

In A Heartbeat
by Wendy Arthur



After Montana Series - Episode 11

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This romantic drama is an Uber, however all characters are created by me.

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This story depicts a loving 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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So many thanks go to my beta-reader, Norsebard. Your help is very much appreciated and continues to be most welcome. And an extra thank you for helping me get this one out so fast!

And thank you to all of my readers. Your feedback has been most helpful and encouraging.

This is the next installment in a series of stories, 'After Montana' which can be found at <http://marshallcarson.wordpress.com> **'In A Heartbeat' is part of a 3-episode 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 or left at <http://marshallcarson.wordpress.com>

Chapter 1

It had only been three hours since Mark and Jamie had come to the farmhouse. It felt like three years to Kate. Receiving the news that her beloved wife was missing, presumed dead after her plane had crashed in the wilderness, had sent the blonde into some sort of catatonic state. She still lay on the couch; she hadn't said a word. She gazed straight ahead and didn't appear to register anything anyone said. It was like a nightmare... a horrid nightmare that she couldn't wake up from. Even with people she loved around her, she still couldn't bring herself to speak. Morning would be breaking soon. She'd have to find a way to cope with the girls when they woke. Kate wasn't sure how to snap out of the Hell she was enveloped in. But she had to try for her daughters' sake, didn't she?

Jamie sat at the kitchen counter flicking mindlessly through the pages of a magazine. She had one eye on the actress, frantically trying to think of a way to help her. The pale green eyes that were fixated on the fireplace and had barely blinked in hours, worried Jamie to the point where she thought of calling a doctor and demanding a house call. As the clock ticked on, the blonde agent became more agitated. She didn't show it but she needed to be doing something more and really wanted to go back to work. She had called Sam thirty minutes ago. The producer had taken the news as expected but had pulled herself together and was on her way to stay with Kate.

Kamali paced back and forth across the hallway, sensing something was terribly wrong with his family, and when Shannon came down the stairs in search of her parents, he followed her into the living room before resuming his pacing at the central point of the house where he could see all occupied rooms at once.

Jamie was about to attend to the young girl when Kate suddenly sat up on the couch and opened her arms to her daughter. Shannon crawled onto the inviting lap completely unaware of the anguish her parent was trying to hide. "It's still dark, Mama."

Kate just nodded and held her precious cargo whilst rocking back and forth to some unknown rhythm. They sat like that until Shannon dozed off again and it broke Jamie's heart. How were they going to cope in the next few days... weeks? How long would it be?

Mark had left to go back to his office, trying to find something... anything he could do to help find his agent. The relevant searches and alerts were already being put into action but he still wasn't satisfied. The local rescue services in Minnesota could only put one chopper out to search in the dark. But where would they start? The area was so incredibly vast and the last known location of the plane before it lost contact didn't necessarily pinpoint the area it went down in. Mark felt that this might be the first time he would be brought to tears at work. He felt utterly useless.

Getting up from her seat in the Carson's kitchen, Jamie turned away from Kate and fought back the tears that threatened to spill again, knowing that it wouldn't do either of her friends any good if she stood here and cried. *'That's it... Mark can fire me if he wants to. I'm going to find CJ's body.'* A horrified look came across her graceful features. *'To find CJ...'* she corrected herself. Even if it meant disobeying orders, she was going to Minnesota.

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“FUCK!”

The curse left her mouth before she'd even opened her eyes. She could feel pain – actually, pain was an understatement – and she could smell fuel and... something more familiar to her. *'Death,'* she thought morosely. *'Am I dead?'*

The stench tickled her nostrils as she mentally cataloged what she was experiencing. An excruciatingly painful left wrist... probably broken; a dislocated right shoulder making her arm feel like it had been ripped out of the socket, and that stupid old ankle injury which blatantly made itself known with a tight throbbing inside her boot. *'My throat...'* she thought while trying to swallow. *'It burns.'* She decided that if she could feel all these hurts, she had to be alive... for now. She didn't know what she would see when she opened her cobalt blue eyes but she did know it wouldn't be pretty. Her body was suspended by her seatbelt and hung limply to the left.

“The plane's on its side,” CJ Carson whispered soundlessly into the cold cabin. *'Doug!'*

Her eyes flew open and the image that greeted her contorted her face into a severe wince. She had seen a lot in her time as an FBI agent and could handle the moonlit sight of the pilot's bloodied head split open in front of her. Still, it wasn't something she welcomed. The plane's exterior had been all but ripped to shreds. The pod that formed the aircraft's protective body was battered into an unrecognizable shape and it seemed the only thing that had saved her life was the fact that her seat was on the right hand side of the tiny cabin. She looked up to see that the right wing had disappeared and guessed it was most likely sheared off by the treetops on their rapid descent, sending the small aircraft spinning down to land on its left side. She also guessed that the thick canopy of treetops – now sporting a ragged and unnatural hole – had formed some kind of barrier that had somehow lessened the speed and impact. She also knew Doug was an

experienced pilot and would have done everything in his power to land as carefully as he could during their hair-raising descent.

Glimpsing around her between blinks, she took in all she could before making her move. The cold, hard ground was literally a few feet away from her face and jagged pieces of metal stuck up precariously close to her body. *'Why am I alive?'* She pushed the cumbersome headphones off, letting them fall below her and slide into a gap behind the pilot's seat. Releasing herself from the seatbelt was going to be a tricky move but she had to do it. She had to get outside and find help somehow. Doug was dead... there was no doubt about that. CJ could see his skull and she also had a feeling that the large piece of metal protruding from his belly would have ensured he wouldn't survive. *'So sorry, Doug...'*

She gingerly moved her right arm and stifled a squeal as the dislocated shoulder cried out in protest. Her left wrist was definitely broken but she knew she had to use the arm to stop her from falling on the spikes below. "Shit..." she muttered hoarsely as she positioned her left hand above her head. Contorting to reach for the door post, she hooked the limb around it as far as she could to test her own strength and the rigidity of the beam's support. It creaked but didn't give way and she ground her teeth together as she crossed her stiff right arm over to release the buckle, all the while praying she had no life-threatening internal injuries that would end up killing her anyway.

As the security of the strong belt loosened, she realized that her foot was trapped beneath the disfigured front seat and she bit off a curse as she took the weight of her body on two painful limbs. Quickly twisting and untangling her boot, she pulled upward and – since the window was shattered – she was soon hanging her torso over the outside of the wreckage. The skies were dark now as clouds rolled across her only source of light and, with her feet still dangling inside the plane, she stupidly looked at her watch but couldn't see a damn thing. *'Where'd the moon go? Damn it, I need to find a flashlight... or a match.'*

Her tall, normally-powerful body went limp as she fell to the snow-dusted ground. The agony sent her wailing onto her side, clutching herself until the pain became bearable again. *'Fuck!!'* Finding her steely determination once more, she got to her feet and began to feel around in the opening that had been the nose of the plane, to hopefully find a First Aid kit or anything else that might come in handy. Her shoulder tightened angrily and she gave up after a few minutes of agonizing stabs. She limped over to the hole that she had emerged from earlier and stood on the curled piece of metal that vaguely resembled one of the wheel struts to elevate herself enough to reach inside the fuselage. CJ knew her bag was under her seat but wondered if it had stayed there throughout the ordeal.

"Oh... thank you," she husked quietly as she felt the padded strap of her FBI-issue backpack. She ignored her screaming injuries to gently wiggle it free from its mangled pocket.

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Jamie flung the door open and grabbed Sam into her arms. The redhead clung on for a few minutes and they both held their breath as a myriad of feelings flowed over them. As they

released one another, they locked eyes and Jamie nodded at the unspoken question. “She’s in the living room... I just don’t know what to do, Sam.”

“Leave it to me, hon. Just do me one favor, Jamie. Go find her... and bring her home.”

The agent’s bottom lip trembled as she forced her tears away. “I will,” she promised, squeezing her love one more time and striding out over the porch.

The producer clicked the door closed and padded quietly past Kamali and through the doorway into the living area. Kate sat on the couch holding a sleeping Shannon. Sam almost cried at the empty look in her friend’s eyes. She crouched down into Kate’s line of vision and waited patiently until the actress acknowledged her presence.

A slight adjustment of the blonde’s small black pupils brought the compassionate face of Samantha Morris into focus. Kate continued to look at her but said nothing.

“Hey...” the producer whispered. “I’m staying with you... and there’s no point in telling me not to, because I won’t listen. Jamie will find her, Kate... she’ll bring her back... no matter what has happ-“

“She’s not... dead.”

Sam barely heard the heart-wrenching declaration. “Honey... I know it’s hard to accept but-“

“She’s not.”

A deep inhale indicated to Kate that her friend did not believe her. Why would she? If a small plane crashes in a remote, freezing wilderness and ten hours later the rescue services haven’t even found the location yet, chances are the passengers have no hope of surviving. But Kate could feel it. She had been sitting here – since the devastating news had punched her square in the gut and ripped a huge piece of her soul asunder – thinking about her ‘sickness’ and now trying to feel why it had immediately disappeared. She was connected to CJ, she knew that, but this... this was something different. It was stronger still. She could ‘feel’ her wife, feel the agent’s life flowing through her, but not knowing how to explain that she once again remained silent.

“Kate, I... I don’t know what to say to make this easier...”

“Then don’t say anything... just be here.”

The words were so lifeless and devoid of inflection, it was almost as if Kate wasn’t present while saying them. She was such a warm, loving and beautiful being but Sam was having a hard time seeing that right now. Kate was calm... too calm... and her face bore no expression. Sam realized she couldn’t possibly imagine what the actress was going through or how she should react, so she just nodded and hoped this robotic, inhuman stage was temporary.

The producer gently squeezed her friend's hand then stood up and headed to the coffee machine, hoping that the enticing aroma would encourage Kate to consume something. And to be honest, she really needed some caffeine herself before she called into the studios to tell them she wouldn't be coming in for the next few days.

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CJ's breath came in bursts against the chilled air as she held the cold piece of wood against her swollen wrist. She bound it to her arm with the long socks she'd gotten from her pack and let out a yelp when the fracture shifted under the pressure. *'Damn it, that smarts.'* Using her mouth and other hand to pull the ends into a tight knot, she growled and bit down onto the cotton material before letting it go.

A wide yawn overcame her and she looked to the skies to see dark clouds drifting past the half moon, giving and taking her natural light source as they saw fit. Trying to ignore the powerful ache from her splinted hand, she dug a little deeper into the bag with the other one and finally felt her Maglite with her fingertips. Pressing the button and finding it working, she mentally punched her fist in the air since she couldn't do it literally.

'Right... the dislocated shoulder.' She looked around her using the blue-tinted flashlight and found a suitable sturdy tree trunk. *'This is gonna hurt, CJ.'* With a slight wiggle and some extreme pain, she tried to figure out which way to slam the shoulder back into place. Guessing at the direction, she thumped her body against the solid wood and screamed out at the blinding agony that almost caused her to pass out. It receded quickly and left a comparatively dull ache down her right side. She clenched the muscles briefly and nodded when the arm was a little easier to move. *'There... all better. But no firing guns anytime soon...'* With that thought, she reached under the thick coat while taking deliberate deep breaths to counteract the soreness brought on by the movement, and felt the reassuring shape of her Glock strapped to her ribs.

She smacked her dry lips together and reached up tentatively to touch her face, finding a mass of sticky goo running from her temple to her jaw. Placing the torch in her mouth and shining the light on her fingers, the deep red color of the blood told her it was clotting. CJ glanced at the shadow of Jensen's body in the cockpit and realized how incredibly lucky she was. *'How did I get out of this? Someone's watching over me.'* A quick look at her watch told her she had been here for twelve hours... that is, if her watch was still working.

Raising her blue eyes to the sky, she realized it would be getting light soon. She had hoped to see or hear some sign of rescue. Surely they would have helicopters here with night vision cameras? Did they even know the damn plane had gone down? Did Mark think she was just taking her sweet time getting home? She rummaged around in her pocket and found her cell phone. The glass front was destroyed and it wouldn't switch on. With uncertainty flowing through her, she fought back another face-splitting yawn and frowned. Her body weakened and she dropped to the ground. Feeling the cold of the snow seeping through her cargo pants, she shuffled along on her butt until her body was under part of the wreckage before exhaustion claimed her completely. As her mind fought with and began to lose the battle against sleep, she realized the last time she

had rested was on the flight from LA. That was at least two days ago. ‘*Well that was stupid...*’ was her last coherent thought.

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At 8.30am – Pacific Standard Time – Kate Carson rose wordlessly from the couch with her older daughter in her arms and headed for the staircase. Sam watched her go then discreetly crossed the living area to follow her.

As the actress ascended in a slow climb, Shannon awoke. “Mama? What are you doing?”

“Morning, Shan... you fell asleep in my arms, remember?”

“Uhm... oh, yes... I came downstairs.”

“You sure did. Now it’s time to get Lucy up too.”

Sam could hear the blonde’s voice and became concerned at Kate’s apparent chirpiness. Putting it down to her feelings of love for her children and her need to protect them from pain, the producer turned and went back to the kitchen to make a start on breakfast.

In Lucy’s bedroom, Kate was pulling clothes from the closet for the youngster to wear while Shannon used the bathroom. Lucy woke up when her sister came back through the door.

“Shan...” The girl turned her head and saw Kate. “Mama!”

“Good morning, precious girl. Did you have a good sleep?” the actress asked while leaning over and depositing a kiss on the small forehead.

“Uh huh... I dreamed about a green bear,” Lucy husked around a yawn.

“A green one?” Shannon enquired with surprise.

“Yes, like a big teddy bear with a star on its tummy.”

Two small chuckles emanated from the children and Kate smiled, but inside her heart was breaking. The complete joy and love for her daughters was smothered fiercely with her devastation and emptiness at the loss of her soulmate. How could she keep this up? How was she going to tell them that Mommy wasn’t coming home until... until when? Would she ever come home again? ‘*Yes... yes, she will. Otherwise, I can’t do this.*’

Kate blinked rapidly and concentrated on the conversation going on across the room. She had to keep on existing – keep on functioning – if only for her children.

* * * * *

Jamie entered the Bureau building and strutted with a confidence she didn't feel until she was standing outside Mark's office door. Her heart was thumping rapidly with nervousness and everything else, and she prepared herself for a stand-off with the boss.

When he shouted her in, she opened the door and went straight to the front of his desk. Mark looked up and clasped his hands on the smooth oak surface. "Jamie..." he nodded once, "who is with Kate?"

"Sam is there now and Tony will be there soon. I just called him to let him know what's happened." Jamie took a deep breath to ready herself for a small war. "Sir, I need to go--"

Mulroney raised his hand sharply. "Save your energy, Agent." He got to his feet and reached around behind his chair, lifting an overnight bag and dropping it down on the desk. "I assume you're coming with me?"

Green was confused for a moment until she realized he was thinking the same thing as her. "You... you're going? But what about the case? Our killer's leaving us clues now... he's not gonna stop until we catch him."

"Agent Seamore will be here later today... from Portland. He's a top profiler and will be working the case with Ethan and Mikey until we get back. I know our guys can handle this and I've cleared it with Deputy Director Mitchell... told him CJ was our priority. Actually, I was surprised when he agreed." Mark paused and looked blankly at Jamie. "I can't stay here while CJ's out there..."

His voice faltered and his gaze dropped to his feet. Jamie now knew he was feeling the loss too. "Yes... I'm going with you, Sir. I'll grab my bag from the office. Gimme two minutes."

Mark nodded and began shutting down his computer. He wanted to cry but there was no time for that. The jet was waiting for them at LAX. He had no idea how he had managed to pull in so many favors but he didn't care how much this trip would cost the Bureau. He wasn't going to come back without her and he'd pay for it himself if he had to.

He soon met up with Jamie and they headed down to the parking garage. When his agent started driving in silence, he dialed Kate's home number and waited for a reply.

"Hello?"

"Sam? It's Mark. How's she doing?" He waited until the rustling noise stopped and he heard the sound of a door closing.

"Sorry about that... I had to get some privacy. She's... I'm not sure... she's with the kids and she's acting normal... too normal."

"She's a strong woman..."

“Yes, but she told me CJ’s alive. You should’ve seen her face, Mark.”

“CJ might be alive, Sam... don’t give up hope yet,” the AD said a little abruptly. ‘*Do I really believe that?*’

A sigh blew into the phone. “*I won’t. For Kate’s sake.*”

“Can you put her on the line, please?”

“*I... I’m not sure that’s a good idea...*”

“Please, Sam...”

“*Okay, gimme a minute.*”

Mark looked over at Jamie while he waited. “I need to let her know where we’re going.”

“She might not say a word to you, Sir.”

“I know that. But I have to tell her.”

For some reason, Kate accepted the call and Mark heard a faint “*Hello?*”

“Kate... I’m just calling to let you know that Jamie and I are on our way to Minnesota.” *Silence.* “I won’t come back without her, Kate. I promise.” *More silence.* Mark realized his tone was pretty brash due to the adrenaline rushing through his veins and he deliberately softened his voice. “I care about you, Kate... please look after yourself ‘til we get back.”

“*Thank you, Mark.*”

Mulrone was about to say something else when Sam came back on the line. “*Hey... she just handed me the phone. Sorry...*”

“No need for sorry, Sam. We’ll contact you as soon as we have some news.”

When the call was over, he glimpsed at Jamie who mirrored his expression. “I’m worried too,” she said quietly. When the AD nodded somberly, they both faced forward and readied themselves for the most important search of their lives.

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CJ woke up with a thumping headache. Her whole body ached along with it and she muttered a few obscenities as she struggled to her feet. ‘*Like I wasn’t suffering enough?*’

She gradually became aware of the light and – still mentally grumbling at the situation – scanned her surroundings anew, her eyes coming to rest on the mangled fuselage of the small plane. Her

internal complaining came to an immediate halt. She backed away a few paces. “Oh God...” It looked much worse in the harsh glare of day and Doug’s body resembled a scene from a gory horror movie. The recent events combined with a view that normally wouldn’t affect the tough woman caused CJ to double over and hurl the limited contents of her stomach onto the white snowy ground.

Standing upright again, she approached what was left of the cockpit and reached up – her arm shuddering halfway due to the pain – and respectfully closed Jensen’s eyes... eye? His head was a mess so it was hard to tell. With her dark brows permanently fixed low, she looked down into the plane and saw the corner of a green box. *‘The First Aid kit...’*

There was a hole in the wreckage close to her feet and she dropped heavily to her knees and reached in to grab the item she wanted. Struggling to free the plastic box and aggravating her shoulder in the process, she groaned with gratitude when it came loose and fell onto the oily dirt. Pulling herself and the box away from the unpleasant sights, she found a few useful things to take with her when she had to leave. She figured nobody could find the wreck as she’d been here since the hours of darkness and not a sound had been heard apart from the howl of a distant wolf and a faint, random buzzing from the dying aircraft. Still, she’d wait a little longer, even if it was freezing cold.

CJ took two sachets of saline solution, knowing they would make her even more thirsty but unable to resist the tempting feeling of fluid on her nipping throat. Downing them with some difficulty and a resounding grunt, she stuffed the remaining sachet, some dressings, Band Aid’s and a roll of medical tape into her pants pocket before spotting a dented old tin cup that Doug must have used during his longer flights. “Maybe I’ll find a river...” she whispered hoarsely to the forest. The cup was carefully pushed into her bag using her right hand. The left one was completely out of commission and appeared to be slowly growing numb.

The agent knew the longer she hung around at the crash site, the more likely it was that her injuries would not fully heal. How would anyone find her? Communication with the ground seemed to be lost way before the impact, so that and the hostile terrain would make any search much more difficult. She needed medical assistance... and soon. But looking through the murky cloud cover, she guessed she was nowhere near civilization. Would she die here? It was her last coherent thought before she collapsed backwards onto the snow and into another irresistible sleep.

For almost an hour, she drifted through a vast plain of nothingness before she dreamed. As the tall woman sunk deeper and deeper, Kate’s mischievous face floated boldly in front of her, rippling teasingly out of her grasp. A tiny smile tugged at the sides of CJ’s mouth. The blonde’s lips moved as the mirage began to fade and the agent knew it was telling her to come home. She reached out to try and keep the beautiful sight with her but it fizzled out until there was nothing but blackness.

A sharp and decidedly cold intake of the mountain air brought CJ back from her subconscious. She sat up and let out a cry when the move reminded her promptly that she was not in good shape. Her stiff, freezing limbs and the dusting of snowflakes on her black clothing brought her

to the conclusion that she just couldn't wait any longer, and she clambered to her feet to begin a slow limp down the valley, hobbling over the rough land and white patchy terrain, very thankful for her heavy work boots and warm jacket. She tightened the collar – with some difficulty, since her arm wouldn't allow much movement – and gulped back her fear at how lost and injured she appeared to be. The vision of Kate suddenly surrounded her once more, sending the pain to a distant corner of her mind. The imagined actress drifted through a break in the trees and CJ followed blindly. She was going to get home... somehow.

Chapter 2

It was a crisp, sunny Thanksgiving morning in Los Angeles, California. Tony arrived at the Carson residence with his heart on his sleeve and when he saw Kate, tears sprung to his brown eyes. She was pale, withdrawn and – unbelievably – already looked like a shadow of her former self.

When she noticed his presence and the fact that he was wiping his eyes, she approached the young man who had come to mean so much to the family. “Tony.” Her arms slipped around his neck and he could do nothing but return the embrace. “Don't worry. She'll be back.”

When Tony pulled away, he frowned. “Kate...”

“Please... don't. I need to believe she'll be back soon. The alternative... I just can't...”

“But they said she-“

Kate raised a hand to stop him. “Don't say what everyone else is thinking, Tony. Please just... believe me... okay?”

The driver had witnessed the great love between his bosses many times. They had an irrefutable and mystical tie that bound them that he would never be able to figure out and with that in mind, he nodded to the woman standing in front of him. “Okay. But I want to help you out until she comes back. I'll go take the girls with me when I walk Kamali... how's that?” he said, gently rubbing her shoulder.

Those kind words should have sent the blonde into floods of tears but she simply nodded. It felt like her body and mind were there, playing the role of Kate Carson but her soul and her spirit were off somewhere else, doing a job she wasn't even aware of. But she wouldn't ask herself questions, trusting that whatever was happening, it was valid and true.

Tony headed toward the back door a short while later with two girls and a dog in tow. Shannon stopped in front of her mother and when the actress crouched to her level, she placed her small

hands on the woman's cheeks. "Mama... today's Thanksgiving. Where's Mommy? She promised she'd be home..."

The blonde's heart stopped beating as she froze in place. An irrational anger forced its way through her body but when she realized it was Shannon who had spoken to her and she looked at the innocence on the young, curious face, the anger turned to agony. "She... Mommy's..."

Tony saw the war going on inside the weary actress and bent down to speak to Shannon. "She'll be late, Shannon. She couldn't help it but we'll be waiting when she gets back, won't we?" he smiled, trying to make it believable.

"But..." Shannon began to protest.

The driver took her hand and gave a minute nod to Kate. "Let's go... Kamali's already at the back gate with Lucy! We need to catch up!"

The actress plastered a somewhat fake smile on her face when her daughter looked at her. With a sigh, the girl turned to her buddy. "Okay, Tony. Race you!" She took off out the back door and Kate bit her lips as the young man followed. How was she going to explain it to them? She shook her head in despair, not even sure she was capable.

The actress sat on one of the bar stools at the island unit, leaning her elbows on the surface and dropping her face into her hands. She tried to concentrate on regulating her breaths and wondered why she hadn't cried yet. She rubbed her eyes before sitting upright. Her heart stopped in her chest when she saw her wife standing opposite her, leaning one hand on the backrest of another stool.

"You're doing fine..." the tall woman said.

Kate closed her eyes to try and erase the sight from her mind, knowing it just couldn't be real. She opened them again and frowned when CJ remained. She wasn't going to encourage this type of mental instability so she stayed quiet.

"Not gonna talk to me?"

"I... no."

"Hmm, all right. I just wanted to tell you you're going to be okay."

Kate shook her head vigorously. "Okay!? How can I be okay when I'm talking to a... a... what are you anyway?"

The CJ vision shrugged. "I'm... just here." It touched where its own heart would be and began to fade. "Right here..."

The blonde stared straight through the space where CJ had stood. She considered that she might end up in a white padded cell pretty soon as she fell into a trance and gazed at the same spot for quite some time.

* * * * *

By the time Mark and Jamie reached Minneapolis International Airport, they were itching to get started with the search but knew they still had a long way to go before they would get the chance. They were puzzled when a tall, young man in a suit stood outside the arrivals area holding up a piece of paper in his hands displaying the words, 'MULRONEY, GREEN'.

The Assistant Director approached and the man held out his hand. "Sir... I'm Special Agent Tim Dalton."

"Apparently so..." Mark said, checking the badge that was flashed at him, "... but how did you even know we were on this flight, Agent?"

"Sir, as you know, I was working with... Agent Carson when she was here. I knew you would send someone and I'd been checking the flight manifests after I called your office and was told you were out of contact for the foreseeable future. When I saw you were traveling with another agent, I wanted to come pick you both up." Tim fidgeted slightly since he felt he'd been a little presumptuous and had perhaps rambled a little too long. He waited nervously for the AD's response.

Mark's nod was of obvious approval. "Good to meet you, Dalton. This... as you already know... is Special Agent Jamie Green."

"Agent Green." Tim offered his hand and the tall blonde shook it.

"Dalton. I'm... we're anxious to get up there..."

"Yes... yes, of course." He finally let go of the gorgeous agent's hand. '*Do they all look like this in LA?*' Shaking himself out of the unbidden thought, he tilted his head. "There's a Black Hawk waiting for us not far from here... it will fly us direct to International Falls. I've set up a base at Jensen's Aviation."

Mark blinked. "You *are* organized, Dalton. Do we have troops up there already?"

"They're gathering now, Sir. Bureau personnel, local cops... even a couple of US Air Force volunteers. The local mountain rescue chopper had no sightings during the night but we've got two Black Hawks now, three 530 Little Birds and possibly a Chinook coming in to rendezvous with them at the airfield. Some local pilots have volunteered to take us up in their lighter helicopters too but I wanted to leave that decision up to you... since they're civilians an' all. I saw you already had an Incident Room set up at Washington. I've contacted them to make sure they have my number... and to notify me immediately if they get any new information. I've told our team not to release a single word about this to the press. Doug Jensen has a safety record

that's second to none and I want to know why his plane fell out of the sky... before the speculation starts!"

Both Jamie and the AD were surprised at the ferocity in Dalton's voice. Mark had to agree with the young man. "I don't want the press knowing either, Dalton. CJ's partner doesn't need that right now..."

"I agree, Sir. I can't imagine the stress Kate will be going through... and I'd hate for her to hear some dumb broadcaster spouting inaccurate news about her wife... and especially in her line of work. The press would have a field day."

Mulroney now knew that Tim was aware of CJ's situation and really seemed to care about both his agent and her wife. '*Good guy,*' he told himself.

As they walked, Jamie realized that her best friend affected many people profoundly, and this young agent was no different. "I'm very glad to have you on board, Dalton..."

"I'm glad to be able to help," he replied. "This way..." With a gesture towards a waiting cab, he lifted his chin with determination and updated the two slightly shell-shocked agents further on the short drive to their helicopter.

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On her way down a steep slope, CJ's feet slid on the shifting earth beneath her. Every bone in her body seemed to pound doubly hard every time her boot hit the ground. Trying to support herself on her weakened right arm, she pushed off the soft dirt, keeping her feet side-on to the incline to avoid further mishaps. Whilst turned to her side, she spotted a tiny dripping waterfall as it slithered down the drooping grasses into the ravine below making her smack her dry lips together. She dropped down and, using her backside and feet, she shuffled across the unyielding terrain. With the battered tin cup in her good hand, she watched as the drips tap-tap-tapped their weight onto the hard surface then began to plop when the receptacle gathered more nourishing liquid. Not able to resist any longer, she brought the cup to her mouth and took a hearty gulp, choking herself in the process and angering her burnt throat. '*Musta been those stinkin' fumes...*' she mused after the gritty coughs subsided.

The Special Agent's entire being just wanted to lie down and surrender to the hostile environment but the lingering thought of her wife and children waiting at home boosted her to her unsteady feet. Re-adjusting the strap of the backpack on her left shoulder, she resumed her slow and careful descent to what she hoped would be civilization.

* * * * *

In a darkened room, Kate walked between two small columns of stone. On top of each one was a flamboyant vase carrying an impressive plume of red and black roses. She kept moving forward, passing the massive gray flagstones on the floor without realizing her feet weren't touching them. Her blonde head began to back away from the black casket in front of her but her torso

continued to pull like a magnet, forcing her to look inside the space left by the half opened lid. In stark contrast to its foreboding exterior, the casket was fully lined with luxurious silk, bright as the purest snow. Nestled in its clutches and resting on a matching pillow, was her beloved CJ. A choked gasp caught in her throat. It couldn't be true. She couldn't go on if it was. The agent lay there in one of her white work blouses, looking like she was simply taking a nap. Kate couldn't stand it and tried to turn away but some unseen force stopped her and held her to suffer at the disturbing view. "I can't! This has to be a nightmare.... just a nightmare!" she yelled.



The body in the casket opened its eyes and Kate froze. CJ looked at her and parted her lips to say, "Yes... just a nightmare."

The agent's eyes closed again and a burning white light emanated from her chest. The brighter is got, the more panicked Kate became. The light was blinding her now, and her eyes began to burn in their sockets. "No! No! Please no!" At that moment, the actress screamed and found herself waking up suddenly in the arms of Sam Morris. "Oh God..."

"Shhh, shhh, you're okay, honey. It was just a bad dream," the producer murmured while rocking the trembling woman back and forth.

"I... I'm okay, Sam..."

When Kate tried to pull away, the redhead didn't release her. "Hey... you don't have to go through this on your own. I'm right here. Let me hold you for a bit."

Deciding that she didn't have the strength to argue, Kate relaxed her tense muscles. She couldn't get the image of CJ's corpse out of her mind and shivered at the memory. *'But she wasn't dead... she spoke to me. Just a nightmare...'* The actress opened her dry eyes. "She's not dead..." she whispered.

Sam heard her but chose not to respond. How long could her friend deny what was obvious to everyone else?

A few moments later, the noises of Tony and the girls returning from their walk effectively ended the embrace. The producer got up to leave and Kate swung her legs over the side of her bed. Trying to take a nap was not such a good idea after all.

* * * * *

His cell phone rang for the third time in an hour but he could answer it now. Using his ill-gotten police scanner, he'd listened to their broadcasts and confirmed that this part of his job was over. "Hey man..."

"Is it done?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure the target's dead?"

"There's no way she walked away from what I just did."

A silent pause. *"Okay... get back to LA. We have a little more to do before we get the big bucks."*

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm headed back to the airport now," he said, rolling his eyes and sipping his coffee. He hung up the call and, after emptying the cup, left the roadside diner and got back into his rental car. In his sick and greedy mind, the next part of the plan should be fun.

* * * * *

Assistant Director Mark Mulrone stood leaning his hands on the large table in front of him. It was covered in maps, lists, weather reports and various other necessary pieces of information that would assist them in their upcoming task. He was overwhelmed by Special Agent Dalton's determination and connections. Jensen's Aviation staff were buzzing around him, making sure that every member of the huge team who had assembled here in hangar one, were fueled for their journeys. Water, coffee, sandwiches and snacks were laid out on another table against the wall.

He scanned the space around him and looked out the massive hangar doors when another helicopter engine could be heard. A few moments later, the Chinook rolled into view and stopped just south of the building. Once the noise died down, three mountain rescue personnel in bright red jumpsuits strode toward him, stopping when Jamie spoke briefly to the leader and redirected them over to where everyone else was now standing in a large group. The amount of

people here was quite incredible since over a quarter of them were actually off duty and volunteering their time for free. Gruffly sniffing back a pang of emotion, Mark puffed out his cheeks as a burst of air left his lungs.

He cleared his throat to prepare himself for the briefing he now had to give. After a sly glance at his watch, he began. "Good evening, all of you. First of all, I want to thank everyone for being here. I did not expect such a generous turnout and your assistance is more than appreciated. As you know, we are here to search for the plane that went down in the Voyageurs National Park just south of Kabetogama Lake, approximately thirty nine hours ago. The overnight search team had no luck and had to return to base after the weather turned. So... the aircraft we are looking for is a Cessna Skyhawk displaying the Jensen's Aviation livery... which I believe is two thick red stripes on a white background." After a nod from one of the airfield's staff, Mark looked back at his eager troops. "The plane was carrying two passengers... pilot, Doug Jensen and Special..."

He briefly faltered but only Jamie seemed to notice as he covered it well with a cough. "... And Special Agent CJ Carson. You all have your designated search areas. Do not deviate from them unless you have prior orders and have clearance from the control tower. Hangar four here at the airfield is the refueling point and we'll come in for breaks in shifts. I want at least three units in the air at any given time while the daylight holds. The current weather conditions are going to make this difficult... cloud cover is patchy and low, and there's the threat of more snow to come. The size of area we need to cover and the type of terrain dictates that we simply cannot do a ground search. This National Park is full of lakes and bogs, not to mention mountains. Each aircraft will have their pilot, co-pilot, one Federal Agent and one air-support-trained police officer. Some units will also carry a medic where space allows. Keep your eyes sharp and look out for anything unusual. I need you to report back to me at regular intervals so I'll check in with each call sign periodically. My call sign will be Zulu One and I'll be on one of the Black Hawk choppers with Special Agent Green and two NTSB agents."

The normally calm man felt a rare nausea fill his belly and gulped it back. "I will proceed immediately to your location if you spot the downed aircraft. If... *when* you find it, do NOT risk your lives to get down there. Search the surrounding area and find a safe place to land before going in on foot. I know most of you know this but I have to be clear on that point... I don't want to lose anyone else in there. This is hostile terrain... don't forget that."

Mulroney took a deep breath as the nods and murmurs in his audience settled down. "We know where the Cessna lost contact with Air Traffic Control but we do not know what path the plane took thereafter... it could have gone off course during its descent. Our experienced rescue team in the Chinook will be searching what we think will be ground zero and will move out to assist others if they find nothing. We only have a few hours of daylight left so let's get out there. Good luck..."

When the people began to disperse and ready themselves to leave, Jamie approached her boss. "You okay, Sir?"

Mark looked up at her and blinked a few times. He knew she was concerned about him and attempted a partial smile. “Yeah... thanks, Agent. Now let’s move.”

“Yes, Sir...”

* * * * *

Kate was in the crèche, coloring a picture with Lucy. She was barely cognizant of what she was doing and her daughter chastised her when she went outside the lines. “Mama! You made the face all purple... look!”

“Oops, sorry... I’ll need to pay more attention, huh?”

The younger girl nodded profusely and continued with her artistic creation before Tony finished fixing the movie into the DVD player and called her over. As he settled down with both children in the giant beanbags, he signaled to Kate to see if she wanted to join them. The actress declined with a head shake and left the room.

She walked through the kitchen and into the living area where Sam was hovering by the fireplace. Her producer friend had been like her shadow since she arrived at the house and it was starting to get to Kate. Add to that the fact that Cecilia Carson had turned up a couple of hours earlier – no doubt notified of their situation by the Assistant Director - and was drifting around the house clearing up after the kids and generally loitered in case Kate needed her.

The blonde began to feel suffocated. She just needed her wife and she couldn’t have her so she wanted to be left alone to suffer in silence. “I’m going for a walk,” she said abruptly to Sam.

“Do you need some company?”

“No!” Kate retorted a little too sharply. Her bottom lip trembled at her outburst and she rushed through the hallway and out the front door alone. She jogged frantically away from the farmhouse and when she reached the end of the jetty that stuck out over the lake, she finally stopped running and tried to breathe. A gut-wrenching wail left her throat and she collapsed onto the wooden boards beneath her.

She sat there with no clue where her life would go if her CJ didn’t come back, and she had no idea how her broken heart would ever mend. She would exist... of course she would. Their children were so important to her and she would never leave them but there was nobody else in the world that could complete her like CJ could. *‘I’m not strong enough to survive without her...’* She let her eyes slip out of focus as she gazed at the surface of the lake.

“Yes, you are...”

CJ appeared beside her, casually swinging her long legs next to Kate’s. The blonde’s body stilled as a chill swept through her. She trembled and dared not look at the vision that she sensed was

watching her. “You’re not here...” Kate whispered, wondering the whole time why she couldn’t cry to release her pain.

“I’m always here,” the apparition said, reaching out to cover the smaller woman’s heart.

The actress leapt to her feet before it made contact and spun around without looking at what her imagination had conjured up again. Focusing her eyes on the house, she broke into a run and didn’t look back.

* * * * *

CJ sat on a rock and couldn’t shift a delusionary image of her wife from her mind. Kate was rushing away from her. She vaguely wondered where the blonde was going and bit her bottom lip as she tried to remember her soulmate’s touch. The memory came to her and her body seemed to react as her heart pumped stronger and a fiery, determined look fled across her weary eyes. Hissing some cold air through her teeth and slowly reaching up to her head, she also remembered how she came to be sitting here. After tripping over a fallen branch, she had tumbled to the ground, thumping her head on the very rock she was now perched on. She put her daydreaming – including what happened next – down to her most recent injury.

CJ raised her eyes as a pair of black leather boots came into view. She gawked at the man who leaned lazily on a nearby tree trunk and carved pieces of his apple with a strange-looking dagger. “Jack?” she asked, not even realizing yet that she was seeing a dead man. “What’re...?”

“What am I doing here?” he said nonchalantly. “Just waitin’ for you...”

“Huh?”

“I said... I’m just waiting for you. Clearly, you’re not gonna make it so I’m just waitin’...”

CJ blinked and finally figured out what he meant. “Fuck off, Jack! I’m going to get home and I’m not going to die!”

“Hmm, ya look kinda pathetic sitting there on your tush. If you were goin’ home, you’d be up an’ walkin’.” He took another piece of apple to his mouth, holding it between dagger and thumb, and it was then that CJ noticed his clothing.

“What the hell are you wearing?” She was so confused.

“You like it?” the big man asked, tugging on his tunic that was adorned with silver studs and swirling patterns. “I always thought it looked hot... black leather an’ all.”

“If ya like that sorta thing...”

“And I see by your face that you don’t,” he jested, waving the dagger in her direction.

“Like I said before, fuck off, Jack.”

“You do realize you’re not making a sound, don’t you? Lost your voice? I mean, I can still hear you... but no one else can and I don’t mean to be nasty but you look like you were just dragged through Tartarus...”

“You’re making no sense to me... go away!”

“Okay... but I’ll be around... ya know... waitin’? See you soon. Ciao!”

And with that, he disappeared. *‘Jesus, I’m completely losing it.’* The tall agent got to her feet, groaning and hissing as she did so. Her injuries were many but at least only a couple seemed serious. Unfortunately, the two more serious ones were both her arms and she never realized how much she’d used the damn things until she couldn’t. She walked forward, feeling the pressure in her old ankle injury as it continued to inflate against the inside of her boot. *‘May as well keep walking while I still can...’*



Chapter 3

After the fourth day of searching, Mark Mulroney sat in his motel room. He had barely spent a few hours in it so far but right now he was scrutinizing maps of the National Park on his laptop. Scoring off yesterday's search areas, he began to draw lines and section off the stretches of mountainous land to the east of the Cessna's flight path that they would focus on today. The maps were soon attached to an email and sent to Deputy Director Mitchell. Ten minutes later, he couldn't sit still and got up to use the shower before Jamie called him to say she was ready to leave again. They had managed five hours of sleep last night after the search teams were beaten into submission by high winds and zero visibility.

There had been no sightings of the plane and every moment that passed chipped away at the Assistant Director's resolve. He had to admit to himself now that it wasn't a rescue mission anymore. It was recovery... but at least if he recovered the body of his agent, she could be laid to rest.

Less than two hours later, the choppers were in the air and Mark was scanning the horizon as his aircraft came about to start their new search zone. His headphones sparked to life with the broadcast he had been waiting to hear. Charlie Six, one of the Little Bird helicopters, had spotted a wreck that matched the Jensen Cessna's description and were now looking for a place to land. Once they'd received the grid reference, the AD's pilot turned their chopper and headed in the direction of the site.

Mark suddenly felt sick. Jamie sat beside him with a desolate expression covering her graceful face. What were they going to find?

* * * * *

'They don't look poisonous,' CJ thought as she picked a few tiny red berries from a nearby bush. As she placed one in her mouth, her face scrunched into something rather unattractive as she swallowed the bitter taste of the fruit. She didn't feel like eating but her body had gotten pretty ravenous as the days passed and she'd decided that if they were going to affect her health, she just didn't care anymore. She downed the last of her water, gratefully gotten in the early hours of morning when she came across a small stream in the valley, and looked up between the two mountain peaks that now faced her. Every time she thought she was going to find something different over the next rise, it ended up being the same old scenery; mountain, valley... mountain, valley. Eyeing the lowest point between the giants, she gathered her courage and the remainder of her dwindling strength, and stood up only to fall back down again when her legs gave way.

"Ready to go?" a soft voice quipped behind her.

Her head spun to see another vision appearing between the shrubs. She was getting used to them now... not necessarily a good thing. "I... I can't get up."

“Of course you can, honey. I know you have more left in you,” Kate said while moving towards her using a long stick to prod the wiry branches out of her way.

Dark eyebrows drew together at the weird costume her wife had on this time. “I swear I’m going crazy.”

“Nope... you’re not crazy. But you are suffering from exhaustion and exposure. Maybe I’m just here to help you focus?”

“So you can hear me talking, right?” the agent asked, remembering what ‘Jack’ had said.

“Yeah, but you’re not using your voice. Just as well ‘cause your throat’s a mess.”

Kate stood leaning on her pole and CJ shook her head. “Why are you guys wearing these strange clothes?”

“You don’t like it? I’m quite partial to the red velvet...”

CJ was quite partial to it herself, had she the mental ability to really think about it. The short skirt and tailored, decorative sports bra were very appealing. “I do like it... yeah. And your hair...”

“Nice, huh? What do you think?” the blonde said, ruffling her short shaggy locks with her hand.

“It’s different... you look... beautiful.” CJ was ripping apart inside. She missed her wife so much. “But really... what’s with the outfit?”

The Kate vision looked down at her own body. “I know it’s confusing. I’m not really sure why it feels so right on me, but it does. Anyway, I’m here to help you... see that cave in the rock face up there?”

“Yeah...”

“You need to head over that ridge.”

CJ immediately whined. “But that one’s so much higher than the one I was going to cross.”

“Ahh, but you don’t know that there’s a huge lake on the other side of the one you were gonna try... this place is filled with water... bogs and swamps... rivers all over the place. So, it’ll get you out of here faster if you go my way. I want you to get home, Xe...” The Kate mirage etched a cute frown on her face and blushed. “I want you to get home, CJ.”

The tall agent was completely baffled by this woman who looked exactly like her wife but acted... different? “Uh, okay. Help me up?”

“I can’t. I’m not really here, remember?”

“Right.” CJ looked down and moved to pick up her cup using her right arm. It would only move from the elbow down now but she kept putting up with the pain just to make sure the entire thing didn’t drop off.

When she looked up to say thanks, the vision had disappeared. “I’ll end up in an asylum at this rate.” She decided not to try and speak out loud again when her raspy whisper brought on another bout of coughing... painful coughing.

* * * * *

As each passing hour dragged on, Kate lost more and more of her confidence. Mark hadn’t called in days. Jamie had only called Sam to say they were no further forward in the search and the actress knew it didn’t look good. She knew CJ was probably the toughest person she’d ever known but even tough people can’t fight fatal injuries.

Shannon suddenly appeared in front of her and Kate struggled to recollect where she was at that moment. *‘Oh... the back yard.’*

“Mama?”

“Yes, Shan?”

“My hair is really long now...”

The blonde paused for a moment to process the random comment. “It is... and it’s beautiful, sweetheart.”

“Can I get it cut?”

“If you want to. Why don’t we go today, huh?” the blonde suggested, thinking it would keep Shannon from asking more questions about her Mommy.

“Could we? Me and you?”

“Sure. I’ll ask Tony if he can drive us, okay?”

A tight hug was Kate’s response and she held her breath to stop herself from screaming out her agony, desperately wishing CJ was there to hug them too.

Three hours later, while Lucy slept in her car seat after she and Tony had enjoyed a burger and a play in a giant ball pit, the driver’s jaw dropped when two females walked out of the hair salon. Shannon had certainly had a trim and her brown locks hung loosely at shoulder length but Kate? Kate had cut all her hair off. A short, choppy and – he had to admit very beautiful – hairstyle adorned the actress’ head. It was somewhat feminine and completely changed her look but she was still as stunning as ever. When they got into the car, the driver turned his head. “You guys look incredible,” he smiled.

Kate forced a smile right back but Shannon was bursting with excitement. “Look at Mama’s hair! Isn’t it pretty?”

“It sure is, Shan. You both look really beautiful.”

“It was my idea. I just told Mama to get it short and she did it!”

“Wow... cool, huh? Well... I’m so happy to be driving such gorgeous ladies home.”

“Thank you, Tony,” Kate said quietly. “Here, Shan... color in your book...”

The girl nodded and happily filled in the gaps with her stubby crayons. “I can’t wait ‘til Mommy sees us,” she said without lifting her eyes from the page.

Tony almost saw the punch to Kate’s gut as she convulsed slightly at the innocent words. He spun around and started the engine, knowing he couldn’t really do anything for Kate except pray that CJ would come home in one piece.

* * * * *

Jamie’s heart was racing as they carefully hiked along the ridge and into the small valley. The wreckage was up ahead and she suddenly hated her job. Mark strode a few paces in front of her and was the first to greet the men of Charlie Six who were already on-site.

A tall, burly man walked over to them and reached out his hand. “Agent Bishop, Sir. It’s definitely the Jensen plane.”

“Bishop... have you located the bodies?”

“One body, Sir.”

“I don’t understand... was Agent Carson not confirmed as being on this flight?”

Jamie heard the AD’s voice rising and delicately placed a hand on the back of his shoulder, out of sight of the others. Mark didn’t seem to respond to the touch but his body slouched a little soon after.

Bishop licked his cold lips and bit them to get the feeling back. “Sir, Agent Carson survived the crash.”

“What?! How do you know that?”

“Uh... she left a note, Sir.”

Jamie gasped. “A *note!*?”

“Yes... sorry, we haven’t met. I’m Agent Bishop,” he said, shaking the blonde woman’s quivering hand.

“I’m Agent Green... can you tell us where this note is?”

The burly man smiled. “Yes... see the belly of the plane there? It’s at a forty-five degree angle to the ground...”

“And...?” the Assistant Director said, getting a little agitated.

“She must have been sheltering under there, Sir... she wrote it on the fuselage.”

Mark had to see this with his own eyes and with a nod he walked over the snow to the remains of the Cessna. Before he got down on his knees, he saw a dark body-bag lying on the ground. “Is this Doug Jensen?” he asked somberly.

“Yes... he’s been identified... and the plane’s serial number confirmed,” Bishop replied, moving to assist his colleagues.

Jamie knelt down on one knee next to Mark when he shuffled to lie under the belly of the plane. What he saw almost made him laugh. He read it quietly to Jamie.

“About time you showed up.

Couldn’t wait any longer.

Almost frozen to death.

Headed downhill.

Could use some help.

CJ Carson.”

“I can’t believe she survived. Kate was right.”

Mark shook his head in disbelief and looked at Jamie. “Seems like it... but we haven’t found her yet. There’s no way she could continue on a straight path in this landscape so finding her will still be a challenge. I have no idea how we’ll be able to see one individual from the air.” He touched the scribbled words tenderly. “And I think she wrote this in blood... she’s probably seriously injured.”

When he stood up, both he and Jamie stepped away from the mangled wreck. The blonde put her hand to her forehead. “I just can’t believe she survived that.” She turned to hide her face from the other rescuers as she tried to choke back a cry of anguish.

“We’ll find her, Green,” the AD tried to reassure. “Or... knowing CJ, she’ll find us.”

Jamie half smiled at that. “We can’t call Kate yet, Sir.”

“I know. No point in giving her false hope. Let’s go.” He spoke briefly with the others about removing Jensen’s body before returning to his chopper to begin planning the recovery of the plane. Once he’d given out the orders, they took off once more and commenced their next search. If they had no luck on this run, they’d have to wait until morning. It was getting dark out there... and heavy snow clouds were threatening.

* * * * *

A few hours later, CJ had made it to the cave but her body had given up after she’d sat down, so now she cowered under its shelter as the snow began to fall. She left the cup outside to fill up, aware that when it was full she could put it inside her jacket to melt the flakes. Sniffing away the cold drip that was constantly trickling from the end of her nose, she thought about her wife. Kate had been through this Hell before and CJ had a new, deeper respect for the woman she knew she’d love forever. The actress didn’t have boots to shield her feet; she didn’t have a thick bomber jacket to cover her chilled skin. Kate had traversed this type of terrain in this type of weather without anything but a ripped up blanket and her pajamas. CJ felt like a weak idiot.

‘God... she’s tougher than me. I don’t know why I’m surprised... I always knew that.’ Of course, the agent had survived a plane crash first, but that didn’t make much difference either... Kate had been beaten for a week before she escaped into the wilderness. *‘Why do we keep going through these things? Why is our life always like some kind of action thriller?’*

“It’s a pain in the ass, isn’t it?”

The Kate vision leaned against the opposite wall of the cave mouth and CJ appraised the recurring mirage that she now welcomed. “Kinda...”

“But would you really want a dull, boring life anyway?”

“I can’t imagine my life would ever be dull or boring with you in it.” The hallucination smiled and CJ almost cried at her beauty. She looked at the short hair again and smiled herself, trailing her eyes down the familiar body. “Hey, I like your coat.”

“Thanks,” the vision said while brushing her knuckles down the tan hide. “I do too.”

“Are you going to help me again?”

“Well, you haven’t climbed over the ridge yet... I’ll wait ‘til you’ve gone further. You’re on the right track.” Just then, CJ was startled when a wolf sauntered in and curled up at Kate’s feet. She stared at the creature with its fair coat and bright green eyes until the smaller woman chuckled. “You look like you’re about to have a heart attack...”

“No... no, not at all. It’s just...”

“She’s awesome, isn’t she? We’ll guide you, CJ... trust us.”

And with those words they both vanished, leaving the agent completely baffled again. But this time, she got the strange feeling it wasn’t just Kate who was trying to help her. It was her great-grandfather too.

* * * * *

Kate tried to hide from everyone in the study after the girls had gone to bed. Tony had yet to leave and was doing his best to keep out of the way; Sam wouldn’t leave and was constantly tailing the blonde as she moved through the house, and Cecilia was never going to leave, clearing up after dinner – and the dog – making sure there was nothing left for the actress to do.

Kate knew they all loved her and wanted to be of service but it was driving her insane and she didn’t feel like interacting with anyone. She needed to be alone to have some time to herself to think, time to figure out why her wife would leave her, time to grieve? She could never blame CJ for this. The agent didn’t know her plane would crash. But still, she promised many times they’d never be apart! Anger, hurt, confusion and heartache ran through the petite body and her mind ran in tighter and tighter circles until she couldn’t keep up with it anymore. She needed quiet!

“Kate, would you like some tea before I go for the night?” Cecilia said gently as she popped her head around the door to the study.

“No, thank you.”

“I could make up something for you to eat later, if you want...?”

“No. Please, Cecilia, just head home.”

The older woman knew Kate was hurting but if she didn’t eat she was going to waste away to nothing, and that would affect the children eventually. “Kate, please let me-“

The actress rose abruptly and stormed over to the door. “I need some time. Will you all just go?!”

The others heard her uncharacteristic words and emerged from the living room. With Sam, Tony and Aunt Cece now standing in the hall looking at her with sad eyes, she held her head in her hands and her voice rose. “Just get out and leave me alone... please!” All her energy left her and she finished in a whisper. “Please.”

Sam and Tony went to collect their things and Cecilia approached her to give her a hug. Kate returned it but let go when the others headed for the door. “Thank you.” Once all three had left, she apologized to the empty room and slumped down on the bottom step next to the dog. She felt totally and utterly lost.

* * * * *

The frosty morning bit at CJ's fingers as she attempted to move the stiff digits. She hadn't slept as such, but she had drifted in and out of consciousness throughout an extremely cold night. Shifting her eyes to the side, she saw that the previous night's visitors hadn't returned and wasn't sure if she was happy or sad about that.

She sat up with an effort and tried to find the will to keep trying to get home. Her body was saying forget it but her heart never could. *'Time to go.'*

She eventually got to the top of the ridge above the cave and her face fell when she saw nothing but a long, long way down a gradual slope into the next valley. Some of the fluffy clouds were floating below where she stood, blocking her view and showing just how high some of the ridges were. Following her gut, she began her unsteady descent, wishing with everything left in her that she didn't have much more of this to do.

'Maybe a helicopter ride home?' She decided that wish was a bit of a stretch and settled on just finding some water. She'd given up on eating since all she'd come across so far was the occasional berry bush and even those small treats were agony to swallow. She would be starting to lose weight from her severe lack of nourishment over the past week and she silently cursed herself once again for not eating properly when she was hunting down a murderer. She wondered how much longer her body could sustain itself without fuel. The reason the plane had crashed popped into her head and she smiled humorlessly at the irony.

* * * * *

Forty eight hours later, Kate Carson lay completely still in her bed, her blank eyes staring at the ceiling as usual. She had managed the children on her own the last two days and with only three phone calls from Sam to check up on her, she felt like she could breathe a little better. Tony had come into the house yesterday and filled up the kitchen cupboards and the fridge which meant Kate didn't have to leave the house, and that suited her just fine. She hadn't been answering calls either but seemed to recall a message on her voicemail rescheduling her audition... to when, she didn't know.

Sleep had eluded her for a week now and she felt like her soul had been fully ripped out, never to be restored. Every moment that passed without CJ increased the pain inside and her heart crumbled a little more every day when no news came of the agent being found. In a fit of fury and agonizing frustration, she had yelled at Mark on the phone yesterday morning and forced him into telling her everything. He'd said that CJ survived the crash but they hadn't located her yet and, amidst their heightened emotions and angry words, he was quick to point out that she had most likely succumbed to the elements after this amount of time. She had also discovered that the recovery crew was having problems bringing the plane down from its remote plateau, giving her an idea of just how inhospitable the area was and how much trouble her wife was really in.

Kate had been completely numb after the call and had cared for her daughters the best she could, even though she felt like a brainless zombie. She knew it was starting to affect them now and she also knew she'd have to tell them something soon to explain their Mommy's extended absence. December was upon them and both girls had mentioned CJ, asking if she would be home before Christmas. Kate hadn't answered them but had neatly diverted their attention onto something easier for her to handle. She also hadn't sent them back to school yet.

She sighed and blinked her dry eyes. She still hadn't cried since the day CJ went missing and her spirit had gone into hiding to try and cope. She grabbed the tee shirt she had previously pulled from the laundry basket and held it against her cheek, inhaling the faint scent of her soulmate. An agonizing squeeze on her heart should have made her cry... but the tears just wouldn't come.

She closed her eyes again and tried to think back over the past week, vaguely remembering Mark sitting opposite her and telling her that CJ's plane had gone down in the Voyageurs National Park. She remembered the distant darkness that swooped in and engulfed her petite frame, suffocating her insides. It seemed like yesterday that he'd told her and she struggled to bring into focus everything that had happened since then.

Hearing a floorboard creaking somewhere outside her door, she expected to see Shannon coming into the dark room. The girls had not been sleeping very well and it worried Kate. She just wished she could make it better for all of them. When her daughter didn't appear, she held her breath to listen again. A deep and penetrating fear filled her when she heard Kamali growling low and long.

She bolted upright and a freezing cold chill traveled down her spine when the growling did not stop. As her heartbeats tripled in speed and power, she shoved CJ's tee shirt between the pillows and shot out of bed, heading to the closet with her stomach in a multitude of burning knots. She unlocked the safe and pulled out the Colt .45, loading the clip like a professional. She stood up and held the weapon at her shoulder with both hands pointing upwards, just like CJ had taught her. Kamali was still growling and she swiftly moved to the bedroom door and peeked out into the upper hallway.

She saw the big dog standing on the landing, his front paws at the edge of the top step. His head was hung low as he looked towards the front door and his lips were peeled back in a vicious snarl. His growls came in waves and his sharp fangs glistened in the moonlight that ricocheted around the space from the various windows. He reminded her of a wolf about to defend its territory as he inhaled a scathing, rough breath between the chilling rumbles. Kate had never seen him like this and it terrified her – not because she was afraid of the dog, but because she was afraid of the reason he was acting this way.

The actress seemed to instinctually know that nobody was inside the house otherwise the German Shepherd would be barking or attacking the intruder. But something was definitely wrong and she padded along the upper hallway until she reached the end of the wall where it met the railing. "Kamali," she whispered. The big canine was silent for a few seconds when he turned to look at her, but soon whipped his head back around to continue his warning, sending a low and definite growl down the staircase. Kate followed his gaze and saw that the alarm box above

the front door was still lit a solid red, meaning the perimeter of the house had not been penetrated. An especially loud growl was heard from the dog just as her eye caught a dark shadow moving quickly across the ground in front of the porch outside. Taking deep, deep breaths, she refocused her mind and as the figure was going left to right, she immediately thought the intruder was heading to the barn... for what, she didn't know. There was nothing of value in the large building.

Leaving Kamali to guard the stairs, she moved stealthily back to the master bedroom to look out the window. She heard a faint, distant squeal but couldn't understand where it came from. The horses suddenly bolted across their field in fright. She could barely see through the darkness but suddenly, a human figure dressed all in black except for some dirty white sneakers, entered the barn. He looked to be carrying something but again, she couldn't make it out. Kate's heart was working its way up her throat and she desperately wished CJ was with her right now.

Barely a moment later, flames licked their way out the barn doors and when Kate saw the intruder running from the building her fear turned to anger. She bolted down the stairs, glad when Kamali stayed to guard the children's bedrooms, and pressed the alarm code into the keypad to unlock the door. Flicking the safety off and swinging her aim to the left, she poked her head momentarily out the door before drawing it back in – again just like CJ had taught her. She saw nobody on the porch and repeated the process to the right. The black figure came sprinting past the front of the house and Kate lifted the .45 and took aim. The man moved quickly and she fired a shot at the ground about two feet behind his running form.

A loud “Fuck!” was heard and the intruder disappeared faster into the blackness of night.

She watched with piercing eyes until she could no longer see the retreating figure. Kate's heart was racing and she backed up over the threshold, locking the door before heading to the phone. Kamali had stopped growling and the blonde looked up at him as she dialed 911. “Good boy.”

Once she had summoned the police and fire department, there was nothing else to do but get the girls out of the house just in case the fire spread over the distance between the buildings. It was highly unlikely but Kate would never take the chance. The horses were outside so she wasn't about to risk anyone's life to try and quell the blaze herself. She ran upstairs past the dog to get the girls.

Shannon was already awake. “Mama! There was a loud bang.”

“I know, honey. Don't worry... but we need to go out into the car, okay?”

“But it's dark!”

“Shannon, please just do as I say. C'mon, we need to get Lucy!”

They collected the younger girl and a couple of blankets. Once outside, Kate was confused to see the Dodge Ram parked behind her car. ‘*When did that get here?*’ She looked at the keys she had grabbed from the hall table and realized they were CJ's spare set. ‘*Tony... he must have picked it*

up from LAX. That man thinks of everything... She felt terrible for sending him away but she didn't have time to wallow over her mistakes right now.

She bundled her children into the truck with their blankets and loaded the dog into the back of the vehicle, then jumped in herself and reversed away from the house to wait for the emergency services. With the truck doors locked and the gun on her lap – with the safety back on – she picked up her cell phone with shaky hands to call her father. It was time for him to come and visit.

* * * * *

“Thanks, Dad... I'm sorry I woke you.”

“No apologies, Katie. I'll get a flight as soon as I can.”

“I love you,” the actress said, rubbing her hand through her short blonde hair.

“I love you too... just hold on 'til I get there, honey.”

“I'll try... bye, Dad.”

“Bye.”

Once the actress hung up the call, Shannon pulled herself forward by grabbing onto the front seat. “Are you okay, Mama?”

“Yes, Shan. I'm sorry about earlier. I... I was a little scared.” When Kate had been sitting in the car for a few minutes, she'd realized the fear that had encompassed her was all for her children. It had jolted her roughly out of her mind-numbing catatonic state.

“Is Grandpa coming?”

“He'll be here once he gets someone to look after the restaurant. Grandpa Jeffrey can't do it because he's sick.”

“What's wrong with him?”

“Just a bad cold, hon.”

“What's that?” the seven-year old asked, pointing to the smoke billowing from beyond the house.

“The barn's on fire, sweetie... but don't worry. The fire fighters will be here soon.”

The moment she said it, the sirens could be heard in the far distance. Shannon and Lucy both watched the dark driveway to see if the flashing lights were visible yet. Kate scanned the area

around them constantly, watching for the return of the intruder who had invaded their haven. There was no reason for anyone to come all the way out here to set fire to a barn and it increased her worry the more she thought about it. Had she stopped him doing something more by shooting at him? Had they been targeted?

Chapter 4

There was a rustle in the nearby undergrowth but CJ couldn't move. She'd just relieved her bladder and using her arm to undo her cargo pants was getting more and more difficult. She sat ruminating over her various injuries, supporting her broken wrist with her failing right arm. She was shivering and didn't want to budge from the protective huddle she was now in but when a twig snapped, she had to look up into the moonlit clearing. "Not again..." she mumbled, realizing with startling clarity that she'd only thought the words and wasn't actually speaking.

"What? You want me to leave?" the vision asked.

"No, please don't! I just... seriously, am I losing my mind? Or am I just dead and don't know it?"

"Neither of the above," the blonde chirped as she sat down about two feet in front of the agent.

"O-kaaay. Where's your wolf friend?"

"She's around. I wanted to come and talk to you..."

CJ quickly checked the outfit her wife was wearing this time and it seemed that this was definitely Kate. The vision sat casually with her legs crossed like it was the middle of summer, wearing faded blue jeans and the black halter-neck sleeveless shirt CJ loved. Her eyes rose to find the cutest grin on the mirage's friendly face. "What?"

"You're staring."

"Oh, uh sorry... what did you want to talk to me about?"

"The man you saw at Jensen's airfield."

"What man?"

"The one that gave you a strange feeling in your belly..."

"Oh... the mechanic guy?"

“Yes.”

“What about him?”

The Kate vision looked at her seriously. “Had you seen him before?”

“I... I don't think so... I...” CJ's stomach re-enacted the flip-flop it had performed that day. “Oh God... I... it was him on the plane.”

“What plane?”

“The... the flight from LA... he was the guy who was watching me when... when I spoke with the old lady. But why...?”

“I don't know... but don't you want to find out? You'd better get home, CJ...”

The shrubbery began to appear through the vision and CJ knew Kate was fading away. “Hey... wait!” But it was no use. She was alone again. *‘Damn it!’*

Testing her flashlight and seeing it shining bright, she got up onto her knees and attempted to stand. She knew her boot was the only thing preventing her ankle from exploding but she had to keep moving, even if it was the dead of night. For the next twenty hours, she pushed herself beyond her limits and covered a fair amount of ground. To the National Park, it was barely a blip on its landscape but to CJ it was an arduous trek across the world.

* * * * *

He finally met up with his partner in crime at a downtown bar in Los Angeles. They had to continue with the plan and their next move was to do more damage at the Carson house to scare the blonde thing out of her wits. His problem was going to be explaining to his buddy that he didn't want to do it.

“Hey, man...”

He looked up at the recognizable voice. “Sit.”

“So what's the next move?” Mr. ‘Electronic-Tabs’ asked as he slid into the booth.

“Not sure yet but I am sure about one thing...”

“What?”

“I ain't doin' it.”

“What?!”

“She fucking shot at me, man! I didn’t sign up to get killed. She ain’t no easy target... she’s a crazy bird.”

“You listen to me... and listen good. You will do it. We’ve got two hundred k’s each riding on this and if you don’t follow through, I’ll fuckin’ kill you myself.”

“If you want the money, you do it!”

“I’m the brains of this outfit... you’re the brawn.”

“Hey!” he protested. “I got brains too... I did the job on that damn plane, after all...”

His partner laughed. “Yeah, but I had to tell you *how* to do it.”

“Well, I ain’t getting’ killed. No point in workin’ for all that money and then dying before you see any of it.”

“She’s just one chick... and I’m sure she won’t shoot ya... probably can’t even aim straight. Just get the next part done... and do it right or I’ll hunt you down.”

He looked down into his glass and shook his head. There was no way to get out of it... and he really wanted all that cash. They had no idea that Kate Carson had deliberately aimed at the dirt that night. They had no idea who they were dealing with.

* * * * *

Mark thumped his fist down on the table. “They want to do what!?” he bellowed at a startled Jamie.

“Uh, they’re calling off the search, Sir.”

“No way!”

“But Sir, it’s been over a week. We’re never going to find one person in thousands of square miles of wilderness. It’s impossible.” Agent Green was exhausted and knew she was being defeatist but her brain felt like mulch.

“We are not giving up, Agent!” the AD bit off sharply.

“I don’t want to give up, Sir... but how can we continue without the backing of the Bureau?”

“There are volunteers here... and we can fund the rest somehow.”

At that moment, Agent Dalton came running into the hangar. Mark had thought he was taking a nap in his motel room but little did he know his colleagues had been hatching a plan after the depressing news had come down through Tim’s boss. “Assistant Director... oh, hi Jamie... uh,

I'm not sure how but we managed to get another few days. They'll continue to retrieve the wreckage but we only have half our search team. Your idea worked, Jamie..." he nodded at the blonde woman. "My Deputy caved... kinda. The Black Hawks are leaving and one of the Little Birds has been called away but telling him to cut the workforce, and well... begging... it worked!"

"Dalton, Green..." Mark felt a swell of pride for the two agents. "Well done. Call the Black Hawk in... I think he's still out there. Let's take a couple of hours rest until we get organized... then it's back to it."

When Tim moved away, the tall man turned to Jamie. "Hey... sorry."

"Sir, you don't have to apologize to me."

"Yes I do, Jamie. I know we have to remain professional in public but this situation is... unique? We both love CJ and I shouldn't have snapped at you. I know you want to find her just as much as I do."

His declaration was not lost on the blonde and her opinion of her unusual boss rose higher than it already was. "Mark," she chanced, "...it's okay to lose it. That *is* your job, after all. You're the boss and you can shout all you want... but thank you... and apology accepted. Our girl will turn up. I just know she will."

He nodded and pulled his bottom lip between his teeth. "I'm not gonna be able to rest but I think we should go to the motel and at least freshen up."

"I'd have to agree..."

Once the helicopter landed and its crew was relieved of duty, the agents did just that. They knew they couldn't work on fresh air alone, much as they'd like to.

* * * * *

The flames were extinguished efficiently after the Fire Department arrived. The cops were also there in force. Three marked police cruisers had arrived and when an older man with a balding head got out of the last car, Kate vaguely recognized him. It seemed her call about the fire and intruder on her property had caught the attention of a certain LAPD officer who remembered Kate Marshall.

When he approached her, he held out his hand. "Miss Marshall... I wish we could meet again under better circumstances but... nature of the beast, I suppose."

"I'm sorry... with everything that's been going on recently I can't remember your name."

"Lieutenant Johnson, Ma'am. I dealt with the threat letters you were receiving at the studios a few years back."

“Oh gosh... yes... thank you for coming out so fast, Lieutenant.”

“Please, call me Callum. Shall we go inside now? The Fire Chief has cleared the house.”

“Of course, I’ll just need to bring the girls in,” the actress said, reaching for the truck’s door handle.

When she let Shannon out and lifted Lucy, a female officer stepped forward to offer her assistance with the dog and spare blanket. The young cop wrapped the fleecy cover around Shannon’s shoulders and a sleepy ‘thanks’ was her reply.

Kate called the dog as he was being released to try and keep him close, but he was desperate to check out the remains of the barn and guard his humans from the many people around the house, and began to leap away. A stern command from Kate made him come to heel. “Thank you for your help, Officer...?”

The female cop with the spikey black hair smiled. “Daniels, Ma’am... and you’re welcome.”

The small group walked into the farmhouse and once Kate got both the girls settled into her bed in the master suite – just for tonight – she headed back along the upper landing, pausing at the dog who was standing on his spot wondering where his two buddies were. The actress crouched beside him. “Lie down, Kamali... they’re right there... in my bed.” The big canine relaxed a little no doubt due to the wonderful fingers scratching along the hair under his collar, before Kate kissed his head and stood up. She continued down the stairs to find the two officers still standing looking around the living area. “Oh, please sit. I apologize for-“

“No need for apologies, Miss Marshall, you’ve been through quite an ordeal.”

“It’s been an awful night,” she agreed.

“You have a lovely home...”

“Thank you.”

“I’ve spoken to the Chief... he believes it was arson and I’m sure they’ll be confirming that soon. You mentioned on your call that you saw the perpetrator running away?”

Yes. I... shot at him to scare him off.”

“Shot at him?”

“I wasn’t aiming to hurt him, Lieutenant. I merely wanted to make sure she wouldn’t stick around,” Kate said rigidly.

“I understand. I assume the gun is-“

Kate shook her head with agitation. “Yes, it is registered! It belongs to my wife. She’s a Federal Agent.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize. Is she on her way home? Someone should really be here with you...”

The actress gulped back her bitter reactive response. “She’s... missing. The FBI is looking for her. I’ve called my father.”

“Ah...” Johnson wanted to delve deeper since something was definitely going on here but he decided to go back to his office to do that. This woman looked like she was ready to break, although he did remember Kate Marshall having a stubborn and fiery attitude back in the day. He had wanted to put a protection detail on her seven years ago but she wouldn’t allow it, telling him she wasn’t going to let a sick crackpot win and force her into hiding. Looking back, the cop knew he should have pushed the issue and shook his head while he made a few notes in his book. “We’ll leave a patrol car out here for the next few nights until I can get a better picture of what’s going on.” When the blonde was about to protest, he raised a hand. “I won’t back down this time, Kate. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

As he stood to leave, the actress inhaled deeply in defeat. “Okay. I’ll show you out.” When the two officers were on the porch, she thanked them and looked out to see that the fire trucks had left after cordoning off the barn but she knew the investigators would be back. The Lieutenant spoke with one of his cops before he got into his cruiser and drove off. Kate pushed the door closed and locked it, setting the alarm before going upstairs and crawling into bed beside her children. Lucy had grabbed a hold of CJs tee shirt and Shannon was holding her sister’s little hand while they slept. Kate knew that somewhere in their subconscious, the girls sensed something was terribly wrong.

* * * * *

In the middle of the night, somewhere deep within the Voyageurs National Park, the temperature was falling to a few notches below freezing. CJ opened her nipping eyes and wondered when she had fallen face down onto the rough and very uncomfortable ground. Her flashlight lay in front of her, lighting an eerie patch of snow and casting strange shapes and shadows all around her. Her shallow breaths caught in her throat when she saw the black wolf standing in front of her, its blue eyes fixated on her prone body and saliva dripping from its dangerous fangs. The wolf’s head hung low and it growled angrily at her before she saw two feet standing next to it. Doing her best to lift her head, her eyes traveled up the strong body until they met with familiar green orbs. But those beautiful eyes were filled with rage this time and the agent gulped back her apprehension. The wolf stood loyally by the vision’s side and CJ knew they were both hallucinations but they still made her feel... something. Kate had taken on a fierce look – not like all the times before – and the smaller woman stood with her hands on her hips. “Shit... she’s really angry,” the agent mumbled from her place in the dirt.

“Look at the state of you!” Kate growled, accompanied by a growl from the wolf.

“I’m doing... the best I can. Don’t-“

“The best you can? The best you can!? That’s bullshit and you know it! Don’t you want to get home to us? Don’t you love me enough to get back on your Goddamn feet and try harder?”

CJ’s eyes narrowed in pain at the accusation. “I do love you! More than life... you know th-

“No!” the vision interrupted. “I don’t know that. Look at you... you’re pathetic. Now get up off the ground, Agent Carson, and quit whining! Move!!”

CJ pushed herself up on her good hand but the action made her shoulder ache and her newly acquired cuts – gained from a slip up earlier with a thorny bush – sting like crazy. Frustration rose within her as she tried to get to her feet... with no help from her supposedly loving wife.

“Get up! Get up now!!”

“I’m fucking doing it, Kate! Damn it!”

The next words were punctuated by toe kicks to CJ’s leg, which she was sure she could actually feel. “Get! The! Hell! Up!”

The agent was livid now and from her sitting position, she tried to swipe a punch at the hallucination’s legs but Kate moved too quickly. “Leave me alone!” As soon as the words were out of CJ’s mouth, the vision’s face was directly in front of hers.

“Is that what you *really* want? You want to be left alone... to die? I thought you’d never leave me, CJ. I thought you would be there for me forever. You have the chance to get home to me and our daughters and you’re lying here in a pool of self-pity?” The vision of Kate rose up to her full height once more and stepped back. “If you want to be left alone, so be it. I’ll just give up on ever finding you again!” And with that, Kate disappeared.

CJ cried out in agony at the new stab through her heart, and it echoed across the wilderness around her. “No... no, no, no!” After forcing the sound out, her throat tightened again and she tried to swallow against the burning lumps that threatened to close it up completely. She somehow found the energy to stand and once on her feet, she twisted around to look in all directions. No sign of her beloved wife. No way to apologize for her lack of effort. ‘*I do want to go home.*’ She took the last drips of dirty water from her trusty cup and wiped her hand across her brow, making the dislocated shoulder scream out in protest yet again. She numbed herself to its newest stream of constant nagging and noticed the dirty streak on her hand. ‘*God, I’m filthy.*’ She tried her best to move one foot in front of the other and whispered, “Come back, Katie... please. I need you. I’ll always need you.”

* * * * *

At 10am, the smaller team of recruits bustled about in the hangar at Jensen’s Aviation preparing to leave. Morale was low and they all knew their task was like finding a tiny needle in a giant haystack. Searching from the sky was a nightmare, even with the heat-seeking camera they had. All they’d found with it so far were wild animals.

Mark climbed into his chopper and strapped on the seatbelt as Jamie put on her headphones. He was losing confidence by the minute and felt sick at the thought that they might have to leave CJ's body out there. How could he leave her to die after she'd managed to survive the crash? He couldn't even think about the possibility that he wouldn't find her.

Little did they know, they had covered the area CJ was in but the camera wouldn't have locked on to her that night as she had been dozing inside the mountain cave. With a loud whirr, the helicopter came to life and lifted off the ground to commence another long day above the Voyageurs National Park.

* * * * *

Meanwhile in California, Kate Carson was getting more than a little concerned for her mental health. While she was getting ready in her room, she looked over to the ensuite and saw CJ leaning against the doorjamb swirling a metal hoop around her finger. "Uh... what are you doing?" the blonde asked, figuring if she didn't say anything, the vision was just going to stare at her all day.

"Just watching over you..."

"I'd prefer if you didn't watch me get dressed..."

"You don't want your wife to watch you get dre--"

"You're not my wife. She's..." Kate faltered and dropped her eyes.

"Ah... how do you know I'm not?"

"For one thing, my wife wouldn't have one of those." She pointed to the hoop.

The vision shrugged and stopped twirling the item, grabbing it by its edge and looking at its reflective surface before she began to fade. "Listen to your heart."

And with that, Kate was alone in the bedroom again. '*Listen to my heart? I always listen to my heart... and it's aching right now...*' She shook her head to refocus and wondered how she was going to get through another day without going completely out of her mind. "The children," she said aloud. "That's how I'm going to get through it..."

* * * * *

Later that night, Mark sat eating a cheeseburger at a roadside diner near his motel when his phone began to ring. Jamie looked up from the other side of the table with her mouth full of fries as he answered the call. "Mulroney."

"Assistant Director, this is Tennison. I'm afraid I have to shut you down. There's a major incident here in Minneapolis and I need my troops. I'm sorry to cut your search short."

“Sir, I need to keep looking-“

“No, Mulrone... after nine days, I can’t justify prioritizing your case over one that can actually save lives.”

“With all due respect, Deputy Director, I have an agent out there and I’m going to find her.”

“Not on the Bureau’s nickel you’re not. There’s nothing else I can do.”

“Right.” Mark didn’t even offer a goodbye and hung up the call angrily. “No way are we quitting...”

“Is he calling it off after all?”

“Yes. Funds are needed elsewhere,” he mimicked sarcastically.

Jamie now prodded at her food then dropped the fork with a clatter. “I hope Dalton didn’t get any hassle from this... I pushed him into approaching the DD.”

“Not your issue, Jamie... and Tim can take care of himself.”

“Sir, we’re going to keep looking, right?”

“Yes. We’ll appeal to the volunteers. They’ve been great so far and I think we could keep one chopper in the air... even if I have to dig into my own pocket.”

Silence descended on the table as they pretended to finish their meal. Jamie felt the fight leave her body but when she looked up at Mark, his dark eyes were full of fury and she knew he was on the verge of throwing the rule book right out the window.

* * * * *

“Hey,” Kate said as she hugged her driver.

“Hi... I was surprised to hear from you this morning. Are you... okay?”

“Okay is such a subjective word, Tony, but yes I’ll be okay. I wanted to get the girls’ routine back to something resembling normal so Alice is here today and I hoped you would just... stay for a while?”

“Oh Kate, I’d love to, you know that. I didn’t want to leave you before but...”

“I know. I’m sorry about how I acted-“

“Whoa! Don’t you dare say sorry... I... I can’t imagine what you’re going through.”

The actress sighed. “Well... you’re here now and I need to update you. We’ve had news...”

“About CJ?”

“Yes. They found the plane and she survived the crash but...” Kate continued with some difficulty. “She’s missing. The agents are searching for her.”

The young man took her gently by the shoulders. “That’s amazing news though, Kate. I’m sure she’ll make it... she has a lot to live for.” He pulled his boss into a hug and when they parted, Kate gave him a tentative smile.

“There’s something else. Last night, the barn burned down.”

“What!?” I didn’t even notice when I came up the drive.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have been looking for anything like that and it’s not really visible from the drive. But Tony... someone deliberately set it on fire.”

In a move that was quite bold for the driver, he put his arm tightly around Kate’s shoulder and led her into the kitchen as he spoke. “You think they targeted you?”

The blonde gawked at him as she stood next to the island unit. “What made you say that?”

“I don’t know... it’s just kinda far from... well, everywhere out here and if it was just some crazy arsonist, they’d have plenty of places to pick without going on a fifty minute drive to find an empty barn.”

“You’re right, Tony. I’m just amazed that you thought the same thing as me,” Kate said, running her hand through her short hair and frowning. “Wow, I haven’t gotten used to this new style yet.”

He caught the look and grinned. “You look beautiful, Kate.”

“Are you kidding? With these dark bags under my eyes...?”

“You’re still beautiful... and when CJ gets back you’ll get some rest.”

“You sound pretty confident of that.”

“I have to be. I believed you when you said she wasn’t... dead... and it turns out she survived the crash. You were right... and she’ll be home soon,” he nodded while taking a nervous, shaky breath.

Hearing him say that with such conviction made Kate realize how silly it really sounded. She had been saying to her friends that CJ was alive from the start but how could they ever believe that without feeling what she felt inside? The crash was bad enough, but now her wife was out there

in the middle of nowhere in God-knows-what condition and it had been ten days now. Was CJ dead? Was she kidding herself? “I have to have faith in her, Tony.”

“I know. I do too,” he replied, covering her hand on the cool counter surface. “Coffee?”

“Yes please... and thank you. You’ve been great and I’d love it if you’d stay with us today... and take the girls to school tomorrow?”

“Of course, I’d love that too. Where are they, by the way?”

“They’re with Alice and the twins in the crèche. Come to think of it, they’re all very quiet... must be watching a movie.”

Tony felt like crying. Alice was here, he was here and it seemed Kate was coping a little better. He was so relieved. The heavy burden bearing down on her shoulders remained obvious and her eyes still bore a huge amount of pain, but that almost super-human inner strength she possessed was asserting itself again; a good sign. He watched as the blonde popped her head around the crèche door and turned to nod at him. As she crept back towards him, he asked in an exaggerated stage whisper, “Did you call your Dad?”

“Yeah... he’s coming to visit today. He had trouble getting cover for the restaurant and Jeffrey’s sick so it took him a while to organize.”

“Do you want me to go pick him up?”

One side of Kate’s mouth curled upward. “Would you? He gets in to LAX in...” She turned to look at the clock. “...two hours.”

“No problem.”

That was the last decent conversation anyone had with the actress. While Tony was away collecting Eddie Senior, Kate got a call from Mark to tell her that the Bureau was calling off the search for her wife. Mark hadn’t managed to secure a helicopter and was still looking for a way to continue, even going so far as to ask his own Deputy Director for help. It wasn’t looking good and he felt terrible for letting Kate down... for letting CJ down. The blonde didn’t take the news well and clammed up once again, going about the rest of her day in a haze and automatically saying goodbye to the kids as they left for school the next morning. It had knocked her back down and she wasn’t sure how much more she could cope with.

Chapter 5

Special Agent CJ Carson crumpled to the ground but at least this time it was planned. ‘*Just a teeny break...*’ she assured herself as the dusk slowly settled over the mountains on her eleventh evening in the unforgiving wilderness. She reached into her pocket for a Band Aid since her right palm looked to be getting infected. She forced the hand to her mouth to suck off all the dirt and spit it onto the snow. Drying it on her jacket seemed to defeat the purpose of cleaning it but she had to make the Band Aid stick and once she’d done that, she talked herself into getting back up. A gruff roar made her freeze like a statue.

The bear was standing on all fours about thirty feet in front of her. He watched the human and twisted his head to the side to analyze her when she moved her arm slowly and steadily. CJ wondered if he was real but quickly decided she should just assume that he was. She reached for her gun and prayed the bear wasn’t as hungry as he looked. Another roar and he was standing tall – about eight feet tall – on his back legs.

He dropped down again with a thud and made a move towards her. She cocked the pistol and took aim into the sky, hoping to scare him without having to kill him. Heck, shooting him would probably just piss him off. With a loud bang, the Glock let out its warning, halting the huge beast in his tracks. A string of curse words ran through CJ’s mind at the shattering pain the backlash of the gunshot caused in her body. The bear grunted and stuck his bottom lip out at her, making him look really stupid when in actual fact, he was probably wondering if she might taste good enough to fight for. A few tense seconds passed before the giant chose to avoid this dangerous prey and look elsewhere for his lunch.

When he disappeared through the trees, the gap he left twinkled. CJ was still a little stunned and let her eyes glaze over as she brought her mind around full circle and slowed her pounding pulse. As she refocused, it dawned on her that the twinkle was a light. ‘*A light? Not a star?*’ She got up and grimaced at her body’s protestations. ‘*Another hallucination...*’ she thought grimly.

“Nope.”

CJ felt the vision of her wife standing right behind her. “Not a hallucination?”

“It’s real. Looks like you found civilization, honey.”

“What’s the catch?” the agent queried, still not truly believing she would ever get out of here.

“Catch? Hmm... well, it looks to be a million miles away but I’d say you could be there by dinner time tomorrow.”

“Don’t talk about food. I’m not sure if the thought makes me want to throw up or if I want to eat ‘til I throw up.”

The ghostly figure chuckled. “Just go home, CJ... before we both die of heartbreak.”

At that, the taller woman turned her head. “Is she... I mean, are you...?”

“Existing... yes. Living? Definitely not.”

“Oh Katie... I need to be with you so bad.”

A nod to show the feeling was mutual. “Then head for that light and don’t stop until you get there.”

In an instant she was gone and CJ turned back to what she hoped was a street lamp... in a town... with a phone... and maybe a doctor. With a new surge of hope and energy she never knew she possessed, she put her Glock back into the holster and started her trek home... keeping her tired eyes open in case the bear decided to try again.

* * * * *

Eddie Marshall Senior folded the book closed and kissed both his granddaughters goodnight. As usual, the story had sent Lucy to sleep. She never concentrated on the words so much as the soft voice that sent her off into the land of nod. Shannon curled into her Grandpa’s arms. “Is Mama sad?”

Eddie had pretty much been on the verge of tears since he’d arrived and seen the state of his daughter and heard what had happened to CJ. Now, he held back his emotions for the sake of this fragile and sensitive child. “She’s a bit sad, yes sweetheart... but you know what?”

“What?”

“You and Lucy make her feel better and I know she’ll be fine soon.”

Shannon lifted her head and rubbed her eyes. “Is it because of Mommy?”

“What did your Mama say about that?”

“Just that Mommy couldn’t get back as soon as she hoped. She’s still far away and she’ll be home soon...”

“I’m sure she *will* be home soon, Shan. Mommy’s... lost... and her friends are trying to find her and help her to get home.” The caring man didn’t quite know how to explain everything and sighed. “I bet she’s back waaaay before Christmas though!”

“I hope so ‘cause look...” Shannon said, pointing to Lucy who had Barney the Bear tightly in her grasp. “She hasn’t wanted Barney since we first came home to live here. I think she’s sad too.”

“Oh honey, you’re such a clever girl. Listen, how about... tomorrow I take you and Lucy and Kamali for a fun picnic after school. We could go out into the field, take a little dinner and maybe play with your sister’s ball too! That might cheer her up, huh?”

“Oh yes, that would. She likes to play ball.”

“Good. Now you lie down here and stay close to Lucy... and I’ll go stay close to your Mama, all right?”

“Okay, Grandpa... night-night.”

“Goodnight, precious girl. See you in the morning.”

He tucked them both in and dulled the nightlight to a peep. Leaving the door ajar, he wandered down to find Kate, side-stepping a relaxed Kamali at the foot of the stairs. He found his daughter on the couch, staring at her cell phone on the coffee table. As he approached he saw her press a button on the handset and lean back to listen to the message CJ had left before she got on the ill-fated plane. “Oh, sweetheart, don’t torture yourself,” he said softly as he sat down.

Kate didn’t break her trance while the message played. When CJ’s warm tones finished with, *‘See you all soon... I love you more than you’ll ever know... always. Bye, Katie,’* the actress looked into her father’s eyes. “I’m not torturing myself, Dad... I need to hear her voice.”

“But you’ve been listening to that all day,” he continued, making sure he made physical contact to let her know he was concerned. “I just don’t want to see you drive yourself insane with-“

“I would go insane without it... without her...” Kate collapsed into the older man’s embrace and he held her while he stifled his heartbreaking cries. What worried him most was that Kate couldn’t shed a single tear.

* * * * *

The sun had set in LA and Kate sat out back on the swing seat with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She could hear CJ’s voice in her head after listening repeatedly to the message all day and she suddenly needed to see her wife too. She wanted to cry and a bout of frustration kicked its way through her when her entire being simply refused to let the tears fall. *‘I’m a damn robot,’* she thought after slouching further into the seat.

“Never a robot,” said an achingly familiar voice right next to her.

This time, the actress wasn’t so freaked out by the vision. She sat up straight and turned to see her beautiful CJ glowing beside her. “Please tell me what you are... I mean, you’re not here... and they stopped looking for you... I can’t...”

“So they called off the search... so what?”

“Well, I need you and-“

The vision held up a hand. “And what about me? I need you too and I’ll make my own way back... I told you, Katie, I’ll always come home to you.”

“Then come home,” the blonde pleaded.

“Touch my face...”

“What?”

“Just touch my face.”



Kate hesitated but slowly did as CJ asked. When her hand met the space where the face hovered, she wanted to pull back but the vision grabbed her wrist and held her there. A mild heat grew in the blonde’s palm and for a moment she felt calm and almost cried. It scared her a little and she looked at CJ beseechingly. “I need to let go...”

The hallucination nodded somberly. “Just don’t let go of me... of your hope... of your belief. I’ll be home.”

As the vision faded, Kate’s hand flew to her mouth to muffle a painful wail. She took a few recovery breaths, leaned back in her seat and listened to her racing heart as it forced her blood around her body. “I’ll always believe.” She hadn’t felt any physical being when she’d touched CJ’s face. It was haunting but at the same time, the energy she felt was... real? *‘Always.’*

* * * * *

CJ's adrenaline was pumping furiously around her body. She could see the light getting closer now and it boosted her speed. She couldn't seem to feel the pain in her right arm anymore and she cradled her broken wrist as she strode down the path. *'Path?!'*

She stopped and looked down at the gravel. It was definitely a pathway. *'Path for hikers...?'* It couldn't be more than a day's walk now and she knew her Kate vision had been right. She hoped to be there before dinner time and according to her watch, it was 4am now. *'I'm gonna make it,'* she told herself with confidence. She picked up the pace a little more even though her ankle was not-so-subtly hinting she should slow the Hell down. "No more resting," she whispered roughly, "I can rest when I get home."

* * * * *

A massive yawn split Agent Green's face as she slurped down the mediocre coffee provided for them by Jensen's Aviation. She was waiting for her Assistant Director while he fought with his boss on the phone again. She was very impressed with Mark's unwillingness to back down. She knew it was procedure for the Bureau to call off the search after so many days, and trying to find an agent in a remote area about the size of Singapore was practically impossible anyway.

A thick cough heralded Mark's arrival. "Let's go."

"Did Mitchell give in?"

"No. I told him I'd pay for the damn thing myself. He was not amused but I'll deal with it when I get home."

Jamie nodded and followed him out of the hangar. They had one helicopter and one pilot. It was going to be a long day.

* * * * *

CJ could see a house. It was still miles off but she could see it. She might not have made it by dinner time but she was unbelievably grateful that there was no snow down here and she was still able to follow the path that had been neatly laid out for the past... she wasn't sure how many miles. Just up ahead, her man-made way home split off in two directions. *'Aw crap.'* Once she was standing at the fork in the road, she looked into the distance to see if she could fathom which one would lead her to civilization quicker.

Her eyes slowly fell to the grass at the side of the gravel where two wolves stood side by side. They were too calm to be real and she looked deeply into their eyes. The dark wolf had blue eyes and the lighter one had green. A small nasal laugh escaped her as she presumed her over-tired mind had conjured up the canine equivalent of her and Kate. The two beasts turned and sauntered off down the path that led to the left. She shrugged then drew cold air between her teeth in a wince when her body chastised her for doing so. *'I need to quit movin' like that.'*

She followed her four-legged friends and focused on the building that would hopefully be the end of her nightmare. *'I'm coming home, Katie.'*

* * * * *

Six and a half hours later as the darkness threatened to fall on Ash River Trail, CJ knocked wearily on the front door of a ramshackle little farmhouse. Her breaths had suddenly shortened. The realization that she didn't have to walk any further had flooded through her aching body and she was about to collapse for the final time. It seemed like forever before the door opened but when it did, the friendliest-looking old lady smiled warmly at her. The smile soon disappeared when the home-owner took in the state of the gaunt and battered agent. CJ couldn't talk but Mrs. Chapman didn't think twice about accommodating her. She ushered the tall woman inside and guided her to the armchair.

"Oh honey... what's happened to you?"

The agent slumped down into the cushioned heaven and tried to moisten her throat. A raspy whisper finally left her mouth. "Call... medic..."

"Oh, of course... immediately! You wait right there and I'll get you some water too. You look like a ghost!"

The woman bustled out of the room, called 911 then grabbed a glass of cool, fresh water for her anonymous visitor, but when she got back to the living room CJ was out cold.

The next thing Special Agent Carson remembered were the ceiling lights flying down in front of her as she was wheeled rapidly along the hospital corridor on a gurney. She had been transported by air ambulance to the town of Cook and it seemed there was some urgency to start her treatment. "Stop..." she croaked as nausea overwhelmed her. The lights continued to flash by and she felt the motion sickness take hold. She lurched and was immediately moved onto her right side where her shooting shoulder pains made the sickness even worse. She figured it was either suffer that pain or drown on her own vomit. She'd take the pain. The gurney continued to move until a curtain was whipped around her cubicle. Someone began to remove her clothing and she used every molecule of energy left in her body to somehow croak louder. "Wait!"

When the hands stopped moving, she tried to look at the nurse. A fuzzy human came into view and she whispered. "Need FBI... my gun... you can't..."

A reassuring voice cradled her as she fought against the unconscious bliss that tried to drag her back under.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, in the air above the National Park with their eyes glued to the camera screen, Jamie and Mark scrutinized every color change the hi-tech equipment highlighted. The Assistant Director whipped his head around to gawk at Jamie as the message came through.

“Zulu One, Zulu One... are you receiving? Over.”

“This is Zulu One... go ahead, Control.”

“Please be advised, Special Agent Carson has been airlifted to Hook Trauma Center. I repeat, Special Agent Carson has been located and is at the Hook Trauma Center... over.”

Before either agent could process the information fully, their pilot was requesting clearance to redirect his aircraft. “Roger that, Control. Confirm we are clear to attend, over...”

“That’s affirmative. Remain at your current altitude and proceed. The hunt is over, Zulu One.”

“Ah roger that, Control. Report condition of Special Agent Carson, over...?” the pilot asked, seemingly reading Mark and Jamie’s minds.

“She’s alive... a little beaten by Mother Nature but alive, over.”

“That’s good to hear, Control... Zulu One over and out.”

Mark nodded at the pilot when the man looked over at him to make sure he heard the conversation. Jamie felt a stream of tears leave her eyes and turned her face towards the window to rub them away discreetly. The helicopter made a swooping right turn and it wasn’t long before they were landing at the trauma center in Hook, Minnesota.

* * * * *

Two power-walking Federal Agents flew along the hospital corridor after a receptionist had given them CJ’s location. She had been put in a room and was asleep, having been hooked up to a monitor while they pumped fluids, sedation and painkillers into her. Surgery on her broken wrist was scheduled for 7am and her shoulder – which was now safely cradled in a sling – had been reset correctly. Her left ankle had been drained of excess fluid and was elevated and wrapped in a bandage and a big blue Velcro-strapped support slipper. Her belongings were bagged and secured in a cabinet at the nurse’s station.

“Excuse me,” Mark said to the petite nurse behind the counter while he flashed his FBI badge, “I’m Mark Mulrone with the FBI. I’m looking for CJ Carson... she was brought in by air ambulance...”

“Oh yes, I know exactly who you mean...” the woman chuckled. “She was fighting to go home as soon as she got here. Never seen anyone so determined, even though she was throwing up and couldn’t string two words together. I assume you have the number for Kate... that was one of the things she kept trying to say... poor thing has no voice right now.”

“Yes... yes I have the number. I need to see CJ to confirm it’s her.”

“It’s her. I have her belongings right here.”

“I still need to see her... please.”

The nurse took in Mark’s shining eyes and nodded once. “All right, but if she wakes... don’t get her all riled up. I’ll give you five minutes.”

“Thank you.”

Through all of this, Jamie was silent. She felt that if she spoke, she was going to bawl like a baby so she decided to shut up and follow behind the pair as they walked to CJ’s room.

Mark blew out a breath and Jamie audibly gasped when they saw their friend and colleague lying on the bed. It was CJ all right... but the powerful woman looked so helpless and Agent Green knew her eyes were welling up again. But this time, she didn’t try to stop it. She sniffed and approached the bed while Mulroneu stood silently at the door and thanked any unseen force he could think of for his agent’s safe return.

“Hey, DM...” Jamie whispered as she leaned over the battered woman. “You... have no idea how glad I am to see you.”

CJ’s eyelids flickered when a strand of her hair was gently pushed aside, and she husked out a response. “Pen... fold?”

“Yeah, it’s me. You rest now. We’ll be right here when you wake.”

“We?” the raven-haired woman whispered.

“Yeah... Mark’s here. We never stopped looking for you, honey.”

The nipping blue eyes opened a little. “Th-thanks...”

“Shh now... rest okay?” Tears were streaming down Jamie’s face now.

CJ tried to voice to her main concern. “Katie...”

“Mark’s gonna call her right now. I promise. Sleep, DM...”

The sedation made sure CJ could do nothing but comply.

* * * * *

Kate lay on the sumptuous couch and closed her gritty eyes. She knew she wouldn’t sleep. She hadn’t managed it since that horrible night and now on top of that, she had a snoring father on the large armchair and a cop car outside, reminding her of the situation she was in. Every night since the fire, the LAPD had sent one patrol car to sit outside her house. The intruder hadn’t returned and the confirmation from the fire chief that it was indeed an arson attack had left her feeling even more unsettled. Lieutenant Johnson had called to say he was investigating the

situation and that they had gathered evidence from the scene. A half-burned canister thought to have contained jet fuel had been recovered and the actress was getting more and more suspicious due to the apparent link to her wife's 'accident'. Had the culprit left her a clue on purpose? Were they trying to taunt her... to terrorize her? She wanted to speak to Mark about the whole thing but to even think about the Assistant Director right now reminded her harshly of her lost love.

She hadn't been out to see the carcass of the barn yet, leaving it to Tony to check on the horses in the field. The driver had been doing so much for her and was working long days to make sure Kate had everything she and the girls needed. She wouldn't ever be able to thank him for his generosity and kind-heartedness.

A cell phone buzzed rudely from the coffee table and she looked over to see that it was hers. With a deep sigh, she picked it up to answer when she saw Mark Mulroney's number come up.

Time slowed almost to a halt as she felt an especially strong heartbeat vibrating in her chest. It thundered in her ears, through her bones and seemed to last for an eternity. It was like vertigo; like falling off a cliff with no way to stop it, and Kate had to bring her mind back from a moment of pure clarity and uncertainty combined. '*Everything's about to change...*' she thought as a pain swept through her soul like it was on one last rampage before it had to leave. She didn't dare hope...

Mark's voice pulled her into real time again and she blinked at the powerful swell of feeling she was experiencing. "*Kate? Are you there?*"

"Yes... sorry, Mark. I... I'm not sure what happened..."

"*Hi... listen, is there anyone with you?*"

'*Oh please... not more bad news,*' she thought, panicking at his question. "Yes. My father's here," the blonde said, looking over at a slouching Eddie Senior.

"Good. Kate... we have CJ... and she's alive."

The actress' mouth fell open and her breaths shortened to tiny bursts as her heart constricted violently. "Wh-what?"

"She's alive, Kate... and I'll bring her home to you as soon as she's strong enough."

"Oh... oh God, I..."

The volume of her words woke Eddie and he sat up with a start. "Katie? What's wrong, sweetheart?"

She didn't answer him and he came to perch beside her for moral support. Kate struggled to regroup and listen to Mulroney's soothing words as he tried to cushion the shock. "...*keep her in for observation and re-assess her condition tomorrow after the surgery-*"

“For what?!”

“Just her wrist... she’ll be fine, Kate. Jamie and I are staying here at the hospital and will bring her to you. Please, I know it’s hard but try and get some sleep?”

“I... I will, Mark.”

“Good. I’ll let your wife know. Are you gonna be all right?”

“Yes... yes, I think so.”

“Okay... bye, Kate.”

“Bye.” She was dumbfounded at the news she had just received and as she got up and walked through the living room, blindly putting the phone down on the island counter, Eddie watched her with a grave expression distorting his sleepy features.

Kate pressed a couple of buttons on the coffee machine and placed two mugs next to it. Her father waited nervously until she brought the beverages to him and sat down. The actress stared blankly ahead but her eyes held something new. When he tried to ask her what was wrong, she didn’t answer him. She didn’t seem able to speak and he feared the worst. Kate was in shock – yet again – and she didn’t really have the presence of mind to check if she was still breathing. Mark had said CJ was alive and she was going to be fine?

‘CJ’s alive... she’s alive... she’s alive,’ she silently chanted. Even though it was what she had felt in her heart, she still couldn’t believe she had been right not to give up. In that single heartbeat, all her silent prayers had been answered, changing her entire future once more. “She’s alive...” she whispered.

Eddie barely heard the soft-spoken words. “Katie... I can’t hear you... what happened?”

“They... she... they found her. She’s alive,” the blonde croaked as her dry, red-rimmed eyes closed for a second. The dark circles under those eyes and the fact that she had lost some weight due to her complete inability to eat for the past thirteen days, showed clearly that the actress had been through almost as much as her wife.

Eddie silently moved closer to Kate’s side and put a comforting arm around her shoulder. “Wow,” was all the normally chatty man could gasp.

Kate didn’t know how to express her previous devastation and now, her relief. She wasn’t able or ready to smile yet but her heart felt a tentative surge of hope that she would see her soulmate soon... and not just in visions and dreams. As she slowly moved backwards into the large couch cushions and curled up into the fetal position, the older man let her go and stood up to get a nearby blanket. After covering his daughter with the warm, soft-knitted throw, he headed for the downstairs toilet to blow his nose and clear his tears, before settling into his armchair to watch over her.

He knew she still wouldn't sleep even though it was the middle of the night, and as he analyzed the blonde's face, he knew he'd never seen Kate look so exhausted. It brought to the fore just how important CJ Carson was to his precious daughter's wellbeing. With a self-deprecating eye-roll, he corrected that thought... he knew how important they were to one another's wellbeing.

* * * * *

A little after ten o'clock the next morning, Mark opened his eyes and grumbled at the hard plastic chair that pressed against his right buttock and thigh. It took him a few seconds to realize he was leaning to the side and his head was on a rather comfortable cushion. '*Cushion?*'

He sprung upright and turned to see Jamie grinning and rubbing her eyes. "Don't worry, Sir... it was just my shoulder."

"Oh... right... good."

The blonde agent didn't think she'd ever seen her boss blush before, but being with him on this assignment had given her new insight into the reserved man's personality. As he stood up and stretched to hide his embarrassment, she decided to ease up on him. "Want me to go grab a couple of coffees?"

"Hmm, yeah... have you heard from the doc yet?"

"Nothing yet."

"Did you sleep?"

"Not really. Chairs are too damn uncomfortable."

Mark sat back down and sighed. "No kidding."

"Sir, you do know that when she wakes up, she's going to sign herself out of here?"

"I figured she would try that... I'd imagine 'home' has been the only goal in her mind since she found herself in that damn wreck."

Jamie nodded. "And home is Kate and the children."

"Oh I know that, Jamie, and to be honest, I don't think anyone will be able to stop CJ from leaving. She'll go AMA."

"I know. I'll just have to make sure I rat her out to Kate when we get back. If anyone can convince CJ to take medical advice, it's her."

The doctor came towards them, effectively cutting off the conversation. "Mr. Mulroney?"

“Yes. How is she, Doctor?”

“Fine, fine. The wrist is set and she’s coming out of the anesthetic now. She’s not going to have the use of either arm for a while and she may never regain full strength in that left wrist. Do you know if she has help at home?”

Jamie spoke up. “Yes... full time help at the moment.”

“Good. I’ll let the patient decide which arm she wants the sling on. With her injuries, I’m not sure two of them would be an option. Let’s see...” He glanced at his notes. “She’s suffering from exhaustion and going by what has happened to her, I’m not surprised. Looking at her injuries, I would never have suspected she’d been in a plane crash.”

“I know... she’s been incredibly lucky. Quite frankly... we can’t believe she’s alive,” Mark said while shaking his head.

“Well, I see no major permanent problems. She has a nasty bump on her head but that seems more recent... not from the crash. Her voice will come back... it’s likely the fumes, the prolonged exposure to freezing temperatures and her lack of nourishment have aggravated her throat. The cold also caused some circulatory problems but with some decent care, they will soon be remedied. I’ll write prescriptions for everything she needs and a letter will go home with her detailing care and exercise instructions for her arms.”

“When can we see her?” Jamie asked anxiously.

“Give it another hour to let her head clear.”

Mark bit his lips. “Uh Doctor... when will you be releasing her?”

“I’d like to keep her for observation for the next forty eight hours... if not more. Why? Do you need her to leave with you?”

“She won’t stay here for that long. I can tell you that for certain.”

“Well, she’ll be going against medical advice then.”

“I know. I just wanted to warn you...”

“Noted. I have to go... if there’s anything else you need to know, call for the nurse and she’ll beep me.”

“Thanks, Doctor.”

An hour later, CJ was awake and lucid... tired, but lucid. Since Jamie had gone to call LA with an update, Mark stood over her now with a goofy smile on his face. “So... I got your note.”

If the tall agent didn't feel so bad and wasn't so anxious to get home, she might have laughed. A forced half-smile would have to do for now. "Good..." was her only whispered response.

"Doc says you'll be fine. Might take a while though..."

"I need... to go home..."

Mark bit his lip. "Yeah, I already knew that, CJ. Give yourself some time to get over the op, will ya?"

"No..."

Mark sighed just as Jamie came in the door. "Hey, DM..." When CJ opened her mouth, the blonde chastised her. "No, don't speak. It'll be better for your throat if you rest it. Now, I called Kate. She knows your surgery went well. She told me she wants to come to you but I told her to stay with the children."

CJ nodded her approval and ignored Jamie's advice about not talking. "I'm going home... now."

"No, CJ..." Mark retorted.

"Now!" the bed-ridden agent rasped as loudly as she could.

"Okay, okay... don't bust anything. Let me see what I can do." With that, the Assistant Director left the room to accommodate his rebellious and very stubborn colleague's wishes.

* * * * *

Five hours and a lot more fluids later, the nurse reached around to CJ's back to untie the hospital gown and get the agent dressed. She was stopped by a quiet 'No' and stepped back to purse her lips at her difficult patient. "No? But you can't do this by yourself..."

"Jamie..." CJ whispered with a head tilt toward the door. The nurse grumbled and left.

Not even a minute had passed before the tall blonde agent came into the room and found her friend trying to remove the garment by herself. "Whoa... stop right there. Did I hear that nurse right? You want me to do this?" she asked, splaying her hand out towards CJ's lovely attire.

Agent Carson nodded.

"Are you sure?" Jamie said with a rather pronounced eyebrow wiggle. "There's nothing underneath the gown."

CJ rolled her eyes and nodded again. "Quit it and help..."

“Ooh, I love this whole half-husky, half-whisper thing you got goin’ on...” The raven-haired woman scowled at her friend’s banter and Green relented. “Sorry, I was trying to be funny... otherwise I’m gonna cry my eyes out and I’d just as soon not do that here.” She looked at the clothing they had managed to acquire for their invalid. “Okay, we got Bureau issue hoodie, sweatpants and a clean winter field jacket...”

CJ’s expression spoke volumes. The jacket had ten inch high letters on the back, emblazoned in yellow, and she wasn’t in the mood or the condition to be advertising the fact she was FBI.

“It was all I could find and anyway, you won’t be in public... and when you are you’ll be in a wheelchair so no one will see it.”

Now CJ’s eyes opened wide and burned with fire. Well, the drugs she was currently on probably dulled the fire to a peep.

Jamie continued her one sided verbal conversation. “I’m not gonna argue with you. You have no option on this one... Bigfoot.”

The injured agent wanted to smile, she really did, but there was just too much to process and all she could think about was what her Katie had gone through in the past two weeks without her. *‘Wow, it’s been that long?’*

Once Jamie had worked the sweatpants around CJ’s support shoe, she tugged them gently up her friend’s legs until they were in place. Now she had to take off the sling and gown and somehow get the hoodie on without angering the patient’s painful shoulder.

A few moments later, CJ perched on the side of her hospital bed – topless – and watched Jamie trying to avert her eyes. Somewhere under all the turmoil, she gave a small inner giggle and was impressed with her colleague’s professionalism and lack of flushed cheeks. A small smile came her way once the dressing was complete. The painkillers had done their job admirably and she was soon ready to go without too much discomfort. Jamie had been very careful too, which had helped immensely. The blonde looked into her eyes now and spoke with such a loving voice that CJ almost cried.

“You’ve lost weight, hon... time to get home and let Kate take care of you. You two need one another... that much is very clear.”

Feeling the tender emotion bubbling under everything else, CJ nodded her head and waited while Jamie rolled the wheelchair over to her bedside.

Chapter 6

After a silent four hour ride in the Bureau jet, Mark and Jamie escorted a pale and ghostly looking CJ the rest of the way to her house. When the vehicle pulled up in front of the porch, Mark unfolded the wheelchair and put it beside the open car door. The injured agent slipped gingerly out of the SUV and looked at her boss, shaking her head. There was no way she was going into her home in a chair. The Assistant Director threw his hands up in the air and smiled before putting the contraption near the front door for later.

When the doorbell rang, Kate was standing in the back yard looking at the stars so Eddie got up to see who it was. When he pulled the door ajar, a puff of air escaped his lips as his eyes opened wide in shock. He hadn't expected them so soon. Mark, Jamie and CJ stood stock still on the porch. The raven-haired agent gaped at the familiar face with tears now streaming over its cheeks but it wasn't the one she desperately needed to see.

Eddie put his hand out but quickly adjusted his aim when he saw the plaster-cast on CJ's wrist. He touched her good hand and guided the tall woman gently over the threshold. The agent's dark hair was unkempt, her face still held a large visible bruise and her other injuries were obvious but the loving man knew CJ would not have wanted to stay away any longer than necessary.

At that moment, Kate came through the living room wearing an expressionless, drawn and gray face. She saw the vision of her one and only love standing full height in the doorway and tried desperately to figure out if it was real or not.

Then she saw Mark and Jamie and couldn't possibly imagine why she would be seeing them in her hallucinations. Kate's legs were going to buckle and CJ immediately sensed it. She limped rapidly over to her wife. She couldn't speak and due to her injuries, she couldn't help Kate either. She silently pleaded to Mark, who had already made his way across the hallway. While Jamie closed the front door and consoled an emotional Eddie, Mark supported the petite actress and took her to the couch. Once she was reclining safely on the large cushions, he backed away, seeing CJ drop to her knees on the rug beside her soul mate. Shifting onto the side of her thigh, the agent waited until they were both able to communicate.

Both Jamie and her AD discreetly went into the kitchen to talk quietly with Eddie... but also to enable them to keep a caring eye on their two lost friends. They were worried about the bewildered condition of both of them.

Kate's eyes had remained open the entire time and CJ sat wondering if she had even truly seen her. Maybe Kate thought it was a dream. The agent couldn't believe it either and through the haze of her painkillers, she gawked fuzzily at the perfect image before her. *'Her hair... it's the same as the visions...'* She wanted to speak but it seemed no words would come forth from her hoarse throat. She knew they were both in shock.

A few empty moments later, Kate blinked and saw her life-partner sitting on the floor, her side leaning against the couch just like that first time in Montana. CJ suddenly felt two needy hands clawing at her arm and her still-aching shoulder, willing her to come onto the couch. The tall woman immediately crawled up and stretched her long body out beside Kate, mindful of the harsh plaster-cast. Motioning the actress up with her good hand, she slipped the left one under

the blonde's head and then, with the offensive cast up against the backrest of the couch, she pulled Kate to her.

The smaller woman gripped her spouse's body tightly and could not believe she could actually feel it in her hands. CJ was here; solid, real, alive, and pretty much in one piece. Neither of them was ready to shed a tear yet, their bodies not even remotely recovered from the shock of enforced separation. When Kate's head was pressed harder against CJ's breast, she heard the familiar, steady heartbeat echoing and vibrating pleasantly through her fatigued body. A hesitant warmth began to return – a unique feeling only CJ could bring – and her soul, the soul she thought couldn't be saved, began to mend. She could feel herself breathing again as the air blew from her nostrils and deflected off CJ's neck. The tension that had taken up a seemingly-permanent residence in her muscles began to fade away. Finally, her eyes closed and the overwhelming exhaustion claimed her. And she allowed it, knowing she was truly back where she belonged.

CJ held onto her wife with every ounce of energy she had left. Her breath drifted across the beautiful short blonde hair under her nose and she inhaled the most welcome scent of her Katie. She couldn't speak and couldn't really think clearly but at last, she could feel. She could feel her beloved wife clinging to her; she could feel the relief gradually winning the fight against the stress, pain and heartache, and she could feel the tension leaving the smaller woman; a tension that mirrored her own. When Kate sank deeper into the couch cushions and deeper into CJ's body and heart, the strong agent finally succumbed. She was home... and for the first time in almost three weeks, the reunited soulmates fell deeply into slumber under the watchful eyes of two FBI agents and a loving father.

* * * * *

"They both look hellish," Jamie said just above a whisper after Eddie had headed upstairs.

"No wonder. I don't know how CJ managed to survive the cold, never mind the wilderness..."

"I do," Jamie said. When Mark looked at her questioningly, she smiled. "She's lying right there beside her, Mark."

He nodded with a wistful smile. "They really are something. I've never seen anything like the bond they have."

Jamie chanced a personal question even though she was technically on duty. "Anybody special in your life, boss?"

He glanced at her before returning his mug to his mouth. After taking a sip of his coffee, he narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "I have been seeing Cecilia. It's been pretty infrequent though, and I suspect my job interferes too much..."

"CJ's aunt?"

"Yes, Jamie. CJ knows about it... I think."

“Oh well... I hope it uh, continues...”

“Thank you. How are things with Sam?”

“Yeah, they’re good, thanks. I seem to live at her place more than mine so I guess it’s just a matter of time before we move in together...” she smiled, thinking she owed him a little information in return.

“Good, good. Well, I’ll get home and let you settle for the night. Keep your eye on them both, will you? Take a couple of days off, Jamie... you deserve it.”

“But the killer...”

“I’ll see how the guys are getting on with the case when I get to the office in the morning.”

“Then so will I. Don’t worry... I’ll sleep for the next few hours and be fresh as a daisy tomorrow.”

“A daisy, huh? All right... I could use your help.”

“That’s settled then. Oh and Sir, the stuff that went on here at the house...”

“Stuff?”

“When I spoke with Eddie on the phone he said that the barn out back was burned down deliberately. It seems now that jet fuel was used to start it...”

“CJ and Kate’s barn?” When Jamie nodded, he frowned. “Jet fuel?” Another nod in response. “That’s too much of a coincidence.”

“I agree. And those cops posted outside just backs up what we’re thinking.”

“Cops?”

“You didn’t see them, did you? If the LAPD thinks they need to put a car outside every night, there must be something to this. I’ll ask CJ and Kate if I can stay... just overnights... and only until CJ gets a little stronger.

“Good idea.”

“I’ll keep my firearm with me at all times and report to you in a more personal way so as to keep it off the record, so to speak. When they’re feeling stronger and throw me out, I’ll defer to the agent that you’ll no doubt put on duty, and he can take over on a perimeter detail.”

“I knew you were a great agent,” he smirked as they headed into the living area on their way to the front door, “I just never figured you as a mind reader.”

Jamie returned the grin and locked the door behind her boss. She tiptoed silently back through the living room followed by Kamali, and let the dog out for a final time before setting the alarm with the code CJ had told her many moons ago. Kamali went to his bed after a pat on the head from the blonde agent and, deciding she couldn't wake the slumbering pair, Jamie strolled into the crèche and collapsed in a heap on one of the large beanbags. It had been one helluva Holiday season so far.

* * * * *

After three hours of solid, deep sleep, CJ opened her eyes and immediately remembered where she was. Her lips pressed against the short strands on her wife's head and a murmur escaped the actress' mouth. "Mmm..."

The agent knew Kate was still asleep but she desperately needed to see her soulmate and hear her voice. Even though her arms ached and her head felt like it was splitting open, she wasn't going to move from this spot for a very long time. Since her voice was no use, she nudged the smaller woman's head with her lips again, this time pressing a little harder. The next murmur was accompanied by a sudden tension in Kate's body.

That tension left just as quickly as it came when the actress gradually remembered what she was holding on to. Her eyes shot up to seek out CJ's face and a few long, surreal minutes passed with Kate staring at the flesh and blood person lying in her arms. Her hand reached up tentatively to touch her wife's cheek and when she felt the warm skin, her eyes filled with moisture. "You're... you're really here..."

CJ craned her neck a little and pressed her mouth against the smooth, full lips of her love. When she pulled back, Kate was crying. "I'm here," the agent whispered as her own eyes filled.

For the next twenty minutes, in the middle of the night, lying on the couch in their warm, inviting home, the two Carson women finally cried a river. Kate's tears ran onto the agent's sleeve and CJ's tears soaked through the blonde's tresses but they didn't care. Their souls rejoiced and they were both home. All the anguish, pain, heartache, stress, agony and longing of the past two weeks came out in those tears, leaving a lighter place in their hearts and breaking up the heavy cloud that had befallen them. They clung desperately to one another and CJ did well to hang on but she finally had to give in to the pain, releasing her tight embrace and breathing out a groan.

Kate sniffed loudly and lifted herself up on her elbow. "Oh God, honey... I'm so sorry... you're hurt and I-" The taller woman raised her hand a little like a kid in school, making her wife's heart burst with love. "What, CJ?"

The hoarsest, deepest whisper Kate had ever heard grated its way through the agent's throat. "I'll take any pain if you'll just stay in my arms. I don't want to let you go."

"I'll be in your arms every second I get the chance, but I want to take care of you as well."

CJ placed a fingertip under her spouse's eye and wiped away a few droplets before resting the digit on the gray skin. "This... no more of this... I want to take care of you too. You..." A constricting cough broke her words. "You haven't been sleeping..."

Kate dropped her gaze and touched CJ's neck... anything to keep as much contact as possible. "No, I haven't. How could I? You were... oh CJ... I couldn't cope without you."

"I was nothing without you, Katie. But we're together now." The Federal Agent took in the sights and smells she knew so well, and relished in the simplest of touches from her spouse's body. Blue eyes gazed deeply into green and CJ stretched up to finger a cropped piece of hair. "I love this..." The blonde's eyes melted as the finger moved to a pert nose. "And I love this..." The pink lips were next to feel the sensation. "Love these..." The slightest smile creased CJ's mouth. "I love you... with everything I am."

Another flood of tears rolled down over the actress' cheeks. "I love you too... more than you'll ever know," she sniffed again, trying to at least stop crying for a second.

"I do know, Katie." CJ's whisper was disappearing now and the actress decided they had spoken enough.

"Honey, rest your voice now. I want you to regain your strength and get well." Kate couldn't stop even more tears from falling at the thought of her wife going through the crash and subsequent hellish journey. "I... I thought I was gonna lose you. I can't lose you, CJ... I can't."

The agent put a gentle pressure on her wife's back with her right hand and brought Kate closer against her body. When the blonde head nestled in its favorite spot under her chin, her own tears renewed themselves. She tickled her fingers through the chopped strands. "It's you and me... forever, remember? And before I stop talking... I have to tell you that... the new style is very sexy."

A small vibration told the agent that her wife actually chuckled. She couldn't wait to see her laugh but guessed it was still a little too soon. The shock was wearing off now but they were totally overwhelmed with emotion and tiredness. CJ vaguely wondered what time it was and if she would see her daughters soon, but sleep knocked her out before the thought was complete. Kate followed her into the land of nod and in the kitchen, Agent Green cried her eyes out... but these tears were of relief, happiness and love for her friends.

Jamie went to sit on the window seat and as she looked out over the lake, she saw it was almost morning. Checking her watch and wiping her eyes on her sleeve, she got up to restart the coffee machine and prepare breakfast for her two favorite children.

* * * * *

"Mommy's home!?" Shannon squeaked as she leapt from her bed.

“She sure is... they’re both snuggled up on the couch downstairs right now,” Eddie Senior said, taking the girl into his arms as she rubbed the sleepiness from her eyes. “I want me and you to go get Lucy up... and then I’ll talk to you both about how careful we need to be with Mommy.”

“Did she get hurt?”

“Yes, sweetheart, she did... but she’s going to be fine. We’ll just have to be extra gentle with her until she gets better, won’t we?”

Shannon nodded as she was led by the hand along the upper hallway by her loving grandfather. It took them a few minutes to rouse Lucy from her super dream about giant cupcakes but once she was up and had listened to Eddie’s instructions, they all headed quietly down the large staircase followed by the ever-devoted Kamali.

Jamie met them in the hallway. “Hey,” she said quietly, “I was just about to come and get you three up.”

“Morning, Jamie... how are they?”

“They’re fine... fell back to sleep actually. They didn’t let go all night.”

‘*Of each other,*’ the aging man added silently for her. His eyes showed his lingering sadness at what had happened but his smile said it all. He was so overjoyed that his two daughters were back together and his worry for them began to dissipate. He wiggled his hands, both of which were joined onto two smaller ones, and took a deep breath. “Okay, beautiful girls, let’s go see your tired parents...”

When the two children were standing next to the couch, they both scanned their eyes over their Mommy’s body, noticing the sling, the plaster cast and the strange footwear right away. Eddie gently shook Kate awake while Jamie headed back to the kitchen to finish her preparations.

“Katie... Katie honey... the girls are here to see you.”

“Hmm, oh!” The actress turned her head. “Hey, you guys... good morning,” she said in a calm, relaxed tone. She checked on CJ and saw she was still sleeping in her arms. “Mommy’s real tired but I’ll wake her now. She can sleep while you’re at school and she’s been desperate to see you both.”

“I’m awake,” came a whisper from deep in the couch cushion. “Help me up, Katie?”

The blonde carefully maneuvered the larger body until her wife was in a sitting position. “Girls, Mommy has a very sore throat so she can’t talk too much.”

Shannon sat down beside the agent and placed her small hand on the gray sweatpants covering CJ’s thigh. “Grandpa said you were sore in your body but... can we hug you, Mommy?”

“Oh, Shan... of course...” CJ felt her throat drying again and asked Kate with a glance if she could help her out.

“Come around here, Shannon,” the smaller woman instructed gently. “You too, Luce. On this side, Mommy has this cast to help her hand get better. It was hurt quite badly.”

“How did it get hurt?” Shannon asked. Lucy stood right beside her and changed her security blanket – in the form of Barney the bear – into her other hand so she could feel her Mommy’s plaster cast with her little fingers.

CJ watched as Kate told her story in the simplest terms possible. “Mommy was in a crash, sweetie.”

“Like Tony was?”

“Kind of the same, yes.” She didn’t want to terrify the girls about planes falling out of the sky so left her explanation at that. “So... if Mommy puts her hand back on the couch there.” She looked at CJ. “Put your hand back on the couch there, Mommy.”

The raven-haired woman belatedly realized she was supposed to do something and with a quick grin to Kate, she moved her hand, feeling the sting from the surgery and resulting stitches.

“Sorry... there we go.”

“Thank you,” the blonde smiled. “Now... you guys can come in here and give her a big hug and a kiss.”

Both girls did so and it actually made the agent feel so much better. Shannon’s curiosity was bursting to be unleashed as she scrutinized CJ’s foot. “That’s a funny shoe.”

The tall woman looked down. “It sure is... but it’s helping my ankle to feel better,” she croaked.

“It got hurt too?!” the girl said dramatically. After CJ’s nod, she continued. “And there too?” she said, pointing at the sling.

“Yep.”

Lucy patted the agent’s knee. “A lot of sore bits, Mommy. Maybe Barney can help.” She thrust the teddy bear into CJ’s lap and kissed the knee where her hand was. “I don’t need him anymore... you can have him.”

CJ almost bawled. “Thank you so much, Luce. I’ll keep him... right here.”

Kate realized with startling clarity right then that her daughters had been very worried about CJ even though they didn’t know she was in danger of losing her life, and a wave of guilt washed over the blonde. She had been so lost when her wife was missing and even though she had cared for the girls and loved them as much as always, she still hadn’t known how to tell them the awful

truth. It seemed they had sensed it anyway and she shook her head slowly at how they had instinctually picked up on her stress.

Shannon wedged herself between Kate's knees and looked closely at the woman's face. "Mama... the sparkle came back!"

"Sparkle?"

"Your eyes are all sparkly again."

Beside Kate, CJ's smile grew with every word and the actress looked very curious about what would come out of the sensitive child's mouth next. "Are they not always sparkly?"

"Not when Mommy was lost. But now they are!"

Kate pulled her biggest daughter onto her knee. "Do you know that you are the cleverest seven-almost-eight year old that I have ever known?"

"Really?" Shannon squeaked, raising her eyebrows in a perfect CJ impression.

"Really!"

"He-he..." The young girl flopped her head onto her Mama's chest and looked at her other parent. "We're going to help you get better, Mommy."

CJ reached over with her right hand and yanked it back when the pain shot up through her shoulder. "Ooff!" she husked.

Shannon's hand immediately landed on the offending joint and rubbed gently. "Do you need medicine for it?"

Kate bit her lips between her teeth to stifle the emotion she was feeling. "I'll get Mommy her medicine after you two wonderful girls have breakfast and get to school. Now scoot!" she said, wobbling their giggling daughter off her knee. Lucy was already skipping through to the kitchen singing "Auntie Jamie, Auntie Jamie," on her way, and Eddie laughed at the impromptu song before telling Shannon to come sit next to him at the island unit.

* * * * *

Eddie Marshall Senior had done his grandfatherly duties admirably and once he'd sent the children out the front door with Tony, Jamie left too. She told her friends she had to talk with them later and they organized for her to bring take-out for dinner to save any effort being made tonight.

Eddie strolled into the living room to find his daughters sitting quietly on the couch. "Well... what a day so far and it's only 8am! I don't know about you tough girls but I'm totally exhausted

with all this excitement! Oh! I'm going to pop upstairs and make a few calls before I take a nap." CJ and Kate never got a chance to respond as the flamboyant man continued his little speech. "I'm just so glad you're home, CJ... Oh! I love you both so, so much and... well, it was hard to see Kate without her big, bad FBI agent. I'll hear all about it when you feel ready. Oh! Now I'm gonna cry again..." He sniffed as he turned to leave. "I'll get out of your hair now and you two can have a much needed cuddle! C'mon, Kamali... let's leave them in peace for a while." He enticed the dog into the hallway and up the stairs with him. The two women heard a distant, "Oh you're such a handsome boy..." and Kate chuckled.

"He's back to his crazy old self..."

When she turned to her wife with the smile still on her face, CJ watched her with besotted eyes. She leaned in and kissed the blonde on the temple, the cheek and those velvety lips, before pulling back a few inches. "You're my life... you and the girls."

Kate let out a gasp and felt her heart skip a beat. "And you're mine. I still can't believe you're home, CJ."

"Believe it. Believe in us..."

"I do." The actress studied the stunning face of her soul mate. Apart from one nasty bruise on the side of her cheekbone, the agent's skin was as flawless as ever. "You were so lucky... we were so lucky. I..."

"Hey... I told you... I'll always come home to you."

And with that, Kate burst into tears again, unable to hold back in expressing her relief and her love for her partner. Long moments later, the cries came to an end and her stomach gurgled loudly making CJ tremble with silent laughter. Kate looked at her sheepishly. "I guess since everyone else has eaten breakfast, maybe it could be our turn now, huh? Wait... don't answer that. No talking."

"Am I gonna have to learn sign language?" the tall woman rasped.

"Hmm, maybe..."

"I don't know that you'll be able to shut me up, Katie... there's so much I want to say to you."

"There'll be time for that. Lots of time. I won't be working for about eight months... so plenty of time for me to take care of you." When CJ tried to get up and follow Kate, the actress waved a finger at her. "And it starts now... stay right there."

"I uh... have to pee," CJ whispered, utilizing her very cutest pleading face.

"Oh..."

CJ read Kate's mind as the smaller woman tried to figure out some complicated problem. "And I think I'll need help." The blonde nodded and gave CJ a toothy smile. "And I really love your hair." Once the tall woman was on her feet... foot... she managed to touch her wife's head without being held back by her upper body injuries. "When did you get this done anyway?"

"Uhm... I can't remember the day. My mind was mush and... Shannon was very persuasive," Kate murmured, her eyes closing at CJ's wonderful touch. She kept them shut when two perfect lips covered her own, making her weak in the knees. She opened her mouth at the request of a gentle tongue and sunk into the heavenly kiss. When it was over, she looked at her sensual wife. "You really *do* like my hair, don't you?"

CJ did not miss the teasing look and nodded seductively... well, as seductively as she could in her condition. She was so happy to see Kate recovering from their ordeal. She knew the actress would have suffered as much as her, if not more. Kate hadn't known CJ was alive. That would have been complete torture for the agent had it been the other way around. "I love you, Kate Carson... I know I keep saying it but I need to say it right now." A deep sigh. "Now... help me pee."

Kate let out an emotion-filled giggle as she moved to support CJ across the hallway. "You'll have to do the peeing part yourself... the rest, I can help with."

"Good... 'cause I don't think I'll manage to uhm..."

"I know. And *you* know I don't mind doing all that for you. At least you have pants on that are easy to pull down."

The agent wiggled her hips to bump them with Kate's. "You can strip me later." They both smirked at the inference. It would be a while before that sort of stripping would be going on.

* * * * *

While Kate worked on breakfast, the agent sat on the couch and realized that even three minutes without her beloved in her sights was too long. With a swallow, she rose to her feet and hobbled through the double doors into the large diner. Her troubled-looking wife was lost in a daydream and stood with her hand resting on a tray laden with breakfast goodies. CJ approached slowly but still managed to startle the actress. "Oh! Hey..."

"What's wrong?" the agent grunted.

"Wrong?"

"Yeah... you looked... worried?"

"Oh... no, I was just reliving the last few days. It's been a... rollercoaster ride."

CJ forced a smile. "Do you need to talk now? I mean... really talk?"

“I... I don't think I'm ready yet, honey.”

“Me either. So stop thinking about it and let's try to enjoy this food, huh?”

Kate blew out a breath. “Okay. Only if you stop talking and let your throat rest.”

The agent narrowed her eyes. “Bargaining with me at this early hour?”

“You're still talking.”

“You're still thinking.”

Kate's laughter was the most incredible thing CJ had heard in weeks. It was husky and filled with true mirth. “You...” The actress tried to catch a breath. “You're just full of mischievous wit, my darling wife. What's going on?”

“I'm happy. I know I may not look it most of the time but I really am. See?” A giant toothy smile momentarily lit up the stoic face.

The blonde smiled and cupped CJ's cheek in her palm then trailed her fingers down the agent's jaw line, causing the tall woman's blue orbs to roll closed in bliss. Kate stared at the face of her one true love and couldn't help but bite her lips to stop the ridiculous amount of tears she still seemed to have left. “I'm happy too... you make me happy.” When CJ's eyes opened, Kate grinned. “And what will make me even happier is if you'll eat something now... then we could maybe let you soak in the tub?”

A moan left CJ's hoarse throat. “Sounds... heavenly.”

“It's settled then. Now carefully go sit down and be a good little patient.”

The agent's dark eyebrow curled to let her wife know that was the most unlikely scenario of the decade. Another laugh followed the tall woman back into the living area. Her self-imposed mission right now was to hear that laugh as much as possible, so she would try to continue her goofy antics until they were ready to discuss the plane crash and everything else. Then she would probably go back to the goofy stuff... simply because she felt like it.

* * * * *

It seemed they had managed to consume less than half of what Kate had prepared but it was a start. Neither one of them was ravenous, which was surprising considering they hadn't been eating properly – if at all – since CJ left for Minnesota. “A decent attempt, I'd say...” Kate chirped around her last mouthful.

CJ nodded and watched her wife go into the kitchen and pick up a sheet of paper from the countertop. She read it for a few seconds then returned to the agent with a dark brown bottle and a spoon. “Time for your medicine...”

The actress gawked at CJ as the normally tough, cool, taciturn Federal Agent pressed her lips together harshly and pouted out the most ridiculous frown she had ever seen. Keeping the frown in place, CJ shook her head from side to side like a petulant toddler.

“You need to take this goo three times a day, CJ... it says so on that list the doctor sent with Jamie. Now, open up!”

Another shake of the dark head.

“CJ...” Kate warned with an admonishing head tilt.

“Stop looking at me like I’m a naughty child,” CJ rasped out, still holding her eyebrows down low.

“Stop acting like one.”

“I wasn’t.”

“You were.”

“Not.”

“...Were too.”

The agent was desperate to belt out a hearty laugh but since her body would admonish her severely for doing that, she pretended to be easily defeated and opened her mouth begrudgingly. The spoonful of sticky, smelly liquid went in and she almost gagged at its flavor. It did immediately cool the roughness in her throat but she wasn’t going to tell Kate that; the Kate who was now strutting off to the kitchen with a satisfied smile on her face.

Chapter 7

Mark Mulrone sat reading through the initial report he had been emailed about the parts of the plane recovered so far. The operation was ongoing but most of the fuselage was now in a huge hangar that had been temporarily appropriated by the Federal Aviation Administration and NTSB investigators. When piecing together everything they had recovered, they had found an unidentified substance on the fuel lines and electronic cables. The substance had been sent for analysis but initial suspicions were that it was some kind of acid. ‘*Sabotage...*’ The Assistant Director jumped when the door to his office was knocked loudly. “Come in.”

“Sir...” Jamie said gravely.

“What did you find out from the LAPD?”

The blonde agent sighed and flicked open the pages in her hand. “The fire at Kate’s was definitely arson... we have the official findings now. Jet fuel was the accelerant and they also found a knife near the entrance to the barn with blood on it. That part is confusing but they’ve sent the blood sample to the lab... just in case it was our suspect who cut himself.”

Mark shook his head. “Did you get the analysis of the fuel he used?”

“Yes, right here.”

“Good. Take it down to our guys and have them compare it to this,” he said, handing her the note he had requested about the Cessna’s fuel. “I don’t know that it will be the same type of aviation fuel but I think it’s safe to assume that this guy... whoever he is... will go back to CJ and Kate’s house. If my gut feeling is right, he’s pretty clever and calculating, and is trying to send Kate a message. I need you to continue to be at the house at night until further notice, Jamie.”

“What’s your plan?”

Mulroney gulped back the sick feeling in his belly. “We need to be smart about this. If this guy sees a manned car sitting outside the house, he’s not gonna come close. I want to catch him, Jamie, and I think our best chance to do that is with you inside the house. CJ and Kate aren’t really fit enough to defend themselves right now so...”

“I understand, Sir. Bring him in alive... perhaps a bullet hole in the leg?”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that... but yes.”

Agent Green gave her boss a single nod to confirm her agreement. “Okay... I’ll get down to the lab with this... then I need to go help the team with this killer. Our case is going at a snail’s pace.”

“I know. The clues aren’t exactly easy to decipher though.”

“Tell me about it. Maybe we should let CJ have a look...” Jamie said as a joke.

But Mark raised an eyebrow. “Maybe...”

* * * * *

As Kate bent over the tub to check the temperature of the running water, CJ limped through their large bedroom. She could feel the healing energy swirling around her and she couldn’t believe how amazing it felt to be back home. The light streamed in from two of the three windows; one on the back wall – the adjacent one that looked out towards the barn had its drapes closed for some reason – and the one facing the lake at the front of the peaceful farmhouse. It was when she looked out of this window that CJ saw a marked police cruiser at the top of the long driveway.

The driver and his partner seemed to be just sitting there. Her face twisted in confusion and when her wife came out of the ensuite, she turned her head. “Katie... why is there a cop car outside?”

A small grimace crossed the blonde’s features but she recovered well, although she did wonder why the police were there during the day. “Uh, why are you still standing?”

“I asked you first.”

“And I told you to get off that foot until I drew your bath.”

“Okay, Nurse Strictly. I bet Aunt Cece has a better bedside manner than you,” CJ whispered loudly. Her ‘not talking’ plan just wasn’t working.

“Aunt Cece doesn’t have to put up with you as a patient,” Kate retorted.

The agent conceded and smirked at the actress. “Good point.”

“I know it was.” This new type of interaction was most welcome to Kate. She could see her wife’s eyes twinkling with mischief and welcomed the lightheartedness, but the question of the cop car lingered with her. She went over to where the agent now sat on the edge of their large bed and crouched down between her knees. “Explaining to you why there is a cop car outside means we have to talk about that stuff we’re not ready to talk about yet. How about I tell you in bed tonight... what’s been happening here while you were away. You can just listen for now and when your throat starts to ease up you can tell me everything you went through in Minnesota?”

Kate didn’t look too concerned about anything and CJ trusted her. “Kay.”

“All right, let’s get you into that soothing water.”

“Pants first,” the agent said, lifting the only limb that wasn’t painful.

Kate stood up. “I need to take them over your hips first, honey. Stand for me...”

“Anything for you,” the taller woman said, sneaking a kiss as she rose.

“Quit that or I’ll start bawling again.”

“Bawl all you want,” was her hoarse reply.

Kate looked up onto pools of blue and let a couple of tears fall. “I love you so fucking much, CJ.” A long arm slipped around Kate’s waist and a delicate kiss was planted on her neck. She inhaled a quivering breath and returned the gesture, pushing up on her tip-toes to kiss the agent’s sore cheekbone. After a few breaths to slow their hearts, Kate rubbed her chin. “Okay... what was I doing?” CJ chuckled and pointed to her pants. “Right... yeah... bath.”

The sweatpants came off with relative ease. The actress tried to ignore the fact that her wife had no underwear on but CJ's smirk at the flushed face in front of her showed Kate she hadn't been successful. That same flushed face gasped aloud in horror when the blonde lifted the bottom of CJ's hoodie. A thick, angry line of black, blue, purple, yellow and all the colors in between, straddled the agent's hips, running just below her navel.

Kate's shaky inhale was long. "Oh honey..."

"Seatbelt," CJ rasped.

Her concerned wife nodded. "Is everything okay in there though?"

"Yeah... doc cleared me."

Kate nodded again silently and after completing the arduous task of undressing the tall, injured woman – and removing her sling, bandages and support shoe – Kate helped her to hobble to the ensuite. When they were both standing at the side of the tub, CJ scrunched her mouth in thought. "I guess it would be too much to ask for you to join me, huh?"

The blonde looked at her adoringly. "For now... yes. I would love nothing more than to be in there holding you but I'd definitely hurt you if we shared. Now get in and I'll pour some nice hot water over your hair. Use this stool to rest your cast on. You're getting pampered for however long it takes you to recover... and I won't take no for an answer."

They were briefly interrupted by a melodious voice from the upper hallway. "Everything all right in there?" the newly-awakened Eddie shouted. "Need my assistance, do you?"

A laughing reply from Kate floated through to him from the ensuite. "No thank you... we're doing okay, Dad!"

"Fabulous! Just remember I'm here for a little longer if you need me to do *aaaanything*... I've seen it all before, you know," he teased when he heard a splash.

Kate rolled her eyes. "Thanks, Dad, but I'll manage. How about cooking us up something appetizing for dinner tonight?"

"Ooh, I'll get started on the prep ASAP!! Oh! It's going to be so super tasty! Now, no hanky-panky in there while I'm distracted! Oh!"

The actress grinned to her tall wife, who was now standing in the water. "He was so worried about you."

"I know. He hasn't said much but I can see it in his eyes," CJ whispered. She tested her balance on one foot and gingerly lowered herself down, guided by a secure helping hand. "Oh and some pampering sounds fine, by the way..." she croaked as a few stabs of pain reminded her of her

current weakness. As Kate kneeled at the side of the tub and began scooping water up and over her shoulders and head, she smiled lazily. ‘*Sounds very fine indeed.*’

* * * * *

In bed that night, CJ reclined against three soft, plump pillows and inside, she was floating on a heavenly cloud. That feeling could have been helped along by being heavily laden with food, painkillers and throat medicine. Kate approaching the bed just added to her fuzzy, warm feeling and she drunkenly smiled at her gorgeous wife. “I’m gonna say it again... I love your hair.”

Kate slipped under the blankets and lay on her side to face her spouse. “I’m so happy you like it... I didn’t get the chance to be apprehensive when I first saw you but I know you loved my long hair too...”

“I did... I love your hair any ole way. It’s *you* who makes you stunningly beautiful, not your hairstyle.”

The actress blushed and ran her hand through the cropped locks. “Thank you,” she whispered bashfully.

CJ turned on her left side and positioned the offensive cast against her body. “You’re welcome, Katie.” She looked deeply into the orbs in front of her. “Hey... your eyes... they’re blue?”

“Uh, nope...”

“They look much, much more blue tonight.”

Kate took in the dazed face of her wife and smiled. “Hmm...”

“Blue-green?”

The blonde laughed quietly. “Whatever you say, beautiful. Now, would you like me to explain a few things... like why we have cops camped outside?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Are you sure you’re up to this? I mean, you look kinda drunk.”

CJ snickered. “I’m totally lucid, Katie. The only thing I’m drunk on is you.”

“You’re so damn cute, do you know that?”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay... tell me things... please.”

Kate snuggled down under the duvet and lay as close to CJ as she could, bringing their heads together if not their bodies. “Promise not to get stressed or freaked out?”

The agent held her breath while she thought about that. “I... promise.”

“Well... the barn was burned down last week.”

“*Was* burned down? As in, somebody burned it down?”

“Yes, honey... it was deliberate. The Fire Department confirmed it was arson...”

CJ’s nostrils flared as a flash of anger washed through her. “Were you and the kids here at the time?”

“Yes... Kamali... he started growling in the middle of the night and I was awake anyway...”
Kate shrugged at her total insomnia while CJ was away. “Anyway, the dog alerted me and I got up. He had never growled like that before so I knew something was really wrong. I went straight into the closet and got the .45 before I went along the hall and saw the guy running past the front porch. When I came back to the bedroom, I watched him running out of the barn and then I saw the flames. I was furious by this point and I rushed down to the front door and shot at him as he ran away.” Kate stopped at the shocked look on CJ’s face.

“Did you get him?”

“No, CJ... I didn’t aim to hit him, just to scare him off.”

The agent nodded her relief. Even though she would have liked the guy caught and jailed, she knew if Kate shot someone in the back as he ran off, it would be her who would end up behind bars. “As long as you and the girls are safe... I just don’t understand why someone would come all-“

“The way out here to start a fire...” Kate finished for her. “I know, Tony and I thought the same thing.”

The taller woman saw the pensive expression deepen on her wife’s face and reached out her hand. “We’ll figure it out together, Katie... try not to worry about it.”

“I’ll try. You look really tired now... let’s talk more tomorrow, okay?”

“Seems like my body wants to catch up on all the sleep I missed.”

“You didn’t rest at all on your... trek?”

“Sleep wasn’t really possible. All I could think of was you, Katie. I’m only here because of you, you know.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. I saw... you... a lot when I was lost.” CJ watched her wife’s eyes change and hurried on. “But I’m not crazy, I swear-“

“I know you’re not crazy. But... you saw me?” After a nod from the agent, Kate pinched her lips and thought back to her visions. “Uhm, I saw you too.”

A dark eyebrow shot upward and CJ’s knuckles tenderly touched the beautiful face. “Tell me...”

“Well... I really thought I *was* going crazy. You appeared to me a few times.”

“Where were you?” CJ whispered as her breath almost mingled with Kate’s since they were lying so close to one another.

“A few times in the house... and once out by the lake. You... you kept coming to me at my worst times... when I felt I wasn’t coping. You told me I was doing fine.”

“Oh honey... I’m so sorry you went through all this.”

“*We* went through all this, CJ. And you’re here now... for real.”

The agent inhaled the scent of her wife and acknowledged that Kate was here for real too. She pushed her forehead forward onto her soulmate’s and asked her next question. “This might sound weird but... what was I wearing when you saw me?”

Kate smiled. “I was pretty freaked out a couple of the times so I didn’t take note of your clothing,” she said with a snort, “but the rest of the time, you were wearing your Bureau combat gear.”

“Hmm. Nothing... more unusual?”

“What do you mean, honey?”

“Like, was I wearing any strange clothing that looked... ancient?”

“Ancient? No... no, I don’t think so. Why?”

“When I saw you... and I saw you a *lot*... you were wearing a kinda... uh... revealing outfit. It was like you were a fighter... or a warrior from a different age.”

“Wow... did I look cool?”

CJ chuckled. "You looked amazing. But what was more amazing about it was that I saw your short hair."

Kate's eyes widened. "No way!"

"Way," CJ replied with a head bob. "I loved it then and I love it now. There's something really freaky going on with us, Katie... and I'm really, really very fine with that."

"I'll say. I think what we share is incredible. So I was a warrior, huh?"

"You sure looked fierce, especially the time you came to me angry. Oh boy..." A small cough silenced the agent until she composed herself.

"Why was I angry with you?"

"To be honest, I think it just manifested like that because I was never gonna get back up otherwise. You called me Agent Carson. Oooh you were maaaaaad."

The actress grinned at the husky whispers coming from her chatty spouse. "Well, I do have to keep you in line. But tell me, did it work? Me being angry, I mean?"

"Of course it did. I'm here, aren't I?"

"Well duh, yeah. Man, I think I need sleep too."

CJ drifted on. "I saw Jack... just once... and that was enough."

"Jack?"

"Yeah, he was wearing weird shit too... and he said he was just waiting for me... to die."

"Ewww, that's not a very nice thing to hear."

"I know. He was dressed like a warrior but different from you. Are you sure I wasn't wearing anything strange when you saw me?"

Kate thought carefully about her visions while gazing into CJ's eyes. She blinked to break the trance when she remembered something. "Actually, there was one thing I was puzzled about. One of the times I saw you, you were twirling this... thing around your finger. It was round... and made of metal, you know, like a hoop? I thought it was maybe a toy but I never understood why you would look at it like you did."

"How was I looking at it?"

"Like it was a treasure... something important to you. It was a part of you."

“That *is* strange.”

“Maybe we’re both just losing our minds, CJ.”

“Or maybe we’ve just been here many times before. We’ve always felt that anyway.”

“True. Let’s not speak about it to others or we’ll definitely end up in straitjackets.”

CJ snorted a laugh then spoke around a yawn. “Deal.”

“Sleep?”

“Yeah... but can you do me one more favor?” CJ husked.

“What?”

“Move closer. I can lie the cast on that pillow over there and you can take your usual spot. I need to feel you.”

“I’d love that,” Kate murmured before they moved into position. She pushed her nose into CJ’s neck and inhaled deeply before curling into her usual place under her wife’s chin. “Now I’m home.”

Since CJ had just performed the same deep inhale at Kate’s head, she nodded minutely. “Me too.”

* * * * *

Around 4pm the next day, Shannon and Lucy arrived at the house with Tony and pranced excitedly into the living room to tell their parents all about their day at school. Lucy suddenly changed direction when she realized she really had to pee and Tony waited outside the downstairs shower room in case the youngster needed help to flush.

Shannon continued on and found CJ in her comfy spot on the couch. She was eager to begin her account of the day’s events and once she had greeted her Mommy, she scooted over the soft cushions until she was about two inches away from the agent. “Is your hand getting better, Mommy?” she asked, touching the plaster cast.

“Sure, Squirt. It’s healing every minute.”

“When will the thing come off?”

“The cast will be there a while until the bone heals properly.”

“Oh.” The girl thought about that then seemed to accept the agent’s words.

“So... tell me about your day...”

“Oh well...” Shannon’s voice chirped on as she gave her Mommy a shortened run down of her school escapades but CJ stopped her when she heard her daughter say that Sian’s mom works with Mama now. The agent was puzzled. “She works with *your* Mama?”

“Yes. Sian was very excited about it.”

“Oh...”

“Can I have a cookie?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. Mama’s in the kitchen. Go see what she thinks,” CJ said with a hint of proper vocals. When Shannon got up to leave, she called her back. “How about a kiss for me first...?”

“Okay.”

Once the request was fulfilled, Shannon skipped away only to be replaced by Lucy. “Me too. Mommy!”

CJ laughed and leaned forward again. “Mmm, thank you for these kisses. They make me feel so much better.”

Lucy scratched her cheek. “I could kiss your hand too.”

“Maybe not the hand because it’s covered up... but how about this shoulder right here?”

The tiny girl climbed up beside the agent and very loudly kissed the shoulder. “Mwuuhh! All better?”

“Yep.”

Lucy disappeared and CJ glanced to her right, seeing Tony standing in the doorway looking at her. “Hey, man...”

“CJ...” he said faintly in greeting. “I...”

The poor guy couldn’t stop his tears and the agent waved him over. She quirked a dark eyebrow once he was sitting next to her. “No kissing... but gimme a hug.”

He laughed through the cries and hugged her carefully. “So glad you’re home. So glad...”

“Me too... I’ve been hearing how amazing you were when everything went to shit.”

“Oh uh... you have? Well I... just did all I could to help.”

“I know... and that’s what was amazing, Tony. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” He looked at the small pile of letters he had deposited on the coffee table. “I brought in the mail. I’ll just put it with the bundle in the study. You guys have a lot of letters to open... and a package.”

Tony walked away leaving CJ’s mouth hanging open. She just remembered what the package was and she wondered if Kate had even remembered ordering it. Her eyes narrowed playfully as she filed the information away for later. She raised an eyebrow when Kate came into the room followed by a couple of children nibbling on a cookie each. “Sian’s mom is working with you?”

The actress grinned. “I see the grapevine is working splendidly. Yeah, she’s my new agent... I’ll tell you all about it later.”

“It’s a good thing though, right?”

“Oh yes... she’s a wonderful woman,” Kate nodded. At CJ’s even higher eyebrows, the blonde laughed. “Not as wonderful as you, my love... no grown-up is as wonderful as you,” she said, mindful to keep the children included in her conversation. “And no person on this entire planet is as wonderful as my three girls.”

Lucy chuckled and Shannon looked bashfully at her Mama. “Four wonderful girls in this house... and one wonderful dog,” she snickered.

CJ and Kate laughed at that but the laughter changed to ooh’s and aah’s when the oven started wafting out the delicious scents of dinner. The agent was pleased to discover she was beginning to have an appetite. She knew it was simply the astonishing healing power of her family’s love and she was glad she had insisted on getting home as soon as possible.

Epilogue

Eddie Marshall Senior muttered as he put his bag in the hallway. His flight home was leaving LAX in a few hours but he knew his family were fine now that they were all reunited, and it was time to get back to work.

It was 7.15pm and Jamie had arrived. He approached the blonde agent as she stood in the living area, talking to CJ and Kate. “Now Jamie... no more couch for you! I’ve changed the linens in the guest room. It’s all yours, you lovely thing!”

“Aww, you didn’t have to do that, Mr. M.”

“Nonsense! Anything I can do to be useful...”

“Dad,” Kate called out. “You’ve been an incredible help. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Oh! Sweetheart, my place is by your side any time you need me. Oh I love you people so much!”

CJ smiled from her armchair. “We love you too, Dad.”

“Oh, that gorgeous voice is coming back... I just know it!” He rushed over to kiss and hug the agent goodbye and she returned it, feeling a tad emotional at his leaving.

“Come and visit soon, huh? Preferably when I’m a little healthier...”

“I will, CJ. Oh, I spoke with Eddie Junior... he sends his love and will call to arrange a visit. He was worried about you but I told him to give you all a little more time before he sprung Sasha on you!”

Kate and CJ laughed at that, knowing Sasha Amoretti was rather clumsy when she was in the vicinity of one of her idols, Hollywood actress Kate Marshall.

A shout came from Tony, who was on the porch after putting the bags in the car. “Eddie! Time to go!”

“All right, all right!” the man sung out. “Katie... I’ll call you tomorrow after I’ve averted any impending disasters at the restaurant!”

“Sounds good, Dad... and thank you for being here...”

“Like I said... anytime, sweetheart.” He kissed his daughter goodbye and waved to all as he left.

Agent Green went to greet the kids and settle them in the crèche in front of a movie for the next short while. She had something she needed to tell their parents and she didn’t want young ears hearing it. When she returned to the living room, only CJ was there. “Where did Kate go?”

“Oh... she just went to get a clean dressing for this cut.”

‘How appropriate...’ the blonde agent thought, knowing what she had to tell them as soon as Kate returned. She sat down on the edge of the coffee table. “How’s the infection?” she asked, taking CJ’s hand delicately in hers and examining the wound.

“Closing up nicely...”

Kate walked in and sat beside her wife, giving Jamie the opportunity to say her piece. “I... have some news for you guys.”

Both Carsons looked up and the raven-haired woman tried to read her friend’s face. “Go on...”

“We got the results back on the bloody knife that was left in the barn.”

CJ tried to recall if she knew about a knife. “I think Kate told me about that...” A look to the actress told her she had.

“Well, the blood on it was found to be equine.”

Kate’s brain ticked over as she thought about the horses and tried to recall something important. “Oh... oh no...”

“What, honey?” CJ said, taking her hand.

“Tony told me at one point that Nevada had cut herself... on her chest... but we thought it was just from the fence or maybe a branch in their field. He treated it and she seemed fine. I never really thought about it again. Oh God...”

“It seems like this guy was trying to hurt them but don’t worry, I’ll be staying here every night from now on to keep a watchful eye.”

“But Jamie, you’ll need to sleep sometime... you can’t work all day then stay awake here all night.”

Jamie was glad they hadn’t refused to let her stay and she had to agree with the actress. “I’ll think of something... okay?”

“We’ll think of something,” CJ corrected.

Little did they know that as dusk fell outside, a lone figure had approached the horse field from the other end of the property armed with a juicy apple and another sharp knife. Once the horses were standing next to him trying to pry the apple from his closed fist, he plunged the blade into Idaho, who let out a squeal as she tried to move away, sending Nevada sprinting across the field and over the fence in her panicked but instinctual flight response. The big golden mare split the top rail in two as her powerful hooves clattered against the wood. She took off across the plains, disappearing into the distance until she was but a tiny dot on the horizon and the evil man retreated into the night once more.

To Be Continued...



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