

The After Montana Series - Episode 12

## **In Your Arms (After the Sunset Part 3)**

by

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## DISCLAIMERS:

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This romantic drama is an Original story and all characters are created by me.

All characters depicted, names used, and incidents portrayed in this story are fictitious. No identification with actual persons is intended nor should be inferred. Any resemblance of the characters portrayed to actual persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

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This story contains scenes of violence. It also contains the wrongful death of an animal. Any readers who are disturbed by or sensitive to this type of depiction may wish to read something other than this story.

This story depicts a sexual relationship between consenting adult women. If such a story frightens you, you better click on the X in the top right corner of your screen right away.

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**\*\* Warning! \*\*** Menstruating women ahead!! And they're making love! Please don't read on if this offends you!! No... seriously.

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So many thanks go to my beta-reader. Your help is very much appreciated and continues to be most welcome.

And thank you to all my readers. Your feedback has been most helpful and encouraging. Keep it coming!

This is the next installment my series, 'After Montana' which can be found at <http://marshallcarson.wordpress.com> . **This is episode 2 in Season 2, and is part of a 3-story arc.** To understand and enjoy the characters and situations fully, you should probably read them in sequence.

Comments and/or opinions can be sent to [stagefreakmusic@gmail.com](mailto:stagefreakmusic@gmail.com) or left at <http://marshallcarson.wordpress.com>

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## Chapter 1

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At 9.35pm, Kate Carson awoke from her unplanned snooze in Shannon's bed. She had teased her wife before about falling asleep mid-bedtime-story but she realized now how easy it was to drift off with the children snuggled up against her. The actress slowly put the book on the nightstand and unwound Lucy's arm from under her sweater. Once on her feet, she scooped up the smaller daughter to take her to her own bed.

Placing Lucy on the cool sheets in her room – which had Nemo's orange and white body printed repeatedly over a blue background – woke the girl up. "Mama... is it bedtime?"

"Yes, sweetie... go back to sleep. Here's Barney to cuddle," the blonde said, tucking the soft brown bear into her daughter's grasp.

"Mmmphh."

"I think that was a thank you," Kate whispered to herself as she left the room. Kamali gave her a single lazy tail wag as she passed him outside the door and she headed downstairs to find out what the two Federal agents had gotten up to in her absence. What she found made her smile. Only one agent was present in the form of her slovenly wife.

CJ was very much entitled to be slovenly after what she had just gone through. A two week trek in the wilderness after surviving a plane crash would definitely make anyone a little tired to say the least. Kate sighed as a welcome sense of peace washed over her at seeing CJ smile at a cute story on the news channel she was watching. *'Cute story on the news? That's unusual...'*

When she entered the living area, she lay down gently on CJ's thigh, knowing her injured spouse could reach her head if it was resting there. Facing the television, she felt the right hand lightly scratch through her short blonde hair. She curled her own hand around CJ's knee and proceeded to yawn widely.

"You fell asleep, didn't you?" the agent whispered.

"Kinda..."

A husky chuckle came from CJ as she continued the patterns over her wife's scalp. "What did you read to them?"

"That Barney the bear story where he gets found by his friends after being lost... I figured it would be a good prelude to a restful night," Kate slurred under the tender touches.

"Good call, honey."

"Mmm, thanks. Where's Jamie?"

“She’s taking her walk around outside... checking the perimeter for anything unusual.”

“What were you smiling at a minute ago?”

“There was a story on the local news about a litter of puppies that were stolen... a homeless man reported that he saw something and they caught the thief, who had an illegal puppy farm running out of his house. All the stolen dogs were saved. I was smiling when the puppies got returned home and the owner gave the homeless man a puppy... and a job.”

“Awww... you big softie.”

“Yeah, well... it’s a nice Christmas story.”

“It certainly is... but no more talking. How come you get all chatty when you’re not supposed to be speaking?”

“Just a rebel, I guess,” CJ retorted and stuck out her tongue.

“That’s quite true... hmmm. Well, that was a lot of words right there and I can hear your throat straining so just be quiet and rub my head.”

CJ chuckled at that and wet her finger before sticking it in Kate’s ear, drawing a dissatisfied growl from the blonde before the scratching resumed and she purred instead.

Meanwhile outside, Special Agent Green did her second lap around the large farmhouse. It was the same as the last time. All quiet, no sign of intruders. She looked over at the barn again. It’s blackened, burnt out remains were all that was left of the old building which had been constructed at the same time as the house, at least sixty years ago. “What a shame,” she mumbled as she continued on her way. As she came around to the backyard, she glanced over at the horse field and saw the silhouette of one of the horses standing peacefully against the almost black sky. She assumed the dark shape beside it was the other horse sleeping on the ground.

Why would she think anything different? The standing animal wasn’t freaking out and seemed to be completely at ease.

What Jamie didn’t know was that Idaho stood there bleeding out. Her peaceful demeanor was due to the lightheaded, tired feeling of slipping into unconsciousness. Sometime during the night, the dark mare would fall to the ground and in the morning, Jamie would learn that the lump beside her was only an overgrown piece of scrub that had always been there. She was unfamiliar with the lay of the land in the horse fields and what she had observed could be easily misconstrued by anyone who didn’t know any better. Yes, she was a Federal agent and should have perhaps checked, but she was also a human being who made mistakes just like everyone else.

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When Jamie came in the front door, she locked it behind her and strolled into the living area. CJ and Kate were still on the couch and she half-smiled at the couple. “All quiet out there,” she said, perching on the arm of the chair.

“Great. Wanna watch a movie with us?” Kate offered drowsily.

“No thanks... I’m gonna take a shower and maybe grab forty winks while you guys are still up. Is that okay?”

“Of course, Jamie. Kamali is on duty with me while you rest, so go on...”

Jamie smiled at the blonde and returned the nod CJ gave her as she got up to leave. Once she was gone, the head massage resumed and the actress moaned out her pleasure.

CJ bit her lip. “Honey?”

“Mmmyeah?”

“No blissful moaning like that... I uh... it makes me think of things I can’t do yet.”

Kate turned around so that she could look up at her wife. “Sorry. I didn’t even realize I made a sound.”

“You don’t need to be sorry. It’s just that... when we’ve been apart for a while, you know how we get when we’re reunited, and this time it’s even more... intense?”

The blonde sighed. “I know, CJ, but there’s no way we can... well, because of your injuries, I don’t want to...”

“Don’t want to?”

“I don’t want to *hurt* you or make them any worse. You need to regain your strength and that includes not aggravating anything until you heal enough to start physio.”

“I honestly don’t think I can wait *that* long, Katie.”

“We might have to... this time.”

CJ tried to read the expression on the beautiful face and staring into Kate’s eyes, she saw fear. “Hey...” she whispered, placing her hand on her spouse’s smooth cheek. “What are you worried about?”

“I... just want you to get well.”

“But you’re worried about something else. What is it?”

“CJ... if your arms don’t heal... well, you won’t be able to be...” The actress drifted off and took a deep breath.

“I won’t be able to be what, Katie?”

“A Federal agent... and I know how important your job is to you, honey. But if you can’t fire a weapon again, you’ll lose-“

“Whoa! This arm here...” CJ flexed her right hand. “This one is already feeling better. It was only a dislocation and even though I did the wrong thing by slamming it against that tree... boy, was that painful... it’s going to be fine real soon. The wrist will be almost back to normal. I know it might not be a hundred percent again but I can wear one of those supports. A lot of agents do that on their knees, elbows, wrists... and Katie, I shoot with my right hand so I’ll be fine.”

During CJ’s little speech, her voice wavered between a croaking whisper and her usual husky tones. Kate smiled at her wife’s determination and strength. “I know you’ll be fine. I guess I was just afraid I’d break you... I mean, we can be pretty passionate when we get going...”

“I’ll say,” CJ smirked. “It’s gotta be soon though, honey... I can’t stop watching you... wanting you. I promise not to use my arms at all.”

Kate raised a dubious eyebrow. “I can only imagine.”

“I have many skills.” The agent wiggled her tongue.

“Uh h-huh...”

“And just so you know... it wouldn’t be the end of the world if I had to quit being an agent. Yes, I love the job but I love you more and you know it. The end of my world would be not having you and our children. So right now, I’m just peachy, thank you very much.”

“I love you.”

“Ditto, baby...”

“No more talking now.”

“There’s only one way to shut me up,” CJ said, puckering her lips and closing her eyes.

Kate rose up eagerly to grant the silent request.

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As twelve o’clock drew nearer on CJ’s third night home, she lay with her foot elevated on Kate’s lap. The actress sat cross-legged on their bed and was delicately massaging the ankle that had

been swollen beyond recognition not so long ago. Thankfully now, it was just tender, but CJ was still unable to put her full weight on it. She couldn't deny it felt a million times better already. "That feels incredible, Katie," she muttered with her eyes closed.

"Good. It's looking a lot more like a foot again."

"I know." CJ looked at her wife. "And my shoulder will start to ease off soon too."

"I know you hate feeling unable, honey. Just give it time."

The taller woman nodded and watched the loving hands as they moved across her skin. She was mesmerized at the thought of those hands touching other parts of her body and felt the welcome heat stirring in her belly. "I uh..."

Kate met her gaze and saw the hooded expression on her partner's face. "Oh no... don't look at me like that. We can't, CJ..."

The agent's puppy-dog eyes were bigger than ever. "Pweeease?"

"We... we can't. Not yet... but I promise if the doctor's happy with your progress on Monday, I'll think about it, okay?"

"What doctor?"

Kate hated that she had just killed the playful mood but she was terrified of something going wrong. She wasn't sure why she was being so hesitant to make love to her wife. It just seemed to be way too soon, even for them. "You have a check-up on Monday. It says so on the letter from the hospital in Minnesota. They organized it before you even left. Didn't you read it?"

"No, I didn't. I'd just as soon never hear of Minnesota again."

"Well, you don't have a choice about this. I need to know... for my peace of mind... that you're going to get well. I... I want to be there with you... this time."

The agent was on the verge of tears watching her spouse struggle to get the words out. Kate was being tortured by the fact that she wasn't there when CJ was found. It made the tall woman realize just how much her wife had been through... and was still putting herself through. "Katie, are you feeling... I dunno, guilty about not being there with me in that hospital?"

The actress dropped her gaze to the covers and nodded. "I should've been there."

"Hey... look at me." When Kate did so, CJ leaned forward to cup her wife's cheek in one hand, no matter what pain it caused her. "You were there with me every second... *every single second* since I left your side. Don't you get it, Katie? Me and you... we're one."

A tear trickled into the large hand as the actress absorbed the sound of her soulmate's weakened voice. "One?"

"Yes... I'm within you and you're within me... always. I'm always here."

When CJ's hand fell to her heart, Kate let out a whimper before crawling into her place by her wife's side. "That's... what the vision of you said... and did."

"Like I said, we're one... and I think that's why we can see each other when we're forced apart physically. I can't think of any other way to explain it."

"Unless we're just crazy..." Kate said between sniffles.

With moisture gathering in her own eyes, CJ chuckled. "Then I'm very happy to be crazy."

"Me too."

"You know, when I first found you... on the mountain in Montana?"

"Mmhmm?"

"The feeling I got that day... I mean, I was just out clearing the snow as usual and something I couldn't comprehend... encompassed my entire being. I felt panic, like something was terribly wrong with my world all of a sudden. Then I don't know... I was just led out into the forest by some mystical force. I felt like a freak but I knew what I was doing was right."

"I don't think you ever told me this before. What happened next?"

"I walked for maybe... a half mile with my gun drawn... then... then I saw you lying there. The panic left me but it was replaced by a totally different feeling, one that I never let myself truly think about until I was out there in that wilderness by myself and I kept seeing you over and over."

"What was the feeling?"

"Something huge clicked into place... like I was meant to find you again and I was relieved the search was over even though I had no idea at the time I was supposed to be looking... and I had no idea what it meant. I guess now I do... sort of."

"Uh wow... what do you think it means?"

"I told you... me and you, forever... eternity. It's like all of this has happened before..."

Kate finally lifted her head and green eyes melted into blue. She knew deep within her that she felt it too. Maybe they'd both figured it was too crazy to mention to each other until now. The

intense contact between them lasted for a few profound, expansive moments before a smirk appeared on CJ's face, followed by a smile and a knowing nod from the blonde.

"Eternity," Kate whispered before laying her head down again. A few more quiet moments passed while Kate rolled things around in her head. She knew there was something still nagging at the back of her mind and she felt a little morose for wanting to experience more of what CJ had gone through. Her wife's lips caressed her hair and she smiled, believing that the agent would understand why she would ask her next question. "CJ..."

"Yeah?"

"Would you find it really weird if I asked you to let me see the photos of the crash site? I mean... I assume they took some..."

The taller woman paused until she felt the reactive frown on her face dissipate almost as fast as it had arrived. She knew how curious Kate was but this wasn't just curiosity. Her wife needed to feel she had 'been there' somehow and CJ could understand that. "Are you sure you want to see those?"

A nod preceded the quiet response. "I can handle it... especially because you'll be right there with me. I know you got out of it alive... but I just... need to see them."

"I understand, honey... I really do. I'll ask Mark to bring them, okay?"

Kate looked up at her wife's face. "Thank you for humoring me..."

"I'm not humoring you, Katie, and I absolutely know you can handle it. Maybe it will bring us both some sort of closure, huh?" CJ kissed Kate's forehead as her wife nodded her answer. She wondered how *she* would feel seeing the wreckage again. Kate was definitely strong enough to handle it, but was she? *'We're together now... yeah, I can handle it...'*

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It was very early in the morning when Tony arrived for work with a happy smile on his face. His bosses were reunited and he was about to see his two buddies in the form of Shannon and Lucy. When he knocked the front door he could see the dark shape of Kamali bouncing around excitedly. He would never understand how the dog could identify friend or foe so quickly but he wouldn't question it either, knowing the clever canine had been ready to protect the family when the intruder was burning down the barn.

The door was opened by Agent Green. "Hey, Tony... you're just in time."

"Hi, Jamie... for what?"

"I'm just about to do my rounds and those two..." she flicked her head towards the staircase, "aren't up yet. Lucy and Shannon are in the kitchen having cereal."

“No worries. I’ll stay with them and have some coffee. See you in a minute then...”

“Yep. Be right back,” the agent said with a wink.

Jamie scanned the long driveway and the lake then headed around the side of the house to examine the pile of charred wood that used to be the barn. She continued along the fence that enclosed the back yard and headed across the dusty ground to the perimeter of the horse field. She stopped dead in her tracks when she saw Idaho lying flat out on the ground. Her hand came to her mouth in horror as she glanced at the bush she had assumed was the other horse last night. Something was terribly wrong and she vaulted over the post and rail fencing to run towards the unmoving horse’s side.

“Oh God, no!” Jamie choked out as she knelt beside Idaho’s weak body. The sticky dark patch on the equine’s chest oozed and dripped onto the grass, adding to the pool of blood that was already there. “I’m so sorry, girl.” The horse blinked slowly and Jamie sprang to her feet and broke out in a sprint back to the house.

She saw the dog in the back yard and knew the door would be open. Kamali watched as she leapt impressively over the fence and slowed her pace as she approached the porch. Breathing heavily, the agent signaled for Tony to come over to her.

“What’s up? You look like-“

“It’s Idaho... she’s been hurt,” Jamie whispered to ensure the girls didn’t hear.

“Hurt? How hurt?”

“It... it looks like she’s been stabbed. Call the vet, Tony. I need to get Kate up.”

“She’s already up... in the living room on the phone to her Dad.”

“Right.” The blonde turned to grab a dish cloth. “I’m going to see if I can... just tell Kate what’s happened... I’ll be outside.”

Less than five minutes later, the actress came running across the field to find Jamie holding the folded material against the wound to try and stop the bleeding. “Oh Idaho... you poor girl.”

“I’m so sorry, Kate... I should’ve-“

“You should’ve what? How could you know?”

“But I looked out here last night and she seemed fine!”

“Nobody came up the drive last night, Jamie... otherwise the dog would’ve alerted us.” Kate suddenly stood up. “Where’s Nevada?”

“I haven’t seen her.”

“Damn it!” The actress’ sharp eyes zoomed in on a specific part of the faraway fence. “She’s gone.”

“How... how do you know?” Jamie asked while trying to press the dish cloth harder against the seeping wound and comfort the horse with the other hand.

“The fence is broken... I’d say she jumped out. Shit!” Kate put her hand across her forehead to try and keep her tears in check. Someone was really trying to hurt her and she wanted to know who it was. “The vet’s on his way... shouldn’t be too long now.”

But just as she said it, Idaho took her last breath.

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Once the veterinarian had left and the horse’s body had been covered with a tarp weighed down at the corners by rocks, Kate sat on the couch with her head in her hands. The girls had gone to school with Tony and were still oblivious to the sad event, but the actress knew she’d have to tell them soon so they could bury Idaho tomorrow morning. Kate hadn’t been entirely sure of the rules regarding the burial of large animals but the sympathetic vet had assured her he would send someone over to take care of it professionally. She just had to pick a spot for the grave to be dug.

Jamie was out across the land somewhere trying to find clues as to what direction the intruder had come from and how he’d gotten close enough to the animals to do what he had done. Kate knew Jamie was feeling incredibly guilty and no amount of placating from her would make the tall blonde feel any better. She just worried that their friend was going to burn out soon. Agent Green was in desperate need of rest but she was just as stubborn as CJ and wouldn’t listen to reason.

The thought of her wife made Kate sit upright. CJ was still asleep which was highly unusual and in the actress’ current state of mind, she panicked a little. ‘*She’s fine... just tired,*’ she assured herself. Nevertheless, she got to her feet and went up to the master bedroom. Finding her beautiful CJ relaxed in slumber, Kate shuffled onto the mattress beside her. After she kissed the agent’s sore shoulder, she tickled her finger along a graceful jawline. “CJ... wake up, honey.”

“Hmm.”

“Wake up... it’s 10am,” she whispered near her spouse’s ear.

“Oh... hi.”

“Morning.”

CJ sensed her wife’s mood immediately. “What happened?”

“Oh boy, you don’t mess around.”

“No, I don’t... what’s up, Katie?”

The taller woman didn’t move due to her injuries but her eyes were alert and focused on the green ones above her. Kate sighed and sucked her cheek in between her teeth, feeling tears sting the back of her eyes. She looked everywhere but at CJ while she thought up some delaying tactics. “Wouldn’t you like some coffee first?”

“Okay, now I know something’s really wrong. Tell me...” CJ coaxed.

“Oh honey... Idaho... she’s dead.”

The agent’s eyes immediately glistened. “How...?”

“Who... whoever he is, he did it last night. She was stabbed.” Kate joined her wife as CJ motioned her down beside her. “There’s more, CJ... Nevada’s gone... I think she fled in fright.”

The agent sniffed away a swell of emotion. “Don’t worry about Nevada... she’ll come back.”

Kate wasn’t so sure but remained quiet, rubbing CJ’s belly to try and comfort her somehow. After long moments, the blonde got her stream of silent tears under control. She felt like they had both been crying since her wife had returned but she decided it was better than not being able to cry at all. “What are we gonna do, CJ?”

“I’m not sure yet, Katie, but I have a feeling we’ll have help.”

“I know. Jamie’s unrelenting right now... but she needs to sleep or she’ll end up collapsing.”

“We’ll figure something out today, okay?” CJ kissed the nodding head on her breast. “I’m so sorry about Idaho, honey.” Another kiss was bestowed upon the short blonde locks. “Let’s get me up and dressed, huh? Then I’ll have that coffee before we have to deal with everything.”

“Okay. Wait right there and I’ll get you some clothes.” Kate rose from the bed and went to the closet.

CJ watched her. She could see the obvious upset in her wife’s intelligent eyes but she could also tell Kate’s brilliant mind was going over and over all the events of the past few weeks. “What’re you thinking right now?” the agent asked while shuffling her legs off the side of the bed.

“That this could be some crazy fanatic again... we both know the lengths a mentally unstable person can go to.”

“True. It’s definitely a possibility.”

Kate accompanied her tall wife into the ensuite and helped her freshen up. “I don’t like the fact that he’s found out where we live. But there’s something that’s bugging me...” the blonde said while running a warm cloth over CJ’s face.

“What?”

“If he’s just some crazy fan, why would he be following you... if it’s all been the same person, that is?”

CJ nodded while she thought about that but she couldn’t rule out a stalker since she knew a raving lunatic like that would do practically anything to be the only one wanted and loved by the subject of his infatuation. Still... that scenario didn’t quite *feel* right this time.

## Chapter 2

By lunch time, CJ and Kate had decided on a spot behind the second horse field for the burial. It was far enough away from the house but could still be seen from the back windows. Kate had cleared up the breakfast dishes with CJ insisting that she had to watch and provide moral support. Kate knew her wife just wanted to be close to her at every opportunity and if she was honest, it was what she wanted too. Jamie sat with them now at the island unit in the large kitchen diner as they sipped on warm beverages.

“So...” CJ said distractedly as Kate helped lower her mug from her mouth, “... this guy could have come back here after I saw him at the airfield. I know it was dark but... did you notice anything at all about the man who burned down the barn, Katie?”

“I couldn’t really see him clearly. He wore black clothes and dirty white sneakers... and either a dark hat or dark hair... but that’s all I could see.”

CJ nodded and rested her hand on her wife’s arm. “I can’t really give a good description of the guy I saw either... except his face. I guess I could work with a sketch artist.”

Jamie perked up at that. “I’ll organize it when I get into the office. I’d better head off now actually.”

“Thanks, Jamie... and take it easy today, huh?” CJ forced a withering smile. Jamie didn’t respond but kissed them both on the cheek and left the house looking like she was on a mission.

Kate’s hand covered the larger one and she pressed her lips against her love’s right shoulder again in a subconscious effort to somehow help it mend. “I feel a little vulnerable for the first time.”

“You mean here at home?” At the blonde’s nod, CJ kissed her on the forehead. “Me too actually... nobody ever invaded our haven before. I have something I want to suggest. I know it’s more ‘Hollywood’ than you’d like but I think we should get security fencing now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Agent White at the office... his father owns and runs a landscaping business and I’ve been thinking I’d like him to come out and quote us for solid six foot fencing and electric gates. And before you say no... just take some time to think about it, okay?”

Kate curled her fingers around CJ’s. “I don’t want time to think about it. I agree with you on this one. I didn’t think we needed it before... but now...”

“I’ll call him later today then.”

The actress stroked her spouse’s arm. They both seemed to be craving the constant contact right now. “How are we going to tell the girls about Idaho?”

“We’ll do it tonight... they’ll cope better if we just tell them the truth.”

“I know. It’s just hard to give them bad news. They sensed there was something wrong when you were away.”

CJ slowly stretched her arm up to Kate’s shoulders, surprised when she managed it without yelping. “But I’m here now, Katie.”

“I love you, CJ.”

“And I can’t live without it.” Both women turned into the kiss, their lips simply resting on each other and savoring the connection before they parted and locked eyes. They felt a strength flow through them, reinforcing their hearts and minds. They knew it was going to be another tough week but together, they’d meet the challenges head on.

\* \* \* \* \*

“*So what happened?*”

“I got one of ‘em good. If it doesn’t die, it’ll be enough to scare that chick.”

“*That chick needs to be more than scared... we need to make her feel like she’s going insane. Jesus, why did we take this job?*” An irritated sigh sounded over the phone line before the dollar signs appeared in his eyes again. “*I want the damn money, man. Go back to that house and... I dunno... terrorize her. But don’t hurt them kids.*”

“Christ, you think I don’t know that?”

*“Just do your job!”*

“Okay, okay... I’ll go back tomorrow night... gimme time to think of somethin’ good.”

*“Don’t fuck it up... we’ll start to look like a bunch of amateurs if we don’t pick up our game!”*

He hung up the call muttering obscenities to his ‘business’ partner. It seemed he was doing all the damn legwork and putting himself in the line of fire... literally. *‘I want a bigger cut... I think he’s ripping me off.’* With a snarl, he paced back and forth trying to think of what to do next. A short time later, a dark eyebrow curled when something he deemed nasty enough sprung to mind.

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Kate put one hand on her hip and the other pulled at her lips while she thought. “Right... I’ve called Sam and Aunt Cece to apologize for yelling at them...”

“What did they say?” CJ asked, wiggling her fingers to invite Kate to hold her hand.

“Just what you’d expect... no need for sorry... we’re just happy you’re okay now.”

“And they mean it, Katie. Don’t worry about it anymore.”

“I’m not, but it made me feel better to say sorry anyway,” Kate said with a semi-smile. She held onto her wife’s warm hand but didn’t sit down. “Hey... you want tea?”

“Sounds good. I’ll call Mark and be right through.”

“Just stay here... I’ll bring it.”

“I think I need to get up for a bit... my butt’s numb. I’ll be careful... promise,” CJ assured before managing to pick up her cell phone from the coffee table without so much as a flinch.

The actress watched the stiff movements and narrowed her eyes. “Hmm, okay but shout if you need me... I mean it.”

“I will.” When the over-protective blonde headed through the double doors into the kitchen, CJ hit the speed dial for her boss’ office. After a few rings, he answered. “Hey Mark, it’s-“

*“CJ... how are you?”*

“I’m fine, thanks.”

*“I’m so glad... and Kate?”*

“Yeah she’s good too. Very bossy but, you know...”

*“I bet. It’s just as well really, since you’re such a bad patient an’ all...”*

CJ rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, listen... I was calling to ask you a favor?”

*“Shoot...”*

“I’m assuming you have photos of the crash site?”

*“Uh yes... what about them?”*

“Kate... she wants to see them. I think it’ll help her to come to terms with things.”

Mark sighed. *“She’s an inquisitive woman, CJ... perhaps it will give her the full picture without you having to-”*

“Yeah... I’m having trouble describing things to her. Could you bring them over?”

*“Of course... I wanted to come and talk to you both anyway.”*

“Maybe tonight, say eight o’clock?”

*“Sounds fine, CJ, I’ll see you then.”*

A few moments later, the tall woman hobbled into the kitchen and made it to the island unit before she let out the aches and pains verbally. “Shit! Oww... can you hand me some more painkillers, honey?”

“You hurt yourself stretching for the phone, didn’t you?”

A scowl accompanied the agent’s answer. “Maybe.”

“I wish you’d let me help you more.”

“You’re doing practically everything for me as it is. I can’t even wipe my own ass,” CJ husked with a little frustration.

“Hey,” Kate soothed as she approached with a glass of water and some pills, “I know you’re not used to having a weakness, baby, but remember... this is *me* here...”

The agent’s face held barely contained anger. “Damn it... can you scratch my forehead please?” she growled a little harsher than intended.

Kate put down the glass and reached up to help her poor wife out. “Here?”

“Left a bit...”

“My left?”

“No... mine.” CJ’s eyes closed as the itch was scratched. They remained shut when Kate’s hand continued to roam over her scalp and massage her tense skull. Literally thirty seconds later, the anxiety and frustration was reduced to a little pile of remorse. “I’m sorry, Katie.”

The actress inhaled deeply and picked up the glass again. “I know this is gonna be hard for you... but I’m always going to be more than willing to take care of you. You just need to learn to let me...”

“I know. I really am sorry. It’s just getting to me a little already.”

“And it’ll get to you a lot over the coming weeks... but don’t worry, I can handle you.” Kate kissed the taller woman’s cheek after she’d gulped down her meds but it soon turned into a much deeper embrace when CJ turned her head and sucked on the blonde’s bottom lip. Tongues began a slow dance and Kate’s arms slid around her wife’s neck while CJ’s right hand gently grabbed her buttock. Their breaths became short and needy as the warm, wet muscles fought for dominance surrounded by smooth, searching lips and when Kate felt the pulsing begin between her legs, she broke the arousing contact between them.

A moan of disappointment left CJ’s raspy throat. “I... need more...”

“Nuh-uh... not yet.”

“How about... we open the package that’s been sitting in the study for weeks?”

Kate’s green eyes widened. “I totally forgot about that.” Her mind raced for a few seconds. “No... definitely not opening that right now.”

“Aww, go on... at least let me see what you bought.”

“No, honey. Please just go with me on this, okay? I don’t want to open it because I want us to be in a... a better place where we can have some fun. I’m not feeling much like having fun right now.”

CJ hadn’t let go of her beautiful partner’s body and, only moving from the elbow down, she ran her hand up Kate’s back. She applied a little pressure to bring their lips together again. A soft, loving kiss was bestowed upon the actress and when they parted, CJ nodded. “I agree.”

Kate gazed into the pools of blue. “Thank you for understanding.”

“I really do understand, Katie... I just love you so much and want to be able to make you feel... the power in our... I dunno... I just want you to feel incredible.”

“I always feel incredible in your presence, honey.” Kate ran her hand through CJ’s long dark hair, very aware of what her wife craved. “And I want intimacy too. Maybe I’ll be able to do... something... without you having to move. Let me think about it, all right?”

An excruciatingly beautiful smile graced the agent’s face. “All right... and I’ll think about it too, believe me.” CJ stole another quick kiss. “Thank you for making me feel better.”

“I’m getting good at distraction techniques.”

“You always were...”

“I guess I have many skills too, huh?” the blonde tried to quip lightly, although it didn’t quite come off that way. “Okay, what was I doing?”

“Tea.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate leaned against the fireplace and watched her wife sleeping on the couch. CJ had followed her around like a lost puppy until the actress forced her to get off her bad ankle and rest. It hadn’t been too difficult – a kiss and a promise of more to come being the only encouragement required. Their kisses had been amazing though; a combination of the aching love they had for one another and the burning passion yet to be spent.

The blonde had knelt beside the couch after that, with her head on the taller woman’s thigh until a light snore could be heard. She got up once CJ was sleeping since her mind wouldn’t shut up and her body seemed to want to pace the house constantly. After tidying up the crèche and loading the dishwasher, she’d gone to the study and written down everything they had talked about this morning.

Someone was trying to hurt them. Assuming for a moment that the events were linked, this someone had attempted to kill CJ and was now trying to torment Kate during what should have been a time of mourning. She wondered if this person even knew CJ had survived. The curious part of Kate’s brain had overridden the emotional part and she’d mustered the courage to look up the reports on the Internet, finding surprisingly little on the crash and subsequent recovery of the wreckage. She wondered if that was Mark’s doing and wanted to remember to ask him about it later.

Burning down the barn could have been deemed an accident – had she not witnessed the man on her property – but attacking Idaho was a blatant attempt to scare and upset her. Were they trying to push her over the edge? Were they trying to drive her out of her home? Kate looked at CJ now and knew that wasn’t going to happen. They were strong together and wouldn’t be beaten... and they had the FBI on their side too. She wondered if the criminal even knew who he was dealing with.

She looked over to the hallway to see Kamali lying flat out on the cool, varnished floor, peacefully waiting for his best friends to come home from school. He pricked one ear at the actress and wagged his tail a few times. She smiled and tried to relax a little, remembering how their devoted and gentle canine had also been a fierce guard dog when he had to be.

Kate strolled over to the space between the couch and the coffee table, lowering herself to sit on the wooden surface and observe the love of her life as she napped. CJ's right arm lay clamped to her side and her left rested on top of her body in its sling. The broken wrist was very painful and the agent had found that every time she even flexed the muscles in that arm to move it, the agony shot through her injury sharply to remind her that she shouldn't. The blue sling wrapped over her left shoulder to disappear underneath a mass of silky dark hair which had thankfully regained its luster after not being washed for two and a half weeks. The tall woman's carved features were relaxed in sleep and her facial bruise was healing slowly. Every now and then, CJ's mouth would curl slightly into a smile and Kate hoped it was due to a pleasant dream. She knew there had been nightmares since her love had come home but it seemed the tough agent didn't remember them in the morning... or so she'd said.

Kate sighed as a wave of nausea washed over her at the thought that someone had almost taken her wife away from her. She bit her lips before leaning forward, unable to resist kissing her soulmate. As her mouth gently pressed against the one below her, she felt CJ respond immediately. After a few seconds of the tender contact, a very quiet whispered conversation began as they shared the same air, their faces mere millimeters apart.

"Again..." the agent gasped, her eyes still closed.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't. I was already awake before you sat down."

"Oh really...?"

"Yeah... I love it when you watch me. Kiss me again..."

Kate did so before speaking in the same low whisper. "I love you, CJ Carson."

Blue eyes opened and almost crossed as the taller woman tried to focus on her spouse's beautiful face. "I love you more..."

Kate grinned while grazing her lips against her wife's. "Not possible..."

"I beg to differ."

"Shall we agree to disagree?"

"I think that's wise..." CJ concluded before grabbing at Kate's bottom lip with her teeth. When she let go, the blonde pulled back a little more to look at her. A stunning smile spread across the

agent's face and she glanced down at her own body. "I do believe... that if you lie between my legs and rest on my belly, you won't hurt me... in fact, you'd be making me feel so much better."

"What about your sling?"

CJ pursed her lips in thought. She had the sling on her left side today and wasn't fond of the discomfort when the wrist was moved. "Grab hold of the material... over there," she signaled with her eyes. When Kate did so, she nodded. "Now just drag it very slowly to the left..."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't."

Once the arm was sufficiently out of the way, Kate bit her top lip. "Was that okay?"

"Yeah... now please... come here?"

Kate took in the pleading eyes and the cutest grin she'd seen in quite some time. As she moved slowly on top of the agent, she gave a mild warning. "Don't get all excited... I'm only doing this because I seem to need constant contact with you..."

"I know... I need it too. Aren't we pathetic?" CJ jested.

"Maybe... but I don't care."

"Me neither." When Kate finished adjusting her position to make sure she was not causing pain to her partner's bruised abdomen, CJ inhaled deeply, taking in the heart-warming natural scent of her partner. "That feels amazing."

The actress' head came to rest under a convenient chin and they could both feel the lengths of their bodies melting into each other. She could also feel her libido jumping to attention even after she had warned her wife against it. "Mmm, it really does."

Many long, quiet, blissful moments passed before the CJ started shifting her hips. "Uh honey... things are getting uncomfortable in my pants."

Kate let out a chuckle. "Are you trying to cheer me up?"

"If that works for ya... yeah, but I think you should move because I'm--"

"Uh huh, I get it... not very dry?"

It was CJ's turn to croak out a laugh. "Yes. How did you guess?" Kate blushed and didn't say anything, and the agent feigned surprise. "You're feeling it too... I knew it!"

As the blonde pushed herself carefully off her wife and stood up, she placed her hands on her hips. "Of course I feel it too, CJ. I'm just worried about making your injuries worse."

"Well, just so you know... that position did not hurt one bit. I mean, just so you know..."

"Noted."

Kamali began to prance inside the front door at the sound of a familiar engine approaching the house and CJ smiled. "School's out."

A click in the lock and an excited doggy yelp heralded the arrival of Tony, Shannon and Lucy, and a quiet Friday afternoon was shattered... in the best possible way.

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The two small girls sat cross-legged on the bed while CJ read them a story from her chair. Her injured foot rested on the nightstand and the book was balanced on her raised thigh. That's how Kate had positioned her before going back downstairs.

"...And Thomas the Tiger saw the river raging fast. He didn't know how to get across it and he was a little scared when the--"

"Mommy?" Shannon interrupted.

"Yes, Squirt?"

"Were you scared when you were lost?"

'*Ah... I wondered when these questions were going to start,*' the agent said to herself as she moved her fingers slightly to close the book. "Yes... I was quite scared."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't know where I was. I wanted to get home to my family and I couldn't tell you I was okay."

Lucy was suddenly engrossed in this new story and leaned her little chin on her hands. Shannon shuffled forward to touch the top of her Mommy's knee. "So... how could you not tell us? Didn't you have a phone?"

"You remember Mama telling you I was in a crash, right?" After two wide-eyed nods, she continued. "The crash happened in a huge, *huuuuge* forest. There were lots of trees and lots of mountains and lots of snow! It was very, *very* cold." CJ made sure to put on her best story-telling voice but to keep it light so as to not scare her daughters. She wasn't aware that Kate was listening from the hallway with her hand over her heart. "Nobody lived in the forest except the animals... and my phone was broken, so you know what I did?"

A “What?” from Shannon, a shake of Lucy’s head and an invisible nod from Kate was her collective response.

“I had to walk for miles and miles and miles to try and find my way home. It took a very long time...”

“Did it take the whole time you were lost?”

“Yep... the whole time, sweetie, but I knew I had to get home to you girls and your Mama because you would be worried and maybe a little scared too...”

Shannon nodded. “Yes but... you broke your bone and had a sore foot so you couldn’t walk properly... so how could you go that far?”

“You know... I wondered that too. But I know how I managed to make it. I made it because I love you all so much and all I could think about...” CJ’s eyes glistened. “All I could think about was seeing your faces again and hugging you tight. That made me stronger. You two... and Mama... made me strong enough to keep walking. Even when I was so tired and fell down, and I thought I would never get back up, all I could think about were my three best girls.”

“Did you see animals?” Lucy chimed in, her big brown eyes struggling to stay alert.

“I did... I saw a bear!”

“A bear?!” both girls said together.

“Yep... and I think he was hungry so I had to use my gun to fire a shot in the air and scare him off.”

“You didn’t kill him?”

“No, Shan... I didn’t want to have to kill him. Thank goodness he ran away after the loud bang though, huh?”

“Yes, ‘cause he might have hurt you.”

“I know. He was very big!”

Lucy’s little mouth formed an ‘O’. “...Must have been a grown-up bear!”

“I’d say so, Luce. I’m glad to be home now where there are no bears except Barney,” the agent said with a smile, and her younger daughter nodded profusely in agreement.

Shannon’s bottom lip trembled slightly. “I’m glad you’re home. Mama was really sad without you.”

“Oh I know, Shan. But it’s over now.”

“Yes... but we’re still sad because Idaho died.”

Lucy was being overwhelmed by her tiredness but her frown told CJ she was sad too. They had told the girls earlier about the horse, explaining that she had died – but not that she had been killed by an intruder – and would be buried tomorrow. The children had asked if they could put some flowers on the grave afterwards and their parents had told them yes. They were also told that Nevada had run away but they were going to try and find her soon.

Within the space of three weeks, CJ’s plane had been the target of a saboteur, their haven had been invaded, their horses were gone and their barn had been completely destroyed. The agent had no idea what would come next and her inability to do anything about it was frustrating the hell out of her. She clamped her mouth shut for a second to stifle her conflicting emotions.

“You beautiful girls listen to me, okay? Everything’s gonna be fine. We’re all here and we’ve got each other... always. We’ll find Nevada and we’ll get a new friend for her someday, all right?”

“A new horse?”

“Maybe... yes. Let’s see what Mama thinks too, okay? We all need to decide together when the time is right...”

“Mama thinks it’s a good idea...” Kate said, walking through the door, the signs of her tears evident in her red-rimmed eyes. “We’ll give ourselves some time and when we’re all feeling a bit better, we can get a new horse.”

CJ looked lovingly at her wife. “How long have you been there?”

“Long enough, honey.”

“Mama... can you tell us a story too?” Lucy chanced drowsily.

“I think you’ve had enough stories tonight, don’t you? Quite a lot of Thomas the Tiger *and* Mommy’s adventure story!” she winked at CJ. “Time for sleep...”

With a halfhearted grumble, Shannon slid out of her sister’s bed and shuffled to her own room. Both women kissed Lucy goodnight and Kate helped her wife along the hallway to do the same to their older daughter. Soon after, they were headed down the staircase – with CJ refusing help to see if she could manage it on her own, which she did – and met up with Agent Green in the kitchen, where she sat at the island counter with her laptop. Since CJ had been upstairs for a while, she had yet to greet her colleague.

“Hey, Penfold...”

“DM, how you feelin’?”

“Meh... you know,” CJ answered cryptically.

“She’s pretending it doesn’t hurt,” Kate interpreted.

“Ah...”

“So what’s new? Anything on our... situation?” the raven-haired woman asked while shuffling her butt cheeks onto the stool that her wife held in place for her.

“Yeah, some stuff... but I promised Mark I’d wait until he arrives.”

CJ begrudgingly nodded. “Kate and I have been running it over in our minds... and can’t seem to figure it out yet.”

“How do you know what goes on in my mind?” the actress asked. CJ just gave her a look and she grinned. “Hmm, yeah... psychic CJ.”

“Nah, we just have this spooky link... but you already know that. You’ve been busting a gut to try and figure out who would want to hurt you and drive you insane... and why they would want to do all that instead of just coming after you directly. You know it’s probably not a lunatic fan because they would most likely have you kidnapped by now and they wouldn’t really have the means to track my movements in order to hurt me. And why bother with that when I was away from home and wouldn’t be here to stop them coming after you? Your cop mind has been working overtime, honey... same as mine.”

Kate’s mouth hung open for a few seconds. “Spooky link confirmed.”

Jamie donned an astonished expression and nodded in baffled agreement. “You two are weird.”

CJ smirked. “I know. I wouldn’t have it any other way though...”

“I can see that.”

“So... if we rule out Kate Marshall psycho-fanatics, who else do we have?”

Jamie sighed. “Can you wait for ten minutes ‘til Mark gets here?”

“Oh yeah... forgot you said that,” CJ agent harrumphed. She would have drummed her fingers on the counter but lifting her arm would just cause more pain so she sat and sulked instead.

Kate caught sight of the grumpy face and shook her head. “Caffeine... I’ll start the machine.” The right side of CJ’s mouth twitched into what might have been a smile had it gone any further. Kate grinned as she turned her back to grab four large mugs.

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In a cold, dark and busy street in Manhattan, Eddie Marshall Senior stood with his arm around his partner. Jeffrey was beside himself with grief as they watched the building that housed their restaurant, Prescilla's, burning to the ground. The horde of firefighters were working diligently inside the cordoned off area which practically covered the entire street due to flying pieces of debris and signage, and some falling rubble.

Eddie had gotten a call about two hours after they had closed up for the night, and now they stood and watched their livelihood crumble in a matter of minutes. It was a blessed relief for the two men to find out that all the occupants of the apartments above their business had been safely evacuated but Jeffrey was incredibly upset simply at the sight of the angry flames that still challenged the experienced firefighters of the FDNY.



Eddie was feeling somewhat emotional but wasn't showing it in his usual flamboyant way. He knew they were well insured and was most thankful that there was no loss of life. There was anger and upset bubbling up inside his heart but his mind was frantically throwing scenarios back and forth, making him far too distracted to cry. So he just held onto his beloved partner and watched while the huge jets of water fired at the shell of the building. Blue and red lights flashed all around from the police cars and fire trucks, and Kate's father couldn't shake an unwelcome and uncomfortable feeling in his gut.

His dark green eyes narrowed as he saw another few windows exploding outwards due to the intense heat of a blaze that didn't seem to be going out. 'A fire... another fire...?'

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### Chapter 3

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Back in California, Mark had arrived and was in the living room with Jamie, CJ and Kate. While a few logs crackled in the large fireplace, they sat centered around the coffee table which held four mugs of steaming brew. As the Assistant Director organized his paperwork and his thoughts, CJ watched him surreptitiously from her position in the corner of the couch. She knew he had things to say but she was growing impatient waiting for him to say them. She also knew her irate mood was partly due to the fact that she really wanted to drink the liquid that teasingly tempted her nostrils with its delicious aroma, but she didn't want to have Kate help her in front of her boss. As the blonde started to do just that, a sharp glance from the agent stopped her in her tracks. Kate frowned at her wife but quickly realized why she had acted in such a fashion. A sigh from the actress let CJ know she had gotten the message and wasn't too happy with it.

CJ was getting jittery now. Nobody was speaking and she had just offended her wife to boot. She took a breath, ready to blurt something... anything out, when Mark decided to speak. Finally!

"Right... sorry that took so long." He missed his top agent rolling her cerulean eyes, and continued. "We've made some progress in our investigation. Agent Dalton has found an image of the man you saw on the flight from LA... I have the still right here."

"Dalton?"

"Yes... he wasn't assigned to the case but he's been working this on his own time and making sure I get any info as soon as it's discovered. Seems you really made an impression on him..." Mark said with a raised eyebrow.

Jamie snorted. "She always does." She winked at CJ to show it was said with affection.

"Well... here's the picture. He got it from one of only two cameras at the airfield."

CJ reached out to take it, again forgetting her shoulder was stiff and sore. A sharp hiss through her teeth made Kate rise from her seat. "I'm okay, Katie," the agent placated once she'd taken hold of the photo. The blonde sat back down and CJ smiled apologetically at her before looking at the fuzzy image of the man wearing overalls and carrying a metal toolbox. "Yeah, that's him. Can't see his face too clearly in this picture though..."

Mark nodded. "We'll still need you to work with the sketch artist. I should be able to arrange that for tomorrow and before you say it... no, you're not coming into the office. He'll come here, if that's okay with you both."

“I *can* walk, you know,” CJ muttered.

“Maybe so, but I’m on Kate’s side here... you need to recuperate.”

“Me too,” Jamie chimed in.

“Oh, so everyone’s ganging up on me?”

Kate moved to sit beside her wife. “Call it what you will... we just care about you, that’s all.”

The AD shifted to swap seats with Kate to give the two women more room on the couch. “We do, CJ. And I want you to enjoy your coffee, so why don’t you just let Kate help you? I know how badly injured you were and I don’t care if... well, you know...”

CJ sighed heavily. She knew they didn’t care that she needed help with everything right now, but she hated to appear incapable in front of any of her professional peers. Thinking about it for a minute more, she realized that the colleagues in this room were much more than just people from work, and she reluctantly gave in. “Uhm, Katie... could you help me with the mug?”

Her wife smiled widely at her. It was loving, compassionate, forgiving, and ultimately Kate. “Yes... here.”

Once his agent had taken a few satisfying gulps, Mark continued on like nothing had happened. He knew CJ would prefer it that way and he wasn’t going to mention her current weakness again since she seemed to get the message already. “So... Tim has been feeding information through to me regularly. The cause of the crash has been confirmed, as you both know, but the acid was found to be of a type that is quite hard to come by. Ordering it should require identification and a verified delivery address. The suppliers in Minnesota were few, and I cross-checked the customer names with the passenger list on your flight from LA...” He looked to CJ and Kate. “One name matched. This guy... whoever he is... has added identity theft to his crimes. He used a dead man’s name and address, which was a PO Box in Duluth. Dalton is looking into that now. Our arsonist must have a fake ID... a passport... and he seems to be very well prepared for his job. Jamie and I were thinking he could either be a seriously deranged stalker coming after you, Kate... or he’s someone from your past with the Bureau, CJ. I already checked to make sure Alison Timmons is still locked up... and she is... just in case she acquired an accomplice from somewhere. I wouldn’t put anything past that woman.”

“Neither would I, Sir-“ When the AD held up a wagging finger, CJ smirked humorlessly. “I mean Mark... but we had ruled out the stalker thing. A stalker would just come directly for Kate. Surely he wouldn’t go to all this trouble to eradicate me first... and then screw around trying to scare his target?”

“Depends on the type of nutcase he is.”

Kate spoke up. “That’s true, CJ. We never considered he might get off on playing with people’s minds... on playing with me. Maybe he wants me so terrified that I won’t know which way is

up... then he can snatch me without any problems. I mean, I've already shot at him so he won't think I'm going to be uh... easy?"

CJ's eyes widened a little but even *she* couldn't find a joke in there right now. This was too serious. "Okay, so the nutcase theory is back in. But Mark's right, it could be someone I've locked up in the past. Or maybe I locked up their family member and it's time for revenge." She gripped her lips between her teeth and noticed Jamie had some files on her lap. "What did you find, Penfold?"

The tall blonde swallowed her gulp of coffee. "We've got a few pieces of evidence from here at the house. He left some pretty good tracks on the ground when he ran away. We took impressions and if we can find him and find his boots, we'll match those quite easily. He managed to lure the horses with an apple. I found small pieces of it on the ground in the field. I think he approached from the north so he must have walked for a while over the plains before he reached your property. This tells me he's very organized and everything he does is premeditated... almost like he has a deliberate agenda... a final goal in his mind that he's supposed to achieve. So again, this doesn't rule out the crazy stalker... they can be quite cunning when they have to be."

"I'd have to agree," CJ said absently, while Kate and Mark nodded.

"Oh and by the way... I've cleared the back yard of any toys. There's nothing left lying out there so I can see anything suspicious as soon as it appears. I'll do that every night after the girls go to bed. I don't know what this guy's next move will be but I'd say he'll make it under the cover of darkness... and I'll be ready for him."

"Not tonight you won't, Agent Green," Mark said firmly. "I'll be remaining here tonight... in the car. I'm going to park up in the trees just beyond the house and keep watch. It gives me a good view of the whole place, including the driveway. You need to rest."

This was news to all three women but the way Mark said it booked no room for argument. CJ was actually kind of relieved. Jamie desperately needed sleep and Kate voiced her thoughts for her. "You *are* exhausted, Jamie. And we'd be happy for you to stay, Mark, but feel free to stay in the house."

"No, no... I'm all set up in the sedan. Don't worry about me. And it's only for one night... I'm sure I won't be able to keep Jamie away any longer than that."

"You're sending me home?" the tired agent asked in a high-pitched voice.

"Of course..."

"But... but I can sleep here... then at least if you need me, I'm close by."

Agent Green's chin was slightly jugged out and her eyes were almost maniacal. Mark twisted his mouth in thought. '*She's pretty determined too.*' He gave a single head bob. "Okay... but you *must* sleep."

"Yes, Sir."

The Assistant Director smiled briefly. "Might as well go now, Jamie..." Green didn't need to be told twice... she was close to being unconscious on her feet. Once she'd bid them goodnight, she headed upstairs and since there had been no resistance to his 'order', Mark took a deep breath of relief. "Right... I suppose I should head out there then... but before I go I just wanted to say I'm sorry about what happened to your horses."

"Thanks, Mark," Kate replied. "Can I ask you something before you go?"

"Sure..."

"I couldn't find much about the crash on the Internet. Why is that?"

"While the investigation is ongoing, only the basic information will be put out there. All we released was that a small plane went down with two passengers on board, one of them a Federal Agent. No names were given and to be honest, I think we'll keep it that way for now. I'm not even going to comment on whether anyone survived or not."

CJ nodded in understanding but Kate asked, "Why?"

"I want this guy to think he succeeded in what he set out to do. I believe he tried to kill CJ and now he's set on harming you in some way. Your wife's plane goes down and suddenly someone starts trying to intimidate you? The timing of it all and the jet fuel used in the fire... it wasn't a coincidence. He seems to be intent on coming back here to hurt your family and I want to catch him before it escalates even further."

"And we appreciate that... believe me. Having the LAPD on the case is fine... but I feel better knowing I can trust the people protecting us," Kate finished quietly.

CJ felt a pang of nonsensical guilt about her inability to protect her family. She pushed it aside harshly and refocused her mind. "Mark... how did you manage to take over this investigation anyway? Our unit's supposed to deal with serial killers..."

"I know. Technically we didn't take *over* the investigation but we are running our own alongside the LAPD one. The plane crash is a Federal case and is now linked to what's going on here... but you're right about our unit and Mitchell is pretty pissed at me right now. The guys have been working on our killer but the case is progressing very slowly... and thank you for reminding me..." He pulled a file from his bag. "I wonder if you might take a quick look at these..."

"What are they?"

“Crime scene photos...” Mark looked to Kate and asked, “Are you okay with this?” even though he already knew the answer.

“Yes.”

Once the images were spread on the table surface, CJ narrowed her eyes and looked at them from various angles. “The drawings are very crude...” she husked, pointing a finger towards the stupid-looking little diagrams the killer had taunted them with on each body. Mark nodded since he’d thought so too. In fact, he thought they were a load of nonsense and the killer was just playing with them. He waited patiently for his top agent to speak again. CJ finally pushed back from her hunched up position over the coffee table. “They look like a really crappy attempt at Hieroglyphics,” she announced.

Mulrone stood perplexed for a few seconds before his eyes closed. “Jesus...” He rubbed his forehead. “I never even... you’re a fricking genius, CJ. How did you do that so fast?”

The convalescing agent shrugged – noting a miniscule improvement in her shoulder – and smiled at her boss. “I like Ancient Egypt.”

The tall man laughed. “Kate, can I take her brain to work with me?”

“Uhm no... I need the brain too... it’s kind of a package deal,” the actress jibed back, making CJ smirk at her.

“Well,” Mark said with finality. “I’ll let you two get some rest.”

“Wait...” CJ croaked, moving stiffly and tapping her finger on one particular photo. “They look like Hieroglyphics... except this one here. Was there something different about this victim?”

The tall man twisted himself round to see what she was looking at. He shook his head at how things were starting to fall into place. “She was the only one found indoors... under the floorboards of an old vacant theater building.”

Literally five seconds later, CJ nodded. “I’d look at Grauman’s Egyptian Theater downtown. They have Hieroglyphic plaques displayed on the walls. Maybe your killer’s been there. Hell, maybe he even works there...”

“That’ll be our next move. I don’t know why you’re not the Director of the FBI already...” he said with a small laugh.

“Never wanted that, Sir. I love the field... don’t wanna sit in an office,” CJ winked.

“I can understand that. Okay, I have to go.” He put a large envelope on the table marked ‘*Jensen Cessna – Crash site MVNP015*’. “I’ll just leave these for you.”

“Thanks. Keep me posted on the killer, will you, Mark?” CJ asked in a gruff but vocal tone.

“I will. Good to hear that voice coming back through. See you guys later. You know where I’ll be if you need me.”

As Kate showed him out, CJ leaned back against the couch cushions and sighed. “Well, at least I’m not completely useless.”

“Please tell me you did *not* just say that...” Kate said incredulously as she walked back into the room.

“I meant at work, honey.”

“Thank goodness... because you are not useless. Every second of your life is of huge value to me...”

“I know that... I meant because I can’t go help catch...” The agent realized her wife’s tight grin meant she was pulling CJ’s leg a little. “If only I could be of more use to you right now,” she said, wiggling a weary eyebrow.

Kate sighed at that. “There’s no hurry to make love, CJ... I want you to recover properly... and anyway, there’s too much going on. I can’t relax.”

“That’s precisely my point though... I think it would relax us both...”

“Not tonight, okay? But soon, I promise.”

CJ felt her heart get heavier. “I guess. I know it’s not really an appropriate time for—”

“CJ... it’s not that. I’d love to be with you. It seems to bond us very deeply and makes us feel invincible, but your injuries were pretty bad this time and...”

“I’ve had injuries before, Katie. When I was shot, we still managed to... connect.”

“When you were shot you had the use of your arms, honey. Please try and give yourself some healing time.” Kate had settled beside her partner and was rubbing her hand through the dark strands on the agent’s head. “I love you so much...”

“I know,” CJ murmured, closing her eyes as Kate’s miraculous touch lowered her stress levels yet again. “I love you too... and I love your magic hands.”

Kate smiled and remained close to her wife. She glanced at the coffee table and decided she’d look at the crash site photos tomorrow. She’d had enough for tonight.

\* \* \* \* \*

They had watched some cheesy movie with the TV turned down low. No words were exchanged. They weren’t needed when their bodies were in constant contact. CJ yawned when the titles

began to scroll on the screen and Kate moved slowly from her warm spot on her spouse's chest. "Mmm, bedtime?"

CJ glanced at the clock. "Wow, it's after midnight already. Yeah... let's get the invalid up to bed. It could take a while."

"Wait here and I'll get you some painkillers... to help you sleep."

"Thanks honey," CJ croaked out, warbling somewhere between a tight whisper and normal volume.

"It sounds like your throat's getting better," the actress said on her way into the kitchen.

"I sound like a teenage boy whose voice is about to break... ugh!"

Kate came back to a standing CJ and smiled at her wife's messed up bed-head. "You sound far more like a gorgeous Federal agent who just went through a terrible ordeal and now she's back home where she should be, healing under the care of her lovely wife."

The agent gasped out a chuckle. "That was quite a story."

"You think I'd make something like that up?" Kate winked.

"Nah... especially not the lovely wife part... she's more than lovely though... she's perfect."

"Sweet talker..."

"Truth."

Kate gazed into the agent's eyes and felt her heart speed up. "*You* are perfect."

"Yeah, with my broken parts and messy hair..."

"Your broken parts will heal and your messy hair is adorable. You're still perfect to me... so no more back chat."

"Yes, Ma'am." CJ followed behind her wife as Kate carried the things she needed for a restful night... well, as restful as the agent's night could be when she couldn't move much.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a hazardous trip up the staircase, they arrived in the master bedroom and the taller woman dropped to sit on the edge of the large bed. "Okay... I give. That was hard work."

Kate deposited the glass and pills on the nightstand and came to kneel between her wife's legs. "Glad you finally came to your senses. Maybe we need to keep you on one level for a while."

“No... I just need to stop denying that it hurts... at least, to you anyway.”

Kate nodded. “Like I said... glad you came to your senses. I’m the one you can be completely honest with... no matter what.”

“I know. You’re the only one.”

With a smile, the actress got up. “Let’s get you something to wear to bed...”

“I’d rather just wear nothing... less hassle,” CJ said, glancing down at her arms.

Kate’s green eyes narrowed. “Hmm... you naked...? I’m not so sure that’s a good idea right now.”

“I happen to think it’s a great idea.”

“You would.”

“And you really don’t?”

“You know what I mean, CJ... of course it’s a great idea, but-”

“Uh huh... so... get me naked.” The agent watched her wife’s shoulders slouch and a look of resignation wash across the beautiful features. “C’mon, honey...” Those words managed to come out in a husky murmur and it did the trick.

“Okay...”

Kate unconsciously licked her lips as she approached and CJ thought her heart might just burst. Then Kate’s cell phone rang and the agent closed her eyes in disbelief when her spouse changed direction and picked it up off the nightstand.

Green eyes looked confused for a second as Kate saw her father’s number on the display. “It’s Dad...”

CJ watched worriedly and spoke just as the confusion on her partner’s face turned to concern. “It’s the middle of the night in New York... answer it, honey.”

Kate nodded and pressed a button. “Dad? Are you okay?”

*“Katie? Is everything all right there at the house?”*

The actress could tell her father was more than freaked out. He sounded calm and ‘manly’, which meant there was a crisis ongoing. “Dad, we’re okay... what has happened? Is Jeffrey hurt?”

*“Oh no... no, Jeffrey’s fine... he’s stopped crying now.”*

“Dad! Please tell me...” Kate begged.

*“Honey, I don’t want you to worry too much but Prescilla’s burned down tonight. The whole building is wrecked...”* Eddie heard a gasp on the line and stopped talking.

“Burned down?”

CJ’s pulse quickened at that and she truly hoped that whatever had burned was not related to the problems they were having. “Katie?”

“Hold on, Dad...” the blonde said before addressing her wife. “The restaurant was destroyed by fire tonight.” She saw her wife’s eyes narrow and Kate swore she could read CJ’s mind. “I’m about to ask him, honey.”

The agent blinked, and when she heard Kate ask the exact question she wanted answered, her mouth dropped open.

“Dad... what started the fire? Do you know that yet?”

*“Not yet, sweetheart... there’s still smoke everywhere and I’m about to head home for a while. The police have our details and they’ll call us when the FDNY find something. The most important thing is that nobody was hurt or killed... and that you precious things are still safe too...”*

“You think it’s connected to us?”

*“Oh Katie... I don’t know. I can’t help but think it’s a little too coincidental.”*

The actress hated when her father was using his serious gruff voice and she rolled her shoulders at how uncomfortable it made her feel. “Let’s see what the professionals say first, okay? No jumping to conclusions...”

*“I know. I’ll call you in the morning when we know more. I have to get Jeffrey home. It’s freezing here, you know...”*

“I know, Dad. Tell Jeffrey we love him... and we love you too.”

*“Right back to you all, darling. Sorry to call with bad news at this hour.”*

“Don’t worry about it... call any time... for any reason, Dad.”

*“Oh honey... you really are wonderful. Try and get some rest... and the same to that gorgeous wife of yours!”*

Kate heard a little of her father’s flamboyance in that sentence and it lifted her frowning eyebrows a little. “You too, Dad... night.”

“Goodnight, sweetheart.”

When the call was disconnected, Kate looked at CJ and saw that the agent was gawking at her, waiting for information. “Prescilla’s and the apartments above it are completely burnt out... and still smoldering.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“No... thankfully.”

“He thinks it’s connected to our situation, doesn’t he...”

It wasn’t really a question and Kate sighed. “Yeah, he does.”

“Katie, that’s quite a stretch... considering we’re on opposite sides of the country...”

“I know... it would mean this guy has an accomplice, wouldn’t it?”

CJ eyebrows shot up her forehead. “Uh yeah... shit, that’s possible. I never even considered there could be two of ‘em. Man, I’m really not thinking.”

“Honey, of course you’re thinking but there’s a helluva lot to think about right now and you’re in a lot of pain too. I guess Dad’s paranoia’s just rubbing off on me. I hate it when he sounds so serious and... un-Dad-like.” Kate dropped onto the mattress next to her spouse.

CJ kissed her on the temple then rested her forehead on the same spot. “I hate to add to the pile of problems right now but eh... I think I just got my period.”

The actress shook her head. “You are *never* a problem, CJ... c’mon, let’s get to the bathroom.”

Once they were in the ensuite, the agent watched Kate bustle around the room for a moment then come to stand in front of her. CJ pursed her lips. “I might manage to do this by myself...” she whispered sheepishly.

“I doubt it... and I don’t really want to see you hurt yourself in your quest to get the right... angle? And anyway, you’ve been trying to get me inside you for days... looks like you got your wish,” Kate said with a glimpse of a twinkle in her eye.

Dark brows rose and the agent put on her best thinking face. “Not exactly what I had in mind but you have a point there, Mrs. Carson.”

“Uh huh... and you wanted to be naked for bed, so let’s do that first. How about a quick shower before I do the deed?”

CJ chuckled quietly. “You’re the boss.”

“Glad you agree.” Once the taller woman was standing in front of her wearing nothing but her plaster cast and a bashful grin, Kate smiled. “Do you know how beautiful you are?”

CJ’s cheeks burned crimson at the unexpected compliment. “Not as beautiful as you.”

“Hmm, I wish you would just take the compliment and know it as the whole truth. You’re a Goddess, honey.”

“To you, maybe... and uhm thank you, Katie. I love you.”

“I love you too, you big goof. Shower...” the blonde ordered while pointing at the enclosure.

“You have to come in too... otherwise I won’t be able to rest my cast on anything.” CJ tried to keep her expression neutral.

Suspicious eyes narrowed for a second. “All right...” Kate removed her clothing and the agent’s pulse rapped a fast beat... everywhere. The blonde leaned in to start the water and let it warm to the preset temperature. As CJ hobbled into the shower – with the throbbing area between her legs causing more of a limp – Kate gently grasped her right arm and guided her so that her cast would be in a dry zone. Kate stood facing her and lifted the injured left arm carefully onto her shoulder. CJ flinched but it was less painful than moving it herself. “Now I know it might be hard for you, but don’t move your arms. I’ll do the washing... for both of us.”

The taller woman’s nostrils flared and she remained silent. She watched with great interest as her wife removed the shower gel from the small in-built shelf and lathered some into her palms. The bulk of CJ’s body was under the soothing spray and when Kate’s hands met her overheated skin, she moaned at the sizzling contact. Kate looked up into her wife’s eyes and realized how much denying CJ was torturing the agent. *‘She doesn’t have to move an inch... and I could...’*

Kate blinked and continued to delicately cleanse the injured body. CJ’s breasts were heaving with her labored breaths, and every area Kate touched seemed to press back against her. Decision made, the blonde moved her hand lower, cupping CJ’s dark mound, her middle finger pressing gently into the sodden flesh beneath.

“Oh... Katie...” the agent whimpered.

“Just relax... and stay still.”

CJ almost did as she was told but she had to open her legs a little more. Finding a comfortable enough position for her weakened ankle, she readied herself for the onslaught of some wonderful sensations for a change. “It won’t... take... long...” she gasped out as Kate circled her clit with a fingertip.

“I know...” Kate’s left hand came to up to cover her wife’s breast, chaffing the erect nipple with her palm. She knew from the swelling between CJ’s legs that she was so ready and, since the agent was very wet, she slipped two digits slowly inside.

“Yes...” CJ’s eyes were shut tight and her mouth hung open to gather necessary oxygen. Her legs trembled and she fleetingly thought this might not have been such a good idea. Kate’s thumb pressed against her clit as the soft thrusting continued and she felt every nerve ending telling her it was too late to change her mind. She didn’t want to anyway. “My... Katie...” The heartfelt words escaped in a hitching of breath as the orgasm swept through her.

Kate’s hand left the hardened nipple and she grabbed CJ around the waist in case she collapsed. “Hey...” she said loudly enough to be heard over the water. “Focus for me... don’t fall.”

CJ managed to smile and open her eyes. “I’m... okay.”

“Good.” The smaller woman kissed a nearby chin. “And yes, I am your Katie.”

Once the agent had recovered, the washing was completed as fast as possible since she’d been on her ankle way longer than Kate would’ve liked. Standing in the ensuite, the blonde pulled the ponytail from her wife’s hair and brushed it through. With that done, she moved in front of her and looked up into a somewhat peaceful and sated face. “Okay... spread ‘em.”

CJ smirked. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Very sure... just don’t get aroused again.”

“I’ll try.” When her wife’s finger circled her entrance, CJ’s body couldn’t help but react. “What’re you doing?”

“Well, I gotta find the hole first... it’s not like doing it on my own body...”

“Oh... uh... ah! Sure... that feels nice...”

“Quit it,” Kate said, hearing the husky tones get deeper. “Okay... let me know if it’s uncomfortable?”

“Oooo-kay.” A few seconds later, CJ had to admit Kate had done ‘the deed’ incredibly well. “That feels fine, honey... and uhm... thank you.”

“Anytime, beautiful.” The blonde reached up to place a delicate kiss on her partner’s cheek. “Just always remember... I would do anything for you. Actually, the tampon task was quite... pleasurable, so you just let me know when you need me again.”

CJ rolled her eyes and dragged herself towards the bed. Kate threw the wet towels into the laundry hamper, cleared up a few things, ran her fingers through her own short locks and shut off the light in their bathroom before climbing in beside her wife.

The agent desperately wanted to make love to Kate – to reciprocate for her pleasure in the shower among other reasons – but she was pretty sure the actress would refuse such an offer. With a sigh, she asked anyway. “Katie?”

“Mmm yeah,” the blonde said as she snuggled down in her pillow.

“I... I want to make love to you too...”

“Oh CJ, that’s not why I did it.”

“I know that... but I want-“

Kate placed her fingertips over her wife’s lips to silence her. “Just relax... please? All I need are your arms around me...” The words were out before Kate could stop them and she watched the agent’s eyes fill with tears.

“And I can’t even do that properly.”

CJ looked pretty desolate as Kate moved into her left side. The cast safely clamped between them, she held her unusually emotional partner and cooed into her ear in apology. “All I need is you, CJ... that came out all wrong. I’m sorry, baby... so sorry. It’ll get better soon... I promise.” The blonde kissed the tear-stained cheek and CJ turned to her, engaging her in a deeper kiss that conveyed what she wanted. Tongues met and danced around one another as if their hunger could never be satisfied. Kate could feel the blood rushing in her ears and her heart pounding double-time. It felt incredible but she knew they couldn’t touch one another the way they usually did and the thought made her pull back once more. “Hey... I love you more than you’ll ever be able to imagine... always believe that. Nothing can change-“

“Katie, do something for me?”

“Anything...” The actress realized what she’d just said and almost laughed at what she knew was coming.

CJ’s wide grin – even through her tears – showed that she’d heard it loud and clear. “I’m glad you said that. Now, I’m going to slide down the bed and you’re going to...” The agent felt the heat shoot through her body. “...let me taste you.”

Once Kate had the image in her mind, it was hard to shift it. She really wanted that powerful connection with her one and only love, and she also wanted to grant the pleading wish her wife’s eyes now conveyed. She nodded and silently got to her knees. CJ slithered down the mattress without too many grimaces and waited in anticipation of what she was about to see. Her mouth already filling with saliva, she watched Kate lean down to kiss her passionately, smoldering eyes closing as they met. She let the actress sink into her while engulfing Kate’s tongue with her mouth, suckling on the muscle as it explored around her teeth. The blonde moaned at the pulling motion and felt it in other places. Her nipples tingled and her clit throbbed.

CJ let go of the intoxicating mouth and whispered, “More...”

Kate moved – very cautiously – over her wife’s torso and when blue eyes latched onto her breast with a hunger so fierce she could barely breathe, she lowered the rounded flesh down to waiting

lips. CJ groaned her pleasure as she pulled the stiffened nipple into her mouth. She really wanted to touch Kate but knew she couldn't, so she concentrated on feeling everything she could with her mouth.

The pebbled areola tickled against her lips and she felt the bud inside her mouth harden and elongate. It made her stomach clench and she was eternally grateful her abdominal bruising didn't cause her any pain. She squeezed her thighs together to try and alleviate the little spasms of empathy that ran through her center, and moved her head to grab the other nipple with her teeth. Kate barely cried out, her breaths becoming ragged and her thoughts swimming in a sea of gratitude that her wife was here with her now. When CJ finally let the sensitive point go, Kate climbed higher and heard a whimper from her lover.

"Oh God yeah..." CJ murmured, seeing the glistening flesh peeking out from behind the dark blonde curls. "Please, Katie..."

In a slightly awkward position but still able to get comfortable without leaning on CJ's shoulder, Kate was poised over her wife's face and holding onto the head of the bed for dear life. She was a little shocked at how wet she was and vaguely wondered why she had been denying them this life-affirming connection. She looked down to see an intense pair of eyes pleading still, and she realized she hadn't lowered herself enough. She slowly did so and an audible exhale exploded from her lungs at the feel of a hungry mouth covering her most intimate area. A thick tongue slid up through her folds and played forcefully with her clit, making her cry out again. "Ciara..."

CJ was in that heavenly place she would never tire of. Her wife surrounded her face and she could smell, taste and touch Kate the way she had been craving. Without the use of her hands, she decided her tongue was going to work extra hard... and that suited her just fine. Focusing on the engorged flesh, she swirled and circled it quickly to bring her spouse closer to the edge. Judging by the sounds coming from the actress' throat between every short, panting breath, her technique was working like a charm. She stopped the frantic flicking for a moment and took the tip of her tongue to Kate's very wet opening, teasing it mercilessly before sliding her flattened muscle – painfully slowly – through the swollen folds to the top of the blonde's twitching clit.

"Please..." Kate breathed.

CJ thrust her partially-erect tongue inside a few times, the tip feeling around in the warm canal to gather the delicious nectar that surrounded it, while her nose teased the sensitive bud, driving the actress to a higher level of arousal. Kate held back a scream and when CJ withdrew to suck her clit into her scorching mouth, the actress felt herself crashing over a tidal wave of pleasure. CJ continued to suck and began to bat her tongue fast, bringing Kate's orgasm to an almighty climax. The smaller woman thrust one final time onto CJ's face and the agent was blissfully lapping up everything Kate offered. It was only after a few seconds, she realized Kate was offering a lot... but she didn't care at all, and waited until her wife came back to her senses before she made their predicament known.

Hearing a slight chuckle below her, the actress inhaled deeply a few times to get her breath back before whispering, "What?"

“I think you got your period too...” CJ snickered before she kissed the tender flesh above her.

Kate rolled off to the side and once on her feet, she looked at her wife before heading to the ensuite. “That’s almost gross...”

“It most certainly is not! I love it... I love you, remember?”

“I know but I meant... if the world could hear us now, some would find it gross.” She leaned over the agent and wiped her chin. “I realize you don’t... but some would.”

“Hmm, well, it’s just a natural occurrence and it’s all quite delicious to me, but only because it’s yours, honey.”

Kate kissed her before moving away again. “Ditto, CJ.” She came back out of the ensuite after attending to herself and frowned. “Looks like we’re totally in sync with that now too, huh? How weird...”

“Uh huh, we always have that awesome time of the month together but this is the first time we’ve got it on the same day... same hour actually.” After a sarcastic hmm from the blonde at the word ‘awesome’, CJ shifted slightly so they could lie close together once more. “And while we’re on the subject of weird, how did you manage to read my mind earlier?”

“When?”

“You were on the phone to Dad and you said... and I quote... ‘I’m about to ask him, honey,’ but I hadn’t spoken my thoughts aloud.”

Kate looked up to check CJ’s eyes for any signs of a joke. “I did?”

“Yes. And then you went on and asked Dad the question with the exact words I had used in my head.”

“Uh... wow. Maybe I just know you *too* well now.”

“Perhaps,” the agent murmured with a kiss to the short blonde hair. “Sleep now... and thank you so much.”

“For what?”

“For letting me love you.”

Kate almost cried. “I’m the one who should say thank you, CJ... it was wonderful... as always.”

“I’m just glad you let me... and it caused me no pain whatsoever, just in case you were wondering.”

“Good.” Kate kissed the soft skin next to her face. “Night, honey...”

“Night, my love.”

Both women felt impossibly closer somehow and as Kate drifted into slumber, she had to admit that making love had eased a lot of her tension. She would concede – only to herself – that CJ had been right all along.

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## Chapter 4

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Kate awoke early and got up to relieve her bladder. When she came back into the bedroom, she looked at her stunning partner as the agent continued to sleep. She got up each morning expecting it all to be a dream, but it wasn't; CJ was here. Tears stung the back of Kate's eyes again at the feeling she'd had of never seeing her wife again. It had been way too close this time and she wondered if there would ever be an end to the drama that was their life. Oh, she could cope with drama – she was an actress after all – but she just preferred it when her family were not put in mortal jeopardy... or any kind of jeopardy for that matter.

The thought of her job made her eyes pop open. *‘Okay... need to get my head in gear... and call Lorena.’*

She thought about what to do first. CJ seemed to really need her rest but the injured woman would need help in the bathroom when she woke and Kate knew she didn't have much time since her wife usually stirred without her in the bed. She grabbed her robe and decided that a text to Lorena would suffice for now. It was early Saturday morning and her agent slash manager wouldn't be at the office. If there was anything urgent, she was sure the kind woman would call her back at a convenient time.

Kate was also waiting for her father to call back with news about the fire at Prescilla's. Then there was Idaho. It was going to be a sad day but Kate was feeling surprisingly strong. She knew it was partly due to what she had shared with CJ last night and partly due to the miraculous inner-strength she exuded when her wife was with her. She glanced at the slumbering woman. *‘She knows what I need better than I do sometimes.’* With a shake of her head and a smile, she left the room to go check on the children and the Federal agents. Finding the children still deep in the land of nod, she headed downstairs.

Since it was daylight now, the Assistant Director had come indoors and sat with Jamie in the kitchen, sipping on coffee and reading through a couple of newspapers he'd brought last night in case he needed something to read. Kate had wondered where Kamali was as she descended the stairs but she saw him now, sitting patiently but keenly alert by Mark's side.

“Did someone give you a tasty treat, Kamali?” the actress inquired, pursing her lips to stop a smile.

Jamie looked at Kate, then at her boss. “Busted.”

Mark was too busy trying to peel his eyes away from Kate. He hadn’t really seen her in such casual attire before but he covered his surprise well. He was heartened by the fact that she felt comfortable enough to be there in her robe. “Sorry, Kate... he’s been a very good boy... didn’t even bark at me when I was lurking around outside your house all night.”

“He’s such an intelligent dog and he knows you’re a friend. And I’m just kidding, Mark... he’s allowed the occasional treat.”

“Did you two sleep okay?” Jamie asked her friend.

Kate turned to see if there was any hidden meaning behind the words but it looked to be a genuine question with no knowing smirks or winks, indicating to her that Jamie hadn’t heard them in bed last night. “Very well, thank you. What about you?”

“Like a log. I was more exhausted than I thought. And that guest bed is really comfy.”

Mulroney grunted at her. “My seat wasn’t so great but I wasn’t here to sleep anyway... still, maybe a visit to the chiropractor wouldn’t go amiss. I’m getting too old for all night stakeouts.”

“Aww, Mark, you’re not that old...” Jamie blurted before she could stop herself.

“Watch it, Green.”

The agent tensed, but then she saw the glint in her boss’ eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. She cleared her throat and with a smile, replied. “Sorry, Sir.”

Kate chuckled as she poured some of the coffee from the pot into her ‘So Say We All’ mug. It seemed the Sci-Fi geek in CJ was rubbing off on her. “So I assume all was quiet last night, Mark?”

“Yes. I hate to say it but I hope he comes back soon though... I want to catch the sonofabitch.”

“I agree.” Kate sighed. “I need to get today over with before I can think any more about it. We have to bury Idaho this morning. The guys should be here in about two hours to do that,” she said, looking at the wall clock and seeing it display eight fifteen.

“Do they take care of everything?” Jamie asked after finishing her coffee.

“Yes. Apparently they dig the hole, prepare the... animal... and fill it in. The owners can be present or not.”

“Are you going to be there?”

“I might, but the girls will have to stay indoors. Seeing our horse being... hauled around is not for young eyes, so I’ve asked Tony to come in today.”

“Ah, I was going to say... I mean, CJ can’t really... oh never mind.”

Kate sighed. “I know she can’t, Jamie. And it’s okay, you can say it... CJ can’t cope right now.”

“Don’t let her hear you say that,” the AD harrumphed.

“I think she’s coming round to the idea that she’ll just have to deal with it.”

“Yeah, but not in front of us... and on that note, I’m heading out.” The tall man slid off the stool, bid them both goodbye and was about to leave when Kate called his name.

“Mark?”

“Yes, Kate?”

“Last night... my father called. He’ll be calling me back later with an update. I’m not sure it’s any of your concern but... his restaurant burned down last night... completely destroyed.”

“Where...?” the Assistant Director frowned.

“In New York City... like I said, I don’t think it’s any of your concern but I thought I’d mention it.”

“No, no, I’m glad you did. I’d like to look into it, if that’s okay with you?”

“Yes, thank you. He seems to be worried about the possibility of it being linked... but I’m not so sure...”

“I don’t know, Kate. I wouldn’t put anything past this UNSUB. If I find out anything important, I’ll let you know, all right?”

“Thanks. Why did you say UNSUB?”

“Because that’s what we’re supposed to call the killers, perps, suspects... if they’re unknown. The BAU always use Unknown Subject.”

“CJ doesn’t...”

“I know. She sticks to what she’s used to, doesn’t like too much change...” Mark paused to think. “...at work anyway.”

“I don’t think I’ve heard any of you use it.”

“You’re right. But we do write it in reports and case files from time to time. Thing is, by the time we’re done, they’re usually known... so they go from the suspect to the perp. It’s all the same thing really,” he explained with a shrug.

Jamie added, “They’re always thinking up new words and acronyms... sometimes I can’t keep track. Why not call it like it is?”

Kate nodded. “I’d have to agree... anyway, I’d better let you go, Mark.”

“No worries. Bye guys.” Just as Mark was leaving the house, Tony had his hand raised to ring the doorbell. The AD grinned. “Morning, Tony. Go on in.”

“Thanks, Mark.” The driver curled an eyebrow. “What’re you-? Never mind... see you later,” he added to the man’s back. After a wave over Mark’s shoulder, Tony closed the door and headed towards the voices.

“Ah, Tony... and that’s my cue to leave too.” Jamie said with a single nod. “See you later, Kate... tell CJ I’ll be back after dinner time.”

“I will. Try to have a good day,” the actress said, accepting the kiss on the cheek from the agent.

Tony entered the kitchen as Jamie left and he rubbed his forehead before looking at his boss. “Uh... busy house, huh?”

“Very. There’s coffee in the pot if you want some, Tony. I better go get the family up,” Kate replied, patting the young man’s shoulder as she passed him.

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Taking the stairs two at a time – easily paced by her galloping dog – Kate looked in on the girls. They were still asleep so she decided she’d get CJ ready first. Heading to the master suite, she popped her head in the door and saw the agent yawning widely. ‘*Perfect timing...*’ With a simple smile, she went to the bed and perched on the edge. “Good morning, beautiful.”

“Hey, honey...” CJ slurred. “What day is it?”

“Saturday.”

The agent had to think for a minute. “Oh... what time...?”

“Around nine. You have three hours before the sketch artist arrives. Want some help?” Kate said as she leaned forward to kiss her wife.

“Mmm...” CJ felt herself respond to the soft lips but she knew her bladder was about to burst. When the blonde pulled back, she pouted. “I need to pee.”

Kate stood and waited until her spouse moved gingerly into a sitting position and her feet were placed firmly on the carpet. CJ was gloriously nude and the actress tilted her head to appreciate the long body. CJ saw where Kate’s eyes were roaming and mischievously tugged on the tie on Kate’s robe, making the thick, fluffy cotton fall away from her torso. “Hey! None of that...”

“Just a kiss,” CJ whispered as her lips met the firm abdomen. She nipped at the skin – hearing a gasp above her – and stuck her tongue into the navel before licking everywhere she could reach to make the little bites all better. She took a long, intoxicating inhale and closed her eyes.

“Okay... I’m done.”

“Jesus, honey...” Kate was panting slightly but recovered enough to assist her wife to the ensuite to deal with the usual morning ablutions. Once the naked agent was suitably ready, she cradled her broken wrist as she limped back to the bedroom. Her shoulder was throbbing this morning but she wasn’t going to confess that little detail to Kate. She stood and watched as the blonde grabbed some underwear, a pair of navy blue sweatpants and Kate’s oversized UCLA hoodie. She put the pile on the bed and turned to CJ. “Ready?”

“I love you,” CJ said with dreamy eyes.

“And I love you, mushy kitten. Ready?” Kate repeated with a tiny grin.

“Yeah... go for it.” Only six minutes later, CJ was fully clothed and her wife gently hooked up the sling fastener behind her back. The actress adjusted the material as she moved around to the front again and – checking CJ’s expression for signs of discomfort – stood back with her arms crossed, looking quite satisfied with herself. CJ snickered at her cocky spouse. “You’re getting good at that.”

“I was just thinking the same thing. How was the pain?”

“Hardly any this time... and my ankle’s almost back to normal. I think I’ll start walking around a little more. The shoulder’s annoyingly tight, the wrist’s still useless and painful, but everything you did was great, Katie. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, my love. Now...” Kate took a breath and spoke quickly. “Let’s get you downstairs before our daughters get up. I’ll get them organized with breakfast and Tony’s here... he’ll watch them with you while I go out and bury our dear, sweet horse and then-”

“Hey... look at me.” When Kate did, CJ kissed her lightly. “Breathe, honey... and I want to come with you to bury Idaho. Ah, ah! No arguments... I could use the walk and I’ll be very careful.”

Kate took in the deep, dark eyes and could tangibly feel the love and honesty exuding from them. “Okay.”

\* \* \* \* \*

When the men had left, Kate and CJ stood in the December sun and looked at the large, slightly raised mound of dirt. Idaho had been laid to rest and both women were glassy-eyed. Kate wrapped one arm around her wife's waist and leaned her head on her chest.

CJ propped her chin on Kate's hair and sighed deeply. "I can't believe she's gone... just like that. I hate this guy, whoever he is..."

"She didn't have a nasty bone in her body. Why did this horrid person have to harm an innocent animal?" Kate sniffed.

"I don't know, honey," the agent replied as she kissed the short blonde hair. "It seems he's trying to find ways to hurt you..."

"To hurt us..."

CJ ducked her head to catch Kate's eye. "Katie... whoever he is, he's trying to hurt *you*. I'm supposed to be out of the picture... and now he's tormenting you. I hate to say it, but it's looking more and more like another psycho-stalker."

The smaller woman cupped her hands over her mouth and nose, dragging them downwards as a huge sigh escaped. "Maybe..."

"We better head back in case Dad calls."

"I have my cell here in my pocket... but yeah, let's go." Kate took one last look at the grave. "We should get something to mark her name on."

"We will." CJ began to hobble across the field with Kate's hand on the small of her back.

"Take your time, CJ."

"No worries there... I can't go any faster than this."

It took a good fifteen minutes to get to the back yard, and both CJ and Kate were looking forward to a few quiet hours talking with their daughters and mourning their loss. Surely that wouldn't be too much to ask after such an emotional morning? As the day would come to pass, it seemed it was indeed too much to ask.

CJ tried to walk as normally as she could through the child-proof gate and into the house via the back door. She was very aware of her wife behind her, no doubt assessing her condition and watching in case she faltered going up the two steps into the rear hall that led past the gym and into the kitchen. Once she was on the flat floorboards, she heard a sigh of relief from Kate and stifled the urge to turn around and tell her beloved that she really could manage. She pushed back her mild irritation, knowing that it was simply the frustration of being partially disabled that

wanted to voice itself to whoever was available to listen. She knew she was horrible to deal with when she was sick or injured and shook her head to chastise the flaws in her character. Blowing out her own sigh, she continued to move forward until she saw Tony and the girls in the crèche, drawing at the low art table.

Shannon was up on her feet as soon as she saw her parents. “Mommy? Is... is Idaho gone now?”

As Kate continued past them, the girl leaned her head on CJ’s hip. The tall woman moved her right arm to touch the brown hair, feeling the pinch of pain and trying to ignore it. “Yes, Squirt... she’s gone.”

“When can we go out to put flowers there?”

“Maybe later today... all right? I’m quite tired now and I need to sit down for a while. Want to sit with me?”

“I will... but I want to finish my drawing first.” Shannon walked slowly back to sit beside her sister. It seemed they were working on a drawing together and CJ smiled sadly before she headed to the couch.

Kate was on the phone when she joined the agent and as CJ sat there, she listened to the one-sided conversation.

“Yes... I’m sorry I’ve been MIA this past while. No... no... yes, things are fine but I am dealing with some difficult family situations... oh absolutely, Lorena...”

CJ’s body relaxed a little since she’d realized Kate wasn’t talking to her father. She almost didn’t want to know if the fire at Prescilla’s was arson but she suspected it was going to be confirmed sometime today, either by Eddie... or Mark. The agent inhaled slowly and focused again on her wife’s hypnotic voice.

“Who at Olympian? Oh okay... right... right. The 20<sup>th</sup>? Gosh it’s getting close to Christmas but yes, that’s fine. Oh? Which shows? Mmhmm... right... oh, Ellen? Oh goodness, yes... but when would that be? Right... okay that’s possible.” Kate listened intently, her green eyes staring at the pad on the coffee table as she wrote a few notes on it. She nibbled on her lips and scratched her temple with the end of the pen. “The Tonight Show? Yes, I did that one before... a few years back. Different host now but I could do it again. Okay... okay... can you let me know the date as soon as you find out? Okay Lorena, and thanks for understanding. If you can put all the details in an email for me, I’d appreciate it... great... yes, bye for now.” She hung up the call and fell backwards onto the plump cushions.

“Interviews?” CJ said with her signature raised eyebrow.

“And the rest... meeting slash audition of sorts for Infinity One, two major talk show requests, a possible guest appearance on the crime drama, After The Fall, and a few magazines wanting

interviews too. I've been holding off as much as possible since I left Deadline but I guess they're desperate to find out what happened now."

"How much can you tell them?"

Kate sat upright again and looked at her partner. "Not much about Mischa's end since it hasn't aired yet... but I knew the fact that I'd left would get out eventually. It was probably someone at the studios who leaked the info. I guess I can talk about my possible new show and no doubt, they'll want to talk all about my new haircut," she finished with a grin.

"I bet they love it as much as I do..." CJ drawled.

"I don't think anybody can love it as much as you do, honey."

"I just wish I could touch it more. But with these stupid arms..."

Kate fell slowly to the side and rested her head on the agent's lap. "Does that help?"

"Yeah." CJ managed to move her hand onto the short blonde strands and trail her fingers over the actress' head. "So when do they want you on Ellen?"

"Maybe next month... she never had an actual schedule. She just wanted to know if I would do it."

"It's a great show to get invited onto."

"Totally... but it doesn't really fit into my wanting to keep a lower profile..." Kate's voice drifted into nothing and she closed her eyes as CJ's fingers worked their magic, but the moment was short-lived. Lucy came bounding into the room with Kamali and the doorbell rang just as the house phone let out its shrill repetitive tone.

Kate hopped to her feet, threw the phone handset onto the couch for CJ to answer and followed her youngest daughter out into the hallway. Lucy headed into the downstairs bathroom and Kate went to the door to look through the small glass panels that ran down the side. Her sandy eyebrows crept upward when she saw her brother on the porch. "Eddie?"

"Hey, Sis... it's great to see you."

"It's great to see you too. I didn't know you were even in LA..."

The tall man hugged her and gave a sullen half-smile. "Dad caught me up with all the recent events. He called me last night... apparently right after he called you. Since I was due to arrive here tomorrow for a job on Monday anyway, I thought I'd change my flight and come see you guys. Is that okay?"

"Of course, Eddie..." Kate returned her brother's hug and led him into the living area.

When they saw CJ, Kate almost cried. She hadn't even considered the agent would have trouble with the normally simple task of holding the phone. CJ had managed to answer the call and now had the handset perched on her sore shoulder, her head uncomfortably lolled to the side to pin the contraption in place. "Shit!" Kate whispered as she tried to hold back the emotion she was suddenly experiencing. She mouthed a 'sorry' to her wife and got a silent 's'okay' in response.

Eddie gave a little wave to his sister-in-law and her answer was a raised eyebrow and another mouthed word – 'Dad'.

Message received, Eddie Junior took Kate's hand and pulled her into the kitchen. When he turned around at the island unit, Kate saw him holding back the tears. "Eddie? What's wrong?"

The tall man choked through a cough and collected his thoughts. "I... sorry... I just wasn't prepared to see her so... so beat up? I know that's silly, but..."

"Hey..." The blonde took him into her arms. "It's not silly. I wasn't even thinking you hadn't seen her since the crash. Believe it or not, she's looking much better."

He stood up straight and met his sibling's eyes. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. When she got home... she was gaunt, skinnier and in agony. Her hair was dirty and a little matted... her bruise was an angry red..." Kate swallowed back her own sadness at the memory. "And... and we were both completely in shock over the entire thing."

"I can't even imagine." Eddie rubbed Kate's back soothingly. "How's she coping with not being able to... do anything?"

"I'm coping okay..." CJ said, limping slowly into the large diner. "But I have the best, most patient, most supportive nurse in the world," she finished, leaning slightly to kiss Kate's short hair.

The actress held CJ's cheek. "Honey, I'm so sorry about throwing the phone at you like that. I didn't even think..."

"It's okay... really. Hey Eddie... you'll forgive me if I don't hug you," CJ said, making an apologetic face.

"Can I hug *you* without causing any damage?" he asked.

"Sure. Just be gentle."

As he encircled her in the most delicate hug ever, he whispered in her ear. "It's so great to see you, Sis. Love you."

CJ gulped back the lump that formed in her throat. "Love you too," she husked.

Eddie backed up. "I'm just so... relieved? Is that the right word? I mean, when Dad first told me about the crash... I... well, you know."

"We know," Kate said quietly. "So go say hello to your nieces then we can have coffee and chat."

"Where are they?"

"Engrossed in an art project with Tony."

"Cool... be right back."

Kate went immediately to CJ and slipped her arms around the slender waist. "I really am sorry about being so heartless with the phone, CJ."

"Katie, quit it. You didn't do it intentionally, and anyway, I managed okay... once I got it up to my ear."

"I know but--"

The agent's lips silenced Kate mid-sentence. Once the contact broke, CJ smiled. "I know I've been a grumpy old wife but you've been incredible to put up with me, and when you think about the kind of things you're having to do for me... well, I can never thank you enough, hon."

"You don't ever need to thank me. The fact that you're here is a true gift to me."

"Still, it might be a little nicer if I wasn't such an impatient patient," CJ smirked.

"Very funny. But think about it, CJ... if it were the other way around, would you put up with me?"

"It would be a pleasure. I wouldn't call it 'putting up with you'..."

"Exactly! I love taking care of you... I just have to work around the self-sufficient, independent, mega-tough Special Agent part of you and--"

"Okay... yeah, yeah," the taller woman interrupted when she saw Eddie come back into the kitchen. "Coffee time?" she winked at her wife.

Kate gave her an all-knowing look and moved to the machine. "Coffee time."

\* \* \* \* \*

"A camera system?" Kate exclaimed.

Eddie Junior nodded. "And it won't cost you a dime."

“Why not?”

“Well, I helped develop the software and our company is producing the system. It’s selling pretty well already and we get... you know... fringe benefits. I could install it while I’m here actually.”

“You have it with you?” CJ curled an eyebrow at her brother-in-law.

“Yep. I brought four cameras, motion sensors and the digital recording equipment. It’s easy to install. You can have a camera on each side of the house which will give you a full exterior view of the grounds surrounding the building.”

“Wow... I... well, it sounds great, Eddie. We have a guy coming on Monday to quote us for fencing and gates.” Kate blew out a breath. “But this will make me feel even more secure.”

“Are you going to fence the entire fourteen acres?” he asked in a high-pitched squeak.

CJ shook her head. “Actually, I was thinking about that. The fourteen acres has a fence of sorts around it already and we only really use the three fields that are irrigated and maintained so we could take the new one around the back of those, right down to the road, along the front of the lake and back up behind where the new barn will go. We can put a full-height door on the back fence to let us onto the rest of our land and the electric gates on the driveway will finish the circuit off quite nicely.”

Kate was wide-eyed. “You’ve certainly thought this through, CJ.” She paused to think for a second. “That sounds perfect actually.”

The agent let out her breath and smiled. She hadn’t mentioned her thoughts to Kate yet and that had sounded a little like there was no room for discussion. “I was gonna talk with you about it,” she said with a nose scrunch.

Kate laid her hand over her wife’s and turned to her brother. “We didn’t feel the need for all this fuss before, but now... we feel a little exposed.”

“I’m not surprised. Listen, I can get you a video entry system for the gates too... but I’ll need to come back to install that. Maybe next month?”

“Eddie... that’s really too much-“

“Nonsense,” he broke in. “It’s my gift to you all. I feel better knowing your home is safer too, you know.”

“Thank you,” both women said in unison.

A nod from Eddie was followed by a few moments of silence. When Kate swallowed a large gulp of her cooling coffee, she suddenly looked up at her wife. “Dad... what did he say?”

“Oh... sorry, I forgot about that,” CJ said with a shake of her head. “He still hasn’t had the final report from the investigators but there was a witness who said she saw a guy throwing a few bottles through the glass of the restaurant’s front door... then striking a match.”

“Shit...” Kate muttered. “But... there’s a security shutter...”

“Yeah, the bottles fitted through the gaps. Seems the guy planned it. I hate to say it, Katie, but...”

“I know. It sounds like it’s linked to us.”

Eddie cupped his mug with his hands and frowned. “Who would go to all this trouble just to hurt you, Kate?”

“I don’t know, Eddie... I just don’t...” Kate stopped talking, and as an unwelcome thought ran through her mind, she shivered. She dismissed the thought as ridiculous and finished her sentence. “Just don’t know.”

CJ saw the shadow swiftly cross her wife’s face and wondered what had disturbed Kate. She would not forget to ask her once they were alone. It didn’t seem that was going to be anytime soon as the doorbell sounded again, breaking the agent out of her thoughts. Ten minutes later, she was sitting on the couch describing – to a very skilled Bureau sketch artist – what the suspicious man at Jensen’s Aviation looked like.

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## **Chapter 5**

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Eddie Junior and Tony had taken Shannon, Lucy and Kamali out for a long walk, hoping to give CJ and Kate some time to relax. Not long after they all left, a phone call from Mark had ensured the relaxation didn’t happen. Kate was now washing dishes at the kitchen sink to give her something to do. CJ was still talking to her boss – or so Kate thought – and she’d already surmised from the beginning of the agent’s one-sided conversation that the fire in New York was indeed started deliberately, and the dreaded words ‘jet’ and ‘fuel’ had been used. The blonde sighed and dried her hands on the dish cloth. When she heard a sound that was a combination of scream and growl, she headed out of the kitchen.

“Goddamn it!”

Kate winced and, seeing the couch empty, crossed the living room quickly.

“Katie?!” was yelled from somewhere ahead.

The actress entered the hallway and called out, “Where are you?”

“Toilet,” was the barely restrained shout.

Kate glided across the smooth wooden boards and walked into the downstairs shower room. The sight that greeted her made her pause. CJ stood with her pants and underwear around her ankles, her face reddened with what the blonde suspected was anger – and perhaps a little embarrassment. A few tears were evident, as was the frustration in the blue eyes that averted their gaze away from Kate. A scrunched up piece of toilet paper had drifted to the floor and the smaller woman sighed silently as she continued toward her all-too-independent spouse. “Why didn’t you just ask me to come help you?”

“Because you’re helping me with everything!” CJ blurted. “You help me dress, you help me wipe my ass, you help me brush my teeth... you even help me feed myself. I can’t take a damn drink without your help!” The agent stood rigidly and tried to calm her nerves.

“CJ... if I was the one who was injured...” Kate stopped talking when she realized she was about to repeat herself.

“But you’re not the one. I don’t have your patience. I don’t have your strength when it comes to things like this.” CJ breathed deeply in an attempt to slow her heart rate. “I can’t deal with being vulnerable... being weakened and having physical restrictions. It’s pissing me the hell off!”

“Honey, this has to stop. Look at you... you’re trembling with rage.”

“It’s not rage,” the taller woman croaked, feeling sweat pouring off her scalp and between her shoulder blades. She once again looked anywhere but at her wife. “It’s pain.”

“Jesus, CJ... what happened?” Kate scooped down to pick up the piece of toilet paper and dropped it into the bowl before ripping a few more sheets from the roll.

“I couldn’t... wipe properly and when I bent over to try again, I lost my balance. I automatically threw my hand out to catch myself... and pulled it back when the agony shot through my shoulder. Then I fell against the wall and...” A low grunt escaped and CJ gave up talking.

“Your right shoulder?”

The tall woman nodded somberly.

“Can you let me help now... before everyone comes back from the walk?” Another nod. Kate completed the intimate task, finishing with pulling the sweatpants over her wife’s hips, flushing the toilet and gently washing the three available hands. “You’re due some painkillers. Come with me.”

The tough agent still trembled as they traversed the lower level of their home and ended up in the kitchen. “I’m sorry, Katie.”

“You keep saying that, CJ, but it’s not necessary. I understand you getting angry... as long as it’s not directed at me.”

CJ looked up sharply. “Never! No... it’s not... you know I’m just...”

“I know.”

Watching her amazing spouse filling a glass of cold water and snagging the appropriate amount of painkillers from the cupboard high on the wall, CJ tried to figure out how Kate was handling everything so well. “How can you stand this?”

Kate headed over to her. “What?”

“This! I can’t touch you... I can’t help you around the house. I can’t protect you. I’m useless!” CJ said, lowering her eyes once more.

“Look at me, CJ!” When the agent did, Kate frowned. “That better not be shame I can see in there... this is *me* you’re talking to here! I know you... and I know this is temporary. But even if it wasn’t, CJ, it would never change how much I love and admire you.”

“I... know that.”

“Then you’d better remember it. Now listen to me... you protect me every minute of every day.”

CJ frowned. “What? How can I?”

“Honey, you taught me how to use a gun, you taught me about the law... far more than I knew before. You taught me how to listen and see things the way you do. You taught me about profiling criminals... how they think and why they act like they do. Hell, you’ve almost taught me how to do your job. You give me a reason to be stronger, more determined, more courageous and I’ll never let anyone hurt you because I feel just as protective towards my family as you do. Let *me* protect *you* right now. That’s what you do for me every day. You’re my savior, my heart, my soulmate... and always my protector. Don’t ever forget that.”

The agent’s mouth was agape and she gazed at her warrior wife in wonder. “You are simply incredible.”

“*We* are incredible... you just have to remember how you feel and know that I feel it just as intensely for you too. We’ll get through this, CJ.”

“You seem-“

“So sure? I am.”

“How did you know what I was going to say?”

Kate raised an eyebrow. “The spooky link?”

“Ah, yes.”

The eyebrow lowered as the blonde chuckled at her own thoughts. “You know, that sounds like the title for some kind of covert dossier on Fox Mulder.”

Now CJ’s eyebrows shot up in surprise as a hearty laugh erupted from her belly. “How... how do you do that?!”

Kate snickered and planted a kiss on the tall woman’s lips. “I just know how to tickle your geeky funny bone, I guess.”

“I guess,” CJ snorted.

\* \* \* \* \*

With everyone back at the house, dinner was a bustling affair and CJ once again became frustrated at her complete inability to assist with anything. The pain from her little mishap in the bathroom had required heavier medication to ease the sting, and it was a slightly fuzzy Special Agent who sat at the head of the table with her wife.

Eddie Junior had made a start on installing the camera system and with Jamie’s help he would complete his work after the meal. He was currently reloading Lucy’s plate with a second helping of risotto while the small girl licked her lips in anticipation of more delicious food. Shannon sat with her hand around a glass of milk and as usual, she regaled all present with tales of her week at school.

CJ watched all this for a while before finally looking to her partner. The actress’ profile was lit up with Kate’s seemingly permanent glow of love. The blonde smiled and nodded along with the various conversations while eating the remainder of her meal. CJ was entranced for a few moments – no doubt compounded by her drugged, lightheaded feeling – before Kate turned to see hazy blue eyes lost in another world.

“You all right, honey?” the blonde said, glimpsing at her wife’s barely-touched meal.

CJ nodded but couldn’t seem to refocus her eyes. “I’m just not very hungry.”

“Once I’m done here, I’ll help you to bed. I think you should sleep it off...”

“Okay.”

Now Kate knew her wife was in pain. No argument, no grumbling and no resistance. CJ was doped and ready to rest. As soon as her last mouthful was consumed, Kate stood up and discreetly hauled CJ to her feet. “I’ll be back in a few...” she said to the rest of the table.

The agent stopped mid-shuffle, blew a strand of black hair off her face and turned to Eddie.  
“You staying tonight, Eddie?”

“I have a hotel booked, CJ, but thanks. I think you have a full house anyway.”

CJ rolled her eyes. *‘I really need to get that fifth bedroom fixed up... and put a damn bed in it! Fat chance with these stupid arms...’* she groaned to herself. With a sigh, she nodded at her brother in law. “Yes, you’re right.”

Eddie nodded and smiled. “Thanks for thinking of me, Sis. Have a good sleep.”

Kate nudged her wife gently to get her on the move again. Tightening her arm around CJ’s waist, she helped her up the staircase with some effort. “Honey... please stay with me here... I can’t hold your full weight.”

“What are you trying to say, Katie? That I’m piling on the pounds?”

“Ugh... of course not... if anything, you’ve lost far too much! I’m not... you know you’re just taller-“

“I was... joking. I won’t fall.” CJ interrupted. She attempted a wink when Kate glared at her.  
“Almost there...”

Kate let out a puff of breath when the agent finally sat on their bed. “Okay... let me at least get your bra off to make you more comfortable.”

“I don’t think I’m in any condition for you to start that kind of thing...”

“Quit it, smart ass.”

Once the underwear was expertly removed, CJ lay back in the bed in her soft sweats and tee shirt. After a mild complaint at the movement in her left wrist, she sunk into the pillows.

“Thanks, love,” she slurred as her eyes dropped heavily.

“Sweet dreams, honey.” Kate placed a delicate kiss between the dark bangs on the agent’s forehead and before she even stood upright, CJ was emitting a light snore.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jamie Green was in the study assisting Eddie Junior with the monitor for the new cameras which were now secured in place outside the house. The system was wireless and therefore pretty quick to install, especially for tech whiz Eddie.

Kate slowly descended the stairs after reading a quick story to her daughters. The house was suddenly very quiet and since CJ was still out cold, Kate decided to relax on the couch and look over her emails, including the rather long and detailed one from Lorena Xu. She found a video

file attached to the message and opened it to find the pilot episode of Infinity One. Since the file lasted for well over an hour, she decided to watch it once Eddie had gone for the night so she could view it without any interruptions.

Absorbing everything in Lorena's email, Kate sighed. She had wanted to melt away into the background for a while but it seemed it just wasn't possible right now. She was still in demand and the public seemed to have a voracious appetite for information on the famous actress. She resolutely decided that her career was important and her fame wasn't going to disappear or lessen in intensity, but she would be pretty strict about her working hours and her requirements before her final acceptance of the role of Le'Ana Bezwick.

*"Kate?"*

The blonde got up and walked over to the study. "Yeah?"

"Want to come pick your camera angles?" Eddie said with a smile.

"It's up and running already?"

"Yep.... come see..."

Kate went to stand behind Eddie and saw the quartered split screen. "Wow... the picture is really clear, Eddie."

"Yes... it's a good system. And look... you can bring up any one camera by simply pressing the number. Then, when you want to go back to all four you just press the home button."

"That's great. Thanks so much," Kate grinned, ruffling her brother's brown hair.

"Hey! Quit that," he grumbled. "So... any angles you want to change?"

Once Kate was satisfied with the cameras, she turned to Jamie who was sitting on the couch with her laptop. "Jamie?"

"Hmm... I got an email from Mark about the fire in Manhattan. It's very likely it's linked to what's been happening here. They've sent the fuel sample to the lab for type comparison." Agent Green looked up at her friend. "It looks like there are two of them."

"Damn it. Who the hell are they?"

"I wish I knew." Jamie would be on high alert tonight and would keep her gun strapped to her chest at all times. She still held a lot of guilt about Idaho and she was determined this guy was not getting away with anything else. Deciding she would increase her patrols to every half hour throughout the hours of darkness, she closed her laptop and got up off the couch. "We'll get them, Kate."

The actress nodded. "I hope so."

Neither of them could have realized just how accurate Jamie's last statement would be.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was almost midnight. Kate had checked on the girls and her wife, assisting the tall woman to the toilet before putting her back in bed. CJ went out like a light again and Kate had snagged the Colt .45 from the safe before she headed downstairs. Now the house was silent once more, save for the occasional grunt and heavy breath as Agent Green did a little sparring in the gym between her patrols to keep her alert.

The actress sat in the study with her laptop on the desk. With the lights out, only the glow from the screen was visible –the whole house was in darkness save for a wall light in the gym – and she clicked the Infinity One file to begin watching the pilot episode of the show she was about to join. Twenty five minutes in, she was quite impressed with the writing, the dramatic direction, the CGI special effects and the way the story and characters were grabbing her attention. She also noted with interest that the fighter pilots wore smart, formal, authoritarian outfits. She really liked those and hoped they hadn't made too many changes in the wardrobe department for the continuation of the series.

Kamali appeared outside the study door with his ears pricked and his doggy nostrils sniffing the air. Kate watched him intently but he simply sat down in view of her and stayed alert. The blonde swung the swivel chair around slowly to free herself from the desk, knowing that something had made him move from his bed. Just as she did it a loud crash came from the kitchen. Kamali bounded into action and Kate jumped up to look at the camera monitor. A dark figure ran clockwise around the back of the house.

The dog began to bark loudly and another smash made Kate jump out of her skin. She turned to see what had clunked to the ground beside her. A large rock lay splintered on the floor and the study's small window had a jagged hole in the middle of the glass pane. Another smash and Kate heard Jamie shout "FBI!" just before the backdoor slammed closed behind the agent. The actress reacted quickly. Kamali was going nuts but if she let him out he might get hurt. She grabbed the Colt .45 and ran out the front door, making sure it closed to keep the dog in. Remembering what direction she had seen the man going, she went to face him head on. What she didn't count on was running into him at the corner of the building. She had no space or time to aim her gun so she decided her fist would have to do.

Before his surprised eyes could even register her presence, she had punched him square in the face, making him unsteady on his feet for a few seconds before he recovered and came at her. Her right foot flew out and kicked him dead-center in the gut, forcing him to double over, but again he recovered and Kate realized she needed to inflict a little more damage. Aiming for under his chin, she thrust the heel of her hand upward as he tried to grab at her shoulder. The resounding impact sent his lower jaw crashing into the upper one with a clatter of teeth. As he fell backwards, he let out a yelp before landing on his ass.

This had all happened in a matter of seconds and Special Agent Green came running from the rear of the house just in time to see the man try to get up and attack Kate. The ferocious-looking actress commanded him to “stay down!” but he ignored her and got a solid sneaker-covered foot in the face as his reward. The entire time, Kate had held her gun-wielding hand out behind her so that she wouldn’t be tempted to shoot the bastard, but also to avoid having him grab her weapon. Jamie fleetingly thought how amazing Kate would be as a law enforcer.

While the attacker was reeling on the ground from the compact blonde’s last assault, Jamie swung into action and pushed him onto his front. “FBI... you are under arrest...” While she cuffed him behind his back, she read him his rights between ragged breaths.

Kamali was still barking and Kate knew she was needed inside the house. The girls would have woken and possibly CJ too. Once the cuffs were secured on the man’s wrists, she glanced at Jamie. “I’ll go call it in.”

Jamie actually smirked at her temporary partner. “Thanks. I’ll manage this...”

The actress ran indoors and found a snarling Kamali at the foot of the stairs. He stopped as soon as he realized who had entered the house but Kate saw the reason for his aggressive stance. Two sleepy girls stood on the upper landing looking down at her. “It’s okay, girls. Everything’s okay.” Kate was about to pick up the phone when she saw CJ hobbling along to meet their daughters.

“Katie... are you all right?” the agent asked in confusion.

“I’m fine... really.” She was still filled with adrenaline but took a deep, controlled breath and dialed Mark’s number. “Mark... it’s Kate... we need you here... now. Yes... we caught him. Okay, thanks.”

When the blonde turned to look up at her spouse, CJ’s eyes were wide and slightly more focused. “Him? You caught-“

“CJ... can you take the girls back to bed? I’ll be up soon...” Kate pleaded.

The agent nodded and herded Shannon and Lucy away with her voice. “C’mon you two... let’s get tucked in.”

Just as they disappeared from view, Kate heard Shannon say, “Was it a bad man?” The actress couldn’t believe how alert and attentive her older daughter was, even in the middle of the night.

Kate settled the dog somewhat by giving him a scratch behind the ears and a few calming words. A couple of minutes later she was half way up the stairs when CJ came back into the hallway. Kamali had followed the blonde and she rested her hand on his head. “Honey, can you keep him up here for a bit? I need to go check on Jamie...”

“Katie... what happened?”

“We caught the perp. He smashed windows this time... I’m not sure what else yet... but he’s outside with his face in the dirt.”

“Why do *you* have dirt on your face?” CJ asked with concern.

“Uh... I kinda beat him up a little bit.”

A dark eyebrow rose and the tall woman blinked, her mind going back to a time in her office when Kate had done something similar to a homicidal Agent Powell. “I see. Be careful... please?”

“Of course I will. Take the dog and go into our room. I’ll be back as soon as Mark gets here.” At CJ’s skeptical look, she added, “I will.”

Feeling completely useless once again, CJ went to the master suite and called the dog who reluctantly trotted over to her side. She closed the bedroom door and Kate sighed heavily before running back downstairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark, Jamie and two other agents had left about fifteen minutes ago. But before they went, they had searched the grounds and found a suspect piece of raw meat out in the back yard. Agent Green knew it hadn’t been there an hour earlier when she’d done her last patrol of the perimeter, and she guessed their arsonist had intended it for Kamali. She wondered what the lab techs would find in the meat, and the thought of the Carsons losing their dog after everything that had happened only made her furious at the idiot who sat cuffed in the Bureau sedan.

The chunky slab of beef had been carefully bagged and removed, and the piece of dirt under it dug out in case of any lingering poisons seeping into the soil. Mark and Jamie weren’t taking any chances about what kind of harmful chemicals could be in the meat. Agent Green had hurriedly told Kate to remove her outer garments just in case the attacker had touched her. The actress assured her friend he had not gotten close enough but carefully undressed anyway, discarding the clothes into evidence bags, which Jamie took with her.

Now in her pajamas and a pair of flip-flops, Kate stood and looked at the mess in the kitchen. Glass was strewn all over the sink, the counter and the floor. At least the rocks used to break the windows were already gone; more evidence collected by the FBI. Jamie had called out a couple of CSU agents who had already catalogued and photographed the various scenes and now the actress had to wait for the company who would come and board up the windows until they could get replacements ordered. “Guess I better clear up,” she whispered to herself with her head in her hands. She vigorously rubbed her face and tried to decipher where to start. It was 2am and she was getting tired now.

CJ had stayed hidden while the Bureau personnel were there. Kate suspected her injured wife was feeling wholly inadequate and a little dazed. But the agent now appeared in the doorway with a much calmer German Shepherd in tow.

The blonde turned around to face her wife. “I’m sorry I didn’t come up like I promised, CJ... I just needed to clear-“

“I know.”

CJ looked so lost. Kate went to her and slipped her arms around her spouse’s waist. “I’ll always need you, CJ...”

The taller woman’s lips rested on the shaggy blonde hair as she returned the sentiment. She noticed the dog walking away from her and called him back. “Kamali... here.”

Kate released her grip. “Yeah... keep him in the living area until I clear up the glass. The kitchen, the study and the playroom are all off limits.”

At the mention of the playroom – Shannon had decided the crèche was due a name change – both women felt a wave of anger wash over them and they locked eyes before CJ whispered. “They definitely took the guy into custody, right?”

Kate nodded slowly. “Yes. Jamie said she’ll keep us updated.”

“And you’re definitely okay? He didn’t hurt you?”

“No, CJ... he didn’t get the chance to lay a finger on me.”

“Okay.” CJ called the dog and went to sit on the couch. She really needed to top up her painkillers but would wait until Kate had a minute to get them. Guilt, shame, despair and frustration ran through her mind in waves. She hated that she couldn’t defend their home, couldn’t help Kate clean up and she couldn’t even get her own damn medication. “Fuck!” she growled in a low voice.

“CJ... please don’t...” came through the open double doors.

“Don’t what?” the agent frowned.

“I know what’s going on in that head. Please stop being so hard on yourself...”

“Breaking news... Marshall the Mind-Reader strikes again,” CJ said dramatically.

Kate chuckled briefly as she deposited the larger pieces of glass in the sink for now. “And Carson the Self-Critic curses her for being so accurate...”

The taller woman grinned. The grin turned into a quiet laugh and she shook her head in amazement before getting up to lean on the kitchen doorframe. “Maybe you’re Marshall the Magician. I was feeling worse than shit about two minutes ago and here I am laughing with you.”

Kate smirked as she got down on her hands and knees to sweep up the smaller shards. “You and I are magic, CJ... and I’m not going to hold onto everything this case has done to us. Jamie caught the guy and I’m sure the people involved in this whole mess will be brought to justice now. I have complete confidence in you Federal agents, you know. And before you say again that you feel useless... you are not! Having you here with me is every bit as important as having you out there catching the bad guys... more so, actually.” She glanced up to see CJ’s curious expression. “Okay, look at it this way... your colleagues can replace you to catch the bad guys but nobody, and I mean *nobody*, can replace you here... with us. Don’t you ever forget how much you mean to me, CJ. You’re my everything.”

When Kate stopped talking and stared at the floorboards, she thought about just how true that was and how if CJ hadn’t come home, she would’ve died inside. When she didn’t hear her wife respond, she looked up to see awe in the stoic face.

“Now it’s my turn to say... I fucking love you, Katie. How can you be such an incredible human being?”

Kate stood and approached her gorgeous spouse. “That’s a matter of opinion. But... perhaps you’ll finally believe this incredible human being when she tells you that you are the opposite of useless... and hear me this time, CJ... your arms will heal. Let’s speed up the process by letting me help you. No more Miss Independent until we see what the doctor says on Monday, and until then, no more trying to do things on your own. I can do it all. I even managed to kick the arsonist’s butt without you. You don’t have to take on the world by yourself, honey... we can do that together. Have I convinced you yet?” she said with a playful flutter of her eyelashes to lighten the heavy subject matter.

CJ bit her bottom lip. She could feel laughter simmering in her belly. “Yes, Katie.”

“No more trying to wipe your own ass. Agreed?”

“Yes, Katie.”

“Good. About time you saw sense, woman!”

The smile crawled over the agent’s face and she laughed out loud causing Kamali to pop his head around the door before retreating away from his silly humans. He decided that the energy around their home was pretty much back to normal now so he trotted upstairs to settle into his bed between the children’s doors.

Once Kate disengaged from a loving kiss with CJ, the taller woman stayed with her while she meticulously collected up the glass in the playroom. By the time they had made sure to get every piece and then do the same in the study, the emergency carpenters Mark had called arrived at the house and made light work of placing temporary boards on the windows. Once the women had settled Kamali again, they checked on their daughters and finally fell into bed at 4.30am.

Exhaustion claimed them quickly but before it did, Kate set her alarm to make sure she was up to greet the girls at a reasonable hour after what had become the busiest Saturday she'd ever had.

## Chapter 6

At 0600 hours in the FBI's Los Angeles field office, Special Agent Jamie Green sipped on a paper cup full of bitter coffee as she stood in the dark viewing room. On the other side of the two-way mirror and sitting at the table in interrogation, was a tired, slightly bruised and grubby man who looked a great deal more than his thirty four years.

The agents had already secured a warrant and had the rental apartment of Vernon Betts searched. They had fingerprinted him, and lo and behold he had a record... albeit a short one of misdemeanors. And in a small stroke of luck, the partial print they had pulled off the knife in the first attempt to harm one of the Carson's horses was a three-point match to Betts' right middle finger. They'd use that as a starting point to convince him to spill his guts about who he was working with. The smelly fuel-stained leather gloves found in his apartment would also help to nail the bastard against the proverbial wall. Jamie's face held a snarl as Assistant Director Mark Mulrone walked in the door.

"He has a few known associates. If we can persuade him to talk and name his partner, we've been authorized to offer him a deal for his cooperation."

"What kind of deal?" Jamie asked with a frown.

"Don't worry, Agent, he's not getting away with anything serious but if he owns up to his part in it all and gives us what we need, he'll only be charged with arson, attempted murder and murder. We might tell him there's a child endangerment charge too, just to see what his reaction is." Mark scratched his forehead. "Oh... and the fuel used in the fire at Mr. Marshall's restaurant was a match to the fuel in our case... so I want the name of his accomplice."

Jamie took the file her boss handed her and skimmed over the details. "Well, it looks like he definitely has one since he was in LA at the time of that fire," she said, looking at an image of Betts, captured while he withdrew cash at an ATM in Studio City on the night in question.

"You ready to begin?"

"Yeah, I figure four hours is enough time to let him sweat," Jamie muttered with a curl of her lip.

It wasn't long before the two agents had surmised that Vernon Betts had a pretty low IQ. They had first questioned his intelligence when he told them he was waving his right to have a lawyer present since he was "just a bit player".

After the usual spiel at the beginning of the interrogation – for the audio and video recording and to keep their asses covered legally – Jamie got straight into it, questioning Vernon about why he was on the Carson’s property last night. He couldn’t deny he had smashed the windows – since he’d been caught in the act – and the agent pretty much told him she knew he had left the meat in the yard which had been found to have traces of cyanide laced through it. She also told him she hoped he was careful when handling the meat since not wearing proper protective gloves could have allowed the poison to absorb into his skin and ultimately, into his bloodstream. Betts had stared worriedly at his hands for quite some time after that.

It was a startling sign of guilt... and also of someone who didn’t really have a clue what he was doing. Jamie wanted to know why someone like him had gotten in way over his head. Jumping from a couple of old petty theft charges and a DUI to malicious arson and murder was a puzzle the agent wanted to get to the bottom of.

“Why did you do it, Vernon?”

The arsonist shrugged. “Money.”

“How much?” Jamie said abruptly.

“A lot.”

“Don’t play around with me, Betts. How much?”

He stared at her for a few seconds, knowing he was never going to see his payout now. “Two hundred grand.”

“Two hundred grand to set fire to a barn and break some windows? Seems like an awful lot, don’t you think?”

Vernon began to sweat. He knew he was fucking up constantly but this woman intimidated him, and where the hell was his ‘business partner’ now huh? Free as a damn bird, that’s where.

Jamie decided to push. “You’re going away for a long time as it is, Vernon, so you may as well tell us the whole story... and tell us who you’re working with.”

“A long time? What the hell for?”

“Malicious arson, for starters... that’s a felony charge, Vernon.”

“Felony arson?” the man grunted.

“Yes.”

“That’s crap.”

“You set fire to, and completely burned down a structure... and you did it willfully and maliciously,” Jamie said, taking her words from California Penal Code 451PC itself. “So it’s a felony charge... up to nine years for that one alone... never mind the murder.”

“Murder!?” Betts yelled. “I didn’t kill anyone!”

“No? It’s funny you say that since you were caught on the property of Special Agent Carson of the FBI. You burned down her barn and terrorized her family. And it’s also funny because we have you on camera at the very airfield that Agent Carson’s plane took off from in Minnesota... where it was sabotaged. And I have a sneaking suspicion that you’re no mechanic.” Agent Green threw the still image of Betts onto the table.

Vernon leaned forward briefly. “Can’t even see who that is...” he stated defiantly, however some of the blood seemed to have drained from his scruffy face.

“Well... that’s true. It’s good we have Agent Carson’s identification of you to fall back on then, isn’t it?”

“How can she...? She’s dead!”

Jamie’s eyes clouded over. “I didn’t mention anything about Agent Carson being dead, Vernon. Care to tell me why you said that?”

“Well... uh... because her plane crashed, right?”

“I didn’t say that either.”

“I saw it on the news,” the man said frantically.

“No names were released.”

Betts knew he was well and truly screwed... and well and truly stupid. “I’m not saying anything else.”

“Vernon, if you cooperate with us and give us names, we can see about cutting you a deal.”

“A deal?”

Jamie nodded, as did Mark. Betts thought about it. He wasn’t going to be a free man and he wasn’t going to be able to spend the money he had only dreamed of. And would Mr. Electronic Tabs get all of it? He might if he finished the job. Vernon resigned himself to the fact that they had blown the whole deal. Now, he wasn’t going to take the fall for them all. No way. “Okay. What do you want to know?”

“Why such a big payout?”

“We were supposed to get rid of...” the man gagged on what he almost said but knew he had to tell them or else. “To get rid of Agent Carson.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “We just wanted the money... didn’t ask why.”

Jamie noted the ‘we’ and moved on with her questions. “Why did you burn down the barn?”

“To send a message... and to drive the blonde insane.”

“How would that send a message, Vernon?” Jamie asked, her eyes narrowing with hatred.

“I... well... that we weren’t to be messed with and that she was all alone and vulnerable...”

“So you sabotaged the plane in order to kill an FBI Agent and then your job was to drive her wife insane? Seems like a strange job for someone like you to take on, Vernon.”

Betts’ breathing became shallower as he tried to think of a way to get out of all this. “I didn’t kill anyone. You said she was alive... b-but earlier you said murder...”

“I might have said that but remember, planes tend to have a pilot... and he is very dead.” Agent Green’s anger was evident and she looked briefly down at the sheet of paper in front of her before pinning the man with a glare once again. “How did you get the address of your target?”

Vernon had had enough and was getting really pissed off about the loss of the big bucks payout *and* his freedom. ‘*Murder... I’m completely fucked.*’ He sighed heavily. “She gave it to us... told us to fuck up the blonde’s mind but not to hurt the kids.”

“She?” Jamie said, but quickly noted the comment about the children. She was fuming inside but remained completely professional, even though she wanted to rip this guy’s intestines out with her bare hands for messing with her friends.

Silence from Betts.

“What exactly did *she* order you to do?”

More silence.

“Vernon, I told you if you cooperate with us, we can push for a lesser sentence. We need to know who was behind this whole thing. Who were you working for?”

“You’d really gimme a deal? No bullshit?”

Jamie nodded.

“We were... ah fuck. You know what, that rat bastard ain’t getting his stinking hands on all that cash. I had a partner in all this...”

“And his name would be...?”

“Darrell... he’s hacked into all kinds of places... tryin’ to dig up dirt on your agent before we...”  
He shut his trap again.

“Trying to dig up dirt before what...?”

Vernon didn’t respond and Mark was getting agitated. “Vernon... if you don’t tell us everything, you alone will go down for it all. Malicious Arson, Destruction of Property, Sabotage, Murder-“

“No fucking way!?”

The Assistant Director stood abruptly and his voice was booming. “Enough! The evidence is overwhelming... we know this is all linked to the plane crash. You were caught on camera. You followed Agent Carson of the FBI... you followed her to Minnesota, you tampered with the plane and you came back here to Los Angeles to mess with her family afterwards and destroy their home. You’ll never get out of prison...”

It seemed that Vernon was now shaking in his boots and sweating onto the table. He gulped audibly and adjusted his butt in the hard wooden seat. “Darrell Gates... he’s some kinda computer genius. He’s in for two hundred grand as well. And before you ask, I don’t know where he is, but he should be back from New York by now... I... I’m not sure. I usually meet up with him in public.”

Mark’s eyes hardened at the New York information. “You must have a number for him?”

Betts nodded. He knew the game was up. “Yeah.”

Jamie saw the change in the man and decided to push a little further. “So who was paying you both, Vernon? That’s a helluva lot of cash.”

“Dunno.”

“You must have a first name at least? Surely you didn’t talk to her without getting a name?”

Betts ground his jaws together. “M-meredith. She said her name was Meredith... snooty bitch. That’s all I know.”

Ten long minutes later outside the interrogation room, Jamie pulled Mark aside and with her stomach in knots, she spoke quietly near his ear. “Sir... I think I know who’s behind all this.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate awoke ridiculously early. After three hours of half-decent slumber, she turned on her side to check the time, noting 7.40am on the small alarm clock. “Mmm, another hour or so...” she mumbled to herself. Closing her tired eyes in the hopes of falling back to sleep for the duration, she snuggled down in the pillow and shuffled her butt back a little until she felt the outside of CJ’s warm hip.

A jarring, vibrating noise and a far-too-loud and jolly ringtone made the actress jump, and before her green eyes could open again she blindly reached out for her cell phone to perhaps smash it against the nightstand.

“What?!” Kate snarled into the handset.

“*Uh... Katie?*”

“Oh God... sorry, Dad. Wait... why are you calling?”

“*Oh sweetheart, I just needed to talk to you.*”

“Has something else happened?”

“*Well, yes and no. We know everything you know about the fire but now... well, our landlord has given us a month to get out of our apartment. I’m... I’m just beside myself with worry.*”

“Jesus! Did he say why?”

“*Not really, just that he’s had a better offer and he can’t refuse it. Big, big bucks. We can’t even dream of matching it! Jeffrey and I need to find a new place to live. And what with the restaurant gone... I just don’t know what to do.*”

“Can you let me wake up a little and I’ll chat to CJ about it?”

“*Oh! Of course, Katie. I’m so sorry to wake you.*”

“Dad... you can wake me anytime. I’m just really tired because I’ve only had a couple hours sleep after a hectic day yesterday. Oh! We caught the guy, by the way!”

“*When?*”

“He was here at the house last night... smashed some windows and stuff... but he’s now in the custody of the FBI.” Kate felt CJ stirring behind her. “Dad... I promise I’ll call you back today. We’ll figure this out, okay?”

“*Oh, it’s not your responsibility to fix it, sweetheart. I’m glad they caught that horrible man though. At least that’s one positive thing.*”

“I know. And we want to help you and Jeffrey somehow. Let me get back to you, Dad. We love you.”

*“All right... bye for now, Katie. Love you too.”*

“Bye.” He sounded so desolate and once she’d hung up the call, she turned to her wife. CJ’s eyes were still closed but Kate knew she was awake. She shuffled around and leaned over gently to bestow a kiss on the irresistible lips. “Morning, my love.”

“Kiss me again.”

After doing just that, Kate smiled sadly. “I know we both want to sleep for a week but we have to get up... or should I say, I have to get up. But before I do... that was Dad on the phone.”

“I know. I heard you say goodbye to him. Is everything okay over there?”

“Not really. They’re losing their apartment now.”

Blue eyes shot open. “What? Why?”

“Landlord got a better offer... seems someone is offering to pay him obscene amounts of money for the rent and he can’t refuse it. I don’t like the sound of it... there’s something... something...”

“Katie, tell me what’s going on in your head? And tell me what went through your mind yesterday when Eddie asked you who would hurt you...” CJ had a gut feeling she already knew but she wasn’t going to say it until Kate did.

“I... I don’t know... just a weird feeling. It’s probably nothing.”

CJ narrowed her eyes a little before giving a single nod. She knew Kate would talk to her when she’d come to terms with it. “Okay... but please... you know you can tell me *anything*, no matter how horrid or unlikely you think it might be.”

Kate’s stomach flipped as she gazed into the deep blue. It was like CJ knew exactly what she was thinking, and knew she just couldn’t voice the ugly thought. The moment was broken by Lucy Carson merrily hopping through the hallway and slamming her little body clumsily into their bedroom door. “Mama... Mommy! It’s daytime!”

Kate turned as Lucy stood and wiggled at her side. “It’s too *early* in the daytime for little people to be this awake,” she smiled as she helped the youngster climb onto the mattress. “What woke you, Luce?”

“‘Cause of the bad man last night,” Lucy said plainly while crawling over to kiss CJ’s arm.

Kate glanced at her wife, knowing CJ would have allayed their fears when Shannon had mentioned the bad man but she wanted to assure Lucy that there was no need to worry anymore... at least, not about that particular baddie. "C'mere, sweetie..." Once the girl was squashed against her side, Kate ruffled the brown curls. "Auntie Jamie took the bad man away last night. He won't come back again, okay?"

"She did? Oh..." Lucy turned to CJ. "Did she take him to your work?"

The agent smiled at her daughter's logic. "Yes, Little One, he won't be hurting anyone anymore."

The small girl nodded and leapt off the bed. "Can we have breakfast then?"

The actress raised an eyebrow at the quick change in conversation. "I think we can do that. Where's your big sister though?"

"Sleepin'," Lucy said with a roll of her big brown eyes. "And snoring...!"

Kate laughed briefly and got up to deal with two children and one dog. She would no doubt have to explain why the windows were boarded up. She dismissed the notion of lying to them and telling them it was an earthquake or something. She had made a deal with herself – and CJ – to always tell them the truth when possible, so the truth it would be. But at least she could tell them that the person who smashed up the house would never bother them again.

With a quick assurance to CJ that she would be right back to help her, Kate went to wake Shannon and perform the family's morning routine.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark sat at his desk waiting for Jamie to do her initial investigations into someone he was extremely surprised to hear was a suspect. But after what his agent had told him, he had to agree that she couldn't be ruled out. He had been shocked when Jamie mentioned Kate's mother and told him what the woman had done to the actress in the past. Kate was such an open, honest and loving person and he admired her even more now since she had come from such a horrendous and abusive woman. He didn't know the whole story, of course, but Jamie had told him in confidence what she knew about Elizabeth Emerson and her vague threat about getting her grandchildren no matter what. Considering what Betts had told them about his orders and not hurting the kids, Elizabeth was a person of interest. No question.

Mark took a deep cleansing breath when there was a knock at the office door. "Come in..."

Special Agent Green appeared and closed the door behind her before taking a seat opposite the boss. "Sir... I have some info but nothing concrete... and nothing that can point to her guilt outright."

"Tell me what you found..."

“First off, as you requested, I checked thoroughly into the Davenports... and there’s absolutely nobody who would have an interest in the girls from their previous family.”

“Good. What else?”

“Well...” Jamie flipped a page on her lap. “Our new suspect, Elizabeth, lives in Greenwich, Connecticut with her current husband, Arthur Emerson. She married him nine years ago and went from barely being able to afford her old mortgage, to the lap of luxury in a matter of months. Arthur is a self-made millionaire. I did all the usual background checks. No criminal record, no IRS issues... nothing of note turned up. The only thing I was curious about was that she seems to share a bank account with her husband and she withdraws cash... large amounts of cash... from that account on a regular basis... usually inside the bank and usually five or ten thousand dollars at a time. She’s been doing that for years now...”

“She could be storing cash at their home for... well, I don’t know what purpose, but we’ll need to find out where that money has gone.”

“I agree. Her purchases on both the account and a few credit cards... including a Platinum American Express card... seem to cover all the usual things. Restaurants, gas, salon visits, many, many clothing and jewelry purchases and lots of spa treatments. She also writes checks for a couple of charities and an insurance broker named Derek Gates. I still need to find out what company he works for... probably insuring her expensive jewels or something. According to her bank statements from the last five years alone, she spends a fortune.”

“And considering her past, it’s all Mr. Emerson’s money, right?”

“Seems like it, Sir. So... we need to find out why she has to pull all that cash out so often.”

Mark pursed his lips. “How much in total, Jamie?”

“Uh...” The blonde agent turned a few more pages. “Approximately... three hundred and forty thousand dollars to date.”

The Assistant Director whistled and shook his head. “Wow... could she have been planning to need that amount one day or has she been spending that on top of her card purchases over the years? Hmm... it’s still pretty circumstantial. There was nothing else?”

“Nope, she’s just a rich bitch-“

“Agent! I know you’re angry but don’t...”

“Sorry, Sir.” Jamie repented before her eyebrows shot up as a new thought came to mind. She looked back down at her lap to scrutinize her paperwork and cursed herself for missing the obvious. “Aww damn... Gates! Derek Gates, Darrell Gates... is that a coincidence?”

“Go find out. We’ll go to CJ and Kate with this tonight... but until then, keep on it. Get Mikey to do some of his fancy work and find out all you can about this woman before we dare to even suggest Kate’s mother is involved. And check into that insurance company...”

“Fancy work, Sir?”

“You uh... you know what I mean, Agent.”

“Yes, Sir!”

\* \* \* \* \*

“CJ?”

“Yes, hon?” the agent murmured. She was lying back on their comfy couch while Kate rubbed her foot. The pain had all but gone from the injured ankle now and it only ached a tiny bit when she walked on it.

“I’ve been thinking about Dad and Jeffrey’s news... and their latest predicament.”

“Uh huh...” CJ hoped she’d been thinking the same thing as her wife and spoke before the blonde could continue. “I have too... and it would be a pretty gutsy move if they would consider starting anew here in LA.”

Kate’s hands stopped suddenly and her eyes slowly rose to seek out her partner’s. “Okay... I’m officially freaked out.”

CJ smirked smugly. “Great minds think alike, that’s all. I’d love to see them more often.”

“I would too. I wanted to run it by them anyway... they might not go for it but I just wanted to put it on the table.”

“I agree. They could do a roaring trade in West Hollywood.”

“Mommy, look!” Shannon shouted from the island unit where the two girls were making pastry shapes for baking into fruit tarts later. “A heart shaped one! And I wrote my initials on it!”

CJ craned her neck to see through the double doors. “Oooh, awesome... help Lucy make one too.”

“I will!”

“So you think it’s a good idea, CJ?” Kate asked while thoroughly rubbing around a big toe.

“Yep. Let’s ask them about it when we call later, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Does either of them drive?”

“Yeah, Dad does. Why?”

“Honey, they’re used to Manhattan... no need for a car there. But here...”

“Jeez, I never even thought about that angle. Glad you’re on the ball, Agent Carson,” Kate chuckled. “But yeah... Dad drives. Tony will be here during the day though... so I’m sure he could help too.”

“Here?” CJ asked, curling a dark eyebrow.

The blonde’s hands stilled again. “Uh, oops... yeah, I was thinking, you know since we’re going to have all that empty land out behind our new security fence...”

“Go on...”

“Maybe, uh, we could build a little guest house. I mean, I have some really good publicity coming up and the extra money will help with...”

The agent let out a small laugh. “That brain of yours has certainly been working overtime, Katie. It sounds like a great idea.”

“You think?”

“Of course I do. There are so many positives to it... and not a lot of negatives I can think of. Let’s see if they even want to come here first... and if they’d want to live *that* close to us.”

Kate crawled onto the couch to kiss the agent. “You are such an awesome wife, CJ.”

“I was thinking the same of you, my darling. Now, shall we go see what our daughters are creating?”

“We shall.” Kate got up, put on her spouse’s socks, helped her to the kitchen and onto a bar stool, where they both assisted in the pastry workshop that was spread all over the smooth countertop. CJ could only delegate and coordinate the decoration of her own pastry but she was contented with that... for once.

\* \* \* \* \*

Not long after dinner was consumed, Tony appeared at the Carson’s front door laden with grocery bags. Kate looked him up and down before a smile crawled across her face. “How did you know we were low on tasty things?”

The young driver guffawed. “You’ve all been home now for days without really leaving this house,” he said with mischievous glee. “I figured the fridge would be getting kinda lonely by now...”

Kate laughed and followed him through the living room where CJ welcomed him with a smart ass comment about his rather bright green pants. Once in the kitchen, Kate shouted to tell the children that their buddy was here and two screaming banshees appeared from the playroom to ‘help’ Tony put the food away. The actress chuckled to herself and went back to join her wife.

By 8.30pm, Tony was gone and Kate had loaded the dishwasher, put the kids to bed and found a glazier who would come to measure the smashed windows and estimate the cost of replacements. He would be at the house on Tuesday morning and she sensed another busy week ahead. CJ sat at the dining table and since her latest dose of meds had kicked in, she held a half full mug of tea in her right hand with her elbow supported on the tabletop. She looked awfully pale but proud of herself, and Kate walked over to join her. “Hey... feeling okay?”

“Yep.”

“You were great at dinner, honey. I hardly did anything for you.”

CJ raised the lower portion of her right arm off the table. “The pain feels less sharp but that’s probably the mega-drugs you gave me.”

“Could be. Lifting your mug is one thing but I still need to help you with everything else. Once we’ve seen the doctor tomorrow, I’ll relax a little... promise. Then we have the glazier on Tuesday, Mr. White on Thursday to give us a quote for the fence, and I have a meeting on Friday with Lorena. And in between all that, we have a family to take care of and I need to give a statement to Mark.”

“And it’s almost Christmas. We’d better get the tree up.”

Kate looked puzzled for a second as she tried to decipher today’s date. “I can’t believe the girls haven’t mentioned that yet.”

“They’ve been a little preoccupied and to be honest, they might not have realized it’s December.”

“Let’s make some time to pull out the decorations this week then.”

CJ smiled. “Add in some time to breathe, Katie.”

“Yes, that too.”

.

## **Chapter 7**

An hour later, CJ and Kate decided on an early night. They had barely switched off the lights in the living room when the house phone rang. It was Mark... and he was on his way to see them. Once Kate hung up the call, she gently turned CJ around and positioned her back on the couch.

“Who?” the raven-haired woman asked.

“Mark... and possibly Jamie.”

“At this hour? I don’t think we’re gonna like this visit, Katie.”

“I know.”

Kate shuffled around the room and turned a couple of lamps back on and once their two friends had arrived and sat down around the coffee table, the blonde bit her lips before politely offering drinks. “Tea?”

“Not for me,” Mark said quietly. Jamie declined too.

Kate dropped down at CJ’s right side. “You’ve come with news... and it’s not good.”

Stated so plainly, Mark cleared his throat and realized there was no point in stalling. “The man we caught... Vernon... he gave us some information during interrogation.”

“He talked?” CJ asked incredulously.

“He did. Let’s just say he’s not the sharpest tool in the box but after we told him about the evidence against him he gave us some good leads. Thing is, Jamie picked up more from his confessions than I did and now... now I need to ask you some personal questions... Kate.”

When the Assistant Director said her name, Kate blinked. It felt like all the energy had suddenly been drained from her body and it appeared to everyone present that she’d already guessed what was coming. “Go ahead.”

“I’m so sorry, Kate, but I need to ask. Do you know anyone by the name of Meredith?” Mark posed with a grimace. CJ inhaled sharply and Kate’s eyes filled with moisture. “So sorry...” he repeated.

“No, it’s okay. I... yes I do.”

CJ held a breath as she pushed through some pain to place a comforting hand on her wife’s thigh. Kate was still gathering her wits so the agent spoke for her. “Mark... Meredith was Elizabeth’s... Kate’s mother’s... middle name. She hasn’t used it since Kate was a child.”

Kate held back her anguish and looked at the agents. “What did this Vernon say to you exactly?”

“He told us he had an accomplice. He told us how much they were being paid and that the woman who was paying them called herself Meredith. He also said they were ordered not to hurt the children.”

CJ’s eyes narrowed. “How did you know that was significant?”

“Well you see... Jamie had to tell me-“

“Sir...” Agent Green interrupted. “I got this. CJ, I had to tell Mark what... what Elizabeth has said and done in the past. I had a strong hunch when Vernon spoke about the woman who hired him and what she had ordered him to do. It... I’m sorry to betray your-”

CJ sighed audibly, stopping her friend mid-sentence. “Jamie... you didn’t betray my confidence... not really. It’s relevant to the case and if you hadn’t told Mark, I’m sure I would have done it myself.” She looked at her wife as she spoke. “I just don’t want Kate hurt by Elizabeth anymore... so can we bring her in?” she asked, returning her gaze to the AD.

“Not yet... the evidence is all circumstantial right now. I hate to say it, but what we need is some kind of confession.”

“She won’t just tell all, so how do you propose to get it?” CJ said, scratching her fingers over her spouse’s thigh. Kate’s silence spoke volumes and the agent could feel her pain.

“We need a lure... we need her to admit something... anything that can link her to the crimes.”

The actress looked at him sadly. “You need to set a trap.”

Mark saw the torment in his friend’s eyes and hated that he was the one to bring her this news. “Yes. Bringing her in for interview would only tip her off and allow her to prepare... or to hide potential evidence.”

“I’ll do it.” When CJ was about to object, Kate turned to her. “If it really is her doing this to us... the only way to get her to slip up is to let her think she’s won, right?” The three people around her all nodded in unison. “Then I need to call her and tell her I can’t cope anymore... and that I need her to come here to help me. If it *is* her... she thinks you’re dead, CJ... and she thinks I’m a pathetic idiot.”

Mark was pretty astounded. He hadn’t wanted to involve Kate – a civilian – in this but he had to admit, her plan was the only one that might work considering they hadn’t tracked down Gates yet, and the sooner all this was stopped, the better. “Are you both sure you’re okay with this?”

CJ was still mulling it over and looked deeply into the green eyes that held her attention. Without breaking the contact, she spoke to her colleagues. “She needs to be wearing a wire, the children need to be out of the house... and we all need to be here listening and ready to pounce.”

“You can’t be pouncing-“ Mark began.

“I’ll let you guys pounce... but I *will* be here and that’s final,” CJ said forcefully. “Katie... this is what was running through your mind before, wasn’t it? About your mother, I mean?”

The actress nodded and turned to Mark to explain. “When Dad’s restaurant burned down I was suspicious. Now he’s being evicted from his apartment because some unknown person has offered a fortune in rent and the landlord can’t refuse it. When my brother was here yesterday, he asked me who would want to hurt me this much.” She looked at her lap then covered CJ’s hand with her own. When she met Mark’s eyes again, she was holding back angry tears. “The only person who would want to hurt me this much is my mother. She hates me... always has. She’s always despised the fact that she could never fully control me and she’s envious of... I don’t know what... but anything bad that happened in *her* life was always *my* fault. When I ran away in my teens... her contact with me became more than vicious and degrading. I think now... she’s trying to take everything I love away from me. She threatened me before, saying she would have her grandchildren no matter what. We didn’t think she was serious but...” Kate shrugged. “She’s trying to scare me to death and leave me nowhere to go... except back to her. She can’t stand to see me happy. It all fits, doesn’t it?”

The Assistant Director nodded solemnly. “I’m afraid it sounds entirely plausible... and it also sounds like she’s losing her mind. I can’t fathom how anyone could do these things to another person, never mind their own flesh and blood...”

CJ’s jaws ground together. “I can’t either, Mark but believe me... Elizabeth is capable of that and more.”

The man nodded. “Jamie found more circumstantial evidence that seems to point to Elizabeth too. As I told you, our arsonist... and murderer... has a co-conspirator in all this. His name is Darrell Gates. When we did the background checks on...” Mark paused and glanced at the actress.

“I know how it works, Mark... please, go on,” Kate said with a strained smile that held no happiness.

“We did checks on Elizabeth... and she has an insurance broker by the name of Derek Gates. It could just have been coincidence but Jamie looked into it, and they’re cousins.”

A huge exhale blew out of the actress’ mouth. “How do we set up this meeting with my... with Elizabeth then?”

“I’d say the best thing to do is exactly what you thought we should do. If you could call her and tell her everything here is falling apart... tell her you can’t cope and that you need help with the girls. Don’t mention CJ... let’s see if she mentions her... and don’t mention specifics about what has been going on here with the fire and the horses, et cetera.”

“Right,” Kate said with a head bob. “And don’t tell her about Dad’s circumstances either. Basically, we want her to hang herself... for her to tell me something she shouldn’t know.”

The Assistant Director was worried about how calmly Kate was taking this but when he thought about her strength of character and what she had been through the past few weeks, he guessed this was a normal response for the plucky actress. “Exactly. Do you think you’re up to it?”

All through this conversation, CJ had been holding her wife’s hand. Kate squeezed that hand now and replied, “I am. Will you want to give me a script of sorts to stick to or...?”

“No, but you can write a few notes of your own, if you’d like...”

“If she confesses anything, will it be accepted as evidence?”

CJ almost smiled then. “Good question...”

Mark gave his agent a glance then looked to Kate. “Yes. Don’t worry. I’ll cover all the bases... make sure it’s admissible in court.”

The actress rubbed her eyes. “When do you want to do this?”

“As soon as possible...”

“As in tonight?” Kate queried, eyebrow high.

Another nod from Mark. “I’d like to know exactly when she’s going to get here... and it needs to be pretty fast because I have cops out looking for Darrell Gates and investigators checking into his cousin too. I don’t want to bring Darrell in immediately because Elizabeth might call him.”

“Ah, good point.” Kate was pulling at her lips in thought. She turned to her spouse. “You’re very quiet. Are you okay with all this?”

“I am if you are, Katie. I’m right with you all the way.”

Jamie stood. “I’ll go start the coffee machine then. I know it’s late but I think I need one.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It was after midnight when Mark and Jamie left. Kate had performed admirably and the call to Elizabeth – which had been recorded – went like clockwork. The fact that it was the early hours of the morning in Connecticut, and the strained and wavering voice of Kate – who basically told her mother that her life was falling apart and she wasn’t coping with her children – made the frantic call more convincing to their suspect. But Elizabeth hadn’t seemed at all surprised by it, which only served to add credence to the likelihood that she had orchestrated the entire thing for this exact outcome. The only difference was... Elizabeth would be expecting the call to be real.

CJ and Kate had eventually climbed the stairs and rolled into bed. The blonde was exhausted but CJ could feel the lingering anxiety in her wife and carefully turned on her left side to face her. “Tell me...”

No other words were required and Kate mirrored her soulmate's pose, almost bringing their foreheads together. "I hate being deceitful to anyone, CJ... even her."

"I know... but it's the only way to know for sure, Katie."

"I understand that. I guess I wasn't ready to believe she could go this far. I mean... she tried to have you killed. That's unforgivable."

"It is. I didn't want to believe it either, honey. I think we'd both considered it and dismissed it as not possible."

"Maybe we should've known better then. There was no surprise or concern in her voice when I told her I was having a breakdown. We know she's bitter and vindictive to the extreme... and she just confirmed it to me again tonight," Kate said with a shudder.

"Thinking of what she's done more recently... her behavior's getting worse. I just didn't think she'd resort to this. Do you... do you think she's lost it? Mentally, I mean?"

"I don't know," the blonde whispered.

CJ could see the hurt in Kate's eyes and wriggled closer to her, bringing their bodies into contact. The agent grunted as she moved the right arm over her wife's shoulder. "Try to get some sleep, my love."

"I will." Kate maneuvered herself to ease the position of the taller woman's arm. "Please don't hurt yourself, CJ... I can hold you, if you want."

"I always want... but I need to do this. Let me hold you while you rest, honey."

"Okay."

\* \* \* \* \*

Monday dawned with the sun shining bright as usual over downtown Los Angeles and its surrounding cities. Kate had gotten everyone up, dressed and fed by 8am. CJ was starting to think she truly had married Superwoman. Tony had taken the girls to school and the actress drove the Dodge Ram to CJ's appointment at Cedars Sinai.

They had been at the hospital for a while now but when CJ had first arrived, the doctor whipped her away to take off the plaster cast and X-Ray the left wrist again. A new cast was put on since the reduction in swelling had rendered the old one inefficient, and now the agent sat on the examination bed with her feet swinging gently above the floor. Doctor McNeil greeted both women and sat down in the chair next to Kate's. "Well, you've been through the mill, haven't you?"

CJ nodded. "Seems like it."

“Let’s see... your wrist is an extra-articular fracture and they’ve done a neat job with the small plate-“

“Plate?” the tall woman squeaked while looking back and forth from the doctor to her wife. Kate was nodding and CJ realized she really hadn’t paid much attention to what happened in the hospital in Cook.

“Yes... it’s all here in your file. You have a narrow plate and a few screws which will come out once the bone heals. Sometimes the displacement is such that a little help is required.”

“Oh...”

“Have you been able to wiggle your fingers?”

“Yeah... since I got home... but it’s painful.”

“I understand that but keep wiggling them every now and then. If they get numb, come back in to see me. The new cast will feel a little tighter but if it’s uncomfortable in any way, we’ll need to readjust.”

“Okay. What about my other arm? Shouldn’t I be feeling more able to move my right shoulder now? I mean, it was only a dislocation, right?”

“Dislocation, yes, but yours is not simply a dislocation,” the doctor said, waving his pen in the air. “Impact dislocation can be quite severe and when your plane crashed, the socket was fractured. Then... you tried to self-remedy the situation which damaged the cartilage too. You’ve ripped the connective tissue and the supporting muscles are still a little enflamed. The painkillers you’ve been given are powerful and contain an anti-inflammatory, and to be honest you need to stay on them a while longer because of the amount of trauma your body underwent but... I’d say you can start *very* gentle pendular exercises with that right arm. I’m stressing it needs to be very light use... you’re gonna have to build up your physio level gradually. Patience is the key here.”

“I’m not so good with patience, Doc...” CJ mumbled.

“But I am,” Kate piped in. “Doctor, the fracture you spoke of... is there anything that should be done for it or...?”

“The fracture was a small piece of bone that has completely separated from the shoulder socket. It did complicate things a bit, but it shouldn’t cause any further problems after the injury heals.”

“Will I get full use back in the right arm?” the agent asked worriedly.

“Probably... but you might feel aches every now and then if you overdo it. I doubt your daily life would be too affected by it.”

“I’m a Federal Agent. I need to be able to fire a gun.”

“I think, with your attitude and determination, you’ll be back with weapon in hand in a month or two.”

CJ was relieved to hear that, although the ‘month or two’ part was going to be a test for her. But she would do it, and she clamped her lips together after convincing herself that with Kate supporting her, she could do anything.

The physician saw the resolute expression on his patient’s face and covered a little grin with a cough. “Do you have any more questions?”

The agent sighed. “I don’t think so. Katie?”

“Can’t think of any right now... no.”

Doctor McNeil smiled. “All right... I’ll see you in another three weeks for a progress check and possible removal of that cast.”

“Yeah?” CJ said with a little too much enthusiasm.

“Yes but if... and I mean *if* I take it off, it’ll be to replace it with a sturdy medical wrist support. Remember, that injury will take longer to heal than the shoulder.”

The taller woman almost pouted then but, remembering where she was, she waited until after the doctor left the cubicle and gave them some privacy. Her bottom lip pushed out and Kate chuckled.

“Really? You gonna pout all the way home?” the blonde asked with a kiss to her wife’s nose.

“Actually, no... I’m just pretending to be a poor soul. I have nothing to complain about in the grand scheme of things.”

“That’s very true. You’re alive, CJ.”

“I know, honey... thankfully. Let’s go.”

\* \* \* \* \*

After a late lunch, CJ sat at the island unit watching Kate pour some fresh pineapple juice into two stubby glasses. When her spouse sat down next to her, a sleepy smile spread over her features. “How you holdin’ up, beautiful?”

Kate ran a hand through her chopped hair. “Surprisingly okay... considering...”

“You’re pretty amazing, I have to say. Having to cope with me is a feat in itself... never mind everything else. I’m so glad I married you.”

The actress smirked at the unexpected comment. “And I’m never letting you go.”

“Sounds perfect to me.” The tall woman slurped on her juice, managing again to lift her own drink. *‘These painkillers are pretty good,’* she thought before a dark eyebrow quirked when Kate began to tap away on her cell phone. “Who you calling, honey?”

“Dad. When I tried yesterday I got a busy tone then I forgot to call him back.”

Clearly, Eddie Senior had seen his daughter’s name on his display because the call was answered in less than two rings. “*Katie!*”

“Hey, Dad... sorry I didn’t get back to you yesterday.”

*“Oh that’s fine, sweetheart! I was on the phone all the time anyway. I’ve already found jobs for a few of our staff.”*

“Wow... that’s fast work, Dad. I guess you know a lot of people in the industry over there, huh?”

*“Well, yes. I just felt bad that we can’t do anything for our people now. It’s awfully sad...”* A couple of gasps came over the line before Eddie spoke again. *“But time for a new start, I feel. We were so very well insured. I always made sure to overdo it where that was concerned. I suppose now at least one positive thing can come out of all this. Oh but listen to me babbling on. Are you all coping over there?”*

“Yes... we’re doing okay. There’s so much happening and I can’t tell you some of it right now but I promise when it’s all over, I’ll update you, okay?”

*“Of course, of course. How’s CJ?”*

“She’s right here beside me and getting better by the minute.” The agent shouted a ‘hi, Dad’, and once the messages were passed back and forth, Kate continued. “We were at the hospital today for a check-up. Her injuries are healing... just not fast enough for her liking.” Kate stuck her tongue out at CJ’s mock glare.

*“As long as she gets better and lets you take care of her. I saw how completely exhausted you both were when she came home. Oh!”* A short pause ensued until Eddie regained his faculties. *“You are all so precious to me. I miss you so much already!”*

“We miss you too... and that leads nicely onto an idea both CJ and I had... and I wanted to leave it with you to talk through with Jeffrey.”

*“What idea, sweetheart?”*

“Since everything is changing over there and you need a new start, why don’t you come live in LA and-“

A loud heartfelt cry came across the line as Eddie lost control of his emotions. “*Oh... oh Katie...*” Sniff, sniff. “*Oh my goodness, why didn’t I think of that...? Oh but I just don’t know!*”

“There’ve been way too many other things to think about in recent weeks, Dad. Anyway, it’s only one option but we wanted to let you know we’d be so happy to see you more often... and you have a great support network over here too, you know?”

“And you could stay with us ‘til you get settled,” CJ said loud enough to be heard – without a croak in her voice for the first time.

*“This is unbelievable. It’s a great idea!”*

“I’m glad you think so...” Kate said, letting out a long breath.

*“I’ll talk it over with Jeffreydoodle and we’ll let you know. We were just saying last night how things here don’t feel good anymore. Oh! I must go and find him.”*

“Okay, Dad. Talk real soon. We love you.”

*“Oh darling... love you too... all of you. Bye for now.”*

“Bye.” Kate hung up the call and rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. “Hmm... he seems pretty excited by that idea, honey.”

“Awesome,” CJ slurred.

“Oops, somebody’s getting drowsy again, huh?”

“Mmhmm... ‘cause you gave me a dig bosed of pills.”

“Do you mean a big dose?”

“Yeah... that.”

“Nap on the couch?” Kate suggested.

“If you’ll hold me...”

As soon as Kate had assisted the dopey agent into the living room, she did just that until the kids came home from school.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tony was about to leave for the evening – after sharing a take-out pizza with his second family – when Kate stopped him just inside the front door. “Hey... you seem a little off today.”

The young man shrugged his shoulders, more to loosen up than a gesture of indifference. "I've just been on edge. I kept checking and re-checking all around us when I was driving the girls home from school. When we stopped at the toy store, I was... I dunno, agitated?"

"But everything went okay, right?"

"Yeah, sure. I think I've just been really worried about you guys and I feel very protective towards the girls when we're out."

"Which is why... even during this horrible time... I can leave you to pick them up at school and know that you'll take care of them. I trust you, Tony."

"I know, Kate... and I'm honored to receive that trust... believe me." He sighed. "This will all be over soon, right?"

"Yes. I think so. I'm going to need you on Saturday... I need you to take the girls somewhere, possibly for the whole day. Any ideas?"

"We can't stay here, you mean?"

"Right... I need them to be away from the house."

"Does this have to do with what's been going on?" Tony asked with concern.

"Yeah but don't worry... I'll tell you all about it after it's done."

The driver curled his brow but nodded. "Shannon keeps talking about going to some animal farm her friend told her about. I think it's the one in Pomona. How about I take them there? We'll head to the beach before we come back. I can keep them amused for the whole day, I think... but you can just text me when you're ready for us to come back."

"You're a true gift, Tony. Thank you."

"You're always welcome, Kate. I love spending time with my two best buddies. Is it okay if Cyn comes along on our day out?"

"Are you kidding? Of course it's okay...!" Kate laughed.

When Tony left, the actress returned to her wife's side and later, after their daughters were tucked up in bed, they descended the staircase, hand in hand for the first time since the injured agent's return. While Kate sat in the corner of the large couch typing away on her laptop, CJ watched her with a rather pensive look on her face.

"What you thinking, honey?" the blonde asked without looking up.

“Hmm... just that every time I look at you right now, I hear the Wonder Woman theme tune in my head.”

Kate barked out a laugh. “Wonder Woman?”

“Yes. While I was lost... and since I came home... you just have *the* most powerful and resilient spirit I’ve ever seen.” CJ’s partner looked at her then and with a small smile, the agent counted her lucky stars once more. “I am in awe of you, Katie.”

The laptop discarded, Kate crawled to her wife’s side and snuggled in. “Like I said before, you’re a part of me, CJ. When you were lost, I knew somehow that you were alive. I could feel the life flowing through you. When you came back... well... since then, I’ve counted every second as a gift. And I’m not wasting a single moment of that gift on what others will try to do to us... to kill our happiness. So maybe my... profound willingness to always move forward, to live every moment in the present, is what you see as that powerful spirit?”

“It is... and you just shared it with me by saying what you said. You fill me with strength.”

“And love,” Kate grinned with a squeeze to her wife’s waist.

“Always love.” The declaration was sealed with a deep kiss that was only broken by the sound of the front door being knocked quietly. But Kamali wasn’t worried and it was a ‘code knock’, so CJ knew it was Jamie. “I hope this isn’t more bad news.”

As the actress went to answer the door, CJ propped herself up a little and gave her fingers an experimental wiggle. ‘*Hmm, not bad.*’

Kate pulled on the handle after a quick glimpse outside told her it was indeed Agent Green on the porch, but she had a familiar redhead in tow and Kate was elated. “Sam!” She grabbed her dear friend in a bear hug that lasted for a good sixty seconds. “I’m so glad to see you.”

“I missed you, Kate.”

“Ditto, hon, but it’s been such a horrible time. I’m sorry we-“

“No, no... I know you guys are going through a lot... and I’ve been away on location too. I hope you don’t mind me dropping by with my other half?”

“Do I mind? Hah! Come on in.”

When CJ saw Sam, she smiled. “Hey, stranger... it’s good to see you!”

“Oh, CJ, you look great!”

Once Sam had kissed her on the cheek, the agent nodded. “Thanks... I’m definitely improving, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah, Jamie told me what condition you were in before... oh boy...” the producer scratched through her fiery hair and blew out an audible breath.

“So...” Jamie said in a mock huff. “How come she gets the nice greeting and I don’t?”

“Aww, Penfold... if we greeted you like that every time we saw you, we’d never get anything else done. You’re here every damn day right now!”

The blonde agent sent her colleague a wink. “Getting sick of me, huh DM?”

“Nevah!”

Jamie smiled but knew she had to get to the reason they were here. At least it was nice to have a few minutes of teasing first. “Okay, back to business. I have a little update and I hope it’s okay that Sam’s here. She was desperate to see you both.”

“Fine by me,” Kate said as she sat shoulder to shoulder with the producer. She had missed her a lot.

With a nod from CJ, Jamie went on. “Right. It seems they tracked Darrell Gates down quite easily... through his cell phone... and when he received a call from an anonymous female who basically told him the ‘job’ was almost complete, we figured we hit the jackpot. Then the woman said something about an upcoming trip and how, when she was on that trip, he should be in the area to carry out the final part of her plan while she was there with the target... giving her the perfect alibi.”

“Shit. How did you guys get to hear the call?” CJ asked with wide eyes.

“Mikey.”

“Ah. Say no more. So what else...?”

“Gates has been arrested. He’s in custody now. He was already in LA and they’re going to interrogate him. They want to know what the final job is.”

“I do too,” Kate said worriedly.

“Well, we have him now, Kate. He’s not going to carry it out, whatever it was.”

“So everything’s still on for Saturday?”

Jamie nodded at the actress. “Yes.”

Sam sat listening to all this. She knew the basics of what they were talking about and she was still worried for her friends, but it seemed the Bureau had things in hand and it was just a matter of one more arrest. She hoped that whatever was happening on Saturday was going to put an end

to all the troubles her friends had gone through recently. “What’s happening on Saturday?” she asked quietly.

A fleeting nod between CJ and Jamie could have been missed if not for the sharp eyes of their partners. CJ spoke up. “Elizabeth’s coming to the house. Kate’s going to try and get her to confess.”

“Oh my GOD! Your *mother’s* behind this!?”

Kate put a hand on Sam’s thigh to calm her. “Hey... I’m okay, if that’s what you’re worried about. And yes, Elizabeth seems to be the one masterminding the whole thing.”

“Oh, Kate...” the producer gasped. “I just can’t believe it.”

“Neither can we,” CJ said morosely. “Actually... we *can* believe it, we just didn’t think she would go this far.”

Sam looked to her lover. “But didn’t you say this was all one big case? Like... from the plane crash to now?” Jamie nodded and the redhead gasped again. “Shit! She... she orchestrated that too?” she said, gesturing to CJ’s arms.

“Sam, she seems to have done it all... including the fire and other problems in New York.”

The producer looked amazed and Kate could see the anger in her hazel eyes. The conversation continued for a short while until Sam finally calmed down when Kate explained to her that she really was handling the whole situation.

When Jamie told them that the recording of the phone call Gates received could now be used in a voice comparison with whatever they got on Saturday, Kate knew they would have hard evidence. She also acknowledged that the content of the call – the anonymous woman coming to LA to be with the ‘target’ – fitted rather nicely with Elizabeth coming to LA to visit Kate. She realized with a heavy heart that her mother was indeed the woman behind it all, but she still wanted to hear some sort of confession... if only for her own sense of closure and to confirm the hatred in Elizabeth’s eyes before she said goodbye to her for the final time.

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## **Chapter 8**

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The next few days seemed to fly by. The smashed windows were now replaced and Mr. White had come to estimate the cost of their new fence and gates. He could do the entire job right after the Holiday season and CJ had accepted the expensive quote after learning that he had given them a special FBI twenty-five percent discount because she was friends with his son. Once she’d explained to her wife about the quality of product and the lower rate they were going to

get, Kate seemed to accept it too. Seeing the charred remains of the barn, the chirpy landscaper had told the Carson women of his trusted colleague who could build a new one, like for like, at a reasonable price. After he was given a photograph of the previous structure, he said he'd call them back later with a rough idea of what would be involved.

The hustle and bustle of two young daughters had also kept them all busy, including Tony who was only too happy to still have plenty to do while Kate was on hiatus from the studios. His four days off next week would balance his hours nicely. All in all, they seemed to work as a well-oiled machine, with CJ up on her feet more and delegating efficiently in Special Agent mode.

But as the week neared its end, Kate became a little more anxious about her unorthodox acting job scheduled for Saturday. CJ was doing her best to nurture her wife's heart and reassure her at every opportunity. She knew Kate was strong but it never hurt to be attentive and aware of your partner's moods and feelings, even if you aren't able to wrap your arms around her.

So it was Friday afternoon, and Tony had just left to pick up Lucy and Shannon from their respective schools. Mark Mulroney had also just left after he and Mikey came to install hidden cameras – one built into a custom picture frame on the mantel and one neatly concealed between the stereo and its speaker on the other side of the room – making sure to cover most parts of the living area. The monitoring equipment was set up in the study, a convenient place for the agents to pounce from. The Assistant Director had decided this setup would be better than Kate wearing a wire as they would get face and voice information recorded for better and irrefutable evidence.

Now all Kate had to do was make sure to guide her mother to the couch when she arrived tomorrow. Mark had bombarded her with all this information as soon as she'd come home half an hour ago after her meeting with Lorena and the Infinity One people. Everything was in place for her new job next fall... and it seemed everything was in place for Elizabeth's confession too. The actress just hoped she could pull it off.

A chin gently landed on Kate's shoulder from behind. "Hey... you all right?"

"Trying to be... I'm getting a little nervous now."

"I'm not surprised," CJ murmured into a nearby ear. "You're coping a helluva lot better than I would."

"I'm sure you'd be just as resilient, honey."

As Kate turned around, CJ planted a soft kiss on her nose. "Hmm, I'm not so sure."

"Are we all set for tomorrow? In the study, I mean?"

"Yeah... and Mark confirmed Elizabeth's booked on the flight arriving at LAX around 11am, so I guess it's on."

"Shit. Okay... I can do this," the blonde nodded to herself.

“You can, Katie... I know you can. And we’ll be right there with you. The guys are coming back at 6am. When’s Tony taking the girls?”

“I think he said he’d be here before eight... and I told him to take my car tomorrow. Should we hide yours around back?” Kate asked with uncertainty.

CJ studied her wife and saw her own fears reflected right back at her. “You’re feeling violated by her coming to our home, aren’t you...”

The actress bit her lips while she thought about it. “I think... yes... I don’t want her knowing anything more about our life together. I feel like she’s been spying on us for too long and I want it to end. I don’t even want her knowing what your license plate says. I mean, what if she can still get to us after this? What if-“

“Shhhh, it’s gonna be okay, Katie. There’s so much pointing to her guilt and once we have her voice on our video recording... I know it’ll be a match to the one on Gates’ phone.” The taller woman leaned her forehead down on her wife’s. “We’ll get her. This will all be over soon. Just breathe with me, honey.”

Kate took a long, slow inhale and held it. Gently wrapping herself around CJ’s body – arms and all – she let the breath out and groaned. “I know you’ll get her,” she whispered.

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Tony Wilkinson stood with his two charges at the side of Idaho’s grave. Not far away from them, CJ and Kate had made their way to the rear of the other horse field to fix the broken rail. Well, Kate would fix it. CJ was just there for moral support and the exercise.

Shannon turned to the driver after arranging her little bunch of wild flowers on the dirt. “Tony?”

“Yes, Shan?”

“Do you think we could make a sign with Idaho’s name?”

“I think we could do that. What could we make it out of?” Tony asked, curious to see what the intelligent girl would come up with.

“Maybe find a piece of the old wood...” Shannon said, pointing to the remnants of the barn. “If we write on it with a big pen, it might look nice.”

“Sounds good... or we could try to engrave it into the wood then color in the spaces.”

“Yes! What do you think, Luce?”

“Can I help with it?” the smallest person asked while throwing the ball for Kamali.

“Of course, Lucy,” Tony smiled. “Let’s ask your mommies if it would be okay to use some of that old wood, huh?”

“Race you!” Shannon shouted before setting off towards her parents. The others followed and it wasn’t long before everyone headed back to the house together.

Less than an hour later, Kate stood at the kitchen counter preparing a salad for dinner. Tony was in the playroom with the girls, deciding on what their homemade headstone was going to look like, and CJ was lying on the couch resting her foot after the walk.

Kate thought about the past few weeks while she chopped some tomatoes. She had loved having her PA there to help them and she really did appreciate him more than he would ever know, but she was so looking forward to her family having the house to themselves for a while. It seemed like it had been full of people non-stop since CJ went missing and Kate craved some peace and quiet. She accepted the fact that the hectic household was necessary right now and she was grateful to all their close and trusted friends for watching their backs. Hearing an excited doggy yelp in the back yard, Kate crossed the kitchen floorboards and looked outside. With her jaw hanging loose, she saw the reason for the dog’s incessant prancing.

Nevada was pacing the far side of the distant fence they had just mended. Moving in a fast trot, back and forth, back and forth, the horse didn’t realize that if she ran to the east for a few hundred yards she could get down to the house with no obstacles in her way.

Kate was overwhelmed that CJ had been right. The big golden mare had come home and, knowing the children were safe inside with Tony, the actress ran into the gym and grabbed a jump rope. With a pat to Kamali’s head, she left the back yard in a hurry. On her approach to Nevada, she reduced her pace and called the horse’s name soothingly. A loud snort was her reply and she held her palm out flat even though she had no treat for the equine. Nevada gave the hand a thorough sniff and a light nip, and followed the greeting with a whinny. The actress slowly put the jump rope around the muscular neck and the horse stood calmly, instinctually knowing this human would not hurt her.

Kate gave the mare a light scratch on her nose and trailed her hand up to do the same to her forelock and ears. Another little whinny and they were on their way along the fence line. Once they were at the gate to the backyard, Kate let Nevada loose. For some reason, she was certain the horse wouldn’t leave... and Nevada didn’t. Instead, she sauntered over to a nearby patch of grass and ducked her head to munch happily on the green tufts. Kate took in the condition of their four-legged family member. The palomino’s coat was dull and dusty, and her mane and tail ruffled and knotted, but she was alive, reasonably healthy and her eyes seemed alert. Kate was elated to see her and she went indoors to find CJ, knowing it would be an emotional reunion for her wife.

Deciding not to risk spooking the horse with excited young children just yet, she went silently into the living room and carefully helped CJ to her feet without a word.

“What’s going on, Katie?”

When they were in the back hallway, the actress answered. “I want you to see something... but try and stay quiet. Don’t alert the girls just yet. Watch your step, honey.”

As Kate lead her out the backdoor, CJ looked around and didn’t see anything out of the ordinary for a few seconds. At the corner of the addition that housed the gym, she gasped when she saw her horse standing at the gate swishing her tail. “Oh God... she came home!”

“She sure did. You were right, CJ.”

“Oh Katie... I just hoped she was okay and would somehow find her way back. I didn’t know for sure.” As the agent approached the tall mare, Kate hovered just behind her in case she needed help. CJ managed to raise her right arm and Nevada dropped her head immediately to allow her human to pet her. “Hey girl, welcome back. Where’d you go, huh? Where’d you go? We missed you.”



Kate smirked at the baby-talk whisper and walked forward to place her hand on CJ’s back. “I bet she missed us too. We better get her a new friend soon. I’d imagine she knows Idaho’s gone.”

“She might do. They’re very spiritual animals. I’m just so happy she’s here.”

“Me too, honey. Now let me find my jump rope and I’ll hold onto her when the girls come out here... just in case she gets spooked again.”

It wasn’t long before two excited children came skipping out of the house to witness the very welcome return of their large pet. It was a small light in the shadow of recent events, and it could only continue to grow brighter once tomorrow was over.

\* \* \* \* \*

Another restless night had passed and Saturday arrived with a cloud-covered sky over the Carson farmhouse. It may have been symbolic of things to come but Kate had opened the drapes with a defiant swipe of her hand and a smile on her face to show the world – and herself – that she was going to get this done... and do it right.

Everyone who had to be there had arrived and everyone who had to leave had gone for the day, including Kamali who had gone with Tony and the children. The house was now filled with an unsettling silence and Kate paced from the living room to the kitchen, looked out the window and returned to her perch on the end of the couch. It was 12.30pm. Had Elizabeth changed her mind? Was she going to leave the actress to wait for her all day? *'Jeez... it's more likely that the airport's busy or her flight's delayed.'* She wasn't desperate to see her mother; far from it. She just wanted this whole business over and done with. It was hurting her, it was hurting her family, and she would quite happily never see Elizabeth Emerson again.

A few clicks came from the study and Kate looked at the picture frame on the mantel. She knew the agents were watching the room. She knew her wife was watching her. That thought made her relax marginally as she stood to walk around the couch. A vehicle could be heard outside, its tires crunching over the gravel at the top of the driveway, and Kate looked at both cameras before heading to the front door. The temperature in her home seemed to drop a few degrees and she nervously rubbed her hands down her jeans before she reached for the doorknob.

Simply seeing Elizabeth made her skin crawl. "Come in," she said tentatively with her head hung low. It seemed the act was coming naturally to her since she felt like an eight year old emotionally abused Katherine Marshall all over again in this woman's presence. *'Don't let that happen... she's not worth it,'* she told herself, before straightening her back and lifting her head.

"Katherine. I hope you appreciate that I flew all this way to help you. I knew you would need me eventually. Are you coping, dear?"

Every word was spoken as if Kate was too idiotic to truly understand what was being said. The actress tightened her lips a little and replied as softly as she could. "I'm not, no. I... I didn't know who else to turn to."

"Was I your last choice?"

Kate hadn't expected this hostile greeting but adapted her performance to seem as meek and inferior as possible. "No, I didn't think anyone but you could help. You're organized and in control. I feel like I'm losing it."

The vile woman seemed unperturbed and strolled through the hallway, pulling her ever-present white gloves from her fingers. She looked around the living area, not even attempting to hide her disdain at the Native feel to the place. "It's a bit small and plain for an A-list Hollywood star, don't you think?"

Kate hid her reaction well and continued toward the couch. "I doubt I'm on the A-list."

"Oh yes, that's true. Perhaps this fits you then. It's... meager."

*'First direct stab at my confidence. No effect! Kate, one... Elizabeth, nil.'* The silence lingered until Elizabeth sat down gingerly on the couch as if something might jump up and bite her on the ass. Kate wished something would.

Finally, she spoke again. “So tell me... what has you so upset? Did something bad happen?”

“A lot of bad things happened and I need help with the girls. I can’t deal with them anymore.” Kate gulped in what might have looked to Elizabeth like defeat, but it was really the untruth of what the actress was saying that was sticking in her throat.

“Well, I told you nothing good could come of being with that... *woman*. Now that she’s gone, you can come back to Connecticut with me and I’ll help you. I know a nice, safe place for you to recuperate.”

Kate glanced briefly at the mantel but the comment about CJ being gone wasn’t enough. The actress knew it but she thought she was on the right track with her ‘I’m so helpless’ approach. “A safe place?”

Elizabeth sidled up to her daughter and put her arm around her shoulder. “Yes, very safe. And the children will be better off too. I’ll take care of everything... don’t you worry anymore.”

But the actress was worried. It sounded like her mother wanted to put her in a padded cell and take her children for good. She wouldn’t rule anything out where this monster was concerned. “I... I really appreciate that.”

“I’m glad.”

“There’s nothing here for me now anyway.”

Elizabeth nodded. “I know. Losing someone is such a hard thing to overcome... but with my support, you’ll be just fine.”

“What do you mean, losing someone?”

“Katherine... I’m sure you would be coping fine if you weren’t alone, so something must have happened. She’s left you, hasn’t she? I knew it would happen.”

“I don’t want to talk about her.”

“Good. Neither do I. Tell me sweetheart, what happened to your barn?”

Kate felt the bile rising. Now the bitch had the audacity to make her talk about all the other tragedies? “It... it burned down.”

“Who would do something like that?”

There is was again; the implication that she knew far more than she should. But it still wasn’t an admission of guilt. “I’m not sure. It was probably just an accident.”

“Oh... I suppose it could have been.”

“You think someone did it on purpose?”

“I don’t know, dear.”

“You seem to think someone was responsible...” Kate tried not to sound accusatory.

“Oh no... I wouldn’t have the first clue about that. Now tell me what else you’ve been going through.”

“Like I said... a lot of bad things have happened... so much loss. I think I’m going insane with the worry of it all and the girls are suffering. It feels like someone’s out to get me.”

“That’s such a shame.”

“Yes. And it’s so hard to cope on my own... but then again, CJ might come back and I-“

“Oh, Katherine, she’s not coming back.”

“What? She might-“

“No, Katherine.”

Kate realized the way to make Elizabeth slip up was to get her angry. How do you make Elizabeth angry? You talk about CJ. “She’ll come back... CJ loves me-“

“No! You have to face it. She’s dead and gone,” Elizabeth said, patting Kate’s hand condescendingly. “Now... I think you’re losing your mind and I know a place where you can feel better. You need to pack a bag and come with me. There’s no one else to help you now.”

Kate glared at the woman who had given birth to her. “How dare you say she’s dead!? Just because she was dead to you all along, doesn’t mean she’s dead to me!”

Elizabeth stood and balled her fists at her side. “She is dead! You can’t come back from a wreck like that!”

The actress’ eyes bulged. “Wreck?!”

“Yes! A stinking, mangled, smoking, blood-filled wreck. She must have felt *real* pain... true agony... before she died, and she deserved it! All of it! She brainwashed you, Katherine. It was time for retribution. I knew it was coming to her. Now you have to turn to me because there’s nowhere else for you to go! I made sure of that. I’ll deal with everything now... and you’ll let me because you have no other choice! If you tell anyone about this, they’ll truly think you’ve lost your mind!” When Kate suddenly calmed, the older woman looked at her as if she’d grown two heads. “Well!? Pack your bag... and get me my grandchildren!”

“No.”

“No? No!?”

“That’s what I said... no.”

“Elizabeth Emerson...”

The guilty woman looked toward the new voice in the hallway where Mark stood with Jamie and two other agents. “Who are you?”

“Mark Mulroney... FBI. You are under arrest.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I haven’t done anything wrong. Katherine invited me into her home.”

Agents Paulson and Carey walked over to flank the woman. Mark moved to stand beside Kate. “Ma’am, if you’ll just come with us.”

“I most certainly will not!”

Nobody would have thought Elizabeth’s pasty face could get any whiter, but when CJ walked into the living room, all the blood drained from her cheeks and her head almost fell off from the amount of vigorous shaking in the negative. “AAAAAHH!!” she shrieked. “No! No, no, no... you’re... you can’t be alive!”

“Keep going, Elizabeth... all this evidence is great,” CJ sneered at the evil bitch as she stopped to stand side by side with her wife.

“You.... you wretched-“

“Oh and by the way... that entire conversation was recorded as evidence. You are most definitely under arrest.”

Gray-green eyes burned fiercely at the tall Federal agent. When Kate put her arm around CJ’s waist, Elizabeth growled. “Katherine! You tricked me!? You are a horrendous child! Unnatural... hideous... hellish creatures. You are filth! Do you hear me?! You are an abomination, Katherine! An abomination!”

Mark had heard enough and ordered the now-handcuffed Elizabeth out the front door. “Elizabeth Meredith Emerson, you are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law...”

As the Assistant Director disappeared, Kate turned to her wife and buried her face in CJ’s warm sweater. “Oh CJ...”

“I know. It’s over, Katie... I’m so sorry...”

“No...” The actress looked up at her wife. “*I’m* so sorry she did this to you!”

“She did this to us... and it truly isn't your fault.”

“I feel responsible somehow.”

“You should never feel responsible for her hateful... and now criminal actions. You are a beautiful soul and the complete opposite of her. But she's gone now, and we're here. She won't hurt us anymore.”

“Yes but... it seems to happen over and over. I mean, look at Jason... then Jack... and now Elizabeth. They all went a little crazy in some way... because of me. Am I some kind of lunatic magnet?”

“Are you trying to tell me I'm crazy?” CJ asked, raising that dark eyebrow.

“I'm serious, honey.”

Mark came to the doorway and interrupted the conversation momentarily. The other agents had gathered the minimal amount of equipment it had taken to record Elizabeth's screamed confession and now the Assistant Director was ready to leave. He made a silent gesture, telling his injured agent he would call her as soon as he knew more and, closing the door quietly, the FBI and Kate's mother were gone. Just like that.

The taller woman took a deep breath and met her wife's gaze. “Okay, being serious... you are not some lunatic magnet, Katie. Those people had problems in varying degrees and if it wasn't directed at you, it would have been at someone else. You are so unbelievably loving and compassionate and caring. You've harmed no one... it's those people who do harm... and choosing to direct that attention on you was just coincidence.”

Kate had gotten lost in her partner's voice and eyes. When the voice stopped, she blinked and sighed. “I guess you're right. Maybe I'm just overwhelmed. Today seemed so surreal.”

“I know. Hopefully, it'll feel better in the morning.”

When CJ kissed her forehead, Kate closed her eyes. “Yeah...”

“Actually, it'll feel better when we get the girls home. They wanted to pamper Nevada today... give her a little brush and some treats.”

“That sounds like something normal, guaranteed to ease my anxious brain,” Kate said, looking up to her spouse. “Let's send Tony a text message.”

Before they separated, CJ had a thought. “Hey... do you want to talk about what happened here today?”

“Maybe in bed tonight...? I just need to process for a while.”

“Sure.” CJ followed her strong wife into the kitchen, where they contacted their driver slash child-minder before heading out for a slow walk with the dog. Passing Nevada in her field, the agent nodded to herself. *‘Yeah... some chilling out with our family is definitely a good idea.’*

## Chapter 9

After a restless night, Kate rose early on Sunday morning and dressed in a comfy pair of old sweatpants and CJ’s Foo Fighter’s tee shirt. They had talked briefly last night but due to emotional and physical exhaustion, sleep had taken over and eventually, they realized they weren’t really making much sense. They’d fallen deeply into slumber with Kate wrapped around CJ’s back, their legs in a tangled bundle under the cozy covers.

Now, the actress yawned as she stood at the island unit. The coffee maker gurgled while she prepared breakfast for her wife and children. Once she’d topped the dining table with bowls, cereals and jugs of fresh fruit juice and milk, she went back to the counter and readied the bread next to the toaster and the mugs next to the shiny caffeine machine.

Before she headed upstairs to wake CJ, she went outside to check on Nevada. Seeing the sleepy palomino lying down in the pasture with her mouth lazily nibbling on the grass around her, she smiled and checked the horse’s water supply. When she was satisfied all was in order, she strolled back indoors and pulled the Christmas tree and bauble boxes out of the large closet in the hallway. She knew the girls would be excited to decorate it since they were so late in doing so this year. Later, when everyone’s tummies were filled, the pleasant task would be done at a leisurely pace by the whole family.

“Good morning.”

Kate jumped when her wife appeared at the top of the stairs. “Hey you... everything okay?”

“Yes... I managed to pee by myself. Aren’t I clever?”

“You really are.”

CJ grinned as she descended carefully in her favorite pajama pants and tank top. “Time for the tree, huh?”

“Yeah... I think we need to try and have a normal family day today.”

“Agreed,” the agent said, approaching to kiss her beloved partner on the lips. “Mmm... nice.”

“Very.”

“How’re you feeling this morning, Katie?”

“I’m fine, I think. Yesterday feels like a blur... and it just doesn’t feel real so I’m not sure how to cope with it, you know?”

“I know. I want to call Jamie later to see what’s happening though.”

Kate placed a hand on her spouse’s collarbone. “Can you try and leave that until tomorrow? I need to forget it... even for a short while.”

“Tomorrow,” CJ nodded. “You didn’t sleep much, did you?”

“I did for the first four hours then I kept jerking awake. Sorry if I disturbed you...”

“You didn’t. My night was pretty similar.” The taller woman raised her right hand slowly to slip it onto Kate’s waist. “Let’s be real lazy today.”

“Sounds perfect...”

\* \* \* \* \*

Special Agent Jamie Green could not believe their luck. While searching Elizabeth Emerson’s handbag, they had found the untraceable ‘burn’ phone she had used to contact Darrell Gates. The fact that the woman had kept this crucial piece of evidence showed Jamie that Elizabeth was absolutely positive she’d gotten away with everything, that CJ was indeed dead, and that Kate was well within her clutches. It might also show that Kate’s mother was not quite living in the real world. She truly underestimated the actress and appeared to have a warped sense of reality. But that didn’t really matter right now. Hard evidence was what the FBI needed and it seemed they now had quite a lot of it.

The interrogation was underway; Jamie and Ethan were tasked with questioning their capture while Mark and Mikey dealt with the other murderer the SSHU had been dealing with previously – who incidentally had been caught after CJ came up with the information about Grauman’s Egyptian Theater. Agent Carson was indeed a huge asset to the Bureau, and the Assistant Director knew how lucky he was to have her working with him.

So now, in two different rooms in the same corridor, the working members of the SSHU had two very different killers from two very different cases. In Interrogation Room 3, Jamie sat facing a woman she detested but her feelings were well hidden behind her professional, expressionless face. She was thankful Agent Matthews was the one talking at the moment, since she felt like getting up and strangling the bitch.

“How did you know about the wreck, Mrs. Emerson?”

“I’m not answering that. Do you think I’m an idiot?”

“No, Ma’am... and I never inferred anything of the sort.” They had only been in here for about ten minutes and Ethan already wanted to punch Elizabeth. ‘*She’s related to Kate? No way...*’

“I have a top attorney. He’s the best money can buy,” Elizabeth said smugly.

Agent Green looked at her blankly. “And he’ll be here soon, I’m sure.”

“Don’t speak to me like that, child. You have no idea who you’re dealing with!”

‘*Oh yes, I do,*’ Jamie thought to herself. “What was your part in all this?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“We have evidence. Your call to Darrell Gates, the phone you used to contact him, the fact that you have an insurance broker who just happens to be his cousin... Darrell spilled his guts to us, you know? Told us everything... and he knows what you look like. Once we compare the voice on that phone call to the recording we took at your daughter’s house... there’ll be so much evidence against you, no lawyer will be able to get you out.” It looked like Elizabeth didn’t believe a word of it but Jamie saw the ever-so-slight change in the woman’s cold eyes. “Why do you hate your daughter so much as to-“

“How dare you!?” the accused jumped to her feet.

“Sit down, Mrs. Emerson!”

“I will not! How dare you say that I hate my own daughter!”

“Sit... down!” Jamie stood and began to move around the table.

Elizabeth sat quickly. Had she truly been caught? Had Kate outsmarted her? That thought made her snarl. “My Katherine will not see sense and she’s losing her mind. I need to show her how to live a good, respectable life. That’s all. That deviant she calls a wife... oh, it’s so disgusting. It should never be allowed to happen.”

“So you tried to have CJ killed? That seems a tad over-dramatic...” Jamie was not succeeding in keeping the anger from her voice so she paced the room for a moment to recover her senses.

“Over-dramatic? No...”

“Oh, so you don’t deny it?” Ethan asked.

“Well... of course I do. Only terrible murderers do that sort of thing.”

“Right... so you just pay *them* to do your dirty work. Tell me, Mrs. Emerson... do you have receipts for all the large sums of money you withdraw from your bank account?”

“I... what does that have to do with anything?”

“This Darrell fellow says you owe him a lot of money. How were you planning to pay him? Cash or check?”

Elizabeth was about to spit venom. “No comment. Not another word until I see my attorney! I want him here now!”

Jamie sighed silently. Those were the words she hadn't wanted to hear. She supposed she should have expected it. She and Ethan were surprised they'd gotten anything out of the woman at all. Vernon Betts had said enough to point the finger at Elizabeth but Darrell Gates had hung her out to dry. Apparently, he was the only one who had met her face to face when she had 'employed' them and he had easily picked her out of an identification book full of similar-looking suspects, after telling them his cousin had asked him to do a job for a very wealthy client of his. Everything was slowly fitting into place and Agent Green was pretty sure they could build a solid case against all three. The warrant for the insurance broker's arrest had also been granted. She hoped they could pin something on him too, since he'd put Elizabeth in touch with his criminal cousin.

Jamie was just glad CJ was on enforced leave. She knew her friend would want to be in the thick of this investigation. She also knew that it wouldn't be allowed, making CJ incredibly difficult to handle. Jamie hoped Kate and CJ were somehow finding a way to relax after their latest nightmare and as she sat at her desk to begin writing up her reports, she looked over at CJ's chair. “Life is never dull with you around, DM.” She smiled and thanked her lucky stars that Elizabeth had not been entirely successful in her plans. Jamie had found true friends that she loved here in LA... and CJ Carson was at the top of that list.

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A couple of days passed in what seemed like a couple of minutes. With their house now looking much more festive, Kate was trying – and succeeding to a degree – to look forward instead of back. Her mother had made her unhappy too many times throughout her childhood and beyond. She was determined that it wasn't going to happen anymore and had told CJ in no uncertain terms that they were going to get on with their lives and smile as much as possible. CJ had been kept up to date with Elizabeth's capture and she knew the woman was in a cell awaiting her arraignment, which was scheduled for tomorrow. She hoped Elizabeth would be held in custody until trial. She hoped they could relax without the worry of a possible visit from Kate's deranged mother if she was let out on bail.

It was late at night in the Carson household. CJ and Kate had been heartened by the news that Eddie Senior and Jeffrey were putting plans in motion to move to the Los Angeles area and restart their restaurant business somewhere in the gay district of West Hollywood. The two men hadn't been told about the idea of a guest house being built but CJ had browsed the Internet with her wife looking at the possibilities. They'd also had a final quote for the new barn. Construction would begin in four weeks and once it was done, Nevada would have a beautiful new home to share with a new equine friend.

CJ sunk deeper into her thoughts and didn't notice when Kate leaned on the doorjamb of the ensuite with a razor in her hand. She'd just helped CJ in the shower and the agent had commented dryly about needing a shave.

"Want me to trim anything?"

The taller woman lay on the bed naked, only the rough plaster cast marring the most beautiful of pictures. "You'll just have to cope with my slightly hairy legs for a while. You're not coming near me with that thing."

"I can cope fine. It was you who complained about not being able to do your usual preening," the actress projected from inside the bathroom. When she didn't get a response, she switched off the light and returned to the bedroom sans razor. She stood and watched her love for a few seconds until the agent snapped out of her haze. When their eyes met, CJ still seemed miles away and the blonde knelt on the mattress beside her spouse's hip. "What're you thinking, CJ?"

"...Just about the crash, about how it didn't have to happen... and about Doug."

"Are you having nightmares about it?"

"Not that I remember."

"Do you remember the... impact?" Kate said sadly. They had looked at the photographs Mark brought but they hadn't really talked about everything yet; bits and pieces, yes... but there was still some other stuff to discuss.

"No. I remember falling. I was scared. I remember feeling really sick... so sick in my stomach. I was thinking about you and the girls... about how I wouldn't see you again. And then, I started thinking about how you would go on without me... and I was worried because you would suffer. The agony in my heart was too much to bear and I began to hyperventilate, and I dunno... I think I passed out before we hit."

The actress covered her mouth with her hand to quell the whimper she couldn't stop. "That might have saved you, honey."

"I don't know," CJ murmured.

"Your body would've been limp if you were unconscious... it might have saved you from more serious injuries... or even--"

"Let's not go there, Katie. It's over now and I don't want to keep reliving it. I need to stop thinking about it somehow. Will you help me...?"

"Yes... but I think it'll take some time before we both stop thinking about it."

"Maybe..."

Kate produced the bottle of massage oil she'd gotten from the ensuite. "Time for some pampering..."

"That sounds good, but what about the sheets?"

"It'll be fine. I'll wash them tomorrow. Just close your eyes and let me take care of you."

CJ tried to read her spouse and figured the actress needed to concentrate on something other than the thought of her mother trying to destroy her. "All right..."

Kate switched off the bedside lamps and worked by candlelight. The low flicker of the flames combined with the scent of the oils – and CJ – would help her relax too. She began by lifting the agent's long, dark hair up and over the pillow. Warming some oil in her hands, she delicately started massaging the strong shoulders. "Is that okay?"

"Mmm, yes, it doesn't hurt. You're so gentle."

The blonde smiled as she continued with the rhythmic movements, working down over both arms as far as injuries would allow. She managed to cover the long torso without her stunning partner being too much of a distraction but CJ's short breaths were hard to miss, so Kate moved past the area between the womanly hips and traversed the longer than long legs. Kneading with her thumbs, she dug into the tight muscles above the agent's knees. A soft grunt escaped CJ's mouth and Kate grinned. "You're enjoying this, huh?"

"Yeah... but you've neglected one particular area that needs your attention..."

"I'll get to it soon," the actress husked. And she did get to it. Somehow, her hands were replaced by her mouth and she ended up kissing her way up CJ's inner thigh. Kate nipped at the soft skin and reveled in its warmth. She could smell the welcoming scent of her beloved and felt helpless to resist. She was drawn into the sweet flesh like a bee to honey and she extended her tongue to touch the dark, curly hair. CJ moaned out her acceptance. Kate delved a little deeper and her wife couldn't help but raise her hips off the mattress.

"Oh Katie... it's been so long..."

"I know, honey... just relax." Kate knew only too well how long it had been since she'd loved CJ this way, and when she began to tenderly suck on the hardening flesh, the taller woman gasped loudly.

A passionate assault on CJ's center followed. Kate was slow and patient, loving and arousing, and the agent was brought to the edge of reason before being allowed to fall into her climax. Kate had an overwhelming need to make her wife feel something other than pain or stress, and built up the intoxicating pressure once more. When CJ was recovering from her second orgasm, the blonde smiled contentedly into the soft, burning flesh at her lips. She backed up a little – while CJ basked in her afterglow – and visually admired the beautiful body.

A few heartbeats later, the raven-haired woman moaned with sated pleasure as she opened her eyes and sought out Kate's face. "What are you doing?" she whispered, still catching her breath a little.

"Just looking... memorizing... analyzing..."

"Any results I should be aware of?"

Kate let out a small chuckle before touching her wife. "Right here..." A fingertip tickled across the agent's clit. "We're really similar, you and me... but your inner labia, they're more..."

A curious eyebrow lazily crawled up CJ's forehead. "More what?"

"More... succulent than mine."

"You make me sound like a piece of steak."

The actress smirked at the mock indignation on her spouse's face. "You're much more delicious than a piece of steak. In fact, you make me drool constantly..."

"Feel free... to add your juices..." CJ couldn't continue and began to laugh lightly.

A toothy smile covered Kate's face and she crawled up beside her love, taking the thin duvet with her. "Are you laughing at me?"

"I'm laughing *with* you... and maybe laughing a little at your genital comparison class."

The blonde grinned and kissed a nearby cheek. It felt good to smile after everything they'd gone through. "By all means... laugh away. It's the best sound in the world."

"It sure is. Hey... do something for me?"

"Something more...?" Kate feigned exhaustion.

"Not that, smart ass. Can you just move right here... into my left side?"

Kate wriggled her way into position. "Here?"

"Yeah..." The agent had her left arm under her wife's neck and was now tentatively moving her right over Kate's body. With a few flinches, she lifted the cast off the pillow and completed the embrace. A small smile of satisfaction graced her tired features as she closed her eyes.

"Now I'm in your arms," the blonde murmured.

"Right where you belong..."

Sleep came quickly for both of them and after making it through a most agonizing period of their lives, they both dreamed of a peaceful, love-filled – and hopefully, quiet – Christmas with their daughters.

In the Carson household, love would conquer hate every time.

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## Epilogue

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Betts and Gates had left the courtroom and were back in their cells. Defense and prosecution had presented their cases and it seemed the prosecution had done a grand job of convincing the judge. Both men were remanded in custody, pending trial.

Next on the list was the woman who masterminded the entire thing, and she stood defiantly next to her high-priced and well-publicized attorney during her arraignment. But even *he* couldn't get her out on bail. The judge's voice boomed after the prosecution had once again given their reasons for requesting remand. "Given the severity of these charges, the accused's financial status and her likelihood to flee... I see no alternative but to remand her in custody until trial. Next case...!"

"Remand?! Remand!?! Do you have any idea who I am?" Elizabeth fumed. "How dare you! This is preposterous! I am innocent... innocent, do you hear me?"

The sound of the judge's gavel repeatedly thundered around the cavernous room. "Order! Order in the court!"

"I didn't do anything wrong! My Katherine needs to be reborn... she needs my help to guide her from the clutches of Hell! That woman has defiled and poisoned her! She must be punished! I just want to heal Katherine! That's all I ever wanted! You must let me out!"

"Control your client, Mr. Williams! Order!"

Elizabeth's lawyer tried to placate her as she blindly raved on. "I won't stand for this sort of behavior! Do you hear me? I've tried to make her see! And if that Jason had just done what he was supposed to do in the first place, all of this would never have happened!!"

"Officers of the court... get her out of here!" The judge was furious and battered the gavel down again. The murmurs in the viewing area gradually became louder and two Federal agents in the back row stood up in unison.

Jamie's stomach turned over violently at hearing Elizabeth's words, and she wrote down the last sentence in her notebook. "Oh God... what did she mean by that?"

Ethan had to think for a moment before he could close his mouth. “I... I don’t know. But Jamie... it sounded like she... I mean, for a long time now she’s been...”

He couldn’t finish the thought and as his sentence hung in the air, they watched Elizabeth being dragged away by two court officers. As she disappeared through the heavy wooden doors, her shouts faded away. “I’ll do anything... anything to make her see she’s worth nothing! Nothiiiiing!”

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The End...

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