



INESCAPABLE

Remembering
BOOK TWO

MADGE H.
GRESSLEY

Car wrecked, kidnapped, auctioned off, drugged, and moved five miles under the Pacific Ocean. If that wasn't enough, add amnesia to the mix. Darcey Callahan doesn't know who she is or where she's from. She doesn't remember who "the man" who purchased her is, and although her mind tells her she should not trust the man, her body betrays her. Is it possible that her body remembers what her mind cannot?

KUDOS for *Inescapable ~ Book 2 ~ Remembering*

In *Inescapable 2 ~ Remembering* by Madge H. Gressley, Darcey has been rescued from the human trafficking ring by Brad, but she can't remember who she is or where she comes from so she thinks Brad is just another man who has bought her. To top it all off, she discovers that she is now five miles beneath the ocean in a bio dome. There is no escape so Darcey must learn to deal with her situation and figure out who she can trust. Not an easy task when she has no memory of anything before she woke up as a captive in a human trafficking ring. Like the first book, this one is a fast-paced and intense page turner. You can't help rooting for Darcey as she struggles with her new reality. A really great read. ~ Taylor Jones, *The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

Inescapable ~ Book 2 ~ Remembering by Madge Gressley is the story of Darcey Callahan, a young woman who went from Texas to Peru to find her missing boyfriend and was abducted into a human trafficking ring. Brad, the boyfriend, discovered what had happened and rescued her, but Darcey had been in a car accident and remembers nothing before she woke up in the hands of the human traffickers. So she doesn't know who she is, she doesn't remember Brad, and she doesn't realize she has been rescued and is now free. So you can imagine her dismay when she learns that she is in a dome under the ocean off the coast of Peru, and there is no way out. Brad, on the other hand, remembers everything too clearly. He wants his lover back but knows he has to wait until she remembers him. In *Inescapable ~ Book 2 ~ Remembering*, like its predecessor *Inescapable ~ Book 1 ~ The Beginning*, Gressley's character development is superb and the story is gripping. Thought-provoking as well fast-paced and intense, this is one you won't want to put down. ~ Regan Murphy, *The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

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Book 2

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Madge H. Gressley

A Black Opal Books Publication



GENRE: MYSTERY/THRILLER/ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

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DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to God who gave me the talent to write it;
to my family and friends who without their encouragement it might
never have been written;
and to my late husband,
Stu who always said,
“I taught her everything she knows.”*

*His touch burned my soul, and it remembered.
I searched my mind. It remembered nothing.*

*He knew he loved her
the first moment he laid eyes on her,
but his soul...ah, his soul remembered
the love of an eternity.*

PREFACE

Darcey's head throbbed, and her mouth was full of cotton balls.

I know this feeling, she thought, trying to work through the fog swirling her mind. *I've felt it before. I've been drugged. Lilly drugged me, but why? How?* Then it came to her—the pastries!

She rubbed her temples, and her arm hit something. It was a shuttle seat. She was lying on the floor of a shuttle. Using the seat for leverage, she tried to sit up and managed to look out the side of the shuttle. She didn't recognize the place. It looked as though it was still under construction. Large stacks of drywall and other building supplies lined the walls.

This must be one of the residential areas still under construction.

Darcey turned and carefully peered over the back of the seat. Across the way was a room that resembled the operations room, only on a smaller scale. Inside, Lilly frantically flipped switches and pushed buttons. Darcey could tell Lilly didn't have a clue about what she was doing.

Panic began to set in. I have to get out of here. Now!

She scooted out of the shuttle onto the concrete floor from the side away from the room. Crawling on her hands

and knees to the back of the shuttle, she looked desperately for some way out. A short distance from the vehicle, she saw an open doorway. Glancing back over her shoulder, she saw Lilly still working on the control panel. Darcey looked back at the open doorway tentatively.

There was no cover between the shuttle and the doorway. Could she run fast enough? She still felt groggy. However, if she waited until her head stopped spinning, it might be too late.

I'm going to chance it.

Moving cautiously on her hands and knees, she inched out from behind the shuttle. She glanced back. Lilly still had her back to the windows that gave an unobstructed view of the unfinished space where Darcey was going to run through. Darcey moved out a little farther, inched herself up into a bent over position, and gave one last look at Lilly before she sprinted through the doorway. Once in the corridor, she ran as hard and as fast as she could, hoping she was going in the direction of the closest connecting corridor.

She found the connecting corridor and looked for directional signs on the wall—there were none. She guessed that she was in the center ring but had no idea which way led to the outer ring or the connecting tunnel to the main dome. She took a deep breath and ran as fast as she could, hoping she had chosen correctly.

CHAPTER 1

Awakening

Her eyes fluttered open. Just that brief motion sent shock waves through her head. It felt like a vice grip had been placed around her skull, and, with each movement, it grew tighter.

“Where am I?” she groaned. The sound of her voice echoed in her skull. She placed her hands on either side of her head. It felt like it would explode if she didn’t hold it together.

How did I get here? Think. What is the last thing I remember? I was being stuffed into a car. I had been sold. Nicho—

In a flash, it all came flooding back. She rolled over, buried her face in the pillow, and screamed.

“No, no, no, no!” she screamed. Tears flowed unabated, as her clenched fists beat against the mattress. “What am I to do?” she moaned. “How am I going to live through this? How can I get out of this?” She sniffed and wiped her nose with the tail of her shirt. “If I did—no, do—where will I go? I don’t know who I am. I don’t know where I am. I don’t have any money. I don’t know anyone who will help me! Oh, God, what am I going to do?”

Panic took hold, and she began to hyperventilate. Gasping for air and struggling to sit up, she felt strong but gentle hands pull her into an upright position.

A man gently sat her up on the side of the bed. “Here, let me help you up. Put your head between your knees. That will help.”

“Wh—wh—where am I?” she asked, between ragged gulps of air.

He gently rubbed her back and tried to control the urge to wrap his arms around her “You are safe,” he said.

She looked up to see who that mesmerizing velvet voice belonged to and lost what little breath she had left in her lungs as she gazed into emerald green eyes.

It’s him! It’s the man from the gala.

She inwardly cringed and tried to move away, but there was no place to go. She was too dizzy to run. His hand on her back was doing crazy things to her heart that she couldn’t explain. Finally, the stress that had been building came crashing in on her. She couldn’t hold on any longer to the anger, frustration, and fear that had sustained her these past months. She hugged her middle to keep from breaking in two as the dam broke, and a flood of tears cascaded down her face.

The pain of seeing Darcey cry hurt Brad down to the bottom of his soul. He reached out, gently pulled her to his chest, and cradled her close, letting her cry herself out until there was nothing left but hiccups. Gently rocking her, he caressed her hair and kissed the top of her head, murmuring softly that everything was going to be okay, inwardly cursing Santiago for doing this to her.

I will have that bastard’s head on a platter, he swore.

Slowly, she unwound her arms from her middle and wrapped them around him. He thought his heart would burst. The feel of her was ecstasy. He wanted to hold her closer, tighter, until her body melded with his, and they were one.

No matter how he longed to make that happen, for now, he couldn’t do anything more than hold her. If he pushed her,

he knew he would lose her. She had to learn to trust him—she had to want him.

When her crying jag subsided, it hit her. She was wrapped in the stranger's arms and hers were clinging to him like he was a life preserver that had been thrown to a drowning victim. *What am I doing? What am I thinking? This feels so right, yet so wrong. This man bought me. He paid money for me, like he would for a piece of meat. No! No! No! This is not right!*

She forced herself away from him. He let her go, and when his arms fell away, she felt cold, extremely cold.

“Just go away and leave me alone,” she snuffled and picked up the tail of her shirt to wipe her nose.

He handed her a box of tissues he picked up from the bedside table. “Here, use these.”

She glared at him as she jerked a tissue out of the box. It made her nervous as he watched every little move she made.

It's like he's waiting for me to do something that he doesn't like.

“Thanks,” she said sarcastically and blew her nose loudly. The tissue fluttered out in front of her.

That wasn't very lady-like, she admonished herself, Oh what the hell, he bought me and what he sees is what he's got, like it or not. Why should I care?

A smile played around his mouth as he watched her small display of defiance. “Would you like some breakfast? It's been quite a while since you ate last.”

“I don't know if I'm hungry or not,” she said petulantly. “My stomach is all upset, and my head hurts, and I feel awful.” She buried her face in her hands and started to cry all over again.

What's the matter with me? I don't cry, she thought angrily wiping at the tears sliding down her face with her fingers.

He reached for her again and held her tight, and it still felt right. She didn't fight him and rested her forehead on his chest.

“I will get you something for your head, and see about having some food sent in for you,” he said, releasing her. “What would you like? We probably have most anything you might want,” Smiling, he pulled a tissue from the box and sopped up the remaining tears from her face.

“I would like a hamburger with everything on it, fries, and a strawberry milkshake,” she immediately replied, sniffing and blowing her nose again.

Whoa! I didn't even think about that, she thought, startled at her immediate response. *I just blurted it out. Now where did that come from? Was that something from my past life?*

She stared at the crumpled tissue in her hands. In all the months, she had been held captive, she hadn't thought about what food she liked or didn't like, and no one ever asked what she liked. She just ate what was prepared and set before her, never questioning if she liked it, or if she might have liked something different.

He gave her a lopsided grin. “I think we can handle that.” That had always been Darcey's favorite when they'd eaten out on Saturday's, he remembered. Maybe her memory's starting to come back.

Butterflies erupted in her stomach when her eyes met his.

What is the matter with me? She closed her eyes in order to break the connection.

“Please, where is the bathroom?” she asked, out of desperation, her eyes still closed.

She had to get away from this man. Maybe she could lock herself in the bathroom again. But that wouldn't solve anything. There would be no Nicho to come rescue her this time.

Oh, I miss Nicho. She drew her bottom lip between her teeth as she thought of him.

“The bathroom is the first door on your right,” he told her. “I'll order your food.”

She scooted off the edge of the bed and lost her balance, her head spinning again. He put his hand out and caught her before she even knew she was falling.

He raised one eyebrow and tried to hide the grin that was threatening to escape. “Steady. Would you like me to walk with you to the bathroom?”

“No, I think I can make it on my own,” she said curtly, squirming out of his hold. “I’m just a little dizzy. Must be because I haven’t eaten in a while.” *What else could it be?*

She steadied herself and moved over to the bedroom door then turned back. “First door on the right?”

He nodded and watched her as she held onto the door frame for balance.

She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and walked out into the hall.

He called the Bajo el Mar kitchen and asked them to whip up a couple of burgers with the works, some fries, and two strawberry milkshakes. They told him it would be about twenty minutes and it would be delivered.

She closed the bathroom door and leaned against it for several minutes before deciding she had better take care of the necessities. All done, she placed her hands on the cold marble of the vanity and sighed. She raised her eyes to stare at the woman in the mirror.

Steadying herself with one hand, she pushed the shell-shaped handle down to release the flow of water into the porcelain basin. The woman in the mirror stared back at her.

She looked a mess. Her copper-colored hair was badly in need of a good brushing. She had the haunting look of sadness, accentuated by dark circles that rimmed her hazel eyes. Her face looked drawn and pale.

Will I ever know her? she wondered. She dropped her eyes and gazed absently at the water as it splashed into the basin from the dolphin shaped faucet. “Stop this. Pull yourself together.” She looked up, squared her shoulders, and scolded the person in the mirror. “This is where you are now,

and it isn't going to change anytime soon if ever, so you'd best get used to it."

The cold water she vigorously splashed on her face made her feel a tiny bit better.

A nice hot bath would feel even better, she thought, drying her face on an ivory-colored hand towel. She gazed longingly at the gray-green marble tub that filled half the bathroom, imagining her body immersed in a steamy tub full of fragrant bubbles.

When she walked out of the bathroom, she was startled to see the green-eyed man leaning casually against the wall waiting for her.

"Thought I'd wait for you and show you the rest of the place," he said pushing himself away from the wall. "The food just arrived and we can eat at the bar." He gently took her by the elbow and guided her into an enormous living area.

His hand on her elbow shot waves of desire and passion through her body. The place where he touched burned, the heat sped up her arm, and then there was no air for her to breathe. She jerked her arm away from his grasp, stopping the heat that was setting her body on fire.

He raised an eyebrow. A ghost of a smile touched the corners of his mouth as he let her precede him into the living room, watching as she briskly rubbed her hands up and down her arms.

The living area had a vaulted ceiling that covered the living room, the dining area, and the kitchen. A dark, marble-topped bar separated the kitchen from a formal dining area and a large, dark-brown, leather sofa and matching chairs defined the living room area. A big, flat-screen TV hung on the wall over a large stone-front fireplace. She noticed that a holographic insert stood where the logs would have been in a real fireplace and decided it wouldn't be quite the same as having a real fire burning like the ones at Vargas's. Regardless of the pretend fireplace, the entire area had a cozy, comfortable feel. The light in the room made her feel

like it was a sunny day and then, she realized there were no windows.

Odd. Her eyes searched the room.

He led her over to the bar where he had placed the burgers and milkshakes. He waited until she had hiked herself up on the barstool before he also slid onto the stool next to her.

It smells awesome, she thought. Her mouth began to water as the delicious aroma assailed her nostrils.

She had her burger almost gone before she realized that he was also eating, but much slower. He seemed to be enjoying watching her wolf down her food.

“What!?” she exclaimed, glaring at him and annoyed with herself for scarfing the burger down. She took a pull from the straw in her milkshake. “I guess it’s been longer than I thought since I ate last. I didn’t know I was so hungry.”

I know I should feel embarrassed, but I don’t. What he bought is what he’s got. So he can learn to deal with it—or not!

“I’ll order you another if you want. It will just take a few minutes for it to get here,” he said, enjoying the unladylike scene she was making stuffing the last bite of the burger in her mouth. Then she sexily licked off the small dash of mustard that lingered in the corner of her perfect mouth, setting an explosion of butterflies off in Brad’s stomach. It was all he could do to contain the impulse to pull her into his arms and ravish those perfect lips.

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye, noticing the delighted expression on his face. “No, I’ll finish the fries and shake. I’ll be fine,” she said, stiffly, mustering as much dignity as she could, considering her recent lack of manners. She was not going to give him any more opportunities to laugh at her.

“When you’re feeling up to it, I will show you to your quarters, they should be ready by now,” he replied. He was trying to contain a laugh that threatened to escape his lips as he watched the look of indignation cross her face.

Slipping off his bar stool, he gathered up the lunch dishes and placed them on a large oval tray for the café staff to pick up later.

“Yes, that would be okay. I would like to clean up,” she said, wiping her mouth with her napkin, still not looking at him as she placed it on the tray with the dishes. She felt dirty, her muscles hurt, and she was tired. “What time is it? I’ve lost all track of time,” she asked, looking around.

“It’s almost noon. If you’re ready then?” He held out his hand for her to take. She reluctantly placed her hand in his. He felt the electric jolt he always felt when they touched. The jolt ran through his body then set off another explosion of butterflies in his stomach and a wave of desire. Startled, as she suddenly jerked her hand out of his, he searched her face. Surely that meant she had felt it, too.

A thousand tiny pulses of heat surged through her body when her hand touched his. She jerked it back and rubbed it down the side of her leg trying to dispel the inexplicable feeling his touch had created.

What was that? she questioned, looking at her hand.

He stepped aside for her to precede him out the front door. She stepped hesitantly out the door and into a wide, oval, gray tunnel. The fact that there was no defined division between the floor, walls, and ceiling, unnerved her.

What kind of place is this? She shivered as her eyes traveled over the gray expanse of the corridor. *Is this another place where I’ll be locked up again? This time, is it a place with no windows? Will I ever see daylight again? At least at Vargas’s, there were windows.* The questions raced through her mind. A twinge of fear crept in, and she shivered again.

She looked again at her surroundings, and the twinge became outright fear as a feeling of foreboding enveloped her. She grabbed the man’s arm. “Where are we? What kind of place is this?” she demanded, her nails dug into his skin.

Brad was taken by surprise at her reaction. He had become so used to the dome, he forgot she knew nothing of this

project, let alone that it was five miles down, on the ocean floor.

“I’m sorry.” He winced, loosening her grip on his arm. “I should have explained to you right away where you are. You are in the bio-dome. This is the project I have been working on but was unable to tell you about.” He stopped and turned to face Darcey, holding her hand as he spoke. He could feel her trembling. “Let me explain,” he said, gently placing his arm around her shoulders. “A group from my senior university engineering class started this project as an experiment to create an underwater habitat capable of sustaining life over an extended period of time.”

He hesitated to add the real reason for the project. A group of independent scientists had discovered that over the past three decades, the Earth’s ozone layer had been depleting at a rate far faster than anyone had anticipated. Brad hadn’t even told Ty and the guys who were working on fixing the damage caused by Armando’s attempted sabotage. Because the ozone problem was serious, the fewer people who knew about the dome, the better chance it had of staying under wraps until it was absolutely necessary to let the public know. If that information ever leaked out, there would be worldwide panic. So, until the time was right, the rest of the billions of Earth’s inhabitants were being kept in the dark.

The controlling global government, the United Federation of Nations (UFN), had been keeping a tight lid on the problem and vehemently denied any scientific research that contradicted their policy. They suggested it was being used as propaganda to cause a worldwide panic to bring down the government. Brad had heard rumors that the UFN had been researching the possibility of off-world colonization, but no hard facts had been found.

His professor at the university had been one of the scientists on the team that had discovered the rapid decline of the ozone layer. He encouraged Brad and his team to quietly develop a habitat that could sustain people when the inevitable happened. However, it was certain that if the UFN discov-

ered the real purpose behind the Bio-Dome, they would claim it for themselves. If that happened, it was a given that any future domes built would be only for the elite of the world. There was much money to be made by selling space in the dome to high-ranking officials from around the world. That had never been part of Brad's plan. His had been, and still was purely humanitarian.

"If successful," he continued, "it would, when finished, be a complete city on the ocean floor. It would have everything a city should have. It would include businesses, theaters, restaurants, schools, hospitals, parks, farming, and would be capable of housing up to five hundred families with additional domes being added as needed. We were almost ready to take our design from the drawing board to reality when some VIPs, who had been closely watching our progress, stepped forward and made us an offer we couldn't refuse for the plans to our dome, the biosphere ecosystem, and the filtration system. Since I was the head engineer on the project, they hired me to build it. Now, here we are, five years later and five miles down on the ocean floor off the coast of Peru. The only access to the dome is by specially built submarines." He paused, noticing the blood draining from her face. "It is all perfectly safe. You have nothing to worry about. In the next few months, the dome will be ready for its grand opening."

"Fff—ff—five miles? A submarine?" she stammered, panic setting in. There was no air to breathe, her knees began to buckle, and she slipped from under the man's arm.

He has to be kidding. Doesn't he? she thought, as the floor rushed up to meet her.

Before she reached the floor, he grabbed her, putting his arm around her waist, holding her up.

"Easy," he said. "There's nothing to be afraid of. You are entirely safe," he reassured her.

"That's easy for you to say," she exclaimed, her breath coming in short gasps. "You haven't been kidnapped, locked up, and sold. How do I know you don't have something like

that planned for me right now? Right here in this place, where there's no hope of escape?"

She stared at him, fear in her eyes, as she squirmed her way out of his grasp and almost fell again.

He grabbed her again. "Hey, calm down! You're going to hurt yourself." He gave her a small shake. "I promise, you are in no danger. You are safe and no one is going to lock you up ever again," He emphasized "ever again," his brows coming together as he felt her breathing hard.

She wasn't sure what he had just said. She was too busy trying to control the panic that threatened to overtake her, as well as attempting to block out what his touch was doing to her. "I have to sit down," she said, short of breath.

He kept his arm, around her waist and steered her the short distance to a strange-looking door with no doorknob. She watched as he took a card from his pocket and swiped it through a slot in a small black box attached to the wall beside the door. The door silently slid open.

He guided her through the door and into a beautiful room much like his quarters, but the décor was lighter with a feminine touch. Her shoes sank into the plush cream-colored carpet covering the floor. The soft colors of the room had a calming effect as she made her way across the room and sat down on the sofa. She put her head between her knees and breathed slowly. The man watched from across the room, worry lines creasing his brow.

This had always been Nicho's remedy when I had a panic attack, she remembered, drawing a ragged breath.

He walked into the kitchen and came back carrying a glass of water. "Here, this should help," he said, handing her the glass.

"Thanks," she said, avoiding touching him as she took the glass. She knew she couldn't withstand another episode of the feelings that raged through her body from his touch.

He watched as she drank some of the water resisting the urge to sit down beside her and comfort her. His heart cried for her, knowing how this must be driving her crazy not

knowing who she was, who he was, and being in a strange place. It couldn't be good for her sanity. His only hope was that she would start regaining some of her memory soon and that their connection to each other would be strong enough to pull her back to him from the abyss she had fallen into.

Taking the glass, he placed it on the triangle shaped, coffee table in front of the sofa. "Better?"

"Yes, thanks," she replied, trying not to look into those green eyes, which she felt could look right into her soul. It was all too unsettling.

Feeling a tiny bit better, she glanced around the room, the woman in her appreciating the beauty of it. The curved sofa she was sitting on was upholstered in a beautiful patterned fabric of muted tones of sage green and ivory. The matching chairs complemented the sofa in a solid fabric of a darker shade of sage green.

Across from the room was a formal dining area with a rectangle glass-topped chrome table and eight matching chrome chairs. The chairs should have looked hard and cold, but in the soft light of the room they glowed warmly. A light-colored, marble-topped bar separated the dining area from the kitchen area that was filled with the latest in appliances. Four chrome and leather bar stools stood like soldiers in front of the bar.

There were no windows in this space either, yet there was some sort of light that did not come from the table lamps or the wall sconces. It was a defused light, like daylight.

How can this be? Five miles under the ocean there is no daylight. How can this be? she wondered, shaking her head.

"Do you have a question?" he asked, watching the puzzled expression on her face.

"Yes." She turned and looked at him. "How come it looks like daylight in here when we are, as you say, five miles down on the ocean floor? How's that possible?"

"It's possible because of the biosphere ecosystem and filtration system designed by my friend Mike Bellington. The ecosystem controls all of the atmospheric conditions

within the dome, and that includes artificial daylight. I'll explain it all to you later when you've had a chance to rest."

Her mind was in a whirl as she tried to absorb the information he had just given her. She wandered around the room, still in awe of the surroundings that he had said were to be her living space. Reaching the door on the far wall, she pushed it open slowly and peeked around it. Her eyes widened as she took in the charming bedroom before her.

The lush, cream-colored carpeting from the living room continued into the bedroom where a king-sized bed sat squarely on a six-inch high riser in the middle of the room. A cream-colored silk coverlet trimmed in sage green spread across the bed, its edges just brushing the floor of the riser. Mounds of light sage green, ivory, and dark sage green pillows were piled high against the tall ornate, whitewashed wooden headboard.

A seating area in front of the bed's footboard consisted of two matching chairs, upholstered in dark sage green brocade, and an elegant marble-topped table with a stylish cut-glass lamp sitting on it. Wandering farther into the room, she spied another seating area at the back of the bed, just behind the headboard. The tall headboard had obscured it until she walked around the bed. There, a sofa and chair, matching the ones in front, completed the furniture in the room. Also attached to the wall opposite the seating area was a flat screen TV and below, bookshelves filled with books of all sorts.

Continuing on, she opened the door opposite the right side of the bed that led into a large, over-sized marble, chrome, and glass bathroom. Sitting in the middle of the stone tiled floor was what she was sure must be the bathtub but, it looked more like a mini-marble swimming pool. She looked up at the ceiling since the lighting above the tub made it seem as though the light was streaming down from a skylight, but there was no skylight.

A glass walk-in shower with multiple showerheads occupied one corner of the bath. Elegant brushed chrome fixtures and two raised, translucent blue glass basins accented

the ivory marble-topped counter that ran the length of one wall. Beveled mirrors extended from the counter top to the ceiling above it. The toilet and bidet were discretely hidden behind a blue, glass-block wall.

Another door led into a huge, walk-in closet and dressing room. Gasping, she noticed that the closet was already full of clothes.

My clothes. He brought my clothes, she thought, a smile spreading across her face as she took a closer look, running her hand down the row of dresses and across the shelves of sweaters and slacks.

Seeing her clothes seemed to make everything okay and the anxiety she had been feeling slowly began to fade away. She didn't even stop to analyze why these familiar things were so important to her.

She swung around to see him standing in the doorway. His arms were folded and he was leaning casually against the door frame, with a lopsided grin that was doing crazy things to her insides.

She took in every inch of his very male body. It wasn't just his touch that drove her crazy—it was everything about him.

He swung his arm around, encompassing the whole of the quarters, and pushed himself away from the door frame. "Well, what do you think?"

She tore her eyes away from him before answering. "It's beautiful, and this all for me?" she asked, doing a three-sixty, her arms out wide, looking at it all again. She still was unable to wrap her mind around the idea that all of what she saw was hers.

"Yes, this is yours," he said, grinning.

He resisted the overwhelming urge to pick her up and swing her around then toss her on the bed, and make love to her, but he knew he couldn't, not yet anyway. He struggled to put a damper on his growing desire as he watched her graceful body twirling around in front of him. He knew eve-

ry inch, every curve and it was driving him crazy not to be able to take her in his arms.

“I’ll leave you now, so you can have your bath. It’s been a long thirty-six hours. You need to rest, and I have things to look after,” he said, unable to stop smiling at her. “You are free to look around. Your door will never be locked unless you lock it.” With that said, he turned and left her standing in the middle of the bedroom.

What did he just say? My door will never be locked? I am free to look around, she thought in amazement. *He bought me. I’m his property so I’m supposed to be his slave, aren’t I? I must have missed something. Something I didn’t hear correctly.*

She ran out of the bedroom, hoping to catch up with him. The concept of him giving her her freedom never entered her mind.

She reached the front door and saw it was closed. It was a sliding door but did not have the usual handhold to use in order to slide it open. She pushed and then pulled on the door, but it would not budge.

She backed up, exasperated with herself because she couldn’t figure out how to open one stupid door, when it suddenly slid open. The man was standing there looking at her with that goofy, lopsided grin of his, making her stomach do summersaults once again.

“Sorry, I forgot to show you how to open the door and to give you your ID card that will let you go most everywhere,” he said, stepping back into the room.

He handed her a small plastic card the size of a credit card. It had a photo of the woman in the mirror on it, with the name Darcey Callahan in big, bold letters printed underneath the picture. She stood, looking at the card and then at the man, in confusion.

“Yes, that is your name. You are Darcey Callahan from Dallas, Texas. You and I have been dating for over a year. I know this is a lot to throw at you right now, and I’m sorry. So please don’t stress over it. Take it slow, give yourself

time to take it all in and remember who you are. I will help you as much as I can,” he told her in a rush, not knowing exactly how to handle the situation without scaring her more.

She was dumbfounded. Her legs wouldn't hold her and she collapsed on the floor. He came over and squatted down in front of her, taking her hands in his. Electric shocks radiated up her arms where her hands touched his. All of a sudden, there was no air to breathe. She had an overwhelming urge to throw her arms around him and bury her face in the curve of his neck. Instead, she struggled to let the urge pass and sat there frozen. Her mind was slipping into a numbing void as she stared at the man in front of her. She was not actually seeing him at all. Her heart beat wildly.

“It's okay,” he said, drawing her into his arms to comfort her. “You are safe now. You no longer have to worry about what will happen to you. I didn't plan on telling you this so soon, but I realized you had to have an ID card, and it would have to have your name and photo on it. I didn't have a choice.” He paused, waiting for her to absorb all he had just said.

Darcey pulled back out of his arms, a million questions racing through her mind. She couldn't give voice to any of them. All she could do was stare at him, her mouth open. It became increasingly hard for her to breathe.

A small frown slid across his face as she pulled back. “It's okay. When you're ready, I will tell you everything that I know about what happened to you. But in the meantime, let me show you how to use your card.”

He would leave it at that for now and hoped that changing the subject would alleviate some of the stress she was feeling right now. He took her hands and pulled her up, mesmerized by her hazel eyes as she looked into his.

Brad averted his eyes to break the connection and cleared his throat as he began explaining how the ID card worked. “You take your card and slide it like this, in this slot.” He pointed to a small back box on the inside resembling the one on the outside of the door. He took the card

from her hand and slid it through the slot in the small black box, and the door closed. He slid it again, and it opened. With one last pass of the card, he closed the door.

“To lock the door,” he said, pointing to the button on the top of the box. “Just push this button here, and you will see a red light come on to indicate the door is locked. Push the button again, and the door will be unlocked. Do you want to try it?”

Brad looked at her bewildered expression as he handed the card back to her. Maybe he should have handled it differently, slower, but it was too late now.

“I—I—ge—ges—guess,” she stammered, her mind still in a jumble, trying to make some sense of what she had heard him say.

Darcey took the card from him and stared at it, unable to comprehend how the face and name on the card could be her. The face looked like the one in the mirror, the one that had been looking back at her these past months, but she felt no connection to the name or to the face.

“Here, let me help you,” he said, partially drawing her out of the stupor she had slipped into.

Blankly, she looked up as Brad took her hand holding the card and slid the card through the slot. The door opened. Then he repeated it, and the door closed. Then he took the forefinger of her hand and pushed the button, and the red light came on. He pushed it again, and the light went off.

“There, see how easy it is? There’s also a slot outside beside the door. Want to try it by yourself?”

He grinned at her, but instead of his smile lifting her spirits, her face reddened in frustration that he had made her feel like a helpless child.

“No, I’ve got it,” she said curtly, yanking her hand out of his.

She couldn’t tell if her heart was beating rapidly because of his touch or because she was agitated at herself for acting like a fool.

“Well then, I’ll be off,” he said. He needed to leave before he made matters worse. He had to give her some space and time to set things right in her mind. “Oh yes, one more thing.” He paused just inside the door. “There’s a pager on the bar. Use it if you need me. It is synced with my phone. Remember to take it with you if you go exploring. This is an enormous place and, until you know it, it is easy to get lost,” he cautioned, and then he was gone.

Trying to calm her irritation at his condescending manner and being treated like a child, she was still attempting to put the things she had just been told in order, but nothing stayed in place. It all kept jumping around. She looked at the card in her hand and then at the slot on the wall. Dazed, she took the card and slid it through the slot. She watched as the door opened. She slid it again, and the door closed. She had no idea how many times she numbly repeated the process before the jumbled mess in her mind settled and she could think again.

The man had said her name was Darcey Callahan and that she was from Dallas. Those names meant nothing to her. They didn’t jog anything in her memory. She had thought she would feel relieved to know her real name, but it was as foreign to her as the man. She felt no connection to it. The only things real to her were these past months.

“He said don’t worry about it. What good would it do anyway? What can I do about it? It is what it is. How would worry change anything?” she grumbled to herself.

It won’t, but when you see him, have him tell you about this Darcey Callahan. You may be surprised what you find out about her.

Who are you? Get out of my head! Leave me alone!

I can’t leave you alone, we are one and the same. You just haven’t remembered me yet, but you will. I’m here to help you find your way back... The voice was fading away. ...you will remember...

Then, it was gone.

She shook her head and looked at the card in her hand and the face on the card. Yes, it matched the one in the mirror, but she still didn't know her. She only knew who she had been for these past months—Saleem.

She took a slow turn and walked back to the bedroom. She needed to get cleaned up. She felt sticky, dirty, and was sure she didn't smell too pleasant either.

The water began to flow into the marble tub as she turned on the tap. She discovered soap, washcloth, and towels behind the rattan doors of a large, freestanding cabinet across from the tub. Slowly, inch-by-inch, she slipped into the steaming water. It felt like heaven as the bubbles engulfed her body right up to her chin.

Later and feeling much better, and dressed in a pair of jeans and a white boyfriend shirt, she walked into the kitchen and looked in the gleaming, stainless steel fridge to see what there might be to eat. It was empty. She turned to look through the cabinets. They too were empty of food, but were stocked with all types of cooking utensils, pots and pans, dinnerware, drink ware of all kinds, and silverware.

She grabbed the pager the man had left her, put it in her pocket, and opened the front door. She stepped out into the corridor, and looked left, and then right, seeing nothing, but the gray expanse of the corridor in either direction. She turned around and saw the slot for an ID card on the wall beside the door. The number 308 was stenciled in bold, black numbers above the slot. She made a mental note of the number, slid the card, and the door closed.

"That was easy," she commented to herself.

Darcey had no idea where either way led so she tossed a mental coin—heads go right, tails left. Heads it is. She started walking, noticing every so often, there would be another number with a slot beside a door. She guessed these were other living quarters.

Darcey had gone maybe fifty feet when she heard a soft humming sound coming up behind her. With a quick turn of her head, she saw a golf-cart-type vehicle heading in her di-

rection. She jumped back and pressed herself flat against the wall to let it pass. Too late, she noticed there had been no need to move. There was plenty of room for her to keep walking and the cart to pass.

Feeling foolish, she gave a half-hearted smile to the people in the cart as they drove by. The cart turned left a short distance in front of her. She jogged to where it had turned. It was another corridor.

Interesting.

Standing in the middle of the junction of the two corridors, she looked around to find something to help her to remember her way back. She saw, on either side of the connecting corridor's walls, directional signs with arrows pointing in the direction the cart went. Bajo el Mar Café and Main Street Plaza stood out in bold, black letters. Then she turned to look at the sign on the corridor wall behind her. It had numbers 300-325 with an arrow pointing right and 399-375 pointing left.

Now that she had her bearings, Darcey took off down the corridor, following the cart. She could see farther on that the corridor she was walking down opened into a partially finished area. However, before she reached it, another corridor intersected the one she was in, running perpendicular to it.

Looking right, she saw the Bajo el Mar Café that the man had said he ordered their food from. She paused and peered through the row of large glass windows into the interior of the cafeteria. Lots of tables and chairs filled the dining area. A cafeteria-style food line ran down the side, several vending machines sat against one wall, and a beverage station with every imaginable beverage available sat next to the vending machines. She made a mental note to come back here after she finished exploring.

There were only a few people in the café, and she didn't see the man, so she continued on, toward the open area. Reaching it, she saw that it was a plaza and still under construction. Many workers were bustling about, working on

what appeared to be twenty large rooms that ringed the outer edge of the circular plaza.

What had the man said? It would be like living in a city, but under water? This could be a shopping area, like a mall.

Walking on into the center of the plaza, she realized it would be a park when completed. She marveled at the workers laying sod around a stone paver sidewalk that circled a fountain. There were park benches stacked just off to the side, waiting to be installed in the grassy area.

Looking behind her, she noticed that the corridor she had just come through, continued on across to the other side of the plaza, and she headed toward it. Reaching the next intersection, she saw directional signs again. The Services & Maintenance arrows pointed in both directions. The signs with Pacific Theatre, Costal Library, Stingray Bowling Alley, Hydroponics, and Bajo el Mar Café pointed to the right. Corporate Offices, Pacific K-12 School, ORCA Medical Wing, and Bajo el Mar Café pointed to the left.

Then it hit her—the perpendicular corridors were circular.

This is strange. What kind of place is this—no windows, but yet, it's like the sun is shining, and the air feels fresh like you're outside? And, he tells me this is five miles underwater with some kind of ecosystem running it all? she wondered in amazement. I'll have to ask him to explain all of this now that I have my wits about me again. And I'm going to have to ask his name, too. I just can't keep calling him the man. Strange, he hasn't bothered to introduce himself. Odd.

She wandered on, turned left, and walked toward the corporate offices. That seemed to her the best place to look for him. There were more people here going about their business.

The doors to most offices were either open or had large glass windows that opened onto the corridor. Everyone she saw or met was friendly. They smiled and said “Hello” as if they knew who she was, but otherwise left her alone.

Strolling past several offices, she casually looked in each of them, smiling when she found the office happened to be occupied, still hoping she would see the man, but she didn't find him in any of the offices. She walked on. Since she didn't have a watch, she guessed it had been maybe an hour or so that had passed by the time she eventually wound up back at the Bajo el Mar Café. Darcey stood outside, debating whether to go in.

I sure could use a cup of coffee. Do I need money? she fretted. *I don't have any, but I could ask. Surely, they could afford to let me have one cup of coffee on the house.*

Her mind made up, her hand reaching for the door, she pushed it open and hesitantly walked in. Then she saw him walking across the floor toward her with that lopsided grin of his turning her knees to jelly. Her heart beat faster, and butterflies erupted in her stomach. She felt excited to see him and didn't take the time to analyze why—she just was excited to see him.

Brad saw Darcey hesitate before coming in the door and hurried across the floor to meet her. She looked lost but, seeing him, her face lit up with a big smile and Brad's heart took wings.

"Darcey, I'm so glad you found your way here. Are you hungry?" he asked, taking her hand and leading her over to a table. "Sit and I will get you something."

"All I want is a big cup of coffee, please." Darcey smiled at him still holding his hand as she sat down. The vibes she was feeling felt right and she let her hand linger in his grasp, relishing the heat from his touch as it raced through her body.

Brad looked down at their hands and then up into her eyes.

He wasn't sure what he saw there, but it wasn't fear—acceptance maybe? Was she feeling the connection as he felt it? His heart pounded.

"I'll get your coffee. Are you sure you don't want something to eat?" he asked, again.

“No, just the coffee,” she replied.

Her eyes followed his tall, muscular frame as he walked away. The surge of heat from his hand raced up her arm all the way to her heart—it started doing crazy things.

She wasn’t sure what had just happened, but she liked it, and she felt completely safe for the first time in months, even safer than Nicho had made her feel. At this moment, she felt like she could fly.

While Brad was getting Darcey’s coffee, his phone vibrated. Pulling it out of his pocket, he saw that it was Luis Vargas, who had helped him rescue Darcey.

“Luis, I’ll have to call you back. I’m not in my office. Give me about five minutes.” Brad put his phone back in his pocket and took Darcey her cup of coffee. “I have an important call I need to take. Can you make it back to your quarters, or would you like to wait here for me, and we can go together?” he asked her, hoping she would wait.

“I’ll wait. This is nice to just sit here, watch people, and know I’m not locked in a room. Do I need money to get another cup?” she asked, blushing, embarrassed at not knowing what the protocol was for acquiring another cup of coffee.

“No, just go get all the coffee you want and something to eat, too. I won’t be long,” Brad said, walking away his heart soaring.

Brad hurried down the hall to his office, a goofy smile plastered across his face. Entering, he stopped to pour himself a glass of Scotch before he sat down and picked up the phone to call Luis.

“I have excellent news,” Luis said. “I have the location where you can find Carlos.”

“Luis, it is good to hear your voice. Thank you for all your help,” Brad responded while anger and frustration welled up inside of him at the mention of Carlos’s name. It immediately squelched the euphoria he had been feeling just moments ago.

“Carlos is in Lima, along with his other two associates. They are staying at a house just outside of the city. I will

email you the directions. It seems he has come into an inheritance of some sort and will be staying in Lima for a while,” Luis told him. “Tell me how is Darcey? I have not told her grandmother yet. I will wait to tell her grandmother until you have had time to help her remember.”

“Darcey is doing well. I believe some things are coming back to her. Her reaction to me is changing. She is more comfortable with me. I haven’t had to dodge any flying objects or fists lately.” Brad heard Luis laugh. “I hope to have good news for you in a few weeks.” He took a drink and set the glass on the desk. “I need to go. Darcey is waiting for me,” he said, a hint of anticipation in his voice. “Tonight will be our first real time together, so I want it to be special. I will call you in a few days and let you know what happens with Santiago.”

“I will look forward to hearing from you.” Luis hung up and emailed Brad the directions where to locate Carlos Santiago.

Brad didn’t check his email before he left, deciding that Santiago would still be there tomorrow, and he didn’t want anything to distract from the evening he had planned. Earlier, he had given instructions to the Bajo kitchen staff about what he wanted delivered to his quarters for this special evening. Everything should be ready at seven.

He glanced at his watch. It was going on four-thirty.

Having emptied her cup, Darcey picked it up and walked over to the beverage station for a refill. Walking back, she chose a table closer to the windows where she could watch the busy people in the corridor. Wherever this was, it was bustling with activity, and it was wonderful to just sit and know she would never be locked up ever again. She glanced down the corridor and saw the man heading toward the café and an explosion of butterflies came back.

Brad pulled the door to the café open and was pleasantly surprised at the feeling of happiness he felt radiating from Darcey. The feeling grew the closer he moved toward her. When he reached the table, the feeling had grown to one of

pure pleasure. He didn't know if she was remembering, but he certainly hoped so. An unabashed grin spread across his face as he gazed into her eyes. "Do you want to finish your coffee here or take it with you," he asked as he sat down, his eyes never leaving hers.

"If you're ready, I can take my coffee with me," Darcey told him. A smile played around the corners of her mouth and she was having a hard time controlling it. The smile wanted to spread across her face and she couldn't let that happen. It had only been a few hours since she had come to know him. It was too soon to be having such strong feelings for him.

I don't know this man, and I don't want him to get the wrong idea about me. I may be his property, but I'll be damned if I will give myself over willingly, she vowed.

However, she wasn't sure how long she could hold out. Her body responded of its own accord whenever he was close and that worried her. She willed herself to resist the onslaught of emotions that would come the next time he touched her.

Brad stood and extended his hand toward her. "Okay, let's go then."

Darcey avoided taking it, knowing she couldn't handle touching him again. Instead, she picked up her coffee cup in one hand and slid the chair back up to the table with the other.

Keeping her distance seemed the better choice for now, even though he hadn't made any untoward advances.

He's always behaved like a gentleman. Could I have misjudged him? He certainly isn't Nicho, but he seems to be just as concerned about me as Nicho was. She pondered that thought as they walked to the Café door.

"We'll take my shuttle back so you won't have to walk," he said, holding the café door open for her.

Ten minutes later, Brad parked the shuttle in the designated shuttle parking area located about twenty yards from his quarters. They walked the short distance to his door.

“I thought we would dine in tonight.” Brad opened the door and motioned to her to enter. “Dinner will be delivered around seven.”

“What time is it?” Darcey asked. “I don’t have a watch and I haven’t seen a clock anywhere,” she said, looking around to see if he had one.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize you did not have a watch. I will get you a clock and watch if you would like,” he said making a mental to pick one up for her. “It’s a little after five. Would you like to rest a while before dinner?” he asked. “You can lay down on my bed—or go back to your own quarters,” he added quickly.

Oh, shit! Why did I mention my bed? Damn! He watched her reaction out of the corner of his eye.

A bit of pink tinged her cheeks. “Thank you, but I would like to change clothes before dinner, so I think I will go back to my quarters,” Darcey replied, turning away from him and heading for the door.

She waited, not looking at him, for him to open the door. The circling butterflies in her stomach fluttered at the mention of ‘his bed’ and she knew she was blushing. She gritted her teeth in frustration as they erupted into a full-blown explosion when his arm brushed against her as he reached to slide his card through the slot.

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! she admonished herself. *What’s with you? No! Forget it. You’re just hungry, that’s all.*

Brad watched as Darcey walked the short distance to her quarters. He felt that she seemed much better. At least, he hadn’t noticed any adverse reaction when he mentioned she could rest in his bed. Maybe her memory of him would come back sooner than anticipated—he hoped.

He didn’t know how much longer he could hold out not touching her. The brief brush against her as he opened the door nearly drove him over the edge.

How can she not feel the power of our connection? And, if she does, how can she remain so calm?



Entering her quarters, she was amazed, yet again, that this was all hers. She went over, flopped down on the sofa, swung her legs up, and marveled at her newfound freedom.

Clasping her hands together behind her head, she leaned back against the sofa's arm. *Maybe this being owned by the man might not be so bad, after all, she speculated.*

What had he said? We had been dating in my past life? Damn, I wish I could remember, but there's nothing but a blank space before I met him at the Gala.

A smile spread across her face and her eyes closed.

But when he touches me, a thousand fingers of heat surge through my body. There is something there. I can't explain it. Could it be, my mind does not remember him, but my body does? She let the thoughts roll around in her mind for bit, then sat up and placed her feet on the floor.

Kicking her shoes off and flexing her toes in the lush carpet, she stood and walked to the bedroom to change for dinner, no closer to an answer.

CHAPTER 2

Lilly Snoops

Carrying a handful of reports, Lilly opened the door to Brad's office. She planned to leave them so he would be ready to work on them first thing in the morning. She was nothing if not efficient and possibly borderline OCD. Everything about her life was completely organized, right down to her toothbrush that hung perfectly vertical in its holder. "A place for everything and everything in its place." Her mother had pounded that into her head since she'd been big enough to walk. Placing the reports on Brad's desk in a neat pile, she noticed he had left his computer on.

Wasteful, wasteful, she thought annoyed as she reached over to turn it off.

Her hand paused in midair when she noticed the contents of his email inbox were displayed on the monitor. Glancing briefly at the list, one email, in particular, caught her eye. It was from Luis Vargas. Curiosity got the better of her, even knowing she shouldn't, she opened it anyway.

The message jumped off the monitor's screen at her. *It seems that Carlos has recently inherited the ranch of one Armando Martinez in Lima. You will find him and his two friends there.*

Lilly pulled Brad's chair out from the desk, collapsed into it, and stared at the offending email displayed on the monitor's screen.

What the hell does this mean? she pondered. *Why is he staying at Armando's residence? Armando's lawyer had assured me there were no living relatives, so how did Santiago inherit Armando's ranch?* That question rattled her self-imposed, aloof exterior.

All of these months she had been successful in keeping everyone in the dark and manipulating things from behind the scenes, always careful that nothing would connect her to Armando or to Javier's plans. She did not need a wild card popping up now and ruining everything she had worked so hard to conceal. And with Brad seeking to exact his 'pound of flesh' on Santiago for what he had done to that woman, it might cause the authorities or Corporate to come snooping if Santiago suddenly turned up dead, especially now that Armando's connection to the missing woman was a matter of public record.

Then she paused and realized there was nothing that would connect her with either Armando or Santiago—no paper trail that would lead back to her.

How stupid of me to worry, she thought, relieved, a slight smile playing around her mouth. *I have been so very careful to destroy everything that could possibly connect me to Armando. And, as for Santiago, I've no dealings whatsoever with him.* She sat up straight. *This must be some of Javier's doing. Damn him!*

Lilly had been furious with Javier when he had not consulted her first before soliciting Armando.

"I could have told him just what a loser Armando really was. But, nooo, he plowed right ahead and arranged with Armando to handle the job," she fumed. Then it dawned on her that she was in Brad's office and the door was open. She quickly stepped across the office, shut the door, turned off the light, and closed the window blinds.

On her way back to Brad's desk, a smug, self-satisfied feeling slowly spread through her as she thought about the elation she had felt upon hearing about Armando's "most unfortunate accident." She had gleefully clapped her hands at the news, but that had been short lived as she knew Javier's decision to eliminate him had come too late. Things had already been screwed up. Still, it had made her day.

Now, none of that mattered since she had taken control of the situation and strongly stressed to Corporate that it was imperative for Brad to be called back to handle the situation personally. She had manipulated Corporate into letting her be the one to go to Dallas to retrieve Brad. She knew that with Brad back in the dome, he would see just how valuable she was to him. However, that too, had been short lived. Because, upon arrival, she had been slapped in the face with the news that Brad had a girlfriend.

She had been furious at the news and would have made the woman disappear then if it had not been for the fact that she had had to return to Lima the same day. Then she had been overjoyed at the news that the woman had been kidnapped. However, she had to maintain her façade of sincere sympathy, and it had galled her immensely each time she had had to pretend to really care.

Then there was the situation of hiring the tech crew to work on the virus that had been uploaded into the filtration system. She knew that the Eastern Alliance had been behind it, and when Brad came asking her opinion about hiring some experts, she had been thrilled. She then had contacted Javier for his recommendation, and he had assured her that Ty Horton was nothing but a hack and could not handle the job. Time would run out before Horton could even find out what was happening.

Hiring the new technical crew had been another stupid move on Javier's part, Lilly fumed as she sat tapping her fingers furiously on the arm of Brad's chair, stress building at the thought of her perfect plan being derailed right before her eyes. *How could he not have known who they were?*

She should have trusted her own instincts and researched them herself. If she had, she would not be in this situation now. The virus would have done its job and ORCA would now be scrambling to try and fix the problem. Too late, she had realized that someone in the Eastern Alliance must have been feeding Javier false information, manipulating him to their own agenda.

“Javier never had the backbone to do what was needed for this job in the first place,” Lilly growled. “But it is still not too late for me to keep things on track.”

Chatting up Matt and gaining his trust had been a priority in her plan. It was imperative that she acquire knowledge about everything pertaining to the operation of the new hydroponics system. In just the few short weeks that she had been working with Matt, she now knew more than enough to do what was necessary.

However, it would have been so much better if they had just listened and let me handle the whole damn thing from the beginning.

Slowly, a plan was forming in Lilly’s mind on how to handle this new situation. First, she would find out just what the connection was between Santiago and Armando. Then she would anonymously contact Santiago and inform him that the boyfriend of the woman he kidnapped would be paying him a little visit. A sinister snicker escaped her lips as she thought about the possibility of each man eliminating the other. If the Gods smiled favorably, her problem would solve itself. She smirked as she picked up the phone and called Armando’s lawyer’s number. She checked her watch, it was a little after four. He should still be there.

“¡Hola!” the receptionist answered.

“Yes, I would like to speak to Eduardo, *por favor*,” Lilly said.

“*Uno momento, por favor.*” The receptionist put her on hold and the on-hold music grated in her ear. Drumming her fingers in frustration, she gritted her teeth and endured the noise.

“Eduardo, here,” he answered, annoyed at the lateness of the call. He had just been ready to walk out the door for home.

“I need to know how Carlos Santiago is connected to Armando. You said he had no living relatives,” Lilly accused him.

“We did not know about Santiago until three weeks ago.” Eduardo rubbed his forehead, cringing from what he knew was coming. *How did she find out?* he wondered. He purposely had not called her about this information, because he knew she would overreact, just like this. “Carlos is not a relative of Armando’s, but he is the stepson of Maria, the housekeeper, and, as you know—” He let out an aggravated sigh. “—Maria has inherited all of Armando’s property and money,” he finished, clenching his jaw in agitation.

“I do not know if this will cause complications or not,” Lilly ventured. “I have found out that Daniels is determined to seek revenge on Santiago for what he did to that American woman. However, I think I can arrange it so that they will eliminate each other,” she said thoughtfully, more to herself than to Eduardo.

“Are you sure that is a wise thing to do? Is there any chance it could lead back to us? We are cutting it close as it is. We cannot afford for anything to go wrong now,” Eduardo worried, his fingers paused drumming in midair. He was beginning to worry what would happen if his connection in all of this were found out. *The only reason I have hung on this long was for the money*, he reflected.

“Nothing will go wrong,” Lilly growled at Eduardo, “I have what I need to stop the dome from opening. We just need to make everyone believe that Javier is the sole mastermind behind all of this and then get that woman out of the way,” she said, irritation evident in her voice. Lilly had refused to call Darcey by name ever since Brad had brought her back to the dome. Lilly would take pleasure in seeing to the removal of that woman herself.

Everything had been working out just fine. It had taken Lilly most of the five years she had been with ORCA, to connive and lie her way to a position in the dome. The last position she had acquired had been under mysterious circumstances. Nonetheless, once there, she had made herself indispensable. Then, gaining Brad's trust, she had wormed her way into being second in command next to Brad. Quickly, she had earned his complete trust. She now had far-reaching run of the dome, which included everything pertaining to its operation. It would have been only a matter of time before Brad saw her for what she was—a full partner to him in running the dome. To her, the dome was her life—their life. Then Corporate had sent him to the Dallas office, he met that woman, and it had ruined everything. Brad did not see anyone but her. He could not talk about anything but her. Lilly had been ecstatic at the news that Darcey was missing.

It was her, her, her! Lilly's mind screamed.

Frustrated after Javier and Armando's botched attempt to get the plans, Lilly had gone directly to Corporate seeking permission to let her go to Dallas to bring Brad back to the dome. The only thing she had not counted on was meeting Darcey. Lilly had hated her the minute she laid eyes on her that day at Mike Bellington's. It took all of her strength to sit there, watch as Brad fawned over her, and not jump up and scratch her eyes out.

"If you are sure," Eduardo said hesitantly. "I will leave all of the final details in your capable hands."

With that, Eduardo hung up swiftly. She had already given him too much information for his own good. He did not want to know any of the gory details. The less he knew, the safer he felt. Besides, by the time he reached home now, his wife would have dinner on the table and he would have no time for his nightly cocktail before dinner. He hated having his routine interrupted.

Lilly decided she would not call Santiago tonight but would wait until Brad left on the sub in the morning. She wanted to give Santiago just enough time to prepare for

Brad's visit. She smiled at the thought of Brad walking into an ambush. It would be over quickly. It would serve him right for hooking up with that woman. Lilly changed the email back to "unread," and left Brad's office as she had found it, humming to herself, satisfied with her plan.

CHAPTER 3

Some Questions Answered

The food arrived right on schedule, and Brad set to work making everything perfect. He stepped back to admire the table he had just carefully set before lighting the candles. Replacing the ARC electric lighter in its charger base, he turned on the music and lowered the lights. Nervously rubbing his hands together, he gave everything one final look. He was ready to go get Darcey. He slid his card through the slot, triggering the door to open and there she stood, her delicate hand raised, ready to knock. For a moment, there was no air to breathe. His heart was pounding, his palms sweating, just like the first night he saw her.

“You look beautiful,” he said finally, smiling, letting his eyes roam over her graceful figure in the black, form-fitting jumpsuit. The plunging neckline, accentuated by a single diamond pendant that rested just above the valley where the graceful curves of her breasts met. “Please, come in,” he said, swallowing hard. *I’ll never make it through this evening*, he thought.

“Thank you, sir.” She gave him a cheeky grin, noticing his eyes had missed her face entirely, and walked in. “Wow, everything looks wonderful.”

“A glass of wine?” Brad held up the bottle.

“Yes, please.” She smiled at him, inhaling the delicious aroma floating in the air. “What’s that wonderful smell?”

“I thought maybe you would like to have a juicy Texas sirloin, done to perfection,” Brad grinned, handing her a glass of wine. “Salad, baked potato, and, of course, Texas toast. That was your favorite back home.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t remember,” she said and sighed sadly. “I wish I could.” She wanted more than anything to remember who she was, to put a name to the face in the mirror that looked back at her each morning, and have it mean something—anything.

“Don’t worry about it. It will come if you don’t force it,” Brad assured her. “You probably won’t remember everything at once, so don’t expect it.”

“Thanks, I’ll try to remember that.” She half-smiled at him, taking a drink from her glass. Inhaling, she turned away from him so he couldn’t see the sadness in her eyes.

But I do expect it, she thought bitterly. I want to know it all—right now. I don’t like this feeling of being the middle, between who I was before on the right, who I am now on the left...and...me in the middle, belonging to neither side.

“Dinner is served, madam.” He bent at the waist and made a wide sweeping gesture with his hand toward the dining table.

She turned and laughed at his over-exaggerated maître d’ impersonation and followed him, where he made a major production of seating her at the table.

She watched him over the fresh bouquet of white roses in the center of the table, as he refilled their glasses with wine, glad for his comic performance. It lightened her mood. She began to relax. As hard as she tried, she couldn’t take her eyes off of him. Drinking in every inch of him, she believed he truly was the most handsome man she had met in this new life, maybe in her old life as well if she ever remembered.

She thought about Quin—handsome in a rugged exotic way with the scar down the side of his face, and Nicho—roguish, with a hint of dark mystery in those amber eyes. But this man—this man was one hundred percent all male—perfect in every way. It was something she couldn't define in words, but he had an essence that neither Quin nor Nicho possessed. That something was reaching deep down inside of her, pulling her toward him. He caught her staring and smiled that lopsided grin of his. Her heart jumped into overdrive and butterflies erupted in her stomach. Blushing, she diverted her eyes to stare at the bouquet.

Why does he do this to me? she wondered, annoyed at herself that he could stir such feelings in her with just a grin that made her hot and cold all at the same time.

Brad forgot what he was doing, as he watched the soft glow of the candlelight caressing Darcey's face, and almost overflowed the glasses. Catching himself in time, he laughed. He was acting like a schoolboy on his first date. He hadn't felt like this since the first time he saw Darcey—hot and cold all at the same time, butterflies in the pit of his stomach, heart racing, and sweaty palms. He couldn't tell if she was feeling the same way, but she was feeling something. He was sure of it. She was blushing.

"Tell me about me, please," she asked, clearing her throat, moving on from the awkward moment. "But first, you must tell me your name. I need to know what to call you. Somehow 'hey you' just doesn't fit," she said with a nervous giggle, and neither did 'the man' that she had been calling him in her thoughts.

He grinned sheepishly. "Sorry, I should have introduced myself first thing. I don't know what I was thinking. It's Brad—Brad Daniels." *You dope! Yeah, I wasn't thinking*, he chastised himself. He had been so thankful to have her safe and back with him, he had blanked out the fact that she had no idea who he was.

Darcey's mind remained a blank. His name stirred nothing inside of her. He could have easily been called John Smith and it would have had the same effect.

No, his name means nothing to me, but the physical stuff—the touching, that grin, those eyes—now that's something else, she reflected, as the corner of her mouth turned slightly upward. *My body remembers something. I just wish it would pass the information on to my brain.*

“Let's eat and I'll tell you all of what I know happened to you,” Brad said, vigorously slathering his baked potato with butter to hide his nervousness.

During dinner, Brad told her everything he knew that had happened to her since they had started dating. He told her how they met, about his job and why he couldn't tell her about it, and then why he had to come back to Peru. He told her about Armando and the car crash, about his search for her leading him to Morocco. He conveniently left out the part Vargas had played in him being able to buy her at the auction, the DNA test, and her grandmother. However, he did tell her he had found Carlos and he had plans to take care of him personally. He didn't trust the authorities to do the job.

The meal finished, Brad and Darcey settled themselves on the sofa. Darcey curled up in the corner on one end and Brad, not wanting to be too far away, settled for somewhere in the middle of the sofa—close, but not too close.

“Tell me, did I have friends? What was my life like? Did I have a job, parents, brothers, sisters?” she asked, excited at last to have some questions answered about her life before she was kidnapped. Hoping against hope, that something he would tell her would trigger a memory.

“Yes, you have lots of friends,” he said, adjusting himself into a more comfortable position. “Your best friend is Marti Campbell. You have been friends since grade school. You have a job, you're a graphic designer at one of the largest firms in Dallas. You've been working for them since you graduated college—”

“My parents? Who are they?” she interrupted.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly, reaching for her hand, “but your parents were killed in a car accident when you were thirteen.” He didn’t know how else to break it to her other than to come right out and say it. He didn’t want to hurt her, but maybe the jolt of hearing that her parents were dead would trigger something. He gently squeezed her hand. “Your Uncle Jack, who is your father’s brother, raised you after your parents died,” he told her.

She listened to the words, but she had not memory of any of those things. She had thought that once she knew, she would remember, but instead, she was more lost than ever. She had all of the information at her fingertips but couldn’t grab it—the pieces were all there, floating, just beyond her reach. It was like the nightmare she’d had on the boat, and then that first night at Vargas’s.

Brad watched her face as he told her about her parents. He could see she had no memory of them, and could only imagine what she was feeling now—lost, maybe.

“Tell me about my best friend, Marti,” she suggested wanting to change the subject. “Tell me everything about her.”

She needed to think about something else besides her parents. It was bad enough that they were gone but worse, she couldn’t even remember them. She was sure she had grieved over her loss at the time, but now, it felt right that she needed to do so again even though she couldn’t remember them. She settled herself farther back into the corner of the sofa, drawing her legs up beside her.

“Well, where to begin?” Brad paused, noticing she had pulled her legs up beside her, creating a barrier between them. “You and Marti have been best friends since grade school. In college, you majored in Art and Graphic Design. Marti majored in Phys Ed and played catcher for the girls’ softball team. After you both had graduated, Marti and her father went into business together and own Campbell’s Sporting Goods in Dallas. You were hired by one of the big-

gest design agencies in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. You have been, twice, awarded ‘Graphic Designer of the Year.’” He paused again, catching the look of anticipation on her face, hoping something would trigger a memory.

“The two of you never do anything without the other. It’s like you two are two halves of the same whole. I have to tell you, sometimes it’s a little creepy the way you two mesh together.” He chuckled. “The first night I met you at the Sweetwater was when you and Marti and some of your girlfriends, all came together for your weekly girls’ night out.” He turned and looked into her eyes. “I knew you were ‘the one’ the moment I laid eyes on you, and I knew you felt it too. When we danced, the rest of the world melted away. There was just you, me, and the music. I wanted to take you home after the bar closed, but you gals have some sort of a girl thing—if you come together, you go home together sort of pact.” He shrugged and grinned. “Try as hard as I could, I couldn’t talk you into letting me take you home. You had to go with Marti,” he told her, shaking his head. And, then, like a bolt of lightning, it hit him—he would contact Marti and fly her here to help Darcey restore her memory. He would have Lilly arrange that in the morning. A rush of adrenaline coursed through his veins.

Yes! That’s the answer, he thought excited. If it hadn’t been so late, he would have jumped right up and called Lilly right then.

Brad poured the last of the wine in her glass. It was getting late, and Darcey needed to get some rest. These past forty-eight hours had been exhausting for him. He could only guess how they had affected Darcey. She looked tired, and the wine was making her sleepy. He smiled, as she tried to keep her eyes open.

“Would you like me to walk you back to your quarters?” Brad asked, smiling as she yawned.

The temptation, to pull her into his arms, almost pushed him to the breaking point. He wanted to ask her to stay, but he knew it was too soon, and he had given her a lot to think

about. She needed some alone time to absorb everything. No, he wouldn't push her. She had to come of her own accord. Besides, she was half asleep now. He would be lucky to get her back to her quarters before she completely passed out.

"Yes, that would be nice," Darcey said through a yawn, forcing herself to stand up. Through half-closed eyes, she made her way to the kitchen with her glass and set it on the counter.

She covered her mouth to hide a very unlady-like yawn. "Would you like me to help clean up?" she asked, hoping he would say no. She didn't think she could stay awake long enough to walk the few yards to her door, anyway. She yawned again.

"No, the Bajo staff will take care of this in the morning, but thanks anyway." Brad chuckled watching her yawn again. He put his arm around her shoulders and guided her out into the corridor. He noticed she didn't flinch as his arm settled softly on her shoulders. He could have pulled her closer but didn't, not yet.

Baby steps.

They stopped in front of Darcey's door. Brad waited, amused while she missed the slot with her card and tried twice more before she succeeded.

Brad grinned at her. "Well, good night. See you in the morning," he said, watching her sway in the doorway. "You can call the Bajo and have your breakfast delivered. I know you haven't had time to do any shopping."

"Yes, I suppose that would be nice if I had a way to call them," she mumbled through a yawn, rubbing her eyes.

"Oh, that. Yes, I suppose it would help to know how to do that." Brad grinned. "Please step inside." He took hold of her shoulders and turned her toward the living room, gently pushing her along. "Over there on the desk—" He pointed. "—you will find the phone system for the entire dome. Right now, only the occupied quarters and offices are in the system. It works just like a cell phone, but you cannot place long distance calls yet. When completed we will have our

own phone system, much like any other cell phone system.” He showed her the electronic address book.

Through bleary eyes, she looked at what he was showing her. The names and numbers wouldn’t hold still so she could read them.

Oh well, maybe they will have settled down by morning, she thought, stifling another yawn. She was tired and she needed him to go. “Thank you. You’ve given me lots to think about,” she said politely, maneuvering him toward the door. She didn’t want to think about anything else. All she wanted right now was to curl up in that big bed in her new bedroom and go to sleep. She put her hand on his chest and gently pushed him out the door. “I’ll see you in the morning,” she said, yawning again, as the door slid shut.

Darcey stood staring at the door. Her mind refused to think about any of the things he had told her. It was screaming “sleep” at her. She kicked off her shoes as she walked toward the bedroom, took off her clothes, let them lay where they fell, and snuggled naked under the coverlet. Before she fell asleep a thought occurred to her.

Did he have his arm around me? It felt like he did. Maybe I just dreamed it. I’m sooo sleepy. The fog of dreamland descended on her.



Brad watched Darcey’s door slide shut, smiling at the image of her standing there half awake, beautiful, and so vulnerable. A surge of love enveloped his heart.

Turning, he jogged off down the corridor toward his office. He needed to check on the email from Luis. It was too important to wait until morning.

Flipping on the overhead lights, he crossed to his desk and sat down. The screen saver rotated through images of Darcey. He moved the mouse, and the computer sprung to

life. The images of Darcey blinked away and Brad's inbox displayed on the screen.

He scrolled down the list looking for the one from Luis, double clicked on the email, and it opened up. Brad scanned the email and fell back in his chair like he'd been punched. Luis had written that Santiago was at Armando's ranch.

What the hell is Santiago's connection to Armando?

Lilly had said his lawyer told her Armando had no living relatives. Well regardless, he was going to take care of the son-of-a-bitch tomorrow. Contemplating the situation, Brad decided he would not tell anyone, including Lilly, that he was going. There still might be someone here, who could tip Santiago off. Corporate had not come up with anyone besides Armando, but that didn't mean there couldn't be someone else, too.

Brad decided on his course of action. First, he would leave Lilly instructions to arrange for Marti Campbell to be flown down to Lima. Next, he would call Luis and see if his man was still in Lima. After much thought about the situation, he decided he was going to need backup when he went after Santiago. It wasn't just Santiago he would have to take care of, now, there were the other two, also. He looked at his watch. Luis should be finished with lunch by now. Brad punched in Luis's number on his cell. He didn't want a record of the call showing up on the office's call logs—just in case.

Luis heard his phone ring and pulled it out of his jacket pocket. It slipped and dropped to the floor. Picking it up, he checked for damage.

"Yes, what do you want?" Luis growled into the phone.

"Howdy." Brad laughed. "Sorry. Have I caught you at a bad time?"

"My apologies, Brad. I just dropped my new phone, but it appears to be okay." Luis sat down on the edge of the sofa. "What can I do for you?"

"I'll be quick, so you can get back to whatever you were doing." Brad laughed again. "Is your man still in Lima? I am

going to deal with Santiago and I'm going to need backup since his other two friends are here with him. I'd like the playing field to be somewhat level."

"Yes, he is. I will give him a call and have him contact you. Do not do anything until you hear from my man, Angelo."

"Thanks, but have him call me on my cell. I don't want anything showing up on the office call logs. We still haven't found out who is behind the sabotage," Brad told him.

"Nicho will be back today, would you like me to send him over, too?" Luis asked as he walked over to his desk to look for Angelo's cell number.

"No, I think Angelo and I can take care of things." One thing Brad didn't want or need was to have Nicho show up and muddy the waters. He had avoided talking to Darcey about her relationship with Nicho—or anything that had happened at Luis's, for that matter. It brought out his green-eyed monster every time he thought about Nicho.

Brad hung up, turned off the computer and lights, put the instructions for Lilly about contacting Marti on her desk, and jogged back to his quarters. It was just past one.

This would be a short night.

CHAPTER 4

Looking for Santiago

Brad fumbled around, trying to find the button to shut off the shrill buzzer that was ripping through a dream about Darcey. Finally, he found it, silenced it, then fell back onto the pillow, and stared at the ceiling. He wasn't exactly sure how he was going to handle Santiago. Perhaps when Angelo called, they could work out a plan, since that was Angelo's kind of business.

He flipped the covers back, sat up on the side of the bed. The thought of Santiago touching Darcey pumped anger and adrenaline through his body. Brad knew he needed a plan. The thought of killing someone was unsettling, to say the least, but his only other option was to have him arrested, and he knew from Santiago's rap sheet, he had never been prosecuted. Brad just couldn't take the chance that the son-of-a-bitch would get off, yet again. He would reserve making any final decision until he had talked with Angelo.

While the coffee brewed, he dressed and called the sub captain, telling him to have the sub ready by seven thirty.

Brad filled two mugs with coffee and carried them down to Darcey's quarters. She opened the door in her baby blue silk robe that clung gracefully to the curves of her body,

leaving no doubt in his mind she had nothing on underneath. Her hair was tousled but even with no makeup on, she was breathtakingly beautiful to him. His heart turned over and the butterflies erupted in his stomach. He knew he was crazy in love with this woman and had been from the first moment he saw her, but his soul—his soul had been in love with her for an eternity.

He flashed her a toothy grin. “Coffee, madam?”

What a pleasant surprise. Darcey was elated and gave him a sly, sideways grin, stepping aside for him to enter. Excitement stirred in the pit of her stomach as she watched him carry in the mugs and place them on the bar. *Where are all these wonderful feelings coming from? Why can't I remember this man? I so desperately want to remember him, to remember everything. My body remembers, why won't my mind?*

“Here, better drink it while it’s hot,” Brad said, taking a drink of his. “I don’t have much time this morning. I talked to Luis last night, and one of his guys is here in Lima and is going to help me with Santiago. I am going topside as soon as I leave here, but I wanted to see you before I go. Lilly will be available if you need anything,” he said, watching her as she took her coffee and curled up on the sofa.

“Lilly?” she questioned, frowning faintly.

“Yes. Lilly Montego. She is my executive assistant.” *Another slip on my part,* he thought. “Sorry, I forgot you have not officially met her yet. However, you did briefly meet her once at Mike’s stables in Dallas. She will be available if you need anything. I have asked her to show you around and introduce you to our people.”

“Oh, thank you,” she said absently. She was more worried about what might happen to Brad than she was about being escorted around. “Do you think there will be trouble?” she asked thoughtfully. She wasn’t sure who this Santiago person was. Brad had told her he was the one who kidnapped her, but the only one she could think of was the Creepy Man. She had never heard Creep Man’s name. Quin had called

him a broker, so unless she saw him, she wouldn't know for sure. A little shiver of apprehension crept up her spine.

"I don't know. I hope not. I think it should be okay with Luis's man there," Brad told her, even though he didn't know for sure how this was going to play out. He didn't want to worry her.

"Why don't you just turn him over to the authorities?" she asked, watching him over the rim of her cup. That seemed the simplest solution to her. And, a lot safer.

"I've checked his rap sheet, and he has been arrested numerous times for trafficking but never prosecuted. Best I can determine, he has always had an alibi or been able to bribe his way out. As I said, he's never been prosecuted, and I can't take the chance it will happen this time, too. There's nothing for you to worry about," Brad said, his smile fading as he watched the frown deepen on her face.

He walked over and sat on the coffee table in front of her. He took her coffee mug, set it on the table beside him, then gathered her hands in his and kissed them, avoiding the palms. That can wait till later. "I told you, everything is going to be okay. You don't need to worry about anything. You are safe here. No one can hurt you here." Brad squeezed her hands. "Now, I have a surprise for you. I am going to bring Marti down so you can talk with her. Marti can fill in the blanks that I can't. She will be here in the morning."

"I will look forward to meeting her—again." Darcey gave a weak laugh. *Will she be the key to unlocking my memory? I hope so.*

Brad stood up, dropped her hands, and kissed her on the forehead—a sheer reflex. He cleared his throat and stepped away from her. "I've got to go. The sub will be waiting for me. I'll call you later and let you know how things went." He turned and walked toward the door.

Darcey was still sitting on the sofa. He couldn't tell what she was thinking. That had been a stupid thing to do. He had promised himself he wouldn't do anything to upset her.

It didn't even register that he had gotten up or kissed her or left until she heard the door slide shut. Darcey sat there trying to figure exactly what she was feeling. *Do I really want to know who I was? Will knowing my name be enough? Do I really want to know all of the rest? I thought I did.*

She had been worrying about it for months. It had been on her mind twenty-four/seven since she had woken up in that dirty little room. But, now, she knew her name, and it meant nothing. Would knowing the rest make any difference?

Over the past several months, she had grown used to her new life, although she had never admitted it to herself, until now. Even though she had been kidnapped and kept locked up in a gilded prison, she found herself enjoying being pampered and catered to. She had grown used to the designer clothes, the jewels, and the finer things that had been given to her. She had enjoyed a different kind of freedom—one with no responsibilities and no decisions to make. Was that something she really wanted to give up?

Will you just listen to yourself? A tiny faint voice echoed from somewhere in her past. Darcey Callahan, you can't say you like what has happened to you so much that you want to continue being someone else's property. The voice was getting louder. Think about it—you want to know about your life, past and future. They can both exist for you. You don't have to give up one for the other. Think about it.

She didn't know where the voice in her head was coming from, but it was like a long-lost friend coming to visit.

You know who I am, Darcey. I'm your inner voice, your conscience, your intuition, your voice of reason. Listen to me. Let me help you through this. I will lead you in the right direction. Trust me.

How can I trust you, I don't even trust myself to make sound decisions anymore, she questioned the voice.

You can trust me. I will not let you down. You need to listen to Brad. He is the right one for you.

How can I do that? I don't remember him. Was I in love with him? What did he mean to me? Can you answer those questions? Darcey demanded of the voice.

You will know the answers to all of your questions when the time is right. I will help you find the right time. Trust me.

“This is ridiculous. I’m talking to myself. Someone is going to come and lock me up,” she said out loud and tuned the voice out.

Darcey looked at the clock Brad had brought her and saw it was seven fifteen. What had Brad said? He was leaving at seven thirty? He was going to go find Santiago. She worried that something terrible was going to happen, but couldn’t do anything about it. She would just have to wait till she heard from Brad. She stood up and headed for the bedroom to get dressed, and then she was going to have breakfast.

As she passed the desk, she decided to call for breakfast like Brad had suggested. The lady taking her order said it would be delivered in half an hour, plenty of time to get dressed before it arrived.



Brad dashed back to his quarters, pulled his Glock out of its hiding place, shrugged into his jacket, and put three extra clips in his jacket pockets. He slipped the gun into the waistband of his jeans at the small of his back and adjusted his jacket so it covered the gun. Checking his watch, he saw it was going on seven fifteen. There was plenty of time to get to the sub’s bay.

The sub’s captain welcomed Brad aboard, closed the hatch, and started the ascent up to the top.

“There’s fresh coffee in the galley,” the captain said to Brad’s back as he headed in that direction.

Brad laughed. “Thanks! That’s just what I had in mind.”

Some of the sub's crew was still in the galley when Brad walked in. Raising his hand in greeting as he walked by the table where they sat, he went straight for the coffee pot.

It wasn't the best idea to have more caffeine since he was already wired to the hilt in anticipation of the confrontation with Santiago. He felt the gun in his waistband as it was pushed against his back when he leaned against the back of the chair he sat down on—an unsettling reminder he might have to use it before the day was over. Thank goodness, his jacket covered it up. The captain would not have been pleased to know he had a gun onboard. Although it wasn't loaded, firearms were forbidden on the subs.

His phone vibrated and he pulled it out of his pocket. The caller ID indicated it was from Luis. He wondered what Luis wanted.

“Luis, what a surprise,” Brad greeted him. “What's up?”

“Morning, Brad,” Luis said. “I just wanted to let you know that Nicho will be arriving this morning. I checked out Carlos and his two compatriots. They are nothing to be messed with. So, I am sending Nicho to help out. I do not want to lose you. My men are trained in this sort of thing. It is their job. Let them handle the bad stuff.”

“Thanks, Luis, but I think Angelo and I can handle the situation,” Brad said, as his stomach sank. The one person he didn't want to show up was on his way here. But there was no use in trying to talk Luis out of it—his mind was made up.

“Nonsense, my boy. This will be a good thing and make, as you said, the playing field more level.” Luis laughed. “You will need to pick Nicho up. His flight will arrive at eight-thirty. Call me when it is over.”

“Yes, I will pick up Nicho and give you a call when it's over.” Brad hung up staring at his coffee cup.

Now, why did I say I would pick Nicho up? he wondered, questioning his own sanity. He wasn't going to surface before ten. Maybe Angelo would call before then and he could pawn picking up Nicho off on him.

Keeping Nicho and Darcey apart might not be so hard, after all, he thought. I will just make sure Darcey stays five miles under the Pacific in the dome.

His phone vibrated again and he saw it was Angelo.

What timing, he thought. *The universe is smiling this morning*. Brad let it ring two more times before he answered.

“Hello,” Brad said.

“Hello, Angelo here,” he said. “Where do you want to meet?” Straight, and direct to the point. No useless chatter was how Angelo liked it.

Following suit, Brad replied, “I just heard from Luis. He is sending Nicho. I have to pick him up at the airport. His flight arrives at eight-thirty, but, I won’t be topside until ten. Can you pick him up?” Brad asked.

“Sure thing. Where do you want us to meet you?” Angelo asked again.

“Let’s meet at the Starbucks near the airport. I’ll be there as soon as we dock. Say by eleven? No later than eleven-thirty,” Brad told him.

“Right. We’ll see you there,” Angelo said and hung up.

CHAPTER 5

The Quiet Surface Ripples

Lilly was up early. She hadn't slept well. She had tossed and turned, worrying about Santiago and Brad. Might as well go on into the office, she thought, brushing her hair. She knew Brad wouldn't be in before eight so she would not have to worry about calling Santiago just yet. Brad would be leaving sometime before noon, she figured. It was a two and a half hour journey to the surface so, it was possible he might leave before ten.

Lilly rinsed out the teapot, filled the kettle with water, set it on the stove to heat, and reached for the tea canister. The canister was empty. Lilly slammed the lid down on the tea canister, switched off the burner with force, and walked out the door.

"The morning is getting off to a poor start," she grumbled.

Walking into the Bajo el Mar Café, Lilly stopped at the beverage station, filled the large size disposable cup with hot tea, and added three sugars. She then carefully placed the plastic lid on top, selected a pineapple pastry from the food line, and told the cashier to put it on her tab. The cashier glared at Lilly's back as she walked away.

Lilly could feel the hostile daggers in her back, but it didn't bother her in the least. All of these people will be gone in a few weeks, she thought smugly. She could afford to ignore them now.

Lilly took the opposite way around the service ring so she could walk past Brad's office before entering hers. She had guessed right, he had not come in yet.

Opening the cabinet doors above her credenza, Lilly took out her favorite tea mug, carefully removed the plastic lid from the disposable cup, and poured the hot tea into the special mug. Placing the lid and cup in the waste bin, Lilly pulled her chair out to sit down and noticed a note from Brad on her desk. Setting her mug on the stone Thirsty Coaster, she picked up the note and sat down as she read what Brad wanted her to do—contact a friend of Darcey's, a Marti Campbell in Dallas, and make arrangements to fly her down on the corporate jet.

Lilly's frowned as she glared at the note.

"What the hell is he thinking?" she fumed. "This is not a corporate related job—the corporate jet should not be used for this," she muttered. "It is a waste of money to bring this person here and for what? To keep that damn woman company while he goes off to look for Santiago?"

She crushed the note in her hand and threw it on the desk. If it were actually possible for steam to shoot from someone's ears, then straight shots of steam would be blasting from Lilly's.

Drumming her fingers in frustration on the desktop, Lilly knew she couldn't do anything about it now. She had no choice but to follow his instructions and arrange for this woman, no matter how much it irked her, to be flown to Lima. Lilly picked up the note and ran her hand angrily across the paper to press out the wrinkles in order to read the number for Marti Campbell. Lilly heard a woman answer.

"Hello?"

"Hello. Is this Marti Campbell?" Lilly switched from anger to business in a split second, speaking in a pleasant

tone as she wadded up the note again and threw it in the trash.

“Yes,” Marti answered. She had looked at the caller ID before she answered and saw it was coming from the ORCA Corporation. Her heart skipped a beat. Maybe they had news of Brad or Darcey.

“This is Lilly Montego, I am Señor Brad Daniels’s Executive Assistant Director of the Bio Dome Project. Señor Daniels has requested me to ask you to come to Lima, Peru. It is in regards to Señorita Darcey Callahan. I believe it has something to do with her loss of memory, but he will explain it all when you arrive. The corporate jet will be ready to leave from the Dallas International Airport at eight this evening. Can you be ready by then?” Lilly quipped.

“This is about Darcey? How is she? Where is she? Can I talk to her—” Marti was bombarding Lilly with questions when Lilly interrupted her.

“I do not know. This is all of the information I have. Can you be ready to leave at eight?” Lilly cut her off. It irked her having to do this and she was not going to spend another second answering this stupid woman’s questions.

“Well, yes I can. But can’t you tell me something about Darcey now?” Marti asked, bewildered as to why this person couldn’t give her some information about Darcey.

“No, I cannot give you more information about Señorita Callahan because I do not have any more information to give you. It is not my job to give you information on Señorita Callahan. My job is to give you information about your trip,” Lilly ground out. She was losing it. She had to get herself under control. The woman on the other end was not going to get under her skin. Lilly gritted her teeth in frustration. “Please, be at the airport at seven and go to ORCA’s private entrance gate. There will be a shuttle waiting for you. Be sure to bring your passport. The shuttle will take you to the ORCA hangar where you will board the corporate jet. Do you have any questions?” Lilly finished giving her the instructions through clenched teeth. Her knuckles on the hand

gripping the receiver were turning white. She hoped the woman did not ask any more questions. Lilly had reached the end of her politeness.

“No, I don’t think so.” Marti could hear the change in the woman’s voice and wondered what her problem was. “I will be at the private gate at seven. Thank you.” *Strange woman*, Marti thought. *Wonder how she got to be Brad’s assistant.*

Lilly slammed the phone down, all of her calm reserve gone. She had reached the boiling point. This is not good, she thought.

She took a drink of her tea. It was lukewarm. Disgusted she slammed the cup down. Tea sloshed over the rim, forming amber puddles on a stack of weekly reports.

That was it! Lilly gritted her teeth and looked around for something to throw.

Then, like a switch that had been pushed to ‘off,’ her reserve kicked in and the tantrum was over. Lilly concentrated on cleaning up the spilled tea and straightening her desk.

Glancing at her watch, she saw it was already ten minutes till nine. Lilly stepped out into the corridor and walked the short distance to Brad’s office. It was still dark.

CHAPTER 6

Exploring

Darcey ate breakfast and left the dishes on a tray outside her door for someone from the Bajo to pick up later. She checked the clock. It was almost nine, so Lilly should be in the office by now. She shoved her feet into a pair of sandals, put the pager in her pocket, and left, heading for the corporate office area. Brad said she had met Lilly at Mike's, but Darcey had no memory of her—or of Mike, for that matter.

Passing Brad's office, she saw that it was dark, like the feeling she had in the pit of her stomach about this thing Brad was doing. She didn't like the idea of Brad going off on his own in search of this Santiago person, even if he did have someone else to help him. She was sure he had no idea how dangerous these people could be. She had heard stories from the other women about the men Vargas dealt with. They did not give a second thought to killing someone—man or woman—if they got in their way.

She guessed she had been lucky to have not experienced anything like that while she was in Creepy Man's custody. But, she remembered Quin had said that if Creepy Man had

ever found out what they had done, he would be hunted down and killed. She shuddered at the thought.

Looking up, she saw a woman walking toward her. The woman had a strange look on her face. Darcey wasn't sure if it was disgust or hate. Whichever it was, she felt an immediate cold chill cover her entire body. As the woman got closer, her expression changed, and Darcey could read nothing on her face. *Maybe I just imagined it because I had been thinking about the Creepy Man*, she thought.

"Hello, you must be Señorita Callahan," Lilly said, keeping her hands by her side while a cold smile played around the corners of her mouth. "I am Lilly Montego, Señor Daniels's Executive Assistant. I am sure he has already told you that I will be glad to help you with anything you might need or want to know." The words tasted like battery acid in her mouth. The last thing she wanted to do was help this woman with anything—except to help her die.

"Hi, I was just coming to find you to see if you have heard from Brad, yet," Darcey said, forcing a smile as she watched Lilly closely. Darcey was getting bad vibes from this woman and felt a prickly sensation at the base of her neck.

Good. Your intuition is beginning to kick in.

There's that voice again, Darcey thought.

Yes, I'm back and you'd better listen to me on this. This woman is up to no good.

You may be right. I feel horrible, evil vibes radiating from her, Darcey agreed.

Go with it then. Follow your instincts on this.

Lilly's eyes narrowed at the question. *What did she mean about "hearing from Brad?"* she asked herself. *Has he gone and left without telling me?*

Lilly, clinched her teeth. "I am sorry...have I heard from Brad?" she asked, trying to control her voice.

"Yes, Brad left early this morning for some meeting in Lima," Darcey told her. If Lilly didn't know about Brad's meeting with Santiago, he must have had some reason for

not telling her, so Darcey wasn't going to give her any more information.

"Oh, that." Lilly gave the impression that she knew all about it. "No, I've not heard from him, but I will let you know when I do." She smiled a cold smile that never made it past her lips. "If you will excuse me, I have some reports to file before ten. I will be in my office if you need me." She turned sharply on her heel and marched back in the direction she had come from, leaving Darcey bewildered, standing in the middle of the corridor, staring at her retreating back.

Fuming, Lilly slammed her office door. The 'bang' echoed down the corridor.

Well, this is just fine, Lilly seethed. What else can go wrong? Now, she had no way of knowing how soon Brad would try to get to Santiago. If she didn't hear from him soon, she would try calling his cell. She could not risk calling Santiago until she knew for sure what Brad's plan would be. She sat down, put her elbows on the desk, and her forehead in her hands. *What was I thinking letting that woman get under my skin? I am letting my emotions run unchecked and that is not good.*

Lilly's normal controlled exterior was beginning to crack. It was time for another dose. She got up, shut the window blinds, and locked her office door.

With her hands shaking, she pulled the gold chain from around her neck and selected one of the two keys dangling from it. Bending over she unlocked and opened her bottom desk drawer and lifted out a small, silver, metal box from its hiding place. Taking the other key, she unlocked the box. Lifting the lid, she set out two small glass vials, a syringe, a small rubber hose, and a package of sterile needles. She sat and stared at the objects on her desk, shaking her head.

This is too soon.

Sighing, she turned around to the credenza and grabbed a small bottle of rubbing alcohol and a couple of sterile cotton balls from the first aid kit. She fastened the needle in the syringe, and pushed the air out, then reached for the first vi-

al. Swiping the top with the alcohol soaked cotton ball, she plunged the needle into the vial and drew out two ccs, then repeated the procedure with the second vial. Eyeing the syringe, she laid it on the desk, wrapped the rubber hose around her arm just above the elbow, and tied it snugly. Stretching her arm out, she rubbed the bend of her arm with the soaked cotton ball. The needle slid easily into the raised vein. As soon as the dose hit the bloodstream, a calming effect washed over her. Closing her eyes, she sighed and relaxed against the back of her chair, relishing in the euphoria as the drug raced through her body.

That was way overdue, she thought. Promising herself now, she would be more careful in the future—no more mistakes. The stakes were too high. “The In-Charge Lilly” was back in control.



Well, that certainly wasn't what I had been expecting, Darcey thought. *I wonder what got her upset so much that she slammed her office door. Maybe she isn't as friendly as Brad thinks. Guess I'll just do some more exploring on my own.*

Darcey shrugged and walked on in the direction she had been going when she ran into Lilly. She passed the corporate offices. Glancing in the direction of Lilly's office, she saw the door was closed and the blinds pulled shut.

Odd.

Passing the service area, she stared through the windows of one room marveling at all of the equipment lining the walls and wondered what all of it had to do with maintaining the dome. Just as she turned to walk on, she collided with someone in jeans and cowboy boots.

“Oh, excuse me!” Darcey said, blushing. “I'm sorry I wasn't paying attention to where I was going. I hope I didn't hurt you.”

“Not at all, ma’am,” the man said, touching his old, battered Stetson. “I shouldn’t have been barrelin’ out the door like that. Didn’t hurt you, did I?” *Where have you been all my life, beautiful lady?* he thought and grinned wider.

Darcey laughed. “No harm done. I’m new and was looking at all of the equipment in there.” She turned and indicated over her shoulder the room he had just left.

He grinned as he touched his hat again. “Ty Horton, ma’am. It’d be my pleasure to show you what all that does. I’m through with my shift, so how about right now?” *Yes, indeed!* he thought.

She extended her hand. “Hi. I’m Darcey Callahan, pleased to meet you, and yes, that would be wonderful if you would like to do that,” she said, returning his smile. “I think Brad had scheduled Lilly to show me around, but she seems a bit busy at the moment.” She laughed to herself, remembering the door slamming.

Taking Darcey’s hand in his, Ty pumped it up and down. “You must be Brad’s Darcey. He said he was bringin’ you here. Glad to meet ya, ma’am,” Ty said. He released her hand. “Where ya wanna start?” he asked, his spirits slightly dampened now. *Brad, you lucky dog*, he thought. *You didn’t tell me she was a real looker. Some guys have all the luck.*

“I don’t know. This is all so new to me. Exactly what is this place? she asked, as they turned and started to walk on. “Brad has not had time to explain all of it to me in detail, yet. He has just given me the basics. Why don’t we just start here and see where we wind up?”

“Shall we?” Ty indicated that they should begin walking. “Well, this is a bio dome, designed and built by Brad. We’re five miles under the surface of the Pacific Ocean, just off the coast of Peru. When this is finished, the dome will support up to five hundred families. It will be a small city on the floor of the ocean,” he told her.

“Yes, that’s what Brad has told me, but I would like to know more. What is all this equipment for? Darcey asked,

pointing at the equipment that lined the walls of the room they were passing.

“That’s the reactor and air-filtration system room, better known as the operations room. It holds the heart and soul of the dome,” he said.

“This is all so amazing,” she said, trying to take it all in. “How long has it taken to build this?”

“This is the sixth year. Official opening of the dome will be sometime next month. However, it will take another couple of years for everything to be completed,” Ty told her, as they walked on around the service ring to the entertainment area.

Ty explained all of the things that would be available when the dome was completed as he escorted her around. It was a little past noon when they wound up back at the Bajo el Mar Café and Ty asked her to join him for lunch.

“Thanks, I would enjoy that,” she told him.

CHAPTER 7

The Plan

It was ten-fifteen when the sub docked and Brad hailed a taxi. He gave the driver the address and hit the callback button for Angelo.

“Brad here. I’m on my way. Should be there in twenty minutes or so. Did you have any trouble picking up Nicho?” he asked.

“No, the flight was on time. See you in twenty,” Angelo said and hung up.

The taxi pulled up in front of the Starbucks. Brad tossed a couple of bills over the seat toward the driver and got out. Checking the tables on the patio, having never met Angelo, he looked for Nicho. He spied them seated at a table farthest away from the street. Brad walked toward the table and gave a small recognition nod.

Nicho stood and extended his hand. That caught Brad off guard. The last time they had seen each other it had not been on the best of terms.

“It is good to see you again,” he said, shaking Brad’s hand, but he never smiled. It was not good, but Luis said he must work with this man. It was in the best interests of everyone. “I trust all is well.”

“Yes, all is well and it’s good to see you again,” Brad said, also not smiling. *This is a switch*, he thought. *Back in Morocco, he had wanted my head on a platter. What’s with the change in attitude?*

Angelo sat there, watching the sparring match, and wondered just what these two had in common besides their dislike for each other. *This should be interesting*, he thought. He just hoped, if push came to shove, he did not get caught in the crossfire.

“You must be Angelo,” Brad said, extending his hand in the direction of the man still seated. Angelo appeared to be about Brad’s age with shoulder length sandy colored hair. His blue eyes stood out in his darkly tanned face. The five o’clock shadow added to his unkempt, sinister look. Brad was glad Angelo was on his side.

Angelo shook Brad’s hand but did not stand up. “Yes, glad to meet you.”

Nicho and Brad sat down. Brad casually looked around, checking to see if anyone might be within hearing distance before speaking. “Okay, I presume that Luis has filled you in on what’s going on?” He looked from Nicho to Angelo, who both nodded. “Short and simple—we need a plan,” he said, leaning forward looking from Nicho to Angelo again. “I can design and build a bio dome to exist five miles down on the ocean floor, but this sort of thing is way out of my league.”

“Yes, Vargas explained the situation when he contacted me and asked me to do some scouting,” Angelo said. “I have checked out the location where Santiago and his friends are. They are on a ranch that was owned by Armando Martinez, who recently departed this earth.” Angelo smiled at his reference to Armando’s demise. He did not exactly know the guy but had heard the rumors going around about Armando. It appeared that his death was not a great loss to anyone. “The main house is surrounded by a security wall. There are only two entrances—the main gate, and the delivery entrance. Both have electric gates.”

“Are the gates locked all the time?” Nicho asked.

“As far as I can tell, the delivery gate is only opened when a delivery is made. The main gate, however, is left open when one of them leaves and is closed when they return. If the gate is closed, it is a pretty sure bet they are all inside.” Angelo leaned forward as he talked, drawing a layout of the gates on a napkin. “I have been watching pretty much twenty-four-seven since Luis called. The pattern has never changed.” He tapped the napkin with the pen.

“What times do they leave the ranch?” Brad asked, pulling the napkin over and studying the drawing.

“It depends. There does not seem to be any regular schedule for coming or going,” Angelo said. “However, I have only been able to watch for the past two days. In that time, they have left the ranch four different times. Best that I can determine Santiago has never left. It has always been the other two. Sometimes together, sometimes alone. That’s the best I can tell you.”

“So there is no easy way in if the gates are closed,” Nicho surmised, speaking more to himself, than the other two. “Is there any way to open the service entrance from the outside?” he asked, thinking that particular gate would be less conspicuous than storming the front one.

“Short of cutting the power, I would say no,” Angelo stated, leaning back in his chair and tapping his pen on the table. “Let me ask this—are we planning on having a discussion with these guys, or are we going to eliminate them?”

“My plan is to take ‘em out—period,” Brad said, emphatically stabbing the napkin with his finger and sending it sliding across the table toward Angelo. He looked over at Nicho. “What’s your assessment of Santiago? You’ve had dealings with him.”

“Yes, regrettably, he is the one I dealt with when I picked up Saleem. I am sorry—Darcey,” he corrected himself. “He is not to be trusted. I have no qualms about taking him out, permanently.” Nicho looked at Brad as he spoke, and their eyes met in mutual agreement.

“Angelo, you and Nicho have had more experience in dealing with this sort of thing, what do you suggest?” Brad asked, looking from one to the other.

Angelo had been sitting there thinking about that very thing. A plan was what was called for—a delaying plan, like Vargas asked him to put together. Vargas had told him to do whatever it took to keep Brad out of the mix until his elite forces got there and could take care of Carlos. Angelo was not sure why Vargas wanted this, but he was being paid to work, not to ask questions. However, he did hate that he would be missing out on the action. “If it’s the decision that we eliminate them, then I suggest a surprise attack.” Angelo looked from Brad to Nicho. He could tell that Brad was anxious to have it over with, but Nicho, on the other hand, gave nothing away. Angelo had no way of knowing if Nicho was in on Vargas’s plan or not. He gave no indication he knew anything about it in the conversation from the airport. Angelo could read him in later if necessary.

“As much as I want this finished, I can understand doing it the right way. We need something that the authorities will not question when it’s over. I don’t want anything reflecting back on ORCA,” Brad said, looking at Angelo. “What do you have in mind?”

Angelo nodded. “Agreed. I propose we watch for a couple of days and see what deliveries they get and when. It will be easy to stop one of the deliveries and take it in ourselves. The delivery most likely will be met by the kitchen or house staff. They will be easy to deal with. I have asked questions of people who knew Armando, and they have told me he only had an elderly housekeeper and one maid. There was a groundskeeper, but Armando had let him go shortly before he was murdered.”

Brad and Nicho listened as Angelo talked on.

“Since I have the only car and a residence here, we will go there and finish our conversation,” Angelo said, standing up, noticing that the patio was filling up with lunch diners. He waded up the napkin and stuffed it in his jeans pocket.

They trailed out, following Angelo to his car in the parking lot. The hot, noonday sun bounced off the silver BMW M6 Coupe, as Angelo opened the driver's side door. It was a tight fit for Brad to fold his six-foot-seven-inch frame into the backseat.

Angelo slipped in behind the steering wheel and started the engine. Nicho was the last in. He handed his briefcase to Brad then shut his door.

Angelo punched the accelerator to the floor, squealing the tires as he left the lot. The thrust pushed Nicho and Brad into the back of their seats. Nearby pedestrians stopped and gawked as they barreled down the street, tires smoking.

"Man! This baby can move," Brad said, admiringly, thinking he outta check into buying one of these.

"How long have you had this?" Nicho wanted to know. "The last time I was here, you had an Audi. This is a big step up."

"Yes, I suddenly found myself single again and decided it was time to live a little while I still could." Angelo laughed. Next to dumping that damn witch he'd been living with, the BMW had been the best freaking decision he had made in years. Twenty minutes later, they pulled into a parking lot beside Angelo's apartment building. They took the stairs two at a time instead of the elevator to the third floor. It was quicker and no one noticed them.

Angelo's apartment was modest compared to the vehicle parked outside, but comfortable. Two bedrooms meant someone would have to bunk on the couch unless they wanted to sleep together. Angelo smiled at the idea. They could flip for the bed. He laughed to himself as he pulled three cold beers from the fridge. Angelo tossed a bottle of beer to Brad, who had stepped out on to the balcony, barely missing the sliding glass door. He then handed one to Nicho, who had made himself at home, lounging in Angelo's favorite chair.

"Gentlemen, gather round the table so we can map out our strategy." Angelo motioned for them to move to the table. Reaching under the counter, he pulled out a gun. "First,

we need to see what kind of fire power we have. We do not know what we may be up against. So, it is best we are prepared,” he said, laying his MAC-10 on the table.

“I brought my Glock,” Brad said, pulling the gun from his waistband and laying it on the table.

Nicho got up and picked up his briefcase. He laid it on the table and popped it open. Inside, the newest carbon fiber body AR-15 lay nestled snugly in a bed of black foam rubber. Nicho pulled out the pieces and assembled it in a matter of seconds. He held up the gun for them to see. “Gentlemen, meet the new carbon fiber TRITech AR-15. Totally undetectable when passing through metal detectors and X-ray machines.”

Angelo reached for it and passed the gun back and forth between his hands. “What does it weigh? It is almost like holding nothing.”

“It weighs less than a pound without the clip. With the clip, somewhere around two pounds.” Nicho tossed Angelo an empty clip. “That one holds forty rounds. I never carry bullets with me. I can always pick some up wherever I’m going.”

“Well, it seems we are ready in the firepower department,” Brad said, reaching for the AR-15. “Nice gun. What’s this baby cost?” he asked, running his hand over the gun, enjoying the feel of its texture.

“Around forty-five hundred,” Nicho told him, as Brad handed the gun back to him.

“The first item of business is to get a van, something we can disguise as a service vehicle of some sort,” Angelo said. “Nicho, will you call around and see what’s available?”

“Okay, I have a connection that can get us what we want, no questions asked. I will call him when we are done here,” Nicho said, breaking the gun down and putting it back in the briefcase. He was hoping there would be some action where he could see what this baby could do. It performed like a dream on the firing range, but that was not like using it under pressure.

“We will also need a car, something less noticeable than my BMW.” Angelo laughed. “Have your contact get us one.”

Nicho pulled out his phone and called his contact. Brad stepped out on the balcony and called Lilly.

“Hello, Lilly here. How may I help you?” she asked, in her now-calm business voice.

“Hey, Lilly, Brad here,” he said. “Just wanted to check in to see how Darcey is.”

Lilly gripped the handset hard, till her knuckles turned white. *Of course, that woman would be his first concern, not the dome or me*, she thought angrily. “She’s just fine. I believe I saw Ty escorting her around just before lunch,” she said curtly, her free hand clenching and unclenching rapidly.

“That’s great. If he’s showing her around, you won’t have to disrupt your day to do it,” Brad told her. “Sounds like everything’s under control. I’ll call you later.”

Brad hung up before Lilly could respond, leaving her fuming because he had not asked one question about the dome, or her, plus, she had not been able to question him about Santiago.

Brad immediately called Ty’s cell. He wanted to tell him ‘thanks’ for taking Darcey around.

Ty looked at the caller ID before answering. “Ty here. What’s up boss?”

“Hey, just talked to Lilly and she said you were giving Darcey the grand tour.” Brad laughed. “And I wanted to tell you thanks for doing that. I haven’t had time yet.”

“Not a problem. My pleasure to help out where I can.” Ty chuckled. “We’re getting’ a bite to eat right now.” Looking at Darcey, a brief stab of envy hit him. “You want to talk to her? She’s right here.”

“Sure, if you don’t mind,” Brad said.

Ty handed the phone to Darcey. I’m going to have to get out more. It’s been too long since I’ve had female company.

She took the phone. Butterflies began in the pit of her stomach in anticipation of hearing his voice. “Hi,” she said.

“Hey, how’s it going? Has Ty been showing you around the dome?” Brad asked, her voice setting off the butterflies that exploded in his stomach. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the moment.

“Yes, we’ve been all over the place. I can’t believe all of the wonderful things that are happening here,” she told him, her heart rate increasing as she listened to the velvet tones of his voice. *What’s the matter with me? All I have to do is hear his voice, and I have no control over my emotions.*

“I’m glad you are having a wonderful time. I’ll be gone for a few days. This thing is going to take longer than expected. I told you to check with Lilly if you needed anything, but since Ty has been showing you around, I’m going to ask him to keep an eye on you. That way Lilly can keep her mind on running the dome till I get back,” Brad explained to her. “I miss you. I will be back in a few days. Let me talk to Ty, so I can tell him to watch out for you.”

“I miss you, too,” Darcey said. “Please be safe.” She handed Ty the phone. She was amazed at her instant response. She didn’t hesitate to say she missed him because she really did. It had just come naturally—like it had been a part of her for a long time. *Just go with that feeling. It’s leading you in the right direction,* that little voice whispered to her.

Ty put the phone to his ear. “Yeah, boss man?”

“Ty, will you keep an eye on her for me. This trip is going to take longer than I expected, and I’m not comfortable leaving her all alone. So, if you would do that, I’d be forever grateful,” Brad explained. He knew she would be safe, but just knowing there was someone she could turn to, if necessary, gave him peace of mind, and he could put his full attention on, Santiago.

“Sure, man. No problem. I’ll be glad to watch your little lady.” Ty laughed and winked at Darcey. Yeah, I definitely have to get out more.

“Thanks, I’ll see you in a few days then. I guess everything else is running okay?” Brad asked. He still had that nagging feeling that something else was going to happen.

“Yeah, so far everythin’s runnin’ as smooth as a new baby’s bottom. I don’t think we’ll have any more problems,” Ty assured him. “Don’t worry. My guys are on top of things. See ya when ya get back.”

“Yeah, see ya.” Brad hung up and walked back inside.

Darcey and Ty finished lunch and walked back to the operations room where Ty had promised to show her the equipment that made the dome work.

There was a low hum that she assumed was the reactor running. An electrical smell hung in the air. The room had a chill, and she guessed that was because of all of the computers and various complicated-looking control panels that lined the walls.

In the middle of the room was a rectangular opening with a railing on three sides protecting the public from falling down a stairway leading to subterranean depths below the floor.

“This first room, here, has the desks for the tech guys who make sure everything runs smoothly.” Ty motioned to the area with several unoccupied desks.

“How many tech guys work here?” she asked, noticing all the empty desks.

“Right now, there are two who look after the reactor, and the four of us, who handle the bio-filtration system. All of these desks will be full when the whole thing is up and running full force,” Ty said. He looked around to see where the other guys were. “If I can find them, I’ll introduce you to them.” He walked over to the railing and leaned over. “Hey! Are y’all hidin’ out down there?”

“Yeah!” someone shouted from the depths below the floor. “Be right up.”

Boots thudded on the stairs as someone approached.

“Well, hellooo!” the lanky young man said as he took the last two steps up the stairs in one big leap. “Who have we here?” he asked, grinning.

Ty glared at him a silent warning to behave himself. “Hey, take it easy. This is Darcey Callahan, the boss man’s lady.”

“Well, mighty pleased to meet ya, ma’am.” He grinned, touching his well-worn cowboy hat and giving a slight bow. He was bumped from behind, almost sending him face down on the floor by two other men, who had bounded up the stairs just a few seconds behind him.

Darcey blushed and laughed at the antics of the men. *Who are these guys? They remind me of the Three Stooges. But who are the Three Stooges? Did I know who they were in my past life? Was part of my memory coming back? Somehow, I knew they were three goofy guys that did crazy things. That much I am sure of.*

“Darcey, here are the other two who are in charge of the filtration system. This is Matt Wilkins, Scott Taylor, and you’ve just met Steve ‘Hot Dog’ Nelson. Gentlemen, let me introduce you to the boss man’s lady, Darcey Callahan.” Ty beamed, making a wide arc with his arm encompassing the three men, who were looking like the kid who had been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Ahem, pleased to meet you, ma’am,” they said, almost in unison, touching their hats.

“However,” Scott said, stepping forward, “I believe we’ve already met. I’m Marti’s stepbrother. We met several years ago at the wedding of my father and Marti’s mother.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t remember you. I was in a car crash and I’ve lost my memory,” she told him. “But I’m glad to meet you anyway—again.” She laughed. “I’m glad to meet all of you.”

“Come on, guys, I want to show Darcey how this thing works, and how indispensable we are to the dome.” Ty laughed, steering Darcey toward the stairway that led down

to the filtration system. “Careful, watch your step,” he cautioned.

The guys moved over to let them pass and followed as soon as Ty and Darcey had reached the bottom. They weren’t going to let Ty take all of the credit. Falling over each other racing to the bottom, they all arrived almost at the same time.

Darcey laughed to herself. *Yes, definitely the Three Stooges.*

They showed her around and told her all about the sabotage, how Matt had written the program that ‘saved the day’, and how the other guys had implemented it and cleared out the virus. All four of them were proud of their work, and not the least bit modest about it, either. She liked these guys and hoped they would be friends.



Lilly hung up the phone, fuming, after talking to Brad. She did not get a chance to question him about his plans. That left her at loose ends on when, or if, she even wanted to contact Santiago now. She had a meeting with Matt in a few minutes and had to calm down. That was going to be difficult, as she was still angry about Brad’s concern over that damn woman. Lilly closed her eyes and took several deep breaths, willing herself to relax.

She had been working on Matt for weeks, gaining his trust, taking it slow in order to learn how the hydroponics worked without causing suspicion. Now, she had all the information she needed to complete what Armando and the Eastern Alliance had messed up in their feeble attempt to delay the opening of the dome.

One of the major things that the Bio Dome Project boasted was its experimental hydroponics system that not only shortened the growing process, but increased production. The experimental integrated system allowed for a new

cycle to come online when the previous cycle was halfway through its completed cycle. It made the Bio Dome completely self-sufficient for fruits, vegetables, and grains with no lapse in the growing cycles. The variety of fruits and vegetables that was growing in the gardens was astounding. The seed and sprout stores had every known fruit or vegetable variety available either in seed form or sprouts.

Matt walked into Lilly's office with a big grin on his face. "Afternoon, Miss Lilly," he said, sitting down in one of the chairs in front of her desk. "Ready to go over to the gardens?" he asked, twirling his hat in his hands. "They will be finishing up installing the growing units and getting the solution tanks connected."

"Yes," Lilly said, as she stood up and turned off her computer. "Let's go."

It's a little early to be working on the tanks, she thought. Javier had told her the tanks would not be ready until the week before completion. Apparently, he was not as privy to the workings of the hydroponic section as he'd led her to believe. *When am I going to quit listening to him?* she scolded herself.

They walked over to the hydroponics area next to the Bajo el Mar Café. Matt used his ID card to enter. That was something else she was going to have to get. Her card would not let her in the hydro area, and what she needed to do could not be done from the outside. She would have to requisition herself an ID card for the hydro area. That was something she should have done months ago but had neglected to do it since Javier had assured her his plan would work. However, no one would be suspicious of the request coming from her.

Stepping inside, the warm, moist air felt like a tropical rainforest. It smelled fresh and clean. They walked past the workers who were putting up the remaining units, where the actual plants would be introduced.

"These will all be ready next week to put the seedlings in." Matt smiled, as they walked from one section to another.

“But isn’t that a little soon?” Lilly asked. “The actual completion date isn’t until the end of next month.” This was the first she had heard about planting early. Her plan relied on the planting not happening until the week before the scheduled completion and opening date, leaving them no time to replant after her plan went into action.

“Just a little precaution because of the attempted sabotage earlier,” Matt said, as he got down on one knee to check the connections to a solution tank. “We’ll have plenty of time to work out the bugs before the opening.” Getting up, he brushed off the knee of his jeans and walked on. “Plus, corporate wants to use the first harvest to prepare the food that will be served at the opening.” Matt didn’t notice the scowl that crossed Lilly’s face.

A change of plans may be in order, she thought.



Bam! Bam! Bam! Sounded on the apartment door. Angelo had called for pizza.

“Get that! It’s the pizza,” Angelo shouted from the bathroom to whoever was closest to the door.

Brad jumped up off the couch and headed for the door. Just out of curiosity, he looked through the peephole first. The guy on the other side of the door did not look like a pizza deliveryman. Brad backed away from the door and motioned to Nicho to come over, pointing to the door.

Bam! Bam! Bam! Again on the door.

Nicho looked through the peephole and started laughing. “That is my contact with the van.” He opened the door. “Hey, man. What took you so long?”

The contact laughed, punching Nicho on the shoulder. “This place is hard to find. Next time send me GPS coordinates.”

Nicho walked over to the couch and sat down, motioning to him to sit down. Nicho knew this guy well enough to

know he would try to gouge them on the price, so some firm negotiating was going to be needed. “What do you have for us?”

“I have got what you want for the van and the car,” the contact said, his eyes jumping between Brad and Angelo and back to Nicho. “But it is gonna run double this time. Overhead has gone up—you understand.” He paused and chuckled nervously.

Nicho was not smiling. “Okay, what is your double-figure?”

“The van and car are both untraceable, should they need to be—you understand?” He gave another nervous chuckle, looking from Nicho to Brad and Angelo. His tongue ran across his thin lips. “But for you, I have a special deal, both for ten grand.” A nervous smile played around his mouth.

“A special deal, eh?” Nicho slapped him on the shoulder. “Well, how did we get so lucky? And only ten grand?” he said, sarcastically with a hint of a threat underlying the remark. He turned and winked at Brad and Angelo.

“Ummm, Yeah. Well, I could go a little lower, take a little less on my end, you know,” the contact said, running his finger around the inside of the neck of his shirt collar.

Nicho smiled big, showing his teeth. “Well, that is real nice of you. Just how much less?”

“I could go as low as eight.” The contact waited, his eyes flipping from one to the other. A droplet of sweat trickled down the side of his face.

Nicho’s eyes narrowed and the friendly pretense disappeared. “Well, that is mighty nice of you. Why don’t we call it four, and we have a deal?”

“Aw, come on, man. I have to make something out of this. You are leaving me no room for profit here,” the contact wheedled. He fidgeted, adjusting his position on the sofa several times.

Nicho laughed. “Hey, that sounds like a personal problem to me. Tell your man to take less. You will get your

money when we pick them up. Where are the vehicles?" He stood up and offered him his hand.

"I will call you with the address," the contact said, reluctantly taking Nicho's hand. *Shit, I will have to pay Joe the agreed price for the two vehicles and just eat the damn loss,* he grumbled inwardly.

Angelo opened the door just as the pizza deliveryman was ready to knock. Nicho slapped his contact on the back and pushed him out the door. The deliveryman stepped aside to let him stumble past, looking at Angelo in confusion.

"You ordered a pizza?" the pizza delivery guy asked, looking at the receipt taped to the box's lid, checking the address.

"Yeah. How much?" Angelo pulled his wallet out and handed the man the money.

CHAPTER 8

Darcey Meets Marti—Again

Marti fumed about the phone conversation she'd had with Lilly as she packed her small case. That woman had a real problem. For the life of her, Marti couldn't see why Brad had ever made her his executive assistant. She would suggest to Brad that he pay for a course in people skills for her.

Sorting through her closet, Marti picked out several outfits before she finally settled on four. She neatly folded the outfits and put them in the case on top of her shoe bag, beside her makeup bag. Marti zipped the case shut and set it by the front door.

Earlier, Marti had called and left messages for all of the girls and then called her dad. He was excited that Darcey had been found and that she was okay in spite of her memory loss. He volunteered to drive Marti to the airport and told her not to worry about how long she might be gone. He had everything under control at the store.

Ashley called back around four. She had been at the jewelry market all day and was exhausted, but with the news about Darcey, she felt revitalized. She would have to plan a party to celebrate as soon as they could get Darcey home.

“Are you sure about it? They’ve actually found Darcey?” Ashley asked, enthusiastically.

“Yes, Brad’s executive assistant called and said she’s fine, but has lost her memory. They are flying me down to see her. I leave tonight,” Marti told her.

“This is wonderful news. Have you called everyone else?” Ashley asked. “If you haven’t I can do it.”

“Yes, I’ve called everyone, but so far you are the only one to return my call,” Marti told her. “But, it’s just a little after four so they’re probably not off work yet. Would you mind checking to make sure everyone knows, just in case they don’t return my call before I leave?”

“Sure, no problem. What time are you leaving?” Ashley asked.

“They are flying me down on the corporate jet. I have to be there by seven, but won’t take off until eight,” Marti explained. “It’s an eight-hour flight, so I should be getting there in time for breakfast.”

“Wow! The corporate jet! How cool is that?” Ashley said. “I sure wish I was going with you. Be sure to tell Darcey ‘Hi!’ for me.”

“Yes, I’ll tell her all of you have been worried and that you’re all glad she’s okay,” Marti said. “I’ll call you when I get there.” She hung up and called her dad. “Dad, I’ve got everything ready. Do you want me to meet you at the store?” Since her dad was taking her to the airport, it didn’t matter where she left her car.

“Come on down to the store. It’s closer to the airport from here, and you can put your car in the warehouse.”

The drive to the store took a little longer than she expected because of the road construction on the freeway. Pulling into her parking space at the store, she looked at her watch. They still had time to grab something to eat before she had to be at the airport.

Marti grabbed her purse and went inside to get her dad. He was with a customer, so she waited behind the counter, thumbing through the latest sportswear catalogs that had ar-

rived, trying not to worry about her best friend who probably wouldn't know her at all. What would she do if she couldn't help Darcey remember? *Silly girl! Think positive. I will help her remember—no doubt about it*, Marty thought optimistically.

Her dad rang up the purchase, thanked the customer for their business, turned around, and leaned against the counter with his arms folded. He smiled at her. "You all packed and ready?"

"Yeah." Marti smiled back. "Come on. We have time to grab a bite before we have to leave for the airport," she said, walking toward the automatic doors. "You can drive. I'll pull mine around to the warehouse. Have someone open the door for me," she yelled over her shoulder, as the doors slid closed.

They arrived at the airport around six-thirty but had difficulty in locating ORCA's private gate. After asking several of the airport personnel, they found a security guard who directed them to ORCA's entrance. They drove to the end of the terminal and found the road. Once they turned on the road, Marti could see the gate with a sign *ORCA Corp. Authorized Personnel Only* on the fence.

Marti's dad stopped the car in front the gate since the man on the other side showed no indication that he was going to open it for him to drive through. He helped Marti with her bag, gave her a hug, and kissed her forehead. "Take care and you call me as soon as you get there. You hear?"

"Yes, I'll call as soon as the plane lands," Marti told him. "Don't worry. Everything's going to be okay." She gave him a final hug and walked up to the gate. The man opened it just enough for her to walk through.

"¡Hola! Señorita Campbell, I presume?" the man asked. "I am your flight attendant. If you will follow me, *por favor?*"

Marti smiled, looking around for the shuttle that was supposed to be there. "Yes, that's me."

“It’s just a short walk to the plane.” The attendant took her bag from her hand and started down the tarmac.

Marti turned back one more time to wave at her dad before she took off hurrying after the man.

The attendant, who was several steps in front of Marti, glanced back over his shoulder to make sure she was following. He slowed his pace so she could catch up.

“I am sorry,” he apologized. “I have a tendency to walk faster than most people.”

“Not a problem,” Marti said with a laugh, falling into step beside him. “It’s been a long day for me and I’m running a little slow.”

They boarded the plane and were in the air by eight-o-one. Marti was the only passenger. The crew consisted of the pilot, co-pilot, and the attendant who had collected her at the gate.

“*Señorita*, the galley is open if you are hungry or thirsty,” the attendant said as he paused by her seat before continuing on his way to the front of the plane.

“No, thank you,” Marti said, “I’ve already eaten.” She smiled, unbuckling her seat belt to get more comfortable. “I would like some magazines if you have any, I forgot to pack something.”

“Certainly,” the attendant said and continued down the aisle to the front of the plane.

He disappeared behind the curtain at the end of the aisle. Several minutes later he reappeared carrying a stack of magazines.

“I did not know what you would like, so I brought several.” He placed them on the table in front of her. “Let me know if you need anything else, *por favor*.”

“Thank you. These will be plenty.” Marti picked up the *People Magazine* and started thumbing through it. She really didn’t want anything to read, but just something to keep her hands busy, and maybe occupy her thoughts. She worried about Darcey. What if she couldn’t help her to remember? Could they still be friends? Would Darcey still want to be

friends? It was all so unpredictable. It would break Marti's heart if she couldn't pull this off.

Somewhere around midnight, Marti turned off her overhead light, reclined her seat, and drifted off still worried about Darcey. It was what she did best—worry.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee pulled Marti back from dreamland. When she opened her eyes, it was still dark outside the plane's window. The only light was the sliver of light that shown between the curtain and the wall at the end of the aisle. Marti put her seat in its upright position and reached up to turn on her overhead light.

"Hello?" Marti called, watching the curtain. "I sure could use some of that coffee."

A few minutes later, the attendant pushed the curtain aside, and Marti could see there was a small galley behind him. He came toward her carrying a tray with a cup of coffee, several packets of sugar, three small plastic containers of creamer, and two fresh-baked scones.

"This is super!" Marti said, moving the magazines aside so he could place the tray on the table. "The scones smell wonderful. Thank you." She looked up at the attendant, but he had already started back toward the galley.

Certainly doesn't talk much. She took a sip of the coffee. It was hot and rich. She looked at her watch. It was three twenty-nine. We should be landing in about thirty minutes. Finishing her coffee and a scone, Marti stood up and stretched. Wondering where the attendant was, she walked toward the galley just as he emerged from the cockpit area carrying a large mug.

"I'm looking for the restroom. I would like to freshen up before we land," Marti inquired.

"The restroom is in the rear of the plane." He pointed toward the back of the plane and turned to fill the mug with coffee. He didn't say any more, just opened the door and re-entered the cockpit.

Marti barely made it back to her seat before the pilot turned on the seatbelt sign. She pulled the seatbelt across her

lap and slipped the buckle in place, locking it as the landing gear's motor whirred into action and the wheels locked in place, vibrating the cabin floor.

From the plane's window, Marti watched as the plane came to a standstill in front of a large hangar, wondering if Darcey would be there to meet her. *No, probably not*, she thought. *Why would she come to meet someone she didn't know?*

Emerging from the cockpit the attendant opened the plane's door, motioning to Marti that she could deplane when she had collected her things.

"There is a limo waiting below that will take you to the dock where you will board the submarine. The sub will then take you to the dome to meet your friend," he said as a matter of fact. He looked at Marti with raised eyebrows as her eyes flew open wide and her mouth dropped open.

"Submarine?" she squeaked. "What submarine? Submarine? Like ocean type submarine?" Her voice was getting louder.

"Yes. That's how you get to the dome where your friend is. I presumed you had been told about this." He sounded aggravated.

"No!" she practically shouted. "No one said anything about a submarine or a dome or anything even close to that."

Por favor. Do not stress over this. It is a simple matter of taking the sub to the dome. It is perfectly safe," he said, exasperated. Reaching down he took her case from her clenched, white-knuckled fist. In that moment, he made a split-second decision to accompany her. They couldn't have a hysterical female on board the sub. "I will be going with you. It is all completely safe, I assure you." He motioned again for a shocked Marti to precede him down the stairs to the waiting limo.

Forty minutes later, Marti looked out the limo's window and saw the top of a submarine as they pulled up to the dock. She was surprised at the size. What she had in mind was a small two-man sub used for exploring the ocean, not this

full-sized, military looking submarine. Two men were standing on the dock beside the gangplank. One stood perfectly still while the other kept checking his watch every few seconds. She guessed he was the one in charge.

Marti and the attendant emerged from the limo to be greeted by a very impatient sub captain.

“You are running behind time,” the captain said, sternly looking at the attendant. “Let’s get her on board.” The captain motioned to the other man to gather the two pieces of luggage the limo driver had set at the end of the gangplank and follow them into the sub.

The attendant just nodded and took Marti’s arm, escorting her up the gangplank and to the open hatch on the top of the sub.

Thank goodness, I wore slacks, Marti thought as she peered down the hatch, seeing a ladder disappearing in the interior of the sub.

“I will go first,” the attendant said. “I will help you down the ladder. It is very easy.” He was smiling to himself as a wayward thought drifted through his mind—*too bad she is wearing slacks.*

The attendant reached the bottom of the ladder. “Okay, you can start down,” he hollered up.

The captain assisted her until she had her feet firmly on the top rung. The rungs were wider than she had expected and it was easy to step down from one to the next until she reached the bottom. The first mate with the luggage descended next, followed by the captain who secured the hatch before he completed his trip down the ladder.

“Please take our guest to the galley where breakfast is being served,” the captain instructed the attendant. The captain turned to address Marti. “Our trip to the dome will take approximately two and a half hours. Ask Thomas here if you need anything, *por favor.*” With that, the captain turned and walked away.

“So you are Thomas?” Marti asked, wondering why he hadn’t introduced himself before this.

“Yes,” he said simply and motioned for her to follow him.

Strange man, Marti thought as she followed him down the narrow passageway. She had never been claustrophobic, but too much time spent in this could change all of that. She took a deep breath, just to make sure there was enough air, and inhaled the delicious aroma of sausage and eggs floating out of the galley doorway.



Refilling her mug from the coffee urn, Marti sat back down at the table where Thomas was finishing his third cup of coffee.

She had tried several times to engage him in conversation, but only succeeded in getting single syllable answers or grunts. This was very frustrating for someone who loved to talk.

“Is there a restroom on this thing?” she asked, slightly aggravated at the cold shoulder she was getting from Thomas.

“Yes, it is called ‘the head.’ I will show you the way.”

He got up and walked to the door. He waited, stone-faced, for Marti to set her cup down and follow. He could do without this chatty female and was beginning to have second thoughts about having had accompanied her. Thomas preferred the quiet and avoided people whenever possible. Unfortunately, it was unavoidable this time.

Two and a half hours later, the horn sounded, signaling the sub had reached the dome. Marti quickly ascended the ladder into fresh air and what looked like sunlight, but soon realized it wasn't. She had taken three deep breaths before she stepped out onto the gangway. The air tasted fresh and sweet with a little salty tang mixed in.

Thomas followed her down the gangway with her cases. “This way, *por favor*,” he said, indicating the corridor lead-

ing away from the docking area. “We will go this way to find your friend.” Walking a few yards down the corridor, he stopped and motioned for her to get in a golf-cart like vehicle. “We will take the shuttle to your friend’s quarters. It is too far to walk,” he said, flipping the switch. The electric motor jerked to life and they drove off.

Marti wasn’t sure, but she felt they were traveling up an incline the farther they went along the corridor, as if it was spiraling upward. Everything was monotone gray, so it was hard to distinguish floor from walls or from ceiling.

Spooky.

Some twenty minutes later, Thomas stopped the shuttle in front of what he told Marti was her friend’s quarters. Marti jumped out and picked up her cases from the back. Thomas had already knocked once on the door when she stopped beside him. He waited a couple of minutes and knocked again.

From somewhere behind the door, came a faint muffled, “Just a minute, I’m coming.”

The door slid open, and Darcey stared, bewildered, at the two people standing there. She didn’t know either one.

“Darcey!” Marti let out a joyous yell and bounded into Darcey, wrapping her arms around her, and hugging her tight. Darcey staggered backward a few steps from the force of Marti’s overly exuberant greeting.

“Oof!” Darcey expelled her breath as the woman slammed into her. “I’m sorry, but who are you?” she asked, pulling the woman’s arms from around her and trying to regain her balance.

“Oh, Darcey, it’s me, Marti!” she said and reached to hug her again.

Darcey took a step backward. “I’m sorry, you’ll have to excuse me. But I don’t know you.” She looked past Marti to the man still standing outside the door. “Am I supposed to know you, too?” she asked, not sure what to expect now.

“No, I just transported your friend here. If everything is all right, I will go now,” Thomas said. He turned abruptly,

jumped into the shuttle, flipped the switch, and took off down the corridor.

Darcey turned and looked at the woman who said she was Marti—the Marti who Brad had said was her best friend. *I have no idea who this woman is, but that's no reason to be rude*, she thought. “Please, come in,” she said. “I am truly sorry, but I don't know you. You will have to tell me how we know each other.”

Marti turned and smiled at Darcey as she walked past her. Darcey closed and locked the door. She didn't know why she locked it. It was just a feeling she'd had ever since her run in with Lilly yesterday.

“Sure thing, girlfriend. Where do you want me to start?” Upbeat and smiling, as always, Marti looked around the room for the best place to sit. She decided on the sofa. Sitting down, she patted the seat next to her, indicating that Darcey should sit beside her, but Darcey had already headed for the kitchen.

“How about some breakfast? Coffee maybe?” Darcey walked into the kitchen, opened the fridge, and pulled out some ham and a couple of eggs. “I can fix us an omelet. Do you like omelets?” she asked, looking around the fridge's door at Marti.

“Yes, but don't bother on my account. I had breakfast on the sub, but I could do with another cup of coffee,” Marty told her, leaving the sofa to walk over and sit on one of the bar stools. “Please, don't go to any trouble for me.”

“No trouble, I haven't had breakfast, so making extra won't be a problem.” Darcey smiled, set a cup in front of Marti, and placed the coffee pot on a trivet within Marti's reach. “Now tell me all about you and me,” she said, as she started preparing her breakfast.

Marti proceeded to tell Darcey all about their relationship from the beginning. About grade school, college, graduation, jobs, friends, and family. Marti told her about how her parents had died in a head-on crash on their way back from Abilene. How her dad's family had shuffled her from family

member to family member until her dad's brother, Jack, had taken her in and raised her. Marti told her that there wasn't any family left on her mother's side, and she had no brothers or sisters. But Marti and her dad thought of Darcey as family and that Marti loved her like the sister she always wanted.

Marti then elaborated on how Darcey had met Brad and how much they had meant to each other. How they spent every moment together when he was back in Dallas from the job in Peru, about what happened when Brad left, and how she had almost gone to pieces trying to find him. And, last, how much trouble she had caused by going off without telling anyone what she had planned. The minutes flew as they talked, Darcey asking questions—Marti providing the answers. It was mid-morning before Darcey looked at the clock.

"Oh, crap! I forgot about the time." She just realized she was still in her pajamas and was supposed to meet Ty at eleven for another sightseeing venture. "Excuse me while I get dressed. I'll be right back." She smiled, jumping off the barstool and jogging to the bedroom. *Marti has given me so much to think about. I just wish I could remember anything, just one little thing that will make sense.*

I told you, don't worry about it. Things will come back when you least expect it, that tiny voice told her. *Just let it happen.*

She threw on her slacks and a tee, then, grabbed her sandals, slipping them on as she walked back into the living room. Marti was still sitting at the counter.

"Here, I'll put your case in the bedroom," Darcey said, picking it up. "I don't have a spare bedroom, but I believe the sofa makes into a bed." She laughed, something about this reminded her of a distant memory of a slumber party.

You see? I told you things would start coming back. Just give it time, the little voice said.

"I'm supposed to meet a friend of Brad's who is going to show me more of the dome," she told Marti. "Slip your

shoes back on and let's go. I'm sure you're curious about this place, too."

Marti cocked her head and looked at Darcey with questioning eyes. "Yes, just precisely where are we? And that sub. It's just crazy!"

"We're five miles below the Pacific Ocean, off the coast of Peru." Darcey laughed at Marti's expression. She could only imagine that she must have looked a lot like Marti when Brad had explained to her about the dome and sub.

Marti blinked then stared. "You-have-got-to-be-kidding—five miles?"

"Yes, five miles, can you believe it?" Darcey started for the door. "Come on, let's go." She was feeling elated for the first time in months.

They talked as they walked over to meet Ty, who had been pacing in front of the Bajo el Mar Café, waiting. Ty spotted them as they rounded the corner from the corridor.

Who have we here? he wondered, smiling as Darcey and Marti approached.

Ty touched his hat and gave them a sideways grin. "Well, well, well! Two beautiful ladies. How did this old cowboy get so lucky?"

"Ty, this is Marti Campbell, Marti this is Ty Horton," Darcey said, introducing them.

She could see Ty was already smitten with Marti and had a feeling that it was mutual. *We will have to have some "girl talk" later*, she mused, making a mental note to herself. *Girl talk? Where had that come from? Is it possible that was something we had shared before? I'll think about this later...*

Darcey made a wide arc with her arm to indicate the entire dome. "Ty and his buddies keep all of this going."

Ty laughed. He turned and indicated for them to walk with him to the shuttle parking lot. "Well, come on, ladies. I'll get us a shuttle, and we'll go sightseeing."

They climbed in. Darcey let Marti sit in the front seat with Ty and noticed that neither one objected.

“Want to stop by the operations room again? Marti might like to see where I work,” Ty asked, but he was already heading in that direction and had almost reached the front of the operations room before he finished the question. “Well, since we’re already here, why don’t we take a look around inside?” he drawled, laughing.

Marti smiled sweetly at him. “I’d love to see where you work.”

“Well, right this way, ladies.” Ty jumped out of the shuttle and helped them down. Stepping over to the operations doom door, he opened it to allow the women to enter first.

CHAPTER 9

Matt's ID Goes Missing

The message light on Lilly's phone was blinking when she set the Styrofoam cup of tea down on the desk. Reaching up in the cupboard, she took her favorite tea mug out and sat it on the stone Thirsty Coaster on her desk before punching the message playback button. As the message played back, she removed the plastic lid from the Styrofoam cup and poured the steaming tea into her mug.

The voice on the message started, "Lilly, I am sorry but, due to the recent attempts at sabotage, plus Armando's murder, Corporate will no longer issue new ID cards until after the official opening of the dome. I suggest if you need access to the hydroponic section, that you have Matt assist you. I am sorry, but there will not be any new cards issued until after the opening."

Lilly still had the foam cup in her hand. She crushed it and flung it as hard as she could. Little drops of tea immediately went spinning out as it flew silently through the air and landed on the seat of the chair in front of the desk. Her jaw tightened. That was not at all what she had expected to hear. Lilly knew that security had been tightened but had not expected to have the ID cards curtailed as well. She had not

been topside since Armando's murder, and Brad had not mentioned anything about it. Of course, his head had been up his butt since he brought that damn woman here. Now, she had no choice but to try to get Matt's ID card. Lilly stood there, hands clenched into tight little fists, grinding her teeth.

Taking several deep breaths and relaxing her hands, she looked up just as the shuttle with Ty and a couple of women went by her office window. She recognized the one in the back—it was that damn woman. Her jaw tightened. The other must be the stupid woman from Dallas. Lilly stepped to the door to see where they were headed. The shuttle stopped in front of the operations room. Ty, and the two women got out and went inside.

Wondering what they were up to, Lilly casually strolled from her office to the operations room and peered through the window before entering. "Hello everyone," she called, as pleasant as was possible, considering what she was thinking at the moment.

"Well, hello there!" Ty touched the brim of his hat and gave her a big Texas grin. "You're just in time for the grand tour. I'm going to show these two beautiful ladies what goes on around here."

"Thank you, but I've already seen it all many times." Lilly looked at Ty and then at the women, "I'm sure you will find this all very interesting. Will Matt be joining you?" she asked, casually, looking back at Ty.

"I imagine he will and probably Scott and Hot Dog as well." Ty grinned again. "It's been quite a while since these old cowboys have had two such lovely ladies to escort around. Would you like to join us for lunch? We'll probably wind up back there around one or so," he asked, out of politeness. He knew Lilly was Brad's second in command, but, for the life of him, he couldn't understand why. Lilly grated on his nerves.

"Thank you, but no. I have reports to get out," Lilly said, barely able to restrain herself from grinning over her exceptionally good luck. She knew exactly where Matt kept

his hydroponics ID card. And, now, learning that Matt would be out for the morning, she knew exactly what she would do. “Well, enjoy your tour, I have work to do.” She actually smiled as she turned and walked out into the corridor. In fact, she smiled all the way back to her office.

Darcey watched as Lilly left. *That is one weird woman. I'll have to mention to Brad about how she has been acting,* she thought. Turning around, Darcey saw Ty take Marti by the arm and lead her over to the control panels, where he started explaining how and what part of the reactor it controlled. Then he explained how it was his job to make sure everything ran smoothly. She smiled to herself at how he conveniently left out mentioning Matt, Scott, or Hot Dog.

She watched Marti's eyes glaze over, trying to take in all he was saying. She knew what Marti was feeling, having experienced the tour just yesterday, but under the watchful eyes of all the guys who made sure she knew just how important each one's job was.

Thudding footsteps raced up the stairs from down below and two cowboy hats appeared simultaneously at the top of the stairs.

“See, I told you Darcey was here.” Hot Dog punched Matt in the arm. “And look, she's brought a friend.”

“Howdy, ma'am,” Hot Dog said, touching the brim of his hat and turning to Ty. “How 'bout an introduction, man?”

“Sure thing,” Ty said, clearing his throat. “This is Marti Campbell, Darcey's friend from Dallas.” He made a big sweeping gesture in Marti's direction. “Marti, these two crazy dudes here, are Matt Wilkins and Steve 'Hot Dog' Nelson. Along with me, and Scott Taylor, who should be here shortly, we are the resident geeks,” he said smugly.

Marti smiled at them. “Nice meeting you guys.” *It's a regular smorgasbord of hunks here,* she thought as she looked over at Darcey and winked. She was definitely going to call the girls back home and tell them all about this.

Another shuttle pulled up outside the operations room door. Scott jumped out and swaggered in, reading the papers on the clipboard in his hand.

“I’ve finished the inventory in the—” He looked up to see everyone looking at him, and then he noticed the new face and grinned from ear to ear. “Well, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?” he said, taking his hat off and looking at Marti, who was looking at him, astonished.

“Oh my gosh!” Marti exclaimed, her eyes wide in amazement. “Scotty! I didn’t make the connection when Ty mentioned your name. Oh my gosh! This is great!” She ran over and threw her arms around him.

Everyone else stood staring at them with wide eyes.

His arms around her waist, Scott picked her up and swung her around, laughing. Putting her down, they hugged again and turned to look at four astonished and questioning faces.

“This is my step-brother,” Marti said, smiling, still holding onto Scott’s hand. “We haven’t seen each other for over six years. Not since my mom and his father got married and moved to Wyoming.”

“Well, I’ll be,” Ty said. “I forgot you mentioned that when you first met Darcey. Talk about a small world.”

Darcey stood there, watching it all unfold, and couldn’t remember having ever met either Marti or Scott. She was envious of the easy camaraderie between them. She barely had someone she could remember from two months ago, let alone someone from six years ago.

Will this nightmare ever be over? Salty tears stung behind her eyelids.

You’re stressing again—stop it! And, quit feeling sorry for yourself. You can handle this, you know you can. Her little voice floated to the front, poked her, and reminded her this was no time for a pity party.

Stuffing her disappointment down, she inhaled and put on a brave face. “Okay, guys, let’s get this show on the road,” she said, walking over and poking Ty on the arm. “At

this rate, it will be noon before we get out of here.” She laughed, heading for the door.



Lilly entered her office, smiling. Yes, this is going to work out all right, after all, she thought.

She would watch from her doorway to see when they left and then slip in the operations room and take Matt’s ID for the hydroponic area. Lilly stepped over to the door and leaned out, just enough, to be able to see when they left.

Gleefully, she watched as they all piled into the shuttle. Laughing and talking, they drove off. Quickly she stepped out into the corridor and looked around. No one took notice of her, so she started walking, with measured steps, in the direction of the operations room. She kept reminding herself to walk in her normal manner, even though she wanted to run as fast as she could to get there, as the thrill of what she was about to do pumped through her body.

She carefully stepped into the operations room, surveying the area and checking for anyone who might still be there. Seeing no one, she headed straight for Matt’s desk. Sitting down in his chair, she slowly pulled out the drawer where Matt kept all things relating to the hydroponic systems, including his hydroponic ID card. It slid open easily. Inside were several bulging file folders, manuals on the solution tanks and planting stands, several hydro related magazines, and numerous reports.

Lilly grunted at the weight of the file folders and magazines as she lifted them out of the drawer and placed them on the desktop. Peering back into the drawer, she saw Matt’s well-worn, black leather wallet and picked it up. It fell open, revealing several ID cards, allowing access to various parts of the dome.

Matt is such a creature of habit. She chuckled as she lifted his Hydroponic ID card out of its pocket. Pity, he thought

he was so clever not to carry his wallet around. Thank you, Matt, for being so cautious.

She replaced the wallet exactly where it had been, then the magazines and file folders in the position she had found them, and pushed the drawer shut. Picking up the card, she gave it a small kiss before putting it in her pocket. Lilly's step was light. She smiled all the way back to her office.

Upon reaching her office, Lilly took the card out of her pocket and placed it in the drawer with her little metal box. The drawer was a safe hiding place.

Lilly sat at her desk feeling quite smug about her little adventure that had gone so well. Then she spied the daily reports sitting in a neat pile on the corner of her desk and decided she had better call Brad and give him the report to keep up appearances. She was sure he would be worrying why she hadn't called. She picked up the phone and called his cell.

CHAPTER 10

The Plan—Phase Two

Carlos watched Quin and Ricardo as they neared the gate. He pushed the button. The gate swung open. They were going to the bank to withdraw the money Vargas had finally put into his account for that American woman.

Carlos had been afraid he was never going to see it, since Vargas had cut all ties and told him to never darken his door again. Then this morning out of the blue, his bank had notified him the money had been deposited into his account.

After arranging with the bank, Carlos had sent Quin to withdraw part of the money. He needed a little folding money in his pocket. His funds were running low, and he still had not found another buyer for his merchandise. Not that he had any at the moment, but looking for new merchandise had been unexpectedly curtailed when he had had a run-in with some of Vargas's men last week. Several broken ribs and a concussion had laid Carlos up for the past week, so he had left it up to Quin and Ricardo to do the scouting. So far, they had not found anything that was worth his time.

Carlos was getting restless and needed some fun. Pulling out his little black book, he thumbed through the pages, stopping at the one with a big cherry red lipstick kiss.

Ah, yes Crystal. He sighed, remembering her sweet, innocent little sister who had garnered him a handsome penny. He chuckled, thinking how easy it had been to take her right from under Crystal's nose. Crystal had been frantic when she found her sister missing and had come to him for help in looking for her.

Stupid woman. If Crystal hadn't been such a tyrant, her sister would not have run off, making it so easy for me.

Crystal was a transplant from Los Angeles, and her business had been doing very well here. Well enough that she had brought her little sister here after their parents had died in a skiing accident in Colorado. Pulling his phone out of his pocket, Carlos punched in Crystal's number.

"Crystal, Carlos here. I need a party..." Carlos arranged with Crystal for a catered affair for Friday evening.



Brad lost the toss for the bed and stretched out on the couch as best he could, with the arm of the couch hitting him mid-calf. His fully extended six-foot-seven-inch frame was not meant to fit between the arms of a five-foot couch. Finally, he pulled the cushions off, placed them on the floor, and fell asleep.

It was a little after seven in the morning when Nicho's contact called back with information on where to pick up the van and the car. Angelo happened to be familiar with the area but he wasn't comfortable going without some protection. Holding open a black leather bag, he dropped the loaded MAC-10 in, along with a couple of extra clips. Brad slipped his Glock into his waistband and an extra clip in his pocket.

Angelo had handed the bag to Brad in the backseat before he slid in behind the wheel. He estimated it was an hour drive to the address Nicho's friend had given them.

An hour and a half later, Angelo found the address. Slowing down and looking for the entrance, they drove past a dilapidated wooden privacy fence. It stood maybe ten feet high and had once been painted a brilliant blue, but the paint had peeled and faded by the sun to a dusty gray blue. A rusted *Keep Out* sign hung lopsided from the heavy rusty chain that had been strung across an opening in the fence. Angelo pulled the car up to the chain. Nicho hopped out, unhooked the chain from a nail that had been bent upward to hold it, and let it fall to the ground. Angelo slowly drove the BMW through the opening, the tires crunching the cinders covering the lane as it moved forward in the middle of a graveyard of discarded vehicles. Coming to a halt in front of a shack with boarded up windows and rusted tin corrugated siding, Angelo decided it must be what served as the office for the yard.

The men looked around cautiously. In the distance, they could hear dogs barking and the sound was getting louder as the dogs moved closer. Angelo reached his arm across the back of the seat, and Brad placed the bag's strap in his open hand. Angelo slipped the strap over his shoulder, put his hand inside the bag, and took the MAC-10 off safety before slowly opening his door. Nicho stepped out on the other side, moving so Brad could unfold himself from the backseat. Brad moved the Glock from his waistband to his jacket pocket as he stood up, but stayed behind the door—just in case.

Three enormous Rottweiler's, with ears laid back and teeth bared, came barreling out from between two stacks of flattened and rusting vehicles. They were barking viciously and were headed straight for the BMW, their big paws kicking up loose cinders, sending them flying out behind them.

"¡Parada!" Nicho's contact came running from the shack, yelling at the dogs. "¡Parada!"

The dogs slid to a halt in the loose cinders, changed directions, and, with their tongues lolling out, loped over to the shack where Nicho's contact reached down and playfully rubbed them behind the ears. "Sorry about that." The contact grinned, but he really wasn't sorry. He was still pissed off about losing money on the deal and would have been damn glad if he could have let them loose to tear them a new asshole. He grinned bigger. "I had intended to have them penned up before you got here."

"Just keep them out of the way," Brad said, his hand still in his jacket pocket, "and it will be fine."

Nicho walked out from behind the BMW's door and headed toward the shack. Brad and Angelo followed—Angelo's hand still inside the bag. He wouldn't think twice about putting the shittin' dogs down.

"Where are the vehicles?" Nicho asked, looking around.

"They are back here." The contact motioned for them to follow and started walking around to the back of the shack.

Nicho followed right behind him, Brad hung back, watching over his shoulder, and Angelo's finger moved to the trigger. The dogs sat on their haunches at the edge of the shack, watching as the men made their way to the back area.

Rounding the corner, they saw an older model, white GMC cargo van, and a more recent black Volvo sedan. Both vehicles appeared to be in decent shape on the outside.

Nicho opened the driver's door of the van and looked inside. Stale beer, cigarette smoke, old pine air freshener, and an odor he couldn't quite name, hit him in the face. The driver's seat was pretty well worn, some springs showed through the faded and worn gray cloth on the side closest to the door, but the seat itself was still serviceable. The passenger's seat was in slightly better condition.

Nicho opened the back doors, letting fresh air flow through. He could see the original carpet had been replaced with pieces of now dirty and stained orange shag carpet. The same carpet pieces had been glued to the sidewalls and ceiling as well. In spite of the fresh air flow, the smells were

stronger here and mixed with other unidentifiable odors, causing his eyes to burn.

He walked around to the driver's side and held out his hand for the key. The engine turned over on the first try and purred quietly. "This will do," he said, turning off the engine, and wondered how long it would take to fumigate it.

Brad stuck his head in and wrinkled his nose. "We'll have to do something about the smell. I'm not sitting eight hours in there with that smell." He walked away rubbing his eyes and coughing.

"Not to worry," Angelo remarked, and followed Nicho over to the Volvo. "I have a friend who knows how to take care of that kind of thing."

The Volvo was in decent shape on the inside as well as the outside. The leather seats were cracked and worn from use and age, but otherwise okay. The interior smelled of old carpet, dust, stale cigarette smoke, and sweat.

Nicho opened the door to the Volvo and extended his hand for the key. The leather seat crackled, as he sat down and put the key in the ignition. It turned over. The engine of the Volvo ran as smoothly as the van. "These will do fine," He turned and smiled at his contact, who looked relieved. "I will get you the money."

They turned and headed back to the front of the shack. Angelo still had his finger on the trigger as he watched the dogs stand and wag their tails as the contact approached. Nicho caught Brad's eye and motioned for him to open the BMW's trunk. Inside, he found a briefcase. Brad carried the case over and set it down in front of Nicho's contact. The dogs growled, watching Brad walk away, then turned and immediately began sniffing out the briefcase.

"It is all there—the amount we agreed on." Nicho pointed to the briefcase then turned to Brad. "Flip you for the van?" He laughed, as he tossed the Volvo's keys to Brad.

"Thanks, man." Brad gave him a sideways grin. "I don't think I could have made it in there."

Both men laughed.

Maybe Nicho isn't such a bad guy, after all, Brad thought.

Angelo waited till both men had started the vehicles before he placed the leather bag on the passenger seat and slid in behind the BMW's wheel, but keeping the safety off.

They dropped the vehicles off at Angelo's friend who assured them he could make the van smell like new.

CHAPTER 11

Crystal's Place

The red message light blinked, repeatedly, as the men walked into Angelo's apartment. Angelo punched the play button.

"Hey there, baby," the voice on the answering machine purred. "You said to call if I heard anything about Carlos. Well, I'm calling. Call me back and I'll give you the details. Better yet, why not drop by and get it in person?"

Angelo turned and grinned at Nicho then Brad, who nodded knowingly.

"That was Crystal one of my contacts. I reached out to her about Carlos," Angelo said, plopping down in his favorite chair before Nicho could. "Want to go for a drink?"

Brad opened his mouth to say that sounded like a plan just as the phone in his pocket buzzed. It was Lilly. He frowned. "Excuse me, I've gotta take this," Brad said, walking out on the balcony. "Brad here," he said hesitatingly. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine," Lilly said, a little taken aback by Brad's voice. "I am calling with the daily report. I did not get to give it to you yesterday before you left. I have yesterday's as well as today's. Where would you like me to start?" she

asked, straightening the reports spread out on the desk in front of her for the third time.

“Is there anything in the reports that needs my immediate attention?” Brad asked with a scowl, pacing back and forth on the balcony. Brad knew Lilly was efficient, sometimes too efficient to the point it made him look like a slacker. Still, she was the cog that kept everything running in the dome, and, for that, he was glad.

“No, I don’t believe there is any emergency at the moment. Everything seems to be running smoothly and on schedule. The hydroponic system will be ready by the end of the week for planting.” Lilly paused to give Brad an opportunity to say something. When he didn’t, she continued, her jaw tightening. “Miss Callahan’s friend from Dallas has arrived and they are being shown around by Ty and his friends.”

“That’s great. I’m glad her friend has arrived. I’m sure it will help her remember her past. Thanks for taking care of that for me,” Brad responded, looking out over the balcony railing and watching the traffic speeding by below.

“It was my pleasure.” Her fingers tightened around the receiver as she said the words. “How much longer do you think your meeting will take,” Lilly asked, hoping he had forgotten he had left without telling her all the particulars of his trip. Maybe he would reveal some information as to what his plans for Santiago might be.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know. It will probably be two or three more days, at least,” Brad said, turning and leaning against the railing. “I’ll give you a call when I’m coming back. In the meantime, just keep everything on schedule. You’re doing a super job and I do appreciate it. Also, you won’t have to worry with Darcey. She has Marti and Ty looking after her.”

Lilly became concerned when Brad didn’t mention Santiago. That left her in a quandary about whether to call Santiago or not. But, then again, she could just let nature take its

course. If Brad came out on top, she could still take care of him just like she had planned to do for Darcey.

“Thank you,” she said stiffly. “I will keep everything, as you say, on schedule until you return. If there is nothing else, I will file these reports and let you get back to your meeting.” She paused, waiting for Brad to say good-bye.

“Yes, thanks, Lilly. I’ll let you know if you need to do anything else. Bye for now.”

Brad slipped the phone back in his pocket. It had been at least five minutes since Brad had last thought about Darcey. He felt a twinge of jealousy, thinking about Ty and Marti watching over her, but it couldn’t be helped. He needed to take care of the Santiago situation. Santiago stole something from him and Darcey, something that they might never get back. The man had to pay.



Angelo stopped the BMW in front of a classy-looking nightclub. The valet opened the passenger side door for Nicho and Brad to get out, then stepped smartly around to Angelo, his hand held out to receive the keys.

Angelo watched through narrowed eyes as the valet drove off in the BMW. *There’d better not be a scratch on that when I come back.*

The doorman held the door open for them. It was semi-dark inside, and it took a few minutes for their eyes to adjust. It was obvious from the furnishings that the club catered to an up-scale clientele. This was not a dirty hole-in-the-wall, that Brad had anticipated.

Since, it was early afternoon, there were not many people in the club. Most of the stools at the bar were empty. Angelo motioned for Brad and Nicho to go on over to the bar while he turned and walked toward the back. Nicho and Brad both ordered a draft beer. The bartender set two foam-

topped, frosted mugs in front of them and waited for someone to pay.

“Flip you for it.” Brad laughed. “You call it.”

“Okay...heads,” Nicho said, pulling out a coin.

“Naw, man, we’ll use mine.” Brad laughed again, flipping his coin in the air. “I think your damn coin has two heads.” Brad caught the coin in his hand, turning the hand palm down as he slapped it on the back of the other hand, “Still want heads?”

“Yeah, sure.” Nicho laughed, putting his coin back in his pocket. “Cannot blame a guy for trying.”

“Well, you’re a lucky dog. It’s heads.” Brad showed him the coin. “But there’s no flipping for the bed tonight. It’s mine.”

Brad pulled out some bills and tossed them toward the bartender who snatched them up as if he was afraid Brad would pull them back. Brad turned and looked at Nicho. They both laughed.

Brad looked up to see Angelo reflected in the mirror that ran the length of the back bar, walking toward them with a sultry brunette hanging on his arm.

“Gentlemen, this is Crystal,” Angelo introduced them, smiling at both men. “Crystal tells me that Carlos is planning a party Friday out at the ranch, and it is a catered affair. I think we have our in.”

Brad raised an eyebrow and looked at Angelo then at the woman leaning heavily against him, his arm protectively wrapped around her waist. Brad didn’t like the idea of discussing their plans with this woman. They couldn’t afford for anything to go wrong. He wanted to make sure Carlos and the other two pieces of shit were taken care of with the least amount of chaos possible.

Angelo caught Brad’s questioning expression and placed his hand on Brad’s arm. “There is nothing to worry about. Crystal has a score to settle with Carlos, too. She is with us. She knows it was Carlos who kidnapped her sister two years ago, but has no way of proving it. Crystal wants Carlos out

of the way as much as you do.” He smiled down at Crystal and gave her a squeeze. “Crystal has offered to help us with our plans. If you will follow us...” He turned with Crystal, his arm still around her waist, and headed back toward her office.

Brad and Nicho shrugged, picked up their beers, and followed. Brad still had doubts about including this woman in their plans. It wasn’t wise to have so many people involved—that’s when things always went wrong.

Several hours and much discussion later, they came to an agreement on a plan of action. Crystal would provide the necessary catering company logos for the van and uniforms for the men. As part owner of the business, she could arrange things without suspicion. She would also arrange for their van to carry the food that needed to arrive first, making it easy to get them inside. After that, they were on their own.

The men piled into Angelo’s BMW and drove over to Angelo’s friend who had been fumigating the two vehicles. They had the last few hours left of Wednesday, all day Thursday, and Friday morning to get things ready.

Angelo silently thanked the powers that be. This is the perfect foil that Luis has been hoping for to delay Brad just enough for his elite forces to handle Santiago and his two friends. He couldn’t have planned it better. He would report to Luis later after everyone had gone to bed.

Picking up the van and Volvo from Angelo’s friend, they drove them over to Crystal’s warehouse for the van to be outfitted and for them to select the uniforms to wear on Friday. The van would be picked up Friday morning. Brad followed the BMW in the Volvo back to Angelo’s. It would be used for surveillance until Friday morning.

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About the Author



Madge Gressley lives in Missouri with her granddaughter and three dogs (Pixie, Lily, and Milo). An award-winning visual artist for over thirty years, she decided to trade her paintbrush and canvas for paper and pen—but, in this case, computer and keyboard—and started her writing career in 2013. She works from home where she squeezes her writing in between jobs for her graphic design business and letting the dogs in and out—a full-time job in itself.

Gressley is an accomplished, award-winning visual artist. She is a Signature Member of the Missouri Watercolor Society and Best of Missouri Hands Juried Artist. The scope of her artistic talent covers a wide range of media, including acrylic, oil, watercolor, clay, and graphic design. Her work is proudly displayed in the collections of numerous corporate and private collections throughout the United States, Great Britain, and China.

She is also co-owner and graphic designer for Art & Graphic Innovations, LLC, a Missouri based graphic design firm, and owner of MEG Originals Fine Art.