

Dreaming of a Life

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Chapter 1

"Are you sure, Gail?"

"I had Joe check it out. My own partner is a thief. Just like in the movies, right Marti?"

By Gail's tone of voice, she wasn't despondent nor did it seem to be any real consequence to her. She obviously had dealt with it and moved on. Marti stared at her friend, impressed with her ability to forgive the betrayal and loss of money.

"Yeah," Marti said, pushing her glasses back up her nose.

Gail glanced at Marti. "This is the first time I've taken on a partner, and it will be the last, Marti."

"Gail, you took *me* on as a partner."

"You were a silent one...besides it was *your* money," Gail pointed out, grinning.

Marti went back to twenty years ago when they were college roommates. What an odd couple they were. Gail, a wealthy scholar athlete, partied through her four years as if it were nothing, and her, a poor struggling art student, worked part time to pay for what her art scholarship didn't cover. They had parted company at graduation with each of them going into well paying jobs that fulfilled their workaholic habits. They swore upon the ritual of broken champagne glasses flung into the ocean that they would be sisters, never forgetting each other's birthdays.

The advertising company that Marti interned at hired her full time and Gail went into a large corporation's management training program out of California. When Gail had enough of the politics of big corporations, she asked Marti to help her launch her first business venture. They continued to lead busy lives, traveling often, but keeping in touch via internet chat rooms.

Obviously that kind of correspondence left out something important that an eye-to-eye contact filled in. Gail looked a lot more tired than Marti had ever remembered her looking at college. She wasn't aware that Gail had the same observation of her.

"Maybe you need a new challenge," Marti said, agreeing with the underlying tone in Gail's voice.

"I like it better when someone owning shares has no power to put hands on the profits. Gods, it's like being married only without the fun."

Marti pushed her glasses back up her nose. "So, sell your half to Ben and let him steal from himself."

Gail frowned and tapped her fingers on the steering wheel. "He wants me to sell it cheap to him. NOT going to happen." She snorted and then shot Marti a triumphant grin. "Won't he be surprised in a few days. I've sold my half of the business and for a very good price."

"It's not against the law, is it?"

"No! I just need someone to take up space in my hotel room for a couple of days while I meet with my buyer in San Fran. I've signed the papers and the money's been paid, but his lawyer wants us to meet one more time. Maybe he wants me to turn over the keys to the executive washroom or something." Gail glanced over at Marti.

Marti's anta for danger was doing more than twitch. "They already paid you?"

"Yep. Money hit the account on Wednesday. It's paid for a new office on 4th and my assistant said everything is a go. Believe me, I know too much about these people that buy you out and then sit on the money they agreed on."

There was still something unsettling to Marti about this. "Are you sure I'm not going to get shot at, kidnapped, blown up, or be involved in anything that is going to hurt?"

"You have an active imagination. This is a small business with two offices, Marti."

"Does Ben suspect something is up with this trip?"

"I haven't spoken with him since I told him he's not getting any of the profits until what he took from the company account is back. My attorney served him. All up-and-up. He told me he'll take me to court, and I told him good because I'll charge him for the lawyer's fees too and take his boat." She laughed heartily. "That's where he meets his girlfriends, so I know that hurt. I've been doing my work from the condo."

"He *does* suspect something. So, who's your buyer?"

"Benny Clark. He's Australian."

Marti laughed and Gail joined in. "Woman, what is with you and Bens?"

Gail shrugged her shoulder. "With the way the economy is these days, that business won't go any further unless it's goes illegal. Bad karma."

"Are you sad?"

"No. What about you?" Gail switched subjects abruptly. "Geeze, Marti. When you said you were going to get out of your rut, you weren't kidding! I thought six months and you'd be back at a regular paying job." She took her eyes off the road for a moment, glancing at Marti, and then back to the road. To her eyes, Marti was too thin and beginning to get the hard edges around her eyes that people who lead harsh lives have.

Marti laughed cynically. "Yeah. Slaving away in college for pittance, then right into a mucho paying job where I was still slaving away. Only...one...big...problem," she enunciated. "It was my job to sell people and products that I wouldn't even sell to my enemy. It wears the soul down, Gail. Like you said...karma." She sighed heavily. "I just want to put my name on something that I'm proud of."

"I still have all the art stuff you did in college. I had them framed and they're hanging around my apartment. People that see it think it was done by a professional. You're really good, Marti. Why can't you paint during the weekends?"

Resignedly she shook her head. "I start a tree, a still setting, even a profile...but I just stop in the middle of it." She shrugged her shoulders unable to explain her lack of interest in what she started.

Gail sighed, not knowing what to say and not willing to give a flippant answer. The silence went on for a while as each thought about their own need to move on with their lives into something new.

"Where are you staying these days? Marianne said she hadn't heard from you for a month." Gail's voice interrupted Marti's thoughts. "I told her I hear from you weekly, and you sounded fine."

"Marianne won't be seeing me if I can help it," Marti tersely informed Gail. "And how do you know her?"

"She called the office. Said she needed to speak with you. How did she get my office number?"

"Long story made short, she probably got it from my stuff. My backpack disappeared when I spent the night at her place. Did she say why she was looking for me?"

"Nope." Gail looked at Marti then back to the road.

"I think my life needs to take an upward course change," Marti said.

"Sounds like my vacation offer came at a good time," Gail said.

"It will be a nice break."

"Hey!" Gail slapped her forehead. "I nearly forgot again. That joint account we started for my first business when you had money to loan friends...it's still open. I got credit cards for us in the mail a couple of months ago."

"Oh, Gail! That's been what, twelve years? Does that mean we're earning interest on it, and I have to fill out an income tax form?"

"Believe me, if it was that much my accountant, tax consultant, and income tax preparer would have said something. Your card should be in my wallet somewhere. That time we met at the coffee shop I was going to mention it and give you the card, but we got to yakking about everything else."

"You didn't write it in your organizer." Marti remembered the visit warmly. She had been feeling depressed that week until she heard from Gail. "I thought you cut me a return check and moved most of the money out when you finally had enough to open a small business account."

"That was so long ago. *I* don't remember. But I think my *business manger*," she emphasized, "has been keeping the account active, otherwise we wouldn't be getting ATM cards. Come to think of it I don't remember ever getting cards for this account. Must be a new bank account service...something more they can charge us for. I'll ask him how much is in there so the IRS doesn't come looking for you." She gave a quick look at Marti to gage her mood. "So, how's your courier part time jobber? Do you ride around on a bike and do all those crazy things between cars?" Gail asked interested.

"No, no. No crazy city driving. I work only during the day and make sure during winter my hours don't go into the night. I have a Vespa that I putter around on. Right now, it's down for repairs so I've been taking metro. You want to know the bus routes in my city I'll tell you."

"I've used a courier service once. Some guy in an old Toyota truck. It was cheaper and faster than snail mail, but gas got costly."

Marti wondered how much she should tell her about her part time job. Marti suddenly realized that Gail was asking her something. "What?"

"Have you heard from 'Blue Dog' lately?"

"Uh, no, can't say I have. But I remember the last time I logged on she said she was going on a business trip to another continent. Why?"

"I thought she would be back by now. She has some information for me. You know, I logged on last night and couldn't recognize anyone in our favorite chat room, not even the one you've been sniffing after."

"Uh, sniffing? Paaaaaleeease. I'm not that into chats these days. I just logon the days we chat and hang until you drop in."

"Oh, right. Like I believe that. You have been sniffing around."

Marti pushed her glasses again up the bridge of her nose. Unconsciously she felt where the tape was on the glass frame, holding the arm secure to the frame.

"By the way, I did call your friend Cari to get in touch with you and got her lover, Marge. I wanted to find out more about that person that called my office. Marge said they hadn't heard from you in over two weeks, but I should try the internet. What's up with that?"

Marti raised her eyebrows at her friend. She was curious just what Marianne had said to provoke Gail to worry about her. "I move around so I don't wear out my welcome with my few friends. You may not know it, but when you quit your job, suddenly your working class *friends* get worried about inviting you over."

"Ahh. Like when someone becomes a couple and they no longer want to have their single friends over. Are you making enough to eat?"

"Courier work doesn't pay enough for me to have my own place, but I don't starve. With all this worrying you sound like you're pregnant or something."

"How's your social life? Are you interested in anyone?" Gail persisted. She was not going to let the old *pregnant* remark that in the past would have her going off on a tangent about human overpopulation of Southern California knock her off track. Not this time.

"Not someone you would know. Not someone I would know." Marti smiled remembering the few conversations she had with 'IYD', short for 'In Your Dreams'. IYD didn't say much about herself, but Marti knew it was a woman. She also didn't show up much in the chats, but if she was going to see someone, that would be who she would like to see if for no other reason than to satisfy her curiosity. She wondered if that was whom Gail was referring to as her 'sniffing' someone out. All she knew of her was that she lived somewhere between L. A. and San Francisco.

"Yeah? So, what's her name?"

"I don't know. No one gives real names and addresses, you know. I'm going to do some coastal traveling after this paid vacation. Maybe that will inspire me." Marti hoped that tidbit would change the subject.

"I hope you're going to be careful. A single woman traveling alone in any country is like a magnet to the low life maggots of society. By the way, Margie said your supervisor from the courier service called, asking where you were."

"Really?" Her throat suddenly felt tight. "What else did she say?"

"Just that Carlo, your supervisor, sounded worried about you. She also mentioned the police were asking about you. Margie said some of your street friends said the PD found your ID with some dead bodies..."

Marti held her breath for a few moments, trying to get her heart to beat with less force against her ribs. "Gail," she stated carefully, "you need to stay out of this. Whatever it is! Margie and Cari should know better than get involved with street gossip." She let out a puff of air. Margie would know a lot of her street friends because she sent them to the free clinic Margie staffed, if they looked ill, knowing they would be taken care of.

"What? Marti, tell me! We're sisters! Did Carlo do something?"

"Gail..." Marti pushed her glasses back up her nose and put her hands on the dashboard. For a moment she worried about Gail's sudden aggressive move to get into another lane before a truck. She decided speaking to her about her driving would only make both twitchier and it would not change Gail's driving habits.

"Carlo sent me to an address that took me about an hour of metro travel to get to. It was in a neighborhood that felt really creepy."

It would seem like a hasty decision to share her secret with but she had been thinking about it since she had witnessed an execution a few months earlier...another sticky situation that had her realizing it was time to get off the streets and hide among the normal people.

"What kind of neighborhood is that?"

"No one was on the streets. The only reason why I went through with it was because it was daylight and there were no alleys." She paused a moment, returning to the place she was describing...seeing it with crisp detail down to the shadows that crisscrossed the sidewalks broken up from tree roots. It was late afternoon but still would give her time to get back without having to travel in the dark.

"I delivered a flat envelope that felt like nothing was in it. The guy asked me for my ID. The only one I have was the courier ID, and before the guy can give it back to me, we hear pops. Like packets of firecrackers going off."

Marti looked down at her hands, wrapped around her hat so tightly that it no longer looked recognizable. She forced herself to relax. "Next thing I know, I'm being dragged out into the front of the house where a gun battle at the OK Corral is being replayed. Pandemonium was going on everywhere. Glass breaking...things flying around and screaming...someone was screaming," she paused, wondering if it was her screaming, she heard.

"I don't know how I escaped from being shot, but I ended up behind the building. A motorcycle was parked with keys left in the ignition." She could hear her voice shaking, probably from the cold that gripped inside her. "So, I hopped on it and took off. Once I was out of the neighborhood, I kept thinking this is NOT my bike and I don't have my ID with me and then I started worrying about the coincidence of where the motorcycle was placed. I was getting real paranoid. I left the bike in a parking lot near a bus stop after I wiped my fingerprints off. I caught the first bus that passed, took it to my locker at the bus station, grabbed my backpack and then left town. I get paid up front for each job, in cash, and kept some money in my pack in case of emergencies, so I had a little over five hundred dollars on me. I've been lying low and spending as little as possible until I can think of what to do." She couldn't tell Gail everything because she didn't know everything. Right now, who was the good guys and who was the bad was not clear. Until she knew who was who she would lay low.

Shakily she pushed her glasses back up her nose.

"Marti! And you're worried about my little ruse. Why didn't you call me! Alright! Alright. I'm cool," she reassured Marti who nervously snapped her cap against the dashboard. "So, how long have you been on the run?" Gail demanded concerned.

Marti laughed humorlessly at the phrase "on the run."

"About two weeks, I think. I lost track of time. Am I a wanted person by the police?"

Gail shrugged her shoulders. "They haven't contacted me. Maybe you can give your friends a call and find out. If you are, the police would have spoken to them by now." She glanced at her friend. She decided not to share the information her own private investigator provided, which was the reason she frantically contacted her friend about the one week vacation out of town.

Gail pushed in the CD of Chopin piano pieces, something that usually soothed her soul.

Marti fell into an uneasy sleep.

"Hey, Marti. Need a potty break?"

Marti opened one bleary eye and then the other. Carefully she pushed the warm ski jacket Gail must have dropped over her down. She picked up her broken glasses from her lap and pieced the parts together by feel. Peering out the window, it was dark except for the lights on the rest stop. Semi-trucks were parked haphazardly along with a dozen RVs, cars and pick-up trucks. Marti was still deciding if it was safe for two women to be wandering around when Gail hit the side of the door with the flat of her hand.

"Come on! I gotta go!"

"Oh, right." A blast of cold air hit her when she opened the door.

"Grab my wallet, will you? I've got change for the junk food machines. Hungry?"

"I don't know. Give my brain time to decide. It's just waking up." She yawned.

While Gail used the toilet, Marti locked the door and went to use one herself.

Before they went out, they both listened at the door to make sure no one was waiting. Marti unlocked it. Both women could see three men hanging around too close to be comfortable. While Gail watched, Marti quickly grabbed some snacks and both women hurried back to their car.

"Damn!" Marti shouted when they had the car started and back on the road. "We are not doing that again! That is not the type of rush I want for excitement!" Her voice was shaking.

It was an hour later that Gail startled Marti awake.

"Oh, crap!"

"What?"

"We're being followed."

"By who?"

"I don't know. But those two lights have been behind us since we pulled out of that place. One light is stronger than the other. I think I saw it earlier, but I can't be sure."

"This is a freeway. Maybe they're heading north too."

"Marti, I slowed down to give them an opportunity to pass. Instead, they slowed down and let other cars go ahead of them. They've just started to get closer."

"Then go faster."

The car leaped forward and both women prayed they were not going to run into anything that hurt.

"The next off-ramp shut your lights off and get off!"

"They'll see my brake lights!"

"Well, think of something...turn around when the next car passes on the other side! They can't turn around that fast! Then the next car we see going...shit!"

Gail was already doing something. She braked, pumped the pedal at the next off ramp pulled off, made a U-turn and turned the lights off. Marti's glasses flew off but she was too busy bracing herself with her hands flat on the dash to catch them.

Nothing happened. Cautiously, with lights off, she drove along the other side of the off ramp to get back on, heading in the direction they were intending. She waited until she saw lights approaching. She then headed back onto the freeway, hoping that by driving with another car in sight it would give them some protection.

"Damn idiots probably have a CB and think this is fun!"

"The highway patrol listen in on some of the channels...they wouldn't dare!"

"We're way out in the boonies! The cops probably..."

"Don't scare me any more than I am now," Marti pleaded.

For a while they were following the lights ahead of them when suddenly the driver made a U turn and headed back toward them in the other lane.

"It's that damn truck. He's crazy!"

"Where's your cell phone?!"

"You won't be able to get a signal with these mountains all around us!"

"Crap!"

The truck did another U-turn in front of them with Gail barely able to keep the truck from smashing into them. As Gail picked up speed she frantically prayed for an off ramp that had an opened gas station.

The crash against the bumper sent the BMW sliding sideways and then rolling. It came to stop right side up and Gail's foot still on the accelerator sent the car shooting forward, fish tailing on the dirt and broad-sided the truck that was coming in for another bump. The BMW managed to right itself, but the air bags were engaged pinning both women in the car as it blindly ran into a gully and came to a stop in a drainage ditch.

Chapter 2

Darcy McLagh drove faster than she would normally drive the jeep, distracted momentarily when the first of the storm began to drum on her canvas top to her Jeep Wrangler. This was not her favorite mode of transportation for driving on freeways. Her truck had been stolen from outside of the bank after a successful bank robbery. Later that night she was contacted by the highway patrol who found her truck totaled outside of Tahoe, with three very dead bodies trapped inside.

Bad karma got them and in my truck, she thought disgustedly.

"Mandy, stop whining. If I wanted a whiner I would have a roommate," she grumbled. The dampness was causing her body to stiffen up and make her joints ache. The jeep's heat was cranked up as high as it could go. The warmth beat against her legs but it quickly dissipated as it rose above her waist.

Mandy let out a sharp bark and again pushed against the canvas to see what was going on outside. Darcy knew she wouldn't want to know. Thunderstorms made Mandy nervous...it made her nervous too.

Darcy started a string of curses under her breath as she peered out at the road ahead of her when the sprinkles turned into a downpour. Normally she stayed home with bad weather in the forecast. However, her insurance agent, cousin to her twin sister's husband, was on vacation, so she ended up with an agent that insisted she be present when he looked over the remains of her truck. He thought a few months in a repair shop would bring its squashed condition back to some sort of life. His wife's family owned the only repair shop in town, which Darcy was warned about by a friendly highway patrol officer...a very nice looking woman in her uniform and out of it. Darcy threatened him with her agent when he was back in town, if he didn't sign the papers declaring it was totaled, so his family could do with it what they thought they could.

The agent quickly signed the papers so she could get her replacement truck ordered the same day.

Darcy started to slow down as the off ramp to Farmsdale whipped by. Her turn off was the one right after. There was no sign of her off-ramp. It had long ago been removed because the graffiti and gun shots made it unreadable. The road was a bumpy short cut through the mountains that would allow her to bypass the gusty winds. A drip hit her nose as the rag top finally reached its saturation point.

"There's an abandoned building that has an attached garage along here. I just hope I'm not going to have to share with someone I must watch my back with," she said to Mandy.

A sharp bark reminded her that she was not alone.

"Sorry. Of course you'll protect me," she told Mandy, who quivered from fear in lightening storms.

As she maneuvered along the rutted muddy road she saw someone slowly walking toward the same place she was headed.

"I guess we're going to have to share, Mandy." She hurriedly rolled her window down. "Hey!" She yelled as she came alongside the soaked figure. Rain spattered in her face and she wiped her eyes. What could have been a warm ski jacket was now a wet blanket draped over a figure that was too slim to be a threat. But then again...

The figure backed up a bit and slowly turned to face her, the head tilted up slightly with the rain pelting the dark face. Darcy wondered why the stranded pedestrian hadn't noticed her lights and attempted to hail her.

"Get in!" For some reason she felt she needed to be forcibly about it. Maybe Ellen was right and she was around animals too much.

Lightning flashed across the sky, giving both figures a brief glimpse of the other. The figure moved slowly toward the front of the jeep, touching the jeep as she made her way to the passenger side. Darcy leaned over and pushed the door open a crack. The stranger paused as the German Sheppard with its nose resting on top of the passenger seat whined. Eventually, the cold wind and wet weather pushed the stranger into the seat. She closed the door, shutting out the worst of the weather.

A thin hand reached up and pulled the wet hood down. Dark hair clung to the woman's head. From under the wet coat, she pulled out a hat, remarkably dry, which she put on her dripping head. Darcy thought that it showed good sense. Leaking body heat out through the head was not a good thing since her feet sounded like they were swimming in her shoes.

"There's a shed I was going to park under until the worst of this passes over!" Darcy shouted over the crashing of thunder. "Do you want to get out of that wet coat? There's a blanket right behind your seat."

The steering wheel jerked in her hands as she hit a rut on what used to be a driveway that would lead to the remains of the garage that she hoped was still standing. Normally when she drove by it, it was so recessed from the road she had not bothered to study it. She was sure it had a bit of a roof left.

She looked closely before her unable to see very much in front of the jeep. As the rain increased its down pour both women leaned forward, looking for something that looked like a building.

Mandy was resting her muzzle on the passenger seat also looking.

"Stop!" the woman's voice shouted just as the sheet of water stopped and the jeep's headlamps showed a wall in front of them. There was still some roof covering.

"Hold on, I'm gonna back up here. Mandy, sit down. You're being a back seat driver again."

"My name's Darcy."

"Th...th...thanks for the lift," a hoarse voice shook.

"It wasn't very far. Did your car break down?" Darcy turned on the small lamp in the jeep so they could see each other.

Eyes darkened by the night blinked back at her and then the woman nodded. The old blanket was wrapped tightly around her shivering figure.

"Well, there aren't any gas stations out this way. Not much of anything out this way..."

"Except this shed...and you two," the hoarse voice whispered. The woman gave a tentative smile.

"Yeah." Darcy wondered what she was going to do with this woman any further than giving her some respite from the weather. Her clothes were too wet for health

reasons to let her wander around. The woman's teeth were chattering, loud enough to be heard over the rain.

"I've got some clothes in the back. They're not clean but they are dry. I can loan you some tennis shoes too."

"Sounds good," the stranger chattered, and then clamped her jaws shut.

Darcy leaned back and rummaged around the briefcase that held absolutely nothing of value and found her bag. "Mandy, move over." She sat the bag on her lap and with Mandy's nose buried in the bag as well as her hands, she shined her flashlight into its depths. She pulled out a flannel shirt that she usually wore over her T-shirt, so it was not too ripe from wear. Her jeans had some dirt on them from having to change her jeep tire on the way into the city. The socks were thick and clean. She always carried an extra pair. Her tennis shoes were okay. What can you really say about used tennis shoes except size?

"Looks, okay?" she glanced at the silent woman who nodded, blowing on her fingers.

"Anything dry is welcomed," she replied. "Thanks."

"Here take this flashlight." Darcy handed her the heavy emergency flashlight.

"Thanks." Taking the flashlight and the bag that Darcy restuffed the change of clothes in, the woman slid out of the jeep.

While the woman changed Darcy resettled in the jeep and tried to get comfortable. She moved the mirror just a little to keep an eye on the woman. She didn't want to be too trusting. Darcy's eyes occasionally glanced at the stark landscape whenever lightning ripped the darkness. In those flashes she could see the sleeting rain and hoped this part of the flat land did not experience flash floods and then shrugged her shoulders remembering that this old building had been standing for ages.

Mandy didn't like the weather and small growls rumbled in her throat with an occasional whine at the lightning and the booms that followed.

Darcy turned her head a little when the door next to her opened and the woman climbed up into the seat. She had long sleeves pulled over her hands as if to keep them warm. The woman's stomach growled.

"Hungry, huh?" Darcy asked.

She leaned back and pulled her backpack out. She always carried snacks. Further in the back she had three boxes full of food supplies and small things for other residents of LC. Since LC was in the middle of nowhere it was the duty of any resident that was heading into the city to take "requests to pick up supplies."

"Here, try a few of these," she handed three of her favorite trail bars to the woman who eagerly took them and finished them in no time. Darcy remembered a sandwich she was saving for the road until it was more important to concentrate on driving than eating. "Egg salad sandwich and an apple..." She handed over the sandwich and apple. She found a napkin and passed that over.

From the bag of apples that she purchased in the city, she pulled one out for herself. Baking apples were in the second bag. The few trees on her property were winter bare, so she broke down and purchased fruit and vegetables from a corporation run grocery store. She also handed over an unopened bottle of water.

"An apple. Thanks for the water, too." The stranger's voice was getting stronger, but it still sounded hoarse. Not surprisingly, she was probably coming down with a cold.

Darcy munched her apple, thinking about what she knew of the stranger. She had not eaten in a while. Mentally she ran over the reasons why a person would be so thin and not volunteer a name to someone that had just rescued her.

Running away? From whom or what?

Darcy wished she had not finished the coffee. Leaning back, relaxed with the stranger's silence, she glanced at her passenger and found her head tilted to the side as if asleep, with the blanket pulled over her for added warmth.

The car's engine woke the stranger who nearly jumped out of the jeep. Darcy remained silent, warming the engine and letting her passenger calm down on her own.

The rain was still coming down but it was lighter and unless she wanted them to both be sharing Mandy's warmth in the back seat, she was going to have to get the engine started to get the heater going and get back on the road. The thought of home where there was a house and a soft bed waiting her was incentive to make another try to get home.

"Sorry, I...forgot where I was," the stranger said.

Darcy glanced at her. She was peering out the window as if trying to find something. The woman looked frightened.

"No problem. Look, what do you want to do about your car? This storm is going to last a few days and going back for it now..."

"It's okay. I'll call someone from your phone."

"I don't have one. There's one at the community store." Darcy pulled out from under their cover, driving slowly over what was left of a paved driveway, and then onto the service road that would wind through the mountains and home.

Total darkness pushed against the bouncing light beams that showed the slanting rain fall and a rough road with a lot of potholes. Overhead the dark clouds cut off any light from the night sky. Darcy's attention was focused on not running over anything that would damage the jeep.

"Where do you live?" The voice startled Darcy.

"Not completely out in the middle of nowhere, but close enough."

"Oh. Is there a name?"

"LC, for Last Chance."

The silhouetted head of the stranger looked at Darcy for a moment and then back out at the shadows of mountain peaks that appeared in distant lightening flashes.

Heavy rain had abated for a moment, but Darcy knew it was because they were taking one route and the storm was taking another, but it would catch up with them. She was hoping she would beat it. She glanced up at the corner of the rag top that she imagined looked like it would not take another heavy deluge of rain.

Her lights flashed on the road sign as she turned. The signpost was actually still standing.

"You want to share your name?" Darcy finally asked, shifting around another sharp turn on the road that would take them into what the scattered residents of LC called town.

"Oh...ah, yeah, it's ahh, Miles...Celine Miles," she offered.

"Celine. Okay. I have a spare room. You can stay until the weather lifts." Darcy pulled her vehicle to a stop near another ragged vehicle that appeared suddenly out of the

darkness. "I'm dropping off some of these supplies..." She glanced at her passenger who was absentmindedly stroking Mandy's head. "In this weather it's not wise to use a cell or phone."

"Is it late?" Celine asked not seeming to be bothered by the lack of a phone.

Darcy reached for her watch dangling from the turn signal. "It's only nine-thirty. Why don't you wait here with Mandy? I won't be long." She didn't want to introduce her to the other residents just yet. They would ask too many questions, and Darcy had a feeling the woman would panic.

Celine nodded.

"Are you going to be alright?" Darcy asked.

Celine gave Darcy a smile. "Yes."

"Okay, well, Mandy stay." Darcy slid out of her seat and opened the back, unloading the three boxes of supplies onto the porch. Darcy was perturbed by her passenger. Something was scarring the woman...that much she knew. And the name? Who was she kidding?

Darcy pushed open the general store's door with her shoulder, lugging in the first box of supplies. The warm room was filled with noisy people she only saw occasionally. She shook her head at the offered help, letting them finish their game. After dropping the third box off she waved Jack over. To him she explained her guest and asked him to send a message to Doc to see if she could meet her at her place.

Celine laid her head back against the seat and felt tears sliding down her face. A pointed nose prodded her arm. Celine stifled a groan. Her body felt like she had been battered.

Car accident. Was she in a car accident? She shook her head. She didn't drive a car.

How did she know that?

She was exhausted. Maybe she would get a chance to take a nice hot bath...and see why her body hurt all over.

Suddenly Celine's eyes popped open. She felt cold damp air waft by her. She pushed the blanket that was lying over her onto her lap.

"We're at my house," a voice informed her.

Celine looked at the blurry form of a woman who was leaning back into the jeep. Her hand reached her temple as if in habit, and then dropped.

"You can stay out here but it's really cold and will get colder by morning."

"Darcy! Girl! It's colder than a witch's tit! Get in here before we lose heat!" an old voice hollered from the porch.

"Darcy," she whispered.

"Mandy, get in the house," Darcy ordered. "Can you carry this, Celine?"

Celine nodded her head. Celine took one of the boxes that was handed to her and moved with the gentle push in the direction of where the only bright light was coming from. Her feet climbed three stairs and a hand patted her shoulder.

"Come on, girl. You look tired. I got a warm bath already for you. Then there's a nice clean bed waiting for you."

Celine followed her into a warm well-lit house.

Chapter 3

"You look exhausted, Darcy. Didn't you get any sleep last night?" Ellen, always an early riser, was sipping her coffee when Darcy strolled into the kitchen the next morning. Ellen spent most of the night at Celine's bedside, napping in an old reading chair that looked like a padded Roman couch made comfortable with pillows and a comforter. She had heard Darcy working out earlier in her private gym, which inspired her to get up to make coffee.

She no longer worried that Darcy would use her workouts to run away from problems. Darcy took that time to assess what was bothering her and figure out what she could do...or took that time to adjust to the fact that she could do nothing. She felt Darcy had come a long way since she first arrived in Last Chance both physically and mentally.

"I have to get out there and feed them blasted free loaders," Darcy griped. "What did they do before we came along?"

"Well, first they didn't live in a place that is mostly desert. If you bring animals to a habitat that is not their natural environment, you must expect to take care of them. Second, it's raining out there. Put on your boots and coat...I don't want to be treating you for a cold."

"How was it last night with Celine?" Darcy drew a chair across from Ellen, trying to ignore the fact that Ellen had her new crossword book, and before she had even a chance to put her name in it.

"She was in a daze. Like she was sleepwalking. She was in a car accident is my guess. There are bruises about her body, not like someone who had been beaten. Fortunately, her face was spared. Could possibly be an air bag prevented a lot of damage. Whatever happened, she was the passenger and the car wasn't going too fast. Happened maybe a few days ago, by the way the bruises look."

"Did she say that?"

"Nope. She has bruise marks left by a seat belt that was pulled tight on her right side instead of left. Some bruising on her abdomen but my touching her around the area didn't elicit pain. Most seat belt injuries are to the spleen and retroperitoneum...she wouldn't be walking upright," she added when Darcy frowned. "She also had small cuts on the right side of her neck. Probably the passenger side window broke."

"Uh huh. I'm making pancakes for breakfast if you and George want to join us. And leave me some of those puzzles!" She finally got to what was bothering her, as Ellen filled in another row of words.

"I'll leave you some," she told Darcy who was looking fit to be tied. "You have fresh fruit," I noticed. How about strawberries? I'll get George to pull some from the pots. G'wan and get to those animals. I want to hear about your trip. Gives me something to talk about with the gang over bingo."

"What is so interesting about my visit to the city? I met with the insurance agent, ordered a new truck with the insurance money, bought some food...and a new puzzle book..." Darcy glared at Ellen.

"...and picked up a stray in the rain," Ellen reminded her as she filled in another row of words...in ink.

Darcy got up from the table and stomped out of the kitchen, into the mudroom where she bundled up. The slamming of the door announced her progress to the barn to feed the animals.

Ellen chuckled. "That woman spends too much time alone with the animals. They always let her have her way." She hoped that all the animals were in the barn because she didn't want to have to face Darcy's temper if she had to go out looking for any of them in this weather. Darcy worried about them as if they were her children.

After penning in two more words she rose from the table, grabbed her coat, and climbed up the stairs to the widow's walk that sat above the second floor of Darcy's home. Darcy only used one room on the second floor, unless her sister's family came for a visit. Ellen turned on the small light and made her way to the signal lamp. Learning to signal was her greatest accomplishment because that was how the scattered residents that had no phones, some CB radios, and few cell phones communicated. It was like a party line. She never knew who would respond.

She thumbed the latch a few times and waited. George, after about five minutes, the time it would take him to get up from his easy chair that faced in this direction and power up their signaler, gave two flaps in reply. Ellen thumbed the offer from Darcy. George loved her walnut pancakes though he was not supposed to be eating the nuts since they were hard on his stomach.

After finishing her second cup of coffee, Ellen knocked on the spare bedroom door. She heard movement and then the door opened. Blue eyes blinked back at her.

"Good morning, Celine. Coffee's ready, and we've been promised pancakes when Darcy's finished feeding the critters. I signaled George to bring over some strawberries, if you would rather that on your pancakes. Come on, girl! Oh, my name's Ellen but everyone calls me Doc. We met last night, but I doubt you remember much, huh?"

"Good morning," Celine said.

The hoarse voice had cleared. But then, Ellen had her drink enough of that honey concoction John raved about and that Darcy kept on hand. Celine had put Darcy's old clothes from last night back on and her hair looked like she had stuck her finger in a socket.

"You look like a nice bath, or shower would give you that almost civilized feeling. I know there's no soap or towels in your shower room. Use Darcy's. Our water is tanked in, so use it sparingly. Even with all this rain feeding into the cisterns it's a good habit to develop out here. Her bedroom is right that way. She's got a comb and brush you can use too. I'll dig up some other clothes than what you're wearing. I'll put them on her bed. Kitchen and dining room are off that way."

Celine nodded and headed toward the room Ellen pointed out to her. Hesitantly she peered into the dark room and then stepped in. Finding the light switch by feel, she turned the knob until the room was in a soft glow. Her eyes rested on the bed that was rumpled and smiled when two sets of luminous eyes from different parts of the bed blinked back at her. One emerged from the covers and gingerly walked over the comforter and leaped onto an elaborate cat pole that stood in front of a window. The other withdrew further under the covers.

Ellen moved beside her. In her arms were a set of towels and clothing, including thick socks.

"Thank you."

"It's quite alright."

The bathroom had more mirrors than a health spa, Celine thought as she stepped in. After staring at herself and not seeing anything that looked familiar to her, she started to undress, not interested in the bruises that covered her body. She dropped her dirty clothes in the hamper, not wondering where her own clothes were.

Ellen was sitting at the dining room table working on something. The steaming coffee near her smelled good.

"Good morning, Doc," Celine greeted.

Ellen looked up and nodded. "You're looking better. Feeling better?" She pushed a coffee mug in her direction. "Milks over there in the pitcher if you use it, and sugars in the bowl."

Celine found the pitcher cold to touch. She poured some milk for herself and then added coffee.

"Do you do crossword puzzles? This one is a real stinker. I think Darcy got this book because it's full of hard ones and she doesn't like anyone to do them." Doc Ellen smiled at the figure she could see in her peripheral, coming in from the mud room, quieter than when she left.

"You're right. I didn't buy that book for you to do the easy ones and leave me with just the hard ones." Darcy appeared in the kitchen doorway with her wet weather gear already removed.

A wet German Sheppard started to bound toward them.

"Mandy! Get over here. You not only stink but you're wet."

Mandy quickly changed direction and playfully grabbed the towel Darcy was holding to dry her off. After a few moments of tugging, Darcy managed to wrap the towel around her and dry her off as much as possible.

"Go over there by the heater and lie down on your blanket," Darcy directed.

Darcy collected a coffee mug, added milk and poured coffee in it, content to just wrap her cold hands around the cup. "Good morning, Celine. How did you sleep?" She noted she looked better cleaned up.

"Good morning, Darcy. Fine."

A noise that had Celine jumping to her feet announced someone's arrival.

"That should be George." Ellen rose from her seat and Mandy joined her, dancing toward the door, her tail waving in full gear.

Darcy studied Celine as the woman stood with a look on her face as if she were ready to flee but didn't know where to go.

Footsteps stomping on the porch and then after a few moments, Celine heard the deep voice laughing about pancakes being ruined with all the fruit on it. Celine heard Ellen's voice but not what she was saying. The tone of voice was soft and tender. She reentered the room tugging an older man with her.

"Celine, this is George, George-Celine. Strawberries and sauce here." Ellen took the Tupperware bowls into the kitchen.

They all gathered in the kitchen and watched Darcy create pancakes with bananas and another stack with strawberry sauce topped with strawberries. The chatter was about the weather, problems the rain may cause, and then on comparing windmills that supplied their homes with power. Darcy had a new AIR-X that handled high winds well and would shut itself down if needed. It also would not overcharge the batteries. George was excited about that, because he was too old to be going out in bad weather to shut the four, he had down. They also spoke of setting a larger one up further away from the house, where they had measured the wind speeds for a year with an anemometer and checked wind temperatures even in the summer to give them an idea where they would be able to get the most wind power.

Celine silently listened to the conversations but then drifted off somewhere. The scraping of a chair had her eyes blinking and then sitting back in her chair, wondering where the time went. Glancing up, the others were walking into the kitchen with their dishes. Celine collected her plate and coffee mug and followed.

"...compost," finished George.

"You want to borrow Billy Goat?" Darcy offered, smiling over her shoulder as she finished drying the last dish.

"I don't want that goat over. Then I must feed him and where am I going to put him in this weather?" Ellen grumbled.

"In the front room. If you want room heat, that's the place."

"That goat is not coming into my house." Ellen wagged a finger at her husband.

"You can come over here for the manure, and not in my car."

"I'll bring it over," Darcy said. "How much are you going to need?"

The trio, with Celine trailing politely, walked out to the mudroom where coats and boots were waiting.

"Right now, none. Not a good time to be fertilizing," George told them over his shoulder. He lifted Ellen's coat and scarf from the coat rack. "I was just giving her a hard time."

Ellen turned and poked him as he helped her with her coat.

"We can use some help with sealing the mobile. We're getting a draft from somewhere we can't reach," Ellen mentioned.

"Do you want me to look at it today?" Darcy asked, helping George with his coat. She noticed he was not as agile as he was a few weeks ago. She guessed it was the weather.

"No, no. No rush," George said.

"Tomorrow, if you're not busy," Ellen said. "I hate drafty places in the winter. I'm not that willing to put up with it in my older years."

George made a disagreeing sound but didn't add anything more. The couple stepped out with the wind blowing in cold and damp weather. Celine retreated to the front room, shivering.

"Do you want to go into town to use the phone?"

Celine turned to face Darcy again, caught thinking about nothing. Her cheeks reddened, and she cleared her throat. "I...uh...can't think of anyone to call."

Darcy watched her for a few moments, waiting and studying the woman who was offering her a myriad of expressions from confusion to embarrassment.

Celine looked down at her hands and then back up at Darcy. "I looked in the purse I had..." She swallowed and tried not to cry. "I didn't find an ID. No keys, nothing written in the notepad that's translatable...it was wet. I guess I had dropped it in the water or something. I had a Chap Stick, and a wad of bills. I don't even know if it's my purse."

Celine took a deep sobbing breath and turned away from Darcy, frightened by the sudden outburst of emotion.

Uncertain of what to do, Darcy stepped close to Celine who turned back to her. Both women automatically wrapped their arms around each other. When the sobs had longer spaces between them, Darcy relaxed enough to notice the warmth the body she was hugging radiated and how nice it felt to hold someone without ulterior motives.

Darcy stepped back to lead Celine to the couch, letting her fingers slide down her arm and intertwine fingers. Reluctantly she let the hand go when she gently pushed her down into the corner of the couch. She pulled the comforter from the couch back and tugged it around the shivering Celine. Celine had drawn her legs up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. The thick socks were all that were peeking out from under the comforter.

"I'm frightened," Celine whispered from the corner of her couch.

Darcy nodded, giving Celine time to decide whether she wanted to elaborate on what she feared, while mentally making a list of all the things a person could be running from...including a bad marriage.

"I..." Celine's voice interrupted Darcy's thoughts. "I don't know if I've done anything wrong...but I...uh..." Celine shook her head helplessly. "I need a place to stay...just for a while to figure out what's going on with me." She looked up at Darcy pleading with her eyes.

"You're welcome to stay until you get things straightened out."

Darcy groaned inwardly, thinking it was her libido that spoke up. It was that time of the month where her hormones were on the march. Obviously a one night tryst with the highway patrol officer wasn't enough.

Well, Celine was her responsibility, another part of her reasoned. If you save someone's life, Judhith would say, you're responsible for her. It was not a feeling everyone in their small community shared, but what was is the rule that "whomever you bring into the community, you are responsible for her and whatever mischief she causes."

Celine shook her head dismally. "I...I don't know if...I just don't know anything." She wiped at her tears. Her nose was stuffy and her eyes felt puffy. Nothing was clear to her. Her body was sore all over and movement was difficult. She felt miserable. Her fingers wrapped around the Kleenex Darcy handed to her.

"Do you want to continue using Celine for a name?"

Celine gave a ghost of movement of her shoulders, "It's alright, unless someone takes issue with my using it."

Darcy stood up. "I have some chores to finish up with..."

"Can I help?" She rose, letting the comforter fall back on the couch.

"You have any experience mucking stalls?"

"Mucking stalls?" She looked down at her clothes. "No. But I can guess it's dirty work. I keep using up your clothes and shoes."

"No problem. Later we'll go over to the store and pick up some stuff for you. We recycle stuff around here... things people get tired of or can't fit in anymore."

"Like a thrift store," Celine said.

"How can you stand this stink!" Celine groaned as she pulled the scarf around her face that Darcy had given her for warmth rather than what she was using it for. "Even with my nose stuffed, I can smell it." She straightened up and stretched her sore back, then went back to shoveling out the stall.

Darcy said nothing but nodded to acknowledge she heard her. Once she explained to Celine what needed to be done, she was quiet except for occasional remarks she made to the animals.

Mandy was sitting in the corner watching her playmate Clementine, keep the mix of horses, llamas, and two goats at one end of the barn. None of them wanted to go out into the rain while their stalls were being cleaned.

As each area was mucked and clean bedding was thrown down, the two moved smoothly to the next, working well together. Finally, Darcy gave a hand signal, and Clementine encouraged the critters to move into their respective areas, with crouches and standing up and then lying down again, inching her way this way and that, until everyone was in their own stalls.

"She sure is well-trained," Celine marveled. "And they are all so well behaved."

"Just remember they butt or bite and it hurts. They're all here for bad behavior," Darcy warned. She gave Clementine an affectionate rub and then the dog took off to play tag with Mandy.

"What do you mean?"

"Most of them developed bad habits so no one else will have them." Darcy cleaned her hands under the rain spout, then grabbed up her coat spreading it above her head like an umbrella, inviting Celine to join her under it.

Celine washed her hands, then stepped beside Darcy and wrapped an arm around her waist. Together they ran across the yard through another deluge of rain. The wind whipped against them, tugging at the coat until it offered almost no cover, and Darcy struggled to hold on to it. They both laughed at the absurdity of it. Mandy ran ahead and slipped through her door into the mudroom, unwilling to be left behind—even if it meant missing playtime with Clementine.

"It's cold!" Celine shivered as she shucked the waterproof boots off and hurried into the warmer front room.

Darcy draped her coat on the coat rack, idly noting that the water catcher was draining properly, removed her boots that she kept for such dirty work as mucking stalls, and walked into the front room.

Celine was standing near the heater, staring out at the rain.

Darcy could see the rain from the window, slanting across the yard, with the wind blowing in swirls and interesting patterns.

Celine turned to face Darcy, who was standing inside the doorframe watching her.

"So..." they both started.

Darcy nodded at Celine, stepping into the room and sitting on the couch, intentionally taking a non-threatening position.

Celine wanted to sit next to her, taking comfort in her near presence, but she was cold from the pit of her stomach and out to her limbs, so she remained near the heater soaking up warmth and hoping it would seep into her bones. Her hands were tucked under her arms more out of nervousness than for warmth.

"I want to find out who I am but..." and there she stopped as if trying to find a way to not sound suspicious to her hostess.

"You don't want to find yourself in a sticky situation and not able to defend yourself. We can start with the missing person's board on the internet and then go from there." Darcy could feel her internal critic winding up for a long blast of reasons why she should not get involved, and she shut it down. She was learning to do that much better.

"Where can we do that?" Celine smiled at the "we", feeling a glimmer of hope.

"The community's general store has a PC that's hooked up to the internet...when the weather lets up, we'll go into town." She looked down at her hands, hiding the flush that heated her cheeks when she saw hope on Celine's face.

"So, after taking a shower to clean off this smell, is there anything else I can help with?"

Darcy went over in her head the mundane chores of turning the toilet compost and the kitchen compost, checking the batteries, and then the wind generator. She needed to go over her list for seeding the garden boxes in the hot-house and then turn over the mulch in the side boxes....the list went on.

"I do exercises now. You can join me if you like." She hadn't had a workout companion for a long time.

"Sure."

"I'll get you something to wear. What would you prefer...sweats...shorts... long shirt ...no spandex..." She turned slightly to look at the woman that was close behind her as she headed to her bedroom. Celine nearly bumped into her when she stopped.

"What do you suggest?" Celine pushed her short brown hair back, a nervous gesture, squinting up at Darcy who was uncomfortably close.

Darcy switched directions and led her to her basement where she had a miniature gym set up. It had been geared for her recovery, which took two long years of grueling hard work. Now that she was back to moving around without looking like she was in pain, she found comfort in the rigorous physical routine.

"So...?"

"It's warm down here. I think shorts would be better than sweatpants."

"Okay. I'll get you a pair. There's a stack of towels right there. I keep bottles of water next to the towels. I use a towel to clean up the equipment after my use."

Celine nodded. "Okay."

The clanking of weights dropping and the whirling of a treadmill was heard along with heaving breathing. Two women, intent on their workouts...paying little attention to the other... or so it would seem.

Darcy noticed that Celine had strong legs but that was it. Her body was out of proportion. She was thinking about how to encourage Celine to balance her body strength without insulting her.

Celine's attention went from her workout to Darcy's body that was showing more skin than clothes.

After thirty minutes Celine shut the treadmill off and stepped down. "Would you mind if I interrupted you?"

"Ooooff!" Darcy was so engrossed in her images of Celine that she was taken by surprise by the voice near her. She nearly hit herself in the head with the barbell, except Celine helped her set it on the Y-bar above her head. It gave Darcy a good view of her breasts from below.

"Thanks. Well, what would you like to work on?"

"You look well balanced and all, how did you do it?"

"It's taken a while. I'll get you started if you're interested."

"I have nothing to do right now..." Celine frowned then shook her head, looking disappointed. "I...thought there was something there ...something about me that I almost remembered."

"Have you heard of PTSD?"

"No. Is it one of those sex diseases?"

"That's STDs. Sexually Transmitted Diseases. PTSD is post traumatic stress disorder."

"Post traumatic stress. Do you think that's what I have?" She looked thoughtful and then nodded. "Maybe. Don't they have flashbacks, nightmares, things like that?"

"Yes, and among other things."

"Well, I slept fine," she lied.

"Just a thought. On this body building thing. Your legs are strong, that's good. You must do a lot of walking or running," Darcy appraised. She noted that Celine nodded at this, though she didn't know if she did that because it was true or Celine was just responding to what she was hearing. "But your arms and upper body..." Darcy touched the back of Celine's arm with her finger and flicked the skin back there. "My mother calls it school marm's arms. She was a schoolteacher herself, and an avid tennis player, but she also had that loose muscle there. Looks funny to have firm arms but for there. Swimming will firm it up abut also..."

Celine giggled from the tickling and grabbed Darcy's hand and held it away from her, Darcy reacted by twisting out of her grip, grabbing the hand, and was surprised when Celine responded by pulling her off balance and tossing her over her hip. It all happened quicker than each consciously registered.

Darcy flat on her back looked up into the horrified face of Celine's, feeling shocked.

"Well, that's another thing we know...you know how to defend yourself." Darcy rolled to her feet, feeling the combined effects of weather and the jolt to her system from being dropped on the thinly padded concrete floor...and another jolt of something else that she didn't bother to stifle. This was going to be an interesting guest, she thought as she regarded Celine with a hint of a smile.

Celine was shaking her head in disagreement. "No. No. I don't know where that came from. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you." She looked frightened and confused.

"Well, I was looking for a partner to work out with. We can train and see what you know. You did that out of reflex, so you would have to have some training, and it

would be better for your sake to keep up your training until we find out why you needed it." The mystery surrounding Celine was appealing.

Celine nodded, following Darcy's reasoning, but right now, she couldn't see herself tossing anyone and she didn't know how she dumped Darcy.

"Let's start with arm workouts. Reps, light weights," Darcy said.

Celine moved to where Darcy gently tugged her, who then handed her a five-pound barbell. At first, it was so light Celine thought it was a joke, but by the end of the second set, she was feeling a strain on her arms and elbows.

That night Celine fell into a heavily exhausted sleep. Even though she soaked in a hot tub her body felt as tired as her brain. She woke several times at night worried about something but all she could sense was the rain beating on the roof.

Chapter 4

The smell of coffee and a cold nose pressed into her cupped palm woke her. Startled, she opened her eyes to the additional smell of doggy breath. That she knew she was not accustomed to. Luminous eyes stared back at her as she let her brain catch up with her need to empty her bladder.

"Hey, Mandy," she said softly.

Celene slid out of bed and hurried across the cold room into the warm bathroom. She silently thanked Darcy's sense of priority in what should be kept warm all the time. She was stiff and sore.

Pulling on chilly clothes, she burred and peeked out the window. A clear sky with stars. It must be early in the morning. She followed Mandy down the hall, taking comfort in the German Sheppard's nails clicking on the wooden floor. In the warm kitchen, Darcy was busy moving around a stove.

"Good morning, Darcy."

"Morning. Good girl, Mandy." Darcy smiled down at the Sheppard who then headed for her spot, circled a few times and then plopped down with a big sigh on the thick pad identifying it as her corner.

"You sent her to wake me?"

"Yes. We need to feed everyone and then get out to the store before everyone else is there."

"Everyone else?" Celine asked, feeling a slight panic.

"All of four people, but that would be two too many. Some are too cantankerous to want to be around." Darcy slid the eggs onto two plates, handing them to Celine and gesturing where to place them. She dumped the diced potatoes with an assortment of vegetables from the heavy skillet onto a platter plate. She laid that in the center of the table, setting a big spoon on top of the steaming heap and then went out to the backdoor and whistled.

"Judhith came over early this morning to help with the feeding," Darcy explained to Celine's paled face as her eyes fixed on the back door with fear. "The jeep is out of gas so we're going in with her. You can sit there; the eggs are for you."

"What's she doing out there in the cold?" Celine asked shivering as some of the cold drifted by her from an open door.

"Checking the animals."

A bulky form draped in layers of clothing stomped into the kitchen from the mud room. Boots had been removed and maybe a raincoat too, but gloves and coat were still on. The coat was taken off and casually tossed on the back of one of the chairs, with gloves tucked carelessly in the coat pocket. The knitted cap remained on, and the scarf was rewrapped around her neck. Judhith sat without a word and accepted a plate from Darcy. Without any formality, the woman started to scoop up potatoes from the serving platter.

Celine waited her turn, scooping up two servings of the warm potato mixture and then mixing her eggs with it. They ate in silence. When they all finished their morning meal, Celine was surprised they had cleaned the piled plate of potatoes.

Dishes were scraped into the composter and washed quickly. Everyone bundled up. Darcy picked up a sack near the door and gestured for Celine to go before her. She was dressed in Darcy's spare winter coat, but her legs and feet were cold as the outside weather enclosed her in a freezing grip.

Darcy sniffed the air. "Smells like snow," she muttered.

Judhith merely nodded, yanking the door open. The passenger doors were difficult to open. Celine wondered if a lubricant on the hinges would help.

Though Judhith seemed to avoid the major potholes, the rough road didn't give them much relief. Celine thought she now knew what driving without shocks meant. She shared the back seat with recyclable items and Mandy, whose ears seemed to droop, as she swayed and bounced between the door and Celine.

As Celine stared out the front windshield three buildings began to take shape along the uneven landscape. The car came to a sliding stop in front of one of the buildings. Glancing around as she got out of the car, she couldn't see much of anything. Celine looked around for Judhith but she was nowhere to be seen. Darcy was climbing the stairs to the building. Not wanting to be left alone, Celine hurried after Darcy.

Darcy slung the sack she had onto a stack of carpets. "Hey, Jack. I've got some stuff to trade for some clothes and the use of your PC."

"Morning, Darcy. You still have credit with us." He nodded at Celine, who hung back near the door, looking uncertain.

"You've got the place for yourselves. The gang of four are busy digging out their sweat lodge."

"Celine...this is Jack – Jack – Celine. G'wan and look over the clothes. Get what you need for a week. That's about how long this storm may last. No sense in sending you back out in it to find your car." Celine still was not moving from the doorway. "It'll get colder so choose some warm stuff. I'll be right over there." Darcy pointed to the PC, sitting in an area with couches and reading chairs.

"You two want some coffee? I got some vanilla nut brewing."

Darcy nodded still watching Celine who stood in doorway, looking lost.

"Celine, how do you drink your coffee?" Jack asked.

"She takes milk," Darcy intervened. She pulled the desk chair out, dropped into the seat, and clicked on the blue e of the Internet browser.

Celine moved into the store, peering down the aisles of stacked goods.

For what amounted to an hour, Darcy went through different sites looking for some helpful information for Celine to read on PTSD and then scanned the missing person's postings.

Celine finished picking out clothes and quietly sat next to Darcy sipping her coffee. Her eyes periodically looked around her, though not with the same nervousness she had first shown.

"Okay," Darcy breathed disappointed. "Nothing on the missing person's sites of anyone that fits your description."

"You seem to know quite a lot about these sites. Do you get that many lost people?" Celine asked.

"Yes. Last Chance attracts a lot of lost souls." Darcy hesitated wanting to go to another website but decided not to. She had enough on her plate right now.

"Come on. Let's go over to the hospice." Darcy picked up one of Celine's boxes of clothes and carried it out the door.

"Hospice?" Celine quickly followed, picking up one bag that had underwear.

"Yes. Way out in the middle of nowhere, we have a hospice. It's also our clinic, hospital and social gathering place when the general store is closed." Darcy glanced over at Celine, who had closed the screen door carefully and quietly before catching up with her. Darcy took the bag she had and dropped it on top of the box of clothing that she set on the store porch.

"We all take turns volunteering time to help out with the residents. If you want to get on the list, just put your name on the chalkboard near the door."

"Why are we going there?" Celine found Darcy's strides a lot longer than hers, though they were about the same height. She was nearly running to stay even with her. Mandy was already waiting on the porch.

"So, you can get a check up. You do need to find out if you have anything to worry about as well as you need glasses."

"Oh. You do eye exams too? It seems so odd in a small place like this?"

"Out here we have what makes us comfortable but not busy," she responded cryptically. "Your medical information is held confidential. Unlike doctors and hospitals in today's cities, the hospice workers don't share medical information with any pharmaceutical companies or government agencies. The doc puts your information on a CD that is yours to keep. We have our own laboratory, so you get the results from your tests fast and again only the doc knows the results besides yourself."

"What if she dies," Celine asked worried for some obscure reason.

"He. John is the full time doctor here." Darcy pulled the door open and stepped into the too warm room. She was already peeling her coat off and unwinding her scarf.

"Mandy, go lay down. It's not visiting day for you," Darcy told her in a soft voice.

Celine removed her coat while peering around her. A too slim woman dressed in a fluttering white lab coat came walking toward them.

"Hi," a deep voice greeted them, totally taking Celine by surprise. "My name's John, sometimes Doctor John if I ask you to bend over...but you don't have to worry, my exams are gentle."

"John, your humor may not be appreciated by those who don't know you," Darcy warned.

He shrugged his shoulders indifferently and kept his hands in the lab coat pockets.

Celine quickly stuck her hand out to cover her confusion, which John ignored. Embarrassed, she tucked them in her pant's pocket to keep them warm.

"Germs get spread by shaking hands," he offered as way of explanation. "In here we're careful about that. What can I do for you, Darc?"

"She needs a physical." Darcy looked over at Celine with a raised eyebrow.

Celine gave John an uncertain look. John smiled.

"Do you mind if Darcy here stands in the room? She can wait in the corner where she doesn't have a view...can't have her getting off on this...but can make sure I only do what is considered short of handling you."

Celine turned red and was going to go back out when she realized she really needed some place to start on getting a solid record of who she was, so she nodded.

"Okay. Step into that room. It's warm. We don't have any hospital gowns...just a sheet, so I'm going to first give you an exam that you can keep your clothes on. Okay?"

John kept up a steady flow of conversation. She followed directions and moved from a bench to a chair, gave blood somewhere between the pelvic exam and the eye exam. She was aware of Darcy's presence, but her thoughts were in a fuzzy place where sounds and people were muffled or filtered out so the world around her appeared dull and cold.

It wasn't until she found something warm being handed to her that she realized she was sitting in the middle of a pen that had lots of small squirming puppies. She lifted the small warm brown body up and cuddled it close to her face. She laughed when her lap was suddenly overrun with two more wanting attention.

"I hope you're not getting attached to any of them," Darcy told her worriedly.

Celine looked up at her startled. "I..." she looked down at the four pairs of brown eyes that were looking back at her. "No. I just like to feel them. They're so soft and warm." She giggled when the one she was holding licked her ear. "Besides, they're too young to be separated from their mother." Celine looked around for the mother.

"The mother was hit by a truck when she was carrying her pups from one side of the road to the other," Judhith informed them. "Someone must have dumped her because she was carrying."

Celine could feel the anger in Judhith's voice as she gently stroked a pups' muzzle.

"I'm...that's horrible!" Celine replied, tears filling her eyes.

Darcy tapped Celine on the shoulder. "Come on. John should have the results of some of your tests by now."

When they were in what could have once been a large closet, now stuffed with a small table, PC and two chairs Darcy told her in a low voice. "Jessie, the mother to those pups is fine. Judhith every now and then makes up these stories..."

"Oh." Celine let a long breath out. "What's going to happen to the puppies?"

"Judhith will find homes for them."

"What does she do around here...what does anyone do around here to support themselves?"

Darcy was spared an answer when John stepped into the small room and slid behind the PC, a feat someone as thin as her could accomplish...or him.

"Well, by the results of your AIDs test, you tested negative. No STDs. You haven't been raped and no internal injuries. You have one thing that needs attention."

"You got the results already," Celine asked surprised.

"The new AIDs test only takes an hour, and we didn't find anything else in the one-hour testing. We'll let you know about the other tests. Your cholesterol is good, heart

good, however, I'm worried about your blackouts and we don't have an MRI machine to see if there is something to worry about. Celine."

Celine blinked at John surprised.

"You need to hear what I'm saying."

"Oh, sorry...I don't know where I'm going off to," she apologized, embarrassed.

"That is a problem. My suggestion is to get an MRI. Do you know what that is?"

"Not exactly."

"It gives images of your brain showing spots that may be injured or damaged,"

"Do I have to do it right away?"

"It would be advisable. You said you have no headaches, dizzy spells or nightmares?"

Celine shook her head. "No. I wake up a lot at night, but I go back to sleep."

John typed that on the keyboard and then looked up at her. "Why is that? Disturbing dreams, a sense of danger, heard something, heart burn? Anything?"

Celine shook her head at all the suggestions. "I don't know."

"That's okay. It happens with some amnesia victims. So, the bruises on your body...you can't think of what could have done that?"

Celine shook her head again, while in her mind images of lights in the dark flashing across her companion's face, and then both of them screaming from the impact to the back of the BMW that sent the Beemer into a skid and then... Celine blinked a few times then looked at the doctor as he continued.

"Well, if you think of anything let me know." He did a few more things, ejected a CD, wrote on it, and then handed it to Celine. "When you come in, bring it with you. It has a password to protect it so no one can open it or update it without my password. For your file it's 's8l1n3'. Can you remember that?"

Celine nodded. John looked over at Darcy, who nodded that she would remember.

"How serious is it?" Darcy asked.

"I don't know. Head injuries are tricky. I can call Mary at the university hospital, and she can set up a run of tests."

The two looked at Celine who looked like she was listening.

"Okay." She looked at Darcy, trusting her to decide for her.

"What you're agreeing to do, Celine, is to go into the city, to a university hospital, where there is a very big machine called an MRI. The machine will do scans on your brain to see if you have an injury that is causing you to have these fade-outs. The hard part is you have to remain very still when you enter what seems like a big tube, or like a water pipe, where they will take scans," John said. "To ensure you remain still, your head will be strapped in place. It takes an hour."

"Strapped down," Celine repeated looking first at one and then the other. "I...why?"

"So, you don't move your head," Darcy said. "I'll be there with you," Darcy told her soothingly.

Eva who was standing in the doorway with something added, "Like when we tested your eyes earlier. You rested your chin in the cup and didn't move your head when we looked into your eyes." She leaned over Darcy's shoulder and handed a stethoscope to John. "You better hang on to that. You know how Jessie likes to play with it, and with the puppies there will be nothing left of it."

Celine turned to look at the other volunteer in the clinic. The ophthalmologist, Celine reminded herself. "Okay."

"I'll give them a call and set it up. Usually, we don't get a choice of days. It's pretty much when they have an available slot," John explained.

"You're not going to drive her in that beat-up jeep of yours, are you?" Eva asked.

"You plan on lending me yours?" Darcy asked looking hopeful but knowing that Eva would not lend her vehicle unless it was an emergency.

"Heck, no. She's, my baby. Besides, she hasn't been converted to ethanol yet."

"Let us know when you get the appointment, John. Come on, Celine. We've got chores to do."

"Jack!" Darcy hollered as she stepped onto the store porch. Jack appeared from behind the building, confusing Celine.

"James, can I borrow your cycle?"

"Sure," he answered grinning, "but it'll cost ya."

"What?"

"A dozen of them brown eggs your hens lay."

"Nix. They don't lay much in this weather and I don't want interest tacked on. I'll mix up a batch of my pancake batter."

"That'll do."

"Got a thermos?"

James jumped up onto the porch and was just about knocked off his feet by his twin who opened the door. "I'm gonna get some of her pancake batter, and I'm not sharing it this time."

"Hey!" Jack shouted after his brother and then turned to Darcy. "I'll trade you some gas for..."

"What is with you two? Don't you have pancake batter? How much gas for a thermos?"

"I'll fill your jeep's tank," he generously offered.

"You two can come over tomorrow and pick up the bike and deliver my gas and I'll make it pecan."

"Yeeah! You got a deal!" And Jack disappeared into the store.

"I take it they don't do pancakes themselves, very well?" Celine asked. She was handed her bag of clothing while Darcy picked up the box. She turned and walked back down the stairs and led Celine to a shed behind the store.

"Nope. But then, I make a good batter of banana pecan pancakes. My specialty."

"Oh." Celine squinted up at Darcy. "So, how are we going to carry my new clothes and stuff? What is that?"

"You can dump the stuff in the sidecar there." Darcy pointed at something that looked like a child's cart without a motor, "and ride behind me or sit in the car with the stuff and Mandy."

Celine looked at the small sidecar dubiously. Then she glanced back at Darcy thinking of how close she would be to her while they rode home. That brought a flush to her cheeks. "I'll ride behind you, if you don't mind."

"Wise choice," Darcy smiled at her thinking of the warm pair of arms that would be holding on tight to her.

James or Jack came out with two thermos and handed them to Celine who added them to the cart. "Hey, Darcy, James and I were talking and...can we come over and you cook for us?"

Darcy laughed. "I suspected as much. No clean pans huh?"

"We can't agree whose turn it is to clean."

"Okay, how about..."

"No, no. None of this up before dawn. Give me a respectable time," Jack argued.

"Ok, about nine?"

"Good. We'll see you then." He took the two thermos back with a wide grin on his face.

It took two starts before the engine sputtered, roared and then dropped to a loud purr. Celine sat behind Darcy and wrapped her arms around her waist. Mandy jumped into the cart and settled down.

By the time they reached Darcy's place Celine decided the only nice thing about that mode of transportation was wrapping her arms around the driver. They made it before the rain came down heavily but even sprinkles on a bike was tough, though Darcy blocked everything. Celine's hands were cold from Darcy's rain-soaked coat.



"Celine," Darcy's voice woke Celine from another blank period of staring at nothing.

"Hmm?" Celine watched Darcy as she stepped around the brown leather couch to sit next to her.

"We have an appointment for you Saturday...that's in two days from now. It's going to be early in the morning so we're going to have to start over there really early."

"An appointment?"

At the university for an MRI," she reminded her.

"Do we have transportation?"

"We can borrow Ellen's car. I don't want to use my dirt bike on pavement. Or, if all goes well, my new truck will be here. I've also arranged to stop at the 1-hour optometrist shop. You can use some glasses."

"Truck," she repeated, wondering why that would tickle her faulty memory. "How come we didn't take your bike this morning?"

"No gas. Since Judhith was coming over to look at Ginger Ale, I didn't see any sense in walking in."

"Why did she want to look at Ginger Ale?"

"She's ready to pop." A pleased grin spread on Darcy's face.

"Ginger is the fat horse that's...she's pregnant! I've never seen a horse have a baby."

"It's not always a pretty sight nor does it smell good...but, I tell ya, when you look at that little itty bitty, all spindly legs, trying to get to mama's milk it is so beautiful that you forget all the other stuff."

"You really like that, huh?"

"If I didn't, then I shouldn't be in the business."

"You're a horse rancher?" Celine asked as she got up to follow Darcy into the basement. There was a clock in the workout room and Celine stopped studying it.

"Hey, are you going to stand there all night and look at that clock?" Darcy asked.

Celine looked at her startled. Darcy had changed into her workout clothes. Where had the time gone?

"Go get changed. We'll do some Chi Gung exercises." She felt compassion toward Celine as she watched her face take on a frustrated look. Darcy guessed she was beginning to realize she was having blackouts. She was hoping it wasn't small seizures.

"Don't worry about it, Celine. You can't do anything about it so let it go. I'll watch out for you," Darcy added gently as the blue eyes begin to fill with moisture.

Celine sniffled and felt Darcy's finger flick the tear that was dropping down her cheek. "Why? I mean...I really appreciate you helping me but why are you doing it? I could be a killer or some..."

"Terrorist? Member of a gang?" Darcy joked.

"Something...like that," Celine whispered.

"Until we know, I'll be your friend. You look like you need one and I'm not exactly overrun with them."

"Thank you for everything, Darcy."



Saturday arrived.

Celine's one hour in the MRI machine was spent listening to music that did little to cover the loud banging from the MRI machine that would stop and start, startling her.

It was late when they got out so Darcy got them to a hotel with the intention of stopping at the optometrist on Sunday. If Eva hadn't told Darcy that Celine was nearly blind without glasses Darcy would have procrastinated, hoping she recovered her memory during that time and took care of her own medical needs, or found someone else who was headed into the city would have done it. Darcy hated the city. Yet, even as she thought that she knew she would have volunteered. She liked being near Celine.

Dr. Linda Reinhold was on weekend duty and both knew each other well. Darcy left Celine with her while she did some quick shopping for some other clothes, she thought Celine would need...like more underwear, shoes, boots, and pants that fit her, as well as a few workout clothes. It was while she was walking by an art store in the mall that she remembered that Celine had filled up her scratch pads with doodles.

"Excuse me..." the young clerk turned to her after returning an item to the shelf. "I'm looking for drawing pads."

"The other side of the store to the left." The clerk turned back to a box and opened it, sitting it on the shelf so customers could see what was inside.

"Thanks," but her voice was faint as she got a peek at what was in the box. It was a mixture of art equipment from pencils to oils with everything neatly stored in a box that reminded her of a fishing bait box.

When she left the store, she had three different types of pads, the art box and paint brushes. As she was walking back to the optometrist's office, she was wondering what this inspiration was going to lead to. Darcy thought it might have something to do with who she was. She shook her head as she pushed open the door with her shoulder. Maybe she was spending too much money on this stranger and when she did start to remember

who she was...she would leave everything behind. What would she do with all this stuff then?

Celine was in the waiting room, her new glasses sitting on her nose. She was reading something and didn't notice her until Darcy spoke to her.

"Celine, are you ready?" Darcy asked setting the bags on the chair next to her.

Startled, Celine looked into the face of a person whose voice was familiar but whose face was always a blur. Her face turned red as she realized that Darcy was handsome looking. Her blond hair was tied back, showing off a tanned face with expressive dark gray eyes. Her shoulders looked strong, and though the long-sleeved shirt hid her muscular forearms, her tanned hands looked strong with long fingers tapered to clean short unpolished nails. Celine's eyes slowly went back up the body, resting momentarily at her breasts and then back to her face, blushing at being caught staring.

"You, okay?" Darcy asked worried, wondering about the blue eyes that slowly worked their way up to her own.

Celine nodded. "I just...didn't know what you looked like." She cleared her throat nervously. "Thanks for the glasses. I have some money..."

"Why don't we wait with the money until we make sure it's not marked," Darcy commented and then smiled.

"Okay."

"What's that?" Darcy pointed at the brochure on laser eye surgery that Celine was holding.

It had an appointment time on it. "Let me see that," Darcy pinched the brochure between her fingertips and angrily headed to Linda's office. Linda was walking back into her office with a pair of glasses in her hand when Darcy caught up with her.

"Linda! What the heck are you doing?" Darcy demanded in a low voice, waving the appointment card at her.

"I'm doing what my dad promised. What's got you so bent out of shape? You still have eight more to go."

Darcy had forgotten about the deal that was worked out with the residents of LC in exchange for a favor.

"She is with you, right?"

"Yes, yes. I just forgot," she admitted and had the grace to blush.

"She's lucky Dad had a cancellation on that day, or she would be waiting months. He wanted to know how everyone is."

"Everyone's okay. I'll drive her in then. Did she understand what this involves?"

"Yes. She said she heard of it. I told her it wouldn't cost her a thing. It's a favor for a friend."

"What did she say to that?"

"Nothing. But I think she was more interested in what she could see. It was like she hadn't had glasses for a long time."

That was something Darcy wanted to think about. This woman was getting more interesting. She didn't begrudge the offer to Celine about her eyes, it was something she understood after going through it with Judhith, who had been legally blind without her glasses. She was the first to undergo the surgery. It took some getting used to not seeing her without her thick glasses. Her personality and disposition had made a forty-five degree change for the better. Her hearing certainly improved.

Chapter 5

Late Monday night Celine woke from a dead sleep sitting up suddenly. She fumbled around for her glasses and stared out her window, worried about what could have wakened her. There was a light on in the barn. Hurriedly she dressed, pulling her new coat on and wrapping the scarf around her neck. It was in all this dressing that it occurred to her that she was definitely not from a cold weather region because she would have moved to somewhere warmer if she had the choice. That's when it further occurred to her that maybe she was in a relationship with someone...maybe a man...or another woman.

That thought disappointed her.

She pushed the side barn door open and closed it carefully behind her. She followed the sounds of an unhappy animal wheezing. Celine peered over the door to Ginger Ale's stall and could see both Judhith and Darcy working hard with the mare who was lying on her side. Mandy and her friend Clementine were watching on the other side of the aisle looking miserable.

"Can I help?" Celine asked without thinking and then was hit by the smells. She nearly gagged.

"Yeah, come over here and hold her head," Darcy instructed softly. "Slowly, move slowly."

Celine stepped into the stall, careful not to get in the way of the waving hooves. She positioned herself exactly how Darcy was seated.

"Hey, Mama Ginger," she cooed softly, stroking the brow of the wet horse. Celine made sure she didn't look at what the two women were doing...it looked rather obscene and downright dirty. Then Ginger let out a groan that Celine felt in her own womb, causing her to look up and there in a gray sack, was an unrecognizable shape, being squeezed out of her body. "Okay, Ginger, breathe and then give another push," Celine told her, not really knowing what she was saying but she remembered it had something to do with human birthing.

Ginger gave a snort and another groan and both women at the other end had a bundle of goop landing in their laps. Judhith pulled the sack from the newborn's face and then stepped back as Darcy moved over to Celine and helped her up.

"Come on, let's give Ginger a chance to clean her foal."

"Please don't touch me with those," Celine begged as she moved around Darcy and then past Judhith. Both women laughed and pretended to threaten Celine with their blood stained hands. With her new spectacles Celine was surprised at seeing what Judhith looked like. She was heavy with meaty arms that were neither fat nor muscle. Judhith was a large woman. Her face was neither ugly nor pretty. Her soft voice was the second time she heard her and she realized it was soothing and held a great deal of love for the mare as she coaxed and commanded it to give up its sack of grey goop. And from this smelly mess came an ugly gangly creature that struggled to master its balance and then wobble with great determination to a teat that promised warm nourishment.

A few hours later, the three women were sipping coffee and watching mother and foal eat.

"I never knew they could learn to walk that fast." Celine wrinkled her nose and grinned at Darcy. "You're right. It stinks and it's dirty, but it is so beautiful to see. Thanks again for the glasses, Darcy."

Judith handed her mug to Darcy and nodded to the two women. She was smiling when she left the barn to return to wherever she came from. Celine turned to Darcy and gave her a hug, feeling the taught body pressed against hers. There was no return hug but there was also no resistance.

"What's that for?" Darcy asked.

"I just feel so happy and this is the only thing I can think of to do with it." She looked up into Darcy's grey eyes lit from the nearby light. "Is this alright?"

"Sure. Look, I need to stay out here... You have about three more hours of sleep time before chores..."

"Can I stay out here with you? I'll keep you company. I won't talk."

Darcy gave a short laugh. "In your case it would be good if you talked. But sure you can stay." She then busied herself with arranging the bales of hay so that with a few blankets draped over it, they could sit high enough to avoid the draft at floor level. The windmill atop of the barn powered the heaters so she was not worried about freezing.

The two snuggled under the sleeping bag Darcy pulled over them. The dogs slept at the foot of the bales, occasionally lifting their heads and sniffing the air.

"You said you're a horse rancher...where are the rest of your horses?" Celine asked, as she struggled to keep her eyes open.

"I did not say I was a *horse* rancher. I'm a rancher," she grinned down at Celine who was stifling another yawn.

Darcy smiled as the blue eyes were finally hidden behind the heavy lids. Celine's breath evened out and she snuggled closer into Darcy's side, tucking her hands against her chest, with her fingers curled protectively around her new glasses.

Ginger Ale, the golden Arabian brood mare, that was Darcy's pride and joy, nosed the hay bedding and then brought her head up and nuzzled her off-spring who was curled up and sleeping off the first few hours of life outside of her. Ginger whiffed air toward Darcy and then settled down for the rest.

"You're gonna have a nice filly there Ginger. This one's gonna make it," she reassured herself and the snoozing mare. Mandy and Clementine thumped their tails in agreement.



Darcy opened one eye, and then the other as the figure that was lying beside her moved restlessly in her sleep. Sleeping on top of a few bales of hay didn't make for a comfortable bed if you were used to a real mattress, so Darcy was worried Celine would roll off and onto one of the sleeping dogs. She was debating about waking her or simply letting her continue to sleep. She instinctively put her arms around her to prevent her from landing on the ground.

She groaned to herself as she felt her sexual desires more than nudged awake. Celine shifted her body position to fit against Darcy.

Darcy breathed in the smell of Celine blocking out the smells of the barn. Then let her eyes close so she could drift in a light doze.

Not long later her eyes opened. Ginger Ale was quietly chomping her feed while her little one was bumping and tugging at a teat for milk. Darcy had left a small lamp on so she could keep an eye on the pair. Her mental alarm told her it was about that time for her to get up and feed everyone that was out and about the barn, yet she remained where she was. She studied the vapor from Ginger's breath.

"Cold. The heaters must have shut off." Darcy shook Celine's shoulder gently. Eyes peered out at her from under the sleeping bag cover.

"What's wrong?"

"Time to get up." Darcy flipped the cover aside and jammed her feet into her boots. A grunt and some other noises came from her as she turned to pull her coat up from the bale where she kept it warm by lying on it. She needed to make a potty run to the toilet in the small equipment room that she had converted from two stalls.

"What?" Celine looked up at the wild looking woman, hair sticking out, threaded with straw. "Yeow!" Celine shouted when she slid her feet into her shoes. "Darcy! You didn't tell me my shoes were going to be like ice."

"Well, that's another thing we can put on the list that we know about you. You're not used to cold mornings, so you don't camp out."



Celine was washing the breakfast dishes when she spotted a Hummer pulling up into the yard, stopping near the barn where Darcy was working on something. It was easy for Celine to tell when Darcy needed space. It was understandable too...after all living way out in the middle of nowhere was a clue that she liked her solitude.

Dishes done, Celine brushed the hair out of her eyes while contemplating whether to make another pot of coffee. There it was again. A cramp. Stronger this time.

"Oh, great," she groaned softly. She slowly breathed in and out, taking little comfort that this felt all too familiar. "I need to find some tampons or sanitary napkins." Holding onto the doorframe for a few moments she waited until the cramp passed.

"Celine! What's wrong!" Two pairs of hands supported her.

Celine started to laugh and then doubled up again, groaning. "I...I've got cramps...I think I'm starting my monthly."

"Monthly?"

"Her menstrual cycle. I've got a few napkins in my Hummer that I keep for emergencies. I'll go get them," Eva told the two women.

"Are you going to be alright?"

Celine's face took on a pasty look.

"I...I can say without a doubt...I feel...terrible." Celine leaned into Darcy who assisted her to her room.

Eva joined them handing a plastic case to Celine. "There's three napkins in there. I know on my first day, I used to get sicker than a dog and bled like I was hemorrhaging. Isn't Judhith coming out later to check up on the foal? She can bring some napkins from the store."

Darcy nodded. "Are you sure you're going to be alright?" she asked Celine again as the woman curled up from another cramp.

"Yeah. Thanks, Eva," she muttered as she gratefully headed into her small bathroom.



For the rest of the day Darcy went about her business but would stop by and check on Celine. Sometimes she would find her curled into a small ball on her bed groaning and other times she would be sound asleep. Her two cats, Queenie and Lord Byron, taking a liking to her, were curled up on the foot of her bed, offering their presence as comfort.

Chapter 6

Celine woke up and found herself staring into the luminous eyes of Queenie, short for Queen Cleopatra. The fluffy orange and white cat was lying on her chest, which explained why her innocuous dream suddenly took an extreme dogleg turn into the beginnings of a heated game of foreplay...her and Darcy being the key players. She glanced around for the black and white, Lord Byron. A black tail flicked at the foot of the bed.

"I need to change, Queenie. You're going to have to move." She scratched the cat on her purring head who readily stood up, and then with a few bouncing leaps, was out the door, with Lord Byron quickly following.

After her shower she decided that the only good thing was she did not have cramps anymore, but other than that, she felt like she should lock herself up for another day. However, she dressed for morning chores. In the kitchen she noticed that she beat Darcy to put on the coffee. As the coffee dripped to readiness, Celine picked up the envelope that was on the small breakfast table that had her name on it. Well, she guessed it was her name. The handwriting was terrible.

Sounds of Darcy stirring could be heard with her morning grumbling at Lord Byron, which sounded angry about something.

"Mornin'," Darcy mumbled as she stumbled into the kitchen, not looking her usual morning self. "Good. Coffee." She plopped onto the other chair and proceeded to pull her thick socks on. "Eva dropped that off yesterday."

"I don't understand all this..." Celine flicked the pages with her other hand impatiently.

"No one can understand John's handwriting. Sometimes not even he does," Darcy grumbled.

"It's typed. I don't understand all this technical jargon. Don't they have a translator?" Celine complained. She rubbed her forehead where a headache was developing. Her back hurt and she was still tired. "I hate this time of the month. I think for those who want to have babies they can keep all of this, but for us that have no intention of having any we should be able to ... What's wrong?"

"Not a damn thing." Darcy rose to get coffee. She pulled two mugs down and proceeded to pour milk in the cups to get them ready.

"Darcy, I'm sorry. I..."

"You don't need to be sorry for anything."

"I don't think too well when it's so early and I know that's a terrible excuse. It was insensitive."

"What are you talking about?" Darcy's voice was a mixture of annoyance and confusion.

"Well, uhh." Celine really felt like she was on a slippery slope now. It was too late to go back. "You don't have any sanitary napkins or plugs, nothing for your monthly so I thought...well, I thought you maybe...I mean with the scars on your body...that maybe you..." her voice trailed off. Her face felt hot and she was embarrassed with not handling the conversation right.

"I need a translator to understand what you're talking about. I don't have sanitary napkins because I don't bleed. So, what's the problem? Judith delivered a dozen boxes for you."

"So, what was that expression for then?"

"I don't have to give an explanation about myself to anyone. This afternoon I'll take you to town and you can ask John or Eva to translate the note."

"Are they a number?" Celine suddenly asked, thinking maybe changing the subject would help, though even her choice of a conversation change had her startled. She decided she was not a glib person.

"Whh...No! You interested in one of them?" Darcy asked quickly, and with considerably less heat. She poured coffee in each of the mugs.

"No," Celine replied with relief. Her conversation change had worked. "I think I would rather wait and see if I'm married or something before I have designs on anyone. Don't want to confuse the issues of my sudden return and my other half is in bed with someone else. How will I then justify breaking up with her for... ahh..." Maybe she was being too glib...

"For?" Darcy prompted, thumping the mugs on the table.

"I was getting carried away with a story." Celine took a sip of her coffee hoping that would close the subject.

However, Darcy seemed to find this interesting and persisted. "You should continue with the story, it could be a way to tease out your lost memories. Like some therapists do when they read you off a list of words and you say the first thing that comes to your mind. You should be good at that."

Before Celine could comment Darcy had risen from her chair and was already heading out to the mudroom, taking her coffee with her.

"Word association...I wonder what you would say if you knew that when Freud had his patients do it, he had fertility statues hanging from the ceiling over the couch," she muttered to herself, feeling cranky and lousy. "That man pushed subliminal queuing to another level. That's like staring at Hustler or Playboy all day and expecting a man not to be horny. Darn. I'm really bitchy. Maybe I should go back to my room and curl up for the rest of the week..." She looked around her. Not even Mandy was around to listen to her conversation.



As was their custom, they spoke little and now that Celine had her routine down, Darcy gave her little direction. Celine kept to her side of the barn and left when she was finished. At first, she was bothered by Darcy's preference for solitude and silence, but as she shoveled the llama's dung she thought about how she had pretty much taken away

Darcy's time to herself and maybe this was her way of asking for it back, or maybe she was PMSing too.

Celine went into the house to clean off the smell of barn and then wandered into the front room to wait for Darcy to reappear, taking the drawing pad Darcy had given her.



Darcy came back into the house a few hours later feeling calmer. She leaned over the couch to see just what Celine was so intent on and she found the drawing pad filled with sketches of Ginger Ale and her foal Ginger's Pride. They were not full sketches, rather exercises of someone trying to catch movement.

"That's nice," Darcy said.

Celine looked up smiling. "How were the hens? Promising enough for an omelet?"

"Yes, but they didn't say just when they were going to start rolling them out."

Darcy gave her a hand up and they both headed to their respective rooms to change into workout clothes. Whatever was bothering Darcy seemed to have departed.



"When you twist your hand up and around, you're following the small finger with your eyes and you're twisting your waist. You also need to concentrate on keeping your weight evenly balanced on both feet...it's all in the waist. Can you feel yourself teetering because your balance is on your toes or the outsides of your feet? Right. Flat foot," Darcy coached while demonstrating the Chi Gung movement.

Darcy watched Celine as she worked to keep her balance in two movements, not really expecting her to get every small detail down yet and then continued with her own exercise. Without focusing, she was aware of her breath. Her eyes moved to the bottom of their sockets, watching the tip of the small finger as it started at her waist, twisting up to her nose and turning her waist as her hand moved, spiraling up over her shoulder with her eyes finally moving from the fingertip to the ceiling. Eyes, massaging her internal organs, balance and flexibility she worked on. When she was content that she had worked on this move enough she started the next.

When she finished her Chi Gung exercises she worked on perfecting other moves in Tai Chi without connecting them. And then she called it quits. She wanted to give herself a hard workout, but she didn't want Celine's company.

"We're not going to..."

"No," Darcy told her shortly.

"Why not?"

Darcy turned to her angrily, "Why do you always have to question me? If I don't feel like doing something I don't have to justify myself."

Celine stepped back surprised. "I thought I was the one that's supposed to have PMS."

"Why can't I have PMS? Because I don't bleed, I lose all rights to be a woman?" Darcy shouted.

To Celine this was a perfect case of PMS, and as much as this felt this scene was all too familiar, she couldn't remember if she was looking at herself or someone else.

"I don't know a damn thing about your condition or physical..." she began, her voice coming from a distance. Her hands twisted the towel, unconsciously mimicking how her stomach felt.

"No, you don't! And you don't need to. I don't feel like teaching anymore. If I want to exercise alone in my own home, I shouldn't have to justify it!"

"Well just say so!" Celine could hear herself respond, but it wasn't her. She could not stop the onrush of anger. "This *is* your house so you should be able to ask for privacy!" Celine shouted back. Her back bumped into a wall, and she felt a disquiet burning in the pit of her stomach. "Two women PMSing in small spaces is not a good thing," she said and stomped up the stairs, and out of the basement, not bothering to close the door since she knew it would be a slam. She just wanted out of that small space. A bubble bath always calmed her down. Where in the middle of nowhere was she going to get a bubble bath?

Chapter 7

Judhith came by regularly to check on Ginger and her small Pride, but not always visiting the house since the two human occupants were too cranky. On one of the visits, she left another sketch pad off, a used box of watercolor tubes, and a palette sitting on the kitchen table with a note from the twins that they heard she liked to draw. Celine had little to do to occupy herself aside from chores and exercises, so her drawings were rapidly filling the sketch pads Darcy had given her. Playing with watercolors was something else to occupy her time.

Five days later both women felt in a better mood and worked at cleaning out the stalls without the edginess of the previous days. After returning to the house and having a shower Celine found her cup of coffee already poured in *her* cup, and Darcy sitting in *her* chair, looking like she was waiting for her.

"Morning, Darcy. What flavor of coffee is that?"

"Butterscotch. Judhith dropped it off last night. Today do you feel up to driving into town? John should be awake by noon, if you still want your results translated."

"Yes, I do. He must keep late hours." Celine wondered what in a town in the middle of nowhere, could he be busy with, then decided maybe she did not want to know.

"His residence is on the top floor of the hospice, so he takes the night shift. When people are near death, they don't sleep, so he reads to them."

"That's nice to have someone that cares nearby. I was thinking of volunteering to work in the hospice. Would you mind...I mean if it's not too much trouble of dropping me off at the hospice and picking me up?"

"No, I don't mind." A flash of guilt gave Darcy a quick insightful glimpse of why she didn't just tell Celine that she could borrow her jeep or motorcycle and drive herself. She wanted to do it to stay close to Celine.

"Okay." Celine smiled.



Darcy stopped the bike in front of the hospice to let Celine off. "I'll pick you up in three hours. If you finish early, the store has a computer, games, and books you can check

out until I get back." Darcy was pleased Celine had volunteered at the hospice. It would give the small community a chance to get to know her. There was no telling how long Celine would stay, and in Last Chance, everyone was expected to pull their weight.

Stiffly, Celine got off the bike. It was not made for a passenger. From her backpack she pulled out a drawing she had rolled up.

"Can you give this to Jack or James? I thought they may like to add it to the bulletin board they have in the store."

"You don't want to give this to them yourself?"

Celine's face turned bright red. "I...can't you do it for me?"

"Sure." Darcy took the ink sketch. It was a pen drawing of one of the twins sitting atop the roof tossing dirty pots and pans at the other brother that was racing around the building on the motorcycle with Jessie, the dog, hanging on in the attached cart. She also added Jessie's puppies, which were bouncing around with one or two being tossed out and Judhith running behind with a wheelbarrow collecting the tumbling pups. She had one puppy safely sitting in the wheelbarrow as another came her way. Darcy thought it looked good, but her compliment didn't seem to bolster Celine's confidence in her skill. Darcy chalked it off to something to do with her forgotten past and was angry at that for Celine's sake.



"Good afternoon, Celine," a soft voice called to her from inside.

Pausing in the entrance to let her eyes adjust to the dim lighting, Celine faced a frail looking man who slowly approached her, pushing a walker with bright orange tennis balls on its back legs.

"I heard you're the new resident in the twilight zone," he wheezed.

Celine could now see that the man was young, though his body language was that of a very old man. An oxygen tank was attached to his walker with the thin tube attached to his face, under his nose.

AIDS the thought whispered to her.

"It's not what you're thinking," he said. "Come on. I'll take you to DJ."

"DJ?"

"Doctor John," he spoke with effort.

Celine decided not to ask any more questions. Following at a slow pace, she was able to get glimpses of other rooms where the occupants were engaged in various activities. The room she was led to had a big bay window that looked out into an arboretum where a few more people were either reading from wheelchairs or conversing.

"Not what you were expecting?" John's voice from behind her asked.

She turned to face John. He was pulling off gloves and tossing them into a trash can outside of one of the rooms.

"I've never been to a hospice. What kind of patients do you have?"

"No patients. Just people that want to die in peace. I see you have your results. Let's step into my closet," he grinned. "Alex, are you about finished with your exercise? Judhith left some plantings you asked for on the workbench."

Alex nodded and continued his slow journey.

In the office John didn't squeeze behind his desk but rather took the seat next to hers. "It basically says they couldn't find anything wrong and would like to do more tests.

Just from watching you, and seeing your eyes, I would say you're having fewer blank episodes."

Celine nodded. "I don't feel like I'm in a fog anymore. I just don't remember anything."

"Are you getting enough sleep?"

"I wake up one or two times at night, but I go right back to sleep."

"Do you find yourself going to bed earlier than say, sunset and getting up hours before Darc?"

Celine smiled at the abbreviation of the woman's name. "I don't know what time I go to bed. It's not like she has a clock in the guest room." She tilted her head as she thought about that, "In fact the only clock I recall is above the basement stairs. And no, there's no way I get up before her and want to. Sometimes when I'm stumbling into the kitchen to start the morning coffee, she's coming up from the basement." The image of a sweating, scantily clad woman, poster perfect for an add dealing with healthy women, had her pausing at the effect it had on her libido. The very reason she needed to do something out of the house with some distance from Darcy.

John smiled and looked down at his hands amused, "I understand you have painful menstruating days...first two days?" he asked.

Celine took a deep breath and then let it out, laughing. "Yes. The irony of it is that I lose my memory of everything but this. I actually remember being out of it for a few days...and worse...suffering from PMS."

"Selective memory. Well, you're in good company. Darc usually doesn't come into town during her phases. Gole practices aryuvedic medicine. She has some herbs that could help if you're interested. She works the second shift here. Her family has been practicing it for generations, so her knowledge is quite extensive.

"Why doesn't Darc...Darcy try it?"

"That's her business. I wouldn't go poking around about personal stuff on her. She's pricklier than a porcupine."

"Okay. What about my memory?"

"From your symptoms it appears you may be experiencing retrograde amnesia. Your recovery of earlier memories can start anytime, and in spurts or completely. With this type of amnesia, you may not recover the memories that caused this trauma. Most people associate head traumas being the culprit of amnesia but an event can also cause it, which may be the case with you. According to Doc, she said when she examined you on your first day here, she found body bruising that reminded her of someone that was sitting in the passenger seat when the car rolled, but that you had no head bruising."

Celine was silent for a while as she let this information merge with her own ideas on what may have happened. "I see," she finally said.

"Anything else?"

"Yes, I was interested in volunteering some time here."

"The list is on the door near the entrance. Put your name after the time you can be here. We have a training program..." John went quiet for a few moments and Celine could see his eyes were tearing. "We don't have a trainer right now," his voice sounded strained, "so, I guess I'm it. How about at eleven on whatever days you can make it into town?"

"You won't be too tired?"

John laughed. "Tired is my middle name, as the refrain goes. If you have time, I'll give you some basics right now and introduce you to our current residents."



Darcy glanced up at Jack as he moved to sit beside her. He slid a mug of coffee on the small table near her, giving off the aroma of hazelnut, and glanced around the store in a conspiratorial manner. "I got a hit on our newbie. She's hit the missing persons."

Darcy couldn't resist the impulse to also look around the room before leaning forward to hear what he had to say.

"Her name is Martha Newcomb. Strange thing about this is that a police department employee of Clairton filed the missing persons report. I didn't find any warrants or tickets for her so it's curious why they're looking for her."

"She works for them?"

"No. Her bio shows that she graduated top of her class in design about fifteen years ago from UCLA and went to work for McKee's Software and Technology Design, where she apprenticed. She quit her job there about two years ago, and that is the end of any employment records on her. She didn't file any tax papers last year. She has no forwarding address. No active credit card accounts in her name, but she does have a joint checking account with a Gail Delfin. Enough in the account to keep it open but the ATM cards to that account haven't been used by either."

Darcy looked at him with surprise. "You got past a bank firewall?" she asked in mock horror, covering the sudden sinking feeling in her stomach at hearing she shared a checking account with someone.

"If I wanted to make myself look good, I would say yes, but not having the need for such trivial ego strokers as my brother...no. I know someone who works at that bank. I asked and after I applied a great deal of my charm, she said the account is one of the many business accounts Gail Delfin has opened. The difference between this account and others she has opened is it is the first she has opened with the bank, it's joint, and it's not a business account. For each new company Ms. Delfin starts, an account is opened. When she sells the business, the account is closed and the funds transferred over to the new owners. From the bio on Delfin, she went to the same college as Newcomb, they were college roommates. After graduation Delfin worked in a few businesses and then started out on her own. She's one of those idea types. She starts a business to fill a market need, gets it into the green and then sells it for a lot of money. When she first started this trend, about thirteen years ago, she didn't have the capital to begin so Ms. Newcomb supplied the capital. This account was basically used for the first two business ventures as collateral. Now the only activity is from Delfin's business manager, Gary Malcolm the third, who deposits enough money to keep it active. She also has a tax consultant, Gary's roommate, J. J. Hunt."

"So, for about two years she dropped out of sight." Darcy wondered what would cause someone that worked for a prestigious firm to disappear.

"She's got an active yahoo free mail account," Jack told her with a grin.

"Yeah?"

"Uh, huh. Last time she accessed it was two weeks ago. Right now, her mail inbox is maxed out."

"So..." Darcy's brow furrowed, going over what information she gathered from Celine and what Jack was telling her about Martha Newcomb...and her school friend, Gail.

"Her MRI show anything?" Jack asked.

"No. She's not blanking out like she was in the beginning. At the general meeting, are we going to invite her in or wait?"

"Let me find out more, like where she's been for two years. My curiosity is what interest the police have in her. If I found that information on her then it's not like she's been hiding. I mean, her Email has her name in it. Could be she made enough money from working for the design company and from lending money to her friend and retired, or she's taking a sabbatical. People do do that. Look at us," he laughed. "But, that doesn't explain what the police want to see her about."

"You like her," Darcy accused.

"I like the sketch she did of us. It's going on the bulletin board."

"That's it?"

"Yeah. She may become famous one day and I can say..."

"What name did she sign it with?" she interrupted him smirking.

"Oh, damn! There goes my investment." He patted her on the arm chuckling and went back to sit behind the counter where he played video games all day, for all Darcy knew.

Darcy logged onto her yahoo account looking for any messages from "Dreamer." Nothing. She met Dreamer in a chat room one Wednesday evening about three years ago. One of the few times she logged on that late. For the last year, Dreamer only logged on Wednesday evenings. Darcy had imagined she had married and that was the only time she had out. Though she was intrigued with this person, she tried not to become too interested and ask the twins to use their PC those evenings...that was getting attached to someone. She was not ready for that.

She quickly scrolled through her Emails and then deleted everything after not finding the one person she was interested in. She moved to the chat room where Dreamer usually was on. She watched the conversations for a while, not becoming an active participant. As usual the conversations at this time were not quite as wild as the evenings, no doubt because a lot of the participants were at work.

Darcy was about to sign out when a name appeared in a question clustered with others. Something about Dreamer. Frantically she scrolled up looking for the sentence. *Sexy Toes: i haven't heard from dreamer for a while. anyone know where she is*

Darcy then scrolled back down looking for anyone that may have answered. There was a long pause with other conversations scrolling on before "Bearded Lady" gave a response.

Bearded Lady: No. Why you asking. Interested in the dreamer. ;-)>

More conversations and after a pause another reply.

Sexy Toes: i miss her conversations

The next response was quicker.

Bearded Lady: She said she was going on vacation.

Sexy Toes: must be nice to go for over a month

Bearded Lady: DAD would know more.

Darcy leaned forward and was about to click on Bearded Lady's private chat when her logoff flashed.

"Dark and Deadly. Come to think of it, I haven't seen her on the chats for a while...and she logs on periodically any time of day," Darcy muttered.

"What?" Celine asked.

Darcy liked the chills that the voice sent through her body and settle nicely in her stomach. She turned to look at Celine.

"Hi. I was going to get a ride back with Judhith but I noticed your bike was still here. You saved my wits and butt."

Darcy glanced at her watch. She had been there for two hours. "Sure. I'm surprised you like the dirt bike over a car. It shakes more than her vehicle."

"Convenience. We're going in the same direction." *I also get to hang onto you and you are something worth hanging onto.* Celine would have slapped herself for that mental slip, but she enjoyed the idea too much.

While Celine's thoughts were on Darcy, Darcy was deciding when to tell Celine who she thought she was. She decided later at dinner.



"So, are you going to ask me, or what?" Celine asked as she washed the dishes with Darcy hovering around.

"Ask you what?" Darcy asked defensively.

Celine turned around slapping the sponge on the counter. "Darcy, promise me something...no lies if I ask you something. If it's none of my business tell me but don't play this..."

"Alright. Alright. What did John say?"

"He said if I can be at the hospice by eleven in the morning, he will begin my training."

"Celine, promise me something, when I ask you a question and you know what I'm asking..."

"Okay, okay. No teasing."

Both broke out laughing.

"He said the MRI didn't show any brain damage and he thinks it's retrograde amnesia. Temporary forgetfulness, in layman's terms. I looked it up in the library at the hospice. It's also called hysterical amnesia."

"Stop that," Darcy told her firmly. "I appreciate your predicament but the time for feeling sorry for yourself has passed."

"You're right. There are people who are worse..."

"That's still feeling sorry for yourself." Darcy's voice had a hint of humor causing Celine to look up at her.

"You're right, again. So, other than not remembering who I am, my health is good. I should live in the present and if my memory comes back...deal with it then. I'm not so sure I like living on this edge of uncertainty though."

"It's not for everyone," Darcy agreed. She hesitated and then began, "I have some news for you. Good and bad. I'll start with the bad. The police of Clairton reported you as a missing person. Does the city ring a bell?"

"Clairton," she said slowly, shaking her head at the same time. "No. Where is it located? Maybe if I see it on a map..."

"I don't have one. We'll pull it up on the internet next time we're in town."

"Does this mean...I'm not sure I understand...don't police post missing persons?"

"They post it, but they don't normally report it unless you were one of theirs..."

Celine looked at her startled and then broke into wild laughter. Finally, she got out, "Oh, Darcy. For sure...I just don't think..." Then she remembered how quickly she countered Darcy's grab to her wrist. "Good grief, Charlie Brown. I sure hope not. I mean, I have nothing against cops, but gods. They see too much of the underbelly of humanity to stay unjailed. If that's the truth, then I quit. Besides, without my glasses I would be lost. They would never hire me unless it's as a civilian."

Darcy watched her, surprised at the vehemence in her statement. However, she knew she was not a cop, unless that's why she disappeared for a year. Was she undercover? No. Her dependency on her glasses would not be to anyone's advantage. Maybe she was their sketch artist. She was good at drawing people, though she didn't seem to care for it as much as drawing the animals. Maybe that was it. No. Then she would be gainfully employed and file yearly income tax.

"Missing person...that means you know my name!"

Celine's excitement cut into her thoughts.

"Martha Newcomb...went to college..." she started to recite.

Celine jumped up in a panic, "I don't want to hear it! I...don't want to know. Please, Darcy. Not right now," she implored. Celine then started to cry uncontrollably, and a frightened Darcy leaped up not knowing what to do.

Mandy jumped up in her corner with a bark.

Celine turned and ran out the front door into the cold night without grabbing a coat or closing the door behind her.

"Mandy, follow and protect," Darcy ordered, hoping she would have the sense to run into the barn where there were blankets and warm animals. "I should have picked up on her mentioning hysteria associated with amnesia. Darc, what does the word "dumb" bring to mind?" she muttered as she closed the door Celine left open.

Not wanting to dwell on something she couldn't change, she decided to work out.



Darcy gave the practice bag a roundhouse kick and then spun around to elbow the bag, dropped down into a Tai Chi Snake Creeps Down move, as the bag swung over her, up into rapid fist flurries, one to the neck, chest and groin, and then she stopped. Standing still for only a moment, she went into action, responding from the flashing light in her workout room.

Two people had entered the house upstairs. Her usual companions, Queenie and Lord Byron were not with her. Cursing to herself she moved to the backroom where there was another exit, not bothering to look at the security monitors she had not turned on. She got sloppy and wasted too much time. The visitors could well be Celine and Mandy...but she had forgotten to turn on the alarms while she was in the basement. The exit had three places she could escape to. One was outside, one to the barn and the other put her in the kitchen's broom closet. Unfortunately, if someone had a thermal visor they would be

following her passage. She decided to end up in the kitchen and listen. If it was Celine, chances are she would...

Voices. Celine was speaking with someone. Judhith. Darcy waited until the voices moved on into the front room before pushing the closet door open.

Mandy, was lying in her corner of the kitchen as if waiting for Darcy. She yawned when Darcy stepped out, her tail thumping an uneven rhythm on the floor.

"What are you doing in the closet?" Celine asked with a funny look on her face. She had returned to the kitchen to get a glass of water for Judhith.

"You have your quirks and I have mine," Darcy told her drawing herself up in pretended ruffled dignity.

"Okay," she replied, however her tone of voice indicated she would be bringing this up again. "Judhith brought Mike's horse over. She said he doesn't have shelter for Blackie in this weather. What weather is that?"

"It's predicted to snow in a few days. Mike's horse shed fell apart in the last windstorm."

"I told him not to be tearing down the other one." Judhith appeared in the kitchen doorway. "He shouldn't be building something he hasn't any experience building."

"That could go for all of us, Jude," Darcy told her gently. "So, what did you do with Blackie?"

"He's in the corral getting acquainted with the others. I also came to tell you a meeting is scheduled for Saturday and you're both expected."

"We'll be there," Darcy answered for both.

It meant that Jack found out something that they all needed to discuss, which also meant that it was about Celine, and she was just going to have to face her other face and the demons that went with it.

Judhith had been gone for an hour. Both Darcy and Celine elected to work out, each sweating in their respective spaces, their silence giving them the distance to gather whatever nerve they needed to do what needed to be done.

Darcy was lying on the weight bench pressing a light weight, working on reps rather than strength when a shadow changed her focus.

"I'd like to explain why I got upset earlier." Celine paused, taking the time it took Darcy to sit up from her exercise to get a handle on her fear of finding out something about herself that would warrant her leaving Darcy and LC.

Darcy dropped the bar on the Y-support and sat up, feeling guilty that maybe she should have asked the twins how to break this to Celine instead of just blurting it out.

"Okay," Darcy said. She wiped her brow and took a deep drink from her water bottle. Celine was twisting her towel nervously. She would have offered that they both take a shower and meet in the front room where she would feel more comfortable, but it did not look like Celine could wait that long.

"So..." Darcy encouraged.

"I don't want to leave here and I'm afraid that I have a life and obligations somewhere else that I still don't remember anything about."

"No one is asking you to leave, Celine. The meeting Judhith is speaking about is a formal invitation for you to meet everyone in LC. We're a small close-knit eccentric community. To outsiders we're strange, as in the outer limits kind."

Celine wrapped her arms around herself looking perplexed. "Does that mean this Martha is not married or..." She laughed embarrassed. "Well, I guess for sure I'm not running away from a straight marriage." Her face became red. She cleared her throat. "But, uhh." She let out a puff of air. "It doesn't mean I'm not in another type of relationship."

"Maybe, but I doubt that. The twins would have come over here to personally tell you that if it were so."

Celine let out a deep sob of relief, then added, "So, who is this Martha person? I'm sure I wasn't driving so just how did I get out here? That's what I'm scared of. And why are the police interested in me? I mean, what if I robbed a bank or something?"

"You have a joint account with a college friend...it has money in it so...it's not a money issue that you're wanted for. Besides, your face would be on another type of list."

"A joint account?" Celine could feel her stomach sink at the thought that there may be someone in her life that she owed fidelity to.

"Gail Delfin. She lives in Santa Monica, about three hours from Clairton."

"College. I'm in college?"

"No...well, actually, you graduated from UCLA about fifteen years ago, went to work for a firm you apprenticed to, and about two years ago quit that job. Jack was looking through the missing persons listings for us and that's when he found a picture of you and your name. From there he was able to get information on you, until about two years ago. He also said you have a yahoo account and hasn't been accessed since a few days before I found you in the rain. Any of that spark familiarity?"

Celine frowned. "I can barely remember when we met. I just remember that it was raining...and the cold."

Darcy was quiet as she let Celine think of it longer and then continued. "Well, Jack is still working on what you were doing since you quit your job. He's trying to find out why the police are concerned enough about you to post a missing persons but not a warrant."

That relieved Celine somewhat. "What day is today," she asked suddenly.

"Wednesday. Tomorrow is your eye surgery."

"Judhith was telling me about hers. Have you ever done it?"

"I don't need it."

"I asked Judhith about Dr. Reinhold saying it was a gift. She wouldn't talk about it...in fact she ignored my question."

"So..."

"Darcy why do I have to spell some things out to you?"

"Why do we have to spell some things out to you? If someone doesn't answer you, can't you get the hint? We don't keep asking you about what you won't answer..."

"That's different. I don't remember!"

"Well maybe we don't remember or want to!" Darcy returned.

Both women took deep breaths and then as if in silent agreement, left the room in separate directions.



"Who's going to be at this Saturday meeting?" Celine asked as they settled in Ellen's Toyota hybrid for the trip into the city for her eye surgery.

"Everyone that feels attending the meeting is important."

"I don't think some of the people in the hospice..."

"They don't attend meetings. They don't participate in things that have to do with worldly problems, Celine," Darcy decided to lower Celine's anxiety level by telling her a little about the purpose of their strange town. "Have you heard of Sedona, Arizona?"

"It's supposed to be a sacred place to the indigenous people that used to live around there, or like where the largest cathedrals in Europe are built...over places of energy that pagans had treated as sacred. Wow! I know things!"

"Yeah. Like that...Last Chance is also a power spot, which is why the hospice is where it is."

"Are they expecting to be cured?" Celine asked confused.

"No. The majority of the people in the hospice are here to prepare for their physical death. The stories that John reads are metaphoric so that their dreams can prepare him or her further, and where the cognitive side doesn't interfere."

"If these people know that they're dying and choose to come here to prepare, why do they need metaphors?"

"Resistance. It's like with people who go into therapy. They may have the best intentions of working on a problem, but you'll find a large percentage of those clients don't want to put any effort into the sessions other than to be there and talk...about wanting to change."

"So, just what does someone do to die in a more spiritual way?"

"They're here to make peace with themselves. You see, the majority of these people are angry. They've alienated themselves from friends and family and most importantly, from themselves."

"I haven't heard anyone say anything angry there," Celine looked bewildered, feeling like she was in a twilight zone. Where did she hear that from?

"Yeah, well you're probably not around the new arrivals. We have someone on each shift that has training in handling the toughies."

"Like you?"

Darcy gave a short laugh. "No. I do other things to support the community. That is *not* my cup of tea."

"The people that live around here, like Ellen and George...why are they here?"

"They just happened here, like you walking in the rain," she answered. "Or like you mentioned, someone tells them."

"Like this is really twilight zone," Celine told her with feeling.

Darcy waited for Celine to ask her why she was here, and she wondered if she would be able to tell her and how much.

"How did John get here?"

"Are you going to ask me about everyone?"

"I was going to work my way down the list..." she looked at Darcy.

"Well, how about we stop here, and we'll continue with the list another day."

"Okay. Darcy, you guys don't do strange ceremonies or anything..."

Darcy gave a short laugh. "That's subjective, don't you think?"

"What?"

"Some people may think our Chi Gung before we work out is a strange ceremony."

Celine nodded, deciding that maybe it would be a good time to stop asking Darcy questions. For the rest of the ride both were silent.



There were over fifty people in the store when they arrived. The couches were pushed against the bookshelves, and the merchandise racks were rolled against the walls giving more space. Foldout chairs were lined up in neat rows, and three coffee urns were full with decaf, caffeinated, and hot water labeled on them. Tea was stored in jars, requiring a pinch of leaves.

Darcy chose chamomile tea and Celine selected mint.

Celine was surprised by all the people. She didn't realize so many people were in Last Chance.

"Hi, Celine. I'm Mac. Nice artwork. Do you do anything else besides ink?"

Celine reflexively shook his hand.

"Max paints," was Darcy short introduction. "She does good pencil drawings. I sneaked a peek at some of her watercolor and not bad."

Celine looked at Darcy and then back at Mac. "I'm not that good. But I like working in watercolor."

"Junior likes your work too. He's our oil painter. I do acrylic and some watercolor. Maggie does sculpture in different mediums, and you've probably seen Darcy's clay work. We have a lot of artists here."

Celine looked at Darcy surprised. "I didn't know Darcy did anything but take care of barn animals and lost souls." She smiled at Darcy, thinking that Darcy was holding back on her.

"Alright, let's get this meeting going," James shouted above the din. The clanging of a bell followed and that got everyone's attention.

James and John were up front.

"We can take care of the usual business at another meeting. What we're here for is about our newest visitor, Celine." John gestured to her to stand.

Embarrassed, Celine stood up and quickly sat back down.

"It's up to her to decide whether she wants to join us or not."

"Celine, before your arrival, we discussed you and whether you were someone that falls into the type that would be comfortable living in community with us. What we know about you, and how you have been acting since your arrival, has led the majority of us to offer you a probationary trial to see if you would like to become a member. The probationary time is where you live amongst us and learn about us and we of you. If you decide to join us, you'll need to finish up whatever business you have outside of the community, and take up responsibilities in being a part of us."

"We're not a religious community nor a political one, per say. Whatever your beliefs are, are yours. We are an ecologically based community as well service orientated. Hospice is one facet of our responsibility. Living in self sustaining residences is another facet of our civic responsibility. Nothing is wasted and nothing is used that can't be recycled. Darcy can give you a tape to watch on how we manage our homes and if there is anything she can't answer, one of us can. Because we are a community, we share our funds. It's not to say you can't have your own bank accounts, just that each person is responsible for supporting the community in money as in work."

"Do you have any questions?"

Celine swallowed and nodded. "What if I don't want to belong?"

"Then you don't. We're not a cult nor do we practice membership drives," John grinned.

"You can be a member for five years or less and leave. James has left four times and returned. He has these urges to ski."

The others laughed.

James snorted and added, "They keep giving me a "'Break a leg,'" send off. Think how that makes me feel every time I hit the ski slopes."

Celine laughed with the others.

"So, think about it," James said. "Think about Martha Newcomb and her business."

"Don't feel embarrassed if one of us asks something you're not willing to share and you want to say, None of your business. That's perfectly legitimate. We all had another life before we came here that we no longer associate with. Remember, we're service to others orientated." John gave another smile and then looked around for any hands raised to say something.

Celine nodded, feeling Darcy's supportive presence near her.

"Okay. There're goodies in the back from Russell's trip to the city. Better get as much as you can. Brownies from our favorite bakery go fast."

He had not finished the sentence before everyone was up and moving to the back of the store.

Celine didn't go very far, as people she had never met greeted her and wished her well. They all liked her ink sketch and asked if she could do one of them. Darcy didn't leave her side.

On their ride home, Celine was exhausted. Darcy was relaxed. In Celine's pocket was a printed page on what James picked up about Martha Newcomb. Celine hadn't read it.

Chapter 8

The surgery was an eye opener, so to speak. Linda's father, Hank, was quick, efficient, and explained to her as she was prepped. A computer in Linda's office had done all the measuring. After going through the MRI and having her head immobilized, she thought she could take her head and eyelids being held in place.

The two left the medical building with Celine wearing dark glasses to protect her light sensitive eyes. That night she wore the protective goggles she was given while she slept.



Celine tried to get up early the next morning so she could work out with Darcy, but her dreams that night were so disjointed and filled with too much business, so she just laid staring up at the ceiling in the dark. It was the smell of coffee that got her up.

Darcy was sipping coffee as she read a horse magazine, probably months old like the rest of the magazines Darcy had.

"Morning," Darcy mumbled.

"Uh, huh. How can you tell, it's still dark out there? Yum," she said as she took a deep breath of the coffee.

As Celine poured her coffee, it dawned on her that it would have been a great mistake on her part to have interrupted Darcy's time alone in her weight room. In fact, waiting for Darcy to break the silence always seemed to work best.

Two solitary people enjoying companionship at a distance. Just like her and Gail. Chat room relationships were more their...

A crash from Celine's mug dropping onto the counter and bouncing into the metal sink had Darcy leaping up and Mandy scrambling to her feet whining and looking around.

"Gail and I...we're just friends!"

"Okay." Darcy could feel her heart beating rapidly.

"We don't see each other much...her signon is 'DAD', 'Dark and Deadly' and mine is 'California Dreamer' no... 'Dreamer', because someone else has 'California Dreamer'."

"Oh, crap," Darcy whispered. She was caught off guard.

"I'm remembering!" Celine continued excited. "Oh!" She leaned against the counter trying to decipher the mixed information she was processing. "I...we..." she shook her head confused. "I saw a gun battle...or...no that's probably a movie..." Celine was beginning to feel anxious.

"Stop! Right there," Darcy ordered her. "Now take a deep breath, and again. Listen to me...you don't have to process what you're starting to remember. Just let the images through without putting sense into them. Cognition gets in the way of..."

"Imagination," Celine nodded. "One of my professors used to say something like that."

Darcy's face colored for a moment. "Come on. Let's clean this up and get to the chores. Remember not to pick anything up that's heavy and keep those eye covers on when you're in a dusty area," she rattled off as she grabbed two towels and tossed one over the spilled coffee. She wanted some time alone to think about why hearing that

Celine's relationship with Gail was only a friendship made her suddenly want to sing. And even better...Celine's comment that she was 'Dreamer'.

Celine started to wipe up the spilled coffee and marveled at the fact that the mug didn't break.

The light in the kitchen dimmed slightly, letting Darcy know someone had entered the mudroom. Probably Judhith. She had not turned off her alarms this morning.

"Morning, Judhith," two voices echoed, though with different tones.

"He died last night," Judhith informed the two women.

"The AIDs patient," Celine guessed. That was one room she didn't enter because he needed the assistance of someone with more skills than she had.

"Yes, Alan." Judhith identified.

Darcy nodded, she understood. It would mean the next person on the list needed to get gas for the morgue wagon to take the body to their usual mortuary agent. The community's lawyer would have to get Alan's papers in order, and his room would have to be cleaned. Not many AIDs patients came their way, but they had one room that was set aside for patients with their special needs.

"I'll help with the chores. We need you to take the body to the mortuary and take care of the business in the city. It's Ellen's turn but George has a cold and she doesn't want to leave him."

Darcy nodded, understanding Ellen's fear of George dying while she was gone.

"How did the surgery go?" Judith asked Celine.

"Good. You were right. Just think about something else. He had some amusing stories to tell to take my mind off it."

"Oh, yeah."

As the three women moved through the barn, shoveling up soiled bedding and tossing down clean hay, Blackie made himself obnoxious by butting whoever he could reach with his head.

"What is with you?" Celine turned toward the horse angrily. Judhith suddenly was pulling Celine out of the corral where she had been dumping out oats in the pails.

"He's been trained to do that. Unfortunately, we haven't been able to untrain him. Now calm down."

"That is annoying!" Celine told her angrily.

"Yes. But think how he feels to be doing exactly what he has for years on the circus route and then he's dumped for a younger thing...and at the butcher blocks..."

"Judhith!" Darcy warned.

"He was! That's the truth!"

"We don't know if Blackie's owner was going to send him to the..."

"Don't say it!" pleaded Judhith.

"Okay. I think it was good for everyone's sake that Mike rescued him from the circus and that he's been teaching him other things besides his clown tricks. Now, let's finish this up."

"He's a clown's trick horse?"

"Yeah. And don't encourage him to show you his tricks," Judhith and Darcy spoke in unison.

"The guy taught him some rude things. Let's leave it at that," Darcy elaborated a little.

Chapter 9

"You don't have to come with me," Darcy told her as she changed into what she called her city clothes.

"Yes, I do. I need to tell Gail I'm all right."

"I don't think that's wise. Let's see what Jack has to say when he gets back. Of all the times he decides to chase down Crazy Albert. Why couldn't James go out?" she grumbled.

"That's the fate of the toss," Celine remarked off-handedly. "There are a lot of coffee houses that have internet services. That's what I did..." Celine broke off as she nodded to herself as the memory of why she did that came back. "Oh, gods. I think we're in trouble here. I have got to get in touch with Gail. She has a private investigator that does a lot of work for her. She can find out what's going on."

Darcy didn't comment on the 'we' part, but she again noticed the little butterflies in her stomach were fluttering a lot more than she could remember happening before Celine arrived. "Is this a healthy paranoia or what?" Darcy asked worried as she pulled her leather motorcycle jacket on. She was going to take the cycle to the hospice where the hearse that they used would be waiting for them with the body.

"I think I was working undercover for the police department, but I can't remember for what."

"You went from a design artist for a reputable firm to an undercover agent?" Darcy asked unbelievably.

Celine nodded, looking uncomfortable. "It's a long story." Celine hoped she would let it go at that.

"Well, it's a two-hour drive, so you can start the story when we're on the road. It's not like Alan's going to blab it to anyone."

"Funny. Very funny." Celine threw her leg over the back of the dirt bike and held on as a chuckling Darcy kick started it. She glanced at Mandy that was disappointed in being left behind.

"Judhith will be by..." she glanced up as the Toyota hybrid pulled up. "Hey, Ellen. How's George?"

"Coughing. I was going into town to pick up some herbs from Gole and thought I would thank you for taking my place."

"No problem."

"Do you think you can pick up some crossword puzzle books for me and some magazines on home and gardens for George?"

"Sure can."

"You're not going to put that small horse on your motorcycle, are you?" Ellen asked horrified, as she looked from the unhappy German Sheppard to the bike.

"Hardly. I don't have room for her and Celine. Can you give Mandy a ride in?"

"Sure can. I bet she'll like riding with me better than trying to balance on that thing."



The hearse was one of the old models that the previous owner had purchased and fixed up as his mad car. Whatever it was Celine felt uncomfortable until Mandy squeezed in the front seat with them, pushing Celine closer to Darcy. Things got a bit brighter for her.

"So, you were going to fill me in on stuff," Darcy prompted, as they bumped along a road that Celine was not sure if they had traveled before.

"I can say the same for you." She stared at the woman whose shoulders were rubbing against hers and giving her more warmth than sharing nearness would give. In fact, the only other times she was this close to Darcy was when she was upset or when they were sparing in forms of self-defense that Celine was sure she was not familiar with, reaffirming her belief that it was a fluke that she tossed Darcy.

"Okay. I was in a car accident and my twin heard about this place and had my sorry ass transported here to heal. Since I liked the place...I stayed."

"Twin? You have a twin...like James and Jack?"

"Yeah."

"Well..."

"So now about you," Darcy reminded.

Celine was going to press Darcy for more details but realized that what she had to reveal was going to be more important than her curiosity about Darcy.

"I was remembering things but nothing that made sense and now I know it wasn't in sequential order..." She shook her head realizing that made no sense. "I was remembering what started everything... well not everything, there was an incidental meeting outside of the office I worked at. It made an impression on me, and I decided that I needed to do something about it before..." Celine's voice trailed off. Where to start? Did everything start with the meeting on the street?

"I quit my job to make peace with myself. I didn't see the world as a nice place and yet I knew if I looked in the right places, I would see beautiful things and people. I just couldn't do it living the way I was. I was too paranoid to get involved with eco groups, demonstrations, and it was not just enough to fire off Emails to public officials because their workers only select mailings that support the party line so our public officials, even if they have the best intentions never get a balanced view of an argument or have a chance to grow into someone more enlightened because they are being propagandized as much as we are. Do you realize that this is what has happened to all of us since childhood? Our parents' parrot what the government news tells them, the school teaches only government lies for what they term history, and as we start listening to the news we're listening to the same crap!" Marti stopped for air and then became embarrassed at Darcy's blank expression. "There I go...standing on my soap box, as Gail would say."

"So, what happened?" Darcy encouraged, uncomfortable with the intensity of Celine's feelings, but needing to know what occurred. She breathed in deeply, letting the tension it created in her dissipate. She reminded herself to give Celine Barbara Hand Clow's book to read on *Catastrophobia*. Maybe it would help her not be so intense.

"I lived on the street. Sometimes I had places to crash at, like at friends who I returned the favor by doing their laundry, cleaned their apartments...anyway I met someone, another person who like me, did odd jobs to pay for safe places to spend the night. We teamed up. If either of us didn't have a safe place, we would sleep on the street

but one would watch out for the other." She glanced at Darcy for a moment, noting her profile and watching her eyes studying the cars on the freeway. She took reassurance from her quiet presence.

"There are predators out there that look for a woman who doesn't have anyone to look out for her, and they don't always have that sign on them saying what they are. *She* showed me how to defend myself."

Darcy's eyes flicked over to hers, picking up the unhappiness in the slump of her shoulders.

"Anyway, we met up in the afternoons to find out if the other found a place or not. On this one night neither of us had a place so we were going to meet at our usual rendezvous. I was late." A sob twisted her face into anguish, and tears rolled down her cheeks.

"There's a box of tissues in the dash," Darcy offered.

Celine's throat was tight and her heart hurt, but after a good blow of her running nose she continued. "I heard voices arguing from our place. It's two blocks from a cyberspace bar I would visit once a week. It was a Wednesday night. I was frightened for Jenny when I heard one voice, so I picked up something in the alley to use as a weapon and crept up to see what was happening. I didn't hear her voice, just two men's. One calm and the other angry. I hid behind some trash bins. There were two cops in their uniforms. One had two stripes on his arm. Then, it happened so fast, he put a gun to her head and shot her...execution style!" Celine sobbed and covered her face. She could feel Mandy's nose touching her cheek and suddenly Darcy was holding her. It occurred to her that no one was steering the hearse.

After a while Celine stopped crying and Darcy kissed her tenderly on the forehead.

"Feeling better?"

Celine nodded. She took a deep breath and let it out. It felt good to tell the story. She was not sure if she had told anyone. "He said that was putting an end to the problem. I heard they beat her up really bad before they shot her. The two officers called it in as a gang slaying." Celine was shaking so much Darcy held onto her hand until Celine squeezed her hand back.

"Celine, was there a light in the alley?"

"Yes, over the computer store's back door. They had a light real high up with a wired thing around it so that no one could throw something to put it out. It lit up half the area so if anyone approached where we slept, they would have to go through the lit-up area. Jenny thought that made it safer than most places."

Darcy rubbed her hand over Celine's arm until the shaking in her limbs lessened.

"So, to shorten this long story..." She blew her nose softly, "I was recruited by Jenny's partner to take her place. He didn't say who he worked for or I can't remember. He said it was a drug enforcement agency that believed the local police department was running a drug and prostitution ring." Celine paused, and then grimaced, shaking her head. "I can't say for sure if he told me that or Jenny told me that. I'm really confused right now."

"I believe it," Darcy muttered, bringing back some of her own demons. "So..." she squeezed Celine's arm gently, encouraging her to go on.

"Jenny's partner was Carlos. I think his first name was his real name because he always answered to it, just not so good with his last name, Hernandez. He was the supervisor of a courier company that would give us a job when they got really busy. One day Carlos was arguing with the police officer that killed Jenny about being short handed and he had no one except me. So, I get chosen...just right where Carlos wanted me to be. My first job as 007 and crap happens," she laughed sounding hysterical, and then gulped to contain her nervousness. "A gun battle outside where I delivered the package erupts and chicken me, high tails it out of there...and I've been on the run since..."

"When did the gun battle happen?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Unless it's a Wednesday when I log on the internet to talk to Gail, all days are the same, and there's Sundays. The soup kitchen people get upset if we don't stay for prayers. I don't think it was Sunday. I'm definitely not cut out for the spy business."

Darcy squeezed her hand then checked her side mirrors to pull back onto the freeway. Both women were quite with their own thoughts for a while.

"Was it around the time you were on the highway?" Darcy's voice broke the silence seven off-ramps later. Celine knew that because she was counting them to take her mind off haunting thoughts.

She shook her head looking apologetic. "I don't remember much around the time when you found me. I just remember it was raining and someone gave me a ride."

"Me. You don't remember it being me?"

"The only thing that is clear is one day I realized I was washing dishes in your kitchen."

There was more silence.

"Celine..."

"Friends call me Marti..."

"Well, let's stick to Celine. If you have all this hanging over you, we don't want ears to perk up with your name spoken." *And I like Celine better.*

"Okay."

"So...you're Dreamer, huh?"

Celine turned to look at her for a moment. *She logs on to gay chat rooms. I remember that day in the store...* "So...who do you logon as?"

Darcy chuckled remembering the down and dirty conversations they had over the internet. Darcy was smart enough to know that people tended not to be quite what they showed themselves to be in chat rooms, which was why she liked to play the games. Her past time was to see if she could figure out what these people really were like.

"In Your Dreams," she smiled.

"Get off! You are not! Are you really? Really!" Celine started to laugh with Darcy, with Mandy adding her bark to the noise. Most of the depression that was surrounding Celine lifted, letting her forget for a moment that she had seen a friend gunned down.

The rest of the drive was spent exchanging ideas they had about the other characters that were in the chat room regularly.



"Celine, wake up. We're here." Darcy touched Celine's head that was on her shoulder.

Celine straightened up, looking around her. They were in a parking bay and according to the sign, it was Morgan's Family Mortuary. A middle-aged man and a woman stepped out. Darcy gave each a hug and then handed over the paperwork that Clinton West, the community lawyer had sent to the hospice, via the internet.

"This is Celine, Celine, Philip and his wife Char. Char, Alan has no relatives that he wanted to acknowledge but chances are when his death is posted all sorts of people will be crawling out of the woodwork. He has bills but selling his property will cover them. He's left the rest of his money to the hospice."

Char nodded, giving her husband a rueful look. "As long as someone sees profit, they'll be howling foul play. We'll send them over to Clinton. Ellen sent an Email. She said your sister sent an Email that your new vehicle is ready and you have to come over and visit if you want it."

"They're back from the family cruise then. I must leave the hearse off to get the shocks and oil pan replaced. Do you have someone you can recommend?"

"Take it to Atlantic Car Repair. We take ours there. Give them this." Philip pulled out a card, wrote something on it and handed it to Darcy. "It's a family member so he'll give you family rates."

"Okay. Thanks. Mind if I use your phone?"

While Darcy phoned her sister, Celine used the restroom and washed her face. Meeting back in the hearse, Darcy was playing with a happy Mandy who had a new chew stick.

"Della will have one of the kids pick us up at the repair shop," Darcy explained to Celine.



Darcy's "one of the kids" was a young girl with plenty of rings in her ears, eyebrows, lip, and dark makeup that matched her sulky mood and clothing. Her vehicle was a black BMW that was too flashy and fast for someone that Celine felt was suicidal.

"Barbara Jean, if you don't drive like you want to live to see tomorrow, we're changing places," Darcy told her as she gripped the hand hold above her head.

That only egged her on but at the next stop Darcy pulled out the ignition key, stepped out of the passenger seat and walked around to the driver's seat. She pulled the young girl out and dragged her to the passenger seat, strapped her in and shut the door. Once in the driver's seat, Darcy strapped in and started the car up.

"You drive like an old lady!" the young girl started.

"I learned to love life," Darcy looked over at her.

That brought a silence that didn't lessen the tension that went on for the next twenty minutes. The road they drove along had fences that gave little room for a pedestrian to walk, except in the drainage channel that ran the length of the road on each side. Well spaced "No trespassing. Private Property" signs were broken by the occasional elaborate portals that were gates into the property the fences guarded. Darcy steered the car over to the ninth portal along the road and came to an idle, as she leaned out to punch in numbers the gate started to open.

"Hey, stranger! Get your butt in here! You owe me a game of car racer!" a deep voice boomed out of the speaker.

"Hah!" Darcy replied as she sanely drove up the curving drive that had Celine wowing at the landscape and gardens some of the area revealed.

"Get out crazy Barbara," Darcy ordered, pocketing the keys, and walking around to unlock the passenger door and drag a still sulking Barbara Jean out by the elbow.

Celine only observed but was silently applauding Darcy. She and Mandy had been hanging onto each other in fear of their lives when she drove. Mandy happily trotted beside Celine up the stairs.

A young woman with her arm wrapped around the waist of a healthy young looking white haired man were waiting on the top stairs of a three story Victorian house, complete with a widow's walk. She gave Darcy a hug without interfering with Darcy's hold on Barbara Jean.

"I thought she was grounded from driving," the woman remarked to her companion.

"She is. Barbara Jean, you're getting to be a real pain," the older man told her.

"Celine, you met crazy Barbara, this is her father and my brother-in-law Anthony Westerly, and my twin Della...and I'm the oldest," she added.

"But I'm the smartest," Della returned promptly. "Come on young lady. Get your butt in the house and no sass. Go help Margaret fix lunch. You have kitchen duty for the week, if I remember right."

"How are you Celine, welcome to my humble adobe." Anthony gestured to his acres of land. "Come on in everyone. We got Cookie preparing some really interesting dishes we learned about on the cruise."

"Humble? I guess if you compare it to the Wrigley's place on Catalina Island," she replied.

"Who did you send to pick us up?" Darcy asked.

"Junior, but he probably let his sister con him into giving up the privilege."

"Privilege? What is junior grounded for?"

"Drugs," Della and Anthony replied in unison.

"He was drunker than a wino in the pool area with a group of his friends. He's been told it was the last time he could have parties on the property. That's all I need for that damn new police chief they hired to say Anthony was a dealer and he seizes my property."

"He can only seize what is proved to have been purchased as a result of..."

Anthony waved his hand. "I know what the law used to be...but this new guy...Chief Guidio Mendoza..."

Celine stopped in her tracks, turning pale. Quickly she recovered and ran to catch up with the group. Instead of admiring the art and architecture of the house, her mind was going in circles. Guidio was a name Carlos mentioned. Maybe it was a coincidence.

Lunch was interesting with a bored teenager joined by her brother and two other cousins that Celine was too distracted to pay attention to. After lunch the cousins and brother and sister were ordered to help clear the lunch dishes and they were to wash them as punishment for letting Barbara Jean misbehave.

"So, where's my truck?" Darcy demanded of her sister.

"Ah ahh. No, you don't. You're playing a game with me. Five out of six. You owe me," Tony said.

"Alright." Darcy looked over at Celine. "We play for things. Like my new vehicle. The insurance company paid for part and 'loser' over here paid the rest. What do you think my place could use? Never mind..." she quickly told Celine.

Celine was about to tease Darcy again that her large front room could use one of those big screen televisions with a satellite dish that the small café had and the store shared. Darcy had been horrified that Celine would wish that on her, pointing out that she would get too many visitors dropping in who did not want to drive into town.

While the two sat in front of the huge screen Della invited Celine out to view the grounds that Della loved.

"BJ!" Della called out. Celine turned to see the young girl looking unhappy, standing near the kitchen door. "Come on with us."

When BJ was closer Della continued, "I can't name all the plants, and I want Celine to get a real tour." Della reached out and hugged the young woman and then pushed her gently toward the golf cart they were headed for.

BJ, surprisingly enough, blushed and nodded. This was a different face to what she had earlier exhibited. Celine wondered if she had a twin and it was the evil one she had witnessed earlier. Della slid into the driver's seat with Mandy clambering onto the back seat as if she knew where she was to sit. BJ sat next to her, wrapping her arms around the happy German Sheppard.

They started off along a road that was like a path, surrounded by landscaped bushes and then suddenly they were out in the open.

"Oh! That is wonderful." Celine laughed with delight. A small train started, even puffing out smoke from the stack. A miniture town was set up with people and businesses. They followed the train on a lower road and to Celine it was a strange feeling to see the small scenes unfold. A few times the train gave a 'whooh hoooh' and chugged on.

"It was BJ's idea. While she was recuperating from the accident, she started this project and had everyone running around getting this and that because she was being one royal B to the staff and family."

"Well, it's nice. Did Darcy help too?" she asked curious.

For a few moments there was silence. Surprised, Celine looked at Della. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry about Darcy."

"She was still recovering from the accident," was all Della would say.

Celine's antennae stood up and quivered. "So, BJ and Darcy were in the same accident?"

"Yes." Della again didn't elaborate but the reflection in Celine's sunglasses of BJ showed it was not a subject either wanted to discuss.

Celine thought maybe a change of subject would break the tension. "You know, Mandy defies all my expectations of a German Sheppard. I always thought they would be aggressive and unfriendly toward strangers."

"She is one big sensitive boob!" Della told her laughingly. "When BJ and I would get into these shouting matches when she was still a puppy, she would cry and whine like someone stepped on her tail. For her sake we found a calmer home with Darcy."

BJ giggled. "Come on, Mom. Darcy just got out of the hospice and could barely make it to the toilet and back to bed the same day on her own."

Della smiled and glanced back at BJ. "It was a wonderful gift BJ, and I think both Mandy and Darcy love you for it."

Celine looked alarmed at this bit of news. "How on earth did she take care of a puppy if she had problems herself? Did someone help?"

"I'm sure she had plenty of help. She was only four months out of six months in traction, was partially paralyzed, always in pain, and she had a contract out on her life... Besides being depressed she was a real grouch to be around," Della explained softly but there was a lot of pride in her telling.

"Who put a contract out on her?" Celine asked worried.

"Wennie Officer Ernie Martin...her partner!" BJ angrily returned, causing Mandy to bark.

"Hon," Della cautioned BJ.

"He was the one that sideswiped my car, just about killing Aunt Darcy and me. He tried to kill her when she was in the hospital too."

"We only suspect, we don't know for sure. BJ couldn't sleep on her second night in the hospital; she palmed the sleeping pill. So, she went looking for Darcy, no doubt thinking she could talk her into getting both of them out of there before they were supposed to be released."

"No. It wasn't that," BJ told her vehemently. "I told you, no one would tell me if she was okay. They kept treating me like I was some kid that couldn't hear the truth! So, I found out where she was and went to see what was so secret about her."

"That's when she saw the police officer that hit her car wearing a lab coat and walking down the hall, so she followed him. He was about to go into Darcy's room when he spotted this wild looking patient, looking part mummy and part mad woman shouting in her cell phone. He took off. BJ woke everyone not on sleeping pills. She called her brother and had him sitting by Darcy's bed until she got a hold of me." Della shook her head. "Tony was on the east coast and was due in. We weren't married then, not even close to dating." Della smiled back over her shoulder at BJ. "Anyway, when he gets into town, crap hits the fan. He had a private bodyguard posted inside of her room and BJ's, and he had an injunction filed against her partner and the police department to keep their distance from her."

"Why would he try and kill her?"

"Ernie and a group of his friends were running a house that had underage girls of seventeen acting as their private stable of servants and prostitutes. Most of them were street kids that they busted. They also had some older women that could pass for younger. Darcy overheard the existence of this place by accident. It was referred to as 'the boys' club'. At the time, she had been putting up with a lot of harassment by her male coworkers, so she thought this bit of information that came her way was part of it. So, Darcy didn't speak to anyone about it except me. She didn't know what to do about it because she had no proof, only a few overheard conversations, which could well be a plant."

"Wow," Celine agreed softly.

"Well, to make a very long story short, Tony had a PI firm investigate. It turns out that the mayor belonged to this club. His claim when he was caught was that the girls

were eighteen and over and just looked young. That blew a lot of nice people away. Anyway, Ernie committed suicide when all but one of the girls' pressed charges of being forced into being a sex slave to these fine upstanding church going men," Della finished.

"Serves them right," BJ snorted.

"They got the pastor at their church to testify on their behalf. They claimed it was something a homosexual made up to frame upstanding church going Christian men bent on destroying heterosexual families. And if it were in the bible belt it may have worked, but Californians are not blinded by that rhetoric."

Celine had a sense of familiarity."

"So, how did you meet Aunt Darc?" BJ asked as they moved by a fountain that had a few ducks waddling about.

"In the rain. I was stranded on the freeway."

"Yeah? Darcy doesn't usually like to leave the community so it must have been when she had to go into the city to sign papers over the wreckage of her pickup. Which is a blessing in disguise. That thing needed to be replaced."

BJ nodded. "But it sure was fun to take for a spin in the dirt," she smirked.

"You will not do that with this one," Della warned.

"I'll give it about a month in that dirt, and it will be ready," BJ teased.

The small drive wound around other places that did not have a train and miniature towns, but from what the Westleys were saying, they had frequent family picnics in various places.

They also had stables. The cart moved alongside a corral where horses moved toward their cart, perhaps curious to see who was visiting.

"That's Jasper out of Shafiq. He's Ginger's Pride's sire. Reshmi is over in the stables up the lane. That's Ginger Ale's dam. They come from Simeon Arabians," BJ explained. "Her mares are good stock. Good legs, perfect necks with the right size to body. The offspring are consistently beautiful. We only breed straight Arabians. We got Darcy a colt from True Colours," she bragged.

Celine had no idea what that meant.

"Don't tell her though. It's going to be her birthday present."

Della stopped the cart and before Celine could ask just when that occasion was, the two women were out. They spoke with a woman who was inspecting the hooves of a stud, standing between two posts with a line on each side of his cheek harness keeping him from dancing away. His coat was burnished red and his white stockings made it look like his nick name would be socks.

The horse was restless and moved about so Celine stayed where she was in the cart.

"Are you cycling?" Della asked as she returned to the cart.

"No. Why?"

"A stallion smells a woman bleeding, and he wants to mount her," BJ told her smartly.

"BJ," Della told her disapprovingly. "It makes the stallions restless. He's a bit jumpy, that's why I'm asking," Della explained more delicately.

"I will stick to the mares," Celine said.

"BJ," Della warned, as if anticipating another comment. "Come on, let's go for a walk," Della invited.

Celine wished Della had let the brash teen speak because she was really curious now. BJ's green eyes were sparkling and the smirk on her face told Celine maybe even mares were not safe to be around when she was on her monthly.

Both Westleys seemed to love the creatures, sharing little bits of likes and dislikes of each animal they stopped in front of. The graceful creatures seemed to like them, for each elegant head reached out to touch and be touched as they passed. By the time they made it back to the house, it was dark and dinner was being prepared by the nice aromas that assailed their nostrils as they walked through the foyer.

"We took Cookie with us on our cruise. She went visiting the chefs on the kitchen deck and got every receipt we liked," BJ told Celine proudly as they followed their noses.

Dinner was not just delicious but the most entertaining that Celine ever remembered having. From the bantering and quips that never were mean spirited, Celine felt she was surrounded by a loving clan, which included Margaret the cook, whom the kids had long ago nicknamed Cookie, which stuck.

Chapter 10

"Now remember, don't say much," Darcy cautioned Celine again.

Celine knew Darcy kept repeating it because she felt something was not right. Now that she knew some of Darcy's background, she figured she would know better.

While Darcy bought coffee for both, Celine sat at one of the vacant PCs in the cybercafé and logged on. She found her Email box full so without even reading them she selected all and deleted them.

"Aren't you even curious?" Darcy sat next to her and handed her a cup of coffee.

"Nope." She turned to glance at the woman that she was beginning to like more than what she allowed herself to feel for people along the romantic lines. Even now she felt fluttering in her stomach which she had no intention of discouraging.

Darcy's gray eyes darkened, and a smile creased her lips as she returned the stare.

Celine broke eye contact and took care of her business, sending Gail an Email and then she switched to the chat room she normally logged onto. This was not Wednesday evening so she didn't expect Gail to be around, which was good since Gail would want to know too much.

"I'm going to sign on over there." Darcy leaned close to her ear.

Celine giggled and scratched her ear. "Shall we heat up the room?"

"I think that will be fun," Darcy told her.

After an hour of titillating not just the chat room but themselves, they both signed off.

"You could have taken it easy!" Darcy told her frustrated.

"You could have cooled a bit yourself," Celine came back tartly. "Have you thought about how much gas this thing uses?" Celine asked as she climbed into the cab.

"We'll convert it to something we have more of. Gas and diesel aren't the only things you put in a car to make it go. And don't say mice," she warned.

"What are we going to do about the hearse?"

"The kids will bring it in about two weeks. It gives Pete at the car repair shop some time to get the old parts together and really go over what needs to be fixed."

"We need to pick up groceries, staples and some horse feed before we go back." Celine was looking at the list she held in her hand. "Good thing you have a lot of room in the back."

Darcy smiled. "We would have had plenty of room in the back of the hearse."

"Betcha the shocks aren't as good. Frankly, I feel a lot better in your truck than a hearse."

The ride was quiet for a few miles and then Celine decided to broach a personal question. "How did you come to LC?"

Darcy pursed her lips and was quiet for a few more miles and then sighed. "I was one of those angry patients. I got over it," she told her shortly.

"So, you stayed in the hospice?" she encouraged.

"At first. And then one day..." she glanced at Celine and then back at the road, "when I got to the point where I could get up and use the toilet without assistance I moved into my own place."

Celine rubbed her forehead in frustration. Darcy obviously was not the person to go to if she wanted information about her, which reminded her of John's warning to not dig into Darcy's personal life.

"So, do you have family that you need to send word to?" Darcy asked, interrupting Celine's train of thought.

"No. I lost the last of my family in my first year at college," she said without thinking."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Darcy told her in a serious tone. "It must have been hard on you."

Celine turned her head to study the dark profile. "We hadn't spoken since I was fifteen." She smiled without mirth. "I was the proverbial 'black sheep'. I moved in with my grandmother until she died." She wrapped her arms around herself. "By then, I was old enough to live on my own."

Her voice sounded distant to Darcy, as if she were looking back at something.

"They died in early December," she continued. "What's so ironic is that, that Christmas was the best I have ever had. Gail invited a group of us from our dorm that had no family to celebrate the winter break to her family's house. Gail's family was vacationing in Australia where it was warm. She said all the kids were grown up and her parents saw no reason spending their winters in the cold." Celine chuckled. "Gail was a black sheep too, which may have been why we got along so well. She was the only child that went to college on an athletic scholarship. And then four years later set up a scholarship for college students, the type no scholarship covers. Middle class and no special grades or talent." Celine looked at Darcy, proud of her friend. Darcy glanced her way and then returned her eyes to the road, saying nothing.

"Anyway, there were about seventeen of us girls hanging around the college. None of us had ever been in a house with more than three bedrooms." She sighed at the memory. "Gail told the staff that was still at the family house that they could go home to their families if they wanted to. I think two of them didn't have family, so they joined us." Celine wiped tears from her eyes. "It was wonderful. She and I went out and picked a huge tree, unflocked from a church tree lot. Because it was snowing outside, we voted that was all the white we could handle. Gail and one of the house staff...Charlene, I think...dragged out boxes of different types of ornaments that were stored in the garages.

Her mother usually did different themes each year. We couldn't decide just what we wanted. I mean I've only seen that many different ornaments in a store. Gail left us to decide while she went into town with Charlene's husband...or was it her boyfriend? Anyway, they went to pick up a turkey, and all the fixings. She also bought everyone a gift and a stocking that she stuffed with things. It was so thoughtful and so like her.

"We sang songs and just had such a wonderful time. Since they only had seven guest rooms and some of us would have ended up sleeping in the main room where the tree was, we all grabbed pillows and blankets and slept together on the floor with a real Christmas tree smelling up the room. We talked all night, told stories...it was just...beautiful." She looked down at her hands. "I guess I feel guilty because during that time my parents were already dead and buried and I didn't even know it."

"You know what George says?"

"Minister George?" Celine asked teasing.

"Yes. He says when people die, they lose that prejudice and burden of who they were in the physical and can see things without the veil of human hypocrisy."

Celine watched the dark profile as she spoke. "So, you're saying...?"

"Maybe your parents were there and rejoiced with you that you were able to find a group to enjoy that time with."

Celine tilted her head and looked out at the night. "Maybe. They sure had a lot of prejudice and hypocrisy to lose, to say nothing of bitterness. They were losers, Darcy. Pure and simple. They hated everything, everyone and even themselves. I can't understand how I could have a loving grandmother and her daughter was a beast." Celine snorted and shook her head. "I don't like remembering them."



"Hey, wake up. Do you have to use the restroom?"

Celine's eyes blinked open in panic. She looked around frantically.

They were at a busy gas station.

"Come on, before the whites of my eyes turn yellow. Mandy, let's go potty," Darcy called to the napping dog.

The three looked around as they walked into the store.

"Hey! No dogs. Read the sign!"

Celine shivered and looked up at Darcy. Darcy unhurriedly walked over to the guy and had a few words with him. Whatever it was, Mandy's presence was not objected to anymore. As they were pulling out, Celine looked back at the store clerk who was watching them through the glass window.

"There's no license plate number for him to write down and he won't know which way we're going," Darcy told her.

"That's a truck stop. He doesn't have to know. All he has to have is a CB or truckers who do." Celine couldn't stop her hands from shaking in her lap.

Darcy pulled over to the side of the road and stopped the vehicle. "Okay, what's happening?" she asked softly, reaching to hold the cold hands that shook in her warm ones. Mandy's muzzle was resting on the console, her worried eyes riveted on Celine.

"Does this remind you of something?"

Celine shivered harder and a soft keening started in the back of her throat.

"Someone was chasing you?"

A nod.

"You're safe now. We're off the road...in a big truck..."

At the word truck Celine frantically looked out the windows then began to claw at the door handle, missing it to let her out.

"Celine, that was then this is now! Look at me, hon. Look! Come on," she coaxed. "See me? Good. Good. You're scarring Mandy."

Mandy was whining with her luminous eyes looking at Celine.

"That's better. What type of truck are you scarred of...?"

Celine swallowed and got out faintly. "White...just white. One of the lights was sideways...it came after us..."

"Who is 'us'?" *That sounds like my truck!*

"Gail," she whispered hoarsely. "We crashed."

"Well, we know she didn't die," Darcy reassured her. "Her bank would know."

"What?"

"Her bank would know. Her business would know, and the highway patrol would know. The only people that died were three guys in a white truck...my truck," she muttered in disgust. "They stole *my* truck after robbing *my* bank and totaled it."

Celine burst out laughing, dispelling the cold in the pit of her stomach. "Sounds like you were having a bad day," Celine told her while squeezing Darcy's hands. "I'm alright." She took a steady breath, with Darcy squeezing her hands back. "We can get going. Really. I'm fine now."

Darcy smiled in the dark. She restarted the truck and headed back to the freeway.

They were on the freeway for about twenty minutes when flashing lights appeared behind them and stayed with them.

"Now what?" she muttered. She could feel Celine's anxiety rise again. "Mandy, get your nose back." She pulled to the side and waited. "Don't reach for anything. I don't want anyone nervous."

"Hello, Darcy," a smiling woman's face appeared at the driver's side. "I thought that was you Richard was describing. Hello, Mandy. Yep. There aren't many soft spoken tall blond headed women with a German Sheppard that wanders the freeways. I see you have your replacement vehicle. Nice."

"Hello, Cindy. Celine this is Cindy, Cindy this is Celine."

Cindy nodded at the dark silhouetted figure in the truck next to a woman she would like to have another night out with, and wondering what the relationship was between the two women in the cab.

"Cindy, were you working the night my truck was totaled?"

Cindy shook her head. "The Beaver was." She grinned at the name. "It was his night for finding wrecked vehicles. He found what was left of a Beemer too. He didn't see anyone on his first search of the Beemer, but when he went back to wait for the tow truck, he found the driver unconscious a few yards from the car. He said it looked like she dragged herself from the vehicle and just passed out. She had her cell phone near her but up in that area there's no signal."

"How is the woman?"

"She's fine. Got her to the hospital. She spent a day there for observation. The last I heard she was released with a broken collarbone and that's it. If you're going to get in a car accident Beemers are the best for that. Why are you asking?"

"Think those bank robbers had anything to do with it?"

"She ID'd them. Said they were slamming her car. There was white paint on what was left of the driver's door and her bumper in the back looked like the truck butted...hey, you alright?"

Darcy turned around and quickly removed her seat belt while Cindy moved quickly to the passenger side, pulled the door open, and removed the seatbelt. She half carried the hyperventilating woman from the car and sat her down on the side of the road. Mandy followed, jumping out of the truck and pressed up against Celine. When Celine was feeling better, she was moved back into the truck with a new blanket wrapped around her. Darcy always had emergency supplies in her vehicles.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" Cindy asked in an undertone, pulling Darcy aside.

"Was the driver of the other car Gail Delfin?"

"Yes. Was she the passenger?"

"How did you know there was a passenger?"

"I went back to have a look the next day. Beaver leaves a lot out in his reports. The tracks told me there were two people in the accident. The passenger pulled the driver out, then headed back to the car but veered off toward the freeway. I thought at the time the passenger was looking to flag someone down, but the tracks were weaving. I checked with truckers that pass the area regularly and they said they would keep an eye out and an ear open to see if anyone picked up someone in that area. Haven't heard back yet...but some of them drive through a lot of states before returning this way. She wearing contacts? I found a pair of glasses...thick ones...near the wreck."

"I found her the day I was driving back. She was walking along the road on the off ramp after Farmsdale. By then it was raining pretty hard."

"That was about three or four days later," Cindy mused, "going in the opposite direction."

"Uh huh. Let's leave those days alone for a while. She's just recovering from her amnesia, and I don't want to push her over the edge by asking her to remember something that may be traumatic."

Cindy nodded. She knew where Last Chance was and could always stop over on her days off to have the blanks filled in. Then her thoughts went to how she could kick Beaver's butt without their Captain finding out how his son-in-law really fucked up this time. The guy wasn't a bad sort, just not into details which one day will get him or his back-up killed.

"So..." Cindy hinted.

"Do you have Delfin's number?"

"It's in the file..." Cindy said.

"Cindy, can I tell you something and then you just keep it between us?" Darcy was trying to figure out how to get Cindy to not add to the case file and was basing her trust of the woman by her one-night stand...and an enjoyable one at that.

Cindy nodded, happy to have a puzzle fit together.

"Her memory is coming back in bits. She remembers she worked as a stooge for a law enforcement type, but something went bad and she's been lying low, waiting for the good guys and bad guys to sort themselves out. Gail and her have been friends since college, so I think she knows that Celine was running from someone or she would have

mentioned that she had a passenger. I'm basing my belief on the fact that she had no memory loss of the incident because she was able to ID the truck."

Cindy nodded slowly. "So, what do you want?"

"I don't really know but something about her being a stooge for any law enforcement and left out to dry doesn't sit well with me. Collateral damage is not a problem with some types."

"Are you going to tell me her real name?"

"Martha..."

"Newcomb. I thought I recognized her. You're right to think something stinks."

Cindy shook her head as she thought about what this all meant to her career if it got out. Her and Beaver would be looking for a new job...but Beaver had his father-in-law and she had only herself. "A missing persons came out a few days after the accident, with a younger picture of her. And then, four days after the accident a guy came asking questions. The day after you stopped by, as a matter of fact," she grinned. "But as you know, he came too late. The rains by then had washed away the tracks and the Beemer was already towed to the wrecking yard and smashed beyond recognition." She paused, thinking. "That guy made my nape hairs rise. He wanted to speak with Beaver about his report. Beaver came out looking sweaty and grim. Said the guy grilled him as if he were a criminal or something."

"Who was it?"

"Agent George Monteagudo. I always thought agents traveled in pairs like nuns...this one was alone and was driving his own car."

"Out of state license plates?"

Cindy smiled. "I see the spirit hasn't lessened. They were California but didn't have the city on the license frame."

Darcy blinked for a moment.

"I looked you up. You were a transfer from the military police to your hometown PD. You were in your rookie year when a fellow police officer sideswiped a car that hit you, putting you and the driver of the vehicle in the hospital. The same officer committed suicide about a year later when he was one of the officers arrested for running a prostitution house that had some underage girls."

Cindy leaned forward peering into the darkened eyes of Darcy who was getting angry.

"I like to know why some people put out this mystique that they are more than what they appear to be," she told her softly. "I'm just a woman who likes to ferret out information during slow times. Your secrets are safe with me."

"What else did you dig up on me?" she asked quietly.

"You disappeared while the trial went on. The word amongst the 'brotherhood' was you blew the whistle on them. Some of those idiots don't understand that if you let filth in your 'hood' you become filthy too. They let their 'brothers' run a prostitution ring and with young girls...I hope they got the whole group, and they all get to play cell maid to someone that takes issue with that."

Darcy nodded. "I've retired from that sort of stuff."

"I don't think so," Cindy told her softly. "So, what are you going to do?"

"I'm advising her to lay low and see how much of her memory comes back. Then go from there."

Cindy nodded. "Not too many people know about your little community." She smiled at Darcy. "But a few of us who have sick family members, we know."

"Anyone I know?"

Cindy shook her head. "My grandmother is working on everyone's last set of nerves but she's not quite ready yet. When she's at a point, you'll see me with her tied and gagged in the back seat."

Darcy smiled. "The hospice will be there."



"What were you two talking about," Celine asked quietly.

Darcy looked over her shoulder and pulled back onto the road. "You, me, the hospice...little things like that."

"I thought you hated to give out personal information," Celine asked jealously.

Darcy glanced at her quickly and then smiled. "She was giving me my bio. I think she was letting me know that she could be trusted by not saying anything about you."

"She recognized me?"

I'll have to get Jack to check her out. "On a missing persons poster and because a guy that gave her the creeps from the Feebs came asking about Gail's accident. Gail's fine, by the way. Does the name Agent George Monteagudo ring any bells or start any shivers?"

"Start shivers?"

"When I get a bad feeling about someone, I get these shivers that start at the back of my neck." Darcy shivered as if demonstrating the reaction. Mandy let out a yelp to reinforce the feeling.

"No. Never heard of him. Carlos was my only contact. Jenny was official law enforcement though. She showed me her badge, and it wasn't a security guard one," she joked to ease some of the tension. "She said if anything happened to her that I was to get her badge and send it to an address that was taped to the badge. Do you think someone is looking for her badge?"

"Maybe she hid something else with the badge."

"I'm not going back," Celine told her softly. "I don't care if you think it's the right thing to do."

"I think you should do what is right for you. Everyone else in this stupid game is. I've found for myself that it's difficult sometimes to know the difference between the bad and good because not everyone is showing you their true colors."

"What do we do?"

"Stay low. No more Emails. If the Feebs are involved your mail and her mail are being monitored."

"So, your bad vibes about my logging on the internet was right."

"Maybe."

"We sure gave them a hot time if they know I'm Dreamer."

Darcy gave a short laugh.

That gave both women something to think about for the rest of the drive.



Darcy stopped at the store to let the twins know what was going on. And while James went to the roof to send out light signals to Jack, who was out in the field with Crazy Al, Darcy logged onto the internet but not as herself.

Celine was over at the hospice listening to Lonnie talk about her soup receipts until Lonnie's attention went to her program that was coming over the satellite channel. The sound of Jack's dune buggy had Celine curious, so she headed to the store.

Jack, Crazy Albert, James, and Darcy were playing a racing car game. They were hooting and shouting when she arrived.

"Hey! You did that on purpose," Albert accused James when he crashed his car to block Darcy and Albert from beating out Jack. "Next time, Darc and I, we're gonna do the same to ya." He slapped his dusty pants and looked up at Celine.

"Gal, yer creating a lot of shaky energy in the ethers," he accused. His head was shaved and looked as weathered as his face. His clothing was the color of the desert, but maybe it was because he was wearing a lot of desert dust.

"Celine, Albert, known by his best friends with the endearing nick name of Crazy Al. Al...Celine..." Jack introduced.

Albert nodded and pointed to the bulletin board. "You got any more of that in ya?"

"Oh, yeah."

He nodded as if that sealed a bargain. "Well, tell 'em what we got!" he encouraged Jack.

"A rumble in a small-time political machine," Jack dutiful began as a preamble. "Seems the cops and someone in city hall are working with a local gang to line their pockets by harassing local businesses and running some of their own businesses. A small task force was sent to investigate but someone tipped them off and three people died. One female agent that was undercover, the one that sent in the tip, that would be a police clerk, and the undercover agent's handler. All executed the same way. A new team moved in but it's not any surprise now. The word out in the streets is that a street person, whom the agent befriended, has some evidence the agent had against the group. So, they're looking for this woman. Everyone is looking for this woman."

They all looked at Celine.

"Great! Just great! I don't remember anything about evidence. If I had it, I would..."

"Don't give it to any of them!" Albert told her seriously. "They'll bury it and you too."

"Sounds like it was mismanaged," Darcy agreed feeling an eerie deja vue. "So, someone pin pointed the person that gave the tip off, or wants everyone to think that. Wonder if they only had two people working on it."

"Mulder and Scully worked alone!" objected James, the die-hard X-File fan.

"No. They had Skinner to pull them out of the fire, and put them in," Jack argued.

"I liked it when Lucy Lawless got involved," Celine added.

"It got too fragmented, with Scully jumping in now and then with hints of Mulder," Darcy put in her opinion.

"Maybe they're all too busy with this antiterrorist thing," Jack suggested, bringing them all abruptly back to the present.

Darcy shook her head. "It just doesn't feel right. You know?"

The others were quiet.

"I'm tired." Darcy rose.

"Hey, Darcy. That's a nice truck," Albert told her following them out. He inspected the vehicle from stem to stern, even went under it.

"She sure is a beaut." The others agreed also looking it over, but not rolling under the chassis with flashlights, as Albert.

Darcy slid behind the driver's seat, waved at everyone when the inspection was over, and then pointed the truck toward home.

"So, when ya gonna convert her to something nonpolluting?" Al asked as she stopped near him.

"Make the plans," Darcy told him and then pulled out.

"Is Albert always that intimate with other people's vehicles?" Celine asked.

"Yep. He was looking for bugs. The kind people used to track a quarry's whereabouts."

Celine turned to look at her. "You did that before we left."

"Yes. I have a healthy amount of paranoia. Keeps me alive, just like Crazy Al's does him."

"Why 'crazy'?"

"He got that nickname because he likes to make bombs. Sets them off in the desert when he's having one of his flashback episodes. Warns people when it's not a good time to visit."

"Oh. Nice system. So, you think we can work on something less spectacular to warn the other when she is PMSing and needs space? Could probably cut down on getting Mandy upset with our yelling."

"Hang a red flag out, or maybe I should bring that gargoyle out my sister bought me," she mused. "I stashed it in the closet. We can cover it on good days and uncover it on bad."

Celine nodded. "Sounds like a good plan. Maybe add some incense sticks to the atmosphere."

Darcy glanced her way, missing the rut in the road. The truck took it fair enough, but Mandy did not appreciate the lurch and barked her objections.

Chapter 11

For the rest of the week, both women were busy. Celine borrowed the motorcycle daily to ride over to the hospice to put in time reading and just sitting quietly with the residents. She witnessed the patience of John and the more seasoned staff with the anger some of the newer residents displayed. Celine realized she would not last long in her present state of mind if she had to work with the new arrivals. The peacefulness of the staff's approach and of the other residents that had gotten beyond their own anger, would eventually affect the new arrivals, Celine had no doubt.

It was during one of her introspective moments that a presence behind her alerted her that someone new had arrived. She rose from her seat in the arboretum and turned to see who it was. If she were going by appearances, there was nothing wrong with him. The only thing she could detect was he made the hairs at the back of her neck rise.

"Can I help you," she asked quietly, still in touch with the peacefulness of the area.

"I'm looking for a..."

"Excuse me." John forcibly placed his body between Celine and the stranger.

"Celine, can you go help Ellen? She's with Al."

Celine nodded, realizing what John was saying made no sense at all.

"This is a restricted building. Visitors are not allowed on the premises without an invitation." John pointed his gloved hand to the doorway he had come through while he moved the visitor with just the appearance of what may be on the gloves.

"I have..."

"You don't have a warrant and if you do we have a team of lawyers you can go through which will be less stressful for our residents. We are a hospice for the dying and some with contagious diseases which is why we are a restricted hospice."

Darcy strolled into the hospice looking like the local law enforcement she was. "I understand you're trespassing on private property, causing a nuisance of yourself, harassing residents?" Darcy was pulling on rubber gloves.

"Who are you?"

"The sheriff and if you don't leave this building, you'll be a patient of some city hospital because we don't have room," she frowned.

"AIDS. I'm not afraid of that ..."

"Nope. Our one AIDS patient died the other day. This way please and don't touch anything. Don't touch yourself. Didn't they teach you anything about communicable diseases?" she criticized the man as he reached to rub his chin.

On the porch she gestured to an outside shower. She accepted the antiseptic soap that Eva handed her. It smelled foul. Darcy had him rinse his hands with it, then gave him something to take with him to bathe in that smelled just as bad. With that they pointed to his vehicle after he could not tell Darcy just why he was there nor would he show her any form of ID.



"That's Agent Montegudo. He probably recognized Celine, so, let's think of something to do. Chances are they got the satellites spying out this place," Jack announced excitedly.

"They can be confused," Crazy Al waved his hand. Everyone looked at him. "I'll hide her," he grudgingly conceded. "But I ain't gonna give up my secrets!"

"Just wait a moment here," Darcy silenced them. "Now, if he found her others know too. He may have been sent in to smoke her out. So, let's think before we scatter. "Jack, have you found anything out about Monteagudo besides the usual bio?"

"I can't get the satellite connection back," Jack told her mournfully. The very reason the alarm had been put out was that their satellite and other communications systems with the outside world had gone dead. The drill was to bring key people into town and the others scattered further into cover.

"This is it then. We rehearsed this drill for years and now we're gonna do it," Crazy Al smacked his fist in his hand with no attempt to disguise his excitement.

"Yep." Darcy had thought that it would be her, they would be hiding or maybe Al because he really did know something about something no one was supposed to know about. It never occurred to her that it would be an outsider they had taken in.

Jack looked at his silent brother, suddenly remembering Judhith's refrain about boredom sometimes bringing you what you wished. Even though they all left the business of city life gladly, boredom often had them wishing for some sort of excitement in their humdrum lives...secretly if not publicly...and here it was.

"Alright, I'll pick her up and we'll head out. Draw them away from the hospice," Darcy nodded at the others.

"What about your truck?"

Darcy pursed her lips. That was what she was planning on driving back in. She was going to drive the cycle up into the bed. However, when Al had misinterpreted her moves, she figured it was his usual cryptic way of saying he had a better idea. "What do you purpose?"

"Plan B."

"I'm here! Who was that idiot on the road?" Judhith demanded breathlessly as she banged into the community store.

"Feeb," Al told her. "After the newbie. We're on plan B."

Judhith nodded. It meant they suspected they were being monitored and were going to pull a switch. She had her thermal doll stored nice and safe in her car. She ran out to go and get it.

Celine was collected and three vehicles took off, instead of two, each looking like there were two passengers, and fifteen minutes later another vehicle with two people in it.

"We're hiding in your house?" Celine asked disbelievingly.

"We need to find out just what they're willing to come in with. They knocked out the store's satellite, cell phones, and it would also affect any UV high tech toys. They used an EMP, Electromagnetic Pulse or Cold pulse weapon. It gives something like a cardiac arrest to electronic equipment for about 30 seconds and depending on the efficiency of back up equipment it could take about a minute to a day to get things back up."

"Who is doing this? Why are they after me?"

"It might not be you. And why?" Darcy was silent as she drove the bike over the rough ground. When she came into town she had ordered Mandy to stay at home. She was hoping no one was trying a surprise visit while she was away. She had trained

Clementine to move the animals away from the barn in case any strangers trespassed. If no one was home Mandy was trained to wait for her away from the house and barn. She replaced her anxiety with a belief that whoever was behind the agent's visit would not make his move until at least an hour to get everyone in place.

"I'd like to see just what Jenny only hid with her badge."

"Isn't all this stuff a bit over reacting? And what if it's only her badge?" Celine asked, beginning to feel panicky.

"Can't hurt to be careful. If we had her badge, we would know who she was working for." Darcy could feel Celine's grip around her tightening. The nape hairs on the back of her neck had graduated to the hairs on her arms. She remembered feeling this way in her military training, the scary exercises that were used to cull the ones they could use in covert ops. She was lucky and got out before she had to use her training on real people.

Celine slid out of the truck with Mandy running toward them, hopping about and making noises of joy in her throat.

"I'm going to check the horses," she told Celine in an ordinary voice. She wanted to make sure the doors from the stalls to the coral were opened. She looked into Ginger Ale's stall and found two pairs of dark eyes looking out at her.

Darcy could feel Celine watching her from the barn door. Gazing out the back door Darcy could see the dark outline of the new pen covers for the llamas. She continued her check, ensuring that the escape trap doors were working and had not been tampered with. Satisfied, she moved back to the house. Celine's fingers intertwined with hers and both women felt the heat they had both been refusing.

Celine and Darcy reluctantly parted to go into their respective rooms.

After tossing and turning too long to feel tired, Celine gave up and headed out to the barn. She wanted to work out but she could hear the barbells being worked and guessed Darcy would want privacy...she did. It was not a bother because Celine felt the need to be outside.

"Can you beat that, Mandy? After two years of living on the streets, I feel more comfortable in the open."

She looked down at the dog that dutifully walked at her side. Luminous eyes looked up at her and then resumed a scan around the barn. If Mandy were a person, she would definitely be a bodyguard, Celine thought amused. As she moved to open the barn door she felt Mandy bristle and a low growl rumbled in her throat.

Nervously, she pulled open the barn door and in the dark interior she waited until her eyes became accustomed to the darker environment. She curled her fingers around Mandy's collar to prevent herself from running into anything.

"Mandy, find Pride," she whispered.

Five steps into the barn and she came to an abrupt stop as Mandy did. She dropped to her knees because her fingers that were comfortably wrapped around the collar tugged her down. Mandy lowered herself so close to the floor that Celine finally crawled next to her. She was not sure where Mandy was leading her, but it was not to Ginger Ale's and Pride's stall.

There were running footsteps outside, letting her know why Mandy was upset. Mandy led her to one of the underground trap doors Darcy had shown her. Into that Celine and Mandy went. Mandy had her own special platform that when she stepped onto

it, it started down the ten-foot drop. Finding the flashlight set in a wall niche, Celine turned on the red light and quickly found the locker, raiding it for equipment. She wanted nothing to do with the weapons Darcy had stored, because she had no idea how to use any of them nor did she want to know. Night vision goggles, flack jacket, survival pack and two water jugs were her choices. That left two for Darcy in case she would come this way. Her hands were shaking and her insides felt cold at the fear that slowly was taking over her limbs. Her mixed feelings on returning to the comfort of Darcy's presence and to know that she was going to be alright, warred with her absolute terror at witnessing any violence. Shakily she wiped the sweat from her brow as she followed Mandy's tug down the tunnel. Her mind went back and forth over her fear of seeing something she would not be able to live with and of leaving Darcy alone.

She knows what she's doing. You have to do your part. I hate not knowing what I'm leaving her with.

Mandy seemed to know the way well and trotted confidently down the tunnel. It seemed like a long time, but Mandy kept on going. Finally, a ladder appeared before her and so did a masked figure with a drawn gun, the red beam targeting Mandy who was slowly approaching the figure snarling.

"Mandy, sit!" Celine's voice shouted fearfully. Mandy looked back at her confused and then back at the figure, when she suddenly winced and slumped onto the ground.

"No! No!"

The red dot pointed at her between the eyes and a gloved hand gestured for her to turn around. Celine's mind froze and stumbling on numb legs that were about to collapse, she only was able to partially turn when she fell to the ground in a faint.

Chapter 12

Darcy heard Celine moving around and knew neither was going to get any sleep. She finally rose and dressed in dark clothing. She would wait in the workout room, maybe straightening up the place. Queenie and Lord Byron followed her down as they usually did. After about twenty minutes of moving the weights to another part of the room, more of something to do than as a convenience, she paused as she heard Mandy's nails click across the wooden hallway floor. The light in the workout room flashed that someone had opened the kitchen door. Darcy went into her small security closet in the weight room and looked on the security screens.

"Crap!"

Quickly she shut off one set of alarms and palmed the emergency switch that would shut rooms down that she considered important. The workout room was her 'panic' room and right now, it was where she should be. Her house would not burn down. It was constructed with nonflammable material, but things inside would get damaged from the water sprinklers that would go off to put out a fire.

"Come on you two. Get in here. I know, I know. But it's not for long. You two like the barn," she reminded the two felines softly.

The lights would turn on around the barn, and an audible for dog hearing would tell Mandy and Clementine they had a job to do. Clementine's was to herd all the residents of the barn out into the coral which extended safely away from the barn in case

the hay was set on fire. She was hoping that nothing would happen to Ginger and her filly. If anything did...

Mandy's job was to seek out Crazy Al. She knew Celine would be with her because Celine promised she would do as the drill called for. Everyone depended on each person to play her or his part, and deviations were expected but not encouraged since it meant someone may be left wide open.

She pulled on the flack jacket that covered her thighs, and then one hand pulled on the warm winter coat, flipped on her night vision goggles, and checked the power pack to make sure she had enough charge to last eight hours. Though it was handy to have, the NV goggles ate up power. Darcy was hesitant about selecting weapons. Once she picked up a gun or a knife that was the persona she would be calling into existence. She did not want to be pressured into using a tool that was created for taking lives.

The two cats, from repeated training, allowed themselves to be hoisted up onto the floor of the barn, where they scampered off to play with their playmate, Clementine, who spent most of her time in the barnyard. Clementine could not be enticed into a house. She was one of Judhith's rescues from the desert and it was guessed she either had an unnatural fear of houses, or she was severely trained not to enter one. Darcy had worked with her and found the Australian Sheppard was a true herd dog and that is what task she gave Clementine to do, giving the dog her self confidence back.

Darcy needed to set up a false trail, and it would start with drawing them away from her beloved pets and home. Pulling out the thermal doll she activated it. Just beyond the barn, she surfaced and started to move away from any residents. Her NVs were working so dead pulse or anti they had used to kill the satellite and cell phones was no longer in effect.

Glancing back Darcy could see hot spots spread out, following her. She counted four. Finding a slight slope, she dropped to her stomach and hit the button to scan around her.

Seven. Four in a vehicle and two behind me. Herding me to where the four will no doubt be waiting.

If Darcy were wearing a watch and checking it, thirty minutes later they were trying to squeeze Darcy to a point she knew was a dry wash. The lights flashing in the mountains told her flash floods would be filling the washes. However, by the smell in the air, though water would run through the washes, snow would be falling before daylight. Grinning she paused to set up a trap.

Darcy prepared her sixth trap, glancing around her as her fingers moved over the pin without needing sight. She ran a zigzag pattern and then up another small slope only to be slammed in the head, with the goggles taking most of the shock. She was automatically grabbing the extended arm and breaking it, while elbowing the person in the throat and then slamming the rifle she pulled from unresisting hands into the head of her attacker. A shout of pain behind her told her that someone got caught in her trap and she needed to move on. If she trusted the sounds around her, she had taken out four and had three more to go.

She heard the sound of a flare gun and instinctively left the thermal doll on top of the mound and pulled her attacker with her down the slope. At the bottom she hid under his body as bullets peppered the top of the slope. The explosion of the thermal doll sent debris falling around her. The straining engine of a jeep as it climbed the slope had Darcy

pulling the rifle her attacker had wrapped around his arm toward her. Rolling onto her stomach she pulled the rifle up hoping to get some shots off to decommission the jeep. Her first shot hit a tire, and the jeep took a sharp turn from the impact of the bullet, sending it skidding sideways down the slope and then turned over, dumping the occupants. Not waiting, she rolled and slid to the bottom of the next slope and ran along the wash...not a very smart thing to do, she kept reminding herself. And after the third reminder she crawled up over the embankment and fell flat on her face. For a few moments as she breathed heavily, she tried to figure out why she fell. Her heart was pumping and making a lot of noise so she could not hear much of what was going on around her until a boot kicked her, catching her in the arm and lifting her a few inches off the ground.

She felt lucky her thick coat absorbed some of the kick, but her body was not responding to her brain which was trying to get her to defend herself from the next kick, which was to her head. Rolling with the boot, she managed to get a hand up and fingers to wrap around the offending ankle, and then her other arm. She heard a screaming curse, as she twisted his ankle until she heard something give. However, as one went down another was standing over her bringing the butt of a rifle down on her leg. She kicked it off course and then with her other foot kicked up into his groin as hard as she could, figuring that if he was wearing protective gear, it would still hurt.

Darcy did not wait to see what would happen, as she repositioned her NV goggles and a quick glance around her, she pulled herself into a shaky stand and stumbled in a direction she hoped was right.

Darcy stared out over the landscape until her eyes hurt, searching for anything that may appear to be out of place. Her heart was racing and her hearing was filled with the pounding of her blood rushing through her, as her lungs gulped air. She had been running for about an hour now. The air was filled with drifting snowflakes. She glanced down at the wrap around her forearm. There was blood leaking. Pulling out the first aid kit from around her waist, she wrapped another cloth around it and tucked the ends in. It was past hurting and was now numb.

Where is Celine? Is she out there alone and scared? Gawds, she still is recovering from seeing her friend killed. No, she has Mandy. Mandy will take her to Al.

She rubbed her eyes tiredly. The sun had another hour before it would come up. Her expelled breath created a vaped cloud in front of her. Tiredly she rose and headed away from the road that wound up the mountain and out of the valley. Her legs would not move any faster than a walk. On another slope, she dropped to her stomach and looked around, trying to get a sense of what was around her. Sounds of the wind, blowing past her cold ears, then she heard it. Vehicles moving to her right. They were following the service road. What was keeping them here?

Darcy could hear angry voices as the three cars drove by. She carefully searched around her. She lost the more professional soldiers in the wash. They obviously forgot about flash floods. She looked up again, seeing the lightning off to her right. It was getting closer.



Celine woke to a pounding headache. She was in a bouncing vehicle on the floorboards and tied.

"There she is! Over that way!"

"No. Let the others go after her. We'll head up to the road and wait. I can use a cigarette. We've done our part," another argued. The vehicle came to an abrupt stop, sliding a little on the dirt road.

Now she could smell herself. Vomit and urine. Familiar smells of the street.

"Get her out of there, John. She's stinking up the place. With the heater on it's going to smell worse," the second person ordered.

"Are you going to stand out there with her, because I'm not," John replied. "That's what I thought. We're already in enough trouble with sitting out the hunt."

"Shut up, you two," a soft voice ordered. "I can hear you whining twelve yards away."

"Hey, Al..."

"Shut up!" And then a fist hitting flesh and some curses when the new member continued. "You're talking too much. Get out of the jeep and take her with you."

"It's cold out there!" John objected.

"Maybe next time you'll remember not to talk so much," the leader returned.

"Who made you..."

"You're crazy, man. We're on the same side," John voice sounded incredulous.

Celine was hoping they would shoot each other. As long as they worried that she may hear something, it meant they were not going to kill her...though right now she worried about Darcy. Her mind screamed at her that she should not have left her behind, drowning out another voice that said she would be alright and that Darcy knew what she was doing.

When the standoff ended Celine was dragged out into the cold and dumped on the side of the road. Her bodyguard stood nearby.

Celine's mind wandered off, where she went, she didn't know but a sudden curse brought her back, and then a painful jerk on her arms attempting to stand her up cleared some of the blur her thoughts were in. Numb legs gave her no sense of balance or feel as to whether she was standing on her own or if her feet were flat on the ground.

"Pick her up!" the self appointed leader ordered. "Take your goggles off, you moron. They aren't working. They have a cold pulse weapon."

Three voices, mixed with obscenities and controlled fear, moved in the air around her.

Celine could hear a low growl that vibrated in her sternum, but it was not coming from her. Her body dropped back on the ground with a thud. Her cheek scraped the ground; her hands tied behind her bruised from the rocks she landed on. The guard grabbed his rifle that was near her but never straightened up. His body made a slow fall that dropped him on top of her. The weight knocked the breath from her.

Celine felt nothing. She had no contact with her physical body. It was strange to watch the scene unfold. The jeep occupants jumped out and seemed to be confused as they bumped into each other trying to hide behind the jeep away from where the other two previous occupants lay. Her attention went back to the two prone bodies. One was lying over the other. The top one was unconscious; however, the one below was struggling. She knew what from. The body below could not get air. Dispassionately she watched as another person arrived and pulled the body off. The one below was still struggling to breathe. Hands and legs were freed, and the newly liberated body curled into a ball as air trickled into the emptied lungs.

Celine could feel small feather touches on the side of her face. Blinking into the darkness she lay, peering through the dark shape of her guard's out flung hand that blocked some of her view, gulping in cold air.

"Come on, Celine. We're going to get you out of here," Jack whispered to her urgently. Another set of hands grabbed her on each side and pulled her over the shoulder. The carry was more uncomfortable than her ride in the jeep, but the voice was reassuring. Gratefully the carry was not far. Celine couldn't see in the dark, but she was leaning against a rock wall. A lamp was lit and she could see that they were in a cave. It nearly smelled as bad as she did. Her nose wrinkled.

"Gawds," she croaked.

"Come on, Celine. You need something warm inside of you. That's it."

"Where's Darcy," she asked when she was able to finally speak.

"Leading them on a wild goose chase. How are you doing?" Judhith studied the darkened eyes in the dim lighting, looking for signs of stress and finding them.

Celine nodded, not daring to think any further than the present. Unconsciously she wiped tears from her face. "Fine. What's happening?"

However, Judhith knew she didn't really want to know. There was a time when she felt the same way. Viewing drama on television and on the news media was different than experiencing it in real time.

"We've got some change of clothes, and you can get cleaned up in the back of the cave," she offered. She pushed Celine in the direction and followed behind her. Mandy lifted her nose and nudged Celine who had not noticed her yet.

"Mandy!" Celine collapsed on the ground and grabbed the Sheppard, giving the dog a hard hug. "Oh, gawds I thought she was killed!" she sobbed in the dog's furry neck. Mandy was wiggling with delight and trying to lick the face of her new friend.

"Okay you two. Don't want any rumors to be started," Judhith muttered as she moved further into the cave. The cave curved and on the side of the wall she pushed and a door opened. Inside was a comfortably sized room.

"Back there is a place you can freshen up. It has running water, but not much. Just a quick shower. Judhith pulled out a bag that contained jeans, sweaters, T-shirts, socks, boots and a few handkerchiefs. "Here's a change for you."



Darcy stumbled for the hundredth time, taking the fall on her good shoulder and rolling onto her back. For a few moments she looked up into the sky to catch her breath and get her bearings. Snowflakes that had been drifting for over an hour, landed on her face. Blinking, Darcy studied the surrounding mountains. The cave was not far now. Rolling back onto her feet, she continued at a slow climb, looking for a marker.

"If you move one step closer, I'll shoot you," Celine's voice warned.

"Then please, shoot me and end my agony," Darcy told her hoarsely. She could hear rocks moving and suddenly a strong arm was wrapped around her waist, helping her up the rest of the way.

"Duck," Celine directed softly. A whine told her that Celine was not alone.

"You just about scared us," Crazy Al wheezed.

"What's going on?" she asked as she was guided to a soft spot to sit on. However, she fell asleep as soon as her head rested on what could be a pillow.

Chapter 13

"You're sure she's the only one out there, Al?" Celine asked worried.

"Well, there may be a rabbit or two," he told her. "Just look. See. Nothing on the scope."

"When did the others say they would report in?"

"Girl, you're getting your knickers all in a wad. Just sit down," Judhith told her grumpily. She bit off some beef jerky and moved it around in her mouth, sucking on it for a few moments.

Celine sat near Darcy's sleeping form, brushing her fingers over her cold cheeks, worried over what Darcy must have been going through.

"You should have told her the plans were changed," Celine told Judhith for maybe the fourth time that morning.

"She still would have done what she did to draw them off. You know...she's hung up on you," Al told her solemnly, studying Darcy's dirty fingers that held onto Celine's while she slept.

Celine looked down at the face she had wiped with a damp towel and then at the injured arm that Judhith had cleaned and stitched. "Are you sure all this is going to work?"

"It'll work. The Feebs want that rogue agent bad. I tell ya it's easy to lead agents around. Just give them a reason not to like ya, and there is nothing...not even evidence, that is going to change their minds on them hounding you. And if our plants of evidence don't do it, they would be planting their own. They don't like him."

Judhith was paying more attention to Mandy's paw that was wrapped. She had a bullet graze from someone that shot at her.

"Hey," a hoarse voice called.

"Hey, yourself," Celine replied grabbing the water bottle.

"So, what's happening?" Darcy whispered.

"The satellite started back up. We reached Tony and he did his bit. The Feebs want to catch Agent Montegudo doing the dirty," Al reassured her.

Darcy drank enough to wet her mouth. "Do we have transportation?" Darcy asked with less hoarseness.

Al nodded over to the corner of the cave where Darcy's dirt bike rested against the wall.

"Good. We have to find that agent's badge and see if that's what everyone is so interested in getting to." Darcy pulled herself up and taking a deep breath stood up. No dizziness and no headache. She was doing good.

"First, you need to wash up. I left enough water."

"Hey! What about the snow?" Al asked.

"We'll be fine. Don't forget to check up on Ginger and Pride. And let the cats back in the house. After playing in the barn they come into the house with all sorts of barn stuff in their fur," Darcy grumbled as she made her way to the privacy door. She was handed clothes and a towel.

Feeling a lot better, Darcy stepped back into the cave and joined the others standing around her bike.

"You're not driving. I am," Celine told her firmly strapping a helmet on. "This is going to be one rough ride when we hit the freeway," Celine remarked dryly, as she tapped the off-road tires with her boot toe.

"We're going to stop and pick up Jack's truck." Darcy patted her leg as she settled behind Celine. "I'm not suicidal."

"Good to hear."

Darcy's grip around her waist was comforting, nice and very distracting as Celine began their bumpy ride down the slope that was slippery with snow. The rough ride brought back memories of her own off-road riding when she used it to relieve work stress. They switched rides at Jack's place. The ride into town was more comfortable in Jack's truck.



"No, don't park here. You'll get a ticket," Celine told her when Darcy stopped near an alley.

Darcy looked up and down the street. "I park it anywhere else and we won't have a truck to return to."

"They know me around here. They won't touch it."

Darcy looked at Celine doubtfully. Then looked around again. She didn't see anyone but she could feel them. She moved the truck to where Celine directed.

"Well, come on. Our tails are probably about ready to pee in their pants with all these delays," Darcy told her softly, shutting the driver's door firmly while keeping vigilant to what was not going on around her.

"We needed a nap. Besides, it gives us the edge, right?" Celine closed her door noticing that it was still too early for the street regulars to gather. Street people did not want to antagonize the shop owners, so they stayed away during business hours. Memories, good and bad played across her mind as she led Darcy up one street, crossed, and then over another, unconsciously setting on an evasive route as she had in the past to see if anyone was following her. She could feel the eyes of people watching her from their shop windows, wondering if she was going to ask for a handout or get sick on their stoop. Then they would have to call the police...

"Celine!" a soft but sharp call had her turning.

"Are you alright?" Darcy asked putting a hand on her elbow.

"Yeah," her voice, even to her did not sound alright.

"Memories?"

She merely nodded and resumed her walk, though slower and not with the same slumped shoulder posture she maintained when she was exhausted and scared. Something had happened here and the eyes looking back at her knew about it. She looked up at one face in the rock-n-roll record store. The rings and tattoos did not have to be clear; she knew them by heart. Abruptly she turned and walked into the store.

"Tom..." she took a deep breath, "you're still a dickhead in my book...but thank you," and then she turned and walked back out, passing a surprised Darcy who exchanged looks with the bald ringed, tattooed youth.

"Hey, M!" he called to her.

She turned.

"Watch your back," he said in a lower voice. "Your street friends have been picked up. Someone's hunting you."

She nodded and resumed her walk, again taking different routes until she was where she wanted to be.

"What is this place?" Darcy asked.

"It's where some of us met to be safe. Safety in numbers, right?"

Darcy kept an eye out while Celine disappeared behind a trash bin that was filled beyond its capacity.

"Darc?" she whispered.

Darcy turned and joined her. "It's going to take a lot of baths to get rid of this stink."

"Come on. We can sneak back to the truck this way," she told her softly.

"They aren't going to be out there. If they haven't cornered us now, it means they know you have the key and where we're going next."

"So...what do we do?"

"The unpredictable."

Both women looked out from behind the trash bin in another alley. A rent-a-post office-box stationary store was what Darcy was looking for. While Celine waited in the alley, Darcy went in for some supplies. When she came back out, they stopped at a phone booth that still had a phone book attached. Darcy addressed twelve different envelopes and inserted something in all of them. Celine then led her down another skinny alley and across the street where they could see the truck. Darcy's eyes searched each vehicle and delivery truck that was parked on the street. She had memorized who was there when they parked and who was there now.

"That one right there," Darcy pointed at a beat up brown pizza delivery van. See the stuff on the side there? It's monitoring. You wait here while I put these under the tires."

"No, I'll put them under the tires. They would expect me to do it. You create a diversion." Celine took the nails wondering when Darcy picked them up.

"Okay." Darcy pulled her coat inside out and put a cap over her head. She appeared two yards from where Celine was walking like a young guy, pausing to look over a poster of a scantily clad rock singer advertising a drink. Celine nearly choked when Darcy pulled something out of her coat pocket and looking up and down the street, not seeing any pedestrians, drew something on the figure. Celine moved out from her position and ran across the street, placing the nails against each tire and moving low around cars and then back onto the sidewalk.

Darcy disappeared into a store and while she was probably changing to something else, Celine unlocked the truck, and just as she was pulling out Darcy hopped into the truck bed. After driving in and out of alleys that Celine knew intimately, she stopped the truck long enough for Darcy to hop into the passenger side.

"Well..."

"Well what?"

"What did you do with the poster?"

"Nothing. It's against the law to graffiti," she informed Celine. "Turn around here, and go back up that block and park."

Darcy dropped an envelope in one of post office drop boxes. "Come on, let's go to the next city and do the same."

It was cumbersome to hop onto the freeway, get off at every other city, find a post office or drop box and mail another envelop. After the last one was gone, Celine was happy to let Darcy take over the driving.

"Home," she said happily.

Celine smiled at her. "Thanks, Darcy."

"For what?"

"For not...for not asking me to...well, you know."

"Well, I'm not that excited about walking into a cross-fire. The problem with law enforcement slayings is that there are people involved that equate collateral damage as 'just one of those things'. Shall we stop at..."

"I have to see Gail. She's probably worried and I'm worried about her too."

"Okay, but don't you think you should wait until the badge gets to its destination?"

"You're right. So, are you hungry?"

"Let's get out of this city first. A truck stop that I know of has good food and quick service."

Instead, they stopped at a McDonalds for Darcy and Wendys for Celine, since her favorite truck stop had a new name and was too busy for a quick stop. While they ate in the car, Darcy's eyes occasionally glanced in the mirror. She caught Celine's eyes and nodded slightly then resumed her eating. Finished, she took their trash to dump it and Celine got out to use the restroom.

The truck was on the road for about twenty minutes with two people sitting in the cab. Cars without markings except having flashing lights on their roofs, boxed the truck in and forced it off to the side of the road.

In no time the truck was surrounded with people pointing semiautomatics and rifles at them.

"What's going on," Jack demanded.

"This is Blue Toad to the Lone Ranger there, gonna put ya on hold while we jaw with these cowboys pointing guns at us, over," James released his finger on the mic.

"Come on Blue Toad, Lone Ranger comin back at ch'ya. Cowboys with guns? Let me call my cousin and see what's up the road thar. Don't want to upset my load, out."

"Get out of there!" one of the men shouted. "Hands above your heads...turn and face the hood of the vehicle and lay across the hood!"

"Sure, only don't shoot. We don't own a gun nor even want to know about their use."

"Bad karma," his brother added.

Meanwhile the voices on the CB were telling the men with guns, who still had not identified themselves, that their vehicles and license plates were noted and others would be looking out for them.

"Where are the two women?" one of them demanded, ignoring the noise on the radio.

"We don't have any women with us," Jack told them. His face was being squished against the dirty hood while his wallet was removed and further roughly patted down. Only Jack knew these guys were not used to doing this because they forgot to check under his arm which would not make any difference because he did not carry any weapons...however, the truck was wired for recording everything that was going on.

"There isn't any more room for anyone in there," James added, "Ouffff." His body was slammed from behind.

A call from one of the truckers had the men hesitating. Lone Ranger was asking about their hold up. It seems a truck going in the opposite direction had spotted them and was giving Lone Ranger the details...with information on their weapons. The men quickly slid their guns to a less threatening position.

Jack and James felt the pressure on their backs lessen. One of the men that removed Jack's wallet dumped the contents on the freeway disdainfully.

"You'll pick that up," James informed the man in a low voice. "Because you and I know, the chances of getting hit by a vehicle if one of us retrieves it is high and I don't think you would want the truckers to be announcing that over the air waves.

"Pick his stuff up and let's go!" a voice behind them ordered.

The man did as he was ordered, angrily slamming the wallet and contents on the hood of the dusty truck. The twins remained standing outside of the truck until the two vehicles departed. Then Jack pulled out a plastic bag and gloves. Carefully he dropped Jack's wallet into the bag with its contents. James added the registration papers that had also been handled.

"Bag it, Daniel," James parodied.

"You watch too much television, bro." Jack tossed the plastic bags onto the floorboards and then they both looked for the bug on the truck.

"Tailpipe," James informed his brother. He pulled the gadget off and tossed it into the brush. "I learned that on television too," he smiled.

They continued their check and then hopped back in, heading for the nearest mall along the freeway where they could buy some games for their play station two.



Celine stretched her legs out and then turned to pet Mandy's head. The Sheppard wiggled in absolute happiness at being reunited with Darcy.

"So, where to?"

"To Della's. I need to let her know we're okay and I need a good safe adrenalin rush by beating Tony five out of five on the Indy. No, better make it four out of five. I don't want to completely demoralize him."

"So, do you think things will get quieter once we get back home?" Celine asked idly as she stroked the head that was lying across the console.

Darcy smiled. "So, you plan on remaining?"

"Yes. I remember the reason I quit my busy life was to see if I could find the interest to draw again. I'm drawing...but now I need to get to the next step...find out what medium to work in. I was at that step when I joined the 'money' club. I think I'll start with watercolor."

"George paints with watercolors...or he used to." Darcy was quiet for a while.

"Did he do the painting in your dining room?"

"Yes. It was me when I was younger and into showing horses."

"I thought it was your sister."

"Plastic surgery and age," Darcy replied without looking at Celine.

"Why?"

"I had to have reconstructive surgery because of the accident so my sister and Tony thought since I was not going to be able to run away very well if I were recognized, they would give me a fighting chance with a new face."

"It wasn't something little was it? I mean it just wasn't the mayor to a small town or a group of police officers mixed up in this child prostitution ring."

"Who told you? Well, no. It went higher." Darcy shook her head. "But that's finished."

"So, what happened?"

"In the beginning of the investigation it kept stalling, which convinced Della and Tony that someone was interfering with the FBI's involvement. I was still in a coma and vulnerable. BJ and TJ stayed at my bedside and my sister, being a nurse, had connections at the hospital so for a while I was kept safe. Sometime around then they began the surgery on my face, to put it back together and that's when they decided to get me out of town."

"Gods, and then I bring this into your life."

"Quite alright. I was getting bored, but some of this physical stuff I can skip. It's one thing to do mock battles and another to get flattened for real."

"I've heard I'm good at giving massages," Celine's lips curled up into a smile.

"Really? Who did you give them to?"

"Gail, when we were in college. She was a track star and would come home from road trips walking like she was sore. She said she didn't want the male trainer touching her."

"Well, if it's been that long, you sound like you can do with some practice. I don't mind volunteering. Just so you know, if you hear me snoring don't wake me."

Celine giggled, which advanced into laughter as Darcy looked wounded.

"Hey. Isn't that what massages are supposed to do?"

Celine held up her hand. "Wait a moment. This is In Your Dreams speaking to Deamer?"

"No. It's Darcy saying to Martha. I'd like to go slow and get to know you."

Celine smiled. "Okay, but I haven't been called Martha for so long..."

"Well, I don't feel comfortable with Marti. I keep seeing the reruns of the Mickey Mouse Club and the Spin and Marty shows."

"Okay, let's compromise. How about Celine."

"I can deal with that."



"Hey, wake up. We're here," Darcy nudged Celine.

Celine woke stretching her jaw into a yawn. "It's daylight," she mumbled.

Darcy looked up at the sky as she stepped out of the truck. "Sure is. Hi, BJ! Hey, TJ. Aren't you two supposed to be at school?"

Each of the kids gave their aunt a hug.

"We got time off because we're getting our school project ready."

"Crazy Albert mailed us the motor plans and the drawings on how to put the little monsters together. The rules are we have to do it all ourselves."

"When is it due?" Celine asked after BJ hugged her and TJ gave a polite handshake.

"Next week. The class comes over and we demonstrate it. Wanna see it? We have the dogs guarding it against our competitors sabotaging it."

"Sabotaging it? What kind of school is this?"

"A very competitive one. Hi, hon." Della gave her sister a long hug. She then gave Celine one. "A friend of yours is here. I sent her the message Darcy had me send and she was on my door step the next day."

"Gail?"

"Yep. She's trying to beat Tony in the new game he has. Good thing she's a lesbian or I would worry..."

"She is..." Celine decided not to tell her that once a month she did dabble with the male sex. Something to do about an itch.

"Hey, kiddo!" a woman that could be mistaken for being a relative of Celine's came out of the house and wrapped her arms around Celine. They held onto each other for a while and then Gail stepped back to look her over. She touched the tip of Celine's nose.

"I thought you couldn't wear contacts?"

"I...uhmm...don't."

"Della told me you had amnesia for a while. Gods, kid. You scared me but I knew you were all right. You know that connection we have. I just knew you were still alive." She gave her another hard hug and released her.

"Yeah. Well, I was found and well taken care of. Dark and Deadly meet In Your Dreams." Celine gestured toward Darcy who was standing next to her twin sister.

Gail's green eyes blinked a few times and then narrowed studying Darcy closely. "Yeah? How did you two manage to connect when you didn't even do the 'private' chats?" she demanded.

"The gods willed it, Gail," Celine told her glibly, while thanking whatever god it was.

"You mean you two knew each other before all this?" Della asked surprised.

"Well, no..." Darcy sighed. "Can we get into this another day? I'm bushed."

"Sure, sure. You got your usual room...ahh..." Della was uncertain just where to put Celine. If she and Darc had a relationship she wanted them to feel comfortable sleeping together but if Gail and Celine had a relationship, which Gail had not really admitted to anything more than close friends, but could close friends also be 'fucking buddies' as Darcy used to refer to some of her old girlfriends? Della shuddered inwardly at Darcy's old persona...something she had picked up while she was in the military. She could not understand if they were identical twins, how Darcy could find military life that tempting to join when she abhorred having her life that structured.

"I've the Chinese room. A gorgeous bed! Hey, we have a lot to catch up on and you owe me!" Gail told her firmly.

"Okay..." At that time two stomachs rumbled.

"Old Faithful," Gail told everyone.

"Good. Let's raid the frig," Della replied and hauled her husband off the couch.

"Hon, make us some of your egg sandwich specials, unless any of you prefer something else. Margaret has a lot of leftovers. We are a 'raid the frig' bunch of addicts," Della informed Celine and Gail.

"You don't look like you're wearing it," Gail told her frankly admiring Della's shape.

"We miss meals because of our involvement in projects," Tony said, wrapping his arms around his wife's waist. "And I chase her on the treadmill," he added with a laugh.

Chapter 14

"Alright, Marti, so what do you remember, and why do they call you Celine. Is that your undercover name or something?" Gail's voice was teasing and since both had a glass of wine with their ribs and rice snack, they both were relaxed.

"I don't remember anything related to the accident nor do I think I want to," she told Gail as firmly as she could. Gail could be persistent to the point of being a pain. Celine pulled the covers up over her head, feeling too lightheaded for her to be involved in a serious conversation.

Gail pulled the covers from over her head. "Still don't drink much, huh?"

"Have I ever?" she asked seriously.

"Not that I recall. I was just teasing. So, tell me about where you're staying."

"I can't. Not yet anyway. We had a 'home invasion' of the weird kind at Darcy's place. Darcy didn't think it was a legal raid, and Crazy Al was talking government conspiracy theories, which though far fetched still are close enough to the truth. I don't want to get you involved Gail." She rubbed her face with both palms and groaned. If they had found her in the desert then they obviously knew of her friendship with Gail.

"There was an FBI agent that came knocking on my door and then two days later a Narc cop." Gail elbowed Celine. "How 'not involved' can I get? Come on, give. I'm between jobs and need an exciting vacation, something that will drive me back into work," Gail encouraged.

"Gail, when was the last time you took a vacation?" Celine asked, watching her friend from close. Gail's head was just a foot away from hers on her pillow.

"A couple of months ago with you. It didn't turn out like most people say their vacations should end. So, how come you don't wear glasses anymore?"

"Eye surgery. What have you been doing since you got out of the hospital? Darcy said you were in the hospital."

"Laser eye surgery? No, kidding? Just like me. Isn't it great?"

"Yeah, only I don't remember that much of having to wear glasses." She started to giggle.

"What? What? Tell me or I'll tickle you," Gail threatened.

"I didn't realize how attractive Darcy was until I put on glasses. I got a pair of glasses about a week before the surgery."

"Wow. I was wondering how you managed without yours. The highway patrol officer introduced me to this agent while I was flat on my back in the hospital. I had nowhere to run and couldn't just pick up the phone and call for a lawyer. He was asking questions about the accident and handed me what was left of your glasses, asking me about them. He didn't believe my story when I said they weren't mine and I didn't know whose they were. He had a box with evidence bags. Things picked up at the scene of 'the accident', he says. Not much stuff...ownership papers and insurance coverage. Things

that could not be resold. That made me suspicious. I asked him about my CDs, clothes and stuff in my suitcase. He said he was wondering about that himself. But he wanted me to stick to what he was showing me. When I could, I called my lawyer to find out who cleaned out my car. It's either the tow truck guy or the highway patrol guy because his office got really uncomfortable when my lawyer asked questions about my belongings."

"I remember I had a backpack. I guess that's gone too."

"And my wallet with two ATM cards in it and one with your name."

Celine looked at her for a moment. "I don't have a...oh. Darcy mentioned I had a joint account with a college roommate. At the time I thought it meant I was in a relationship or something." Celine pursed her lips for a moment. "Didn't we talk about this before?"

Gail had read all she could on amnesia when she got the cryptic message from Della about Marti. She knew enough not to push her on what she could not remember since it may cause more trauma connecting it with something that was painful to remember. But she was really curious and she was getting heat from her lawyer and private investigator about the whereabouts of Marti, who was causing them a real pain, though they were getting paid for the pain.

"Do you remember the conversation we had on the drive to Tahoe about your courier job?"

"I remember I told you that I witnessed something that I should not have, which is why I'm worried about these people looking you up."

"Just testing you. I guess that wasn't what caused you to forget everything."

"I think it was an overload. Let's talk about something else. What do you plan on doing now that you don't have a company to run, or even better, have you heard from...what is his name?"

"The two Bens. As a matter of fact, I'm being sued by both. Those conniving sharks knew each other and set me up for the sale. They're a bit ticked off that I cashed the check instead of depositing it into the business account. How stupid do I look? They couldn't put a stop payment on it. They were expecting to find something of great value on my work PC like designs I hadn't copyrighted yet. Not even a fat chance. I copyright as soon as I get an idea. They claim the ideas belong to the business and therefore are theirs. My lawyer said they don't have a leg to stand on. It does not have anything to do with *their* business...it would be going into a completely different direction."

"You live dangerously. You may think all this is small business stuff but..."

Celine let air out in exasperation. Judhith had a good saying for things like this, 'It is as hard to follow good advice as to give it', and sure enough, she, who did not follow others advice very well, was giving it. Gail had been in the business for almost fifteen years, and she certainly didn't need to hear from her who had no experience in that field. "I worry about you. You're my family," she told her softer.

Gail's lips turned up at the corners, "So, as family we have no secrets, huh?"

"Of course we do. All families have secrets. If they didn't, no one would talk to each other. What?"

"How did you meet IYD?"

"It was an accident. When I started to remember things, she told me she was IYD and she guessed I was Dreamer." Celine closed her eyes and sighed. "I wanted to know who she was and look what the Ladies of Fate did. How blessed...ehh?"

"You've got some real strong 'mojo' girl. You also left a lot out. I'm going to have to stick close to you."

Celine yawned wide, cracking her jaw. "I have to get some sleep. We've been on the run since I don't know when."

Gail looked at her friend whose eyes were already closed. She leaned over and turned off the light, deciding the rest of her information gathering would have to wait.

Chapter 15

Family breakfasts at the Westerly's was chaotic. Margaret set it up like a buffet. Under each silver lid was a surprise, from crepes stuffed with something sweet or tart to other breakfast treats: waffles, pancakes, eggs, sausages, warm muffins and best of all, coffee.

It was the aroma of coffee that woke Gail up. She rolled over and nudged her dozing friend. "Hey," she croaked. "I'm hungry."

Celine mumbled and obediently rolled out of bed and stumbled toward the bathroom.

Gail set out clothes for herself and when she heard the toilet flush, she knocked on the door and entered. Celine was stepping into the shower. From years of sharing a small dorm bathroom, they had little shyness.

Celine was dressing when a soft knock on the door had her hopping over to open the door. Gail must have locked it because Celine was sure she didn't.

Darcy was looking down at her boots when Celine opened the door. A wide smile appeared on Celine's face at seeing the almost embarrassed Darcy.

"Good morning, Darc. Sleep well?"

She nodded. "You guys ready?"

"Gail! You about ready?" she hollered.

"No. I'll meet you downstairs. I know how you are when you're hungry. Go ahead. I need to put a face on," Gail hollered back.

"She's only kidding," Celine informed Darcy in an undertone. "Okay. See you downstairs. But you had better hurry. I'm very hungry. Come in and wait for me to put my boots on." Celine gestured for Darcy to come in.

Celine sat back in the chair and while she pulled her boots on, Gail came sauntering into the room without anything on. Darcy who was leaning against the wall near the door lifted her eyebrows up a few notches. Gail kept her college athlete's physique by continuing with her running and using light weights, so Celine thought she was impressive, though she was not interested in Gail in a sexual way. However, the way Darcy looked her over, Celine felt jealous and then guilty.

"Oh, hi. I thought you two were gone," Gail nodded casually at the two and went to the bed where her clothes were laid out.

"We are now. You have one minute and by then I'll be back for seconds," Celine told her and headed to the door Darcy opened.

"Naw. You have to breathe so that gives me five minutes," Gail told her as she slid on her jeans. But by then the door was closed. Gail laughed to herself at Darcy's

expression and Marti's. Obviously, Marti liked IYD, but they had not done anything yet. All talk and little show, she thought humorously.

"So, does Gail always walk around in the buff?" Darcy asked as they walked down the stairs.

"We've roomed together for four years in a small dorm. It's nothing for us to see the other naked. Come to think of it, I don't think she has ever been embarrassed about her body. I always thought that had something to do with her being an athlete...you know taking showers around other women."

Darcy felt a little better about hearing that. "So, what are you two going to do?"

"I'm going back with you...aren't I?" Celine looked back at her worried.

"Sure...if you want."

"Good. I want. I haven't changed my mind." Celine stopped on the stairs and turned to face Darcy. Darcy stopped abruptly. Celine wrapped her arms around Darcy's waist and gave her a hug, resting her head on her chest.

Darcy was surprised and for a moment didn't do anything, then she wrapped one arm around Celine and returned the hug. "What's that for?"

"I needed it," she told her in a muffled voice.

There was silence for a while, Darcy not relaxing her hold on Celine. "I needed it too. Thank you."

Celine gave her another squeeze and released her. She intertwined her fingers into Darcy's free hand and tugged her onto her level.

"So, what are we going to do?" Celine asked.

"We're going to see what Tony has. He's been in touch with the FBI office in San Francisco. I heard his phone ring early this morning."

Celine leaned against Darcy and her arm slid comfortably around her waist as they walked into the dining room area where BJ and TJ were discussing heatedly the placement of a monster.

"Quieter!" shouted Tony as he came out of the study, looking grumpy. "You two sound like you're on the senate floor." He brightened up when he spied Darcy stepping away from Celine to pick up a plate, handing one to Celine and then choosing one for herself.

"Good morning, Gals. Sleep well?"

Darcy nodded as she took a peek under the lid that covered steaming muffins.

"Like a baby," she responded.

"We spent the night catching up on..."

"Good morning, everyone! Ahh. Tony, I know you cheated and I figured out how you did it. I want a rematch!" Gail demanded cheerily.

"Where's Della?" Darcy asked as she put some crepes on Celine's plate that appeared next to the pinchers she was holding and then dropped some on to her plate.

"Out at the barn. We have two new brood mares and a stud."

Darcy looked surprised. "What about Jasper?"

"What about him?"

Darcy turned to see her twin standing in the doorway to the dining hall. She had removed her boots and was in stocking feet.

"Two studs in the same barn mean trouble," Darcy repeated her sister's favorite saying. Della would rather work with the brood mares and send away for the sperm. She

had little patience with stallions and their sensitive nostrils to any female in heat. Though, Jasper was her baby, and she always made concessions with him.

"Well, we now have Medicine Man, Ancient Fire...she is beautiful. You should see her. The sun hits her coat and it's like looking at fire. We also have Arabian Princess. She's another gray with nice black mane and tail and dark fetlocks."

"What about Medicine Man?" Darcy cleverly knew her sister was hiding something about this horse.

"Want to see him?"

"After we eat?" Celine begged. "I want to too."

"Okay. I'm gonna shower and change." Della turned to Tony and pecked his cheek. "Good morning, hon. Your business finished?"

"No," Tony grumbled. "I'll tell you when you get back. I'll have your plate ready, so hurry back or it will be cold."

"Or before Darcy eats everything." Della ran up the stairs laughing at her sister's attempt to say something with a full mouth in retort.

When Della returned the dining room was full of laughing voices, everyone trying to out do the other in outrageous tales...the rule was they did not have to be truthful.

"So," Della started as she sat next to her husband that was driving the first cart, to the stables, "what's happening?"

"The managers of each region are sniping at the other, but all come up with a suggestion that they should get gift trip separate from the others of their building."

"Oh. The very thing you're trying to discourage."

Tony nodded his head. "These gift trip packages are supposed to equalize everyone in the greater scheme of things...yet these guys insist that separate restrooms and eating facilities is not enough. I think I've been too lenient."

"Maybe more teleconferencing than having everyone fly to this city or that," Della suggested.

"Yeah. No more bonuses unless a region performs well. No more perk packages."

"I think a lot will quit," Della mentioned with a smile.

"Good. They can go somewhere else and bleed the stocks dry. I'll gladly buy their stock options back and start looking for another type of regional manager."

"Are you going to have TJ listen in?"

"Yeah, he needs to be in on this stuff," grunted Tony.

"I think BJ is old enough to start getting involved," Della hinted.

Tony glanced at his young wife smiling. "You think she has the head for this stuff?"

"About as much as TJ. I think some of her acting out has to do with her being left out of the family business. I got her interested in horses, but I'm not her real parent and I really do think if you show her the same..."

"You think I'm favoring one over the other," he finished. "Okay. You're seeing a lot better than me." Tony squeezed Della's hand that was resting on his knee.

"You two up there, you're making me want to get married," Darcy taunted.

"Jealously will give you heart burn," her sister told her and turned around, throwing a key at her.

Darcy caught the key and laughed. "What key is this too? Your wine cellar?"

"I'll show you," Della told her with a hint in her voice that it was a real nice surprise.

Darcy looked back at the other cart that BJ was driving and had TJ, Celine and her friend Gail. The four of them were engaged in an animated conversation. Darcy wondered what the four of them could find so interesting.

Darcy sat back in the cart and watched the landscape of human design pass by. She remembered many picnics she had with her sister when she was working for Linda, Tony's first wife, under trees, near a pond, and sometimes on the terrace. She still was in the military and came home on leave. Della lived on the estate as a live-in nurse to Linda. A horse's clear bugle call sounded through the strand of trees that separated the bend in the road from an unobstructed view of the beginning of the stables. An answering call, that Darcy recognized as Jasper challenged the new comer.

"Oh, boy," Darcy muttered. "You have your hands full, sis."

Tony stopped the cart and hopped out. He held his hand out for Della who took it and kissed his knuckles and then slid his arm around her waist. The gesture was so natural. It caused Darcy to wonder about herself and all the information on identical twins, or maybe they were just twins that had looked identical. As she stepped out of the cart an arm slid around her waist. She looked into the blue eyes of Celine whose smile was doing things to her stomach. Darcy cleared her throat and felt Celine's laugh vibrate against her body.

"You got the key?" Della asked her when they stopped in front of a closed paddock. The angry sounds of a stallion came from within.

"You purchased a hard head," Darcy mentioned.

"He's been mistreated," Della told her. "Just up your alley. Happy Birthday, sis." Darcy looked nonplused.

"It's not our birthday yet."

"I know. But you refuse to make it to our parties so..."

"You keep giving these huge parties and I don't know anyone."

Della rolled her eyes.

"I can't believe that we're related. I don't do that," Darcy said.

Tony started to hoot with BJ and TJ following suit. "Yes do you!" three voices chorused.

"I do not! That's whining!"

The three just laughed harder.

"I told you that you whine too much when you don't get your way," Darcy told her sister.

Darcy pulled the doors to the paddock open. An elegantly shaped head pushed its head out, ears laid back and teeth barred. Darcy leaned back in time to get out of the way. An ear piercing call to war barreled out of the stallion's lungs.

"Oh my gods!" Celine breathed. "He's gorgeous!"

His coat was silver with black spots and his mane was white. He had scars around his head, some looking recent.

"How did he get those?" Darcy asked.

"I would say a mixture of self inflicted and from his handlers." Della watched her sister as she studied the injured horse.

Darcy nodded. "When can I take him?" Her thoughts were already on where she was going to put him and how she and Judhith were going to start his gentling.

"Whenever you're ready. For Jasper's sake, the sooner the better."

"Good. I'll start now."

"We'll be visiting the other new arrivals." Della reached for Tony's hand and glanced up into his dark eyes. "I want you to see her. She's so beautiful."

"They both are," BJ said in a firm voice.

"Okay, okay. No favorites. Come on everyone." Della led the way out of the stallions' area.

Celine did not want to leave but Darcy's attention was elsewhere. She turned and followed the others. "What is she going to do?" she asked as she came alongside of BJ.

"Gentle him," BJ answered.

"How does she do that?"

"When you get back to her place, you'll be able to watch her. Right now, she needs to get him to trust her enough to let her put him in the trailer."

"We're going to trailer him back with us?" Celine was excited. She was imagining just what the mare and filly would be thinking about their new neighbor.

"Yeah. Here are our two new ladies. Ancient Fire and Arabian Princess." She waved at the two mares that were with each other in the small corral. "They grew up together and when I was looking at Ancient Fire I just couldn't separate them."

Tony nodded. "You're right. She's beautiful. I hope her offspring can capture the coloring."

"Well, I like Arabian Princess," BJ told the two feeling they should not be leaving out the other.

"Then she's yours," Tony told his daughter, smiling at her as if that was the plan all along. "But you have to train her too." Both parents smiled at her suppressed squeal.

TJ laughed and nodded at his father. "Nice gift, pop. Does this mean I get my BMW roadster?"

"Not until your grades improve and your driving record clears," Della and Tony chorused.

"Ohhh," he groaned.

"You sound like Aunt Darcy," BJ told him making a face.

While the four continued chatting, Celine fell in with Gail who was looking at some of the other mares that were roaming over a large pasture, some playing and others just feeding on grass.

"Horses like peacefulness. It makes them confident," BJ told the two women. "So, keeping them in a small stall is not good. Horses are claustrophobic. One of the things we do besides raising champion brood mares, is train new horse owners. They stay about a week in the bunkhouse on the other side of the barn, getting acquainted with either the horse they bring or with one they purchased from us. We always do a background on our buyers, just to make sure they're going to good homes. We aren't in this for the money, though it's nice. It's love."

Gail and Celine smiled at BJ whose eyes lit up on the subject.

"So, you do a lot of business?" Gail asked.

"Not during the winter, though that would be a good time because a lot of owners don't know what to do with their horses during cold and wet weather. That's school time and we're both in school during the day," BJ answered.

"Della likes working with the horses more than the people and when dad's home they spend a lot of time doing things together and hanging around horses is not one of dad's things," TJ explained as he caressed one of the younger horses that came up to see what they were doing.

"Do you work with horses too?"

He smiled. "Not as much as BJ and Della. I help when they need an extra hand. I like the miniature train business better. Besides, dad has me working on a business degree so I can one day sit at the meeting tables and know what those guys are telling me."

"Don't go to the managers. Go to the sources, customers and clerks," Gail told him knowingly.

"Call each customer?" Tony asked interested, as he and Della joined them.

"Yes, like doing follow ups to see if they are satisfied with service."

Tony went over this and his problems with his managers. His repeat sales were not as good as his new sales. The mixed reasons from the managers were like listening to excuses and finger pointing but nothing that made sense.

"Dad, why don't we do that?"

"Maybe you and BJ can do some calling. Get a feel for the client base," he agreed. "But first things first. BJ has a mare over there that she needs to start working with. Mighty fine lady she is," he smiled at his daughter.

Minus BJ, the four moved back to the stallion barn where they could see Darcy in a large corral working with the young stallion.

"Magnificent stud," a young woman mentioned as the group wandered to the side gate.

"Ginger, how are you doing?" Della greeted.

"Ginger this is Celine and Gail...gals, this is Dr. Ginger Peskas. She's our vet."

"Hello," Ginger smiled at the two women and then gestured at Darcy and the stallion.

"She's got him to trust her. Now she just has to work on his ramp skills. I noticed when they were unloading him, he shies from anyone that is standing next to the ramp." Della nodded in agreement and for a while more the family did a lot of horse talk, not intending on leaving Gail and Celine out, but they did. The two women were intent on watching Darcy who was touching the stallion and putting a halter on and removing it and then doing the same with different equipment, from blanket to saddle. After each successful task, Darcy would step back and let the stallion stand alone awhile and when he would come walking up to her, she would add something else. Finally, she stopped and began taking the tack off. He followed her into his covered area but she closed the gate so he was left wandering around the corral. His nose led him to food where he was content to munch.

Darcy met them at the carts looking pleased. They all got into their respective carts and headed back to the mansion.

"So, Missey Gail, what do you plan on doing with yourself?" Celine asked her as they headed upstairs to change or take a nap.

"Well, Tony owes me a rematch, and then you and I need to discuss you."

"Why? Is something wrong?"

Gail laughed. "Marti, if the FBI comes knocking on my door and the same day a Narc, then yes. We have something to discuss. Have you told anyone about...?" she gestured with her hand.

"Uhh, about what?" Celine whispered melodramatically.

"Well, the shooting..."

"She told me," Darcy walked into the room looking a little angry.

"Okay. So...what's going to happen now that she's remembering things?" Gail asked defensively. "I don't want Marti to be taking heat for this stuff. She's not cut out for it."

Celine laughed. "Gail, you are not telling me anything I don't know. We mailed evidence to Agent Bennett in the Los Angeles FBI office."

"And Judge Montero was also notified that the evidence is with Agent Bennett and what it is," Darcy added.

"And we..."

"It's closed," Darcy told both women firmly. "So, let's forget about it for a while. I was going out to the Westside to check on something for Della. Do you want to go, Celine? I understand Gail has a challenge with Tony so we won't be missed," she teased.

"Yeah. I'm about that close to beating him 5 to 0."

Chapter 16

"Run that by me again," Celine asked as she glanced back at the trailer that was behind them.

The stallion had been loaded without any problems and they had left within fifteen minutes of telling Gail they were going to check on some horses in another area. BJ had done most of the work, all but loading the stallion.

"I don't want to say anything against your friend Gail, but someone has been following her and after all that mess we've just escaped from I don't want to be attracting anything bad again."

"I could have told you if you asked. Her last business was a partnership. She sold her half to a guy from the land down under, and now both are suing her because they were after one of her ideas that they thought belonged to the business but what she feels is what her next business will be about. If someone is following her, it's from that mess."

Darcy nodded but didn't feel any comfort in that knowledge. She was getting that familiar feeling of something was not right and that cloud was around her friend Gail, though Gail herself looked alright. And if Della picked up on it too, which was why she and Tony had them leave while they kept Gail busy, then there was something to it.

"Where are you going to keep your stud?" Celine asked in a teasing voice.

"I sent an Email to the twins so Judhith will be getting his own area set up and away from the filly and mare." Darcy grinned at the thought of her family expanding.

"What are you smiling about?" Celine asked gently, stroking the hand that she was holding.

"I was thinking of Judhith."

"Should I be jealous?"

Darcy laughed. "Not that way. Judhith has been talking about setting up a farm like Della and Tony's is, but on a smaller scale. Well, she's getting her wish. That woman is going to be very busy. I want you to remember...if you're cycling..."

"Don't go near the stallion," Celine parroted Della.

"Don't go near the barn. Mares can get fidgety too. That way we won't have him trying to jump fences...just in case."

"Darcy, isn't that a slight exaggeration," Celine objected.

"Depends on which way the wind is blowing." Darcy brought their clasp hands to her lips and kissed Celine's knuckle.



Even though they got home late, Judhith, Ellen, the twins, and Eva were at the ranch, waiting for them. They were all excited about the stallion and Celine had to admit, the stallion was beautiful. To watch him move quietly into his lighted area after touching noses with Clementine who had taken a nonthreatening position to be introduced to him, Celine was amazed at how changed he was from the morning greeting of hostility. Celine told everyone good night and headed first to the shower and then to bed. She was tired. She heard the others leave sometime later. Unable to sleep, she rolled out of bed and quietly moved down the hall toward Darcy's room. The door was open and she could hear the shower. For some reason, Darcy was showing in the dark.

"Darcy?"

The shower stopped. "Yeah?" Darcy stepped out of the shower, a dark shape in a dark room. Celine moved toward her, somehow finding her. Her hands moved over the wet form, starting at her shoulders and down her arms to her wrists, where two sets of fingers intertwined, as both women stepped forward. Celine pressed against Darcy, feeling her pajama top absorbing the water from Darcy's dripping form. Lips met, softly at first and then roughly.

Celine could feel herself being backed into the wall and when she was pressed against it, Darcy dropped her hands and began to explore her body, not yet moving her hands under the loose shirt. Celine, cupped her hands around Darcy's breasts, feeling the hard nipples against her palms. She groaned as Darcy's fingers gripped her buttocks, kneading a rush of warm liquid down her core, more than dampening her pajama bottoms.

"This is it," Darcy whispered between nibbles and sucks along Celine's jaw line, mouth and ear lobe, "This is where you are either all talk or willing to show." She bit Celine's ear lobe, and this time Celine brought one leg up and around Darcy's waist, hooking her leg around her and pulling her in closer.

"This is a two way street, Darlin'. Show me that this is no dream," Celine whispered hotly. She wrapped her other leg around Darcy's waist. Darcy carried her to her bed.

"So, Dreamer, what you said you liked was that for real?" Darcy whispered hoarsely, as she body trembled from where Celine's hands were going.

"Yeah, In Your Dreams," she enunciated slowly, "and was that all brag about what you said or...was it just you dreaming for it?" She pinched Darcy's nipple hard and got a groan.

"Let's find out," Darcy grabbed Celine's face between her hands and kissed her hard, pressing as much of her body against Celine as possible. Her hands ran along Celine's arms, until their hands intertwined and she rolled them over so Celine was below her. "Do you trust me?" Darcy asked in a soft voice next to Celine's ear.

"Yes," she told her in strangled voice. Anticipation had images going through her head on what their conversations on the chat room were about...her egging IYD and IYD not giving any space coming back with things that Celine had never heard of, which had her visiting a porno shop later to see what IYD was getting at.

It was time for both to find out if it was more bluff than truth.

Chapter 17

Midmorning Darcy was in the stallion's corral, working with him, though to Celine's untrained eye, she was brushing him.

Celine was sitting on the enclosed porch, painting. Outside the weather was cold and clouds, though not dark, were rushing across the sky. She had pushed aside the sweater she had draped over her shoulders for warmth. Her watercolor brush whisked downward as she smeared the grays to create the appearance of rain in a dark alley, and then looked again at the huddled people she had left as dark blobs seeking some shelter from nature's cleansing wash.

For a long time she stared at the painting, reliving the feeling of the numbing cold of her body and the cramps in her stomach from lack of food as she willed her body to heat itself. It was concentrating on something other than how she felt that got her through another miserable night. Each moment was survived by not thinking in time frames but by completion of dreams...moving onto the next until it was time for the soup kitchen to open.

"Celine," a soft voice called her back, and warm hands wrapped around her cold ones. It took more than a few calls to get her to realize that she was crying for those that she left behind and who were still struggling to survive. She realized that there was nothing she could do to help them because they could not survive in a self-structured world where dependability of showing up for a job would give them some relief. She could feel herself being rocked as she sobbed for everyone that was just waiting to die. The soft voice continued to whisper to her and she gradually stopped crying, nestled in the warm embrace.

"Celine. Martha. Hey. Wake up sleepy head," Darcy's voice called to her.

Celine's eyes popped open when Darcy shook her shoulder.

"Hey. Do you always fall asleep after you paint something?" she asked teasing.

Celine pulled the blanket covering her down to her lap and looked to where she thought her painting was and then around her wondering what she did with it.

Darcy gestured at the window. "You left it over there."

Sitting against the window on the sill was her painting. It was a grim scene from street life. A pale figure was walking through the alley, carrying food and a thermos. Celine blinked a few times, wondering who had added the figure.

"It's like an angel helping those people," Darcy mentioned.

"I guess," Celine replied uncertain, wondering if she was blanking out again. Looking about her she noticed that her tools were neatly laid out. The pallet with many colors smeared across it, was dry and the brushes cleaned.

"I just finished up with Medicine Man," she leaned over and kissed Celine's lips, lingering as the tip of her tongue ran over Celine's relaxed lips. "I thought maybe, we could soak in the jacuzzi."

Celine giggled when Darcy's hand slid down her side. "Hey, no tickling."

Darcy stood up and gestured to the painting. "You really captured the plight of street people in the bad weather. Memories?"

Celine nodded. "Something is not right about something." She shook her head. "It's like at the tip of my tongue and I can't figure out what it is."

Darcy looked at the painting and then at Celine. She pulled the hassock in front of Celine, and sat on it, taking up Celine's cold hands and wrapping them in hers. "Is it about your friend that was killed?"

Celine shook her head. "No," she said with certainty. "It's not about that." She sighed relieved. Then she frowned and looked up at the painting, wondering about her dream which was fading quickly. She leaned over to kiss Darcy. "It'll come to me," she whispered against her lips. Leaning back, she looked into the dark eyes of her lover. "Do you think that stuff I was caught up in is finished?"

Darcy nodded. "Too many people have evidence that it exists and all have an ax to grind. I learned a lot about how to work the press from BJ. She saved my butt when someone was hunting me. Come on, let's go work out."

Darcy's fix for most things.

"And then a soak in the jacuzzi," Celine reminded her.



The two women snuggled on the couch, Darcy acting as a pillow for Celine, as both women quietly read their books. Both felt pleasantly relaxed and not ready to go to bed yet. The cats were sleeping on the back of the couch, Mandy was lying in her corner, wrapped in a tight circle, however, her eyes were moving as if following something. Celine moved from one position and then another until she finally got up, turned and gave Darcy a kiss on the forehead.

"I'm going to paint some. I have some ideas floating around that I need to put down."

"Sure...do you want to paint in here?" Darcy shocked herself in asking.

Celine smiled and shook her head. "Water coloring can be messy. I'll be in the kitchen."

Darcy felt a tug of disappointment and quickly dismissed it as getting too dependant on someone and reminded herself quickly of what it had once led to.

"You don't want me to paint in the kitchen?"

"No, go ahead. I..." she shrugged her shoulders, "have no particular place in mind." She could hardly tell her to paint in her room.

Celine washed the fastened paper in water and then laid the board on the table. She carefully picked her colors, squeezing them out on her pallet. She watched as the color dropped onto the wet paper and spread into patterns, and then with her brush coaxed them into something recognizable. She moved to another area and again dropped

color onto the wet space and studied the pattern it created. Encouraged by her brush and the addition of more color in some places and then pulling up the excess with a sponge or a dry brush, she nodded her pleasure as each gave interesting textures to her creation. She blotted, then applied more color, some wash, color, each time using different brushes for differing effects. Her work continued.

"A labor of love?" a soft voice asked.

Celine looked up startled and then smiled at Darcy. She straightened her back and then stretched it, feeling and hearing her spine readjust.

"Why did you change clothes?"

"I usually don't wear the same clothes two days in a row." Darcy leaned forward and kissed her gently.

Celine returned the kiss, taking pleasure in the lips that caressed hers. Leaning back and looking into the dark eyes she asked, "What time is it?"

"Time to feed the horses." Darcy went over to the coffee machine and started to prepare coffee. "Want some?"

"No. I want to finish this up." She glanced at the picture and could see things that still needed to be added and embellished. She realized this painting was more complicated and busier than the other. She didn't hear Darcy leave, she had turned back to the painting, adding images, bringing out shading to more detail. It was not until dinner time that she was finished. She simply put her brushes away and left the last painting to dry.



A light tapping woke Celine.

"Uhhh!" she groggily responded. "Yes?" she tried again. She pulled the covers back and went to the door, wondering why Darcy was not coming in.

She pulled the door open and found a gun pointing at her head. A gloved hand pulled her roughly around and shoved her against the wall. Hard hands patted her down. Frightened into silence, she numbly endured the hands going over her body. Nothing was said as the gloved hand jerked her around and shoved her down an unfamiliar hall. Where were they taking her? Where was she?

A dark room loomed ahead and just the idea that she was returning to this place had her screaming and frantically back peddling to avoid what descended on her.

"Celine!" Darcy's voice was frantic as she tried to avoid getting hit with flailing fists to prevent Celine from choking herself in the bedding that was wound around her.

"Martha!" she tried again, this time getting fewer physical movements, but the sobs that came out of the swathed damp figure wrenched her heart. Celine was frightened.

"Okay, okay. I'm here...I'm here, hon. Wake up," Darcy soothed as she pulled at the sheet and finally was able to get Celine free. She held the trembling woman in her arms and rocked her, not listening to the incoherent sobs from her, but rather feeling the fear she radiated.

Mandy lent her own noise and finally jumped up on the bed and lay on the other side of Celine.

It took a while before Celine realized that Darcy was not wearing anything. She caressed the skin that pebbled under her touch and then stopped embarrassed. She pushed away a few inches from Darcy, who easily loosened her grip.

"What's going on Celine?"

"It was just a nightmare." She took a deep breath and let it out, realizing that her chest hurt.

"Something you've had before," Darcy said with certainty.

Celine looked up at her startled. "How did you know?" she asked faintly.

"Tell me about it."

Celine shifted uncomfortably. "I don't really know what it's about...just that when I have it, I know I had it before."

"Does it have something to do with your paintings?"

"My paintings? Of the horses? No. Why do you think that?"

"Come on. I want to show you something." Darcy stopped long enough to grab the robe behind Celine's door for herself.

Darcy turned the light on in the dining room, where she had propped along the floor leaning against the wall were seven watercolor paintings.

Celine looked at them doubtfully. "Where did you get these?"

"You painted them in the last two days."

Celine looked at Darcy with disbelief. "That is not something I would do. It's not my technique. And why would I want to paint something so depressing? And two days? It was just yesterday."

Her voice caught and fearfully she turned her back on them, looking out the window, vaguely noticing that the sun was coming up.

"Before you came here, when was the last time you painted?"

Celine shook her head not wanting to think about it, not understanding why. Celine left the room, frightened to be left alone but more frightened by what Darcy was asking her.

"Martha! What are you running from?" Darcy called after her.

"Nothing!" she shouted back walking faster.

Darcy watched her, knowing that time was running out but not knowing from what. Her own intuition was not reliable and too often got her into things way over her head. But this was important and it was annoying that she could not get a grasp on why.

In her room, Celine quickly changed into workout clothes. It was something she learned from Darcy. When anxious, tire the body out and the cognitive functions would follow.

Darcy joined her but left her to herself. A light flickered from someone entering the kitchen. Judhith's voice called to them from the first floor that she was delivering some supplies from Jack's visit to the city.

Darcy stopped her workout and ran up the stairs.

Celine shut out the voices upstairs and turned on the treadmill. She usually started and finished her workouts with the treadmill. When she finished, she went directly to her room and showered. She picked up a book near her bed and reclined on the Roman bench chair, ignoring her growling stomach. She didn't want company, she wanted to not think, yet, the struggle to concentrate on the words of the book brought her to the third turn of the page and she didn't know what her eyes were scanning.

Celine put the book aside and got up to stand staring out the window. She had a view of the barn. She could see Darcy working with the stallion and Judhith watching. Still feeling something hovering just out of her peripheral and unwanted Celine dressed

and left the house to go for a walk. Mandy followed, doing her dog thing, stopping to sniff, then rushing ahead for a few yards and looking back at her. Mandy looked happy. Unconsciously she smiled at the dog, pulling her coat around her tighter. It was chilly. She didn't note if it was her or Mandy that set the fast pace, not intent or interested in a destination. Her thoughts were more on observing small things around her, determined to focus on the present and not the images that were just near the surface of consciousness.



"Well, where did she go?!" Darcy slapped her leg angrily.

"Mandy is with her. If she gets into trouble..."

"She's already in trouble! Look at the paintings!" Darcy gestured upset.

"It's almost like looking at one of those ink blots," Judith agreed. She glanced at the twins who were still studying the paintings as if they were a marvel. Shrinks, she thought disgusted.

Darcy had driven into town when it grew dark because Celine had not returned. She took the paintings to have James look at them. He and Jack had been therapists in their other life...before LC. James specialized in artists while Jack liked the corporate types who wanted to be artists.

John had left to go back to the hospice after deciding that the others could handle this. Eva was thinking maybe she would have to get the Hummer out for patrol duty, so she waited around the office, playing 'Tomb Raider'.

Jack pulled up a chair and handed Darcy a cup of tea, deciding she didn't need to be wound up any more than she was with caffeine.

"Tell me again...but this time...describe your impressions...No. Don't use your critical side of how she appeared to you. I want your emotional feel for what was happening around you."

Darcy took a deep breath, letting the aggravation at Jack's request out. She closed her eyes to center herself. During her stay at the hospice, when she finally acknowledged she was able to sense things most others could not, Jack patiently had taught her how to sharpen these skills. Since she could not move around much without pain, the lessons were the only thing that relieved her boredom.

"She was in the kitchen, painting. When I stepped across the threshold I felt out of it, like I was stepping into a room I was not familiar with. She was bent over a painting, talking to herself, telling herself where to put things and this was too dark and that was not quite right. I didn't recognize her...I mean...it was her voice and all, but she was so different..."

Darcy was quiet for a moment, as she went over in her mind's eye her fear of approaching this stranger.

"I thought it was a dream and I was watching her paint a nightmare. I had stepped back and went into another room where it was normal. She was there for over twenty-four hours. No breaks. When she finally went to bed, she woke up screaming that she did not want to go back."

"How long from the time she went to bed to the waking up?" James asked.

"About an hour." Darcy glanced at one of the paintings. "She didn't remember the paintings or she didn't want to talk about them." She turned to Jack and James asking, "What's happening to her?"

"Did you know that she was in one of your mother's classes?"

Darcy looked guilty. "Yeah. She repeated to me one of her refrains about creativity."

"Have you spoken with her lately?"

"No."

"I spoke with Della. She has your mother's notes on her students."

"So..."

"She found her notes on Martha Newcomb. She wrote," he looked at the paper in his hand, "'Ms. Newcomb will either go mad or leave her painting all together because she refuses to accept her abilities to paint clairvoyant events', end of quote."

"This family thing can be a pain in the butt sometimes."

"You know, Darcy, you were once in the same boat. You could probably help her out best since you've been there and passed the test," James suggested.

"That explains why she went into an art business that was so structured. She needed the discipline to keep herself from seeing things that scared her," Jack mentioned to his brother.

"Until two years ago, when she quit her job and went onto the streets. Maybe being so structured didn't work. Della is going to speak with her friend Gail. From what I understand, she hasn't started any new ventures lately. The two men that own her last business are suing her for something," James mentioned.

"That will keep Della busy," Darcy laughed. "So, how is everyone?"

"Why don't you get yourself a satellite and you can connect to her yourself?" James asked.

"Because I like being out in the middle of nowhere with only the animals to talk to," she responded.

"Hmm." Jack and James commented in unison.

"What about Celine?" she went back to their original problem.

"Well, it's cold out there and will be getting colder. Let's trust Mandy and the Fates that brought her to us."

"Whatever she's been putting off all these years is coming back to her, and she needs to face it," Judhith told the others firmly. "There are some things we can't outrun."

"Here, here," Darcy agreed looking at Judhith and then the twins.

Chapter 18

"But why are you burning your socks?" Celine asked frustrated. It made no sense to her why Crazy Al was burning his socks when it was cold and socks were important.

"They've got holes in 'em! No use for 'em that way."

"Well, can't you recycle them?"

"I am. I'm using them for fuel...turning them into ash and then I'll scatter their remains on my garden." He sat back and pulled out a smoking pipe that he liked to chew on. "Not like we got birds out here that would use the yarn for a nest," he mumbled as he regarded the empty bowl. He was wishing he had not given up smoking.

Celine got up from the chair and paced the room. His eyes followed her as she circled the area. He paced too so he had a nice area cleared for things like that. He also had demons that chased him even into his waking hours. He could tell when someone had

the same malaise and Celine had it. It fascinated him to watch her. He had no idea what he looked like, so this was an eye opener. She didn't look all that scary...yet. She refused to look into the fire as if something might be in there. He looked into the fire. He was not afraid anymore to face his fear. He had the whole desert to run and scream out the panic it possessed him with and no one to call the police on him. He saw things...things that could happen in the world and things that didn't belong in this world.

Once he shouted out what he saw in his visions on street corners, but no one wanted to hear it. No one wanted to change their ways. He tried many things to tame the visions from drugs to religion. It was all wrong. After one year in a mental institution, he decided it was not worth preaching to the unbelievers. Following his release from the mental institution he had fled into the desert and found LC.

Al picked up a flare gun he used to warn off any visitors. It was not for him this time. He could see it coming. It was the eyes, looking this way and that for things that only she could see. It could be scary if you did not have someone to guide you.

"Where're you going?" she asked frightened.

"Gonna send up a flare. If'n ya gonna jump in the fire might as well do it now and get it over with," he told her solemnly.

When he returned, the young woman was sitting too close to the fire for it to be comfortable.

"Just sit right on that stool. It's all rigged up for the ride," he told her. He knew how to ride it out without getting hurt.

The woman blinked her darkened eyes at him, and he could tell she was just about there. She didn't need any drugs. She had that thing in her. She surely did. She listened to him and sat on the padded stool. She was not seeing the flames. She was seeing the dark entrance behind a waterfall.

"Go on," his voice encouraged. "It's not gonna hurt if ya do it. It's gonna hurt if you don't."

And she went in.

Against the darkened tunnel walls ran reels of tape of things happening in peoples' lives. She knew it was past, present and future events. Only with practice would she be able to discern what *could be* future. She could hear someone talking but it didn't concern her so she moved on. She had been here more than once...maybe more than a dozen times.

The expected garden was just on the other side of the tunnel opening. She just had to get to it. However, this time she didn't run frightened to the other side, tripping over the uneven ground caught in someone's nightmare, feeling like *Alice in Wonderland*. Then she had been running from someone, or was it *to* someone? And it was because she wanted to change what she had seen was going to happen. She was going to interfere with another's destiny. She needed to talk to the person in the garden.

The light in the garden was bright, but the fauna surrounding the stone bench absorbed most of it, lessening the whiteness of everything so she could differentiate from one thing to another, and even as she thought this, things began to color with their own uniqueness. Now the fuchsia bush was recognizable and the ferns, African violets and marigolds. There were plants she didn't have names for, but as she noticed them, the names came to her. And then, there on the bench was who she was expecting. She felt welcomed.



As Darcy headed for home, frustrated at not knowing where Celine was, a flare reflected off the jeep's dusty hood. Stopping suddenly, she jumped out of the jeep and stared in the direction of Crazy Al's place.

"Mandy! Of all the people she takes him to. Blasted dog! What could she be thinking?" She slapped her jeans in frustration and then pounded on the hood of the jeep. *Why couldn't she stay with me? I would have shown her!* Yet she knew that she would have been awkward and not a good leader. Crazy Al was the person best suited to teach her but...

Darcy got back into her jeep and resumed her ride home. She remembered it was a group thing. Everyone meditated on the new member and gave her whatever energy and blessings she needed to make a successful crossing to find her teacher on the other side or wherever it was. Darcy certainly didn't know where she went when she was in trance. Her teacher was a creature she was never able to describe or even put a species name to...she merely called it Jo.

Darcy parked the jeep next to the truck, taking time to stop at the barn and check up on the llamas, horses and goats. She should be tired, but she wasn't.

Upstairs in her sacred space, she lit two candles and some incense and then folded her legs into a seated position before a small table that only had a vase of flowers supplied by her hot house. In a soft voice she began the mantra that would help her slip into a trance and to the garden where they all gathered.



"What is it you fear?"

"What I will see." A cold sweat broke out on Celine's forehead. She just wanted to control what she could see, yet was that not the whole point? If she was to see something that was horrible and it could be prevented, she wanted to know how to help those involved prevent it.

"Yet you choose to see."

"I want to help!" Her hands shook in her lap at her fear of facing someone that was braver than her, because if she took this predicted path, she would perish or suffer greatly.

"Help with what?"

"I don't want them to suffer," she whispered. *I don't want to see suffering.*

"A child suffers when she cannot have something she wants at that moment."

"It's not the same."

"No?"

She knew that was not true the moment she had said it. The memory of a moment out of her own childhood and feeling her mother's anguish at her wails replayed in her mind's eye. She could see the ripple effects of what could happen if her mother gave into her childish impulsive needs and the ripple effects of her mother not doing so. There was no judgment in the revisiting of this episode in her life, nor did she know what her mother had done.

"It's like exercising. You can push yourself until you are exhausted and experience the immediate, next day or future effect it has on your body, or you can just

do so much and stop, or you cannot do any exercises at all and experience another type of present and future."

"This is not like exercising. This is life and death." She laughed. "Okay. I get it. It's all subjective. So, it's like playing god."

"It's all subjective..."

"Well, I am interfering with..."

"Interfering or participating, it's all subjective."

"So, it's a matter of knowing what the consequences are," Celine said.

"If you like chess games."

"I don't. Too much brain work. I just want to help," she said plaintively.

"Yes."

"So how can I help?"

"You have a tool."

"But, I don't know what I'm seeing. I don't understand it!"

"When you paint a tree, is that how the tree really is?"

"A trick question. It depends on what the lighting is and what type of medium I'm using, and still, no. I can never really show what the tree is like. Each person has to experience it on her own..."

"Yes. And so it is with your visions. You paint your interpretation of a tree, and from there others will interpret what they understand to mean in relationship to them. Does that take away from the meaning of the tree?"

"I understand symbols and how subjective as well as collective they can be in meaning. I just..." Suddenly it was crystal clear to her. "I can just paint what I see..." *But some of it is terrible!*

"If you paint a garden...will everyone see the same garden?"

"That's subjective..."

"Yes. Because for some people with unpleasant experiences in a garden it would have ominous meanings, while to others it would mean nothing, and today it would mean one thing and tomorrow another."

She sighed. "Okay. I just don't want to be hung out to dry because they're controversial or, well, you know."

"It is a choice..."

"So, you're saying my paintings can be interpreted however the person who looks at it sees it?" This was not what she really wanted. She would rather the viewer see what she was trying to show. Then she laughed. As if that were possible.

"As it is with all art...be it written, audio, oral or visual. Yes," was the amused return.

She nodded understanding. Deeper in the garden she could see a gathering of people. They were too far away for her to recognize anyone, but at the moment she didn't care. As long as they didn't invade her private little space with their noise or presence she would tolerate the idea that it was not her private garden.

Chapter 19

It was early morning and the sun was just breaking over the white laced mountain peaks to the north-east. Mandy had chased another rabbit into its burrow. Celine was still

laughing at the expression on Mandy's face when the rabbit had suddenly appeared before them and sped off. It had caught them flat footed. If Celine thought about it, she would have wondered why she had never heard of rabbits living in a desert.

Celine watched the land come to life around her as she walked, her feet well placed and not even stirring up dust. When she smiled her face felt as if it were cracking. Peering through her vaped breath, she squinted at something that appeared to be headed toward her but as of yet what it was, was unclear.

"Hey!" she hollered suddenly. The figure changed course. A small figure detached itself and followed by starts and stops. Mandy took off and ran barking at the familiar figures.

Darcy stopped in front of Celine and slid off Ginger Ale. Celine stumbled over the uneven ground and wrapped her arms around Darcy, hugging her tightly.

"I'm sorry. I went for a walk and found myself just walking," she told Darcy, her voice muffled in the cold coat fabric. "Crazy Al found me. He said he would let you know I was alright." She looked up into Darcy's face worried that Darcy was angry.

"He did. Are you headed anywhere special?"

"Yeah. I was looking for a place where I can get some banana nut pancakes," she smiled hopefully.

Darcy's looked relieved. She turned around, leading Ginger Ale with Ginger's Pride and Mandy following.

"Hey. You rode without reins?"

"Yeah. So, are you feeling better?" Darcy asked as they walked.

"Yeah. I think I know why I stopped painting."

Celine linked her hand with Darcy's looking up at her worried. "Darcy, do you mind me living with you?"

"No! I know I'm not easy to live with." She took a deep breath, "I'm just not used to living with anyone other than the animals. Did you want to move?"

"No. I like it out where you are. We're kinda lucky that we cycle at the same time. That's a plus, don't you think?"

Darcy gave a short laugh. "Maybe for our sakes, but I don't know about the animals and neighbors."

"That's the nice part about being so far out from people. I don't have to worry about being interrupted from my work every twenty minutes by phone calls, doorbell ringing, neighborhood fights, more propaganda being fed through the news..." suddenly Celine stopped. She didn't want to think about politics and how the people in power were killing everyone on the planet for their insatiable need for domination and... A squeeze on her hand stopped her thoughts.

"You are not helpless. Believe in the power of thought, intention, and that there is something more than what you can see," Darcy smiled at her, "and cannot see."

Celine squeezed her hand back. "I'm frightened, Darcy."

"We all are on occasion. Those that are cruel are like vampires. They live on the energy of despair. If you believe that things are hopeless and there is nothing you can do it is the beginning of despair. To believe that a god is behind it all, that's despair. It's giving up your divine power to evoke change either through prayer, compassion ...which is not pity...or physically doing something. Don't get me wrong that I have something against those that give up thinking for themselves or those that think because they are in

places of power that this gives them a 'god-blessed' right to abuse others. I think we are all here to learn something and experience where and who we are. You are only responsible for yourself and considering how much we all deal with each day, I would say that is plenty enough."

Celine smiled and gave a small laugh, then looked up at Darcy. "That's the most I've heard you speak. Can you tell me more about Last Chance?"

Darcy's eyes were looking ahead of them and looked over at Celine briefly. "Yeah, sure." She looked back up the road. "I think we have a visitor."



"But they're wonderful!" Jennifer told the two women. "I know seven to eleven galleries, east and west coast, that would love to show them."

"I don't know. They're not exactly lovely to look at," Celine told her doubtfully.

"Oh, you don't know what you have here," Jennifer told her seriously. "The galleries I'm speaking of are small. I can get maybe four of your paintings in each. How many more do you have?"

"That's the lot, Jen," Darcy told her dryly.

"I'm not sure how much I can do a week," Celine spoke slowly. She knew how much she could *probably* paint a week but she did not want to give any figures. She knew what it was like to work in an environment that depended on consistent manic productivity and she didn't want to get back into that mode of living. Not out here.

"Do you mind if I take pictures? I can send the images to the galleries over the internet and see if they're interested. You'll find out that I'm right. These will sell like hotcakes." She smiled over at Darcy who had made her breakfast specialty...banana nut pancakes.

Celine rubbed her forehead, already images were coming to her, as if the idea of finding a market was priming her creative pump.

"Sure. Go ahead," Celine agreed.

"Good! I'll send you an Email to the LC general delivery," Jen smiled pleased. She had already taken pictures of them at the general store. Jen had been visiting her elder uncle whom she had brought to the hospice after he was blacklisted from every hospital and retirement home in most states. At John's suggestion she had visited the general store to look at the watercolors and immediately wanted to know who the artist was, hoping it was not someone that died.

Darcy raised two eyebrows over this statement. Obviously, she had been discussing this with one of the twins. Darcy was thinking she needed to explain to Celine the co-opt way they ran the town. She could either contribute to the idea or be taxed by the town... whichever way she felt comfortable with.

After Jen left Celine sat for a few moments looking thoughtful. "I'll need an agent, tax consultant, bank account..." her voice trailed off when she caught Darcy's shaking head.

"Remember Jame's speech? Last Chance is run like a co-opt. We have competent people who take care of things like that. If you want to join. It's still a probationary period but we can help you..."

Celine wrapped her arms around a surprised Darcy. "Are you kidding? Are you unsure of how I feel about you? About this place? Where else would a freak like me be accepted and supported?"

"Yeah, you're not alone in the weird world."

Celine nodded. "Can I live here...with you?"

"I would like to think we already answered that. If you want, I have a shed in the back that I do my pottery in. I can section it off and give you space...if you'd like."

Celine smiled. "Can I see it?"

END