

A close-up photograph of a man's torso. He is wearing a white, long-sleeved button-down shirt that is open at the collar and down the front, revealing his bare chest and midsection. The shirt has a subtle pattern and visible buttons. The background is a solid, dark grey color.

Vittano's



Willow

ALIYAH
BURKE

Vittano's Willow

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Editor and Formatter: Savannah Frierson

Cover Artist: MMJ Designs

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To all of my teachers who never let me take the easy way out in class. To my family for showing me what being a true family is all about. And last, but not least, to those men and women who take the time to help those less fortunate through sponsoring, adoption, and missionary work just to name a few...thank you!

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I take full blame for any and all mistakes in this story, not the ones who do this for a living. To my editor and my cover artist. Thank you! Y'all are the best.

O n e

Petty Officer Second Class Osten Scoleri grumbled under his breath. *What the hell was I thinking when I agreed to this?* He had been the idiot who had raised his hand when the second-in-command of his SEAL team had asked for a volunteer. So now, for the next two weeks, he had to sit behind a folding table and answer questions from high school students about life in the Navy. Granted, it had been delayed for a while since they had been out on missions, but now it was almost November and he was here.

Readjusting his hold on his box of pamphlets and other information, he paused as his gaze picked out a gorgeous Corvette pulling into the parking area. Its black and silver finish gleamed in the late autumn sun.

A group of teens waved to the driver and waited. Osten watched as a young woman climbed out and reached in for a briefcase. "Morning, Ms. Jackson," one of the students said.

"Good morning, gentlemen." She smiled at all of them as she locked her car. "And how are we doing on this lovely Monday?"

The students were all big, strong young men and they seemed to dwarf the woman they surrounded. Osten watched to see if there was any sign of impending trouble.

"Fine, Ms. Jackson. We're just fine. Getting ready for the big game this week," another student spoke.

"Well, make sure you pass the test and you will all be ready on this end." Her snappy response reached Osten as he watched them disappear inside the building, the students holding the door for her. A round of laughter from the boys was the last thing he heard.

Picking up his pace, Osten continued on his way as he became the object of many female stares. He was in his dress blues, and, even as a Petty Officer, still cut a very dashing figure. So while the girls were checking him out...he was mentally going over the vision he had seen walking into the school before him.

He hadn't been able to see her all that well, for the students had blocked his view, but what he had been treated to was very attractive. She wore a straight black skirt that hugged her hips before stopping above her knees, topping it off was a pale-colored shirt.

Her hair was free to settle around her face, which had hidden her features from his questing gaze. Her voice was sultry, yet filled with kindness. Osten was intrigued.

Walking into the office, he sat his box down beside him as he waited to be acknowledged. Finally a large woman headed in his direction.

"Good morning," she said in a friendly tone.

"Good morning, ma'am. I'm Petty Officer Scoleri reporting in."

She nodded. "Ah, yes. The man from the Navy. I'm Sandi Richmond, one of the assistant principals. Well, we will get you all set up. So if you will just follow me." Her large bulk moved from behind the counter.

Lifting his box with ease, Osten fell into step behind her. He was stuck here in this high school for two weeks, from noon to the end of school, with the exception of today. He had arrived early to get situated. As he followed the blonde woman, he took in the layout of the school.

Finally the woman stopped beside a folding table, waving a hand toward it. "Here you go. Most students will be asking questions between classes, but those who are very interested will get permission from their teachers and come to speak to you one on one." She looked at him with blue eyes.

Osten placed his box on the table. "Sounds good."

Sandi smiled at him. "If you need anything, feel free to ask any one of the teachers. Um, the closest would be Ms. Jackson. Her room is that first door, just up the ramp. So, you can always just go knock on her door if you need something while classes are in session and you don't want to walk all the way back to the office."

Osten nodded. "Ms. Jackson, got it. Thank you." *That's what those kids called the woman in the Corvette.*

Sandi sent him another smile. "My pleasure. Now, is there anything at all I can get for you before I get back to my office?"

"No, ma'am. I'm fine. I will just set up and wait for people to stop by." With a glance at the woman who seemed reluctant to leave him he added, "Thanks for the help."

"My pleasure." Sending him a friendly wave, she walked away.

Osten shook his head, took a deep breath, and began to set up the pamphlets and other things he had in the box. Then he took a seat and waited for his first student to walk by.

By the end of the day, Osten had met many of the teachers, most of them female teachers who took to flirting with him like second nature. The one he hadn't met yet was Ms. Jackson. She didn't leave her room for the hours he was there.

He could tell she was a well-loved teacher, for her students were always laughing and talking when they went in her room and doing the same when they left. He had also made some appointments to talk to students one on one over the next two weeks. It seemed he would be coming in earlier than noon, but he didn't mind.

As he was packing up his box up for the day after he had answered his last question, that door opened again. Out stepped Ms. Jackson. From his position, Osten could see her shirt was a pale yellow. She had her jacket over her arm and her purse in one hand.

"Ms. Jackson," a male voice spoke, jerking Osten's attention away from her body.

"Hey, Mikhail. What can I do for you?" she asked as the young man hurried up to her.

"I wanted to ask you a question about the assignment."

Immediately she swung the door to her room open wider. "Come on in and let's go over it."

"Thanks, Ms. J," he said.

Osten watched them walk into her room. The man had been one of the young men who had stopped by to talk to him and set up an appointment to have a one-on-one with him later in the week. A highly intelligent senior, Mikhail was a tight-end on the football team hoping for a scholarship to help pay for some schooling.

Osten's packing slowed as he found himself waiting for her to leave that room. All that vanished when he saw Ms. Riley approaching him. A slim blonde woman, she was beautiful with a nice body; however, it wasn't anything that attracted Osten.

"Afternoon, Mr. Scoleri," she fairly purred as she stopped by his table.

"Ms. Riley," Osten replied with a nod of his head.

"How was your day? Students treating you okay?" Her manicured fingers trailed over a Navy pamphlet as her sultry eyes met his.

"Wonderful. Everyone has been extremely nice to me. If you will excuse me, I need to get going." He picked up his box and began to walk off.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she hollered after him.



Chantoya Willow Jackson heard Abigail Riley's voice all the way in her room. She had forgotten today was the day the man from the Navy would be in their school. Leave it to Abigail to make him feel welcome. Really, really welcome.

Rolling her light brown eyes, she gathered her jacket and followed Mikhail out the door. As a teacher of AP Biology, her tests and assignments had a reputation for being some of the hardest in the school. But her students did amazingly well; she offered the information and they absorbed it and prevailed each time.

Locking the door, she walked with her student out of the school. They parted ways at the bottom of the steps, Mikhail heading for the football field to begin practice and Chantoya proceeding onto her car.

"Thanks Ms. J," the young man shouted as he began to sprint away, his bag bouncing with every step he took.

Chantoya, who normally went by CJ, opened the car door and placed her items in her vehicle when a shadow fell over her. Righting herself immediately, she turned to see another teacher from the school. Marvin Whittle, one of the Physical Education teachers. He was a good-looking man, but CJ really had no intentions of pursuing a relationship with him or any other teacher at the school.

"Afternoon, CJ." His words were smooth, even as his blinding white smile stood out starkly against his bronze skin.

"Marvin," she said politely. "What can I do for you?"

"Just wondering if you would like to grab a bite to eat?" Big brown eyes sparkled down upon her.

"Sorry. I have to get going. I am meeting some people this afternoon and I don't want to be late."

Eyes narrowed briefly before he acquiesced. "Well, just a thought. You owe me a rain check then."

"Sure," she agreed. Her gaze landed on a figure past Marvin's shoulder. It was a man in a military uniform. He was watching them as

if unsure of whether or not she needed assistance. With a small smile, she waved at the man standing by his blue car.

CJ was touched when he touched his fingers to the brim of his hat, nodded back, and climbed into his car. How long had it been since she had a man pay any sort of attention like that to her?

Most men she met wanted one thing, and that included the man standing before her. If not for her brothers and the reputation of their die-hard protection of the baby and only sister in the family, she could only imagine how serious some of the advances would become.

"Have a nice day, Marvin," CJ said as he looked over his shoulder to find the person she had waved to, an action that allowed her to climb into her car and start the engine. She drove away, not really waiting for any response from him. He made her feel uneasy.

Once CJ entered her apartment, she locked the door, leaned heavily against the wood, and took a deep breath, allowing it to uncoil the tension that had increased inside her. It had been a constant companion of hers for the past week, but CJ reassured herself the disquiet would pass eventually. After a moment, she went to her answering machine and clicked it on. Listening to her messages as she moved through the nice, although quaint, one-bedroom dwelling, a smile crossed her face as she heard a message from each of her brothers.

Sitting down in a chair, she flipped through her mail as she tried to figure out what she wanted for dinner. The last message, a hang-up, got her attention and she shivered from a cold chill.

Taking a shower to make the unease, CJ ran over food options in her head. Still having reached no decision after she was done, dry, and dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, she stood in front of her fridge for a moment. Nothing jumped out at her.

With a huge sigh, she started when the phone rang. Salvation. It was a friend who wanted to get together for dinner and shopping. Eagerly, CJ agreed and grabbed her purse and left immediately after hanging up with her friend, Polly.



Osten pulled into the lot at the beginning of the school day. He had several appointments with students and didn't want to be late. Flipping open his cell when it rang, he answered, "Petty Officer Scoleri."

"Hey, Baby Boy."

"Hey, Harrier," he responded as he climbed out of his car. "What's up?" Harrier, aka Lieutenant Commander Scott Leighton, was the leader of the Megalodon Team, the SEAL team of which Osten was a member. "Baby Boy" was his nickname in the group.

"Just checkin' to see how you were doing? Getting ready to get back to school?" the deep voice teased.

"Actually, I just pulled into the lot. I have a few appointments this morning for personal interviews with students. My weeks are filling up; I think I will be here the whole day for most of them."

"Well, sounds like you would be a wonderful recruiter."

Osten growled low in his throat. "That's not even funny. I am *not* recruiter material."

"Well, if the students get to be too much for you, don't hesitate to call us in for backup."

Osten knew the man would have a sparkle in his blue eyes and a cheesy grin on his face. "I'll do that. Do you think Lex would mind?"

"Leave my wife out of this," the warning came.

"Well, I'd want her at my back," he sent back. "Then you and the rest of the Team."

"Keep me posted," the order came.

Osten heard a baby crying in the back and grinned. "Will do. Later, man." He hung up.

The roar of a powerful engine captured his attention and he looked up to see that 'Vette pulling into the lot. *Damn, that is a nice car.* Putting on his cover, what civilians called a hat, Osten grabbed his box, shut the door, and locked his car.

His sharp gaze picked out Abigail approaching him from the right, so he headed towards the school, his course taking him past the car and the teacher he had yet to meet.

The obsidian black door swung open and a pair of legs swung out. Despite the cold, they were bare from the knee down and a delicious shade of toffee, with low-heeled black shoes on their feet. A skirt, red this time, entered his vision as the owner of those legs climbed fully out of her car.

She had on her jacket as opposed to carrying it and she bent over to reach in after her purse and bag. Osten felt his body jump in reaction to seeing the tight skirt stretched over her firm butt.

When she stood again, she tossed her head, sending her hair flying around her. Then she shut and locked her vehicle. She turned to her

left and began to step toward the building, but then stopped and looked back at him.

A grin crossed her face, making Osten freeze. It lit up her face like nothing he had ever seen before. Well, perhaps once before. Her face was heart-shaped and her eyes were a light shade of brown and slightly slanted at the ends. They drew him in. The button nose and full, plump lips caught his attention more than once as he looked her over.

"Hello," her cheerful voice said, even as her eyes hardened for a brief second. Osten would bet she didn't think anyone would have noticed, but he wasn't just anyone.

"Good morning. I don't believe we've..." he trailed off as a strip of dyed red hair fluttered into her eyes.

"Met?" she finished for him, tucking the hair back behind her ear.

"CJ?" Osten wondered.

Those eyes narrowed as she looked at him even closer. Her hand covered her mouth, showing off her polish-free fingernails to him. "You...you...you were at the car show, Dez's wedding, and the party to celebrate Murdock's birth, right?"

It was Osten's turn to grin. He flashed her one known to make knees tremble. "I was. Osten Scoleri." He glided closer and held out his hand. "Nice to see you again."

Taking the hand, CJ smiled once more. "They called you 'Baby Boy', right?"

He flushed. "Yes, ma'am. That's right." Reluctantly he released her hand.

"Well, I have to go, and it looks like your attention is about to be taken away from me anyway. So I will say 'goodbye' for the moment. Feel free to stop by if you need anything and also, you are more than welcome to leave your stuff in my room so you don't have to carry it back and forth daily. See ya around, Osten." She waved and walked off as Abigail approached.

Once inside her classroom with her students working on their assignment, CJ allowed her mind to run over the meeting this morning. The man who had stood before her was proud and strong. He wasn't much taller than she, but he carried himself in a way that made him appear so.

His dark hair was cut short, she supposed in some form of regulation style. His eyes were a very dark brown, yet they shone with

intelligence and more than a smattering of rogue. His lips were firm and CJ found herself wondering what it would be like to have them pressed against hers. He had beautiful olive skin that looked natural...of course, there was only one way to find that out.

His smile had made her knees go weak and the mere touch of his hand had sent tremors through her body. Why hadn't she noticed him more the past times they had met, she didn't know. Today, however, she had never wished so much that she was off school property and alone with that mouthwatering man.

The man was handsome beyond belief. Strong, masculine features filled out his face, and the way he filled out that uniform was sinful. Barely containing a groan, CJ turned her attention back to her class from the good-looking man she now knew to be a member of an elite military team, the SEALs.



The woman screamed and screamed until her throat was raw. The cuffs shackling her chaffed her sensitive ankles raw. Above her a lone light shone, doing nothing but depressing her further. Shivers overtook her and she pulled up the musty smelling wool blanket, grateful at least for its protection against the cold. A dripping sound from somewhere unknown never ended. There was no hope.

Eyes red from crying looked around the room. A heavy chain riveted into the wall was attached to her. There was an old mattress on the floor and she had a bucket to use as her bathroom.

At least she was alone for the time being. The horrible man who had done this to her was brutal when he was there. He would smack her around a bit and then take her and call out another woman's name.

Osten's stomach rumbled long and low. It was after one in the afternoon and he had yet to eat anything all day. He groaned with dismay.

"Hate school that much?" a teasing voice asked from beside him.

Looking up, Osten was met with the most gorgeous brown eyes he had ever seen. CJ stood there watching him, wearing a light-green shirt that offset the color of her skin wonderfully. His body reacted immediately to her beauty and her scent. It was one he couldn't identify; but on her...it was amazing.

Shaking his head he responded, "No, well, I never did like school, but I am just hungry." She grinned, showing him a mouth of straight, white teeth. What a beautiful smile.

"Well, you can join me in my room for lunch. I have extra, unless...you had other plans." She tipped her head to the side and as he followed her gesture, he saw Abigail approaching.

"I would love to join you." Standing immediately, Osten moved to her side. His eyes took in how nice she would fit against him. Chantoya Jackson was the perfect height for him.

"Great. Let's go." Together they walked into her room. His eyes took in her space that was full of lab tables. One in the back had some dishes on it and they sat there.

"What do you teach?" he asked.

"Biology. AP Biology if you want to be technical." CJ pointed to a stool. "Grab a seat; just let me get you a plate and some silverware."

He was impressed. "Wow." He pulled out a stool and sat on it. "Thanks," he said as she set dinnerware in front of him.

Taking a seat across from him, CJ dished up the food. Fried rice, egg rolls, and some fresh fruit. "You're welcome."

Osten put a bite in his mouth and saw CJ's eyes narrow briefly. "Hey, Abigail," she said.

"CJ. I was just coming to see if Mr. Scoleri wanted to grab a bite to eat with me." She pouted. "I guess you beat me to it."

"Guess so," CJ mumbled. She and Abigail were merely polite to one another on a good day.

Refusing to take the hint, Abigail moved further into the room, her high heels clicking across the floor. "I feel like I am going to slip in your room. I'm so glad mine has carpet."

"It's kind of pointless to have carpet in a lab." CJ ate a bite of food and prayed for the patience to deal with her. Her right hand kept clenching and unclenching in the attempt to control her temper.

"I didn't know you had met CJ yet," Abigail said to Osten in a falsely sweet voice.

"Actually," he told her, "I have known her for a while now. Two of our friends just celebrated the birth of their child, and we were both there." He placed a pointed look at the woman who had just sat beside him. "So this is like a 'getting reacquainted' type of lunch you are interrupting."

CJ choked before she could cover it with a cough. She loved the dejected look on Abigail's face. Osten sent her a quick wink before staring down the blue eyes of Abigail.

"Oh, I see." She sighed dramatically before placing a hand on Osten's uniformed arm. "Well, I want a lunch with you while you are here." Her voice was seductive and blatantly offering.

"I'm not sure I can guarantee that. I take things a day at a time," his answer fell.

Abigail looked at the woman across from her newest interest. Her brown skin shone with good health; all-in-all, she would agree that CJ was very pretty, but no one took a man from her. Especially a black woman. "I'm sure I will find a way to get you to agree."

She rose from the stool and sashayed out of the room, not aware that her exaggerated walk was ignored by the man it was supposed to entice.

CJ laughed the second she was gone from the room. "Wow! Abigail doesn't get turned down often. She isn't pleased."

He shrugged. "She isn't my type." His dark eyes roamed over her as if seeing what lay beneath her clothes.

Squirming on the stool, CJ was amazed by her body's reaction to him. By no means chaste, there really hadn't been a man to get her body this wet without doing anything other than talking to her. "Her loss," she managed to get out.

"If you say so." He took a bite of the egg roll. "I prefer my women a bit more 'natural,' as opposed to grossly over advertising themselves." He seemed to understand her mood. "So, have you known Dez long?"

A genuine smile graced her face as she nodded. "We have known each other for over twenty years."

"That's great." Osten really liked Dezarae Connelly, the wife of one of his teammates.

The light chime of a cell phone broke into their lunch. "Excuse me," CJ said and went to answer her phone. "CJ," she spoke.

Osten watched the gamut of emotions that crossed her face. Everything about her was so expressive. He saw the way she sucked on her full lower lip while she listened to the person on the other end. Her eye corners crinkled when she smiled, along with the bridge of her cute nose.

Sitting in the back of a high school lab room, Osten found himself aroused by the natural grace and beauty of the woman with him. Closing his eyes, he looked away from her. He had to get himself back under control before he embarrassed himself.

"Sorry about that," she told him as she took her stool again.

"No need to apologize. I'm the one intruding into your lunch." He took a drink of water and watched as heat flared in her gaze when he licked a drop off his lip. His erection pressed against the confines of his uniform.

"No intrusion," CJ hastened to assure him.

The bell rang, causing them both to jump. "Well, thank you for lunch," Osten offered as he helped her put things in the trash.

"Thanks for the company." CJ cleared her throat and took another drink of water.

Together they walked up to the door. Osten snuck another look at her face and had to fight his desire to kiss her pouty lips. "See you around." He slipped out the door and flowed toward his table. Each motion was flawless.

She didn't step out of her class for the rest of the day. Osten watched her door, but never saw her. He waited until the halls had

cleared a bit before he gathered up his box and walked to her door, knocking on the frame.

"Come on in," she called.

Stepping in the room, he gazed about and found her in the back of the room putting some items in a locked cabinet. "Thought I'd take you up on that offer," he said, his smooth timbre moving across the large room.

That brought her head around. "Osten," she said with a grin. "Place it anywhere you like." She faced her cabinet again. "Unless you want it double-locked."

Osten placed the box beside her desk and walked through the sterile tables to where she stood. Hopping up onto a stool, he ogled her unobserved. Her body was toned and fit. She was beautiful. "No need for that, it's just pamphlets and such."

Facing her shelves, CJ fought for sanity. Her knees just about gave out when she heard his silvery voice in her room. This attraction was crazy. Then with him being so close behind her, she wanted to crumple just to see if he would put his arms around her and help her up.

"Suit yourself." One more quick prayer and she was ready to face the man who was fast becoming an obsession to her daydreams. Abigail wasn't crazy about her pick this time. Turning, CJ was amazed by the amount of desire she saw on the face that met hers. Crossing her arms over her chest, CJ stood there and waited for him to regain control of his emotions. *At least I'm not the only one affected here.*

"Are you leaving?" his question was raspy.

"Yes. I have to get going."

He stood in one smooth motion. "I'll see you out."

"Ever the gentleman," she kidded him as they walked to the front of the class.

"Especially with a lady." He nodded his head toward her.

"Oh, that's funny." She put on her jacket and gathered her things before gesturing him to leave the room before her. *Damn, but he fills out a pair of pants nicely.*

She locked the door and at the main entrance a feminine voice halted them. Abigail. The blonde came scurrying up the hall. "Oh, there you are! I was hoping for a word with you before you left for the day." After a brief pause she added, "Hello, CJ."

CJ nodded in return. "Good evening." Then she walked out into the blustery afternoon. *Why does Abigail bother me so much? Oh, right, because she thinks she is better than I am.* The frown that crossed her face disappeared the second her gaze settled upon the handsome man standing beside her vehicle.

"Hey, you!" she yelled and quickened her step towards him.

Osten and Abigail walked out in time to see her launch herself into the waiting arms of the man. Abigail smiled while Osten scowled. The man was big, taller than Osten and just as muscular. He had jet black hair and Osten saw he was of Asian descent.

CJ smiled as the strong arms closed around her. She breathed in the scent that had always made her feel so safe. "How are you doing?" she asked, pulling back to place a gentle kiss on his lips.

"Wonderful. Yourself?" His eyes were tender as he looked down at the brown pixie in his arms.

"Good. Busy, but good."

The callused hand cupped her cheek. "I brought you my Escalade."

CJ's eyes grew wide. "What? Why would you do that? I don't need it."

The man shook his head, immediately silencing her protests. "There is a huge system moving in. One, your car shouldn't be out in snow; and two, I want to know you are safe. No arguments from you. I will use my truck."

"Binh, I don't want to take your vehicle. At least not that one."

He shrugged. "Doesn't matter. It's been decided." His finger tapped the end of her nose. "Come on, you need to get out of this wind."

"When are you going to stop treating me like I'm in diapers?" she grumbled as she followed him over to his black Escalade.

He grinned. "Probably never." Holding the door for her, he helped her inside and made sure she buckled her belt.

"I love you. Are you coming for dinner?" CJ asked as she placed her keys in his hand.

"I'll be there. Six?"

"Perfect. That gives me time to get home and work out before cooking." She leaned over and kissed him. "Take care of my baby and I will see you later this evening."

Returning the kiss, he nodded. "I will and I will. I love you too." He pulled back and shut the door before walking over to the '58 Corvette, unlocking it, and climbing behind the wheel. He left the lot in a flurry of fallen leaves.



In his car, Osten didn't like the anger he felt pooled in his gut at the sight of CJ in another man's arms. Admittedly, when he had first met her at Dezarae's car show he'd only given her a cursory glance until Aidrian began talking to her more. But at Ross and Dezarae's wedding, he had been smitten by the toffee-skinned temptress who was Dezarae's maid of honor.

Her dress had hugged her body like a dream. It had been a shade of purple that he still didn't know; but on her, it was perfect. He hadn't gotten up the nerve to ask her to dance. Instead, she'd danced with Ernst, who had been the best man, and Aidrian. So he'd just watched her all evening.

Then Osten had seen CJ for a third time at the party his Team had held to celebrate Dezarae and Ross returning home with their son Murdock. As before, he'd spent observing her as well.

And now he had the chance to get to know her better and there was a man in her life. Well, why wouldn't there be? She was a vibrant, attractive, young woman.

He left the school lot with the scowl still fixed firmly upon his face.



When CJ pulled into the school's lot the next morning, she watched as the sailor climbed out of his own vehicle. He had a cup of coffee in his hand and he walked toward her as she got out. CJ swallowed to get her emotions under control.

"Morning," his sexy voice said as he stopped before her.

"Morning, yourself. Aren't you here a bit early?" she asked with a smile as she locked the SUV.

"I have some students coming in to talk to me and I wanted a chance to see you." He fell into step beside her.

CJ fought to stop the trembling. "Really? And what did you need to see me about?"

"I wanted to ask you out." He raked his gaze over her body. "If you aren't seeing anyone right now."

CJ stopped and faced him. One hand settled on her jean-clad hip as she tried to see what his game was. "You wanted to ask me out?"

Nervous, Osten nodded. "I did."

Walking again, CJ waited for him to open the door to the school and they headed to her classroom. The halls were basically empty at this time; a few students were here but for the most part, their steps echoed in the big building. Stopping at her classroom, she unlocked it and swung the door open, hitting the lights.

Osten followed her in, closing the door almost totally behind him. He watched as she hung up her coat and put her purse in a drawer of her desk. "Well?" he asked, resting a lean hip against her desk.

Sitting up in her chair, CJ put her light eyes on his face. "I don't normally go out with guys from school, but I guess that wouldn't really apply to you. So, sure, I'll go out with you."

A sexy grin turned up one corner of his mouth, showing her that he definitely had a rakish side. "Wonderful. Tonight work for you?"

Mentally, CJ ran over her schedule. "Later on in the evening, I won't be leaving the school right away today. Where did you want to meet?"

"I can pick you up," he insisted.

Hesitating, CJ almost said no when something prompted her to agree. "Okay, let me give you my address." Opening a drawer in her desk, she pulled out a pen and paper. She scrawled the information down and handed him the sheet.

"Beautiful," he said with a wink. "What time?"

Thinking quickly, since her students were beginning to file in the room, CJ answered, "Seven?"

"Great." He stood up straight and set his coffee on her desk, perfectly aware of the students watching him. Lifting his box in one arm, he spoke, "Thank you for allowing me to keep my stuff here, Ms. Jackson."

"No problem," she responded.

Making sure none of the students could see him; Osten boldly raked his gaze over her body again and sent her a candid wink along with a lick of his firm lips. Then he grabbed his coffee and walked out the door.

CJ tried not to squirm in her seat as her students began to ask her questions about the man who'd been in the room. She answered

them the best she could, but all she could see was that tongue of Osten Scoleri's sneaking out to lick her body. Up and down, over and over again.

Three

CJ locked her door and walked down the hall. Osten had stopped by to put his box in her room, but there had been students after class so all he did was thank her and disappear.

Her students had cleared their throats as her gaze had lingered on the spot where the handsome Navy man had been standing. With a blush, she'd turned her attention to helping them. Now they were gone and she was on her way to her next destination.

She put her bag in the car and locked it again. Pocketing her keys and phone she began to go in a different direction. Opening the gate, she stepped onto the field. A deep breath made her shiver from the chill in the air, but still she began her warm up.

Finally she was ready. Hitting the track, CJ began to run. The first lap was the hardest, but then she settled into her rhythm. The familiar feel of the steps and the repetitive motion was just what she needed.

Round and round she went, her body aching, but she refused to quit. She needed to release some energy. So zoned, CJ failed to notice a pair of eyes watching her as her feet pounded on the track.



A man stood in the shadows and watched. His eyes grew predatory as she moved around the track. He watched how her ponytail bounced with each step she took, how her workout clothes fit her like a second-skin.

As he became aroused, he bit his lip. Now was not the time to act upon that urge. Soon, the moment would be right. Ignorant to the

blood on his chin, he continued to stare. However, the desire was too strong for him to ignore. Reaching into his pants, he gripped his hard shaft and stroked it as his gaze stayed upon her strong body. He came with a muffled shout as he envisioned breaking that spirit and enjoying her the way he was meant to. Sagging against the cold concrete wall, he wiped his hand on his leg and put his softening cock back in his pants. Soon, she would be the one bringing him pleasure. In more ways than one.

Her steps slowed, and soon she was by the gate and stretching out. The compulsion to take her had him moving out from his hiding place. Yet, the appearance of another man brought him around.

His eyes narrowed into slits when he saw the way she welcomed him. "You shouldn't be such a slut," he hissed to the dark. "I will have to break you of that. Cleanse you."



CJ looked up as a shadow loomed over her. A face-splitting grin filled her face. "Thurston! What are you doing here?"

The tall blond opened the gate and moved toward her, kissing and hugging her. "Ugh, you are sweaty."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, I *did* just get done running."

"I can see that, Chipmunk." Laughing, he pulled her back into his embrace. "I've missed you."

"I missed you too." She reached up and kissed him. "But that doesn't answer my question. What are you doing here?"

"So, what, now I can't come see you?" Piercing blue eyes shifted around. "Are you planning a secret rendezvous with someone?"

"No. But I do have a date this evening, so I have to go home."

Falling into step beside her, he draped his arm around her. "I think I need to meet him."

"I don't think so," CJ said instantly.

"Hmmm, I don't think you really have a say in the matter."

"Thurston!"

"Thurston!" he mimicked. CJ punched him in the side. "Ouch. Careful with that left hook, darling."

"Don't be an ass."

"You are going to owe me dinner or you know I am going to tell," he threatened.

"Fine, I have some food you can eat. But keep your mouth shut."

Broad shoulders shrugged. "Depends on what you have to eat." This time he blocked the punch he knew was coming. "Hey, now, beating on me is gonna cost you more."

"Shut up, Thurston," she chided. Unlocking the SUV, CJ climbed in. "I'll see you at home, okay?"

"I'm right behind you." He winked at her and walked to his vehicle.



CJ opened her door and came face to face with Osten. He took her breath away. His clothes were expensive; she could tell by the way they hung perfectly over his muscled physique.

She could smell his aftershave and the very faint hint of cologne. It was a scent she wanted to smell more of...on him.

He wore a dark green, button-down, long-sleeved shirt that was tucked into black slacks. Around his neck was a thin gold chain with a small, yet masculine cross on it. Bottom line, Osten Scoleri looked delicious.

"Hello," she said with a smile.

"Evening," Osten replied, bringing his left hand out from behind him to give her the bouquet they held. A baker's dozen of roses: six pink, six white, and one red in the middle. "For you."

"Oh, Osten," she breathed. "They're beautiful."

She took them from him and smelled the fragrance wafting off the arrangement.

Osten moved his gaze over her. She wore a dusky rose silk shirt and a pair of black dress pants. Her hair was twisted away from her face and up off her neck. On each side of her face hung a thick, silky, corkscrew curl. Settled around her neck was the Madonna and child necklace she always wore.

"You're welcome." Osten felt like a hero for making that smile cross her face. The urge to kiss her was overwhelming and he physically had to halt his motion. "You look stunning."

CJ never lost her smile. "Come on in and I'll put these in some water, then we can go."

Following her, Osten closed the door behind him. His observant gaze moved around her apartment, learning and memorizing the domestic side of Chantoya Jackson.

Her home was very clean and organized. All of it was very open, he could see into the kitchen from where he stood. Oversized and overstuffed chairs and couches filled the living area with plants placed sporadically around, adding to the allure. His eyes moved to the television that was on and quickly continued on; his gaze landed on CJ as she stopped in her kitchen.

It didn't take long and she was back in front of him. "I'm ready if you are," she said.

His eyes glowed with an inner fire. "Let's go." Osten held her jacket for her and then the door as they left. He placed one hand on her back as they walked out into the night.

Stopping at his vehicle, Osten opened the passenger door for her. He drove a newer green Toyota Camry. As CJ slid across the leather seat, she took in the interior. "Very nice," she told him as he climbed in on the other side.

"Thanks." He fastened his seatbelt.

"So, where are we going?" The click of her belt echoed in the car after her question died.

"There is a nice place up by the mall I thought we could try." He started the car and began to drive them to their destination.

As they drove, CJ snuck glances at the man beside her. There was a quiet strength that surrounded him, unlike quite a few of Italian men she knew who went overboard in showing themselves off. She liked that about him. He didn't shove his masculinity in your face, but he had an aura about him that said if he thought it necessary he would do just that. He was a man's man who didn't need lots of pretense and arrogance to prove himself to the world.

Her gaze remained fixed upon him in the darkened interior of the car. CJ knew it would be no hardship to stare at him all the time. "So," she said, trying to rein her thoughts before they got out of control. "How is everyone else in your Team doing?"

Osten smiled. He knew she had been checking him out and was trying to play it off. "They are all doing wonderfully. Ernst is engaged to be married and is blissfully happy. So it is now half and half on the Team."

CJ laughed. "You sound worried about that."

"Well, Lex, who's Scott's wife, seems desperate to get all of us married. Especially Maverick."

"Maverick," she responded. "He was the tall, silent one, right? I believe his name is James?"

Dark-brown eyes narrowed at that; Mav didn't share his first name with many people. "That's right."

CJ was quiet for a moment. "I see. Well, good for him. He should get married."

"He has no intentions of doing so," he assured her.

With a shrug, she replied easily, "Maybe he just hasn't met the right woman yet. I'm sure there's someone out there for him."

It sure as hell ain't you, sweetheart. "That could be, or it could be he is perfectly happy being a bachelor." Osten glanced at her and shook his head over the grin he saw on her face. She was teasing him. "You are a spunky one, Ms. Jackson."

A flash of white teeth gleamed in the glow of the car. "I like to joke around. Besides, you got all surly sounding so I couldn't resist having some fun."

He nodded. "Okay, but I'll remember this." Reaching the location, Osten steered the car into a parking spot and shut it off. They got out and walked up to the door of the establishment.

"I've heard this place was wonderful, but I hadn't eaten here yet. Thanks for bringing me." CJ touched his arm tenderly.



Standing in front of her apartment door, Osten took her keys from CJ and unlocked it. "Thank you for a lovely evening," he murmured.

"Would you like to come in for a cup of coffee or something?" CJ offered as she stepped into her apartment.

"I would love to, but I can't." Osten halted her with a hand on her arm. "Rain check?"

CJ nodded. "Sure." *I guess he didn't have as good of time as I did.*

Apparently, his observant gaze didn't miss the look of dejection that crossed her face, for Osten stepped closer to her and slid his hand behind her neck. Gently his lips touched hers. The jolt spread through them both at first contact.

With his tongue he gained entrance to her mouth. His other hand dropped her arm and landed on her back, singeing her through the jacket and shirt she wore. Osten's tongue swept from side to side in her warm mouth. He learned her taste and taught her his.

As her body sank into his, he slowly withdrew from the kiss. "I really have to go," he murmured in a gravelly and hushed voice. "I will see you tomorrow at school."

Eyes heavy with longing, CJ licked her lips and enjoyed the flare of desire in his rich stare as he watched her. "Tomorrow," she mumbled.

"Goodnight, *insegnante dolce*." His thumb traced her bottom lip before he stepped away and walked off down the hall.

Closing the door behind her, CJ slumped to the floor. Her body was on fire for that man's touch. She could feel the dampness on her thighs, and whatever he had called her only added to the flood her body seemed to produce.

That night her dreams were chock full of a strong man with olive skin and dark-chocolate eyes whose kiss could send her into convulsions. Osten Scoleri.



The rest of the week passed with Osten finding time to send her heated looks and winks. His tone was always professional when he spoke, but his gaze never failed to set her blood to boil as he visually stripped off her clothes.

Friday afternoon found CJ sitting at her desk after the final bell had rung. She was grading her last paper of the day and didn't want to take it home to work on it. So into her task, she failed to notice her door opened wider.

"Hello, beautiful," Osten's voice filled the empty room.

CJ looked up and smiled as the blush ran up her cheeks. "Afternoon, Osten." She placed her pen down on the desktop and put the full intensity of her eyes upon him. He held the box in his arms.

Moving into the room, he placed it down in the normal spot where he kept it. This time however, he didn't leave. Instead he approached the desk, his uniform showing off the predatory moves he had as if they were part of his genetic makeup and he'd been born to them.

Two large, strong hands placed themselves on her smooth desk. Osten leaned down closer to her and asked, "Did you miss me?"

Dragging her eyes away from those hands of his and forcing her mind to focus, CJ licked her full lips. "No, why would I? I just saw you at lunch when you and Angela ate in the cafeteria."

A smug grin cracked his face. "And here I thought you didn't see me in the cafeteria. I tried to get your attention and you acted like you didn't notice me."

CJ flushed again. It was true. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Shouldn't lie to me, gorgeous. We both know you saw me. I would have rather sat next to you at the table." He reached for her face with one hand and stroked the silken skin with his knuckles.

CJ trembled at the contact.

"Ms. J," a masculine voice intruded.

She sprang back from Osten's sensual touch to meet the highly amused gaze of Mikhail. Osten took his time in standing upright. The young black man stood in the doorway, his eyes flickering back and forth between the two adults in the room.

"Yes, Mikhail. What can I do for you?" CJ asked, praying her embarrassment would fade quickly.

The young man stepped further into the room, his dark gaze missing nothing. A smirk that seemed predisposed to be on young men's faces filled his. "I was just checking to make sure you were coming to the game tonight? And perhaps bring along your *friend*."

CJ felt her face heat up even more. "Of course I will be there. I don't expect my students to let me down and I don't let you down. I'll be there." She swallowed as she tried to ignore Osten's scent that still filled her nose.

"Football game?" Osten asked, keeping his eyes on his sweet, sexy teacher.

"Yes. It is a serious rival school, so the game is very important to us." CJ met his gaze and got a dry mouth from the amount of passion she witnessed swirling in his dark eyes.

"Are you coming, Petty Officer Scoleri?" Mikhail questioned, hope plain in his voice.

Osten met the inquiring gaze of the young man. "I would love to watch to a football game. Sure, I'll go."

A huge grin crossed Mikhail's face. "Wonderful, you and Ms. J can go together; that way you can sit with each other." He winked before bolting from the room with a, "See you later!" trailing after him.

Her head thumped to the desktop. "I can't believe he saw that," she complained.

Strong fingers lifted her chin up from the desk. "Don't do that. I don't want you to hurt yourself."

CJ opened her eyes to find Osten millimeters away from her face. Before she could say a word or move, he kissed her. Marked her. Branded her with nothing more than the feel of two fingers on her chin and his lips against hers.

His tongue swept into her mouth; setting her body on fire as he had the last time they kissed. As she moaned and pressed closer to his seeking tongue, he released her mouth and stepped back.

CJ raised her eyes to his and saw they appeared black they were so dark. "What was that for?" she asked.

"I couldn't help myself. Now, come on, I'll walk you out."

Osten took another step back from her tempting body. Every inch of his warrior's body was primed to make love to her until neither of them could move a muscle.

Standing on limbs that were none to steady, CJ gathered her items, slipped on her jacket and followed him out the door. After double-checking to make sure it was locked, they walked out of the school in silence.

Marvin Whittle was waiting out front when they pushed through the doors and stepped out into the cold fall air. "Afternoon, Marvin," CJ said politely.

"CJ," he responded even as his eyes narrowed as he looked at the man beside her. "I see you are running later than usual today."

She sent him a shaky smile. "Well, being Friday I didn't really want to take papers home with me, so I finished grading them here. Will I see you at the game tonight?"

His eyes brightened a bit at that. "Of course. I will see you then." He walked off with barely a nod to Osten.

"I don't think he liked seeing me with you," Osten observed.

"Marvin doesn't like much," CJ countered. She began walking to her vehicle as he fell into step beside her.

"Except you," Osten remarked, frowning over the possessive way Marvin had looked at Chantoya. He had decided she was his woman, and no man should be looking at her like that Physical Education teacher had been.

Four

Osten sat inside the black Escalade as CJ drove them to the game. She had on a pair of blue jeans and a sweatshirt with the school's mascot on it. In the back seat she had a thick coat and gloves for later on in the night. Her thick hair was free and fell around her shoulders.

While he gazed at her, CJ watched the road and tried to pretend that she hadn't noticed the way he looked as he walked into her apartment. He wore a pair of black jeans that should have been deemed illegal the way they cupped his lower body. He had a Navy sweatshirt on that was gray with black lettering. A black leather jacket lay in the back next to hers.

Pulling into the school's lot, CJ parked a short distance away from the stadium's entrance. Parking spaces were rapidly filling up. They got out together and Osten waited while she grabbed her jacket and slid it on, hiding her full chest from his searching gaze. As she locked the vehicle, he put his jacket on.

Together they walked to the gate and CJ waved at the teacher standing there. Then they proceeded on to the bleachers where CJ stopped to chit and chat with many adults and students. It was apparent she was a very well-loved teacher.

As they climbed up to their seats, CJ stumbled. Osten's strong hand was there to make sure she didn't fall. "Are you okay?" he asked in her ear.

"Yes, I'm fine. Embarrassed, but okay. I have climbed these so many times, I shouldn't be tripping." CJ loved how protected she felt with his hand on her elbow.

"Just so you are okay." Osten reluctantly released her arm and sat down beside her after she chose a spot.

"I am," she reassured him.

"Well, I could kiss it if you think that will help," he teased softly as the crowd began cheering for the home team as it took the field.

CJ trembled. What a wicked thought that gave her. "I'm okay, really." She shoved him playfully with her shoulder. "It may hurt later, though."

The look he sent her banished each and every chill she had on this cold evening. It was full of promise and a primal hunger that should have scared her. "I'll make sure to kiss away all your pains," he vowed.

They focused on the game, yet were constantly and most assuredly aware of each other throughout the night. Osten bought her a hot dog and some hot chocolate at halftime. CJ was having a ball; while she loved football, tonight's game was extra special and she knew it was because of the man with her.

Her school's team the Raiders won in the last two minutes of the game. CJ was hoarse from yelling and cheering on her boys. Osten got into the game right beside her and was shouting just as much as she.

They stayed in their seats while everyone else headed out. When the crowd had thinned considerably, Osten stood and offered his hand to CJ. Together they walked down the bleachers and headed to where she had parked her SUV.

At the gates, Marvin stepped in front of them. "Evening, CJ," he said. His dark eyes moved over Osten and he frowned. "Mr. Scoleri," Marvin added almost like an afterthought.

CJ smiled, her arm hooked through Osten's. "Evening, Marvin. It was a great game, wasn't it?"

"It was," he conceded. "I didn't know you were dating anyone."

CJ halted for a moment. "I'm not. I know Osten through mutual friends who got married recently and he agreed to come to the game with me, but we aren't dating." Her head cocked to the side as she played close attention to the Phys Ed coach.

Beside her, Osten tensed. He hated the words that had just come out of her mouth. However, he did notice how Marvin relaxed a bit at the news.

"I see," Marvin said. "Well, I'll see you on Monday. I have to get going. Goodnight." He walked off without waiting for any response.

CJ began heading towards her vehicle when a hand grabbed hold of her. Osten spun her back toward him. She cocked an eyebrow at his action. "What?"

"What's so wrong with me?" he demanded. His pride had been tweaked, and while he didn't need to be overly arrogant, he was still a proud man.

"What are you talking about? There is nothing wrong with you."

"But I am not good enough to be dating?"

Frowning, CJ just stared at him.

Osten held her gaze and raised a thick eyebrow. The longer she remained silent the more he wanted to show her just how good they were together. "Well?" he prompted, sounding downright surly.

Now CJ smiled at him. Not a coy or cutesy smile, but one that was gentle and full of understanding. "I didn't mean to offend you."

Mindless of the fact they were standing on school property, Osten gathered her body close to his. He didn't speak, just cupped her heart-shaped face in his hands and pressed his lips to hers.

The shockwave passed through them both instantly brought a heat that belied the late fall conditions. CJ slid her hands inside his leather jacket to rest upon his lean sides, fingers scrunching his sweat-shirt.

His thick tongue swept through her mouth. He tasted mint and chocolate. Osten's body reacted almost painfully to her nearness and touch.

CJ trembled, her body weak with desire. There tongues danced with one another as his callused hands cradled her cheeks, his fingers moving slightly in her hair. *Dear God, this man is deadly!*

Slowly and reluctantly, Osten drew away from her tempting and lush mouth and stepped back. His dark brown eyes swirled with barely controlled passion. "No offense taken, because if I really didn't mean anything, there wouldn't be sparks like that between us." He spoke in a deep voice that simmered with assuredness and sensuality. In the hushed lighting of the parking lot, Osten reached out and rubbed his thumb over her kiss-swollen lips.

Loud whistles broke the sexual tension between them. Both adults looked toward the entrance to the locker rooms and saw six of the football team's starting offensive line watching with smirks on their faces. Mikhail was in the middle.

"Way to go, Ms. J!" the young black man hollered, hefting his duffle bag in a silent salute.

"Oh, shit," she groaned. "All those boys are in my classes. I'm never going to hear the end of it."

Osten preened, clearly loving it. "Maybe they'll spread it around. And *Marvin* will stop drooling over you."

Shoving him in the chest, CJ shushed him. "That's not helpful."

At least he gave her the satisfaction of a grunt. "Best I could do," he teased.

"Great game, guys," Chantoya yelled back as she swallowed down her embarrassment and headed towards the six students.

With a smile, Osten spun on his heel and followed the woman who enamored him. His eyes took in her gently swaying hips as she moved in front of him. Unconsciously he shifted his full erection so it didn't feel so uncomfortable in his jeans.



Standing under the overhang of the equipment shed, he watched her. He had seen her at the game with that other man. "My woman needs to be cleansed. Shame on you for being out with someone else! You should never have let him touch you, you slut!" he hissed to the dark.

It had been difficult talking with her. All he had wanted to do was kill the man with her. He was no dummy; he could interpret the sidelong glances and frequent touches that Navy man gave Chantoya. *His* Chantoya.

He had watched them sitting together on the bleachers. Saw how they'd cheered together for her students. And his fury had grown.

But what got him the angriest was how romantic their interactions at the game had gone. He had wanted to yell at her, demand she shower him with the affection he deserved. Her devotion was created for him and him alone. She was ignoring that and it infuriated him.

So now as he stood in the shadows watching her, his rage at her blatant disregard for her true place — by his side — causing his nails to draw blood in the palm of his hand. The pain made him focused enough that he remained hidden.

"Soon, Chantoya, you will be mine. You will be cleansed of this degradation you have allowed to touch your body. Soon, the only touch

you will have or crave will be mine. No more being a slut or whore, for we will be one."

The image of CJ being his to touch and caress as she lay beneath him naked brought him quickly to full arousal. He fondled himself to the sound of her husky laughter as she spoke with the students. He remained hidden until after she left with the man who had defiled her with a single touch.



Osten stayed by the door of CJ's apartment. "Are you sure you don't want something to drink?" she asked as she hung up her coat in the closet.

He groaned as her jean-clad derriere moved past him to put her keys on a hook beside him. "Maybe one drink..."

"Well, come on in." She flashed him a shy smile. "I know my place is small but make yourself at home. I'll make some coffee."

Shrugging out of his jacket, Osten draped it over the chair by the door. He swept his gaze around her apartment, taking in the roses he had given her the night of their first date.

Moving into the kitchen, he watched her pull out two mugs and set them beside her Senseo machine. He positioned his body against her counter, taking in her elegant motions.

"Do you take anything in your coffee? Sugar? Cream? Milk?" her husky voice broke through his stare down with her butt.

"Sugar, please," he managed to say.

"Are you okay?" she asked without looking over at him, intent on fixing his cup.

Nothing you can't cure. "I'm fine."

Handing him the steaming mug, Chantoya Willow Jackson wondered about the expression on his face. She gulped as their skin met during the transfer of the mug. Obviously struggling to control her emotions, she turned back and put in a packet for her own cup.

She pointed to a crystal dish. "Sugar's right over there in the glass bowl."

Osten knew she was nervous. He wanted to kiss her and make love to her, but instead he headed for the container she indicated. Lifting the lid, he smiled.

There was a divider separating white and granular brown cubes of sugar. A spoon and pinchers were also there. On some instinct, Osten

spooned brown sugar into his drink and recovered the dish. He stirred in the sugar with the spoon in his cup.

It wasn't long before CJ led him to the living room. They sat together on the couch.

"Thank you—" they both said at the same time.

"Go ahead," CJ said.

"No, you go. Ladies first."

Putting her cup down, she looked at him. "I just wanted to thank you for such a lovely evening."

"Thanks for letting me tag along."

She grinned. "I was the envy of everyone there, having you arrive with me," Chantoya gloated.

Osten felt the same way. He hadn't been blind to all the appreciative gazes she got from single and married men alike. "I'm not sure if I should be glad or not."

CJ smacked him playfully on the arm. "You know what I meant."

His eyes darkened. "Are you going to kiss my boo-boo and make it all better?"

In a second the mood switched to something where sexual desire was first and foremost as they remembered the byplay in the bleachers. Osten placed his mug on a coaster that rested on her coffee table and faced her.

"If that's what you want," she whispered.

"What I want," he told her in a velvet tone. "What *I* want is to kiss you again."

CJ was amazed at the strength in this man. They were similar in height and she was a solid buck and a half. It seemed effortless for him to hold her.

He reached for her sides and picked her up to settle on his lap, her muscled legs on either side of his lean waist. His hands were gentle as they brushed her hair away from her face.

For a moment he merely looked at her. Took in how full her lips were, how smooth her unblemished toffee skin was. His hand continued to brush over her face, keeping her thick hair behind her ears. He noticed the silver hoop in the top of her left ear.

"Why do you keep staring at me?" Her words were hushed in the soft light that filtered around them.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured as the pressure from his fingers brought her head closer to his mouth.

Chantoya shivered as his breath caressed her cheek. She licked her lips as he gazed at her. Their mouths were millimeters from touching. She could smell the coffee on his breath and it was so nice.

Osten removed the minuscule distance and claimed her soft lips with his firm ones. He nibbled on her bottom lip before slipping his tongue into her waiting mouth.

Straddling his waist, CJ could easily feel his rigid erection pressing firmly against her body. Her mouth eagerly accepted his searching tongue. She put her hands on his head, pressing them closer together.

Rocking back and forth, she ground herself down onto him. The kiss was still gentle, exploring, and learning. Osten refused to change the pace. She whimpered as she rotated her hips faster, telling him what she desired, what she craved.

Inhaling the subtle smell that surrounded her, Osten could make out the scents. A light tropical smell and a hint of something that he knew was pure Chantoya Jackson. The combination resulted in him being as hard as marble and wanting desperately to be buried deep between her toned thighs.

He moved his hands down over her shoulders and arms until they rested on her full hips. Her little mewling noises kept chipping away at his waning control.

He felt her hands move over his chest and could feel her nails scoring his skin. Groaning over his own lack of restraint, Osten laced his hands under her sweatshirt, allowing himself to finally touch her satin skin.

His hands cupped her breasts, cradling the fullness of her along with the smoothness of her bra. He trailed his fingertips over her taut nipples, delighting in her shiver.

"Off," he ordered. Both of them wasted no time in removing shirts. Osten sat back against the couch as her eyes moved over his bare chest.

Taking in a sharp breath, Chantoya allowed herself to ogle his chest. There wasn't an ounce of fat on him. His olive skin was stretched tight over a six-pack that was covered by a moderate amount of chest hair. Every muscle in his upper body was rock hard and well defined, making her want to trace over the ridges with her tongue.

Her hands reached out to move over the carved physique before her. Licking her lips, she mumbled, "Jesus, you are cut."

Each touch of her soft hands brought a tremble in his chiseled body. CJ drew her bottom lip into her mouth as she explored the bared chest before her.

Over the pectorals, down across his ribcage, her hands flowed slowly. Total enjoyment and concentration was on her face as her fingers memorized his torso as a blind person learned a face.

Finally she moved her eyes and hands back up to his visage. He was fighting to not give in to the demon that wanted to be released and dominate this woman. CJ could see he was struggling to remain in control.

Five

Osten felt ten feet tall at her observation. He was pleased she found him attractive. His own eyes moved over her flat stomach, toned abs and up her full chest that was barely contained in the white satin that covered them. "And you are astoundingly gorgeous."

His callused hands moved to the sides of her full breasts and he teased her nipples again with his thumbs. A masculine grin crossed his face as her head dropped back, granting him further access. All this magnificent bounty and it was all being offered up to him.

Unable to stop himself, he maneuvered his hand to the front clasp on her bra. The material sprang apart, revealing to him the total and perfect view of her breasts. His mouth latched onto the right nipple, drawing it deeply into his hot mouth. She released a low moan.

His teeth grazed against the pebbled nipple, changing her low moan into a richer, deeper one. His palm cupped her left breast, teasing the nipple with his rough skin.

"Oh," her throaty voice split the breathing sounds in the room. "Osten." His name was half groan, half beg.

Without responding verbally, he changed breasts with his mouth. His thumb and forefinger continued to tease the hard nipple he had just released. Each tug he gave on her tight tips aimed to draw a responding pull from deep within her body.

She ground against his throbbing cock. Her hips had begun to move in that instinctive motion he knew would take him to the stars.

Osten placed his strong hands on her sides, bringing her head up. Their lips met in an intense explosion. There was no wish to go slow any longer.

Their mouths mated together in increasing passion. He pulled on her lower lip and nipped it before sucking away the pain. Each whimper she emitted he took as his mouth refused to release hers.

Bare chests rubbed together. The coarse hair on his evoked tremors through CJ as it brushed over her highly sensitive nipples. And each quiver she experienced shot a jolt of awareness through his primed body.

Osten changed their position on the couch. Mouths still connected, he laid her back on the soft gray material of her sofa. Now he was on top of her and one hand moved down to the button on her jeans.

Beneath him, CJ pulled back from his kiss. Her eyes were heavy-lidded as she gazed upon his face. "Osten," she whispered.

"What?" his question just as hushed as her voice had been.

She shook her head in embarrassment. "I can't."

Closing his eyes against the disappointment that coursed through his body, he leaned in and pressed a quick kiss on her swollen lips. "Okay," he murmured, climbing off her body and putting some much needed space between them.

CJ sat up and tugged her sweatshirt on over her head, leaving the bra where it lay on the floor. She worried her lower lip with her teeth while regarding the almost wary expression on his face. One of her hands reached partway to him only to retreat.

Osten fought to control his breathing. He hadn't ever been so randy in his life, for only getting as far as he did with a woman. And with this one, he wasn't going to rush, no matter how he wanted to.

However, when he noticed her reluctance to touch him, he reacted. He grabbed that same hand and tugged her over to him, settling her across his lap. He latched his hands around her waist, grateful and disappointed for her wearing the sweatshirt.

"Did I go to fast for you?" he queried as his nose nuzzled her soft hair.

She relaxed her weight against his chest. "No, oh, God, no! I want you so much it hurts, but I can't."

"Will you tell me why? What did I do?"

"It wasn't you. I want to, I just *can't*."

It dawned on him what she was trying to communicate with him. His face spilt into a wide smile. "I get it now; just call me stupid."

"I never should have led you on," she mumbled in his chest.

"Baby, when this is over and we are in this position again, I will show you just what I wanted to do to you tonight. I'm okay." He stroked her arm as she eventually nodded, remaining silent.

For a while they sat together on the couch without speaking. Her fingers trailed idly up and down his bare arm. Osten kept his cheek pressed against her head and gently rocked them back and forth.



Chantoya woke up on her couch covered with the purple blanket that had been over the back cushions. Blinking a few times to focus her eyes, she realized she was alone. His jacket was no longer on the chair by the door.

Swinging her legs to the floor, CJ got up and headed down the short hall to her bedroom. Quickly she grabbed some clean clothes and went into her shower. It didn't take long for her to return to the living room, straightening up while a breakfast casserole baked in her oven.

A knock at the door made her smile. "Hey there," she said, swinging the door open to come face to face with a tall black man.

One eyebrow arched as he asked, "Is that the way you were taught to answer the door?"

"Ajani," she said with elation. "Probably not, but who cares. Give me a hug."

The man was about six feet tall and solid muscle. "Hey, yourself." His trunk-like arms settled around her smaller frame. He pressed a kiss to her cheek.

"And me?" the voice behind them caused her look at the man walking around the hall corner. Tall, blond, and extremely handsome.

"Thurston!" she exclaimed as she was handed between the men. The blond pressed a kiss to her cheek as well.

The trio walked back into her apartment where the men went into kitchen and began snooping into what was cooking. "I'm hungry," they complained as she shooed them out back to the living room. Luckily, she had already picked up her discarded bra from last night.



Standing in the lot to CJ's apartment complex, Osten frowned when the same Asian man whom CJ had embraced so easily at the school entered her home. The man, dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved

crewneck, had climbed out of an older model Ford truck. A brown bomber jacket protected him from the biting wind.

Osten had fallen asleep with CJ's luscious body in his arms. Around two in the morning, he had awakened and decided to leave. After tucking her in on the sofa, he had kissed her lips and slid out of the apartment to head home and work out.

Around eight he'd realized he wanted to spend the day with her. Instead of calling, he took a chance and dropped by. As he'd climbed out of his car, he'd seen the man from the school heading into her building.

He'd glowered and come to a decision. At the school, Osten had let it go; but since last night, he was more than willing to fight for what he knew was his future. His teammates who had gotten married had told him his soul would know when it was right.

And it said Chantoya Jackson was right. Tugging on his three-quarter length, black leather jacket, Osten took a deep breath and headed for the door as well. He would find out what her relationship was with that man before he did anything stupid. At least that was the plan.



Sitting at the table with the three men, Chantoya grinned. She loved them all so much.

"What's so funny, Chipmunk?" Thurston asked as he helped himself to more of the casserole and steaming biscuits.

"Nothing," she said, accepting the dish of hash browns from Binh.

"Shouldn't lie to us," they all reminded her.

"Can't I just smile?" she quipped, getting up to grab the pitcher of juice.

Ajani held up his glass and she refilled it. "I suppose, but we want to hear about this date you had earlier this week."

Her light pecan eyes snapped to the blond in the group. He held up his hands in surrender. "I didn't tell, they guessed. And I can't lie to them."

"Right," she scoffed. She believed that about as far as she could throw him.

"Well," Ajani prompted, picking up his fork and beginning to eat.

With a sigh, Chantoya sat back down and started to tell them about Osten, but a knock sounded on the door. The men exchanged glances before looking back to CJ with questions in their gazes.

Moving quickly, CJ went to the door. She swung it open to reveal the man who had made her feel like the most precious woman in the world from the way he kissed her, caressed her, and respected her.

He was dressed in another pair of sinful jeans, blue ones today. A dark-green shirt was visible beneath the expensive jacket. She could smell the light hint of aftershave he wore. His dark eyes moved eagerly over her body before meeting her questioning gaze.

"Osten?" She glanced nervously over her shoulder. "What a surprise. What are you doing here?"

Osten's heart plummeted as he imagined her in the loving embrace of that other man. "I came back to make sure we were okay." *Doesn't she want me?*

Her hand tightened on the door. "We're just fine. I—"

"Who's that at the door, CJ?" a deep masculine voice interrupted her. Instead of waiting for an answer a man appeared behind her and met Osten's gaze.

Immediately bristling at the familiar way he touched CJ's shoulder, Osten sized up the man he now considered a threat. He was even more handsome close up. Tall and lean, the Asian carried himself with amazing confidence.

Osten took in the red shirt he wore as well as the biscuit he was holding in his hand. "Oh," he lied. "I didn't know you had company. I'll see you later."

"Who are you?" the question was asked immediately.

"Who is it?" another masculine voice yelled.

The man behind CJ hollered back. "Don't know. Some guy."

Osten heard chairs sliding across the floor and within seconds he found himself under the furious scrutiny of three men. Three big and strong men. One Asian, one African-American, and one Caucasian.

CJ licked her lips and looked behind her at the men glaring between her and Osten before she glanced back at him and sighed. "Osten, I'd like you to meet my brothers."

Brothers! Brothers? Only Osten's expertise of controlling his emotions allowed his surprise to be kept off his face.

Chantoya pointed over her shoulder at each man as she named him. "Ajani, Thurston, and Binh. Guys, this is Osten Scoleri."

The grins that crossed their faces worried Osten. They were ones of men laying a trap.

Jesus, I feel like I'm sweating!

Ajani reached out with his hand. "Nice to meet you, Osten. We were just sitting down to breakfast, why don't you join us. There's plenty."

Impressed by the strength in the hand shaking his, Osten replied easily. "I wouldn't want to intrude."

The blond man shook his head. "Nonsense. We would *love* to get aquatinted with you. Hear *all* about how you know our *little sister* here," Thurston assured him.

Ajani pulled him past CJ and into the apartment. The door closed behind him and he found himself being escorted to the table. He shrugged out of his jacket, thrilled that even amid the tension in the room, CJ couldn't hide her appreciation of his body from him.

As she took his jacket and hung it up, Osten shook hands with the other two brothers. He waited while they brought another chair to the table.

When the five adults sat back down, Osten was at the other end from CJ. Not directly across, that was Ajani. No, he was between Ajani and Thurston, directly across from Binh.

If I ever wanted backup... "This looks wonderful," he told CJ with a smile.

That was the last thing Osten said to her for close to an hour. The brothers were *very* protective of their baby sister. Osten truly believed if he hadn't survived BUDs, he would have bailed at the very idea of any further relationship with CJ.

But, damn it all, he *did* survive. And he *was* a Navy SEAL, a SEAL who was falling in love with their baby sister. So...*they* had better get used *him* being around her.

With his natural calm and confidence, Osten answered each one of their personal and probing questions. CJ remained silent as she ate and then began cleaning up.

Osten was amazed they helped her clean. All of them removed their own dishes. When he tried to help as well, Binh was there to keep him away from his sister.

Thurston wiped down the counters and the table; Ajani put the extra food — of which there was very little — into containers and placed them into the refrigerator; and Binh helped her with dishes, and yet — all without ceasing their litany of questions.

Coffee was made and poured by the time clean up was over. This time the last seat available was next to CJ and Osten willingly sat in it. He sent her a reassuring smile as Binh set out the dish of caramel glazed cinnamon buns.



He added the most recent photo to her shrine wall. In the back room of his place, he had dedicated a wall to his perfect woman. The fact she had been defiled by another's hands didn't deter him in the slightest. He knew just how to cleanse her and restore her to her pure state.

Photos taken with students at biology fairs, newspaper clippings in which she was merely mentioned, found a place upon the wall. Her old college photos were scattered among them as well.

Hanging in the closet was the pristine outfit she would be wearing when she became his for all time. The dress was going to be perfect on her. It had taken him a long time to find the right wedding dress. But he knew it would fit, for Chantoya took care with her body and hadn't gained any weight since college.

It was an ivory beaded lace, halter sheath dress with a pearl-encrusted collar. The chiffon Watteau train was detachable, but he envisioned her wearing it. And for her head there was a rhinestone and pearl metallic tiara. Perfectly dyed shoes waited to be placed upon her feet.

He even had the appropriate underclothes to go along with it—two sets at that. He couldn't wait to see the garter set upon her flawless dark-toffee body as he took off the dress. Everything was concealed in plastic to keep it free of any type of dirt. The other set he kept by his bed for his pleasure. Most nights he brought himself to release holding one of the silk articles against his erection as he imagined it was CJ stroking him.

"It's only a matter of time now, my love. Soon we will be together; I just have a few more things to get ready." He reached out to touch a photo of her smiling face. It was a close-up of her and another teacher, but he had cut away the other person. "I want it to be perfect for us."

Opening a box in the closet, he pulled out the ties that she was going to wear. The softest leather he could get lined the inside of them. His excitement grew as his eyes traveled over the rest of the items in the storage chest. She might resist at first, but he would teach her that he

was her lord and master. Once she learned that, he would allow her more room to roam.

His fingers trailed over her leather outfit she would wear after they were in their new place. He would be able to take her at any time without needing to remove any of her clothing, for it barely covered anything, for the body suit left her breasts and crotch free. Yet knew it would be exquisite on his queen.

The images of her dressed in that had him jerking off in front of her shrine, where his mind envisioned her calling out his name in ecstasy as he pleased her in ways she had never experienced.



Closing the door behind her trio of big brothers, CJ released a huge sigh, opting to remain facing the door and placing her head on it while she tried to control her emotions. "I thought weekends were supposed to be relaxing," she bemoaned to the room.

They had insisted Osten leave before them. Thurston had quite delightfully walked him out.

Tipping her head back she looked up at the ceiling. "I should be happy they love me so much. But damn, they are draining!"

Moving through her domicile, CJ turned on some smooth R&B, stretched out on the sofa, and closed her eyes when a knock came at her door. Her eyes flew open. "Probably one of my brothers making sure Osten stayed away..."

Walking across the carpet in her socked feet, she opened the door with a sharp, "What?"

"Am I disturbing you?"

The man and the voice that belonged to him sent shivers throughout her body.

Six

"What are you doing back? I thought you left." A brilliant smile filled her face as her insides trembled at the thought of being alone with Osten again. Her eyes slid around his fine body to check out down the hall.

He stood there grinning mischievously. "I am not about to let your brothers run me off. I did leave; Thurston saw me go in my green car. I just came back with the one I take to school."

She chuckled as her hand reached out to pull him into her apartment. "Get in here. I thought it was one of them coming back to make sure I wasn't with you!"

He shut the door behind him. Winking, he licked his lips. "I wanted to spend the day with you and so I came back." Slipping out of his jacket he added, "You have some very protective brothers."

Accepting his arms around her body, she nodded as the scent she was fast learning to identify as Osten surrounded her and filled her senses. "You have no idea. They have got to be impressed you didn't take off running. Most guys do."

"Well, they were stupid. It would take a hell of a lot more than that to get me to run from you." He tilted her head up so their gazes could meet. "I don't plan on going anywhere." His lips swooped down for a tender yet explosive kiss.

Her arms tightened around his waist as she responded immediately to the kiss. When he pulled back, she whimpered in disappointment. His lips brushed against hers lightly before he swept her off her feet and carried her screeching to the couch.

Osten dropped her on the soft cushions before joining her. "Tell me about your family."

She cuddled up against him and placed her head on his lap. One hand stroked her soft hair as he waited for her to begin talking.

"Our parents were missionaries. I know we look kinda weird for a family, but we are one. Ajani and I are blood and our mother married Thurston's father. Later on, they adopted Binh. I was only a little kid, one or two when she remarried."

She turned her head so he could look down onto her face. "Papa died in Malawi when she was pregnant with me, which is why she wasn't on the trip with him. But she met David at a huge meeting of missionaries. It lasted for a week and after that both of our families ended up in the same place, Vietnam. Since they sort of knew each other, they hung out, traded off babysitting duties and such. Eventually they fell in love and got married."

Chantoya reached up and wrapped her hand around his, seeking out comfort. "I think Thurston's mom died from cancer. About three years after they were wed, when I was five, they adopted Binh."

Rubbing the back of her hand with his thumb, Osten digested what she had said. "How old are they?"

"Ajani is thirty-nine, Binh is thirty-three and Thurston is thirty-six." She closed her eyes and enjoyed his touch.

"And are any of them married?"

Chantoya shook her head. "Nope."

"Not in any rush?"

"I think they are more concerned with what is going on in my life. Since our parents died, they have taken the role over with a vengeance."

"So they are all the family you have now." It wasn't a question.

Her brown eyes opened, brimming with love. "Yes. Our parents died five years ago in a plane crash. So I am blessed to be so well protected by my brothers. I know they would die for me."

"I am so sorry for your loss, baby. So sorry." He brushed a light kiss over her forehead. "I can tell that all of you share a very strong and deep bond of love."

"We do."

They sat in silence for a short time, enjoying being together.

"So basically, you're telling me I have to convince your brothers I'm good enough for you?" Osten asked after a few moments.

CJ gave a short bark of laughter. "Good luck with that. If you stood a chance, then yes, that is what I would tell you."

He huffed. "What, you don't think I can?"

She looked up to view his narrowed gaze. "Don't take it personally, but they don't think any man is good enough for me."

"And that keeps the men away."

Sadness flickered across her beautiful face. "Yep. No one wants to date me...and my overbearing brothers!" Chantoya looked away from his face to stare across the room.

"Hey," he said softly. "Look at me." His tone changed to a command, but it was still gentle. When she complied, he murmured, "I'm in it for the long haul."

CJ smiled softly as his finger twirled the chunk of her hair that was dyed red. *We'll see.*

"Come out with me for the day?" he asked.

"To where?" *Does it really matter? You will be with that mouthwatering hunk of Italian fineness.*

"Washington."

Chantoya sat up on the couch and looked at him. "Why Washington?"

"I figure your brothers won't be looking around any corners up there. Whaddaya say? Are you game?"

It took her less than a second to decide. "Sure, just let me change." She got off the couch.

"You look fine to me," he told her as she went to her room.

"I'm not going to the capital in a torn shirt and these pants."

CJ changed and grabbed her purse. Glancing at her reflection she shook her head. "Oh, well," she uttered as her feet took her back to the living room.

Osten had groaned as he envisioned pulling her clothes off of her toned body. The draw to head to her room had been strong. Somehow he ignored it and he sat down to wait instead. He passed the time looking at a biology book she had on her coffee table, but his gaze found hers the moment she stepped into the room.

"Okay, I'm ready."

His dark eyes took in her faded but fitted blue jeans, turquoise blue shirt, and tennis shoes. He continued to stare as she went to the closet and grabbed a black leather coat.

Rising swiftly, Osten cornered her between the closet and his body. "So am I," he purred in her ear.

CJ trembled. "Be good," she admonished.

"I'll be *very* good, I promise." His warm breath teased her ear.

"Osten," she cried out softly, and he could feel her body tremble.

"I can't *wait* until I am buried deep inside your gorgeous body and I hear you moan my name like that." He stepped closer to her and pressed his body tight against her, reveling in how she pushed back against him. There was no way she couldn't feel his unyielding erection.

"I thought we were going," CJ forced out.

"I'd rather be coming," he murmured in her ear, seconds before spinning her around and plastering his lips to hers.

Every nerve in his body was on edge for this woman. It cried out for her touch, desperately seeking the relief she could provide.

Her curvaceous form arched into his solid one. Their tongues dueled and stroked one another. CJ ran her tongue throughout his mouth, learning its shape and taste the best she could.

Osten pulled away. His eyes were almost black as he stared down at her, his breathing ragged and shallow. "We need to get going," he rasped.

Chantoya nodded, pursing her lips together as if trying to hold on to the sensations of their kiss. Together they walked out of her building and climbed into Osten's vehicle. He remained silent as they headed off to the train that would take them to Washington D.C.



"Would you like to come in?" CJ offered.

Osten shook his head. "I'd better not." Seeing her look of disappointment he explained, "I don't know how much more control I have, CJ. I want you."

He stepped flush to her body; eyes met and held. His voice was like the lure of passion as it caressed her. "I want you so bad I can taste it. Every time I close my eyes, I see us making love. I have to regroup and get some control back so you don't think I am some damn animal."

Shocked beyond belief at his admission, CJ stared at him wide-eyed. "Thank you," she said eventually. "I don't think anyone has ever done something like that for me."

"Then they were all morons. There is more between us than just sexual tension, CJ, and I don't want to forget that; nor do I want *you* to forget it. I meant it when I said I was in this for the long haul."

He leaned in and kissed her tenderly, yet thoroughly before moving back. "See you at school, my sweet teacher."

Her hand shot out and grabbed his jacket. Osten could see the question in her eyes, but she only said, "I had a wonderful time, thank you." She moved in and gave him the softest kiss he had ever received on the corner of his mouth.

By some miraculous power Osten managed to leave the vision of loveliness before him and walk down the hall. Once outside in the night air, he stopped. His body slumped against the wall as he tried to control his breathing. There was just something about that woman that made him crazy.

Pushing away from the cold stone, Osten strolled to his car. Once inside he placed his dark head against the leather headrest. "I must be going crazy; I think I am falling in love."



CJ slept that night with dreams of Osten floating around in her head. The next day she went to church with her brothers and then all four of them went out to eat for lunch.

Her afternoon was spent sitting in front of her big window, drinking hot chocolate while she alternated reading a romance novel and watching the snow fall outside.

Binh had been right when they had said a huge system was on the way. The temperature had been dropping for the past couple days and finally the snow had begun. It had been snowing for little over an hour and there was already close to two inches on the ground and the snow was increasing in its intensity.

A gentle smile graced her face as she finally gave up on reading and just enjoyed watching Mother Nature as she swept through Virginia. While flurries were common place, a dumping like this was most definitely an unusual occurrence. Cradling her hot cocoa in her hands, Chantoya snuggled deeper into her overstuffed chair and witnessed as one by one the lights in the city turned on to combat the swarming darkness and flakes.

Once her drink was gone and her stomach began to growl, CJ uncurled herself from the chair and padded in her thick socks to the kitchen to begin making some dinner. She pressed a button and filled her apartment with some '80s music. As her gumbo was reheating on the stovetop, her doorbell chimed.

Swinging the door open, she grinned at the sight of the snow-covered person standing on the other side. Dezarae Connelly. "Hey there, come on in." CJ hugged her friend.

"Hey, yourself." Dez walked in shaking the snow off her coat as she took it off.

"What are you doing driving in this stuff?" CJ questioned, propelling her friend into the kitchen where she fixed her a mug of hot cocoa.

"This is like nothing to what I am used to driving in," Dez protested.

"I'm not worried about your driving, it's everyone else's." She handed over the steaming mug.

"Thanks. I know, but I have something to ask you and I just figured that I would come over and visit you."

"Well, you know I love to see you. What's up?" CJ stirred the slow heating dinner.

"Well, I was wondering if you wanted to come to a show with me, help with the driving and all that?"

"You know you don't have to ask me that. I love going to shows with you. Where and when?"

Dezarae laughed as she put her feet up on another chair in the kitchen. "It would be this Friday we would leave late and get back late on Sunday."

Leaving the stove, CJ sat down across from her friend and propped her feet up on the same chair. Her strip of red hair hung in her face as she nodded. "Absolutely. I would love to."

"Wonderful," Dezarae said. "We will have a great time. Catch up on things."

As the smell of gumbo filled the kitchen, CJ got back up and proceeded to ladle some into a dish for each of them. "I kind of thought that I would get to see you more when you moved down here."

"Me too! Who knew being a wife and mother would take up so much of my time?" she mused. "But on this trip you can tell me all about you and Osten."

CJ almost fell over she spun around so fast. "What are you talking about?"

A knowing smirk filled Dezarae's face as she took one of the bowls from her friend. Picking up the spoon she ate one heavenly bite before she decided to say anything. "Ross says Osten is at your school for two weeks. This is delicious," she added with a wink.

"Just because he is at my school doesn't mean there is anything going on between us," Chantoya protested as she began to eat.

"Uh huh," the doubtful murmur filled the kitchen.

"His table is near my room, that's all."

"Umm hmm." Another bite of the gumbo.

"Okay, so he went to a football game with me on Friday," CJ admitted.

One finely sculpted brow arched as Dezarae merely continued to eat.

CJ dropped her spoon and blurted out, "Then he came back here and we played tonsil hockey for a while and other things. And then yesterday he met my brothers and took me to Washington for the day. I haven't slept with him yet, though."

"I knew it!" Dezarae gushed. "Girl, how long have I known you? Long enough to know what your type of man is. This is great! We're going to be family in more ways than one!"

"Hold on there, Phoenix. I never said I wanted anything serious with him." Picking up her spoon, CJ took another bite.

Dezarae set her utensil in the bowl and locked eyes with the woman across from her. "So, how are his kisses?"

"Phoenix!" CJ wailed as a fierce blush ran up her cheeks.

"Well, just from what I've seen of him, I'd say he has one hell of a package for you," she teased.

"I am not talking about this," Chantoya insisted.

"We used to talk about all of this kind of thing. Why not now, unless he means something to you?" Dez took a drink of her water, never looking away from CJ's face.

"Because you married a man who works with him. A man who's like his brother."

With a sarcastic eye roll, Dezarae said, "I'll let it go for now, but you know Ross's going to be asking me about you, checking on you for his friend's sake; but don't worry, I'll leave out all those escapades of college—the poles, bikini bottoms, and sparkling pasties!"

CJ allowed her head to thump on the table beside her food. "I'm doomed. My brothers on one side and you with your stories on the other!" Resignation was on her face when she lifted it.

"I'm sure I can get some babysitting out of the deal. Or something..." Dezarae let it hang in the air as she looked pointedly at her dish.

CJ snorted. "I'll make you some gumbo." She loved to cook the meal. "Just please don't tell him about the things I did in school."

"Sweetie, if I never told your brothers, why would I tell Osten? It's just a wonderful bargaining chip." Dez waggled her eyebrows, causing them both to burst out in laughter.

Seven

Shutting the door of her vehicle, CJ was glad she had her brother's SUV. Her car wouldn't have made it up that last hill. An arctic blast hit her directly and she tried unsuccessfully to control the chill that pierced her.

As she moved toward the door, another biology teacher approached her. "Morning, Gordon," she said as he fell into step beside her.

"Morning, Chantoya," he responded in a kind voice. "Did you have a nice weekend?"

She grinned despite the cold. "I did. And what about you? You and your wife have a great weekend?"

"We did thank you. Layla really wants to meet you." Gordon Blake sent her a brilliant smile. He was a handsome Caucasian man with dark-brown hair cut so it accented his aristocratic cheekbones. Dark-blue eyes looked intelligently out at everyone and his features were very much defined.

Just before they got to the door, it opened and they found themselves face to face with Marvin Whittle. "Morning," he said low in his throat as his eyes took in how they were walking together.

"Morning, Marvin," CJ said. "Soon, Gordon, we'll have to get together, I'd like to meet her as well."

"I was wondering if you would like to have our date this weekend, Chantoya?" Marvin asked, totally oblivious to the fact she was in the middle of a conversation with another man.

Gordon looked at her and waited for her response. She shook her head, "I'm sorry, I can't."

"Oh, okay." His dark eyes roved over her figure. "I am going to begin to think you are avoiding your date with me, Chantoya."

She shrugged. "I already promised to help a friend out this weekend. I am leaving Friday after school."

"He must be pretty special," Marvin suggested.

Chantoya Jackson narrowed her light-brown eyes. "Not that it is any of your business, but the friend I am helping is a woman. Excuse me; I have to get to class." She slipped past the men and disappeared into the warmth of the school. The men looked at each other and followed her inside.

She was unlocking one of her back cabinets when she heard, "Morning, sexy," whispered in her ear.

Gasping, CJ spun around to come face to face with Osten Scoleri. She blushed as he leaned in for a quick kiss. "How are you doing?"

"Much better now that I've seen you," he muttered as he took in her outfit. She wore a gray pantsuit with a splash of the same red that was in her hair. It lovingly hugged her curves and made his mind follow all sorts of paths it shouldn't, especially in school.

"Flattery will get you everywhere, Mr. Scoleri." She licked her lips and enjoyed the answering flare of passion in his eyes.

"I'll remember that," he promised as he moved away from her and put an acceptable distance between their bodies.

Carrying the box she had been after, CJ headed toward her desk at the front of the room. Osten followed and went over to the box of things he kept in her room. Placing her things on her lab desk, she looked at the man who had hefted his own box onto his hip. "See you later?" CJ asked.

"Most definitely. I have some students coming in early to talk, so I have to go. But I will be by to see you." He winked roguishly at her, and a blush moved over her face. "Have a great morning." Osten turned and walked out of the door.

Damn, I see him and all I want to do is strip naked and have him touch me. Snapping herself out of one hell of a daydream, she went around setting up items at each lab station that were to be used today.

At the end of school, Osten was there to walk CJ out after she locked her room up. As they were heading down the hall, Abigail was heading towards them. He noticed CJ clench her jaw instinctively before relaxing and pasting a smile on her face.

"Osten," Abigail spoke in her high voice. "I've been looking for you."

"I bet you have," CJ hissed under her breath. Louder, she said, "Hello, Abigail."

"Oh, hi, CJ. I almost didn't see you there," the blonde woman sniped.

Osten fought not to laugh at CJ's comment. "What can I do for you, Ms. Riley?" he asked in a very professional tone.

"Please," she cooed. "Call me Abigail, or Abby." One hand reached out to rest on his arm.

Groaning softly, CJ stepped around them. "I hope you two have a nice evening." Then she headed at a brisk pace toward the front door. Osten kept his face emotionless as he turned his unwilling attention on the woman before him.

By the time he finally made his way out of the school, he was in a mood. He had such great plans to spend the evening with CJ and now he didn't even have a chance to ask her before she left.

Biting back a curse, he stopped in his tracks and his eyes widened in surprise. Her vehicle was still in the parking lot. But where was she? Osten's gaze looked around the lot without success.

A shout from the football field jerked his attention in that direction. *Would she watch a football practice?* His eyes drifted over to the track and as he saw a figure moving around it, he headed in that direction.

Osten stopped at the fence. Before him was a work of art. Chantoya jogged around the track. Her pace was even and steady. He took in her black running pants and white shirt.

"She can wear anything and it affects me. Damn, she's hot." His gaze followed her around until he got a funny feeling. Something wasn't right. Osten shifted from boyfriend material to hardened SEAL in less than a second.

A calculating set of eyes moved over his surroundings. He didn't see anything, but he never doubted that feeling in his gut. Movement towards the commentator's box in the bleachers caught his attention.

Marvin. He was up in the box and watching CJ as she moved around the track. Rage filled his compact body. Osten hated the fact this other teacher was ogling a woman working out. It was only made worse by the fact she was *his* woman.

Osten knew the moment he had been spotted, for Marvin quickly left the shelter of the box, heading off towards the football field. A

vibration from his cell phone jarred his attention and soon he was leaving school property.

The rest of the week flew by with amazing speed. Osten really had no free time to spend with CJ, but he did manage to find time for a kiss.

Abigail continued to make her presence known; and regardless of how he felt, Osten behaved. Required to be a gentleman, especially when in uniform, Osten tolerated it. He was worried CJ would think he was interested in Abigail. However, she always accepted his kiss and then went on with her day as if it were unimportant to her.

Friday morning, CJ was dressed in hiking boots, dark-blue jeans, and a plain charcoal-gray sweatshirt. Over all that, she had a leather jacket. She strode into the school holding a cup of coffee.

In the hallway she met a few other teachers and exchanged greetings with them before heading toward her room. She stashed her personal items and began preparing her lab for the first class of the day.

Climbing out of his car, Osten tugged his pea coat even tighter around him. "I'm so glad this is my last day," he muttered as he headed for the front door. "I love being near CJ, but damn, I could use some action."

As he got closer to his desk, he saw his first appointment waiting. Mikhail. The senior was back for a second meeting. At the table he noticed his box of pamphlets. *Well, there goes my excuse to see CJ.*

"Good morning, sir," Mikhail said with a smile. "I was early and Ms. J said to bring you the box."

"Not a problem. And good morning to you as well," Osten said, shrugging out of his thick coat. "So, I brought the rest of the information you asked about for Annapolis." Osten pulled some brochures out of the pocket of his coat and handed them over to the young man. Until the first bell rang, Osten talked with the student and gave him all the information he could.

CJ waited impatiently for the last bell of the day to ring. Looking across the large room, she noticed her charges were all talking quietly among themselves, waiting for the same thing. "Okay everyone. I'll have your exams for you on Monday. Guys, good luck at the game."

"You aren't coming, Ms. J?" one football player asked.

"I wish I could, but I'm going to be out of town."

"You'll be here next week though, right? For Winter Formal?" Mikhail voiced the question the other students had.

She nodded. "Absolutely. I'll be around for the game and the dance after. I'm chaperoning." Chantoya sent her room of seniors a mocking glower. "So make sure you are good."

The room erupted into laughter and cheers. Chantoya was a favorite teacher among the kids. The bell rang and her students began to file out of the room. As the last one left, she looked around and smiled. Her kids were the greatest. All of them had pushed in their stools and cleaned up after themselves. Sometimes she had problems with freshmen, but by the time they were seniors they were wonderful.

Grabbing her jacket and the bag holding the exams, she closed and locked her door. Sliding her sunglasses on her face, CJ headed off down the hall.

"You look good enough to eat," a deep voice uttered in her left ear.

"Ah!" she exclaimed and jumped. Spinning around, CJ saw Osten beside her. "How do you do that? Sneak up on me?"

He flashed a handsome and roguish grin. "Sweetie, that's what I do."

CJ stuck her tongue out at him. "Well, it scares the crap out of me." He sent her an apologetic smile. "I bet you are glad to be done with your sentence here."

Falling into step beside her, he lifted one shoulder slightly. "I'll miss seeing you, but I don't belong behind a desk."

"I know you don't. It's a bit blasé for you, isn't it? Not dodging bullets and all that?" Her eyes cut to the side and admired the way that coat he wore draped so perfectly over those broad shoulders of his.

"A bit. Although, I'd heard that high school was rough."

One side of her mouth lifted in a cynical motion. "Many are. We are really lucky that we have amazing teachers and great students."

"That you do," he admitted easily. "Go out with me tonight." Osten reached out with one hand and halted her at the front doors.

"I can't. Sorry," she replied.

"Tomorrow?"

Placing her hand over the one he had on her arm, she explained, "I really wish I could, but I'm leaving town for the weekend. I'm going with Dez to a car show."

Swinging open the door, Osten chuckled. "Should've known it would be too late to ask you."

"Well, what are you doing next Friday?" she asked as they walked out into the cold afternoon.

"Nothing that I am aware of. Why?"

"It's the Winter Formal and since I have the distinct honor of being a chaperone for the dance, I would be grateful to have a handsome man on my arm."

His eyebrows rose with faux curiosity. "And you want that man to be me?"

"Well," she drawled. "I was hoping to have The Rock on my arm, but...I'll take you as an acceptable replacement for him."

"I'm gonna make you pay for that," he warned.

"Ohhh, I'm trembling."

"You will be," he vowed.

A tremor rocketed through her body as she envisioned Osten naked in her bed. "Don't make promises you can't keep."

"I'm not. I'll be there."

"Great!" CJ squeezed his arm and headed to her vehicle. "See you then."

"Bye!" he hollered at her retreating back.



Chantoya slumped heavily in her seat as the familiar and welcome structure came into view. Her body wasn't used to jarring around inside of a tractor cab, yet she rolled her shoulders and worked the double clutch and downshifted as she pulled into Dezarae's driveway. It was about two in the morning on Monday and she had to be at school bright and early. At least she had gotten some tests graded while Dez had taken her turns at the wheel.

CJ had just the running lights on so it wouldn't hit the house once she parked. Her eyes landed on exhausted slumbering Dezarae. They had been extremely busy at the shows, and now she was catching up on her missed sleep. And though Chantoya was tired as well, she knew that Dez was worse off.

Letting the cab idle, CJ smiled as the porch light came on and Ross stepped out into the cold night. There was still about five inches of snow left on the ground from that storm that had passed through. He pulled his jacket closer around his frame and moved off the porch towards the truck.

"Hey," CJ said to Dez. "We're home. Your hubby is about to reach the truck. Wake up."

Dezarae sat up and rubbed her eyes in the cab light that CJ had turned on. "Wow, you did drive the rest of the way. I'm sorry."

"Hey, you kept me company with your snores," CJ teased. "Don't worry about it. I could tell how exhausted you were."

"You did as much work as I did. If not more." Dez undid her belt as Ross walked up to the door.

"But I don't have kids at home. I'm younger and therefore have more energy." CJ jumped as Dez reached across the truck and smacked her in the arm. "Ouch!"

"Serves you right." The passenger door opened and Ross Connelly pulled himself up and kissed his wife. The passion between them was so intense; CJ felt like an intruder.

Chantoya looked away saddened she had no one waiting for her. Shrugging, she turned off the rig, grabbed her bag, and jumped out of the cab. Without waiting for either of them to climb out, she headed for her brother's Escalade that was parked at the Connelly's home.

She unlocked the vehicle, tossed in her bag, and then started the truck. Making sure the defrost was on, CJ shut the door to keep what little heat there was inside and went to the back for the scraper. Tugging on her gloves, she began to clean off the frost from the outside of her windows.

"Hey, are you just going to leave?" Dezarae asked as she materialized beside her.

"I don't think I was needed for what you two were doing." Her reply was easy and tried to hide her pain of being alone.

Ross settled his arm around her, pulled her in for a quick hug. "I don't know. Two women could be a lot of fun for me." He grunted when his wife punched him in the side. "I'm sorry, CJ. I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable. You are more than welcome to stay the night." He dropped his arm from her body.

Shaking her head, CJ continued to work on her windows. "Thanks, but I have to get home." When Dez stepped in close with a question on her face, she continued, "Spend some time with your hubby. I'll call you later." She kissed her on the cheek. "Love you. Bye, Ross." Not giving them a chance to argue more, CJ climbed in her vehicle and drove away. By the time she made it home, the car was warm. Quickly she went inside her lonely apartment and to bed.

Eight

His eyes narrowed as Chantoya climbed out of her vehicle. At least she was alone instead of having company at her side. Glancing at his watch, he noted the time and jotted it down in his book. Three in the morning and it was a school night.

He wanted to yell and scream at how foolish she was being. She needed to get her priorities in line. Her students were important to her; and next to them, she should only care about him. He would tell her who she could be with.

They would be the perfect couple. She would be undying in her devotion to him. Of course she wouldn't be able to teach for a while, until she accepted her future with him. But eventually she would come around.

Lowering the binoculars, he put the vehicle in gear and drove home. She was back, safely, and he didn't need to stay any longer. It was hard enough not to stake his claim on her in public. His hands smoothed across the silk panties he had taken from her lingerie drawer.

They were special. He had slept in her bed, masturbated in her panties and now he was taking them home with him. Inside her apartment, he had placed small cameras in various spots. He could see her in the shower, where she slept, and anywhere else in her domicile.

"At least I know who the man you embraced is," he said as he drove away. He had found the pictures of her family and realized that man had been a brother. He found the obituary of her parents' death in an album that also contained mementoes from the funeral service.

"Don't worry, my love. Soon. Soon, we will be as one and your loss will fade into a distant memory. I will be the important one in your life. Me and of course our children." He felt his penis stir at the thought

of seeing her swell with his child. Of course that was well after he had taken his pleasure with her, over and over again. A child would bind them together forever.

Once he was home, he placed the panties on a shelf that was beneath the shrine for her. Then he headed for the shower, where he jerked off, the nipple clamps he had put on himself vibrating and tightening as his free hand tugged on the chain connecting them.

"Chantoya," he grunted and his hand slid faster along the length of his erection. The soap made his hand glide faster and the smell was an identical to the one in Chantoya's bathroom—brown sugar and cinnamon. She also had tropical-scented soap, but he preferred this one.

Closing his eyes, he imagined it was her soft brown hand gliding over him, bringing him to the explosive release. He shuddered and cried out her name as he shot his ejaculate all over the wall of his shower.

Leaning over, he removed the clamps and dropped them outside the stall. His knees were shaky as his hand rinsed off the come that was on the wall. Eyes glowed with feral pleasure as he pictured Chantoya covered with his semen. "It won't be long and you will be on your knees in front of me, servicing me, pleasuring me."

He climbed naked into bed and jerked off one more time to the mental picture of Chantoya in his bed with him. A perfect dream found him that night, spinning a web of desire and contentment as he and Chantoya were wed.



Lunchtime on Monday found CJ sitting alone in her lab eating a turkey club sandwich while she created her genetics exam. Setting down her sandwich, she picked up a chip and began drawing two charts—one for Mendel's law of independent assortment and the second for Mendel's law of segregation.

So into her work, she never noticed the door swinging open.

A pair of dark-brown eyes watched from the doorway. They moved slowly over the shiny hair that fell gently around her shoulders, down the back of the pale blue shirt and on further over the khaki slacks that covered the lower half of her body. Half of the firm mouth kicked up into a smile.

Assured steps advanced him deeper into the room. His mind was racing on things he would love to do with and to the woman before him working so diligently on her class work.

Stopping a few feet behind her, he stood in silence for a moment and just enjoyed his view. As she reached for another chip, he smiled. "I've missed you," a rich masculine timbre filled the empty lab room.

Chantoya jumped at the voice. She had been so consumed by her work that she hadn't heard a thing behind her. She turned and a big smile crossed her face as she saw the handsome Italian man who stood behind her.

"Hey, Osten." CJ stood up from the stool and faced him totally. "What are you doing here?"

"I missed you," he said as he moved closer to her form, his eyes raking boldly up and down her body. A frown crossed his face briefly. "Do you not want to see me?"

"Of course I do, don't be absurd." Her dark hair jerked as she shook her head in mock exasperation. "I was merely wondering what you were doing here."

The frown was banished like the sun burning away the morning fog. "Good. Because I definitely wanted to see you. I missed you this weekend." One hand reached out and tugged her in closer to his form.

"I missed you as well, but I had some things to do." CJ shook her head again as she allowed him to tow her closer.

"I know. You were with Dez and having all that fun away from your men."

A black brow arched. "Our men?" she questioned.

He nodded. "Yep. Your men. That would be me and Ross."

Her hands settled upon the firm muscles of his chest as her fingers danced along the brown fabric of his shirt. "I didn't realize I had a man," she teased.

"You have a man." Osten lowered his mouth to fit over hers. *She is a perfect fit for me.* His tongue traced her lower lip before he slipped it inside her warm mouth.

Within seconds, she was moaning as he relearned the shape of her body with his hands. Slowly, Osten backed them up until the lab station was directly behind her butt.

Leaving her with no option of anywhere to go, he increased his perusal of her mouth and curves. Just before he was lost completely in

the headiness of her touch, his trained ear picked up the sound of people approaching.

Reluctantly, he dropped his hands from her tempting figure and stepped back, putting a respectable distance between them. At the look of frustration on her face, he merely smiled as students began entering the room.

Before Osten left her alone for the afternoon, he leaned down and whispered in her ear. Her kids had no idea what was being said; all they saw was Chantoya nodding before the SEAL walked away with a wave over his shoulder. They also didn't know their teacher was fully aroused by the private message he'd left behind.

That night a knock came on her door and CJ admitted Osten into her small apartment. Before the door had fully closed behind him, she was in his arms. Their bodies pressed together in a fashion that made it hard to tell where one ended and the other began.

His lips teased hers as he used the tip of his tongue to run around the edge of her lush mouth, tasting, learning, and coaxing her to open for his searching tongue.

CJ shivered. His touch sent shockwaves through her system. This was better than any of her dreams. She felt her pussy clench with desire as his hands fisted in her shirt.

"I want you, CJ," he murmured against her mouth.

"Bedroom's down the hall," she whispered back.

A growl rose up from his throat as he placed his hands on her bare waist. His mouth moved around to nibble at her neck. Each bite delivered another wave of desire through her.

Osten lifted her off her feet with ease and carried her back to the bedroom. He let her body slide down his until her bare feet sank into her plush gold carpet.

"I am gonna enjoy this body so much." His words were delivered in a deep timbre as his hands tugged off her shirt.

He felt his cock jump as her bared breasts were exposed to his lustful gaze. Without saying a word, his hands reached out and cupped them. They felt so right in his hands.

The nipples were pebbled and she bit back a moan as he moved his thumbs over them, the callused pads teasing her. He met her gaze

briefly before leaning over and putting his mouth over one tempting nub.

Her knees shook as each tug on her breast created an equal one in between her thighs. "Osten," she gasped as her hands gripped his haired forearms.

"Oh, baby, you will be calling out my name so many times to-night."

"I want you..."

His eyes glowed possessively at her admission. "What exactly do you want?" He adjusted his hands so they could tug on her nipples.

"You," she panted, trembling at the desire he knew she saw in his eyes.

"Tell me." He tweaked a tip. "Tell me *exactly* what you want."

"I want..." she hesitated. "I want you to make love to me."

"Not explicit enough. Tell me what it is you want." He moved his hands to the waist of her sweats. His tongue laved a path between her dark breasts before moving down her sternum.

It dipped into her bellybutton as he dropped to his knees before her. One jerk and her pants and panties were pooled around her ankles. "Tell me, CJ," he commanded, his warm breath teasing her pelvic region.

"Please," her word was a soft beg as it fell upon his ears.

"Tell me," he ordered again. "What exactly you want." Her heady smell filled his nose and he fought to control his primal reaction.

"I did," she whimpered.

"I want specifics, sexy." He maneuvered his hands to her hips. His eyes seemed to be glued to the neatly trimmed patch of hair between her toned runner's legs.

CJ opened her mouth to say something, anything, but his next act froze whatever words she had. His mouth moved closer to her dripping core.

He used his thick tongue to run up the slit separating her nether lips. The taste of her made him moan with scarcely restrained passion. She was a mixture of spice and honey. His cock throbbed insistently in his pants.

Without thought, Chantoya spread her legs more, giving him better access. "Tell me," he rasped. "Do you want my tongue here? Or not?"

"Yes," she panted.

Another swipe before he demanded, "Then say it."

"Please. I want...I want...your tongue."

"Where? Where do you want my tongue, baby? Here?" He used that very organ to circle her clit.

"Yes!" she mewled.

"Or did you want it somewhere else?"

Deep inside me. "No!"

He chuckled as if he could read her very thoughts. Bringing her body closer to his waiting mouth, Osten seemed to inhale the scent of her body. "Tell me what you want." Two fingers spread her lips, exposing her engorged clit.

Ring! Ring! Ring!

Osten on his knees before her vanished as her CJ's eyes dragged open. Her alarm clock blared in her ear and with a frustrated groan she smacked it, shutting off the intrusive noise. Flopping back, she muttered curses that would make her brothers blush.

Her body ached for release. Nipples were still tight and sensitive. Her pussy was so close to finding what it craved. With a mind of its own, her hand drifted back under her blankets and settled between her legs.

CJ closed her eyes and conjured up a picture of Osten. There he was standing before her, removing his clothing and telling her just how much he wanted to take her.

Faster and faster her fingers moved over her clit. The other hand pinched a nipple and she felt her body jump in response. It didn't take long for the tingling of her orgasm to wash over her. "Osten!" she screamed to the room as her back arched. She released the nipple she held to grip the sheets on her bed.

Boneless her body sank back down to the mattress. Her eyes remained closed as she waited for her breathing to return to normal. The shimmering image of Osten seemed to send her a mocking smile before it vanished, as if telling her, *see what I can make you do?*

Momentarily satisfied and only barely so, CJ rolled out of bed to take a shower. "I can't believe I did that," she complained. "I need to get laid, this is getting ridiculous!"



The eyes on the monitor were mere slits. He had sat there watching her sleep; and as she became aroused, he had taken out his rapidly swelling member and stroked it along with moans.

After her alarm woke her up, he figured she would just get up and get ready for her day. When she fell back onto her bed and began to pleasure herself, he almost fell out of his chair.

He was within seconds of coming after he saw her beginning to arch off the bed. Until...until she screamed Osten's name. His penis had softened right there on the spot, leaving him frustrated and angry beyond belief.

"How dare you dream of that man! He is not for you. *You* belong to *me!*" Shoving back from the wall of monitors, he stalked to the bathroom where he climbed into the shower and got ready for his day.

Nine

All day at school, Chantoya couldn't get her dream out of her mind. It had felt so real. It had felt so perfect.

During her lunch, she tried to find a way to ensure all the work could be done by Friday. CJ didn't want to give her students homework on Winter Formal weekend. She was going to move the test for the juniors to Thursday unless they wanted it on that Friday.

A knock on her door brought her head up. She smiled as she saw who was standing there. Gordon Blake. He stuck his head in the door and whispered conspiratorially, "Is it safe in here?"

Raising her eyebrows, CJ asked, "Safe from whom?"

"Abigail." He gave a mock shudder. "She seems to forget I'm a married man."

Waving him in, CJ laughed. "Well, she doesn't like it in here 'cause I don't have carpet on my floor."

He tipped his head back and burst out laughing. "I can totally imagine her saying that."

"What's up?"

Sitting down at the lab station across from her, Gordon reached into his briefcase and pulled out some papers for her. "I came across these when I confiscated some note passing in my class."

With a frown, CJ took them and gasped. "These are my tests!" Her heart was breaking; she had believed better of her students.

"I am sorry CJ," he said reaching for her hand. "I know how much you count on your students to be honest."

"Who had 'em?" She moved her hand and took a drink of her water.

"I got them from some freshmen." He pulled another sheet of paper from his satchel. "I made the list of their names for you."

"Thank you, Gordon. I think it's time the freshmen learn what happens when people cheat in my class."

He sent her a kind smile. "I'm so sorry about this." Standing, he gathered his case and headed for the door. "I have to go meet my wife for lunch. I'll see you around."

"Bye Gordon and...thanks," CJ said as he disappeared from sight.

She stared at the proof she had in her hand and after a moment hissed, "Damn it!"

A masculine chuckle reached her. "That's not very ladylike, nor is it really proper for school."

Without turning around she groaned. "Great. Now I'm hearing his voice outside of my dreams. Why can't you just leave me alone, Osten? In my dreams is bad enough but now you're bothering me at work?"

"Well now, that's really not what I wanted to hear." The voice was closer and she felt Osten's scent surround her and his lips tease her ear.

"Osten?" she gasped. She turned her head and found herself nose to nose with him.

"Someone else you were expecting?" There was displeasure in his tone.

A stunning smile crossed her face as she scrunched up her nose. "Nope. Wasn't expecting anyone, really. Good to see you, though."

One black eyebrow arched. "Really? Didn't sound that way, although the part about being in your dreams shows promise." He lowered his voice. "How were the dreams?"

Instantly wet, CJ bit back a moan. "So good, I don't think I can share them with you in school." Her eyes twinkled with fire.

His eyes darkened. "Be careful starting something you can't finish, Chantoya."

Unheeding his warning she allowed herself to run her eyes over his fine physique before leaning in so their mouths were millimeters apart and whispering, "Oh, I finished it, all right. Not as satisfying as having you finish, but I can wait." Her tongue snuck out and tasted his lips before she backed off completely.

Osten had never almost embarrassed himself in public because of something a woman said, until this very day. It was a miracle he didn't have a damp stain spreading across the front of his blue jeans. This woman was such a naughty little minx.

His whole body jerked at the picture she had painted for him. He could just imagine her polish-free fingers slipping between her legs to bring herself pleasure. How her eyes would flutter and roll back in her head as she approached her completion. How her lush mouth would open to scream his name as she found it.

"Is everything okay, Osten?" CJ asked him from where she stood two lab tables away.

His dark-brown eyes flashed with the promise of retaliation. "Fine, love. Everything is fine."

"Good. Now, as much as I would love to stay and chat with you, I have some cheating freshmen to take care of." She waved the paper with the names Gordon had given her before him.

Immediately shoving his lust to the back burner, Osten touched her arm. "Baby, I'm so sorry. I know how much you pride yourself on your students."

A forced smile crossed her face, although he could tell she was touched he had seen how important her students were to her. "Thank you. It has been a while since I've had this problem, so it hurts more."

Her sure steps took her toward the door. She looked back at him over her shoulder. "See you later? Want to come over for dinner?" At his nod she added, "Six-thirty good?" His dark head nodded again. "Wonderful, I'll see you then." She was gone, out the door and down the hall, leaving him with the gentle smell of her...brown sugar and cinnamon.



Osten handed her the bouquet of flowers the second she opened the door. In the next, he had her in his arms, kissing her like he couldn't get enough of her. Pulling slowly away, CJ sent him a tender smile.

"Thank you, these are beautiful." She moved into the kitchen to find a vase to place them in. It was a large mixed bouquet.

Osten allowed his eyes to travel over the dark blue skirt that hugged her lower body. It stopped just above her knees. She had discarded the jacket she had worn earlier, which left her in a tan shirt. He was envious it was allowed to caress her skin.

When her eyes met his and she arched her eyebrows, he blinked. "What?" he asked striding toward her.

"I asked you what you'd like to drink." Her response was given with a grin. "But you seemed a bit preoccupied with something."

CJ took in the way his dress slacks fit so nicely on his body. He had a black shirt that molded to his chest and that same simple cross sat around his neck.

"Well," he replied. "I was thinking about something all right. Or rather someone." One hand reached out and trailed down the side of her face, making her tremble.

Despite her urge to lean in and kiss him, CJ waited for him to answer. She held his gaze and it didn't take long before he shrugged with a huge sigh, "Fine. Be that way. I'll have water."

Moving away from his touch, CJ got him some cold water and watched him as he took a drink. She swallowed as he licked his lips to get the last drop; everything about him was so erotic. He made breathing X-rated.

"CJ, if you keep looking at me like that..." He let the ending hang in the air.

Her lower body clenched with lust for the man who stood in her kitchen. Never before had one affected her so much. "What are you going to do to me?" Her voice had dropped to a low drawl.

He groaned as she sashayed her ass toward him. "Don't start this if you don't want to finish it."

"I want to know what exactly you plan on doing to me." One hand reached out and trailed lightly up his arm before moving back down again.

His eyes burned with feral flames. Before she could blink again, he had her up against his body, trapped in his steely arms. "I am going to make you so tired, you can't even think about walking."

She trembled as her body flooded with moisture. "Big talk. Why don't you show me instead of telling me?"

"Dinner?" His hands moved down to cup her ass, bringing her pelvis closer to touch on his.

"I'd rather be dessert," she purred as her hand trailed down over the front of his slacks.

Osten didn't even look at the table that was set for an intimate dinner. He never saw the white tapers that sat in the crystal holders just

waiting to be lit. The bottle of wine that was going to be their beverage for the evening remained unacknowledged. The salad that was crisp and waiting for them and the main course that she had just taken out of the oven when he had arrived went unheeded.

None of that mattered at the time, for he had what he craved in his arms now. Chantoya Willow Jackson.

He lifted her into his arms, loving how she immediately curled against him, nestling her face into his neck. "No stopping this time, CJ. Tonight, I make you mine," his low voice muttered into her ear.

"I've been yours for a long time now, Osten. Tonight we just seal the deal." She nipped him on the side of the neck.

And you will be mine for the rest of our lives. "I can't tell you how long I've been waiting for this night."

CJ just nuzzled into him and entrusted him to carry her safely. She had no reason to worry. Osten had no intentions of letting this woman fall. Now or ever.

Osten walked into her bedroom and allowed his gaze to take in her sanctuary. Her room was spotless, but that didn't surprise him in the least. His woman didn't strike him as a slob.

Setting her down on the dark gold carpet, Osten placed a long lingering kiss to her mouth. Both of them had racing pulses when they separated. "Let me undress you," Osten's deep voice was the only noise in the room aside from their breathing.

CJ stood still and gave him a silent assent. Her eyes followed his movements and her body clenched as he reached for the buttons on her shirt.

Osten began at the top, unbuttoning the one that was up around her neck. The tiny, tan, round pearl button slipped easily through the slit. It didn't take him long at all and the shirt was totally open, allowing his lecherous gaze to see her light tan underwire bra.

His callused hands brushed her shirt off over her shoulders and let it flutter to the ground. Osten's eyes seemed to glow in the lights of her bedroom. "You are just so beautiful," he said, letting his gaze run over her one more time. CJ trembled at his words. She felt like the most stunning woman on earth from the way his eyes caressed her.

Stepping closer to her again, Osten placed his hands at her waist. Silent, he undid the hook and eye clasp, grabbed the zipper with his index finger and thumb, and lowered it. With a slight tug, he

maneuvered the dark-blue material over her hips and down her satiny-smooth legs to the floor.

His breath caught in his throat. *The hell with what mythology claims; I have Venus right here.* His cock pressed even harder against his slacks.

Chantoya stood before him in a lacy set of lingerie. Her panties were the same shade as her bra, lace cheeky women's boy shorts—a personal favorite of his.

She wore no type of hosiery on her legs; but then with legs as gorgeous as hers, why would she use them? A moan of appreciation left him as she kicked the skirt away from her feet.

Repeatedly his swollen dick reminded him just how long it had been. "Take your bra off," he ordered her in a gravelly voice. CJ slid her hands around to the clasps in the back. "Slowly," Osten added. "Do it slowly."

Tremors of lust shot through CJ's body. *He wants to torment me.* She lowered her lids as she undid the hooks. Moving her hands up to her shoulders, CJ slowly began sliding the straps down her smooth skin.

"Slow enough?" she teased as she stopped just shy of letting her breasts fall free. His eyes flashed dangerously and CJ had a siren's smile on her face as her bra fluttered to the floor.

Her hands traveled over her own breasts, treating them like a lover. Gentle caresses, lingering touches, all enticing moves to the man who watched her. Dropping down, her hands glided over her flat belly and stopped before slipping between her thighs. She pulled them back up at the top of her remaining article of clothing.

"These too?" Her question came out in a husky timbre.

"Those too," Osten said. His eyes stayed on her hands, waiting for the moment she would bare herself to him.

Millimeter by torturous millimeter, CJ lowered the panties. As she stepped out of them, Osten was ready to erupt in his pants, the intensity was so strong.

He was ready to rip off his clothes, pound his chest like a cave-man, and carry her off to be ravished by him, locked away from the rest of the world.

Osten blinked rapidly to make sure it wasn't a vision before him. "Damn and double damn CJ," he murmured in appreciation.

She was stunning. Her breasts were firm and full, her waist was narrow, and her legs were long and toned. A man who normally preferred a shaved pussy found her neatly trimmed one absolute perfection.

He could see evidence of her arousal on some of the dark hairs that rested there. Control had just about vanished.

"Get on the bed." His command was rough.

CJ backed up until she was on the bed. Osten strode towards her looking primitive and so damn sexy she couldn't stop the moan that escaped.

"Slide back against the headboard, raise your knees, and spread your legs."

Trembling with anticipation, she did as he ordered her to do. "Osten?" she asked as her legs opened wide in a welcoming gesture.

"What, baby?" He kicked off his shoes and yanked his shirt off. His hands were at the clasp of his slacks when it dawned on him she hadn't answered him. "What, Chantoya?"

"Let me see you." Her words were like a beg.

Osten lowered the zipper on his pants and shoved them down his body. He was left in a pair of white boxers that restrained a giant ridge in them.

CJ groaned as her body relied on the headboard to hold it up. His chest was as wonderful as she recalled.

Osten's eyes smoldered as he watched her. "Do you like playing with yourself, Chantoya?"

She stilled. CJ hadn't realized she was doing that. *Oh, my God! I can't believe how I lose all sense around him!* "Yes," she admitted.

Removing his boxers, Osten wrapped his hand around his thick cock. When she moaned again, he almost lost it. Her large nipples were pebbled and he longed to suck on them again.

"Play with yourself for me. I want to watch you." Osten began moving his hand along his throbbing erection. He noticed how her eyes followed its motion.

CJ did as instructed. He knew her body cried out for his touch, as did his, but Osten was inclined to wait. It was so arousing watching her pleasure herself while she observed him simultaneously.

“Dip your finger inside yourself.” She did. “Good girl, now pull it out and circle your tit with it.” Osten moved his hand faster as she did so.

He could smell her own arousal. Her juices were dripping onto her bedspread. He didn’t doubt she could see the wetness on the head of his dick and she licked her lips and moaned as if she imagined wrapping her lips around his thick cock and lapped at the taste that was Osten’s.

That did it. Osten's control snapped like the steel teeth of a bear trap. Immediate. Stepping up to the edge of the bed, he let go of his cock and reached over to grab CJ's wrist. She flashed her eyes up to his and his hot mouth closed over her finger, sucking off the remaining flavor of her body.

"You taste good," he murmured. "But that wasn't enough for me." Osten lowered his powerful body between her still raised thighs and touched her lips with his.

He kissed his way down her body until his mouth was resting above the patch of hair between her legs. Repositioning his arms so they were under her upraised legs, he inhaled and allowed his body to become acquainted with CJ's personal scent.

It was a rich smell. His mouth moved lower. Looking at her, Osten could see her swollen clit that called him to touch, lick, and suck. She glistened with her own juices down there and he couldn't wait any longer.

With one swipe of his tongue, he ran it between her nether lips and moaned in pleasure as her flavor integrated with his taste buds. Back up he moved his tongue, almost oblivious to the mewls that were streaming from her throat.

"Lean back, baby. Let me enjoy you," Osten commanded as he went back to the business at hand.

CJ couldn't sit up if she had to. The feel of his thick tongue lapping at her made her shiver. She felt his body shift again and her body convulsed as soon as he slid a thick finger inside her. "Osten," she moaned.

He ran his tongue around her clit before sucking it into his mouth. Adding another finger to her, he began sliding them in and out of her sopping wet body. It didn't take long before her body was responding with thrusts of its own. CJ would grind down on his fingers every chance she got.

Stars began to flicker in front of her eyes and she felt her body orgasm again. CJ screamed his name to her room.

Osten knew it was time.

While CJ was still trembling from the intensity of her orgasm, he moved out from between her legs. He then pulled her further down on the bed and climbed off. "Just a second, baby," he promised as a frustrated look crossed her flushed face.

Grabbing a condom from his discarded pants, Osten hurriedly opened it and rolled it on his straining erection. He climbed back on the bed and positioned himself between her legs once more.

His index finger dipped inside her one more time before he pulled out and replaced it with the head of his cock. Not a word was spoken as Osten slid fully within her willing body. Their eyes never left one another as they were joined together.

Pausing once he was fully encased by her velvet heat, Osten asked in a low, tender voice, "Are you still with me?"

"Ummm hmmm," she mumbled.

"You are so tight, Chantoya." Osten moved back out and watched how her eyes grew darker with the feelings that rocked her body.

"Osten," she begged as he moved forward again.

"What?" Back out. And in again.

"Oh, my dear Lord," she moaned as her hips arched to meet his thrusts.

"That is one way to put it," he ground out and bit the inside of his lower lip to keep his control.

CJ's fingers were wringing out the color of her Mediterranean blue comforter. Her straight white teeth caught her lower lip. Osten picked up the speed of his action. He loved how her muscles contracted around him when he pulled back, like she didn't want him to leave. *Not that I have any intention of going anywhere.* Sweat beaded on his brow as he tried to lengthen the time before he came within her.

It didn't help anything when CJ lifted her legs up and latched them around his waist, bringing him in closer, the angle allowing him deeper. A groan of pleasure left his throat as he pounded harder.

His fingers dug into her hips as he drove into her body over and over again. He couldn't get enough of the feel of her around him. Osten craved more; he didn't want this to end.

The tightening of his balls told him another story. Determined she would find euphoria first, he took one hand and slipped it between their bodies to find her swollen clit. Rubbing it as he continued to stroke within her, he watched her as she came.

She was beautiful. Her face flushed and she bit her lower lip, her hands still wringing out the blankets beneath her. Her strong legs clamped around him as her internal muscles gripped him.

The pure bliss on her face and the ripple effect he was feeling sent him spiraling over the edge after her. His cry of satisfaction blended in with hers. Osten could feel his body pumping out his release and he shuddered with the intensity of it all.

Limbs shaky, heart pounding, breathing erratic, Osten collapsed beside her after he pulled out and took off his condom, dropping it in the receptacle by her bed. He gathered her sweaty body close to his and loved the fact her heart was beating as crazily as his was.

"Are you okay?" he whispered, his lips moving along her temple.

"Yes," she drew out on a long breath as she snuggled in closer to his body. "I haven't ever —"

"Me, either, baby," he interrupted her. "Me either."

With a contented little purr, CJ draped her exhausted body over his, tucking her face into his neck. She wanted more, she wanted tons more of his touch and his love, but she was emotionally and physically exhausted.

Who knew it was possible to have that many orgasms in one night? It felt like every ounce of mobility was stripped from her. *But, damn if it don't feel awesome!* CJ closed her eyes and let her body begin to descend from its pleasure high.

Osten wrapped his arms around her and tugged her closer. He loved how she burrowed into him as if she belonged there. *Well, she does.* His eyes closed as he put his nose into her hair and let her breathing lull him to sleep.



The glass shattered against the wall. And another one. And another.

"Bitch!" he swore as he threw something else.

How dare she?! How dare she allow herself to be soiled by another man?!

She'd willingly let someone else touch her, violate her. And she'd seemed to enjoy it so much! Her whole face had been alive with pleasure as she'd sat there and played with herself in front of him.

He wanted to hurt something. "You *never* let another man touch you, stupid bitch!" The man in front of the monitors stood and seethed. One fist drew back and before he knew what happened, he had moved toward her shrine and punched her photo.

The glass splintered beneath the force of his blow. As the computer generated photo of her, in an exact replica of the wedding dress he had for her in his closet, became covered with his blood, he stopped.

He picked up the photo, wiped off his blood, and held it close. His tone changed completely as his fingers traced her face. "I'm sorry, baby. I didn't mean to yell. I just can't stand to see another man's hands on you."

Looking for another frame, he continued talking as if she could hear him. "I will have to make sure you are cleansed. But first, I think I need to get you away from everyone sooner. You are taking too many chances. I don't like it."

The man found another frame and instead of adding that picture, he ripped it up and printed another from his computer. This time he added his own image to the photo. Putting himself in a tuxedo, he printed out the image and placed that one in the frame. Then he put it back on his shelf.

As almost an afterthought, he pulled open a drawer and took out the bands he had purchased and set the pair of gold rings in front of the picture in its crystal-lead frame.

"There. That is *so* much better." Kissing his finger he touched it to the image of her face. "You look so perfect in your dress and soon you'll have *my* ring on your hand and *my* dick inside you. You belong to me Chantoya; it's time you realize that."

Closing the door behind him, the man went and climbed into his bed, also exhausted. His temper displays always tended to wear him out.

By the time he awoke, he was still upset over what he had witnessed but was in enough control that he knew he would be fine when

he saw her in person. He'd worked out extra long to try and get rid of his excess rage.

Stopping off to buy some coffee on his way to work, he smiled as he took her photo out of his wallet and kissed it lightly. The barista saw the picture as he slipped it back in his billfold. "Your wife?" the young woman asked.

"Yes," he responded with a smile. "That's her."

"She's beautiful." She slid the coffee over to him.

"Thank you, and have a wonderful day." He shoved a dollar in to the tip container.

"You, too, sir."

He climbed into his car, started it, and turned up the heat to try and keep the winter chill out. "See, Chantoya. Even others know you belong to me." There was a grin on his face as he drove off.



CJ stood beneath the spray of her shower. Three more times that previous night, Osten had awakened her and made such sweet wonderful love to her body. Never before had a lover been so attentive to her feelings.

He'd always asked if she liked something or not. Chuckling, she shook her head. "I don't think there was a single thing he did that I didn't thoroughly enjoy." Tipping her head forward, she let the almost hot water stream down over her shoulders. She was sore.

A knock on the bathroom door made her eyes and head snap up. "Yes?" she asked in a strangled voice.

"You okay in here, Chantoya? Can I come in?" Osten's deep timbre reached her.

"I'm fine. Almost done, come on in if you want."

"Oh, I want..." His voice was right behind her as his body filled the stall shower.

"Good morning," she said softly as his strong arms wrapped around her figure.

"Morning to you." He brushed his lips along the wet skin of her neck. "You're up early."

"I have a class to teach, but feel free to stay as long as you want." CJ fought the desire to sink fully into his embrace. She was running late as it was. "I was just getting out."

"Do you have to?" His fingers trailed along her belly and headed for the junction of her thighs.

Shuddering, she nodded. "I'm late already. I have to go."

"Well, I wouldn't want you to be late for school," he rumbled in her ear. "Can I see you tonight?"

Needing to put some distance between her and the man in the shower with her, CJ left and was drying off before she answered him. "I am going out with some friends."

Osten scowled slightly. He felt himself growing more possessive with each passing second. Even before he had made love to her, he'd felt that way; but now, it was almost off the charts. Biting back his growl, he said. "That's good. What about lunch? Can you do lunch today?"

She stuck her head back in the shower and ogled the man who was lathering up in there. "Don't you have to work?"

Running soapy hands over his defined chest, Osten grinned at her. "Yep. But not today. I have to work tomorrow."

"I can do lunch. Where do you want to meet?"

With a lewd leer, he pointed to the shower. "How about right here, against this wall?"

Narrowing her eyes in return, CJ said, "Oh, I don't know if I'd be done with you in that short of time." Letting her eyes land on his semi-erect cock, she deliberately licked her lips, long and slow. "I would need at least an hour to enjoy that."

Semi-erect became fully erect. Osten reached for her, but CJ skipped back and slipped out the door. "CJ," his partially amused roar came through the door.

Chantoya got dressed in record time. She had just poured her coffee when Osten walked into the kitchen all gorgeous with nothing on but a tan towel around his waist. His hair was damp and he was between her and the door. Osten crossed his thick arms over his chest and watched her.

"That wasn't very nice you know," he reprimanded. "Leaving me alone like that."

"I didn't want to," she admitted, her eyes glued to how his towel was beginning to tent out.

"Jesus, I can't control myself around you." Osten gestured toward his swollen penis.

Snapping her lid on her coffee, CJ asked, "Is that such a bad thing?"

"Only when you have to leave." He spoke from right beside her.

"I wish I didn't. I would love to help you out," she purred as her hand moved between them and touched the terrycloth tent.

Osten just stared at her with his dark eyes. They moved over her aquamarine shirt and black slacks.

CJ knew she had to get going. She was already late. Nevertheless, she jerked on the cloth in her hand, dropped it to the floor, and followed it down until she was on her knees before him.

Before he could say a word, her lips were wrapped around his cock. CJ closed her eyes in bliss as she licked and sucked at the flesh in her mouth. He was a good as she imagined he would taste.

Swiping her tongue across the head, she was granted a moan. One hand circled the base of his penis as her mouth began to move.

Up and down, her head bobbed, her hand matching the action. Osten was grabbing the counter with one hand and the other was fisted so he didn't mess up her perfectly coifed hair.

He looked down at the vixen on her knees in front of him. Dressed the professional every inch, she was giving him a blowjob that would make anyone take notice.

Her lashes rested on her cheeks as she slurped on his thick cock as if it were a Popsicle in the middle of summer. He was so close to coming, and all it took was the warmth of her mouth around him.

CJ dropped her hand from his dick and began playing with his balls as she took more and more of him in her mouth. The pressure she maintained on him was constant and perfect. Her nails lightly scraped along his scrotum and he felt them began to tighten.

She purred in the back of her throat, the vibrations rocketing through his sensitive erection, bringing him closer yet. Faster her head moved, tighter her suction became, and it didn't take long for Osten to erupt deep within her mouth.

"Shit!" he shouted to the room. His hips bucked one more time, shoving his dick deep into her throat as he unloaded.

CJ dug both her hands into the backs of his thighs, holding him in place until he finished. As she pulled her mouth slowly off him, Osten was counting on his one hand to hold him up.

Standing, CJ licked her lips, winked, and disappeared down the hall. Moments later she was back. "See you for lunch," she said.

"Thanks for breakfast. It really hit the spot." Then she was gone, leaving him lightheaded, horny, and falling deeper into love.

Eleven

Despite how last night had made her feel, Chantoya Jackson was nothing but business as she faced down the freshman who had tried to cheat in her class. Regardless of her reputation for being a wonderful teacher, she despised having students who cheated in her courses. With the exception of Biology I, she otherwise taught to the students who were pursuing a more academic career. The ones who wanted the scholarships for higher education. The college preparatory classes.

For that reason, she was downright harsh when she caught cheaters. Cheating was bad enough, but if one *chose* to take her class then one had better be ready to work in it.

The three she stared at were suddenly not as brave or arrogant as when they had entered. CJ had called parents in to be a part of this meeting, even though it was first offense. When it came to things like this, she took no quarter.

"So," she explained to both students and parents. "I will give them one more chance in my class, but if I catch them cheating again, they will be thrown out. I have no time in my day to spend keeping my eye out for ones who don't want to do this work honestly."

Her gaze shifted from parents back to the trio of students. "I have some of the brightest students in the school in my classes and I *will* not cheapen their hard work to acquire that name by putting up with students who cheat. Now, I normally am a very laidback teacher, and I will do my best to get you ready for college, but you have to give me your all. Honestly." She placed her hands down on the desk she stood behind.

"You are doing nothing but hurting yourself in the long run. College isn't anything like high school. And it's not fair to my other

students for you to be taking up so much of my attention." Her eyes snapped fire as she made sure to make eye contact with each of the kids.

"If you need the extra supervision, I've asked one of your parents to sit in the class, which would free me up to pay attention to the other students as opposed to making sure you weren't cheating. So should you long to have one or both of your parents sitting with you in class, then we can go that route."

At the horrified looks on their faces, she added, "Or you can give me your word that you won't even attempt to do something like this again." CJ crossed her arms and waited for the response.

"We won't do that again, Ms. J," they answered as one. "We are so sorry."

"Apology accepted," CJ said easily. "I guess you should apologize to your parents as well for keeping them from work. She stood and shook each parent's hand. "Excuse me; I have another meeting to get to. Thanks for coming in." Then she left the students with their less-than-pleased parents.

Moving down the hall, CJ groaned as she saw Abigail coming around the corner. "Morning, Abigail," CJ said politely.

"Morning," she snapped. Abigail fell into step with CJ as they were both going to the staff meeting. "I heard you went to the football game with Osten."

"I did." *And last night he slept in my bed with me.*

"I thought you had a policy about dating people at work?" The question was snide.

"I do. But he doesn't work here and it wasn't a date. He was asked by some of the students to come and so he caught a ride with me." CJ had to control her response; she really didn't like people all up in her personal business.

"Oh." Suddenly Abigail was a lot nicer sounding. "Well, maybe I will ask him out. He's so good looking. With all those muscles, I bet he is amazing in bed."

Biting her tongue to keep in her response, CJ grunted noncommittally. *He is more than amazing, you stupid bitch!*

"You know he will want to date me. I am a woman who looks good on every man's arm. I wonder when I should ask him." With a toss of her hair, Abigail looked over at CJ.

Stopping before the door of the teacher's lounge, CJ gave into the devil on her shoulder. "Well," she half purred, half snarled. "You

can always ask him at the Winter Formal. He'll be there with me." She snatched open the door and stomped inside leaving Abigail to follow.

The whole meeting passed with CJ feeling like gloating. Abigail continued to send her evil glares, but it didn't matter. The knowledge that she finally got under Abigail's skin was enough to put her in an even better mood. *Who knew being a bitch could be so much fun?*

As they were leaving the lounge, Abigail muttered something spiteful under her breath, which resulted in CJ acquiring a bigger smile on her face. "Hey Marvin," CJ said as she refilled her coffee mug. "How are you today?"

"Not to bad," he said in his deep voice as he reached for the coffee pot after she was done with it. "Yourself?"

"Good." And she was. She glanced down and her eyes widened in shock. "Marvin! What happened to your hand?" CJ pointed to his right hand that was wrapped in gauze.

The physical education teacher looked at her, silent for a moment. Then he shook his head. "I did something foolish. I'm fine though. Nothing to worry about." A large smile filled his dark face. "Nice to know you care."

"Well, I don't want you to be hurt, Marvin. Don't be silly." CJ added French Vanilla creamer to her coffee and stirred it in, not seeing the gleam that grew in the other man's gaze.

"When are we going out?" He dumped some sugar in his mug and reached for a spoon.

"I'm not sure that would be possible. I'm dating someone, so it wouldn't be fair to either of you. And I am not like that." She reached out for his arm and placed her hand on it briefly. "I'm sorry. I truly like you Marvin, but only as a friend."

The hint of something swarmed in the back of his sienna gaze. "So I'm destined to be stuck in the friend category, am I?" He nodded as he picked up a thing of half-n-half and added it into his drink.

"I'm afraid so."

"Well," he said in a voice both of them could tell was forced to be cheery. "I'll take what I can get." Dropping the container in the trash, Marvin picked up his mug and turned to the door. "I should get going. I have to go relieve my sub from watching over my weight-lifting class." Then he walked out as the bell rang.

Cleaning up after herself, CJ wondered about his attitude. Marvin seemed lost in thought and not entirely thrilled about her decision. Her head shook as she took a swallow of her drink. It was perfect.

Closing the lounge door after her, she walked down the hall toward her classroom. Speaking with the students as she moved through them, she encouraged them to hurry along and get to class.

Her morning flew by. During one change of classes, Gordon stuck his head in to see how her meeting went with the students and their teachers. He was leaving as Osten walked in carrying a bag of takeout.

He and Gordon nodded at each other and when it was just the two of them alone he kissed her long and hard. "I've missed you all day," Osten muttered against her swollen lips.

"Stop it, Osten. I'm at school; I have to have some pretense of decorum." CJ pulled back from him and sat down at a table where she could keep an eye on the door.

"Sorry," he said, following her to the chosen table. Opening the bag he removed covered plates and placed one in front of her. "Here you go, I hope you like chicken parmesan."

"I love it, don't eat it often, but I love it." Happily, she reached for a fork and proceeded to uncover the dish to reveal food that was still warm. "Oh, this smells divine," she purred.

Osten chose to ignore that sexy sound and uncovered his dish as well. Reaching into another bag, he took out two waters and placed one before himself and CJ. "I have ravioli with meat sauce if you want that instead."

"No, this is just fine," she paused and looked at him. "Unless you want this."

Wicked fire flickered in his eyes. "I want you," he swore.

She smiled saucily. "I'm not on the menu."

"Want to be?" He winked as he began to eat.

Chatter was light and fun as they ate lunch. They were cleaning up when her door swung open and Abigail walked in. The scowl on her face vanished the second she saw who was in the room with CJ.

"Oh," she said sweetly as her heels clicked loudly as she walked across the lab floor. "I didn't know you were here, Osten." Abigail stopped beside him and looked into his eyes, resting her hand rested on his arm.

"I don't know why you would have. I was here for a lunch date with CJ." Osten looked over to where CJ was disposing of from the empty food containers. When she met his gaze, her own was shuttered as if unsure of what was going to happen.

Behind slightly narrowed eyes, Abigail sniped, "I didn't know the two of you were dating."

"Again, I fail to see how that is any of your business," Osten retorted with increasing scorn. "Neither of us needs to report to you."

"I never said you did," she began. "I just didn't see you with...with...CJ."

Osten peered at her. "Why not? Chantoya Jackson is one hell of a woman. I've been attracted to her since the moment I first saw her at the car show. She is charming, intelligent, sweet, kind, caring, and sexy as hell to name a few things."

Abigail looked between the two of them before she sighed. The blatant warning in Osten's gaze told her it was in her best interest to keep her mouth shut. So for the first time in her life, Abigail did that.

Without saying a word, she turned on her heel and walked out of the room. The door shut forcefully behind her and the room was silent save for the slamming sound reverberating through it. Osten strode over to where CJ stood silently.

"You okay?" he asked as he put his arms around her.

"Fine," she said. "Did you mean what you said to her?"

"Every last word." His lips brushed tenderly over hers before he stepped back to put a proper distance between them. "Don't ever doubt that."

"Thank you," CJ spoke quietly.

The ringing of the bell broke the spell. Osten stepped back further. "Enjoy yourself tonight and give me a call. We'll go do something fun." Glancing over his shoulder, he made sure the door was still shut before he said, "Or stay in and do something fun."

He winked as she blushed. "Thanks for lunch," she said as her door opened and students began to file in.

"You are welcome. Talk to you later, CJ." He saluted her with two fingers and slipped out the door and vanished from sight.

The warm feeling his words to Abigail had given her stayed with her for the rest of the day. As she was walking out to her vehicle in the cold, her cell phone rang.

"CJ," she said as she unlocked the SUV, climbed in, and started it. "Hey, Binh. What's up?"

As she sat there and waited for her ride home to get warm, she spoke to her brother. He was inviting her out to dinner the next night.

Chantoya accepted, hung up from that call, and began to drive herself home. She still had to shower and get ready for her girls' night out.



An overly exhausted CJ unlocked the door to her apartment. The evening had been a blast catching up with old college friends. However, as she'd told the rest of them, the next time was going to be on a Friday so she didn't have to get up and go to work the next day.

Closing the door behind her, CJ locked it and walked through the dark to her bedroom where she kicked off her shoes and stripped off her dress, letting it pool to the floor at her feet.

Only turning on the light in the bathroom, she brushed her teeth and washed her face. Double-checking to make sure her alarm was set, CJ climbed into her bed and closed her eyes. Immediately, sleep overtook her body.

Her dreams were full of summertime, swimming, old tire swings, lemonade and Osten at her side. Even though she had only gotten three hours of sleep, she felt rested when her alarm went off the next morning.

More snow had dumped during her brief rest last night, and she drove slowly. Short careful steps took her from her car to the front door where she mumbled her good mornings at the office and then proceeded on to her room.



Osten shoved the door to his locker shut. He hated this part sometimes; he wanted to explore his relationship with Chantoya, but the Team had been called for a mission. He had left her a message on her home phone, not bothering her at work.

Hefting his bag over his shoulder, he fell into step with a few other members of the Megalodon Team as they headed for the waiting van that was taking them to the airfield. They were taking a plane to drop over their destination and parachute in.

Still the mood was lighthearted and cheery as the aircraft taxied down the strip. They were in a converted airliner, so the radar would not alert those watching that it was a military mission. Once they were in the air, Scott stood and explained the mission to them.

The team slept, checked, and double-checked weapons and gear. As they neared the jump zone, they removed all personal effects and handed them over to one of the pilots.

Slipping on his mask, Osten nodded his readiness to Scott after Dimitri situated his air respirator. It didn't take long and the entire team was ready.

One by one the men fell away into the cold, dark night. None of them knew if they would survive this mission or not, but each of them more than willing to do his job and put his life on the line.

Eight dark shapes hurtled through the night sky. Eventually, all eight parachutes were opened and they floated down into the waiting jungle. The separated team regrouped and with silent signals spread out, moving through the thick foliage of the jungle toward their intended targets.

Three nights later, short blasts of gunfire punctuated the jungle's natural symphony.

This time, nine people slinked through the trees to their rendezvous point. Their progress was slow for the ninth person was scared and couldn't see well at all. When they paused, hiding for the remainder of the raining night, their foes futilely searched high and low for them. The next day two helicopters landed in a large grassy field and picked up the waiting group.

Everyone was scruffy, sweaty, and tired, but all were alive and well.

Exhausted, Osten Scoleri closed his eyes as they flew home. The image of flawless sienna skin hovered before him as he fell asleep.

Twelve

It had been over a week and CJ was a little unsure of how to react. Osten hadn't called her outside the message she'd received after returning from her night out with the girls saying he would be gone for a while.

For a while she debated calling Dezarae and finding out what was going on, but she didn't want to seem clingy. Or suspicious.

So instead she threw herself into her work. Abigail had had a smug look on her face when she'd gone to the Winter Formal with Binh instead of Osten. That look still haunted her. CJ understood a mission always came first, but still it stung to go with her brother instead of the man she thought she was dating.

Stretching in her chair, CJ looked down at the papers she had left to grade. So far the lowest grade was a high B. She was extremely proud of her students. Looking out the window of her classroom, she groaned as her eyes fell upon the darkened evening.

"God, I miss summer." She began shoving papers into her bag, wanting to get home and take a long shower. Once her coat was on she locked her door and walked down the hall.

There was no one around, but she felt a chill run over her spine. *It feels like someone is watching me.* CJ walked faster, determined to get home, and quickly. As she barreled around the corner, she almost ran into the janitor, an older man named, Samuel.

"You okay, Ms. Jackson?" he asked as he reached out a hand to help steady her.

"I'm so sorry, Samuel. I didn't mean to run you over." She fought the need to turn around and check behind her.

But Samuel did, peering her and back at her face. "Someone bother you, Ms. Jackson? You look mighty scared."

"I just felt like someone was chasing me," she said on a forced laugh. "I guess I'm getting paranoid. Silly, huh?"

"No." He propped the mop against the wall. "Let me walk you out."

"I'm fine, really. Don't worry about it," she insisted, feeling more than a little embarrassed for her actions now.

"No. I insist. Beggin' your pardon, Ms. Jackson, but you seem awfully frightened for it to be just nothing. I would feel better knowing you got to your vehicle safely."

Chantoya didn't argue anymore, for she *would* feel much better having him beside her as she went. "If you're sure it won't be an imposition for you."

Samuel sent her a look like she was insane. "There is nothing that would make seeing you safely out an imposition. So get that thought out of your head," he ordered as he slipped on his jacket that was lying on the rim of a garbage can. "Let's get going."

"Thank you, Samuel," CJ said with heartfelt appreciation.

Together they walked out into the increasing darkness and cold. As the school door shut after them, neither was aware of the narrowed eyes that watched their departure. Through a pair of clenched teeth, a low hiss filled the empty hallway. His chance to grab her was gone for the day.

Samuel closed the door after she climbed in and remained outside until she finally drove off. He had a smile on his face as he went back inside the school. Chantoya Jackson was one of the few teachers who would even talk to him. Most of them pretended he didn't even exist.

They were just as bad, if not worse than the majority of the students. But CJ always had a smile ready for him. And she even knew his name; he would bet a month of his meager salary that most of the teachers at the school didn't know it.

Placing his coat back on the side of the trashcan, Samuel picked up his mop again. As he finished the hallway he was mopping, he halted. He could feel a chill as well, but couldn't place from where it was coming. There was a feeling of malice in the air. Shaking off his bad vibe, he rushed through the rest of the school and went home to his small apartment.



CJ smiled at the man across from her at the table. Her plans for going home and relaxing went to the wayside when she pulled into her complex and recognized the vehicle parked in a space beside hers.

"So, what do I owe this pleasure?" she asked as she picked up the glass of wine and took a sip.

"Do I really need a reason, Chipmunk?" the large man asked.

Rolling her eyes, CJ put down her drink and rested her chin on the backs of her hands. "Of course not, Ajani. But I don't usually get you without one or both of my other protectors. You know I love seeing you."

Her brother arched a brow at her and ate another bite of salad. "Well, I just wanted to see how things were going with you."

CJ snorted disbelievingly. "You could have called for that. What, y'all think I would be more apt to share news, if any, about my love life to one of you...as opposed to all three?"

Ajani didn't stop eating. "I have no desire to know a bloody thing about your love life, Chipmunk. A brother doesn't want to even imagine his sister doing things like that, much less want details." He looked up from his plate and gestured to her lasagna. "Eat."

Automatically picking up her fork, she ate some more. "This is wonderful, thanks for making dinner."

"Well, I must say, it wasn't as hard as I thought it would be."

With a wink, CJ retorted, "It rarely is difficult to open the box and put the dish in the preheated oven."

"You are a sassy one. You aren't too big for me to put over my knee, you know." Ajani glared at her playfully.

Holding up her hands in mock surrender, she laughed. "Sorry. It was almost too easy."

"I don't forget," he warned.

"I know. Now really, Ajani, what brings you here?"

This time he put down his fork and held her gaze with his. "I want to talk to you about Binh's birthday."

"Okay, what about it?"

"I think he wants to go back to Vietnam and Thurston and I were talking. It might be nice if we gave him the flight and hotel so he could spend his money on traveling around once he got there." He took

a drink of water. "However, we will have to do it soon, so he doesn't book something before hand."

"What a wonderful idea. Count me in," CJ said enthusiastically. "Just let me know how much I need to contribute."

"Okay, we weren't sure how you were on extra money, so we didn't want to assume anything."

Chantoya looked at her brother. She loved her family so much, it hurt. "I know I don't make much on my measly teaching salary, but I have a good savings. I'll be fine. Just let me know how much and when."

Ajani grinned, showing two rows of perfect white teeth. "You know we love you."

Wrinkling her nose, she smiled. "And I love the whole ratty bunch of you as well. Even when you invade my personal life!"

"Ratty? We're ratty?!" His dark eyes traveled down his immaculate suit and when he looked back up at her, one black eyebrow arched. "I am *not* ratty!"

"No, you're a snob." Ajani only dressed in the best clothes. Rarely was anything out of place on him. He was a proud man and it showed. His wonderful shape and awesome taste in clothing made him a very attractive person. But his personality made him even better.

Ajani opened his mouth to protest, only to shut it and shrug. "True. And we only snoop in your life 'cause you are our favorite sister."

Another very unladylike snort came from her mouth. "I'm y'all's *only* sister!"

"But our favorite one," he consoled her with a grin.

With an eye roll, CJ got up from the table and walked to the fridge to pull out the bowls of butterscotch pudding she had chilling in there. Placing one before her brother, she put the other by her seat. "I'd better be, for all the trouble you cause me."

"We cause? Whose name is Chipmunk? Do you know what those creatures do? Nothing but cause trouble." He laughed out loud at her expression. "But they are oh so cute when they are scampering up trees!"

"I do not scamper," she thundered affronted.

"Not anymore, but you used to. Lord, I remember trying to keep up with you; it took all my wits to keep you in sight!" He acted like it had been a horrible experience.

"Whatever," she growled as she dipped her spoon into the pudding and brought it to her mouth.

Later on, she kissed her brother on the cheek as he got ready to leave. "Thanks for such a lovely dinner, Ajani."

Returning the kiss, he grinned down at her. "Love ya, Chipmunk. Take care and I will let you know about Binh."

"Okay, drive safely." Her hand held the door as Ajani walked out into the hallway.

"I always do. Bye." He left, striding down the hall and disappearing from her view as she went back into her apartment.

Suddenly exhausted even more, CJ sat down on her couch. A faint beeping reached her ears and it took her a bit to figure out it was her cell phone, telling her she had a message.

Reluctantly she picked up her phone and dialed her voice mail. It was Dezarae; and just as she was dialing her number, the doorbell went off in her apartment. Snapping her phone shut, CJ hesitated. She was still a bit spooked from school and without her brother around, she wasn't sure she wanted to answer the door. Especially at ten at night.

Cautiously, she headed for the door and peered through the peephole. All she could see were balloons. *What the hell?* "Who is it?"

There was no answer and so she turned away, only for her doorbell rang again. This time she jerked the door open, ready to snap at the person on the other side. But her angry words died on her lips as she found herself staring through balloons and flowers into the dark sepia eyes of one Osten Scoleri.

"Forgive me?" Were the first words out of his mouth as he extended the flower and balloon display toward her.

CJ swung the door open further to admit him. "For what?" she asked as he entered the apartment. Her eyes followed him, taking in his black leather jacket and black jeans he wore.

Osten set the vase on the table. Turning to face the woman behind him, he allowed his eyes to roam over her figure, just as stunning as she was in his visions.

Dark purple pants and a lighter purple sweatshirt draped her form. Her hair was loose around her face, framing it gently. She wore no makeup and had never looked more beautiful.

"For not being on your arm at the Winter Formal Dance." He gathered her close in his arms and put his lips upon her temple. "I honestly wish I could have been with you."

Wrapping her arms around his waist, she inhaled his scent. "Me, too, but I had a very handsome man on my arm."

Osten tensed. "Really? Well I'm glad the Rock made time for you."

CJ laughed as she squeezed him tighter. "Well, I don't think Binh is that close to the Rock, but hey, I'm sure he will be happy to know you find him cute."

Osten breathed a sigh of relief. She had gone with her brother. "So you aren't mad at me?"

She shook her head. "I got your message saying you had a mission. I figured either you did or you didn't want to see me after you had gotten what you wanted from me."

Setting her away from him, Osten stared down at her, a mixture of shock and amazement in his eyes. "You don't honestly believe that do you? That I got what I was after and would just leave you alone?"

CJ was astounded by the amount of hurt she heard in his voice. Her eyes blinked rapidly as she gawked up at him. "I don't know," she said softly.

"Why would you say that?"

"I didn't have a clue as to what your reasons would be for not coming. I don't know your schedules for missions. I just didn't know what to think, so I left it alone." CJ cocked her head to the side. "Why does this bother you so?"

"Because I don't want you to ever think I would be so callous. Chantoya, what we shared was nothing I have ever had before with another. It is not something I would just toss by the wayside." His fingers brushed tenderly over her cheek. "It hurts to think you would think me capable of doing that to you."

She trembled at his touch. "I didn't want to presume anything."

Dropping his hands to her butt, he pulled her in close to his body. "Then presume this—I *want* to be with you. I think about you all the time. It was your face that kept me sane during this mission."

Chantoya smiled as she leaned back and looked at him. "What did I do that made God think I deserved a man like you in my life?"

Osten lowered his mouth until it rested directly over her full lips. "You were born sweetheart. And you are wrong, I am the blessed one."

Tracing the rim of his mouth with her tongue, she whispered, "Thank you for the flowers and balloons."

"I was going to bring chocolate, but I was in too much of a rush to get here to see you. Sorry."

"I don't want chocolates. I want you, Osten. Just you." Chantoya pushed the jacket off the broad shoulders of the man wearing it. He shrugged it off and tossed it over a nearby chair.

"And I want you. More than you will ever know." Osten picked her up and carried her gently over to the couch where he laid her upon the soft cushions and covered her with his own body.



"Nnnnnnnnn!" The wail filled the room, reverberating off the many monitors set up in there. "Why? Why would you let him touch you again?!" The man was shaking he was so angry.

"He has to die. He has violated you again; I won't sit back and let you allow him to do that." His muscular body flexed as he rolled his shoulders. "No. It is time to rid you of this man."

Standing abruptly, he moved to another wall that held an array of weapons. "I know you think you like him, but you are mine, CJ. Once was bad enough, but to flaunt him before me, to spread your legs for him...that is just unthinkable!" The voice dropped to a low hiss as he gazed over the selection before him.

"You belong to me and it's about fucking time you start acting like it!" he shouted as he slammed his fist home in the wall—the same fist that had busted the glass when he'd witnessed them sleeping together the first time.

"All of this irresponsibility is just going to make your transition harder." He shook his head. "I don't want it to be difficult for you, but you keep insisting on making me angry and allowing yourself to be defiled by the stink of another."

His eyes fell on a sniper rifle. That would be the way to go. "You couldn't just remain friends with him. Now I have to tell you who you can and can't talk to. I thought I could trust you."

Taking down the rifle, he held it close to his chest. "I thought you were different than other women. I thought you would keep my trust." He shook his head. "I should have known. Women can't be trusted; they are evil and need to be controlled at all times."

His face scrunched up like he was in pain. "Why! Why? You were such a good woman, the one who was going to prove everyone wrong. But *no*, you had to go and become a slut."

He kicked over a chair. "Why did you have to become a *slut?!'*"

The motions were automatic as he loaded bullets into the chamber. "You are mine, Chantoya. Mine!"

Thirteen

Osten and CJ made love one more time the next morning before she took her shower and left for work. As she pulled into the school parking lot, her phone rang.

"CJ," she said after she flipped it open. It was Dezarae calling for a dinner date. CJ walked into the school without really paying attention to her surroundings, and she hung up after they settled on the time, day, and place.

Because her mind was preoccupied, CJ failed to see the puddle of melted snow in the hall.

Whoosh!

Her feet fell out from beneath her and she headed for the floor.

Strong hands wedged themselves under her arms and stopped her descent. "Hang on, I got ya."

Swallowing her screech, CJ didn't struggle as the man helped her back up. "Thank you, Gordon."

He chuckled as he released his hold on her. "Glad I could help." Her savior knelt down and began to gather her scattered items. CJ squatted beside him and helped. "Sure you're okay?"

"A bit shaken up. I guess I was so lost in my thoughts I didn't pay attention." She shoved test papers back in her bag.

Holding out a few remaining papers, Gordon stared directly at her and said, "Well, be careful. We wouldn't want to lose you."

Slightly embarrassed, CJ smiled as she tried to take the papers from his grip. "Thanks for being around, Gordon."

His eyes warmed as he opened his gloved hand and let her take the papers. "You are so welcome."

CJ tried to focus on the fact she was kneeling in the hallway of the school where she taught. But there was difficulty in doing that. *When did Gordon become so attractive?* Her eyes landed on the small dimple that appeared in his right cheek as he smiled softly at her.

Blinking, CJ cleared her throat. *Jeez, CJ. The man is married!*

"You two planning on spending the whole day down there?" a sharp voice intruded.

Both of them glanced to see Marvin standing over them with a glare in his gaze. "Hadn't planned on it, Whittle," Gordon said in a less than civil tone.

Chantoya felt like she had been caught doing something wrong. Hand in the cookie jar, lusting over a married colleague; that kind of thing. She stood along with Gordon and switched her bag to the other hand. "Morning Marvin," she said politely.

"CJ," he said curtly. His cutting gaze swung around to fall on the other man there. "Don't you have a class to get to, Blake?"

Without hesitation, Gordon responded with the same amount of hostility. "Don't you have *another building* to be at Whittle?"

CJ glanced between the two men. *What was their problem?* Her mouth dropped as Marvin ground out, "Shouldn't you be callin' your wife...you *do* remember her, don't you?"

"What's your beef with me, Whittle?" Gordon asked, not biting at the taunt.

"You need to watch out who you pay such close attention to. I don't like you around Ms. Jackson."

CJ was astonished and outraged. "Excuse me?" she seethed. "What did you just say, Marvin?" Her hands planted themselves at her hips while her light pecan gaze shot daggers. "You have *absolutely* no right to say anything like that to Gordon! He is not only a fellow teacher, he is also a friend!"

A cadence began in the hall as her foot tapped on the floor. "I already have three brothers; and trust me, you aren't one of them—so kindly remember that!" Chest heaving with indignation, she took a deep breath and looked to Gordon. "Thank you for not letting me crack my skull open."

Shoving through them, CJ stomped down the hall and to her room. She wasn't around to witness the flames of animosity blaze hotter between the two men in the hall. After they finally went their separate ways, Samuel walked into view, chuckling, and mopped up the water.



"I can't believe he said that!" CJ fumed. "Like I need another man in my life dictating shit!" She took a swig of beer before stabbing her T-bone steak.

Her dinner companion laughed as she took a bite of her baked potato. "You must be pissed if you are eating like that."

Another healthy swallow of beer passed Chantoya's lips. "Shut up, Dez. I love steak and beer."

"I know, but I haven't seen you attack them with that type of vigor since...since that trucker said women couldn't possibly drive an eighteen wheeler."

CJ paused, another bite of steak heading toward her mouth. "I remember that chauvinist. I loved making him eat his words."

Both women laughed as they recalled the man's astounded expression when CJ had backed up her rig in half the time it had taken him to do it. "You're right, though, Dez. I don't eat like this anymore." CJ put down her fork and ran a hand across her face.

"Something else bothering you?" Dez took her fork and stabbed a chunk of steak from CJ's plate and ate it, ignoring the raised eyebrow.

"No," CJ sighed. "Well, maybe...hell, I don't know." She reached for her beer and took a smaller drink.

"Everything okay with you and Osten?"

"Yes, I guess." CJ put her attention on the bottle. "I'm falling for him, Dezarae. And it scares the crap out of me."

Dez drank her wine. "I'm not that far away if you ever want to talk about it, and I promise none of it will get back to Ross."

"I know," CJ sighed again.

"But that's not it." Dez frowned as she looked at her friend. "CJ, you're scaring me. What's wrong?"

Though she didn't want to answer, CJ knew Dez wouldn't drop it until she did. "I feel like someone's following me. I can't shake the feeling." CJ met Dez's concerned look and shrugged lightly. "I'm just getting paranoid. I'm sure it's nothing." She sent a smile across the table. "Tell me about you. How's everything going?"

As the two friends parted company that evening, Dezarae was still worried. Worried enough that when her husband asked how the evening had gone, she didn't even pretend to be affronted. Dez told him about CJ's fear and suspicion. And that night, while Ross lay in bed

holding the woman he loved, he made a mental note to pass the information along to Osten.



"What the *hell* do you think you are doing, Osten?!" CJ's screech filled her small apartment.

Standing on the chair in the kitchen, Osten swallowed. He knew how it looked. There was a miniature camera in his hand and a vent near his shoulder with the cover removed.

"It's not what it looks like. I found this," Osten began, and sighed when he saw the tears well up in her eyes.

"Then explain what it isn't." She was also furious. How could he? "You found it and what...thought it would go great up there?"

"No. CJ, I'm taking it down."

"Great!" she yelled. "Positive now about who comes and goes in this place? What were you thinking? Tape her? Sell it?" Her eyes grew wide. "Oh, God, you got the time in the kitchen here?!"

"CJ, please. Let me explain."

"Hell, no! Aside from you, only my brothers come here. Just get out!" her voice cracked. "Take your fucking camera and get out!"

Climbing down, Osten moved toward her, stopping when she shrank back from him. "I wouldn't do this to you, CJ. You have to believe that."

"Get out. Between you and my brothers, I'd bet on you leaving it here." Wiping the traitorous tears away, she crossed her arms and tried to look brave.

"Okay," he sighed. "You're too irrational right now to listen to reason." Her eyes narrowed. "I have no reason to spy on you, CJ. You know that." He moved away and slid his jacket on. "I'll give you a few days to calm down before I come by or call."

"Don't bother," she hissed, stomping past him to the door and yanking it open. "I'm sure I'll still be *irrational*."

Way to go, Scoleri. Bad choice of words. "Think about it, Chantoya. Why would I sabotage what we have?" He stepped into the hall and watched her.

"I seriously doubt you planned on getting caught. Oh, and it's had. What we *had*." CJ slammed the door in his face and engaged the locks.



"Interesting," the man said as he watched CJ crying on her bed. "Very interesting." A sadistic smile crossed his face as he witnessed her slam her door on the man who had discovered one of his cameras.

"At least it was just the kitchen one."

His left hand freed his cock from his boxers. He sat there and jacked himself off as he observed CJ cry on her bed. At the last minute he put a cloth up to catch his stream of ejaculate.

His Chantoya still lay on her bed. One finger reached toward her. "Look at it this way; you may have saved his life."

Standing, the man walked to his shower and got cleaned up for his night out on the town.



Chantoya moped around the house. She ate a half gallon of ice cream and watched old romantic movies. She fell asleep watching *The King and I* with Yul Brenner.

A loud pounding at her door woke her. Lurching off the couch, a very disheveled CJ opened the door and stared through puffy and red-rimmed eyes at her brothers. All three of them.

"Jesus, Chipmunk, you look like hell. What happened?" Thurston asked as he moved into the apartment without waiting for an invitation. The other two men followed.

Three sets of masculine eyes roamed over her apartment. They took in the dishes in the sink and on the counters. The empty and sideways ice cream container, the partial bowl of cheese puffs and some snack mix.

"You okay, little sis?" Ajani asked, frowning at her.

"What do you guys want?" she grouched.

"It's Saturday," Binh said as if it should explain everything.

"Which means I have a day off. What are y'all doing here?" Tightening the blanket around her, she stumbled drunkenly back to the couch where she fell face first onto it and covered her head.

The three brothers frowned as they looked at each other and back to Chantoya. Something was horribly wrong if she was acting like this.

CJ felt herself being lifted. One whiff and she knew it was Ajani who carried her; he wore a very deep, woodsy scent. He placed her on the bed and left her there, closing the door behind him.

When she woke again, she smelled eggs and bacon. Rolling off her bed she stumbled to the door and headed up the hall. All three of her brothers sat around her kitchen table eating breakfast.

Binh glanced at her before looking back at his plate. "What?" she snapped, not realizing why she was being so mean. "What are you still doing here?"

"Fix yourself a plate and sit down," Ajani's voice ordered.

"What is it with every fucking male trying to order me around?" she hollered as she threw her hands up in the air.

"Chantoya Willow Jackson, mind your tongue!" Ajani thundered.

Wide-eyed, Chantoya did just that. Ajani didn't shout often. Jaw clenched she took a seat at the table. Thurston and Binh avoided her gaze.

Ajani set his fork down beside his plate and looked at her. He never said a word, just waited for her to raise her head and meet his gaze.

Slowly CJ lifted her eyes and put them on the eldest member of the family. There was nothing but love in his gaze. "I'm sorry, Ajani," she said.

"What is going on for you to be acting like this?" When she didn't say anything, he arched a brow and waited her out.

Ajani won. But then, Ajani always won. "I'm just frustrated. I feel like someone has been following me and watching me." CJ left out finding Osten with the camera in hand. "And I just broke it off with Osten." Her head thumped on the tabletop. "So forgive me if I'm less than happy to see anyone."

The three men exchanged glances. They didn't like the sound of this. "What do you mean you think someone is following you?" Thurston demanded.

"Just what I said. I'm losing it. I'm just tired and need a vacation. Desperately." Shoving back from the table, CJ walked over to the stove and fixed herself a plate of breakfast. "Please, I don't want to talk about this right now. I need to work through it."

With her filled plate in hand, CJ sat down and picked at the still warm scrambled eggs. She kept her eyes on her plate although it was

easy to tell they were watching her. The silence became almost overwhelming.

Regardless of how much she loved her brothers, all she wanted was to be left alone to wallow in her own personal misery – something she had in abundance at the present moment. She could feel the tears and bitter taste of betrayal surfacing all over again.

Everyone noticed how her hand trembled as she reached for a glass of juice. Still her brothers never said a word.

“Would you quit looking at me like I’m about to have a psychotic breakdown? Just say whatever is on your minds, already!”

Binh leaned back in his chair and laced his lean fingers behind his head. “I think you need to come with me to Vietnam.”

CJ’s head snapped up as she stared at the youngest brother. “What did you say?”

“I think you should come with me to Vietnam. Take some personal time and go. You work way too hard. You never take time off and you are running yourself ragged.”

She opened her mouth only to shut it when he shook his head at her. “No. I got my gift from you all and I am touched. But I think now you should be with me as well.”

Her eyes took in the faces of her other siblings. “Tell him. I have to work. Make a living and all that.”

“Actually, we think it’s a wonderful idea. And now that we’ve seen you, our decision is even more solidified.” Thurston looked at her as he leaned massive arms on the table. “You need to get away. Get away and sort some things out.”

Chestnut eyes met and looked at each other set around her table. “I would love to go with you, Binh.” All three brothers smiled until she said, “But, I can’t go until Christmas vacation. I can’t bail out on my students just because I’m having a crisis.”

“I’ll make the reservations. Email me your dates of the break and I will go from there.” Binh picked up his coffee mug and drank the rest of it.

“Okay, now would you guys please tell me what you are doing here?” She looked at them all again. “I know I’m a mess and I know my life seems to have gone into the crapper, but normally you don’t show up this early on a Saturday.”

Ajani stared at her. “Do you really not know?”

CJ shook her head. Closing her eyes she tried to remember what she had forgotten. All she could see was Osten and his betrayal. "I haven't a clue."

The three men grew somber. "Chipmunk," Thurston said gently. "Today is the day we go to the cemetery."

CJ was ashamed; she had totally forgotten. She took in the suits her brothers wore and shook her head. "I am so sorry. I'll be ready to go in a few moments." The tears of shame were streaming down her face before she made it out of the kitchen. *How could I have forgotten something so important? I am the worst daughter ever.*

Fourteen

Osten was in a foul mood. The image of Chantoya's face as she accused him of spying on her never gave him a moment's rest. Then again, neither did her parting shot as she slammed the door in his face.

What we had.

Had. As in past tense, not to have again. Ever. Osten swore and kicked the standing heavy bag in his apartment. Never. Finished. Over. Chapter closed.

All words of finality streamed through his head as he fought the bag. Sweat ran in rivulets down his face, and still he pressed on. Punch after kick after punch after kick.

"Aaarrgh!" he shouted as he delivered one last kick to the bag before sagging against it. Chest heaving with exertion, Osten grabbed a towel and wiped away the dampness on his face.

Snatching up the water bottle, he took a swig before staring at his reflection in a wall mirror. The person who stared back at him wasn't one he was proud of. There was bitterness in his gaze that hadn't been there when he'd been with CJ.

Two days. Two days had passed since she ordered him out of her apartment. *Out of her life*, his brain taunted. "I've given you the weekend, CJ. I can't give you any more time. I need you back in my life."

It was Monday. He knew where she was and how to reach her. Heading for his shower, Osten tried to come up with of plan to get her to hear out his explanation.

When Ross had told him what CJ had told Dezarae about her suspicions of being followed, his body had kicked into protect mode.

He'd merely been doing a cursory check of her apartment when he'd spotted a loose screw in the vent.

What had started as him tightening the screw had turned into something else entirely. Seeing the camera had made him livid. Someone was spying on his woman.

The only thing on his mind was getting rid of that camera — an act she'd walked in on. He didn't fault her line of thought, but he'd hoped for the benefit of doubt. The devastation that had filled her features had told him otherwise. Not right then.

Of course, upset himself, he hadn't been thinking too clearly and just had stepped in it with his idiotic choice of words. Then, not only had there been hurt on her beautiful face, but also anger and betrayal.

So he had left, though vowing to himself to find out how many there were in her home and who had placed them there. Also, Osten *would* gain CJ's trust back.

Walking out of his bathroom clad in nothing but a towel, Osten headed over to his breakfast bar where the camera was. It mocked him, laughed at him, challenged him.

Leaning against the edge, he let his dark eyes move over the object. He had already checked it for prints and the only ones on it were his own. Nevertheless, he just had to figure out who was doing this to Chantoya.

This person was no idiot. He or she was smart enough not to leave prints and the camera's signal was untraceable right now.

It was bouncing around through so many places he couldn't pin point where it ended. Hell, his friend had said the signal might have ended before it really did and the perp just continued to let it bounce to throw people off track, should he or she get discovered.

"I have to get into her apartment and find out if there are any more." Pushing away from the bar, Osten headed for his bedroom and got dressed. His body never relaxed; all he saw was CJ in danger. Chantoya was his and whatever threatened her had to deal with him.

Zippering up his leather jacket, Osten shut the door to his apartment behind him. "Come hell or high water, CJ, I will protect you. Whether you like it or not." Then he jogged down the steps and climbed into his car. He had something to do.



CJ ate lunch in the cafeteria. It was her day to help watch out in the lunchroom. Her appetite was less than healthy and she merely picked at her salad. Every now and then she would shake her head at a student who was trying to start some trouble, but otherwise she spent the hour keeping to herself.

Apparently her face screamed of her desire to be left alone, for even Abigail steered clear of her. As the bell rang, CJ stood, tossed her food away, and headed back to her classroom.

The day muddled along, and she found herself swallowing back tears that continuously threatened to fall. As the final bell of the day rang, CJ sent a forced smile to her students. Gathering her stuff, she walked out of the building and into the cold afternoon.

Her light gaze picked out a familiar vehicle that waited in the parking lot. Ignoring the lurch her heart gave, CJ looked away and headed for her own mode of transportation. Unlocking the door, she climbed in and locked the doors behind her.

“What the hell are you doing here, Osten Scoleri?” Her words were low as she started her engine.

Determined not to give him another look, she put her car in gear and drove out of the lot. Instead of going home, CJ headed for a park. She pulled into a spot and shut off the engine. For a moment, she just sat in silence.

With a sigh, she grabbed her coat and got out. Locking the vehicle, she began to walk along the path. She passed schoolchildren, couples, dog walkers. Each step she took giving her more and more time to sort out her muddled feelings.

Time seemed to lose all meaning as she wandered throughout the park. Finding a nice quiet and secluded place, Chantoya sat down on the bench. The cold wood seemed to immediately chill her body about five to ten degrees. A few ducks swam aimlessly around in the small pond before her.

Pulling the collar of her coat up higher around her face, CJ released a huge sigh. *Finally, a moment to relax!* Readjusting herself, soon CJ was resting her chin on her knees as her legs were drawn up to her chest, gloved hands latched across her shins.

She held that position as her body slowly became acclimated to the chill in the wintry air. The vapor from her breathing rose up and around her and entertained her blissfully blank mind for a short while.

Another large sigh left her and her eyes drifted shut. Suddenly, she was so tired, she just wanted to sleep. CJ fought to stay awake,

knowing it wasn't the smartest idea to fall asleep outside, especially when one was tucked away from everyone's eyes.

Her body felt extremely heavy. Eyelids were very hard to keep open. They were only slightly jarred open when her hands fell away from her legs as they slid off the bench and hit the ground.

"Damn," she slurred and struggled to remain sitting. "What the hell is wrong with me?"

Rolling her head on her neck, CJ took several deep breaths of the cold air, hoping it would wake her up a bit. It barely helped. Squeezing her eyes shut and forcing them open, she began the walk back to her vehicle. "It was a good idea when I left the car to walk this far," she mumbled. "But now...I don't feel like I am going to make it back."

She wobbled a bit as she fought to find her stride. Ten steps later and CJ knew there was no way in hell she was going to make it back to her vehicle. Slumping against a tree, CJ pulled her cell phone out of her coat and pressed a few buttons. Her normally husky voice was barely discernable to the person on the other end of the line; and when she hung up the phone, CJ lost the battle to stay awake.

CJ slowly opened her eyes. The vision was a little hazy; but as her eyes began to focus, she noticed she was in her own room. Yawning, she managed to climb out of her bed.

She realized she had on no shoes but otherwise she was fully dressed. Hushed voices and the smell of chicken reached her nose. Instead of going toward the voices, she headed for the bathroom where she splashed cold water on her face.

Feeling better, CJ headed up the hall and found both Ross and Dezarae in her kitchen. They were speaking softly between one another, but the friction between them was apparent. "What's going on?" CJ asked in a low voice.

Discussion halted as both people looked over at her. Pinned by both brown and gray eyes, CJ froze. Her own danced between them and she questioned again, "What's the matter with the two of you?"

Dezarae stepped toward her after only casting one more glare toward her husband. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay. A little queasy, but okay," Chantoya admitted. "Hey, Ross." She walked over and kissed her friend on the cheek. "Thanks for coming to get me."

Dezarae's eyes narrowed. "You don't remember anything? The hospital?"

With a frown, CJ sat down in the chair that Ross pulled out. "No. I don't remember anything like that. Why was I at the hospital?" She closed her eyes. "Am I okay?"

"You were sleeping when we got there, CJ." Dez sat down beside her and put a hand on her arm. Her dark eyes continually roamed over her friends face. "Your voice was so quiet on the phone; I didn't know what was going on. Ross ended up driving me to the park. You never answered our shouts."

"Sweetie, calm down," Ross's thick drawl broke in.

Dez swallowed and took a deep breath. "You were slumped over against a tree when we got there, so Ross carried you to the vehicles and he drove to the hospital. You did wake up for a little while, but then went back to sleep." Her normally gentle eyes grew hard. "There was Rohypnol in your system."

"A rufie?" Chantoya was totally confused. "Are you sure? Who the hell would want to drug me?"

Ross spoke up. "That's what we want to know. There was a detective who asked you some questions and you told him the same thing, you didn't know. What did you do after work today?" He lowered his strong frame into a vacant chair.

Shaking her head in amazement and complete mystification, CJ began tearing up a paper napkin that was on the table. "I finished work and went to the park. That's it." Looking into Ross's probing gaze, she reiterated, "I didn't do anything else."

His gray eyes narrowed. "Anything seem unusual to you? I mean aside from that camera." Ross stood in a quick motion and began scanning the room they were in. "Have you checked for more cameras?"

CJ felt her heart jump. "I didn't think Osten had time to plant more than the one I caught him with."

"Baby Boy didn't plant anything. He found it," Ross immediately said.

Shoving back from the table, Chantoya couldn't contain her scoff of disbelief. "Y'all are friends; of course you'd say that."

Ross spun around and pinned his eyes on her. "Yes we are friends, brothers even. Which is why I can say with utmost certainty he didn't plant it. If he says he found it, then he found it."

CJ was a little unnerved by the look on Ross's face. "Whatever," she said, trying to go for nonchalance.

Dezarae stepped in before her husband could say another word. "Let's just deal with the issue of how she got drugged."

Ross nodded, knowing his wife had the right idea. His sharp gaze watched CJ as she slumped back down in the chair, exhaustion filling her face. "Perhaps you should get some sleep," he suggested. He remained standing by the kitchen entrance. "We can focus on this again tomorrow."

"I am feeling a bit out of it still." CJ heaved a huge sigh and got up again. "Thanks for everything, both of you." She leaned down and pressed another kiss to Dez's cheek.

"I'm staying the night." Dezarae crossed her arms and dared either of them to defy her.

Halting, CJ looked down at her before nodding. "Okay —"

"You go to bed, I know where everything is." Dez stood and gently shoved her friend towards her room.

As CJ waved over her shoulder and shuffled back down the hall to her bed, she caught the fevered whispers between the couple in her apartment. Dez demanded he keep his mouth shut about the whole incident to Osten, and Ross obviously disagreed.

She felt her body fading even as she brushed her teeth and washed her face. CJ groaned in pleasure as she sank into her bed and pulled the warm comforter over her body. Tomorrow was time enough to worry about what happened; right now, it was all about the sleep.



The whiskey sour sat untouched on the table. The call to drink it, to drown his feelings, was strong. Why couldn't he just let it go? Why?

"Because I was supposed to have had her by now!" he shouted to the room.

He slammed his hand down on the table. "Damn it, Chantoya. Why didn't you go straight home? You always go straight home on Mondays. What the hell were you thinking? You could have killed yourself." A quick movement and he downed his drink at once.

"And that," he growled in a low tone, "would really upset me."

He went into his private screening room and watched as CJ climbed into bed. His eyes moved to another monitor and watched as the man in the apartment left. So it was just his Chantoya and that other woman.

The desire to go back over there was strong. He had gone, but when he hadn't seen her vehicle he just remained in his car. His anger had erupted when he'd seen her SUV pull in and a man climb out of the driver's seat. It was a different man than that bastard she had slept with.

His anger had evaporated the moment he opened the back door and assisted her out. Another black woman had come over to help escort Chantoya inside. That was when it had hit him why she hadn't been home. Something had gone wrong with his plan.

A fleeting concern for her wellbeing had crossed his mind. Very fleeting for he had been driving away before someone decided he didn't look like he belonged there.



"Jesus, Ross, she could have died!" Osten hollered as he bent his fork.

"I know." Ross agreed.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Osten's deep voice dropped to a low, menacing tone.

"We don't know. All I know is what we were told there was a trace of Rohypnol in her blood." Ross took a drink of his water.

Osten's body was rigid. There was a monster out there who wanted to hurt his Chantoya. Closing his eyes, he slowly opened them and Ross saw the relentless face of the SEAL he trusted at his back during any op.

"Is she okay, Ross?" Behind the deadness of his gaze there sat concern.

"She's sleeping it off. Dez is staying with her tonight." Ross picked up a fork full of pasta and looked at it before setting it back down. "She'll be okay, Osten."

"I don't understand why she didn't come to me," he muttered.

"CJ has known Dez much longer."

"And she is pissed at me," Osten said.

"Give her some time."

"I don't know if I have any time to give; someone is after her and I'll be *damned* if I let someone hurt her."

Fifteen

Chantoya was on edge as she drove to work. Worrying her bottom lip as she maneuvered through the streets of Virginia Beach, she fought down the remaining bit of nausea she still had. As she pulled into the parking lot of the school, she sat there for a moment after turning the SUV off.

Heaving a sigh of resignation, she flipped open her cell phone and scrolled through the list of contacts. Her heart constricted as she saw Osten's name. CJ scrolled the total list twice before she made up her mind and pressed the call button.

By the time she headed into the interior of the high school her phone was off and she strove to look as put together as she normally did. Mikhail was waiting for her and she felt comfort in having him at her side going to her classroom.

The entire day, Chantoya was tense. When she needed something to drink, she broke down and got something out of the vending machine. She figured that if someone was going to attempt another drugging, taking something out of a vending machine would be a way to thwart that person. Still, she hesitated before drinking it.

As she walked out of the school at the end of the day, it was no surprise to see the man waiting beside her vehicle. Ajani Jackson stood there, his strong form bundled up against the cold weather. "Hello, Ajani," CJ said softly.

His observant, dark eyes held hers before briefly moving over her as if checking on her wellbeing. They assessed the deepest part of her, a part she wasn't ready to look at yet. When CJ sniffed once, softly, his powerful arms widened and opened in silent invitation.

There was no hesitation as she walked into them. The comforting smell of his cologne and the strength in his embrace made her feel so much better.

"You should have called one of us," he said as he moved her closer to the warmth of his body.

CJ couldn't say a single word as the tears erupted again. Her fingers tightened in the wool of his coat. The wind picked up, sending wave after wave of biting cold through them both. Still he held her in silence.

Ajani looked around the school lot and made a decision. "They are waiting for us at my house. Let's go."

Wiping her eyes and nose with the embroidered monogrammed handkerchief Ajani offered, she nodded her understanding. "I'll be right behind you."

Instead of answering her, Ajani walked her around to the passenger side and assisted her in the vehicle. Moments later, his large frame settled behind the wheel and he soon had them driving down the road to his house.

Her brothers played twenty questions with her before they seemed semi-appeased. Soon she was curled up on the couch, covered by a warm blanket and drinking hot cocoa topped with large colored marshmallows, whipped cream, and shaved cocoa.

Each one of her larger-than-life brothers sat around her. In their hands they had a drink as well. Slowly she met each gaze. Ajani's medium brown ones, Binh's darker brown ones, and Thurston's intense blue ones.

"And so what do we do now?" Binh asked. Everyone knew what he wanted to do—find the person and kick his ass three ways from Sunday. The other brothers echoed that sentiment.

"I'm just going to have to be much more careful," CJ said with more calm than she felt. "Keep my drinks near me at all times."

"What is the school doing?" Ajani questioned.

"I don't know. I informed them what happened, and they were going to let others know. But it isn't exactly going to be easy to find out who did it." She took a long drink of her cocoa.

Thurston looked at her and asked, "Who do you think did this?"

CJ didn't even know she had captured her lower lip in her teeth and had begun to worry it. Did she feel strongly enough about what she had concluded about Osten? Strongly enough to accuse him?

What about what Ross had said? Could she trust him, or was he just sticking up for a friend?

"Chipmunk?" Thurston waved his hand in front of her. "Who do you think did this?"

Blinking rapidly she avoided his gaze for a while. "I...I don't know."

The three brothers looked at one another but didn't dispute her claims. It took a bit of convincing, but they finally agreed to let her go home, alone.



Osten swore as he looked at the cameras before him, his body rigid with anger as he envisioned this pervert watching his Chantoya.

Who was this fuck?!

He had pulled cameras out of every room in her place, including ones in the bathroom directed at the shower and toilet, so the snoop could watch her every second of everyday.

Glancing down at his watch, Osten noted the time and realized he needed to go. Cracking open the door, he glanced up and down the hall before he picked up the box and left.

On his way home, he swung by the house of a friend and dropped off the cameras to see what could be picked up from them. Then as he turned onto General Booth Boulevard, he pondered on his next move.

It was as if his car made up his mind for him, for it veered off onto the road that took him to her apartment complex. He parked and waited for her to return from wherever she was. There was no way he wasn't going to talk to her. He had to know how she was doing.

He waited throughout the setting of the sun. As the temperature dropped he still sat motionless and kept his eyes on her parking spot. It was well after ten when he saw her get out of her brothers' SUV and go into the complex.



Knock. Knock. Knock.

On the other side of the thick door, CJ froze as the sound echoed throughout her living room. Her palms grew damp and she felt the

beads of sweat beginning to form across her forehead. *Damn it! I don't deserve to be scared in my own home!*

CJ's throat grew dry and the knocking came again. Her knees almost gave out as she heard a deep voice call out to her through the door.

"CJ, come on. Open up."

Slowly she cracked it open, leaving the chain in place. Osten stood on the other side staring at her. His eyes were guileless and yet full of concern. "What?" Her voice still shook. "What do you want?"

"Let me in, CJ." His deep voice flowed in through the crack and over her body.

It was totally unexplained and yet, CJ felt the sting of tears wash over her. She craved to be held in his embrace. Her brothers had made her feel safe, but she knew it would pale in comparison to how the arms from this man would feel.

He stood there, one hand deep in the pocket of his dark-gray slacks while the other rested against the doorjamb. His long sleek coat hung past his knees and covered the majority of his navy blue turtle-neck. Those dark, cocoa eyes were totally centered upon her.

Chantoya opened and then shut her mouth. She didn't want to argue with him. She wanted to be held by him, kissed by him. Made to feel safe, special, and loved by him. Closing the door slightly she undid the chain before swinging it back open.

He strode through the door; each step demonstrated the raw power his body contained. While she closed the door behind him, he removed his leather trench and tossed it causally over the back of the chair she had positioned by the door.

Osten turned his head and stared at the woman who was facing away from, seemingly staring off into space. His eyes traveled over the form-fitting workout pants she wore, that were the same shade of red as the streak in her hair. They moved up and took in the white sweatshirt that covered the top half of her gorgeous body.

Her hair was free and he could see the red streak of dyed hair as it intermingled with the darker strands. As he watched her, his observant gaze took in the way her slight body seemed to tremble, with what he wasn't entirely positive, but he would find out.

He waited for her to turn around and face him. The uncertainty in her eyes rocked him to the core. One step brought him closer to her.

As her eyes widened, Osten didn't slow; he stopped immediately before her and gathered her into his arms.

"I'm so sorry, baby. I'm so sorry," he murmured as his hands rubbed her back.

"I couldn't walk on my own," she began blubbering. "Someone put Rohypnol in my system." Her fingers clutched him tighter. "I don't understand why."

Osten had to forcibly relax his body as her words instantly inflamed his protective instincts again. He had an idea why someone would do that to her and it had to do with the cameras he had found. *Relax, man, relax. She's in your arms, now.*

"Why didn't you call me? Why didn't you tell me what happened?" Osten dropped his head so he was nuzzling her hair. Like usual, the smell she wore wound itself around him and escorted him deeper into her web.

With a soft sniff, CJ pulled back and looked up at him with a totally surprised expression on her face. "Why would I call you?"

His expression remained blissfully blank as he stared at her. "Because you are important to me and I hope I am important to you." He shook his head slightly. "But maybe not."

"Don't act all stupid," she admonished, pushing him further away. "I had no idea where you were, if you were busy. I knew Dez would most likely be available to help me." Her eyes hardened for a second. "Besides, I still haven't forgiven you for trying to put that camera in here."

Osten refused to allow her to maintain a distance between them. A low growl erupted from his chest as he yanked her back into his embrace. "I didn't try to plant anything. I know what it looked like, but damn it, Chantoya, that isn't me. Not with you!"

Her body trembled with the rumbles that rolled from his chest as he spoke. She couldn't step back, for his arms were like vices around her. Giving into the inevitable, CJ collapsed against him.

The second Osten realized he was feeling her total surrender, he offered up a silent prayer to God. Her trust in him made him feel invincible and he knew even more, if that were possible, there was nothing he wouldn't do to keep her safe.

Reaching to the switch that was behind her, Osten turned off the light so the apartment was enveloped in darkness. Tonight she was wearing a subtle tropical smell; it made the cold weather outside

obsolete. He wanted to bury himself in her — heart, body, and mind. Everything about her called out to him.

His dark eyes closed and he just held her, kept Chantoya Willow Jackson close to his heart. His nose buried deep in her silken hair, he committed this moment to memory.

I know we can work this out, baby. I know we can. Osten released her when she made a motion to leave his embrace. Still, nothing on the face of this earth could stop the grin that filled his features as her soft hand took his and pulled him down the hall to her bedroom.



Broken glass, twisted metal, and paint chips were all over the floor. Every single monitor was broken in some way. There were holes in the wall made by fists and other objects.

The man leaned heavily on the bat that was in one hand. His chest heaved with exertion and his eyes were dark with uncontrollable rage. As he looked around his place he felt another wave of rage building within him. Not only for the fact had he lost his visual on his CJ, but also because his plans had gone awry.

Eyes flashed in anger as the fingers around the bat, clenched and unclenched numerous times, not sure of what to do. Finally the man gave into the fury that filled his strong body and began to swing the bat again.

Busted items were smashed even smaller as he delivered blow after blow. Holes enlarged from the swings shattering into the drywall time and time again.

This time when it was over, the man sank to the floor with exhaustion. With the anger depleted he really didn't have much left within him for the moment. So he sat there, among the tornado-stricken room. His eyes drifted closed as he fought for clarity and the answer for what needed to be done next.



Osten rolled over in bed and hit an empty spot where there used to be another body. Chantoya was missing. Sitting up immediately, he looked at the clock on the nightstand. Three in the morning.

He climbed out of the bed and pulled on his pants, zipping but not buttoning them. Barefoot, he moved silently up the short hall

through the dark. His eyes found her sitting in silence and illuminated by the faint light from the lamp across the room.

She was curled up on the couch. A crocheted quilt wrapped around her as she seemed to stare off into nothingness. Osten leaned against the corner while he watched her.

She was at war with herself. He was able to tell from the strained and pinched look her normally serene face held. His steps were sure, even if his heart wasn't as he walked toward her and sat down beside her.

They didn't say anything to one another as he gathered her close and tucked her body into his. Osten kissed the top of her head as she curled easily into him. The arm he had draped over her allowed his hand to run idly up and down her arm.

"This doesn't change anything," CJ spoke softly.

Eyes that were almost closed flew back open again. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, we aren't fixed." She rolled her shoulder when his hand stopped moving. "I have to figure out some things."

Those words didn't exactly bode well to Osten's ears. Instead of responding verbally, he wrapped his other arm around the front of her, latching his fingers.

Tilting his head, Osten rested his cheek against the soft hair on her head. His ears picked up on the wind as it increased in force and rattled the windows. They also were tuned into the woman in his embrace and told him when she had fallen back to sleep.

With a tenderness that revealed the depth of his emotions, Osten carefully maneuvered her into his embrace and carried her back down the hallway to the bed they were sharing.

Once CJ was tucked back in, the quilt was refolded, and his pants were removed, Osten slid beneath the covers and gathered her slumbering body to his. Soon, the room was filled with the deep and even breath that accompanied heavy, restful slumber.

CJ awoke to the smell of coffee. Her eyes opened and saw Osten in the doorway holding a mug.

"*Buongiorno, la bella addormentata.*" Osten strolled into her bedroom, totally dressed and looking all together cheery. One hand extended the drink to her.

Eagerly accepting the coffee, CJ inhaled the fragrant aroma, then arched her brow and grumbled, "Morning. You are too frickin' happy.

And what the hell did you say to me?" She positioned her body up against the headboard, making sure the sheet was tucked over her breasts.

The bed dipped as he sat down beside her. One hand brushed the hair back from her face. "I said good morning, sleeping beauty," he responded, before leaning in to kiss her lightly.

His touch combined with his words caused her to tremble. Pulling back from the tantalizing feel, CJ focused on her coffee. Her hand shook slightly, but it was enough that Osten noticed.

He captured her chin between his fingers. "Trust me, Chantoya. I didn't add anything to your coffee aside from sugar." *It kills me to think she doesn't trust me.*

Chantoya's eyes widened, but she put the mug to her lips and drank.

"You love your coffee, don't you?" he teased gently, spying the tiny grin that appeared on her face.

A larger smile graced her features, banishing the earlier scowl, and she took another drink. "I could live on coffee."

Osten's dark gaze never left her face. "Well, food has been known to help with survival."

"Perhaps," she said as she placed the mug on her beside table. "But I would die happy with coffee." CJ got out of bed and slipped on her green satin robe draped across the foot of her bed.

He envied the way the material glided along the contours of her body, touched the skin that rivaled the softest creature in existence. His tongue wiped along his lower lip as he watched her walk to the bathroom with her natural and sensual grace.

"Lucky fuckin' robe," he muttered.

CJ heard him but didn't stop walking. A smile filled her face as she entered the bathroom to get ready for the day.

Osten might have wished to stay beside her all day, but he had to go to work as well. So shoving down his baser instincts, he helped her into the already running SUV, kissed her, and watched her drive away.

Sixteen

A sadistic grin crossed the man's face as he held the vial up to the light. Perfect. It was all set. Soon, school would be letting out for the Christmas holiday and then, then Chantoya Jackson would be his.

Quickly, he unpacked the rest of the box, making sure each glass container was in no way damaged. His dwelling, which had been a destructive mess once he had lost visual in her apartment, was once again clean and organized.

Twelve tubes were ultimately in the box and soon they were in a safe and temperature-controlled environment. He smiled as he cut down the box and placed it in the recycling bin.

Moving toward a table full of photos, he looked at the striking cabin in each of them. "Perfect," he muttered to the room. "This is just perfect." Dark eyes were almost gentle as his mind formed an image of Chantoya being exceedingly happy with him and their numerous children.

Gathering up the photos, he walked to the shredder and put each of them through the crosscutting teeth. The face lost the gentle expression as he nodded. "All is ready for us, sweetheart. Everything is waiting for our new life to begin...together."

The chime of his clock let him know he had to go. Slipping on his large jacket, the man walked out of his home and got into his vehicle. School was never bad when you got to see the other half of your soul.



CJ stood in the back of the room and listened to the principal talk to them about some issues in the holiday show they were present-

ing. She didn't want to be here, she wanted to be back at her apartment packing for her trip.

Tonight over dinner, she would tell Osten she was leaving for nine days to go to Vietnam. She knew he had been hoping to spend some time with her during her vacation. However, she believed it best she get away for a while. And this was a perfect chance to do just that.

Regardless, she just didn't want to be here. She had gotten all her required shots, her passport was ready — hell, *she* was ready. Chantoya shifted as she tried to give the speaker the attention she knew he deserved. If she required her students to give her their undivided attention, then she should do no less when she was the listener.

Running her gaze around the room, she noticed Marvin watching her intently and in a way that was very unsettling. Normally a woman who didn't back down from anything, CJ blinked and looked away from him.

Chantoya refused to look in Marvin's direction for the rest of the morning meeting. As it broke, she left swiftly, stopping only when another biology teacher talked to her.

Her day passed slowly. The upcoming vacation occupied more and more of her thoughts. If her students noticed, they were nice enough not to comment upon anxious fidgeting.

The final bell of the day rang and as her students filed out the door, she gathered her own items. After changing into running clothes in the back of her room, CJ walked towards the front door.

"I know what you're doing, you know," a feminine voice hissed low behind her.

Not breaking her stride, Chantoya barely took the time to look over her shoulder at the woman who was with her. Why was it that the second she laid eyes upon Abigail she wanted to hit her? "What are you blabbing about?" CJ questioned.

Long fingers curled around her upper arm and squeezed, bringing her to a halt. "What, was he leaving you so you felt the need to be all helpless to try and keep him around?" Abigail spat.

Glancing down at the fingers on her arm, CJ moved her eyes back up to meet the hateful glare of the woman standing by her. "Remove your hand," she said lowly. When it was done, she ran a gloved hand over her face. "What are you saying, Abigail?"

A sneer filled her features. "Did you drug yourself?"

"Why would I drug myself?" CJ's eyes narrowed. "What exactly are you trying to say?"

Flames of hatred raved in her eyes. "That you deliberately gave yourself a Roofie just to get Osten to feel sorry for you. I was just about to have him, you stupid bitch! And if he came once, he'll do it again." Abigail leaned closer. "Italian men need beautiful women, not..." she paused as her gaze ran disgustedly over CJ, "a woman like you."

Chantoya wanted nothing more than to lash back at the bitch in her face. But something Abigail said struck a cord deep within her. Was it true that Osten had been around Abigail after she had tossed him out? "Good day, Abigail," CJ murmured as she brushed by and out the door.

Soon CJ was pounding around the track. She was locked on the image of Abigail's sneer as she talked about Osten. *Common sense tells me not to believe her.* But what was going to happen between them when she was gone to Vietnam?

"If...damn it, now she has me questioning whether or not I should even go to Vietnam. Damn her!"

Around and around she went until the cold and the burning of her muscles made her realize it was time to begin the cool down. Her steps slowed leading her into a walk. Stretching one final time, CJ headed off in the direction of her vehicle and climbed in, shutting the door on the wind that had seemed to increase in strength.



Osten wanted to reach across the table and shake some sense into the woman sitting there. *How the hell could she think I would be like that?*

There was a smoky look to her eyes as CJ watched him in return. On anyone else, he would bet it was a trick or a practiced look, but not on her. His eyes drifted down briefly to fall upon her glossy lips, which he knew from personal experience was Chapstick, but she made it tasty.

The beauty across from him wore a lilac-gray silk shirt and a pair of smoky blue dress pants. Her hair had been turned into a mass of curls that hung gently around her face, framing it softly.

Her eyes were bordered by her thick, curved lashes and he never blinked as she brought her fork to her mouth and took the bite of meat off the end. His erection grew at the involuntary groan of pleasure she allowed to escape as she ate her dinner.

"I don't know what Abigail has been spouting to you, Chantoya, but I don't have any designs on her. Never have. The only time I saw her was at the grocery store when I was out with Dimitri."

They had been silent after her initial accusation as they fought their own demons. Chantoya, the fear he was interested in someone like Abigail. Osten, trying to figure out what he had to do to crack the barrier CJ had erected around her heart.

When they had been given their dinner, Osten couldn't remain silent any longer. So he spoke, telling her his side. CJ had shrugged as she swallowed her food. Now, he was not sure what that had meant.

"I'm going to Vietnam," CJ blurted out.

The hand that had been reaching for his own fork stopped dead. "What? When?" Thick brows furrowed. "With whom?"

"After school gets out for the holiday. I am going with Binh."

"And you will be gone for your whole vacation?" Osten didn't want her to go, but he knew she deserved it.

"Pretty much. School isn't out this year until the twenty-second, and we are leaving the next day."

He took a drink of his wine. "Will you be around for New Year's Eve?"

CJ rested her chin on the back of her hands and arched a brow. "Will you?"

Osten had no response to that. How could he? She was totally right. "CJ, you know I can't promise anything like that."

Resting her fork, prongs down, on her plate, CJ took a drink of her water. After her glass was back on the white tablecloth, she reached for her purse. Looking up at the man who appeared so handsome in his black-cherry mock turtleneck, and sharply pressed black slacks, she placed two twenty-dollar bills down. "This will cover my share."

Pushing back from the table, CJ waved him back as he stood. "No, Osten. You want me to adjust my schedule to fit yours. And I am not even over that whole camera thing. I need some time. *Alone.*"

Osten ignored her attempt to keep him in the seat. It didn't take long and he was standing before her, the noise and the bustle of the restaurant fading into the background. His teeth worried his lower lip for a moment before he lifted her coat and helped her slip it on.

With his body behind hers, his strong arms around her waist, Osten put his mouth by her ear. "I understand you are scared. I just wish you believed as fully as I do about what's between us. So while I wish I could guarantee I will be around, I can see your hesitation. You

have my numbers, Chantoya. Call me when you are ready to face your feelings."

Releasing enough of her so he could spin her until they were face to face, Osten moved his hands up to cup her cheeks. "*Voglio passare il resto della mia vita con te. Sei la mia anima gemella.*" A gentle kiss was place on her lips before he stepped back and sent her a small smile. "I don't want to let you walk away from me, but I also know I can't force you to understand what I feel for you."

Chantoya watched in silence as Osten took his strong body back to his chair in an easy motion. Her eyes followed the fluid movement as he sat down and looked up at her. His eyes held the silent question of whether or not she was staying with him.

She blinked back the tears that had snuck up on her. What was it about him that made it so hard to leave him? Closing her eyes briefly, CJ opened them, glanced at Osten one last time and walked away without looking back.

Am I doing the right thing? CJ ran the thought through her mind as she strode out. Regardless, she forced her feet to take her out of the restaurant.

This was the time for her to figure out what she wanted from life, and Osten couldn't help her with that. However, her attraction to him was a big problem.

Could she live and share her life with a man who held his occupation? The risk, the months apart. Was she strong enough to be by his side?

Chantoya hesitated before climbing into her brother's SUV. Her light gaze drifted back to the entrance of the romantic establishment. Something about that man who still sat in there eating his dinner called to her soul.

The tears fell from her eyes as she put the vehicle in gear and drove away.



The assembly went off without a hitch. CJ stood near one of the vice principals and smiled as the students left the auditorium. When the final bell rang today, school would be out until after the New Year.

With a quick smile to Sandi Richmond, CJ walked forward and mingled into the moving throng of high school students. She kept the

lagging ones progressing at a decent speed back to the remaining bit of class for the day.

Chantoya was still in high spirits as she headed from the warmth of the school to the track. As her feet took her around the track, her mind had her basking in the warm tropical sun of Vietnam. For that duration of time, CJ was beyond the reaches of any fear, sadness or anger of any past problem. She was in her happy zone and for that reason was dangerously unaware of the dark eyes that watched her from afar through binoculars.



CJ had just sat down at her kitchen table to enjoy a light snack and grade some papers when a knock came at her door. Her entire body jumped, even though she knew who was on the other side.

Grabbing one more three-cheese panetini to eat, she walked to the door, absently clicking the pen in her hand. With ease, CJ swung open the door and froze.

She was wrong. The person that stood on the other side of her door was the last person in the world she would have expected to see. Her greeting fell flat as all she could do was stare.

Marvin. Marvin Whittle stood there looking at her.

Chantoya knew her mouth was moving but there was nothing escaping. A myriad of emotions moved through her body. As strong as the fear was, suspicion and anger took over. "What the hell are you doing here, Marvin?" she demanded. "And how did you find out where I lived?"

The large man looked down at her with his dark eyes. "I needed to talk to you." His voice was different than what she recalled from speaking to him at school.

A shiver of dread slithered up her spine. "No, I don't think so. This is highly inappropriate. I would like you to leave."

Marvin shook his head. "No, I can't do that."

"I don't really care; I have nothing to say to you." Chantoya shoved down her dread and faced him head-on not willing to give away how she truly felt.

"You need to hear what I have to say," he insisted. His strong body stepped closer.

"Hey, Chipmunk," Thurston's voice broke in, bringing with it a wave of relief. "Sorry I'm late." The tall blond inserted himself between

his sister and the man at her door. "And you are?" One eyebrow arched as he questioned the man.

"Thurston," CJ spoke his name as if he were the answer to her prayers.

Marvin looked at the man standing before him. There was nothing small about him, especially the gleam of anger in his eyes. "I work at the school with Ms. Jackson."

Thurston didn't bat an eye. "And why are you here...?" he glanced at his watch, "After ten at night?"

Marvin pursed his lips. This clearly wasn't what he had been expecting for this evening. Not this confrontation. He nodded his head sharply. "I apologize for my intrusion. I will see you at school, Ms. Jackson." He spun around and found himself looking into two more sets of angry eyes of men who stood there with blatant challenges written across their faces. Another nod to them and he slipped off down the hall and out into the night.

Marvin also didn't notice the man sitting there watching him leave. Had no idea that a member of SEAL Team Seventeen was observing him. And the man observing him had jumped to a conclusion he didn't much care for.



Osten was not entirely positive what name he would give the raw emotions that rampaged through him. Anger, fear, rage—those were all too mild of words for the intensity of what he felt.

The part of his brain that told him to act on his emotions and face Marvin Whittle almost won. Somehow, the control and behavior that had been ingrained in him courtesy of the United States Navy prevailed.

Osten had stopped by after finishing his lonely dinner to talk to her. He didn't want the parting left between them as it had been. Hell, he wanted to make sure she knew as she went off to another country that they were a couple, an exclusive one at that. He wanted to tell her he loved her.

As he'd pulled into the lot of her building, he remained in the warm interior of his car and watched her three brothers go in. Deciding not to do this with them around, he'd started to leave when Marvin appeared. The gym teacher was obviously upset.

Deep in his gut, Osten knew Marvin had been near CJ. Eyes grew as hard as stone as he pictured this man terrorizing Chantoya. His Chantoya.

A vibration at his side grabbed his attention. Muttering a curse, Osten pulled his car door shut and looked at his beeper. After the familiar number he saw 911 and knew he had to leave. It was Scott and they had a mission.

Slicing his gaze back across the lot to the obviously agitated man, Osten looked at and memorized the plate number of the vehicle Marvin stood by. "I love you, Chantoya," he said as he drove away.

Seventeen

Vietnam

The warm sun greeted CJ as she stepped out onto the balcony of her hotel room. The water sparkled like it had been littered with diamonds. This was her last day here; tomorrow, she would be returning to the cold wintry shores of Virginia Beach.

It had been so relaxing. She and Binh had traveled around and visited the mission where he had lived prior to being adopted. Only at night did she feel lonely. Osten had been the last thing she'd thought about before sleep and the first thing when she woke. Was he safe? Was he hurt? Was he with Abigail?

A knock at the door grabbed her attention. Walking back through the breezy room, CJ opened the door and smiled at the attendant. He had brought her breakfast. Gesturing him inside, she waited for him to wheel the cart inside.

The young man bowed and smiled. "Enjoy," he said in a gentle voice.

"*Cám ơn*. Thank you," CJ responded. The man smiled again and left. Another knock came seconds after she had placed a piece of succulent fruit into her mouth. She opened the door to see her brother standing there.

Binh leaned over, kissed her on the cheek, and walked further into the room. "I have to tell you something, Chipmunk," he stated as he sat down on a chair and took a slice of fruit.

Closing the door behind him, CJ swallowed her food and looked at her handsome brother. "And what would that be?"

"I'm not going home with you." Binh waved her down into a seat. "I want to stay here a bit longer and —"

CJ noticed the flush on his cheeks. While part of her felt betrayed he didn't want to return home with her, she knew it had to be a very good reason. "No," she interrupted him. "You don't have to explain yourself to me. I'll be fine. I know I'm the baby and all of this family, but surely I can handle sitting on a plane alone."

Binh sent her a grateful look. "I'll call Ajani and let him know you are coming home alone; that way, he and Thurston can be there to meet you."

Chantoya noticed the way his lean fingers picked at the table. "So, do I at least get to meet her?"

His gaze flew up to meet hers. Another flush highlighted his features. His mouth moved but it took a while before any words slipped out. "Well, I guess."

CJ was well versed in observing people; and while it was obvious her brother was into this person, she could easily read his hesitation on her meeting whoever it was. "You guess?" She crossed her arms. "I get the third degree from y'all anytime I have a guy over and all I get from you is an 'I guess'? What gives, Binh?"

Her brother ran a brown hand over his face and then through his shiny black hair. "I just don't want..." he dropped off.

"You don't want me to act towards her like you have towards men I know?" CJ asked as she ate some more mango.

Shame filled his face. "I suppose that's it."

There was something else but CJ wasn't going to push it. "Hey, I just want to meet this woman. I would never go so far as to say anything to potentially harm a relationship with a friend of yours." *Unless she was bad for you.*

"I am on my way to meet her. Would you like to come with?"

Hell, yeah! Maintaining a demure look, CJ nodded. "I would love to meet her."

Binh flashed a grateful grin. "Finish your breakfast; I'll be back for you in a few moments." On his way out, he snagged some fresh apples slices.

"Okay. I'll be ready in a few." CJ kissed him on the cheek and sat back down. She finished the fresh fruit and put on her sandals as she ate a piece of coconut.

Moments later, Chantoya was walking down the street beside her brother. She listened as he spoke Vietnamese to a few children that ran by. He stopped at the end of the street and CJ noticed they were in front of a hospital.

Composing her face, CJ ignored the look she knew Binh was sending her. She glanced up at the ragged building. *Sweet Jesus, this is really a hospital?* It was on the other side of town from where they were staying, and it was obvious this wasn't a tourist area.

Binh walked up the steps and looked back at Chantoya. With an encouraging smile, he waved her up to his side. As he opened the door, the smell of sickness poured out.

In seconds, Chantoya was swept back in time. Back to when they had done this as she'd grown up. Blinking back tears, CJ met and held Binh's gaze and saw it was filled with understanding. He took her hand in his and squeezed. "I know," he said. "I know."

Together they walked inside the dank building. "This way," Binh spoke softly.

They entered a wide, open room at the back of the building. There were rows of cots, not all full, but enough were. Chantoya immediately zeroed in on a group of youngsters that were sitting around one older child who was reading.

The reading boy looked up and a grin crossed his thin face. Bounding off the stool, he ran towards her brother. "Binh!" he cried as he leapt into his arms. "Read today?"

With a grin, Binh set him back on his feet. "I brought you a new friend. This is my sister."

A toothy smile was turned on Chantoya. "My...my...my name Hoang." He looked to Binh for approval.

CJ offered her hand and said, "It is nice to meet you. My name is CJ." She spoke slowly so he could understand her clearly, not condescendingly.

"Read?" His wide-eyed innocent stare melted her heart.

"I would love to." She took the book from his hand and looked at the title. It was a torn and old copy of Dr. Seuss's *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*. "Oh this is one of my favorite books."

"You come. Read." Hoang pulled her along to the stool.

CJ met Binh's amused gaze as she neglected to sit on the stool, opting instead to sit on the dirt floor like the other children. She greeted them in Vietnamese and then began reading to them in English.

CJ closed the book and glanced up to see her brother and a petite woman standing there watching her. The woman was a head shorter than her brother, and she had a beautiful face, her features

striking. In seconds, CJ knew she was of mixed heritage with skin a similar shade to her own.

She had full lips and thick, sooty lashes that framed her large eyes. But it was her hair that grabbed CJ's attention. It was a soft afro; and the way it fanned her head was nothing short of exotic.

A smile crossed her face as she pushed up off the floor, dusted her jeans off and stuck out her hand. "Hi! I'm CJ."

CJ saw the emotions that flashed through the brown eyes of the woman beside her brother. After a slight hesitation, a small hand, roughened from years of hard work, reached out to grasp her own. "Hello. I'm Lan, Lan Nguyen."

Chantoya sent her another smile. "It is so nice to meet you."

"Read, read, read!" Young voices chanted beside her.

Binh stepped up. "I'll read you something." His eyes flickered between his sister and Lan. "You two take a break."

CJ shook her head with amusement. "I think that is my brother's way of telling us to get to know one another."

Lan walked away with her. After they were far enough away that Binh couldn't overhear, she asked, "Is he truly your brother?"

"Yes." CJ didn't hesitate with her answer. "Why? What did he say I was?"

"His sister, but..." she trailed off, looking embarrassed.

"We look nothing alike." CJ was used to the doubt about her family.

Lan nodded. "Well, yeah."

"Well, trust me, we are. Tell me about you. What do you do?" CJ sent her another encouraging smile.

Lan returned the smile this time, allowing Chantoya to witness its full power.

It took some convincing, but CJ finally persuaded Lan to have dinner with her and Binh, citing she wanted to speak with her more and she would be leaving the next day. Everyone had a lovely time; and hours later, CJ returned to her room after dinner with Lan's promise to write, leaving the couple alone.

The next morning, she was packing when the knock came to her door. It was Binh.

"So?" he asked as he walked in uninvited.

"Come on in," she snorted. He crossed his arms and stared her down. "I like her, Binh. I like her a lot."

A faint tint filled his cheeks. "Me too." Binh crossed the room and kissed her on the top of her head. "Thank you...for being so wonderful to her."

"Do the others know?"

"They have their suspicions," Binh admitted.

"I bet they do," CJ muttered. Her brothers were tenacious.

"Are you ready to go?" Binh questioned, glad the attention was off him for the moment.

Chantoya smiled as she nodded her head. She knew he was trying to keep the attention off him and Lan. "Ready." Sliding her hand through her hair, CJ thought of Osten and sobered. Where was their relationship? Was there even one anymore?

Binh picked up her suitcase and walked to the door. Before opening it, he turned back to her and said, "He's waiting for you, Chipmunk. Don't give up on him so quickly."

"You, either, big bro, you either." CJ smiled at him as she grabbed her carry-on prior to preceding him out the door.

"I don't plan on it," Binh vowed.

During the last leg of her trip home, CJ dreamed of the one who had infiltrated her hearts. Osten was alive and well in CJ's dreams and they were both very happy.

A tired CJ got off the plane and headed for baggage claim. Her vacation had been wonderful; but to be honest, she was totally looking forward to a night in her own bed.

Eighteen

"You okay, Baby Boy?" the question was sincere as the man asking it stopped and waited for an answer.

Osten grumbled, "I'm fine, Merlin, fine." He limped up to where his teammate waited for him. His eyes traveled over his friend; he could easily pick up on the desire to tease him lurking behind the concern.

Golden eyes flickered with humor. "Good, 'cause if you weren't I would seriously have to find the corpsman who bandaged you and kick his ass."

Brown eyes narrowed; Osten was the corpsman. "Yeah, you do that. Just remember that the next time something goes wrong with your explosives...don't come crawling to me."

Dimitri "Merlin" Melonakos laughed outright. "The next time, don't you mean the first time?"

"Cocky bastard," Osten griped with good humor.

"Just that good, baby. I'm just that good." Dimitri smiled as he slung his bag over his shoulder with ease.

"Damn Greek." Osten hobbled along. His ankle had gotten sprained this last mission. Almost bad enough for crutches, but Osten was determined not to need them.

"Fuckin' Italian," Dimitri muttered back with the same amount of love in his voice.

The men ribbed each other, but there was no way on earth they wouldn't be there for their teammates one hundred percent when the time came. They each had a family outside of the Team, but the Team was their family as well.

The duo headed for the hangar they were flying out from. It was time to head home. They'd been gone over Christmas and New Year's. *Guess it's a good thing CJ didn't stay home and hope I would be around.*

Just the thought of Chantoya Jackson was enough to quicken his step. Beside him, Osten heard Dimitri chuckle. "*Stronzo!*" Osten bit off as he kept on going.

That only made Dimitri laugh harder. He might be Greek, but Dimitri also spoke Italian. "You have no idea," he said lightheartedly.

Osten grunted his displeasure but held his tongue, for they had arrived where the rest of the group waited. The others took one look at his face and burst out laughing.

"What the hell did he say to you, Baby Boy?" Maverick asked.

"*Nessuna cosa,*" Osten replied without thinking.

"Okay," Maverick said, "I guess I should be asking you, Merlin. What the hell did you say to him to make him forget we don't all speak Italian?"

Osten glanced at the tall Native American on the Team. He stood there, arms crossed, waiting for an answer. And while his question may have been directed at Merlin, his unwavering stare was right on Osten.

He just shrugged, opting to stay quiet. Unfortunately for him, Merlin had no intentions of letting it go. "Oh I just asked him how he was doing, that's all."

Osten cut his dark-brown eyes over to his friend. Dimitri stood there with an angelic look on his handsome face. With an eye roll, Osten looked away. Dimitri had a knack for appearing all innocent, it was one of the reasons he was so good at what he did.

Lucky for Osten, the rest of the men were well aware of Dimitri's talent of doing such a trick and the scoffs of disbelief brought a smile to his face. Osten snorted and walked over to a bench that was in front of some lockers and sat down to take the weight off his ankle.

His eyes took a glance over his team. He was the shortest member on the team, but at five-eight, he was okay with that. It was part of the reason Osten had acquired the nickname "Baby Boy."

A few of the members kept their hair cut within military regulations; but since they were a SEAL Team, they were allowed to have more leeway with that rule. As for himself, his hair reached his neck but was styled nicely, Dimitri's was shaggy and unkempt looking, Aidrian was completely bald, and a few had high-n-tides, a Marine cut.

He grinned as he saw the beards Aidrian, Tyson, and Scott sported, knowing full well that two of them would be clean-shaven before their transport even landed back in the States. Osten allowed his fingers to travel over the five o'clock shadow he'd had for a while now. A chuckle escaped him as he realized he would be shaving as well.

A quick glance at his watch told him there were twenty minutes before they were scheduled to leave. Stretching out his legs before him, Osten looked down at the dusty, dark-blue BDUs he wore and the mud-covered boots. His ankle throbbed and he closed his eyes to grab a catnap, the friendly banter from his teammates washing over him.

Smack!

The feeling of a wet shirt hitting him in the face jolted Osten out of his slumber. Knowing better than to jump up and demand an answer, Osten cracked open his eyes.

Tyson and Aidrian stood there watching him with blank expressions. "Time to go already?" Osten questioned, pretending a shirt never hit him, knowing full well they wanted a response.

"Just waiting on you, pretty boy," Tyson stated without missing a beat.

"Funny," Osten replied as he got up and gingerly tested his weight on his ankle before allowing it to take more. "That's what Jayde said—she's always been waiting on a man like me." He grinned as a scowl crossed Tyson's face. "Hope you aren't too disappointed when your kid looks like me."

Tyson ran his hand over his head and leveled his hazel eyes at his teammate. "Good thing you know the basics of doctoring. That way, when I kick your ass, you can bandage yourself up."

Osten shouldered his bag and smirked. "Well, now that I'm injured, at least you have a fighting chance—!"

Whap!

Another soaking shirt hit Osten in the neck this time.

"What is Jayde gonna say when you have no clothes in your possession?" Osten taunted as he dropped the shirt on the ground and deliberately walked on it.

Aidrian arched a brow as he looked back at Tyson. The second Osten relaxed his guard, he, too, whipped a shirt that scored a direct hit on the young corpsman. Masculine laughter filled the open hanger as before long it turned into a battle.

Eight men froze at the piercing whistle that had suddenly ripped through the room.

"I know y'all don't harbor the notion of climbing on *my* plane looking like that!"

The Megalodon Team blinked once before each of them smiled boyishly

"Nice to see you, sir," Scott yelled back as he stood and helped the man nearest him up. Then he jogged over and shut off the water.

"Working hard, I see," the pilot commented as his co-pilot handed out towels as the men walked up the stairs.

Wiping a towel over his face, Scott nodded. "Just trying to get the dirt off us, before we get home."

Rich Meckler, a retired Rear Admiral, just rolled his eyes. He was extremely proud of this group of men. They were all sons to him. His gaze narrowed as he noticed the last man coming up the stairs was limping, though almost indiscernibly.

"What happened?" he questioned as the man moved past him.

"Had a disagreement with a bunch of logs," Osten said shaking his head.

Rich understood. He and his copilot made sure the luggage was secured and soon, the Cessna Citation Sovereign was taxing back down the runway and lifting into the sky.



The flashing light on his answering machine was not anything Osten wanted to deal with. None of the messages could be from Chantoya, for he had her number forwarded to his cell; and before he had even gotten on the plane, he'd checked for any message from her. Nothing. This meant they were from his family and he just wanted to see CJ, hold her in his embrace, and kiss her full, sweet lips.

Osten carried his bag back to his bedroom. Regardless of his desire to do other things, he always made sure to repack his bag so it was ready to go at a moment's notice. As he pulled out torn shirts, he realized it was time to go shopping. Twenty minutes later, his bag restocked and in the closet just waiting for the call, Osten walked out of his apartment and left.

He wore a dark blue button-down shirt tucked into pressed black slacks. A black leather belt helped to accentuate the narrowness of his waist, and black shoes adorned his feet. His black leather three-quarter-length coat completed the ensemble.

His face was still covered with a few days of stubble, adding a roguish charisma to his appearance. He found a stride that hid the

remnants of his limp and got in his car, heading for the mall. Most of the snow was gone, but it was still downright cold. Tugging his coat tighter around him, Osten walked into the mall. As the noise assaulted him, he realized that the kids weren't back in school yet. A sexy smile turned up his lips as Chantoya came to mind.

Whispers of appreciation reached his ears as he moved past a group of women. Before Chantoya, he would have stopped and talked, perhaps even taken one of them home with him. Now, they had nothing to entice him.

"Come on, CJ," the woman's voice said loudly over the hustle and bustle of the mall. "Let's get going."

Osten almost tripped over his feet as he spun around. His eyes zeroed in on a woman across the floor who was trying to pull someone along at a rapid pace. Dark eyes moved to the person being tugged along and felt disappointment fill him. It wasn't his CJ.

Turning back to his initial direction, he walked off again and went into a clothing store, heading to the men's section. Waving off the salesman, Osten looked at shirts.

"Yes, I'm here to pick up the Jackson order." A deep voice got Osten to look over. He recognized the tall blond brother to his Chantoya. Thurston.

Osten put down the shirt in his hand and thought about what to do. The second her voice graced his ears, he knew.



"I'll get the shirts, why don't you go grab the women's skirts," Thurston suggested with a gentle push.

CJ laughed. Her brother had no sense of subtly, but she allowed him to send her to the women's section to pick out some skirts to send to Lan. With three skirts chosen, Chantoya made her way toward the customer service counter in the back by the men's section. "I'm ready, Thurston. I think she'll look great in these."

Without hesitation the Nordic giant said, "You really liked her, didn't you?"

"I did. And I have never seen him so happy. It was like I didn't even exist when she was in the same room."

"Is she as pretty as you?" Thurston asked, grinning down at his little sister.

"Please," CJ scoffed. "I feel like a troll next to her. She is beautiful."

"Well, you are kinda homely," Thurston quipped. His arm dropped over her shoulder and pulled her close for a hug.

"Kaie, hold kjeft!" CJ snapped playfully.

Her brother tsked. "Now, now. What would our parents think with those words coming out of your mouth? That isn't why you were taught Norwegian." His blue eyes twinkled with mischief. "What would Ajani think of you using such language? Calling me a jackass and telling me to shut up."

Chantoya immediately clamped her mouth shut and blanched. Even though she knew Thurston was teasing, her mind immediately conjured up the disapproving face of their eldest brother. Ajani was a firm believer against using crude language. He thought it was a reflection of poor upbringing; and after their parents died, he didn't take kindly to hearing it.

Reading her expression correctly, Thurston snickered. "You are so fun to pick on."

The clerk held out a package to Thurston and he took the three skirts from CJ and said, "Ring it all up."

As the clerk did as ordered, CJ caught the light whiff of cologne she recognized as Osten's scent. Readjusting the hold she had on her other purchases, CJ shifted her weight. Longing coursed through her and she shifted again, trying to calm the wave of lust that smell brought to her body.

"What's wrong, Chipmunk?" Thurston asked as he signed the receipt.

"Nothing." Like I am going to tell my brother I am aroused because of a smell! "I'm fine."

Shoving his wallet into his back pocket, Thurston grabbed the bag with the most recent purchases and turned. CJ waited for him to put the question to her again, like usual. However, he was silent; in fact he wasn't even looking at her.

Chantoya frowned. "Thurston. Thurston? Are you even listening to me?" Muttering under her breath, "Probably some blonde who got lost," she turned and promptly gasped.

Nineteen

Osten waited for her to turn around. He had watched CJ move through the store to reach her brother's side with her natural grace. His observant gaze took in the nice khakis she wore that cupped her firm derriere in a way that sent the blood to his lower anatomy.

Osten spied her hiking boots and then he allowed his eyes to move up. She wore a white jacket over her shirt. Her hair was free of confinement today and it bounced with each step she took.

"I'm not a lost blond, but I could be," Osten said smoothly. "Hello, Chantoya."

Not a word left her mouth. She just stood there and stared at him. Her big brown eyes moved up and down his body before staying fixed to his own.

"Hello again, Thurston," he added politely. All he wanted to do was pick up CJ in his arms and kiss her senseless.

"Mr. Scoleri," Thurston said with a nod. Licking his lips, he reached over and took the purchases his sister had in her hand, kissed her on the cheek and said, "I'll take these. I'm assuming I am no longer needed. I'll call you later on, Chipmunk." Then he walked off, leaving Osten and CJ alone in the store.

Silence dragged on between for a few more seconds. Osten couldn't believe how much he had missed just looking at her. "Happy New Year, CJ."

"Same to you," she responded in a soft voice.

Vanquishing the distance between them, Osten cupped her face with one hand and swiped his thumb over her lower lip before he covered her mouth with his own. His lips were tender upon hers and he took some time learning her taste all over again, as if it were the first

kiss they shared. His other hand rested against the smoothness of her face.

"I've missed you," he mumbled against her mouth before his tongue swept back through.

CJ closed her eyes in pure pleasure. She had been dreaming about his touch since she'd left him at the restaurant. This was much better than any dream could be. Drawing back from his intoxicating mouth, she smiled as their eyes met. "I missed you too."

"How was your vacation?"

"I had a wonderful time. Was reintroduced to work that I had put behind me and really want to get back into." Her intelligent eyes shifted over his form. "How was your time?"

Osten shrugged. "We are all alive, so good." His hand moved through her hair before he leaned in and kissed her lightly. "Have some time?"

Chantoya didn't even hesitate. "Yes."

"Wonderful." He laced their fingers and began walking for the door. "Did you drive?"

"No, I came with Thurston." The callused feel of his skin against her palm made her swallow and imagine earlier times and shared experiences.

Osten gave himself a mental note to thank her brother for leaving them alone together. He smiled as they moved through the crowd.

"What happened?" CJ's question was low, but Osten had no problem hearing her over the noise.

"What are you talking about?" He glanced over at her in time to witness the frown of disapproval cross her face.

"You're limping. So, I'll ask again, what happened?" Chantoya stopped walking and Osten, being who he was, stopped immediately as well without question.

He was impressed. It took a very observant person to be able to spy the minute limp he had. Despite the glower on CJ's face, Osten couldn't help but grin. "I didn't think you would notice. I sprained my ankle this last time out." He saw the concern for him and some fear at his job flare up in her eyes. "I'm fine. Just have a twinge every now and then."

Chantoya watched him intently for a moment before she nodded. "Okay."

Osten used one hand to bring her face back towards his. "Hey. I'm fine."

Her eyes flashed briefly before she got her emotions back under control. "I see that."

Backing off, he respected her disbelief. It was hard to push the issue when it was a very real threat about getting seriously injured on a mission. He was damn lucky all he'd gotten was a sprained ankle this time out.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, smoothly changing the subject.

"Most definitely." Her eyes smoldered with emotion. "I'm starving."

Osten raked his eyes over her form, setting it on fire before they made their way to the exit and his vehicle.

It was well into the evening before CJ and Osten were in any condition to eat. The most pressing appetite, making love, had been fulfilled and they were moving onto the next one on the list. Food.

Sitting across from each other in his living room, the satisfied lovers enjoyed a healthy meal. "Tell me about Vietnam," Osten said as he took a bite of his shrimp linguine.

Chantoya told him as they ate dinner. She filled him in on everything from meeting Lan to the fact she wanted to get back into missionary work.

Osten's eyes rarely left CJ as she talked. The musical lilt of her Southern drawl was a balm to his soul. It made everything right once again in his world. His dark-brown gaze took in the way his pale-yellow, button-down shirt covered her runner's body.

"Osten. Osten? Are you even listening to me?"

He looked up to meet CJ's questioning stare. "Of course I'm listening, *bella*. I was also admiring how stunning you look in my clothes. My shirt looks spectacular on you."

She arched a brow in disbelief.

Osten flashed a disarming grin. "I *can* multitask, you know."

CJ reached for her wine and rolled her eyes.

A strong hand covered his heart as Osten pretended offense. "You doubt my ability?" His eyes closed and opened with a gleam in them. Osten placed his plate down on the coffee table, drained the remainder of his wine, and licked his lips. "Maybe I need more *practice* on how to multitask..."

CJ smirked. "Perhaps. Maybe someone could teach you."

"Oh, does that mean we get to role play?" He reached out with one hand and moved it up her bare leg. "The whole schoolgirl bit complete with the plaid skirt?"

Hopeful. He sounded so hopeful.

Chantoya rotated the stem of her wineglass between her thumb and forefinger. Her light-brown eyes focused on the swirling liquid as if lost in deep thought.

"Well," she said after a pause. "I never really pictured you as a guy who would wear a plaid skirt," she paused and her eyes met his, "but...sure, I'm game. Let's see how you look."

Osten laughed as he removed the glass from her hand and kissed her. "*Bella*, very funny. Not what I meant, a fact I am sure you are well aware." His hands moved inside the button-down shirt she wore, searching for and finding her skin.

CJ blinked innocently. "I thought that's what you meant."

"I don't wear skirts," he retorted. "Some men wear kilts, but I don't even wear one of those. The only man I know who would is Aidrian."

Chantoya gasped, "Aidrian...the large, black man, Aidrian? *He* wears a kilt?" She closed her eyes and muttered her approval as a mental image of that came to her, "Wow."

Osten frowned. "Wow? What do you mean wow?"

"Just what I said. Wow." Her gaze focused somewhere off in the distance at an image only she could see and Osten didn't like it.

"CJ!" He forced an eye connection. "Stop thinking about him in a kilt!"

"Right," she muttered dazedly. CJ got up from the couch and took their dishes to his kitchen. "I wonder..." she mumbled as she loaded the dishwasher.

"Wonder what?" Osten asked, not sure he liked the expression on her face.

Chantoya looked directly at him and said deadpan, "If they truly don't wear underwear with kilts." Then she turned and ran down the hall toward his bedroom, laughing at his thunderous expression.

"Chantoya!" Osten yelled as he followed her.



Everything was set. All he needed now was his beautiful wife-to-be. Slipping on his overcoat, he headed down to his vehicle. As he got his morning coffee, even the barista picked up on his enthusiasm.

"You seem mighty chipper this cold morning," she said as she took his money.

"I am. I'm taking my wife on a surprise vacation. It's been so long since we've been able to get away."

Handing back the change, she cooed, "How sweet. Are you taking her on a romantic cruise?"

He flashed a grin. "I'm taking her somewhere we can be alone." *Totally alone.*

The young woman put a hand over her mouth briefly and blinked her big blue eyes. "That is...just...oh, my God. I wish there were more men in the world like you."

With another smile, he took his drink and moved back out into the cold January morning. That grin remained in place as he pulled into the high-school parking lot. Immediately, his eyes moved to where CJ normally parked her car. His heart sped up as he recognized the SUV she had been driving.

"Time to face our destiny, Chantoya." Coat buttoned against the cold, he headed for the front door.



CJ rolled her shoulders as she walked to her apartment. She was exhausted. First day back was always stressful but normally she didn't feel this tired. At least it was Friday and she had the weekend to recover.

"Must be because I didn't run after school today." She shrugged and entered her home.

Later today she had a meeting with Matt Slone, the head of CTBOI, Closing the Book on Illiteracy. It was to encourage not only children but also adults to learn to read. CJ personally loved to read to children and didn't have any problems teaching adults. It was most imperative for people to be literate.

Heading for her shower, CJ felt more lighthearted than she had in a long, long time. Things were good for her. Osten had returned...and safely. She was giving back to the community, something she acknowledged she needed to more ever since her trip to Vietnam.

Cleaned up, CJ straightened up her apartment and then got ready for her meeting with Matt. By the time he knocked on the door, she had snacks ready for them to eat.

Two hours later, the meeting ended. She'd gotten started on her paperwork for courses to eventually become certified for TESL, Teaching English as a Second Language.

She leaned against the closed door and smiled. This had definitely been a good day. CJ straightened up from the snacks that had been out and got ready for bed. Before she actually went to sleep, she spoke with Binh, who was still in Vietnam, and filled him in on her newest decision. They chatted about what he and Lan were doing with the children; and when she asked, "When *are* you coming home, Binh?" All she got was hemming and hawing.

As she climbed into bed, Chantoya listened to the wind howl as it whipped around the building. She knew she would be scraping windows in the morning. With a sigh, she burrowed deeper into her warm blankets and drifted off to sleep with a pair of dark-brown eyes watching her in her dreams.

Something was wrong!

CJ bolted up in bed, wide awake, heart pounding. She listened in the dark but the only sound she could identify was the blood roaring in her ears.

Running a shaking hand down her face, CJ mumbled, "Just a nightmare, Chantoya Willow. Get a grip." Swinging her legs to the floor, Chantoya got up and decided to get a drink of water.

She glanced at the clock before heading to the bathroom. Two-seventeen. "It's never five minutes before my alarm goes off. Always gotta ruin my sleep!"

Leaning against the sink, CJ sipped some water. Exhaustion was moving back in at warp speed. She didn't even fight the yawn.

A whisper of a sound caught her attention. Like a wave, her exhaustion was washed away, leaving behind fear. Hands became sweaty, throat like cotton, and bile crept into her throat. *What the hell?*

The pounding of her heart echoed throughout her skull, making her want to cover her ears. CJ headed up the hall and turned on the light to banish away her demons.

A wry chuckle escaped her mouth as her eyes scanned the empty room. "Damn, I am seriously losing it." Her hand reached for the switch to shroud the room in darkness.

BAM!

Her front door flew open and the dim light in the hall provided and eerie backdrop for the man who had barreled his way into her home. Cold, mind-numbing terror riveted her feet to the floor.

CJ heard a scream in the room but wasn't positive it came from hers. *Move, feet move!* It didn't work. The intruder had found her. His dark eyes were cold and hard as they glared at her.

Her brain finally registered what she saw. Or rather whom. Marvin Whittle stood there like one of the four horsemen – Death. "Get out!" she demanded as her hesitant steps took her a little further into the hall. *If I can make it to my room...*

Her meager plan evaporated as he pulled a gun from the back of his pants. "Get over here, Chantoya," his deep voice commanded.

"Get out!"

"Chantoya—" He broke off whatever he had planned on saying and raised his gun to a shooting position.

CJ broke and ran for her bedroom. She heard a muffled voice behind her but didn't stop. A sting on her hamstring almost stopped her, but she kept running.

She slammed her bedroom door shut and locked it before scrambling for the phone. As she punched in 911, she heard furniture being knocked over.

"Come on, come on!" She waited in the dark for someone to answer. Nothing. "Please," CJ begged as she checked for a dial tone.

Silence.

"Shit!" Dropping the phone, CJ turned her head. *The fire escape, of course!* She faltered at bit as the room began to spin. Trying to shove down the nausea, Chantoya went to the window and tried to open it.

It wouldn't budge. "Come on!" she cried and kept jerking up on the frame. "Open! Please, open!"

Tears rolled down her face as she heard the knob of her bedroom door jiggle.

Break the glass!

CJ knew her room well and knew there was nothing within reach that would break the window. Except her.

Sweat dripped down her body as she fought off the feeling that was taking over her. Her limbs were getting so heavy.

One ram into the window brought a crack. Chest heaving with exertion, CJ would have sworn she'd used all her strength. Drawing back for one more strike with her elbow, she collapsed.

Chantoya could barely break her fall; her reactions were so unlike their norm. Feeling she was seconds away from vomiting all over her carpeted floor, CJ knew she wasn't going to get away.

The room spun out of control and she couldn't even feel her legs anymore. With her last bit of strength, she jerked off the necklace she wore and threw it in the direction of the bed.

Her bedroom door burst open and CJ saw Marvin's body standing there, so large. His shoulders looked like they touched both sides of her doorway.

His mouth moved but she couldn't hear anything. Her blurry gaze was focused on the gun clutched in his meaty hand as he moved toward her. That image escorted her into oblivion.



"CJ. CJ!" a low voice kept pestering her. A familiar voice. A masculine voice.

It was a struggle, but she managed to drag her eyes open. A few moments passed before the room came into focus and she was able to hone in on who called to her.

"Gordon?" CJ scratched out. He looked horrible, as if someone had used his face for a punching bag. One eye was almost swollen shut, a shiner blazed on his cheek, and his lips were busted.

He sent her a small lopsided grin. "You okay?"

"No." CJ tried to move but her body wouldn't comply. "You?" Her throat hurt and the lack of mobility scared her. She wasn't tied up; however, she couldn't move.

"Hurt like hell."

"Marvin...Marvin..."

"I know," Gordon murmured. "He did my makeup."

CJ couldn't fight the exhaustion and closed her eyes. *Osten! I'm scared!*

Each time she managed to pull her eyes open, Gordon was crouched beside her. Like he was watching over her. Her body became more and more alert every time she awoke.

This time, Chantoya noticed a soft glow from a lantern cast about the room. She had no sense of how much time had passed. This was a different room than she remembered being in before. And now she was on a bed instead of the floor. Gordon was no longer beside her.

Opting to just look around first, CJ saw she had bare feet; the crimson color on her toenails brought a slight and brief smile to her face. Osten had painted them for her.

Osten...her mind latched onto his name like a lifeline.

Despite her mind being much more alert, her limbs still felt heavy with fatigue. Each attempt to get something to move was like walking up and ice-covered slope in heels.

Chantoya was sweating by the time she was confident she wasn't paralyzed. Her wandering eyes took in the layout and wished she had more energy to get up and try the door. Despite everything, she wanted to make sure she had the functioning capability to get the hell out of dodge when the time came.

If he had wanted me dead, would I be in a clean bed? "I'm also gonna ignore the fact I'm in clothes that aren't mine."

Regardless of her determination, her entire body tensed when the door began to open. Slumping back, CJ tried to pull off acting asleep.

Gordon's voice reached her and she opened her eyes. He was dressed in jeans and a black turtleneck, the swelling on his face looked a tiny bit better.

"Hey," he said in a soft voice.

"Where is he?" CJ asked as Gordon moved to sit beside her.

"He...who?" Gordon's eyes held hers in the low light. He brushed his hand over her face and down the arm she had attempted to break the window with.

She winced at the pain in her body. "Marvin," she answered as she took in the pitch color outside the window. "We have to get out of here."

Gordon nodded. "Let me go see if I can find some shoes for you." He stood.

"Okay." CJ sent him a relieved smile. Before he reached the door, she said, "Be careful, Gordon."

"I'll be back as soon as I can." He sent her another brief smile before looking cautiously out the door and slipping away. She closed her eyes and gathered her strength.

A bit later her door began to open again and CJ tensed, only to relax as Gordon stuck his head in. "Found some," he whispered.

Suddenly, he was jerked out of her sight. The shoes tumbled to the floor and the sounds of a body being tossed into a wall along with incoherent mutterings were all she could hear.

The wall reverberated and CJ could make out the sounds of fists hitting flesh.

"Gordon!" she gasped and tried to lunge out of bed. Her body rebelled and didn't want to move. CJ fought through it and made her way to the door.

Peering into the hall, CJ saw no sign of Gordon or Marvin. All she saw was blood along the wall. She prayed for strength and courage. Shoving her feet into the shoes, CJ felt the adrenaline course through her.

What do I do? Leave Gordon and get help? He may kill him. Of course, he may already have.

Forcing down her panic, CJ moved up the hall, trying to be as quiet as possible. Aside from the low light in the hall the rest of the place was dark.

Totally unsure of where to go, CJ picked her way carefully up the stairs. At the top, her eyes squinted as she tried to find the door. A noise spurred her into action.

Chantoya froze as a light went on to her side in another part of the building. Her ears picked up on sounds she identified as kitchen noises.

Bastard!

The good news was she now could see where she needed to go. The glass on the door reflected the light. Hope gave her more energy.

CJ barely paused to grab the thick coat that hung on a stand by the exit. She knew a thin tee shirt and pajama bottoms weren't enough to protect her from the chill, but the coat was only slightly better.

Despite the urge to jerk open the door, CJ moved it slow in case it squeaked. No noise emerged and she slipped outside. The frigid air sliced through her clothes and she put on the coat while her shaky legs took her down the steps and...into calf-high snow?

"What the...?" CJ shivered as the cold stabbed into legs, face and lungs.

I haven't got a clue as to where I am! CJ swore a multitude of times as the cold seemed to make her already hesitant limbs even less maneuverable.

Stumbling now, she fought to make it to the vehicles she saw to her right, close to a tree line. Struggling against the wind, she finally got there and climbed inside a 4x4 Jeep.

Chantoya wrestled with her exhaustion as she searched valiantly for the keys. They were shoved between the visor and roof. A prayer of thanks went from her lips to heaven as she put the key in and turned.

Click.

Click.

Her heart plummeted. "Come on," she coaxed and tried again.

Click.

Click.

Light flooded the entire area and CJ forced back her scream of terror and frustration as a large figure appeared on the porch.

Click.

Click.

Tears began to fall as each repeated attempt to start the Jeep failed.

Stay or run.

Fight or flight.

Die on his terms or perhaps make it out alive.

Her decision made, CJ crawled across to the passenger seat and shoved it open before bolting back out into the snow.

"Chantoya!" The deep voice seemed to travel on the wind to her ear. "Don't run from me!"

A quick glance over her shoulder was all she afforded him. Then she continued her quest to the tree line. *If I can make it there, I stand a chance.*

They loomed before her. The flood lights cast weird shadows around their gnarled figures.

Keep going, CJ!

It was whisper quiet and if not for the sting, CJ wouldn't have even known she had been hit. Reaching up, she felt her fingers close around a dart imbedded in her neck.

With fading consciousness, she looked in the direction it came from and saw the big figure loading another dart as he approached.

Her body crumpled to the snowy ground; and as the darkness took over, she heard. "I told you not to run from me, Chantoya."

Then there was peaceful nothingness.

Twenty

Ross Connelly threw open the door to the free weight room at the gym, his gray eyes searching for someone. "Osten!" he yelled as he moved toward the man he sought. "Baby Boy!"

The Italian lay on his back, working the bench press. "What's up, Jeb?" he asked without breaking off his effortless motion. "Trouble?"

"I've been trying to get in touch with you."

"My phone and beeper are in my locker." Osten put the bar on the holder and sat up, grabbing the white towel beside him to wipe away the sweat from his face. He looked at his friend and teammate and frowned at the expression that met his inquiring gaze. "What's going on?"

"It's Chantoya."

A feeling of dread settled about him. "What about her?"

"She's missing."

Those two words nearly floored him. She's missing. Missing? His beautiful CJ? "Chantoya?" His fingers tensed around the terrycloth towel he held.

"Dez just called me. She said she stopped by to drop something off and," Ross paused, "there were cops there. She found signs of a struggle and another teacher was dead—shot twice."

Osten felt his face compose into a mask as his mind sorted through the information he was receiving. "I have to go," he stated as Ross walked with him to his locker. *Shot twice...another teacher...who?*

"Call us with news," Ross said as Osten slammed his locker shut.

Slipping on his jacket, Osten nodded. "I will." Then he was gone, off sprinting to his car. The second he got off base, he put the accelerator to the floorboard and tore off toward her apartment.

Osten was near to a dead run by the time he got of his car to CJ's door. Dezarae was standing near with Thurston and Ajani, but broke away to come to him. The two brothers looked beyond worried as they waited for some form of news.

"Osten," Dezarae said as his arms enfolded her.

"What the hell is going on, Dez?" Osten watched as CJ's brothers approached as well.

"Osten," Ajani said. Thurston merely sent him a brief nod.

"Tell me what I can do," Osten commanded.

Thurston kept one eye on policemen who seemed to be growing in number around them. "Marvin Whittle is dead. Apparently, he was working a sting that involved another teacher. Unfortunately that is all they are willing to tell us; they seem to be asking more than they are willing to tell."

Osten's heart plummeted. *What was going on?* "Which teacher?" Even as he asked, he had a sinking feeling he already knew.

"That's not your business," a new voice interrupted. "Identify yourself."

Osten met the gaze of a woman in a power suit. He smelled FBI. "What are the Feds doing here?"

If the woman was shocked he had figure it out, she didn't show it. "Who are you? I'm not asking again," she snapped.

"I'm her boyfriend."

"Really?" The tone was skeptical. "And where were you last night?" Her hands flipped through a notebook, getting to the page she wanted. The click of a pen echoed in his ears.

Osten stared at her. She arched a brow, glanced at the paper and said, "Petty Officer Second Class Osten Scoleri of the United States Navy. Navy SEAL." Her blank stare looked back at him. "You could have done this."

To be fair, this woman didn't elicit a reaction from Osten, either. "I was on base doing a training operation. I didn't do this."

Dezarae backed him immediately. "Of course you didn't! Osten would *never* hurt her!"

Dispassionate blue eyes moved between the four people there. "We'll need to ask you some more questions. Make sure you don't leave town."

Osten didn't bother watching the Fed walk away, instead turning to Dezarae and CJ's brothers. "Talk."

Ajani left to intercept another agent and obtain more information, so it was Thurston filled him in. "Marvin Whittle was after a teacher who..." he trailed off, not wanting to think about it and his sister in the same thought.

"Gordon?" Osten questioned. It was an answer that made sense to him, for Gordon had popped into CJ's room a few times while Osten had been there. Being trained to observe helped, for Osten knew most people wouldn't think anything of those meetings. In fact, on the bare surface, the meetings had been benign, but apparently something in his subconscious thought to retain those instances.

CJ had told me he was married, so I backed off...maybe I shouldn't have – his looks had been a little too long for someone who claimed to be madly in love with someone else.

Thurston's gaze zeroed in on him. "Do you think so?"

"Yes," another voice butted in. "Do you think so and why would you say that?"

Osten took his eyes off the tall Nordic brother of his love and placed them on the new intruder. A skinny man with graying hair and a pock-marked faced stood there. The eyes that stared back at him were sharp and assessing.

"Well?" the man reiterated.

"Just a thought." Osten let go of Dez who ran over to the newly arrived Ross.

"How long have you know the missing woman?" the question came.

Osten swung dark eyes to the man and stepped toward him with slow, barely concealed rage. "Missing woman?" he asked in a deceptively modulated tone. "That *missing woman* has a name. Chantoya Jackson. She's not just another statistic. She is a well-loved woman."

Thurston reached out and touched Osten's shoulder. It got the message through. Osten didn't adjust his stance in anyway but he was calmer. Relaxing his jaw a bit, he took a deep breath.

"I say that because –" Osten felt his pager vibrate and without hesitation he pulled it off and read the number displayed on the screen. "I have to go."

Osten patted Thurston's arm. "I'll be by later." He glanced around the apartment; he had been denied the opportunity to look over

himself. At that moment, he made a promise to himself CJ would be brought home. Moving toward Ross and Dez, he placed a quick kiss on Dezarae's cheek before disappearing from view with Ross.

Five hours later, a worried Osten knocked on the heavy door before him. The hope on Ajani's face died as he saw Osten standing there. "Come on in, Osten." Ajani stepped back into the foyer and waved the Italian inside his home.

The tension in the house was stifling. Ajani led the way past a room with FBI personnel hanging out in it, milling around devices set up in case the kidnapper called and demanded ransom.

Osten noticed the same man and woman who had spoken *at* him in CJ's apartment. *Not her place now, a crime scene. A kidnapping scene. A murder scene.* He knew they were watching him carefully.

"Anything?" Osten asked as Thurston sent him a tense smile while he placed a glass of water before him.

"Not yet," Ajani answered. His fingers trailed absently around the rim of the glass in front of him.

"Binh caught the first flight out, so he should be here in a while. There hasn't been any ransom demand and..." Thurston trailed off, looking extremely vulnerable.

"What have the Feds said?" Osten questioned and then took a drink.

"Not a god-damn thing," Ajani swore as his fist pounded the wood table. "It's my sister and *they* won't tell me anything!"

"We don't know anymore than you do," the older federal agent interrupted. "We have to wait. I'm sorry. I know this is difficult but —"

"Bullshit!" Osten snapped. "That is such crap!" He finished his water and stood, hands resting on the table. "You're lying."

Ajani and Thurston watched the interaction.

"Why would I lie?" The man had his hands clasped behind him.

Osten scoffed. "Aside from the fact you're a Fed? Well, how about if Marvin Whittle *was* under at the school, then you know his intended target or at least a profile of said person. The mere fact this person killed one of your own means revenge is first and foremost on your agenda."

Pushing away from the table, Osten moved around until he was before the agent and spoke so lowly only he and the other man could hear. "And I know that means CJ's life isn't top priority for you. You

are willing to write her off as expendable." Osten's tone dropped and grew even harder. "I'm not."

The agent looked down at the unwavering stare. "Do you know something that may be pertinent to this case?"

"Other than she felt someone was following her? That there were cameras in her house so she could be observed at any time she was home? The incident with the Rohypnol? No, I wouldn't presume to know anything that you don't already know."

"Cameras?" The man flipped through his notes. "I didn't know about any cameras."

"It was a while ago and we got rid of them," Osten explained to her brothers. "I thought she told you."

Fury raged in both black and blue eyes as her brothers shook their heads. "No. She didn't," Thurston clipped out.

Leaning against a counter, Osten put his eyes back on the agent. "Who are you?"

"Special Agent Marks."

"Okay, Special Agent Marks, tell me what you know—everything—about Gordon Blake."



CJ felt lethargic. Light-headed. Nauseous. And a whole slew of things she figured it would take too much energy to identify.

The blankets she was tucked in smelled familiar to her. It was the gentle scent that she used as fabric softener. Comfort settled around her as she figured she had just experienced one hell of a nightmare.

Moving slowly, she sat up in the bed and saw she was dressed in black boxers and a white tee shirt. No shoes or socks were on her feet.

"Damn!" she muttered, realizing it wasn't an unfortunate dream. Sunlight shone in through the tall window, filling the room with its wintry glow.

A cabin. A nice one but still a log cabin. Thick rugs were placed on the floor and they banished the chill from her feet.

CJ walked to the large window and peered out—nothing but forest as far as she could see. Well, forest and snow. She had no idea where she was.

After a quick search of the room told her there were no more clothes to be found, she went to the door and opened it. Was this the same place she had tried to run from before? Her instincts told her yes.

And they nagged her about something else...something she didn't want to acknowledge. Shoving the uncomfortable thought to the back of her mind, CJ moved down the silent hall.

She passed a bathroom and another room whose door was locked. CJ made no noise as she waited at the edge of the living room. No one was in sight, but...she had no idea of where to go once she was outside. What she wore was all she had against the wintry elements, and she didn't see any boots by the door to protect her feet.

Still, she had to try.

CJ opened the door slowly. The frigid air blasted her. She gripped the wool blanket she had taken from the back of the couch and stepped onto the porch.

Down the five steps, CJ halted as a voice reached her. "Your determination always did add to my attraction for you. But even you should know better than attempting to run wearing such thin clothes."

That voice sent tremors through her. Like caught up in slow animation, CJ looked over her left shoulder. The wool blanket fell gently into dark folds on top of the crisp crust of the blinding-white snow.

CJ took in the man who seemed to be so at home on the porch of the cabin. Dark blue jeans covered long legs and a black leather coat. Stubble adorned the lean face, adding charm and handsomeness to it.

One of his shoulders rested against the rounded pillar as he watched her. His hair was like usual, perfect. She knew the man staring at her but at the same time she didn't; the eyes that raked across her were a different color than she recalled.

Instead of the dark blue she was used to, CJ found herself being appraised by a pair of pale green eyes. Standing there watching her, waiting for her next move, the man had a rifle next to him. It was a man she had believed a friend. Gordon Blake.

"No," she mumbled. "It...it can't be!"

Like it was a normal day, Gordon tugged up his gloves and trailed one leather-covered finger through the snow on the porch railing. "Come on, Chantoya. Come back inside."

She moved backwards, taking her further from the man. In a flash, the eyes grew to pale shards of ice. "I mean it, Chantoya. Do *not* make me chase you."

She didn't stop. In fact, she began to pick up speed. The blanket lay where it had been dropped and even the cold air didn't seem to affect her. Her mouth moved but nothing came out.

"Where are you going to go? Look around, CJ. There isn't anywhere for you to go. You can't take a vehicle. You don't even know where you are." He waved a hand around. "Nothing but miles and miles of deep snow and freezing cold. And I don't want to have to bring you back."

While it might not have been the smartest thing to do, running was the only option she had. Chantoya was off the steps and into the snow at the bottom. She could now feel the cold spiking into her feet and spreading up her legs.

"CJ. Don't you see we belong together?!" He moved a gloved hand between them. "Now, come back here before your feet get frost-bite."

"Marvin? What about Marvin? I thought...he...you..."

Gordon pushed away from the wood column he had been leaning against and moved to the top of the steps. "Ah, yes, Marvin. Well, he did bash my face in, but he was trying to keep me from you. He's dead now." He shrugged like it was nothing. "Come inside and I will tell you what's going to happen."

When she stood there glaring up at him in disgust, his eyes narrowed. "Don't make me tell you again, CJ. Come up here."

Like her feet weighed a thousand pounds each, she slowly reached down for the blanket as she passed it and took each step like it were harder than the last. And it was, for Chantoya knew Gordon Blake held her future in his hands. He would decide whether she lived or died. She was in his world now.

Ever the gentleman, Gordon opened the door for her and allowed her to enter first. Chantoya shoved down the revulsion she felt at the touch of his gloved hand along the small of her back. He took the blanket from her, folded it, and replaced it back along the backrest of the couch.

"Sit down, CJ." His command made tears fill her eyes but she did as told.

"How could you do this, Gordon? Kill Marvin? Kidnap me? Why would you do this?" CJ asked as her feet started to get warm.

"It is fate. We were meant to be together." Gordon pulled off his gloves and wriggled his fingers. "You will come to accept that fact," he stated like he was talking about the weather.

"You have a wife, Gordon. We aren't meant to be anything, except at one time fellow teachers."

"No!" His shout reverberated through the cabin. "You were made for me." His eyes swirled with barely controlled emotion. She could see the effort it took for him to calm down. "No," he said again, softer this time. One hand ran down his face before it reached out toward her.

The motion was almost agitated as he moved his fingers. "We, Chantoya, we belong together. Don't you see? You have to see. We are perfect complements of one another."

"What about your wife, Gordon? She's not going to want to share you with anyone." A wave of his hand made her heart plummet. "What *happened* to your wife, Gordon?" *Dear Lord, I know I shouldn't ask.*

His gaze glazed over as he pursed his lips. "She...she is happy. She is in Virginia Beach. And knows that you, *you*, Chantoya, are my soul mate."

Shaking her head, CJ couldn't help but blurt out, "I am not your soul mate, Gordon. You can't kidnap people and think they will want to be with you. You don't know me, and I don't—!"

He jumped up. "Don't say it! Don't tell me you don't love me. Don't lie to me!" His hands made fists at his sides as he glared down at her.

CJ swallowed her fear. *This man is seriously unstable.* "Okay, okay," she tried placating him. "I just mean that I am still freaked out."

Gordon sat back down, apparently appeased for the moment. "Look, I don't want to keep drugging you. I want you to be able to have freedom while you are here. But if you push me," his voice dropped to a low growl, "I will have no problem doing just that."

Drugs?

Her throat was once again dry as could be. He wasn't a man to trifle with. There was not a single remaining thing that reminded her of the man whom she had taught beside. The caring man had been wiped away, leaving her with this doppelganger.

CJ scanned the interior of the cabin before allowing her gaze to focus back on Gordon. The man was staring at her. Dezarae telling her about the Roofie came flooding back to her mind. "Did you drug me?"

A perverse smile crossed his normally handsome face, twisting it into a grotesque mask of falsification. "I had to. I would've had you if you had just gone home that day. Why did you go to the park? You could have hurt yourself?" He admonished. "I know this was a little rushed. I was going to wait until school was out..."

Chantoya realized she most likely would be safer if she kept him talking. "But you didn't wait, why?"

"I couldn't see you anymore."

Baffled, CJ fought off a shiver and asked, "You saw me at school everyday." School. Her students. In a rush, they became first and foremost to her mind. "What about school, Gordon? We have an obligation to the kids. What day is it?"

He waved off her question. "You won't be going back to teaching for a while. Not until after we get married."

Married? Married! Hell, no! Biting the inside of her lip to keep her comments inside, CJ battled back tears of despair.

"I even have your dress picked out for you. Don't worry, it'll fit perfectly. I know. You haven't gained any weight since college." He smiled as if she should feel honored by his thoughtfulness.

"You can't keep me here!" she gasped, outraged.

An eerie fire rose in Gordon's eyes briefly before he contained it. He watched her and spoke, "That's where you're wrong." Gordon leaned back in his seat, still watching her. If not for the scary look in his eyes, CJ would have easily imagined this conversation in the teachers' lounge.

"See, CJ. My original time would have made it so I had to keep you, tied, drugged or both. I don't want that. With the weather you can roam the cabin because I would hope you aren't dumb enough to try and leave wearing what you are."

CJ's heart sank. Gordon was right, without a lot more clothes and something on her feet she didn't stand a chance.

The look on his face told her he had known the train of her thoughts. "Oh, yeah, as long as you behave, CJ, you can keep those clothes. If I have to tell you something more than once, you will lose an article."

Why can't I wake up? Parading around naked wasn't even up for consideration, not in front of Gordon.

"In time you will learn how we are meant to be. You will come to my bed willingly. Pleasure me. Service me. And even enjoy it, for *we* are meant to be."

A Herculean effort was required to keep the revulsion off her face. Death had begun to look like a better option. *This man is nuts!*

"I can't wait to show you what our future together will be like. I know you are willing to be freaky in bed." He ran a hand along his jaw line. "Hmmm. Maybe I should send that Osten a thank you."

Osten? "What does Osten have to do with this?" CJ was astounded.

Gordon stood and chuckled. "I watched you with him. I saw how you enjoyed being ordered around in bed."

Heat flew into her face. How could he know this? *He's lying, CJ. Don't let him goad you.* As she tried to appear indifferent by his words, CJ noticed a flush to his body and an increase in his breathing.

"Of course, that bastard deserves to die for touching you and you had to be cleansed. But still..." he trailed off and fondled the obvious ridge in his jeans, "you are beautiful to watch as you orgasm. And when it is because of *our* love for one another, it will be even better."

CJ squeezed her eyes shut and turned her head as the sound of a zipper being lowered reached her ears. Gordon's voice slithered into her ears.

"When I get to see all that supple black leather on you, your body bent over a fur-covered table..." his breathing grew raspy. Pushing up from her seat, Chantoya kept her eyes on the floor. She wasn't about to sit there and listen to this. "No!" he shouted. "Look at me, CJ. Look at me!"

Squeezing her eyes shut, she raised her head until she knew her eyes were above his head. Then and only then did she lower her gaze, not daring to go past his face. "What?" CJ knew there was pure loathing and disgust in her voice but she couldn't help it. He repulsed her.

His face was glazed over with passion. Those green eyes, though on her, seemed to picture something only he could see. Gordon didn't answer her and as his eyes drifted closed, she ran back to her room. The sound of her name falling off his lips chased her back to her new sanctuary.

CJ sat in front of the door considering there was no lock. Wrapped in a blanket from the bed, she shivered and let the tears fall.

Twenty - One

Osten stood behind the man at the computer. His fists were clenching and unclenching as he waited for the search to end. The other people milling around in the room were totally ignored.

0 RESULTS FOUND Flashed in the middle of the screen.

"Sorry, man." The young tech shrugged without turning to face Osten behind him.

"Keep searching. Find me something." Osten ground his back teeth as he moved away from the computer.

His pager vibrated and he pulled it off, glanced at the number and headed for the door. Osten could feel Special Agent Marks's gaze on him, but he didn't slow in his departure.

Climbing into his car, Osten drove to just inside the base, got out, and climbed into the back of the minivan that was waiting for him.

Jayde Kincade was driving the van and Scott Leighton's wife, Lex, was riding shotgun. "Sorry it had to be this way, Osten. But we figured the FBI will be tailing you," Jayde's soft voice said.

He didn't know what to say, so he waited. After he had gotten the page he'd called the number once in his car. Tyson had said only, "Meet Jayde at the base," and then had hung up.

Jayde drove to a Mexican restaurant, parked, and then she and Lex got out. Osten followed and escorted them in establishment.

The women headed to an empty table at the back and sat down. Unsure, Osten made to sit as well before a familiar voice reached him. "Osten," Tyson spoke. The women barely looked at him as he left.

Tyson led him to a small backroom. Inside, Osten was confronted with two men he didn't know. His dark eyes met Tyson's hazel

ones. Tyson explained, "These are two men I worked with when I was in the counterterrorism unit. Ethan and Willie. I called in a favor."

Both men reached out a hand to Osten. As he shook them, they supplied their name again. Willie was a thick Asian man and Ethan looked...a lot like Aidrian.

His shock must have been on his face, because Tyson immediately said, "I know. The first time we met I thought it was Hondo as well."

Ethan smiled before a serious look crossed his face. "This is what we know. Marvin Whittle didn't die from the gunshots." At Osten's skeptical look, he clarified, "They were minor; and though he could have died from blood loss, he didn't. He was poisoned. And sodomized."

Osten didn't object to the chair Tyson pulled out for him. Ethan continued. "The poison was from *Hapalochlaena maculosa*, Blue-Ringed Octopus. He became paralyzed but could still feel what was being done to him. He went very painfully."

Willie took over the explanation. "I spoke to the school and got Blake's record. I did a little digging and found a few more aliases. He has eight others." Willie moved to a computer. "Anyway, I plugged in some info and there were five things that popped up while researching his names."

Osten abandoned the chair to look over Willie's shoulder at the nineteen-inch computer screen. "Well, let's assume he's driving wherever he's going. He wouldn't want to chance CJ asking for help or making a scene. Or if she was drugged, I don't guess he'd want to explain what was wrong with her and risk someone remembering her like that."

Tyson moved beside Osten as well. "Okay, so if the poison prolonged his death, we should add a few hours to the time he would've had for a head start."

Ethan added, "We have all his accounts flagged so if any of them are used, we'll know immediately. We flagged Ms. Jackson's accounts also."

"What's that red square?" Osten asked.

"He has a cabin in the Appalachian Mountains. No one knows where; however, some rumors have floated down it was in Virginia, the Blue Ridge. To be fair, we've also heard Vermont's Green Mountains. But we have no solid proof." Willie shrugged.

"She's there," Osten affirmed as his gaze ran over the part of the Appalachians that moved through Virginia. Tyson shot a glance to Osten who just nodded. "I can't explain it, Cade, I just know."

"All right." Hazel eyes moved from current teammate to past ones. "Get me photos of this area and call me when it's done."

"You got it." Ethan and Willie gathered the computer and walked out the door.

Osten looked at Tyson. He was the Team's second in command, a friend, and officer, and Osten had no idea of what to say. How were they going to get pictures of the area?

"I—"

"No need to thank me for something that never happened." Still, one half of his lips curled in a smile. "Let's get some food."

Not a word was said about what had transpired in the back of the restaurant. Osten ate lunch with Tyson, Jayde, and Lex and talked about a surprise party Lex wanted to throw for her husband.

Moods were considerably lighter as they made their way back to Jayde's van. Tyson helped Lex into the back, his wife into the passenger seat, and waited for Osten to climb in next to Lex.

The ride back to the base was still contrived of party plans. Osten was let out by his car and he watched as they drove away with a slight wave.

Not even the cold bite of winter could cut through his thoughts of CJ. For a few moments, he rested against his car before climbing in to head to his quiet apartment. Once there, Osten focused on remembering everything he could about Gordon Blake, anything that might shorten his search for that man and ultimately Chantoya.

Two days passed and Osten was ready to blow a gasket. He had heard nothing from Tyson's contacts and almost snapped at Scott when he called him into an office.

"Sir?" he asked, noticing Tyson was leaning against a far wall.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Scott demanded.

Eyebrows rising with confusion, Osten didn't really have an answer so he asked again, "Sir?"

"Cut the crap. This thing with CJ. I had to hear about it from Jeb." Cornflower blue eyes snapped with rage.

"I—"

Scott waved him silent. "No. This is time for you to listen. We are family. You share these kinds of things; you don't keep them to

yourself." He waved his hand between himself and Tyson. "We care about you, so from now on —"

"Ease off, Harrier," Tyson interrupted. "I knew. We were waiting for some photos to come in before we told everyone. I thought it best to keep it quiet. We can all be a bit smothering at times when we know something's wrong."

Harrier seemed a bit mollified by that, although his eyes were still hard when he looked back to Osten. "Okay, then. Now that y'all informed me, you will tell everything."

Osten opened his mouth, only to shut it when Tyson said, "Well I got the photos so let's do a show-n-tell for everyone and figure out how we're going to get CJ back."

Scott picked up his phone. He dialed a number and after a quick sentence hung up. "They'll be here soon."

The trio of men headed for their usual situation room, took their normal seats and waited for the rest of the team to arrive.



Chantoya had no idea what day it was. Gordon had said she was drugged so there was no way for her to really know how long she had been here. She was wrapped in a blanket and sitting on the bed. For the past few days she had been "choosing" to remain in the room.

Gordon was apparently unconcerned by it. He let her hide for the most part, but demanded she eat. CJ had almost lost one of her two articles of clothing had left for that display of refusal.

At least every day he gave her clean ones. CJ prayed it was a dream.

Gordon took her to a room that still made her shudder. It was like a shrine dedicated to her full of photos of her during many different periods in her life.

He took great pride in sharing with her what he'd deemed *The Pleasure Palace*. It was full of the toys they would use on one another — furs, feathers, leathers, and more. However, it wasn't until he brought out her wedding dress with matching undergarments that CJ realized just how far gone Gordon truly was.

As she sat on the bed, she understood that making a run for it was going to be her only chance. Eyeing the blanket, she tried to devise a way to cut it so she could wrap her feet. The door opened and Gordon

stood there; over his arm was a dress. "You are wearing this for dinner."

CJ nodded immediately, wanting him to leave.

Her quick agreement satisfied him and he laid the dress across the foot of the bed. "I'd give you shoes if I thought you'd behave."

Trap, her mind screamed. Don't look eager. "Are we going outside?" CJ hoped her question was the right tone. She hadn't been outside since finding out Gordon was her captor.

"No. We are having a candlelit dinner. A nice, quiet, romantic dinner between lovers." He sent her a grin that had once been endearing. Now it was repulsive.

Lovers?! CJ reached out of the blanket and touched the dress. Silk. At first glance, she thought it was black; but upon closer inspection, it was just very dark purple. "When's dinner?" Chantoya questioned, keeping her eyes on the dress.

"I'll be back for you in an hour." He turned for the door, pausing before walking out. "Don't forget, CJ. I am watching your every move." Then he was gone.

CJ was nervous and before she knew it, she'd reached for her necklace only to remember it was no longer there. She waited until the last possible moment to change. As she slid the dress over her head, CJ tried to think of a way out. Gordon didn't trust her. That was obvious. She was locked in at night and he had nothing within reach should could injure him with.

All her utensils were plastic and she only got a spoon. Never a fork or knife. Her cup was Styrofoam.

And he had cameras everywhere. Everywhere. At least now she knew who had broken into her home and put the camera there.

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you, Osten." A humorless laugh escaped her as she realized it was moot to apologize when it was highly unlikely she would see him again.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she envisioned Osten smiling down at her with his dark, sparkling eyes. How safe his touch made her feel; how special he made her feel.

"No more holding back my emotions," she vowed. "If I get out of here, I am going to make sure the people I love know it."

Love. She loved Osten. "I hope I get the chance to tell you to your face, Mr. Scoleri." Hands that seemed steadier with the thought of Osten smoothed over the dress that fit her figure perfectly. The smooth material hugged her body, enhancing everything God gave her.

"You look beautiful, Chantoya." Gordon's voice was low and near sincere as he spoke to her from the door. "Come on, dinner's waiting."

Osten. Hurry up and find me. Pasting a bland expression on her face, CJ walked toward the man who stood by the door and held out a hand to her. Gordon wore a double-breasted black silk suit with dark purple accents. The pale green of his eyes seemed to glow more against the darker coloring gracing his body.

Placing her hand in his, they walked up the hallway together. As Gordon led her into the dining area, her breath caught in her throat. It was beautiful. Stunning enough that she almost forgot she had been kidnapped. Almost.

A white lace tablecloth with covered dishes draped the intimate table. Sitting in the middle were two tapers, dark gold in color, their flames flickering in the otherwise darkened room.

Gordon was silent as he escorted her to her chair. After he had pushed her seat in, he uncovered her dish for her. CJ looked over the food before her and felt her mouth water. Although an asshole, this man sure knew how to tempt her stomach.

Salmon with an orange maple glaze framed by an array of grilled vegetables and scoop of rice pilaf completed the food on her plate.

"Our meal, my dear," Gordon said in a deep voice as he took his seat.

CJ tried to control the swell of hope as she laid her eyes upon true silverware. Looking across the table, she was grateful to have the intense eyes of Gordon glancing at something aside from her for the moment.

"You should begin to eat," he admonished slightly.

"I was wondering about the salmon," she blurted, desperate to have him believe she wasn't planning an escape.

"It's fresh from the Pacific Northwest. Alaskan, not Atlantic." He speared a bite of the fish and chewed it carefully while watching her. "I know you don't eat Atlantic salmon."

Eating slowly, Chantoya thought of a way to phrase her question. Her eyes drifted to half-mast as the rich flavor of the salmon filled her senses. "It's winter, how'd you get fresh salmon?"

Gordon dabbed his linen napkin at the corners of his mouth before he sent her a smile that scared her. "Trying to figure out where you

are?" He shrugged easily. "Of course you are. You are still under the impression you are going to be leaving me."

CJ watched warily as Gordon set the napkin down beside his plate. "Let me tell you something, CJ." His eyes bore into hers. "I have been following you for years. I have done extensive research on you and I *know* that you are the perfect complement for me in all ways. We are both exceptionally intelligent; we share the same passions; and I am positive our children will be the best we both have to offer."

Her hand shook as she ate a bite of rice pilaf. This was a nightmare that wouldn't end. "Then why the drugs?" she asked even as her mind wondered about the food she was presently eating.

"Would you have willingly come with me?"

Hell, no! "You are a married man, Gordon. I respect vows of matrimony."

"As do I, Chantoya. And when we get married, I will be very pleased to know you take the vows as seriously as I do. That it is binding...*for life*."



Black and white photos with pen markings littered the table. Absolute silence filled the room as the group waited for the last man to enter. Seven pairs of sharp eyes swung to the door as it opened.

"We have until twenty-one hundred before the FBI launches its operation." Tyson closed the door behind him and took his usual seat. "It will take them about three hours to get into position." Silence reigned again.

Each man looked at his watch. All eight of their timepieces were perfectly synchronized with one another. As one the men pushed back from the table and stood. They put the gathered photos into a shredder before emptying the room.

The men moved down the hall, breaking off to head to their own personal lockers. Osten was the last to enter the locker room. His mind moved over the images he had committed to memory.

"Petty Officer Scoleri," a feminine voice, said breaking his concentration.

His gaze flickered up to the woman before him. "Chief Leighton," he said automatically. His team leader's wife stood before him in her khaki uniform. "What can I do for you, ma'am?"

"I need to speak to you. When you are done here, report to me in your briefing room." She nodded sharply and walked off.

Osten looked around and then grabbed his bag. Shutting his locker door, he locked it and headed back to the room he had just vacated.

Knocking once, he waited to be called and then stepped into the room once he was. Immediately his eyes found Chief Alexis Leighton waiting for him. Her back was to him and she seemed to be studying a map of the world.

"Petty Officer Scoleri reporting as ordered, ma'am." Osten stood straight and waited for her to speak.

"Shut the door, Petty Officer," she ordered without turning around.

As soon as the heavy gray door shut, Osten found himself facing Lex. Everything about her demeanor screamed rigid and professional, but the expression in her eyes softened for a brief moment.

Then she stiffened and walked smartly until they were almost side by side. In her left hand she had a small vial and pressed it into Osten's hand. "Have a safe trip, Petty Officer." Then without any other further words, she headed for the door, stopping only to say, "Commander."

Turning around so he had time to pocket the vial she had given him, Osten found Scott standing there watching him. Alexis was not in sight. "Everything okay, Baby Boy?" Scott asked.

"Fine, sir."

"Gonna tell me what my wife was doing in here?"

"All she did was wish us a safe trip." Osten felt bad for lying; but if Alexis hadn't seen fit to tell her husband, he wasn't going to say anything, either.

Shrewd blue eyes narrowed. "Very well. We're ready to go."

"Right behind you, Harrier," Osten slipped back into the less formal talk between teammates. Shouldering his bag, he followed Scott out to the waiting van.

The short ride to the Naval Air Station Oceana Master Jet Base was done in relative silence. Osten felt an anxiousness fill him that had not ever been there before. It was different from the first time he went on a mission with this team. But it wasn't just a "normal" rescue mission for him, either. This time it was personal.

The quiet remained although all around them was plenty of noise and hustle. The men were stoic as they walked up into the back of the cargo plane they would be jumping from.

As soon as they were airborne, the men changed. They put on the snow suits that would keep them hidden from prying eyes and warm in the cold night air. Harrier went over the details of the mission one final time as they were flown to the jump zone.

The sun was dropping below the horizon when the tail end of the plane opened. By the time the group reached ten thousand feet and opened their chutes, it would be pitch black and they would float in totally unseen. The cold winter air swirled about the men as they lined up and waited for the green jump light. All gear had been checked and double checked, so they were ready.

Osten felt the familiar rush of adrenaline fill him as he watched the men before him fall away into the increasing darkness. He snapped out a salute to the jump master and stepped out into the night, letting the air whisk him away.

The fall was done in total silence, each man knowing what he needed to do once he reached the ground. Chutes and harnesses were quickly stored as the men regrouped after landing. No words were spoken; hand signals were used as they spread out in pairs and carefully made their way to the target that held their "package."

Chantoya Willow Jackson.

The biting winds swirled and did their best to make things miserable for the eight men out in the elements. None of them lost focus on the task before them, though. The cold wasn't a factor. Their outfits could hold up in extreme sub-zero temperatures.

Osten clicked the mic at his throat. Everyone froze and waited. "Movement," his muted voice reached the others. "West corner."

Maverick's whisper reached them. "Raccoon in the trash. Package and Tango same position."

Osten clicked twice for his understanding. Progress was careful as they tried not to alarm animals, trip sensors, or any other precaution that maybe around the cabin's perimeter.

A glance to the tinted face of his watch told Osten how long they had until the feds arrived and shit hit the fan. Making eye contact with Jeb, Osten gestured for him to proceed and he would watch.

The team leapfrogged and continually made progress from the trees to surround the cabin. They never gave away their position or forgot to watch each other's six. They were a team, a well-oiled ma-

chine, and it was obvious with the smooth way they worked with one another.

Merlin set explosives to take out the generators that powered up the cabin. The other Team members positioned themselves by exits. Hondo made sure all vehicles were unusable. Ghost flowed up to back up Osten while Maverick turned his sniper's scope to the lone road and watched for the feds, keeping their transport out on standby.

"On my mark," Harrier's low voice reached them. He had his finger on the switch to take out the generators. All the men waited for his command. Knowing once all hell broke loose, they only had a short time to retrieve Chantoya.

"Whatever you do, do it now and fast. They'll be here in five minutes. Chopper in four, and we have an unidentified vehicle about a minute ahead of the feds. Can't tell if it's an undercover or not," Maverick's deep voice filled them in.

"Move out," the command rang.

Twenty-Two

Chantoya fought to maintain a civil conversation with the deranged man who had kidnapped her and killed the man of whom she had believed the worst. Marvin Whittle. She felt shame for her previous thoughts about him.

"What's wrong, CJ? What are you thinking about?"

"Marvin," she blurted out without thinking it through and belatedly wondered if that were the smartest thing to say.

"What about him?" Gordon asked, sipping his wine.

"How could you kill him? What about a family he could have left behind?" She placed her fork down, anger filling her.

"He got in the way. It was nothing personal. I'll kill whomever to keep you by my side, where you *belong*."

Bile rushed to the top of her throat. He spoke of killing so nonchalantly, so lackadaisically, it made her sick. "I'm just...I don't know what to say. Marvin was a human being and you killed him for no reason. You make me sick!" CJ pushed back from the table.

"Sit down," he ordered. "You haven't finished your meal."

"Go to hell!" she yelled and ran for her room.

Gordon was after her in a second. Chantoya felt the back of her dress rip as he tried to stop her. Without thought, she spun and smacked him right across the face and kept on running.

From his growl of anger, she knew that her actions had taken him by surprise. It wasn't long before his heavier steps were after her. CJ ran into her room and slammed the door, knowing it was pointless; she couldn't get away from him. "I should have gone outside," she muttered to the room as she used her body to try and keep the door shut.

The knob jiggled and her stomach heaved as tears began pouring down her face. *I'm about to die.* Her body tensed and she tried to push against the door, keeping the devil out of her room. The ripped material from her dress flopping over her shoulder was ignored.

"Open the door, CJ." Gordon's voice was once again calm and modulated. That scared her even more.

She shook her head and braced herself even more. Chantoya wasn't about to waste her energy on talking to him; she had to find a way to keep him out of the room. But the only thing in there was the bed and she had already found it was screwed to the floor. The mattress wouldn't help her, either.

"I'll give you one chance to open this door," he said. CJ felt the door move as Gordon tried to open it. Strength born of fear gave her the power to stop that attempt. "You're making me angry, CJ," he snapped.

Still wordless, CJ stepped away from the door and positioned herself to the side. She knew he would be busting in and perhaps the momentum would give her the opportunity to run past him and out of the cabin. Her heart was pounding so loudly, she was sure that he could hear it and would be wise to her plan.

Crash! The door flew open and Gordon stumbled with the force of his hit and the fact there was nothing behind the door to stop him.

CJ didn't hesitate; she tore out of the room and up the hall, heading for the door. The threat of dying in the cold wasn't enough for her to stay in this place another minute. If she got frostbite...she got frostbite, but she would still be alive.

Her eyes found the front door and her feet moved faster. Bare feet skidded as she slowed to open the door. One hand reached out for the brass knob and she crumpled to the floor as electricity flowed through her.

Gordon stood over her before she could get her body to cooperate and function. "I told you there was no way for you to escape me." He crouched down next to her. "Hurts, doesn't it? Just like being tasered by the cops." Standing, he walked off, leaving her lying there.

Struggling to find her feet, CJ was totally unprepared for the blow that knocked her back to the cold, hard floor of his cabin. Gordon had backhanded her and now stood over her. "Don't *ever* defy me like that again. You know what...I think it is time we take this to the next level."

The tall man leaned down and painfully yanked her up, propelling her down the hall in front of him. They went past the room he had

kept her in and up the stairs to what CJ assumed to be Gordon's room. Dread set in.

Gordon shoved her into the room with enough force that she stumbled to the bed before she had regained her balance. Her dress would have fallen to her navel if she hadn't held it up.

"Years, Chantoya. I've waited years for you and by God, you will be mine tonight!"

"No!" Her mind scrambled frantically to figure out how to stall him. "We can't do this, not like this, Gordon!"

"Yes, now." He moved into the room and prowled closer to her. "I make you mine in all ways and then we begin your training."

The bed was at her knees and she was out of room. Clutching the torn dress in one hand, CJ held out her other one. "No, please!"

"Why are you acting like you want me to be nice? Just a bit ago you were running from me." Gordon arched a brow and looked at her with those pale green eyes.

Think, brain, think! "You told me I had to be cleansed because those other men touched me, right?" Gordon stopped his approach and stared at her. "If you do this to me, before we are married, it would be the same thing, right? So we have to be married first," CJ blurted out, praying that would work.

"You're right. I can't take you without wedding you first." Gordon moved to a closet and pulled out a garment bag. He moved to the bed and held it out to CJ. "Shower and put this on. We wed tonight." That said the man walked out of the room.

"Shit!" she swore as she was alone once again. Who knew this was how it would end. Her eyes cut to the right where the phone was, but it wasn't on its cradle. The side of her face throbbed and she still felt off from the electricity that had pumped through her.

Avoiding the mirror, CJ climbed into the shower and sank to the floor, holding her legs to her chest as the water pounded over her, and cried. Finally she stood and finished the shower, determined to find a way out of this.

"If we are getting married, that means he has to get a priest, and I can just say no and that I'm being held here against my will." Feeling a bit better, she finished drying off and found that Gordon had put her favorite lotion down beside the clothes she had to wear. *It is seriously disturbing just how much he knows about me.*

After lotioning her body and she was ready to put on the clothes, CJ closed her eyes and prayed this would be over soon. As she

unzipped the bag and took the perfectly pressed dress out, she sighed. No matter what Gordon's state of mind, he had chosen a beautiful dress. Even with the bruise on her cheek, CJ had to admit she looked pretty good once dressed.

There was a sadness in her eyes that took away from the overall image she presented; but as her shaking hands placed the tiara on, Chantoya knew Gordon wouldn't care.

With the train attached, CJ sat down to wait. Her heart fought valiantly to find a slow rhythm and give her some sense of decorum and control. A knock at the door barely gave her pause. This moment, to her, was paramount to walking the plank.

"Are you ready, Chantoya?" Gordon's voice, a voice that at one time had been relaxing to hear, asked.

"Is the preacher here?"

"No, not yet." The doorknob turned.

"Don't come in, Gordon. You aren't supposed to see me before the ceremony."

"If this is some sort of trick, I'm warning you right now, CJ—"

Fire flashed in her eyes. "Look, at least give me this. You aren't letting me have family or friends around." CJ knew her voice sounded sharp and drawn, and she couldn't care less.

"I'll be right outside the door. He'll be here about nine."

"Whatever." CJ continued to sit on the edge of Gordon's bed. She could see a shadow outside the door but didn't move. For all she knew it was a trick and Gordon was watching her right now. There were cameras in his room as well.

It had been extremely difficult to take the nail file and keep it hidden but she'd been unable to resist the attempt when she saw it there in the bathroom. Another reason to hold still. The tight dress didn't leave much room to conceal a makeshift weapon.

Half past eight. Watching the clock, CJ wriggled her toes inside the shoes on her feet. *He finally gave me shoes.* Trying to control her emotions, CJ realized she had to wait until the main door was opened or figure out how to shut off the power to the voltage that ran into the handle. *That wasn't a nice feeling, having all that power sent through me.*

Even if stabbed, Gordon would present a huge danger. He might still have a gun on him, not to mention, he was healthy, in his element, much stronger, and extremely certifiable.

Quarter to nine. Twenty or so versions of how things could go ran through her mind. *Anytime now, the preacher will be here.* Stab Gor-

don? Where? Eye, throat, crotch, arm, chest, or wherever she could reach. She had no clue.

"Fuck!" she heard Gordon yell. "Goddamn raccoons setting off the perimeter alarms!" He sounded nervous.

Hands began to sweat and Chantoya wiped them off one at a time on the comforter. How she longed for her necklace and the comfort it brought her. A Madonna and child with her name engraved on the back, she had worn it since before she could remember. She hoped that if her brothers found it, they would know she didn't go willingly, for she never took it off.

"He's on his way up," Gordon told her through the door. "Soon, Chantoya, soon you will be mine."

Calm. Serenity. Fortitude. One hand ran down her face as she shifted on the bed. *Stay strong, CJ. You will survive this.*



BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Explosions rocked the house and plunged it into total darkness.

CJ screamed and hit the floor. *What the...?* Fear she had been trying to control surged forward and spilled over. When a hand clamped down onto her shoulder, she began to fight.

Struggling as she was dragged across the floor, gagging when a foot hit her in the gut. "Shut up!" Gordon hissed, not at all sounding in control. Reaching for the file, she plunged it into his thigh as hard as she could. "Aarrgghhh!" he hollered.

None of that registered to her as she scrambled in the direction she believed the door to be. Yanking it open, CJ barreled out into the pitch black hall and kept going. *How far to the stairs? Was it seven or nine steps?*

"CJ!" Gordon yelled as shots began ringing behind her. Apparently, he had managed to make it to the door as well, for one of the bullets landed in the wall beside her.

Not slowing, CJ panicked further when she ran into something solid. *Another man? Gordon? His preacher?* She fought as hard as she could until she was easily restrained and felt cloth cover her mouth and nose. As she fell into oblivion, Chantoya could somewhat make out Gordon's voice as he cried out her name in pain and anger. Then there was nothing.

As the chopper flew away into the night, Osten ripped off his night vision goggles and had a light on CJ as he checked her over. She was unconsciousness and he longed to wake her, but it had to be this way.

Renewed anger and the desire to kill filled him as his fingers traced the hand prints that were on her shoulder and cheek. Still, his touch was beyond tender as he cleaned away the sweat and dirt from her face.

People were silent as they headed back from a mission they never even went on. The fact CJ was in a wedding dress wasn't mentioned, or that Osten had almost killed Gordon. It had taken Tyson and Aidrian to pull him off the unconscious man.

The other men in the chopper allowed a slight grin to touch the corners of their stern expressions at the way Osten cradled Chantoya's body against his. They didn't say a word as he attached a necklace back around her neck before lowering his face by hers and just holding her.

As the chopper landed, there was a waiting vehicle into which Osten placed CJ. Dark eyes conveyed the unspoken message of safety and speed to the man who got behind the wheel and drove her away.

"You'll be with her soon," Harrier's voice said softly. "He'll take good care of her."

Osten never moved until he could no longer see the taillights of the vehicle transporting his future. Then and only then did he follow Harrier into the hangar and entered a dark SUV.

Forcing himself to not answer his ringing cell phone, Osten still checked the number. It was Ajani. A few minutes later, Osten played the message Ajani had left: Chantoya had been found and was recovering in the hospital. Then Ajani gave him the name of the hospital and her room number.

The rest of the night passed slowly as the men ran drills out in the cold weather. Harrier finally let them go at 0930 and Osten's hair was barely dry as he left the base and headed for the hospital.

His steps were quick despite his exhaustion as he entered the building. Without speaking to the receptionist, he made his way up to Chantoya's room.

A moment of hesitation stopped him outside, but he opened the door slowly. Sharp eyes landed on the figure that lay so still on the hospital bed. The normally dark skin was pallored and contained a gray tint.

The only chair in the room was taken by a large man who sat in silence by the prone body. Worry lines filled his scruffy face. He held one of her hands in his own. His fingers caressed her skin.

"Ajani?" Osten spoke softly, not wanting to startle him.

"They're keeping her sedated until they make sure there is no remaining toxin in her." Ajani never looked away from his sister. "How do they know what they gave her won't make it worse?"

With a deep breath, Osten moved fully into the room and walked to the other side of the bed. "Have faith." Looking down, fresh rage immediately swarmed the Italian. Her face still bore the remaining traces of bruising. *Oh, my precious CJ. I long to kill him for doing this to you.*

Barely aware of her brother in the room, Osten brushed a hand across Chantoya's forehead before leaning down to kiss her. Trailing his lips along her cheek he stopped by her ear.

"Don't leave me, Chantoya. I need you in my life." A wry grin flitted briefly across his face. "I know, I know. That's selfish of me, but I don't care. You mean more to me than anyone I've ever known."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I wish I were lying there instead. Fight to get through this, CJ. You are resilient, like the willow tree. You can make it. I'll be waiting."

Osten reached around and removed his necklace. With the care of a man touching something so delicate, he put his gold necklace in her hand, kissing each finger as he closed them around the cross. He wanted to put it upon her neck, but her own necklace was there and he knew it gave her comfort.

"Mr. Scoleri," a low voice grated behind him.

"Yes?" he said without turning around. His eyes flickered to Ajani who looked between him and the person behind him.

"You are going to have to come with us."

Brushing a kiss on the back of CJ's hand, Osten stood and turned. Special Agent Marks. "What for?" All the compassion in his eyes left, leaving a blank stare.

"For interfering with a federal investigation."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know damn—"

"Don't cuss in front of my sister!" Ajani snapped out, his voice harsh enough that the other men fell momentarily silent.

"My apologies," Special Agent Marks said. Then he looked back at Osten. "You know fully well what I am talking about. Going in and blowing up Gordon's home and beating him."

Osten shook his head in disgust. "I did nothing of the sort." He turned his attention back to CJ. All tender emotion returned as he gazed down at her. "Come back to me, CJ. *Non posso vivere senza voi. Voglio passare il resto della mia vita con te. Sei la mia anima gemella.*" He kissed her on her dry, cracked lips and brushed a strand of hair away from her ear.

Facing the frowning agent, Osten said, "I'm not going to argue with you in here. Step out into the hall and say your piece."

The FBI man nodded and waved Osten out first, closing the door behind him. "Why did you interfere?"

"I didn't interfere with a damn thing," Osten said, holding the other's gaze.

"Then can you explain what happened out in the mountains last night?"

"I don't know what happened in the mountains last night. I wasn't in them. I was here on base."

Marks ran a hand over his head. "Cut the crap. We both know that you busted in there, blew up his place, beat him up, and rescued the girl."

A glint appeared in Osten's dark eyes. "Is he still breathing?"

"Yes," Marks answered. "Why?"

"Because I would have killed him if I had gotten a hold of him."

Understanding filled the older man's gaze. "I believe you would have. But that doesn't negate the explosives, or the fact she was gone when we got there."

"Look, I just got here. I left base about 0945 this morning. Had I been the one to rescue her, I would have brought her in and would have been the one to call her brother telling him she had been found. Not the other way around. So, back the fuck off!" Osten snarled.

"Pretty defensive for an innocent man," Marks taunted.

Osten didn't back down. "Any man would be defensive with you treating him like you are treating me."

"Who can corroborate your story?"

"You can call my CO, XO, or any man from my Team. We were running drills last night. We were doing a 30-30."

"A 30-30?" Marks asked.

"Thirty feet over the water in a helo doing thirty knots. We jump in fully geared and swim back to shore. Last night was a short one, only five miles in."

The federal agent couldn't hide the shocked and slightly impressed look. "That's what you did?"

"Yes, sir." Osten was never going to admit to this man just how truly exhausted he was. The "nonexistent" rescue, the 30-30, and the "easy" fifteen mile run that followed had taken their toll on him more than usual given his attention was on Chantoya.

Osten waited for the next question. His tenuous hold on his temper was fading fast. CJ was in the room right behind him. He needed to be with her, not answering a crabby man's questions.

"If that's all, I'll be getting back inside," Osten said calmly.

That got the man's attention. "Actually you still have to come with me. Until we get all of this straightened out."

"You're arresting me?" Osten asked, incredulous.

As the annoying man stood there and assessed Osten's question, he flipped through the notebook silently. "No, not arresting you. I'm detaining you until I am satisfied with this story you gave."

"Are you fuckin' shittin' me?" Osten demanded, his muscular physique tensing. Special Agent Marks merely stared back. "The woman I love is in there and you want to detain me? Because you don't believe my story? Listen you asshole, I suggest you make this quick, because if something happens to her while I'm being 'detained', so help you..."

"After you," Marks said as two other agents appeared to flank Osten.

Osten muttered in Italian as he pulled his phone out of his pocket. One agent reached for it. "I'll take that," he said.

Without a moment's hesitation, Osten had the agent pinned against the wall, immobile. His phone was against his ear and uttered simply, "Feds have me." Dropping his arm from where it rested against the skinny agent's throat, Osten snarled, "Don't *ever* do that again." Then he dropped the phone in the man's hand.

Not giving a single look behind him, Osten strode out into the cold. He missed the look that passed among the agents, but he didn't care. His only concern was the woman he was forced to leave in the hospital room.

Twenty-Three

The car ride to the plane was full of tense silence. Special Agent Marks rode next to Osten. The agent Osten had slammed into the wall kept searing him with angry eyes during the whole flight. None of it mattered.

Osten struggled to rein in his emotions. *It'll not do CJ any good if you get locked up.* Closing his eyes, he conjured up a serene picture of her. It was an image of CJ with a sparkle in her eyes doing what she loved to do more than anything – teach. Osten found that look and held onto it, using her light to keep himself from venturing into the dark.

Not a single word was spoken as the agents escorted him through the lobby of their building. Four men and one woman moved across the tiled floor to a holding room. The second the door closed behind him, Osten groaned softly. *This is such shit!* Having surrendered his phone, the only thing he could do was wait.

He scanned the room, taking in the scarred table, faded government-issue carpet, two chairs, and, of course, the one-way glass. No expression visible on his face, he was stoic as he sat in one of the chairs, and waited. After thirty minutes he said, “Coffee would be nice, or a cold drink.”

Three minutes later the door opened. Agent Marks walked in holding both a cup of coffee and a bottled water. “Here you go.” Marks put them both down and took a seat across from Osten.

Taking the water, he said, “Thanks. Finished checking my story yet?”

“Not just yet. Why don’t you tell it to me again, from the beginning?”

A swallow of the cool liquid ran down Osten's throat. "How about you apologize and give me a ride back home?" Osten counter-offered.

"Give it up. I know you were there. That is how you work." The tone turned scathing. "You SEALs."

Osten halted the bottle at his lips. "You rang the bell." It was a statement. Any man who got tired of the hellish regiment they endured to become a SEAL only had to go ring a bell and he was done.

Marks's nose flared, the first sign he was losing control, then he regained it back. "When she wakes up and says you were there, I'm gonna be all over you like —"

The door swung open. Osten and Marks watched as a beautifully intense black woman entered. An aura of power surrounded her, one only enhanced by the professional pants suit she wore.

Osten saw a small scar on her right jaw, but it was her eyes that snared him and apparently Marks too considering the expression on his face. Dark brown eyes were cold, business-like. They demanded respect.

She looked directly at Osten. "Not another word. My client has nothing to say," she said in a crisp tone, barely glancing at Agent Marks. "We're leaving and y'all will be billed for the transportation to get him home. Mr. Scoleri, shall we?"

Osten stood and found that in her heels she was almost as tall as he was.

"Wait a sec, who are you?" Marks demanded. "You JAG?"

"No." Her calculating eyes landed on the man questioning her. "I'm his attorney until the time he receives military counsel. My name is Chantelle Porter." With a flick of her wrist, a beige business card landed before the agent. "If you have any more questions for my client, I'm sure you'll go through me."

Osten followed her out of the interrogation room and out of the building. He had tried to say something but she'd shushed him even as she'd handed him his phone.

At the top of the steps, she stopped. Osten zipped up his coat as winter's chill bit into him. He recognized Jayde Kincade, wife of his Executive Officer, XO, approaching them. "Jayde," he said, going to meet her, "Is Cade here?"

"No. Sorry." Her eyes landed on the woman beside him. "Chantelle meet Osten. Osten, meet Chantelle Porter, my sister."

Grasping Chantelle's hand, he bent over it. "*Grazie*, for helping me." Facing Jayde, Osten leaned in and kissed her cheek. "*Grazie*, Jayde. But why?"

"Let's go," Jayde said. Taking Osten's offered hand, they moved up the street. "Chantelle and I were up here shopping when Tyson called furious with a message he got from Ghost." She looked at her sister. "That's Ernst. I told Chantelle and she offered to help. Hope you don't mind going back with the two of us."

Osten grinned. "Not at all. Thank you both. I insist on buying dinner for us." He placed a call to Ajani and got updated on CJ's condition. Then he headed off with the two women.

The sisters were a lot of fun. Chantelle drove a Toyota Prius and despite her earlier coldness, was a very warm and funny person. He and Chantelle spoke on the ride back as a pregnant and exhausted Jayde slept.

"I can't believe she hasn't told Tyson," Osten said as he checked over his shoulder on the slightly snoring woman.

"Well, she just found out. She wants to tell him face to face, and it didn't help that when he called today he was less than pleased."

"I understand. That's the way I'd want to be told."

Chantelle smiled in the increasing dark. "You'll have to give me the name of the hospital so I can type it in the GPS."

"No problem. Thanks again for helping me out."

"Jayde said you're family. I wasn't the best sister when we were growing up. We've just started to bond more. When I heard her say with such confidence that she believed in you, I couldn't say no." Chantelle chuckled. "I had to get a power suit. I didn't think jeans would cut it; otherwise, we would have been their earlier."

"I owe you one. If it is within my power to grant it, I will."

Chantelle flicked a glance back to her still-dozing sister. "You don't owe me anything. If you are family to Jayde, then you are mine as well."

Osten smiled. "*Grazie*. That doesn't change the fact I am in your debt."

Chantelle remained silent and focused on the road. After a few moments of companionable silence, she pointed into the night. "What looks good to you for dinner?"

"Wherever you and Jayde would normally go. It doesn't matter to me."

"Well, okay. If you're sure." Chantelle pulled into a Red Lobster and shut off her vehicle. Turning in her seat, she said gently, "Jayde. Wake up, it's time to eat."

Osten watched silently as she woke, stretching like a cat. *Damn, Cade would keelhaul my ass for looking at Jayde.* He quickly got out of the car and called Ajani for another update.

The Italian SEAL escorted two beautiful women into the restaurant and sat across from them in the booth. When their waiter came, Osten deferred to the women, letting them order first.

Chantelle and Jayde kept him entertained with questions and stories of their own. It was a welcome relief from the stress he had been feeling. He smiled as he dipped his lobster in the melted butter and placed it in his mouth.

Jayde met his eyes briefly and Osten was again drawn in by the kindness in her gaze. "I think, Chantelle, we should get him back to his woman. I'm sure he wants to see her again today." He opened his mouth, but Jayde continued, "Besides, I should tell my husband I'm preggers. You know, he might like to be the...um...fifth person to find out."

She flashed Osten a conspiratorial grin. "Don't tell him you knew about this first."

"No, ma'am. I will act surprised when he comes in and brags about it to all of us." He waved for the bill.

"Cheeky man, Baby Boy. I'll tell him it's yours." Jayde reached across the table and smacked his arm. "Damn," she murmured and felt his bicep, "I can see why it was so easy for you to carry him. You're all muscle."

Osten fought down a blush as he signed the slip. "If you say so, ma'am." It was one thing to joke with the men about their women, but a whole other thing entirely to joke with the women about their men.

As they stood, Osten helped both women into their coats before slipping on his own. Jayde slid her arm through his. "I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable. I was only teasing."

He smiled down at her. "I'm fine. Not used to being teased by my XO's wife, that's all."

Chantelle took his other arm. "Thank you for a wonderful dinner."

"My pleasure, ma'am. Thank you for saving my six."

At the car, Osten opened the passenger side door when Jayde whispered in his ear, "I know you're exhausted. Sleep. I'll get Chantelle to the hospital."

Osten kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Cade is one *hell* of a lucky man to have you in his life."

Jayde squeezed his hand. "So is your CJ." Osten climbed into the back, buckled himself in and allowed the soft beat of the music to guide him to sleep.

He woke the moment Chantelle pulled into the hospital lot. His body, while tired, still felt much better than it had; even a tiny bit of rest had done wonders for him.

"Here you go, Mr. Scoleri," Chantelle said.

"*Grazie*, thank you, for everything you've done for me." He climbed out after Jayde.

"Take my card and call me if you need anything from me. Anything at all. In fact, whomever you get from JAG as your counsel, have him or her call me and I'll fill that person in on whatever that Marks character has told me." Chantelle held it out to him.

"Will do." Osten put the card in his pocket and assisted Jayde back into the car. Kissing the back of her hand, he whispered, "Congrats on the baby." Raising his head, he looked at the driver. "Chantelle it was an honor. Drive safely." He shut the door and headed into the hospital after the women drove off.

Hurrying through the halls, Osten knocked once on the door before he entered. All three brothers were around the bed. He could see Ajani and Thurston with tears on their cheeks. His heart sank.

Thurston looked up at him and smiled sadly. "She's awake, groggy, but awake. She's been asking for you."

The news very nearly floored him. *She asked for me.* Stepping up beside Binh, he nodded at the brothers before his dark eyes dropped to the woman who owned his heart. "Welcome back, gorgeous," he murmured as he kissed her lips tenderly. The bruise still made him furious but her being awake tamed him.

The most beautiful voice said, "Osten." Her eyes were still a bit unfocused as they moved over his face. "You came."

"Of course I did." His heart lurched at the tears her eyes acquired.

"Have to tell you something," she rasped, exhaustion apparent as her eyes drifted shut.

"I'm all ears, baby."

"It was you who saved me." Her eyes opened again. "You were who I latched onto. I love you, Osten Vittano Scoleri." She sighed. "I wanted to make sure I told you."

Cupping her face tenderly, Osten kissed her lips. His heart was pounding so loudly he was sure everyone could hear it. "*Ti amo, CJ, Ti amo.*"

"Remove that man from this room!" a voice commanded. Special Agent Marks had returned.

Osten's gaze hardened. *Bastards!* CJ turned her face and pressed her lips against his palm. Her eyes showed her fear of being without him.

"Step away from the witness, Mr. Scoleri. You are still a suspect in our investigation."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Osten held CJ's gaze and mouthed, "I love you."

"We haven't questioned her yet and don't want you helping her story along." The tone was snide.

Running his hand over her cheek, Osten stepped back, knowing he would hurt them if CJ was injured in a tussle. "Then you should have left a man here," Osten snapped. "Ask your questions and leave."

Special Agent Marks shook his head. "You have to leave. Oh, and if you resist, we'll arrest you." His eyes were full of challenge.

It left a rotten taste in Osten's mouth, but he moved toward the door. *Do what's best for CJ*, he told himself. The door shut behind him with a loud click and the two agents took up positions on each side of him.

Tense moments passed as Osten waited for the door to open again. He positioned himself against the opposite wall, facing the door. His was expression bland courtesy of his training, but inside he was furious.

He was moving toward the door the moment it began to open. Agent Marks stepped out, closing it behind him. "Let me in there," Osten ordered.

"Nope." Marks glanced at the two guarding the door. "If he gets in, you lose your job." His eyes moved back to Osten. "We need to talk further."

His temper dangerously close to boiling over, Osten snapped his head around to glare at the agent. "What the fuck for? You questioned her. I gave you my alibis; let me back in there with her!"

Marks shrugged. "We still need to question her more. She isn't up for much talking."

"You mean interrogation," Osten snarled. His body stepped closer to the agent. "I want to be with her."

"Her brothers are in there." Marks pulled out a piece of gum and began chewing it. "You two stay separated until my questions are answered."

"Special Agent Marks!" a loud voice bellowed.

Osten glanced over his shoulder and almost grinned. Almost. The group bearing down on them was led by a man who had murder in his eyes. His commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander Scott Leighton. Behind him strode Lieutenant Tyson Kincade and Chief Petty Officer Ernst Zimmermann. Between those two men were Jayde and Chantelle.

Not a smile to be found. Osten looked back at Marks before standing at attention. "Commander," he said sharply to the six-five powerfully built man in field cammies. "Lieutenant, Chief," he added to Tyson and Ernst.

"At ease," Scott growled out before turning to the agent. Looking down on the man, he thundered, "Who in the *hell* do you think you are, flying one of my men off to DC without informing me?"

"I'm Special Agent Marks of the—"

"I know who you are. What were you doing with *my* man?" Scott interrupted.

"This is a federal investigation, you have no jurisdiction."

"Bullshit," Scott growled. "You goddamn feds. Think you're so untouchable. You took a member of *my* team almost four hundred miles away from where he was supposed to be. For the mere reason to detain? He didn't get his call, and we could have written him up as being UA when he didn't show back up to work and didn't answer his phone."

Osten easily picked up on Scott claiming rights to him. His CO had a volatile temper when riled and this was one of those times.

"He made a call," Marks protested.

"You never should have fucked with a member of *my* team."

"I don't answer to you." The federal agent tried to look unaffected by the man looming over him, but Osten knew it was hard to do amid Scott's anger.

"And *my* people don't answer to you. Are we clear on that? We told you where we were. I'm sorry that it was over by the time you finished your coffee and donuts, but don't blame us."

Crushing his empty coffee cup, Marks glared but Osten knew it didn't even faze Scott. "I have some more questions for him," Marks said.

"And we'll make him available. But *this* kind of thing will never happen again." It was a directive, not a question. "Go with Chief, Scoleri." Osten hesitated one second too long. "That's an order, Petty Officer!"

"Sir, yes, sir. Sorry, sir." Osten stood at attention again and spun sharply after Scott nodded at him. Then he walked away with Ernst.

"I'm not done with him," Marks complained.

"Actually, Special Agent Marks, you are." Chantelle's take-no-shit voice reached him as he and Ernst got into the elevator.



Osten called to her. Kissed her. Loved her. She loved him. Chantoya stirred on the bed, desperate to hold him and be held by him.

Sluggish.

Her limbs weren't functioning. Why? Had he paralyzed her? Osten. Osten. "Osten!" she gasped as her left hand clenched.

"Chipmunk?"

Her lids were so heavy but she still knew Ajani's voice. CJ opened them slowly and saw her brothers gathered around her, concern filling their handsome faces. "Missed you," she said quietly. Thurston and Ajani were on one side of the bed and Binh was on the other.

"We missed you, too, Chipmunk. We missed you too." Binh kissed her forehead.

"Where's Osten?" CJ asked in a raspy voice. "I know he was here. I talked to him, right?" Tears filled her eyes.

"Calm down. He was here, you spoke with him. You're holding his necklace." Thurston's deep voice told her.

Her hand tightened and she felt the small cross under her fingers. It calmed her. Brown eyes closed as sleep overtook her again. But this time a faint smile had kissed her lips.

It was still there when she opened her eyes again. The light in the room was faint and it came from the lamp by the window since

shades were drawn. Her eyes moved slowly to the figure that sat silently in the chair.

His eyes were tired but he smiled when their gazes met. It was Ajani. "What time is it?" she murmured.

"Nine-thirty in the morning."

"You were here all night?" CJ knew that without a doubt.

"Of course. Thurston will be here soon. How are you feeling?"

"Like I'm operating at quarter speed. And sore. Oh, and tired."

She shifted and immediately Ajani got up to help her. "Thanks. How are you?"

Ajani brushed a hand along her face before offering her a drink. A sad chuckle left him. "You are so much like Mom. Always worried about everyone else no matter what was wrong with you."

"I miss them. All of them, Ajani." CJ took his hand and felt his love surround her.

"Me, too, Chantoya, me too." He cleared his throat. "I'm fine thanks for asking."

"I do love you, despite how you treat me like I am still a baby."

"Well, just so you know. I probably will never stop treating you like a baby." He smiled.

Rising up her bed, she grinned when he fluffed her pillow for her. "Now, tell me what they told you about my condition and how long before I can get out of here." She picked up the spoon and began eating the Jell-O on the breakfast tray he had moved into her reach.

"Well," he paused, "you were given a drug to keep you sluggish and slow. All of it is gone from your system and no permanent damage was done." He held up a hand. "I don't know what the drug was."

Pulling the chair closer to the bed, he sat down and continued. "They said the rape kit was negative. You have a fractured rib and other bruises."

Chantoya closed her eyes and tried not to vomit as memories washed over her. "When can I go home?"

"The feds want to question you a bit more – that much I know."

Fear began to build within her. "Where's Osten?" She didn't care she sounded desperate; she wanted that man beside her.

"The feds won't let him in to see you until after they question you. They dragged him out of here yesterday."

She gasped. *It hadn't been a dream. Hearing him here.* "Why would they drag him away? Why? What did he do?" Her brother just looked at her, and that only increased her dread and need to protect Osten.

"I want to leave, Ajani. Now!" Chantoya shoved the tray away and swung her feet over. Her legs were shaky and slow to cooperate, but they worked. "Get me my clothes or so help me, I'll leave wearing nothing more than this hospital gown!"

"Okay. This man must be important if you are ready to take on the federal government wearing a paper gown."

"He is, Ajani. And I didn't realize just how much until Gordon took me. They have no right to keep him away from me."

"I don't question the feds, Chipmunk. I'm just telling you what I know." Ajani pressed the call button for the nurse.

Twenty-Four

It was six in the evening and Chantoya sat in her apartment along with her brothers and federal agents. She wore a pair of thick wool socks on her feet and her feet were propped up on the rung of Binh's chair.

"Then what happened after you stabbed Gordon in the leg and ran?" Agent Marks asked. Another agent was also taking notes and the conversation was being recorded.

CJ sighed and took a drink of her coffee. *This sucks. I don't want to keep going over this.* "Like I told you before," she spoke in her teacher tone, "I ran for the stairs. Before I got to them I ran into someone else. I struggled then passed out; then, I woke up in the hospital."

"You didn't see his face? The man who rescued you." Marks questioned.

"No. How would I? It was dark and smoky. I was freaked out and running for my life." Her fingers tightened around her mug. "Plus he had a face mask on. I remember scratching it when I struggled."

"So you didn't recognize anyone?"

"Gordon," she snapped, losing patience. "Gordon was the only one. Why are you pushing this?"

"Don't cover for Osten, young lady. If he or his Team were there, just tell me."

"Look here, Agent Marks," she growled, "I don't lie. The only face I saw there was Gordon's. And the only other person I was supposed to meet was the man who was doing the 'marriage ceremony.' So do us both a favor by not insulting me. Get out, I'm tired."

"We have more questions."

CJ slammed her mug on the table, oblivious to the hot liquid she spilled on her hand, and her eyes shot daggers at the intruding agents in her kitchen. "Then hurry up and ask them so you can get the fu...heck out. I don't want to be your pawn in this pissing contest you are having with the SEALs. So ask your damn questions, and no more about who I did or didn't see. I wish I did know who rescued me, but I don't."

By eight, it was just her brothers left in the place with her. "Are you sure you'll be okay, Chipmunk?" Thurston asked as he held her close, mindful of the binding around her torso.

"Yes. I'm okay. I'll be okay." she held him tightly.

"I don't want to leave you here alone, but I'll respect your wish." He kissed her. "Call if you need *anything*."

Each brother said the same thing as they hugged and kissed his baby sister. Ajani was last and when he pulled back, CJ said. "Can I have your phone?"

Understanding filled the brothers. They all knew they were no longer her champion for comfort. Their baby sister had gone and grown up.

Ajani handed it over without a word. "Goodnight, Chipmunk, we love you," was the last thing he said as they left.



Osten's phone vibrated, waking him from a restless slumber. The number on the screen had him wide awake in a flash.

"Ajani?" Osten said into the phone. "Is everything okay with CJ?"

"She misses you." CJ's voice reached his ear.

The world stopped briefly. "CJ, honey, are you okay?" He longed to hold her, to allow whatever scent she wore to float over him. To let her soft curves settle along his harder body and enjoy her with him.

"I'm home." A pause. "Osten?"

"*Che bella?*"

"I know the feds told you to stay away from me," she sniffed and his heart lurched.

"All you have to do is ask, Chantoya. I'll be right there if you want it."

"I don't want you in trouble with the feds."

"Fuck the feds, CJ. If you want me with you, nothing will keep me away. Much less a bell-ringer." He was out of bed and slipping on sweats over his boxers as he spoke.

"I need you, Osten," she said softly. "Please."

"I'm on my way, baby. I'll be right there," he paused briefly, "I love you." Then he hung up and finished dressing in a flash. Shoving his feet into some shoes, he ignored the need for socks and was quickly on his way over to her apartment.

Osten slipped inside her complex and went to her door. Reaching out, he knocked with a gloved hand. "CJ, honey. Let me in."

The door opened immediately and Osten was blindsided by the fear she was trying so hard to hide. Her body still seemed so frail and delicate to him, and the crimson robe she wore didn't help.

Osten pulled her to him. Her arms wound around his torso and she shuddered uncontrollably. "I tried. I really tried to be brave. B...b...but all I see is that night."

"You have no need to feel ashamed of your fear, baby. You had a horrible experience." He peeled off his gloves as he made sure the door was shut and he hooked the chain as well, never once letting her out of his embrace.

"But I don't want to be seen as weak."

Osten shifted his weight and stared down into her eyes. "Chantoya, you aren't weak. You are a survivor."

"The things he...wanted me to do to him." Another round of shudders attacked her, causing her teeth to chatter. "He watched us here."

"I'm taking you back to my place. You need to get some sleep."

Her fingers clenched his sweatshirt. "No. I have to get through this. Can you stay with me?"

"Of course I will. You are my soul, CJ." He brushed his lips against her clammy skin.

"Thank you for the cross," she murmured against his throat.

Osten knew full well she was trying to be strong, and her defense mechanism was to keep talking. "Let it go, baby. Stop fighting and let it go. Cry it out, get rid of it." His words were kind but firm.

Chantoya stiffened in his embrace before she shook with a violent tremor. Then the flood gates opened. A lamenting wail rose from her very soul and filled the room. Osten closed his eyes and forced back his cry of rage at her pain and suffering. "I'm here baby, cry it out."

She crumbled and Osten instinctively adjusted to hold her up. When he had more control of the situation, he lowered them both carefully to the carpet, mindful of her injuries.

The second he was sitting on the floor, CJ was on him, climbing on his lap and seemingly trying to crawl inside his skin. He wanted to tell her to remember of her injuries, but held off. *She's the best one to know if she is in pain or not.*

Finally, she stopped moving. Her hands had maneuvered under his clothes to rest against his heated skin. Her runner's legs had wedged between his powerful ones. To him, she looked uncomfortable. *How wrong I am.*

Her face was buried against the skin below his Adam's apple. Her warm breath skimmed his sensitive skin. *Jesus, she is turning me on.* The bottom of her robe covered their legs and the red against her stunning skin was only making him more aroused. Shoving his lust into a lockbox, Osten focused on helping Chantoya get through this.

"Say something," her words vibrated against his skin and he felt his cock stir again. "Hearing your voice helped me through it. I don't care what you say; just talk to me, please."

Osten laced his fingers and held her close. He didn't have a clue what to say, so he spoke about any and all things that came to his mind. "You know the first mission with SEAL Team Seventeen I was on, I was so scared, so sure I was going to commit some huge mistake and get people killed." His soothing voice flowed and changed from English to Italian as he spoke.

"There we were in the Pamir mountain range of Tajikistan and I was panicking. We were supposed to be breaking up a little summit meeting of terrorists that was trying to remain undetected. It was in a small remote village with mostly women and children in it. I was worried they would die in the process, especially since the men we were after wouldn't hesitate to use them as shields."

His hands unhooked and began moving up and down her back. "As we made final preparations to go in, Hondo walked over to me, crouched down to my level, and said so low I wasn't sure I had heard him, 'We've all been scared. Remember your training, remember who you are.' Then he walked away like he hadn't said a word."

A wry chuckle escaped Osten as he remembered. "We went in and did our job. Hondo and I were paired off and his cool presence helped me stay the same way." His lips brushed her hair. "They are a

wonderful family. I am lucky to be one of them. Yet, since I have met you, when we are gone, I miss you so much." CJ stirred slightly at that.

"You mean so much to me, CJ. I didn't know it was possible to care this much for another person. I take your smiling face with me when I go away, and it is the thing I look forward to seeing the most upon my return. I love you, Chantoya Willow Jackson."

Time passed and slowly her sobs faded into silence. Her grip on him lessened and he knew exhaustion had been the victor. Osten kept them like they were for a while longer.

Carefully, he maneuvered her so she was in his arms and then Osten got up from the floor and carried her to the bed. He toed off his shoes and got out of his sweatshirt before getting into bed with her. Lying back, he allowed her to get comfortable upon his body. Burying his nose in her hair, Osten closed his eyes as the silken strands tickled his nose. Securing his hands around her, he too succumbed to slumber.

Osten's sleep was light but fulfilling. He awoke when she made any sound or tensed. "I'm here, Chantoya. Rest, baby. Just rest," he murmured in Italian from his lips to her ears, and slew whatever demon haunted her for the time.



Chantoya shifted slightly, her cheek brushing soft cotton that covered something much harder. The smell registered—it was Osten. With a smile, she inhaled deeply as comfort surrounded her.

"Osten," she mumbled on a yawn. Her eyes and throat were sore.

"I'm here, baby." His lips moved against the top of her head.

"Really here, or a dream?" Some of her dreams had been very vivid with this man.

"Flesh and blood, *bella*, I'm flesh and blood." He chuckled and the sound reverberated through her.

This is where I belong – in these arms, so strong and yet so gentle as they hold me. "I love you, Osten," CJ said as she listened to the steady beating of his heart.

His arms tightened briefly. "I love you, too, Chantoya." One callused hand ran down the back of her head as he kissed the top of it. "I love you too."

CJ sighed with happiness. "Osten?"

"Yes?" He trailed his fingers absently along her back, going against the ribbing on her shirt and making her focus on his touch even more.

"Will you be in trouble for coming here?"

"I don't know and don't care."

"Did you?" She pulled away slowly and turned to straddle his lap. Immediately, she felt him stir and begin to harden against her crotch.

"Did I what?" His hands landed on her thighs, his fingers moving in circles and sending her body into high alert.

Chantoya couldn't answer. The man looking back at her scrambled her brain. He wore a black tee and gray sweats. His thick black hair hung near his shoulders, giving off that shaggy and unkempt look that was rough and dangerous simultaneously. His stubborn chin was covered in dark stubble. Fat, sooty lashes framed his seductive eyes, eyes that looked like melted dark chocolate. They simmered with passion.

"Did I what?" he asked again, his eyes never leaving her face, nor did his fingers stop tormenting her and driving her closer to ripping her clothes off.

"Save me."

"Yes," Osten said without blinking.

That one immediate response meant the world to her. Her heart pounded so hard. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes as she leaned in to kiss him. "Thank you for coming to get me." Her pelvis ground down onto him. She wanted to have his thick, hard length buried to the hilt inside her body. The ridge she slid across was only adding fuel to the fire.

Eyes fluttering, he responded in a sex-infused timbre, "CJ..."

Using steady back and forth motion, she moved along the stiff erection he had inside his sweats. Her hands slipped under the shirt and a hiss escaped when the heat from his skin burned her.

"Osten." His name was full of blatant need.

"Your injury?"

"We'll just have to be careful." She kissed him and felt his shudder of surrender. CJ moaned as his thrusting tongue swept into her mouth.

The touch he had was magnificent. Her body dripped with readiness, and she knew he could tell, for she wore no panties. He slowly moved his hands from her thighs, up under her robe and settling on her

butt, each hand squeezing a firm cheek, sending ripples of desire through her.

Pulling back, CJ drew hard on his tongue before scraping her teeth along his lip. His eyes were ablaze with a deep, insurmountable craving for *her*, something that was an aphrodisiac like no other to her. Past his growing need, she saw promise.

Her hands skimmed over his chest. *He is magnificent.* "Off." She tugged on his shirt. Osten complied and CJ thrust her tongue deep into his mouth, dancing with his until they were both short of air. "Good," she purred.

Trailing down the defined chest, she dipped her fingers below his waistband. "These, too, off." She rose up enough for him to wiggle them down over his lean hips and kick them off.

A groan of pleasure and torture slipped out of his mouth as she sank back down, her soft robe teasing the outside of his thighs and her wet pussy teasing his cock. CJ opened her robe a bit more and looked down. The large bulbous head of his swollen erection was dripping precum.

With her index finger, she touched the moisture and smeared it all over the head. Each time his cock jumped, she smiled like a vixen. Still, CJ couldn't stop the moan when she slid her wet pussy lips up on either side of his erection. Back and forth she moved until it glistened with her body's juices.

She looked up to see his clenched jaw. Moving up the length, she watched his eyes as she stopped just short of letting the head sink into her velvety warmth and move back down. Each time the longing grew in his gaze.

"Tell me you want me," she said, her fingers sliding through her dripping pussy to get to the base of his throbbing cock.

"I want you, Chantoya," he vowed. "Take off the robe totally; let me suckle on you."

Her free hand undid the knot at her waist and she carefully opened the blood-red robe. Her breasts hung free, the tips already pebbled with desire and the wish to be attended. "Better?"

Osten muttered something in Italian. One hand reached for a globe; and as his callused hand covered it and played with the tip, she bore down on his cock, using the head to abrade her swollen clit.

"What did you say?" she asked as her eyes gazed at his watching her fingers down by her pussy and his cock.

"Nothing," he muttered.

Up and down her hand moved, ever so slowly. She ran it around his entire erection, making it shine with her nectar. "You like watching me play with you, don't you?"

"Hell, yeah!" His dick jerked as if agreeing.

Moving up along his cock with her body, she stopped again and looked at him. Then she closed her eyes and tilted her hips, allowing him entrance into her. "Oooohhhh," she hissed as he filled her.

"CJ," Osten said on a moan.

She began to move. Slowly, enticing. She went up and down, rotated her hips, rocked side-to-side, and twisted in circles, searching for what worked best for her need at that moment and didn't hurt her. Her body burned. Her soul burned. Her wet canal gripped him like a vice.

Osten's hands landed on her hips, but he allowed her to remain in control. Sweat beaded on his forehead. CJ opened her eyes and stared at him. "Which way do you prefer, Osten? Back and forth like this?" She moved that way. "Or side-to-side like this." Her hips rolled nicely.

"Jesus, CJ. You're killing me."

Sucking her lower lip into her mouth, she rotated her hips, mewling contentedly at the sensation it gave her. Every nerve was on end. Going slow was the only way to keep the orgasm at bay.

Reaching for his chest, she pinched one of his nipples. His whole body reacted like it had been hit with a defibrillator. His eyes were halfway closed when he lifted her, brought her down and thrust up to meet her and impaled her upon his cock.

"Osten!" she screamed as she convulsed with the orgasm that hit her.

"I'm sorry, baby. You just looked so fuckin' hot, I couldn't help it." His voice was an octave lower than normal.

"Osten, please, don't stop. I need..."

Osten helped her increase the speed. "Me, too, baby."

Flames licked up and down her body. The desire in his eyes to take total control was obvious to CJ. His rough fingertips touched the bottom of the bandage that wrapped her ribcage, and then a different expression settled across his face. *What did my bandage remind him of? That Gordon had me? Maybe he thinks that Gordon...*

Osten's eyes never left her face and CJ watched his expression as he thrust into her. The primal need to dominate faded away like the tide and was replaced with the need to love. The solid flesh inside her channel touched her in ways that made her toes curl deep into her

blankets. He held her hips at such an angle so she could get maximum pleasure from his cock.

They didn't kiss. There was no suckling of breasts; but at that moment, Chantoya experienced more passion than ever. Their gazes had melded into one another. And she knew what it was like to be joined with a soul mate in a manner that evolved far beyond the mere physical.

CJ knew nothing but the touch and love Osten gave her. Her recent terrifying experience was not even a blip on her radar. The fractured rib—painless. She transcended above it all, leaving her alone with Osten in a world of their own creation, never to be duplicated by anyone else.

His movement within her had slowed to long, drawn-out strokes, filling her with such euphoria. The other times with Osten had been off the charts, but this put them all to shame. The tenderness was so extreme, it was almost like a dream.

The flames of raging lust that had cried for her to attain an intense release had been replaced by a feeling of absolute completion. She realized what making love truly was.

"Osten?" she whispered, not wanting to break the magical web that had woven around them. "Do you...?" Up and down she moved.

"I feel it to, CJ."

"I've never..."

"Me either." His fingers tightened slightly and eyes locked they came as one. The pulsing of his cock deep inside her triggered multiple orgasms. The lights in the room faded as her vision flickered.

CJ's eyes rolled back as her body fell to pieces. She slumped forward, trembling, and connected with Osten's sweaty chest and the extreme speed of his heartbeat. *It's beating about as fast as mine.*

"Holy hell," CJ panted.

"Are you okay?" he asked, touching her bandage slightly before lifting her off his erection.

"I'm perfect," she promised.

"I agree. Yes, you are." His lips grazed the top of her head.

"Thank you, Osten."

"Don't thank me, CJ. We create this in one another. We are soul mates. *Sei la mia anima gemella.*"

"What does that mean?" she asked, curving into him even more.

"You are my soul mate."

"Teach me, teach me how to say that." CJ blinked back tears. Who knew life could be this wonderful?

Osten did. And that phrase was the last thing he heard from her before she fell asleep. Their hearts and breathing were in tandem with one another not long after.



The rattle of the chains was almost nonexistent. The buckets placed there for a bathroom had long since been needed changing. Food was gone and water was not far behind. The lone light bulb above was beginning to flicker, and the water drip was still there. She sniffed silently, having long given up the attempt of screaming for help.

The frail body lying on the moldy mattress was a far cry from the person who had entered the house a year ago. A thin wool blanket was pulled up in a meager attempt to retain much-needed warmth. It was a battle between cold and starvation to decide who was escorting in death to end her suffering.

Twenty-Five

In a perfectly pressed uniform, Petty Officer Second Class Osten Scoleri stood at attention before his CO and XO, Harrier and Cade, or Scott and Tyson. Right now, however, it was Lieutenant Commander and Lieutenant. There was no emotion on any of their faces. Standing beside Scott was Special Agent Marks and he was waiting for an explanation.

"What, if anything, do you have to say about these accusations, Petty Officer?" Scott asked.

"He's right, sir. I went over to Ms. Jackson's apartment." Osten didn't dare hesitate with his answer. It was time for him to find out just how much trouble he was in. A glint of something appeared in Scott's gaze, but he knew what had appeared in Tyson's: humor. *Jayde must have told him about the baby.*

"Something about this situation you find funny, Sailor?" Scott bellowed.

"Sir, no, sir." Eyes forward. Just like in boot camp and BUDs. Never let them see you sweat. Osten wiped the grin he hadn't even known he'd been sporting off his face in a flash.

"I want him arrested," Marks demanded. "You can't hide him behind your walls."

The flare in Scott's nose told Osten how close the not-so-good with politics officer was to telling the federal agent what he really thought about him.

"Permission to speak freely, sir."

"Go ahead." Scott relaxed a bit.

"Sir. Special Agent Marks told me I couldn't see her until they questioned her. They had already left her apartment when I went over. I assumed that they had done just that."

Scott glanced to Marks. "You said that?"

"Well, I didn't mean the second I stopped questioning her he could go back. I may have had more questions." Marks glared at Osten.

"He's done nothing wrong, Agent Marks," Scott ripped up the paper in front of him. "You don't get him." He looked to his left and said, "Make sure Agent Marks is seen out."

Tyson nodded. "Yes, sir." He led the protesting agent out the door.

When it was the two of them, Scott was silent as he looked Osten over. Osten wasn't sure what was going to happen and hadn't moved a muscle. "At ease."

Osten relaxed his stance but was still careful to keep a blank look on his face. He didn't even jump when Scott threw his pen down on the desk.

"Damn it! What the hell were you thinking?"

"Nothing but protecting her, sir."

"Sit down, Baby Boy. Do you realize what could happen if Marks decides to be more of a prick? They can arrest you for meddling in a federal investigation."

Osten sat and ran one hand through his hair. "She called me from her brother's phone. She was petrified, alone in that place. How could I say no to that?"

Hands folded, Scott rested his mouth against his index fingers. "You couldn't. Not any more than the rest of us to our women." He sighed. "I think that with Chantelle and a bit more persuasion, he will back off. He seems to have it out for you anyway. What did you do to him?"

"Nothing. He doesn't like SEALs," Osten explained. "He rung out, but I didn't do anything to him." Shifting in his seat, Osten felt uncomfortable, nervous even.

"Something else on your mind?" Scott asked as Tyson walked back in the room.

"Just that...that...well, I'd like some advice on how hard it is to keep a marriage while being in the Teams."

Both men smiled knowingly. They shared a glance with one another before they looked back at him. "What say we go grab a drink, talk about this," Scott said. "You do have a change of clothes right?"

"Yes."

"Good. Meet at the usual place in fifteen." Scott stood and walked out with a wave and Tyson followed.



Dezarae handed CJ a cold drink. Everyone had gathered at Ross and Dezarae's house for the day. "How are you doing, sweetie?" Dez asked.

"I'm okay." CJ had, with Osten beside her, cleaned out her stuff and gave it away. She bought new sheets, underclothes, lotion, and shower soap—new scents, new memories to be made with them.

"We are looking for a place to get together and then we'll see what happens from there." CJ smiled as she met Osten's gaze across the room and he winked at her.

"I know where it's going. The same place it did, or is...sorry, Kacy...for the rest of us," Dez said. The five women laughed, bringing all the male attention to rest on them.

"I think they believe we are up to something," Lex said, laughing harder.

The others agreed. As they sat in the living room while dinner finished cooking, CJ asked, curled up in Osten's arms, "Do you know if they ever found Gordon's wife?"

Silence fell as eight men and four women looked at her. "His wife?" Tyson asked.

"Yes. All through school he said he had a wife but when I asked him about her, he just got this freaky look in his eyes and said she was happy and in Virginia Beach. I hate to think he has another woman locked up somewhere." Chantoya pressed closer to Osten.

"What about that list of aliases he used?" Osten questioned.

Ross scrambled and grabbed a pen and paper, handing them to Osten. "Do you know what her name is?"

CJ frowned. "Um, Layla. But if he has so many aliases I don't know if that is true or not."

"Ross, computer?" Tyson asked as he sat down. Ross gave him one that he took to work with him. Tyson powered it up and within seconds had his fingers skimming across the keys. "Let me know when you are ready for the names." Osten had written them down from memory the second he'd gotten hold of the paper.

"Go," Tyson ordered. The rest of the room watching in silence.

Kacy got up to get the pitcher of iced tea and was refilling people's glasses when she stopped and interrupted Osten. "What was that last name you said?"

CJ looked at Kacy. She was very impressed with the saucy electrician; she had met her a few times before now, courtesy of Dez being a good friend to them both. She was such a kind and honest soul.

Osten looked up at her. "Butler Amos. Why?"

She waved him off, grabbed her phone from her belt, and placed a call. Setting the pitcher on the counter, CJ watched her as she spoke into the phone. "Brett, hey, it's me, Kacy. What was the name of that scary man who had the isolated room in the basement? Are you sure? Thanks." She hung up and faced the group.

"Okay, here it is. We did work on a house for a man named Butler Amos. It was a huge mess but the strange thing was that he had a room in the basement on a different power source. One light bulb, possibly soundproof." Kacy walked around, took the pen from Osten and wrote on his paper. "There's his addy."

Osten looked up at her and said, "Thanks, Kacy." He pulled off his cell phone and opened it. "I'm gonna give it to Marks. Maybe it'll make him happy." CJ smiled as he pressed a kiss to her forehead before standing and making his call off to the side.



"What do you think?" Osten asked Chantoya, his hands on her waist, the lovely spring air surrounding them.

"I think it will be wonderful." She leaned back into him, confident he would not let her fall.

Osten grinned. It was an older townhouse, but it was a corner lot and it was all theirs. Spinning her in his embrace, he kissed her, telling her without words just how much she meant to him.

"Hey, is this why you called us over? To move your things while y'all make out?" Dimitri's teasing voice asked.

The whole team and families were helping out. "Pretty much, Merlin," Osten tossed to him. "I figured you should do some work somewhere."

Dimitri muttered something back that had Osten laughing. Leave it to him to be so blunt. At least he'd said it in Greek, although the meaning was obvious.

They all went out for a huge dinner afterward, and once Osten and CJ were in front of their new home, he pulled her to him. Wrapping his arms around her, they looked into the bay window of their future.

Things were well. CJ was back to teaching, Layla had been found; and though she had a long road to recovery, at least she was alive.

His lips brushed her temple. "I love you, Chantoya."

Burrowing back as if taking more of his heat, CJ said, "Love you, too, Osten."

"What do you see? When you look in the window?"

"Besides the numerous boxes I have to unpack?"

Chuckling, his teeth nipped her neck. "Yes, besides those."

"Happiness," she murmured. "I see happiness in there."

"Close your eyes." Tipping his head so he could make sure they were closed, he kissed her cheek and said, "Now what do you see?"

"Oh, Osten," she breathed. Her trembling hands reached out to take the box he held out in front of her. Inside the small box sat a diamond ring.

"Will you marry me, Chantoya?" He held his breath as he waited for her answer.

"Yes, oh, God, yes!" she squealed as she spun around and jumped into his arms, kissing him wildly.

Osten made love to his fiancé that night in their new home on the eve of the start of their grandest adventure. Around two in the morning, he awoke and rose up on one strong arm, staring down at the woman sleeping soundly beside him.

His free hand reached out and traced along the curve of her jaw. A tender smile crossed his face as he saw what the darkness was keeping in shadows. It was the face of his future wife, the future mother of his children, his future.

Spooning around her warm body, he nuzzled the back of her neck, loving how her hair felt so soft against his skin. The woman in his arms was his everything. Chantoya Willow Jackson was...

VITTANO'S WILLOW.

About the Author

Aliyah Burke loves to read and write. She loves to hear from her readers and can be reached at aliyah@aliyah-burke.com , aliyah_burke@hotmail.com, and feel free to join her yahoo group at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/aliyah_burke or friend her at <http://www.myspace.com/aliyahburke>. Please stop by her website, www.aliyah-burke.com for more available titles.

Aliyah is married to a career military man. They have a German Shepherd, a Borzoi, and a DSH cat. Her days are spent splitting her time between work, writing, and dog training and showing.