney's. Currently, Keegan was in another conference room talking with her legal counsel on what options she had. Connie had sunk to an all time low by making money off her daughter and her seriously ill ex-girlfriend. Gwen could hardly believe all the lies in the files in front of her. Her wallowing was interrupted by a shadow moving past the doorway. She glanced at the stacks of manila folders. The contracts were the key to this entire mess. The actual agreement to sell the information to Look was between Leonard's agency and the tabloid. The agency acted as a proxy for Gwen. Gwen's signature was only on the original agreement with the agency. Connie had copied or forged Gwen's signature on the other agreements. Audrey, the administrative assistant at the investigative agency noticed the doctored forms. When she started with Leonard, she updated the contracts with her initials in the bottom corner. Most of the forms with Gwen's signature had no initials. The small detail was overlooked by the agency since there seemed to be no issues with the assignments.

Connie had masterminded this entire scheme. A year prior to Gwen's photo's being published in Look, Connie asked her daughter to help her by hiring an investigator to look into a new boyfriend. Being burned by many of Connie's love interests in the past, Gwen thought the idea of having the creep investigated before he bilked money out of Connie which in reality was Gwen's cash flow. The files revealed that Connie never hired to look into the man. Instead, the contract was to broker the deal with Look. Gwen then rehired the agency to investigate who sold the photos. In reality, Leonard went to check out Keegan in Michigan. Gwen's attorneys had reviewed the contracts with Look regarding Keegan's photos. There was nothing legally she could do. Down the hall, Keegan's attorneys were probably telling her the same thing. They had no way to stop Look from running the story. The plus side of the situation was that Look had yet to publish run the story. The contract with Leonard gave the agency at least a fourteen day notification window prior to publication. Their options were limited. Her eyes lifted to the door, there were solutions. Hopefully Frost was as good of an attorney as her ego projected. Gwen felt the migraine coming on, this was her fault. If Connie hadn't hired the investigator, none of this would be happening. She really shouldn't blame Glenn Leonard. He was making a living.

The third job was the most recent and the most puzzling. When Glenn mentioned searching for her "brother" Gwen was still in shock from Connie's deception. She didn't want to challenge the fact she had neither a sister nor a brother. The third pile was the thinnest and the most recent job the Leonard Agency was working on. After skimming the first paragraph, Gwen's heart began to pound. According to the documents in the file, two years prior to her birth, a baby boy was given up for adoption. His parents were listed as Christopher and Molly England. Her great aunt and uncle gave up a child for adoption.

Gwen was in shock. She knew the couple well. There was never any mention of a child. Molly and Christopher always looked at her with the loving eyes of parents. They would never give up

a child. Molly had made several comments to Gwen about wanting children. Scolding Gwen when she said she was waiting for the right time. "There never is a right time." Molly's words echoed in Gwen's brain.

As the confusion muddled her brain, she stared at the glass doors. An occasional shadow would walk past, interrupting her focus. None of this made sense. Why Connie would be searching for her cousin after all these years and why tell Leonard it was a sibling? Maybe Connie didn't know about the child until after Christopher's passing. According to the dates on the paperwork, the child was now nearly thirty three years old.

There was something about the dates and times that had Gwen confused. Connie was sent to live with the Englands after Leslie Reid, her mother, died in a car accident, and after some trouble on the naval base. James Reid was a career Navy man and didn't know what to do with a twelve year old girl. According to Connie, she moved in with the Englands just after her sixteenth birthday. While living at the base and under the watchful eye of her father, she had run away multiple times. Molly always referred to Connie as the daughter she could never have. Gwen had always assumed the couple couldn't have children. Her aunt and uncle created a safe happy place for her. Connie was out doing her own thing while Gwen was being raised by the elderly couple. Occasionally, Connie would return, sweep Gwen from the Englands and introduce her to the new boyfriend, fiancée or husband, depending on the stage of the relationship. When Gwen's name began to draw attention, Connie was quick to use her daughter's fame to impress her next suitor. As the years progressed, Connie changed the relationship title from mother-daughter, to sisters. Gwen drew the line at meeting Connie's new companions when one guy asked if she was interested in a ménage à trios with her sister. Completely appalled, Gwen scoffed at the dirty old man and refused to meet any of Connie's friends.

Pushing away from the table, she didn't want to think about her mother any more. The entire situation was a nightmare. Connie's meddling had cost her a piece of her relationship with Keegan and she wasn't going to allow that to happen again. They would get through this as a couple and come out the other side stronger than ever. Looking back on the pile of files, she hoped Keegan was fairing well in her meeting with Frost and her associate Kathy Garrett.

~

"Robin, there has to be something I can do." Keegan folded her hands together on the conference room table and lowered her head to rest on them. She was frustrated after hours of going through the contract line by line, word by word that there was no way out. *Look* had the story wrapped up, Keegan didn't have a leg to stand on. The pictures were taken without her knowledge but she was in a public setting. It wasn't as if Glenn Leonard climbed up a tree in her yard and took pictures through her window. Robin Frost and Kathy Garrett received copies of the contracts. At Gwen's urging, Keegan agreed to speak with Frost and find out her options.

"They have you by the balls, legally." Garrett commented. When she looked through the case Frost handed her last night, she was taken back. She knew Keegan. She watched her lead Weston to the championship. When Keegan went on to represent the country, she and a number of Detroiters were disappointed when their hometown hero disappeared from the team just before the games. Garrett flipped through the photos before she read the case. She thought the case was

going to be a wrongful death or a malpractice suit. Instead, she stared into the bright blue eyes she recognized as a friend. She finally understood the reasons for Keegan's disappearance. "Keegan, if you do the interview and we time it right, you can release the story before the tabloids."

"I don't want to do an interview. Why doesn't anyone get that?" Keegan lifted her head to address the attorneys. She no longer wanted to be in the spot light. She didn't care what story the tabloids ran. She left her soccer career behind a long time ago. Exhausted from the stress of the situation, she just wanted to go home and take a nap.

"Don't do an interview. Let your family and friends tell the story." Frost suggested. She raised a dark eyebrow a bit at Keegan's perplexed look. "Listen, it's pretty obvious that you are extremely content with how things are. I want to run down a few scenarios." The yellow legal pad in front of Robin had heavy black markings on it. Keegan couldn't make head or tail of the scribbling, but the way Frost read from it, she knew the attorney did. "You do nothing. You let *Look* tell your story, or their version of the story. They are the ones with the photos and the proof of your battle with leukemia. So whatever they print will be viewed as the truth since you have no comment for the public." Frost noted the way Keegan shifted in her seat, maybe she was getting through to the stubborn client. The tabloids could be ruthless if the public wanted the story. Keegan's popularity and her mysterious disappearance from the soccer arena would cause a stir. Just the snippet of her at the hockey game during the intermission caused talk around town. Many of Keegan's associates didn't realize she was once a great soccer player whose career came to a grinding halt once the leukemia was discovered.

"Let your family tell the story of how they sat by your side while you withered away to almost nothing. How Meghan's scholarship was threatened to be pulled because she wanted to be by your side. How the methods for bone marrow transplants were out dated and getting a match was like finding a needle in a hay stack."

"Meghan had what?" Keegan's head shot up. Frost looked at Garrett. "Wait until I see that little..."

"Your sister wanted to be with you Keegan. She didn't think you would be here today." Frost explained. She didn't know Meg when she was in school, but Ashley talked at length how Meghan was home and at Keegan's side until the university threatened to take away her scholarship. "You do an interview and let the public know why you dropped off the national team. Why you never played professional soccer again. Explain your relationship with Emerald and how the foundation came into your life and helped. How your sister had a child on the off chance the baby could be a bone marrow match. How Emerald and Helping Hands have gone above and beyond to sponsor donor drives and maintain a data base of potential donors. So when little Christy needs a bone marrow transplant, there is a greater possibility a match can be found." Frost had the intense look in her eyes when she was trying to convince a jury to side with her client. "Tell them how stupid it is not to do research on stem cells. Tell your story Keegan, with your words and your pain. Don't let some rag tag magazine belittle your struggle." Frost watched as Keegan sat back in her chair, her eyes swimming with unshed tears. "Do the

interview Keegan. Trust Gwen to make all the wrongs right and don't let some stupid magazine take away the story of your life."

"You don't lose often." Keegan said as she wiped at her eyes.

"On occasion, I know when to settle." Frost handed her a box of tissues. "Do you want to look over the agreement with SNN that Hannah and Gwen brought?"

"Can I take a few minutes?" Keegan asked as she ran her hand across her forehead. She was not feeling well and the beads of perspiration had her concern.

"Sure. How about we meet back here at two? It will give us some time for lunch if you want." Frost nodded to Garrett as they stood up and stretched their legs. "Keegan, we are going to run out and get some food. Do you want us to bring you something back?"

"No thank you. Robin, I really appreciate everything your doing to help. I'm sorry if I overstepped my bounds last time I saw you."

"It's water under the bridge, Kee." Robin said as she stuffed her briefcase with folders, pictures and pieces of paper. "If you can get Garrett an autograph from Gwen, she may waive her fee."

"Notice she didn't say her fee." Garrett gestured a thumb towards Frost. Keegan gave a small smile to the attorneys and slowly walked out of the conference room. She would do anything for a decent size couch and blanket so she could lie down for a few minutes. "Keegan, I think Gwen is in the conference room by my office if you want to me to check."

"Could you Kathy? I'm not sure if it's stress or pregnancy that has me worn down." Keegan felt her energy sapped from her as she sat back down in the soft leather chair. She was tired of looking at contracts and talking about strategy. She wanted to go home and take a nap.

Gwen rushed into the conference room where Keegan was at. When Kathy told Gwen Keegan wasn't feeling well, her heart stopped. She didn't want to have to deal with another Kirk Lane situation. She relaxed for a moment taking in Keegan's exhausted form. Kneeling at Keegan's side, Gwen let her hand touch the heated flesh of Keegan's cheek. The woman would never complain. There were some many things going on, Gwen didn't notice the pale color or the clamminess of her skin. The same thing happened just before the Olympics. Deep down she had the fear of the leukemia returning. Since seeing the photos of Keegan during her illness, Gwen scoured the internet for any information regarding leukemia. She needed to know what the possibilities were. There would be no more surprises for Gwen when it came to Connie.

"If I didn't before, it is official. I hate my mother." Gwen said as she placed a kiss on Keegan's forehead checking for any sign of fever. "There is just so much I didn't know." Her head hurt as the threatening migraine hit with gale force. She cursed her own flesh and blood for manipulating and sucking cash right from under her nose.

"Gwen, come on deep breaths." Keegan touched her hand gently. "Migraine."

"I am refereeing to them as Mothergraines." A smile touched her lips as her lids lowered closing out the overhead lights.

"Connie's little stunt may throw a monkey wrench into the mix, but I think we can get past it. I hope we can." Keegan said her concern increasing as beads of sweat showed on Gwen's brow.

"Do you want to go home?" Gwen stroked her fingers on Keegan's thigh. "We can have Frost drop by Danny's house tomorrow. I don't deal with this anymore today." Gwen looked into Keegan's eyes. There was a quiet stillness about them.

"I love you." Keegan said as she reached out and cupped Gwen's cheek. Gwen turned her face to kiss her palm. "Can we go home? I want to take a nap."

"Yes." Gwen kissed her forehead.

"Will you lie down with me?"

"I'm not passing on that opportunity." Gwen stood and held out her hands to help Keegan to her feet. Gwen felt the sick emptiness roll across her stomach, a side effect of the migraine. Bill and Sarah were due in town tomorrow. Danny was having a cook out for the family. The idea of seeing the Garrys made her queasy. She wasn't sure of the reception she would get. The recent enlightenment into Connie's activities, she was sure the Garrys would advise Keegan to break off the relationship and run for the hills.

"What time are we supposed to be at Danny's tomorrow?"

"Two." Gwen held her hand as they walked to the main lobby of the firm. The receptionist retrieved their coats. "Can you have Ms. Frost call the house? We're going home."

"No problem Ms. Lerner." The blonde bobbed hair young woman with the pink sweater said as she bit the inside of her lip. "Umm, if you see Mr. Finch, can you wish him good luck for me?"

"Sure thing." Gwen said as she gave the girl a polite nod. She heard Keegan snicker.

"Surprised she didn't give you her number to give to Bobby." Keegan said as soon as they were in the elevator. "Are you okay?"

"My mother and your parents." Gwen remarked as she sank back against the elevator wall. "It's going to be the end of me."

"Oh." Keegan lowered her head. She had spoken to Sarah at length about Gwen. Her mother was pleased and couldn't wait to see Gwen. Bill's reaction to Gwen was still a mystery. She knew her father cared for Gwen, but she wasn't sure if he was willing to forgive.

The drive home was quiet as Gwen sat in sleeping lightly in the passenger's seat. Keegan held her hand, stroking Gwen's fingers with her thumb. They would go home, lie down and re-

energize for the cook out at Danny's tomorrow. The gang was supposed to be there. Bobby was supposed to stop by later if he was able to break free. He was focused for the Motors' quarterfinal playoff games with the Memphis Mountaineers. Gwen hoped he would be able to stop over. She needed a friend and a part of her family. What was the saying if you don't like your family make your own? Having the starting defensive player for the Motors at the cookout would be a good in with Bill. As she pulled into the garage, Gwen was reminded of the first time she had driven Keegan home. Keegan woke at the sound of the garage door lifting.

"Please relax. Everything will work out." Keegan touched her forearm before stepping out of the car and into the house. Gwen waited a few seconds before following. What was the worst that could happen? Keegan would leave her. Gwen felt her chest constrict. She wasn't going to let that happen. Not this time. Not again. She lifted her eyes to the door and saw Keegan holding it open for her. "Are you going to lie down with me?"

"I wouldn't miss it." Gwen touched her lips to Keegan's. "We're sleeping, resting, whatever. No funny business."

"Funny business?" Keegan laughed as she walked through the mudroom and upstairs. "Is that what you're calling it now? What happened to hot monkey sex?"

"My mother and your parents." Gwen grimaced as her laugh caused a shooting pain through her head.

~

There it was again, the buzzing noise. Gwen lifted her head from the pillow and listened. Keegan slept with her, wrapped against Gwen's body. Her head rested on Gwen's chest as her body and leg were draped over Gwen's. Again, the buzzing filled the air. She looked at the clock but they hadn't set the alarm. Kissing the top of Keegan's head, Gwen carefully slipped out of her grasp. Satisfied Kee was still asleep, Gwen put on a t-shirt and sweat pants and ventured in the direction of the noise. About halfway down the hall, the doorbell chimed. Gwen jumped at the sound. Someone was at the front door. Gwen chastised herself for being stupid and scared of a door chime. With a chuckle, she went to the door and opened it.

Connie Sherman stood at the door. Her perfectly styled hair was swept up in the back with small blonde tendrils curling over her ears. A sleek black Lincoln was parked in the driveway with a man standing at the back passenger door.

"Connie, what are you doing here?" Gwen's brow furrowed and her voice was slightly raised.

"Do not talk to me as if I was a servant. What are you wearing and why are you answering the door dressed like that?"

"First," Gwen started her defensives on full alter. "I was sleeping. Second, I will talk to you anyway I want. I am a grown woman, mother." Gwen saw Connie flinch at the use of the word mother.

"I'm sorry. Let's start again. I came to see you. I need to find out what this business is about selling your house. Are you moving in with Bob? Is this his home?" Connie's eyes moved over the quaint structure.

"If you have business with me, please contact Hannah." Gwen said, as she went to shut the door. Connie must have practice with stopping closing doors, since her quick movement prevented Gwen from closing the door.

"I don't know what's gotten into you lately, but frankly Gwen, it's very unbecoming. I will not clear it through your agent to see you. I have the right to see you any time I choose."

"You have no rights when it comes to me!" Gwen pushed her mother back from the storm door and stepped out into the driveway.

"Rights..." Gwen paced. Her eyes lifted to the bedroom window. She didn't want to wake Keegan. "I'll give you some rights. How about my right to live my life as I see fit? No more interference from you, screening my messages, acting on my behalf. How is acting on my behalf translated into monetary gain for you? What about my right to know how my name is being used and dragged through the mud?" Gwen ran her hand through her hair. She noticed the driver had moved into the front of the car and was avoiding the argument.

"What about the hell I went through when those photos were in the tabloids? All the damage control Hannah went through to salvage my career?"

"You came out better afterwards." Connie said smugly. "The point is I didn't have to go through that. You sold the photos to *Look*." The color faded from Connie's face.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Connie denied. "I know it all. I've met Glenn Leonard. I have the files. Jesus, mother, what were you thinking?" Gwen was so busy pacing the cement in frustration that she didn't see Keegan come to the door. "Do you understand what you did? Do you even care?"

"I don't know what you are talking about." Connie's lips were set in a firm line. She wasn't going to budge on this topic.

"You know damn well what I am talking about!" Gwen shouted and started towards her mother. Keegan stepped out and placed a comforting hand on her forearm. As if pulled from a trance, Gwen turned to Keegan's comforting presence. Gwen saw the pleading look in Keegan's eyes. "Connie, contact Hannah." Gwen turned and grabbed Keegan's hand.

"Well... well, you aren't dead. Connie's venomous comment floated in the air. "Knocked up and needing a meal ticket." Gwen felt her hand drop as Keegan confronted her mother with a slap across the face.

"Remember Connie, you are nothing to me but a trespasser. Now get off my property before I call the police and have you arrested."

"I will press charges." Connie placed her hand over the redness forming on her cheek. "I have witnesses." Connie shook her purse at Keegan.

"I'm pregnant, hormonal and justified. You have five seconds." Keegan's voice was controlled and calm. A sure sign she was pissed. "Four...three.." The car door slammed behind Connie as the driver reversed out the driveway, leaving Gwen and Keegan standing there.

"That was interesting." Keegan said as she took hold of Gwen's hand. A few of the neighbors were craning their necks towards her house to see what was happening. "Gwen, look at me." With a few tugs on her hand, Gwen finally looked at Keegan.

"I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for." Keegan pulled her into the house. "I can be a little cranky when someone wakes me up." Keegan started up the stairs to their room.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Gwen said as she tried to loosen her fingers from Keegan's grasp. Keegan turned to her and plastered a searing kiss on her mouth. Breaking apart for oxygen, Gwen smiled up at her. "I'll take that as a no."

"You're such a smart woman." Keegan said as she pulled Gwen up the rest of the stairs. She went to the bed and sat down, waiting for Gwen to join her.

When Gwen stepped between the vee of her legs, she leaned over Keegan, gently putting her lips to Kee's, pushing her back against the mattress. Gwen held her weight above the dark haired woman for a moment. Looking into her blue eyes, she saw the desire in Keegan's face. Her thigh slipped between Keegan's, spreading them apart. She could feel her own desire, but this was about Keegan, about showing her how much she loved her. Gwen sat up and pulled her t-shirt over her head and tossed it to the floor. She saw Keegan's eyes move to her breasts. Grabbing the hem of Kee's shirt, she pulled it over her head. As she moved over Keegan, she felt a hand capture her breast. She chuckled.

"What are you doing?" Gwen questioned as Keegan's hands touched her breasts. Keegan didn't answer, instead she kissed each breast, her mouth covering them with kisses, until she pulled a hardened nipple between her lips, sucking it. Gwen felt the heat of desire rush to her center. She pulled away from Keegan for a moment to shed the rest of their clothes, then brought their lips together again. Breast against breast pressed together. Gwen held in a groan. "I love how you feel." Gwen moaned as she pressed her hips into Keegan's. "The way you taste, your scent." Her mouth followed a path down Keegan's neck to her shoulder, over her sternum. Placing a solid kiss in the valley between her breasts, Gwen felt Keegan's hands roam over her back to her hips, urging her closer. Gwen touched each of her breasts with her lips and fingers, rolling the taut nipple between her lips before touching her tongue against the hard bud. She heard the gasp from Keegan and felt her hips lift slightly off the mattress. Circling her tongue against the nipple, she took it between her teeth and bit down lightly. Just touching Kee was enough today. She wanted this to be about Keegan.

"Gwen..." Keegan's breathy voice filled the room. Pulling back from her breasts, Gwen continued her trail of kisses along Keegan's ribs to her belly, pausing a moment to press her ear to Keegan's child. She let her hands roam the expanse of flesh, grazing her fingers through the thatch of coarse hair between Keegan's thighs. Moving her hand lower, she slipped it between Kee's parted thighs. The warmth and wetness greeting her was her homecoming. She had found her home. It was this woman who loved her unconditionally. Gwen covered Keegan's mouth with her own in a hard passionate kiss that purged her soul of any doubts. Her fingers stroked and coaxed Keegan to a new height. She felt Keegan's legs wrap around her waist as she increased their movement. Holding back to ensure perfection, she wanted Keegan's satisfaction more than her own. Gwen slid two digits into Keegan's warm. Her thumb played a pizzicato against the bundle of sensitive nerves. Keegan's body jerked then went rigid for a moment as the swell of flesh pulsed around Gwen's fingers.

"Oh God!" Keegan screamed as she threw her head back, allowing Gwen access to suck her neck. They lay entwined in each others arms.

Basking in the aftermath, Keegan tried to settle her breathing. They had been together but nothing like she just experienced. Gwen kissed her lightly, then pulled her into the crook of her arm. Watching her chest rise and fall, Keegan tried to calm her racing heart and pounding pulse. She did not speak as she moved to be on top of Gwen. Although her breathing was still labored, she kissed Gwen on her lips and cupped her face. She moved her arms to Gwen's waist and buried her face in her breasts. Gwen cupped the back of her head as she kissed the top of it. Keegan shivered in Gwen's arms, her body still shuddering as small sensations spread through her center. The lock she had on Gwen was gentle as her head rested against her chest. The tears rolling down her face were a surprise. She had never felt so loved or needed by anyone.

"What's wrong?" Gwen asked as she tilted Keegan head up to look at her. She kissed her tears. "Keegan?" Gwen began to question what was happening.

"I'm just really happy." Keegan sniffed and laughed at the same time. "I love you Gwen."

"I love you too."

~

The vodka martini went down smoothly slowing burning Connie's throat. She had three hours until Richard was expecting payment. She needed to get the money from Gwen. If that little bitch wasn't in the picture, Gwen would have already given her the money. Every since that bitch, Kelsey. No, no. What the hell was her name? Keegan...Keegan Garry, Connie fumed about the small dark haired woman who had come back into Gwen's life. She paced her room in at the Weston Inn. She didn't want to get stuck with the bill so she made certain to use the same hotel Gwen stayed at during her charity trip. That way, she could defer the billing to Gwen's account. Five years ago, she was elated to have the witch from Michigan break up with Gwen. Although her daughter was miffed about the relationship ending, her career sky rocketed afterwards. Now Keegan had returned. Gwen career was sure to plummet and the manipulative bitch was turning Gwen against her. All needy and pregnant, Connie was not going to allow her daughter to be used. There was no way she was going to allow that to happen. She needed to remove Keegan

from Gwen's life even if it took drastic measures. She flipped on the television and went back to the mini bar for another Stoli. In the background, she heard notes of Thurston Harris's "Little Bitty Pretty One." The song brought a smile to her face as she thought of Chris and how he used to sing the song to her. She lifted her eyes to watch the scene from John Carpenter's movie, *Christine* where the fat kid is run over by the red Plymouth Fury. Connie lifted the glass to her lips as the smile slowly appeared. At that moment, she decided she needed to get Keegan out of Gwen's life, one way or another.

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Chapter 22

It was a busy morning in the kitchen. Gwen had hard boiled eggs and started cutting fruit for the dishes they were bringing to Danny's for the cook out. Face off time for the quarter final game between the Motors and the Mountaineers was at eight o'clock. Danny planned on having the family over, eat, swim, and then watch the game. Gwen extracted her body from Keegan's over two hours ago. She knew the smaller woman was tiring quicker and her energy level faded fast. Any time Keegan could grab a nap, she was closing her eyes. Today would be a long day. Sarah and Bill were in visiting, the cook out at Danny's and the game tonight. If Gwen could place a bet on the odds, she'd say Keegan would take a nap just after dinner and wake up for the game.

Wiping her hands on a dish cloth, she finished the deviled eggs she had made and set the cut fruit in the refrigerator. She needed to shower and call Bobby. He was playing great and he didn't want to upset his routine. So before every home game, he spoke to Gwen about anything other than hockey, his way of relaxing before the game. When the Motors reached the playoffs, the players, including Bobby, stopped shaving. Gwen cringed at the thought of rough hair as it scraped against her skin. At least Tony's beard had been softened. Bobby was as sharp as a porcupine quill. When Bobby asked her how she knew what a quill felt like, she refused to tell him the horror story from her youth. Since meeting Danny, Bobby developed the habit of stopping by her home before going to the arena. The computer programmer had gotten through the thick exterior of the hockey player. Bobby liked Danny and they would usually chat before the games. Gwen hoped to get to Danny's before Bobby took off for the arena.

Quietly, Gwen stepped into their bedroom and stood over the undisturbed figure sleeping on the bed. She resisted the urge to touch Keegan's face. Her heart pounded against her chest as she thought how lucky she was to have the sleeping woman in her life again. Walking over to the closet, she pulled her t-shirt and shorts off, throwing the garments into the hamper, then looked back at Keegan. She planned on taking a shower, but she didn't want to disturb Keegan. Standing in her bra and underwear, she looked for an outfit to wear to the cookout. May was here but there was still a slight chill in the air. Gwen wondered if anyone would attempt to swim. Finally selecting a pair of navy blue cargo shorts and a gray button up top to wear, she turned to find two very blue eyes staring at her ass.

"Enjoying the view?" Gwen teased as she turned towards the bed.

"Absolutely." Keegan smiled and snuggled her pillow. "Hi. What time is it?" "Close to eleven." Gwen climbed across the bed on her knees until she straddled Keegan's legs. "Are you going to get up soon?" She leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips. "Sleepy head."

"It's your fault. You kept me up very late last night." Keegan whined but placed her hand on the waistband of Gwen's panties. Running her fingers along the waistband, she could feel Gwen reacting to her touch.

"You keep that up and your family is going to wonder why we blew them off. I don't think your parents would appreciate that." Gwen cooed. She knew if Keegan slipped her fingers closer to her center, she would instantly explode. Keegan gave her the look and Gwen knew she wanted her. Her fingers continued on their path towards dangerous territory. "Don't." Gwen stopped her progress with a light touch on her wrist. "I want to too, but your dad is waiting to see you. I really don't want to piss him off." "You're no fun."

"That's not what you said last night." Gwen took Keegan's hands and pinned them gently above her head. Kissing her again on the lips she pulled back and looked into Keegan's eyes. "I'll take a rain-check." Gwen moved her hips against Keegan's thighs. "Definitely tonight." Gwen jumped off Keegan before things got any hotter or heavier.

"Unfair...." Keegan sighed and turned on her side to watch Gwen put on her clothes. She stuck out her lip, pouting.

"Up. I am taking a shower if you want to join me."

"I'm not up yet. I want a cup of regular tea...." Keegan pouted. The doctor advised against any caffeinated beverages. "I'm not a morning person." Keegan stretched her hands above her head and yawned. "Plus my system is all out of whack." Keegan rolled on to her back and placed a hand on her womb. She looked at the caring look that covered Gwen's face.

"Poor baby." Gwen pulled away. She turned her brown eyes to Keegan, who moved to a sitting position. The look in her eyes must have been filled with lust. Because how Keegan looked, Gwen really really wanted to be late for the outing.

"What?" Keegan sat up in the bed, the sheet falling to her waist giving Gwen a full view of her breasts. She watched Gwen's eyes widen and realized that her state of dress was causing the blonde discomfort. "Remember, you said no."

"I'm an idiot." The perplexed look on Gwen's face glanced from the bed to the shower. "Join me Kee."

"We'll be late."

"It's better than being frustrated all afternoon and evening." Gwen watched as Keegan pulled the sheet up to cover her breasts as she slid from the bed. Wrapped in the sheet, she walked up to

Gwen. Holding the sheet with one hand, she raised the other to Gwen's cheek. Letting her cool palm touch Gwen's face, she smiled up at the woman who held her heart.

"Do I frustrate you?"

"You make me very happy. Being with you.... being part of your life makes me happy. I've been miserable without you. I never want to feel that way again." Gwen leaned towards Keegan, bringing their lips together in a searing, passionate kiss. Breaking apart, Gwen leaned her forehead against Keegan's. "Shower....now." Keegan laughed as she leaned into Gwen's shoulder savoring the warmth.

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As the car got closer to Danny's house, Gwen was on the verge of having a panic attack. Keegan noticed the unconscious gesture immediately. Gwen's fingers were spread wide and long exhaling breaths released from her chest. Silently, Keegan pulled the truck over to the side of the road and put it in park. She shut off the engine just as Gwen began to protest.

"What are ..."

"I want you to listen to me." Keegan began. Gwen looked out the passenger's window for a moment than turned her attention back to the driver. "I love you. My family is.. has always known how I feel about you. If I love you, they will love you too." Her parents had always been fond of Gwen, treating her as if she were their daughter.

"How do you know?" Gwen's eyes were on the brink of tears. "I don't know what it's like to have a family that supports you. Your parents treated me better than my family. What are they going to say after they find out about Connie and *Look*? I'm sure Sarah isn't going to be happy to have your story in the tabloids. I will disappoint them. Hell, I disappoint myself." Gwen inhaled deeply, trying to keep tears at bay.

"If you think that then you don't know my parents at all." Keegan said softly. "My parents are happy for us. Us...Gwen. They're happy I'm alive to have a life, a baby, a lover."

"Is that what we are? Lovers?" Gwen knew this was not the time to talk but she didn't know when they would have time alone. "Is that what you want?"

"I'd like to be much more. More than what we were before." She reached hand across the gap separating the seats and grasped Gwen's hand. They intertwined their fingers. "I'd like to think we are a family... or will be.. the three of us. I've dreamed it."

"I want that. Keegan, I want that so bad. I'm afraid. There is so much going on, this thing with Connie, your story, the break up with Bobby, and the new job with SNN. I want to protect you. I don't want you to get hurt."

"You don't need to do that."

"Do what?"

"Any of it, I don't need to be protected." Keegan tightened her grip on Gwen's hand. "What I need is for us to work together, to talk. You can't keep this inside of you. Just like I can't change what I did, but for the record, I would." Keegan thought about Gwen's visit to her hospital room. "I'd call you back inside that room and tell you how scared I was. How I didn't want you to leave my side." A lone tear slide down her face and fell to the floor. "I was the idiot. My mistake."

"No ...no I'm the one whose mother played games."

"How can you control what Connie does?" Keegan asked. She saw the same frustrated look she knew her eyes mirrored. Connie had taken so much away from them. Forgiveness was something neither woman offered. Of course Connie was still pleading the innocent victim. How many other people's lives had Connie destroyed?. Five years was a long time. Leaning across the center console, Keegan pressed a warm kiss to Gwen's lips and wiped the lone tear from her face. "You can't. We can't let Connie come between us. Never again. I was so empty without you."

"She won't baby. Nothing will ever come between us again." Gwen pulled Keegan towards her, kissing her full on the mouth. "Never, again. I promise." When they pulled apart, Keegan saw the pain in Gwen's eyes. At that moment Keegan wished she could catch Connie in a dark alley and take out her frustration. The slap yesterday felt great, but there was so much more damage the woman caused them.

Placing her hand on Gwen's thigh, squeezing lightly in a supporting gesture, she pulled the van back on to the roadway and headed into the familiar neighborhood. Keegan's foot pushed a little heavier on the pedal as she honked the horn and waved at the couple standing in front of Danny's garage. Bill was easy to spot, dressed in vulgar golfing attire of a lemon colored shirt and plaid shorts. His black hair had grayed over the years and his glasses were pushed on top of his head. Sarah, dressed in a light blue sun dress stood next to her husband. Her soft brown hair was cut into a bob style easy to manage and swept behind her ears. She leaned into Bill's side as she lifted a hand to shield her eyes from the afternoon sun.

"There they are!" Keegan commented as she glanced at the nervous looking blonde. She could see the beads of perspiration on Gwen's brow despite the cool air blowing on them. "It's going to be fine. Mom has been looking forward to seeing you. She's glad you're back in my life."

"I don't understand that. Your mother should be pissed at me, not glad that I'm back in your life. If you were my kid, I'd give me the 3rd degree. I want her to be happy for you... for us. Glad and happy are two very different emotions." Gwen mumbled.

"You're over-reacting." Keegan said as she pulled into the driveway. "Come on chicken." The small comment brought a smile to Gwen's face. "It will be like the first time I brought you home to meet them." Keegan held the amber colored eyes for a long moment. "They love you."

Gwen closed her eyes, breaking the intense contact. She hoped Keegan was right. Her eyes popped open as Sarah's voice screamed a greeting to her daughter. She watched Keegan

scramble out of the car and be engulfed in her mother's arms. Both women were in full blown tears as Gwen slid from the car and walked around to the welcoming committee.

"You're absolutely glowing." Sarah remarked as she pulled away from her oldest daughter and took in the bulging midsection, her hands still resting on Keegan's forearms as if she never wanted to lose contact. "You look beautiful." Sarah's voice was full of emotion. She hadn't seen Keegan since Christmas. "Oh sweetie... you look very very happy."

"I am mom. I am." Keegan wiped a tear from her cheek and turned to her father. "Pops." Keegan threw herself against his chest. The once giant of a man seemed to be shrinking with age. Her arms wrapped around his waist. "You're too thin." She said as she felt his scratchy cheek against hers.

"I could say the same for you."

"Liar." Keegan felt as if she was as big as a whale. "Thankfully, I'm not going to the beach. The crowd will probably try to push me out to sea."

"Never. How are you Peanut?" Bill tousled her hair and kissed her on the cheek.

"I'm great dad." She smiled up at him, looking at the deep blue eyes she inherited. She looped her arm in his and turned to a very unsure Gwen standing quietly at the front fender, a worry crease marring her forehead. Keegan gripped her father's arm as Sarah went to Gwen's side. When Gwen shifted her weight from one foot to the other, Sarah lifted a hand to Gwen's face and caressed her cheek.

"Thank you." Sarah said, causing the stoic blonde to drop her head as tears spilled out.

"I'm so sorry." Gwen whispered. Sarah wrapped her arms around Gwen and gave her a giant hug. "I'm sorry." Gwen repeated.

"There's no need Gwen. You're here now and that's what counts." Gwen nodded at Sarah's words struggling to gain her composure. "You are staying?" "Absolutely." Gwen lifted her head and looked at the soft hazel eyes of Sarah Garry. When she looked towards Bill, he was staring at her. He didn't say a word. His blue eyes flicked from Gwen to his wife and back to his daughter. She wiped at the tear drops on her cheeks.

Sarah looked over at her daughter. Keegan was actually beaming. If Gwen made her happy, than Sarah was not one to question. She was thankful her daughter was still alive. The illness that once racked Keegan's system was under control. Sarah said a silent prayer, thankful she was able to have her entire family there with her for Mother's Day. For the last few weeks, she had heard the uncertainty and excitement in the Keegan's voice. A call from Ashley confirmed Gwen and Keegan had reconnected.

When Meghan called to voice her displeasure with Gwen's presence in her older sister's life, Sarah scolded her youngest. *"Can't you be happy for her Meghan? What more does she have to go through?"* When her raven haired offspring failed to reply, Sarah continued.

"I wish you could find someone who makes you as happy as Gwen makes Keegan."

"Somethings aren't meant to be mom." Meghan's answer still haunted Sarah. She wanted her children happy, in loving relationships and healthy.

"Never say never....." Sarah said as she turned towards Danny's house, wondering what had put a smile on her youngest daughter's face.

"Danny said to take everything to the patio. We are still waiting on Ash and Andy. Tony's picking them up. Andy was still napping when we left." Bill said as he tried to grab a bowl from his daughter's hands.

"No way, I'm not at that helpless poor me stage yet." Keegan said as she slapped his hands away.

"Says you." Gwen teased. "She's a bit cranky if she doesn't get enough sleep. She was napping to."

"You're the one who woke me up. I was sleeping fine." Keegan teased. She went back to bed for a half hour after their shower.

"Probably still would be. Did Bobby stop by?" Gwen saw the excitement in Bill's eyes. Sarah smirked for a moment.

"If you are referring to Bob Finch, no we have yet to meet him. I like Bobby better, it fits him." Sarah started for the house. "Meg is here."

Keegan pushed on the side gate then waited a second before opening the latch release. She turned her backside against the wood, winking at Gwen as she pushed it open. Her clear blue eyes sparkled at Gwen as she kissed the blonde passing by.

"I didn't wake you up. I put you to sleep." Gwen smiled, knowing Keegan left the shower very satisfied.

Danny walked out of the house to the patio to greet them. Gwen set the plate of deviled eggs on the table and took the bowl of fruit salad from Keegan.

"It's not much compared to what Deb made that night." Gwen thought about the dinner party at Danny's. How beautiful Keegan looked standing in the fire light, the evil little smirk on her face as she lanced the splinter in her finger, so much had happened in such a short time. Gwen wasn't going to take any moment for granted.

"Gwen, thank you. Don't worry, as if any of you have cooking skills." Danny teased as she organized the spread.

"I can cook." Meg said as she emerged from the house, a silly grin plastered on her face.

"You can microwave and grill. That really isn't cooking." Sarah said as she placed a hand on Meg's arm. "But I still love you." Sarah leaned over and kissed Meg's hair.

"Well, I think you are going to have to battle dad for grilling rights." Keegan commented as Bill was already fiddling with the propane. He had pulled the tank from underneath and mumbled something about a seal. "Let me help you bring some things out. Let the jocks and dad battle over the grill."

"I'm not a ..." Gwen started to argue.

"Please." Meg said as she handed her the brush to clean the grill. Gwen took the brush and began to scrape off the metal bars.

"You okay?" Meghan questioned as she took in the nervous mannerisms.

"My mother, your parents, what else can go wrong?" Gwen said as she stopped scrapping. Meg started to laugh. "It's not funny." Meg didn't stop. Gwen shook the brush at Keegan's sibling.

"How come any time someone say what else could go wrong, the worst happens? Gwen, don't worry about my parents, they love you. Heck if you can win me over, Bill shouldn't be an issue."

"What about Sarah?"

"Mom's a push over. You know that."

"So, you're okay with me being back in Keegan's life?"

"Absolutely." Meg took the brush out of her hand. "Just don't f- it up."

"I won't." Gwen said as she turned to the house to look at Keegan. Standing next to Danny and Sarah, Keegan looked petite. In her hand she held bottled water as she continued to talk. Mother and daughter looked so much alike it scared Gwen a little. At least she knew Keegan would still be a beauty when they were old and gray. When Danny handed her a beer, Keegan threw back her head and laughed. She turned to look at Gwen, a bright smile on her face as she held up the beer for Gwen's agreement. Gwen nodded and nudged Meg.

"Beer?"

"Hell yes." Meg said. "You can't cook out without a beer." Meg continued, then lifted to her eyes to where Gwen was staring. Keegan was looking back at her. "It's great you're back together Gwen. She loves you."

"I don't know what I would do without her in my life." Gwen turned back to Meg who was now staring at the taller figure in the house. "What about you? Dating anyone?"

"Dating?" Meg laughed. "I'm not dating material."

"You'll get there one day. Some woman is going to come into your life and sweep you off your feet, give you a sick feeling in your stomach and give you that rush every time you see her."

"You get that?"

"Every time I see your sister." Gwen explained as the women came out of the house.

"I'll let Ash know." Meghan said as she took the beer from Sarah. Gwen punched the outstretched arm.

"You're an ass." Gwen commented as the beer in Meg's hand spilled a little. "You better give that to your dad."

"He can get his own." Meghan tipped back the brown bottle just as Bill walked up.

"Still stealing my beer." He swiped the bottle from his child and laughed at the lost look on her face. "No respect."

"Is Bob coming over? I think dad is really looking forward to meeting him." Keegan asked.

"God, I hope he shows up. He is trying to maintain rituals. What time he goes to bed. What shorts he wears. And he is looking like Tony. Scruffy beard and all."

"There is nothing wrong with scruffy, and as long as they keep winning, he can continue to look like me." Tony said as he opened the gate, Andy getting a ride high on his shoulders. Ashley squeezed between Tony and the gate, laughing.

"I agree." Ash had on a Motors t-shirt and a pair of khaki shorts.

"As long as the Motors win, who cares what Bob Finch looks like?" Bill raised his beer in agreement. Ashley handed one of the bags she carried to Danny.

"Andy, time to get down. Tony isn't a horse."

"Could have fooled me." Meghan mumbled under her breath.

"What's that, golf girl?" Tony said as he flipped Andy over his head and safely to the ground. Meg ignored him. "All tough and a smart ass." Tony quickly snatched Meghan up by the waist and threw her over his shoulder. He carried her over to the side of the pool as she screamed and threatened him.

"Don't you dare!" Meg screamed.

"Why not? You called me a horse."

"Ash called you a horse." Meg defended herself. "I just agreed." Tony spun around with Meghan screaming and hitting his back. "Ash! Danny, help! Mom!" Meghan called out as Tony dropped her head first into the pool. Tony stood on the edge with his hands on his knees laughing. Meghan flipped her hair back out of her face. If she didn't get it dried, she'd have a curly mess in her hands.

"Pay backs!" She pointed a finger at Tony.

"You started it." Tony said as Danny walked past him to the ladder where Meghan was climbing up. Danny held out a towel for Meghan and wrapped her in it. Rubbing her hands along Meg's back, Danny gave her a quick smile.

"You did start it." Danny touched a finger to Meg's pouting lips. "Tony, just for that, you have to cook." Danny took Meg's hand and led her into the house. "I think there are some clothes you can wear and get your hair dry." The family watched as their hostess took Meghan into the house without argument.

"What's up with that?" Ashley said as she expected her sister to throw a fit and find a way to get Tony into the pool. Instead, Meg let Danny take her into the house. "No clue." Sarah said as she gave Keegan a wink.

~

"Do you have a minute?" Gwen asked as she approached Bill on the back patio. He had been avoiding her since the greeting on the driveway.

"Sure." Bill popped his glasses on the top of his salt and pepper head. He walked a little ways into Danny's back yard where she had a bench swing set up. "Have a seat." Gwen had been pacing the back patio for the last twenty minutes trying to gather her courage to speak with him. She walked down the flagstone path behind Bill. When he gestured to the wooden seat next to him, Gwen swallowed nervously and sat down. She had talked to this man before. Six years earlier, she talked to Bill about giving Keegan a ring and having a commitment ceremony after Greece. This time she needed to stand her ground and alleviate any concerns Bill voiced.

"Wow.." Gwen whispered quietly as she settled with her body facing him. Her back pressed against the arm rail. Bill stared at her with the familiar blue eyes of the Garry family. "Are you angry with me?" Her eyes held Keegan's father for a moment. "Why do you think I would be angry with you?"

"My guess would be you're not happy with Keegan and I being back together." Gwen fidgeted nervously on the wood seat.

"You're close. I think the key word is 'together.' What exactly does that mean to you?" Bill leaned forward and placed his elbows on his knees. His hands dangled loosely between his legs. "How long are you planning on being together with her? Are you going to stick around this time?"

"I plan on forever." Gwen watched his reaction and waited for the negative response. When she did not receive one, she continued. "You and I had a conversation a few years ago."

"What conversation would that be Gwen? The one where you promised me you would love my daughter no matter what?" Bill rocked a little, causing the chains to squeak then as he leaned back.

"I do love your daughter." Gwen's confidence was fading fast. "Things didn't work out the way I had planned."

"I remember the conversation well." Bill chided. "You asked permission to marry Keegan." His blue eyes blazed with disappointment.

"I never asked her." Gwen confessed. She wanted to many times, yet it was never the right time. Between practices, travel, and games, they barely had time together, let alone have an intimate moment where she could propose.

"I thought you wanted a commitment, you were the one who wanted to spend the rest of your life with her. Where were you when she was crying out for you? When she prayed to die because the pain was so bad? What happens when she gets sick again? How long will you wait to jump ship? Lose yourself in some other woman?"

"Jesus, Bill." Gwen commented as she put a hand to her head. She thought Meghan had been hard to convince. The Garry patriarch was making her sweat. "I need you to understand that I love her. I loved her then and I love her now. I never stopped."

"Loved her so much you walked away. Now you find out she was sick and you expect me to believe you will be at her bedside?"

"She's not sick." Gwen argued back.

"At any time, she could have a relapse. Do you understand that?" Bill almost shouted at the blonde. "Then where will you be? You'll have a sick lover and a child who are depending on you. Will you be there for them? You've given me no reason to believe that you will stick around during the rough times. Look at your family Gwen. You can't depend on them."

"I will be there." Gwen shouted as she jumped to her feet. "You know that Bill. I would have stayed in Michigan if she had told me she was sick." She ran her hand through her hair in frustration. "I'll stay because I love her and because I'm nothing without her. Do you get that? Nothing! I know that I wasn't complete until she came back into my life." Gwen shouted again. She waited a moment as she gained her composure. "I should have pulled that ring out the night

she left me in Miami. The night I knew something was wrong and she didn't tell me, or when I came to the hospital, but I didn't. And I've paid. I've paid dearly for missing every single day for the last five years."

"What do you want from me?" Bill asked. His face formed the familiar stubborn lines his daughters had inherited.

"Permission to be with your daughter. Your blessing if..." Gwen sat back in the chair. "When we have the commitment ceremony for you to walk her down the aisle." "You had it once before..." Bill paused for a moment. "Do you have a ring?"

"It's the same one." Gwen said as she reached into her cargo shorts and pulled out the worn and weathered black velvet box. Bill eyed the beaten and well worn box. The plush material had been scraped away from Gwen rubbing the box.

"Nervous habit?" Bill asked as he watched the soccer player rub her finger against the once plush covering.

"Beats smoking." Gwen offered. She set the ring box on the arm rail and got to her feet. She walked a few steps away and looked up at the clear blue sky. Keegan would wonder where she was. "I love her. I truly love her with all of my heart. I love the baby. We're a family." Tears began to slip down Gwen's face as she truly realized she had a family of her own. A family she would protect and love no matter what. A family she would never betray or use.

Taking his glasses from the top of his head, Bill pulled them over his eyes. Opening the ring box, he saw the exquisite engagement ring. The setting was delicate with a thin band of channel set princess cut diamonds with a large half carat centered diamond. "This is a beautiful ring Gwen. She'll love it." Bill stood up and moved to Gwen's side. "Be good to her Gwen." Bill handed the ring back to the crying woman.

"I will. God, I won't disappoint you sir."

"Sir... please Gwen, you've never called me sir... don't start now." Bill hugged her tight. "Do it soon because I don't think I can keep it a secret."

"Tonight." Gwen assured him.

"Gwen! Bobby's here!" Ashley called out the back door. Gwen chuckled as Bill quickly placed an arm around her shoulders.

"Let's go wish Mr. Finch good luck." Bill commented as he grinned like a little boy on Christmas morning.

~

Keegan smiled as she watched Gwen rinse the dishes and hand them to Danny. She wondered what transpired between Gwen and Bill in the back yard. They went from avoiding each other to

actually joking around. Bill was still on cloud nine from meeting Bobby. When the player handed over two tickets to the game, Keegan thought Bill was going to break into tears. Sarah gave him a stern look then nodded in approval. After dinner, Bill disappeared with his buddy, Ben Wilmington heading to the game. When Gwen stood straight up and stretched her back out, she turned to see Keegan staring at her.

"Want to go watch the sunset?" Gwen asked as she handed the last dish to Danny. "That would be wonderful. It will let me walk off some of this food." Keegan said as she touched her full stomach. She needed to get out of the house. Andy was extremely difficult during dinner, cranky and vying for a spanking. He was getting on Keegan's last nerve. The baby was active tonight, kicking her rib cage more than once during dinner. Maybe the little bugger was trying to compete with Andy by creating a ruckus.

She stepped outside into the spring weather to avoid listening to Andy's cries. Cold enough to warrant a light jacket, Keegan wrapped her arms around her torso and waited for Gwen. Keys in her hand, she opened the door for Keegan. Sliding behind the wheel, the blonde turned her and said. "Danny said there's a lakefront park just up the street. How about we go there?"

"Anywhere, as long as I don't have to hear Andy crying." Keegan wondered if Ashley would put him to bed before the game started. Gwen had been quiet during dinner. On occasion, Keegan would catch Gwen staring at her. She didn't mind. They drove a little ways to the park on Lake Erie. The winds kicked up a bit.

"Come on Mommy." Gwen held her hand out for Keegan to grasp. They started to walk along the wooden deck which ran horizontal to the lapping waves.

"Did something happen between you and Dad tonight?" Keegan asked as she placed her arm in the crook of Gwen's arm.

"Actually it did. I wanted to clear the air with him." Gwen started. "I hope you're not mad about it."

"Why would I be mad? I'm glad you talked to him." Keegan said as she leaned her head on Gwen's shoulder. "Being around the two of you was a little tense."

"Just don't scream my name out in the middle of the night and I think he'll be alright."

"Hey." Keegan slapped her lightly gently as her face flushed. Gwen stopped walking and drew Keegan into her arms. "You're teasing me."

"Yes." Gwen lowered her lips and brushed them lightly against Keegan's. The sunlight bounced on the water as the red fingers of light recessed into the horizon. The waves rolled gently on to the shore as a willowy breeze touched their skin. "Come on let's sit." Gwen led her to a picnic table. Keegan stepped up on the seat and sat on the top of the table. Stepping back, Gwen held on to Keegan's hand. She heard Keegan take a in a sharp breath as she pulled the tattered jewelry box from her shorts pocket. "I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you." She ran the

pad of her thumb over Keegan's knuckles. "I've held on to this ring for a long time. It's always been for you. My heart has been so empty without you in my life. I never want to feel that ever again. I'm asking you to spend the rest of our lives together. Marry me Keegan." With shaky fingers, Gwen pulled the ring from its nest and held it out for Keegan.

Keegan's heart stopped beating the moment Gwen pulled the small black box out of her pocket. She heard the words but the shock of the situation was overwhelming. Rays of exiting sunlight glistened off the ring. She knew Gwen was giving her heart. Tears filled her eyes as she bit her bottom lip to stop the quivering. She didn't care about the ring. She cared about the meaning of the words Gwen was asking her.

"Yes! Oh God yes!" Keegan leaned into the blonde and planted a large kiss on her lips. She let her lips linger until she pulled back and peppered her face with small kisses. She felt Gwen put her hands on her hips and pull her closer. "I love you." Keegan leaned down and brushed Gwen's hair from her face. Lowering her lips to the woman in front of her, Keegan heard the sigh just before their lips met

"I've always loved you." Gwen said as she stared into Keegan's eyes. "You're my soul." She pressed her face into Keegan's hand. Kissing her palm, Gwen tasted the saltiness of her skin.

"Did you even look at the ring?"

"The ring doesn't matter. The fact you're asking me to marry you is the only thing I care about. You could have gotten it out of a gumball machine or eaten half the sucker."

"It would have been cheaper, but lucky for you I know what you're worth." Gwen took the ring out of the box and slipped it on to Keegan's left ring finger. "Is it loose?"

"It's perfect." Keegan held the ring out in front of her to actually examine the princess cut diamond. "It's gorgeous."

"You're gorgeous." Gwen pulled Keegan to her feet. "I planned on giving this to you a few years ago, but things didn't work out."

"No, you're wrong, things worked out perfectly." Keegan placed her hand on Gwen's cheek and felt the warmth radiate from her. She kissed her. "Perfect." Keegan smiled holding the soft brown eyes. "Is this what you and Bill were plotting in the back yard?"

"He gave his blessing before he got the tickets. Otherwise, I would always wonder if it was because of the tickets I got his approval." Gwen commented as they held hands for a moment. The sun was setting behind them. "Not to kill the mood but the game is on."

"In ten minutes." Keegan pulled her by the hand towards the car. "Hey at least we're not in a crowded arena. We can cuddle in front of the television without worrying about people seeing us."

"You know what Kee?" Gwen said as she pulled her close for a quick kiss. "I don't care."

~

The car sat idling at the curb waiting. This was the only option. If that woman hadn't come back, everything would have gone according to plans. People didn't care what happened to a "has been". The woman wasn't worth the paper the tabloid was printed on. Things needed to be taken care of before the plan was ruined. This was just a little detour a speed bump in the road. No one would know and no one would care.

The black Jeep Liberty steered down the quiet neighborhood street to the cul de sac at the end. Blocking the driveway entrance were four city department construction cones. The driver of the idling car put the automobile in park and revved the engine. When the SUV pulled against the curb, the back brake light went on then off. The occupant in the driver's seat opened the door and exited the vehicle. Too dark to see exactly what road maintenance was being done, the driver stepped forward to investigate.

This was the opportunity they had been waiting for. As soon as the driver exited the car on the street gunned its engine and headed directly at the figure in the road. With the headlights dimmed the front of the car was aimed at the figure. The car over swung towards the curb clipping the parked vehicle. The impact slowed down the momentum of the speeding car, allowing the target to react. The figure turned to see.

The driver tried to change direction as Gwen's shocked face stared back through the windshield. Connie frantically pulled the wheel away from hitting her daughter.

Screams filled the air as Keegan watched Gwen's body fly across the hood of her truck and onto the tree lawn. The dark sedan squealed its tires as it tried to manipulate the circular roadway. Keegan was pushed against the passengers' door when the rear was hit by the on coming car. Her side hurt and she tasted the coppery flavor of blood. She must have bit her lip during the impact. She screamed as she watched the car come at Gwen. Scrambling to open the door, she finally realized the lock was engaged. In seconds, she was at Gwen's side checking for vitals. She needed to take care of Gwen. Gwen was the only thing that mattered. There was blood on her face and Keegan could feel her breathing yet, she was unconscious.

"Come on baby....stay with me." Keegan looked over her shoulder to see her neighbor's lights coming on. "Call 911! We need police and EMT!" Keegan screamed to Karen Wilmington, Ben's wife. In the distance, she heard sirens.

~

Chapter 23

Hot lights burned over head. A hand reached out to block out the intense light. For the thousandth time, she wondered how she got here. This was something she never planned on. If it was up to her and only her, she would have done everything differently. It was too late now.

Keegan sat in the canvas chair, the studio lights making her sweat and uncomfortable. Tempted to touch her make-up covered face, but she was afraid the woman would put more on her. Now she knew what it felt like to be on the *Inside the Actors Studio*. In the chair across from her sat Dale McKnight. He made idle chit chat with her as he showed her the set offering her the disclaimer he wanted to save the conversation for the "*Where are They Now?*" segment. To her right was a table set up between the seats with glass and a bottle of water. Weston University agreed to allow SNN to use the campus studio and save Keegan the hassle of dealing with local broadcasters. Keegan gave a small smile to the college aged production assistant. She negotiated with SNN that the crew would be all students at Weston. If she was going to do this interview, she wanted people she trusted and could benefit from the experience.

"Ready?" Dale asked the young man who was fitting Keegan with the microphone. Clipping the microphone to the lapel of Keegan's blazer, the student snaked the wire behind Keegan's chair and out of sight. He lifted his green eyes to meet Keegan's and gave her a wink. Keegan almost laughed as the blush ran up his neck to his face. Ashley had chosen her outfit, a soft olive color leaf print jacket with a black blouse and slacks. The student nodded and left the stage.

"As I said before, I'd like this to be like a conversation. Are you okay with that?"

Dale asked as he nodded to production booth. "Are we okay with volume?"

"As I said before, I'll let you know if a topic is off limits." Keegan let her boot dangle from the foot rest. Keegan took in the nod of agreement Dale gave her.

"In studio today, I have the pleasure of speaking with Keegan Garry former member of the National soccer team. Keegan, how are you today?"

"Doing well Dale with all things considered." Keegan glanced from Dale to the people and crew standing off camera watching.

"Your stance with the media has always been very standoffish. So why change? What has happened?"

"Standoffish?" Keegan let one of her bright smiles escape as she looked at the camera. "That's very political." Keegan chuckled quietly. "What hasn't happen would be a shorter answer but I think that would bore your audience." Keegan leaned over and grabbed the bottle of water. She was stalling and knew it. She made promises and needed to get this over with. "Where do you want to start?"

"Let's start in Greece."

"Never been there." Keegan smiled at her own joke.

"That's the point." Dale's shoulders bobbed up and down at his humorous guest. "Why did you disappear from the Olympic team just before the Greece games? There were rumors about an emergency appendectomy. Tell me what happen."

"I wish it was an appendectomy. Of gosh, it was like yesterday. I was riding high. Being on the team, going to my first Olympics and suddenly it was over. Not just the Olympics, my career, my life." Keegan watched as the members of the studio gave her their complete attention. She never thought people would give her plague a second thought. "The day before we were scheduled to leave, I went up for a ball against Shannon Abbott, nothing big just practice. Shannon wasn't going full on and neither was I. We just hit."

"Shannon Abbot is the reason you dropped out of soccer?" Dale thought of the three time Olympian with the curly brown hair and soccer mom persona. "Were you cutting into her playing time?"

"No." Keegan thought about how Shannon was probably screaming at the television set. "A bloody nose was the reason I didn't go to Greece."

"Can you explain?"

"A bloody nose isn't too serious where I come from. I'm a Motown girl, boxing, hockey, we get hit in the face all the time. The problem was, the bleeding wouldn't stop." Keegan recalled sitting on the sidelines with a damp cloth pressed to her face as the team continued to practice. After about two hours the trainers decided to send her to the hospital. "From that incident, it was discovered that I had cancer, leukemia to be exact."

"Didn't you know? Did you feel sick?" Dale's eyes were riveted on his guest. He knew there were things happening, he didn't expect this.

"I was in great shape. We were running six hour practices and getting ready for the games. I felt run down but I thought it was from the preparation and the traveling."

Keegan took another sip. Her throat feeling suddenly parched as she remembered Curtis and the team doctor. "For the record, I was not cut. I was deemed medically inactive."

"Is that important to you that people are aware of that?"

"Yes. I would have never left the team. I didn't have a choice. I would have gone to Greece. I was part of a gold medal winning team. There aren't many people who can say that."

"Did anyone on the team know what you were going through?" Dale was approaching a line but he wasn't sure if his guest would answer.

"Only Coach Curtis and medical staff were aware of the medical condition. There was no need to let the team worry about something they couldn't do anything about."

"So none of your teammates knew."

"None."

"Not even Gwen Lerner."

"Not even Gwen." Keegan stared directly into Dale's eyes. "My mother came up with the idea of the emergency appendectomy. No one would expect me to play in the games after undergoing surgery."

"Rumors swirled around the media tents regarding Gwen leaving Greece and going to visit you in the hospital." Dale waited. "Can you confirm she came to see you in the hospital days before the games?"

"Gwen came to the hospital under the pretense of the appendectomy. I sent her back to Greece to do her job and she did."

"Did you keep in touch or tell anyone on the team about your illness after the games?"

"You have to understand that for me to start treatments for cancer, I went from running ten miles a day to barely being able to walk ten steps. When it came down to finding a cure or in my case a bone marrow transplant, my family got a hold of everyone we could." Keegan reached across the gap and touched Dale's arm. "You even were tested. I think you for that Dale." Keegan watched as the anchor covered her hand with his. She saw the watery look in his eyes. "Not many people knew the reason I left the games. Most thought the leukemia came later. It didn't. I was under a doctor's care for about a year taking interferon, but my blood cell counts started to drop and kept dropping. I received transfusions of red blood cells and occasionally platelets. My condition was worsening and I need to have a bone marrow transplant if I wanted to survive."

"I know your sister's company is in partnership with Emerald Foundation to assist cancer patients and their families."

"Helping Hands Corporation does a lot of work to make sure those in need of assistance receive it."

"I will assume that you did receive a transplant and that a match was found."

"Again, I will encourage your audience to go out and get tested. There are many people who are waiting to find matches in order to live. I did receive a donation. My nephew Andy was my donor. My doctors were able to use the umbilical cord and stem cells for the transplant."

"How old is Andy?"

"Four going on seventeen." Keegan waved to her nephew who stood in front of Ashley. "He's a very good boy."

"You managed to stay out of the press and spotlight for such a long time, why come on SNN and do this interview?"

"There are a few reasons. Mainly, to set the record straight." Keegan chuckled a bit as she thought about what she had said. "I left the team because I was sick. There wasn't a feud between myself and other players. As of late, there seems to be a large media interest in me. If I can tell my story and touch one person to sign up to be a marrow donor, I've done my part."

"You mentioned two items in that last response I want to touch on. You gave a slight laugh when you said straight. You have always been very opened about your sexuality. Has that changed?"

"Do you mean am I still a lesbian?" The entire studio laughed. "Yes. I've never hidden my sexuality. I was out in high school, college, and while playing for the National team. I don't see how who I sleep with affects other people."

"So I don't have a chance." Dale smiled.

"Sorry Dale."

"Let's talk about your current condition." Dale gestured to Keegan's middle section.

"Still a lesbian." Keegan said as she pulled her jacket back and stepped down from the chair. Her jacket pushed back, she showed the camera her bulging middle section. "I am at the start of my third trimester."

"But you're a lesbian."

"Wonders of modern science and a very smart mother." Keegan said. The love she had for Sarah showed through in her answer. She stepped to the chair and scooted up on the high seat again. She had to use the foot hold, but she didn't care. She was short and she knew it.

"What does your mother have to do with you being pregnant?" Dale was caught off guard by the comment.

"Most women who undergo treatment for cancer have some type of radiation, chemotherapy which they have to go through. My mother knew I wanted to have children. She suggested having my egg harvested and I did. I would suggest any person undergoing treatment to think about your future. If you want children, there are ways to persevere your reproductive abilities."

"I never thought of that."

"Neither do sixteen year olds who are undergoing treatments. I work in a hospital. I make time to go up to the cancer wing and talk to patients and share my story." Keegan had a flash of Jason Barascki, a seventeen year old, who was just starting treatment. He and his family spoke about his chances of having children if he didn't do cryopreservation.

"The other topic you touched on was the recent reemergence of your name in the media. I will assume you are speaking of the incident which occurred at your residences a few weeks ago."

"I was."

"I am sure there are things you can't comment on but can you at least tell the audience what you can?"

"There was an accident which a friend of mine was struck by a car outside my house." Keegan felt her eyes tearing up. She still had nightmares of seeing Gwen being hit by the car. Gwen putting her hands out to stop the on-coming vehicle her quick reaction to jump over the hood of the Liberty and roll across on to the tree lawn. "It was a horrible ordeal and I never want to go through that again." Keegan's blue eyes lifted slowly to the blonde woman who stared lovingly at her. The bruises had faded and the damage was repairable. Through it all the thought of Connie trying to kill her was a bit overwhelming.

"You witnessed the entire thing didn't you?"

"Yes, I was sitting in the passenger seat." Keegan could hear the emotional crack in her voice. If this line of questioning continued, she would break down. She almost lost Gwen.

"That friend is SNN correspondent and your former teammate Gwen Lerner." Dale looked to the crowd and saw Gwen leaning on a crutch, her left arm in a cast from the wrist to the elbow. "Do you think she'll join us on the set?"

Taking a page out of Gwen's book, Keegan leaned across the gap between them. Her hand resting lightly on his knee, she looked at him and the camera smiled and said. "No."

"In the famous words of Huey Carmichael, I had to try." Dale referred to the half time interview with Gwen at the Motors game earlier in the season. "So what does the future hold for Keegan Garry?"

"I hope to have a healthy baby."

"When are you due?"

"End of summer beginning of fall." Keegan's hand moved over her womb as if to protect the baby.

"What about the father?" Dale challenged.

"What about him?"

"Will your baby know him?"

"My baby will know its family. Sometimes blood relatives aren't what they are cracked up to be. The father will be part of the baby's life and that is all I will say on that matter." Gwen leaned back in her chair. Frost was right, she told her own story in her own words and let the tabloids run whatever lies they wanted.

~

On the screen were images of Shannon Abbott and Carol Edwards. The former teammates were sitting side by side telling stories about Keegan. The image changed to Ashley and Andy sitting on the couch in their living room. The picture captured Ashley's tears and frustration with the lack of resources for bone marrow transplants. The response the network got from friends, co-workers and professional athletes was overwhelming.

"There are two sides to Keegan. The BC and AC. I met Keegan during the AC stage." Jonathan Sparks sat in the gym. His legs stretched out in front of him as if he were about to strike the seated forward bend pose. "AC?" He lifted his head to the camera. "After cancer." He said as if the anchor was crazy. "We started doing low impact yoga to start rebuilding her muscles."

"Will she watch this?" Dr. Carrie Micha looked in the camera. "I love her you know. She is such a great person. Giving a lot of herself to others. Maybe to much." The camera changed angle as the shot was cut. "Call me!" Carrie said as she held her hand like a telephone handset next to her ear.

A tight shot of Gwen dressed in a sweat soaked t-shirt and soccer shorts filled the screen as footage from the Greek games was rolled.

"Gwen, can you give the fans some insight on Keegan Garry's absence? I know you're close with her." Dale McKnight's voice filled the air. The camera zoomed in tight on Gwen's profile as she tried to jog away. Her escape hamper by the sound man as Dale ran next to her.

"Keegan's missed." Gwen's image turned to the camera and finally replied to the microphone thrust at her. "There are things we can't control. Would we like her here with us of course, but that's not going to happen. Right now, we need to stay focused and play like a team." Her jaw was set in a hard line and the irritation she tried to hold in oozed through the camera lens.

"Rumor is emergency appendectomy. Can you confirm?" When Gwen shot Dale a look of disgust, he changed tactics. "Do you have a personal message for Keegan as she watches the games with her family in Michigan?" McKnight asked.

"Anything I have to say to Keegan has already been said. She knows how I feel and how the team feels. Thanks." Her brown eyes turned hard as they stared at the lens.

~

"Tonight you have been watching an encore presentation of the Keegan Garry's appearance on "Where Are They Now?" There are a few reasons for SNN re-running this episode this evening. It is with great pleasure I announce Keegan has given birth to a healthy baby boy, Christopher William Garry. Also today, the Michigan courts have charged Constance Reid Sherman with attempted voluntary manslaughter and attempted murder. If you can recall last May, former Olympian Gwen Lerner was struck by a car outside the home of Keegan Garry. That car was driven by Miss Lerner's mother, Constance Sherman. Today charges have been brought against Miss Sherman. She is charged with the attempted murder of Keegan Garry, her intended target and attempted involuntary manslaughter of her daughter, Gwen Lerner. Spokes person for Miss

Sherman have stated Ms. Sherman is undergoing psychological treatment. " With a click of the remote, the image on the television disappeared The room instantly darken. Gwen touched Keegan's face. She watched her lover's chest expand and contract with the cadence of her breathing. She felt the sting of tears in her eyes. This was what she needed. She needed this small woman in her life. When sleepy blue eyes rose to hers she couldn't help but smile.

"Hi." Gwen whispered barely heard her own voice.

"Hey." Keegan answered and moved her cheek against the warmth of Gwen's hand. "What time is it?"

"Don't worry about that." Gwen replied as her fingers played with Keegan's hair. She ran her hand through the length enjoying the luscious feel on her fingers.

"Have you seen him?" Keegan asked. She had been out of it for the awhile. The medication the hospital staff gave her was playing tricks on her brain.

"Yes. He's beautiful like his mother." Tears gradually began to spill from the corners of Gwen's tawny eyes. She leaned down and kissed Keegan's lips.

"You're trembling." Keegan smiled as a low murmur came from Gwen. "Lay with me."

Keegan slid over slightly for Gwen to fit in the bed next to her.

"Are you sure?" Gwen felt shy and concern with her lover's comfort. Keegan answered by tapping the bed. Gwen curled her body around Keegan's. "Everyone okay with the name?" The whisper of a voice touched her ear. Gwen nodded against Keegan's hair her voice to full of emotion to speak. She snuggled next to her partner and thanked the fates above for their lives and the healthy delivery of their child.

"Next time you have the baby." Keegan mumbled in her sleepy state.

"I don't have the best genes." Gwen ran her fingers along Keegan's side.

"You look good in jeans." Keegan hummed as her fingers reached back and brought Gwen's lips to hers.

"We'll talk about it later." Gwen smiled as she settled behind Keegan making sure her partner was comfortable. "I love you."

The End

As stated earlier this is my first post to The Athenaeum. This story was a journey for me and if you can see the depth and love that went into it. These are two very special characters and I am not sure what the future holds for them. For me, I hope to post more stories soon.

Thank you for all of the feed back and if you would like to tell what you think of this tale, any feedback is welcome. I am a horrible speller and if it wasn't for the red squiggly line under the words, I'd have no clue.

I want to throw out kudos to Kerri (in the land down under - and a day ahead of me) who has graciously given me her time as a Beta/editor/master of all in getting this work finished and posted.

Take care and hope you enjoyed the ride!

You can send comments to me at burkcatherine@aol.com

Help find a cure for leukemia, lymphoma, Hodgkin's disease and melanoma, and improve the quality of life of patients and their families.
