

After The Storm

By Wendy Arthur

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This story contains scenes of violence (psychological as well as physical), some of which are directed at women. Readers who are disturbed by or sensitive to this type of depiction may wish to read something other than this story.

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

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Many, many thanks to my beta-reader, Norsebard. Your help is very much appreciated.

The characters in this Uber will be back, but each 'episode' will conclude in each story.

Comments and/or opinions can be left here or sent to stagefreakmusic@hotmail.com.

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Chapter 1

It was the end of another difficult hostage situation for FBI negotiator, Ciara Jane Carson. Standing outside the National Provincial Bank in the middle of the night, surrounded by flashing lights and various squad cars, AD Mark Mulrone was trying to convince her that she did good. A tall thin man, with narrow features, he had a kindness in his dark eyes and they seemed to twinkle as he studied her. She had worked with him many times before and he'd made it clear, in one rare drunken declaration that he found her attractive. She, of course, had been completely sober, never having found alcohol very appealing and had deflected his rather weak advances nicely. It seemed now, that he was being a little *too* familiar with her and it made her uncomfortable.

"CJ, you really *are* being too hard on yourself. You only lost two hostages out of eighteen. That's an acceptable percentage, considering this guy was a complete and utter nut."

"There's no such thing as 'acceptable losses' in *my* negotiations, *Mark*. Just back off, okay?" CJ spat back, leaning heavily on the use of his first name to emphasize the familiarity point.

She decided from the sharp look directed back at her, that she had pushed this conversation a little too far. Forcing her anger back, she jammed her fists in her pockets. He *was* an Assistant Director after all.

“Listen, I’m sorry. I’m a little on edge. I haven’t had any time off for five weeks. Maybe I should take a vacation.” She flipped her long, black ponytail over her shoulder and stretched out the kinks in her neck.

“It was a crappy, tough day. Some time off might be just what you need,” Mark said, in a more conciliatory tone.

“Maybe I’ll put in for it as soon as we get back to the field office.”

“You know as well as I do, Agent, that you work too hard. They’ll throw the leave at you. You know, you’re a damn good operative and I know you’ll come to realize...”

CJ phased him out, her mind drifting off through disinterest and sheer exhaustion. ‘*Why can’t I just take genuine praise from people the way it’s intended?*’ she mused. ‘*I’m such a bitch sometimes.*’

She had found this situation particularly difficult. The perp in this case had taken eighteen hostages, including bank staff and customers. Of the two he had killed, one had been shot in the back of the head. It violently threw CJ back to the day she had been the victim of a very similar incident.

Two years ago, Special Agent Ciara Carson had received a commendation for her bravery in a hostage situation where she traded herself for three children. Even though agents are never supposed to offer themselves as bait or replacements, she had come to the conclusion that the demented, drug-induced state of the man who had invaded an Elementary school, would surely lead to the death of the children if she hadn’t talked him into the exchange. Using the “*you have control here but having me as a hostage would get you a whole lot more money and a means of escape*” routine, she had somehow talked him into it. A federal agent could be good leverage in a dire situation, so he had eventually agreed to the switch. But CJ’s heroic act had ended with a bullet in her head and the perp getting away. She had never forgiven herself for letting a psychopath like that get back on the streets. She *had* been lucky though. After eight hours in surgery and a long stay in the ICU, there were no serious repercussions, although the deep scar just under her hairline on the back of her neck, served as a blatant reminder.

Today had brought all the memories back and she felt emotionally drained. Finishing up her paperwork at the local field office, she began her long trip to the Crisis Negotiation Unit back at Quantico, to conclude the rest of her more-than-likely tedious week and talk to the boss about any loose ends.

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One month later, she found herself whistling a tune as she drove north on Route 95. Her section Chief had told her to take six weeks of the accumulated leave she had acquired from working too hard. She’d haggled with him and settled on five. Stopping at her sparsely decorated rental apartment in Springfield, she packed a few essentials and plenty of warm clothes into a suitcase, and threw her laptop bag over her shoulder.

“Maybe I’ll be able to write something once my brain relaxes... or maybe just watch a few movies and chill the hell out”, she murmured, patting the bag and trailing her suitcase behind her.

She locked up the apartment and stopped by Mrs. Litford’s door, letting her know she would be out of town for a while. It was a friendly gesture but she also knew that the old lady would keep an eye on her apartment for her while she was gone. Mrs. Litford worried about the FBI agent in a maternal sort of way, always telling her that she should get a job with “a lot less chance of dyin’...” She’d also leave food in the agent’s freezer that CJ usually had to throw out by the time she got back from her long stints working away. Being a top class negotiator, CJ was in high demand and seemed to travel more than she was home.

But then again, this place had never felt like home. But Mrs. Litford was a kind old lady and CJ was fond of her, so the tall agent assured her that this was truly a vacation, and it would be highly unlikely that she would run into any serial killers or hostage takers up in the Rocky Mountains.

Placing her bags in the trunk of her unmarked sedan, whose dark exterior hid a plethora of FBI enhancements, she pulled out of the parking lot and headed for Dulles International Airport. They had secured parking there, where she could safely leave the car under lock and key.

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The journey was uneventful and she arrived in Montana feeling quite refreshed, having managed a mid-flight nap.

She whipped her scarf around her neck and headed for the rental desk. Her special request for a Jeep Wrangler was easily dealt with. She supposed it should be, as she had pre-booked it before leaving Quantico, but she was still glad things were running so smoothly.

“There you go, Ms Carson. Enjoy your trip. Your booking is verified and open-ended. We’ll see you whenever you get back,” the pretty desk clerk gushed.

CJ had never seen that particular employee before, but then again, it was a while since she had been in Montana. The woman was fluttering her eyelashes at the agent and the six-foot beauty sighed. ‘*What do they see in me?*’ she thought. Still, she could appreciate the dark eyes and tight little body from afar.

“Thanks. I’ll bring it back in one piece,” she smirked. “Have a great day, Shirley,” she concluded, glancing at the nametag on the woman’s breast.

“You too, Ms Carson.”

Outside, the valet brought the Jeep around and CJ admired the shiny black vehicle, appreciating its compact nature that somehow managed to accommodate her six-foot frame in comfort. She took the keys and put her bags in the back. Slipping into the black leather driver’s seat, she immediately started the engine and turned up the heat. Taking off the scarf and throwing it over her shoulder, she reached round and took the bundle of CD’s she had grabbed from her apartment and flicked through them. Deciding on some easy listening driving music, she popped some Melissa Etheridge in the player and pulled out of the lot to head ‘home’. The cabin she had in the Rocky Mountains was the only place CJ had bought with her inheritance a few years back. Her estranged father had, surprisingly, left his estate to her, which wasn’t much, but it was enough to get her the dream wilderness retreat she had always wanted. From the hectic, constant stress of her life with the Bureau, this place was her peace and relaxation. She loved the solitude. CJ wasn’t a people person... not in her private life, and the fact that nobody lived within forty miles of her cabin – except for the animals and birds of the mountains, with their abandoned mines and caves and a forest that was breathtaking – was total bliss.

Driving north on Route 90, she decided to stop in Missoula for supplies before heading onward to Alberton. ‘*More variety, better groceries,*’ she thought. Once she had filled the Jeep to her satisfaction with all sorts of food, canned goods and everything else she could think of, she slumped into the driver’s seat once more, knowing that it wouldn’t be long before she would be slumping into the giant, comfy couch in front of the roaring fire in her cabin. As the engine growled to life, she perused the CD bundle for something to keep her awake.

“Meatloaf?” she muttered to herself. “Belinda musta left that. Gawd... what did I ever see in her?”

Belinda had been a recent brief affair, the only person CJ had been with in a long time. The agent had difficulty letting anyone close to her since Sandy, her girlfriend of five years, had died during a hostage situation three years ago. Every day since, the cool, aloof agent had relived it in every incident, trying to save any and all hostages, somehow hoping that it could save the one she lost. She had blamed herself for Sandy's death and she would never get into a relationship again, where her lover could be used as leverage in a personal vendetta against her or the FBI. Never again.

Throwing the offensive disc to the side, she found some Foo Fighters and smirked as it began to belt out from the speakers. Sighing gustily, CJ brushed her unruly raven bangs from her face and tucked the longer ones behind her ear. Back on the road, she found herself singing at the top of her lungs and looking forward to seeing Charlie again.

She was glad to see the signs for Alberton, knowing she would be stopping soon. She missed being out here, especially during the crazy life that the FBI had provided her recently. Her ocean blue eyes were getting sleepy now and she rubbed them roughly, then slapped her cheek to keep herself alert.

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Strolling through the door of the Alberton Sheriff's office, CJ immediately spotted the short, broad form of Charlie Baxter. The first time she had come up here looking for her new cabin, Charlie had taken to her instantly, saying she reminded him of his daughter, although how this short little man could have a six foot daughter, was beyond her.

"Sheriff, I need to report a crime..." she said to his back.

He whirled around, recognizing the husky female voice and stared at her wide-eyed for a brief moment, before barreling toward her, arms outstretched. She grinned widely as he enveloped her in a bear hug.

"It's been too long, FBI. That's the darn crime," he chuckled as he released her.

"I know, Charlie. The Bureau's been keeping me so busy. I missed you, man. And what's with the goatee?" she said, reaching out to grab the hair in question.

"Hey! Just thought I'd try it. What d'ya think? Will the ladies like it?"

"Hmmm, I might not be the best one to ask about that," she replied casually.

He grinned. "Yeah... can't imagine you like your women with beards."

"Exactly. So, I know why it smells like cigars in here, but why cinnamon?" she asked, eyeing the basket on the counter behind his desk.

Laughing, Charlie lifted the basket and brought it to the desk, opening the lid. "Miss Somerville from the store across the street has a crush on my new deputy. And she bakes too," he quipped, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, thank Miss Somerville from me", CJ replied, reaching into the basket and snagging a bagel or two. "I see your population has increased by two. New neighbors?"

"Nope. We had two births this year. One boy, One girl," Charlie replied.

"Well, congratulations."

The agent spent the next two hours drinking coffee and catching up with Charlie before heading up the mountain trail to her refuge. But not before the stout little Sheriff had forced the CB radio and receiver unit into her arms. He never let her go without communications equipment. There was no cell phone coverage or Internet connection up there and Baxter always sent her off with a radio, which was fine... when it worked.

Chapter 2

In a moderately cold Los Angeles, Katherine Marshall sat in her dressing room staring at the piece of paper. It was another threatening letter. That made five in the last five months. But this one made her skin crawl. She immediately placed it carefully on the envelope it had come in, knowing that Lieutenant Johnson would want it left for forensics to deal with. This letter had not been sent through the mail, like the others. It had been left by someone, unseen, at the office near the back lot where Katherine was shooting her current TV series. She swallowed back the sick feeling in her gut and picked up the phone.

“LAPD investigations. Simpson speaking,” said a gruff voice on the other end of the line.

“Hello, this is Katherine Marshall over at the Olympian studios. Could I please speak to Lieutenant Johnson? It’s urgent.”

The confidence in her voice betrayed how she truly felt.

“Hold for a moment, Ms Marshall“, he replied, recognizing the name and the case.

When the line clicked, putting her on hold, she turned to see her executive producer, Samantha Morris, enter the trailer. Sam had become a good friend and even when they didn’t work together, they stayed in touch. Kate put her finger to her lips in a silencing gesture as she waited for the Lieutenant.

“This is Lieutenant Johnson. How can I help you?”

“Hello Lieutenant. This is Kate Marshall. I thought I should inform you of another threatening letter. This one was delivered by hand,” Kate said, trying to hide the quiver in her voice.

“By hand? Was it left in your trailer?”

“No. There’s a small office, just outside the gate to the lot. He left it there and he might be on camera.”

“Okay. I’m leaving now, Miss Marshall. Don’t let anyone touch the letter...just as before. Be there soon.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.”

Letting out a deep breath, she hung up the phone and turned to Sam.

“He sent another one,” she said, pointing to the paper on her desk.

“Christ, Kate. This guy is getting kinda scary.”

“He is. It seems to get more personal every time he sends one. I’m starting to think he really *is* watching me.”

Sam flinched, tucking her auburn hair behind her ears as she moved closer to the desk. “I’m not sure how he could. You’re surrounded by security at work and have a trusted chauffeur between here and home.”

“I know. But I’m not always at work. I do have a life on my days off. I’m thinking now, I should get a bodyguard until this guy is caught,” Kate said, resting her elbow on the back of her chair and lowering her forehead into her hand.

Sam sighed and looked closer at the letter, never touching it. She was more than familiar with the routine by now. As usual, the letter was typed.

“Marshall bitch

I tried to be nice

I tried to be charming

You never even saw me

You’d never do what I wanted. Selfish slut.

You think I’m a piece of shit?

Your beauty is only skin deep. You are ugly inside.

I’ll make you ugly everywhere.

You’ll be mine. I’ll make you pay

Oh and I like your UCLA sweater

J”.

“That’s just creepy,” Sam said, crinkling her nose at the words.

Sighing deeply, Kate ran her hand through her long blonde hair. “I know. Is there any way we can wrap for today? I think I need to go home once the police finish up here.”

“There are a few more scenes to get this week but if you’re prepared to come in Saturday, we can do the last ones then.”

“Fine,” Kate replied, nodding weakly.

When Sam left, assuring her that she would send the Lieutenant over as soon as he arrived, Kate lifted the glass from the minibar and poured herself a stiff drink. Reclining on the couch, she leaned her head back over the cushion behind her and closed her eyes, feeling the beginnings of a headache creep across her temples.

She woke abruptly to a loud knock on her door. Jumping to her feet and smoothing out her clothes, she went to open it.

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After Lieutenant Johnson and his officers left, she quickly told Sam she was leaving and headed for her car. Noticing her driver wasn't around, she fished her cell phone from her bag and dialed his number. Tony joined her a short time later and opened the car door for her.

"Where to, Miss Kate?" he asked politely.

"I'm going home early, Tony. It's been a hard day."

"No problem. I'll have you there in a flash," he said, smiling into the rearview mirror.

Kate gave him a wide, albeit fake, smile back and tried to relax into the sumptuous upholstery. When she got home, she locked the door behind her, secured the deadbolts and set the alarm, too tired to notice that she had forgotten to set it that morning. Walking through her spacious, single level Beverly Hills house, she shed her coat and shoes in her bedroom, heading for the ensuite. She didn't see the smashed glass from the window in the guest bedroom.

"A long, hot bubble bath. That's what I need," she said to herself.

After a meager dinner, she sat in the steaming tub, leaning forward with her arms wrapped around her bent knees, trying to forget the words of the letter that were still swirling around in her head. Suddenly, she had a strong sensation that someone was watching her. The hairs on the nape of her neck stood on end and a chill swept over her body. She turned her head quickly toward the closet door, which was ajar, and tried to focus to somehow penetrate the darkness beyond. The feeling left her and she shivered.

"God, I need to get a grip," she murmured, shaking her head.

Lying back in the bathtub, she stretched out her five foot four athletic frame and tried to stop freaking out.

Kate was a tough, independent woman, brought up in Brooklyn by her parents, who had lived in one of the poorer neighborhoods. At seventeen she had run away to California, leaving her father distraught and her mother disgusted. She desperately wanted to be an actress and figured she could work there while putting herself through school. She had worked in bars and clubs until one day she met Jason Lee Burns. They started dating and Kate thought he was quite charming. He knew the manager of an upscale bar in downtown LA where the clientele was interspersed with Hollywood giants. Jason had put in a good word with his friend and she had got a job behind the bar. Doing her studies during the day and working nights, Kate was so determined to achieve her goals that she almost ran herself into the ground. At twenty-two years old and just about to finish her University degree, it happened.

One of those movie giants recognized her one night, from a low budget independent movie she had done, and offered her an audition spot for the lead role in his next major picture. She aced the audition and was soon the 'next big thing' in Hollywood. She had finished with Jason before that, when he started telling her that University was a waste of time and she didn't need to learn anything else because she was with him now, and he could get her jobs in the business. Even though he was handsome and had helped her get the bar job, she had never truly understood why he wanted to control her so much. She had been quite naïve, letting him influence her to a certain degree but she'd still had the balls to leave him and do what was best for her. Now, with two major movies under her belt and the lead in her own TV series, Rise of the Phoenix, Kate was a formidable and well-respected actress and producer. She'd also managed to complete her Masters degree in Film Production along the way. She had worked hard and now, at only twenty-seven, reaped the rewards.

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Some time later, a clean and somewhat relaxed Kate went to bed. Lying in the dark, she listened to the branches on the tree outside, swaying in the wind, their shadows casting a dancing image across her ceiling. A creak from the direction of the ensuite made her bolt upright and she scanned the dark bedroom for any movement. Her pulse racing, she sat frozen still, waiting for another noise to draw her heart from her chest. Gripping her quilt-covered knees with both hands and sensing nothing else, she lay her head back on the pillow.

“I’m calling that security firm tomorrow. This is ridiculous,” she whispered to herself.

Closing her eyes, she tried to drift off to sleep, quite surprised when her breathing evened out and her body felt as if it was sinking deep in the mattress from utter exhaustion.

She didn’t know what had awakened her. It could have been the heavy weight bearing down on her stomach, or the firm, cruel grip of a large hand roughly covering her mouth or the whispering, growling deep voice that sounded like evil itself. She stiffened and struggled and tried to scream.

“Don’t you dare,” the voice hissed. “This here knife... will shut you up if you make a sound.”

The man pressed the sharp tip of the knife against her throat for emphasis and she tried not to gulp for fear of being sliced open. Her eyes were open now but they could only make out the silhouette of the figure, definitely male, who was crouched over her, straddling her stomach and pinning her arms with his knees. She felt bile and the remains of her recent, albeit small meal, rising from her stomach and really hoped she would not vomit on his hand. He would probably just kill her immediately for that.

“You’re gonna get up when I tell you. You’re not gonna make a sound and you’ll do exactly as I say... or you’ll die. Understand, bitch?”

Kate nodded mutely. The terror spread through her, but her mind was constantly looking for an opportunity to escape. Everything seemed to come into sharp focus as he lifted his weight off her body. Suddenly she could smell something stale, the metallic tinge of blood and the unmistakable odor of a filthy human body. She realized that it came from the sweaty, fucked-up man who was now dragging her onto the floor on her knees. Her temper was rising and she tensed every muscle in her body in rage.

“Why didn’t you just drug me? I’d be easier to drag around if I wasn’t resisting,” she spat angrily.

“I want to see the fear in your fucking eyes when I slice you. I’ll make you ugly, bitch.”

Kate barely had time to recognize the words, reminiscent of the last letter, when the butt of the large knife came down directly on her temple, plunging her into darkness.

Chapter 3

CJ arrived at the cabin with a smile on her face. The little wooden structure looked so shabby and old from the outside that she chuckled at the irony. Inside it was small but very well fitted out. It even had a large storage bunker under the floor, which the agent had made into a tiny cinema with two plush, comfortable chairs and a large, wall-mounted TV screen that she could hook up to her laptop. The main floor was three basic rooms. The main room was a living area with one large, simple L-shaped couch, a coffee table on a thick, bright blue Navajo-patterned rug, which lay in front of the open fireplace and hearth. The fireplace was flanked by two huge windows that took in the spectacular view. All around her were the small personal items and ornaments that made this feel so much like home, including a photo of a small girl with raven black hair, sitting on a log next to her loving mother. In this room there was also a simple kitchen fixture in the corner with basic equipment.... stove, microwave, kettle, small refrigerator and a sink. Off the living area was a bathroom, housing a toilet, sink and very large bathtub, with shower overhead. And finally, a

bedroom with a king-size bed, closet and a nightstand. It was compact but somehow managed to feel spacious, and CJ loved it.

On entering her home, she noted the musty smell in the air and went outside to unlock the storm shutters. Once that was done, she opened the large windows looking out over the treetops, cascading down the mountainside. Inhaling the crisp air deeply, she looked at the sky. Charlie had said something about a big storm coming, but from here, CJ couldn't see any evidence of that. She headed for the bedroom, threw off her jacket and unstrapped her Colt .45, placing it in her nightstand, which was actually a metal gun cabinet in disguise. She added her ammo, locked it up and went to unpack her bags and food from the car. The Jeep fit neatly beside her woodshed and she appreciated the fact that she could turn the smaller 4x4 vehicle around on her tiny front yard. It saved her from driving back down the miles of single track in reverse when she needed to leave. That thought made her chuckle to herself as she went into the shed and retrieved her axe.

The woodpile was stacked high and with a satisfied look on her face, the tall agent entered the cabin, lit the fire and prodded it until it was blazing brightly. The boiler for her hot water was powered by an ingenious system, linked to those open flames. She never could understand how it worked but was happy that she could indulge in her huge bathtub while she was here. CJ turned on the water heater, intent on having that bath, filled with bubbles, to wash the wood-chopping-induced sweat from her lithe body. Frowning, she noticed that the little red light didn't go on, and with an exaggerated sigh, she went outside to look over the solar panels on the roof. The water was heated by the fire but she still needed the little electric switch to turn the damn boiler on. Once she had climbed the ladder and traced the problem, a loose wire near the junction box, she went back inside and tried again. A smug smile creased her cheeks as the light sparked to life and her little home had power once more. A quick check to the two large storage batteries settled her mind and she completely relaxed, knowing that everything was functioning as it should.

Cracking open a bottle of beer, she switched on the stereo and opened the CD tray. Finding the right tunes, she began to hum along with the music as she slowly went round the room, wiping away almost eighteen months of dust. She switched on the two lamps and their low wattage bulbs, combined with the flickering flames of the fire, gave the room a warm, homey feeling with their diffused light bouncing off the cream-colored walls and wooden structural pillars. Dragging the large rug outside, she beat it good with a long pole and swept the cabin floors. On returning the rug to its resting place, she realized that she had become entirely too domesticated. She decided that it was okay because this was the only place she took care of in this way... and nobody would ever know that the cool, tough FBI negotiator liked to indulge in housework every once in a while.

This place was the only thing in the world that was all hers. That thought used to comfort her. The simplicity of life outside the Bureau... she didn't need anything or anyone. But now, her eyebrows furled in confusion as an entirely different feeling came over her. Something was missing... or someone.

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Rising through the cottony fog in her brain, Kate tried to open her eyes. The pain that shot across her temple forced her to cease her attempt for now and try to focus on where she was and what had happened. The memory of the man in her house, in her bed... "Oh God..." she gasped. It came out muffled and she felt the breath rebound back into her mouth from the strong tape covering her lips.

She was in motion... the grinding sound, the smell of exhaust fumes and fuel and the confines of the space around her brought her to the conclusion that she was in the trunk of the bastard's car. Struggling against the bindings on her wrists, she wriggled her legs up toward her chin, trying to get her hands round in front of her. Twisting her torso and reaching down with her tied hands, she managed to bring them under her feet and up to her face, where she pulled the wide pieces of tape from her mouth. She was about to start yelling and kicking at the lid of the trunk when she remembered the last time she answered this guy back. Not

wanting to revisit that unconsciousness, she shut her mouth and began to think furiously of an escape plan... if she got the opportunity to put it into action.

She shivered, and realized that it was not only from fear, but also from the cold seeping through her pajamas. *'Jesus, I'll freeze to death before he gets the chance to... to do whatever he is going to do.'* What was he going to do to her? She didn't want to think about that and forced herself to open her eyes. She needed to get away somehow. Kate wasn't sure her eyes were actually opened until she brought a small red dot into focus. As her vision cleared, she looked at the red light in more detail. It was the inside of the taillight. She was definitely in the trunk. But where the hell was he going? How long had they been travelling? She knew asking herself these questions was futile but from the stiffness in her limbs and the pain in her back, she guessed she had been lying in this position for quite some time. She would never know. Fear swept over her again and a tear fell, unbidden, from her eye. *'He wants to see your fear, Kate Marshall. Don't be afraid. Don't give him the satisfaction,'* she told herself sternly, over and over, until the vehicle came to an abrupt halt. She listened intently and heard the rustle of paper in the car and a muttered curse, before deducing that the idiot was lost. She would have smiled if the situation hadn't been so dire. Then the car was moving again and a sharp left turn resulted in her head slamming against the side of the trunk. Then she rolled onto her front while simultaneously bringing her bound hands up to try and try to support herself and she knew they were heading uphill... on a dirt track. Her stomach heaved as she thought of how remote this was, and how far from LA she must be.

After what seemed like an eternity, the car stopped and the engine died. Kate desperately tried to slow her breathing before she hyperventilated. The driver slammed the car door and his boots made a crunching sound on the gravelly ground as he walked around the vehicle. Kate now wished she had not removed the tape covering her mouth. That way, she could feign unconsciousness when he opened the trunk. Too late.

The dying light of the evening sky blinded Kate Marshall's nipping eyes as she saw the blurry figure looming over her, his eyes shadowed by the rim of a baseball cap, his face, partially wrapped in a scarf.

"So, you little bitch, you took off the gag. Did I say you could move, you fucking slut? Hmmm?"

A firm backhanded slap across the cheek made sure Kate knew that it was not a rhetorical question. Then suddenly, his face was approximately two centimeters from hers. Her eyes squeezed shut, her whole body tensed, waiting for the next disgusting act that was guaranteed to make her skin crawl. A stinking, rough tongue left a hideous, slimy trail across the swollen cheek.

"Yeah, I knew you would still taste good."

'Still? What did he do to me while I was unconscious?' Kate couldn't stop the tear that ran down her face. She hoped her attacker couldn't see it as it left her skin and fell onto the carpeted floor of the trunk. She wasn't sure what happened next, but she was again in darkness. It took a few seconds to figure out that while she closed her eyes under his lecherous assault, he had produced a small black sack of some sort and quickly wrapped it over her head. Without warning, she was hauled from the car and onto her feet, but not before a piece of cold, sharp metal from the lip of the trunk had ripped a gash in her calf. *'Where did he get this heap of junk?'* she thought angrily.

The actress was dragged along for quite some time over rough terrain, trying not to trip up and fall flat on her face. That would just make him mad. They went uphill for a short while first, then down. She guessed that they had just come over the top of a ridge. Finally, he led her into a cold, dank room. As the man barked out curse-ridden instructions to her, his gravelly voice repeated in an eerie echo. She began to wonder if this truly was the end for her. The cover was ripped from her head after he had thrown her to the ground and Kate looked up to see a small oil lamp behind him, fixed to the rock wall of the... cave? The panic that had been coming in waves, threatened to overwhelm her as she turned to the darkened silhouette of her assailant.

“Not so beautiful now, are you bitch? You’ll be so hideously ugly when I’m finished with you, you’ll never act again... that is, if I don’t decide to kill you,” he sneered.

With that, he reached down to his pants and slid his hand inside. Kate’s whole body froze and she lowered her eyes to the floor.

“Look at me, you fucking slut!”

She slowly brought her eyes back up, trying not to fall apart. He began frantically rubbing his hand back and forth over what was clearly a flaccid penis, getting increasingly frustrated with every passing second. Suddenly, he withdrew his hand and lunged at Kate, punching her face soundly with the offending hand. He immediately stormed out of the large wooden door that was fixed firmly to the cave walls and clanked the lock shut from the outside.

Kate burst into tears and curled up against the cold wall, scuffling her feet on the dirt ground in an effort to bring her knees up tight to her chest in some kind of protective embrace. Her last energy reserves left her and she fell into unconsciousness once more.

Chapter 4

Six days later, CJ walked out her front door to gather more wood from the shed and found herself face to face with a moose. She stood stock still as a small grin curled her lips. The gullible-looking creature snorted a puff of air from its huge nostrils and the agent bit back a chuckle. She did notice that the snort had produced a visible cloud of breath, indicating that the temperature had dropped considerably in the last few days. ‘*Maybe Charlie was right. Maybe a storm is coming,*’ she thought, as she watched the moose turn and begin to graze the grass at the edge of the forest. Gathering the wood she needed, CJ returned to the cozy living area and topped up the fire, before settling down on the big couch with the last cinnamon bagel that she had defrosted, toasted and buttered.

* * * * *

Kate opened her eyes and clamped down her excruciatingly painful jaw to try and stop her teeth from chattering. The sick bastard holding her captive had given his victim a thin blanket so at least it wasn’t *all* torture. But she was still freezing. Living on barely enough scraps of food to feed a dog, the petite actress couldn’t muster the energy to fight the assaults anymore. And he had tied her hands behind her back again, which served to lessen her chance of escaping. He had told her that if she moved them back around, he would slit her throat. Apart from that, every day was the same. He would come in the door, try to jerk off in front of her... unsuccessfully, then beat the hell out of her like it was her fault. Later, he would maybe come by and throw the scraps of old food on the dirt floor for her to scrounge up like an animal. He always wore the cap and scarf, never allowing her to see his face. Every moment, Kate’s hatred grew and it was a fight not to let it take over but she was aware that her anger was the only thing keeping her going right now. She had to keep her mind sharp in case he slipped up. But, God, it was hard. The lack of nourishment combined with exhaustion and a badly beaten body left her no energy reserves for silly things like thinking. But there must be something she could do to help herself. Surely he would kill her soon... either that or she would perhaps die of starvation or freeze to death.

She crawled around on her bloody and swollen knees in search of something to eat. The light from the lantern on the wall was low but she spotted a white peeling of some sort and immediately lowered her nose to the ground. Sniffing it didn’t help of course, her nostrils were most likely full of blood, so she picked it up with her mouth and chewed gingerly. Kate winced in pain as her dry, split lips moved while she ate. Her knees gave way and she fell onto her side, her breath gusting out of her with the agony of falling on bruised or fractured ribs, she wasn’t sure which. As she lay there, trying to stop the tears from falling again, a glimpse of something reflecting in the low illumination flashed in her line of vision. She wiggled her pain-ridden body over to it and her dull green eyes widened when she saw what it was.

'The piece of rusty metal from the car'. Seeing her own blood dried onto the surface, she deciphered that it must have been stuck in her wound and fallen out again when her attacker threw her to the ground. He wouldn't be back today, going by his routine every other day. She had to chance it. The metal could cut the ropes. She moved the disturbed dirt that covered her new tool, with her nose, and carefully bit down on the metal. Kate forced herself back onto her knees and shuffled over to the wall, dropping the metal on the ground. She turned her back on it and sat down. Using her bound hands, she tried to wedge the metal between the rope and the wall. The first attempt was unsuccessful, slicing into her wrist. With a muffled squeal, she sat for a few moments to see if she would faint through loss of blood. When that didn't happen, she concluded that she hadn't hit a vein, and continued. The second attempt was better, she had managed to get a good rhythm going and it seemed to be working, the tension loosening slightly around her wrists. Then the noise outside the door made her heart stop.

When he approached her, she thought she might die of fright, never mind anything else. Praying that he didn't drag her to her feet and see the metal, she swallowed convulsively as she watched him pace the floor. This visit was different. He never came to the cave in the evening and he was incredibly agitated, scratching and clawing at his arms like his skin was infested. *'Oh my God, he's high... or in withdrawal... or something'* she thought in horror. In the next second, his hand was roughly gripping her ankle and moving her legs apart. He hovered on his knees in front of her and Kate thought this was it. He was going to rape her and kill her. She closed her eyes tightly when she realized in horror that he had the knife in his hand and was running the cold blade up the inside of her thigh. Silently praying for help to whoever might be listening, she waited for the hell she was about to endure. Just as quickly as he had arrived, she felt a searing, sharp pain on her inner thigh and he was gone, the door slamming shut with a resounding thud.

Feeling the blood running down her leg, Kate frantically started cutting the rope again, desperation providing the energy she needed to complete her task. It was time to get out of here.

* * * * *

CJ sat on the couch, laptop on the coffee table, rapping her fingers on her chin. She had started writing a new love story a few days ago, trying to express her mushy desires in stories, if she couldn't in life, but her creativity had stagnated already. Her muse eluded her and she stared out the window to the grey sky beyond. At that moment, the first snowflakes began to fall and she was thankful she had chopped a plentiful supply of wood yesterday. She rose to her feet and stood before the glass, watching the approaching storm. A beep from the CB radio transmitter broke her gaze. Taking a few long strides over to the device, she pressed the button on the side of the handset.

"Charlie? This is CJ, go ahead."

"Hey FBI. How's it goin' up there?" came Charlie's cheery tones, combined with the bristling of a bad connection.

"I'm good, Charlie. Just about to baton down the hatches for that storm. I can see it moving in."

"Ain't you comin' down the mountain while you got the chance?"

"You know me, Sheriff. I'm tough enough to ride it out. Besides I don't have to be anywhere for another four weeks and I have plenty of supplies too," CJ shouted over the increasing interference.

"Okay, FBI. Take care. I don't know how reliable this radio's gonna be, but I'll keep in touch when I can. Baxter out."

"Roger, Sheriff. Speak soon."

And with that, CJ cut the transmission. Taking a deep breath, she donned her polar fleece and her padded jacket and headed outside to close the storm shutters. Leaving one of the living area windows uncovered to watch the progression of the weather, she climbed onto the roof to alter the angle of her solar panels. Preventing snow from landing on them so quickly would save her a few trips outside over the coming days. That done, she checked her small backup generator and, grabbing her fuel canister from the back of the Jeep, she filled it to half full. That gave her a comfort zone if the panels failed. Back indoors, she settled down for the rest of the day, wondering what tomorrow would bring.

* * * * *

Several cuts and approximately two hours later, Kate felt the tension on the ropes give way a little more.

“That’s got to be good enough,” she murmured under her breath.

Getting to her knees, she strained her weakened arms, trying to pull them apart and heard a small squeaky tearing sound. Encouraged by that, she did it again and the rope snapped. Tears fell from her green eyes, darkened from pain and tiredness and relief. She immediately got to her feet, ignoring the stinging hurts all over her body and headed for the door. Running her fingers around the outside edge, not finding any weakness, she thought furiously for a few seconds. Where the door met the frame, there was a tiny gap and Kate could feel a slight breeze wafting in from outside. It served to fill her with determination and she brought her hand up to rub her dirty, bloody forehead to help her focus. A few minutes later, she strained her eyes to look through the gap, which was only a few millimeters wide. She could see the bolt and quickly recovered the piece of metal.

Wrapping the thin blanket around her shoulders to stave off the freezing temperatures, she went back to the door and started wiggling the metal through the gap under the bolt. Scraping it from side to side and back and forth against the locking mechanism, her focus sharpened when she heard the bolt move slightly. “*I can do this. And when I get out, that bastard will pay. His DNA must be all over me,*” she told herself, her anger making her motion rougher and faster.

There were a few times when Kate had to stop dead and withdraw the metal, when she thought she heard a noise outside. Her blood froze every time but he didn’t appear. A couple of painstakingly long hours later, the piece of metal suddenly shot upwards as the rusty bolt gave way. The actress almost screamed in excitement, feeling her freedom inch closer. She tried to push the door, but her heart sank when it didn’t budge. She discovered that the bolt she had been working on, which was at her eye level, wasn’t the only lock on the door. Settling down on her knees, she set to work on the bottom bolt, praying again that she would get out before he came back and finally killed her for trying to escape. He hadn’t been aware of the makeshift tool on the floor, so she hoped this was the only barrier he had deemed necessary, between her and the outside world.

Kate stared in disbelief as the second bolt moved far enough to allow her to gently push the large wooden door. This time it moved and, grasping at her blanket, she walked further out of the cave, noting that it was now rapidly becoming dark outside. The snow and freezing temperature forced her to stop and think for a moment. The actress wondered how far she would get with bare feet in this weather. There was nothing out there but trees and rough, very cold terrain. Finding her next actions quite unbelievable, she returned to the cave, retrieved her tool, and split the blanket in two. She wrapped the pieces around each foot, binding the corners to form improvised shoes of sorts. She decided that this was a sensible plan, as she needed her feet in order to escape. Her bare arms would just have to suffer. She chastised herself for wearing a vest and pajama pants to bed that night. ‘*Of course, I didn’t plan on being kidnapped, bundled into a car, driven into the hills and almost beaten to death, did I?*’ she thought sardonically. Looking down at her skin, she realized that her arms freezing might actually dull the pain from all the gashes and bruising. Shaking off her thoughts, she left her temporary prison, taking the sharp piece of metal with her. If he came after her, she would stab the sick pervert.

Deciding that going uphill would take her closer to where her captor parked his car, she started walking downhill through the forest. She cursed under her breath every time she stood on something painful, which to her, included everything really. Clamping her teeth together in her determination, she increased her pace, vaguely wondering where she found the energy. Many hours later, just before daylight broke, an over-exhausted Kate, who was running on sheer will alone, took a break and sat on a fallen tree to fix her blanket 'shoes'. They were soaked through now, but it was better than nothing. The only thing stopping the pounding snow from swallowing her up whole, was the canopy of evergreens above her head.

Suddenly, she instinctually looked up and scanned the area. Her eyes centered on a black figure, staring at her with ice blue eyes. The wolf stood not twenty feet away, but never made any attempt to approach her. Kate remained still, feeling around behind her for a branch with which to defend herself should the animal attack. Then, it turned and walked through the nearby trees and disappeared. The actress wasn't really sure what to feel. The way the wolf looked at her... she hadn't been afraid as such, just unsure and curious. She shook her head and wondered if she had imagined it. Not wanting to stay still for too long, she hauled herself back to her feet and continued on... following the path of the wolf without realizing it. She didn't know where she was going exactly, just that she had to keep moving away from that cave and hope that her kidnapper hadn't discovered she was gone yet.

A few more hours later, the snow was falling fast and steady and after trekking over open terrain, and what must have been quite a few more miles, Kate felt herself weaken beyond her control. Perhaps it was the distance she had traveled, or knowing that she had truly escaped, but every single part of her body cried out in protest and blasted the pain into her conscious reality. She was sure she must have broken bones, as well as the bruising, the cuts and the slices he had carved into the base of her spine in one of his more brutal assaults. The thought of that particular day made her dizzy, and with nausea seeping through her, she tried to find a way to avoid the impending darkness. Kate fell to the ground, face down in the deep snow. A fleeting image of a black wolf crossed her field of vision and her last thought was that she would die here... but at least *he* wouldn't have the satisfaction of killing her his way.

Chapter 5

CJ climbed the ladder that was propped up against her cabin. Wrapped in her warmest winter clothes, she performed the daily morning ritual of clearing the driving snow from her solar panels. Storing the ladders safely away in the wood shed, she turned around to go back indoors, when the strangest sensation flowed through her like a tidal wave. Something wasn't right. She scanned the edge of the forest that surrounded her haven and quickly went inside to retrieve her gun. She stopped momentarily, thinking she had imagined it, then shook her head when the feeling lingered. Grabbing her keys, she locked the door and walked into the forest. Her feet seemed to be taking her in a certain direction, so she went with it. She estimated that she walked a half-mile or so, just about to enter a clearing, when she instinctually brought her gun up to aim it directly ahead of her.

"This is freaky," she hissed quietly. "What the hell is wrong with me?"

Flicking the safety off with her thumb, she steadily walked forward, her heightened senses razor sharp, her boots sinking softly and silently into the snow, which was now about two feet deep. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw the lifeless lump partially covered by the pounding blizzard.

"Fuck!"

Putting the safety back on and slipping the gun quickly into its harness with well-practiced precision, CJ closed the distance in a run. Somehow she knew now, that the situation was not dangerous... that there was nobody else out there. But the fear in her gut wouldn't go away. Fear for this person lying on the ground.

Seeing the battered and torn body, CJ gently turned it over, realizing for the first time that this was a young woman... in her pajamas. Pressing two fingertips against the woman's delicate neck, she thought she felt a faint pulse and a tiny amount of her fear seemed to dissipate.

Heaving her jacket off her shoulders, she removed the polar fleece underneath. Replacing her jacket, she wrapped the fleece around the frozen woman and scooped the petite frame up into her arms. Briskly walking the whole way home, the agent's mind was trying to picture a scenario where the young woman would come to be there in such a battered state of undress. She did not like the conclusion she came to.

Bringing her knee up against the doorframe, CJ rested the woman's thighs on her raised leg as she dug into her pocket for the keys. Kicking the door open, she rushed inside, gently placing the body on the floor. Slamming the door shut hurriedly, she locked the deadbolt and went immediately to her kitchen cupboard, which housed her small, but efficiently stocked, First Aid kit. She went back to the woman's side and knelt down beside her, checking for a pulse again. She was certain there was something there, and leaned over her face to listen for breath. It was faint but she was definitely breathing on her own. With a deep inhalation to center herself, CJ got to her feet again. Her FBI mind thinking quickly, she retrieved a bundle of brand new plastic garbage bags, glad that she had bought the kind with no air holes. Perfect. Snagging a pair of latex gloves, she praised herself for always being prepared for... well, anything really.

"Paper and sharpie," she growled to herself, reaching to the coffee table.

Opening one of the bags carefully, she lifted the woman's foot and removed the first... blanket? Touching it as little as possible, she placed it in the bag and sealed it, marking a piece of paper with details of the contents, for evidence. Hearing a faint groan, she turned to the woman lying beside her. CJ leaned down into the line of vision of a pair of glazed, exhausted green eyes.

"I'm CJ. You're safe now..."

That's all she got out before the eyes fluttered closed again and unconsciousness took over once more. The agent continued with her removal of the clothing, each item placed in a separate bag and sealed. She also bagged the fleece she had wrapped around the body, just in case. Taking a small, sterile plastic swab from her First Aid kit, she trailed it steadily but forcefully under the woman's nails, repeating the process a few more times on each finger before she was satisfied. A few more swabs from the body, including two from what looked like scratch marks on the torso, and CJ was done. She quickly retrieved some warm water from the sink and cleaned the worst of the gashes to stymie any infection, noting the description and location of each major hurt on a piece of paper. A sudden thought struck her and she went to fetch her cell phone. It may be useless up here but it had a camera. She carefully and professionally took photographs of the injuries, including the carved "J" on the woman's back and the deep slash mark on her inner thigh and calf. Hesitating for a few seconds, another horrid thought struck her and she decided she had to take a vaginal swab. She wanted any and every chance of catching the bastard who did this, wanted to cover every eventuality, and efficiently placed the collected evidential swab in a brand new plastic cup, wrapped and sealed carefully in another garbage bag. Eventually she was sure she had done her best, given the situation, and wound a sterile pad around the woman's groin.

CJ collected some of her own clean warm clothes, which were far too large for this petite frame, but fashion was not important right now, so she dressed her gently and respectfully before straightening up, removing her jacket and kneading out the knots in her sore neck.

The FBI negotiator let out a heartfelt moan as she lifted the small body onto the couch, laying her on a well-placed pillow and brushing the dirty hair from the slightly cleaner forehead. As CJ covered her with a light quilt, she noticed the newly revealed face for the first time. It was familiar. She knelt next to the couch and studied the gentle cheekbones, the pert little nose and the full lips. Remembering those green eyes that hid behind the lids, she was overcome with the sheer beauty of this woman. Suddenly, it came to CJ... this

was Katherine Marshall. The agent had seen one of her movies a few years back but never caught the new series she was in. Life was just too busy to watch TV.

Something happened to CJ's heart at that moment, a profound feeling that she thought must surely be linked to the sensation she felt earlier, that allowed her to find, and save this person. She felt something break. Was it her resolve, never to feel for anyone again? Was it the barriers she had carefully constructed over the last few years?

Taking a delicate hand in hers, the agent cradled it lovingly, as if providing this contact would somehow help the healing process. Staring into the roaring fire, she forgot that she had not eaten breakfast, had not washed since yesterday morning... forgot everything except the woman lying on her couch... and prayed that Katherine would wake up soon.

CJ was lost in thoughts of what Katherine had endured. She seemed so beaten up, as if she had been captured and held for days. Surely something like that would be on the news. The agent shook her head when she realized that she had been out of contact with the world for a while. She had no idea what had gone on. With thoughts of the actress running around in her head, CJ drifted off to sleep, her head lolling onto a badly positioned shoulder.

“Seej... see... “

In her dream, CJ saw Katherine calling to her, but no matter how fast she ran towards her, she could not save the actress from an unseen danger. And Katie was calling her. Katie? It just seemed right. Katie called again. ‘*Wait, I’m awake. She’s awake!*’ CJ’s eyes flew open and she turned to the murmuring, weak voice coming from the couch.

“Hey. It’s okay. I’m right here,” the agent soothed, tenderly brushing a strand of blonde hair from Kate’s face.

“I... I... water,” she croaked.

The agent reluctantly let go of the bruised hand in her own and rose from the floor.

“Just relax. I’ll get you some water,” she whispered, bending down to check the temperature of Kate’s forehead. “Do you want some painkillers?” A tiny nod. “You’re not allergic to any medications, are you?”

At Kate’s negative response, CJ went to the kitchen and retrieved a small glass of water and a couple of paracetamol. Returning to the side of the couch, she knelt on one knee and leaned over Kate, to help raise her up slightly.

“You spoke to me...” Kate husked.

CJ smiled. “I did, but you didn’t seem to register it. You remember that?”

“Yes. Your eyes... your voice. You told me your name. I knew I was safe.”

“I’m glad you felt that way. I won’t let anyone hurt you again.”

What the hell was she saying? She was being so protective of this woman, felt so instantly connected to her. It was ridiculous. And it would only lead to Kate being hurt again. That’s the last thing CJ wanted. ‘*Quit it, Carson,*’ she told herself. She broke out of her reverie to find emerald green eyes watching her intently. With a small smile, she lifted the glass to Kate’s mouth, slowly letting go when the actress grasped

it on her own. CJ held her palm out flat in front of Kate and once she had taken the pills, the agent got to her feet.

“Do you need anything else?” the tall woman said warmly.

Kate placed the glass on the little side table that had been put next to her and returned her gaze to CJ’s wide blue eyes.

“Would you... would you help me to the bathroom?”

“Of course. But before I do, I need to ask you a difficult question.” She paused. “I know something terrible has happened to you, but I’ve been up here in the sticks for a while and haven’t seen any news. I’m assuming someone abducted you and... did all this to you?” she said, gesturing to the multiple surface injuries.

“Y-yes,” came the almost silent reply.

“Hey,” she said, gently, “you can talk to me. I only want to help. I just... I need to know if you were sexually abused.”

Kate started and abruptly looked up to CJ’s face. The agent instantly held her hands up, softening her expression.

“I’m a Federal agent. I’ve bagged your clothing and taken many evidential samples,” she explained, pointing to the neat row of sealed plastic bags against the wall.

Kate looked at the bags and gazed again at CJ.

“I wasn’t worried about why you were asking me. I... I think he wanted to, but he couldn’t. He seemed to be... impotent,” Kate stammered, and promptly burst into tears at the memory of her attacker.

CJ was at her side in an instant, balancing on the edge of the couch and wrapping the smaller form up in her arms. Kate tensed for a few seconds and then, finding it the most natural thing in the world, returned the embrace. She didn’t let CJ go for quite sometime after the sobs died away, leaning her head just above the agent’s chest and listening to the soothing heartbeat. The actress couldn’t help but feel somehow guilty about what had happened to her. *‘Why was I so dismissive of the letters until it was too late? I just didn’t take it seriously enough.’*

She squeezed the body she was wrapped around and CJ pulled back slowly to look at her.

“Hey,” she husked, taking Kate’s chin in a gentle grip. “None of this was your fault. Don’t you ever think different, okay?”

Kate nodded, astounded that CJ seemed to read her mind, and rubbed her tear-stained cheeks.

“Wait here a sec,” the agent said, as she got to her feet and retrieved a garbage bag.

“I don’t want you to worry about any of what I’m about to say, okay? I wrapped you in a sterile pad after I took the vaginal swab, in case of any bleeding. I want you to put the pad in here when you’re in the bathroom,” CJ explained, as though talking to a scared child.

“I understand. I don’t know how... but I’m really okay, CJ.”

The agent smiled warmly and drew back the quilt and carefully but firmly, supported Kate under her arms.

“You’re a strong woman, Kate Marshall, but you have to tell me if you’re in too much pain. I’m not sure if your ribs are fractured or not.”

“I don’t think they are. All the pain seems to be on the outside now. Thank you for taking care of me.” Kate whispered the last few words at CJ’s shoulder.

“You’re very welcome but I think I was meant to.” The words left the agent’s mouth before she could stop them.

“What do you mean?” Kate asked, as they slowly approached the bathroom.

“Never mind. I’ll tell you later... when you feel a little better. Okay?”

“Sure.”

CJ leaned against the wall, just outside the bathroom door, waiting for Kate to finish, arms folded across her chest, trying to keep her anger towards the man who did this under control.

“How do you know my name? Did you recognize me?” said a voice from behind the door.

“Not at first, actually. Once I had cleaned you up and took the time to look at your face, I realized who you were. I saw one of your movies, you know.”

Kate shuffled through the door and handed the tied garbage bag to the agent, who promptly disposed of it, before hurrying to the actress’s side. Slipping her arm tentatively around Kate’s waist, she helped her back to the couch.

“Which one? The movie, I mean,” Kate asked, then grunted as she lowered herself onto the inviting cushions.

“Wait Until Tomorrow. I have it downstairs. Good movie,” the agent replied, plumping the pillows and helping Kate get comfortable.

“Downstairs? What’s downstairs?”

“I’ll show you when you’re stronger. I have a feeling we’ll be here for a while. The storm isn’t letting up.”

CJ sat down on the floor again, leaning sideways to the couch, next to Kate. The actress gazed beyond CJ’s head, to the window behind her.

“It looks so cold,” she said quietly, finding the agent’s hand and entwining her fingers through the longer ones.

CJ watched her and realized that Kate had taken her hand unconsciously. The tall woman was surprisingly warmed by the gesture.

“It is. But we’re safe in here, Katie. I’ll take care of you.”

Green eyes focused and settled on the raven-haired beauty before her. The actress smiled, liking the way that name sounded coming from this woman and still not noticing the contact she had initiated with the agent.

“For some reason, I knew that. I don’t know how but I did.” She was silent for a few moments until a sudden thought crossed her mind. “Where exactly are we?”

“In the Rockies. About forty miles from a town called Alberton, Montana...” CJ was silenced by the shocked look on Kate’s face.

“Montana?”

“Yes. Where did he take you from?”

“LA,” Kate said, gazing sightlessly at the quilt draped over her legs.

She felt the thumb grazing gently across the back of her hand in an effort to comfort her. She didn’t react to it, not wanting to lose the contact. And she didn’t protest when the agent suggested she get some rest. But she did request that CJ stay with her.

“I’m not going anywhere,” the tall agent whispered.

What Kate didn’t know was that the statement meant more than even CJ cared to admit.

Chapter 6

CJ was in pain. Her neck was stiff, her leg numb and her left arm throbbed. Lifting her head, she saw that she had fallen asleep next to Kate, still sitting on the floor in a ridiculously uncomfortable position. Glancing at the actress suddenly brought her pain into perspective. She shook it off and slowly stood up, releasing her hand from the actress’s grip without waking her. After a quick visit to the bathroom, she headed over to the little kitchen and, in a well-practiced ritual, threw a bundle of ingredients into her small bread-maker. Checking the food supplies, she wondered if Kate would be able to eat something. *‘Something smooth and easy on the stomach,’* she mused, tapping her chin and pursing her lips.

She rinsed a couple of mugs and put the kettle on, before going to the fireplace to stoke the dying flames. Adding a couple more logs from the pile, she crouched in front of the grate and poked at them as they started to burn.

“Hey you.”

CJ turned to see green eyes sparkling with flashes of amber... a reflection of the fire dancing across the beautiful face. She was momentarily mesmerized and shook her head as if to erase the feelings flowing through her.

“Hey. How do you feel?”

“Better. How long did I sleep?”

Glancing at the small clock on the mantel, the agent rose to her feet and crossed the room. “We slept four hours.”

“We?”

“Yeah, I guess I was pretty tired too,” CJ said, sheepishly.

She was totally unprepared for a slight chuckle from the battered actress. This little woman was amazing to her, nothing like what she would’ve imagined... not that she had formed any opinion about her from her limited knowledge. Hell, CJ never had time for her own life, never mind anyone else’s.

“Do you think you could eat something?” she asked.

“Definitely.”

“How about soup... maybe, mushroom? And some soft bread?”

“If you are talking about the bread I can smell baking, then you’re on,” Kate said, getting to her feet.

CJ headed towards her but the smaller woman put a hand up.

“I think I can manage on my own.”

“Okay, but be careful,” the agent said, arms outstretched but not actually touching Kate.

Giving the agent a half smile, the actress headed into the bathroom, thinking that she would never take things like a toilet seat for granted again. Pushing the thoughts of her time in the hideous cave from her mind, she washed her hands carefully, noticing that the swelling was going down, and returned to the comfort of her new friend.

* * * * *

It was dark outside now, the gale force wind was howling around the little cabin, the snow beating in a quick rhythm against the only uncovered window. After consuming some much-appreciated nourishment and deciding on some quiet music, the two women settled onto the couch and sipped warm herbal tea. Kate was sitting where she had been lying, her more painful side resting against her soft pillows, supported by them and the back of the couch. CJ sat beside her in companionable silence. She’d never felt this peaceful with anyone and noticed the actress seemed to feel the same. She couldn’t really believe, looking at Kate’s face, that she had just survived a week of torture. CJ watched the delicate nostrils flex slightly as the woman took each breath. She watched the pulse point in her neck rap a steady beat on the soft skin. Kate’s head was tilted back, resting on the top of the couch cushion, her eyes closed, holding her mug in her lap between cupped hands.

“What?” the actress whispered.

“Huh? Uh... sorry,” CJ stuttered.

“It’s okay. I just get the feeling you want to ask me some stuff.”

“I... I just wanted to tell you that if you need to talk about what happened, I’m here for you.”

‘You are such a loser, Ciara. Jesus, that sounded incredibly lame. This woman has been through a horrific ordeal and you can’t even form a sentence. This is not like you. Get a grip.’ Her mental slapping complete, she focused again on her companion.

“I do want to talk about it... to talk to *you* about it. I’m just not sure I’m ready yet”, the actress said, placing her mug on the little table.

“I’m sorry...” the agent began.

“Don’t apologize, CJ, please. It was just so... I thought he would kill me, you know? And the night he came into the cave, all high and deranged, I thought he’d rape me or torture me or cut me up...”

Before CJ knew it, Kate had literally crawled onto her lap, painful sobs wracking through the small body with aching intensity. The agent gathered the crying woman in her arms, the damp face tucked under her chin, and whispered words of comfort to this being who had come to mean so much to her in such an incredibly short space of time. She didn’t know how long she held Kate, how long the smaller hands clung to her waist... all she knew was that this felt so right, it scared her. Not the situation that had brought them together, but the feeling of holding Kate so close to her. It was right. She vowed she would find the man who had done so much damage to the actress and do everything in her power to control the urge to kill him.

Some time later, CJ broke her trance-like gaze at the fire and tried to look down at Kate but the smaller woman had buried her face so far into the agent’s neck that she wasn’t sure she’d be able to breathe. Kate’s knees were drawn up to the tall woman’s side, her small, strong fingers grasping handfuls of CJ’s sweater, clinging tightly to her waist. The agent was quite content to cradle this precious cargo for the rest of her life and on hearing the sobs subside and the breaths become deeper and more regular, CJ closed her own eyes to rest for a few hours.

* * * * *

Blinking away the sleepiness, CJ lifted her head from its place on the back of the couch. It was morning. She glanced at the clock, noting it was 9:45am. Daylight struggled to break through the snow, which seemed to be even heavier than yesterday, if that was possible. The agent considered that this severe storm was a blessing in disguise now. Kate’s assailant would not be able to find her – no tracks to follow – and CJ breathed a little easier.

Feeling the warmth of the petite body still sprawled across her, the taller woman looked down to see Kate cradled in her arms, her delicate eyelashes casting shadows over a bruised cheek, various little cuts spread sparsely over the beautiful skin and chapped lips, partially open, showing a flash of white beneath. Even in her battered state, Kate was the most beautiful thing CJ had ever seen. As she brought her fingertips up to graze the line of Kate’s jaw, the green eyes fluttered open. CJ stilled her motion and swallowed hard, not knowing how this woman would react to the tender caress.

Kate stared into the eyes above her, the feeling of being protected, stronger than ever. She could hear her blood rushing in her ears, her heart thumping pleasantly in her chest. *‘I think I love this woman,’* she thought, *‘That’s impossible. I’m reacting to this intense situation and the fact that she’s my savior. Right?’*

She didn’t know the answer, but lying here in CJ’s arms, eyes locked on those blue orbs – so wide right now, Kate wondered if the agent might die of shock – was the best feeling in the world. Kate hadn’t been in a relationship since Jason. Oh, there had been one-night stands since then, but her public persona seemed to be the draw for those suitors. They weren’t interested in the real her. She had found certain women attractive in the past, but had never acted on it... had never wanted to. Now though, she knew that CJ would always be in her life. She just hoped that once this horrid situation was taken care of, that the stunningly beautiful agent would want her, the way she seemed to want CJ.

“Breathe, CJ,” she whispered.

The tall woman swallowed hard again and forced a smile. “I’m sorry,” she said, removing her hand. “I was just looking at what he did to you... and it makes me so angry.” She turned her head away only to feel two fingers on her chin, guiding her back.

Kate studied her for a second. “Do you think I would still be lying here if I was uncomfortable?”

“I guess not.”

“Then don’t worry about caring for me. I... I can’t explain how this feels to me. It’s like I’ve known you for so long... and I’ve missed you. I know that’s not possible, but it’s how I feel.”

“Maybe it is possible. I know I don’t understand my connection to you, but I do know it’s a little overwhelming right now. I don’t get close to anyone, Katie, but I feel like I’ve been holding you my whole life.”

The smile that spread over the actress’s face just then, made CJ’s heart melt. Kate slid her arms around the agent’s neck and buried her face under the long, dark hair. CJ closed her eyes, forcing a couple of overflowing tears to run down her cheeks. A few long, blissful moments later, a loud grumble from the vicinity of Kate’s stomach brought a small smile to the tall woman’s lips.

“Hungry?”

A silent chuckle... detected only by the slight vibration of the body on top of her.

“We’ll eat little and often today, to see how your tummy copes, okay?”

Kate raised her head, her face inches from CJ’s. “Okay.”

The petite woman slid herself back onto the couch to let CJ move. Once the agent was freed, she stretched her lanky, six-foot frame and stood up, circling her stiff shoulders.

“Bed tonight. And I really should change out of my damp clothes this time too,” she muttered, throwing a groan in for good measure.

“Sounds good to me.”

CJ looked at Kate in surprise.

“I doubt I’ll be able to sleep unless you hold me again,” the actress said, by way of explanation.

The agent nodded and headed for the bathroom. When she emerged, she saw Kate standing at the kitchen sink, filling the kettle.

“Hey. Let me...”

“No, CJ. I really think my injuries are all superficial... maybe some bruised ribs... but I want to contribute. Let me make the coffee while you do the toast.”

“All right. But listen,” CJ said, placing her hand on the smaller woman’s shoulder, “if you feel any sudden differences, you let me know immediately. Promise me.”

“I promise,” the actress said, covering the larger hand with her own.

They set about making breakfast, mostly in silence. Once they had eaten, CJ grabbed her coat and boots to go outside and clear the snow, while Kate headed to the bathroom. Opening the front door, the tall agent paused when she saw how deep the snowdrift was. Backtracking into the nearby closet, she retrieved a

shovel and began to dig her way out. Clearing a path to the shed, she dragged the ladder out and carefully climbed onto the roof.

“Jesus, I’m gonna have to clear this about ten times today,” she grumbled to herself, her face hidden from the pelting snowflakes by her hood.

It was falling faster and faster and the taller woman wondered briefly if the cabin would be completely buried by tomorrow. The Jeep was half way there already. Finishing up her task, she grabbed an armful of logs and headed back indoors. Dropping the wood in the corner, she shook off the excess snow on the doormat, before removing her coat and boots. It was then that she realized that Kate was still in the bathroom.

“Kate! Are you all right?” she said, frantically.

“I’m okay, CJ. The gash on my thigh has burst open again. I’m trying to clean it.”

“Do you need help?”

“Yes, please. It’s okay to come in.” She paused. “Do you have a needle and thread in that kit of yours?” Kate looked up as CJ entered.

The agent took in the sight before her and a wave of tenderness washed through her soul. The actress was sitting on a closed toilet seat, CJ’s pajama pants pooled around her ankles and the extremely large top strategically covering all the right places. Blonde hair slightly mussed, face covered in little nicks and scratches and one multi-colored bruise, she held a cloth against her inner thigh and somehow managed to look completely adorable.

“Yeah. Want me to stitch that?”

“I’m not sure. Take a look…” Kate said, removing the cloth covering the gash.

CJ knelt down in front of the actress and examined the tender, wounded flesh. She drew a sharp breath through her teeth in empathy.

“I have butterfly stitches that should hold that. They’ll be more pleasant to apply too,” she husked, with a wan smile.

Kate picked up the pants and held the cloth to her leg, exiting the bathroom behind CJ, following her to the couch.

“Sit here and I’ll get them,” the agent instructed.

“CJ?” the smaller woman said while the agent found her kit.

“Yes?”

“What does CJ stand for?”

The agent chuckled as she returned to kneel once more in front of her patient.

“I guess I should’ve introduced myself better, huh? It stands for Ciara Jane. Ciara Jane Carson at your service, ma’am,” CJ said as she held out her hand.

Kate shook it, smiling. "I'm more than pleased to meet you, Ciara. Mind if I continue to call you CJ, though? I kinda like that."

"I prefer it anyway. Guess I'm more used to it... everyone calls me that."

"CJ it is then," the actress replied, watching the stitches being applied.

"Do you go by Katherine, or Kate?" the agent asked curiously as she worked.

"Usually Kate to my colleagues. My mother calls me Katherine. Only Dad calls me Katie. But I like when you call me Katie, too," she said shyly.

The taller woman smiled and continued her task quietly.

Kate noted that CJ had large, graceful hands, long slender fingers and an incredibly gentle touch. She regarded the agent fondly as she tried to position the skin on Kate's thigh so that the scar would be as small as possible once it healed, before applying the little butterfly stitches.

"There... that should hold it. We might need to re-apply them after you have a bath."

"Oh that's a great idea. Maybe this afternoon?"

CJ looked up. "Whenever you want. The batteries are holding plenty of power and the fire's burning bright. You're good to go anytime."

Kate held her gaze and smiled. "Thank you."

There was a wealth of meaning behind those words and the agent did well to hide the emotion that swelled within her. She returned the smile and rose to her feet, putting away the First Aid kit and stoking the fire. Kate put on her PJ pants and watched the agent quietly, feeling for the first time in so long, that she wasn't acting... wasn't putting up the front that people expected to see. CJ had seen her in a raw, unguarded state... no pretense, just Kate. And the cool agent seemed to like the actress. Seemed to more than like her. The feeling drifted through Kate's entire being and she wept silently in relief.

"I had a thought this morning that I wanted to talk to you about," the agent said, her back to Kate as she prodded at the fire. "I'm telling you about it because I want you to feel as safe as possible here. This storm... it's a good thing. Any tracks you left would have been more than covered by this morning. He won't find you here."

She turned to see Kate crying. Leaping to her feet, she moved to the couch and reclined beside the smaller woman, who immediately moved into her embrace.

"Hey, I'm sorry, Katie. I didn't mean to upset you."

Kate raised herself up a little so that she could look into CJ's eyes. "You didn't upset me. Thank you for telling me that... about the snow, I mean. I was just... I can't really explain why I feel so at peace and, well... happy... even after everything that's happened recently. My tears were just a release. It wasn't you, CJ. I promise."

CJ nodded mutely, afraid that if she opened her mouth, she would tell this strong, beautiful woman that she loved her already. And that would be such a silly thing to do, wouldn't it? An especially loud crackle from

the fire drew both women's attention to the bright flames. Both got lost in their thoughts and, wrapped around one another, they sat silently, wondering how this came to be.

* * * * *

He paced back and forth in angry frustration, kicking the dirt under his feet, wishing she was still lying there for him to take out his anger on. How the hell had that bitch managed to get out? The stupid slut was almost dead when he left last night. His dark eyes took in the interior of the cave, before he went outside. Looking over the nearby ground, he scanned for tracks but didn't find a damn thing.

"I walked all the way up from that damn road and you're not even fucking here? Nobody makes a fool outta me! I'll make you pay, you fucking bitch!" he shouted out to the forest. "Fuck!"

And with that, he stormed off to his car, determined to find her. He had a 'friend' in the LAPD. With enough money, he could get information. Then... he would hunt her down... and kill her.

Chapter 7

After her mid-afternoon snow-clearing session, CJ dropped her six-foot frame on to the couch, just as Kate handed her a mug of coffee. The fire was burning bright, the lamps casting a golden glow across the room, the storm raged outside and the two women sipped gratefully on the dark brown liquid. A beep from the radio got CJ's attention.

"...Bl... canear me?er"

The agent leapt to her feet, setting her mug on the coffee table, and fired over to the receiver.

"Charlie? Can you hear me?"

"..... torm.....head..... east..... rty-eight.....rs"

"I can't get a clear signal Charlie!"

"..... again..... orrow....."

The signal cut and CJ slammed the handset onto the surface.

"Damn it! Sorry, Kate. I had hoped to get a message through to tell them you're safe, you know, to let your loved ones know."

"I doubt there are too many people truly worried, CJ. Just Dad, maybe my mother... and Samantha, my producer. Don't worry about it. We'll get through soon. Who's Charlie?" Kate said, patting the agent's thigh as she sat down again.

"He's the Sheriff in Alberton. He's a great guy... you'll like him a lot. You know, I find it hard to believe that you don't have a ton of folk close to you, Katie," the taller woman said, sipping her coffee.

"Actually, I really don't. It's hard to be close to people when all they want is the made-up façade of a Hollywood actress who's always smiling. It's a fantasy. It's not me."

"Why would they want that, when the woman I see is a million times better?" CJ asked, honestly confused.

Tears burst from Kate's eyes again and CJ put down her coffee, taking the smaller woman's mug from her shaking hands and putting it on the table. Pulling Kate gently into her arms, the FBI agent hugged her lovingly and brushed her thumb over the warm forehead.

"I think we need to talk about everything you've went through in the last week. It needs to come out, Katie, then maybe every time I say something nice to you, you won't burst into tears."

The actress sniffed vigorously and snagged a tissue from the box, considerably put there by CJ. Staying in the wonderfully warm embrace, she began to speak.

"Where should I start?"

"At the beginning... start with how this guy came to target you... and we'll take it from there. Just take your time," CJ soothed.

And with that, Kate began to relive her ordeal, knowing that sharing it with Ciara Jane Carson would indeed help her.

* * * * *

".... And when he pressed the blade against my thigh and sliced it, it became too much to cope with. He was so erratic that night and when he disappeared, I knew I had to get out. That feeling... that fear, was the only thing that kept me going. So... I started working on the locks, painstakingly pushing the bolts by scraping that piece of metal... I could taste the bile in my throat... I was so scared... and what if he... if he came back... oh CJ, he would've killed me for sure".

"Hey, hey... shhhh, it's all right now, Katie. You're safe," CJ said, closing her eyes and pressing her lips against the blonde hair.

"I know. I just... I may look small and frail, but I don't scare easily, CJ. But this... this guy... what happened. He made me feel so helpless and vulnerable, I couldn't stand it. It terrified me."

"And yet, here you are. You escaped. You are not helpless, Katie, you're tough as hell and I never once thought of you as 'frail'. You're amazing to me."

The actress looked up into soulful blue orbs and got lost in the love she saw there. Before CJ could stop it, Kate's full lips were pressing gently against her own. The contact shot through the agent's body like a bolt of liquid fire and she pulled back sharply.

"I'm sorry, CJ... I didn't mean..."

"Hey, it's okay. You just surprised me, that's all."

"It just felt... right," Kate said, frowning at her own words.

CJ nodded. "I know. It did. But I can't... we can't, Katie, not right now. You've just been through such a traumatic experience, you're feeling so much right now... and it would be wrong to..."

"I understand. It's enough that you just hold me... for now."

"I can deal with that... wait... for now?" the agent asked, eyebrow raised.

Kate didn't answer. Instead, she lowered her head to rest it on CJ's shoulder. "You know, I don't know how far I walked, but time-wise, it felt like forever. I left just after darkness fell and... when I collapsed... it was daylight, I think", she whispered.

"Well, from how you described the cave, I'd say you covered a good twenty miles. The nearest caves and abandoned mines are at least that far from here. I don't know how you did it, considering the state you were in. Pretty incredible..." CJ trailed off.

After a muttered 'thank you' from her shoulder, she added, "You're welcome."

CJ heard a small sound of amusement and a broad smile crossed her face as she shook her head.

"What?" Kate mumbled, feeling the cheek move against her hair.

"You're just unbelievably strong and resilient. I love... that about you," the agent faltered at her close call... and a strange sense of déjà vu.

Kate drew back slightly from the embrace with a small frown on her face. "Did you say that to me before? When I was unconscious?"

"No. Why?" the agent said, wondering exactly how she was connected to this woman.

"It seemed familiar... somehow. Never mind. You know what I love about you?" she asked. At the taller woman's quirked eyebrow, she continued, "That I only just met you but I trust you implicitly. I've never felt that before."

"I trust you too. So, that's a good start huh?" CJ replied, her voice lightening to try and counteract the intensity.

"Yeah. It's a great start. But you know I'm falling, right? I have no idea how, but I am."

The silent pause became almost uncomfortable, with Kate's unwavering green eyes pinned on CJ, waiting for a response. The agent finally relented.

"I know", she whispered, "I am too. It's completely crazy".

They each held the stare a little longer, complete understanding passing between them, and then Kate relaxed, slipping her hands as far around CJ's waist as she could. The agent's eyes slipped shut as she pulled the smaller frame impossibly closer, feeling a unique contentment combined with a strange excitement about her future. A future where Kate was with her for the rest of her days, laughing with her, crying with her, living with her, making love with her... A little startled at her thought process, the agent decided that it was time for food. She was becoming delirious. Wasn't she?

"How about some dinner? Must be about that time," she suggested.

"Does that mean I have to move?"

"Yes. But you need food and if we eat now, you can have your bath afterwards," the tall agent said, trying to coax the actress from her lap.

Kate uncoiled and ungracefully got to her feet, wincing at the many aches and pains that made themselves known.

“You okay?”

“I’m good. But maybe I did crack a rib.”

“I think you just have some serious bruising, but take it easy.”

CJ made dinner after winning the debate about Kate not helping her. The petite woman, who now lay sprawled across the couch – stomach fully satisfied – eyed her companion thoughtfully.

“Tell me about you, CJ. How about your job?”

The agent sighed pleasantly and shifted Kate’s feet to put them on her lap. “Well, I’m Special Agent Ciara Carson. I’m a Crisis Negotiator with the FBI, which involves mainly hostage situations. I work out of the Crisis Negotiation Unit at Quantico right now, but my job takes me all over and about half my time seems to be spent at the LA field office,” CJ smiled at Kate and went on. “I’m often pulled into serial killer cases because of my expertise in psychological profiling and I pretty much worked myself to death recently. That’s why I came up here. I desperately needed the break... and the solitude.”

At the sudden expression change in the actress’s face, CJ shot her a warning look. “Don’t you dare apologize for being here. That would be completely ridiculous and unacceptable. I don’t think I could have imagined spending this time with anyone better.”

“Wow, you can be quite scary when you’re being all forceful like that,” Kate said. But before CJ could worry that she had indeed scared the feisty little woman, she saw a smirk on those delicate lips.

“Quit teasin’ me,” she growled playfully.

“Can’t help myself. You’re an easy target,” Kate retorted cheerfully. “So... which University?” she added, getting back to what was fast becoming her favorite subject.

“I got my Masters and PhD in Criminal Psychology and Forensic Psychology at Princeton after getting my BA at Cornell. When I started with the Bureau, I did the usual stuff, but they eventually spotted where my talents lay and I ended up getting my National Negotiation Certification. I had started out working from the LA field office for a few years, then they transferred me to Quantico.”

Kate expelled her breath in a gust. “You *have* had a busy life. How old are you, anyway?”

“How old do you think I am?” CJ responded, eyeing the beautiful actress warily.

“Well, to fit all that in, you must be a least ninety.”

“You know, if you weren’t injured, that comment may have initiated a severe tickling incident.”

Kate giggled. “Just as well I’m injured then,” she said, withdrawing her feet and gradually swinging herself around. With her head now on CJ’s lap, she looked up into the warmest blue eyes she had ever seen. “I’ll settle for a head rub.”

“Uh huh”, CJ whispered, as her hand began a slow trail back and forth through the actress’s blonde hair. “I’m thirty-five, by the way.”

“May I be so bold as to ask about your personal life and your family?” Kate requested, closing her eyes under CJ’s caresses.

“Could you narrow it down?”

“Start with your family, if that’s okay. I want to learn all about you.” The actress paused. “That photo... that’s you and your Mom, right?”

“Yes.”

Sensing CJ’s sadness, the smaller woman opened her eyes. “You don’t have to talk about it...”

“No. I’ll tell you. That was one of the last pictures taken with her. When I was little, my father physically abused me. He hid it well for two years but when my Mom found out, I was surprised she didn’t kill him. After they divorced, we never heard from him again and found ourselves short of money. My Mom got into nursing school and worked at a 7-11 the rest of the time, trying to keep a roof over our heads. I was pretty self-sufficient when I was a kid. Mom was hardly around, but when she was, she was the most loving, caring parent anyone could ask for. She would teach me about her grandfather. He was a full-blooded Navajo and an incredible spirit. She would tell me stories of when she was little, when he would take her to his reservation and tell her about his vision quests and spirit guide. I found those stories fascinating. They were some of her happiest times and she made sure to share them with me.”

“She sounds wonderful,” Kate said quietly from her lap.

“She was. Anyway, Mom was working one night when this armed guy came in to rob the place. She gave him the money from the register, but a cop appeared, just coming in to buy some cigarettes. The guy panicked, shot my Mom and ran out the back exit.”

“Oh CJ. I’m so sorry.” The actress took the large hand from her head, kissed the palm then held it against her chest.

“It’s okay. It was a long time ago. I was nine when my Mom died. After that, I went to live with grandma in Nevada, who did her best to care for me. I headed for Cornell when I was eighteen. The day Mom was killed, I swore I would do everything I could to protect people from guys like that. And the rest, as they say, is history.”

CJ looked down to find tear-filled green eyes. She smiled and squeezed the hand holding hers so close to the actress’s heart.

“So that kinda explains why I have nobody close to me. Grandma died a few years back. I spoke to my father a couple of times throughout my life, but the last time he saw me, I told him I was gay and he said he didn’t want to be associated with a ‘dirty disgusting dyke’. That’s why it shocked the hell out of me when I found out he left me his estate when he died. I used it to buy this place.”

The agent stopped, realizing she was rambling on. She never did that... was never so open with anyone. Just another effect this compact being was having on her.

“You don’t have anyone... else in your life?” Kate prodded.

A smirk appeared briefly on the taller woman’s face. “You mean, do I have a girlfriend?” At Kate’s sheepish nod, she answered. “No. Not since...”

All the color drained from CJ’s face and the actress sat up in concern.

“CJ? Are you okay?”

“I... I don’t know if I can talk about that,” she choked.

“You don’t have to. But you’ve already taught me that sharing something bad can help to heal it.”

“You don’t fight fair, you know that?” CJ said, laying the small body back on her lap.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to push you. I just have this incredibly strong desire to know all about you.”

“Then I’ll tell you all I can. Let’s see... I never really had any relationships at first. I was kind of a loner... still am to a certain extent. Then, about eight or nine years ago, I met Sandy. We were together for five years. We had a pretty good relationship and we loved each other. Although it was nothing like...”

‘Holy shit. Careful, CJ, you’re losing it!’ She was thankful that Kate didn’t ask her to continue with the sentence.

“Anyway, three years ago, some psycho the Bureau was chasing... real smart guy... he knew we were on the case and getting way too close for his liking. He found out too much about me. He... took Sandy... and used her as leverage.” Her gaze grew distant as she continued. “We didn’t know he had her and we had him cornered in a house. I tried to negotiate with him until he told me it wasn’t just ‘any old hostage’ that he had inside the house. Sandy was there with a gun to her head. That’s when I fell apart and somebody else took over the negotiation. I never forgave myself for that. I should’ve held it together. But I didn’t. And he killed her, before shooting himself. It was my fault...”

Tears streamed down the stoic cheeks and Kate climbed onto CJ’s lap, wrapped her arms around the agent’s neck and held her for all she was worth. CJ enclosed her in a powerful embrace, always mindful of the injuries covering the smaller body, and sobbed onto Kate’s shoulder.

“It was *not* your fault, CJ.”

When the agent’s body stiffened, Kate voice became more forceful. “No! Listen to me. It was *NOT* your fault. How can you blame yourself for loving someone? And if an agent is personally attached to a victim in that situation, the regulations state that you cannot continue to be involved with the negotiation anyway. It’s way too risky. You know this.”

CJ gently pushed Kate back a little to look at her. “I do. But how do *you* know it?”

“Just because I’m in show business, doesn’t mean I don’t know a thing or two,” Kate teased gently.

“How do you do it?” CJ said in wonder. “How do you make me feel so... I don’t know... good?”

“Because it seems, my dear, that we are meant to be. It’s just a shame I didn’t meet you sooner.” The actress frowned. “Did I just say that?”

“I believe you did,” CJ said, leaning toward the young woman and kissing her tenderly, trying to control the passion and emotion she was feeling.

“Oh my,” Kate whispered, her face flushed when they parted.

CJ just stared at her. Raising an eyebrow, she smirked. “You realize, I’m never letting you go now.”

Kate could play this game. “Could be kinda difficult when I need to pee though, huh?”

“Smart ass. So... how about you?”

“What about me?”

“You know a ton of stuff about me now... more than I’ve ever shared before. So, it’s your turn, Miss Marshall.”

“Okay. But I really want my bath before bed. How about, while you help me in the tub, I tell you all about my life?” Kate suggested.

“I’m... sure I could manage that. Are you okay with me helping you in there?” CJ asked uncertainly.

“Yes, I am. And anyway, you’ve already seen my body and I sure don’t want to slip and fall. I think I have enough pain.”

The agent grimaced, reminded harshly of what this wonderful bundle of energy had gone through. Kate quietly gripped a larger hand and slowly got up, guiding CJ with her. Once standing, the smaller woman kissed the agent’s chin, then her lips.

“You could run my bath, while I get us some of that cream soda I saw in the fridge,” she suggested hopefully.

“Sounds like a plan. I’m not putting any bubbles in your water though. I don’t want them stinging your cuts.”

“Agreed,” Kate said, and headed for the kitchen.

While the water was running, CJ retrieved some large fluffy towels from the bathroom closet and hung them on the small heated towel rail to warm up. Kate appeared in the doorway with drinks, dip and some chips on a small tray.

“Does someone have the munchies?” the agent grinned.

Kate scrunched up her nose in a most adorable fashion. “I think my appetite is coming back now.”

CJ brought a stool over and put it next to the tub. “There ya go.”

Kate put down the snack and began to undress, while CJ gathered some clean, warm, fleecy pajamas from the bedroom.

“These will be masses too big for you but...”

She gulped audibly when she saw a nude Kate standing in the water, but it was not through any sexual attraction in this instance. Kate’s bruises had... well, started to heal. But good Lord, they looked horrific.

“What?” the smaller woman asked, eyes wide.

“Sorry for staring. Your bruises just look so much worse. Even though I know they’re healing, it still caught me off guard,” CJ said, resuming her walk into the bathroom. “I brought you my favorite fleecy PJs.”

“Thanks... sssss.... Oh!” Kate hissed lowering herself into the water.

“Is it too hot?”

“No, CJ. It’s actually a really nice temperature. My cuts are just protesting a little. I guess my bruises do look ugly, huh?”

“Not ugly, Katie. Never ugly,” the agent husked.

CJ kissed the actress on the forehead and sat on the floor leaning her side on the bathtub, next to Kate’s head. She passed her the occasional chip, half covered in dip, while they chatted.

“So... tell me about your family.”

Kate sighed, finally relaxing in the soothing water. “Well, I grew up in Brooklyn...”. At CJ’s surprised expression, Kate let out a bark of laughter. “Yes, Brooklyn, you heard me. Anyway, my parents were pretty poor back then and I had dreams of becoming famous since I was little. Mother is quite the domineering type, not cruelly so, but very judgmental. We’re not close. Actually, I guess I am the opposite of you in that respect, I’m close to my Dad. They divorced when I was ten and Dad went off and tried to have a family again. He always seemed to be going through the motions, like he thought it was expected that he’d settle down and have kids. Five years after my step-brother was born, my Dad finally plucked up the courage to be himself, and I wasn’t really surprised when he told me he was gay.”

Kate sneaked a glance at CJ, who she found smiling and nodding quietly.

“I think I like him already,” the agent said, smirking.

“You’ll love him. He’s a great Dad, even when they divorced and he had his son, I was still equally important to him and I get on really well with my brother. His name is Eddie Marshall, named after Dad. You’ll like him too. He’s a cool guy. So, Dad and I have always been close, but mother, not so much. I think she just tolerates me and well... now when I tell her about you, I’m sure I’ll get another lecture.”

She covered her mouth with her hand as if she had said something wrong but the agent just giggled.

“Go on. Any relationships or skeletons in your closet?” CJ asked, nibbling on a chip.

“Just one. I had been in LA for a while, working in bars and going to every audition or open casting call I could find, while trying to get my degree. I met Jason in one of those bars and he put in a good word for me with a friend of his, who owned a really upscale place in downtown LA. He got me a job behind the bar, which was really exciting. I knew a lot of casting directors went to that place. And that’s where I was ‘discovered’. Anyway, I went out with Jason for two years but during that time he started trying to tell me what to do. I may have been naïve, but I knew what was best for me... and my career. I left him and finished school with a Masters in Film Production. After that... there were a few one night stands but they seemed to want to be with Kate, the actress, who woke up on screen caked in make-up and every hair perfectly in place... not the real Kate, with her hair in disarray and her sleepy eyes, who needs a bomb to wake her in the morning.”

“I like the sound of the real Kate, myself,” CJ quipped, getting a chip thrown at her for her trouble. “I’m serious. If I’m already attracted to you after the events of the past week, then the real Kate sounds absolutely perfect to me.”

“You’re attracted to me?” Kate asked, raising both eyebrows in mock surprise.

“D’uh... yeah,” CJ goaded.

Another chip flew in her direction and landed on her lap. She picked it up and popped it in her mouth.

“Thanks,” she said with a smug grin. “You know, I never realized that there were still so many narrow-minded people out there... people who would only want that fake on-screen persona instead of an incredible human being like you. That’s crazy.”

“Only in LA,” Kate said, sipping her soda.

“Hah... yes. Only in LA.”

They both chatted a little longer until Kate started to prune. After CJ helped her wash, she held up a warm towel and wrapped the smaller woman in it. She took the other towel and covered the blonde head, massaging gently to remove any excess moisture. Standing in front of the small bathroom mirror, the agent stood behind Kate and brushed through her hair, their eyes meeting frequently in the reflection.

They sat for a while on the couch in front of the fire, while Kate’s hair dried, and listened to music. The smaller woman watched the randomly swirling, fluffy flakes of snow as she sat beside CJ, under the agent’s arm that was draped casually around her shoulders. “*Is this what happiness feels like?*” she mused. ‘*Yes, Katie, You almost died but you feel like you can conquer the world and it’s because of her.*’

“Looks like a lull in the storm,” CJ said, breaking the train of thought.

“Yeah. Do you think it’s easing off?”

“Not sure. I think Charlie was trying to tell us it’s expected to head east in forty-eight hours. At least, that’s what I think he said.”

“That’s what I got too. So, will we be heading out then?” Kate asked quietly.

“No. Have you looked out the door? We need to wait for it to melt a little. It’s about three feet deep out there. Are you in a hurry to leave?”

“No... no way. I just wondered. If we can get a message through to the Sheriff and tell him to let my parents know I’m okay, then I’ll be happy to stay here forever,” Kate said, sighing.

“Forever, huh?”

“I love it here, CJ. Even knowing how I came to be here, I still love this place.”

“I’m glad, Katie. I love it too. But we have to go back to the real world eventually. When we catch this guy, you won’t need to worry about that anymore. I promise.”

With a kiss to the petite woman’s temple, CJ got up to bank the fire. After Kate finished in the bathroom and got into bed, the agent took a quick shower before checking the door locks and shutting off all but one of the lights. When she walked into the bedroom, she saw Kate curled up on her side under the quilt. CJ went to the nightstand and set down a glass of water and some extra painkillers in case Kate needed them. The actress opened her eyes at the sound and smiled at the agent.

Slipping under the quilt, CJ switched off the lamp, leaving only the gentle glow of the light in the living area.

“I like your dream-catcher,” Kate whispered as she wriggled towards the agent, referring to the adornment hanging from the ceiling above the bed.

“It was my great-grandfather’s,” the taller woman said, accepting the precious body into her embrace.

“Why does it have a wolf on it?”

“My great-grandfather’s tribal name was “Walks With Wolves”. He loved to study them as a young man, and the elders in his tribe thought he got so close to them that he had joined the pack,” CJ said, remembering the stories her Mom told her.

The actress was lost in thought for a few moments. “CJ... when I was walking across the mountain... when I escaped... I saw a black wolf with ice blue eyes. He watched me as I rested at the edge of a clearing. I wasn’t afraid of him. And later when I collapsed, I swear I saw him again. I thought I imagined it but...”

“Maybe you did. Or maybe you were guided here. I guess we’ll never know.”

She kissed Kate’s forehead and immediately decided it was a mistake, when the actress raised her head and sought out her lips. She didn’t resist this time, as Kate’s tongue gently requested access to her mouth. She accepted it readily and deepened the contact, keeping it gentle so as not to hurt the delicate, wounded skin. After a few, seemingly endless, moments, CJ was really struggling to contain the fire that ignited in her belly and shot out to spark every nerve ending in her body. Her heart was trying to beat its way out of her chest and a liquid heat began to pool between her legs. She pulled her mouth away.

“Katie,” she breathed, “you have no idea what you’re doing to me, but we are not gonna do this here. Once you’re healed and we’re back home, we’ll take it from there...”

“I am home,” Kate interrupted.

“Oh God...” the agent groaned.

“It’s okay, CJ, I understand. But we *can* kiss without hurting me.”

“We can. But I’m struggling to control my feelings here. How do you do it? How do you get closer in one day, than anyone else has in the past twenty-five years?” the agent pleaded.

“Because you love me?” Kate asked, hopefully.

CJ froze momentarily. “Perhaps,” she whispered.

“Because I love you?” the actress continued.

“Could be,” CJ offered weakly, swallowing hard.

Kate’s hand trailed up over CJ’s shoulder and came to rest on the back of her neck, then stilled suddenly as it found roughened skin. The agent froze once more and tried not to pull away.

“Tell me...” Kate requested gently.

“Tell you what?”

“Tell me about this,” she repeated, brushing her index finger over the skin for emphasis.

'You just can't resist this woman, can you?' CJ's little voice told her. 'She's got you good, Ciara. But, God, she's so incredible.'

"Okay. I got shot a couple of years ago. On the job," the agent said quietly, her face only a few inches from Kate's.

A deep sigh issued from the actress. "Can you tell me about it? Do you want to?"

"I seem to want to tell you everything, so why not this?"

"You may as well. You've been trying to keep me occupied all day. This will just finish it off nicely," Kate teased.

"You can see right through me, can't you?" CJ said, nipping that cute little nose with her fingers.

"Yes. And thank you for looking after me so well. I can't believe how much better you made me feel today."

"You are most welcome. And it was my pleasure," the agent purred. She could see the wide, darkened eyes, struggling to see her in the low light and trailed a fingertip slowly down from Kate's forehead, round her cheek, over her shell-like ear and down to her chin.

"Okay. The shooting," she began belatedly. "Well, I was called to a hostage situation in Los Angeles. This crazy guy was apparently a heavy drug addict and well, he had become seriously strung-out in his withdrawal. He had a pistol and just went into the building that happened to be nearest to him, which unfortunately, was an Elementary school..."

At Kate's sharp intake of breath, the agent paused, squeezing the shoulder her hand had rested upon. "Want me to stop?"

Kate's heart was breaking at the thought of what CJ had gone through. She couldn't comprehend anyone wanting to hurt kids, but then again, thinking how irritable and unpredictable her attacker seemed to be when under the influence, she supposed anything was possible. She shuddered.

"No, CJ. Tell me," she said, taking the hand from her shoulder and clasping it in her own, against her chest.

"He had basically run in there, gone into the first room he found and pointed the gun. I suppose it was a blessing that it was 3pm and almost everyone had left already. But the teacher was still there with three of the kids, handing out projects to take home. He shot the teacher immediately... not fatally... and huddled the three kids into a corner. When we arrived, he was screaming that if anyone came into the room, he would shoot the kids. He wanted money, and lots of it. I was the negotiator that day. It took me eighty-five minutes to talk him into trading me for the kids. I had figured out that, even though he thought he had control of the situation, he was in a highly suggestible state and I told him exactly what he wanted to hear. I said that we would only give him his money and his ridiculous request for a chopper to... and I quote, 'get me the fuck outta here', if he traded the kids for me. And he did. He had the gun to my head when another Bureau negotiator tried to stall him. He flipped out and shot me as I tried to dive for cover. He apparently made his escape through a fire exit".

"How did he get away if you had been in there for over an hour?" Kate gasped.

"It seemed that the classroom's fire exit led out onto an enclosed yard surrounded by high walls. From the outside, the cops couldn't get in and they must have left a gap in the perimeter, thinking he couldn't get out.

But there was a climbing frame in the yard. He must have used it to get over the wall. I was so damned angry when I found that out.”

“You weren’t at fault, CJ. You did everything you could with a hostile and unpredictable nutcase. Do you know how incredible you are? How much I admire you?”

And with that, it was CJ’s turn to cry, unrestrained tears falling to her pillow. Kate gathered the tough special agent into her arms, this time bringing CJ’s head under *her* chin, whispering a few comforting words as the tall woman wept. An undetermined amount of time later, they were both asleep, clinging to one another in a subconscious attempt to protect each other from the world.

Chapter 8

Two days later, the snow finally stopped. Kate stood just outside the door in the late morning sunshine – though the temperature must have been struggling to get up to zero – watching CJ digging the Jeep out of its igloo. She was clothed in a thick pair of the agents sweatpants, turned up three times at the bottom. Her feet were warmed by two pairs of large thermal socks and a huge pair of hiking boots. The jacket she was wearing made her look like she had been inflated by an over-enthusiastic air pump, but the tall agent thought she was unbelievably adorable.

“Why don’t you get back inside... stay warm?” she shouted.

Pulling the door closed to keep the heat in, Kate tentatively trudged through the deep snow. “I wanted to get some fresh air... and watch you work.”

“Ah,” CJ said, leaning on the handle of her shovel and reaching over to kiss the approaching forehead.

“Need any help?”

“Not this time, but if we’re back up here in winter again, you’re doing *all* the snow work,” the taller woman grinned.

“Deal.”

Kate turned around to get a good look at the place that had sheltered her for the past few days. The tiny yard was flanked on two sides by the cabin and shed, while opposite the front of the house the wilderness merged with the little property flawlessly, with evergreen trees and surprisingly flat, but rough terrain split by the dirt track road. The other edge of the yard, lined up perfectly with the large windowed side of the cabin, dropped away steeply revealing, from this vantage point, a partial, stunning view. It felt to her, like she had been here for much longer. It was beautiful and the snow sparkled around her like someone had waved a glitter wand that reached out magically and touched everything. She knew she was being fanciful but CJ’s cabin felt magical to her.

“I’ll go put the kettle on... make you some hot coffee,” she said, walking towards the door.

“Sounds divine,” CJ replied, over-dramatically.

Kate laughed over her shoulder and went indoors only to be greeted by the sound of Charlie’s voice, shouting over the radio. She grabbed the handset, holding the button on the side.

“Charlie?”

“Hey...” A pause. “Who is this?”

“I’m Kate... hold on Charlie, I’ll get CJ. She can explain.”

She didn’t wait to hear his reply, throwing the door open and summoning the agent into the cabin.

“It’s Charlie,” she said, holding out the handset.

“Hey Sheriff.”

“Hey FBI. Care to tell me what’s goin’ on up there?” he shouted over the interference.

CJ could only imagine his curious expression. “Charlie, I have some important information for you. On Tuesday, I found Katherine Marshall nearby on the mountain. She was badly beaten and had escaped her attacker. I need you to contact the LAPD and my office, Charlie. The abduction will be a Federal case...” she paused, waiting for his response.

“I know exactly who you’re talkin’ about. It’s been all over the news. My God, CJ, that’s awful and great all at the same time... you know, that she’s okay an’ all. I’ll contact the proper authorities, don’t you worry about that. I doubt you’ll get down the mountain in the next couple of days. If I can get hold of a snowplow, I’ll try and head up the track.”

She knew she had rattled him with this piece of news. He never called her CJ.

“Don’t worry about us, Sheriff, we’re fine. If you try to get a snowplow up here, you wouldn’t get it back down. There’s nowhere to turn it at my place. Just let the LAPD know that I have her and tell my office that I’ve bagged as much evidence as I could. And tell them to inform Kate’s parents. Let them know she is okay and in the care of an FBI agent.”

“I will, CJ. She couldn’t be in better hands. I’ll get back to you when I have more information. Baxter out.”

“Roger, Charlie. Thanks.”

CJ turned to Kate and was immediately wrapped in a clumsy hug, both their padded outfits making it difficult to get a grip.

“Thank you, CJ.”

“You’re welcome. At least we know that your abduction case is already being investigated. We’ll get him, Kate,” she promised, brushing a strand of blonde hair away from piercing green eyes.

Kate kissed her soundly on the lips. “God, you’re cold. Go finish up quickly and I’ll make the coffee.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the agent saluted on her way out the door.

Kate chuckled and set about completing her task. When CJ came back, she shed the wet waterproof trousers and jacket, and sat on the floor in front of the crackling fire.

“We’ll have you home before New Year’s Eve,” CJ said, when Kate placed a mug on the coffee table.

“You mean, you’ll have me back in LA by New Year’s Eve. I’m glad I got to spend Christmas with you. Shame we didn’t have a tree.”

“I... I don’t usually celebrate it. I... my Mom was killed December 22nd and I guess...” the agent trailed off.

“Come here.” Kate grasped her elbow and led her to the couch, slipping her hand down to entwine her fingers with the agent’s.

“We don’t need a tree. And I already have an amazing Christmas gift,” the actress said, giving CJ the most astoundingly loving smile, the taller woman thought her heart might just burst. “And you found me on December 22nd, didn’t you?”

“You’re right,” CJ frowned, “I did. There are so many weird things going on with us... coincidences maybe... it’s hard to keep track.” She chuckled humorlessly. “Maybe it’s time for things to change a little around here.”

“Maybe it is.”

CJ leaned over and met Kate halfway, their lips joining, trying to convey all their emotions in that one kiss. Hands tangled in hair, tongues tasted one other and bodies delicately pressed together. Kate’s hand slid down the agent’s back and she dragged it round to cup a full breast through the soft material of CJ’s sweater. The tall woman lost her breath and pulled her mouth away a few millimeters to get some oxygen.

“Katie,” she gasped against the warm, full lips.

“Hmmm, yes?”

“You... uh... you... oh! You need to stop.” CJ opened her eyes, seeing spots dancing across her field of vision.

“I don’t want to,” Kate panted into the agent’s mouth.

“Oh Jesus...”

CJ gently grabbed the questing hand and stilled it, but didn’t remove it from her breast. Trying desperately to hold onto her self-control, she took a few cleansing breaths, finally taking the hand in hers.

“Kate. I swear to you... when you’re healed and I can touch you without worrying about hurting you... I will make love to you all night long. You won’t need to ask me twice. Hell, you won’t even need to ask me once,” she said, recovering her breath.

The actress lowered her head, her eyes still focused on CJ. “How about all week long?”

“Whatever you want, Katie. Whatever you want,” the agent promised, kissing each individual hurt on the smaller woman’s face.

“I’ll hold you to that,” Kate said, moving her head to make sure CJ got every single injury covered.

A soft sound of amusement in the smaller woman’s ear made her shiver and CJ’s forehead fell onto her shoulder.

“I know you will,” the agent laughed.

They sat sipping their rapidly cooling coffee in a comfortable silence. It was like each moment spent together, bound them closer in some unfathomable way.

“C’mon,” CJ said, once they had finished the drinks.

Kate followed her to the area behind the couch, just next to the bedroom door. The agent pulled a colorful rug aside that was similar to, but smaller than, the one in front of the fire, to reveal a trapdoor in the floor beneath.

“Downstairs?” Kate asked, excitement threading through her voice.

“Yep. Watch your step. The staircase is steep. Use your feet side-on,” the taller woman instructed, descending into darkness. “Wait a sec, Katie, until you see me come back.”

“Okay.”

A low-energy light bulb went on and CJ appeared back at the stairs. Kate climbed down slowly and found herself in the waiting arms of her new love. Looking around the tiny room, she noticed the two dark red armchairs, the few framed movie posters on the darkly painted walls and a huge television screen, almost as big as the wall it hung on.

“This place is great... and warm?” she asked, now standing with her back to CJ.

Arms slipped around a slim waist and the agent leaned her chin on Kate’s shoulder. “Yeah, it’s thermally lined and the pipes for the hot water run through here,” she said, pointing just above their heads.

“I love it.”

“Good. Wanna watch a movie?”

“I sure do,” Kate said, turning in the strong arms and kissing a soft neck.

“We need supplies,” the tall woman decided. “Let’s go back up.”

Standing in the kitchen, Kate watched with amusement as CJ’s butt danced around in the air while she looked for something under the kitchen sink. The actress tilted her head to get a better view and hummed in appreciation.

“Here it is,” came a muffled voice from inside the cupboard.

CJ stood up and set the elusive item on the counter, plugging it in.

“We’re having popcorn?” Kate said in amazement.

“Yeah... you don’t like popcorn?”

“No, I love it. You just keep surprising me. You sure are well-equipped up here.”

CJ laughed and opened a nearby canister. “Salty or sweet?” she asked as she poured the popping corn into the machine.

“Sweet for me, please,” the actress said, lowering her tone and leering at her companion. “Although, salty can be good too. But for today, sweet will do.”

CJ cleared her throat in an exaggerated manner, before digging out a couple of sodas from the fridge. “Can you grab the laptop?”

“Sure... sweetie.”

The tough special agent considered how she was ever going to survive this woman, as she slowly descended the stairs once more, arms laden with a tray bearing glasses and bowls filled with sustenance.

“What are we watching?”

“You can choose, Katie. They’re stacked behind the chair there,” the agent said, as she linked the laptop to the TV.

“Wow, you *do* have my movie. Glad you’re a fan, Miss Carson.”

“Not a fan, that implies fanatic. I’m an avid admirer, although that just transpired recently,” she smirked, taking her seat.

“Smooth,” Kate complimented. “Ooh, you have ‘Wedding Crashers’... I love that movie. *True love is the soul’s recognition of its counterpoint in another...*” the actress said, remembering the scene. “I always loved that line.”

CJ looked at her. “I love it too. I used to think it was a fantasy though.”

“And now?”

“Now, I wonder,” she replied with a shy smile.

Kate made her choice and was now crouching over the laptop, entering the DVD into the drive. Putting off the lamp, she took her seat, immediately grabbing a handful of popcorn from the bowl, which was balanced on the two middle arms of the chairs.

CJ turned to her and smiled. “Miss Congeniality? Really?” the agent asked in disbelief.

“Yeah. She’s not as cute as you though,” Kate giggled, as she settled down in her chair.

* * * * *

The battered, rusty brown vehicle pulled up against a curb, hiding in the shadows of night and badly illuminated street lamps. The dark figure inside leaned across the passenger seat to wind down the window.

“You lookin’ for business?” the female voice said from the sidewalk, as she leaned down to reveal a barely contained cleavage.

He nodded mutely, eyeing the blonde hair. ‘*She’ll do,*’ he thought.

“Fifty bucks. More if you want extras,” she said, before opening the car door and getting in.

He sat silently looking at her, his eyes darting back and forth, pupils dilated, head twitching. She turned from her forward-facing position, feeling his scrutiny, and took in his demeanor immediately.

“Hey listen, man. If you’re junked up, I don’t do that kinda...”

She soon shut up when the butt of his newly acquired gun came down square across her temple. She slumped into the seat as the car squealed off under his erratic acceleration.

* * * * *

That night, after a highly successful dinner made from frozen and canned goods, the two women were lying back on the couch, CJ propped up against the support of the cushions at the corner of the ‘L’, Kate backed up against her to lean on the tall agent’s chest. Two long arms were lovingly draped over the small, firm body and soft music played over the crackling of a new log thrown in the fire.

“Do you think I’ll have any permanent scars?” Kate whispered.

“I don’t know, honey. I’m not a doctor,” CJ replied, trailing her knuckles tenderly down a nearby cheek.

“I’d like your opinion. You’ve seen all my injuries and I’d think you’d have some idea... in your line of work.”

“Well, I think maybe the one on your thigh... the one on your calf and the ‘J’ on your back. And perhaps a little one here, on your temple... but I’d say it will be easily hidden with make-up. Are you worried about it affecting your career?”

Kate took in all the information she had just heard, separating it out in her mind. “No, I wasn’t worried about work, but it’s good to know you don’t think my face will be covered in scars. Tell me about the ‘J’...”

“The uh... carving he did to your lower back,” CJ said, gently squeezing the younger woman comfortingly as she spoke, “it looks like an upper case ‘J’. I don’t know if it means anything significant, but that’s just how I described it in my notes.”

“Oh,” the actress said, lost in thought. “He was particularly brutal that day. I got most of my injuries during those twenty-four hours...”

When Kate’s voice trailed off, the agent looked at her with concern. “Hey, are you all right?”

“Uh huh. Just trying not to think about it but at the same time, I don’t want to forget any of it either... you know, for my statement. They’ll take a statement from me, wont they?”

“Yes. It will most likely be the FBI who does it now. They’ll have taken over the case when you were abducted. Kate... you might not be able to go back to your house until we catch this guy, you know that, right?”

“I know. And I don’t want to anyway. Will I be able to pick up some personal items?”

CJ sighed. “I don’t know yet. Depends how much they’ve done by the time we get there. Let’s take it one step at a time, okay?”

Kate nodded and turned onto her side, burying her face in CJ's sweater. The taller woman just held her tight and kissed the top of her head. They sat for a while, breathing each other in and contemplating their return to LA.

* * * * *

The raven-haired agent pursed her lips to hold back her giggle as a small snort came from Kate's nose. The actress had started dozing off and was trying unsuccessfully to fight it. CJ reached round and moved her into a better position, but Kate woke up.

"Hmm? I fell asleep, didn't I?"

"Kind of..." the agent said. "Bedtime, I think."

CJ watched with quiet pleasure as the smaller woman got up and headed to the bathroom, yawning widely and scratching through her ruffled hair as she went. The agent's heart was so full, she began to think that perhaps aliens had taken over her body. *'No Ciara, you're just in love... and it hit you like a frickin' freight train,'* her little voice told her sternly.

Heading into the bedroom, the agent stripped off her clothes and lifted her pajama top from the bed, before realizing that Kate was standing, wide-eyed, in the doorway. The tall woman made a move to cover herself up.

"Don't..."

CJ looked at Kate, whose eyes were now the greenest she had ever seen, as they scanned the body before them.

Kate couldn't move. And couldn't stop drinking in the sight of the naked woman standing not too far away from her. The long, black, shiny hair sprawled over broad shoulders, the dark ocean blue eyes, the smooth naturally tanned skin covering a strong collarbone, perfect breasts topped with pert brownish nipples. *'Breathe, Kate,'* she reminded herself. The flat, muscled abdomen, rounded womanly hips, the dark triangle of hair at the juncture of those longer than long legs. Kate gulped audibly as she became aware that CJ was beginning to squirm under the scrutiny.

"I... just came to ask you about toilet paper but... uh..." Kate faltered.

CJ pulled on the shirt-like pajama top, which only just covered those wonderful treasures underneath. "In the hamper at the foot of the tub."

"CJ?" Kate said before she turned away. "Do me a favor and don't move 'til I get back, okay?"

"Uh, okay."

The actress did not take long and returned to the bedroom to find CJ had indeed, not moved, although she did have an apprehensive look on her face. Kate skirted the bed and stood in front of the agent. She slowly removed her own pajamas and dropped them to the floor, looking up into CJ's eyes.

"You won't hurt me. Make love to me... please," she whispered, placing her hands on the front of the agent's top and pushing it back off her shoulders.

CJ's heart rate had increased dramatically at those words and she found she couldn't refuse a plea like that. She didn't want to, either. Watching Kate slipping under the quilt, she paused for a split second and then followed her. Lying on her side next to the smaller woman, she slipped her arm under Kate's shoulders, cradling her lovingly, and pressed her body against the smaller one, groaning as she felt the warm skin of Kate's breast touch her own. Their eyes never left each other and CJ gently laid her hand on the firm, bruised stomach of the woman she loved dearly.

"Are you sure?" she whispered, uncertainly.

"Yes. I want you to touch me." Kate took the hand from her stomach and pressed it against her breast.

"Oh God..." CJ gasped, lowering her head to kiss Kate passionately... but somehow lightly.

The actress returned the kiss, her tongue immediately requesting entry into her lover's mouth, her hands tangled in the taller woman's hair. CJ's hand carefully squeezed the delicate breast and her thumb trailed slowly back and forth over a hard, aching nipple. They broke the kiss to take in much needed gulps of air and Kate smiled, her eyes on fire with the passion she felt. CJ returned the smile and took her time on her journey over Kate's skin. Her mouth trailed down to kiss the actress's neck and nibbled along a perfect collarbone. Knowing this couldn't be an energetic encounter, CJ made her caresses as loving and healing as she could, taking her time to lick and kiss each hurt. She covered a sensitive nipple with her lips, using her tongue to gently flick it back and forth. Kate moaned, her back arching into the touch, wanting this woman with all her heart.

"Oh... Ciara... yes."

CJ didn't even falter at the use of her name, it just encouraged her to continue, but her passion was getting the better of her and she lifted her head to look at Kate and reign in her desires, afraid of hurting this precious being. The actress made a small sound of protest.

"Hey... you okay?"

Kate nodded vigorously and pulled the agent down for another kiss. CJ trailed her hand languidly over the pale skin of the actress's abdomen, using the soft pads of her fingertips to leave a line of goose bumps in their wake. The agent groaned when she felt Kate covering her breast with her hand, massaging it in a circular motion, the nipple hardening and jabbing into the palm immediately. Their mouths parted and they looked at one another, still continuing the sensual caresses. Kate's expression was one of pure love and devotion and CJ hoped this woman knew what the agent was feeling for her. Long fingers tentatively tickled over the thatch of thin, blonde hair at the apex of the smaller woman's legs. CJ gasped at the touch, feeling amazed and privileged at being allowed this intimacy. Their eyes never breaking contact through the entire encounter, it felt like an almost tangible bond between them that only served to heighten the sensations elsewhere on their bodies.

Dipping her middle finger a little deeper, CJ found the top of the tender ridge, already moist with arousal. She groaned at the abundant wetness between her own legs, generated simply by kissing and touching this woman. She pushed lower, parting the swollen outer lips and sliding into the wetness at Kate's opening, bringing some of it out to trail deliciously along the length of the hardening nodule, swollen with desire.

"I... please, Ciara."

CJ smiled at Kate's pleading look and moved her hand back and forth, stimulating the entire length of the slick protrusion, building the pressure and rhythm steadily. She couldn't believe how wet Kate was and it increased her own desire so much that she thought she might come first. Her body was burning now, throbbing with every beat of her heart, and the feel of Kate's center under her fingertips was enough to

make her ache with need. She gently entered the actress with two fingers, thrusting slowly and deeply inside, curling upwards to seek out and press that smooth spot that would build the fire within. CJ brought her thumb into play, rubbing it in circles over the sensitive nodule. The result was immediate as she felt the velvety walls begin to flutter around her fingers.

Kate let out a passionate scream and a slightly incoherent 'Ciara'. Her full breasts heaving pleasantly, the sensations took over her body, spreading out from her core and igniting every molecule of her taught form. CJ watched her in awe, as the actress held nothing back at the height of her pleasure, Kate's inner muscles pulling her fingers deeper as they gripped delightfully with each pulsation. CJ was somewhat shocked when her own orgasm washed over her in waves, triggered by watching Kate climax. Catching her breath, she gentled her caress, guiding Kate through it until finally, the younger woman's body relaxed into the mattress, her mouth open and dry from panting so hard. The agent continued to stare at her as she recovered, thinking that Kate was indeed, the most beautiful woman in the world.

Still intimately connected to her lover, CJ leaned down and kissed the slightly parted lips. When she drew back, Kate opened her eyes.

"You... are unbelievable," Kate said, gazing at the agent with hooded eyes.

"Why, thank you, Miss Marshall," CJ whispered, wiggling the buried fingers slightly.

Kate smiled broadly and clamped down with her inner muscles making the taller woman's eyes widen.

"You want more?" the agent asked, raising an eyebrow.

"As much as I want to keep you there forever, I need to move to do... what I want to do next."

"Indeed," CJ said, and carefully withdrew.

Kate's jaw dropped, heart pounding, as the agent brought her hand up to her mouth, inhaling deeply the intoxicating scent on her fingers, before taking them into her mouth and sucking them clean. The actress swallowed hard and licked her lips. '*Good God, she's beautiful,*' Kate thought.

"So, what are you going to do?" CJ whispered seductively.

Kate's response came in the form of her getting to her knees, revealing her naked body to the appreciative gaze of her lover. She pushed the quilt and blankets to the bottom of the bed and using her hands, spread CJ's legs. The agent gasped yet again when Kate positioned herself between them and carefully lowered the length of her body down on top of the taller woman.

"I'm going to love you," the actress said simply.

The kiss was deep, full of passion and desire, and took CJ's breath away. The feel of Kate's tongue, tasting her, teasing her, healing her soul, caused tears to sting the back of her eyes. Then the mouth was gone, only to kiss and nip at the skin on the agent's neck, a tongue flicking out to lick a delicate earlobe and trail around the shell-like structure. CJ moaned in anticipation as the smaller woman began a lazy journey down over her upper chest, stopping to kiss a small scar there, before continuing on to take a very sensitive nipple deeply into her mouth.

CJ's eyes shot open when she felt Kate's teeth tenderly grip the hardened nub and the wet warmth of her tongue rasped over the tip.

“Katie...” CJ whispered, arching up and expelling a gust of breath.

The actress didn't stop her assault on CJ's senses, bringing her hand up to cover the other breast, rolling its nipple between her thumb and forefinger to intensify the agent's pleasure. The taller woman lost all control and could do nothing but feel the rapture that Kate was putting her through. Incredibly, she felt a mild orgasm ripple through her again but Kate didn't relent. She seemed ravenous now, leaving the breasts behind, kissing over CJ's stomach. The actress dipped her tongue briefly into CJ's navel, making her lover's eyes roll back in her head as they closed. Then the cool, tough, special agent felt Kate's breasts press against her inner thighs and it was all she could do not to scream. The actress nuzzled the dark thatch of hair with her lips and nose, taking a tentative breath, inhaling the musky scent of a very ready female body. The smaller woman wasn't surprised to find that it intoxicated her in the most incredibly delightful way.

She flicked out the tip of her tongue to taste the flooding moisture gathering at the top of the crease, the hair dampened with CJ's strong arousal. Kate heard a heartfelt moan escape her lover's lips and two strong hands tangled in her hair, massaging with the lightest of touches and urging her on. Kate's hunger took over and she plunged her tongue deeply between the swollen folds, nudging the legs apart even more with her shoulders. She flattened her tongue and licked long and slow, from just above the agent's hot opening, over the aching bundle of nerves, stopping at the top before repeating the caress. At this point, CJ was audibly moaning with every single breath, unable to hold off the onslaught of yet another orgasm. Kate sensed it and flicked back and forth over the swollen nub with the tip of her tongue before stiffening the muscle and pushing it as far into her lover as she could.

“Katie... oh God, Katie! Oh... oh!”

CJ screamed and let go of Kate's head as she gripped at the sheet on the bed, her knuckles white. The actress looked up the long length of beautiful, golden body while she continued to lavish CJ lovingly, watching the stunning agent moaning through parted lips, her tongue poking out to moisten the dry skin, the muscles on her abdomen rippling beautifully. The smaller woman swirled her tongue gently in small circles feeling the pulsations gradually lessen, not wanting to leave this heavenly haven just yet. CJ crossed her arms over her eyes, her chest rising and falling rapidly. Kate, immediately concerned, crawled up the agent's body and slipped her arms under the broad shoulders.

“Hey,” she whispered. “Look at me, CJ.”

The taller woman sniffed and moved her arms, immediately wrapping them around the body on top of her. Kate saw the tears and released her right arm to reach up and brush them away. Running her fingers through CJ's bangs, she gazed thoughtfully into the blue, moistened eyes.

“Tell me...” she whispered.

CJ raised her head to kiss Kate, trying to convey all the emotion with that simple touch that she couldn't seem to verbalize at this point. Sinking back onto the pillow when they parted, the agent touched Kate's face, tracing her lips... following the line of her eyebrow... pushing a strand of blonde hair back behind an ear.

“I... I'm so scared, Katie.”

The petite woman's eyes widened and CJ brought a finger up to cover the full lips, forestalling any response.

“I love you... so much... I've never cried like that before. There's so much emotion... I can't begin to tell you what I'm feeling...” the agent stuttered.

Moving the finger from her lips, Kate kissed her lover. “Don’t be afraid of it. I do understand, CJ, believe me. It seemingly came from nowhere and blindsided us both. But it’s so right. I feel it in here,” she said, covering her heart with her hand. “I love you too. What we just did... that was the most natural and incredibly beautiful thing in the world to me. Everything about us feels right, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” CJ murmured, mesmerized by the green eyes above her.

“I’ve never made love like that before. Actually, I’ve never ‘*made love*’ before. I’ve never been in love like this,” Kate said, thoughtfully.

“Me either... not really... and certainly not like this.”

“Meant to be,” the actress murmured. She suddenly became aware of the soft, warm breasts pressed against hers. “Can we stay like *this* forever?” she asked, playfully pressing herself against the agent.

A small smirk curled the full, wine-shaded lips. “I believe that would be incredibly inconvenient, my sweet.” She paused. “Hey! You just did it again. With just a word or a look, you made me smile. Are you a magician, Miss Marshall?”

“Perhaps. What do you want me to be?”

“I want you to be you,” CJ replied huskily.

Kate kissed her and slid over to snuggle up to the agent’s side, dragging the quilt up, enveloping them in a warm cocoon in the middle of the bed.

“I love you, Agent Carson.”

“I love you too, beautiful. Now get some rest,” CJ said, turning to kiss the forehead resting at her cheek.

“Yes, ma’am,” came the sleepy reply.

Chapter 9

Two days later, the morning broke on their last day at the cabin... for a while. Charlie had called the previous evening, letting them know he had organized an improvised rescue vehicle, made up of a powerful quad bike with snow chains and a small plow attached to the front. CJ was quite impressed. It would be small enough to turn and head back down the mountain, leaving the road clear for the Jeep to follow it.

The agent lay awake, lost in thoughts of what came next. Whatever happened, she would stay as close to Kate as she could, for the rest of her leave... if that’s what the actress wanted. Spooned around the smaller body of her lover, CJ inhaled near the blonde hair, enjoying the smell of coconut shampoo, combined with a scent that was uniquely Kate. The taller woman couldn’t get enough of that scent. She could feel the warm skin pressed so tightly against her and sighed happily. They had not made love again. CJ suspected that Kate’s injuries were a little more uncomfortable than the tough little actress cared to admit. The last two days had been spent in complete bliss, though. Lounging together on the couch, making dinner together, talking about life and work, holding one another, kissing... they’d even danced slowly together last night, as the music played quietly in the background. CJ couldn’t imagine being happy with anyone else. Kate was part of her and she hoped the actress would be with her for the rest of her days.

“Hmmm... you awake?” Kate mumbled sleepily.

“I am. Good morning, beautiful,” the agent replied, kissing a soft cheek.

“Good morning, honey.” A wide, thankfully painless yawn. “What time is it?”

“A little after nine. We should get up soon. Charlie’s making his attempt in an hour,” CJ said, resting her lips on the shoulder in front of her.

Kate turned in CJ’s embrace, slipping her arm around the agent’s waist.

“Hi...” she whispered, kissing her love, sweetly.

“Did you sleep well?” CJ asked.

“Like a rock,” came the lazy reply.

“You didn’t need a bomb to wake you this morning,” the agent teased.

She received a bite on the nose for the comment. “Needing to pee works equally well, I guess,” the actress quipped, getting up to take care of the biological necessity.

CJ grinned and watched her go, the agent’s T-shirt covering the actress’s buttocks... barely. Stretching and following her love out of the bedroom, CJ headed for the kitchen counter and filled the kettle. She stifled a yawn as she sliced the loaf they’d made yesterday, and popped two pieces in the grill. Lighting the stove, she took two mugs from the cupboard and decided that she liked the little routine they had somehow fallen into in the mornings. Exactly on cue, Kate came out of the bathroom and CJ felt two slender arms slip around her from behind.

“Your turn, sweetie,” she mumbled against CJ’s nightshirt.

Grasping the hands on her waist gently, she raised one to her mouth and kissed it. “I’ll have peanut butter this morning.”

Kate let her go and continued making the toast, while CJ went to the bathroom. All in all, they were quite an efficient team. Breakfast done, they showered together, taking time to wash one another lavishly, not so much to arouse as to show how much they cared. When Kate entered the bedroom to get dressed, CJ had picked out some well-chosen clothing for her.

“This fleece is a short, tight fit on me... should be good for you while travelling. And these...” She held up a pair of navy combat trousers, “should look okay once rolled up and tucked into socks.” She looked up at the actress, wrapped in a towel and looking at her with a raised eyebrow.

“Thank you,” Kate said, walking towards her.

“You don’t need to wear these. They are just a suggestion. I... mmpphh.”

She was silenced by a warm mouth covering hers possessively and immediately decided that Kate approved of the garments.

“Don’t doubt yourself. I love how you take care of me,” the actress said in a soft voice.

Both dressed and ready to go, CJ went outside to shut the last storm shutter and lay the solar panels flat, noticing that their attempt at a snowman was still standing, if somewhat drunkenly, next to the shed. She chuckled to herself before cocking her head to listen to an unfamiliar sound. A groaning engine heralded the arrival of Charlie – and his deputy – perched on the back of something that resembled a quad bike. The agent smiled as the powerful little device pushed a large wall of snow towards her and she moved to the side as Charlie continued to push most of it over the steep edge of the yard.

“Boy, am I glad to see you, FBI,” he said, removing his huge gloves and hugging her. “This is Jonathan, my new deputy.”

“Good to see you too, Sheriff. Hello Jonathan, nice to meet you,” CJ said, shaking his hand.

Just then, a well-wrapped up actress came out the door, smiling at their new visitors.

“Sheriff... Deputy... this is Kate Marshall.”

Jonathan immediately put his hand out, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Marshall,” he said enthusiastically, clearly a fan of the actress.

“Good to meet you too, Deputy,” Kate replied. She turned to the Sheriff. “And you must be Charlie?”

As he started to nod, a surprised expression crossed his jolly features when she hugged him tightly. CJ smirked as she watched the actress chat briefly with Charlie like she had known him for years.

“Let’s hit the road, Katie,” CJ said, opening the Jeep door.

And with that, they all made their way carefully down the mountainside, the two women in the Jeep, following the little, mean snow-clearing machine. Once at the Sheriff’s office, they discovered that the town was crawling with police and a few Federal Agents. CJ was immediately asked to pinpoint approximately where she found Kate and estimate which direction she had come from, to narrow down the search area for the cave. Kate also helped by describing the terrain she covered before and after her incarceration. Finishing up everything they could for now, they began their journey to LA... inconspicuously tailed by an unmarked Bureau sedan.

“You okay?” CJ asked the actress, as they drove to the airport.

“I’m fine as long as you’re with me,” Kate said quietly.

“I’ll be right by your side for the next two weeks if you’ll let me.”

Kate smiled widely and took the outstretched hand. “I’d love that.”

* * * * *

Back in LA, CJ refused to go straight to the field office, telling AD Mark Mulroney that they would go to UCLA Medical Center first, to get Kate x-rayed and checked out. He agreed, as the only possible evidence they would get now was from the bags the agent had prepared at her cabin.

Later that day, the two women were at LAPD headquarters, and while Kate gave her statement, CJ caught up with the Assistant Director who had come to meet them there. Stopping at the door of the office he was borrowing, she looked at the man, who she had to admit, had become a friend of sorts. His eyes were

scanning papers on the desk, hands clasped in front of his face, forefingers pointed to touch his nose. He seemed to sense her arrival and looked up, offering a smile.

“Special Agent Carson, come on in. How are you?”

“I’m fine, Assistant Director. And you?” CJ said, dropping into a chair, smiling pleasantly.

He looked vaguely puzzled before continuing. “I’m also fine, thank you. So... how come when you go off duty and take a vacation, you end up in the middle of one of the most high profile abductions we’ve had in a long while?” he asked, eyeing her sardonically.

“With all due respect, Sir, an FBI agent is never really off duty,” she said evenly.

He studied her for a few seconds. “Something’s changed,” he said, narrowing his eyes.

“Sir?”

“You. You’ve changed. You’re acting weird... smiling, being civil, being respectful?” he said, showing his surprise.

Obviously, CJ couldn’t hide her newly found happiness or the sparkle in her eyes. She paused to think of the appropriate smart-ass response. Not finding one, she went with honesty.

“Yes, Sir. I have changed. Does that bother you?”

“Hell, no... not in a bad way. I think I like it,” he said, grinning. “But I think you can call me Mark when we’re in private.”

Deciding that he was being genuine, she agreed with a nod. “Okay, Mark.”

“Good. So, tell me all about what has happened so far...”

CJ gave him all the information she had relating to Katherine Marshall and her abduction, from when she had been taken from her house, to CJ finding her lying in the snow. Mark watched the play of emotions washing across the agent’s face as she spoke.

“... I’m sure it will all be in her statement, Mark. But that’s the story as I know it. Apparently, this all happened after the fifth threatening letter she had received, seemingly all of them from this one guy.”

“Good, CJ. Good,” he said, folding his hands on the desktop. “I need to ask you something personal, CJ... about Katherine? And it’s important that you be honest with me...”

“You’re sharp as a razor, Mark, I’ll give you that. Yes, she is the reason I’m different. Will that be a problem?”

“No. But it does mean you will never head up this investigation, CJ. That won’t be possible,” he said, seriously.

“I understand. I didn’t expect to and if it’s all the same to you, I’d like to finish my leave and not rush back because of this. I’m sure the boys have it covered.”

“That’s fine. But I do need you on this, CJ. You’re one of the best and even though I can’t have you leading, I need your expertise and knowledge on this case. Keep your cell phone on at all times and let me know where you’ll be,” the Assistant Director said sternly.

“Yes, Sir. I was thinking it would be a good idea to take Kate to see her father in New York. I think it would be good for her to go and visit him... stay away from LA for a while longer.”

“Good idea,” Mark said, smiling at her.

“I wanted to ask you about Kate’s... Katherine’s house. Will she be able to go and get some belongings?” the tall agent asked hopefully.

“Yes. Her house was gone over with a fine-tooth comb. They couldn’t find anything of evidential value, but they did notice that a few small items seemed to be missing. Maybe while you’re over there, you could ask Katherine to identify what’s missing. We’ll send a couple of guys with you.”

“Thanks, Mark.”

CJ exhaled in a rush and rubbed her forehead fretfully.

“Hey... we’ll get him,” Mark said, sensing her disquiet.

“I know. Well, if that’s all Sir?” she said, rising to her feet.

He nodded. “I’ll keep in touch and see you when you get back. Oh, and CJ? I’m glad you’re happy.”

She rolled her eyes at him and smiled as she left the office.

* * * * *

“Can we do this quickly? I don’t want to be here,” Kate said, as she and CJ followed the two men into her house.

“We’ll go as soon as you grab what you need and take a quick scan around the living room. The team seemed to think some things might have been taken from in there,” CJ said, her arm wrapped snugly around Kate’s shoulder.

“Okay. I’ll pack a case real quick, then look around. Come with me?”

They headed to the bedroom to pack clothes and some cherished personal items. Kate found her laptop in her study and put it with the suitcase in the car. Returning to the living room with CJ, she walked around, not seeing anything missing at all.

“I don’t see anything, CJ,” the actress said, her face twisted in thought.

“What about these circles, here on this table?”

“No... those were two plants that I uh... didn’t look after properly. I had to throw them out.”

“Ah,” the agent muttered.

“Oh. There is one thing missing,” Kate said, pointing to the fireplace.

CJ summoned the agent who had accompanied them, armed with his notebook, and went to Kate’s side.
“Can you tell me about it... describe it?”

“Of course. It was a photo in a black wooden frame. The picture was of me, standing with two friends who worked at ‘The Double Take’ with me. We were standing outside just after the new signage was put up,” she said, frowning. “Why would anyone take that?”

“I don’t know, Katie. The Double Take?”

“Yeah. That was the name of that upscale bar I told you about, remember?”

“Yeah. The one where the movie mogul noticed you,” CJ said, thoughtfully. “Did you know the two people in the picture well?”

“They weren’t close friends but I worked with them for a while. Tom was a nice enough guy and Felicity and I both wanted to be famous. Why? You don’t think Tom...”

“I don’t know. I’m just trying to figure out why your attacker would take the picture.”

CJ’s mind flashed back to the ‘J’ on Kate’s back. Could it be a ‘T’? The agent stored the information away for later and with a last look around, they left and locked up the house. In a nearby hotel, CJ and Kate were soon curled up together, arms and legs entangled in a warm nest in the center of the bed.

“When does our flight leave tomorrow?” Kate asked, inhaling deeply.

“I think, 9.40am.”

“It will be good to see Dad again. Thank you for coming with me.”

The agent squeezed her beloved gently. “I can’t wait to meet the wonderful Edward Marshall.”

Kate chuckled.

“What happened when you called the studio?” CJ asked, sleepily.

“They had to replace me. Sam was outraged that they did it so quickly but they got this actress who was my height and build and put a damn wig on her. I mean, how silly is that? It’s like something out of Dallas.”

“Well, that was stupid. You were the star. What are you going to do now?”

“I think I need a little time out. Maybe I’ll produce something. I don’t know... but I’m not worried about it for some reason,” Kate said, nibbling a nearby collarbone.

“Can I help you with something, Miss Marshall?”

“Hmmm... maybe, a few things, Agent Carson. Maybe I need to be loved tonight.”

“Well,” CJ said, turning to face the blonde. “Let me show you just how much I love you... for the rest of the evening.”

* * * * *

The hooker didn't put up a fight. Why the fuck not? Beating the crap out of her just didn't do it for him.

"I'm gonna kill that Marshall bitch. It's her fucking fault," he sputtered, kicking the body lying at his feet.

He paced the floor for a few minutes, before using the sole of his boot to push the lifeless corpse onto her front. Flicking open his knife, he marked her just like that slut who'd escaped. He'd send her a message all right. They would all die because of her.

Katherine Marshall had made a fool of him one time too many.

* * * * *

Walking down the sidewalk in New York City, hand in hand with the most beautiful woman in her world, CJ felt a bounce in her step and a buzz in her heart. She took in the sights and smells like a normal visitor to the city instead of the Federal Agent who was always called there to work.

"Here we are," Kate said, gesturing to the restaurant.

"Prescilla's?"

"Yep."

"Your Dad works here? Is he a chef?" CJ asked, honestly curious.

"My Dad *owns* here. And he's quite a good chef, but doesn't need to do that anymore."

"He owns it? Why Prescilla's then?"

Kate giggled. "Uh, do you know that movie, 'Prescilla, Queen...'"

"Of the Desert?" the taller woman finished for her.

"It's his favorite movie," Kate smirked.

CJ shook her head and laughed. Once inside the door, the agent's eyes widened and her jaw dropped slightly. From the small frontage outside, she would never have expected the restaurant to be so huge. There was a raised platform off to the left, holding a baby grand piano and what looked like an area for a band to set up. The pianist played a soothing melody and was garbed in a bright royal blue suit. He was a smiling, silver-haired man, who would offer a cheesy grin every now and then to his audience. The tables were all elegantly set, some diners already eating heartily under murmured conversation. The décor was quite colorful but somehow managed to be sophisticated and the waiters were dressed in sharp navy and white outfits. CJ loved it and was very impressed.

"Are you gonna stand there all day?" Kate asked, tugging her towards the back of the restaurant. "Carlos?" the actress said, approaching a waiter. "Is Dad around?"

"Oh yes, yes. He is excited to see you. He's in his office. Welcome back to us, Miss Marshall," Carlos said, ushering her toward the door.

"Thank you, Carlos."

CJ followed and watched as Kate stopped to observe a tall, distinguished man, leaning casually on the front of his desk. He wore a navy three-piece suit and had short, blonde spiky hair with matching mustache and goatee. They covered a very tanned face, containing amazingly familiar green eyes and a strong nose and cheekbones. *'This guy is fifty? Wow,'* CJ thought.

Just then the cool, reserved image of the man was smashed into oblivion when he saw his daughter. He stood up, eyes immediately filling with tears and his hands started flailing around in front of him. He held the actress in a heartfelt hug and cried like a baby. Kate joined him and CJ had to blink back her own tears. A short time later, the emotional turbulence cleared and he gently pushed Kate back by her shoulders.

"You just have no idea how happy I am to see you, sweetheart. I thought I'd lost you." He blurted out a cry again and held his hand over his mouth in a dramatic attempt to stop his bawling.

"It's good to see you too, Dad, I missed you."

"Oh Katie, I love you so much... and Jeffrey... my God, Jeffrey was just beside himself. You should've seen the..."

Noticing CJ for the first time, he flashed her a giant smile. "And who is this tall, dark and deadly beauty?"

Kate bit back a smile and turned to see CJ, smirking a half grin, eyebrow raised under her bangs.

"This, Dad... is Special Agent CJ Carson," Kate said, putting her arm around the taller woman's waist in support.

"I knew it. I just knew it... your knight in shining armor. You didn't tell me she was a stunner, Katie. Well, hello Miss Carson," he said, approaching CJ so fast and hugging her that the agent didn't realize it until her arms were around the man.

"Hello Mr. Marshall. It's great to finally meet you. Katie's told me so much about you... all of it good."

"Oh I like her already, Katie. Wait! Mr. Marshall? Oh no honey. Call me Eddie." He paused, taking in the look on his daughter's face and her arm around the tall agent. "Or maybe... just call me Dad."

"Dad!"

"What?" he said, flapping his hand to brush her off. "Clearly there's more to this than meets the untrained eye. You two make a super couple. Oh sweetheart, I'm so proud of you."

"Dad, please!" Kate pleaded.

"It's okay, Katie. I love this guy," CJ said, sensing that Kate's discomfort stemmed from her worrying about the agent's feelings.

"See? She loves me. You and me are going to get along just fine, CJ. Ooh, what does that stand for?"

"Ciara Jane," the tall woman said, following Eddie to the desk and sitting on the edge beside him.

Kate stood and observed the scene unfolding in front of her, head tilted in appreciation of her beautiful girlfriend and her father, getting along like a house on fire.

“Ciara. That’s lovely. Well, CJ, you have absolutely no idea how glad I am that you came along and took care of my Katie. Oh, you called her Katie too, didn’t you? Well, she doesn’t let just anyone call her that, so you and I must be special indeed.”

Kate dropped her face into her hands and groaned.

“Oh, she gets all embarrassed when I go on like this. I can’t help it. I was emotionally distraught and now my precious daughter is back. I’m so relieved,” Eddie said, sniffing back another tear.

“Don’t you worry about that, Eddie. I’m sure we’ll find a whole ton of things to talk about,” CJ said, pointing her thumb towards the actress. “Come here, you.”

Kate walked over, and to the taller woman’s surprise and delight, she leaned between CJ’s knees and kissed her. Resting her hands on the agent’s thighs, she sighed and looked at her father with a dazed and pleased expression on her face.

“I’m glad you two get on. I love you both.”

“Oh... oh that’s just beautiful. Oh here I go again,” Eddie blurted, as he burst into tears once more.

CJ put a long, graceful arm around his shoulders, holding Kate with the other one and felt like she had a family all of a sudden. That brought tears to the tough agent’s own eyes.

“You okay, CJ?” Kate asked, quietly.

CJ nodded and smiled. They talked for a while longer, with a few more emotional outbursts, until the pianist came through the door.

“Jeffrey!” Eddie shouted, a trifle over-dramatically, “Come and hug our sweetheart and meet her new... sweetheart.”

“Well, babycakes, it’s good to have you back. We’ve been on a knife-edge since you disappeared. It was agony waiting for news. I’m so happy to see you. Oh!”

CJ watched the display of affection from Jeffrey, who seemed to speak even faster than Eddie did. The shorter man was just as well groomed as Kate’s father and a little stockier built.

“Jeffrey, this is CJ. My... girlfriend?” Kate said, looking uncertainly at the agent.

At CJ’s nod, she relaxed her shoulders and smiled.

“Girlfriend? Oh honey, that’s just great,” he said, hugging the tall woman. “We’ll be a couple of couples,” he added, laughing at his own joke.

The agent now realized that this was Eddie’s partner. She decided they made a nice couple. They all chatted for a while longer until Eddie talked them into a free meal out in the restaurant, telling them that it was Open Mic night and he would get them a good table.

* * * * *

After their main course, Kate leaned back in her chair patting her softly rounded belly. She eyed CJ from under sandy lashes, wondering what the agent thought of... well, everything.

“Penny?”

“For my thoughts? I’m just... really enjoying myself,” CJ said, swallowing the last fork full of food. “I love your Dad... and Jeffrey, if that’s what you mean.”

“They love you too. Which makes me incredibly happy. Were you really okay with me calling you my girlfriend?”

“Of course. I’m honored.”

Kate smiled shyly and the agent covered the hand that lay on the table.

“I’ll be right back,” CJ whispered, after kissing Kate soundly on the lips.

The actress leaned her chin on her hands and dreamily watched her girlfriend walk away. Her mind kept spinning around the thought that not so long ago, she was terrified and almost dead... and now she was blissfully happy and more alive than she’d ever been. CJ had done more than save her life. She had taught her to love, taught her that people don’t always need to be kept at arm’s length. She supposed she had also taught the agent that too. *‘It’s just give and take with us. We balance one another,’* she mused.

She didn’t know how long she had been sitting there thinking, too lost in thought to realize that CJ hadn’t returned, until the spotlight came on over at the stage. She turned to see CJ, standing tall at the microphone, preparing to... sing? Kate stared, dumbstruck, quite sure she looked like a beached fish, her mouth opening and closing in disbelief. She took in the sight of her lover clad in faded blue jeans, white shirt buttoned up to mid-breast and her black boots providing one extra inch of height. The actress thought she looked stunning, but what the hell was she doing? Kate was about to find out.

“Good evening everyone,” the velvet, husky tones said over the mic. “I would like to sing a song that I thought I’d never be able to sing to anyone. Nobody was special enough for the words to be true in my heart. But now, that’s all changed.”

Jeffrey came out of the office, hearing the mic being used and headed for Kate.

“What’s she singing, babycakes?” he whispered at her ear.

Kate just shrugged and shook her head. When CJ started to sing with no accompaniment, he headed for the piano, obviously knowing the song.

“You walked in the room...”

And time was standin’ still...

Knew you were my destiny, by the way you made me feel...

Only you in my life...

Forever and today...

You’re everything I ever imagined my love could be...

You for me...

Like the stars need the sky...

And the river needs its rain...

Like an eagle needs it's wings...

And the fire needs its flames...

Like the sun needs the day...

And the night needs the moon...

Like the air that I breathe...

That's how I... dreamed of you...I dreamed you..."

Kate's eyes were filled with tears of joy as she watched the woman she loved, serenade her in the most incredible way. She knew the song and couldn't imagine better words for the way she felt. Taking the tissue from her Dad, who was now standing behind her, she focused on the most beautiful voice she'd ever heard.

"It's hard to explain..."

But when you know, you know...

I was so amazed by you... you had me at 'hello'...

I need you in my heart...

My body, mind and soul...

It only took a moment to take my breath away...

Will you stay?

Like the stars need the sky...

And the river needs its rain...

Like an eagle needs it's wings...

And the fire needs its flames...

Like the sun needs the day...

And the night needs the moon...

Like the air that I breathe...

That's how I... I dreamed of you... and I...

Our love can't be denied... no, no...

There's nothing I can do... nothing I can say...

My heart, it always knew...

That's how I dreamed of you... that's how I... dreamed you."

CJ felt her voice breaking as she held back her emotions. She turned to Jeffrey to let him know she was done, seeing copious tears falling from his eyes. It seemed she had brought the house down, tears and applause all round. The only person she wanted to see was rising from her chair and the agent headed straight for her.

They weren't sure they'd be able to breathe, but CJ and Kate didn't care. This crushing embrace was necessary to both of them and they smiled at each other when the patrons cheered even louder at the gesture. Eddie was sobbing in a flamboyant manner – CJ expected nothing less – and Jeffrey joined him.

"That was so beautiful. Just beautiful! Oh you two... it's just perfect. And what a voice! Oh!" Jeffrey gushed.

Eddie ushered him away to leave the women in peace and they sat down, a little closer together, at their table, hands entwined tightly.

Kate cleared her throat, so full of emotion, "I... I can't breathe, I love you so much. I can't find any words..."

"We don't need words, Katie. I'm usually the one who can't find them. That's why I wanted to sing that to you. It's how I feel. I'm so in love with you."

"Oh, CJ."

Kate leaned over the table and kissed her delicately on the lips, wanting the moment to last forever.

After they said their goodbyes to Eddie and Jeffrey, telling them they would stop by before heading back to LA, the two lovers went back to their hotel.

* * * * *

Kate stood naked at the foot of the king-size bed, her eyes hooded, lips parted. She watched the beautiful agent walking towards her like a big cat, stalking her prey. CJ pressed her warm, smooth skin against the actress and held her, bringing her lips down to cover the smaller woman's. Without breaking the contact, she reached down and scooped Kate up into her arms and placed her on the bed, carefully covering her with her own nude form.

"I love you," she whispered when they parted.

Kate's eyes moistened. "I love you too."

The next kiss was filled with passion, hands roaming freely over much-loved bodies. CJ was breathless when Kate's lips released her, the actress looking up at her with deep green orbs. CJ positioned her hips over Kate's and felt the blonde thatch of wiry hair, catch on her own, making her gasp. The actress's hands were caressing her breasts and the agent groaned as her nipples stiffened until they ached.

“Oh, Katie. I love you... so much,” the taller woman panted.

CJ watched as Kate’s hand moved lower and two fingers, forming a ‘V’, slid between their merged bodies. The younger woman tilted her hips to increase the contact between them and CJ, realizing what she wanted, pressed herself closer. Kate’s fingers spread the agent’s swollen outer lips and then her own. CJ’s eyes widened and she let out a strangled scream, feeling her very sensitive flesh sliding deliciously over Kate’s. She looked down to the actress. Her eyes were closed, her mouth open, gasping as she brought her hand up to trail it from her own lips, down her neck, over her breasts and stilling on her abdomen. The agent had never seen anything so erotic and felt her passion burn with the intensity of it. Concentrating on the incredible feeling of her hardened ridge sliding back and forth over Kate’s, CJ leaned her hands gently on the smaller woman’s breasts, massaging the nipples, making the actress moan with pleasure. Their movements became more frantic as the tension built, CJ’s hips thrusting faster, urged on by her lover.

“Come with me, Ciara.”

“Oh God... yes, Katie... yes,” the agent husked, feeling the clenching in her stomach and the pulsations spreading through her. “Now... I’m... now.”

“Oh... yes!”

Kate was hovering on the brink as she felt the abrupt, uncontrolled thrusts of CJ thighs as she climaxed and the actress was sure she could feel her lover’s wet release trickle inside her, sparking her own powerful orgasm. Arching up forcefully against the agent, Kate felt the pleasure surge through her entire being.

“Oh, Ciara. Ohhh!”

CJ carefully lowered her body and buried her face under Kate’s chin, kissing her neck avidly. She laid her head on the actress’s chest, blowing her damp bangs from her forehead in a sudden burst of breath. When they finally came back to themselves, the lovers lay in the golden afterglow, huddled together in the luxurious bedding, Kate tucked happily under CJ’s chin, their legs and arms tangled together in a clinging embrace.

“It’s so intense, isn’t it?” the actress murmured.

“It sure is. And it gets better every time. I’ve never experienced this before,” CJ said, kissing a still slightly bruised forehead.

“It’s because I love you so much. I love how you feel, how you taste, how you smell... I can’t get enough of you.”

The agent pulled back to look into the green eyes. She smiled... something she seemed to do a lot of these days... and kissed the tip of the cute nose.

“I love you more than I can express. Maybe I should show you instead?”

“Please... proceed,” Kate smirked.

And CJ spent the rest of the night, showing instead of telling.

Chapter 10

Five days later, at the Los Angeles Field Office, Agent Matthews flicked through the case file for a particularly gruesome murder. The Jane Doe had been sliced, beaten, sexually assaulted and hacked at, before being dumped in a roadside ditch about fifteen miles south of the city. As he flicked through the pages, he typed the details into the computer, surprised when a beep drew his attention.

He checked the screen and frowned in puzzlement at what had popped up. Then his eyes widened when he discovered that it was not a mistake.

* * * * *

AD Mark Mulrone sat down for the first time in six hours, rubbing his temples. He hated days like this, all tedious paperwork and constant meetings.

“Come in,” the Assistant Director said, putting down his coffee mug.

“Sir? May I speak with you?” Agent Matthews asked urgently.

Noticing the files in the young man’s hands, he waved him in. “Yes. You have something?”

“Uh, I think so, Sir. I was putting the data into the system for that murder... the Jane Doe?”

“Yes. The one from the highway?”

“Yes, Sir. It flagged up something unexpected...” the rookie agent said, handing him the files.

Mark sighed and looked over the first file... then the second. Agent Matthews watched his expression change gradually as he read the words.

“Did you double check this?”

“Yes, Sir. I even phoned the mortuary to check the marking was right.”

“Good work, Agent. Leave this with me,” Mark said shortly, making sure the young Agent knew he was dismissed.

He lifted the phone. “Special Agent White please.” He drummed his fingers impatiently on the desk while he waited.

“Agent White? I need a profiler for what could be a potential serial killer. No, it can’t be Special Agent Carson. You need to find me someone else. No, send them to me first. Thanks, White.”

* * * * *

Kate and CJ returned to LA when the actress got a phone call about a producing job. Leaving Kate at the studios, under the constant supervision of a security guard – who had been extensively briefed by the agent – CJ went to the office to check in with Mark. Her leave wasn’t over yet of course, but she wanted to see if they had made any progress with Kate’s abductor.

Catching up with some of the guys in the office seemed easier now. CJ couldn’t figure out what Kate had done to her, but it seemed she was more sociable and actually wanted to chat with her colleagues. “*Is it because I’m happy? Is it that simple?*”

Her step seemed lighter as she walked down the corridor towards Mark's office.

"Hey Carson. How goes it?" Agent Powell shouted from a nearby room.

CJ poked her head around the door. "It goes very good, Powell. Very good," she smirked, sending him a brief wink.

The smirk disappeared from her face when she saw Mark. She hadn't expected the pained expression on the Assistant Director's face when she opened the office door.

"Please sit down, CJ."

His exhausted, weary tone told the tall woman that something was definitely wrong.

"Is everything okay, Sir?"

"No. It's not." He took a deep breath and leaned forward on his desk. "I want to pre-empt this conversation by saying that I have sent four agents to Olympian Studios, to take Katherine Marshall into protective custody..."

He paused as all the blood drained from CJ's face. He held up his hand to forestall any response.

"Please let me get all of this out and then, we'll discuss it further."

CJ shifted uncomfortably in her seat and ground her teeth together, trying to stymie the tension and fear building within her.

"A few days ago, a Jane Doe came in. Blonde female, mid twenties, slim build... she was a mess, CJ. Cut up, beaten and sexually assaulted... not raped... and then murdered. We think he strangled her."

CJ swallowed hard and tried not to bolt out the door to find Kate.

"Yesterday, Agent Matthews turned up a correlation between this murder and Katherine's abduction. They seem to be linked... same perp. He carved a "J" into the victim's back. The only difference is, we think this one was done post-mortem."

Mark evaluated CJ and noted her barely contained rage and the fear radiating from her eyes.

"I need you to focus, CJ. I need your help with this and you can't do that if you let your anger get the better of you. Another body turned up this morning... it's with forensics right now. He shot this one after the same kind of beating, cutting, et cetera. We'll get him, CJ. He's getting sloppy. More desperate, but sloppy. Someone saw him dump the body this time. It's not a great description but the fact that he let someone see him tells us a lot."

He paused to gather his thoughts. A knock at the door made CJ jump and the Assistant Director looked at her with concern.

"Come in."

The new arrival barely noticed CJ as he entered the room.

“Hey boss, they turned up some evidence on that body from this morning. Looks like we have a suspect,” he said cheerfully.

CJ shot him an evil glare but didn't speak.

“Thanks, John. But I'm in the middle of something, so if you'll excuse us...”

“Oh, sure boss. Sorry.”

And with that, he left. Mark glanced at CJ apologetically, then returned his attention to the new file.

“Looks like we have our guy. Jason Lee Burns. He left trace evidence and he was definitely on file, although his rap sheet is mainly misdemeanors... until recently when his drug habit seems to have got him into some bigger trouble. Grand theft auto, assault and battery and now it seems, breaking and entering, abduction, sexual assault and murder. We get him and he'll never get out.”

Mark paused again. “CJ, are you okay?”

“Yes, Sir,” she said, flatly.

The Assistant Director looked at the photo then flicked it onto the desk so that CJ could take a look. The agent's blood ran cold and her eyes widened in horror, her lips parting as panicked breaths tried to escape her tensing body.

“Oh, God no.”

“CJ? What's wrong?”

“That's him... that's the guy... the guy who shot me,” she convulsed.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I'll never forget that face. Oh God.”

Mark got up and walked around the desk, gripping the tall woman's shoulders and hauling her to her feet.

“It could be a coincidence, Agent. Don't read anything into it without facts. Now, I want you to go somewhere and calm down. Go to the gym... take a walk. I don't care, just pull yourself together. Do you understand me, CJ? CJ? Special Agent Carson!”

CJ gulped. “Yes, Sir,” she said, trying to inject some calm into her voice.

“Leave this to me for now. Katherine is safe. Listen to me CJ... she is safe. We have six agents rotating a twenty-four-hour supervision. Here's the address of the safe house. Now go and calm down before you leave this office.”

CJ was numb as she walked the corridors. Her mind was filled with everything she had just learned. That psycho should have been behind bars. Kate had been almost beaten to death by the same man who shot the agent in a drug-induced hostage situation. If CJ had done her job right that day, he would never have got away. Kate would never have endured her living hell if he hadn't been free to do it.

The tall woman felt the bile rising in her throat and the despair fall from her eyes in the form of unstoppable tears. Ducking into the nearest restroom, CJ splashed her face with cold water. It didn't work. She felt ill, consumed in guilt and anger. Anger towards this sick bastard who had not only hurt both of them, he had now killed two innocent women. CJ felt utterly helpless.

'How could Katie love me? How can I tell her that this was all my fault? I can't do this...' she thought in horror. *'I won't do this to her. She's better off without me.'*

* * * * *

In the gym, CJ kicked the punch bag until she was in pain. She could see his hideous face and she wanted to hurt someone, hurt him. Sweat dripping from her entire body, all kinds of agony filling her entire being, CJ decided that she would work 24/7 until this guy was caught... she also decided that Kate was indeed much better off without her.

* * * * *

One week later, CJ sat behind a desk covered with files and paperwork. They had made some headway, finding a quaint little house that Burns had been left by his mother when she died. But he was never there and hadn't seemed to use it in his crimes. At least they knew now who they were hunting for. One more body had been found, female in her twenties again, blonde hair, roughly the same description as before, similar MO but this one was dumped in a river, cause of death, drowning. His latest victim had been brutally sexually assaulted with a weapon or instrument of some kind.

The thought of this guy disgusted CJ and she wanted to get him. For the sake of the next innocent victim, yet to be carved, for her own sanity... and for Kate. She had only spoken to the young woman once, telling her on the secured phone line that she had to work this case. They had argued briefly. Kate knew CJ was backing away from her and was very upset... and angry. But CJ knew it would be better this way. Kate didn't deserve to have a screw up like CJ in her life. She deserved better... the best. Still, Kate's harsh but pleading words haunted her thoughts. It was better that CJ was working constantly... she couldn't sleep anyway.

Shaking her head, the agent wondered why if she believed all that, she felt like complete shit. It wasn't the over-working. It wasn't the case. It wasn't the fact that she would curl up in a hole and never come out again rather than face this guy and not be able to kill him. She was completely and utterly miserable without Kate. Her soul ached for the actress, and being so cold and distant towards her on the phone that day, just added to a very heavy burden of guilt.

* * * * *

Sitting on a badly stuffed couch in a dull apartment with only three small windows along the front, Kate Marshall cried. It was a pretty regular occurrence in the last week or so. The agents assigned to her were okay, but Kate was so incredibly heartbroken, she didn't even try to make conversation with them. And they never left her alone in the apartment. She was starting to crawl out of her skin and irritation warred with agitation as she paced the room.

Agent Hopkins offered her a coffee but she just shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Could you guys please give me five minutes, just five minutes to myself?"

"We can't, ma'am," he said sullenly.

“I’ve been here for a week and absolutely nothing has happened. Surely if you were out front in the car for five minutes, I could have some much needed privacy to cry my eyes out, instead of having a fucking audience!”

Kate was appalled at herself. She never cursed or spoke to anyone like that, let alone FBI agents who were trying to protect her.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I just can’t stand this anymore.”

“Five minutes, Miss Marshall. No more.”

She looked up though teary eyes. “Thank you.”

Hopkins and Dale descended the staircase outside the safe house, not seeing the figure lurking in the shadowy undergrowth across the street. They didn’t know that he had ‘paid off’ his LAPD buddy... didn’t know he had been staking out the safe house, waiting for his chance. They didn’t know he would risk everything now, just to kill her. And they didn’t see the gun in his hand or the crazed look in his eyes.

Sitting in the unmarked sedan, they drank their bitter coffee, as a silent bullet punctured the windshield and embed itself in Dale’s forehead. Hopkins barely had time to get his gun from the holster before another tiny, inaudible killer ruptured his Adam’s Apple, impacting solidly into his brainstem.

Nobody saw the cold, unemotional smile on the face of a killer, who only had one final goal to achieve.

* * * * *

CJ clocked out, for the first time in three days, and headed for her car. There was nothing for it... she would have to talk to Kate. She at least owed the woman she loved with everything she was, an explanation about why she couldn’t be with the actress. *‘Goddamn it, CJ! You’re supposed to be smarter than this. How could you do the exact thing you are trying to prevent? You’re hurting her so much while beating yourself up for not preventing her from getting hurt. It doesn’t make sense. What the fuck?’*

The agent was getting really tired of the little voice in her head and stepped on the gas, pulling into the fast lane.

When she arrived outside the safe house, she saw an elderly woman in the street, sobbing and crying out for help. Jumping out of the car, CJ ran to the woman, who pointed at the sedan.

“Oh no! No, no, no.”

She reached in front of the bodies and grabbed the radio mic in the sedan. “This is Special Agent Carson. I’m at the safe house on Oakland. I need backup! NOW!”

She did not wait another second. Heading up the stairs, two at a time, she burst open the front door, knowing full well that she may be too late.

CJ stopped dead, her gun aimed directly ahead, her eyes full of barely contained fury. She scanned the scene in front of her and settled her gaze directly on the face of Jason Lee Burns. In a split second, she recounted in her head what her scan had revealed. They were standing about fourteen feet ahead of her, the couch directly behind them, facing away. Beyond that, a coffee table and TV unit. The rest of the room was sparse. Burns had his weapon pointed at Kate’s temple, pressed so hard against it that a small trickle of

blood ran down her cheek. CJ didn't dare look at her eyes, for fear of collapsing in tears. Instead, she noted that the actress was gagged and her hands appeared to be tied behind her back.

"It's over, man. Give it up." It was a lame attempt but she needed time to think.

"Go fuck yourself, *Agent*. I give the orders around here. Put the fucking gun down and close the Goddamn door. Nice an' easy..." He pushed the barrel of the gun harder into Kate's temple to emphasize his point.

CJ hesitated only briefly before complying with the demands. Memories flashed through her mind of Sandy and she pushed them back with a fierce determination. It wasn't going to happen again. She couldn't stand to lose Kate. But she needed to stop feeling so desperate...

"What do you want? I can get you money... as many drugs as you need..." *'Jesus, what am I saying?'*

"You wanna know what I want? You wanna know what I'm gonna do? Well, I'll tell you, bitch. I'm gonna fuck this whore right here," he spat, flicking his head toward Kate. "I'm gonna make you watch. Then I'll kill her first so you can see all the blood. Then, I'll take my time with you. Howsat you fucking Fed, huh?"

Okay, so he figured out she was a Fed. *'Good for him. Surprised he can think of anything with so much junk floating around in his system.'* CJ thought furiously. *'Use it against him. Force him into a mistake. He wants to fuck her... though he probably can't. Let him try.'*

Totally disgusted with her thought processes, but thinking it might just work, CJ set her plan in motion.

"What you want, bitch? A fucking invitation?"

"Tell me what you're gonna do again?" CJ stalled.

"What are you? Fucking deaf? I told you to watch while I fuck this little slut... before I carve her up so much, she'll never live to see tomorrow. Sound good to you?"

He was getting increasingly agitated, grabbing the back of Kate's neck in a painful grip while forcing her to move her head from the sheer pressure of the silencer that was virtually melded to her temple.

"Well, I'm not much for carving. But, the fucking? Sure."

She had shocked him, she saw. And she didn't dare break her stare at him, just waiting for one tiny mistake. He looked away to check his gun position and CJ took the opportunity to glance at her love. Kate's eyes were wide with fear and shock. Looking at CJ for a brief second more, she realized the agent had a plan. She gave the taller woman an exaggerated blink to let her know she understood and swallowed convulsively as CJ tore her eyes away again.

"You know," he said, his voice suddenly an eerie calm. "I fucked her before. She wasn't that good. Couldn't keep me interested. Useless slut. Then she fucking dumps me after I made her famous. Ungrateful bitch."

CJ slowly realized that this wasn't just any old psychopathic killer called Jason. It was *the* Jason, Kate's old boyfriend. *'Oh dear God!'* She almost lost it then, her flaring nostrils and grinding teeth, the only thing betraying her cool exterior.

"Go for it. Fuck her," she said. *'Go for it. Fuck UP... and I'll blow your damn brains out,'* she added silently.

He looked back and forth between them, then CJ watched as he moved the hand away from Kate's neck and brought it to her ass. The agent wanted to cry. Kate wanted to cry, but wouldn't dare. Jason pressed his denim-clad crotch against her hip and started rubbing. CJ's lips tightened, her eyes full of fire and focus... waiting...

He got increasingly frustrated and fumbled with his fly.

"C'mon, man. Fuck her."

"Shut up. Just shut the fuck up!"

Not able to open his fly with one hand, and seemingly partially aroused – which CJ suspected was not the norm, considering his crimes – he removed the gun from Kate's temple and brought his other hand down to tug at the zipper. It was all CJ needed.

In the space of about two seconds, the agent had flipped her foot up behind her, reached under her pant leg to grab a concealed weapon, cocked the pistol and fired three rounds, two of them ripping into the body of Jason Lee Burns. The third one lodged in his head and caused a reflexive movement, raising his gun-wielding hand so fast and thumping Kate harshly on the face, sending her careening backward over the couch, her head impacting soundly on the coffee table.

"Fuck!"

CJ leapt over to Burns, seeing his eyes open, pupils fixed and dilated and blood pouring from a hole just above his ear. She kicked the gun away from his hand and immediately went to Kate. Kneeling down, she reached around the crumpled body, raising the head and shoulders onto her lap. Gently slapping Kate on the cheek, she spoke softly near her ear.

"Katie. Wake up. Oh God, please wake up."

Green eyes fluttered open, blinking several times and focusing quite impressively on CJ.

"I'll never leave you again. I promise. Never again," the agent said, not holding the tears back.

"I... I was so scared when I saw it was him," Kate croaked weakly.

"I know, honey. I'm so sorry."

She wiped away her tears when she heard the sirens and cars screeching to a halt outside, not really wanting to show an emotional weakness in front of the guys. Multiple feet rattled against the stairs.

"SPECIAL AGENT CARSON. HE'S DOWN. IT'S CLEAR," CJ shouted.

The FBI agents filed in against the walls, guns drawn, as the tall woman helped Kate to her feet. Their eyes met and conveyed a multitude of hurt, anger, love and pure devotion before CJ wrapped her up in her arms. Tears streamed down Kate's cheeks silently. The agent frantically grappled with the binding on Kate's wrists.

"Help me get this fucking thing off!" she spat, as Agent Matthews came into her line of vision.

When the rookie released Kate's arms, they came flying around CJ's waist, more tightly than the agent thought possible.

“I need a paramedic over here,” someone shouted, and CJ decided it was time to go.

Still holding Kate around her head and shoulders, shielding her from viewing Jason’s body, CJ led her outside and into the back of a waiting ambulance. The paramedics checked her over and draped a heavy blanket over her shoulders. She sat on a low bed at the back door and hung her head, feeling completely drained. The agent came back after updating her colleagues and knelt before Kate, taking her hand.

The actress looked up, but didn’t say anything.

“Katie. Please forgive me for not calling. I... I... when I found out it was him, I felt so guilty. I’m no good for you, Katie.”

“Guilty?” Kate croaked, “Why would you feel guilty about Jason?”

“Because... he’s the one who shot me. I didn’t know anything more than that when I saw his picture. If I had nailed him back then during that hostage crisis, he would never have done all this to you...”

Understanding dawned on Kate’s face. “He shot you? That shot in your head? That was Jason?”

“Yes. He’s been on a long downward slide since you left him, Katie. But I could’ve stopped him before...”

“No! Don’t! I’m the one he was after. Obviously, I did something to him... although I don’t know what.”

“It’s not your fault. He was a psychotic obsessive who got way out of hand, helped along by a growing drug addiction. You just lived your life. You can’t blame yourself for that. You did what you thought was best. The blame doesn’t lie with you,” CJ said, trying to heal at least something, with words.

“Then you can’t blame yourself either”, the actress said in a more gentle tone. “You were only doing what you thought was best, CJ. You can’t blame yourself for saving the lives of three children and getting a bullet in the head. That’s just stupid. And you are anything but stupid, Agent Carson. Now can you please take me home?”

“Home?”

“Yes. Take me with you to the office. Do what you have to do. Then take me home... to Montana,” Kate said, wrapping her legs around CJ’s hips and her arms round her neck.

The tall agent didn’t care who was watching this time. She lifted Kate up, supporting the small body with her arms, the actress clinging to her as she walked over to a waiting sedan.

* * * * *

Strolling through the door of the Alberton Sheriff’s office, Kate and CJ immediately spotted the short, broad form of Charlie Baxter.

“Sheriff, we need to report a crime...”

He whirled around, recognizing the husky female voice and stared at the beautiful couple wide-eyed for a brief moment, before barreling toward them, arms outstretched...

Epilogue

One year later:

About forty-five miles north of Los Angeles, California, a pretty whitewashed ranch house stood proudly in the midst of fourteen acres of farmland. A small, serene lake stretched from the bottom of the front yard to the perimeter fence. In a nearby paddock, horses grazed quietly. A black German Shepherd ran forlornly across the yard to fetch his stick. Prancing back towards the big, wrap-around porch, tongue lolling, tail wagging, he dropped the stick at Kate's feet. He was the closest to her black wolf that the actress could find.

Suddenly, the dog's ears pricked and Kate could hear a faint engine sound somewhere far away. The black sedan appeared and drove through the distant gates, gliding towards the house. Kate stood up and approached the tall figure that emerged dressed in a black suit. CJ had been granted her request of a permanent transfer to the LA field office, which made them both very, very happy.

"Honey, I'm home," CJ shouted with a smirk.

"How was your day at the office, dear?" the actress said, pulling the tall woman down for a kiss.

"Hmmm... not as good as this."

A longer kiss ensued until an impatient wet nose nudged CJ's leg.

"Hey, Kamali," the agent said, patting the dog on the head and scratching behind the fluffy ears. "Good boy."

She turned her attention back to the woman who had remained neatly in her embrace.

"So, did you get the part?" she asked, rubbing noses with her love.

Kate paused for effect. "Yes, I got the part!" she grinned.

"When do you start shooting?"

"Three months. They said they'd let me try directing a couple of episodes too," the actress said, buzzing with excitement.

"Well, this is cause for celebration, don't you think?"

"What did you have in mind, Agent Carson?"

"Well, a romantic dinner at home and making love all night is a good start. Do you agree?"

"Oh yes. I agree. So how was *your* day?"

"It was good. No dead bodies, one crisis negotiation in Baltimore that I was not called to... obviously. Helped settle in a new guy to the unit. Good day."

"Sounds fine."

CJ changed out of her suit in their master bedroom and quickly jumped in the shower. Slipping into a dark blue silk robe, she headed down to the living room to find a half-naked blonde actress waiting for her on the expansive couch. Kate had lit a bunch of candles and was lying invitingly across the cushions, teasing the agent with a partial view of what was to come.

“Good job I didn’t get dressed again, huh?”

“Good job you’re not too hungry for dinner,” Kate countered.

“Oh, I’m hungry all right,” CJ husked.

Opening the front of her robe, she lowered her body on top of Kate and kissed the tip of her nose.

“I talked to Dad this morning,” the tall agent said, watching Kate’s expression.

“I’m not sure talking about my father is considered a good strategy right now.”

“Aren’t you going to ask why?”

“Okay. I’ll play along. Why, my darling?”

“Well, I asked him if we could come over next month. I thought we could go visit him and Jeffrey, then get married in Manhattan and go to Montana for our honeymoon,” CJ said casually.

Hearing those words, Kate’s eyes almost popped out of their sockets, and when she saw the agent bring a small velvet box out of her robe pocket, the actress thought her heart would burst out of her chest. Sliding off the couch and onto bended knee, CJ looked more apprehensive than ever. Then blue eyes met green.

“Kate Marshall, I love you more than words can ever express. I want you to be my wife for the rest of my days. Will you marry me?”

Kate’s mouth opened, then closed, then opened again. She looked at the ring, then looked at the special agent’s uncertain face. “Oh CJ, yes! Yes, I’ll marry you. I love you so much,” she blurted, throwing her arms around her lover.

The agent placed the ring on her future wife’s finger and kissed her passionately, feeling it returned with equal intensity. And with that, they sunk down into the cushions and Ciara Jane Carson knew that she would never want or need another living soul as long as she lived.

The End.... ?