

OH BOY
IV

OH BOY PRESS presents

"Love and Glory"

OH BOY IV

a QUANTUM LEAP novel

written by

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and Michelle Agnew

art by

<=minds-i-view=>

based in part on "BOOKENDS"

a short story by Terri Librande

"LOVE AND GLORY": OH BOY IV

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Obligatory Editorial

It's finished! It's all written! Done, completed, finito!

(sounds of wild celebration)

Not so fast, Sharon, we still have the editorial to do.

Later, Sandy, here, have a Butterfinger. (continuing sounds of celebration)

But, we have to get the editorial done so we can send it to Michelle to print out.

(diminishing sounds of celebration) But, Sandy, can't that wait? I want to enjoy this moment.

You'll enjoy it even more when we are really done.

(long silence) Aw, Sandy, you take all the fun out of it.

Stop jumping on the couch and get over here.

Okay, but I just wanna let you know, you're rainin' on my parade.

You've written too much Al dialog, you're starting to sound like him.

Really? (pleased)

You're incorrigible, just like Al.

And you sound just like Sam. "We have to get this done. Stop partying. Get off the couch."

Excuse me, but weren't you the one that was drooling over that Sam illo a mere two minutes ago?

That's different. (defensive) Sam illos are made to be drooled over, especially when <=minds-i-view=> does them. Anyway, I was just reviewing the artwork for its placement in the zine. We have to get them just right.

(derisive snort) Yeah, right. Like it takes five minutes looking at a picture to decide where it goes.

Well, what about the way you went on about that Al illo? You know, the one of him in the tux?

So, you gotta have a little fun. If you don't, all the work that goes into a zine will make you crazy.

Crazy? Don't mention that word. They'll be taking you away to Havenwell. Especially after you and Michelle had the conversation about Beth-the-pizza-lady.

Hey, it was late, okay? Gimme a break.

All right, no more messing around. What do we want to say in this editorial?

This monster epic began two years ago when <=minds-i-view=> did a piece of artwork that just cried out for a story. The resulting piece, called LOVE AND GLORY, grew into a trilogy. Then, we got a short story from Terri Librande as a submission for OH BOY III and it seemed to tell much of the prequel to our own work in progress. So, with her permission, we incorporated some of her ideas into our own project, which had now turned into a novel.

Our friend, Michelle Agnew, expressed interest in helping us tame this beast and our writing team became a threesome. Three way collaboration is not easy, especially when we all live in different cities. Our telephone bills became astronomical!!

We were fortunate when <=minds-i-view=> agreed to do the art work. When she agreed to do at least one piece of art for each chapter, she didn't realize how many chapters there would be. But, then, neither did we!

The novel itself, kept growing as we came up with new ideas. The original outline had maybe fifteen chapters. But, it just seemed there was so much story to be told about the friendship between Sam and Al that it kept expanding when we actually got down to writing it. Now, twenty-two chapters later, we've finally reached the conclusion!

We are very proud of this masterpiece. It's consumed a major portion of all our lives. In writing it, we endeavored to stay true to the story line given us on the show. The problem with that was, they kept adding to it as we were in the process of trying to make everything fit! That's a hard enough task without writing with a history that changes from week to week.

Finally we came to the conclusion that we couldn't include the new information from this

season because it was developing as we wrote the final chapters. There was no way to rewrite hundreds of pages of intricately plotted story to acknowledge the new elements they keep introducing. So, aside from an occasional item here and there, this novel does not make use of fifth season material. It was finished before this year's season finale.

We employed the 'fudge factor' in the final analysis. Facts are stupid things, or so we heard. The harder we worked on this, and the more research we did, we found ourselves agreeing with that more and more. In some cases, we couldn't fully reconcile 'real life facts' with 'television facts' so we sort of blurred the reality and did the best we could. Hence, the fudge factor.

As we struggled with making a complete story out of the bits and pieces Donald Bellisario has given us to work with, we came to understand why he warned fans in an interview some years ago, 'not to think too deeply about this'. In our opinion, down that way lies madness. We decided that if he could play fast and loose with dates, so could we. We just tried to be consistent with our inconsistencies.

So, those of you that tend to be perfectionists in QUANTUM LEAP history, we extend our apologies. If it helps, you can consider this as an alternative universe story. You'll understand why, and why we can't tell you more, when you finish the novel.

The research for this work lead us into more areas than we ever imagined in the outset. It came from many and varied sources; articles on NASA, pamphlets from the Naval recruiting office, personal interviews, and more books than we can count. We did the best we could to keep things accurate and balanced, but we're not Italian, Jewish, nor quantum physicists. If we offended anyone, it was truly not intentional. If we got anything wrong, it wasn't because we didn't do our best to find out the facts.

We would like to hear your opinion of our novel. Please send us your comments. Sharon is still at Box 111, Rt. 2 in Hannibal, MO 63401. Sandy has moved to 4819 B Meadow Lark Lane, Columbia, MO 65201.

Thanks to our husbands and kids for putting up with us while we tried to put this behemoth together. It has not been an easy job for them. Also, thanks to our friends and relatives (that's you, Nick!) for being patient with our inquiries for esoteric information, like how to side-step a clutch.

We want to thank Michelle for all her hours of hard work and putting up with us when we change our minds in mid-story...or sometimes mid-paragraph!

Special thanks to <=minds-i-view=> for all of the wonderful illustrations. It was a full time job in itself. She was very nice every time we added a new chapter, and thereby a new piece (or two) of artwork!

Thanks to our proofreaders as well. Their help has been invaluable. With the three of us writing this, we were sometimes too close to material to catch the problem if something didn't read like we thought it did.

Our gratitude goes to Scott Bakula and Dean Stockwell for their consistently wonderful performances. We really feel like we know the characters of Sam and Al through their portrayals each week. Great work, guys!

Lastly, we want to thank Donald Bellisario for his dream of quantum leaping which became a reality in much the same way Sam Beckett's did. As we finish this editorial, it's become 'official' that NBC network in all their 'wisdom' has pulled the plug on the Project. Write those letters, fans. Be polite, but be persistent. Let those guys on the 'Funding Committee' know we want QUANTUM LEAP back!

We hope you enjoy LOVE AND GLORY. So, get out the microwave popcorn and settle down for a long read!

Keep leaping!

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*"Between love and the noblest cause
there should be no contest.
Love is life's only true satisfaction."*

*-- Professor Gerald Bryant
Star-Crossed*

CHAPTER ONE

"Operation Homecoming"

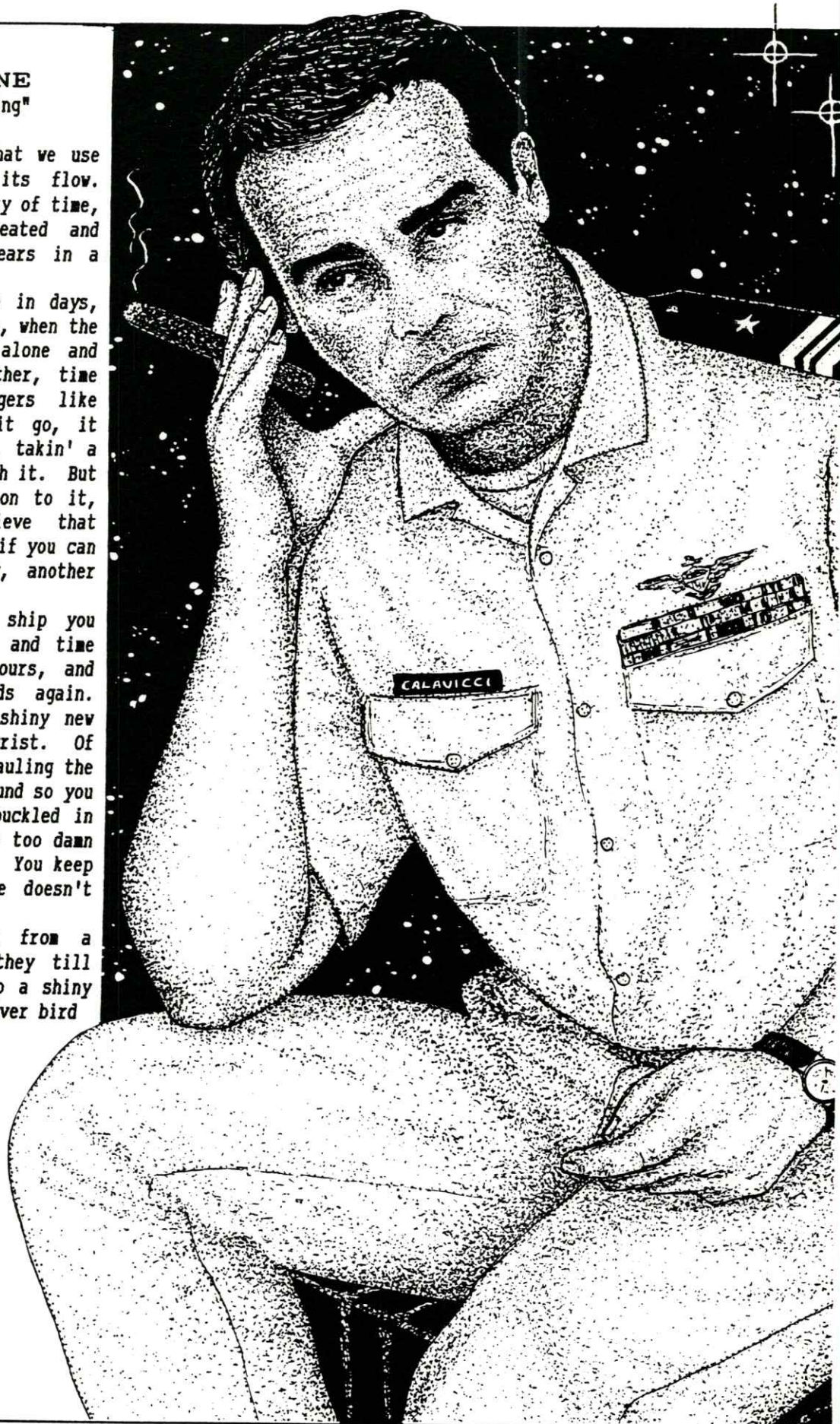
Time is fluid, and what we use to measure it changes its flow. That's the Calavicci theory of time, thought up while I sweated and shivered out six long years in a tiger cage in 'Nam.

When you measure time in days, or months, or even seasons, when the interrogators leave you alone and each day seems like another, time slips through your fingers like water. You don't feel it go, it just does, and it's gone, takin' a big chunk of your life with it. But you keep tryin' to hang on to it, because you gotta believe that you'll get your life back if you can just survive another day, another full moon, another season.

Then it ends. They ship you home to a hero's welcome and time starts ticking off in hours, and minutes, and even seconds again. You can read it on the shiny new watch they put on your wrist. Of course, you have to keep hauling the face of the damn thing around so you can see it because even buckled in the last hole, the thing's too damn big for an arm like yours. You keep checking it, but the time doesn't move.

They haul your butt from a piss-poor village where they till the ground with buffalo to a shiny high tech hospital in a silver bird so sleek it's nearly enough to make you cry. You jump centuries, like H.G. Wells himself, and yet the time, measured on the chronometer, is only a handful of hours.

Hours, minutes, seconds, you can tick them all off like little time bombs. But they won't move, not like they should. Because someone always wants another test, or some more blood,



or another debriefing, and they won't let you suck back up that time you lost. They won't tell you where your wife is, or why they won't tell you. Only that you gotta be more patient.

Patient! When you've just spent six years watching your time trickle away like sweat off your nose or blood down your back.

Finally, they have the escort officer tell you that she's dumped you, and you believe them ...for a while. You believe she's really gone--really kissed you off for some other guy when you were rotting in a VC cage, kept alive by nothing more than the memory of her love. You wish to hell that you had died in 'Nam like she thought, 'cause it hurts too bad to hear it now, when you thought you'd made it through.

Time measured by pain doesn't move at all. It seems like it does, rushing past your ears like you're free-falling after ejecting your butt out of a flaming A-4. It's like falling. But you never hit the ground--never find the bottom of the pit to swallow you and stop time once and for all.

It just goes on and on, and the end never comes. Never, until you realize you're just too damn tough to auger in and die. So you decide you'll live after all, because maybe they're wrong. Hell. They didn't even get the message first hand, but through 'a friend'. They have to be wrong. Your wife would never, ever have wanted it the way they said she did. You just gotta find her--goin' on with the rest of your life while you wait for the chance.

And when the betrayal quits roaring in your ears, you find it's only been twenty-four hours, not twenty-four times infinity that you laid there, waiting to die, and no one, no one even knows.

Time's fluid all right, and it's all dammed up in this watch and forms and tight-assed bureaucrats. So, I'm taking matters into my own hands and measuring it my way. I've had a belly full of someone else controlling it for me.

I'm going to sit here on this exam table--in my clothes, damn it--and smoke this cigar. I've already taken down two nurses and one snot-nosed intern who tried to take it away. I'm measuring this time by cigars, and if I'm not outta here with a clean bill of health and on my way to Beth by the time it's gone, I'm kicking serious butt and to hell with the fallout. I'm enjoying the hell out of this smoke, and I'm enjoying it to the last millimeter.

God help the poor SOB who tries to make me

put it out.

* * *

The sound of two sets of footsteps approaching down the hall reached Al's sharp ears. Harshly taught habits of always remaining acutely aware of what the people in power were doing about him served him still and he prepared himself.

Clamping the cigar in his teeth, he leaned back against the wall behind the exam table and listened. The conversation of the approaching pair was still too low to be intelligible until just before the door.

"Thanks, I owe you," Al heard clearly as there was the sound of a hand on the exam room door. "Good luck." It was the voice of the intern he'd just chewed up and spit out about twenty drags ago.

Smiling, Al drew deeply on the cigar, savoring the feel and the taste of it, and relishing fresh meat. This one had better just give him what he wanted so he could be on his way to the nearest phone. They must be sending in the Big Guns, someone with the authority to tell him--

The punk who pushed open the door looked younger than the intern. Al scowled. Why the hell didn't he rate a real doctor?

With a nod, the white coated kid--who looked barely twenty--met his eyes. At least that was an improvement, to have someone meet his gaze straight on and not slide away as if they couldn't stand to look at him and what the VC had done.

"Lieutenant Commander Calavicci," said the hazel-eyed squirt, "I'm Dr. Sam Beckett. Dr. Tyler asked me to pinch-hit for him and do your final exam."

I'll just bet he did, Al thought with a wicked sense of satisfaction. But it still hadn't gotten him anyone of authority who he could talk to. Deliberately, he propped one foot up on the table and leaned against his knee as he exhaled cigar smoke. "Don't they have any doctors with chest hair in this place? All I've seen for days are you junior leaguers."

Amazingly, the kid didn't ruffle, as if he'd heard it before. "I'm a resident here and I assure you, I'm quite competent."

"Yeah," Al said, his tone loaded with skepticism. He took another defiant puff off the cigar. Didn't the kid have guts enough to



call him on it? "I'll just bet you are."

The resident had lowered his head and was flipping the pages of Al's considerable chart. He went through them page by page, all in order, but far too rapidly to have actually read them.

Who was he kidding? Al thought, nobody reads that fast, not even Evelyn Wood. But the kid's expression changed. So, maybe he'd gotten something from the chart after all. Just let him try to offer him sympathy. He'd hand him his head, resident be damned.

The kid's eyes strayed to the cigar as he put down the chart, and Al met the look with narrowed-eyed challenge. Just let him say...

"We've got some patients on this floor with severe respiratory problems," the resident said almost conversationally, sliding the book he had been holding beneath the chart and onto a small desk.

Al's eyes narrowed still further as he considered the kid, who was fishing a stethoscope out of his coat pocket.

"Some of them are allergy related," the doctor continued, "and triggered by tobacco smoke. I think you know one of them, Mike Skyler. He's two doors down."

Al blinked suspiciously. "How'd you know I know Stacker?"

"Stacker?"

"Mike," Al returned impatiently. "Who told you?"

The young resident shrugged, settling the stethoscope about his neck. "It's in your chart."

Al scowled. "Like hell you read it in the chart. You set this up, didn't you? Stacker's up in rehab, not on this floor."

"Until this morning," Dr. Beckett answered evenly. "We had to move him down to medical to monitor his blood gasses more closely."

"Damn," Al grated, with a vehement shake of his head. But he sailed the cigar into the stainless steel sink with a dead-on toss done with peripheral vision. It landed with a soft hiss as it impacted on water droplets left from the last use. "Whatta waste." Whether he was referring to the cigar or Mike's illness, he did not clarify and the doctor did not ask.

Instead, the kid only said, "Could you please take off your shirt so I can listen to your chest?"

Shrugging, Al snapped, "No exam gowns. I've had enough walking bare-assed around this place."

Dr. Beckett smiled, and there was genuine understanding in his eyes. "I can believe that. The shirt's enough for now. Let's get this over with so you can be on your way."

Al drew a deep breath. He didn't want to smear this kid, but if he had to in order to get a ranking officer to see him, he would. "I'm tired of getting the run around here. You and I aren't playing doctor just so you can get your clinical time in. I wanna see someone who can give me a clean bill of health to show my CO. If you can't do that, you can forget it, kiddo."

"If everything checks out, I'm sure I can get Dr. Hobbs' permission to give you a medical dismissal from the hospital." The doctor's voice was still irritatingly calm and unruffled. "But I can't call him with the request until I do the exam."

Al's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You being straight with me?"

"I don't lie," came the quiet answer and, searching the earnest hazel eyes, Al found he could believe it. This one would have a hard time lying if his life depended on it.

Considering, he held the steady gaze for a long moment and, finding no patronizing pity there as he had in so many other eyes, Al relented. "Okay, kid," he said, unbuttoning his uniform. "So long as we understand each other. Make it quick and don't try to snow me, and we'll get along fine."

Lifting the earpieces of his stethoscope into place, the resident nodded. His attention had already shifted to clinical observation and Al suppressed a sigh. Once more, just once more, he'd allow it. The cigar would be nearly unsmokeable by now, but might have a few puffs left on it if he still had it. He still had time. Maybe it'd all work out okay. Putting aside his shirt, he submitted to the exam.

Acutely conscious of how his ribs were still clearly seen under his skin, Al looked for something to distract him. He found it in the book Sam had slid onto the desk under his chart. While breathing in and out as instructed, he read the spine, VECTOR ANALYSIS OF TIME by William Strunkle. It was a strange book for a MD to be carrying around.

Curious, Al decided to test the waters. "Strunkle get his theories in line this time before he went to print?"

"I don't know. I haven't started it," the doctor answered absently. "I was just on my way to a break when Joe caught me."

What the hell was this kid doing reading high-flown theories on time travel? "After that stink about his sloppy work in TIME FLOW ANALYSIS, I'm surprised anybody'd publish him."

"Mmm," was the answer, as gentle, professional hands probed his lower back. "You're right. But he did have some interesting thoughts on the vectoring process. I thought maybe he'd have done some more work on it."

His next touch caught Al unaware, preoccupied as he was, and he flinched despite his intention not to as the doctor rotated his right shoulder, which had known restricted movement for so long.

"Still tender, huh?" the resident asked.

Al let the caustic comment he could have made pass and settled for a non-committal grunt as he tried to make sense of this kid who read cutting edge physics books on breaks when most guys in his position would be hitting on the nurses or trying to catch a few winks of sleep.

"Damage like that takes a while to heal," Sam continued. "I'd be surprised if you weren't sore. It shouldn't be a problem with your final release."

Release! Al focused on the word. Final release from Bethesda National Naval Medical Center, so he could get out of Maryland and on with his life. He'd find Beth, woo her back from that jerk who had taken advantage of her, and everything would be just peachy. He had six months of convalescent leave to do that--two whole seasons--and then he'd get on with his career. It'd all be okay. If only this kid would quit wasting his time.

"Okay," he growled. "Get your butt in gear. What else do you want me to do so I can get the hell outta here? I got things I gotta do." He could not quite keep the exaltation out of his voice, though he hoped it sounded more like exasperated impatience.

The rest of the exam he tolerated, just barely, though the physician seemed not to notice as he put him through the usual gambit of tests.

When the young man finally sat down at the desk to write his notes, Al demanded, "So? What's the deal, Doc? You gonna spring me?"

Sam nodded. "You're still malnourished, but if you stay on the diet they have you on, keep up the exercises to restore range of motion to the affected area in your leg and shoulder, rest, and stop smoking, I'll release you."

"Eating, no problem," Al said with a shrug. "Same with the exercises, I'm not gonna stay

hunched over like this for the rest of my life. But back off about the cigars, I'm a big boy. As for the rest..." A grin glinted in his dark-circled eyes. "...when I get back to Beth, I promise not to get outta bed for days. I've got six years to make up for, and she's gonna love it."

Incredibly, the resident's calm deserted him and he blushed scarlet. "Unh, well..." He glanced away and stood up from the desk. "Let me see what I can find out for you." Hastily, he left the room, not looking back.

Watching him, Al shook his head in amazement. All his attempts at shaking Junior had rolled off his back and then one reference to sex had done him in. He'd have to remember that.

Slipping on his shirt, he propped open the heavy door to ease the smallness of the room. Standing just to the side of the doorway, where he could see but not easily be seen, he buttoned his shirt while trying to listen to the resident's conversation on the nursing station phone. But the background noise made it impossible, even for his ears.

The urge to pace overtook him and, giving in, he did so as he redressed. Turning at the sound of footsteps, one glance at the look on the doctor's face warned him what was coming. He felt anger contract into a tight knot in his chest at the expression. If they tried to screw him again...

"You've got your medical release. All you have to do is sign all the dismissal papers the nurse will have," the young resident said.

"And?" Al prompted warily, waiting for the catch he knew was there.

"And..." The resident held out a card. "You have to keep a nine o'clock appointment tomorrow with the counselor, Dr. Sim. I tried to get you in today, but this was the best I could do. You have to get their okay before everything's final."

The commander drew a deep breath. More psych. He'd expected that. He'd also expected the restricted motion in his shoulders to keep him tied to this place for physical therapy and that hadn't happened. This, he could handle.

"No problem, kid." Al plucked the card from the resident's fingers. "Piece of cake. My charm and he'll fold like a deck of cards."

"Unh...she," Sam corrected a bit hesitantly.

Al's grin was wicked. "Even better."

Nodding, Sam turned to go. "The nurse will

give you all the forms." He hesitated as if there were something more he wanted to say but was uncertain how to approach it.

"Yeah?" Al decided to give the kid a break. After all, it was down to the space of a handful of cigars now before he'd have his life back. "What is it?"

"Well..." Abruptly the young man seemed awkward and shy without his doctor's persona to hide behind. "Is it true you were accepted by NASA less than two days after you...came home?"

Al tucked his hands in his pockets and rocked lightly on his heels. This guy was full of surprises. "You read that in the chart, too?"

"No, Joe, ah, that is...Dr. Tyler told me. I just...wondered if it were true."

"Actually, I worked with them before, in the early sixties. Test piloted some of their X-15 flights and got the astronaut bug. To tell you the truth, kid, they accepted me when I applied to them about eight years ago. I just got a little...sidetracked." The commander grinned, feeling expansive. "What the hell...I may've missed the moon shots, but there's always the space station."

"The space station, and someday the shuttle, if they ever get the funding. Think of the things we could do with that." There was a hungry light in the hazel eyes that Al knew well. What the hell was this space-struck kid doing here?

A suspicion dawned on the pilot and he regarded the young resident closely. The guy read charts at something approaching the speed of sound, carried quantum physics theory books for light reading, and got a love light in his eyes when talking about pure science. Yet here he doing a medical residency as a doctor. What sort of kid could do that?

Al decided to probe a little further. Maybe it was space medicine the squirt was mooning after. "You sound like you got something in mind."

"Well...I do. It's a stellar measurement using time as an inverse..." Faltering, he dropped his eyes. "Of course, I have to go back to MIT to do some more doc--course work before I can work out the details." His eyes slid upward to Al's as if expecting...what? Ridicule?

Back to MIT?? Al fingered the remaining cigars in his pocket, watching the doctor wait for his reaction. "Went to MIT myself," he said with a shrug. "Quantum physics always kept it interesting. That and a little Lithuanian girl

named Danessa. Now there was a study in motion. She had moves Professor LoNigro could have never imagined. She--"

"You know Professor LoNigro?" the kid interrupted, the glint back in his eye despite the faint blush coloring his cheeks. "We're working on a theory together. We--"

Abruptly he stopped, watching again as if expecting Al to laugh...or take a step away as if he had suddenly grown another head. He looked like he wished he'd never opened his mouth. He looked...like he'd made this mistake before.

"Look, kid," Al said, pulling the cigar out of his pocket and running it through his fingers. "Most of these nozzles around here wouldn't know quantum anything if it bit them in the butt. It's been a long time since I shot the bull with someone who knows a quark from a hole in the ground. You wanna get together after your shift?"

Al watched the temptation war with the caution in the kid's eyes. He'd been led on before for being a brain, that much was obvious, all for the sake of a good laugh. But he wanted somebody to talk to so bad it was like a physical hunger.

That decided him. He wasn't going to take no for an answer, and hell, he needed something to pass the time until 9 a.m. anyway.

"When do they cut you loose here?"

"Midnight," came the reluctant yet hopeful answer.

"Okay." Al swiveled on his heel, not giving him time to reconsider. Geez, he needed to lighten up anyway. "Midnight. I've heard about this great little pizza joint. Scoville's, Eighth and Jensen. I'll meet you there. We'll go throw some theories and mozzarella around."

Before the whiz kid could answer, or chicken out, Al turned jauntily on his heel and strode away, feeling the doctor's eyes on his back.

In the corridor, he turned and called, "You said your name's Beckett, right?"

"Sam," came the answer. "It's Sam Beckett."

"Okay, Sam." Al shot an appreciative glance at a curvaceous nurse in a jumpsuit as he reached the corner. "See you at midnight." He gave the kid a cocky wink then let the nurse lead him out of sight like a puppy on a leash. "Be there!"

* * *

The kid was there, sitting in a back booth, devouring Strunkle's book with that rabid intensity of his as Al bounced through the door. The commander had nearly forgotten about him, flushed as he was with his victory of winning an overnight liberty from the hospital.

It was lucky the pilots he'd been celebrating with had early calls and left before things really got started. He was only half an hour late for pizza with the junior space cadet. Only. But it kind of bothered him, seeing the kid sitting there all alone like a lost puppy, buried in his book as if it were a new bone.

"Hey, kiddo," Al greeted him breezily. "You order yet?"

Sam jumped, badly startled. "Geez, Commander, I didn't know you were there!"

"Al," the pilot corrected, taking off his hat and sliding into the seat across the table. "I said, you order yet?"

"No," Sam admitted as he closed the book. "I wasn't sure when you'd show up, and I kind of lost track of time."

Al noticed the bookmark was holding a place barely ten pages from the end and shook his head. Some classes spent two semesters on Strunkle. Either the kid was cheating and skimming, or he was a mega-brain.

"Okay," the commander said, shrugging out of the brown, leather bomber jacket he had on over his khaki mess dress. He motioned to a passing waitress as he laid it on the seat beside him. "I'll order. You finish the last few pages there."

Ordering, with easy, teasing banter with the waitress, Al watched Sam from the corner of his eye. He really was reading, and had made notes in the margin of the pages. Was this his second time through the thing or what?!

Finishing his order, which included anchovies on the pizza despite Sam's mild objections, Al pulled the book from him as he was finishing the last page.

"So, what'd you think about this?" Al asked easily. "He work out the paradox problem? Or just dig himself in deeper?" Flipping it open to the first chapter, he scanned the first pages. "Looks like he still has some problems. Check this out."

The resident leaned forward with pure excitement in every line of his body. "Yes, I noticed that, and..."

The conversation then began. Al found just how much he'd missed having someone with whom he

could talk high theory. There were precious few who could even keep up with him, let alone lead the way in new directions, and he found that time measured in free-for-all quantum physics theories flowed far more quickly than he remembered.

The waitress--who he learned was a single girl named Susan--appeared at his elbow a final time. "Hey guys, sorry to break this up, but we gotta close. It's almost two."

"But..." Sam looked up in protest. "We just..." His hazel eyes shifted to Al's. "Want to come over to my place? I don't have to be in to the hospital until noon tomorrow. We could work a while longer." He faltered a bit uncertainly. "That is, if you want to. If you're not bored."

"Bored?" Al laughed for the first time in what seemed like years. "Hell, kid. I'm just getting warmed up. We haven't begun to theorize yet!" Gathering his jacket into the crook of his arm, he stood, throwing on his hat and handing Susan several bills. "Sorry to hold you up," he said, waiting as Sam hastily gathered his papers into an untidy pile.

"No problem," she answered with a slight smile, holding his gaze as she took the cash. "I work late most evenings. Come in anytime and I'll have a table for you."

Al grinned, realizing Sam, who was getting to his feet, was oblivious to the covert meaning of the exchange. "Sure thing," he returned with a smile, shrugging into his jacket.

By this time tomorrow, he'd be on his way to Beth, but it didn't hurt to keep in practice. He had some heavy duty wooing to do and it seemed a good idea to warm up. Making good-natured passes at nurses had only gone so far to get him back in the game.

He turned up the collar. "I'll be sure and ask for you."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Sam reach into his back pocket.

"My treat, kid," he said, still holding Susan's eyes. "It's all taken care of."

"Oh." Sam looked up, hesitated, then said, "You ready?"

Al's grin broadened. "Almost." Reaching out, he gave Susan's arm a quick, affectionate squeeze. "Another time, huh?"

She smiled back. "I'll be here."

Turning, Al motioned briskly to Sam. "Come on. Let's go talk some more about that string theory." Stepping back, he gestured regally.

"Lead the way."

With a wink at Susan, he followed Sam toward the parking lot.

In his Maverick, the kid was easy to follow to his apartment, and disgustingly law abiding. Even at 2 a.m. on nearly deserted streets, he stopped for yellow lights. Al's fiery red Corvette, newly driven from the showroom floor that afternoon, seemed to rumble in displeasure, transmitting its impatience through the throbbing of the gear stick under his hand.

Absently, the pilot downshifted and came to a stop behind Sam at the light, and was again reminded--as he had been that afternoon--about his first Corvette; a bad black convertible with a reputation to match.

He grinned. Just about every woman he'd ever met had been 'inspired' by that black car with its passionate red interior. How many times had he laughed and loved in that thing?

How many secrets did it keep within its ruby leather upholstery?

Shifting into neutral, he relaxed his foot off the clutch. Now he had a new Vette. Geez, he could hardly wait to see what this new one--a flaming red from bumper to bumper--would inspire Beth to do!

Beth. Sobering, he slowly caressed the curved handle of the control under his palm. Her smiling face flashed through his mind's eye, the same smile he'd cherished for over six long, lonely years. Her voice was softer than that waitress'--more gentle--and she would never proposition a returning vet in a pizza joint.

Never.

Al moved in his seat, squeaking on the new, cream-colored leather, uncomfortable with the unexpected thought of his Beth in the arms of another man. Obviously that nozzle had taken advantage of her...and now he'd take care of him.

As Sam pulled away from the intersection, Al kicked the Vette into gear, squealing tires in a shriek that echoed his presence through the sleeping neighborhood with a vengeance.

Soon. Very soon now, he'd get his chance.

Sam's expression, when he got out of his car in the apartment parking lot, was one of disapproving admiration. "Do you always drive like that?"

"Like what?" Al asked innocently, getting from the sports car, which ticked softly as it cooled in the spring night.

"Never mind." The younger man shook his head

as if in defeat. "Just remind me never to go anywhere with you unless I drive."

Al grinned, taking the curb up to the sidewalk with a little hop. "Lemme tell you something, buddy. From now on, I'm doing all my own driving. Whether you come along or not is up to you." Without any rancor, he gestured at the apartment building. "Which one's yours? I want to see this masterpiece of quantum physics."

Ducking his head, Sam turned, reaching for his key. "It's not a masterpiece," he answered. "It's only a preliminary. But, I think..."

Al found it easy to slip back into the conversation they had begun at the restaurant. It was much more pleasant to think on than the state of his life at the moment. The conversation flowed between them as they made their way around the corner to the steps that led to Sam's place. Pausing once at the landing to argue out a moot point of disagreement about a vector direction, it took them nearly fifteen minutes before they arrived at the small apartment.

Sam unlocked the door and pushed it open, turning on the light in nearly the same movement. "Come on in," he said, waving Al forward. "I'll dig out my notes. I have them in the bedroom."

With that, he disappeared into a room on the right, leaving Al to enter the apartment on his own. Fingering the cigar in the breast pocket of his jacket, he surveyed the room with his eyes before he pulled the door closed behind him.

It was a good room, not fancy, but good--warm and lived in. Books scattered across the living room floor and coffee table attested to the academic taste of its occupant. Hands deep in his pockets, Al wandered past them, craning his neck to catch a title or two as he made his way through the maze. Smiling at a copy of James Blish's adaptations of the STAR TREK episodes nestled between a PHYSICIANS' DESK REFERENCE and a graduate level physics text, he found himself before the couch.

Pulling the cigar from his pocket, he unwrapped it slowly, eyes traveling over the family photos on the wall behind the sofa. An enlarged snapshot in the center held his attention, and for an inexplicable reason, he felt an odd chill that was almost a feeling of *deja vu*.

It was a family shot--Sam's family, Al would

bet. A young woman stood arm in arm with an older woman wearing a kindly, easy smile. Behind them, his hands on their shoulders in a protective gesture stood a young man in a Navy lieutenant's uniform. Beside him was an older man with hazel eyes like Sam's.

Hearing Sam enter, Al knew he should look away, but the picture held his interest. Placed in the center of a wall filled with photos, it seemed the most significant, the most treasured.

"This your family?" he asked conversationally.

"Unh, yeah," Sam answered, attention coming up from the stack of papers he carried. "My parents, Tom, and my sister Katie."

"Tom?" Al gestured questioningly at the lieutenant with his cigar.

"My brother." There was naked pride in the tone as Sam regarded the picture. "He's a Navy SEAL. That was taken in December '69, right before his first tour..." Again, he lowered his head as he spoke. "...of 'Nam."

The commander nodded, considering the inflection. "First tour. He go back?"

"Yeah," Sam said, lifting his head to meet the other man's eyes. "Came home in early '71 and went back again a few months later." His gaze shifted to the photo. "He..." The odd, bemused frown that creased his forehead seemed to stop him mid-sentence.

The older man watched him carefully. "He come home in one piece, kid?" he asked gently.

"Yeah." Sam nodded once, tentatively, then more forcefully. "Yeah, sure he did. Tom's the one who talked me into doing my residency at Bethesda." He gestured at a picture buried in the lower right corner of the wall of the same young man in uniform, standing on a beach, eyes shaded against the sun. "That was taken last year, near my sister Katie's place."

"Mmm," Al murmured with a nod. He bent to scoop a handful of books and papers from the couch, clearing a place to sit. "Looks like Hawaii. Your family live there now?"

"No." Again, Sam ducked his head. "My Mom lives there with my sister and her husband. My Dad...died...last year."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Sam's shrug was not convincing. "I...wasn't there. The doctors thought maybe Mom's low-fat diet would buy him a few more years. But they were wrong."

"Nobody's got a crystal ball, kid," Al returned, taking off his jacket. "You can't

live your life like you have." Taking a seat, he gestured at the pile Sam held. "Come on. Let's take a look at that idea of yours."

"Okay." Sam cleared a place on the coffee table by moving what appeared to be reams of paper to the floor. "See what you think about this. Professor LoNigro..."

Time spent in thrashing out cutting edge physics went even more quickly than time spent bashing Strunkle's theories over pizza. Together they theorized, debunked, and theorized some more, covering dozens of pieces of paper with equations, both lengthy and concise, Sam's scribbled and Al's neat and precisely numbered.

Between the two of them, they also emptied Sam's refrigerator of its meager stock of beer and his cabinet of popcorn. It was approaching 4 a.m. when Al found himself on the couch, hand cradling the neck of an empty bottle as he regarded the younger man.

Sam had stretched out on the floor, furiously writing down numbers for hours, gesturing excitedly at Al who--from his relaxed position on his stomach--pointed out practical considerations and new directions for the resident's dream of time travel.

Finally running out of energy, Sam fell asleep with his hand on his arm and his pencil still in his hand. Al rolled over on his back and contemplated the ceiling for what seemed like hours, thinking about time, and fate, and mortal attempts to change both.

Sleeping, for him, was out of the question. Rest didn't come easily these days, and he had no intention of falling asleep and having a groaning nightmare in front of a doctor the night before he was going to get sprung. Sam was okay, but too enthusiastic, and as embarrassingly eager to jump into things as a gangly puppy. The Naval officer was not going to risk messing up his chance to get free and take charge of his life again.

Sighing, Al got to his feet and stretched as far as his exercise-deprived muscles would allow. Full movement would come back, he told himself, everyone said so, and there'd be no problem getting into the flight program at NASA. Like hell he was working as ground personnel or an instructor. It'd come back.

Uncomfortably, he was reminded of his own words about 'crystal balls', and changed his train of thought.

Quietly, he stacked up the scattered papers and books, and carried the empty popcorn bowls

and beer bottles into the kitchen. The need for cleanliness and order was so deeply ingrained in him that he could no more leave them than he could resist Sam's infectious enthusiasm.

Stacking the bowls in the sink, he heard a soft sigh from the kid, and a muffled moan that he could not understand. Hesitating, he paused, knowing the sound of a disturbed sleep when he heard it. Wiping his hands on a towel, he was folding it neatly when the kid moaned louder.

This time he could make out the words.

"Don't, Tom!"

It sounded like the kid was dreaming about an argument. Yet he'd talked about his brother like he was some mystic hero. Why the hell would he be dreaming about arguing with him? And what didn't Sam want him to do?

Quietly, Al returned to the living room, reaching down to pick up his bomber jacket from where he'd draped it neatly over the back of a chair. Sam was sweating, pencil clenched so tightly in his white-knuckled hand that he threatened to break it.

Watching him, the older man slipped on his coat. It'd be better for him just to go--less messy, easier on the kid too. Being awakened from a bad dream by a near stranger wasn't a pleasant experience--Al knew that all too well.

The young resident's breathing harshened. What the hell was he dreaming about? Quietly as he could, Al headed for the door. He had to get back to the hospital and catch a shower and shave before that nine o'clock appointment...

The sound from the kid on the other side of the coffee table was a ragged, gasping sob. "Tom!"

Damn it.

Shaking his head, Al turned from the door. "Hey, kid..." Squatting by the resident's side, he used only his voice to awaken him. He'd learned the hard way that you didn't grab a person in the middle of a violent nightmare unless you wanted to get punched. "Sam, wake up. It's just a dream. You..."

The kid twisted on the floor, reaching out to someone Al couldn't see. "TOOOOHHH!" The scream was a terrified, desperate warning cry.

"Sam! Hey!" The older man instinctively caught the outstretched hand. "Wake up, it's only a dream!"

Gasping, Sam woke with a jerk that shook his entire body. "...Tom..." The word was now a muffled gasp.

"It's okay," Al assured him, letting go of

Sam's hand when his eyes opened. "It was just a dream." Leaning back on his heels, he captured the shaken man's gaze. "You okay?"

Drawing a deep, shuddering breath, Sam nodded hesitantly, looking up at Al. "Yeah." He rubbed a shaking hand over his face. "Yeah, I'm okay. I was just...just dreaming." His hazel eyes met Al's. "I dreamed about Tom, that he...died...on his first tour of 'Nam. It was..." Shakily, he pushed himself up to his knees. "...so real."

"Yeah, well..." Uncomfortable with the conversation, Al got to his feet, extending a hand to pull the other man up with him. "Dreams are like that. Tom's okay. You told me so last night, remember?" He peered closely at Sam, who still seemed deeply shaken. "Remember?"

"Yeah." Sam turned to the picture covered wall as if for reassurance. "Tom's okay. He's stationed at..." He frowned as if it were oddly difficult to recall. "...stationed at..."

"Sure," Al said, turning up the collar of his jacket. "Well, I gotta be goin', kiddo. Good luck at MIT. When you get back there, tell LoNigro that Calavicci says hello."

"Okay..." Still scattered, Sam nodded. "Okay, I will." He turned as if looking for something, but unsure exactly what. "I'll...um...tell him."

The pilot hesitated a moment. "Look, Sam, about this string theory of yours."

"What?" The young resident brought this attention back to the present with obvious effort.

"It's good, kid. Really good," Al said seriously. "And I think you oughta be careful who you share it with." He grinned, lightening his tone a bit but his dark eyes were still earnest. "Your secrets are safe with me, but you never know about the next guy."

Sam shuffled his feet. "I, unh...haven't exactly found anyone else to tell it to. Anyone who understands, that is..."

"Yeah, well...if you want my advice, you'll pick and choose who you do tell, so no one steals this Nobel Prize you're hatching. Capeesh?"

With a wan smile, Sam nodded, his gaze sliding away from the pilot's. "Okay," he answered, although Al wasn't certain he had understood his point. Drawing a deep breath, the young man continued, "Good luck today."

"Huh?" Al lifted an eyebrow. "Oh, with the shrink. No problem. I'll be outta there by

noon. Nice meeting you."

With a quick handshake, he headed for the door. Sam watched him go, and was still looking a little bemused when Al lifted a hand in farewell as he closed the door.

Barely two steps down the hall, the commander realized his lighter wasn't in his pocket. It must have fallen out when he was on the couch. Swearing softly, he turned back. He'd just bought the thing--he wasn't about to leave it.

Knocking softly on the door, he pushed it open, drawing a breath to announce himself when he heard Sam's voice. It was coming from the bedroom where he was obviously talking on the phone. "Put me through to Lieutenant Commander Beckett please."

Slipping in quietly, Al reclaimed his lighter and headed back to the door. Despite himself, he paused, one hand poised to draw it closed. He had to know, just to dispel the odd chill chasing down his spine that was an enhanced twin of the one he'd felt the night before when he looked at the family photograph.

"Tom?" Sam's voice was pitched high with relief. "That you?"

With a small smile, Al drew the door closed, leaving the kid to talk to his big brother in private. Everything was okay and he had things to do.

Contemplation of time, fate, and *deja vu* would just have to wait.

* * *

The Navy, like any other institution, can make some stunning screw-ups. When you handle tens of thousands of ships, boats, planes, submarines, weapons--and lives--you just gotta expect some little things to sometimes slip through the cracks.

Like Beth's letter.

They didn't know I was gonna be repatriated, you see. I wasn't on the 'guest book' at the Cham Hoi Hilton--or on the list of POWs to be returned that the brass at Gia Lam airport had in their hands.

I was back at Clark over twenty-four hours before they could dig out the scoop to give Lieutenant Joseph Corelli, so he could break the news to me about Beth. Joe was a good escort officer--as good as anyone can be at a job that stinks so bad. He broke the news then stuck by me 'til I got a lock on things.

It was sorta like being a wingman and flying

by wire. You just put her on auto-pilot and slip-stream in behind the leader for a while. That way, you don't have to take all that head wind flat in the face 'til you're good and ready.

Joe hung close--all the way back to Bethesda, Maryland. We probably got there at exactly the same time some paper-pushing nozzle back at my old duty station found Beth's letter in my file. Knowing bureaucrats, I'm guessing he shoved it into a holding pattern until he could get someone with enough guts to decide when to drop it on me. But then he must have gone on liberty, and the next guy at his desk found it--all neatly labeled with my name--and dropped it into the maw of the Navy machine. That's the way screw-ups happen.

By the time it reached Bethesda, a week after me, I'd convinced Joe and the powers-that-be that I could solo--which I could--and he had shipped back to his duty station in San Diego.

I was on my way to that last appointment with the shrink when it finally found me. Sweet as a heat-seeking missile homing in on a target, it found me.

Beth's letter.

That damned letter.

* * *

"Commander Calavicci?"

Meticulously showered, groomed, and dressed in his summer uniform, Al turned toward the nurse's aide who had called his name. He was on his way to Dr. Sim's office and even though he was half an hour early, he did not want to be detained.

It was Jenny--sweet little Jenny--with a smile like Beth's and magic fingers that could make a mere backrub a damn near spiritual experience.

"Morning, Jen," he greeted her with a wink. "If Billings siced you on me, tell the old tyrant I'm all legal and signed out for two hours for a hot date in the supply closet."

"Al," she chided gently, fully aware he knew that she knew where he was headed. Smiling, she held out a white envelope. "I think this is for you. It came in yesterday's mail."

"What, new orders already?" he joked lightly, taking it from her. "Geez, and I haven't even been officially released yet!"

"No, I think it's a letter. An old letter. It's addressed to Lieutenant Albert Calavicci."

"Well, since I only got promoted a week ago," he said with a grin, "it wouldn't have to be too ol..."

Turning it over in his hands, he saw the familiar script handwriting. His voice--and it seemed his heart--stilled. He felt as if the world beyond him had gone suddenly silent.

It was a letter all right. A letter from Beth.

"Commander? Al?"

Blinking, he realized Jenny was speaking to him.

"What's the matter?"

"Umm..." Clearing his throat, Al looked up from the envelope clenched in suddenly cold fingers. "Nothing." He ran quick hand along his jaw in an effort to regain a semblance of control. "Nothing," he repeated, in a slightly more convincing tone. "It just looks like it might be from someone I've lost track of."

"Oh." She was watching him closely. Damn, he was going to have to do better than this if he wanted to get out of this place. "Aren't you going to read it?"

She was so young, Al thought distantly. So young, so innocent--like Beth had been.

"Umm...later." He slipped the letter into his breast pocket, but didn't button down the flap. "It's probably gonna be old news anyway." He gave her a grin that must have been believable. "And I've...got an appointment that's pretty pressing."

"Okay." She gave him The Smile again and he felt something twist in his gut. "If they let you go today, you come say goodbye before you leave, okay?"

"Huh?" Al brought his attention back to her, trying to look as if he'd been listening. "Sure." He nodded. "Sure. I'll see you later, Jen. Thanks for the special delivery." He lightly tapped the letter near his heart.

"You're welcome," she answered, and turned away to return to her duties.

Pivoting, Al took several quick steps down the hall, putting distance between himself and anyone who may come looking for him. Turning aside into the first open doorway he reached, he stepped out of sight of curious eyes. With only a tiny portion of his attention, he noted that it was some sort of lounge.

More importantly, it was empty. It would do.

Fumbling in his haste, he plucked the letter from his pocket, ripping it open with hands that trembled faintly.

Dear Al,

Unaware he had been holding his breath, he released it in a sound that was nearly a sob. Falling against the near wall for support, he scanned the letter hungrily. It was in her neat handwriting. Pain from his abused muscles, flooding his right shoulder as it pressed against the wall, went unheeded as he began to read...

I saw your picture last week on the cover of LIFE. They say a woman photographer took it. They say she died getting it, and that she may get a Pulitzer.

It's on all the TV news, all the magazines, all the newspapers. Everywhere I go, everywhere I look, I see your face.

And every time I see it, I start to cry. I thought you were dead, Al. It had been so long with no word, and Bob Jensen said your A-4 was burning when it went down and he didn't see a chute. Still, he fought it when I asked the Navy to declare you dead. He was right.

But I didn't know that then. I made the best decision I could at the time.

Every time I see that picture, I tell myself that. I know it's true. Dirk and I are happy. He loves me and we're expecting our first child. It's what I always wanted for us but I don't think we would ever have made it. Even if you had come home to me, you wouldn't have stayed. There's always another tour to be flown somewhere.

Flying always was your true love. I knew that and I never should have tried to change you. You went back on that second tour for Chip, instead of staying home for me.

I just hate that it turned out this way. When I see your picture (I try not to, but it's everywhere), I just want to explain why I did what I did. It was time for me to move on. It would have ended between us anyway.

I want you to go on with your life. Apply to NASA. Do what you've always wanted to do. I have no doubt whatever you choose, you'll be the best. You always were.

Please just let this be goodbye. When you come back, just let it be. I've made my choice and it's over. Please don't make me explain it again.

I'm sorry for the horrible way it turned out for you. But it's time for getting past it. That's what I'm trying to do, get past it. And

I want that for you too.

Be happy, Al, and reach for those stars you always loved, but please, please don't call.

Beth

Stunned, Al stared at her signature for a long moment. The room seemed to spin about him and betrayal began to roar in his ears. It couldn't be true. She couldn't want it this way.

Slowly, he pushed himself upright and took a few steps away from the support of the wall, the letter still in his hands. Disbelieving, he looked back down at it as if somehow the message could have changed.

The shrinks had advised him against looking for her, since she had sent the message via a friend that she didn't want to be found. Even Joe had told him to let it go. They all said she wanted it this way.

Yet he had been so sure...

Reluctantly, he began to read again. She cried, she said, every time she saw his picture. That must mean something. Like that...she still loved him. Nowhere did she say she didn't.

Bob Jensen had fought for him. Beth admitted he had been right. Right about what? That Al was alive or something more? Was she admitting, however veiled, that she had been wrong to marry this Dirk what's-his-face?

Heartened, he read it again. They were expecting their first child. Beth. His Beth was pregnant by another man.

Swallowing hard against the rage, he forced himself to read it another time. It was what she had wanted for them, she wrote, but she never thought they would have.

Well, she was wrong. He would've given her kids later. So...he would do it now. He could win her back. He could. And he'd take the kid, too, if that's what she wanted. They would station at Johnson Space Center in Houston. He could fly for NASA, and she could have more kids. Hell, she could have a dozen of 'em if she wanted!

But first--Al drew a deep breath; it seemed the only one he had taken in many moments--first he had to find her and this nozzle, Dirk. Dirk the Jerk. He didn't even know the guy's last name.

But he would find out. A private investigator could do it. Then, he'd find Beth. Bring her an armload of calla lilies and--

"Commander?"

The voice jarred him from his thoughts and he looked up. It was Jenny, hovering in the doorway.

"Are you...okay?" she asked when he focused on her.

"Sure..." His voice sounded shaken even to his own ears, but he shrugged. "Sure I am. What's up?"

"Well," she said, frowning. It turned to a worried look as her eyes traveled over the letter still in his hands. "Dr. Sim's office called and said you were late for your appointment."

"Appointment," Al repeated uncomprehending. "Oh yeah...the shrink." Hastily folding the letter, he tucked it away out of sight. "I just got...distracted." He quickly tugged his uniform into shape. "Call them for me, will you, Jen? Tell them I'm on my way and..." Hesitantly, he let the request trail off. He couldn't ask her to lie for him.

Nodding, she stepped back to let him slip past her in the doorway. "Sure, I'll just tell them...you got delayed and you're on your way."

"Thanks." He gave her a distracted smile of relief. "I appreciate it."

Turning, he squared his shoulders and strode down the hallway. He had work to do and he had a plan. Getting free of this place came first, and then the rest of it would easily follow.

It had to.

* * *

Furnished efficiency apartments suited Al just fine. After his release, he selected one just a few blocks from the hospital and felt at ease with it. He was just marking time, after all, waiting for the private investigator he'd hired to call with word on Beth. At first, he had planned on flying out to San Diego himself, but the PI had convinced him it was better if he didn't confuse any leads there may be as to her whereabouts. So he took the apartment instead--it didn't really matter in what city he waited.

Actually, he wasn't in the rooms much. He was at Sam's, or out and about with Sam...when the kid wasn't working. And when the young doctor was on duty Al found other distractions, like hanging out with pilots passing through, checking up on his old buddy Stacker, exercising, driving his Vette, or just walking for the clean, wonderfully free sense it gave

him to be able to go anywhere he wanted for as long as he wanted.

Rooms--any rooms--couldn't keep him happy for long. They were just too small.

So, not to miss the PI's call, he subscribed to a message service and set out to reacquaint himself with the world. Waiting and worrying would bring him nothing but an attack of claustrophobia. The call would come, he was certain.

And it did, a week later, just as he was returning from a late night physics session with Sam--one that had spilled over into early morning, as they often did. He discovered the phone ringing as he came in the door.

Heart in his throat, he leapt for it.

It had to be the PI. There was no one else in the world who would call him...except Sam, and he'd just left him.

"Calavicci," he answered briskly. "What've you got, Ray?"

There was a slight pause. "Awfully sure it's me, aren't you?"

"Yeah," Al agreed. "Where is she?"

"Well," the investigator began. "I've checked--"

"Cut to the chase," Al interrupted. "Where's she living?"

"Well, Commander, I don't know yet."

"What??! It's been a week. You said you'd have an answer by now."

"It's turning out to be a little more difficult than I expected," Ray answered.

Al bit back an angry reply. "What do you want? More money? Whatever it takes, I'll pay it."

"It's not the money. I just think... Commander, we need to try a different approach."

"How different?" Al asked, envisioning the dollar signs racking up despite the PI's assurances.

"How about this friend you said relayed the message to the Navy that Beth didn't want to be found."

"Melissa Stonewall?"

"That's her. You're sure the message came through her?"

"I'd stake my life on it. She was Beth's closest friend."

"What else can you tell me about her? I mean, if I could find her, we could go on from there. Other channels haven't, unh...yielded much information."

"Melissa's a nurse, an RN. Well, was a

nurse," he corrected. "I guess she still is. Last I knew she was stationed in Pensacola, Florida."

"Stationed?"

"Yeah, she's Navy. Like Beth."

"That's good." Ray sounded pleased. "With that to go on, I should have her tracked down in a week, maybe less."

"That's what you said about Beth," Al grated, pulling a cigar from his pocket. "Are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely." The guy certainly sounded confident, but then he'd sounded that way a week before too. "I'll get back with you when I find her. After that, it should be only a matter of time before we find Beth."

"Okay," Al agreed grimly. "You keep on it. I mean it. Whatever it takes, Ray, you find her."

Saying goodbye, he returned the phone none too gently to the receiver.

Damn. Another week.

He should sleep. He was tired, but he had no desire to wake up in a cold sweat again, after reliving the torture, hearing the choppers that had left him behind, and screaming out Beth's name into nothing but empty darkness.

Picking up his keys, he headed back out the door. Breakfast was next in order. Then maybe he would try to sleep for a while.

Maybe.

Unfortunately, there was nothing much else he could do--but wait.

* * *

Waiting is an art, and I'm a master at it. The trick, you see, is to break up the waiting into blocks of time. Little or big blocks, it doesn't matter. You just break it down into whatever amount of waiting you can stand, live through it--filling up that block with the most interesting thing you can find--then go on to the next one. Before you know it, you're there, you've made it to what you were waiting for, whether that's a drink of water, the end of a storm...or a call about your wife.

The tricky thing is, you have to be careful not to think too much about what it is that you're waiting for. If you do that, you defeat the purpose of the little blocks of time. You can focus on your goal, but not how long it's gonna take you to get there.

This waiting I divided up into six hour

units. A week will pass in no time. One more week until I'm with Beth--after six years what's one more week? I fill up the time with exercising and eating, driving the Vette full out on the Maryland Expressway and talking quantum physics with the kid.

Sam's all right, a good guy. He took it at face value when I said I was stuck in town a week longer on personal business. He doesn't ask questions and I don't mention that nightmare he had, and it's okay.

He's so damn hungry to have somebody listen to him and get what he's talking about that it's almost sad. Well, 'get' except for when he goes go off on a tangent that I think even Einstein would have difficulty following. But hell, I'm hungry too. We understand each other and it works. It fills the time and I don't think about how much longer it is until the PI calls about Beth.

You gotta watch your thoughts though--guard them so they stay where you want them. 'Cause if you ever start to doubt you're gonna make it, you're done for. Still, it always worked for me. Of course, when I worked out this little beauty of a plan I didn't have to worry about drinking too much wine with dinner and having a sympathetic ear with which to drop my guard.

Not like now.

* * *

"They said she won't talk to me," Al said as if to himself, chin propped on his hand as he regarded the quiet Italian restaurant beyond their booth.

Taken by surprise, Sam looked up from the equation he had been working out on a paper napkin. He apparently hadn't noticed Al had lost interest. "Who?"

"Beth." The tone was oddly flat as he reached for his wine. "My wife...ex-wife."

Sam hesitated. "You want to talk to your ex-wife?"

"Wife," Al corrected stubbornly, tossing down the last of his wine and pouring another glass from the carafe. "She's still my wife. In the way it counts anyway."

Uncertain, Sam probed cautiously. "What do you mean?"

"Beth," Al clarified. "She's still my wife to me." He thumped his chest. "In here. She thought I was dead." Quickly he ran a hand over his jaw. "So'd the Navy. So she married

another guy--Dirk the Jerk. But..." His dark gaze shifted to Sam, his voice growing vehement. "...she'd never have done it if she knew I was alive."

"Ah," was all Sam said. Slowly, he put down his pencil, eyes on the other man.

"They say she doesn't want to talk to me," Al repeated.

"The Navy?"

"Yeah," Al growled, shoving away the empty plate before him that had held fettuccine. "What the hell do they know about it?"

"Well, if...if they talked to her," Sam began cautiously, "then they--"

"Hell," Al interrupted, reaching in his pocket for a cigar, "they didn't talk to her. They couldn't. They don't even know where she is."

"Then how can they say...?"

"They lied," Al snarled. He lit the tobacco then waved the statement away with the cigar smoke. "Well, not exactly. They got a message from her via Melissa when they were hunting for her."

"Melissa?" Sam eyed the cigar but didn't comment.

"Her best friend." Al drank deeply of his wine. "But I'll find her."

"Beth?" Uncomfortable, Sam toyed with his napkin.

"No," Al snapped. "Melissa." At Sam's blink, he clarified. "I've got a private detective looking for Melissa. She may not tell the Navy where Beth is, but she'll tell me. And--"

"--and you'll go see Beth," Sam finished. "Do you think you should?" He hesitated at Al's sharp glance, but then plunged on. "I mean if she really doesn't want to talk to you--"

"Oh, she'll talk to me, Sam," Al assured him, hand propped on his chin again as he morosely considered the glass of wine. "She'll talk to me. It's just a matter of findin' Melissa. And the PI said that'd take a week... maybe less."

"But--"

"A week," Al continued as if he hadn't heard him. "That's nothing." He gestured with the hand that held his cigar. "A flash in the pan. Mere spit in the ocean of time."

Dragging himself from his contemplation, he looked up as if the conversation were ended, or had never taken place.

"Hey, kiddo, I've got a buddy at the Naval

Observatory over in DC. Wanna drive over and see what he's got going?"

"Sure," Sam said, deftly grabbing the check before the commander could. "When?"

"Now," Al answered, giving in with good grace. He tossed several bills on the table for a tip as he stood. "No time like the present."

Sam followed him to the cashier and handed over some cash with the check. "Don't you ever get tired?"

"Nope," Al replied, winking at a blonde cocktail waitress who passed within range. "I'm a perpetual motion machine."

"Perpetual motion," Sam grumbled, taking his change and hurrying to catch up with his departing companion, "is a myth."

The good natured discussion of the comparative reality of perpetual motion continued to the parking lot.

There, when the commander reached for his car keys, Sam stepped decisively in front of him. "I'll drive, okay?"

Al chuckled. "Nice try, kid. But no one drives Abbie but me."

"'Abbie'?" Sam blinked in disbelief. "You named your Corvette Abbie?"

"After Abbie McDonnal," Al replied smugly. "Fastest broad in all St--"

"Al," Sam protested, stepping closer, "please give me the keys. You've been drinking all evening."

"I'm not drunk," Al said, eyes narrowing in warning.

"I didn't say you were. I said you'd been drinking. I haven't."

Easily evading Sam's grab for the keys, Al scowled. He was so tired he could hardly keep his eyes open, but he'd be damned if he'd hand control over to a moralistic youngster on a temperance kick.

"What do you know about pilot--driving a Corvette?" he demanded. "This is not a '69 automatic Maverick!"

Sam cast a glance through the window. "So it's a stick shift. I've driven plenty of tractors. I know how to handle a manual..."

"Tractors!" Al yelled as if mortally offended. "Sam! A '73, big block, 427, balanced and blueprinted Stingray with a Muncie four-speed synchronized trans is not a tractor!"

"Al..."

"Don't 'Al' me, pal. A Vette's like a woman. You gotta stroke her real nice and easy," he said, gesturing expressively. "Until she's

purring like a kitten and kinda archin' against the rpms. Then, ya pop it to her until--"

"Al!" Sam's face was scarlet. "It's a car--not a lover!"

"Kid..." The commander shook his head helplessly. "You're hopeless." Then, astounding the doctor, he pressed the keys into his hand. "You've got a lot to learn." With a flourish, he pointed his cigar at him. "You're just lucky I'm here to teach you." Turning, he gestured at the car. "Get in."

"But..." Flustered, obviously not sure if he'd won or lost the argument, Sam floundered.

"So, whatcha gonna do? Chicken out?" Al demanded, striding around the car. Pausing before the front of the gleaming red hood he shrugged expressively in challenge. "Huh?"

"Unh, no," Sam answered, hesitantly. "I'll..." He looked down at the keys in his hand as if they were alien objects. "...I'll drive."

Shaking his head sorrowfully, Al gazed down at his beauty and affectionately patted the hood. "Forgive me, Abbie," he said soulfully. "It's in a good cause. Somebody's gotta teach the kid the facts of life."

Ignoring the narrow-eyed glance that Sam shot in his direction, he strode to the passenger side. Crushing out his cigar on the pavement, he waited with exaggerated patience while Sam unlocked the car, folded himself into the small seat, and reached across to open Al's door.

Picking up a blue-bound book that rested in the passenger seat, the commander got in, holding it in his lap as he impatiently watched as Sam fuss with adjusting his seat.

Finally, as if trying to avert Al's scrutiny, Sam turned his head and nodded at the book. "More physics theories?"

Glancing down, the pilot looked at the book he had forgotten he held. "Nah," he said, casually tossing it over the back of his seat. "It's one of those blank books. My shrink wants me to keep a journal. If you ask me, it's a damn waste of time."

"Oh, I don't know," Sam said with a grin, adjusting his mirror. "In years to come, it might be interesting to look back on."

With a sarcastic snort which clearly closed the subject, Al shot another glance at the physicist. "Are you gonna drive or just visit?"

"Okay," Sam agreed, reaching for his safety belt. "Okay."

Shaking his head, Al waited, oozing impatience as the younger man fussed with adjusting the belt and finding the correct key.

"You ready now, Flash?" the commander demanded, his tone laden with good-natured sarcasm, when Sam finally fitted the key into the ignition.

"Yes," Sam said, making an obvious effort to keep his voice meek. "I'm ready."

"Okay." Al waved permission. "Start her up." But as Sam's hand moved toward the ignition, he yelped, "Push in the clutch!"

Sam jumped, badly startled.

"Put her in neutral," he continued. "You gotta put her in neutral before you start her. Geez, kid..." He shook his head expressively at the wounded look he got. "Wanna send us through the windshield? You have to--"

"I know," Sam snapped. "I know. Now can I just...?" He gestured eloquently at the dash.

"Sure."

As Sam put it in neutral then turned the key, a deafening screech of heavy metal guitars blasted from the stereo speakers. Al quickly popped the eight-track from the player and threw the cartridge onto the back shelf with his journal--all in the same movement--totally ignoring the doctor's disapproving frown.

"Easy now," Al said, as if nothing had happened. "Slip her into first..."

Sam followed the explicit instructions in silence. Even when the commander directed him to exit from the expressway, he didn't argue out of sheer stubbornness. But when the scenery turned almost rural he could stand it no longer.

"Shouldn't we be going that way?" he asked at last, gesturing to the right when they pulled to a four-way stop. Two lane roads stretched away in all directions in straight, conspicuously empty lines. There were obviously no houses--or cars--within miles.

"No," Al replied tersely, settling back into his seat as if taking imaginary controls. "This, pal, is where we separate the men from the boys."

"Al..."

"Shut up and drive," the Naval officer ordered. "And do exactly what I tell you, 'cause if Abbie ends up with so much as a scratch on her nose, it's your ass."

"Al..."

"The men from the boys," the pilot insisted smugly. "And Corvettes from tractors. Push in the clutch and run the rpms up to 6000."

"But," Sam protested, "with the clutch in we won't--"

"Exactly. Until you side-step it. Then she'll go like a bat outta hell. Now 6000, like I told you."

"But," Sam said again, eyeing the older man uncertainly. "How do I know when the rpms are 6000?"

"Look at the tac!" Al's voice was nearly a shout. "Now do it!!"

Hands tightening on the wheel, Sam obeyed, pressing in the clutch and revving the powerful engine until the sleek car shuddered beneath them as if straining to be free.

"When she's there," Al shouted in command, "side-step the clutch and let 'er rip!"

At Sam's bemused glance, the other man rolled his eyes in irritation.

"Let the clutch slip from under your foot and..." As the resident obeyed, Al's voice lifted in glee. "...hold onto your shorts!"

Sam's inarticulate cry was lost in the scream of the squealing, smoking tires as the clutch engaged and shot them forward into the clear expanse of pavement before them. Fighting for control, he didn't seem aware that he'd even opened his mouth as the rear of the car swayed under them like a belly dancer's hips, and Al whooped in glee.

"Ride 'er cowboy!"

Pushed back in the seat by the acceleration, his eyes wide, Sam fought to bring them under control. They rocketed down the road--which for all the world seemed like a runway--with scenery flashing past them at a sickening speed.

"Okay, speed shift 'er into second," Al shouted, "and keep the pedal to the metal."

Too terrified not to obey, Sam followed the directions exactly, sending the rpms soaring again and fighting for control as the rear of the car fishtailed once more.

"Geez!" he yelped as they straightened out and shot down the road. It seemed they were doing near ninety, though he was far too busy to spare a glance at the speedometer to confirm it.

Laughing, Al settled back in his seat. "Better cool it a bit, Sam, we got some hills comin' up here and you don't want to lose her."

Still thundering along the road, although he eased off on the accelerator, Sam sounded all of sixteen when he breathed, "Wow."

Carefully, almost reverently, he brought her down to a safer speed, cradling the stick shift in his palm as he shifted through the

appropriate gears.

Chuckling, Al tipped his hat forward over his eyes as if preparing to sleep. "Kick in the butt, ain't it?" His chuckle deepened. "Stick with me kid, there's lots more where that came from."

* * *

Being able to pack up all your life's belongings in a knapsack makes it easy to move in a hurry. Real easy.

Maybe too easy.

I didn't stop to think it over when Ray called to say he'd found Melissa down south and was going to talk to her the next day about Beth. I just told him to forget it, send me his bill, and I'd take it from there. I wanted to drive Abbie, but even full out--assuming I could avoid the cops--it just would've taken too long.

I'd run out of waiting.

So here I am, sitting on a plane to Charleston, South Carolina. At least I'm moving. I'm not waiting for someone else to control things for me. Calavicci's back in the pilot's seat and now things are gonna rock 'n' roll.

'Course I'll have fly back to Bethesda to get Abbie. Maybe I'll do that before I see Beth, but probably not. Pity, I know Beth will love her--but Abbie'll be my big surprise when we get back to Maryland. God knows, I don't have much else to offer.

Most of my things are tucked in the compartment above my head on this workhorse 747. I guess some people would say that's sad--a lifetime stuffed into one small bag--but that's not what's important. I'm going to get back what is, and to hell with the rest.

I do wish, kinda, that I'd gotten through to Sam before I left. But he took too long to answer his page and I had to get moving. When we go back for Abbie, I'll give him a call.

When Beth and I get back.

When this is over.

* * *

It was a nice quiet suburban street, not too flashy but none too shabby either. Al looked out the taxi cab window at the two-story, southern-style brick home, lit deep red by the afternoon sun. A chain-link fence ran around the perimeter, disappearing along the sides

under some huge old oaks draped heavily in Spanish Moss.

There were flower beds lining each side of the curved cement path leading up to the front door--a variety of colors already in bloom. Melissa was either doing very well for herself, or she'd finally made good her long-standing promise to hook some rich and handsome doctor.

As he stood on the curb paying the driver, a dog barked in the neighbor's yard. A couple of kids rode past on bicycles, while the guy down the street was busy with his weekend chore of moving his lawn to perfection. Life in the suburbs. This was what 'family' was all about. He was sure of it. You married the woman you loved, settled down in the 'burbs in a house just like that, then raised a couple of kids and grew old together. Simple. The way it was meant to be.

The cab drove off, snapping him back to the present. Donning his hat, he took a moment to straighten the hem of his dress whites then, drawing a deep breath, he opened the gate and started up the path.

* * *

There was a brass lion's head knocker on the door and as he rapped it, he thought back to the last time he had seen Melissa Stonewall. No, Booker. The mail box read 'Booker'. It'd easily been nine years, maybe more, right before the Navy had re-assigned her from San Diego to Pensacola in the fall of '64.

She and Beth had gone through high school together, then nursing school, then finally Naval RTC. Geez, they were more like sisters than friends. Once Melissa had even boasted that it was only after her urging that Beth actually went out on that first date with him!

Distance couldn't break a friendship like that, and there had been plenty of letters and phone calls to prove it.

Al smiled to himself as he waited for the door to be answered. He had a lot of fond memories of Melissa, recalling a mere handful now for the first time in years. He remembered the way she'd always been there for Beth, whether he was away on sea duty, TDY assignments, or simply hanging out with his buddies. If only she'd been there when he went to war. Maybe then he wouldn't be standing on her doorstep now...

A dark-haired woman opened the door and for

a moment he didn't recognize her at all. He could easily have passed her on the street as a complete stranger. Or maybe she was. Maybe he had the wrong house. The wrong street. Hell, the wrong damn city!

Suddenly very anxious, he asked, "Melissa Stonewall?"

She continued to stare at him for at least ten whole seconds. "Al? My God...Al Calavicci?"

Vastly relieved, he took off his hat and nodded in greeting. "It's been a long time."

"Yes, it has." She surprised him by stepping forward to give him a quick hug, drawing away perhaps a little too fast when she felt how thin he was. Stepping aside, she motioned for him to enter. "Well, come on in."

From a tiled foyer, Al stepped into a neat, well lived-in family room. There was a toddler on the floor--a boy of about two who was torn between playing with some toy cars and watching television--and a younger infant asleep in a playpen nearby. He fiddled with his hat, feeling suddenly uncomfortable with such domesticity.

"Actually, it's Booker now," she said conversationally, joining him from behind. "I gave up Stonewall four years ago. Here, let me take your hat."

"Thanks." He paused, watching as she placed it on a nearby mantelpiece, beside a handful of framed photographs and other knick-knacks. "I hope he was rich and handsome like you wanted."

She seemed pleased that he remembered. "Did you ever know me to settle for second best?"

"No," he returned, grinning. "Not really."

Selecting a photo, she turned and offered it with a proud smile. "My husband, Jack," she announced as he took it. "He's...um...out playing golf at the moment, but if you stay for supper..."

Al murmured, non-committal, as he studied the photo. The guy definitely looked like a doctor or a lawyer...

Uncomfortable with his train of thought, he hastily handed it back.

As if sensing his sudden discomfort, she neatly returned the photo to its place then threw him a wry smile. "Would you just look at you?" She made a show of noting the gold stripes on his shoulders. "A lieutenant commander now. What happened to that hot-shot ensign I used to know, the one who said anyone above the rank of lieutenant was 'a horse's ass'?"

He gave her a small shrug. "I guess he found out who the real ass was."

She grew a little more serious. "I'm really glad you made it home okay, Al."

"Yeah."

"I saw that picture of you...from Vietnam. LIFE did a story on the treatment of POWs--" She cut herself off. "I'm sorry, that was thoughtless of me."

"No, it's okay. It doesn't bother me." Geez, what an accomplished liar. He dipped his eyes, searching for a way out of that topic of conversation.

The infant in the playpen provided the distraction by suddenly starting to cry. Melissa quickly crossed to pick up the baby girl, quieting her with a few reassuring pats on the back.

"Would you like some coffee? Something to eat maybe? You look like you could use a good feed."

Al took her words with good grace. "Actually, I had lunch on the plane."

"Yeck," she said with a grimace. "Airline food. Come on, sit down. At least let me fix you a sandwich."

As she started to move toward another room, Al took a positive step forward. "No, I'm fine. Really."

She stopped, meeting his eyes and searching for a way inside his thoughts, obviously curious as to how and why he had turned up out of the blue. Awkward, he floundered into silence, finding there was just no easy way to tell someone you'd hired a private investigator to sift through their personal affairs and track them down.

"Al Calavicci," she mused with a slight shake of her head. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"I...er..." He dropped his eyes momentarily then looked up to meet her gaze directly. "I was hoping you might be able to help me find Beth."

Panic briefly flitted across her face, replaced just as quickly by a cool, confident mask.

"Beth." She smiled fondly, but something about it seemed forced. "I haven't seen or heard from Beth in..." She shrugged. "...years."

"Melissa," he said quietly, not buying her story one bit. He took another step toward her. "I need to find her. The Navy doesn't have any idea where she is, but you're her closest friend

and--"

"I can't help you, Al." She turned away, crossing back to the playpen and depositing the now silent baby on the blanket inside. "I'm sorry."

"But they told me they got a message from her through you. You and Beth always kept in touch." He paused. "You know where she is."

Melissa couldn't meet his gaze. "I...I can't."

"Damn it, she's my wife!"

That brought her eyes back to his, startled. "But she...re-married. God, didn't they tell you?"

"I can win her back."

"Win her back'? Al, this isn't a poker game."

Crossing back to the mantel, she picked up another photograph. When she held it out, he suddenly dreaded taking it. If it was what he thought it was, he didn't want to see it.

Uh-unh, no way.

But Melissa was insistent, and slipped it into his hands. "I think you'd better look at that."

He met her eyes instead, the hair on the back of his neck prickling. He now held in his possession positive proof of something he's tried so hard to deny, evidence of a truth he could no longer pretend was a fallacy. And like a witness to a road accident, he unexpectedly couldn't stop himself from staring at it.

The family portrait crushed the breath from his lungs. It was of Beth and that nozzel she'd married...and a boy of about three. He focused on Beth, not the loving arm around her waist or the child who resembled her so much. Just her eyes, her hair, her smile. She looked wonderful. And so...happy.

"That was taken last Christmas," Melissa informed him quietly. "That's Dirk junior." Just in case he was a complete imbecile and missed it, she hammered home her point. "Their son."

Al tore his eyes from the photo and quickly pushed it back at her, as if through that action alone he could erase the scene from his mind's eye. But the after-image lingered with hauntingly clear quality. "I...I know."

"Then you understand why she doesn't want to see you."

"No, I don't understand!" His raised voice startled her. Drawing a deep, calming breath, he clarified, "Look, you've got to help me.

You're the only one who knows where she is."

"But I promised..."

"Who? Beth?"

"Dirk." She looked away. "He's only trying to protect his family."

"Protect?" The implication of that statement riled him. "What the hell does he think I am?"

"Al, maybe you should...just leave."

"Not until you tell me where I can find Beth." He closed the space between them, meeting her eye to eye. "For pity sake, Melissa, you were bridesmaid at our wedding!"

It was his last ditch effort. And it seemed to have an effect. She paused, guiltily chewing her lower lip.

Al sucked in a harsh breath and held it. She was going to tell him. He could see it in her eyes. There was still hope.

An eternity seemed to pass as he stared at her, waiting. Just as she opened her mouth to speak, the telephone rang. And the sudden sound of reality made her swiftly change her mind.

Without a word, she crossed through an arch into an adjoining room to answer it.

Al expelled the air from his lungs, longing for the comfort of a cigar in his hands. Instead, hearing Melissa pick up, he tucked them into his trouser pockets and began to pace in a tight circle.

Of all the times for the phone to ring! Damn it, he was so close. Stay cool, buddy. Don't blow it now. Maybe if the call was short, if she didn't have the chance to regain her confidence and sensibilities, maybe he could recapture the mood--

He stopped abruptly, his heart leaping to his throat, upon hearing his name whispered in a conspiratorial voice. "...I don't know how, he just turned up. A few minutes ago."

Al ran the length of the room and through the arch. "Who is it?" he demanded, his voice shaking as pure emotion turned him to jelly.

Melissa lowered her eyes--a guilty confession if ever he'd seen one. Heart racing, he snatched the phone from her. She made no attempt to stop him, merely returned to the other room to allow him some privacy.

"Beth?" he asked the caller, forcing her name through the constriction in his throat.

"Oh, my God...Al..."

His heart skipped a beat. For one horrible moment, he couldn't say anything. He just froze up, listening to the ugly silence that separated

them. Say something, lunkhead, or she'll hang up!

"They said you didn't want to talk to me." The words came in a rush. He swallowed hard, not wanting but needing to hear from her own lips if it were true. She didn't confirm it, but she didn't deny it either. Hope. "But I didn't believe them. I mean, why wouldn't you want to speak to me? I'm your husband. Right?" His voice cracked at the question.

Another pause, and another long silence. Damn it, why didn't she say something?

"I...got your letter," he continued. "Took a few years, but that's the Navy for you. Look, I know you...met...someone else. But all you have to do is say it and I'll come get you. D'you hear me, Beth? I love you, and I wanna be with you. Please tell me where you are, honey. Honey?" That awful silence, roaring with betrayal. Tears welled in his eyes. "God, Beth, don't do this to me..."

Soft sobbing came to his ears, and the sound of her tears brought forth his own. He hastily wiped them away with a shaky hand. He didn't know why she was crying, nor did he even try to understand it. Drowning in his own sea of false hope, he could only interpret it as a sign that she wanted him.

"Beth honey, it's okay. Don't cry. Please. Just tell me where you live and I'll break every speed record there is to get there. I swear it."

Another voice unexpectedly entered the conversation from nearby--a man's voice, concerned, asking Beth what was wrong.

Al felt his stomach twist. It was him. The bastard who'd stolen his wife. He couldn't understand her muffled answer, but clearly heard the shyster speak his name with undisguised contempt.

"Beth?" Al asked quickly, fearful of where things were leading. His voice raised in sudden panic. "Beth, tell me where you live! BETH!"

"You've got a hell of a nerve," snapped a man's voice; calm, clipped and deliberate.

Cold hatred invaded Al, slithering through his veins like icy needles. His instinctive reaction was to want to beat this dirtbag to a pulp. With supreme effort, he managed to control his rage. "Put Beth back on."

"She doesn't want to speak to you."

"Just put her on the freakin' phone, you son of a bitch!" Immediately regretting his outburst, he continued before the jerk hung up.

"I'm...sorry," he grated, without any sentiment. He'd kill this guy if he ever met him face to face, but right now he'd grovel on his knees... if that's what it took to talk to Beth.

"My wife wants nothing to do with you, and has nothing to say to you."

The slimy little weasel obviously intended the word to hurt, and it did. Al felt like he'd been kicked in the gut by a steel-toed boot. "Then let her tell me that."

"Look, friend, she's eight months pregnant and you've already upset her enough. So why don't you just crawl back to whatever rock you came out from under, and leave us the hell alone!"

The phone was slammed down in his ear.

Al stood there listening to the mocking drone of the dial tone, totally immobilized, and suddenly stripped of every ounce of anger and rage.

Pregnant. She'd been pregnant when she'd written her letter. And even though she couldn't have cut him any deeper if she'd tried, he'd forgiven her for it.

But this time--this time years later--knowing damn well he was alive out there and that someday he was going to come home to her...

She'd deliberately chosen her new life--her new husband--over him.

Over him!

It was true. All of it. She didn't want him, or anything to do with him. She wanted that freakin' ambulance chaser and the children that could have been his had he not been such an insensitive, gung-ho asshole.

Slowly, in a complete daze, he hung up the phone.

Pregnant. With another man's child. His eyes screwed shut with the pain of it.

"Al?"

Drawing a shaky breath, he turned and found Melissa standing right behind him, holding her two-year-old and no doubt concerned by the look on his face. She touched his arm. He saw her do it but felt nothing. He was numb all over.

Without a word, he made his way back across the family room to collect his hat from the mantelpiece. The photo of Beth and her new family was all the more painful to look at because now he only saw Dirk and his damn victorious smile.

"Al?" Melissa tried again.

But he was already on his way out the door.



CHAPTER TWO

"Nexus"

Sometimes feelin' too much is like feelin' nothin' at all.

The pain's like falling. Like splashing down in this huge lightless well of black water where you keep going down and down and down and you never hit the bottom. You just plunge deeper and deeper and deeper until all the water above you comes crashin' in on your head with a great rushing roar.

Then you hit the rage. It rolls and pitches and surges all around you. It shakes you, rattlin' your teeth and brain and bones, like pullin' over a zillion quadrillion g's. And it shoots you straight back up like a missile breakin' out of an underwater silo and God help whatever poor SOB is in your way.

But inside--deep inside where you really, really live--there's nothing. It's silent--like that terrible dead silence in your ears after something just blew up in your face. It's cold--burning, blistering cold--and dead. Dead like the heart of a black, burned out star.

That's the way it is, when you're feelin'--and not feelin'--way too much. And you don't know if it will ever end, or if you'll ever feel anything even remotely human again.

* * *

An almighty crash startled Sam awake, jerking him back from deep and peaceful slumber. Somewhere down the street a dog barked, punctuating the early morning silence that now rang in his ears. Blinking, he struggled to decide whether the crash had been real or simply part of some distant dream.

Turning over onto his stomach, he switched on the bedside lamp in order to read the hands of the wind-up alarm clock on the nightstand. He winced, both at the stab of light and the time. 2:30ish. With a moan, he fought the urge to simply roll over and go back to sleep, knowing that if he didn't satisfy his curiosity by taking a look out the window, the contemplation of whether 'crash' had been real or imaginary would keep his mind active for the next several hours and put paid to any more much needed rest.

Throwing back the covers, he made the supreme effort to climb out of bed and padded barefoot to the drawn window shade. Running a hand over his face, he parted the venetian blinds and peered out.

In the parking lot below, a car had jumped the curb before coming to a stop with the right front fender buried in a sidewalk corral of trash cans. There were a number of the metal containers strewn around from the point of impact, confirming that the crash to have rudely awakened him had been real. He was more concerned, however, by the fact that he'd instantly recognized the car.

It was Abbie--Al's red Corvette--headlights aimed skyward and engine grumbling in the cool spring night.

As the observation entered his head, the engine was cut. The driver's door was flung open, with such force that Sam suspected it could have been kicked, allowing a white uniformed figure to stumble out onto the road.

Al. Drunk as a skunk.

The lieutenant commander had something in his hand. It was too dark and too far off to tell exactly what...until he raised it to his mouth and tilted his head back. A bottle of booze, without a doubt.

He'd been concerned when he'd phoned Al's apartment and got no answer, until he remembered their dinner conversation from the other week. Then he'd just assumed the private eye Al hired had indeed found his wife, and that the man had simply gone off to meet with her.

Ex-wife, Sam amended silently. And from the look of it his first instincts may have been

correct, because that particular reunion didn't appear to have gone quite as expected.

He watched Al stumble over his feet, using Abbie's hood for support as he dragged himself around through the high-beam headlights to the fender that had collided with the trash cans. When the commander angrily kicked a few of them flying and let loose a barrage of four-letter words at the top of his lungs, he knew for sure that something had most definitely gone wrong.

Sam winced. Not at the barking dogs, or the cacophonous sound of garbage cans being angrily kicked to hell and back. Not even at Al's lively and colorful cussing. No, it was the fact that several of his neighbor's lights had snapped on that had him reaching for his robe. The way Al was going, he'd end up spending the night in jail, drunk and disorderly.

Unless he did something. Quickly pulling on his robe and his slippers, Sam headed downstairs.

* * *

"Al?" Sam called tentatively as he approached the man from behind. He appeared to have calmed down a little, the entire upper half of his body presently sprawled across the hood of his red Corvette.

Or maybe he'd simply passed out.

As Sam got closer, the commander pushed up onto his elbows, but kept his back turned. Well, at least he hadn't collapsed in a drunken stupor. Yet. But his usually meticulous appearance was marred by a dirty and crumpled uniform, as if he'd spent the past two days and nights wearing it. Not to mention the fact that he no doubt needed a shower and a shave--he smelled like a distillery.

"Al?" Sam tried again, close enough now to reach out and touch him. "You...okay?"

As his fingertips made contact, Al angrily pulled free and staggered away a few unsteady steps. With a contemptuous smirk, he raised the bottle for another swig of liquor--but the expression died on his face almost immediately.

"Shit!" Al yelled, hurling the empty bottle off into the early morning darkness.

At the sound of glass breaking and dogs barking anew, Sam shuddered. He'd been afraid something like this would happen--that things wouldn't go as expected.

Al grabbed two fistfuls of his unruly hair and pulled until it made him grimace. "She

doesn't give a flyin' frig about me, Sam!"

It was then that he first noticed the handkerchief wrapped around the commander's right hand. And that it, and the under cuff of his dress jacket sleeve, was stained with blood. "Geez, what happened?"

"I'll tell you what didn't happen, pal. You were right. She didn't even freakin' talk to me!"

He winced as Al--in an unexpected display of violence--kicked Abbie's door. The commander murmured something incomprehensible at the scratch he put in the perfect red paint then lashed out again, this time hammering his crudely bandaged fist on the fiberglass hardtop. With a yelp of sudden pain, Al then recoiled into silence.

Sam quickly crossed to where he stood leaning on his elbows on Abbie's roof, nursing his injury. "Let me see your hand."

The man surprised him by briskly pulling away. "S'nothin', okay? I gotta...this was a mistake, I gotta go." Heading for the open driver's door, he tripped down the gutter and almost fell flat on his face.

Sam caught his arm and steadied him back on his feet. Al made a feeble attempt to shrug off his help, and fell against his car instead. Leaving him propped there for a moment, Sam rounded to the driver's door, leaned in and flipped off the lights. As he pocketed the keys from the ignition, he noted the officer's hat on the passenger seat, and another empty scotch bottle that had rolled halfway under it.

"Four on the floor and a fifth under the seat," Sam murmured to himself with a shake of his head. He wasn't really surprised. For some reason the phrase seemed synonymous with Al Calavicci.

Closing the door, he returned to the man in question. Al said nothing, did nothing, not even when Sam pulled his left arm over his shoulder and took the first step for them both, back toward his apartment.

* * *

Struggling to support Al, who had turned into an unhelpful lead weight on the journey up the stairs, Sam managed to hit the light switch with his palm and tap his front door closed with his foot, all in the same movement.

Weaving slightly around the piles of text books on the floor, Sam crossed to the couch and

gently let the intoxicated Naval officer slip down onto the cushions. Sitting on the coffee table in front of him, he reached for the commander's injured hand. "Now, let's have a look."

Al made no attempt to stop him this time, so he carefully unwrapped the bloodstained handkerchief. The knuckles were split open and still bleeding, and already turning black with severe bruising. There was a lot of coagulated blood, mostly from numerous minor scratches, but the thing that alarmed Sam was the long, jagged cut. The arm was sliced open from between the thumb and forefinger, around the wrist, all the way up to...

Even with the wide sleeves of his dress uniform it was impossible to tell. "Come on, take your coat off."

Al grunted as if in annoyance, but started fumbling with the gold buttons on his dress jacket with his left hand. Sam attempted to help but was shrugged off with a defiant look. "I can manage, okay?"

Nonetheless, he accepted help when shrugging out of the coat proved to be a chore. Stripping him down to a crew neck t-shirt, Sam put his hand on Al's shoulder and gently but firmly made him recline against one end of the couch. The man complied without resistance, hitching a scuffed white shoe up onto the cushions so he could rest his other arm on his drawn up knee.

Laying the coat aside, Sam returned to his examination, finding the rip in Al's flesh went from his hand halfway to his elbow. Closer inspection revealed that it wasn't particularly deep, but whatever had done it had made a hell of a mess. "Geez, Al."

"What?"

Sam glanced up and found him staring, unseeing, at the family portraits on the wall behind the couch. "How'd you do this?"

Al shrugged at the photos, dismissing it as a serious question. "I've had worse." There was no bravado in his tone, it was simply a statement of fact.

"You need stitches--"

"Like hell I do!" The hand was quickly tugged back, reclaimed.

When Sam looked up again he was met by a rebellious stare. "Yes," he insisted, "you do. And you can either let me do it or go back to Bethesda and let them do it."

Al relented, maybe a little too easily, almost throwing his arm back at Sam as he

returned to his scrutiny of the photographs. "You're the doc, Doc."

Sam gently placed it back on his chest as he stood. "Let me get my bag."

Returning moments later with his medical bag, Sam dragged a nearby floor lamp over and turned it on. A pool of bright light illuminated the coffee table and the carpet beneath, making the rest of the room seem dim by comparison. Sitting back down, he was suddenly aware of how well at home the older man was in the subtle dimness beyond the lamplight. Dark thoughts entered his head and unexpectedly gave him a chill.

Tuning his mind elsewhere, he began to rummage through the contents of his bag, but couldn't stop his eyes from wandering back to his patient. Al was still staring blankly at the shadowy photos on the wall, one finger toying with the corner of the nearest frame, absently rocking it back and forth.

Sam frowned a bit. Even though it was the closest photo within reach, it was strange the way the Naval officer had seemingly singled out that particular shot of him and Tom...as if it actually meant something to him. Dismissing the notion as nothing more than coincidence, he focused his attention on the job at hand.

"Damn," Sam said, retrieving a needle and suture, but no anesthetic. "I thought I had some Xylocaine in here. We'll have to go in to ER and--"

"No," Al said flatly. "I've had enough of hospitals."

"But I don't have a local to numb this while I stitch, and with all the alcohol in your system I can't give you anything more." He paused, but when Al did not comment, pressed on uncertainly. "Maybe it'll help dull the pain, but I'm more inclined to think it's gonna hurt like hell." There was no response. "Al? I said--"

"Yeah, yeah, kid, just get on with it." He rested his cheek against the cushioned sofa back and closed his eyes. "After six years in 'Nam I can take anything you can dish out."

Sam regarded him for a long moment, hating this bland indifference. Steeling himself, he set to work, first cleaning the wound then carefully suturing the edges of the serrated cut together. Al flinched once--and only once--at the first stitch. Then he just sat there like a damn rock.

Unfeeling and uncaring.

The task completed, Sam neatly dressed the hand and forearm with a piece of sterile white gauze, then gently placed the limb back on Al's lap. Sitting back, he watched the commander with a concerned frown. He hadn't budged an inch, although his eyes were now open. Still, he neither spared a glance at the finished result nor uttered a single word of comment, gratifying or otherwise. He just continued to stare blankly at nothing in particular.

Apathetic.

Those same dark thoughts made Sam shudder again. During his residency, he'd had too many opportunities to learn of the Vietnamese 'hospitality' toward American POWs. The boys may have been Stateside but the VC were still claiming lives. Suicide was the major contender for those who couldn't cope, those who--just like Al--seemed to have given up the fight.

Sam felt a sudden stab of animosity. Damn his ex-wife! He didn't know the woman, or the whole story behind whatever had happened, but how could she have done this to Al? Driven him to this...this...God, surely he hadn't tried to kill himself?!

Putting his medical bag on the floor by his feet, Sam leaned forward and struck a casual pose by resting his elbows on his knees. Maybe if he could tactfully talk the man through it... "I got sort of worried when I couldn't reach you on the phone."

"No need." Damn, no emotion either.

"Thought you'd flown off into the wild blue yonder without even saying goodbye." Sam mustered a smile to put behind his words...and scored a reaction for his efforts. Although maybe not one he expected.

Al met his eyes and drilled him with a look he found difficult not to flinch from. The man's torment was so real, so intense, that Sam felt it as surely as if it had been his own. His mouth dropped open, and before he could stop them the words were flowing out.

"Geez, Al, what happened?" So much for being tactful.

"I went to find...Beth..." Her name caught in his throat, as if it were painful to even speak it. "She's pregnant, Sam. Again. It wasn't enough that she had me declared dead so she could marry that legal nozzle. Hell no, she had to really bury me." He pinched the bridge of his nose with his bandaged hand. "By having his kids."

Sam floundered, unsure what to say. Finding

out she'd re-married had undoubtedly been a stab in the back, but learning of the children must have felt like a cruel twist of the knife.

"I'm...I'm sorry..."

Al abruptly swung his feet to the floor and sat forward, into the pool of light, an unexpected fire flaring in his dark eyes. The swiftness of the action--the fury riddled through it--startled Sam so much that he actually pulled back. This man hadn't given up like he feared. Oh no, he was far from wanting to simply lay down and die...or take his own life. He was ready to explode!

"Well, don't be! You got that? I don't want pity, from you or anyone else. And I sure didn't survive six freakin' years of hell just so she could destroy me either!"

Sam held Al's glare for a long moment, before the commander drew a deep breath and seemed to calm himself as he expelled it.

"Geez...I gotta tell you, pal. At first I wanted to shoot myself. I must've walked for miles, totally out of it, thinking how I couldn't live without her. Then on the plane home--after I'd had a few drinks--I got to thinking how I've spent the last six years of my life doin' just that!" He smirked scornfully. "I wish I'd've told her, Sam. I wish I'd've said 'screw you, sweetheart'. 'Cause I've got my life back now, and nobody's taking it from me again. Nobody, understand?"

Sam nodded, feeling an odd combination of compassion and relief rush through him. "God, Al, you had me scared for a moment." He flicked a finger at the bandaged hand. "How'd you do that?"

Al held up his right hand and looked at it as if it belonged to someone else. "This?" He scoffed. "When I got back here I went straight to the nearest bar. I was so pissed off at her, it didn't take too many more drinks before I ended up putting my fist through a plate glass window." He gently cradled his injury, acknowledging it for the first time. "Hell, I guess I was lucky I didn't get arrested. That would've really screwed up my chances with NASA."

"You were lucky," Sam corrected in a meaningful tone, "that you didn't kill yourself on the way here in that car! Geez, the way you drive when you haven't been drinking is bad enough!"

Al shot him a twisted grin, as if enjoying his exasperation. Eyes narrowing, he relaxed

back against the cushions, away from the pool of light. A moment passed then he drawled, "The need for speed is in my blood."

Sam huffed a relieved breath. Al was going to be okay. He shook his head, returning the smile. "You Navy pilots are all the same."

"Yeah, a bunch of adrenalin-chasing jet jocks...and damn proud of it too."

Enjoying the exchange, Sam raised a wry eyebrow as he added, "Heaven help the Space Program when you get there. You'll have them flying loops around Saturn!"

"You mean 'rings'." Al chuckled at the pun, then met Sam's eyes. Even in the dim light, the gratitude in his expression was undoubtedly sincerely felt. "Thanks, kid, for patching me up. Guess it just goes to show...I may be an officer, but I'm no gentleman."

"What's a buddy for?" Sam asked with a shrug.

"Yeah..." Al nodded, still eyeing him, as if accepting the idea--maybe really accepting it--for the first time. "...buddy."

Something panged inside Sam. Was it...hope? Hope that their friendship would last beyond this night, this week, this month? That maybe Al really was his 'buddy', and that he wouldn't just up and leave out of his life when NASA or the Navy found something better for him to do?

"I gotta go," the commander said quickly, as if uncomfortable with this shared feeling. But as he started to stand, his hand flew to his head. "Aie yie yie!" He teetered slightly, still under the influence of alcohol, then collapsed back on the couch.

"You're welcome to spent what's left of the night there," Sam told him, getting to his own feet. No wait. There was no way he was going to let Al back behind the wheel of a car in that condition. "In fact, I won't take no for an answer."

They met each other's eyes again. Sam's chin lifted defiantly as he prepared for the inevitable rebuke--he expected Al to argue the point. As usual.

But he didn't. "All right, kid. Since you got Abbie's keys in the pocket of your robe there, and since I don't feel like wrestling you for them at--hell--three o'clock in the morning ...you win." A grin played on his lips. "This time."

Sam let go the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "I'll get you a pillow and a blanket."

"One last thing." Al leaned forward and turned a surprisingly sober expression on him. "We don't discuss her again. Capeesh? Not five minutes from now, not tomorrow, not ever. As far as I'm concerned Beth Calavicci is dead."

He drew a deep breath against that statement, squaring his shoulders. "It's all behind me now --'Nam, her. I'm a free man. And in the next twenty-four hours I plan to let every nurse, WAVE, barmaid and waitress in this whole damn city know I'm available. Understand this, Sam. Beth, as a subject, is closed."

Sam nodded slowly, respecting Al's wishes although far from convinced that declaring 'open season' on women was the right alternative. "I understand."

"Good." Al stretched out on the couch and made himself comfortable, crossing his ankles. He waved a dismissing hand at Sam. "So hurry up with that pillow, would ya? I gotta catch some serious shut-eye..."

* * *

The shrill of the alarm clock woke Sam. Groggily, he risked opening one eye...but immediately snapped it shut at the eyeball-splitting sunlight that was flooding through his parted bedroom curtains. He groaned, loudly, and pulled the covers up over his face, trying to ignore reality. At least for a few minutes more.

But the alarm continued ringing...without mercy. Intent on silencing the annoying bells, his hand groped blindly from under the blanket, and instead knocked it flying. It landed somewhere on the rug below with a satisfying 'thunk', allowing peaceful morning silence to reign.

After a moment, Sam opened his eyes and stared at the colorful weave of the blanket balanced on the tip of his nose. Damn. Now it was too quiet! Surfacing for a second time, he swung his legs out of bed and sat there, using a heavy hand to rub the sleep from his eyes. Seven-thirty had come around all too quickly. At least Al--

Al. His eyes flew to the bedroom door, left ajar...just in case. But he hadn't heard so much as a peep from the inebriated man on the couch in the other room. Which, when he thought about it, was most probably the result of the alcohol the man had consumed. Considering Al had been forced into being a teetotaler for the

past several years, last night's little binge had probably floored him good and proper. Geez, was he ever gonna have one doozie of a hangover!

Toes skimming the rug, Sam debated whether he should wake him or let him sleep. He had an early shift at the hospital--had to be there by nine. Still, maybe he could let him sleep while he threw together some breakfast.

With a wide yawn and a lazy stretch, he slid into his slippers and reached for his robe, donning it as he headed out the bedroom door. Entering the living room, he came to abrupt stop. The couch was empty, save for the neatly folded blanket sitting on top of the pillow.

"Al?" he called, automatically crossing to where he could see the open bathroom door.

No Al.

Anywhere. He'd gone.

A little alarmed, he instinctively reached into the pocket of his robe. Sure enough, Abbie's keys were missing too. And in their place he found a note--a scruffy piece of paper bearing his own scribbled equations on one side ...and Al's neat and newly written script on the other. With a slightly anxious feeling, he held it up to read.

Sam. Thanks for the use of the couch but I was wrong. I couldn't sleep much. Not even after all that booze. Did a lot of thinking though. Don't worry, I'm okay. Sorry I couldn't stick around but you've got work and I've got things to do too. Meet me at Scoville's tonight, 8 p.m., and I'll explain then. Al.

Sam shook his head and smiled. If nothing else, the man never ceased to surprise him.

* * *

Never.

"Al?" Sam stopped stunned, directly in front of the back booth in the pizza restaurant. His eyes quickly darted over the man in question, who was seated beside that waitress, Susan, with his bandaged arm draped lightly over her shoulders. They were sharing an intimate smile, but at the sound of his name he looked up.

"Hey, kiddo, you made it." Noting Sam's expression, the commander's cocky grin faded. "Whatsa matter?"

"You..."

"Huh?"

"Your...clothes."

Taking his arm from around Susan, he thumbed open the wide lapels of his white polyester leisure suit, allowing Sam to see even more of the loud floral shirt beneath it. There was even a gold chain around his neck.

"Like it? The sales chick at the men's wear store said it was real hip." He grinned again. "And real me."

"Unh...well..." Sam floundered, eyebrows raised. But then, who was he to criticize the latest fashions? The only guy around who, in a world gone crazy with bell-bottoms and embroidered flowers, still wore plain blue jeans with straight legs. "It's just that...I've never seen you in anything...other than your uniform...um...before..."

"Well, Susan likes it," Al countered in a huffy tone, then smiled at the young woman beside him. Returning his arm to her shoulders, he gave her an affectionate cuddle. "Don't you, sweetheart."

"It's very cool," she returned, smiling lazily at him while toying with the straw of her empty soda glass.

Sliding hesitantly into the booth on the opposite side of the table, Sam regarded the young woman for the first time. Two things decided him that this was her night off. One, the very fact that she was sitting there with Al, and Two, because she was dressed rather glamorously. Well no, not exactly 'glamorously'. Nothing about the present fashion era could seriously be considered 'glamorous'. It was more like Susan was out to make a lasting impression on her date...

Date?! He blinked in surprise. Al was dating this girl?! After what had happened just last night? It made his head spin at how fast the man had recovered by the blow dealt by his ex-wife. He'd obviously had a busy day!

Opening his mouth to comment, Sam stopped short, caught unawares at the sight of Al making goo-goo eyes with the off-duty waitress.

Without breaking eye contact, Susan grabbed her purse from the tabletop. "Think I'll go check on Janine." She made to move but since she was sitting on the inside, Al had to stand first.

He did so graciously, then sat again with his hands lightly clasped on the table before him and his gaze firmly glued to the sway of her departing behind.

"Janine?" Sam asked, attempting to draw the other man's attention.

"Huh?" Al looked at him. "Oh yeah, Janine. She went to the ladies room just before you got here. Nice girl, you'll like her."

Alarmed by what he thought was lurking behind that statement, Sam leaned forward across the table. "Al," he said warily, "tell me this isn't what I think it is..."

"It's a double date," the man announced breezily.

Sam cringed, dipping his head. "Oh, boy..." He looked up to meet Al's eyes again, catching a glimpse of an amused smile an instant before the commander wiped it off. No way this was the least bit funny! "I thought you had something important to tell me."

"Well, I do." Sitting back, Al patted his pockets then withdrew a cigar. As he unwrapped the cellophane, he said, "I spent all morning butt-deep in red tape to pull it off."

"Pull what off?" He was aware of the careful look Al gave him, the way he took his time lighting his cigar then sat back with his bandaged arm resting casually across the top of the seat.

He exhaled smoke into the air. "Got my convalescent leave rescinded."

Sam's heart leaped to his throat...then sank to the very pit of his stomach. "That's great," he said, trying to hide his disappointment.

"Yeah, wasn't easy either. Not with the hangover I had!" Al waved the bandaged hand which balanced the cigar. "Especially explaining this."

"What did you tell them?"

"That some kid left an empty Coke bottle on my stairs, and that I tripped over it in the dark." He chuckled. "Frankly, I'm surprised they bought it. Guess I can chalk up another victory for the old Calavicci snow job."

"So when do you...?"

"I fly out Thursday. And get this--on one of NASA's VIP jets! Ain't that a kick in the butt?"

"That's great," he repeated softly, attempting to muster a smile for his words. Thursday was only four days away. Only four more days before Al...left. For good? He looked up and held the older man's eyes for a long moment, wondering if he'd really meant what he'd said last night, about them being buddies. Then he felt his shoulders sag. More likely Al had been too drunk to even remember.

Yet as the pilot opened his mouth to say something, perhaps even something along the same lines, Sam sat up with hopeful expectancy. Unfortunately, Al never got the chance to put voice to his thoughts, since Susan chose that moment to return with her friend, Janine, in tow.

Al got to his feet to allow her to sit, making Sam scramble to do likewise in a gentlemanly fashion. Introductions were handed round and he discovered that Janine, a 23-year-old college student with flaming red hair, worked part-time at a unisex hair salon over in Arlington. The girls had been planning, Janine explained as Sam returned to his seat beside her, to spend the evening at the flicks where 'The Godfather II' was playing. Planning, that is, until Al happened along and suggested something better than some old mobster movie.

Sam felt a slight rise of panic at the very thought of what that 'something' might have been. Especially when Al added a wink to the statement.

"Hope you've got your dancing shoes on, kid," Al said, enlightening him. "'Cause we took a vote while we were waiting for you to arrive. And these lovely ladies here decided they wanted to go cut a rug at one of these new disco places."

Disco?! Sam's eyes widened. Then, aware that everyone was staring at him, he forced a smile. Oh, boy!

* * *

The neon sign out front of the establishment spelled out 'BOOGIE TOWN' every few seconds in large, blue script. It was a two-story joint, sorta swanky--or at least tryin' to be--complete with multi-colored lights under the dance floor, a rotating mirror ball suspended from the ceiling, pulsating electronic strobes...and the all important bar in back.

Tables lined the catwalk on the upper level, and I figured that was a better place to sit than at the bar. Not that I've got anything against rubbing elbows with a crowd sitting at a bar--some of the most interesting people in the world are bar flies--it was just that upstairs was dark and sorta secluded. Intimate. Well, as intimate as you can get in a public place. And Susan...well, she definitely had a certain look in her eyes.

On the other hand, maybe it was because she'd

kept up with me, beer for beer. Maybe she was well on her way to getting smashed! I don't really know.

I do know I could very easily get to like these 'discos'. They're definitely the wave of the future. And it doesn't matter diddly-squat if you don't know what the hell you're doin' out there on the dance floor, 'cause nobody else seems to know either. You just cut loose and enjoy yourself, the more outrageous, the better. Of course, it helps to have a couple of drinks under your belt first. Just ask Susan!

And you know what? Even though you 'danced' several feet from your partner, it's a great way to pick up babes. Take, for example, Susan's enthusiasm after a particularly vigorous workout to a KC And The Sunshine Band number. She loved it! Fell into my arms and called me a 'lean, mean, dancing machine'. 'Course I had to tell her I still had a few moves I'd like to show her. Later. And in private.

Yep, if I put my mind to it, I could be King. Dressed in my royal robes, my genuine, one-hundred percent, high-grade, virgin polyester leisure suit, I could have women falling all over me!

Wonder how they'll react to my spacesuit?

* * *

Setting the latest round of refreshments down in the center of the small table, Al glanced at Sam and Janine. Geez Louise! Talk about being a stick in the mud! He had to get the kid to loosen up. He was sitting there, so tense, that he looked like he'd jump sky-high if Janine ventured anywhere within a radius of about half a mile!

Taking a beer, Al sat opposite, close to Susan, throwing her a brief smile as she rested her hand on his knee. Unfortunately, the loud music made conversation, with the exception of a few screamed words, virtually impossible.

Still eyeing Sam, he sipped his beer. The kid was just shy, he was sure of it. If he could just get him down onto the dance floor, Janine could take it from there...

The opening bars of a slow and sexy Donna Summer song made Susan enthusiastically latch onto his arm.

"Al, I love this song. Let's dance," she yelled, all but rupturing his eardrum.

"You got it, doll," he returned, taking the opportunity to nuzzle her ear--at least things

were progressing nicely with Susan. He traded his beer glass for her hand as he stood, but as he started to move away, Sam jumped to his feet.

The kid said something--something that looked like his name. Or it could have been a plea for help. There was an alarmed expression on his face, presumably because Janine had finally taken matters into her own hands and invaded his space. The redhead was instantly standing beside him, and now he was on his feet, the poor kid wasn't getting out of it!

Never one to miss a golden opportunity, Al released Susan and flung his arm around Sam's neck instead, momentarily tempted to lock his elbow so he couldn't escape. Before Sam could show any reaction he set them both in motion, jostling the taller man toward the wrought-iron staircase that led to the dance floor below.

As they reached the stairs, he let the momentum he'd created carry Sam down the first step, then turned to the girls who were following gleefully behind. He reached out a hand to each, momentarily pulling Janine close.

"He's all yours, sweetheart," he said in her ear, then propelled her down onto the step where Sam had come to a sudden and complete standstill.

The kid mouthed a few drowned out words of protest, then turned a timid smile on Janine as she took his hand and began exuberantly dragging him down the remainder of the steps. As Sam stumbled and glanced back with a look of dire peril, Al gave him a grin and a cocky salute. Okay, so the kid was young and lacking experience when it came to women, but what'd he been? The world's most sexually backward teen? Sheesh!

Susan drew him out of his thoughts, getting into her favorite song by boogieing down right there on the steps, without a care for the people pushing past around them. Al watched her with growing interest, wondering if she had any idea of the affect her slow and sensuous moves were having on him.

When she smiled coyly and flipped her hair back over her shoulders, he knew she did. She took his hand, and he let her lead him into the multi-colored lights below. Hey, he was a modern guy. Let her think she was the one doing the seducing.

As they reached the bottom, Al automatically went to move out onto the dance area but found Susan had other ideas. She tugged on his arm and pulled him back under the staircase, away

from the main hubbub of people and lights. At that moment, he completely lost all interest in Sam and Janine, who had been swallowed by the sea of gyrating bodies just a few yards away. Susan had claimed his undivided attention.

In the relative privacy of their dark little nook by the strobe machine, she made a show of undoing the third button of her blouse and teasing him with a glimpse of cleavage.

Slipping her arms loosely around his neck, she began swaying in time with the beat, every now and then allowing one of her sexy little moves to brush lightly against him. Resting his hands on her hips, he moved with her at arm's length, until they fell into perfect sync.

Flexing his fingers, he pulled her close and momentarily lost himself in the sweet, fresh scent of her hair. "Oh, baby...you make me feel so alive."

"I haven't even begun yet," she returned, then playfully pushed him away to finish her dance.

As Donna Summer was replaced by an equally romantic Bee Gees' song, she let the mood carry her back into his embrace.

Hands clasped lightly behind his neck, she asked, "What would you say, if I said I was ready to leave?"

He cocked an eyebrow at her, still moving with her in their dark hideaway. "Well, at the risk of sounding outdated I'd probably say... 'tu casa o mi casa?'"

Susan smiled and tossed her head back with a silent laugh. But when she met his eyes once more, she was deadly serious.

"My place," she said in a husky voice, an instant before she drew him into a kiss.

Al gathered her into his arms, deepening the kiss, finding her tongue's delicate exploration of his mouth to be extremely sensuous. As her fingers wove through his hair, something inexplicable--some sixth sense--had him opening his eyes and, without breaking the kiss, looking over her shoulder.

Through the sea of similarly entwined bodies and flickering lights, he saw Sam. Alone. The kid stood some twenty feet away, amidst crowd and the neon tubing, looking about as inconspicuous as a hooker at a church picnic.

The young physicist met his gaze directly and, with an agitated flick of his head in the direction of an adjacent men's room, indicated that he needed to talk.

Taking his bandaged hand off the small of

Susan's back, Al waved him down. I'm busy, kid!

Sam was insistent. Now, Al!

At that very same moment, Susan bit his tongue. Caught off guard, Al jerked back. There was passionate desire in those flinty eyes, mixed with a look of...uncertainty. Damn. Obviously she wasn't sure how to interpret his abrupt retreat.

He smiled and gently touched her cheek with the back of his hand, hoping it would be enough to say he wanted her too. "Would you...? I mean, I gotta...you know...visit the little boy's room..."

She looked a little piqued at his timing. And rightly so. "Now?"

His eyes flicked in Sam's direction again, this time catching a frantic waving gesture. The kid was almost jumping up and down.

"Unh...yeah. Now." Reluctant to forsake the warmth and nearness of her body, he nonetheless took a step back. "Save my place," he said, throwing her a wink as he moved away.

* * *

The door to the men's room was angrily flung open, hit the tiled wall, and bounced back. Al caught it with his good hand as he entered, Sam trailing close on his heel. As it closed behind them, the music decreased by several decibels. Now there was an interesting concept--soundproof bathrooms. Still, it was probably the only place on the entire premises that allowed conversation at normal levels. That and the ladies room.

"This sure better be important, Sam," Al growled in irritation. Distracted by his reflection, he paused by the mirror that ran the whole length of one wall and slicked down his ruffled hair with his palm. "D'you know what Susan did just now? When I kissed her?"

"Messed...up your hair?"

"She bit my tongue!" He turned from the mirror, eyes sparkling with wicked delight. "God, what a turn on! Bet she's a real animal in the sack..."

"Would you please just forget about Susan for a moment?"

"I'll try, but it's sorta hard to forget those legs that go all the way up to her--"

"Al!"

"What?"

The kid looked like he was about to bust a blood vessel. "I've got a big problem here!"

"Oh...problem, huh?" Al grew serious. He was about to holster his hands in his pockets when he remembered that his trousers were too tight to permit such a move, so he folded his arms instead. So the kid needed some pointers. That he could forgive. "Well, shoot, kid."

"It's Janine!" he blurted. He drew a deep breath. It was as if just getting out her name relieved a mega-weight from his shoulders. Geez, surely it wasn't that bad? "I mean, I'm sure she's a nice girl and everything. She's attractive, has a nice smile, pleasant personality--"

"Great bazongas," Al enthused. Noting the younger man's scowl, he shrugged.

"But I can't talk to her!" He rubbed the back of his neck. "I mean, she thinks a quark is some breakthrough fashion accessory!"

"Sam," Al said reproachfully, "you're not supposed to 'talk' to her!" Another thought struck him, lighting up his eyes again. "Unless it's in Italian. Women go nuts when you make sexy small talk in Italian."

"I...I don't know Italian, but I can speak Spanish and German and--"

"Sam, Sam." He shook his head. "I think you're missing the point, pal."

Self-conscious, Sam checked their privacy before continuing. "The point, Al, is that she wants me to...to..."

Al beckoned with a look and a hand gestured.

"She wants me to...to go to bed with her!" The kid blushed scarlet.

"Yeah," the commander said measuredly, "so what's the problem?"

"I can't!"

He shot the younger man a narrowed look. "Can't?"

Sam shuffled in acute embarrassment. "Oh...no...I didn't mean, I can't. I can. That is, I could...but..." He shrugged expansively, hands slapping his thighs. "...but I don't love her! And it's not morally right to sleep with a woman you're not in love with!"

As Al frowned, trying hard to understand the dilemma, a flushing toilet rendered Sam into stunned silence. A guy about Sam's age, with shoulder length hair and a shirt unbuttoned all the way to his waist, came out of a stall and used the basin between them to wash his hands. The yo-yo snickered at the kid--who dipped his head, totally mortified--before leaving.

The bathroom deserted again, Al planted his right elbow on his left palm and propped his

chin in his bandaged hand. He shook his head, amused. "Santo cielo! What am I gonna do with you?!"

It was intended as a rhetorical question, but Sam took it at face value, throwing him an angry scowl. Hell, he definitely didn't see the funny side of it.

"You got me into this mess, so for starters you can get me out of it."

"Whoa, kid, look..." Al edged back a few steps toward the exit. "I'd really like to help you out here...but I'm on final approach with Susan and I've just been cleared to land. Comprenez?" At Sam's disapproving pout, he added, "Geez, gimme a break, would ya? I've been locked in a tiger cage for the last six years!"

"I'm sure it did nothing to improve your sexual prowess," Sam admonished in a sulky tone. Arms folded, he leaned a hip against the sink.

Al's defenses bristled. "Hey, bud, at least I know what it means to have sexual prowess."

"Are you saying I'm not normal?"

"Well, considering you'd rather spend the evening cuddling a text book instead of a pretty girl..."

They both lapsed into silence as the restroom door opened to admit a black guy in a green turtle neck, and a few stray strains of The Silver Convention.

As the door closed and sealed them in relative silence once more, Sam looked at his feet and absently kicked at a stain on the tiled floor. "I hate disco music."

Al looked the other way, not relishing the argument either, determined to stuff his hands into his pockets regardless. "Yeah well, King Thunder it ain't. But the girls wanted to come here."

"King who?"

He met Sam's eyes, and an unspoken truce passed between them. "English rock band? Wear make-up all over their faces? You've heard me play their album in Abbie." But the kid was drawing a complete blank. "Never mind." He adjusted his stance, getting down to business. "All right, look. What sort of music do you like?"

"Well...Elvis Presley...and I've got a couple of Simon & Garfunkel records at my apartment, but I don't see what that's got to--"

"Okay, they'll do. Since Susan and I are about to split, why don't you take Janine back to your place, slip on something soft and

romantic, then slip out--"

"Al!" Sam cut him off with an astonished look.

"What? I'm tryin' to help here!"

"You can help by taking Janine home for me."

"Kinky, Sam, but I'm a one-on-one type of guy." He grinned, totally shameless. "Unless it's triplets."

"I'm being serious!"

Al shrugged, feigning an earnest expression.

"Who isn't?"

Sam abruptly grabbed his elbow and started pushing him toward the exit. "So go out there and find Janine. Tell her...I dunno, tell her I'm sick. Damn it, I don't care what you say! Just...just get rid of her."

"Wait a doggone minute!" Al stopped, shrugging off Sam's hand and standing his ground. "You expect me to lie to that sweet, trusting girl?"

Sam blushed, shamefaced. "Well, it's not exactly a...a lie. I do feel kind of...funny."

"Funny."

Sam nodded. "A sort of...nervous churning in the pit of my stomach."

"Uh-huh." Al nodded knowingly. "Sam, trust me on this. There's only one remedy for that feeling. And her first name's Jan--"

"Would you just do it, Al?!" Sam met his eyes with a pleading puppy-dog look. "Please?"

Al straightened. "Okay, kid, okay. If that's what you want, I'll tell her." Geez, he was sure glad he didn't have any hang-ups about 'free love'. That would drive him nuts!

Sam let go a tense breath, and for a brief moment Al was afraid he was going to try to hug him. "Thanks. I owe you one."

Heading for the door, he waved his bandaged hand. "Nah, we'll just call it even."

* * *

Incessantly loud music and stroboscopic lights immediately assaulted his senses. Al paused amidst the din, squinting through the crowd and flashing darkness in search of Susan. He half expected her to have given up on him...then he spotted her, still by the strobe machine. With a thankful smile, he quickly darted through the crowd, across to where she stood talking to--or rather yelling at--Janine.

Both girls turned as he reached them.

"Is Sam okay?" Janine asked worriedly, leaning against him as she spoke loudly in his

ear.

Al nodded. "Said to tell you he's feeling a little...funny." He gave her an apologetic shrug that was meant to explain it all.

Unfortunately, it didn't.

"You mean he's sick?" Susan asked.

"Throwing up sick?" Janine was clearly concerned.

"Oh, he's okay." Damn, she was making it difficult by obviously caring.

"Could be the lights," Susan observed.

"Or the noise."

"Or both."

"Wonder if he has a headache too?"

"I thought maybe he was acting a little strange."

Al watched them toss speculation back and forth for a moment before dividing himself equally between them and slipping an arm around their waists. "Girls, girls, I'm sure he's gonna be fine. He just needs..." He hesitated, knowing too well what Mr. Morals needed.

"A little TLC," Janine finished for him. Pulling away from Al's embrace, she motioned to the men's room. "Anyone else in there?"

Even as she asked it, the guy in the green turtle neck came out the door. Assured that in itself was a sign from above, Al grinned. "...unh...not any more."

"Good. See you guys, huh? Like tomorrow. Time to TCB." She headed for the men's bathroom, beating a burly patron across the threshold as she charged right in.

Al ogled at her sheer audacity then, chuckling to himself, turned away with Susan tucked neatly under his arm. He leaned close as he spoke in her ear. "You're my witness. I didn't put her up to that."

"You mean...? He's not really...?"

Al's smile widened. "Geez, I wish I could've seen his face when she walked in!"

They made a brief stop for Susan to collect her purse and sweater from the table upstairs, then made their way outside to the parking lot. By the time they had reached Al's Corvette, the disco noise had been reduced to a merciful thrum behind them.

Pulling out his keys, Al threw a guilty glance at Sam's Maverick parked beside his Vette. Maybe he should have stopped Janine...

He broke into a big grin. Nah!

Opening the door for Susan, he leaned one elbow on the top edge of the window and the other on the roof, effectively trapping her

between himself and the car.

"TCB?" he asked with a smooth smile.

She faced him. "TCB with TLC."

That amused him. "What?"

"Taking Care of Business with Tender Loving Care." She ran a delicate finger along his jaw to his lips, seemingly pleased when he kissed it. "She's an Elvis fan."

"So is Sam."

She threw him a suggestive smile just before climbing in. "So am I."

Closing her door with a jaunty flourish, he quickly crossed around to the driver's side, whistling a few bars of 'Love Me Tender' as he went.

* * *

Love. Desire. Passion. Anxiety. Torment. Hate. You know, the human mind is a very complex thing. Take the way it can propel you from one emotion to the next, without hardly a pause in between. In the early hours of the morning, in the aftermath of so much pleasure, take the way it can mysteriously recall all those unwanted memories of pain. It's virtually impossible to understand why, since you've shut all the doors on that part of your life, built walls so that nothing can slip out and surprise you at an unexpected moment.

I guess it all works fine when you're awake. But when you're not, when you're at the mercy of sleep and your defenses are at their weakest, that's when the system breaks down. Some of those mental doors you thought you'd secured with locks and chains, begin to creak open.

Not that dreaming about being shut in a tiger cage is so bad. At least in there you felt 'safe'. Okay, maybe that's a strange definition of the word, but believe me, there are worse things.

Like being out of it. Outside you were vulnerable, at the mercy of every whim of your captors. If they had a bad day, you'd better look out, bud, 'cause you sure as hell were gonna have one too. And as camp commander, Major Kwan had lots of bad days.

We weren't afraid of Kwan himself--even I could have taken down that little weasel, mano a mano--more his methods of dealing with what he called 'infractions'. Notable of these was The Punishment Tree, so named because that, nine times out of ten, was where we learned the penalty for our 'infractions'. Mind you, none

of us knew what the damn rules were 'til we broke one of them, and the punishment ranged from a good old-fashioned flogging...to death.

It was a regular part of life, this torture, as was near-starvation, being beaten until you couldn't stand...and interrogation. Sometimes they tried to get us to renounce our country, other times they simply tried us for these so-called war crimes. Tried us! When they were the ones in direct violation of the Geneva Convention.

Bob Keramidas was the first and last guy I ever saw point out that one small fact. And he paid for it, taught us all the price for having pride and an unbroken spirit. After they'd kicked and beaten him almost senseless, they dragged him over to that damn tree and strung him up by his feet. Just tied his hands behind his back and hoisted him up. They left him there to die, slowly, as the blood rushed to his head and ruptured capillaries.

But even that wasn't enough.

I dunno where that bastard, Kwan, was at the time, if he knew what his men were up to, or even if it was his idea. But after about an hour, when Keramidas had stopped squirming, they pulled a potato sack over his head and tied it at his neck. Only before they pulled the drawstring tight, they tipped a jarful of spiders into the sack. Ugly, black, hairy things. The kind that make your skin crawl just to think about. And damn it if they didn't shake the jar first, making sure the little buggers were as angry as all get out.

As usual, we were made to stand and watch. To learn. Yeah, we learned all right. We learned the luxury of stretching our limbs was to be paid for in blood. In a way, I'm glad I didn't have to look at his face, 'cause hearing his screams was bad enough. Only I did see him. Later. When I helped bury him in our ever growing garden of white crosses. I've had this morbid dread of dead bodies ever since. Somehow, they always look like Keramidas.

Yep, there are some things that are far worse than being locked in a damn cage.

Like my turn at The Punishment Tree. It started as a routine round of interrogation, until I was slugged in the face with a rifle butt. Such was my 'infracton'--I accidentally bled on the nice, clean floor of Major Kwan's hooch.

I can still feel the bite of the rope as they tied my wrists and hauled me three feet off the

ground. When one of them pulled my leg-irons taut, pinning my ankles, I expected the worst. This time Kwan was to inflict the punishment himself. Judge, jury and executioner, that Charlie bastard. I don't think I'll ever forget the look on his face as he slowly drew his long-bladed knife from its sheath. Or the wicked glint of sunlight that caught the blade and shimmered down its lethal edge, as he took that first step toward me.

A killer in uniform...with Beth's face...

* * *

Screaming, Al sat bolt upright in bed, his breathing labored and his body coated in a slick sheen of perspiration. Gasping, he pushed down the clinging sheet and stared in wide-eyed horror at the eight inch horizontal scar across his belly. In the blue-silver moonlight, it was livid purple.

Gentle arms encircled him and pulled him close against a warm, soft body. With a shuddering sob, he closed his eyes and tried to chase all his personal demons back where they belonged--behind locked doors. How could this be happening? It had been absolutely the last thing on his mind when he'd finally drifted off to sleep with Susan snuggled in his arms.

"Shhh...it was just a bad dream," came her quiet, reassuring voice. She rocked him gently, chin resting on top of his head. "You're all right, baby, it's me...Susan. Not Beth."

Oh, great. On top of everything, the first woman he'd slept with since Beth and he'd called her the wrong damn name! Slick move, Calaviccii. Real slick.

Humiliated by this revelation, he pulled away from the tender arms that held him and swung his feet to the floor. The confidence he'd exhibited just last night was completely shattered in the telling light of the approaching dawn. Damn it, this sort of thing didn't happen to him. Not to him. He was in control.

Wasn't he?

"Hey...it's okay." He felt the heat of her body as she settled on her knees behind him. He tried not to flinch against the stray wisp of hair that swept feather-like over his skin as she leaned close to whisper in his ear. "After all, she is tattooed on your arm."

Tattoo. Al automatically glanced at it. It'd been part of him for so long that he'd

never given it a second thought, and Susan certainly hadn't mentioned it last night when she brought him home to her apartment, and her bed. It was a souvenir of his first flight tour to the Far East, and his first shore leave. A hawk, with wings spread and talons extended. It had been years later--during the Cuban Missile Crisis--when, newly wed and pulling a long TDY in Florida, he'd had the banner added. A flowing ribbon with Beth's name on it, held by the hawk's talons.

God, she'd hated that!

Beth. Hating his tattoo. Hating him. In a POW camp, coming at him with a long-bladed knife...

He raised bunched fists to his eyes, screwing them shut against the burning after-image. Damn the nightmares! Beth was a closed subject. She was, damn it!

The gentle finger traveling the length of his spine had him jumping to his feet with a startled gasp. Hell, he was shaking all over. Without looking back, he reached for his pants and hastily pulled them on. His shirt followed, left unbuttoned as he dragged on his coat. Then, careful to avoid Susan's eyes, he sat on the bed to tie his shoelaces.

"Al?"

When she touched him, he flinched again. He didn't mean to, he just couldn't help it. But she shouldn't see him like this. Not with the carefully constructed walls he'd built crumbled down around his ankles. This was too private. Too close to bearing his soul.

Unfortunately, she took offense to the fact that he was obviously preparing to go.

"That's it, huh? Wham, bam, thank you, ma'am?" She made a sarcastic sound. "Guess I should have known better...with a sailor."

Turning, he searched her eyes. Damn it, she cared. She hadn't merely used him the way he'd used her, and he suddenly felt compelled to tell her that wasn't why he was leaving.

"It's not like that," he said, then hated himself for the outright lie woven through his words.

"Right," she answered, no doubt reading the guilt in his expression. "And I suppose the next thing you'll tell me is that she isn't your wife."

He stiffened. It was pointless to tell her because she'd clearly made up her mind to believe the contrary. Besides which, he really didn't want to get into that discussion. Not

now at...o-dark-thirty. Hell, not ever again!

Standing, he began gathering up his watch, keys and wallet from the nightstand, trying hard to ignore the way his hands were shaking.

Avoiding her eyes, he swallowed hard, desperate to cork the whirling emotions that had him lathered in such an anxious sweat. When that didn't work, he made a rapid retreat to the bedroom door. "I'll...I'll call you."

"Don't bother," she returned flatly as he reached the threshold.

The hair on the back of his neck prickled, and forced him to look back. In the moonlight shadows, he saw Beth sitting in that bed, the sheet clutched in front of her. And in the blink of an eye, that faceless nozzle she'd married appeared beside her...wearing the uniform of a Vietnamese major.

With a cold shudder, he turned and fled into the amber hue of the approaching dawn.

* * *

Sam was busy--too busy for even the briefest of personal phone calls. But, somehow, even while stabilizing a young ensign with a spleen newly ruptured on the Maryland Expressway, planning and ordering a new course of treatment for an admiral just admitted with advanced pancreatic cancer, and discussing the latest case of a repatriated POW's raging Plasmodium Falciparum with the Chief Pathologist, he found time to try. Twice. But there was no answer at Al's apartment--morning or afternoon.

At first, the resident had been worried. What if the commander's drinking and fast driving had finally landed him in a ravine somewhere with Susan?

It had been reflections of the waitress that had turned his thoughts to mild resentment. That's probably where Al was--with Susan. He had dumped Sam, siced Janine on him, and climbed into bed with the waitress.

But, a tiny portion of him admitted, Janine had told him in that humiliating men's room encounter that Al had said he was sick. It wasn't a lie--not really--since by the time he had delivered a coolly silent Janine to her door he had felt sick. The churning in his stomach had escalated to full-fledged nausea. He just couldn't do what Al so breezily suggested, couldn't even though the pilot didn't seem to understand in the least bit why.

Maybe, Sam was wondering by late afternoon

as he finished up mounds of paperwork on the epidemiology review he was conducting with the Senior Microbiologist, Al was mad at him. What if he had written him off? He was leaving Thursday anyway, why would he need to mess with a mega-nerd who couldn't handle his own feet in social situations? Nobody outside his family had ever given him a break like that before--stuck by him even as far as Al had. Maybe he should have tried harder--at least kissed Janine and told her he had an early shift today.

Maybe--

"Hi ya, pal."

The voice, coming from directly behind him in what Sam had believed to be the empty resident's lounge, startled him so badly that his pen skidded upward, nearly obliterating the record of the troubling frequency of Staph Aureus on Three South.

"Al!" Relieved, and faintly embarrassed at his jumpiness, Sam turned in his chair. But at his first sight of the man, the resident's expression changed. Despite his meticulous grooming and yet another pristinely flashy leisure suit, Al looked awful--as if he hadn't had more than an hour or two of sleep since Sam had last seen him. "Where've you been?"

Al's shrug was diffident, but his grin was pure mischief. "Around. In and out." His tone left no doubt as to the innuendo he intended.

Sam felt himself blushing. "Oh."

"When you get off here, wanna go out for dinner?"

"Unh, sure." Sam nodded. "I ought to be done here by eight. Want to meet at Scoville's?"

"No, not Scoville's." Al's eyes slid away for just a moment and Sam frowned a bit. "I'm kinda burned out on pizza. But I found this great Mexican place on Broadway--Pecos. I'll stop back by and we'll go, okay?"

"Okay." Nearly before the younger man could nod, Al was turning away with a jaunty step.

"Gotta go. Gotta see a guy about Abbie's fender."

"Al," Sam began as he got to his feet, "about last night..."

"No problem," the commander answered lightly with a wave of his hand. "Some of us are born partiers." He turned, flashing Sam a grin. "Others have to grow into it."

Pushing open the lounge door, Al did a double-take as an attractive physical therapist in a snug, white jumpsuit passed by.

"See you at eight," he said, obviously

distracted as he leaned nearer the door to watch her move down the hall. "At the ER entrance, so I don't have to come in and track you down again." He was already moving out the door as if drawn by an invisible hand to follow the therapist. "The smell of disinfectant in this place makes me sick." With that distracted observation, he was gone, the door swinging closed behind him.

Shaking his head, Sam stared after him. So he wasn't written off after all. A smile spread across his face, then vanished at the thought of Thursday. He was really going to miss Al--and so far the other man had not said anything about what happened beyond it.

Loud in the small lounge, the resident's beeper went off, paging him to Three South. Already moving, Sam shoved his pen into his lab coat pocket. Maybe tonight Al would say something about future plans that included him. If not, well, he'd cross that bridge when he came to it. For now, he had IVs to order, patients to see and paperwork to do. That, hopefully, should be more than enough to keep him occupied until then.

* * *

Sleeping's pretty much over rated if you ask me. I don't spend much time doing it since I've decided to quit wasting time waiting and start living. I mean, why should I spend time comatose in bed when there are so many more... stimulating...things to be doing?

It was kinda tricky...explainin' to Sam why I didn't want to go back to Scoville's. I know he didn't buy it when I told him I'd burned out on pizza. Just got this almost-but-not-quite frown on his face that said, 'okay'. I hate it when he does that--sayin' it without sayin' it.

Other than that, when he's not being Mr. Morals, he's all right. Geez, you wouldn't believe the stuff the kid has in his head. Incredible stuff. Like everything he's ever read. Physics is his gift, though. He can factor multiple vectors in his head faster than most people can tie their shoes.

So we picked up where we left off on the time travel thing, after he wimped out on me as far as partying. Just for fun, we've been running down some ideas related to the theory... like how you'd go about building a computer that's complex enough not to blow microchips like popcorn the first time you fed it the

processing data, and how you'd keep track of the guy leaping along the string. Stuff like that. When we aren't putting Abbie through her paces, or scarfing down burritos and margaritas at Pecos, that is.

Despite not sleeping, I'm doing okay. See, when I sleep, I sorta lose my grip on the control of all those things I'd rather not think about, and I hate that.

I hate sleeping alone even more.

Tiffany--the sales chick I met when I bought my civvies--is a good kid. She's got a body that would part the Red Sea and she's not too bright. She doesn't ask questions--not even when I wake up screaming Beth's name--and seems content just to hold me until the nightmare passes.

So I crash only when I have to, when Tiff's available, takin' just the minimum of zzz's to get me by. But Sam--he and Tiff are starting to look a little worse for wear.

They can sleep when I'm gone--which won't be long now.

* * *

Al decided that having Sam drop him off at Andrews Air Force Base on Thursday was a good idea. Abbie needed to remain behind for a little convalescent leave at the local body shop and he had arranged for them to ship her by rail to Houston. Let the nozzles return her in less than perfect condition and he would enjoy making them regret it. A little adrenalin now and then was good for the arteries as he saw it.

For now, he felt positively mellow. Having Sam accompany him to the flight was turning out to be fun. The kid just soaked it all up like a sponge. He was so in awe of all that went on about them as they made their way to the proper gate that he was a little quiet, even for him.

It felt good, Al had to admit, taking and returning salutes with a wide-eyed Sam at his shoulder. Guiding the younger man through an environment which was as natural to him as any place he had ever called home was satisfying, somehow. Standing on the warm tarmac with the families that had come to wish their loved ones goodbye, he felt almost--was it brotherly? Hell, he was definitely going to miss the kid.

Just then, an F-4 Phantom roared overhead, low on final approach for landing. Sam jumped and ducked with a civilian's instincts.

Grinning, Al glanced at him from the corner

of his eye, pretending to watch the jet as she flared and gently touched down. The resident was glancing about sheepishly, to see if anyone had noticed his reaction.

As the F-4's braking chute deployed, Al turned his full attention back to Sam, who was now casting an anxious look in the direction of the parking lot where they'd left the Maverick. Of course! The Phantom's low glide path had taken it directly overhead!

"Don't worry about it, pal," he said easily, jerking a thumb toward the distant cars.

"What?" Taken by surprise, Sam faced him.

"I said," Al repeated, deadpan. "Don't worry about it. Any tread marks she left on your roof will buff right out at that superscrubber robowash you go to."

Sam's only response was a slight narrowing of his eyes. Al had come to know that meant the kid knew he was being teased and was lodging a protest without rising to the bait. He didn't even blush--much. He was coming along.

Taking a breath, the doctor said in an obvious effort to change the subject, "I didn't know they flew F-4s out of here."

Surprised, Al was about to retort that he hadn't known Sam would know a Phantom if it knocked on his door...when a sudden, unwelcome realization stilled him. Of course he'd know something about military jets. He idolized his older brother--his real older brother--and Tom was a SEAL.

Unexpectedly melancholy, Al was spared the need for a reply by a shifting in the small group in which they stood. A gleaming Gulfstream jet bearing a NASA tail insignia slowly taxied up the apron to stop just beyond the gate. As the turbos whined into silence, two airmen in khaki coveralls went to meet it, first chocking the wheels then aiding with the luggage as the handful of VIP passengers--including a Major General--disembarked.

Al and the other military personnel present snapped to attention, crisply saluting the two-star as he and his aide came through the gate. As the re-fueling crew moved in on the Gulfstream, the people waiting behind the chain-link fence began to stir in expectation.

It was time to get the hell out of Maryland. He'd nearly overstayed his welcome anyway.

Narrowing his eyes against the sun bouncing off the white fuselage, Al regarded the jet thoughtfully. Soon he would be on her and on his way to NASA--on his way to space. It was



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what he had always wanted. He had just taken an unexpected detour along the way. So why the odd, hollow ache in his chest?

So what if he didn't leave anything behind, didn't take anything with him that mattered. It was time to think of the future. Once in Houston...

A renewed flurry of goodbyes exchanged among the group stirred him from his thoughts. A bit uncomfortably, he realized he and Sam were now separated from them by several yards. How long had it been since he had been aware of the presence of the pensive young man beside him?

Clearing his throat, he hoisted his gear onto his good shoulder, extending his bandaged hand. Behind them, the first of the uniformed personnel were moving toward the plane's open door. "Time for me to go, kiddo. Thanks for everything."

"You're welcome," Sam answered, taking his hand.

But the kid ducked his head in what Al had come to take as a bad sign. It usually meant something personal was coming, and right now he didn't need that. He just needed to get on the plane and get on with his life before any more of his control slipped away.

Al took a step back to try to ward it off. "You take it easy," he said with a quick handshake. "And I'll send you all the scoop on my research on sex in zero-g, okay?"

"Okay." Sam released his hand and lifted his head. He still had that look about him, and Al knew his ploy hadn't worked. "I'll be at MIT after June, remember?"

"Sure," the commander agreed, though he had not considered the fact since he had not truly intended to write. "But they'll forward your mail, right?"

"Right," Sam agreed, nodding slowly.

At that, Al knew he was in for it. Hell, he just wanted to make a clean break. It had been fun, but it was time to cut and run.

"What are you doing for Christmas?"

Surprised, Al blinked. "What?"

"Christmas. I, well..." Sam shifted his feet uneasily and rubbed the back of his neck in a gesture Al hadn't seen in days. "I thought maybe--if you weren't too busy...I'll be going to Katie's. Everybody will. And...I thought maybe you'd like to come too."

"Everybody?"

"Yeah. Me. Tom. At least I hope Tom will be there. You never know with the Navy." He

shrugged hesitantly. "And my Mom. She lives there with Katie and they said...they said you'd be welcome--if you want to come."

"Umm..." It was Al's turn to lower his eyes, hiding under the brim of his hat. "I dunno, Sam. I'll have to see how things go. If I'm hip-deep in training, I won't be able to get away."

"Come on..." Sam sought his eyes, forced them up with his pleading gaze. "You can at Christmas. You'll like Tom. You two will get along great."

Christmas. Al had not given any thought to it. His plans were ordered far differently and holidays had not entered into them. Still, spending it with Sam's revered older brother sounded like one of his less pleasant choices. Why, he didn't know. Since he'd never met the guy, why should he take such a dislike to the idea?

"I'll see," he said with the same hearty assurance in his tone as when he had promised to write Tiffany. "If there's any way I can, I will, okay?"

Sam hesitated, and Al had to look away from his expression. Hell, it had worked with Tiff--but Sam knew.

All he said was, "Okay. You take care of yourself, Al."

"Sure thing, pal." The commander allowed himself a quick, almost-hug around the taller man's shoulders then turned away. "Bye, Sam."

"Bye, Al," came the reply. The quietness of it hurt the older man, though he tried not to show it as he headed for the gate.

It was time for Calavicci to be moving on. Houston--and space--were waiting and he had no extra energy to expend here. He would need every bit of strength to get through the next... what? Days? Months? Years?

Only a few stragglers were still saying farewell as he slipped through crowd. His steps were crisp and clear on the tarmac as he drew nearer to the waiting jet.

Damn. Sam had looked like a sick puppy. How the hell had he gotten into this? The kid had meant it that night when he had asked what a buddy was for.

Al stopped at the foot of the stairs. It was supposed to have been easy--a way to fill the time. It wasn't his fault the kid didn't understand.

He drew a breath and exhaled sharply. Then again, maybe he'd meant it too. This sure as

hell felt wrong.

With a spare economy of motion, he stepped forward and hoisted up his gear to the airman waiting in the open doorway. Turning crisply, he retraced his steps to Sam, who made his way nearer the gate to meet him.

"What's the matter?" the doctor called, mystified. "What'd you forget?"

Al shrugged, not answering until he was just before him. Fixing him with a cool, direct gaze, he said evenly, "We could really do it, you know."

Truly puzzled, Sam's eyes searched his face for a clue. "Do what?"

"Your time travel project." Al waved expressively. "We really could make it happen if we tried."

At a loss for words, Sam just stared open-mouthed at him.

"Well?" Al demanded. "Whatta you say?"

"We'd...have to come up with the technology to..." Sam's voice trailed off in uncertainty.

"Your brains, my charm." Al shrugged. "Piece of cake. You in?"

Sam's gaze was incredulous but elated. "You mean it? Really try?"

"I mean it," the commander answered. For once, he was certain that he did indeed 'mean it'. "It's why you're going to MIT, right?" At Sam's nod, he forged ahead. "So work your butt off. Get your part started. I'll get some seniority under my belt, meet the right folks. First thing we'll do is collaborate on that stellar measurement experiment in orbit that you told me about. Okay?"

Stunned, Sam nodded. "Okay." Then, surprising the older man, flung his arms around him in an exuberant hug. "It'll be great, Al!"

"Geez, Sam," the commander protested extricating himself hastily, and straightening his uniform in quick, mortified movements. "Cool it!"

Softening his words with a Calavicci grin, he punched the resident on the arm and swiveled on his heel. Striding back across the expanse of pavement for the third time, Al couldn't keep the bounce from his step. Houston, here he came.

His expression neutral, as if nothing untoward had transpired, he boarded the jet.

Stowing his things, he took his seat, belted in, and found himself smiling. Now it was okay to be going, now that he was leaving something behind.

There was a soft thump as the door closed and shortly thereafter the plane began to taxi away. Only then did he turn to look for Sam, standing with the other families behind the chain-link fence.

Knowing full well that at the increasing distance between them the odds that he would be seen were astronomical, he lifted a hand in a wave. Somehow, he was not surprised when it was returned.

Still smiling faintly, he relaxed against his seat and lowered his hand slowly. He had no idea when he'd next see Sam, but he knew that he would.

He definitely would.

A yawn took him unawares and he made an unsuccessful attempt to cover it. Maybe he'd sleep for a while--a long while. The prospect no longer seemed as unpleasant as it had for the past few days.

Settling back in the seat, he closed his eyes. Cradling his chin on his bandaged hand, he was asleep before the plane left the ground, carrying him from the small figure at the gate that did not turn away until the jet was a distant dot in the sky. Still, somehow, a part of him knew he was there and that it was all okay.

Sleep, and then NASA, and then God alone knew what he and the kid could do.

CHAPTER THREE

"Time And Tide"

Some of my best Christmas memories involve mistletoe. I've never done with that stringing-cranberries-and-popcorn, relatives-coming-for-dinner-and-eggnog, sledding-on-Grandpa's-farm type of thing.

Not even when Beth and I were together. See, most Christmas holidays either she or I or both were on duty at least part of the time. And when we were free, we stayed home anyhow--just the two of us--rather than fly all the way to Chicago where her folks once lived. I think she was a little disappointed the first year, until that Christmas Eve under the plastic tree when we...

But that involves mistletoe too.

It's good stuff, this mistletoe. Used right, it can get you a lot of the living, breathing presents...the kind that keep on giving well into the New Year and beyond. See, no woman in her right mind slaps your face for a little bodily contact under the mistletoe. Trust me, I know. I've tried it out from Vegas to the Bahamas to Hong Kong. It works--and you can get the stuff just about anywhere. Well, anywhere civilized, that is.

Last Christmas, it got me a Farrah Fawcett look-a-like named Brandy, in front of a crackling fire at the Timberline Lodge. True, it was all a little belated--on account of the fact I was doing duty up on SKYLAB 'til February--but the two whole days of ho-ho-hoing, Brandy, and some hot spiced rum made it a great 'Christmas'. All for the sake of the forgotten sprig of green still hanging over the doorway at Mane Tamer's Unisex Hair Salon. As Sam would say--it boggles the mind.

Sam. Now there's a guy who could use a few lessons in the proper use of Christmas greenery. Last time I saw him was June last



year, when I took a four-day R&R from training and dropped by MIT his first week there after finishing up at Bethesda. Geez, he was like a kid in a candy shop. There was this brunette in the bookstore who was crazy for him...and he never even knew it!

Now it's Christmas again, and he's still after me to come to his sister's for the holidays. Christmas...I dunno. All that family stuff and good cheer. Knowing Sam, it'll be just like 'The Waltons'!

After that little misunderstanding with Oola today--about Sarah and the Best Western--I guess we won't be going to Bimini. Tomorrow's Christmas Day, but I've still got the mistletoe in my pocket and who knows what will turn up.

There is a military hop to Hawaii in a few hours--a Walton's Christmas in Hawaii, geez!

Might be fun, though. At least it'd be something new and totally different to add to my list of exotic Christmas pasts. And I could see what Sam cooked up this semester...maybe kick back a little from all this space training.

Could be all right, I suppose. I wouldn't have to stay if it was too bad. And there's always the mistletoe, if things get really boring.

D'you suppose they drink spiked eggnog in Hawaii?

* * *

Christmas in Hawaii was nothing like Christmas in Indiana, Sam thought as he looked out the window of Katie's bungalow. Instead of snow covered fields and sleigh bells ringing, there was a sun kissed beach with the roar of the surf in the background. Although Sam didn't miss the minus 15 degrees temperature, Christmas just wasn't the same without snow. With a sigh, he turned away from the window.

Looking over at his family gathered in the living room, he smiled. It was good to see them all again. Katie was blooming with the mid-months of her first pregnancy. His mother--her hair now mostly gray--bustling about, making sure everyone's cups were full with eggnog or her special grape juice. How she managed to get that in Hawaii, Sam couldn't fathom. His brother, standing next to his fiancée by a fake fireplace, laughed at one of Katie's second husband, Jim's, jokes.

God, it was good seeing Tom. The year before his brother had gotten last minute orders and

hadn't made it to Katie's for the holidays after all. That made this year all that more special. He was afraid that he might have cracked one of his ribs when he hugged him at the airport--the first time he had seen his older brother in two years.

Ever since that horrible nightmare--when Al had spent the night at his apartment--he'd had an awful feeling that Tom wasn't really alive, but that he had died in Vietnam.

Sam suppressed a shudder. The dream had been so terrifying, so vivid...so real. He'd glossed over it at the time for Al's sake, but it had haunted him ever since.

Until now. Until he was actually able to see and touch his big brother in the flesh. Even so, his eyes kept drifting over to where he stood, as if some part of his subconscious hadn't yet got the message that Tom was indeed alive.

As if sensing he was under such close scrutiny, Tom looked over and caught him staring. He smiled his Big Brother Grin, then crossed the room to join him, unintentionally towing Katie and the others in his wake.

"So, Little Brother," Tom said, putting his hand on Sam's shoulder and giving it a quick squeeze, "Katie's settled down with one on the way, I'm getting married in the spring, when are you going to tie the knot?"

Sam knew he was blushing and hated it. "First, I have to find someone to marry, Tom."

Katie smiled and took up the teasing. "I hear Lisa Parson's still available. From what I remember you all had a thing going in high school."

The blush deepened. "Katie," Sam warned. "That was years ago. I still have a lot of studying left to do. I don't have time for girls. I keep telling Al that."

"Speaking of Al," his mother interrupted as she joined the group with her ever-ready pitcher of grape juice, "when are we going to meet this friend of yours? I thought you invited him to come again this year."

"I did," Sam admitted, relieving her of the heavy pitcher and taking over as Official Glass Refiller. "He couldn't make it last year, because he was in space. But he promised me, that if at all possible, he'd make it this year. I know it's 10 a.m. on Christmas Day but I'm still hoping he'll show up." He smiled fondly. "I never know with Al--he just lands out of the blue."

Katie laughed. "I'm beginning to think he's just a figment of your imagination, like that imaginary friend you had when you were a kid."

"Sam always did have a strong imagination," Tom said.

"Now, children, you haven't changed a bit. Quit picking on your brother. If Sam says there's an Al, then there is an Al."

"Thanks, Mom," Sam said, kissing her on the cheek. He put the pitcher on the table nearby.

"I'm just so happy to have you all here this year. It's the first time we were all in the same place since your father's funeral. I do wish he could be here to see you all. He'd be so proud. Tom, a Naval officer. Sam, a doctor. Katie about to have his first grandchild." Her eyes began to mist. "I love you all so much."

Sam put his arms around her. "We love you too, Mom." Tom and Katie joined him in hugging their mother. "And we miss Dad, too."

She hugged her three children then, dabbing her eyes with her apron, she said, "Why don't we sing some carols? Sam, will you play?" She pointed at the piano in the corner.

Knowing his mother needed some distraction from her grief, Sam agreed and began playing a lively 'Jingle Bells', followed by 'Silent Night' and 'The Twelve Days Of Christmas'. At her insistence, Sam was singing a solo of 'O Holy Night' when the doorbell rang. Katie left to answer it, while Sam sang on.

Minutes later--as he held the chords at the end of the song--Sam looked up from the piano to see a familiar figure, attired in full Naval dress whites and with a small duffle bag by his feet, watching from across the room with a wistful look on his face.

"Al!" Sam's face lit up. "You made it!" He got up from the piano and went over to his friend. Grabbing him in a half-hug, Sam led him to where his mother was sitting in an antique rocker transplanted from the farm in Indiana. "Mom, I want you to meet Albert Calavicci. Al, this is my mother."

Tucking his hat under his arm, Al shook the older woman's hand. "A pleasure to meet you Mrs. Beckett."

"Please call me, Thelma. Every time someone calls me Mrs. Beckett, I look around for Grandma Beckett, God rest her soul."

"As long as you'll call me Al." He smiled, then flicked his head in Sam's direction. "You have quite a son here, Thelma."

"And this," Sam interrupted before they could

embarrass him any further, steering Al away, "is my brother, Tom...and his fiancée, Melinda. Tom's a lieutenant commander in the SEALs."

Al nodded in greeting. "Commander."

"Sir," Tom replied formally.

Sam gave Al a double-take--noting the three broad stripes on his shoulders for the first time. "You got promoted! And you didn't tell me?"

Al shrugged innocently. "Well...it only just happened." He grinned mischievously. "And I've been real busy celebrating."

"I can imagine," Sam said under his breath.

Tom was regarding Al closely. "We haven't met before, have we?"

Surprised, the pilot cast another look at him. "No, I don't think so."

Slowly, Tom shook his head. "I guess not. I would have remembered meeting Al Calavicci, as much as Sam talks about you, but..." He frowned slightly. "...you look familiar to me."

At the break in the conversation, Sam moved over to his sister's side, drawing Al with him. "And this is my sister, Katie and her husband, Jim. They own this house." Sam turned to her with a twinkle in his eye. "Katie, this is my imaginary friend, Al."

Now it was Katie's turn to blush. Sam grinned and explained at Al's baffled look.

"They've heard so much about you, but since they hadn't had the chance to actually meet you, they were beginning to believe I made you up."

"It's nice to meet you Katie, and I can assure you, I am real. Sam's told me a lot about you, too."

"Oh, really?" Katie asked, looking at her brother. From her expression, Sam knew he was in for it now. "Did he tell you about the time when he pushed me off the picnic table and broke my arm?"

"Sam, you didn't?" Al gasped as if scandalized.

"It wasn't like that!" Sam protested. He dropped his eyes, fearing what other stories Katie might tell, and muttered, "It was an accident."

"Or when he promised I could have Tom's room...then reneged on me."

"I never told you that you could have Tom's room!" Sam argued. "Dad said I could have it until I went to college!"

"Or the time," Katie went on, determined to get her vengeance in, "when Lisa Parsons asked him to the dance and he ran away."

Sam flushed scarlet as she snickered, then looked at his feet again.

"Sounds like you," Al muttered, eyebrows raised knowingly.

Tom snapped his fingers. "I remember that. It was that weird Thanksgiving weekend...back in '69. I'd just come home from BUDS training before shipping out to Vietnam, and Sam kept spouting all this nonsense about knowing the future."

Katie frowned as if the memory still troubled her. "He kept saying you were going to die over there. And he played 'Imagine', by John Lennon while we were sitting on the porch. It really spooked me."

"'Imagine'?" Al spoke up. "But didn't that come out in...?"

"I don't remember any of this," Sam interrupted, shaking his head. "All I remember about that holiday is coming home from school on Tuesday...and the next thing I knew I was being hugged by Lisa Parsons at the basketball game against Bentleyville!"

Thelma Beckett got to her feet. "What terrible hosts we are. We sit here talking about the past, when we have a guest. Somebody take Al's hat and get him a drink. I'll see about dinner."

* * *

Conversation flowed easily during the meal. Sam's mother kept plates filled and made sure Al and Melinda were included in the discussions. She asked about Al's work, and the astronaut enthralled his listeners with descriptions of a cloud-veiled blue Earth, as seen from the never-ending blackness of space. Al, in turn, asked Sam about MIT, and the physicist disclosed his plans to add an ancient language doctorate to his studies.

After dinner Sam and Al helped the women take the plates to the kitchen to wash, but his mother chased them off. "You men go on in there and relax. Anyway, we women want to gossip. You'll just get in the way."

Sam lead the way back into the living room where Tom and Jim were talking quietly.

Al collapsed into the rocking chair and moaned, one hand on his belly. "I'm stuffed. I don't think I've eaten that much food since--" He cut himself off suddenly. "--since before I was in 'Nam."

Tom turned. "You flew missions in 'Nam?"

"Yeah," Al said, his face closing in the way it always did when he spoke of those years. "Two tours. Well, actually one and a half. I got shot down before I finished the second."

Shooting Al a concerned look, Sam interrupted in an effort to change the subject. "You look better than the last time I saw you. You've gained some weight. How's the arm?"

Al rotated his shoulder. "Almost good as new, Doc. I've been exercising and eating well. The astronaut training program makes sure of that. They're real tough on us."

"So when do you go up again?" Tom asked.

"Well--unofficially--I think there's a good chance I'll be going up in July...with the Russians." He grinned at Sam and winked at Tom. "Maybe I'll get lucky and they'll send up a female cosmonaut. I've always wanted to find out what it's like...doin' it in zero-g."

Tom and Jim laughed, and Sam sent an exasperated look at his friend. "If they know you're coming, they'll lock up all their women for sure!"

"Sam, is that any way to talk to your best friend?" Tom asked, scolding his brother, then turned to Al. "Don't mind him, he's a prude. Always has been. Too busy with his nose in a book to pay any attention to girls."

"Tom," Sam said plaintively, as if to ask 'first Katie, now you?'

Tom grinned and gave him a hug. "Okay, Little Brother. I'll stop picking on you."

Sam shook his head. "I sure hope Melinda can straighten you out when you two get married."

"You're getting married?" Al asked, interested.

"Yeah," Tom agreed. "Next month."

Al's eyes brightened. "Sounds to me like a good excuse to throw a bachelor party." His gaze shifted to Jim. "Got any good places around here to let off a little steam?"

"There's the Playboy Club," Jim answered. "I haven't been there since Katie and I got married, but I hear it's still open."

Before the conversation could go any further, Sam cut in. "How about some basketball? A couple of good games and you won't be thinking of partying."

"I dunno," Al disagreed with a shake of his head. "I can always handle a good party. What d'you say, Tom? One last night of freedom, out with the guys, before you tie the knot?"

"Sounds tempting," Tom said, casting a

glance at Sam. "But maybe we ought to take Sam up on his offer of roundball first. Wouldn't be Christmas without shooting a few hoops." He threw a punch at Sam's arm. "And we don't even have to shovel the snow from in front of the barn first."

"Right," Sam agreed, with a smile at the memories. "It wouldn't be fair for you and I to be on the same side. So, I'll take Al."

"Okay," Tom agreed. "It'll be like old times, you and I going head to head."

"Sounds good to me," Jim said agreeably. "Just go easy on me. I haven't played much basketball. The only reason the hoop's on the garage is because it was there when we moved here." He got to his feet. "I'll go get the ball and meet you guys out there."

"If I'm going to play basketball," Al said, standing and gesturing at his uniform, "I'm gonna need to change my clothes."

"Oh, yeah," Sam said. "I'll show you upstairs, to a room where you can change." He began to move toward the door. "Then we'll give these guys a good game."

The commander grinned. "You bet."

Tom gave Sam an affectionate push as they moved toward the door. "D'you remember anything I taught you?"

"Everything," Sam said, answering in kind. He gave his brother a mock scowl. "And more. You're going to pay for all those times you bounced the ball off my head."

"Whoa, Little Brother," Tom said with a laugh. "I'm shakin' in my boots."

"You should be," Sam shot back as they reached the hallway. "Between us, Al and I are gonna wipe up the driveway with you."

Laughing, Tom turned and headed in the direction of the front door. "We'll see about that. I hear Jim's got a mean hook shot."

When his brother was out of ear shot, Sam turned to Al, who was coming up behind him. "You know anything about basketball?" he asked under his breath.

"Nope," answered the Naval officer, tucking his hands in his pockets and sauntering on by. "Not a thing. All I know is, it's four points if you make a basket, right?"

Taking a breath, Sam began to answer. Then, realizing he was being teased, he scowled at the commander's back as he headed up the stairs before him.

Four points. Yeah, right. Maybe he ought to ask Tom for a handicap.

* * *

The game was cutthroat and tough. In the beginning, the talk of challenge had been in fun, and it never got out of hand. But once into the game, Sam felt the adrenalin take over, and it seemed to do the same for the other three men.

Tom played all out, pushing Jim as he had once pushed Sam. The game was close, and hard fought, but in the end, they were no match for Sam and Al.

It was Sam who made the final point. Driving in fast for a lay up, he shot past his older brother with a determination that left Tom sprawled in the sun-warmed asphalt of the driveway.

Finding the breath for a whoop of victory, Sam exchanged a high-five with Al. Then he turned to see his brother getting to his feet.

"You okay?" he asked, bending down to put out a hand.

"Don't help me," Tom said, playfully knocking the hand away. "I'm down but I'm not out." Groaning, he pushed himself all the way to his feet. "Not quite, anyway."

Jim, however, was not so macho. Falling back against the garage, he held his hand to his chest. "I have got to listen more to Katie about dieting or this is going to kill me!"

"Dieting," Sam said, wiping the sweat from his face. "Katie's been on a diet since she was sixteen--and she's never needed to be."

Jim groaned melodramatically. "She's already cut me off the sweet deserts she used to feed me. She hasn't made German chocolate cake in months!"

"Life without deserts!" Al exclaimed, rotating his bad shoulder as if it hurt him. "If you ask me, that's grounds for divorce!"

"Well..." Jim rolled his head to one side to meet Al's eyes with a grin. "...she does keep me in sweets of another kind, if you know what I mean."

"Oh well, that's all right then," Al agreed, returning the grin. "As long as you've got the most important thing. You can always sneak out for cake."

Shaking his head, Sam drew a deep breath in order to have wind enough to speak. "You guys," he protested, "is sex all you ever think about?"

"Yes," all three men chorused together.

Pretending disgust, Sam snorted. "You're hopeless, all three of you." Casting a look

toward the kitchen, he said, "You better hope Katie didn't hear you or there will be no supper for any of us."

"Supper!" Jim exclaimed. "I haven't had my afternoon snack yet. Do you suppose there's any pie left?"

"Pie?" Al, who had bent over, hands on his knees to catch his breath, lifted his head in interest.

"So much for diets," Sam said with a laugh. Starting forward, he headed for the back steps. On his way past Al, he caught his shoulder with one hand to turn him. "Come on, let's go see what we can find."

Unexpectedly, the older man straightened with a small sound as if in pain, and winced.

Surprised, Sam stopped instantly. "You okay?"

"Yeah," the commander assured him, all nonchalance and grin as if the sound had never escaped him. "Just a little twinge from my Cham Hoi Hilton days."

"I thought you said your shoulder was better," Sam persisted.

"It is," Al insisted, looking as if he just wanted to put the whole thing behind him. "I've just been pushing it a little lately. It's fine."

Tom had come to stand behind Sam's shoulder. "Cham Hoi," he repeated slowly, lost in memory. "Near Mai Choy, in the north?"

Al glanced at him but said nothing.

"Operation Lazarus," Tom murmured to himself. "That's near where we lost Maggie Dawson." His gaze zeroed in on the ex-POW. "You..."

Watching Al's face, and the way it closed at his brother's words, Sam turned to Tom to forestall him. But it was too late to stop his brother, whose own expression was eloquent in a different way.

Abruptly, Sam felt sick. Whatever was coming, it wasn't going to be good.

"Maggie's Pulitzer," Tom continued. "That picture." His eyes were wide with shock...and pain. "That was you! You were...one of the POWs I was sent in to liberate." He stepped out from behind Sam to face Al directly. "And our mission failed. Al..." He swallowed hard and shrugged as if he knew the words were inadequate. "I am so sorry!"

Stunned, Sam looked from one man to another. Al's eyes were distant, as if he saw not Tom, but that distant time when his pain and captivity had been engraved on film for all the

world to see.

The moment stretched incredibly long, the four of them standing in the warm Hawaiian sunshine. Frozen, Sam wondered desperately what he could say to make it better and came up with nothing. This was something Al and Tom had to deal with, and he could only hope it would work out for the best--for both of them.

Finally, Al blinked, and seemed to focus on Tom. "Hey," he said with an obvious attempt to return to the present. "That happened a long time ago. Forget it."

"But--"

"But nothing." Al frowned a bit. "That's the way it is. Sometimes even the best planned missions fail. You did the best you could, for me and that photographer. We accept that and go on." He shrugged, a slight movement of the shoulder that still occasionally caused him pain. "I don't blame anybody," he said, making an attempt at a grin. "And neither should you. Just forget it, Tom. Unless..."

As the commander's tone shifted to teasing, Sam began to breathe easily again. It was going to be okay. It was really going to be okay.

"Unh-oh," he warned his older brother, trying to aid Al in his attempt to lighten the mood. He had a feeling that what happened next was going to be critical as to whether the two men took a step beyond this. "When he gets that look in his eye, you'd better hit the dirt."

Tom drew a deep breath, obviously struggling to shift gears as well. "Unless what?" he asked, hedging a smile and following Sam's lead.

"Unless you want to take me up on that bachelor party idea," Al finished with a grin. "Christmas with 'The Waltons' is fine...if you throw in a little B&B."

"B&B?" Sam repeated, mystified, and still playing his role of mediator.

"Booze & Broads, Little Brother," Tom said with a grin, though his eyes were still on Al. "It's Navy slang. Just promise you're not going to tell Mom."

"Is that a yes?" Al challenged, still grinning.

"Yes," Tom answered. He flung an arm about his younger brother's shoulder. "And we'll let Sam in on the secrets of a real party."

"Real party," Sam repeated skeptically, lifting an eyebrow at Al. "This isn't going to be another one of those 'learning experiences' like the disco, is it?"

"Disco?" Tom asked, interested.

"Yeah," Al answered with a nod at Tom. "He didn't do too well with that one, but he shows promise."

Stepping forward, he clapped a hand on Sam's shoulder, guiding them all toward the back steps.

"You see, Sam," the commander continued earnestly, as Tom listened, grinning. "It's all in the attitude..." He gestured at Tom. "...like I'm sure your big brother here has told you."

"Attitude," Tom repeated. "And delivery. Delivery is very important."

"Oh, absolutely," Al agreed. "It's..."

Letting them guide him back toward the house, Sam cast one glance back at Jim. His brother-in-law, basketball still tucked under one arm, smiled and gave him a thumbs up signal.

Sharing a slight nod with him, Sam turned his attention back to what his two mentors were telling him. If he was to be the bridge that spanned the rift between the two men, so be it. Both of them were so important to him that it was a small price to pay.

But...it looked like there was no way he was going to get out of going to this bachelor party.

* * *

Sam's head was killing him. There was a faint, muffled roar in his ears that mimicked the distant sound of the surf. But this roar was the aftermath of the impromptu bachelor party...à la Calavicci. Too much smoke, noise, and one--or three--too many beers pushed on him by the partying pilot had combined to produce a headache that made it impossible to sleep.

Sighing, Sam pushed aside the covers and sat up on the makeshift cot tucked into a corner of Katie's screened-in porch. Maybe he could find some aspirin in the kitchen. Surely everyone was asleep again after the entrance the four of them had made--Al, Tom and Jim, stumbling over each other. In their slightly drunken efforts to get up the stairs into the house in the dark, they found it hysterically funny, when he--while trying to get them to be quiet--was the one to fall into Katie's potted palm.

Amusement, however, would be the last thing on his mind come morning, when he'd no doubt hear from Katie about the damage to her beloved plant. But it wasn't his fault that Al had insisted on not turning on the lights! He tried

to shoot down the memory of a snickering Tom and Jim, as Al roughly hoisted him from the hapless greenery.

Taking a deep breath, Sam stood. The porch was pleasant enough, with moonlight spilling through the woven shades that kept the night breeze from him, but he was never going to get to sleep until his head quit vibrating with the merciless echo of too much party.

Moving carefully in the faint light, he pulled on his jeans that he'd left in a heap by the cot. With exaggerated care--for he didn't want to awaken the household again--he pulled open the door leading into the living room. The couch Al had claimed for his bed was lost in deep shadows, and Sam gave it a wide berth to avoid waking the commander.

Feeling his way into the kitchen, he turned on the small light over the counter and, on a hunch, checked the cabinet to the right of the sink. The aspirin was there, nestled in the same lover left corner as it had occupied in Indiana. Smiling, Sam helped himself. Family habits die hard--he had kept it in the same place in his apartment in Maryland.

Swallowing two tablets with water, returning the bottle to the cabinet and putting the glass into the sink, he considered going back to bed. The pulse of his headache, mirroring the memory of the loud, throbbing music from the club, discouraged him. What he needed was some fresh air while the medicine had time to work.

Easing open the back door which led to the small backyard, Sam let himself out into the night. Drawing a deep breath, he savored the scents that were so pleasant yet so alien to Christmas, as he took a few steps into the green grass.

In the silver sheen of moonlight, he could just make out the silhouette of the basketball hoop over the garage doors, and had to smile. This Christmas had been his most enjoyable one in years. Although there were none of the sleigh rides or snowball fights of Christmas pasts, numerous basketball games and the feast on Christmas Day had made it memorable in its own way...to say the least.

Basketball. What was it with Tom anyway? Was he trying to regain his youth, or what? He and Al had trounced all over Tom and Jim--who might be a good husband for Katie but was by no means a basketball player. Not even Tom's skill could compensate against the superior team of Beckett and Calavicci. Perhaps it was just his

Big Brother Complex coming out.

The distant, muted sound of the surf reached Sam's ears in the nocturnal stillness...so peaceful, and so sudden a reminder of the first time he'd heard the ocean against the beach at night. He'd been just a kid then, when his father had packed the five of them into the family station wagon for a tortuous cross country trip to California. It had certainly been a vacation to remember!

His father, how he missed him--his sharp wit, his stubbornness, his uncompromising fairness, his ready love.

Sam smiled wistfully. His mother was holding up pretty well, he thought. Maybe it was the new baby on the way, or maybe time was healing the wounds of her grief.

Tomorrow was his last day of vacation. Although he was anxious to finish his doctorate in quantum physics, and work on the string theory that he and Professor LoNigro had been polishing during the summer, Sam hated to leave his family. He so rarely got to see them these days--his studies kept him busy.

Too busy.

Al was also leaving tomorrow. He had to get back to NASA and his training for his upcoming mission. It had been good seeing him again...and getting the chance to finally introduce him to his family. Al had seemed to fit right in. His mom seemed to really like him...but maybe she'd change her mind if she learned of tonight's escapades...

Warding off a groan, Sam put a hand to his throbbing head. Why, oh why, had he let that smooth-talking adrenalin junkie talk him into going?

Tom and Al had seemed to hit it off fine, after the unsettling revelations of the afternoon. It had been fun, Sam admitted reluctantly. In a way, it had been like having two older brothers, and he had enjoyed the evening.

But not nearly as much as Al seemed to enjoy himself. The commander spent the whole time--between ordering drinks and flirting with the waitresses dressed up like Playboy Bunnies--making remarks that were sure to cause an Indiana farm boy to blush. Sam could have cheerfully strangled him, but since his friend was having so much fun, he didn't have the heart.

Thinking about it now, Sam ruefully reflected that maybe he should have...

"Couldn't sleep, huh?"

Badly startled, Sam spun to see Al sitting on the top step, arms resting lightly on the knees of his pajamas, regarding him intently. He must have walked right past the commander in the dark, without sensing his presence.

"Geez, Al! Do you always have to do that?"

"Do what?" the astronaut asked innocently, picking up the cigar and lighter which rested beside him. Totally relaxed, he lit it and sent a puff of smoke into the night air with obvious contentment. Dressed in his maroon silk pajamas, he was an incongruous sight to behold, seated on the moonlit back stair.

Momentarily forgetting his headache, Sam shook his head, groaned at the agony, then settled on the lower step. "I'm glad you made it this year, Al."

Drawing on the tobacco, the pilot made a sound of agreement. "Me too." He puffed thoughtfully a few moments on the cigar, then continued. "You have a nice family, Sam. Real nice."

"Thanks," the physicist said, leaning back on his elbows, which he rested on the step above him. "I think they're pretty great. I told you you'd like them."

Al tapped cigar ash into the grass. "Katie's great, putting up with me on top of all of you guys." His eyes twinkled in the moonlight. "Though I don't know what she's gonna say when she sees her plant in the morning."

"Don't remind me," Sam groaned. "She'll let me have it, and nobody can read the Riot Act like Katie, believe me. I think it was her way of protecting herself against the bossiness of two older brothers."

Unexpectedly, Al looked away. "That's what older brothers are supposed to do--look out for their kid sisters." His smile was oddly melancholy. "Even if sometimes they don't like it."

"And how would you know about little..." Turning, he stopped himself, seeing the pilot's expression even though the man's head was lowered. Instantly, Sam wished he could recall the words. Uncertainly, he tried again. "Are you...saying you have a younger sister?"

"Yeah," Al answered. "Trudy. It's odd, sometimes it's like she never existed, and other times, I miss her like I just lost her yesterday."

"Lost her?"

"Um-hmm." Al's expression was distant. "She

was...she had Down's Syndrome." His eyes cut to Sam as if daring him to make something of it. "But she was still great. Most lovable little kid you ever saw...even to people who didn't deserve it."

"I bet she was," Sam said softly. "She was your little sister, after all."

"Damn straight," Al growled, but his glance at his friend seemed to hold a hint of gratitude. "Trudy was all right."

"What happened to her?" Sam answered, wanting to know, but uncertain whether he should delve into this topic Al had never before broached. He knew his friend's mother had abandoned the family. Al had spent years in an orphanage while his father was out of the country. Trudy, however was a surprise.

"She died in an institution," the astronaut replied quietly. "Pneumonia, they said, when I went to get her."

"When you went to get her?"

"When I was old enough, when I could take care of us both." Al drew a deep breath that was suspiciously shaky. "How could someone die of pneumonia in 1953?"

"Al..."

Abruptly, the older man waved it away. "It was a long time ago."

"But you still miss her," Sam pointed out.

"Yeah," Al agreed. "I still miss her."

After a brief, companionable silence, Sam shot a glance at his friend. Maybe it was time to lighten the conversation a little. "I'll give you Big Brother Rights to Katie if you tell her you were the one who bent her potted palm."

"No dice, pal," Al shot back, having obviously regained his composure. "You're on your own with that one. I'm not takin' your family fire for you!"

"Some buddy," Sam snorted, tilting back his head to regard the stars. "Just wait until the potted palm is on the other foot."

Long moments passed in an easy silence. Al sat and smoked as Sam regarded the starry heavens overhead.

Finally, the astronaut broke the quiet. "You know, Sam, I've been thinking."

Glancing back over his shoulder, Sam began to answer teasingly. But the pilot's manner gave him pause. Hesitating, he watched his friend exhale, then study the dissipating smoke. He was cradling his cigar in a way that Sam had come to associate with deep thought.

"What is it?" the physicist asked curiously,

watching the astronaut watch the tendril of smoke vanish into the moonlight.

Al shrugged. His answer, when it came, was quiet and slow. "I've been thinking about this time travel theory of yours."

"So have I," Sam began, "I think the researching of the--"

Interrupting him with a gesture, Al shook his head. "No, not the nuts and bolts stuff. More like the...the metaphysical aspects of it."

"Metaphysical?" Sam scoffed, thinking he had been teased. "Since when have you been into metaphysics?"

"Hey," Al retorted with a wounded expression, "I'm as capable of deep thoughts as the next guy."

"Why?" Sam asked with an amused grin. "Are you seducing some graduate student majoring in Zen? What, has she got you contemplating Time and Fate and--"

"I've been thinking," Al interrupted, ignoring the dig, "about what Katie said about you singing 'Imagine' to her over that Thanksgiving weekend in '69."

Embarrassed, Sam glanced down. "Oh, that."

"Yeah, that. What was it all about anyway?"

"I dunno." Sam's head remained lowered. Reaching down, he ran his fingers through the cool grass, searching for a way to avoid the other man's eyes. "That was a really weird weekend. As far as I can remember, none of that stuff ever happened."

Locating a small stick in the grass, the young physicist picked it up and began breaking it into small, telling pieces. His companion sat in silence, waiting for him to continue.

"I guess it's sort of a family joke. I mean, they said I shot the winning basket against Bentleyville...and I can't even remember playing in the game! I guess I was over-excited about it, and Tom coming home and stuff... Personally, I think they made it all up just to tease me. Mom said it's because I watched too much 'Time Patrol' as a kid--got time travel on the brain."

There was a short silence, which ended abruptly with the sharp retort of the stick breaking under Sam's restless fingers.

"Your family doesn't seem like the kind of folks who'd make up something like that to embarrass you in front of strangers."

"You're not a stranger," Sam insisted, still intent on the twig in his hands. "I talk about you all the time. I guess they figure they know

you."

There was another long pause, in which Sam studied his stick, and Al the burning tip of his cigar. When the latter finally spoke, his voice was thoughtful and slow.

"What if...you did it?" Al asked quietly.

Hesitantly, Sam's fingers relaxed in their restless movement. "Did what?"

"You know...traveled in time."

"Oh, come on." Sam tossed the now match-sized wood away and glanced back at his friend. "You've had way too much to drink, if you're going to start believing Katie's stories. She's just pulling your leg...at my expense."

"Maybe," Al agreed quietly. His eyes shifted from the tip of his cigar, to Sam's. "Maybe not."

Recognizing Al's seriousness and the implications he was suggesting, Sam stopped the contemplative frown from creeping across his brow. Al had just had too much party, and the discussion was just getting out of hand. The combination of excess booze and the lateness of the hour, had a way of doing that to even the most rational of conversations.

With a sound of humiliated disgust, Sam clambered to his feet and brushed off his pants. "What is this? The 'Twilight Zone'?"

"What if," Al repeated, completely unperturbed, "at some stage in the future, we build all the stuff and it really works? I mean, face it, pal..." He gestured with his cigar, leaving a glowing arc in the darkness. "...that's why we've been talking about all this... 'cause we believe it's gonna work. Otherwise, what's the point?"

Eyes glinting eagerly at the idea, Al sat forward on the top step--an action which drew another frown from Sam.

"What if we did it," Al persisted, "and it works, and--the clincher--you traveled home to 1969?"

Sam regarded his friend in disbelief. "No," he said with a firm shake of his head. He paced away, then swivelled to face the commander as a new thought occurred to him. He gestured expansively. "I mean, there certainly weren't two of me that weekend--that I think I would've remembered!"

"Well, you don't remember anything else about the weekend," Al pointed out reasonably. "What if you changed history and you don't even know it?"

"That's not the way it's supposed to work."

Al shrugged expressively. "Sometimes things don't work out exactly the way they're supposed to. Hell, even the best laid plans can go a little...ca-ca." The astronaut puffed on his cigar, eyes narrowed in nostalgia. "Like the time, when I was fifteen and took Myra Boychek into the cloakroom and--"

"Al..."

"--and Sister Margaret dragged me out by my ear. I had to sneak Myra all the way over to that creepy haunted house...just to go bump in the night."

Snorting in disgust, Sam paced back to where Al sat thoughtfully savoring his cigar. "Give me a break, Al, Doc Berger was right. I was just stressed out because Tom was leaving for 'Nam."

"Yeah," Al agreed, reluctantly. "I guess. But it was kind of neat to think about it."

"Neat," Sam repeated in somewhat appeased disgust. "Doesn't seem 'neat' to me. It's just ...downright embarrassing."

"Still..." Al rubbed his thumb along his chin as if still lost in thought. "...I've been sitting out here thinking. What if someone went back in time and accidentally changed something. Would there be more than one timeline?"

"More than one timeline?" Sam repeated in surprise. "How could that be? If that were the case, the string theory wouldn't work. And then," he added to drive his point home, still disconcerted by Al's earlier speculation, "we can't have done it."

"Okay, okay," the astronaut agreed with an amiable wave of his hand. "Forget that. But..." He lifted an eyebrow at Sam. "...I've come up with this alternative timeline theory. Wanna hear it?"

For a moment, Sam regarded his friend skeptically. "Is this the lead in to some sleazy joke?"

"Sam," Al protested. "Get your mind out of the gutter! Do you want to hear my theory on not?"

Curiosity won over caution, and Sam re-seated himself on the lower step. "Okay, yeah, I want to hear it. But if this is another of your crazy jokes..."

"No," Al assured him. "It's no joke. Now," he began, leaning forward with his forearms on his knees, "it occurred to me...what if Time is like a living thing--a sort of cosmic ecosystem."

"What?" Sam asked, truly taken by surprise.

"An ecosystem?!"

"Sure," Al persisted, "you know, like the ocean, the air, the land, and the way that all of them fit together, only on a more..." He paused as if searching for a new descriptive word but couldn't come up with one. "...cosmic scale."

Sam regarded him, curiosity truly piqued now. "Interesting idea. What made you think of that?"

"I've seen this planet from up there, Sam," the pilot's said, his gaze turned upward to the stars the physicist had regarded earlier. "From orbit, you see how precious the Earth is. You see how fragile it is...and yet how resilient. It's always shifting, always changing, trying to re-balance when man dumps oil into the water or fluorocarbons into the air."

He gestured with his nearly spent cigar. "One part affects another, and it all heals itself, if man doesn't shove it too far out of whack--like we just might do."

Blinking, he seemed to bring himself back to his point. "What if Time's like that? And we're just too close to it--too much a part of it to stand back and see it? What if, when you travel through time and alter it, it has to somehow bring itself back to status quo?"

Considering, Sam regarded him. "Like that classic science fiction short story? Where the time traveler goes back to prehistoric days, steps on a butterfly, and destroys his own time? You're saying that won't happen...because Time would take the change and..." He shrugged, searching as Al had for the right word. "...fix it."

Slowly, Al nodded. "But it would be done in small increments, little changes in little ways, not in one big blowout. That's the way living systems work. And then the part you changed would look sort of like...like a web. Until it..." The commander made a smoothing motion with his hands. "...all came back together again."

"Then," Sam mused, fascinated by the idea. "It would still be one line...one string after all, with the point of change splintering Time into a tiny maze of lines for a short interval."

"Yeah," the commander agreed, satisfied that he was understood. "And right now we could be sitting here on one of the finer lines of the web, talking about it. It'd be sorta like a sub-timeline. How can we be sure that this..." He gestured back and forth between them.

"...this conversation even took place in that other timeline?" He frowned, resting an elbow on his knee, and scratched his ear. "Or this one. Geez, how do we even know what timeline we're in...?"

"Wow," Sam said, eyeing his friend with a teasing but impressed grin. "I didn't know you had that in you."

"Hey," Al shrugged in a great show of nonchalance. "I can sometimes be brilliant... especially after a night of heavy drinking blurs my resistance to it."

Shaking his head, Sam snorted as he was meant to, but his thoughts were still on what Al said. "You know," he said. "You just may have a point. We're going to have to be really careful not to inadvertently effect anything--not the smallest thing in the past."

"Right," Al agreed. "We already knew that. But this opens up a whole new can of worms. Think about it. What if you or someone else does change history...by accident or design, for better or worse, in a big way or small? Will that person even know it? I mean, what'll they remember when they come home? Life before the change...or after...or both? Geez, Sam, we're likely to have a bunch of people working for us, what'll they remember?"

The physicist remained silent a long time, thinking. "I...don't know," he said at last. "I'll have to give it some more thought. But if the project works the way I think it will, none of this will be a problem."

"True," Al agreed, almost regretfully. "But it's one hell of an interesting concept, intersecting sub-timelines, don't ya think?"

"Yes," Sam said with a nod, "I do. I don't think it changes any of the string theory, but it's an interesting idea. Have you thought out any of the math behind it?"

"Geez, no..." Al snorted. "That's your department. You're the mega-brain of this partnership. You can do that."

"No thanks," Sam answered with a smile. "I already have one time travel theory I want to prove. I've got years of work invested in it, and a belief it'll work. I don't need another one."

"Okay." Al puffed on his cigar. "I'll file this one away. You never know when a good theory of time will come in handy."

Sobering, Sam regarded his friend. "You do have a good point about changes though. I think..."

"What?"

"I think we should make a rule," Sam said, half-joking, and half-uneasily serious. "The time traveler shall not, under any circumstance, take advantage of his position to alter history in any way."

"But," Al protested, picking up his role of devil's advocate. "What if you knew it would be for the good of everybody?"

"Nothing is good for everybody," Sam pointed out. "Somebody always doesn't get what they want in every situation."

"Okay, for the majority then," Al argued. "What if..." He puffed thoughtfully on his cigar again. "What if you could go back to Hitler's day? Okay..." He held up a hand to forestall Sam's argument. "I know your theory doesn't work that way, but suppose for the sake of this argument, it does. Now, if you're there, and you could do a simple thing, like keeping his parents from meeting so he's never born, look at all the people you would save. Wouldn't that be worth it?"

"What if," Sam countered, "he's not there, so someone worse takes his place."

"There can't have been anyone worse."

"You don't know that," Sam shot back. "Maybe not that we know of, but if that one change causes another, and another, like you suggested, who knows what will happen? Who would be born to take his place?"

"Rats," Al grumbled, looking crestfallen. "Stuck in my own web. I guess you win that one. Rule Numero Uno stays."

"Even though," Sam pointed out, one last time, "we're never going to need it."

The conversation stalled, having reached a natural pause, with both men lost in their private thoughts of what they'd just discussed. Sam settled his elbows on the step behind him again and stretched his legs.

Watching the stars, one minute drifted into several, and Sam's thoughts began to drift right along with them. He felt oddly at peace with the universe...even the throb in his head had subsided. But there was something still nagging at a corner recess of his mind...and it all had to do with that inexplicable Thanksgiving weekend, and a long buried nightmare of his brother dying in Vietnam.

What if Tom had died and he'd had a chance to prevent it, just like Al said? Would he even remember Tom's death? Or would it simply not have happened the second time around?

In spite of the implications they'd just discussed, if the chance arose would an edict set in stone and all the theoretical projections of dire consequences in the universe itself really stop him? In his heart he knew he could not let his brother die, not if he could in any way stop it. Could he?

So many questions. So many 'what if's.

'Time and tide wait for no man'--such procrastination would get him nowhere.

A hastily muttered curse from the older man shattered Sam's uncomfortable musings, his startled jump mimicking Al's.

"What?" Sam asked, swivelling on the stair to see the other get to his feet and begin to furiously brush at his maroon silk pajama leg. "What's the matter?"

"Dropped cigar ash on my pants," came the disgusted answer. "Damn, if I burn a hole in these, Oola will have a fit! At least...she would've..."

"Oola?" Sam inquired, relieved that the problem was no more dire than that.

"Yeah, she's Swedish." Al paused, shooting him a wicked smile and a suggestively raised eyebrow. "'Oola-la'...!"

"Let me guess. She gave you those pajamas for Christmas."

He made a face. "You didn't really think they were my first choice for your family to see, did you?"

"Well--"

"Look, my bag was already packed, okay?" Having assured himself there were no holes, Al leaned back against the wall to finish what little was left of the cigar. "Damn shame she never got to see me in 'em." A rueful look crossed his face. "Damn shame she never got to see me out of 'em. In Bimini."

"Bimini?"

"Yeah, it's this island off--"

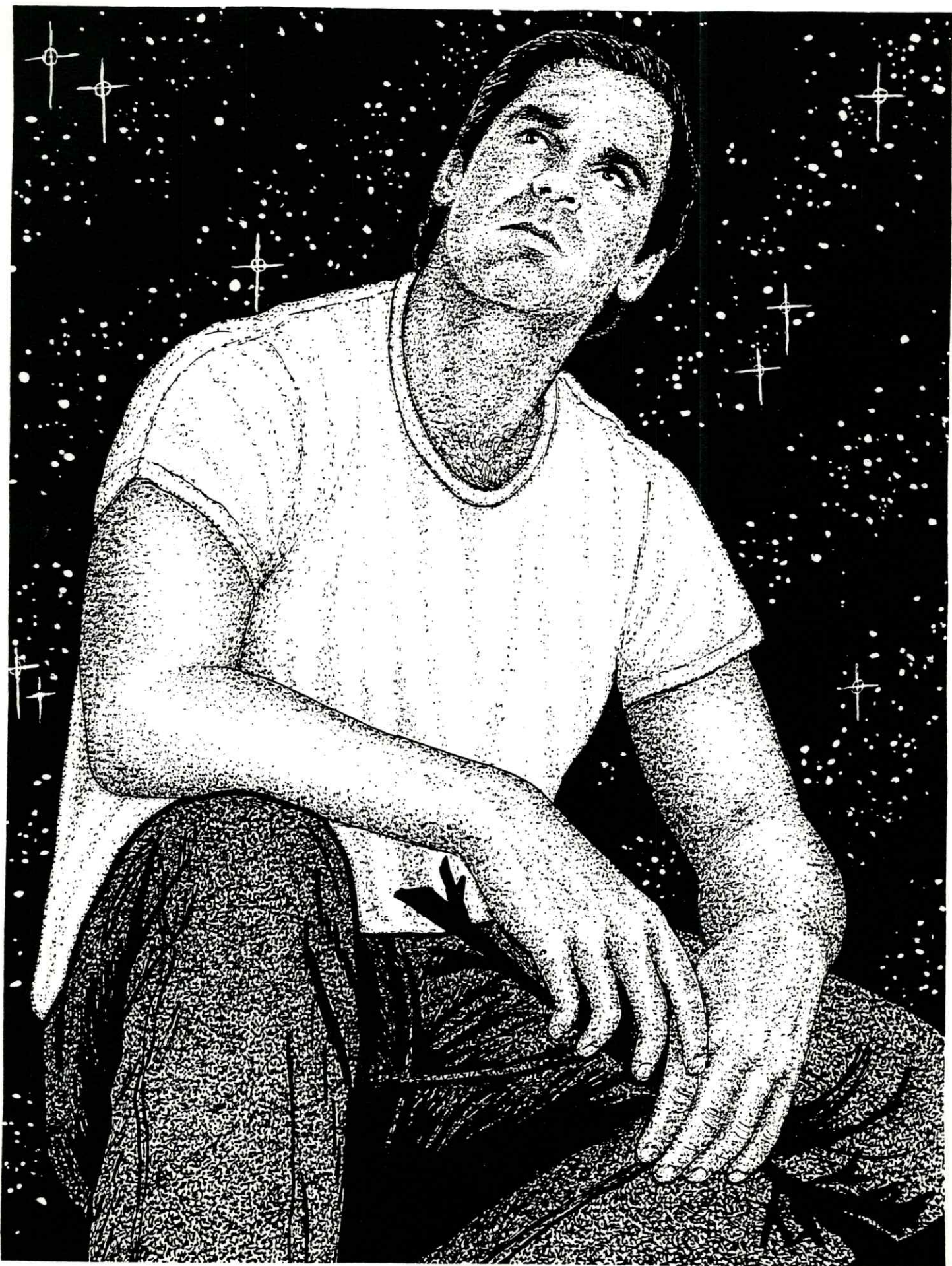
"I know where Bimini is, Al. Were you and this...Oola planning on spending some time there?"

Al nodded. "Until a slight misunderstanding about Sarah and the Best Western."

Not sure he really wanted to know--but too curious to let it go--Sam slowly asked, "What misunderstanding?"

"Well, you see, Oola was outta town last week, so Sarah and I went to the Houston Best Western last Saturday. You know, for a little...pre-holiday cheer."

"Unh...yeah."



"And when we left, I forgot to untie her scarf from the four poster."

"Untie her scarf...?" Sam shook his head. "Never mind, I don't think I want to know."

"Anyway," Al persisted, "a few days later the hotel calls 'Mrs. Calavicci' to tell her she left her red silk scarf and she can pick it up or they can mail it to her--billing the postage to my credit card."

"Mrs. Calavicci?"

"Meaning Sarah--"

"Oh, right."

"--who wasn't there at the time."

"Wasn't...unh...where?"

"My apartment!" Al exclaimed, then shook his head resignedly. "But I'll give you one guess who was..."

"Oola?"

Al nodded glumly. "Making a gift of these gorgeous jammies for our planned trip to Bimini."

"And she answered the phone," Sam guessed.

"She wanted me to try 'em on...how the hell did I know she'd answer it? I mean, who answers someone else's phone, for Pete's sake..." Al snorted eloquently. "That hotel clerk must've had too much rum in his eggnog. I live in Houston. Why--if I had a wife--would I take her to a Best Western there?"

Sam frowned. Not at Al's dilemma, but because he'd never even considered the possibility of the astronaut having had other plans. "You were going to Bimini for Christmas?"

"Well, I was. Until the clerk with reindeer doodoo for brains called and screwed that up royally." Al looked sadly down at his attire then, catching Sam's expression, added, "Av, Sam, you would've done the same thing! She was a stewardess and she was paying for the tickets!" He paused wistfully. "A beautiful, blonde, buxom Swede. With a voice that would melt butter...and hands so talented they could make a grown man cry." He sniffed soulfully. "I gotta tell you, pal. No one, but no one, tells a bedtime story like Oola. The way she acts them out makes--"

"Okay," Sam cut him short. "Okay. I guess I can see why Bimini was your first choice."

Al ran a hand down the smooth silk. "She told me exactly what I could do with these and stormed out," he grumbled, "knocking down two of my best photos of the Blue Angels on the way!" Shaking his head, he took the last puff on his

cigar. "Women. They've got no sense of humor."

Trying to hide a grin at Al's disgust, Sam stood saying, "Well, I hope you learned your lesson."

"Several. Including don't pay with a credit card unless it's in an assumed name, never leave your phone plugged in when you have a beautiful woman in your apartment, and most importantly, make sure you get all the apparel before you leave."

Sam grinned, amused, then solemnly held up his palm. "I promise not to mention the scarf when I meet her."

"Hah!" Al tossed his cigar onto the cement step, ground it out under a slippered heel, then kicked it into the grass. "Which won't be until Hell freezes over, pal. Although she put it a bit more--"

"Eloquently?" Sam supplied, taking Al's gesture as a sign that he was ready to go in.

"That'll do it."

Going up the stairs, Sam pulled open the back screen door and held it for Al. Reaching him, the commander stopped, a thoughtful frown of his face.

"What?" Sam asked.

"You know when we talked about being careful not to change any history and stuff?" Al said in a very serious voice. "You don't suppose we could--you know--maybe bend it a little in a few cases, do you? When it was really important. Life and death, personal kinda things."

Sam hesitated, drawing a sharp breath and searching for Al's eyes, hidden by the darkness of the door's shadow. He couldn't see them, but in his mind's eye he could see the past pain they held. Had the commander's thoughts in the darkness mirrored his own?

"Why? What would you change, Al?"

"I'd remember the scarf, pal," the pilot revealed, deadpan. "I would definitely remember the scarf."

Without so much as batting an eyelid, the older man brushed past and headed for bed, leaving the young physicist to stare after him with an open mouth.

Then, with a grin and a shake of his head, Sam followed, realizing he'd been taken.

Again.

* * *

Next morning, Sam was laying in the hammock, shaded by the large palm trees, relaxing one

last hour before going in to say goodbye to his family. His headache had vanished by dawn, but both Tom and Jim were nursing hangovers the size of a typhoon, or so they said. Both were disgusted to hear the cheerful note of Sam and Al's greetings when they crawled out of bed past 11 a.m.

Thelma had gently scolded them, asking why they couldn't behave with moderation like Al obviously did, since he wasn't tiptoeing around with his head in his hands.

Sam shook his head in amusement. Some people were just lucky, he guessed. Maybe Al had built up a resistance to large quantities of liquor...a thought which made Sam vaguely uncomfortable. Or maybe it was just that he could hide the evidence of his excesses better.

Still if nothing else they had--remarkably--found time to discuss Sam's developing theory of time travel. He could tell Al had been genuinely interested. Not like he was humoring a crackpot genius, but really interested--like he believed it could actually work.

Sam grimaced. He hadn't mentioned anything about his string theory to his family, but could just hear his mother when he did. 'I told your father he shouldn't let you watch so much 'Captain Galaxy' and 'Time Tunnel'. Now you're talking about wearing a tin-foil suit and traveling in time. Why don't you settle down into a nice private practice and find a sweet girl to marry?'

Even though he had his medical degree and was most of the way through his doctorates, he would always be his mother's little boy. She had faithfully supported him in his studies and listened carefully to him, but she never really understood his quest for knowledge. He wanted to know everything. There was so much out there that he wanted to learn about, and so little time.

And Tom? Well, he loved Tom--looked up to him as only a younger brother could--but even he didn't really understand him. So far the only person who truly understood what it was like to be Sam Beckett...was Al Calavicci.

Al, who went from one experience to another without so much as a breather in between.

Al, who lived life like he studied books.

Closing his eyes he swayed in the hammock, pleased by the comparison, and enjoying the cool breeze and the smell of the flowering blooms.

"Whatcha thinking about, pal?" the deep gravely voice broke into his thoughts. "A red-headed beauty in a yellow polka dot bikini?"

Without opening his eyes, Sam endeavored to keep the smile off his face. Would Al never quit? In sort of a masochistic way, he hoped not. He rather enjoyed playing the scandalized prude.

Quickly setting his expression in what Al called 'Preacher Beckett' mode, he replied, "No, I'm not thinking about a redhead in a yellow bikini."

He opened one eye and focused on Al, who was clad in a Hawaiian-print shirt over white trousers, and had an unlit cigar clamped between his teeth. As the older man buried his hands in his pockets and rocked on his heels, Sam climbed out of the hammock and grinned mischievously.

"I was thinking about that blonde in the hot pink bikini who just walked by," he quipped over his shoulder. "The one with a body that just won't quit," he added, borrowing one of Al's favorite sayings.

His friend looked up and down the beach. "What blonde in a hot pink bikini? Where?" he sputtered. "Sam! Which way did she go?"

Sam laughed and playfully punched his friend's arm. "Gotcha." At Al's indignant look, Sam threw an arm around his shoulders and pulled him toward the house. "Come on inside. Mom promised me a cold glass of lemonade and a piece of her coconut cream pie before I leave. I can probably talk her into two."

"Your mom's coconut cream pie?" Al grinned. "That sounds almost as yummola as a blonde in a bikini!"

As they reached the steps, Sam laughed and announced, "A Calavicci first. Food wins over women."

"Well, you know," Al retorted as he preceded Sam in the door. "I have to keep up my strength for that female cosmonaut."

Pausing on the porch, Sam looked skyward and shook his head. "Oh, boy," he groaned.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Flying Blind"

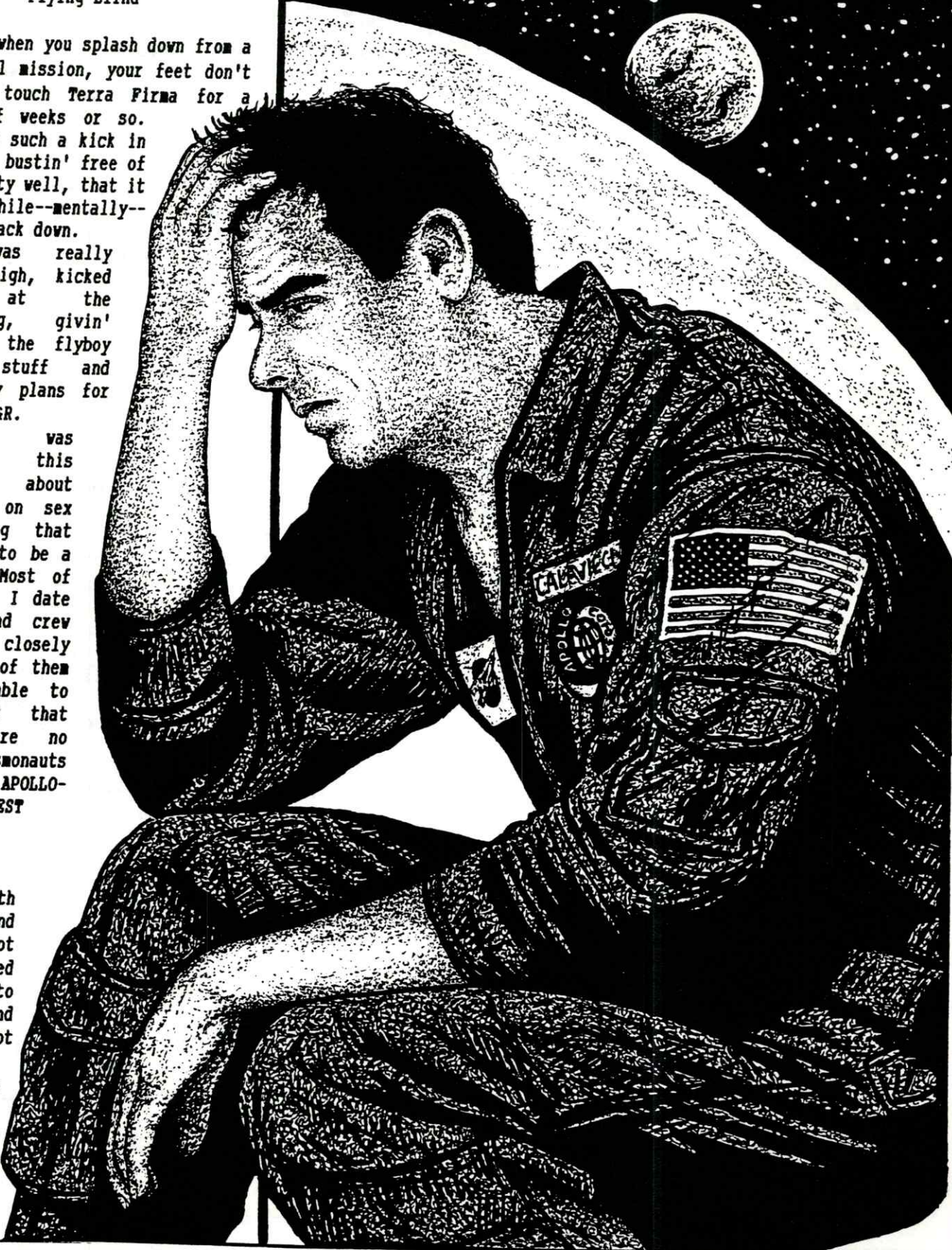
Even when you splash down from a successful mission, your feet don't seem to touch Terra Firma for a couple of weeks or so. It's just such a kick in the butt, bustin' free of the gravity well, that it takes a while--mentally--to come back down.

I was really flying high, kicked back at the debriefing, givin' 'em all the flyboy detail stuff and making my plans for my next R&R.

I was polishing this line about research on sex in zero-g that was sure to be a killer. Most of the women I date don't read crew lists too closely and none of them would tumble to the fact that there were no female cosmonauts on the APOLLO-SOYUZ TEST PROJECT.

I was mighty pleased with myself. And then I got slam dunked back to reality and all that got knocked right outta my head.

LoNigro from MIT got a message



through to me that Sam'd been hurt. A lab explosion, he said. Cause unknown.

Sam'd been hurt and LoNigro couldn't give me any details of how bad because the doctors weren't talkin' to anybody but the party named to be notified in case of emergency.

And that's me.

Damn it, that's me.

And I was stuck in that damned debriefing for another six hours. Policy said they weren't supposed to even give me any messages until it was finished, but LoNigro pulls some weight around here. He's trained some of the finest minds in the country in quantum physics.

Including Sam.

Who is now hurt, and I have no idea how bad.

The minute I got cut loose, I headed for the phone. But it was the middle of the night and I didn't get much information. None of the doctors were around and I didn't even get to talk to the charge nurse because she was with another patient and I couldn't wait around for her to come to the phone.

I had a plane to catch. This plane. Which should be landing in Cambridge in less than twenty minutes.

I have no idea what the hell I'm gonna find when I get to the hospital. I'm really flyin' blind on this one and trustin' to that old Calavicci instinct to bring me through.

I'm no good at this supportive friend stuff and Sam knows that. Why would he pick me for them to call?

They said he wouldn't let them call his family. Knowing Sam, it's because he's tryin' to spare them something.

Spare them what?

Geez. When the hell are we gonna get this bird on the ground so I can see what's goin' on for myself and quit imagining the worst? What if Sam's disfigured? Or maimed? Or paralyzed?

Damn it.

Time measured by worry doesn't move at all.

* * *

Darkness...

It was strange how all the other senses compensated for the loss of one. The smell of the antiseptic cleaners that permeated every corner of the hospital, nearly overpowered the fainter smells of sickness...and death. It was a smell that was familiar to Sam. A smell that called up memories of his years of medical

school and residency.

Even the hospital food, which most people found to be tasteless, seemed to burst with flavor. Sometimes the flavors weren't the best, but since Sam's appetite was almost non-existent, it really didn't matter. He hadn't eaten very much in the few days he'd been here, which he could tell upset his nurses. One of them had even offered to feed him, but he refused. Politely. But, nonetheless, firmly.

He'd spent most of his time in bed, not only because he was blinded by the bandages wrapped around his eyes, but because he still suffered headaches and dizziness whenever he tried to stand. His cracked ribs also hurt with the slightest movement, despite the fact that they were tightly bound.

Three days. He'd been here three whole days ...or was it four? Sometimes, the sheer boredom of it all made it difficult to remember. Other times he didn't want to remember just how long he'd been cooped up. Ironically, the very act of counting the minutes, hours and days was the only thing he could do to while away the time.

The coughing of the patient in the next room caught his attention. Bronchitis, maybe complicated by a lifetime of smoking by the sound of it. It continued for several moments, until it brought the squeaking steps of a nurse as she came to check on her patient.

It was Christine, Sam realized with a smile. He had come to recognize not only the voices, but the individual steps of just about everyone on the staff. Especially at night when it was quiet and their footsteps echoed hollowly up and down that long, lonely, sterile hall. To him--to any blind man--there was no difference between night and day, except for the increase or decrease in activity around him. That and the--

As the coughing subsided into silence, Sam settled against his pillow and turned his head until he felt a gentle warmth on his face.

--that and the sun. It must be sunny outside. A sunny July day. With deep green vegetation and rich blue skies. He could picture them clearly in his mind, even though he might never actually see them again...

Startled by his thoughts, he drew in a sharp intake of breath, then grimaced with the agony that brought to his abused ribs. Stopping himself before he cried out, which would surely bring the nurse and her unwanted attention, Sam forced himself to relax.

Maybe he should try to get some sleep. He could sure use some, having suffered from insomnia ever since he woke up from the accident.

That had worried his doctors. So much that the nurses had orders to give him sedatives if he didn't sleep. But after that first night of drug-induced sleep, where he was trapped in nightmares from which he could not escape, Sam refused to take any more of the ordered medication.

To avoid pressure to accept them, he played possum every time he heard his nurse opening his door. Relaxing completely, he would slow his breathing, and sometimes even snore softly. He'd had years of practice with Tom, when their father would come in to check if they had actually gone to sleep or were still whispering to each other. It was amazing how two brothers could fight tooth and nail during the day, then go to bed and instantly become confidants.

Sleep. With the sun on his face like this, it certainly wouldn't be too difficult...

Lying there, helpless in his hospital bed as the warm waves of sleep began to gently wash over him, Sam's thoughts began to whirl in disjointed bits and pieces.

Over the past couple of days, he'd found it impossible to concentrate on any one thing for more than a few moments at a time. Thinking ahead to when they would remove the bandages covering his eyes was almost too frightening to contemplate. Although he tried to avoid considering the worst possible outcome, it still kept returning to haunt him.

If only Al would come...

They told him the astronaut had been notified, but he was still undergoing a lengthy debriefing after the joint US-Soviet space mission. Debriefing. How long did a damn 'debriefing' take?

Actually, he should be grateful his friend was back on Earth. Had this... 'accident' happened a week or so ago while the commander was still up in space...

No. Concentrate on the present. Al had been notified. Al would come.

Eventually.

Al would come...

Somehow, he managed to doze off for a few minutes but was startled awake again when the nightmare returned. It always did.

Damn.

Raising his hand to his brow, Sam wiped away

the beads of sweat and turned his face from the window and its falsely comforting summer sun. They were always the same, these recurrent dreams. Tom dying in Vietnam, shot in the back, overlapped with images of Katie arriving on his doorstep crying, her face covered with blue and purple bruises. His sister always said she had fallen, though Sam knew better.

No wonder he couldn't--didn't want to--sleep. It only added to his unwanted sense of helplessness.

Letting go a sigh, Sam carefully nursed his damaged ribs and shifted into a new position, physically moving himself further away from the nightmare. At least it hadn't been the flashback of the accident this time. That was still all too vivid in his mind, and that--unlike his nightmare about Tom and Katie--was undeniably real.

He'd been working in the physics lab at MIT, late at night, finishing up a project. He could see the door before him now, as he reached for the handle and pulled it open. Suddenly there was a brilliant flash of light and a blast that flung him backwards off his feet. Searing heat and the acrid scent of singed hair were his last sensations before he lost consciousness.

The first time he had woken from that particular nightmare to darkness, his eyes and chest had been bandaged. The reassuring voices of the doctors at his bedside told him that his cracked ribs would heal completely.

They had not been so certain about his eyes.

He had a chance to see again, they said, but they would not know for sure until they removed the bandages.

As a physician, Sam understood that, but as a patient, he unwillingly suspected they were just humoring him, trying to keep his spirits up. There was no doubting the note of pity in their voices. Once, as they were leaving, Sam overheard one of them say, 'It's a shame. He had such promise. A doctor and research scientist. Who knows, he could have been the next Einstein.'

The comment had wakened a pain in Sam's chest that had nothing to do with broken ribs. The last time he heard, he thought bitterly, they didn't give Nobel Prizes for selling pencils on a street corner.

Familiar footsteps pulled Sam from his morbid thoughts, but he couldn't quite place who they belonged to until the owner had entered the room. At the recognition of who it was, he

broke into a wide smile, the depression that had threaten to drown him suddenly lifted.

"Al," he said, his head coming up in relief.

"Hi, pal," came the familiar rough voice from somewhere near the foot of his bed. Al's tone was carefully controlled, although not totally concealing the worry. "How the hell'd you know it was me?"

"The smell--cigars and Aqua Velva. Sometimes, you use so much of that stuff, I think you must have stock in the company."

"Nah, the girls just go crazy over it. The only thing that gets me more women is my spacesuit. It's amazing."

"I bet," Sam said, absently rubbing at the bandages around his eyes.

"Your eyes hurt?"

"A little, but it's not too bad." He shrugged as casually as possible. "The ribs are worse."

There came the scrap of a chair being pulled across the tiled floor to rest next to his bed. The next time Al spoke, his voice came from closer nearby.

"Yeah...had a couple of busted ribs myself once." The almost indistinguishable rustle of cellophane accompanied Al's words. "In 'Nam--"

"Al, you can't smoke that in here," Sam blurted.

"What? But how'd you--?"

"The guy in the next room has a respiratory complaint. He coughs around the clock. You can't smoke that."

"Another reason why hospitals ain't my favorite places to hang out," came the grudging reply.

The tone made Sam wondered if the astronaut had deliberately pulled out his cigar, knowing he'd be called on it, simply to re-establish that instant rapport of friendship...very reminiscent of the way they'd first met.

Because he had to admit, he certainly felt better. More in control than he had in days.

"Okay. I put it away like a good boy. Satisfied?"

"You were never a 'good boy'," Sam teased, thoroughly enjoying the lighthearted moment after days of depression.

"Hah!" Al's retort was as cocky as ever. "I could get you two dozen signatures on a petition that says I was...just like that." He snapped his fingers.

"Only two dozen?"

"Yeah, well, I ain't had time to become

seriously acquainted with the nursing staff here yet."

Sam chuckled despite himself...then groaned in pain. One hand holding his ribs, he endeavored to relax. Al's next words were spoken in a more somber tone.

"So what happened, kid? All they'd tell me was that you were involved in a some kinda accident at the lab."

"To tell you the truth, I'm not quite sure."

"So why don't you just start at the beginning?"

Sam drew a breath--as deep as he dared--then slowly released it. "I was there working late on one of my experiments, getting ready to leave. There was...some kind of explosion...and the next thing I remember was waking up here."

"Anybody know anything about what caused this explosion?"

"I don't know."

"I see." The commander's voice had a suspicious edge to it, but it was gone as he continued more neutrally, "Then nobody's done any investigating yet?"

"Investigating? Why?"

"Sam," Al began levelly. He always reminded Sam of Tom when he said his name like that. "Did it ever occur to you that this might not have been an accident? It could've been that someone was negligent. Hell, it could've even been a bomb."

Sam's voice raised in incredulity. "A bomb?! Al...you actually think someone planted a bomb?"

"Shhh, quiet down!" Al whispered melodramatically, obviously going for humor to lighten the moment. "You never know who's listening."

Sam laughed, then grimaced as his ribs hurt again. "You've got to be joking. Why would anyone want to plant a bomb in the physics lab?"

"Well...just a few years ago, there were a lot of bombs going off on campuses all over the place. Or so they tell me."

"Yeah, and as I recall they were about protesting our involvement in the Vietnam War."

"Okay, so you got a point," Al conceded reluctantly, "but...hey! Anybody know you were in the building?"

"Everybody knows I work late."

"You got anyone mad at you? A jealous boyfriend maybe?" At Sam's disbelieving snort, Al said sarcastically, "Forgive me, I forgot who I was talking to. You're too busy for girls."

Knowing you, it was more likely a fellow student, mad because you set the grade curve so high."

"I don't think so," Sam added doubtfully. "It was probably just a gas leak...or something like that."

There was a brief pause in which Sam could almost hear the wheels of suspicion turning in the Naval officer's head. "You never said you smelled gas before the explosion."

"Well, I did," Sam answered, then hesitated, trying to decide if that were true. "At least...I think I did."

"You 'think'?"

"It's all..." He felt his throat tighten at the memory of the nightmare of the explosion. "...sort of fuzzy."

"Yeah, well, I think I'm going to check it out anyway. Light some fires under some butts to find out exactly what happened. Is Carstairs still the dean?"

"Unh...yeah." Sam nodded unwillingly. "Al, I don't want you going and causing any trouble." Sitting forward in an effort to make his point more forcefully, the scientist caught his breath in reflex as sharp pain shot through his side. Carefully, so as not to move his ribs further, he eased himself back to the raised head of the bed, hardly daring to breath until he was against it again.

"You're in pain, aren't you," Al said quietly in mild accusation.

"Well..." Sam surreptitiously sought a more comfortable position. "My ribs hurt a little, that's all."

"I'm gonna get the nurse."

"No!" Sam protested, hearing Al's chair squeak as he prepared to rise. "I don't..." When the sounds of movement ceased, he continued in a quieter voice. "...I don't want any medication. It makes me...groggy."

"Well, then you can sleep. The nurse told me that you haven't been doing much of that lately." The firmness in Al's voice shaded into amusement and Sam could just imagine the grin on the commander's face. "Lemme tell ya, pal, if I had your nurse, who just happens to be a gorgeous redhead, I'd be calling her to help me sleep. Of course, my cure for insomnia isn't recommended by the AMA and..." Sam could see the shrug as well as if he had his sight. "...the ribs might slow me down...a little."

Sam could feel himself blushing. "I've been sleeping," he bluffed, trying to sound

convincing.

"Like hell." Al snorted, back in Naval Officer Mode. "I heard about you playin' possum. Knowing you, you're probably lying there with a gazillion things going through that mega-brain. Talk to me, Sam. What's really going on upstairs in that noggin of yours?"

Sam lowered his head, biting his bottom lip to keep it from trembling. "I'm scared, Al." Hesitating a moment, he went on, "What am I going to do if I'm...blind?"

He felt the bed shift as Al came to sit on it next to him. He could feel the older man's close scrutiny on him, and his concern.

At the uncomfortable silence, Sam continued. "The doctor's have been pretty optimistic for the most part, saying that it's only a matter of time, but I've...overheard things."

"What things?"

Sam picked at the blanket covering his legs. "Things. You know...like, 'It's a shame, he had such promise', as if they've already written me off." His head came up. "Al, what am I going to do if--"

"I don't wanna hear, 'what if'," Al cut in sternly. "You're not going to be blind, Sam."

At the reassurance in his tone, Sam almost believed it. "But if I am..."

A hand took firm hold of his upper arm. "If you are, then you'll go on like you always do. Taking one obstacle at a time and overcoming it."

"But what can I do? What kind of doctor can I be? What about research? Who's going to hire a blind quantum physicist?"

"You can do anything you set your mind to. You could be a classical pianist. Look at Stevie Wonder. Or Ray Charles. Did they let being blind stop them? Did Beethoven's deafness stop him? And what about Stephen Hawking? He's given you a run for the title of Genius Of The Century from a wheelchair."

"But blind, Al. I don't know if I can handle it."

"You're a fighter, Sam, you can handle it." A squeeze on his arm emphasized the words. "If you have to, you'll manage. But I don't think you will--you'll get your sight back. Anyway, you're not alone, pal." The hand released his arm and brushed back the hair that had fallen over the bandages covering his eyes. "I'll be here for you. And you have your family."

"I...unh...haven't told them," Sam admitted guiltily, knowing Al must already be aware of

that fact. "I didn't want them worrying." He felt Al get up and heard the scrap of the bedside chair's leg as the older man settled into it again.

"You know, your mom's gonna be royally PO'd at you," came the wry, understated response.

"My mother does not get royally PO'd," Sam asserted, carefully squirming in bed to get into better position so his ribs did not ache quite so badly.

"Okay...so, she's gonna be mad as hell for not telling her you're here."

"I'll tell her when I know for sure how serious it is. She has enough on her mind with Katie's new baby."

There was a thoughtful pause, then Al said in resignation, "Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you when she lowers the boom."

"So, unh..." Sam said in an effort to change the subject. "How'd the mission go?"

"Great," Al replied enthusiastically. "It was great being up in space again." A leer crept into his voice as he went on. "The Russians sent this gorgeous female cosmonaut."

"Let me guess. She was a blonde named Inga."

"Sonya, actually. And she had red hair, with a body that--"

"--just wouldn't quit," Sam finished knowingly. "Right?"

"Right. And everything you ever heard about doin' it in zero-g is absolutely true."

"Did this Sonya also weigh about eighty pounds, was extremely hairy and liked to eat bananas? I never knew you were into orangutans."

"Aw, Sam, you take all the fun out of it. Give a guy a break, huh?"

Sam laughed and laid back against his pillow. "I'm glad you're here, Al."

"I'm glad I'm here, too. So d'you wanna hear about my trip or not?"

* * *

The kid went to sleep in the middle of my story. At first, I didn't realize it, but when he started snoring, I got the picture. It was a shame, too, 'cause I was really on a roll. I would've like to have known how it turned out myself. Maybe when he wakes up...

He looks so peaceful sleeping there, looks like a big, overgrown innocent kid. None of that worry knitting his brow or stiffening his body language. If it wasn't for the bandages,

you'd think nothing was wrong. The bandages... and his hair.

I wonder if anyone's told him yet? I've heard that stress can cause people's hair to turn white, but just one lock over his forehead? It bothers me. More than the bandages over his eyes, more than the tight look of pain on his face every time he tries to move.

That one lock of hair tells me more of what the past three days have done to him than anything else.

So while Sam was busy rackin' up some zzz's, I went to the dean's office like I said I would, intent on kicking some serious butt. But all they could tell me was that they didn't suspect foul play. There was no sign of forced entry into the building or the lab, so if it was planned it had to be an inside job.

My money's on the guy with the second lowest grade in the class. If it wasn't for Sam, this nozzle--whoever he is--would have Summa Cum Whatsit all wrapped up.

Geez...it must be hell for Sam, even though he doesn't say so. I could tell he was really hurtin'...the kid's so damn stubborn sometimes. Maybe that's why I like him so much. He reminds me of me.

Hospitals. I hate them. Although the nurses all looked at me like I was some kinda miracle worker when I left, just 'cause I got him to sleep. I'm not cut out for this Florence Nightingale gig. What the hell am I going to say the next time I see him?

What the hell am I going to say if he is blind?

The doctors say they're gonna take the bandages off tomorrow. So come hell or high water, I'm gonna be there.

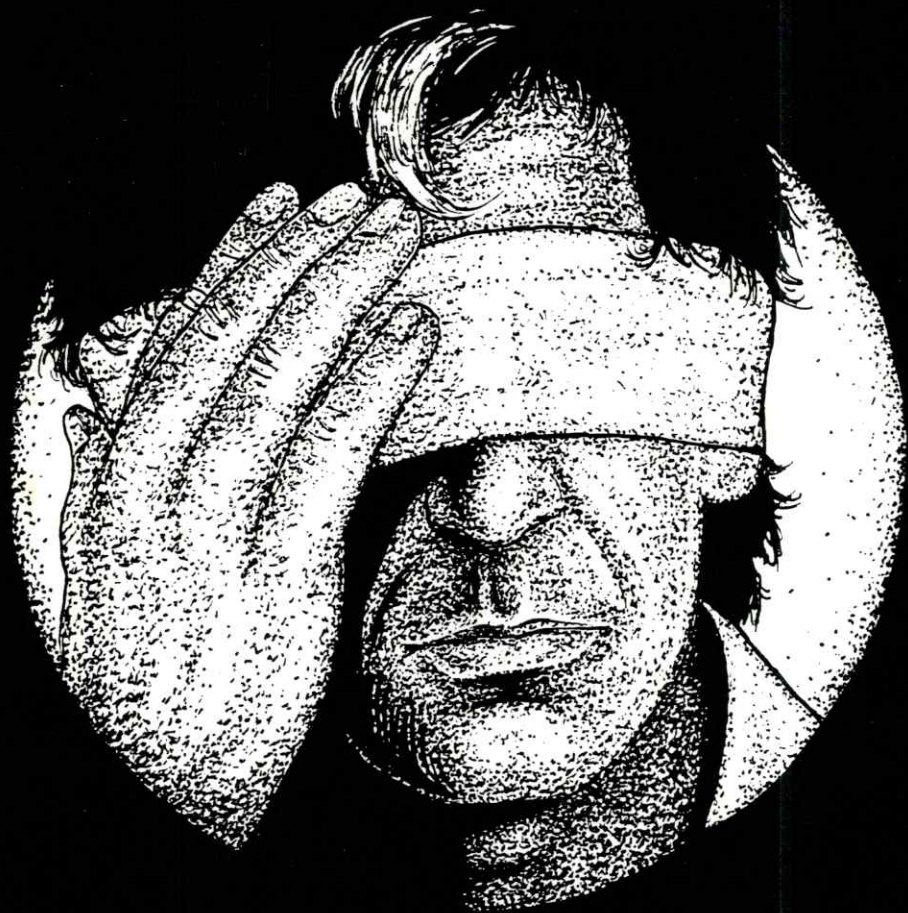
For Sam.

* * *

Sam was eating breakfast when Al returned the next day. Correction: trying to eat breakfast. The physicist self-consciously stopped feeding himself the moment he heard his friend walk in, still comfortable with getting his spoon to his mouth with an audience.

"Hi, Sam," the commander said from near the door.

"Hi, Al," he returned, sensing from the man's tone that he was standing just barely inside the door, probably with his hands in his pockets. "Come on in."



Al's footsteps moved a few steps further into the room...and stopped by the window.

"Is it sunny?" Sam asked suddenly.

"What?"

"Outside. Is the sun out? It comes in the window in the afternoon, but since it's only morning, I can't...um...tell..."

"Yeah," Al said, unsure. "It's sunny."

"And today is the thirtieth, right? I mean, the explosion was on the twenty-sixth and I've been here four days and so that must mean--"

"Sam...what are you talkin' about?!"

"Professor LoNigro's wedding."

"Professor...LoNigro's...?"

"Yeah, he and Dana are getting married this afternoon." He mustered a glum smile. "Wish I could've been there as arranged...I'm glad they have a nice sunny day..." Endeavoring to steer the conversation away from where it was headed, Sam attempted to get another spoonful of food into his mouth.

"Looks like breakfast time," Al remarked, clearly trying for safer waters too. Sam heard him move away from the window, with the sights he feared he would never see again, and into another part of the room.

"Yeah," the physicist agreed, pulling a distasteful face as he listened closely for any clue as to what his friend was doing now. Resignedly, he put the spoon back on his tray. "I guess you could call it that."

"No joke." Al's footsteps continued to vander and there were soft sounds as if he were picking objects up and then putting them down without really examining them. "Hospital food is the worst. Any kind of institutional food is. Although you should see the gunk we get to squeeze outta tubes up in space."

The pacing continued.

"When you get sprung from here, I'll take you to this little Basque place I found last night. It..."

Sam frowned as the commander continued his monologue. He knew that Al wasn't comfortable in hospitals and realized the sacrifice the older man was making by being here with him. Still the pacing was really starting to annoy him.

"Will you please sit down?!" Sam said finally out of sheer exasperation, interrupting Al's favorable review of the restaurant and its even more favorable waitresses. "You're driving me nuts!"

Immediately the footsteps ceased, followed by

a sheepish, "Sorry, Sam." The footsteps quietly approached the bed, and the chair squeaked as Al sat down. "How's your head?"

"The headaches are gone. And before you ask, my ribs are a lot less sore, too. I just want to get out of here. The bed's uncomfortable, I can't feed myself without dropping food all over my clothes, and I want to take a shower in my own bathroom." He realized his voice sounded peevish, but he couldn't help it.

"Well, you're not gonna get outta here unless you make them think you can take care of yourself. Your nurse, Christine, told me you haven't been eating enough." He paused. "So, are you gonna finish your breakfast? Or," he asked in mock threat, "would you like me to feed you?"

"I should have known you'd be consorting with the nurses." With a sigh, Sam carefully brought a spoonful of food to his mouth. There was absolutely no way he was going to let Al feed him!

"Consorting..." Al laughed suggestively. "Well, that's one way to put it. I have a date with Christine tonight. Maybe I'll try it."

Concentrating on getting the food from his plate onto his spoon, Sam did not reply. When Al spoke again, his tone was serious.

"Sam, unh...has anyone mentioned your hair?"

"My hair?" Sam asked in surprise. He put up a hand to his head, but could feel no difference. "What about my hair?"

"Well..."

"What?" Sam's voice rose in alarm as he imagined the worst.

"Now, stay calm. It's no big deal. Women will probably think it's sexy."

"Al...what?!"

"You have a streak of white hair over your forehead." Sam felt Al's touch on his forelock. "Right here. It's not a big streak. Just enough to be...distinguished."

"Is that all?" Sam asked in relief, a bit annoyed. "You had me worried. My uncle Tom had one too. Said he got it when he turned thirty." Sam pushed away his plate with an absent hand. "It was probably caused by the stress of the accident."

"If it was an accident." There was no getting past the doubt in Al's voice.

"Not the bomb theory again."

"No," Al said. "When I went to visit Carstairs--he sends his regards, by the way. I

think he's afraid you'll sue his butt."

"I wouldn't do that," Sam protested. "It wasn't their fault. It was just an accident."

"Accident, my ass," the commander growled.

"Al..." Sam said knowingly. "What'd you do?"

"I got the scoop outta Carstairs."

"How?"

"How? Well, I...it was a piece of cake. The old man told me everything I wanted to know... when I told him that if he didn't come clean, we'd take it as an indication of a cover up and initiate our own investigation."

"You threatened the dean?"

"Well..."

"What are you trying to do?!" Sam protested. "Ruin my career? Al...please tell me you didn't threaten the dean."

"Well--"

"You did...aw, geez, I knew it. You did. How could you?!"

Sam could practically see the shrug from the tone. "'Threaten' is kinda strong, kid. Let's just say I...managed to get him to talk. He doesn't want to lose you--or get sued."

Sam sighed again, unhappy with Al's methods but unable to change them. "So?"

"So?"

"So what did he say?" he asked with forced patience.

"Oh, yeah. He said the Fire Marshal believes the fire originated in the lab next to the one where you were working. Near one of the gas jets."

"The gas jets."

"Yeah, and you said you smelled gas, right?"

"Right," Sam agreed slowly. "So it was a leak, right?"

"Not exactly." There was satisfaction in the tone. "The jet at the source of the fire was slightly open--under a tripod containing some kinda charred yucky mess that they're having analyzed now at the state lab."

"So somebody left an experiment on."

"Or wanted it to look like they had...and set you up for the big ka-bang." There was a slight squeak from the chair as Al leaned forward conspiratorially. "Look, Sam, I've been doing some checking."

"Checking?" Sam asked absently, still lost in trying to recall the last minutes of the explosion. There had been the smell of gas--of that he was now certain--and it had been stronger in the hall. He'd gone to check and--

"Sam?" The commander's worried tone broke

into the physicist's thoughts. "You okay?"

"I remember," Sam said, his breathing quickening at the memory, making his ribs ache in protest. "I remember. There was gas in the hall, faint but I could smell it when I was on my way out. I went to check...and...and..."

"And?" Al's cigar-roughened voice was quiet. "Then...?"

"The door must have sparked when I opened it. The explosion blew me back out into the hall."

"You were the only person logged into the building at the time of the explosion, according to the security guard at the door," Al said evenly. "Whoever set that gas jet didn't want anybody to know he'd been there. And he wasn't plannin' on comin' back either. If that gas had built up a little more before you found it--"

"You don't know that," Sam interrupted firmly. "And it was stupid of me to go and check it out for myself. I should have gotten out of there and called security or the police."

"Should've, would've, could've," Al scoffed gently. "Anybody who knows you, Sam, knows you would go check it out. That curiosity of yours is legend."

"Al..."

"Don't 'Al' me, pal! I know what I'm talkin' about. And I've done some checking."

"More checking?" Sam asked in an attempt at lightening the solemn mood into which the conversation had slipped. "On what this time?"

"On who might want you hurt and get you outta the way."

"Al, come on," Sam protested. "You're paranoid. There's got to be an explanation that doesn't involve scholastic competition and sneaking around setting bombs."

"Interesting you should chose the word 'competition'," Al answered smoothly. "I've got an old friend in the computer department--"

"Female?"

"Yeah, how'd ya know? Alexis, a brunette with a really nice pair of--"

"Never mind." Sam shook his head in resignation.

"--hard disks," Al finished regardless. "Anyway, I had her get into the administration records for me..."

"Those records are confidential!" Alarmed, Sam sat up abruptly...and groaned. "What did you do? Bribe her?"

"In a manner of speaking." Al sounded tremendously pleased with himself and Sam

frowned. "No money changed hands but she was ...satisfied."

"Al," Sam said disapprovingly. "You're incredible."

"That's what she said!" came the smug reply. "Although she said it with a bit more... enthusiasm."

"Al," Sam warned through clenched teeth.

"Okay, well, anyway, I found out there's this guy, William Denkler, who was a heavy hitter in the grades department."

"Bill Denkler, yeah, I know him. We shared a computer terminal for a while in Professor LoNigro's office. He's LoNigro's doctoral assistant."

"A-ha!" Al said triumphantly, as if it in some way proved his theory. "Only because you turned LoNigro down."

"I didn't have time," Sam admitted. "I had research of my own that--"

"Doesn't matter, Sam," Al interrupted. "This guy was killin' everybody hands down, competition wise, until you came along. You beat him out for LoNigro's first choice, who knows what you'll beat him out of next."

"What?!" Sam asked incredulously. "Are you saying that Bill..."

"Exactly. Snuck into the lab and planted the old bombaroo and planned to take out or scare off the competition."

"That's ridiculous," Sam snapped.

"Oh, yeah?" Al challenged. "What makes you so sure?"

"Because," Sam shot back, "Bill is in Washington. He's been there since last week, at a convention. He got back late last night and stopped by this morning to visit."

"Well..." Al paused a moment to regroup. "He says he was in Washington. How--?"

"He was giving a presentation before two hundred fledgling physicists on Saturday night, which is--"

"--the night the lab went ka-blooney," Al admitted grudgingly. "Okay, so maybe it wasn't him."

"No," Sam firmly. "It wasn't him."

"No." There was a creak as if the commander leaned a thoughtful elbow on the bed rail. "He had motive but no opportunity. Who else...?"

Sighing, Sam pushed his breakfast plate and its now cold contents away. "Just let it go, Al, okay?"

"Okay," the other man agreed. There was the sound of the room's door opening, and then Al's

pleased greeting. "Christine! Hey, Sam, it's Christine!"

"Hello, Al. Dr. Beckett," the nurse's voice was low and slightly husky. Sam, who had wondered before what she looked like, decided her voice must fit her if Al had asked her out as he claimed.

"Here," the commander said. There was the sound of him getting to his feet. "Let me help you with that."

"It's okay. I've got it."

"No, I insist." Sam sensed Al picking up his breakfast tray. Something replaced the smell of his cold, congealed hospital breakfast with the scent of Dial soap. Not that!

"Bath time," Al mused softly, his voice pitched low for Sam's ears only. "You lucky dog."

Blushing, Sam was grateful that his bandages covered as much of his face that they did as he heard Al back away.

"Carry on, you two. I've got some things to check on. I'll be back later."

As Sam heard the sound of the other man's footsteps receding down the hall, Christine said, "I'll help you with your bath, then you'll be ready for any other visitors."

Fuming and embarrassed, Sam groaned softly and vowed that, one way or another, he was going to leave this hospital soon...if for no other reason than to pay Al Calavicci back.

"Oh, boy..."

* * *

Christine was a good nurse, allowing Sam to maintain as much of his dignity as he could, given the circumstances. After taking care of his needs, she withdrew, and left the physicist to mull over everything Al had said earlier.

It was ridiculous to think that someone had set him up for the accident. Why would anyone want to? Still...the jet had been left on, and he had been the only one known to be in the building other than the security guard at the front door.

Could--

"Sam?"

The tentative female voice called him from his brooding and he lifted his head. "Who is it?"

"It's me. Sarah. Can I come in?"

Sarah. Sarah Campbell. One of the students he had taken on in a graduate class.

"Sure," he said, unconsciously straightening the bedclothes over his legs and feeling vulnerable. "Come on in and have a seat."

"Oh, no," she said, coming to stand at the foot of the bed. "I just wanted to stop by for a moment to see how you were. I--"

"Brought me flowers," Sam supplied. "That was nice. Thank you."

"How'd you know?" she asked, and her voice had the hint of uneasiness that people often got around him.

"I can smell them," he said, putting her suspicions to rest that he had made some astounding leap of deduction. "It was thoughtful of you to bring them."

"I heard...we all heard...about your accident. You know, all of us in your special applications class. The flowers are from everyone."

Nodding, Sam couldn't think of anything else to say. Was she staring at him?

The soft swish of the room's door opening interrupted the lull in the conversation.

"Hey, Sam," came a familiar voice. "I...oh, sorry, I didn't know you already had company."

I bet, Sam thought. Al could spot women like a shark could scent blood from miles away, especially young, attractive ones like Sarah Campbell. He'd probably seen her come in here and left his place at the nursing station--where he'd undoubtedly been hitting on Christine--to see what the hunting was like.

Well, this time the Calavicci Charm was guaranteed to come up short. This, Sam was going to enjoy, if only as payback for the crack about the bath.

"Come on in, Al," he said casually. Then, he began introductions. "Sarah, this is a good friend of mine, Commander Albert Calavicci. Al, this is Sarah Campbell, a graduate student at MIT."

"Wait...you're not really...?" From the sound of her voice, Sam guessed she had turned to stare at him. "Oh my God...you are! You're Al Calavicci, the astronaut!"

"The same," came an answer, oozing with smoothness. Al obviously thought he was onto something here.

"Al just flew the APOLLO-SOYUZ mission," Sam supplied helpfully, suppressing a grin.

"I know. I've seen you on the TV and in all the newspapers. It must have been really something. I can't believe I'm actually standing in the same room as Al Calavicci!"

Sam shook his head, barely able to believe her adoration. Al was old enough to be her father, and yet she was dotting on him like he was some kind of teen idol. It truly boggled the mind...

There was a grin in Al's voice--and undoubtedly on his face--as he said, "What you see on the TV and read in the papers is nothing, compared to the real thing." Geez, was he talking about the mission...or himself? "I'd be glad to tell you about it firsthand...leaving nothing out. We did some pretty interesting research up there."

Ha! thought Sam smugly, set up for the kill.

"Oh, I know," Sarah answered earnestly. "My fiancé, Carl Bell from Cal-Tech, devised some of the experiments that you carried out. It will be fascinating when all the data is analyzed. I flew out to see him last weekend and he couldn't talk about anything else."

Gotcha, Sam thought in wicked glee.

"Oh...really." One thing about Al, he recovers well from a slap in the face. "I hope he's pleased with the results."

"I'm sure he will be," her voice changed as she obviously turned back to Sam. "I've got to be going. I...hope you're home soon, Dr. Beckett."

"Thanks, Sarah," Sam answered. "And tell everyone I said thanks for the flowers."

"You're welcome. It was really nice to meet you, Commander Calavicci."

Sam struggled to hide his grin as he sensed Al nod politely, and watch the young woman depart. On sudden impulse, Sam called her name as he heard the sound of her pulling open the door.

"Yes?" she answered.

"Can anybody get into the physics building--other than doctoral students or professors, I mean?"

There was a pause, then she let the door close and came a few steps back into the room. "You mean...unofficially?"

"Yes, without security knowing they were there. Anyone have a key that they shouldn't?"

There was another pause, one which lasted so long that Sam suddenly realized she must be sizing up Al before she answered.

"It's okay," he said, "I'm not going to tell anybody--and neither will Al. I just...need to know."

"I...I don't know. I know some people got caught sneaking into the chem building for some

extra lab time last semester. They had a key. But all the locks got changed, and they can't get in anymore. I don't know about the physics building though."

"Okay." Sam nodded. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," she answered, pulling open the door again. "Get well soon."

When the door closed behind her, Al said immediately, "So what's the deal, pal? Her fiancé's in California and she's here in Cambridge, hoping you 'get well soon'? You been holdin' out on me, pal? She planning a welcome home party for two?"

"Geez, Al," Sam protested, taken by surprise. He had expected to be taken to task for not warning the older man that Sarah was not available, or pumped for the reason for his impulsive question, not accused of an illicit affair. "She's a student of mine!"

"Yeah, and a little hanky-panky makes the studying go down."

"That's 'a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down'. 'Mary Poppins'."

"Yeah well, I'll tell you what I think is poppin', Sam. Come on, give. What's the deal? She cheating on her fiancé with you?"

"Al," Sam snapped, beginning to tire. "Don't be stupid."

"Oh, excuse me, Mr. Morals," Al returned indignantly. "I should've known you don't fool around with almost-married women...or used-to-be-married women or...those with big boyfriends or...hey! Sam, that's it!"

"What?" Warily Sam rubbed at his temple, which had begun to ache.

Al began to pace again, talking rapidly. "I bet that's it! Her fiancé thinks you're having an affair with her and he set up the lab to blow when you opened the door!"

"Her fiancé," Sam said with overdone patience, "is in California. Remember?"

"And you're here with his woman!" Al exclaimed. "It fits. He doesn't know what's going on. I bet he's the jealous type. Those hot-house brains usually are. Can't hold onto their women--unh, no offense Sam. And I bet she talks about you all the time when they're together and--"

"Like they were last weekend," Sam pointed out firmly.

"Yeah," Al enthused. "And--"

"Like last weekend in California when the lab blew up here."

"Exactly! And...oh, I, unh...see what you

mean." Temporarily halted, Al stopped pacing to think, then hurried back to Sam in a rush. "So I bet she's in on it! You saw how evasive she was about that key thing! I bet she has a key and they flew back here together and...and..."

Slowly, the excited commander let his words trail off to nothing.

"Aren't you gonna say anything?"

"No," Sam returned. "I'm just waiting for you to figure it out by yourself."

"Unh, well..." Al cleared his throat. "So I got a little carried away, okay. It could still be a jealous boyfriend."

Sam pulled a face, which must have been eloquent despite the bandages, because it made Al stubbornly defend himself.

"Well, it could."

"What did you find out about the stuff they found in the beaker in the fire?"

"Oh, Kelley said...hey, how'd you know I have a source at the state lab?"

"Just a hunch," Sam said with a sigh. "What'd she say?"

"She said," Al began, a bit affronted, "that it was hydro-gen-en...hy-drogen-en..."

"Hydrogenated," Sam supplied.

"Yeah...that...animal fat, with traces of sodium hydroxide and charcoal." He snorted. "At least the charcoal makes sense. The whole lab was charred. You should see the place, Sam, it's a mess--" Abruptly, he cut off his words. "Sorry. Poor choice of words."

"Soap," Sam said thoughtfully as if he hadn't heard.

"Excuse me?" Al's voice came closer. "Did you say 'soap'?"

"Yes," Sam answered. "Those ingredients are all used in the production of lye soap."

"Why," Al said in a mystified voice, "would anybody be making soap in a physics lab?"

"Maybe because they couldn't get into the chemistry lab," Sam answered, beginning to form an idea.

"Huh?" Al's query was interrupted by a knock on the door.

It creaked open, and a new voice came hesitantly from that direction. "Excuse me, Dr. Beckett?"

Sam turned his head toward the source of the sound. "Yes, who is it?"

"It's me, Daniel Merrit," the physicist heard the nervous uncertainty in the young man's voice. "I'm one of the students at MIT."

Recognizing the name, Sam put a face to the

voice. "Physics Applications 304, I remember. Come on in. This is my friend, Commander Albert Calavicci."

"I can come back later when you're not busy." There was almost relief in the voice.

"That's okay," Sam said. "We were just passing time until the doctor's rounds." He paused a second, then asked, "You're taking Organic Chem, too, aren't you?"

There was a long pause, then the answer came. "Yes...I am," then followed in a rush. "I heard about you getting hurt and wanted to let you know how sorry I was," he said, the words coming out in a rush.

"Thanks. It was just an accident. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"What about...?" He hesitated and began again. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Well, the doctors are hopeful. The ribs are healing."

"I...well, I guess I'll be...going." Sam could hear the hesitation in his voice. The poor kid had more to say.

"Are you sure there wasn't something else you wanted to tell me?" Sam said gently.

Shuffling of feet came before the reply, which came in a guilty rush of words. "It's all my fault," the student admitted. "I had to get some more lab time in, and I...I snuck in to try and catch up. It didn't take much equipment, and I knew I could scrounge what I needed. I was just going to try and get a couple hours work done in the lab next to yours. It was going good, and I decided to work longer. I wanted to go get something to eat and I know you're not supposed to leave experiments unattended, but I was only going to be gone for a little while."

There was the sound of shuffling feet again as if Daniel were edging backwards toward the door. From Al, Sam heard not a sound, although he could picture him in his mind's eye, just standing there with a suspicious frown on his face, taking in every detail of the situation like an invisible observer.

"I turned the Bunsen burner down really low," the student continued. "I never thought it'd be too low and it'd blow out...but it must have. It took me longer than I thought. When I came back, the ambulance was taking you away. So it must have been my fault. I'm sorry, real sorry."

Sam could hear the tears threatening in the young man's voice.

"It was an accident, Daniel," he said gently. "Don't be too hard on yourself."

"But what about you? Your eyes? What if--"

"I'll be okay," Sam said, really believing it for the first time. "At least now I know what happened. I have friends and family who will help me. No matter how it turns out. Thanks for coming and telling me."

"Well, I felt like I had to. I wanted to tell you before I went to the dean. I'll be going now, and I'm real sorry." The door opened and closed quickly as the young man left the room, no doubt feeling like he had overstayed his welcome.

"You handled that really well, Sam," Al, who had remained silent through the whole exchange, said. "I don't think I could have forgiven him so easily."

"He's just a kid, Al. He made a mistake. There's no reason he ought to carry that guilt around with him the rest of his life."

"You're a nice guy, Sam. A heck of a nice guy. But..."

"But?"

"But how the hell did you know it was him?"

Sam grinned. "Elementary, my dear Watson." At Al's expressive groan, he laughed, then pressed a hand to his aching ribs. "I made a logical deduction from the information you brought me and what I learned from Sarah."

"What information? All I did was make wild guesses."

"Yeah, but there was some useful stuff thrown in there too."

"Like what?"

"Like...the open gas jet. I wasn't sure if I had really smelled gas, or if I thought I had because we talked about it. I couldn't really trust my own recollection of the accident. It's so scary to have that hole in my memory."

"Yeah, well," Al growled, "a knock on the noggin like that would bumfuzzle the most mega of mega-brains."

"Then Sarah admitted students used to sneak into the chem building, but the administration stopped that. She wasn't sure about the physics building."

"Yes, she was," Al argued. "She just wasn't going to admit it to you. I could tell by her eyes."

"And I could tell by her voice," Sam added. "Then, when you got the information on the failed experiment, I knew what had to have happened."

"How!?"

Sensing Al was at the end of his patience, Sam leaned back against his pillows. "Making soap from lard and alkali is a classic organic chemistry experiment. I remembered I saw Daniel talking to old Doc Wilson last week about setting up more lab time, to catch up on the physics experiments he missed when he was out sick a few weeks ago."

"And...you figured he probably missed a few chem labs, too."

"Exactly," Sam agreed. "And Professor Turnell is not as understanding as old Doc Wilson."

"Hah! Tell me about it. That old buzzard hasn't changed in twenty-five years! Do you know what he did, the time he walked into the chemistry lab after hours and found me and Danessa...in flagrante?"

Sam smiled despite himself. "No, but I think I can guess."

"Geez, he's still got me calling him 'sir'."

"So anyway, Daniel just took matters into his own hands...and snuck in."

"You got all that from what I said?"

"Yeah."

"Amazing," Al said softly, and Sam heard his voice change as he obviously threw a glance over his shoulder to the door. "Poor kid. What'd you think will happen to him now?"

"Don't know," Sam said wearily. "Your crystal ball is as good as mine. I'll try to put in a good word with Carstairs."

"We make a good team, Sam."

"You know something," he agreed with a smile, "I think we do, too."

There was another knock on the door and Al gave an exasperated snort. "Geez, this place is like Grand Central Station."

Sam groaned in agreement. "Tell whoever it is to go away."

But this time, it was his physician, Dr. Bukstein, who pushed open the door. As the rest of his team followed him in, he said, "Well, Dr. Beckett. How are we doing today?"

Tired of being patronized by the hospital staff, Sam--with a sudden resurgence of his earlier impatience--snapped, "I don't know how you're doing, but I'm ready to get out of here." Enough was enough and he was ready to go home. "When do I get these bandages off?"

"Sam, take it easy," Al put in chidingly.

"It's all right, Commander. I understand his impatience. Dr. Maxwell is going to remove the

bandages right now, Dr. Beckett."

Sam heard a gravelly whisper in his ear. "Geez, Sam, I don't know. This kid looks awful young. I could have sworn he was sucking on a lollipop a while ago."

"Al," Sam growled under his breath. He thought about threatening to throw him out, but he didn't want to take the chance Al might actually go. He needed him there.

Instinctively, Sam jerked away as unexpected hands touched his head.

"Sorry," a nervous voice said. "I should have warned you. I'm going to take off your bandages now, if someone would dim the lights. Please hold still."

Realizing that his hands were clenched tightly around the blanket covering him, Sam forced himself to take a deep breath and relax. "Okay, I'm ready."

As the scissors cut through the gauze, the young doctor said, "When I remove the bandages, don't be upset if you can't immediately see clearly. It will be dark and your eyes will need a little time to adjust."

He remained still as the last bit of covering fell away and the doctor bathed his closed eyes with cool wet gauze, then gently patted them dry.

"You can open your eyes now," the young doctor said.

Strangely reluctant to obey, though the doctors were encouraging him, he sat very still, hardly daring to breath.

"Dr. Beckett," came the young doctor's voice. "Open your eyes."

Shaking his head, Sam whispered, "No." If he didn't open his eyes, then he couldn't be blind.

"Sam," Al's voice, stern, reminded him of his father in one of his implacable moods. "Open your eyes. Now."

Sam automatically turned his head toward the speaker and opened his eyes. At first, he was sure that he was blind, that he couldn't see anything, then he was able to make out a hovering form, darker against the darkness of the room. Trying to focus clearer, he blinked his eyes, resisted the urge to rub them, then looked again. He could make out eyes, nose, mouth...there was a worried frown on that face.

"Al!" he exclaimed, grinning widely, despite the tears forming in his eyes, that threatened to spill over. "Boy, are you a sight for sore eyes!"

Al laughed, the frown disappearing into an almost blinding smile.

"Sam," Al said gruffly, wiping at his own eyes. "Nobody but you could make that bad a pun."

After the doctors examined his eyes and left with assurances that his vision should return to normal, Sam turned to Al.

"Well, you were right."

"Of course I was right. I'm always right," Al boasted. "Well," he temporized at Sam's expression. "Almost always. There was this stripper in Reno once, named Velvet..."

"Al."

"I was wrong when I believed her..."

"Al."

"Because I found out she lied when--"

"Al!"

"What, Sam?"

"Thanks for being here."

"Aw, Sam. Don't go all mushy on me. You're my buddy. Buddies help each other, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember," Sam agreed, thinking back to the night a very drunk Al Calavicci had come

to him for help.

"Now, I'm going to help you again," Al said firmly, picking up the phone. "What's your mother's telephone number?"

Meekly, Sam told his friend, who dialed it in. Taking the phone from Al, he put it up to his ear.

Hearing his mother's greeting, he swallowed hard. "Hi, Mom." He paused a moment for her reply, then answered, "Matter? No, nothing's the matter. Well, it was, but...it's okay now."

Looking up, he saw Al head for the door.

"Hold on a second, Mom," he said into the receiver. Cradling the phone against his shoulder, he called softly to Al. "Wait, where are you going?"

"There are some things," Al replied with a grin, "that are above and beyond the call of duty."

"But, Al..."

"You're on your own, pal. Just remember when she lets you have it," he said with a cocky wink as he started to pull the door closed behind him, "that I told you so."



CHAPTER FIVE

"The Right Stuff"

If time is fluid, then my five years at NASA have been Niagara Falls. I've been riding the barrel, and it's been one hell of a ride. So far, I think the biggest thrill being an astronaut has been the joint mission with the Soviets. One of the highlights was when we exchanged packages of tree seeds in space. The American ones were White Spruce, from Wisconsin--first generation and genetically improved. 'Superior Seeds For A Better World'...or so the plaque said. I heard they were planted in Moscow, in Cosmonaut Park, in honor of the APOLLO-SOYUZ program. What a kick in the butt!

Of course, comin' down wasn't so great, riding the crest of the Glory Wave then findin' out Sam had been hurt. Talk about wipeout. But it all worked out fine, and now he's back tearing up the academic records at old MIT. When we get together--every six months or so if our schedules mesh--all he can talk about is his work and his theories and how exciting it all is. I know the feeling. But he did get to looking a little ragged there for a while.

I think the stress of the accident kinda caught up with him, on top of the fact that he pushes himself too hard in his unquenchable thirst for knowledge. That's why--one night over dinner at El Diablo's--I gave him a little advice...about taking care of Numero Uno.

Some of it must have sunk in, 'though when I said he should 'kick' back a little, I hadn't meant it in the literal sense. The kid took up karate! Can you believe it? Sometimes I think he twists things like he does just to get my goat. Still, I guess all that breathing and centering or whatever-he-does helps, 'cause he was a little less stressed out the last time I saw him.

However, Sam Beckett does not know the meaning of moderation. On the phone last week, he told me he was taking up something called 'mu tai'. Sounds to me like a drink that comes with a pineapple and a pink umbrella. Naturally, he didn't listen to the rest of my advice...about women--or woman, if he wanted to start out slow.

I mean, women, right? I may not understand 'em, but I know what they like. In fact, what Calavicci doesn't know, doesn't matter. Take my recent four-day R&R in Las Vegas, for example. Belinda and I had a ball...both upstairs and downstairs. In fact, I had such a blast, I'm considering keeping a standing reservation at The Stardust so I can slip away whenever I want. Now, if I can just get Sam to come along sometime and count cards for me at the blackjack table...but that's another topic entirely.

We were discussing Sam and women--or lack there of. Sheesh. The blind date I set up for him the next night after El Diablo's was almost as big a bust as the one I set up for him at the disco in Bethesda! Geez, I don't think the kid is ever gonna discover the R&R value of women on his own and I gotta admit, I'm getting a little tired of coaching him.

I mean, I'm only human...and right now I'm having a few problems of my own.

* * *

"Mister?"

The tiny squeak of a voice sliced through Al's fuzzed brain like the proverbial hot knife through butter. Jarred awake, he winced and screwed his eyes shut against the agony of what felt like cerebral dissection at its worst.

"Are you dead?"

Dead? Hah! He should be so lucky. You

didn't get hangovers like this when you were dead!

Moaning, he attempted to open his eyes but only succeeded getting one lid to respond. Sunlight attacked his right retina, causing him to screw the eye closed again.

Holy Mackerel! What the hell had he been drinking last night? Rocket fuel?

"Are you, mister? Are you dead?"

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Al forced himself to look at the short, blurred figure standing over him. A small, inquisitive round face swam in and out of focus before him, belonging to a blond-headed boy of about five or six.

"Mister?"

"No, son, I'm...I'm just doing some very important scientific research...on inertia." Persistent little bugger. "For the Government."

"Are you a astra-not, mister?"

"Yeah..." He dragged himself into a sitting position--a movement which almost split his skull in two--and found a welcomed, solid 'something' to lean his back against. But the clink of empty bottles rolling onto the concrete attacked his brain like artillery fire. As it subsided, he drew a deep breath of fresh, clean air. "Yeah, I'm an astronaut. And like I said, I'm real busy right now, okay?"

Geez, where the hell was this brat's mother?

"If you're really a real astra-not, where's your spacesuit?"

Al gritted his teeth, certain he was about to become the first person in the entire history of civilization to actually die from hangover-induced cranial rupture, when the kid's mother mercifully appeared. With a disgusted snort at Al, she grabbed her son's hand and fairly yanked him away.

He moaned again, resting his head against the same 'something' that supported his back. Eyes closed, he sat there soaking up the morning Texas sun, recalling the previous evening and how he got here...wherever the hell here was.

Let's see. He'd been out with Danielle, hadn't he? An intimate dinner for two, followed by some dancing...in her red satin sheets...no, wait. That was Tuesday night.

Belinda! Yeah, that delicious blonde who worked in the Space Center gift shop. He'd only recently won her over with his fascinating theory on sex in zero-g and how to apply it to a gravity-locked environment...hell no, that was Monday.

Last night...last night it had been...geez, how could he possibly forget his first date with Eva?! Ahhh, young and beautiful Eva. But she proved very different from the other women in his life.

For starters, she wasn't a barmaid or a hairdresser or a sales clerk, she was a career woman, a model. Miss March no less! Just twenty-two--literally half his age--and totally irresistible with her long dark hair and heavy Hungarian accent. Of course, he'd known just how desirable she was long before they'd actually met--her centerfold was taped to the inside of his locker door and he'd studied it in great detail from every possible angle.

Last night he'd had the opportunity to get to know the pin-up as a person. She'd come to the States six months ago, leaving behind an elderly mother and two older brothers, starry-eyed and looking for a small piece of that elusive fame the good old U.S. of A. had to offer. A little depressed, she confessed she really missed her mother, and felt awful about not being there to take care of her anymore.

So, trying not to think about just how alone she really was, she'd immersed herself in her career, enthusiastically chasing her dreams--something with which he could certainly identify. Her big break came in the form of her recent photo spread in PLAYBOY. From that--she told him excitedly--she got a cover and a two-page fall fashion layout in an upcoming issue of COSMOPOLITAN, photographed by the legendary Carl Granson himself. Al told her he'd be sure to buy a copy, then realized he meant it--clothed or not, she definitely had the right stuff.

He found her naivety to the dating habits of the typical American male refreshingly different, so their evening had given him great pleasure on a unaccustomed level--first instructing her how to choose the best wine with dinner, then how to cut loose in a disco, and later...

Unfortunately, that's where the fun stopped. He never got to 'later'. Not after she dropped her bombshell. Dancing close, he'd been about to suggest they go someplace intimate for a little bopping of the horizontal kind when, in a moment of obviously sincere appreciation, she admitted she didn't date much.

Men--she explained--always expected to wind up in her bed. She believed in the beauty of a naked human body, and showing it, but in spite of the notoriety that went hand-in-hand with

appearing in PLAYBOY, she just wasn't that type of girl. It was simply 'art for art's sake'. Period. She'd only gone out with him because she'd seen him on television and in the media and he'd seemed... 'nice'.

Even now, the word made Al wince. He'd been tagged a lot of things in his life...but 'nice' had never been one of them.

And with that single innocent remark, she'd made him feel like a regular shmuck.

Hell. Maybe he was a regular shmuck... since nailing the centerfold had been nothing more than a bet from its inception. Two of the guys had staked five hundred big ones against his chances of putting the make on Miss March before the end of the week. Hell yes, he'd accepted it! How could he not? She lived in Houston, she was terminally gorgeous...and he had a reputation to uphold.

So last night he'd done the only thing he could. He had her home by eleven. And did he kiss her goodnight? Maybe a peck on the cheek in appreciation of an enjoyable evening? Hell, no...he gave her a handshake! A handshake, for cryin' out loud! Just what was he tryin' to prove? And to whom?

Disgusted with that pitiful effort, he'd gone straight over to see Stacey, who was one chick always ready and willing to play bingo-bango-bongo with him. Unfortunately, she was already playing it with someone else. So, intent on drowning his sorrows, he'd rounded up several bottles of this and that and simply spliced the mainbrace until he had three sheets--well and truly--to the wind.

Which was presumably how he ended up here. Wherever that was.

He cracked his eyes open a millimeter or two in a brave attempt to find out, but all he saw was a hulking shadow looming toward him. If he was real lucky, it would be Danielle's old man come to pound him to a pulp. At least that would put an end to the misery inside his head...

"Bingo!"

He groaned at the cutting sound of his nickname--coined over two decades ago by his old buddy Mike 'Stacker' Skyler.

"Bingo...geez, buddy! Belinda called and said you were here! You gotta get your ass in gear!"

Someone grabbed him by his shirt in a vain attempt to get him on his feet, someone wearing a gray sweatsuit who vaguely resembled Zippo--

also known as Lieutenant Commander Doug Henderson, fellow rocket jock and the only other Navy guy in the entire motley bunch. Not to mention the closest thing to a best friend he had in the entire state of Texas.

"I mean it, Bingo. You missed a damn physical this morning!"

"What?" There were no physicals scheduled this morning... "What time is it? Hell, what day is it?"

"Thursday. O-nine-hundred." He paused, and looked faintly amused. "Geez, what happened to you last night?"

Al grimaced. "Don't ask."

"Crashed and burned, huh?"

Al just groaned in utter misery. As Zippo hoisted him to his feet, he cradled his throbbing head in one hand and slipped his other arm around his friend's shoulders for some much needed support.

"Well, this ain't gonna make you feel much better. Goose's holding down the fort, but The Webfoot's on the warpath!"

Al groaned even louder. The Webfoot was in reality Doctor Lawrence Webster--a full-bird Colonel--so nicknamed because he was generally considered a real quack. He was relatively new to Johnson Space Center, but had been clearly unimpressed by the recent evidence of the lifestyles led by his astronauts. For some reason, an endless supply of booze and broads just wasn't on the accepted NASA criteria.

The doctor had tried a varied assortment of cunning ways to catch them off guard--like calling spot physicals--just itching to nail someone's butt to the wall as an example to the others.

And this time, as Al distastefully realized, it looked like he was gonna get his chance.

As Zippo dragged him a few unsteady steps, he took an interest in his outdoor surroundings. "Where the hell am I anyway?"

"Visitor's Center," Zippo answered. "You picked a great time to play celebrity with the tourists and visit the Rocket Garden!"

At that, Al glanced back to where he'd been sitting...against one of the engine exhaust pods of the gleaming Titan rocket on display.

* * *

"All right, Henderson, where's Calavicci?" Zippo opened his mouth to answer but never got the chance.

"Sir!" answered the voice from the shower.

Dr. Webster looked clearly surprised to find his quarry actually present in the shower/change room. He drilled Zippo, who was seemingly in the midst of innocently putting a shine on his already-polished-to-perfection shoes, with a suspicious scowl then marched past the other astronauts, who were busy changing from their sweatsuits into their uniforms, to the only shower in the place sprouting wafts of thick steam.

Al, drenched under a jet of hot, hot water, stepped up to the shower door from the other side. He snapped to attention, his bare shoulders now clearly visible above the divider. Thank God Goose had successfully distracted the quack long enough for Zippo to get him back here! It bought him a few minutes grace--now if he could just manage to stay on his feet while he tried to snow The Webfoot...

"You missed a physical this morning, Commander. Why?" Hells bells...the word was dripping with contempt.

"I was out on my morning run when your order to report immediately to the gym came through, sir!"

He tried not to wince at the loudness of his own voice. His head was killing him--they were gonna be scooping gray matter up off the tiles with a shovel any minute now.

"Run?" Webster regarded him suspiciously, and Al did his best to keep his eyes front and center.

"Yes, sir!"

Webster leaned closer, mere inches from the tip of his nose. "I wasn't aware you jogged, Calavicci?" A dubious eyebrow raised slightly.

"Yes, sir, Colonel, sir. Every morning." Well, hey, almost. And on the double that time Danielle's other half came home unexpectedly and--

"Then you shouldn't have any trouble passing my physical."

"No, sir!" No sweat...if it wasn't for the brain-bender he was presently suffering. Hey... maybe this meant he didn't have to take it...?

"I want to see you in the gym--in your sweats--in fifteen minutes. Did you hear that order, Commander?"

"Yes, sir!" His dog-tags jingled as he snapped his right hand to his brow, offering a salute, longing to be dismissed from under the evil-eye.

Webster kept him waiting, skeptically

looking him over for telltale signs of the very hangover he was hiding. Al held his breath, focusing straight ahead on the far wall.

Finally dismissing him with a half-hearted salute, Webster turned on his heel and marched out.

Slowly letting out a long breath of relief, Al gratefully allowed his shoulders to sag. He had to admit, the shower had made him feel a little better, but still it would be easier to just slide down the wall to the floor and stay there for several hours. Instead, as Goose called the coast clear, he turned off the faucets, opened the shower door and walked out--still wearing his trousers, shoes and socks from the preceding night.

Zippo sided up to him as he stopped at his locker, handing him a khaki-colored towel. "He's gonna be all over you like a bad rash," he warned, nodding after the departed Colonel.

Wiping his face, Al slung the towel around his neck and opened his locker door. "So tell me something I don't know."

Miss March greeted him as she always did with her sultry Continental looks, somehow making life seem a little more bearable. Now if he could only keep The Webfoot from having him for lunch...

Changing into his sweatpants, he tossed a white t-shirt over his shoulder and was rounding up his joggers when a couple of other astronauts approached.

Great. Just the two nozzles he wanted to see right now. The new guys--the instigators of Operation Eva--Toad and Pack Rat.

"Well, well," said Toad, grinning smugly as he leaned an elbow against the locker next to Al's. "Looks like the Italian Stallion's about to get gelded."

Al just shot a narrowed look at the guy. Statements like that not only explained why this yo-yo was nicknamed 'Toad', but why he was beginning to dislike all Marines...on principle.

Pack Rat leaned on his buddy's shoulder and tapped Miss March with a knuckle. "Hope she got to go for a ride last night," he snickered, "or else she's gonna be SOL tonight!"

Shoes in hand, Al slammed his locker door closed, forcing Pack Rat to snatch back his fingers--or loose them.

"Whoa...testy..."

"So how about it, Calavicci? You got proof? Or payola?"

"What I got..." Al began, sitting on the

bench seat behind and donning his jogging shoes, "...is 'til the end of the week."

Toad and Pack Rat crowded either side of where he sat. Endeavoring to just ignore them, Al hitched up his right foot and began tying his laces.

"Know what I think, Pack?" Toad asked with a smooth look. "I think all this stuff we've been hearing about this lady killer is nothing more than hot air."

"Yeah," Pack Rat added, pointing at Al's tattoo, "guess we're gonna have to get this hawk here changed to a chicken!"

When they started making clucking noises at him, Al leaped to his feet--in spite of the agony such a move brought to his head--and grabbed two fistfuls of Toad's neatly pressed uniform. With momentum on his side, he easily threw the Marine backwards against the lockers.

"Lemme tell you something, dipstick," Al hissed in a dangerous tone, getting right in the jerk's face, "I'm not only gonna nail that broad and bring you your souvenir, but another five hundred bucks says I do it tonight."

A sly look slowly crossed Toad's face. "You're...on," he said grinning, punctuating his words by stabbing Al's bare chest with his finger.

After a moment's glaring, Al turned, picked his t-shirt up off the floor then returned to the bench to finish tying his shoes. He didn't need to look in a mirror to know there was steam coming out his ears.

"C'mon, Pack, old buddy," Toad said coolly as he turned away. He slapped the other Marine-come-astronaut on the back. "Let's go plan what we're gonna do with that grand we're gonna win..."

"Y'know," Pack Rat said in all seriousness as they left, "I could really do with a new set of tires on the Mustang. And..."

Gritting his teeth, Al yanked his shoelace tight with a vengeance. Geez, that yutz really ticked him off! He knew better than to let such an outright nozzle get under his skin like that...because it only ever served to get him in even more trouble.

Hell. Eva.

Zippo straddled the bench beside him as he dragged on his t-shirt.

"I dunno why you let that turkey get under your skin like that," Zippo echoed unwittingly. "He knows it burns you up--that's why he does it."

"So what're you now? My mother?" Al grated irritably. The Toad Encounter had done nothing to improve his present disposition...or his hangover.

"No, your doctor." Zippo produced a glass and two tablets. "Take two aspirin and call me after The Webster Workout."

Grateful, Al threw the tablets in his mouth and gulped down some water. "Thanks, Zip."

"No, don't thank me, Bingo. Not yet."

He nodded resignedly as he tucked in his t-shirt, knowing too well that Zippo was right. He was about to pay the penalty for getting caught taking one too many walks on the wild side.

He was about to get his wings clipped.

* * *

I'll admit I like to party as much as--maybe more than--the next guy. But I never have, and never will, let it take precedence over the oath I took when I first put on this uniform. When it comes to the crunch, my duty has always come first. No exceptions.

If the Webster Workout was simply about getting drunk--on my own time--then I've only got one thing to say. Check my record, bud, 'cause I sure didn't earn the stripes on my shoulders by being an irresponsible schlock. Capeesh?

I swear--for a doctor--the guy's got a sadistic streak a mile wide. He must have been a Drill Instructor in a former life 'cause he sure tried hard to put me through Hell. No doubt he was out to prove I was hungover, but luckily he was by no means The Master Torturer I think he considers himself.

See, I know. I'm the joe who spent six years being the Torturee. That's why after a killer forty-five minute workout, when he ordered me to do another hundred push-ups, I couldn't stop the smirk. Only trouble was, all that got me was to do them with one hand behind my back.

That was about as close to real torture as it got. I'd only counted off half a dozen when I began to feel it in my shoulder--my bad shoulder--and that hadn't bothered me for years.

But Calavicci doesn't give up.

In 'Nam when things got really bad, I taught myself to focus away from the pain and on something else. Something pleasant. Then I didn't have to think about whatever it was the VC were doing to me. That, by the way, is

another Calavicci hypothesis--that physical adversity is easily overcome when you're mentally free.

My pleasant thoughts then were mostly of Beth but now things are a little different. Not that the memories are any less gratifying, I'd just prefer not to open that door again.

Somewhere around 'thirteen Colonel' it became automatic, mechanical, as that nude pin-up of Eva popped into my head. I, unh...think it was the push-ups.

If I added up all the minutes and seconds I've stared at that picture, it would total as hours. I know every luscious curve, every pore, every subtle nuance, and there's my pleasant thought. Hey, works for me!

At 'fifty Colonel'--when I was literally taking a prolonged breather between each one face down on the gym floor--he graciously ordered me to change arms. I eventually got through 'em, but I gotta tell you, it was no walk in the park.

We had a 'talk' after that--me lying flat on my back with an arm flung across my face and Colonel Quack gloating over me--about how I was one of the senior ranking officers and thus supposed to be setting examples for the others.

Between breaths, I reminded him of Toad, that Marine meatball who--as I saw it, by luck of some military screw-up they haven't sorted out yet--wore oak leaves on his shoulders and was equivalent to me. Well, in rank anyway.

Wanna know what he said? He said I was wrong, 'cause as of that morning Toad had been cut from the Program and was being shipped back to his duty station at the end of the week.

The reason? Simple. Seems the Colonel has a daughter...and Toad got caught playin' leap frog on her lily pad.

That put him in a bad mood, but it wasn't why he was so mad at me. See, we've got this new bird--named COLUMBIA--sitting in a hanger at the Rockwell Corporation in Palmdale, California. There are eight of us busting our butts in flight training here at Houston--each guy tryin' to prove he's the better pilot and should be the one to fly that baby into space on her maiden voyage.

Make that seven, come Friday.

The Colonel was ticked 'cause he knew, next to Bob Crippen, I was one of the best damn pilots they had and he was stuck with me--Mr. Party--whether he liked it or not.

Talk about an ego boost! In spite of it

all, I was floating on cloud nine for the rest of the day. Geez, I was full of it...and I knew I could win.

Hell yes, I was still gonna charm Eva into the sack! A bet's a bet.

And Calavicci doesn't give up.

* * *

It didn't really matter, Al told himself as his conscious let fly with another guilty kick. If Eva changed her mind about him being a 'nice' guy, so what? After tonight he wasn't going to see her again anyhow. He'd just win this bet, retain his reputation, and move onto the next conquest.

Superbly groomed and attired in a slick powder-blue suit, Al rang her doorbell, running his palm over his hair and adjusting his pink tie as he waited for it to be answered.

Then why the hell did what she thought about him bother him so much?

He donned a smile as the door inched open, greeting her with one of his most charming looks. It quickly faded, however, upon seeing her own expression. She seemed...flustered.

"Al! I am so surprised--but pleased--it is you!"

"Well, I..." He stopped short, a little surprised himself, when she grabbed his arm and pulled him across the threshold. And once inside her inner sanctum, he felt oddly akin to a fish out of water. Hands holstered in his trouser pockets, he cleared his throat, turning as she closed the door. "I know we didn't make any plans for tonight, but I thought--if you weren't doing anything--we could maybe..." He let the question hang.

"Oh, yes...I would love to go out with you again. But first, I have a--how you say?--major problem. Do you think that you could look?"

"Sure," Al said with a casual shrug, wondering just what he was getting into. "What, unh...what's up?"

"Is hard for me to explain." She slipped her hand around his arm and dragged him a few steps. "Come, I show you."

She led him through a small living room, with walls adorned in modern art deco, and down a short hallway.

It was all very ordinary, nothing like he'd imagined. Obviously, she had not let her recent taste of success corrupt her sensibilities, because there wasn't one thing even remotely

flashy about her small, one bedroom apartment. He had the distinct impression that the simple tastes reflected here were those of the true Eva Rakosi, the down to earth young woman beneath the highly desirable model.

As they passed the bedroom door, his gaze automatically wandered in--small but seemingly comfortable, decorated in pastel tones and dominated by a queen-sized bed. At the same moment his eyes settled on a stuffed toy elephant sitting on its pink chenille spread, Eva tugged on his arm, diverting his attention.

"Here," she announced, as they stopped by the bathroom door, directly opposite the bedroom.

Al glanced in. It was small, almost closet-sized, with the usually amenities literally crammed in. The vanity door under the sink was open, and the rug in front was pulled back slightly.

Guessing her 'problem' was one of a plumbing nature, he hitched up his trousers and crouched to examine the interior of the cabinet.

"Watch now," she advised, turning on the faucet.

She'd positioned a saucepan under the J-bend, indicating the trouble. A dribble of water dripped into the pot. He reached out to touch the pipe and found the wet spot. There was a small corroded hole, but since it was in the trap rather than the inlet pipe, it only leaked when the sink was drained.

Swivelling on the balls of his feet, he looked up at her. "It's no big deal. I can have it fixed in fifteen minutes."

She beamed with delight. "That would be so wonderful!"

He stood, rubbing his fingers together to dry the spot of water. "Course, I'll have to get some tools first...unless you happen to have a pipe wrench laying about somewhere?" At the shake of her head, he grinned. "Didn't think so." He started back down the hall. "And a new J-bend. D'you know if there's a hardware store...or a K-Mart...around here?"

"Ah, yes! K-Mart! There is one a few blocks from here. I have shopped there many times."

Al's smile widened. She was so down to earth, she still shopped at K-Mart! "Eva, you're full of surprises."

She took a moment to understand his meaning, then returned his smile. "As are you. The space man who can also make good a...how you

say?"

"Plumbing problem," Al said, then grinned devilishly. There were plenty of women out there, scattered over three decades, who could certainly testify to his skill at fixing their 'plumbing'! He gave Eva a wink. "Back in a few minutes."

* * *

Half an hour later, just as he was tightening the nut on the new J-bend he'd installed, he heard the phone ring in Eva's living room. She'd been hovering over him during the whole operation, looking to help even though there was absolutely nothing she could do. From his present position, lying under the sink with his head and shoulders hidden from view, he sensed rather than saw her retreat to answer it.

Giving the pipe wrench a final, satisfied tug, Al squirmed out from under the enclosed space. Getting to his feet, he ran some water into the sink then watched it drain. The test proved successful, so he collected up the wrench and other items then paused, grinning to himself.

If nothing else, the exercise had made unplanned headway in his strategy. Maybe he wasn't any closer to actually getting her in the sack...but at least--tonight--he'd made it in the front door!

He placed the spare washers, empty packaging, and piece of old pipe in the saucepan, then put it and the wrench neatly in the corner of the vanity bench. Unrolling his shirt sleeves, he became aware of the soft tones of Eva's voice coming from the other room. Since she was speaking in Hungarian, he assumed it must have been a call from home, so he was in no hurry to interrupt her privacy.

Exiting the bathroom while doing up his cuffs, he spotted his suit coat in the room directly opposite--where she'd laid it on the foot of her bed--and went to get it. As he pulled it on, he was distracted by a sudden thought. With Eva occupied on the phone, this might be his one and only chance to get 'proof' of his accomplishments.

Glancing around, he quickly crossed to the whitewood chest of drawers and slid open the top one. The neat array of women's undergarments made him smile with voyeuristic delight. He selected one piece and held it up, letting gravity straighten out the folds. Yeah. A pair

of pink silk panties. They'd do nicely.

Stuffing them inside his coat pocket, he quickly closed the drawer and left the bedroom, innocently straightening his collar and tie as he headed down the hall. Although now well past eight o'clock, the detour to her bedroom had put him in the mood for romance rather than going out to eat. Plus now he was 'in', going 'out' held even less appeal. No way, there was gonna be just a handshake on the doorstep tonight!

Perhaps he could show off another of his skills and cook a meal. So what if his menu and culinary know-how was severely limited. He could impress her with something, he was sure of it. Belinda said he made a mean spaghetti sau--

He came to an abrupt stop upon entering the living room. Eva, her phone conversation ended, was sitting on her sofa...crying softly.

Stunned, feeling an odd sense of hurt flash through him, he quickly settled beside her. "Hey, kiddo, what's wrong?"

That was obviously not the right thing to ask, because it only made the floodgates open even more. When she fell against him and buried her face in his chest, he experienced an unaccustomed feeling of awkward helplessness. Doing his best to comfort her gently, he instinctively knew the news from home had been bad.

Extremely bad.

After several extended minutes, she spoke up, her voice small and lost. "That was...my brother, Istvan," she said quietly, still curled in his arms. "My mother...mama..." She spluttered into tears again.

Al's heart lurched--he could almost feel her loss. Her elderly mother had died...he knew that as surely as he knew his own name. The poor kid. She was too young for something like this to happen. And way too far from home.

Closing his eyes, he gently drew her closer and just held her as she wept. All night long.

* * *

They say 'revenge is sweet', and y'know what? I believe 'em. I'd do it all over again in a nanosecond, if only for the look on Toad's face when I presented him with that pair of pink panties. 'Course the cool grand he and Pack Rat coughed up was sorta nice too...even though I didn't really deserve it.

See, Toad was too thick to realize the proof I gave him simply confirmed I'd been in her

bedroom--not her bed. But I sure wasn't gonna tell him that! Not even Zippo knew that little secret.

As far as I'm concerned, I won that bet...and that slimy leatherneck got exactly what he deserved. To be screwed, royally.

I'm just sorta sorry I won it under the circumstances I did. Eva cried in my arms for most of the night--until somewhere near dawn she finally cried herself to sleep.

You know, she's a good kid, doesn't deserve that sort of heartache. I guess--when you get right down to it--no one really does. It's hard losing a loved one, but sometimes it's even harder watching someone else go through it.

I guess that's why I gave her the thousand bucks. It sure went a long way to buying her ticket home for the funeral. It had nothing to do with feeling guilty about having cheated, nor did it mean anything. It was just something I wanted to do and since it felt good, it must've been right.

While she was gone, her COSMOPOLITAN cover came out. I saw it when I went to the newsstand for the September issue of PLAYBOY. That was the first I'd thought about her in a whole month. Geez, she's a knockout. Yeah, I kept my promise--I bought a copy. But personally, I like her PLAYBOY layout better.

'Course she's back in the States now and working hard. I know, because my Eva Magazine Collection is growing by leaps and bounds. She looks great in Baby Dolls--pink really is her color. Funny that she never called me, but then I guess I didn't bother to call her either.

Let's face it, she was simply a bet--which I'd won--so that was that.

Case closed. Right?

* * *

"Two cappuccinos and..." Al paused, looking from the waiter--who was clearing their dinner plates while taking his order--to the gorgeous blonde sitting across the table. "You want that piece of pie?"

Belinda shook her head. "Have to watch my figure."

He grinned. "Don't worry, gorgeous, I'm watching it for you." Still she declined, so he handed the dessert menu back to the waiter and said, "Just the two coffees."

As the waiter left, Al reached across the table and captured one of Belinda's hands in

his.

"So whatcha wanna do tonight, beautiful?"

Their date had been on the spur of the moment, after Danielle cancelled on him. Such were the problems with married women--they had husbands who returned early from their business trips and completely ruined your plans.

Belinda pouted, pulling her hand free. "Al, you always ask me that...and whatever I say, we always end up doing the same thing--going to bed."

He raised a wry eyebrow. "Is that a complaint?"

"No..." Her pout transformed into a seductive smile as she propped her chin on her laced fingers. "No, it's a promise. You pick. What do you want to do?"

"Well..." Sitting back, he hooked an elbow over the back of his chair and offered a casual shrug--as if he'd only just thought of the idea. Truth to tell, he already had the hotel room booked for Danielle. "I was thinking...maybe we could take a drive down to Galveston. You know...stay overnight. I've got tomorrow off."

"For the weekend? Oh, yes! It's a beautiful evening...the moon's full...we could go for a walk on the beach!"

He gave her a devilish smile. "And make love under the stars..." His smile faded abruptly as he spotted something over her shoulder.

"What?" Belinda asked, immediately noting his expression and dreading the answer. She shaded her eyes with her hand and leaned across the table to him, not daring to turn around. "Oh, God, it's not those awful press photographers again is it?"

"Just one," Al admitted, watching with interest as the lone photographer began pestering a couple as they arrived at their table on the far side of the restaurant. Flashbulbs began exploding like ball lightning...annoying everyone in the vicinity.

Belinda looked more than a little irritated, but kept her back turned. "You'd think we could go out just once without them hounding us."

"Comes with the territory, babe," he said, distracted. Pulling his napkin from his lap, he stood and placed it on the table. "Back in a minute."

"Al...!"

Ignoring her indignant plea, he quickly threaded through the flotilla of tables to where one particular patron was creating quite a stir.

"Just one more," insisted the photographer, clicking off several shots. "If you could just look this way." Click. "And a big smile." Click. Click. "Never mind, let's try another." Click. "Hey, unh...Steve right? Yeah, Steve, could you put your arm around her?"

Al stopped just behind the photographer, amidst a growing group of irate restaurant staff who were busy talking about removing the reporter but doing nothing for fear of making a scene.

Bouncing on his toes, Al peered over the press guy's shoulder for a better look at the embarrassed young woman who had unintentionally become the center of some unwanted attention.

Eva. The young guy she was with put his arm around her shoulders as asked, and when Eva shyly dipped her head against him--simply trying to avoid the publicity--the photographer fired off a barrage of shots. Taken out of context, the tabloids would have a field day running a photo like that.

Having been in the public limelight enough to know how it felt to be harassed by a pushy photographer, Al grabbed the guy by the scruff of the neck and--scene or no scene--began shoving him toward the door.

"All right, pal, time's up."

Eva looked up at the sound of his voice, but Al had his hands too full to stop to exchange pleasantries. The photographer didn't resist--probably because he expected it--merely continued to click off the remainder of the film as he was bodily hauled off the premises.

As Al returned--alone--the maitre d' expressed his sincere appreciation, but he waved the man off in favor of making a beeline back to Eva's table.

Her date was helping her up out of her chair. They were obviously leaving...in spite of the fact that they'd only just arrived.

"Eva," he called, as she started to turn away without even glancing at him.

She faced him with a warm smile. "Al." He took two steps to close the gap between them and she put a hand on his arm, squeezing it affectionately. "Thank you."

"No problem, kiddo," Al said, meeting her eyes and returning the smile. "So how've you b--"

"Excuse us," the young man said gruffly, forcibly removing Eva's hand from his arm. He was younger than Al--looked just a year or so older than Eva--and stood behind her like he'd

claimed possession. Leaning over her shoulder, the bozo ignored him--like he didn't even exist--and spoke in her ear. "We should go."

Eva's eyes were locked with Al's. Then, as if resigned to her plight, she looked down and allowed the guy to guide her away with a hand on her hip. Something about her expression made him intervene.

"Hey, wait a minute." Al reached out, wresting her from the other man's grip and unwittingly starting a human tug-of-war. He met her eyes again. "I mean...you just got here, didn't you?"

The young guy pulled her back. "No, we were just leaving. Thanks for your help...but I would have handled it."

The nozzle had a definite attitude problem, and it was starting to get under his skin. All he wanted was a few minutes--a few words--with an old friend. "Then why didn't you?" he challenged, automatically reclaiming Eva as he spoke.

"Because..." She was removed from his grasp again. "...you stuck your nose in first."

Al made his grab for her, but the guy anticipated the move and whisked her back a step, foiling his attempt.

"Just who the hell do you think you are, pal?" the astronaut asked, irritated by the juvenile game.

"Al, please..." Eva implored, aware of the public interest they were generating. "Steven..."

"I'll handle this." Squaring off with Al once again, he stepped forward and said, "Name's Steven McNamara. You may have heard of me, I'm an actor. I'm also Eva's fiancé. And you are...?"

"Fiancé?!" He looked at Eva for confirmation. Geez, what'd she see in this punk? He'd only known him for thirty seconds and could already tell this pretty-boy was a complete nozzle! "You're not really gonna marry this jerk, are you?"

"Who you calling a jerk, dad?" He thumped Al's chest with both palms, knocking him off balance and causing him to take a step back.

Al rebounded, fit to be tied.

About then, the maitre d' arrived on the scene, anxiously wringing his hands. "Gentleman, gentlemen..." He looked hopefully from one to the other, then nervously over his shoulder. As a last ditch effort, he looked pleadingly at Eva.

"Stop it. Both of you," she said putting herself between them, clearly unimpressed by all the macho crap. "You are both being like children."

Al and Steven were locked in a mortally wounding glare.

"Then perhaps the juvenile delinquent here would like to go outside and play for real..."

"My pleasure, gramps."

Unfortunately, nobody remembered the photographer until the first flashbulb went off.

* * *

One morning paper ran the photo on page four, and wittily captioned it 'Hero Hammers Hunk, Hoping To Hook Hungarian Honey's Heart'. Another reported 'Fly-Boy Makes Pretty-Boy Say 'Oh Boy'', while yet another led their page-two story with his personal favorite, 'Astronaut Tries To Keep Actor From Going Hungary'.

Jeepers Creepers!

Disgusted with reporters and photographers and himself, Al flung all three newspapers into a pile on the couch beside him. He sat forward with his elbows on his knees and ran both hands through his hair.

Webster was gonna have a cow! NASA didn't want bad PR...and NASA didn't get bad PR. Until they got Commander Albert F. Calavicci, USN. Geez, when was the last time anybody had anything negative to say about an astronaut...a so-called National Hero?!

But what the hell was he supposed to do? Stand perfectly still and let that dirtball take potshots at him? He'd been provoked, for cryin' out loud! It was a simple case of self-defense...well, that was his story and he was sticking to it. No one had to know it had been his idea to step outside--not when it was the other guy who took the first swing.

Al smirked and sat back against the cushions, hands clasped behind his head. The punk never laid a hand on him. He must've thought 'cause he was younger and a couple of inches taller, he'd walk right over him and--whammo!--a solid left-hook had decked the nozzle in the first round.

Allowing himself a moment of glory, he grinned wickedly. Judging from the blood, he probably broke the guy's nose! Well, you mess with an ex-Golden Gloves Regional Champ and that's what you get.

His grin faded. Not that it did a whole lot

of good. Eva had been clearly unimpressed with his White Knight bit, and still ended up going off with Mr. Meatball...to get his nose fixed. Geez, she'd probably never speak to him again!

And Belinda? Hell, he'd completely forgotten Belinda. It was only after he'd chased off the photographer and went back inside, that he discovered she'd walked out! Just up and left the restaurant in a huff...and gone home in a cab. It would take days of heavy duty wooing and doing--and canceling his Wednesday night recreation with Stacey--to smooth that one over.

The telephone on the endtable rang, interrupting his thoughts. Al turned his head and simply stared at it, suddenly dreading to pick up. That had to be Colonel Quack. Who else would call him this early, at his quarters on the base, on his lay day? The guys all knew he never spent the night there when he had the next morning off...

Hey, maybe it was Sam? Yeah, it was about time the kid checked in...

Holding that thought--the only one that could convince him to go through the motions of answering it--he stretched out on the couch and lifted the receiver on the sixth or seventh ring.

"Calavicci," he said with a resigned sigh, putting his feet up on the discarded newspapers. Might as well get comfortable...if he was about to be chewed out by The Webfoot.

There was the briefest of pauses, which caused him the longest moment of trepidation.

"Al..."

He swung his feet to the floor, instantly recognizing the calm, and slightly hesitant, voice. "Eva?"

"I wanted to speak with you. About last night."

"Look, I..." He swallowed his pride. "I'm really sorry it ended like it did. I was just--"

"I know," she said softly, cutting him off. "The doctor said Steven's nose was broken in three places."

"Eva..." His voice just trailed off to nothing--mainly because he didn't really know what he wanted to say. On one hand, he was annoyed at himself for the slight tarnish he'd put on her career--and his--but on the other, there was a certain amount of satisfaction to be felt, knowing pimple-puss had got just what he deserved. Still... "Eva, I...um..."

"I have something to tell you."

Uh-oh, here it comes.

"Steven and I--how you say?--broke up."

Feeling his stomach twist into an uncomfortable knot, Al rolled his eyes. Oh, great...

"Al?"

"I'm still here." What did she want him to say? That he was sorry to hear that? Like hell he was! It was just that...it didn't sit too good with him to have been The Cause.

"It had nothing to do with you," she said, as if she'd read his thoughts.

"Yeah, right." Nice try, kiddo.

"Steven misunderstood my meaning when I asked him into my apartment. We had an argument...no, a fight...when I would not--how you say?--go to bed with him. He believed being engaged to be married would make it...easier." Another pause. "He told me...he had not really planned to go through with it."

"Told ya he was a nozzle," Al said, then remembered his own desires. And the stupid bet! Geez, she did it again! She made him feel like a total shmuck!

The soft sound of her amusement brought him back to the present. "Yes. And you were right. I will have to remember this American word... nozzle..."

The way she said it--with her accent--made him smile despite himself. "Look, unh, sitting around here is driving me crazy. Are you...? I mean...d'you wanna do something?"

There was a lengthy pause. Talk about pushing your luck, buddy boy! He was lucky she wasn't spitting nails at him!

"I think I also need to--how you say?--get away for the day."

"Great. Can you be ready by..." He checked his watch. "...o-nine-hundred--I mean, nine o'clock?"

"I think that would be possible, yes."

"Great, I'll pick you up then. And, unh... wear something casual, okay?"

* * *

Even in faded blue jeans and a plain pink sweater, she was absolutely stunning. Al had opted for blue jeans himself, with a checked red shirt under a denim jacket. A navy blue baseball cap--sporting a large golden 'N' on the front--and a pair of aviator's sunglasses completed his ensemble.

When Eva feigned a pout over not having brought a hat, he took his black cap--the one with 'NASA' embroidered across the brow--from where it lived on the back shelf in his sleek, silver, 25th Anniversary Special Edition Corvette, and adjusted the snaps to fit her. Since she had already tied her long hair with an elastic band, she popped the ponytail through the back of the ball cap, just above the band.

Together they looked like a couple of old hayseeds. Which was the intended effect, since they were planning to spend the day incognito.

She never asked him where they were going--as if he were the one person she'd trust to the ends of the earth. There was only a look of wonder in her eyes as they pulled up at the local airstrip. He left her by the chain-link fence bordering the car park--in awe of a student in a Cessna practicing touch-and-go's--and went inside the only building around for miles.

When he came out ten minutes later, he was carrying a clipboard in one hand and a set of keys in the other.

"Al, what is it you are planning?" she asked quizzically, as he joined her at the fence.

He indicated the clipboard and grinned. "This is a rental agreement. We just got ourselves some wings for the day."

Her only reaction was to break into a wide, delighted smile.

Being a small municipal airport, there were only a handful of light aircraft on the ground. Al quickly located the one he'd hired--a Beech 'Baron'--tied-down next to a Piper 'Cherokee' on the grass parking area. It was a small, four-seat, twin-prop, low-wing, but it had a cruising speed of some 170 knots and a 1,000-plus mile range on a full tank of gas.

It was all they needed to get away from Houston, from nosy reporters, and from the reality of their high-profile lives...at least for the day.

They joked around a bit while he removed the wheel chocks, tie-downs and flagged pitot covers and stowed them in the baggage compartment, but when it came to doing his pre-flight inspection, Al was all business.

Soon they were seated side by side. He helped her buckle her harness, then settled a pair of headphones over her ears and adjusted the attached mike for her.

"Just speak naturally," he instructed, donning his own headphones. "No need to yell."

Instruments A-OK, throttle set, mixture rich, a quick check that the props were 'all-clear', and both engines spluttered into life. As they followed the line painted on the taxiway down to the run-up apron, Al checked his fuel and oil pressure readings, set his altimeter and nav-aids, took another look at the aerial map on the clipboard...and noted Eva's astonished look.

"Whatsa matter?" he asked, re-adjusting his mouth-mike as he spoke.

"You are not...using your hands!"

The obvious alarm she expressed because he wasn't even touching the control column caused him to chuckle. Taking hold of it with one hand, he turned the column right then left and pushed it in then out, but the plane kept moving straight ahead.

"Doesn't make any difference on the ground. At the moment I'm steering with my feet."

Her eyes widened for a moment, then she smiled. Clearly, she thought he was pulling her leg.

"What, you don't believe me? Put your feet on the rudder pedals."

When she shot him a dubious look, he motioned the same instruction with a flick of his head. She did, her mouth dropping open with surprise when one pedal dipped as he turned them onto the run-up apron.

Sitting there with both engines purring with precision, he went through his flight check verbally, calling off each check out loud as he executed it. Then satisfied that everything was as it should be, he made an all-stations call over the radio--since the strip was too small to have a tower--alerting other planes in the vicinity that they were about to take off.

Once airborne, he levelled out at seven thousand feet, trimmed up his controls and set them on track. They were headed north to--

"Where is it we are going?" Eva's voice came over his headphones.

Noting her still slightly-in-awe expression, he grinned and gave her a look over the top of his sunglasses that said 'that's for me to know and you to find out'.

She pouted good-naturedly, then resumed her study of the wonders outside and below the cabin window. But she almost had a fit when he took his hands off the controls in order to claim his jacket from the back seat. She made such a hasty grab for the control column in front of her that it caused the small plane to pitch nose-down and bank right.

"Hey, hey, it's okay," he said, putting one hand on her arm and taking control with the other.

"But we are not on the ground now. I thought...we would crash."

"You've never been in a light aircraft before, have you?" Gently easing the nose back up, he let the aircraft settle before he let go the controls again. "See? I've got this bird trimmed so she'll fly straight and level--on her own--for hours."

Eva looked away, embarrassed. "You must think--"

"No, it was my fault," he said, cutting her short. "I should've told you." He fished in the pocket of his denim jacket and pulled out a crumpled pack of Wrigley's. "Gum?" At her slow look, he shrugged. "Hey, I'm perfectly capable of flying and chewing gum at the same time."

The wink he gave her brought her out of herself with a smile.

Some two hours later they landed, without further incident, at McAlester Municipal Airport in Oklahoma. They found a parking spot on the grass, and Eva stood watching as Al kicked the wheel chocks in place and tied down the wings.

Slinging his denim jacket over his shoulder, he put his arm around her waist as they walked across to the only building on the whole, near-deserted airport.

It was a glorious day, Al thought, turning his face to the October sun. With a slight breeze ruffling his hair, the smell of aviation fuel in the air, a beautiful girl in his arms--and no reporters--it was enough to make him feel wonderfully free and alive. Geez, it would have been great to have brought some sandwiches for a picnic--pity he hadn't thought of that until now.

At the two-story building--which was the Manager's Office, the terminal, and the clubhouse for the local Flying Club--they found a pay phone and called for a cab. Thirty minutes later, Al was standing on the curb paying the driver for the ride.

As the cab drove off, Al turned to Eva, who was expressing nothing but child-like delight, absolutely mesmerized by the prospective adventure spread out in the field before them.

The County Fair was in town.

It was a flawlessly perfect stroke of good fortune which he could not have planned for any better if he'd tried.

In lieu of a picnic, they ate corn dogs on

sticks then laughed themselves into stitches as they took turns trying to feed each other wispy strands of pink cotton candy. Eva balked at the idea of going on the rides, so he didn't push her. Instead, they headed up Side-Show Alley where--by pitching baseballs at heavily weighted beer cans--he won her a fuzzy blue bear in a white sailor suit.

Aware of her love for soft toys, it came as no surprise when she promised to cuddle it every night. What did surprise him was that she named it 'Albear', after him. At that moment--knowing she was embarrassed by the underlying meaning of what she'd just said--he almost broke down and said she could have the real thing to cuddle... if only she'd ask.

They had a great day, and flew back late the same afternoon. As he stood on her doorstep while she rummaged for her keys, he had growing hopes that she actually was going to invite him to stay. Certainly, the idea had presented itself--he could tell as much from the shy way she avoided his eyes.

"Today was wonderful," she said wearily, inserting the key in the lock. Without opening the door, she faced him, finally meeting his eyes. "It will be very special to me. Always."

"Me, too." He held her gaze for a moment, then remembered he was holding her souvenir. "Umm...here."

She took Albear into her arms and gave him an affectionate squeeze--making Al wish for the umpteenth time that he could trade places with that stupid bear.

"Thank you. For everything."

"Anytime," he said with a modest shrug. He was hanging back--reluctant to leave--not wanting such a perfect day to simply end here, on her doorstep.

When she stepped toward him to plant a warm, moist kiss on his cheek, he held her in a fleeting embrace. It took all of his willpower to keep it as that, because--feeling the momentary pressure of her body against his--he was aware of how so damn easy it would be to turn it into something more.

"Goodnight," she whispered.

In a single, fluid movement, she slipped out of his arms and inside her front door, as easily as time had been known to slip through his fingers.

That night, like so many others that would come to pass, he found refuge in Stacey's bed... and dreamed wonderful fantasies about his very

own pin-up girl, Miss March.

* * *

Eva's making me nuts!

Every time we go out, every time I bring her home and get left in the cold, I want her so much more it's become like a physical ache. I can't concentrate properly, my work performance has dropped, and Toad's replacement--veteran GEMINI and APOLLO astronaut, John Young--is giving us all a run for our money. I mean, this guy's nearly fifty and he's flying rings around us all!

How the hell do I get this dame to invite me into her bed?

She's not like the others, not impressed by my celebrity status, hence impossible to get between the sheets. Since I'm not the type of guy to force a woman into something she doesn't willingly want to do, I just gotta sit back and wait for her to ask me. I guess--in a way--I've come to respect that...even though it's driving me up the freakin' wall!

Is this love? It's not like it felt with Beth, but what else could it be?

Hell, I dunno...I dunno anything anymore! When I'm not spending time with her, when I'm not going bingo-bango-bongo with one of the others and fantasizing I'm with her, I'm staring at her photos. It's become an obsession--one I share with fifty million other guys.

Worse thing is, it's all public. The tabloids have us secretly married and raising a dozen kids! Geez...those ever-present reporters are starting to get to us both. We can't go anywhere without them hounding us. I gotta be real careful to avoid them when I go out with Belinda or Danielle, or they'd have a field day with that. And can you imagine the headlines if they found out Danielle was married? Sheesh!

There are some nice reports though, like when PEOPLE magazine named Eva and me Couple Of The Year. They call it 'love'. A romance. I suppose that's what it looks like to the world in general, but damn it, why can't I understand this feeling?

Hell, something's gotta give...and real soon. I can't take what she's doin' to me much longer. Guess I've got a decision to make. Do I dump her? Or what?

Geez, we get on so well together too. Whatever we do, wherever we go, we always have a good time. The only thing that's missing from

People

weekly

*We speak to the mother of the world's first test-tube baby

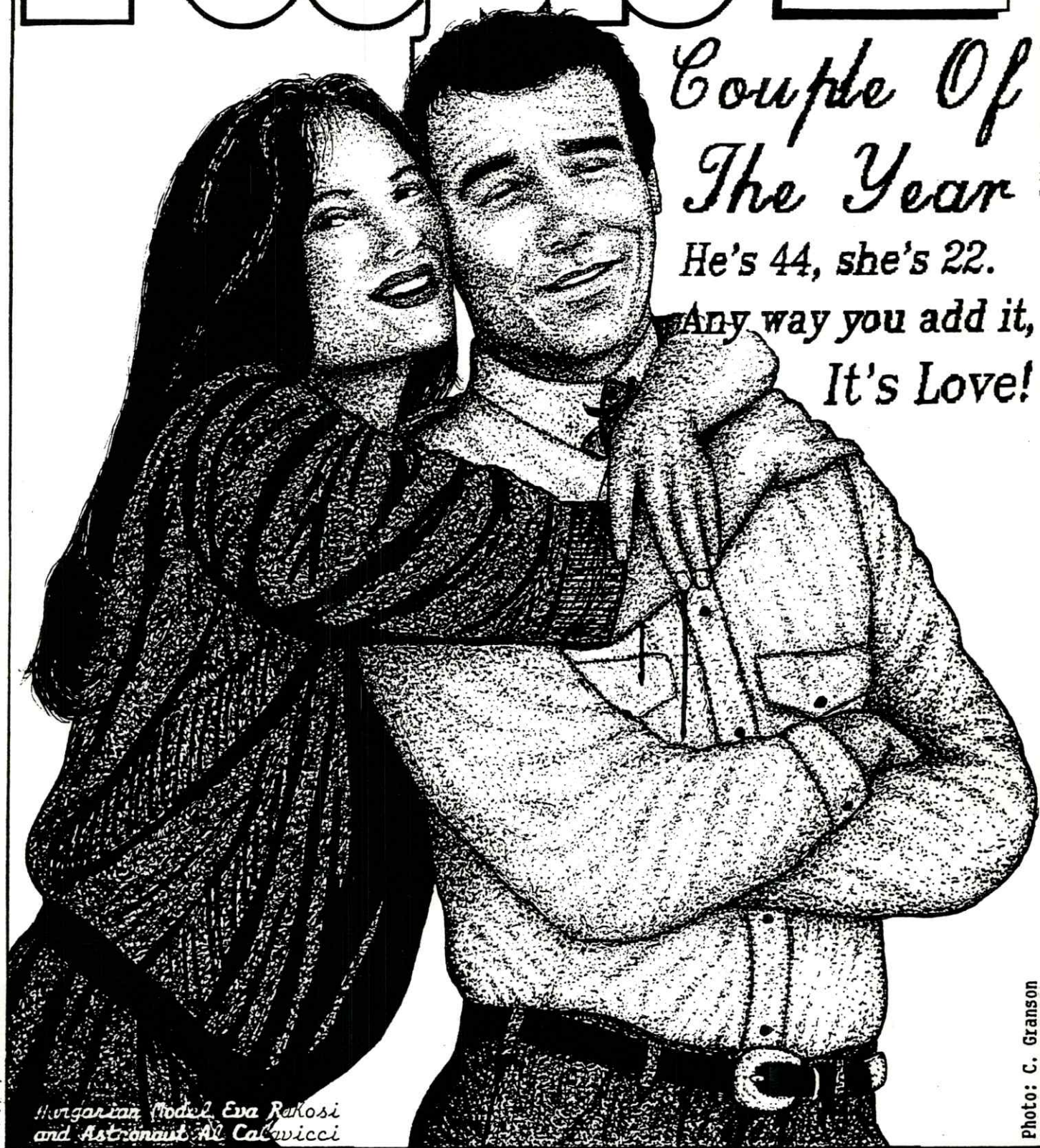
*Robert DeNiro talks candidly about his new film, *THE DEER HUNTER*

Couple Of The Year

He's 44, she's 22.

Any way you add it,

It's Love!



*Hungarian Model Eva Rekosi
and Astronaut Al Calvicci*

our relationship is the sex.

Damn. This broad's got me tied this way and that.

* * *

Al emptied the bottle into his glass, put it back down on the table, then just sat there staring at his refilled scotch. Eyes narrowing slightly, he drew deeply on his cigar, then slowly exhaled the smoke. He'd heard the old adage, of course, about finding courage in a bottle, but told himself he didn't believe it. Not one bit.

His slightly glazed eyes shifted to the telephone beside him. Cigar in hand, he leaned on his elbow and massaged his temple. Damn. He should just get it over and done with. He should just call. Make it quick and clean.

What the hell was he so afraid of anyhow? He'd made his decision. It had to be the right one.

Taking a quick swig of courage, he picked up the receiver and punched in the number--before he changed his mind again.

Another drag on his cigar set him up for the encounter. "Yeah, hi, it's me. Yeah, I know... I've been busy too. Oh, yeah, great. How 'bout you? Uh-huh. Look, unh...I did call for a reason. Yeah. Wanted to tell you something... important." He paused to draw a breath, and smiled drunkenly. "I'm getting married, Sam..."

* * *

Al getting married, out of the blue, to a woman he had never even mentioned: it boggled the mind.

Rushing to make flight plans, pack, and be ready to leave immediately following that big presentation and the reception he had been dreading for weeks, Sam had little time to think about it. It wasn't until the flight out, when he had some uninterrupted thinking time, that he attempted to puzzle out why the prospect of Al's marriage so unsettled him.

Maybe it was the suddenness of it, but he wasn't sure. Sam's private assessment of marriage was that when he met the right person he would know, and it wouldn't take a lengthy courtship to confirm it. Given Al's free-wheeling ease in meeting women and jumping straight into intimacy, he saw no reason to expect it to be any different for the astronaut.

Yet something about the phone call had raised unease in him. Maybe it was the fact that it was obvious Al had been drinking. Maybe it was that he had described his fiancée in such glowing terms--none of which had anything to do with personality or character.

Or maybe, Sam concluded uneasily, it was because Al had shared none of this with him until the decision had been made and the wedding planned to the last detail...and he felt a bit hurt by the exclusion.

As the plane touched down that evening, Sam sincerely hoped that was it. Al deserved to be happy, and he hoped in the depths of his soul that Eva was the woman to share in that miracle.

Arriving at the hotel Al had specified, Sam found that the astronaut had left instructions in the form of a note at the front desk, for him to join the bachelor party already in progress at a place called Midnight Belle's. Someone named Zippo had planned it, and Al's note promised it would 'be a blast'.

Smiling, Sam shook his head and turned away. Pocketing his room key and the note, he picked up his bag and went to his room to change clothes and prepare himself for the festivities. He could just bet it would 'be a blast'. Al knew how to throw a party, and his friends were probably no exception.

Yet even that expectation didn't prepare him for what he saw when he walked into the back room at Midnight Belle's. Al was sitting with his back against the bar rail--his tie pulled askew and the top button of his shirt undone--with a man whom Sam tentatively identified as the host of the party seated to his left. Slow, thumping music came from somewhere overhead.

Their buddies were grouped around them in a semi-circle, enclosing the besequined stripper who was doing a sultry, provocative dance immediately before the rapt guest of honor.

Obviously well on the way to intoxication, the other men hooted and called graphic suggestions as she smiled and moved closer to the sitting man.

Al's eyes narrowed in pleasure as she moved against him in lingering, suggestive moves. His elbows remained firmly on the bar behind him, though from the faint smile playing about his lips and the smoldering intentness in his eyes, it was clear he was enjoying himself without reservation.

The song ended and Sam hovered near the doorway, uncertain whether to enter or flee,

memories of Tom's bachelor party paling in comparison to this one. The stripper--now clad only in a blue sequined g-string--leaned forward and favored Al with a lingering, inviting kiss. Closing his eyes, the bridegroom-to-be responded in kind as his buddies whooped in approval, but still his arms remained behind him--as if now resisting temptation by sheer force of will.

Taking a step back toward safety, Sam saw Al open his eyes and notice him. Now he knew he was in for it.

Lifting one hand, the astronaut casually pushed the woman to one side.

"Hey, buddy," he called to Sam, with an expansive wave and a grin of genuine delight. "Glad you could make it! Come on in."

"Well, I..." Sam began, aware he was blushing furiously, "I..."

The other men had turned to regard him--parting their circle--and Al motioned to the nearest. "Goose, bring my pal Sam on in here." He patted the vacant barstool to his right. "I saved a place for him."

Drawn forward by a grinning 'Goose', Sam found himself pushed onto the seat next to Al. Half-turning, a nonchalant arm about the waist of the nearly nude stripper, Al called to the bartender.

"Scotch for my buddy here."

"Unh, no," Sam corrected hastily, trying to look anywhere but at the bare-chested woman leaning against Al. "Beer..." He faltered as he discovered that the bartender was also a scantily dressed female. Swiftly letting his gaze sweep back to his friend's, he repeated, "Just a beer," as if it were Al he had to convince to change the order.

"Okay," the pilot agreed with a grand nod. "Beer it is. Sam, I want you to meet my friends."

He rapidly began introducing the ring of men by their nicknames, all of whom nodded and greeted him enthusiastically. Evidently, being dubbed a 'buddy' by Al held meaning in this group. After the last man--Zippo--was introduced, Al indicated the woman still leaning against him.

"And this is Ginger. Ging, this is my pal Sam," he said, nuzzling her hair with casual intimacy. In the same tone he had used to order a drink, he directed, "Go sit on his lap and say hello."

"Sure, Al," she said, moving forward without hesitation. "Sam..."

Jumping, Sam withdrew against the bar, lifting his hands to fend her off, withdrawing them hastily when he touched the bare, warm flesh of her waist. "Unh, no...I mean..." The laughter from Al's buddies made him blush even more furiously. "I...unh...no..."

Al laughed and pulled a compliant Ginger away by her wrist. "Sam Beckett, the original Boy Scout," he said with a fond shake of his head, passing the woman over to the man he'd introduced as 'Chance'. "Maybe later, honey, after he gets to get to know you. You go talk to the boys now."

"Okay," she agreed again with a smile and a lingering glance at Sam. "Nice to meet you, Sam."

With a graceful turn, she moved into the room, followed by most of the males who vied for her attention. Dave 'Chance' Healey slipped a proprietary arm over her shoulders, leading her toward a corner table.

Watching, Al chuckled. "Ten bucks says he loses her to Goose in less than two minutes."

Zippo's comment, "Twenty says you're wrong," was lost on Sam who was still mortally embarrassed.

"Geez, Al..." he muttered under his breath.

"Yeah," the commander said in easy, deliberate misunderstanding. He emptied his scotch and, turning to face the bar, lifted the glass to motion to the bartender. "She's a handful, but she ain't got nothing on Eva."

Shocked, Sam turned to the bar as well. "Al--!" He interrupted himself as the woman keeping bar drew nearer.

"Make it a double this time," Al ordered, as she took his glass. He grinned at Sam. "Wait'll you see her, Sam, she'll knock your socks off!"

Sam took a sip of his beer and waited until the bartender had moved away. "I can't believe you're talking about your fiancée this way!"

Though he had thought he'd pitched his voice low enough for only Al to hear, Zippo chuckled drunkenly. "And you say you know Bingo?"

Waiting for his drink, Al grinned, then cast a look over his shoulder at Ginger, who was now sitting on Goose's lap. "One minute, thirty seconds," he confirmed, glancing at his watch. "Pay up."

Snorting, Zippo did so, grumbling good-naturedly as he slapped two tens on the bar.

Collecting his winnings, Al turned to Sam. "So, whatcha been up to, pal?"

Deciding to let the previous subject go, and feeling decidedly uncomfortable in the room where he was the only guest with a blood alcohol level less than the legal definition of drunk, Sam answered cautiously. "I just gave that presentation I told you about, tonight."

"Yeah?" Al accepted his drink from the bartender without looking at her. "Sam's doing some pretty high-powered stuff at MIT," he told Zippo, who nodded politely. Turning back to Sam, he asked, "So?"

Sam reclaimed his attention from where it had wandered to the ribaldry in the corner.

"So?" he repeated, distracted by the nearly naked woman in spite of himself. He wasn't quite the saint Al made him out to be...

"So, how'd it go?" Al asked patiently.

"Okay," Sam said with a nod. "It went okay. The dean said..."

The next few minutes passed without incident, in a discussion of practical application of his work to the space program...if only he got the chance. Zippo seemed as interested as Al, and the exchange was pleasant, although Sam could not fully lose the uneasy feeling he had about the situation.

Al seemed wired, in a volatile mood that usually meant trouble. Despite his jokes and banter, there was an edge to him that fueled Sam's earlier doubts about this whole wedding.

Several minutes later he excused himself to go to the restroom. Upon returning, he found Al had abandoned 'shop talk' in his absence. Again leaning against the bar, elbows propped behind him, he was telling his buddies--who had regrouped their semicircle about him--a raunchy tale about a blonde bombshell named 'Belinda'.

Hesitating, Sam noted that Ginger had vanished and the bartender was busily polishing glasses at the far end of the bar. He reclaimed his seat next to Al, just at the astronaut graphically related the way he'd 'snaked that broad's plumbing' last Wednesday night.

Sam's eyebrows lifted in astonishment. Wednesday?! But he'd called Tuesday night to say he was getting married! The shock of this revelation made Sam feel both angry and disgusted. Maybe there was an explanation for it--but he wasn't sure he wanted to hear it.

Turning his back to the group, he reached for his beer, which had been refilled in his absence.

Al cast him a glance, turned to the bartender and loudly ordered another double. Punching Sam

none too gently on the arm, he asked loudly, "Whatsa matter, Sammy boy?"

Sam's jaw muscles ached with the effort of controlling his temper. He should just leave, let Al sober up, and talk with him about this tomorrow--before the wedding. But the words escaped from him regardless.

"How can you talk like this if you love Eva?" He pitched his voice low, hoping to avoid the rest of the bar hearing what he had to say.

Chuckling, Al shook his head, his answer obviously for the benefit of the room. "Don't worry about Eva, pal." He grinned cockily, like it was an inside joke. "I took care of her plumbing, too."

As Al reached for his recharged glass, Sam's shoulders stiffened in angry embarrassment. Acutely aware of Al's buddies grouped around behind them, he faced the neat rows of bottles line up behind the bar, rather than his friend, as he spoke. "Don't you think you've had enough?" he asked tightly, his voice barely audible above the noise in the crowded room.

Al's narrowed gaze shifted to Sam, the edge of anger the younger man had sensed earlier now glittering clearly in the Naval officer's bloodshot eyes. Sam felt his stomach twist in sudden, fervent regret of having spoken, when the pilot turned his shoulder to his buddies--as if this answer were meant for Sam alone--and took a deep breath to deliver his rebuke.

Like a unexpected reprieve from a higher power, Al was cut short by a voice from behind.

"Commander Calavicci."

Swiveling, Al released his hold on his shot glass and turned to pin the owner of the voice with the glare that had been meant for Sam. "Yeah?"

"Telegram for you, sir," came the reply from a young man in a messenger's uniform. "Your phone service said that I could find you here. It's marked urgent, sir."

"Urgent." Zippo laughed. "Called back to duty, Bingo. The honeymoon's off."

Making a sound of displeasure in his throat, Al tipped the messenger, ripped open the envelope as the young man beat a hasty retreat, and scanned the small sheet of paper within.

"Who's it from?" Goose asked, snickering. "Your intended's mother?"

"A shadow of things to come," observed Chance wryly. "Tracking you down already."

When Zippo took it upon himself to enlighten the group by leaning over his shoulder to get a

look at the message, Al abruptly crumpled the telegram into a tight ball.

"It's from Toad! Out in California!" Zippo supplied, delighted at his success in reading over Al's shoulder. He took a gulp of his drink then added, "Wants to congratulate Bingo on making the legal move."

"Well, at least it wasn't her mother sicing the Baby-Snatcher Police on you," Chance added, still grinning.

"Hey, she's over twenty-one," Goose added in Al's defense, as another snigger went round the group. Then he chuckled too, slapping the groom-to-be on the shoulder. "Just..."

Al snorted contemptuously, getting to his feet and leaning over the bar to toss the balled paper in the direction of the trash can there. "Eat your heart out, Toad...you stupid gyrene bastard."

Sitting back, he shot a glance at Zippo--which to Sam seemed more like a warning--then picked up his scotch glass again. The edge in the man's tone, and Zippo's knowing laugh, troubled Sam, although he had no intention of asking about it now.

As someone offered a drunken toast to the fortunate stupidity of recruits of the US Marine Corps--fortunate for the Navy, that was--Sam decided that it would be best if he just got up and left before things got really out of hand.

Intending on making a tacit departure while the men had their glasses raised, he pushed back from the bar.

Unfortunately, Zippo stopped him from getting to his feet, by placing a firm hand on his shoulder. "So, Sam...what do you think of Eva?"

The question, coming hard on the heels of the mysterious 'Toad's' alleged congratulatory telegram, only intensified Sam's uneasiness. He couldn't tell if it was a legitimate inquiry, or simply the introduction of yet another lewd tale.

Eyering Al, he answered uncomfortably. "I haven't met her yet."

This drew yet another burst of laughter from the surrounding men, and Sam's eyes shifted to them. He knew the sound of amusement at his expense quite well. What was it he had said?

Zippo smirked. "Where did you say you lived--on the moon? She's been on every magazine and billboard from here to MIT."

"She's a model?" Sam asked in surprise, ignoring the further laughter and looking to Al for explanation.

The man's eyes narrowed. Then dismissing Sam with a shrug, he smirked along with his buddies and picked up his glass.

"PLAYBOY's Miss March," Zippo clarified. "Yeah, you could say she's a model."

Al's lips curled into a wry sneer. "Sam doesn't read PLAYBOY," he observed with a cutting sarcasm that the younger man had never before heard Al direct at him. "His tastes run more toward physics journals written in German."

Drawing back, Sam pushed away from the bar, not planning to allow anyone to interfere with his leaving this time. "I'm sure she's wonderful," he told Al. "You should be very happy together. Congratulations."

But before he could get to his feet, Zippo asked, "Did Bingo ever tell you how he met her?"

Sam froze even before Al--his glass paused at his lips--turned the 'ask-and-you're-dead-meat' look on him.

"No," Sam said warily, "no, he didn't."

Zippo sniggered, totally ignoring the look Al threw him. "She was a bet!"

As the other men stirred with renewed interest at this obscene idea, Sam directed his resentment at the man seated on the barstool next to him.

A bet?

Al had conveniently become intrigued with the contents of his glass and sat staring at it as he swirled the amber liquid.

Having gained a captive audience, Zippo took a quick swig of his own drink, then forged on with the story. "See, Bingo had her centerfold in his locker for months--which is unusual for him 'cause he changes 'em regularly--so Toad bet him five hundred bucks he couldn't nail her within the week."

"So what happened?" asked Chance, who Sam had tagged a military pilot although not one of the NASA bunch.

"He won. Naturally." Zippo shrugged and grinned into his glass as he took another swallow. "You're looking at a guy who's had more women than he's had--"

"C'mon, gimme a break, would ya?" Al growled, butting in with another meaningful look at his NASA pal.

Sam's stomach tightened as the groom-to-be turned a look on him that dared him to make something out of it. Barely managing to hold his tongue, he opted for a terse, "I've got to go. Congratulations again."

Sliding off the barstool, he kept telling

himself that now was not the right time to have this out. He quickly headed for the exit, without looking back. Tomorrow, before the wedding, he'd try to talk some sense into the man.

Out in the hall, he reached for his coat. From the corner of his eye, he saw Al follow him, but pretended not to notice as he shrugged on the garment.

"Where the hell're ya goin', Sam?" the astronaut asked in a slightly slurred voice. As he adjusted his collar and slowly turned, Al gestured vaguely at the room they had just left. "Party's not over, yet."

There was an obvious challenge in his tone and manner, but Sam wanted no part in it. Even though he disagreed with the situation with every fibre of his being, it was better to say nothing and just leave. At least until Al was sober and they could talk like rational adults.

"Well?" Al demanded, awaiting an answer.

"Back to the hotel," Sam answered tightly, trying for an even tone.

"What, are you pissed at me 'cause I didn't tell you she was centerfold?" Al settled into a fighting stance. "Or d'you just think this whole wedding's one big damn joke...that she won't really marry a shmuck like me?"

Sam felt a surge of anger at the challenging tone. "Well, you met her as the result of a bet, Al. What're you going to do? Marry her on a dare?"

Al took a menacing step toward him, jaw clenched and fists bunched at his sides. Sam's chin lifted. For one horrible moment, he thought the man was actually going to take a swing at him. But then he stopped dead in his tracks.

"Aw, hell, what'd you know about it..."

Sam pulled his shoulders back. "I know what I see."

"Meaning?" There was open challenge in the tone.

"Do you love her?"

"What?" Al glared at him. "What the hell kinda question is that?! I'm gonna marry her, aren't I?"

"Then tell me. Tell me you love her."

The look hardened. "I just did."

"No...you didn't. And I don't think you can."

Al held his eyes a moment longer, then turned away. "Aw, stow it." He waved a hand in Sam's general direction. "Go on, scram. Get the hell

outta here. Go back to Boston for all I care."

He walked to the door of the back room and parked a shoulder against the jamb--his back to Sam and his hands buried deep in the pockets of his trousers.

Sam felt the hair on the back of his neck stand straight up. Say nothing. Just leave. "Damn it, you know as well as I do. This isn't right."

"Hah!" The pilot scoffed without turning, then muttered something foul under his breath.

Three long strides took him to Al's side, but the man kept staring straight ahead, avoiding his eyes. "Geez, Al, you may be impulsive, but not this impulsive. I mean, you never even mentioned Eva to me until you called three nights ago to say you were getting married!" He paused. "Was it a bet?"

Al smirked scornfully, pushing off the wall as he fished out a cigar. Unwrapping it, he cast a narrow-eyed look at Sam and stuck it in his mouth, unlit. He chomped down on the end, doing a good impersonation of a cynical bastard. "No, it was love at first sight."

"Don't give me that," Sam spat, suddenly vehement. "It's obvious you don't feel anything for her."

Al pulled the cigar from between his teeth. "I feel plenty for her!"

"Of what? Lust?"

"This from the 'expert'! Listen Mr. Morals, why don't you just mind your own business and butt out, huh?"

"And what about this...Belinda? Geez, I can't believe you slept with her after you asked Eva to marry you! If you really loved her--"

"Shut the hell up, Sam!" He turned his attention back to the room beyond the threshold of the door. "Look, if you gotta go...go. I'll catch up with you...some other time."

With that, he returned to the party, leaving Sam alone in the hallway.

Clenching his teeth, the physicist began to follow him, thought better of it, then turned and walked away. Al didn't mean it. He couldn't. Under that veneer of cynical womanizing he was really a pretty decent guy. It was just the liquor talking.

Tomorrow, Sam promised himself as he left the smoky stuffiness of Midnight Belle's, tomorrow he'd get to the truth of it.

It couldn't be as bad as it sounded.

* * *

Sam continued to tell himself that as he sat through the wedding ceremony. All of his efforts to talk to Al had been thwarted. His phone calls had been picked up by his service, and even driving over to Johnson Space Center where the astronaut lived, had been fruitless. He didn't have the proper pass to be admitted onto the base beyond the Visitor's Center, and he couldn't reach Al to get one.

Sam had told himself that maybe it was just that Al was too hungover to answer the phone. He had drunk enough the night before to put a weaker man out of service for a day or two. But watching the groom now, he had to admit Al seemed fully recovered, and very pleased with himself as he watched his bride come down the aisle toward him.

She was beautiful, every bit as lovely as Al had rhapsodized on the phone a few nights ago. There was a sort of an enchanting innocence about her, a shy radiance to her smile that was meant only for Al...and that made Sam's chest ache.

It was only the liquor talking the night before, Sam thought desperately. Wasn't it? This young woman did not deserve that kind of pain.

The ceremony was beautiful, held in the arboretum in the heart of Houston's Memorial Park. Neither the bride nor the groom had family, so there were just a few friends--mostly military from Al's side, mostly gorgeous from Eva's--but they were outnumbered two-to-one by the reporters and photographers on hand to cover the event. Luckily, the media was kept under tight rein by a uniformed Air Force officer named 'Webster'.

Al cut a dashing figure in his dress whites, his best man--Zippo--attired likewise, while the bride and her bridesmaid wore gowns of pristine white taffeta and lace. It was all very white, very pure and perfect, with an abundance of ivory-petaled flowers and snowy silk ribbons, all very much like a fairytale set against the golden light of the setting sun. A fairytale too fragile, it seemed, for the real world...

Sam smiled despite his concerns when the justice of the peace said, "...and I now pronounce you man and wife. Congratulations. You may kiss the bride, Commander."

Sitting on a folding chair in the second row, he watched Al lift his new bride's veil, take her in his arms, and kiss her tenderly--all under a volley of relentless flashbulbs.

Watching the groom break the kiss--under the assault of even more flashbulbs--Sam experienced a warm feeling for the new bride. She loved Al, that was clear from the openly adoring gaze she turned on her new husband, oblivious to all the hoopla taking place about them. She could make him happy...if only he would let her.

Getting to his feet as the happy couple left the canopy covered altar, Sam found himself both looking forward to meeting her, and troubled by the fact that Al, seemingly deliberately, did not meet his eyes.

* * *

Eva was as charming in person as she was from a distance. Meeting her in the receiving line at the reception--held in the revolving penthouse lounge at the Hilton--Sam was charmed by her musical accent as she responded to Al's brief and to-the-point introduction.

"Dr. Beckett. It is a pleasure. Al speaks of you often."

Sam's eyes slid to Al's but found only a carefully neutral gaze. Choosing not to comment, he leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"Congratulations," he said, as he had to Al when he shook his hand. "I hope," he continued, and the sentiment was heartfelt, "you're very happy together."

Moving away, he found a quiet corner in which to wait for an opportunity to speak to Al. The commander was charming, attentive to his bride, and pleasant to his guests--except to Sam, whom he never approached.

The cake was cut, toasts made, and the press chased away by Colonel Webster. Nearly immediately after the departure of the reporters, Al began to maneuver his new bride toward the door. He had booked the honeymoon suite at the same hotel, which, considering the amount of champagne he'd consumed in that past hour, seemed reasonable foresight.

Either that, or Al couldn't even wait long enough to drive across town to get her into bed.

Sam guiltily chewed a lip, immediately condemning the idea as unworthy.

Yet as Eva dallied to talk to her friends, her new husband became more and more insistent. His gaze lingered a bit longer on hers, his body language making it obvious what he had on his mind. The patient, charming Naval officer had waited long enough.

By the time the bouquet was tossed, and captured by a Sarah--a willowy redhead from a New York modeling agency--Al's hand was resting firmly on Eva's waist. With a jaunty salute and a wink at his best man, he attempted to guide his smiling bride toward the doorway.

Slipping from his grasp with the same elusive grace she had shown so often before, she kissed him lightly on the cheek. "One more moment, please, Al. I must speak with Elysa."

Obviously displeased, Al let her go--he had no other choice unless he wished to make a scene. Taking the opportunity, Sam made his move to right the situation between he and his friend.

"Al?" he said, stepping forward before any other well-wishers could intervene. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

For a moment, Sam thought the older man would refuse, then he gestured curtly toward the hallway. Following him, Sam parked his champagne glass on a free table corner and hoped fervently that he had overreacted the night before and everything was going to be fine.

But the look on Al's face when he stopped in the empty hallway was not promising. The older man turned to face him, just across from the double elevator doors on the far side of the corridor.

"What?" he asked curtly.

"Look, Al," Sam said, trying for reason. "I just want to talk about last night."

Fixing Sam with a coolly challenging stare, the groom tucked one hand in the pocket of his dress whites and regarded the younger man defiantly.

"Haven't you said enough?" he grated. "Or do you have some further words of advice for me to use when I finally get her into bed and get the payoff for this screwed-up mess."

Payoff.

At that one word, Sam's apology fled. Were his instincts right all along? "What are you saying, Al? That you really did marry her on a bet?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake! Let it go, will ya?" Disgusted, he shook his head.

There was a soft chime, announcing the arrival of the elevator across from them. Both men briefly acknowledged it, then met each other's eyes.

"Al--"

"I don't wanna hear it, Sam! I'm gonna go get Eva, take her to our room, and caz-za-zoom!"

I married her, so now I'm entitled to it...fair and square. So just change the record, pal, okay?"

He made a move to return to the reception, but Sam stopped him with a firm hand on his uniformed shoulder. Sure Al was angry, but this cavalier attitude wasn't fair to Eva. "How do you think Eva will feel when she hears this... get-her-on-a-bet story?"

Still annoyed, Al shrugged off the restraining hand and simply glared. Although Sam had to wonder if all of this resentment was directed at him. The Al he knew had to be feeling a little ashamed of himself for such a scam. Didn't he?

The man's next words, uttered with a smirk, seemed to completely deny that theory. "Why? You plannin' on tellin' her?"

At that moment, the bride in question appeared in the doorway, startling them both. In the blink of an eye, her happy smile dissolved, replaced by a look of teary-eyed hurt--alerting them both to the fact that she'd caught the end of the conversation.

Fixing Al with a brief expression of incredible pain, disbelief and resentment, she pushed past between them and fled into the waiting elevator.

"Eva, honey, wait. Eva!" Al took a few steps after her but stopped cold as the doors slid shut. He aimed vehement kick at the hapless ashtray before the elevator. "Damn!"

Sam felt sick. Eva was the last person he wanted to see hurt by all this...but damn it, Al had made certain that had been inevitable from the beginning. He also felt more angry with his friend than he ever had in his life.

Fuming, he followed the commander to the elevator, stopping beside him as he stabbed the call button several times.

"What the hell is it, huh?" Sam asked. "You don't love her...geez, that'd be obvious even to a blind man! Is it that she's good in bed? Your 'reputation' at stake if you didn't win your bet? What, Al? Talk to me."

Al turned on him--violently. "Lemme tell you something, buddy. I haven't slept with her. D'you understand me? Marrying her's got nothing to do with winning any freakin' bet."

"But Zippo said--"

"Screw what Zippo said!" He indicated the new wedding ring on his finger. "This is the only way I can get into her bed. Not goin' steady, not engaged, but married. And--geez--"

you just completely stuffed it up!" He hit the closed elevator door with his fist. "Why the hell am I tellin' you this?"

Sam was dumbfounded. It was just lust. Experiencing an odd sense of pity for the man, he lowered his voice. "Maybe because...in your heart you know it's wrong."

Al bristled, taking immediate offense. "It's none of your freakin' business anyway, so just piss off!" Impatiently hammering the call button again, he stared up at the floor indicator.

Sam didn't move. "Damn it, she loves you --really loves you--and you're only going to

hurt her."

"Sam..." Al warned in a low growl, clearly in no mood for a Preacher Beckett lecture.

The second elevator chimed as it arrived. The doors parted and Al was immediately inside it, pressing the button for his floor.

Sam opened his mouth to speak, but Al cut him short.

"Just...go..."

They held each other's eyes as the doors closed between them. Al could not have known just how much his look, and his tone of voice, had hurt.

Because Sam felt cut to the quick.



CHAPTER SIX

"Fresh Start"

The kid doesn't know how close he came to costing me everything. Eva wasn't just mad--she was livid! When I opened the hotel room door, a high-heeled shoe came sailing out, along with a spat of Hungarian that I understood perfectly well even though 'goulash' was about the extent of my command of the language. She was really steamed!

Nobody but me could've gentled her down the way I did. Nobody. Certainly not Boy Scout Beckett... although I did sorta steal his tactics. See, I've watched him give people that sick puppy look--the one that melts them into an extremely pliable puddle right at his feet.

So, I took the 'honest and humble' routine for my own. When I finally got into the room, after nearly taking the spiked heel of her other shoe right between the eyes, I apologized. Boy oh boy, did I ever apologize! Practically crawled on my knees in abject pleading for her forgiveness.

Then, the stroke of genius. When she was thoroughly letting me have it ...I agreed with her. Told her I was an absolute worm to have made up that stupid bet story to tell Sam and the guys, simply to cover the fact that I hadn't really slept with her. Here, I hung my head and, I swear, I almost managed a blush when I added that it wasn't considered macho among American men to view marriage as a prerequisite to sex, and so I'd lied through my teeth so they wouldn't know we



hadn't...you know.

Then I held my breath and gave her another sick puppy look, wondering if she was ever gonna let me...you know.

She bought it. Hook, line, and sinker. Looked at me like I was some kinda White Knight for taking all that flak from my buddies until it got so bad I was forced to lie to them, and yet still never once pressured her to come across.

Nobody--but nobody--could have calmed her down...let alone got the payoff before we even left the hotel for the Poconos.

Hah! Take that Mr. Morals, and thanks for the lesson on how to do it! Geez, who the hell does he think he is anyway? But I showed him. Didn't I?

Still, even with getting what I wanted as often as I wanted it--'cause we had the exceedingly good fortune to be snowed-in at the resort...but that's a different story--I was still pissed as hell.

At Sam, I mean. There was nobody else to be so mad at.

So I sent him a postcard, telling him we were very happy--underlining the 'very' about a gazillion times. Let him chew on that, I thought when I tossed it into the 'out mail' basket at the desk and went back upstairs to my Playmate bride.

Yet somehow, it just didn't make it 'all better' like I thought it would. I was still mad as blazes...but I'll be damned if I know at who.

* * *

Graduation day had arrived, and Sam Beckett--youngest man to graduate from MIT with three doctorates--was unwilling to awaken fully to meet it.

It looked as if he would stand alone to claim his degrees. Tom was out of the country, and Katie--in the final stages of her second pregnancy--couldn't travel from Hawaii. His mother had felt she was needed there, since Katie had been experiencing difficulties and was presently confined to bed.

Both instances were understandable, but nonetheless took a little shine off the luster of the day.

Not yet fully awake, he pondered staying in bed and just pretending he had overslept. It would be so easy to let his present light doze

deepen into true sleep...

Of course, he couldn't do that. He would get up and get dressed, run the gauntlet of press and high pressure recruiters from every type of company and university known to educated man, and accept the degrees. Then, he would have to finally choose among the 'headhunters' and commit to a course of action. He didn't really have a reason for not having answered them already. There were plenty of choices, some of which were even moderately attractive, yet there were none that excited him.

There were dozens of telegrams and cards of all kinds. There were some from the want-to-be employers, some from friends and some from family. But there had been no congratulations from the one person from whom he'd been longing to hear.

Al.

In fact, Sam ruefully concluded, there was likely be no word from the older man at all. And there, perhaps, laid his deepest discontent with the day.

Two weeks after the wedding fiasco in Texas, Al had written a short, tersely worded postcard saying that he and Eva were on an extended honeymoon in the Pocono Mountains and were 'very happy'. The commander had made certain his emphasis was clearly stressed--in fact he'd underlined it twice--but Sam wasn't sure if it was meant to indicate that Al had sorted out The Bet misunderstanding...or if it was simply in defiance of the fact that he'd called his bluff.

After reading it slowly about a dozen times, he had quietly opened a text book and slipped it inside. That sole postcard had arrived nearly five months ago, and had proven to be the only personal communication he had received from the man.

There were--of course--the press releases from NASA, AP coverage as both Al and the Space Administration continued to push full-steam ahead toward the first launch of the Space Shuttle. Commander Calavicci's name would occasionally appear in print...but there was little else.

A few months back, a follow-up article to the glitzy, fairytale marriage of 'The Playboy Playmate And The Astronaut' in PEOPLE magazine, hinted that all was not well on the domestic front. Yet the accompanying photo of a radiant Eva on Al's arm seemed to deny that.

Completely.

Calling, writing, even sending a telegram,

had brought no response. There seemed to be no reason for it, other than that he had been right all along...and Al didn't want--or simply refused--to admit it.

Several evenings--spread out over the months--usually very late after he'd put in exhausting, lonely hours in a lab or library, he'd try calling 'just once more'. Al's service would pick up the line, Sam would leave a message, and that would be that.

Then, three nights ago in a last ditch effort to re-establish communication, Sam called for what really would be 'the last time'. After leaving the message, "I'm graduating," with the officer's answering service, he could do nothing more than hope that this time there would be some sort of reply.

Now, it was graduation morning...and it didn't look as if there would. Groaning, Sam nestled deeper into the covers, his thoughts drawing him further from the refuge of sleep.

He didn't want to wake up, he thought grumpily. But, there was the smell of coffee, bacon and some kind of--

"You like it black, or what?"

The voice, coming from the direction of his bedroom door, jerked him from his drifting. With a gasp of surprise, Sam tried to roll hastily to his feet. Instead, he found himself tangled in the bedcovers and landed in an ignominious heap on the floor.

Stunned, he looked up from the mound of blankets to see Al's immaculate, white-uniformed figure leaning casually against the door jamb, with his ankles crossed and his hands in his trouser pockets.

The Naval officer smiled a tight smile. "What the hell're you doin' on the floor?"

"What the hell are you doing in my apartment?!" Sam pushed himself up to the bed, momentarily wishing he didn't sleep in the nude so he would have a bit more dignity available to him. Trying--unsuccessfully--not to be obvious, he wrapped the sheet about his waist.

"I'm here, okay?" Al's voice was gruff. "You think I'd miss this?"

"I don't know." Sam lowered his eyes. "I didn't think it...meant anything to you, not anymore." His head came up, chin tilted defiantly. "I've called. Where've you been?"

"If you'd've really needed me, I'd've been here." Al's voice was cool. "I was...busy."

"Right." Still embarrassed, Sam re-adjusted the sheet around his waist. "Is, unh...Eva with

you?"

"Nope, just me, pal," Al said flippantly. Pushing himself from his spot against the doorway, he clapped his hands together. "So, come on! Get your ass in the shower and dress! You gotta graduate in a couple of hours."

Turning, he called over his shoulder, "I've got breakfast going--if you can stand my cooking--so get the lead out or I'll eat it all myself."

Watching him leave, Sam broke into a slow smile and shook his head.

* * *

After an extremely quick shower--which undoubtedly set a new Beckett Record--Sam dressed in a pair of neatly pressed, dark gray suit trousers and a white, pin-striped shirt. He was busy putting a knot in his tie as he headed out toward the kitchen.

Pulling his tie into place, he continued straight past Al--who was straddling one of the kitchen chairs backwards, with one arm resting on the seat back and the other supporting a raised mug of coffee--over to the percolator to pour himself a cup. When he turned--sipping the surface of the hot, black liquid--he noted that Al was reading an open magazine, spread on the table before him.

With a start, Sam realized exactly what magazine--an old issue of PEOPLE. Correction: the old issue. And it didn't take a genius to figure out which article the commander was reading.

They met each other's eyes for a moment and, from the way Al closed the dog-eared magazine and hastily pushed it into the center of the table where his hat sat, Sam sensed something was wrong.

Still, he put on a casual look. "So how's married li--?"

"D'you read this?" Al asked abruptly, cutting him off. He tapped the cover of the magazine with his finger.

Sam hesitated. "Unh...yeah...?"

Al gave a nonchalant shrug and sipped his coffee. "Then you know how it is."

"You mean...?"

"I mean Eva and I..." Sighing, the commander leaned on the chair back and shook his head. "We got a divorce, okay?"

Sam opened his mouth to say something, but Al held up one hand to stop him.

"And I don't want to go into the whys and wherefores. I did her an injustice--as they say in hero books--six months later, she's gone. Finito."

"But--"

"No buts, Sam. You were right, I was wrong." He shook his head resignedly. "Cost me every nickel I had too. Not to mention the bruises."

"She hit you?"

"Yeah...with a toaster."

"A t--?" Sam stopped himself, deciding it was better he didn't ask.

"Threw it at me from clear across the kitchen," Al revealed, demonstrating. "She has a thing for small appliances as ammo..." His eyebrows raised. "Guess I was lucky it wasn't the proverbial frying pan."

Sam nodded uncertainly, realizing that this casual air--and the fact that he was here now--was Al's way of apologizing for his lack of communication, and maybe his behavior at the wedding. He knew Al didn't do apologies very well, and as such, accepted this one for what it was.

"I'm glad you're here," he said, and smiled in honest pleasure. "I missed you."

"Yeah, well..." Al shrugged--a quick movement of an unformed shoulder--and stared into his mug. "Same here," he added roughly, almost drowning his words as he took a swallow.

A long moment passed. When Al glanced up, he had that familiar cocky grin on his face. He was about to say something, when he suddenly frowned and sniffed the air.

An alarmed look overtook him as he sprang to his feet and lunged toward the smoking skillet on the stove. "Av, shoot, Sam...the bacon!"

By unanimous decision, they decided to go out for breakfast.

* * *

Sam's come a long way in learning how to handle people. A headhunter from a 'name' University just happened by our table at breakfast and invited him to lunch after the graduation ceremonies.

The kid was polite, said he had gotten his letter about the Professor's position and was considering it, but he was busy for lunch with 'an old friend from out of town' and--by the way--he wanted to introduce him to Commander Albert Calavicci from NASA. It was well done; polite, firm, and very non-committal.

The kid missed the look the recruiter shot me. Sam was too busy sliding a glance over at me--making sure the self-invite to lunch was okay--to notice the guy was green with envy because I had the boy genius' ear and he didn't. But then, that's why I had it--because Sam and I are buddies, despite that business about Eva, and Sam knows it. I would never abuse it, offering him a high-profile, good-for-the-cause-but-a-dead-end-waste-of-potential position like this joker was selling.

Correction: trying to sell.

When he left, Sam told me he wasn't buying. He could see the offer wasn't for him, although it didn't sound like the kid knew exactly what his next move should be. Right then, he just needed somebody to listen. So that's what I did...just listened.

He was so wired during breakfast that I don't think he actually ate anything for talking. The subjects ranged from his job offers--which I didn't offer an opinion on, only a sounding board--to the flavors of quarks, to whether anyone could set up an experiment to actually catch a proton in the act of decay.

That one kept him busy all the way to the campus. It was only when we pulled into the parking lot that he got quiet--real quiet--and with Sam that's a bad sign.

* * *

By the time Al had the car parked and they were walking toward the auditorium, butterflies were dancing again in Sam's stomach. He hated giving speeches--hated it when all those self-assured, secure big shots hung on his every word. He was never sure if they were waiting for him to be brilliant and live up to his press--or fall on his face to prove he wasn't a Boy Genius after all.

"You're gonna do fine, Sam," Al said, walking shoulder to shoulder with him, matching pace to his slowing one. "Don't sweat it."

Drawing a deep breath, the young physicist nodded. "Yeah, sure. I'll just be real glad when this is over."

"Sure." Al drew on his cigar, eyes dancing with mischief. "Don't let it throw you that you're talking to enough brain power to light the Vegas strip for a week, enough brass to outfit the Queen Mary and--"

"Al...!" Sam's voice was exasperated. "You're supposed to be helping me, not scaring

me to death!"

"Helping, huh..." Al scratched one eyebrow thoughtfully. "Well, you could try that old chestnut about thinking everyone in the audience is in their underwear."

Surprisingly, Sam laughed. "My Dad used to tell me that when I had to give speeches in grade school."

"There you go," Al agreed encouragingly. "You just gotta take it up to a more adult level." At Sam's quizzical look he explained. "You find you a blonde in the audience--or a redhead or brunette--doesn't matter, so long as she's good looking." The astronaut gestured excitedly with his cigar. "And then you imagine what sort of underwear she's wearing. Blondes like gold silk, redheads like green. Tall women like garter belts, petite one's like teddies. Then you--"

"Al," Sam protested, "I'm sure that's not what my Dad meant."

"Probably not, but it sure beats the hell outta the picture of your Old Maid principal in her bloomers, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, well..." Despite himself, Sam laughed. "I guess so. But don't you think it might make walking off the stage a little embarrassing?"

"Nah," Al disagreed, tossing his cigar onto the pavement and grinding it under his heel. "A graduation gown can hide a lot of things." He shrugged. "Of course, you could just stick to guessing what matrons have on. And," he added as they approached the entrance where several men in suits had gathered, "overweight deans." He suppressed a theatrical shudder.

Sam halted, reaching into his pocket. "I nearly forgot. Here." As he handed Al a ticket, the people walking behind them neared and then reached them.

Taking the bit of paper, the astronaut regarded it. "A family seat? It's too bad Tom couldn't have made it to use this."

"That one's yours," Sam answered. "I had another just in case he could make it too. I thought...I was kind of hoping that you'd show up." His eyes slid away from Al's as they had in the apartment earlier.

As the older man was about to speak, a hand thumped Sam's shoulder from behind. "Dr. Beckett. So good to see you. Congratulations on your accomplishments."

Before Sam could answer, the man--whom he recognized from the picture that hung in the

campus building which bore his name--was gone. Caught up in the flow, the physicist and his companion began moving forward again as well, heading toward the entrance.

Blushing faintly at the praise, Sam felt his butterflies resurface. That made three Nobel Prize winning scientists that he knew of present in the audience. His steps faltered and slowed. Three! And--

"Boxer Boys," Al said confidently into his ear. He clapped a hand on Sam's shoulder, effectively cutting off his rising panic, and steered him toward the crowded entrance. "He's wearing Boxer Boys, Sam. I'd bet my reputation on it."

* * *

Boxer Boys.

That thought, and the sight of Al sitting proudly attentive, impeccably gleaming in his dress white uniform in the family seats, sustained Sam through the ceremony and his speech.

There was polite applause after he sat down, and his overwhelming relief at having finished it without making any mistakes blunted any doubts about whether he was understood. It wasn't until he was making his way through the crowds afterwards that he began to realize his true intent had been missed, it seemed, by everyone.

Just as he and Al were making their approach to the door, a Saville Row suited representative from Cornel Electronics caught him.

"Samuel!"

Sam felt his stomach sink at the call, not only because he couldn't plead a pressing class schedule and escape as he had the week before, when the dapper Englishman had caught him in the student union, but because he hated being called 'Samuel'.

He and Al stopped side by side. "Mr. Saint John," he said politely, turning and mustering a tight smile.

"'Sin-jin', Samuel," the Englishman tut-tutted. "It's spelt like 'St. John' but it's pronounced 'Sin-jin'."

"Okay...St. John," Sam said correctly, edging a wary look in Al's direction.

The Naval officer merely shrugged with his eyebrows then busied himself by hunting through his pockets for a cigar.

"Brilliant speech, Samuel...the

possibilities are fascinating when one stops to ponder them! Absolutely brilliant!"

"It's just 'Sam', Mr. St. John," he said evenly.

"Oh...mmm..." the man murmured, still smiling. "Whatever you say, Samue--Sam."

Hoping to change the subject, Sam said, "Al, this is Edward St. John..."

"The fifth," the man put in formally, briefly extending a hand, a nod and a smile in Al's direction.

That interrupted Al's search for a stogie. He hastily offered his hand. "Oh...yeah...Al--"

"No need for introductions," St. John said, holding up his left hand as if to forestall the astronaut. They dropped hands. "Your accomplishments at NASA are quite legendary, Commander Calavicki," he said, mispronouncing Al's surname. "I've read all about you."

"It's 'vee-chee'," Al corrected calmly. "'Cala-vee-chee'. It's Italian."

"Quite," St. John said smoothly, as if a little distasteful of the combination of Navy flyboy-turned-astronaut, all wrapped around an Italian libido. Clearly, his upper-class British background considered Al as nothing more than a satyr. Quickly replacing the expression with a more pleasant one, he added, "Are you here on business, Commander, or simply as a friend?"

Sam frowned at the sharpness forming in St. John's gaze as he said it. What the hell did he think? That Al was trying to recruit him? Before he could speak, the astronaut answered with an amiable smile.

"As a friend, Mr. St. John. NASA doesn't send out its astronauts to act as recruiters."

"Rather," St. John agreed with a smile. "Then maybe you'd throw your influence onto our side."

"Our'?"

"Indeed. Cornel has authorized me to offer Dr. Beckett a permanent position with our physics department. He can utilize his full potential with us...if he accepts our offer. We have several new research projects we're bringing on line." He turned a smile on Sam, throwing out the bait. "He can have his pick." He left the carrot dangle enticingly before Sam.

At least, he clearly thought he left it dangle enticingly.

"Well," Al responded with a glance at Sam, who wasn't biting. "Some folks say Sam's true gift is in quantum physics." His dark eyes

shifted back to the recruiter. "But Sam makes up his own mind about things like that, and about the research he chooses to pursue. I think he'll make the right choice."

Stepping into the silence, Sam cleared his throat. "I'm considering your offer, St. John, I'll get back to you within a week." He took a step away. "If you'll excuse us, we're late."

"Of course." St. John's eyes still lingered suspiciously on Al before shifting back to Sam. "I'll be looking forward to hearing from you. Perhaps, this evening, you'd allow me take you and the commander out to dinner."

"No, thanks," Sam answered, edging closer to the doors crowded with families, graduates, and faculty. "But, I'll keep in touch."

Letting the crowd separate him from Edward St. John, the fifth, he headed for the relative safety of the parking lot, trusting Al to part the crowd and follow.

Before he was safely away, however, a silver-haired gentleman stepped before him. "Dr. Beckett, congratulations on a brilliant speech."

Sam felt his smile stiffen. He had grown heartily sick of that word in the minutes after giving his address. Couldn't anyone think of anything else to say after he had posed them all the questions that so intrigued him? He had woven them into a speech about beginnings and endings, graduations and elementary understandings, and how sometimes they were one and the same. Hadn't anyone understood enough to comment on it other than to say it was 'brilliant'?!

"Mr. Millard," he said in forced politeness to the man who represented a mammoth company renowned for its military contracts. "I'm in sort of a hurry."

"Of course," the man replied, ignoring Al who had caught up to the physicist and stopped at his shoulder. "That's perfectly understandable. I'd like to take you to dinner and further discuss our proposal."

"Um, thanks," Sam answered, edging his way toward the parking lot. "But, I'm afraid I have other plans. I got the literature you sent me, I'll let you know my decision."

"As quickly as possible, Dr. Beckett," the recruiter said with a smile. "Our computer technology is on the cutting edge and every bit will be at your disposal. You know," he said, taking a step closer to Sam, who nearly bumped into Al in his desire to get away, "positions as

lucrative as this one don't come along every day. And we would really like to have you take advantage of it."

"I'll think about it," Sam assured him again, then turned and headed into the crowd.

Al would forgive him for foregoing introductions, he was certain. For the moment, all he wanted was to get free of the recruiter and all the others like him.

This time, he kept his head slightly down so he wouldn't have to make eye contact with anyone else who would detain him, and maintained a steady pace to his objective--the car park. Leading the way for Al by several steps, he didn't feel comfortable in stopping until he reached the thinning edges of the crowd dispersing to their cars.

Drawing a deep breath, he stopped to let the NASA astronaut come along side of him.

Unable to stop himself, Sam turned to him, indignant. "You know what that guy wants? He wants me to work on setting up a project ringing the earth with defense satellites! The computer stuff is just the hook."

Al chuckled, finally withdrawing a cigar and his lighter. "Sounds like plenty of need for brainpower to make that idea work."

Sam shot him a glance. "I guess so. And plenty of room for people to die from the work that I do."

Dress whites gleaming in the early afternoon sun that glistened off the cars and pavement, Al concentrated on unwrapping his cigar. "There are military applications to just about any idea, Sam. That's something you have to live with...and keep in mind when you decide what to do next."

"Yeah." Sam regarded his companion, who was still concentrating on the ritual of readying his cigar. "I guess so."

Al's glance at Sam, as he lit the tobacco, was sympathetic. "Your speech about understanding the future by understanding the past, beginnings and endings, finishing one thing sometimes being the same as starting another and the value in recognizing that, sounded to me like a physicist with time travel on his mind."

Sam grinned. "At least someone understood me. I should have known it would be you. Guys like Millard never seem to get it."

"St. John might," Al pointed out. "If he thinks about it."

"Maybe," Sam agreed doubtfully. "Lisette

says he's brilliant."

"Lisette?" Al's eyes brightened with interest.

"Lisette," Sam repeated. "A fifty-year-old physicist from England who's taking a sabbatical to do some work here."

"Oh," Al replied, obviously disappointed.

"She's worked with St. John before," Sam said, returning to his first point, "and she says he's good, both as a researcher and an administrator."

"But..." Al prodded.

"But things go his way or nothing. He doesn't allow much for creativity--especially for wet-behind-the-ears physicists like me. I haven't gotten down to negotiation." He cast a look behind him as if looking for the Englishman at his shoulder. "But I kind of think I have to take my pick of the projects he offers me or nothing...and I'm not sure I want a position like that."

Balancing his cigar between his fingers, Al asked, thoughtfully, "So what are you gonna do, Sam? Have any offers you like? You haven't sounded very positive about any of the ones you talked about to me."

Uncomfortable, Sam shrugged. "I don't know. I thought I'd take off for Professor LoNigro's cabin tomorrow, spend a few days thinking it over."

"Well..." Al regarded the burning tip of his cigar as he flicked some non-existent ash from it. "You could come to visit me instead, if you wanted to. Out in Pasadena."

"Pasadena?" Sam repeated in surprise. "I thought you were in Houston?"

"Nah." Al shook his head. "I got tired of training for the Space Shuttle--God knows if it'll ever fly before I'm too old and gray to be on it. So when NASA offered me a job on a JPL project, I took it."

"You're working on something at the Jet Propulsion Lab?" Sam asked, interested. "What sort of project?"

Al drew on the cigar again. "Let's just say it might be something you'd like to see," he said cryptically. "Why don't you come on out with me? I have to catch a flight in..." He checked his watch. "...three hours."

"Three hours?" Sam protested. "But that doesn't give us any time to catch up on news." He grinned. "I want to hear a lot more about this secret project of yours."

"So come to Pasadena," Al asserted. "You

can kick back and think things over...and see which of these guys you wanna talk to some more about their offers." He studied the burning tip of his cigar. "Maybe I'll even throw in a free guided tour..."

"All right," Sam agreed, sold. "Let's go by my apartment and get my stuff."

"Good," Al said, reaching into his front pocket, pulling out his sunglasses and an envelope of papers. Handing the envelope to Sam, he smoothly slipped on the glasses as the physicist examined what he had been handed.

"What's...?" Sam looked up at the pilot in surprise. "An airline ticket to Pasadena?"

Eyes hidden by the dark, aviator glasses, Al grinned. "Yeah, well," he said, paraphrasing Sam's earlier words back to him, "I was kinda hoping you'd say 'yes'. Come on." He turned to lead the way to the car. "I'm hungry. Let's go get some lunch, pick up your stuff, and catch that plane."

* * *

Security was tight around Al's mysterious 'CLEAR STAR PROGRAM', far more stringent than the basic precautions taken by any of the research Sam had been involved in to date. Despite all his attempts on the plane ride out to get Al to elaborate on exactly what he was doing at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, the astronaut had just smiled and told him to wait and see.

Finally, Sam decided to play the commander's game and wait him out.

Early the next morning after graduation, he patiently watched Al as he took them past the first guard at the gate, acquiring a visitor's pass for the physicist with ease while other cars still waited for clearance.

All the personnel--from guards to white coated technicians--nodded and spoke to Al respectfully. Their progress past the front lobby guard, and the two other locked doors that opened for Al's magnetic-lock ID card, was equally easy...and Sam found he could contain himself no longer.

As they were walking down a short corridor that joined into a longer hallway, he asked, "Are you in charge here?"

Laughing, the commander winked easily at a young, lab-coated woman who was on her way past them in the opposite direction. "I'm not the head honcho, if that's what you mean. No way

I'd leave Houston for flying a desk. Captain Belton's in charge of all that administrative garbage. I'm sorta the...hands-on co-ordinator of things." He cast a look back at the buxom blonde who was now out of hearing range. "It's a dirty job, but somebody's gotta do it."

"So you're saying you're second-in-command then, right?"

"Huh?" Al asked absently, distracted by the blonde who had dropped her magnetic ID card just before a doorway and was bending to pick it up. As her lab coat tightened invitingly across her hips, he made a conscious effort to recall his tongue. "Unh, yeah," he agreed, reluctantly returning his attention back to Sam as the tech retrieved her card and straightened. "Let me show you around and fill you in on just what we do here."

"About time," Sam grumbled. "You kept me in the dark all the way out here."

"Sam," the commander chided, "a crowded airplane is not the place to discuss a top secret project like CLEAR STAR."

"Which is...?"

"Imaging technology. Ultimately, enhancing images received from space, like what VOYAGER's sending back now. Hey, d'you see those photos of Jupiter we got the other month?"

"Yeah, I think the whole world did," Sam said, but frowned as they headed down another long hallway. "But I thought that technique was pretty cut and dried. The filtered photographs are divided into pixels and converted into digital code by the on-board computer system, transmitted back here by microwave--"

"--reconverted into pixels, and then the filtered images combined so we get full color glossies," Al finished. He shrugged. "That's the way it works at the building down that way, and that's what John Q. Public sees on the evening news."

"Yeah, so?" They stopped before a door neatly designated 'Viewing Lab'. "So what do you do here?"

"What if you could add depth to those stills, Sam? How much more could you learn from them, if they were...three dimensional...from every angle...and it was almost like you were there?"

"Holograms?" Sam breathed. "You mean you're working on getting still holographic images from space? I didn't know anyone was working on that!"

Al grinned, reaching for the door. "Good

security," he returned, reaching to slide his ID card through the horizontal scanning lock. "Wanna come see?"

The question was obviously rhetorical, and he laughed at the excited gleam in the physicist's eye as he opened the Viewing Lab door.

"Welcome to the ground floor of holograms, pal," he said, watching as Sam pushed forward with all the enthusiasm of a child headed for a present laden Christmas Tree. "Compliments of Al Calavicci..."

* * *

By mid-morning, although fascinated with what he had seen, Sam was preoccupied with the conclusion that Al hadn't changed one bit. Not even with the challenge of this new and completely different career move. In spite of--or maybe because of--his recent divorce, the commander had flirted with, and/or made passes at, every female in the building.

As such, the physicist found himself wearing an amused grin as they wandered down a hallway between labs. Away from female distraction, Al was enthusiastically talking about the exciting discoveries VOYAGER 1 had recently made, so caught up in his words that he had not yet noticed the pretty brunette in the lab coat approaching from the other direction.

Nonchalantly diverting his attention back to his companion--secretly wondering what this encounter would bring--Sam listened and nodded as Al touched on a range of subjects, from the new data on Jupiter's Great Red Spot, to the composition of its dense cloud cover, to the time-lapse stills the VOYAGER team down the hall had just converted into a movie.

The commander expressed a desire to get his hands on that movie, and run the photographs through his holographic conversion process for the world's first three dimensional movie of another planet. More than that, Al admitted, he wanted those breakthrough shots of Jupiter's moon, Io, and its active volcanoes. What he could do with those!

"The VOYAGER team says the discovery was an accident," Al was saying, not really watching where he was headed, "finding those erupting volcanoes on Io and all. 'Course all the credit has to go to Linda--"

Sam's amused grin returned, as Al spied the brunette and neatly cut himself off in mid-sentence. She had stopped in front of one of

the two hall vending machines, and was presently studying the display. As Al watched the woman select some coins from her palm, Sam watched the commander pull back his shoulders in preparation of zeroing in on his latest target.

"You, unh...you want some coffee, Sam?" Al asked casually, eyes still locked on the brunette's slender figure, automatically digging into his pocket for a handful of change.

"Sure," Sam agreed, although the question was undoubtedly a rhetorical one since Al was already headed toward the vending machines. With a bemused shake of his head, he followed his friend. Sometimes, the man had all the subtlety of a heat-seeking missile!

Sam stood to one side of the coffee machine, with Al between him and the girl, and folded his arms. She gave them both a polite smile of recognition, then returned her attention to the candy machine. She was young and pretty--not Al's type at all. Now, if he was to play his cards right...if only to show he had been paying attention to technique...

Sam grinned. That'd sure shock Al!

Having inserted the appropriate coins into the slot, the brunette selected a chocolate bar from the menu.

"Sweet tooth, huh?" Al said, playing his opening gambit. Smiling at her as they waited for her candy to drop, he started feeding the coffee machine with change.

Mechanically, Sam realized with an abrupt frown, because he wasn't watching what he was doing in the slightest. Nickels, dimes, quarters, even pennies were robotically entered --Al was going to give the poor machine a severe case of indigestion!

The chocolate bar dropped into the bin at the bottom and the woman stooped to retrieve it.

Straightening, she said, "If the afternoon shapes up to be anything like the morning, Commander, I need all the sugar I can get to keep my strength up."

A leer lit Al's eyes. "Don't we all."

Obviously recognizing what was in his eyes and behind his words, she smiled shyly, blushed a little, then moved away down the hall in the same direction from which she had come.

Craning his neck to watch her go, Al kept feeding the vending machine until Sam finally spoke up.

"Unh...Al..."

No answer. Typically.

"Al..." Louder this time.

"Huh?" The commander paused, a nickel between his thumb and forefinger at the coin slot, and turned an expression on Sam which suggested he'd forgotten he was even there. "What?"

Sam grinned and nodded at the coffee machine. "Who are you buying coffee for anyway? You and me? Or the entire United States Navy?"

Al looked at the nickel he was about to insert, then lowered his hand without doing so. A quick glance confirmed the brunette had now disappeared around the far corner. "Oh...yeah. Guess I put in enough already, huh."

"I think you just bought shares in the company," Sam agreed.

"Black?" Al asked, studying the display panel.

"Yeah," Sam answered, watching his friend push the appropriate button.

Unfortunately, absolutely nothing happened.

Scowling, Al thumped it with his fist. "Come on..." he growled impatiently. When that didn't work, he took a step back and let the machine have a half-hearted kick in the shins. "You know, these damn things are always eating my dimes."

"And nickels and quarters and pennies," Sam added, as nonchalant as possible. From past experience, he knew to be slightly wary of the situation whenever Al started kicking things. He shrugged, trying to lighten the man's sudden temper flare. "I...um...think you gave it indigestion."

"I'll give it something more than indigestion in a minute," the commander threatened, giving the machine a firm, well-aimed thump with the heel of his hand.

Unexpectedly--but thankfully--a paper cup dropped into the slot.

Al looked smug. "See? Sometimes it pays to be a little forceful..." His voice trailed off as the 'coffee' started filling the cup. It was nothing more than hot water, which made his expression change to a narrow-eyed glare.

Sensing the situation was going from bad to worse, Sam said, "I, unh...I'm not all that keen on coffee anyway. It's okay..."

"Damn thing," Al snorted, planting another kick in the hapless machine's mid-section. "It always does this. Lucky for it, I've got Plan B." He spun on his heel and strode away, leaving a mystified Sam to follow, as he continued threateningly, "Or I'd've dissected it by now."

Such was the purpose in the Naval officer's quick stride, that Sam didn't catch his quarry until he had stopped outside a closed door labeled 'Enhancement Lab'.

There, the physicist opened his mouth to repeat that he really didn't want coffee all that badly, but was beaten to the punch.

"Coffee's in here," Al announced, making it sound like they were on some official military mission. Looking at the door, the commander drew a deep breath, donned a smile, and pushed it open.

Sam entered the Enhancement Lab a step behind, quietly closing it in his wake and trying to gauge his companion's abrupt change of mood. However, his apprehensive expression instantly faded to a look of awe, his attention captured by the sophisticated equipment lining most of the walls, much as it had been in other labs all morning long.

Taking a firm grip on his elbow, Al guided him across to the large work table in its center.

"Morning, Ruth," Al greeted the petite, dark-haired woman seated at the table and studying a spread of color photographs.

Puzzled, Sam frowned. This was a complete turnaround...and it wasn't fake. Al had parked his temper outside the door, for real.

"This is a friend of mine, Dr. Sam Beckett."

The woman looked up from her work with a genuinely friendly smile and offered her right hand across the work table which separated them. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Dr. Beckett. I've heard a lot about you."

As Sam stepped forward to shake her hand, her eyes flicked briefly in Al's direction making the commander add, "Sam, this is Dr. Ruth Steinman, a professional photographer and my top Color Enhancement Specialist."

"Al, you're such a flatterer."

"Well, it's true."

"Unh...good things I hope, Dr. Steinman," Sam interrupted, noting that his companion had not taken his eyes off this woman since coming into the room. He also noted that when he released her hand, she settled back in her chair and re-directed her smile at her boss.

"Vending machine's on the fritz again," Al explained simply, returning the smile with a casual shrug...like none of what had just happened out in the hall had bothered him in the least. "Thought maybe we could steal a cup of coffee from you."

When she raised an eyebrow at the request, Sam got the impression that this wasn't the first time Al had pulled this line.

"So what's wrong with the coffee pot in your office this time?" she teased, giving permission regardless with a faint flick of her head in the direction of the nearby percolator.

Al crossed to it, automatically turning over one of three mugs--a black one with 'NASA' embossed in gold. It was undoubtedly his mug, and the fact that it was kept here only confirmed Sam's suspicions that Al had indeed had coffee with this woman before.

"Nothing...but my secretary brought in decaf." He made a disagreeable face as he poured them each a mug.

Pursing a knowing smile, Ruthie glanced at Sam. "Last week, it was because he didn't like the brand," she confided in a lowered tone.

"What's that?"

"I was just saying you must be psychic. You always seem to know whenever I make a fresh pot." She smiled up at him as he placed a white mug decorated with music notes beside her. "Thanks."

"Unh, yeah, thanks," Sam murmured, slightly uncomfortable all over again, as Al--suspicious look and all--pushed a plain brown stoneware mug of steaming coffee into his hands. Absently, he thought of the owner of the stoneware mug. Whoever the third occupant of the lab, he or she was obviously not the type to personalize possessions.

"So..." Al began, dismissing the conspiracy and changing the subject. Without taking a sip from his 'NASA' mug, he returned his full attention to the seated woman scientist. "Got anything good?"

He quickly moved round to her side of the table to get a better look at the photos she was working on, putting his mug down beside hers since it was too hot to actually drink yet. The position he took up--with one hand leaning on the back of her chair and the other resting flat on the table by her elbow--seemed casual enough, but body language was screaming a different story.

"Maybe." She shook her head doubtfully, regarding her work again. "I don't know. They still aren't as clear as I'd like. I want to try a variation with the electrolysis of the nickel particles for the overlay mold. I think ...if we could make the coating more mirror-like, the white-light waves will reflect through

the interference pattern better, and hopefully result in clearer images. Look at this one."

Shuffling a photo from the bottom of the spread, she bent forward to examine it, Al's dark head bending with her and hovering over her. Thoughtfully regarding his friend, Sam attempted a sip of the almost scalding coffee and drew closer to listen to their conversation.

He followed it with avid interest. Al evidently considered her professional input important--that much was obvious from the way he listened intently to her suggestions and reflected them back to her in a manner which indicated he understood.

It was also obvious Al was very much attracted to her.

"Dr. Thomas wants to try changing the angle of the lenses first, but I don't think that's the problem," she finished quietly, looking up over her shoulder to meet Al's eyes, just inches from her own. She leaned back in her chair until her shoulder made contact with his arm. "What do you think?"

Al never moved, and for a long moment appeared quite content to simply return her gaze with a slight smile...all much to Sam's embarrassment. He felt like he was intruding on something private here, because it didn't take a quantum physicist to see there was definitely some real sparks flying between these two.

"I think," the commander said finally, still looking intently at Ruth, "that I wanna take you to lunch today.

She smiled. "You took me to lunch two days ago, before you left for Dr. Beckett's graduation...and just about every day before that for the last week."

"So? You gotta eat, don't you?"

Raising his fist to his mouth, Sam unobtrusively cleared his throat.

"Besides," Al continued, without looking away, "Dr. Beckett finds your breakthrough work in holograms fascinating. I'm sure he has plenty of questions he'd like to ask. Right, Sam?"

"You bet I do. Like--"

"Well?" Al cut in smoothly, clearly not ready to take 'no' for an answer.

Ruthie smiled knowingly at Al, then turned an apologetic look on Sam. "I'm sorry, but I have plans. Some of the girls and I have already arranged to go to Brockman's today ...it's Judy's birthday." She reached for her cooling coffee and took a cautionary sip. As

she leaned back against Al's arm again, she continued, "But if you'd like to drop back by later this afternoon, I'm sure I could find time to answer some of your questions while I work. Dr. Thomas should be here then too."

"That would be great," Sam returned, watching Al open his mouth to protest.

However, the commander was cut short by a buzzer sounding from across the room. Worse, he was forced to take a step back to allow her to attend to it.

As she took a seat on a stool in front of the console opposite, Al met his eyes and flicked his head in the direction of the door.

With an enquiring look, Sam silently pointed to his still full coffee mug. The commander's look told him to leave it. Now.

"Talk to Thomas," Al told Ruthie in the return of the same professional tone he'd used when first introducing them. Joining Sam at the door, he opened it for them both. "Tell him I said to go with your idea first."

"He won't like that," she returned absently, adjusting a setting on the machine.

"So then you tell him to come see me. Okay?"

She looked up and nodded in an equally professional manner. "Okay. Thanks, Commander."

"Nothing to thank me for, Doctor. You don't think Thomas is on the right track--I trust your judgement. Simple." He paused to shoot her a grin and a wink. "You can pay me back by having lunch with me tomorrow. No excuses."

"Nice meeting you," Sam called as Al ushered him out into the hall.

Closing the Enhancement Lab door behind them, Al paused and blew out a long breath. Sam was brimming with questions about the process and what direction Al planned to take it next...and about what was going on between him and the enhancement specialist. But before he could ask, the older man was moving away down the hall with a springy stride.

The interlude with Ruthie seemed to have worked wonders, because gone were all traces of the commander's temper. Sam hurried to catch him, drawing a breath to speak, but again Al beat him to it.

"Great, isn't she? Sharp as a tack too. She was wasting her talent in a teaching position... stole her away from Denisson at Cal-Tech."

"Then you better watch he doesn't steal her back."

He hadn't meant it as anything other than a passing comment, but Al took it seriously. He

came to a sudden stop and turned a concerned frown on the younger man.

"She wouldn't go! At least...I don't think she would...?"

Sam regarded him thoughtfully, then said, "No, you're probably right. She's smart. She knows she's got a good thing going here." He grinned broadly. "Especially since she's got you wrapped around her little finger."

For a brief moment, Sam thought he recognized a look of surprise register on Al's face. Then it was gone, replaced by that familiar cocky grin.

"Oh, that." Smiling, he moved off down the hallway again, this time with the physicist beside him. "It's a simple tactic, Sam," he confessed in a hushed tone. "Women like it when you make a fuss over them...helps productivity, you know? They wanna please you all the time, so that you'll make an even bigger fuss over them."

"Which is why you flirt with every woman here..."

"Right. Hey, kid, you're finally catching on!"

"You must have one heck of an expense account."

They stopped.

"What?" Al asked, confused.

Sam suppressed a grin. "Considering all the lunches you have to buy."

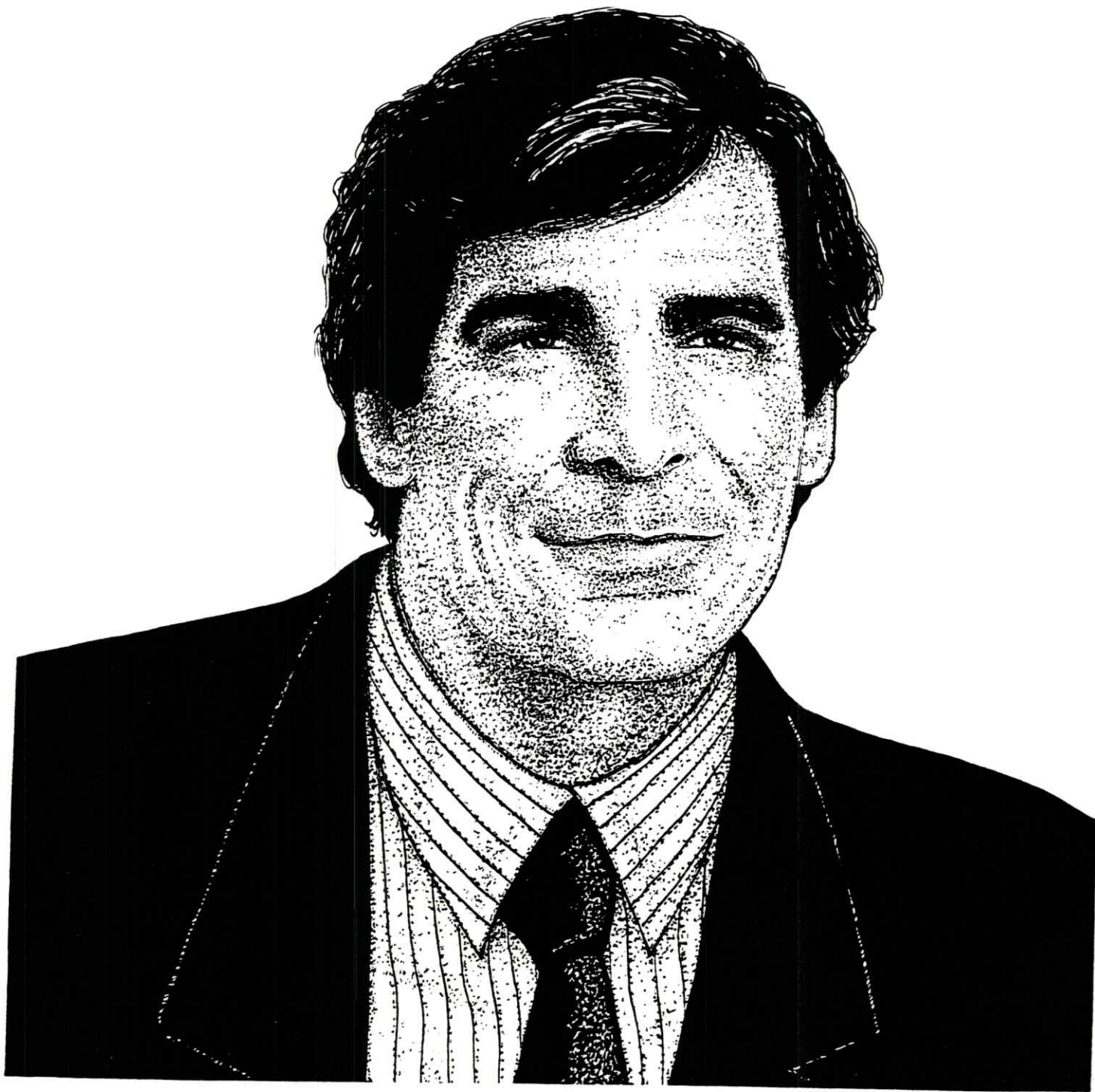
"But I don't take any of them to--" Al cut himself short, realizing he'd been caught, and actually looked embarrassed.

Breaking into a wide grin, the physicist took pleasure in being the one to lead the way down the hall and leave his stunned companion to follow.

* * *

Sam found himself captured by the spirit of innovation that permeated the Project. Everyone was willing to talk about their work after a discreet nod from Al, and eager to speculate about just where the Project could lead. By noon, when they headed for Al's office, Sam was practically drooling.

"Al, this is great!" he said enthusiastically as they walked through the main corridor again. It seemed oddly deserted now, most probably on account of the fact that everyone had dispersed for lunch. "Real cutting edge stuff! And the funds you have to work



with...Al..." Sam stopped, grabbing the commander's arm and forcing him to stop too. "What do you have to do to get a position in a place like this?"

"Well, it's pretty tough," Al answered, turning away and starting down the corridor again, leaving Sam to follow. He half-turned, speaking over his shoulder as the younger man took a couple of running steps to catch up. "You wouldn't believe the waiting list. This Project has real potential, not just in space technology and land-sat data, but in a hundred other ways as well...from kid's toys to medical applications."

Sam accepted that with his usual leap of logic. "Moving holograms! Al, with what you're doing here, it could set the stage for moving holographic projections--maybe even for something we could adapt for my time travel idea."

Again he stopped in the corridor, Al continuing a few paces before stopping to wait for him.

"Yeah," Sam said thoughtfully, looking up at a patient Al, waiting for him with both hands tucked in his pockets. "Al--the observer's role--maybe we could use a holographic projection for the guy doing the observing!"

Al smiled and shrugged a shoulder toward the door just ahead of him. "Come into my office, Sam."

Turning, he moved away as the physicist continued, "Think of the possibilities..."

Al led the way into his small office, indicating a chair for Sam in front of the desk, and took the seat behind it for himself. "Like I said, CLEAR STAR has a lot of potential uses."

"CLEAR STAR," Sam said, sinking into the indicated chair, still thinking furiously. "Why's it called it that? I thought most Projects like this were labeled with acronyms. I can't think of anything that makes sense with 'CLEAR STAR'--it sounds like an acne medicine."

"Belton, the top dog, named it," Al confessed with a grin. "You gotta admit, it's better than the acronym alternative."

"What?" Distracted, Sam lifted his head to regard the commander.

"Still Holographic Imaging Transmission, Sam. Think about it."

"S...H...I...oh..." Shaking his head, Sam blushed faintly. "I see what you mean. But if I could do something like this, I could get a start toward my project before..." He let the

sentence hang.

"Before..." Al prompted, leaning back in his desk chair and reaching for a cigar.

"Before," Sam continued, watching the Naval officer unwrap the tobacco, "I had to tell anyone exactly what that project involves, and what I want to do." His gaze lifted to Al's eyes as the older man put the cigar in his mouth. "Seriously, what do you have to do to get onto something like this?"

Al slowly lit his cigar before answering. Waving away the smoke, he said, "I'm gonna be straight with you, pal. It ain't easy. Belton's a real stickler for experience. Degrees don't impress him much--performance in the field does." He took another puff on his cigar. "A lot of the really experienced researchers are like that. Universities and big companies--like that guy who makes the killer satellites--go for names, for glitz. Guys like Belton, who are doing things you wanna do, are a tougher sell."

Briefly, Sam considered the offers he had gotten so far and saw the truth to his friend's words. "Yeah," he agreed glumly, focusing on a corner of Al's desk without really seeing it. "I could take that position with St. John at Cornel, make a contribution of some kind and publish. But that'd take a year or more..."

Al grinned and shook his head fondly. "Or ten for anybody else but you. But I guess to a fast track guy like you, a year might feel like ten." He leaned forward on his desk. "The trick is, you gotta be able to show your worth ...or have an in with someone who knows what you can do."

Sam looked up, but there was nothing committal in Al's expression or tone. "You're saying to be patient, aren't you. Like Tom keeps telling me--'there's plenty of time' to do all the things I want to do."

Slowly, Al's smile faded, his eyes darkening the way they did when he tried to hide his thoughts. Sam faltered, uncertain how to continue, then deciding to go with his heart.

"Thanks, Al, for showing me all this, for listening to me go on and on about what I should do next and why. I...it means a lot to me."

Al did not reply at once. He tapped his cigar ash into the ashtray, drew on it once more, then rested it on the edge of the ceramic dish.

"You know, Sam," he said, as if he had decided not to answer the younger man's last

comment. "I haven't given you your graduation present yet."

Truly surprised, Sam blinked. "I don't expect..."

Firmly, Al held up his hand to stop him. "I didn't want to give you...what I had to give you...until now. I didn't want you to think it was a bribe...to smooth over that fight we had about Eva."

"Al, I..."

Grinning a bit, his suddenly quiet mood lifting as quickly as if had come, the commander reached into his top desk drawer. Pulling out something that glinted briefly in the fluorescent lighting overhead, he slid it across the top of the empty desk with a flick of his wrist.

"Happy Graduation, Sam."

Automatically, Sam trapped the item against the cool metal with the flat of his palm. Picking it up with a curious glance at his friend, his eyes widened as he realized exactly what it was--a match to the security card he'd watched Al use to open doors all morning long. But it bore the name 'Dr. Samuel Beckett' and the photo from his MIT student ID. "What...?"

Wonderingly, he lifted his gaze to Al, who grinned in open delight, then shrugged in a nonchalant fashion.

"Well, if you're gonna work here, pal, you gotta be able to get in the doors."

"Work here?" Sam breathed. "But you said--"

"--that you gotta have an in. And you got one." He thrust a thumb at his chest. "Me." Al managed to look both defiant and exceedingly pleased with himself at the same time. "I think you've got what it takes, kiddo, so I put your name in with Belton when I heard there was a vacancy coming up this month. He's a smart

guy." Al's eyes danced with Calavicci mischief. "Listens to those who know what they're talking about."

"But..." Sam began, looking from the card to Al then back again. "But..."

"So?" the commander prompted. "D'you want the job?"

"Yes!" Sam said hurriedly.

"Good." Al nodded as if the matter were never in doubt. "'Cause take it from me, pal, there's never enough time to do all the things you want to do--you gotta take the breaks when you find 'em." Rising to his feet, he picked up his cigar and strode around the desk. "So let's go get some lunch. You gotta meet with Belton this afternoon and move into your office."

"And visit Ruthie."

Al threw him a look of mock challenge. "I'm willing to give you whatever professional breaks I can, kid, but you'll have to fight me if you want my woman too."

"Your woman?" Sam grinned at the archaic term and followed Al to the door. "Does she know this?"

"Not yet." Opening it, the commander paused to offer a sheepish smile. "But I'm workin' on it."

Growing a little more serious, Sam held up his new ID card. "Thanks, Al. I...I don't know what to say. I--"

"Geez, Sam," Al protested. "Don't go all mushy on me...I'm gonna get Brownie points when you make good. Just make sure you mention my name when you accept your first Nobel Prize."

Chuckling, he grasped the stunned physicist by the shoulder and steered him into the hall.

"Now, hurry up, will ya? If we don't make it to Brockman's by one, Ruthie and her friends will be gone!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Sanctification"

Falling for Ruthie was one of the easiest things I've ever done. Getting her to succumb to the Calavicci charm, on the other hand, was a completely different matter. For the longest time, lunch was the only thing she'd consent to doing with me outside of the work environment...although through sheer persistence on my part, we did eventually graduate to dinner.

Dessert--if you get my drift--I had to wait for, and it didn't come until after Sam had been working at CLEAR STAR for several months.

Somewhere around Christmas. Boy, what a Christmas! It was well worth the wait, a night of real tenderness and passion, and one I'll always cherish.

Unfortunately it bothered Ruthie.

Bigtime.

Not the fact that she'd finally let me sweet-talk her into the sack, but that we 'did it' the same night we went out to celebrate her promotion to Director. Bad timing, I guess.

Lunch and dinner dates we could put down to business, but playin' bingo-bango-bongo put a whole new spin on the ballgame. She was worried that if someone at the Project found out--namely that nozzle Thomas, who'd she'd just beaten out of a job--they'd think she was sleeping her way up the career ladder. Which, of course, was totally untrue.

Sorta.

Being her boss, I was the one who recommended her for the promotion, but it was because she was the best person for the job. Sex had nothing to do with it.

Okay, so maybe it had a little to do with it. And maybe it was selfish of me to put her in that position in the first place, but I had to be a hundred percent sure I wasn't making the same mistake I'd made with Eva. I had to know--before I asked Ruthie to marry me--that I wasn't considering taking the plunge for the third time simply because I wanted to get her between the sheets.

And I wasn't. I was sure I loved her, and as a New Year's resolution I announced it to the world. Well, I announced it to everyone who attended the lab party anyway.

Love. It still didn't feel the way it had with Beth, but at least this time I could actually say it out loud. I said it to Ruthie, the night I proposed--hell, I even told it to Sam. Grinning ear to ear as the celebration broke into a rousing chorus of AULD LANG SYNE, I took a swig of my drink and declared, 'I loved her, kid'...right to his face.

I wish I could say I had similar feelings for her folks. For Ruthie's sake I tried, but from the very first day they met me, they hated my guts. No doubt I didn't even come close to what their Jewish faith considered as Ideal Husband Material. They disapproved of my smoking. They disapproved of my drinking. They always found something to pick about my clothes--geez, they even griped about the way I cut my hair!

But I think most of all--the thing that really got under their skin--was my Italian heritage meant that my background was in the Catholic church. Not that I'd actually been in a church since Pop died...well, except for when Beth and I got married...

Ruthie's parents were fairly strict about following the commandments of the Torah--much more so than their daughter. When they found out that she intended to marry me even if I were an atheist, we had this nice long talk about how I--if I loved her as much as she obviously loved me--could simply convert to the faith. Anything to keep the peace, right? Then they told me exactly what the ceremony involved and I immediately changed my mind. Unh-uh...no way, José...you can forget circumcision! Period!

Ruthie--God love her--stood by my decision, by my side, and didn't give spit. So we set the

date for the last weekend in January. Her folks didn't like it, but they couldn't stop it either. But hey, I'm a reasonable guy. To avoid what would've surely become a rift in the family, I agreed to being married in a synagogue. The reception would be held in her parent's backyard, and it would all be very kosher--with the exception of me remaining Catholic.

There was a lot I had to learn about her faith, like celebrating Hanukkah instead of Christmas, but when they told me it was an ancient Jewish custom for the bride and groom not to see each other for the entire last week before the wedding--which coincided with the week Captain Belton came down with the flu and asked if I would represent him in DC for the year-end report to the CLEAR STAR brass--I figured I may as well take the opportunity to put a little of my 'unworthiness' to good use.

One last time.

* * *

It was supposed to be the bride who was late for the wedding, Al thought irritably, glancing at his wristwatch for the umpteenth time. Not the groom. It was definitely Murphy's Law in play here, because his flight left from Gate 76, which was literally miles away, and he had less than five minutes to get there!

Squaring the shoulders of his dress blues, he pulled the brim of his hat low over his eyes, took a firm grip on his carry-on bag and his briefcase, and doubled his pace down the moving sidewalk at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. Thanks to circumstances completely beyond his control--namely his present geographical location in direct correlation to the unpredictability of the January weather--his intended flight back to sunny California had been delayed twice since he'd flown in from Washington yesterday...and even canceled!

Normally, it would've been no sweat. He would've just picked up where he left off with that blonde from the DC leg, and gained loads of her sympathy as he played the helplessly stranded traveler to the hilt. Like most other women he'd met over the years, Karen had been very susceptible to the immaculate cut of his double-breasted Naval uniform--all those gold buttons, the gold braids around his cuffs and colorful rows of bar ribbons beneath his gold pilot's wings, looked very impressive against

the navy blue material.

But now was not, by any means, 'normal'. For starters, he was supposed to be getting married in--oh, geez--less than eight hours!

He should've known this past week had been too good to be true. He'd charmed the pants off the CLEAR STAR Committee, with his knowledge of both the Project and space, making such a good impression that one member was even moved to suggest his expertise was wasted in the second-in-command slot.

Quite unintentionally, he'd also--almost literally--charmed the pants off Diane, the blonde whose job it was to keep the minutes of the meeting. No one was more surprised than him when she invited him to her place for dinner one evening and he emphatically refused.

Alone in his hotel room that night, he ate take-out pizza and thought of Eva--the fact that he had cheated on her both before and during their marriage without even the slightest feeling of guilt. That wasn't love, he finally realized, but lust...exactly like Sam had tried to tell him.

With Ruthie it was different. She was everything he wanted, and more, filling the void Beth had left in his life almost perfectly. At least, she filled it better than anyone else had before. There was no way he was going to jeopardize that feeling of completeness, not when it was so hard to find, not when they'd be starting a new life together in just a few days.

Hearing the announcement of the last boarding call for his flight and knowing he was nowhere near the assigned gate, Al amended his thoughts.

In just a few hours, more like it. Hell. Ruthie would kill him if he didn't turn up for the wedding! Worse, he could just imagine her parents gloating that they'd 'told her so'.

Another glance at his watch drew a grunt of irritation from him. He'd passed his own self-imposed safety margin hours ago, and just when it looked like he was going to have to call her to say he couldn't make it, the snowstorm had broken and a couple of flights were finally going out.

But when he went to confirm his ticket on a new flight, he found the line of similarly stranded passengers at the counter was astronomical. Too many people and simply not enough seats on the plane. Hell, not enough planes! Forget going First Class, he was lucky to get a seat at all!

It had taken hours to reach the counter and

get things straightened out. So much that when he'd left it, he had only these down to the wire minutes to get to the gate. His only chance of making it to the synagogue on time rested with catching this flight, which went via St. Louis, and the fact that skipping timezones was going to grant him an extra couple of hours grace.

Determined not to give Ruthie's parents the chance to tell her they were right about him, he shifted gears into an all-out run.

Excusing himself as he practically barrelled headfirst through the crowd, he reached Gate 76 just as they were shutting the door on the last passenger--a pretty brunette--boarding the aircraft. For a moment, he thought they weren't going to let him on. But they did and, fired up as he was, Al found himself still rushing down the boarding access before they closed the door to the jet as well.

He clambered up behind the brunette in a noisy rush, as the stewardess standing just inside the door of the plane checked the woman's boarding pass for a seat allocation. The young brunette acknowledged his loud arrival behind her with a small, amused smile over her shoulder...and Al's heart instantly melted.

What a dish! Okay, so he wouldn't physically cheat on Ruthie, but a little verbal flirting never hurt anyone.

Returning the smile, he handed over his own boarding pass then had the extreme pleasure to follow the brunette, as she followed the stewardess to their seats.

Their seats.

The odds were a hundred to one against, but was it too much to hope that Murphy's Law would just this once look the other way and let her sit next to him? It was a long flight back to San Francisco--what better way to pass the time than chatting up some beautiful babe?

The flight was jam packed. There didn't seem to be a vacant seat anywhere, much less two together. Encumbered with his carry-on and briefcase, not to mention the overhang of airport-weary bodies into the narrow aisle, Al did his best to navigate--following the two women towards the back of the plane--without causing a national incident.

Yes, yes, yes, his mind repeated eagerly. They were going to sit together!

Oh, no, no, he thought, as she slipped into an empty seat on the aisle in the last row... beside an elderly man whose complete attention was wasted on the in-flight magazine.

Discovering his seat was directly opposite, Al breathed a sigh of relief. Okay, so the aisle was to separate them, but it was only a small aisle. No more than...a mere eighteen inches--twenty at the most.

"Here, let me help," were the first words he said to her, as the stewardess left to prepare the cabin for take-off and the young woman struggled to lift her carry-on into the already stuffed overhead compartment. He was acutely aware that just about everyone within earshot was watching them closely--save for the old guy with his nose still in the magazine--and scowling because they were holding up this already later-than-late flight.

"Thank you." Another smile. Another heart flutter.

She sat and adjusted her seatbelt as he hoisted his own gear into the compartment. His soft-sided duffel squashed in around the other bags, but there was no room for his briefcase. Sitting down, he kicked it under the seat in front. Removing his officer's hat, he nodded a perfunctory greeting at the senior citizen in the window seat beside him.

He intended on simply a quick glance of acknowledgement before diverting his full attention back to the brunette, but his gaze lingered--almost double-taked--as he noted that the elderly, heavy-set woman in the Miss Marple tweeds was studying him over the top of her gold-rimmed spectacles, instead of the magazine on her lap.

Combing a hand through his hair, he hid a grin. Screwed by the fickle finger of fate once more! Grandma here should be sitting with Gramps over there! What a pair...

"You don't have children, do you," Grandma said in a voice that held a faint touch of an old foreign accent, although he couldn't place from exactly where. Wherever her homeland, she had spent enough years in the States to lose most of it.

"Ma'am?" Al asked politely, albeit more than a bit bewildered by such a bizarre statement from a complete stranger. He met her eyes just in time to see her roll them.

"I thought not," she said knowingly, then returned her attention to her magazine. "Men who are late never have any children."

He tried not to let his mouth drop open. More than a little affronted by the aspirations she had just cast on his manhood--and the fact that the brunette's giggle meant she had

obviously heard.

As the plane started to taxi, he buckled his seatbelt and directed his eyes toward the cabin front where the flight attendant was running through the *In Case Of Emergency* procedures.

"I hate this part," the old woman told him curtly, trading her magazine for the safety pamphlet from the seat pocket in front of her. "They have to remind you, don't they, that planes crash."

"Like clockwork," Al agreed pleasantly, getting some of his own back. Holding up his own pamphlet, he pretended to study the route to his nearest emergency exit, secretly wishing he was sitting somewhere--anywhere--else!

"And whoever heard of using a seat cushion to float around on! If I was out in the middle of that great big ocean, I'd want more than a itty-bitsy piece of foam."

"You'd need more," Al murmured into this pamphlet.

"What did you say?"

Surfacing, he forced a tight smile. "I said, there ought to be a law. One that makes them carry the same sort of life preservers they have on ships..."

He knew he was rambling, and Grandma obviously knew it too. Fortunately, the conversation came to a pause while the jet took off, allowing him the opportunity to cast a smile at the brunette across the aisle.

Once in the air, Al risked a glance at his overly quiet elderly companion. Her eyes were screwed shut and she had a knuckle-whitening grip on the armrests of her chair. Clearly, flying wasn't her cup of tea.

Feeling an unexpected pang of compassion for the elderly woman, he gently touched her tweed covered arm. "It's okay. We're over the hump."

Opening her eyes and regaining her former composure, Grandma gave him the once over.

He pointed to the gold wings on his chest. "See, I'm a pilot. And I can tell you the worst moment is take-off, just as the wheels lift. That's when the airframe is the most stressed, carries the greatest load. We've gotta be..." He peered past her, out the window. "...a couple of thousand feet up by now. So there's nothing to worry about."

Grandma brightened visibly. "Could you drive this?"

"Well, if I had to, I'd sure give it my best shot." Al puffed with pride. "Actually, I'm a Naval aviator."

"Oh." Grandma pouted, clearly unimpressed. "I thought maybe you were connected with the airlines..."

The airlines?! He had ten times the skill and experience under his belt than a dozen of these commercial jocks put together!

The conversation again went into an awkward stall, which lasted until the stewardess re-appeared to hand out peanuts and ask if they wanted something to drink.

"I'll have orange juice," Grandma said pleasantly.

The stewardess looked at Al. "Sir?"

"Scotch. Straight up and--"

Grandma tugged on his arm, effectively silencing his request, and leaned across him to smile sweetly at the stewardess. "He'll just have orange juice too."

A little unsure, the stewardess cast another look at Al, who was too stunned by the sheer audacity of the senior citizen beside him to do anything more than just barely manage a nod of consent. Then as the stewardess withdrew, Al's expression quickly turned into a scowl.

Noticing it, Grandma countered with one of her own. "Don't give me that look." When he continued to defy her, she added a sarcastic, "What? The Navy teaches you to have something against orange juice?"

"Not when it's mixed with Vodka, no."

Snorting, she murmured something in a foreign tongue which he didn't understand. Not that he needed to, her tone was reproachful enough.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he returned with an even glare, "but you're not my mother."

"No, but maybe I should be," Grandma scolded, like she was talking to a naughty child. Looking away, she settled her shoulders into her seat and waited for her refreshments. "I don't want you drinking in case you have to drive this thing."

"Fly."

She frowned at him, as if he were an insolent child speaking back. "What did you say?"

"It's 'fly this thing', not 'drive'," he explained, running a frustrated hand through his hair, hearing the brunette giggle again. This was definitely going to be a long flight.

* * *

After gagging down a plastic cup of pre-packaged orange juice at the nagging insistence of this elderly traveling companion--anything to

shut her up--Al settled into his seat in silence, hoping that if he simply didn't talk to her, she wouldn't talk to him.

Amazingly enough, it worked. Chin propped on his elbow as he leaned out into the aisle to watch the stewardess walk by, a book-sized pillow behind his head, he risked stealing a backwards glance to confirm that Grandma had settled down to the business of flying. Perhaps she felt 'safe' with a pilot at her side, he decided, even if he was only a Navy flyboy. She had even taken a pair of knitting needles from her carry-on with which to while away the time--a strand of yellow wool stretching anonymously from the rows of stitches into the carry-on bag by her feet.

From the corner of his eye, he watched her work, curiosity sparked sufficiently that at one point he almost asked exactly what it was she was knitting. But on quick reflection of that idea, he concluded that would mean speaking, and that was a definite no-no. Likewise was pulling the copy of PLAYBOY from his briefcase to read--he could just imagine what she'd have to say about that!

Thoroughly bored, he reminded himself that it was a fairly short hop from Chicago to St. Louis--just over an hour flying time--and that he was a master at waiting and could tolerate the old girl for at least that long.

Besides which, he could use a little downtime. He'd been on the go for the past week with seemingly endless meetings with the CLEAR STAR Committee, not to mention rounding it all off by living in a terminal lounge and eating airport food for the last twenty-four hours.

Now it was all behind him, and he was finally on his way home.

To Ruthie.

As the relaxed sensations of flying eased their way through his body, his mind started to drift along with the wispy whiteness of the clouds outside. They looked so soft, like cotton wool. Or like feathered down. So soft, so inviting. Like Ruthie's bed. Like the feel of her body tucked into his as they slept...

Slept.

The first he even knew that he'd drifted off was when he felt the slight bounce of the wheels as they touched down in St. Louis. He was rudely jerked awake...only to find himself using Grandma's shoulder as a pillow support.

Catching the small pillow as he lifted his head, he felt totally embarrassed as she met his

eyes. "I...er...excuse me," he murmured still a little disoriented. He spared a brief glance past her, out the window, as terminal buildings began to flash past. "I didn't realize I was--"

His apology was cut short as the jet's engines revved in reverse. Grandma, who had smiled understandingly at him in his sleep fogged state, turned a bit and cast a worried glance out the window.

"It's okay," Al mumbled, still struggling to awaken. The press of deceleration and its accompanying high pitched whine was obviously worrying his elderly companion and he found himself explaining. "They're just slowing us down, it'll stop in a minute."

A moment later as the whining decreased, he ran a hand through his hair to tame it, and struggled to suppress a yawn. "Excuse me," he apologized again, still embarrassed by awakening to find himself asleep on a stranger's shoulder.

Grandma patted his hand and smiled reassuringly. "It's all right. You reminded me of my aydem. He would always fall asleep on my shoulder too." Her smile held a touch of genuine amusement. "Although usually at family gatherings."

"Your aydem?" Al asked, trying unsuccessfully to determine the language of origin.

She waved a hand. "My son-in-law, Nick." This time she laughed. "I always said he was at his best when he was asleep." The laughter quickly died. "Unfortunately, he's no longer with us."

Pulling off the runway, the plane began to taxi toward the terminal.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Al said, distracted as the passengers around him eagerly prepared to disembark, despite of the captain's request that they remain seated until the aircraft had completely stopped.

"Don't be," Grandma said, looking directly at him and challenging his attention. "When you get right down to it, he had the brains of a shlemiel. Three years after they were married, my daughter found out he had mob connections."

Mob connections? Attention duly captured, Al frowned at her in surprise, watching as she shook her head disapprovingly.

"Couldn't pay a gambling debt," she admitted with a flourish of her hand, "so he ended up feeding the fishes. My daughter moved to Canada after that, and I haven't seen her in over ten years."

"I...um..." he stammered, unsure of what to

say in response to this little piece of personal tragedy.

Fortunately, he was saved from having to answer as the plane rocked to a stop at the terminal gate. The 'fasten seat belts' indicator light bleeped off, and chaos erupted in full. All around, people were on their feet and hurriedly dragging baggage from the overhead bins...including the brunette from across the aisle. Unexpectedly, Al found himself torn between helping her, and listening to Grandma.

Damn. Why did she have to pick now to lay a sob story on him? He'd seem like a real shmuck if he tuned her out in favor of the brunette.

"I have another daughter," Grandma announced, a little more upbeat. "Out in San Francisco. That's where I'm going. To visit her and her husband. My grand--"

"Really," Al interrupted, only half listening as the brunette gave him a sensitive smile. He was about to get to his feet and help her take her bag down from where he'd placed it in the overhead compartment, when the old guy she'd been sitting next to did exactly that.

The brunette turned her smile--and her undivided attention--to Gramps, as the old guy neatly dropped Al's duffle into his lap then handed her carry-on bag to her. They struck up a friendly conversation as the people in the aisle in front of them began to shuffle forward, leaving Al to brood over a missed opportunity.

With only a handful of stragglers and a few flight attendants remaining, Al finally looked back at his elderly companion--who had been remarkably silent for the last couple of minutes. She was studying him again.

"Are you getting off here?" she asked, eyeing the duffle bag clutched in his lap.

"Um...well..." Of course, he wasn't. This flight continued on to San Francisco after a seventy minute lay-over. But he wanted to stretch his legs in the terminal and--

"You know, she wasn't your type at all," Grandma continued knowingly, noting the way he was still gazing somewhat wistfully after the departed brunette.

"My type?"

"Married. Or did you forget to notice she was wearing a wedding ring?" Grandma scowled disapprovingly. "Nick was exactly the same--flirting with women was as natural to him as breathing. Italian libido, you see."

He drew breath to defend himself and his heritage, but she cut him short.

"Now what you need," she continued confidently, "is to find a nice Jewish girl."

Despite himself, Al huffed out his breath and chuckled. "Funny you should say that. My girl back home is Jewish."

Grandma seemed pleased. "Well, good. Then you take my advice and you marry her. Settle down, raise half a dozen children and, unh..." She threw a meaningful nod in the direction the brunette had disappeared. "...stop trying to swim in another man's pool. Or you'll end up as fish food too."

Amused, Al scrambled to his feet with his duffle in one hand and his briefcase in the other. Putting the duffle on his vacated seat, he threw on his officer's hat. "I'll try to remember."

With an impish wink, he turned to head down the now deserted aisle of the plane. But he hadn't even taken two steps when he stopped. Grandma said she was going to visit her daughter in San Francisco. So what was she gonna do? Just sit here for an hour or more, alone in this cold empty plane, until it took off again?

Guiltily, he turned back to her, leaning an elbow on the back of the seat in front and meeting her curious eyes. Okay, so it was really none of his business...but try as he might, Al Calavizzi just couldn't walk away and leave this elderly woman sitting here all alone.

"You, unh...you wanna go grab a cup of coffee or something? We've got a whole hour to kill."

"You're going to San Francisco too?"

"Yeah." Geez, this was something Sam would do! No doubt the kid was rubbing off on him. "So I guess we're stuck with each other until then. Whatta you say?"

With a sincerely touched smile, she reluctantly diverted her eyes. "Thank you for the invitation, but I'm afraid I can't."

"Can't?"

She looked back at him. "I'm not as young as I used to be, and...I'm afraid my wheelchair is in the baggage section. So..." She gestured resignedly at her surroundings, then smiled an understanding smile. "You go. I'll mind your seat and your things."

Wheelchair. That decided him--he would not take no for an answer. "How'd they get you on. Carry you?"

"Yes." Amusement sparked in her eyes behind her gold-rimmed spectacles. "And you should have seen the look on the flight attendant's face when he saw he had to carry me all the way

to the back of the plane. Oy, gevalt!"

"Then I'll make you deal," Al announced. "You get one of them to carry you off again, and I'll meet you outside with a courtesy chair."

"Oh no, I couldn't ask you to go to that much trouble--"

"Wait," he interrupted, holding up a hand. "I didn't tell you what I get outta this."

She raised an eyebrow, awaiting his answer.

Al grinned. "You get to buy the coffee. At airline prices, I figure I'm getting the best end of the deal."

* * *

Edna turned out to be all right, once I got to know her. And even though I'd be forty-six years old come June, she still had the tendency to be maternal toward me. At first, it was annoying as all get out, until I realized it was only because she cared--really cared--about me, a complete stranger, who'd just happened to show that maybe he cared a little too.

Come to think about it, I guess my initial rebellion against this trait was due to the fact that I'd done most of my growing up without the authority figure of a mom to keep me in line. A probation officer just ain't the same thing.

Actually, she was more like the kindly grandmother I'd never known, than the mom I briefly did. You know, the sort that lets you have your ice-cream and cake, even if you don't finish your Brussels sprouts.

However, the subject of family seemed to be a bit of a sore point for us both, considering her story about the ill-fated Nick. So after a very brief mention of my sister over coffee, neither of us brought it up again.

Besides, within a few hours I was going to have more 'family' than I could handle...if, by some miracle, I didn't miss my own wedding.

Aie yie yie, I did it again! Reminding myself of the event would only bring on an attack of nerves. Not that I was nervous about the actual ceremony, you understand. I love weddings, almost as much as I love honeymoons. It's just that meeting all those very Jewish relatives...well, meeting Ruthie's parents had been experience enough.

I gotta confess, I dunno exactly what Edna and I talked about on the second leg of the flight to San Francisco, but it sure made the time go fast. Flying east to west granted me the leeway I needed, although stormy weather

in-bound had made things slow on the ground, and put us in a holding pattern for the better part of twenty minutes. When we finally touched down at seven minutes after 3 p.m. local time, I had exactly one hour and fifty-three minutes to get home, shower and shave, dress in my tux, and make it to the synagogue.

Piece of cake. Hey, with any luck I wouldn't have time to meet any of the relatives until after it was all over...

Finding a pay phone, I called Sam, cutting short his concern about why I was a day late getting back and hadn't called, and told him just to meet me at my place--pronto. Then I found Edna in the crowd again and went with her to track down our luggage. In spite of my own rush--or maybe because of it--I wanted to make sure she got on her way to her daughter's place, safe and sound.

It sorta surprised me that nobody was there to meet her, but then like I said...this flight was more than a day late getting in. I suggested she call them but she insisted that, for a reason she didn't elaborate on, would be too much trouble. She'd simply take a cab.

Collecting our luggage from the baggage carousel, she transferred into her own wheelchair--a motorized model which I told her needed a racing stripe. Then we both went out to the curb to hail a taxi, grateful to find that although still overcast, it had--at least for the moment--quit raining.

Before we parted company, she thanked me for being so kind, and left me with a blessing that somehow seemed like a curse. 'May you be fruitful and multiply', she told me with heartfelt sincerity, emphasizing her point with a quick squeeze on my arm.

Great, I thought, waving at the departing cab then turning to flag one of my own. Fine thing to say to a guy who's about to take the plunge.

Geez. I just wish this whole wedding thing was over with already...

* * *

"Av, damn!"

Lowering the paperback book he'd found on Al's bedside table--a crash course on Jewish customs--Sam looked across into the adjoining bathroom just as the frustrated bridegroom gave up in his third attempt at tying his black bow tie.

"Why is it, they make these things impossible

to tie unless you've got four hands?" Al continued, frowning at his reflection--black trousers, white winged-collar shirt and suspenders.

Putting the book aside, Sam stood up from where he was sitting on the end of Al's bed and crossed to the open bathroom door. He was similarly attired in a classic black tuxedo--minus the coat--and had just gone through the rigors of tying The Dastardly Tie himself. "Here, let me try."

As Sam attempted to knot his bow tie, Al backed out of the bathroom until he could see his reflection in the full-length mirror hanging behind the bedroom door, an action which virtually dragged the physicist along with him.

"Would you hold still please?" Sam implored, struggling to hold a loop.

Al stopped and attempted to look at himself over his shoulder. "Dunno why I just couldn't wear my uniform," he complained after several moments of close scrutiny. "I'm gonna look like a penguin."

"You're going to look fine. You're just nervous."

"I ain't nervous!" Al insisted. "Why would I be nervous?"

Sam smiled knowingly, pulling Al's bow tie into perfect shape and releasing the Naval officer so he could better examine his perfectly groomed reflection. "Maybe because you're getting married in about forty minutes."

"Hell, Sam, I've done it twice before," Al said, his voice pitched a little higher than usual as he turned his attention to his tie. "What's there to be nervous about?"

"Okay," Sam agreed with a shrug, endeavoring to restore calm and order. They'd be leaving for the synagogue in a few minutes, and he didn't want the commander flustered even before they got there. "You're not nervous."

"Damn straight." Al began fiddling with his perfectly tied tie. After a moment, he added, "Okay, so I admit...maybe...meeting all Ruthie's Jewish relations, in a synagogue, is a bit on the daunting side, but--av, hell..." He dropped his hands in frustration, the ends of his undone tie falling to his chest.

Turning the groom around, Sam automatically began tying it again. "Al, you're not marrying her parents or her relations. You're marrying Ruthie. She's the only one you have to care about what she thinks." He smiled. "And I, for one, can tell she loves you very much."

With a sigh, Al turned to him. "But what do I say, Sam? How do I act?"

Sam smiled reassuringly, finishing Al's tie. "Just be yourself."

He scoffed. "I did that when I met her folks and look where that got me. I didn't exactly get their blessing on this, you know..."

"Well..." Two strides took him to the end of the bed as he spoke. There, Sam picked up the paperback on Jewish customs. "I guess there's always this." He thumbed through to where he'd been reading near the end of the book. "It says here in Chapter Eighteen--"

"Chapter Eighteen?!" Al yelled, frustrated. "You only picked it up ten minutes ago! How the hell d'you get to Chapter Eighteen already?"

"Well, I--"

"That's what I get for having a genius for a best friend," Al said, almost to himself. He ran a hand across his brow, then looked at Sam accusingly. "You know, I never used to feel this way before I met you..."

"What way?"

"Like I'm a step behind! It's so damn irritating sometimes." Noting Sam's hurt expression, he relented with a shrug and added, "Other times it comes in handy. What's Chapter Eighteen say?"

"Well...how far did you get?" Sam wanted to know, still a little stung.

"Nearly to the end. Sorta..." Al said evasively. With a wave of his hand, he changed his mind. "To about the middle. Okay?"

Sam lowered the book with a knowing look.

"All right, all right." Al stomped his foot defensively. "So I never got past Chapter One."

"Chapter One?"

"Yeah." Al's gaze slid away, then returned defensively. "And all that stuff the rabbi gave me so I'd know what to do during the ceremony today. I studied that so I won't make a fool of myself."

"You won't make a fool of yourself," Sam assured him with a smile. "You'll be fine."

Absently, Al reached out and took the book. "But this stuff..." He shook his head ruefully. "Soon as I read all those things about circumcision and conversion, I figured it'd be better if I didn't know."

Shuffling nervously, he tossed the book back onto the bedside table with a shudder that looked almost genuine.

"I've got this hinky feeling the rabbi's in the back room of the synagogue right now,

sharpening his knives..."

* * *

The interior of the synagogue was warm for a January afternoon, Sam noted, even for him. Casting a look at his companion--who at that moment slipped his index finger inside his collar to loosen it--confirmed that Al was feeling the heat too. And it wasn't all because of the temperature. They were standing together in front of the *huppah*--the wedding canopy--facing Rabbi Pinsky on the other side, as they awaited the arrival of the bride.

The late bride.

Well, it was traditional for the bride to be late...in Christian weddings, Sam reminded himself. He had no idea whether the custom held true for a Jewish celebration or not--the book never mentioned it.

If that wasn't worry enough, upon arriving at the synagogue the rabbi had promptly informed them that there had been a slight mix-up with the florist. The flowers that were supposed to have been sent here to adorn the *huppah* canopy had been mistakenly sent to a funeral service and vice versa. Rabbi Pinsky had quickly ordered the wreaths sequestered out of sight, before informing Al that his *huppah* would now have to be the traditional embroidered silk cloth, with a Biblical quotation from the book of Jeremiah.

Al had simply nodded, making Sam wonder if the man had even heard what had been said to him. No doubt his mind was on other things...like his fear of being kidnapped, whisked to a back room, and 'converted' against his will. Or like the growing number of guests gathering in the seats behind them.

As the rabbi moved forward to tidy the ceremonial wine and goblets on the pulpit--again--Al asked, "You sure you've got the rings?"

By his count, this was the sixth time the nervous groom had asked this particular question, in the space of as many minutes.

"Yes, I have the rings," Sam assured him calmly, this time without bothering to check his coat pocket where Al insisted he transfer them last inquiry. He glanced at his companion, noting the man's stiff, at attention, military stance as he watched the rabbi's every move. Poor Al. Undoubtedly, he still felt stuck between a rock and a hard place. "Al, relax."

"I am relaxed," he returned stiffly, eyes still front and center.

Sure he was. Sam grinned. The commander hadn't been this tense at his last wedding...but then, marrying Eva had been nothing more than a show for the media. This time, with Ruthie, it seemed to be the real thing. And Al certainly had the nerves to prove it.

The crowd stirred behind them, drawing Sam's attention. Looking over his shoulder, he found that the place had filled up fast--although oddly enough, a large number of guests were dressed in black. Perhaps it wasn't just the wreaths that had arrived at the wrong service...

"What's happening?" Al whispered sideways, not daring to turn around because of Irrational Fear Number Two--meeting a relative. "Ruthie?"

Sam shook his head, watching two young men wearing black suits and white yarmulkes help an elderly woman down the aisle then to her seat. "Just more guests arriving."

"More? Geez, how many relatives has she got?"

"I don't see any of your Navy friends yet," Sam observed. "Who did you invite?"

"No one."

Sam looked back at him. "No one?"

"Her family doesn't like me now. Sometimes the guys can get a little...rowdy." Al took a deep breath, then quite unexpectedly announced, "She's twenty minutes late, Sam, she ain't comin'."

"Of course she's coming," Sam reassured him. "It's probably just the traffic. You know how thick it was..."

The idea of rejection now formed, Al sagged from his ramrod, shoulders back, military posture and actually favored him with a helpless expression. "I can't believe she stood me up. After what I went through to get back here...I really thought she lov--"

He was abruptly cut off by the sound of trumpeted music, announcing the arrival of the bride. Sam watched as an instantaneous transformation swept over Al. Genuine affection warmed his smile and touched his eyes, as he turned to look down the aisle at his approaching bride. Such was this look of adoration, that Sam got the feeling the Naval officer didn't even notice the vast number of people who had gathered in the seats behind.

Turning with a pleased smile, Sam suddenly understood why. Ruthie looked absolutely stunning, her veil drawn back, her smile

radiant, her gown of antique ivory lace. Her parents walked a step or so behind her, and trailing them were two younger women, who Sam surmised were either her sisters or friends. Each carried a lit candle and as they approached, they brought with them the murmur of the same blessing. 'Our sister, may you become the mother of thousands of ten-thousands.'

Reaching them, Ruthie smiled at Al, then began to circle him with her parents and 'sponsors'. Seven times, Sam counted, before she stopped and waited for her bridegroom to draw her to his side.

He couldn't be sure whether Al had read it in the rabbi's instructions, or whether it was simply an instinctive action, but he looked on with honest joy as Al gently took Ruthie's arm and guided her to stand beside him under their embroidered silk wedding canopy--a symbolic gesture of the bride's entering the groom's 'abode', of a man taking a woman to be his wife.

Without being told, Al gently lowered her veil. Eager to get started, Rabbi Pinsky began to recite the first of two blessings. One was over a cup of wine, the other over the ceremony itself, and both were in Hebrew. The cup was then offered, and the bride and groom then drank of the wine. Next, it was time for the giving of the rings.

Mesmerized as he was by the proceedings, thinking how this was just like in 'Fiddler On The Roof', Sam needed to be prompted twice before he dove into his trouser pocket. Somewhat horrified, he came up empty-handed.

"Unh..." he murmured, shooting Al an apologetic--yet warning--look. This was, after all, Al's fault. If he hadn't kept making him put the rings in different pockets...

Hastily patting those pockets, Sam breathed a sigh of relief as he reached into his coat and pulled out the two plain gold bands. He quickly stepped forward to place them on the rabbi's prayer book.

"Place this on her right forefinger," Rabbi Pinsky quietly told Al as he offered the rings, "and repeat after me..."

With a gentle smile for his bride, Al repeated the wedding vows in Hebrew, then in English. "You are consecrated to me, according to the laws of Moses and Israel."

After Ruthie had slipped Al's ring on his finger came the reading of the ketubah which, as far as Sam could gather, was some sort of Jewish pre-nuptial agreement. Surprisingly, it imposed

quite a hefty financial burden on Al in the event of a divorce, but nothing from Ruthie. Presumably, this was because under Jewish Law, only the man had the right to initiate a divorce, and the obligations of marriage were not to be entered into lightly.

Seven more blessings followed over a second cup of wine, including prayers for the couple's happiness. Then, after the rabbi had pronounced his benediction, and bride and groom had sipped the wine from this second cup, Al was handed an empty glass. Sam watched as the smiling groom put the glass on the floor...and stomped on it.

This, the breaking of the glass, signalled the end of the ceremony. As the music played in celebration, the commander turned with his new bride on his arm, and walked back down the aisle under a barrage of 'mazel tov!'s.

With his head close to his new bride's, listening to something she was saying softly in his ear, it was obvious the relatives and entourage that followed did not exist for Al at this moment.

It was done, Sam thought in satisfaction. Al had done fine and Sam couldn't remember a time when he had seen his friend look so happy.

* * *

Dusk was falling, the night rapidly closing in under a canopy of gray clouds. Under overcast skies outside the synagogue, Sam found himself carried to one side by the sea of bodies as the happy couple paused in front of the marble tableaux of a Torah scroll, at the top of the polished granite steps leading down to curbside. As the crowd advanced, he was content to stand back, a smile forming on his lips as he watched the floodlit proceedings over a bobbing ocean of yarmulkes and hats.

And--strangely--black veils.

The moment the wedding procession came to a stop, the bride and groom were beset upon by the horde of enthusiastic well-wishers, 'mazel tov!'s again ricocheting like buckshot off a tin roof. Those dressed in black clustered together, looking more than a little confused.

Sam managed to catch Al's eye, a second or two before Ruthie's mother swept the unsuspecting Naval officer into a half-hearted hug, while her father--an undertaker by profession--sternly shook his hand. Someone began snapping impromptu flash photos of the bride and groom, and anyone who happened to be

in the immediate vicinity. Sam watched Al straighten his shoulders and dredge up a smile--as if enduring the attention with a composure that was garnered especially for the occasion.

A few minutes later, seeing a break in the photo taking and the crowd--and as Ruthie's parents moved away to have a word with Rabbi Pinsky--Sam approached his best friend and his new bride.

"Congratulations, buddy," he said sincerely, taking Al's right hand in a warm, two-handed grip. "You too, Ruthie." He planted a quick kiss on her cheek, resisting the urge to sweep them both into a heartfelt embrace. "I know you'll be very happy together."

Genuine affection lit Ruthie's smile as she gazed lovingly at her new husband--her arm through Al's and her fingers laced with his. "I'll make sure of that." Rubbing her cheek against his tuxedoed shoulder, she quietly added, "Tonight."

A little embarrassed by Al's suggestive smile, Sam looked down and cleared his throat.

"So, let's get this show on the road already," the eager groom announced. He looked around, then frowned slightly. "Where's the car you came in?"

Ruthie nodded at a black limousine waiting down at the curb, a set of mourning flags still in place atop the front fenders. "There."

"Where?" Al asked, looking right at it.

"There." This time she pointed with her bouquet so there could be no doubt.

"I thought we hired a white limo?" He chuckled slightly. "That looks more like a--" Cutting himself off, he turned a dumbfounded expression on his bride. "Geez Louise, it is! You came to our wedding in...a hearse?"

"It's not a hearse," Ruthie returned defensively. "Not really. Not anymore..."

"Anymore? What's that supposed to mean?" the commander asked, suddenly sarcastically. "Next you'll be telling me your old man had to drop off the stiff on the way!"

Putting two and two together, Sam suddenly realized the reason why so many people were in black, and why the bride had been late. Good old fashioned 'car trouble' was responsible in part, coupled with the misfortune of a funeral procession getting a little...off course. He could see it happening in his mind's eye now--funeral cars swapping leaders at an intersection and accidentally following Ruthie's car instead, like something out of a Marx Brothers movie.

"The limousine we hired broke down just as we were about to leave the house," Ruthie explained, proving his theory. She bristled at Al's cynical snort. "It was either father's car or nothing. You should be grateful I managed to get here at all."

"She's right, Al," Sam added in a calm voice. "It doesn't matter what she came in, the important thing is...she came."

"Maybe it doesn't matter to you, pal--"

The discussion came to a timely interruption, forcing both the bride and groom to fake tight smiles, as a hesitant group of black clad well-wishers descended to convey their congratulations regardless.

"I don't believe this," Al mumbled, obviously guessing what had happened as he watched the 'accidental guests' move away.

Sam followed Al's gaze, noting the growing assembly lining the nearby stairs. Without a doubt, everyone was expecting the bride and groom to head for their car--the car--at any moment.

"Let's just get in the car, and leave," Ruthie instructed, aware of the interest Al's present grimace was generating amidst her friends and relatives. Nearby, her father scowled. She tugged on Al's arm to get the momentum started, but he remained stubbornly put.

"Ain't no way I'm gettin' into that, sweetheart. Uh-unh...not until the Big Guy Upstairs shuffles me outta the deck for good."

"Al..."

"Not 'til I get my ticket punched, cash in my chips, kick the bucket, buy the farm--"

"Al!"

"Croak!"

"It's just a car," Ruthie insisted through sweetly clenched teeth. "And in about five seconds, I'm going down those steps to get into it. Unless you want to give my parents the pleasure of saying they told me so, I suggest you stop acting like a complete schmo and follow."

With that she was away, picking up her skirts as she began the journey down to the waiting black limo. The assembled crowd immediately began to shower her with what appeared to be grains of barley, kernels of wheat, and nuts--obviously the Jewish equivalent of rice and confetti.

With a resigned sigh, Al muttered something about 'death by matrimony' then took off without

so much as a backwards glance at Sam, running the gauntlet after his bride.

* * *

Thunder rumbled ominously across the evening sky. Waiting by his car out front of the Steinman residence, Sam spared the heavens a brief glance. With luck, the impending storm would hold off a few hours for the reception, here at Ruthie's parent's house. With even more luck, the thing would be held indoors and not outside as he'd overheard someone say.

Focusing his attention back on the black limousine which had only just pulled up in the drive, he pushed off his car and headed across to it. He had no idea how he'd beaten Al and Ruthie from the synagogue to her parent's home, considering the drive was reasonably short and they had left first. Unless the bridal couple taken a detour, or stopped, or...broken down?

He reached the left side of limo at the same time as three middle-aged women, and just as Al pushed opened the back door from the inside. Standing back, he watched the groom--with a faint but telling smudge of lipstick on his face --quickly climb out of the car then turn to extend a helping hand to his bride.

So, that's why they were late. Sam grinned to himself. It didn't take a genius to work out that Al and Ruthie had evidently taken time to patch up their recent difference of opinion over the mode of transport. And from the look on the groom's face, he knew it was all just water under the bridge.

As the three women began fussing over Ruthie, rearranging her gown so that it would look perfect when she walked into the reception, Sam approached his friend. "You seem to be taking all this in your stride."

"Yeah, well...y'know." Al shrugged, seemingly reluctant to tear his eyes away from his beautiful bride for even a moment. He grinned. "It's not everyday a guy gets hitched. Sometimes you just gotta learn to...go with the flow."

Noting Ruthie was still busy with the women, Al motioned Sam around to the rear of the car. Parking himself against its polished black surface, he fished inside his tux and withdrew one of his ever-present cigars.

"What about this fear of meeting all the relatives?" Sam reminded quietly, a teasing twinkle lighting his eyes as he watched the

groom light his cigar. "Everyone I've met seems nice enough."

Al's cheery facade did a slow dissolve as he exhaled the first drag of smoke, making Sam regret he'd even brought up the subject.

"Seems, yeah."

Noting his attention was captured by something else, Sam slowly followed the other man's gaze. The Steinman home sat waiting--seemingly warm and hospitable--at the end of the concrete drive. The front door was open and through it could be seen a number of arriving guests. In the near distance, the lively sounds of a group of backyard musicians playing their hearts out, invited all to enter.

"Aw geez, Sam," Al whispered heavily, letting the mask slip. He briefly eyed his bride, making certain she was out of earshot before he continued. "D'you have any idea what's waitin' for me in there?"

"Your...wedding reception?" Sam returned, stumped.

"Blitzkrieg," the groom mumbled. "Total annihilation. By her relatives."

"C'mon, Al. It can't be that bad."

The Naval officer enjoyed a long drag on his cigar, his eyes narrowing at the younger man as he inhaled. Blowing out the smoke, he asked, "Can't it? Hell, you read the book."

Sam opened his mouth but was saved having to postulate a reply as Ruthie joined them at the back of the limo, her three helpers heading inside.

"Al!" Ruthie exclaimed excitedly, clutching his arm and inadvertently preventing his cigar from completing its journey to his mouth. "You'll never guess who's here?!"

"Unh...who?" the groom asked with a smile, his mask firmly back in place.

"Bubbe! Aunt Livia just told me she's inside talking to Mother right now. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Oh yeah...just peachy," Al said, throwing Sam a brief but knowing look. He did his best to regain some of his enthusiasm, and managed to sound as if he meant it when he added, "I'm happy you're happy."

"Oh, honey, I want you to meet her!" Ruthie stepped out of his embrace in a burst of enthusiasm. Hands still on his arm, she again foiled Al's attempt at smoking by tugging him a step toward the house.

"Whoa, wait a minute!" Al protested gently. He gave her a wry grin and indicated his stogie.

"Can I at least have a couple more minutes here first?"

She stopped, curbing her delight with considerable effort, and returning his smile. "Okay. It's just that I haven't seen her in ages."

"Bubbe sounds like someone special," Sam said conversationally, watching Al tuck his free hand under his elbow and lean back against the limo to savor the few puffs he had been granted. He was uneasy with the vague awareness that it was like watching a condemned man smoke his last cigarette.

Oblivious to this observation, Ruthie turned around to face Sam, smiling. "She is, she's my grandmother," she answered, equally unaware of the way her announcement had just caused her new husband's cigar to stall at his lips. "I'm so glad she came. I've told her all about Al...I can't wait for him to meet her."

Behind her back, Sam watched the commander pull a sour face, eloquently expressing himself without words. The doomed groom slit his cigar across his throat, depicting what he thought his chances were in a one-on-one with Ruthie's beloved *bubbe*. No doubt he considered himself about to be tried by the family judge, jury and executioner.

However, the Naval officer was a picture of innocence when his bride faced him again. Feet spread apart as he leaned back against the car, Al mustered a congenial smile and said, "Ditto."

Ruthie stepped between his legs and leaned against him. "You'll do just fine."

Then it came. An unexpected shift in her expression, an abrupt all-telling change of mood, as she began to absently straighten her new husband's already straight black bow tie. It caused an alarm bell to sound in Sam's head, but from the look on Al's face, he knew the commander's Inner Defense System had just set off an entire division of warning klaxons.

"She's...rather big on tradition," Ruthie awkwardly tried to explain. "So just be polite and...don't say anything if she doesn't approve. Okay?"

Al's hard won enthusiasm died right on the spot.

Sensitive to this, Ruthie kissed him--quickly but nonetheless reassuringly. "I love you. Nothing else matters."

As if suddenly losing the taste for his cigar, Al dropped it to the paved driveway and crushed it underfoot. Resigned to his plight he

simply nodded, allowing her to take his hand and begin leading him toward the house.

"I'll catch up with you two later," Sam called after them.

They had gone no more than a few steps when Al faltered and glanced back, his expression still reminiscent of a man being led in front of a firing squad.

"Unh...Sam? Don't you wanna come meet... um...Bubbe too?" the groom asked with a meaningful flick of his head and an even more meaningful look in his eye.

"Oh...sure," he answered, realizing his friend was in need of a little moral support. He looked at Ruthie. "That's if it's okay...?"

"Sam, you're already like family," she said, taking his elbow with a warm smile. Then, with a man on each arm, she led them both into her parent's abode.

* * *

Surprisingly, there weren't that many people inside the house. True, guests seemed to be arriving in droves but, as Sam quickly discovered, they were simply depositing their gifts and personal belongings in the front bedroom, before heading down a straight hall and out the back door to where the real celebration was in full force in the floodlit backyard.

With one hand still hooked through Sam's arm and the other through Al's, Ruthie quickly led them down the hall, acknowledging the well-wishes called after them but not stopping. She made a sharp left turn at an open threshold just prior to the back screen door, and Sam found himself entering a modest, rectangular kitchen...which was presently under siege.

It looked like a warzone, but a warzone where the main source of ammunition was food. Littering virtually every available bit of counter space were the testament of a very formidable kosher caterer, an edible ordinance of Jewish culinary genius.

An archway--facing back the way they had just come--led across a box dining room and under another arch into a small living room, through which Sam noted Ruthie's mother and a handful of the more elderly guests. Mrs. Steinman was sitting talking, her words lost in the low murmur of conversation, to someone just out of view.

Bubbe.

Noting her father join her mother, Ruthie

frowned. Clearly Al's inaugural meeting with this 'Bubbe' would be best if held on neutral ground, where her parent's so-called dislike for their new son-in-law would not be an influencing factor.

"Wait here," Ruthie suggested. "I'll get her." She slipped through the arch and into the living room.

Al shot Sam a hopeless look of dread as a surprised greeting in Yiddish erupted from the neighboring room. Turning his back, the groom holstered his hands in his trouser pockets and gazed out the kitchen window, watching the party on the lawn outside as he waited for his inevitable lynching.

The physicist couldn't imagine what was running through Al's mind right now--what it would be like to marry into a family which disapproved of all that was you--your clothes, your habits, your religion--that is, if everything Al had said was true. Maybe Al was simply making a mountain out of a molehill... although he was right on one count. From what he'd read in the book of Jewish customs, Ruthie was breaking tradition, going against custom and her parent's wishes by taking a husband from outside the faith.

Now that he stopped to think about it, while the people he'd met at the synagogue had been pleasant to him as a guest, no one he'd seen today had exactly welcomed Al into the family with open arms. The groom had not found a single ally in this almost foreign culture, with the exception of his loving bride.

Uncomfortable with where his thoughts had wandered, Sam mustered a polite smile as Ruthie returned with the elderly woman known as Bubbe--the one he'd seen arrive at the synagogue just prior to the bride and who had been helped to her seat by two younger men--aware of the way Al remained staring out the kitchen window like a condemned man.

"Bubbe," Ruthie began, "this is Sam Beckett. He's a very close friend, and a colleague."

"My pleasure, ma'am," Sam murmured, realizing all the attention in that kitchen was focused on the groom's stubbornly turned back.

"And this," Ruthie continued, "is Albert. Al, this is my grandmother."

Pulling back his shoulders, Al turned to greet her, his smile as phony as a three-dollar bill. He frowned, then looked down...not realizing until that moment that the woman in question had been pushed into the room in a

wheelchair.

Sam watched with a slightly concerned frown as an expression of total shock blanked out Al's falsified features.

"I don't believe it..." the groom just barely managed to get out.

"Neither did I," the senior citizen in the wheelchair agreed, reaching out to take Al's left hand in both of hers. Her smile was warmed by real affection--the 'open arms' he so desperately needed. "When I saw you in the synagogue..." She shook her head in bewilderment. "Not in a million years, would I have dreamed the 'Al' I sat next to on the plane, was my granddaughter's beloved 'Albert'."

"You sat next to each other on the plane?" Ruthie and Sam asked in perfect unison. They exchanged stunned looks, as much for their timing as for the idea behind it.

"Hello, Edna," Al said, wrapping his other hand around the one she still held. Crouching by her side, he gave her a genuine smile, clearly relieved to have finally found his ally.

"It's about time you remembered your manners and got around to saying it," she returned wryly, then fixed him with a look of mock irritation. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Al almost laughed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Oy vay," she feigned, rolling her eyes at Ruthie and Sam, "I tell a complete stranger most of the family secrets, and still he's not satisfied."

"Takes a lot to satisfy me," Al added with a wink, patting her hand before finally letting go.

Grandma cocked a knowing eyebrow at him as he straightened. "Now, that I can believe." She sought her granddaughter's hand. "Ruth, honey, you take care of Al...make him happy."

"I will, Bubbe, I promise."

"I know your mother and father have other ideas because of your late Uncle Nick...but you just remember this. Tradition is tradition, but love has its own set of rules. Al's a good man. A good man." Her gaze transferred to his. "And I know he'll be a good husband and father."

That knocked the Naval officer for a loop. "F-father?" he asked, looking at his bride as if there were something she wasn't telling him.

"When the time comes," Grandma explained. "Which reminds me...I have something for you both." She delved into the purse on her lap and extracted a pair of newly knitted, yellow baby booties and pressed them into Ruthie's hands.

"Your wedding gift is in the other room--those antique lamps you've always wanted--this is a little something extra. I gave your mother the same something extra on her wedding day, and d'you know what happened?"

"What?"

"You came along nine months later. Of course," she added off-handedly, "that was thirty-eight years ago. So you listen to your old bubbe, and put this man of yours to work before it's too late, nu?" She smiled fondly, and patted the booties clutched in Ruthie's hands. "For mazel. You'll see." Then she threw Al another wry look. "After all, Albert, you were not late this time."

The remark was lost on Sam and Ruthie, but Al seemed to understand the meaning behind it perfectly. Although his only response was a very anxious chuckle.

* * *

An hour later found Sam sitting at one end of a white linen table in the floodlit backyard. He was sharing one entire side of the seating arrangements with the other four CLEAR STAR co-workers who had been invited--all female and all Ruthie's friends. Directly before them were the remnants of a hearty wedding feast--platters of roast chicken, fish, bagels, knishes and more--while seated across from them were four of Ruthie's younger, and perhaps less traditional, male relations. There was one young woman in the bunch--seated directly across from Sam--as if someone had taken the time to organize a little matchmaking.

'Love has its own set of rules.' Grandma's words...and undoubtedly Grandma's doing.

Munching on a second helping of scrumptious roast chicken, Sam smiled shyly at the girl across from him and diverted his attention to the band and the latest round of terpsichorean entertainment. It seemed like almost everyone had taken a turn at entertaining the bride and groom, and this latest batch was no exception.

Half a dozen middle-aged men--including one he'd been earlier introduced to as Uncle Isaac--were carrying out the intricate steps of the present dance with deft precision, in perfect harmony with their fellows while balancing wine bottles on their heads. No wonder it was called 'the bottle dance'--and it was truly a sight to behold.

Not that Al was presently interested in

beholding sights, Sam noted, unless the beholding directly involved his bride. At the moment, the commander held a glass in one hand while his other arm rested across the back of Ruthie's chair. He had clearly tuned-out his surroundings and tuned-in his new wife.

Sam watched him mouth something inaudible over the ruckus, then sipped his champagne. The doomed groom now seemed sublimely confident with things, evidently due to the fact that he had the influential clout of Grandma on his side.

Or maybe he'd just had a little too much to drink...

As the bottle dance came to an end with all six men on their knees in front of the bridal table, bottles still balanced, there was a round of applause which an uneasy Sam felt obliged to participate in. During this break, the thunder overhead was more clearly heard, causing several guests to cast apprehensive glances at the dark heavens above. As if ignorant to the threatening weather, the klezmer immediately began playing again, a rousing chorus which this time brought nearly all of the guests--adults and children alike--to their feet, including all four newly paired couples at Sam's table.

The girl across the table shot him an expectant glance, so the physicist again shyly re-directed his eyes to the bridal table...where he was amused to note Ruthie stand, grab Al's arm, and insist he join her in one of the small circles that was forming on the grass between the tables.

Sam grinned into a glass of champagne as the Naval officer made a distinct gesture of refusal. Still--much like the black limo affair--Ruthie managed to have her way in the end, and the nearest circle of dancers parted to allow the bride and groom to join them. Holding hands, the entire circle then proceeded to teach Al the steps.

By halfway through the song, the commander had been transformed into a real pro...which was not all that surprising considering one of his self-proclamations of the '70's had been that he was a 'dancing machine'. In fact, Sam noted, Al actually seemed to be starting to enjoy himself.

His thoughts again uneasily strayed to the idea of alcohol playing a major part in Al's current mood, and were this time interrupted by a casual voice, coming from beside him.

"They make a handsome couple."

Sam turned to find that Edna had wheeled up to the end of the table, between him and the

girl on the other side. There was a smile on her face as she watched the self-assured bridegroom literally kick up his heels, so Sam couldn't be sure if her words had been addressed at him or at the girl.

"Yes, they do," he offered politely.

"And the horah is not an easy dance to learn," Edna continued, her eyes still on Al and Ruthie. "All that step, step, step, kick..." She waved a hand. "...whatever." The same hand reached out to capture that of the young woman on her left. "Nu, Jessica?"

"Right, Bubbe." The young woman smiled at her grandmother, but then shifted her gaze across the table to Sam.

He returned it shyly as Edna casually reached out and took his hand in her free one.

"I'll, unh...take your word for it," Sam offered, knowing what was coming next but unable to stop it.

"Ah, yes, but what does an old kalikeh like me know about dancing anyway," Edna said nonchalantly, 'accidentally' placing their respective hands on the table before her so that they touched. "Now, Jessica here...she could teach you."

Sam hesitated. "Unh...well, I--"

"She knows many things," Grandma continued. "Twenty-three and studying to be a lawyer, is our Jess. You're a doctor, nu?"

"Yes, but how--?"

"It was a long flight from Chicago. We talked of many things...Albert spoke very highly of his best friend."

She paused, releasing their respective hands from her grasp. But something about the way she kept her gaze on their hands on the table before her warned Sam not to pull his out from under Jessica's, at least not just yet.

Edna chuckled, pleased. "A doctor and a lawyer. Sounds like a 'professional' match, if ever I heard one."

"Um...I...er...I don't think..." Sam stammered, feeling himself blush under Jessica's admiring eyes, feeling his hand break into a cold sweat under hers.

"Go on," Edna said, wheeling back a few feet. "This is a joyous occasion." She gave them both a warm but mischievous smile. "And life is too short. Enjoy the moment for what it is."

Right then, as if on cue, there was a pause in the music signalling the end of the song, allowing guests to either return to their seats



or prepare for the next. Jessica was instantly on her feet, collecting Sam's hand up off the table as she stood. At Edna's encouraging nod, he reluctantly let himself be dragged to the nearest circle of dancers.

"Carpe diem," Sam mumbled as the circle parted to admit him and Jessica into its throngs.

"Seize the day," his partner translated with a smile.

Sam gave her a long look. "You know Latin too?"

"I know many things," Jessica returned in her best 'Grandma' voice. She smiled as the klezmer started a familiar tune and took his right hand. "Including how to dance the horah. Come on, Sam, it's not as bad as it sounds."

"Well..."

Unexpectedly, the middle-aged woman on his left took his other hand and made the first few steps of the dance, an action which forced his feet into motion. With Jessica as a teacher, Sam had the repetitive steps down pat after just a few bars. He quickly found, as his partner had promised, that it wasn't all that difficult to learn...actually, it was sort of fun.

Raising his eyes from watching her feet, Sam found her own eyes were already on him. Brown eyes, like rich chocolate, and mirroring the smile on her lips. He was suddenly struck by how attractive she was when her dimples showed, and wondered how he'd sat at the same table with her all through dinner and never noticed until now. These dance steps he might forget tomorrow, but her smile he'd remember for a long, long time...

He returned her smile, both confident of his new skills and because he really was enjoying himself. As their circle rotated in a clockwise direction Sam looked over to the nearby group where the bridal couple had become the center of attention. Al was definitely into the spirit of things...

As if on cue, the groom looked directly at him. Eye contact said it all in seconds, until Al broke it with a knowing wink and returned his complete attention to his bride. Despite his sincere happiness for them both, Sam also felt a touch of jealousy. Well, no, not exactly 'jealousy'. But in a world where life was like a roller coaster ride, Al and Ruthie had just laid some pretty solid foundations. He couldn't help but feel just a little envious of that newfound stability, longing to find it for

himself.

That was the magic thing about weddings. All the perfect promises, all the perfect dreams for the future...at weddings, everything seemed perfect. A fairytale wrapped up in perfection that seemed like it would last forever. It really made you wish you could find your own special someone, be privy to all this perfection too...

Well, almost perfection, Sam amended wryly, if you didn't count getting funeral wreaths at the service by mistake and your bride turning up in a hearse!

On impulse, he glanced back at Jessica. She smiled again, giving his hand a friendly squeeze as they continued to dance. She was certainly pretty. And smart. Studying to be a lawyer, Grandma had said, a career woman. Maybe even somebody Sam Beckett could fall in love with, given time...

As if a higher being had say in the matter, his thoughts were interrupted by a long, menacing growl of thunder. The dancing stopped, the music stopped, and the heavens finally opened in the inevitable and instantly heavy, downpour of rain. Next, came the sudden bout of pandemonium as the guests converged on the house, somewhat reminiscent of a stampeding herd. All save for Edna, who attracted a number of enthusiastic helpers, all of which she defiantly waved off.

Still clinging to Jessica's hand as they were virtually swept along in the shuffle, Sam managed to glance back over his shoulder as Al and Ruthie came to the elderly woman's rescue. It was Al who she finally allowed to push her chair. It all happened so fast--one moment he was having a good time, dancing with Jessica under the floodlights, next he was squeezing into the tiny back kitchen of the Steinman house with about twenty other similarly soaked wedding guests. He barely had time to turn around before Jessica pulled him to one side to make room for Ruthie as she dashed inside, Al and Edna bringing up the rear.

Grandma was chuckling with wry amusement at the heavenly intervention in the festivities.

"California!" she scoffed amiably, shaking the water off her hands. "It's chlopping out there like a tropical storm!"

"Bubbe, you're soaked," Ruthie said concerned, leaning over her grandmother.

She was, but dismissed the idea with a wave of her hand. "Nonsense. A little rainwater

never hurt anyone."

"It will if you catch pneumonia. Come on, let's get that wet coat off."

"I'll get a towel," Jessica volunteered, momentarily leaving the group by the back door.

"If you're going to fuss over someone, Ruth," Edna admonished, but allowing her granddaughter to help her out of her wet jacket, "fuss over your husband." Looking up over her shoulder as Ruthie peeled the wet fabric from her other arm, she caught sight of Al wiping the drips from his face. "He looks like he could do with a little fussing."

Sam watched as Al's hand stilled in its journey halfway down his cheek, the commander's eyes narrowing on Edna while a pensive expression registered on his face. Following his gaze, Sam's stomach flipped over when he realized why. There, on Edna's exposed forearm, were the tattooed numbers that bespoke of an earlier life in explicit and horrifying detail. He was unable to stop his mouth from dropping open in surprise. She'd survived a concentration camp. She'd been a POW.

That thought had Sam's eyes jerking uneasily back to Al, whose gaze remained steadfast on the elderly woman in the wheelchair. Al had been a prisoner of war--a different war--too. Maybe that explained the strong bond he and Edna had forged. And from his reaction, Sam concluded it was nothing new to him--Al had undoubtedly seen or been told of it before now.

Some plane conversation!

As if reading his thoughts, the groom looked up and met his expression of horror and astonishment head on. Al quietly held his gaze for a suspended moment--as if taking in every detail of his reaction--before he offered a tight smile. Seeing the tattoo now had reopened all those old wounds in the pilot, despite the stoic expression on his face which tried to deny it.

The moment passed as Jessica returned with a towel, and her Uncle Harold--Ruthie's father--in tow.

"Thank you, Jessica," Edna said, gratefully accepting the towel.

"We're clearing out the parlor," announced Harold Steinman, who, like the majority of the drenched guests, had shed the top layer of his wet clothing and was down to his shirtsleeves. His eyes flashed from face to face in congenial invitation, meeting Al's eyes last. "To make room."

With that, he left, taking Edna with him, back into the family fold, despite her protests.

As they disappeared from view, Sam composed himself, suddenly aware that Jessica had stopped by his side again and neatly turned the foursome into two distinct couples.

Al noticed that too, and immediately let his somber feelings dissolve under a cocky grin. He opened his mouth--like he was just about to voice some wry remark on this pairing--when two kids, about seven or eight years old, rushed into the middle of the group.

The boy immediately favored Jessica's side, while the girl remained stubbornly defiant despite the crowd of taller, wetter adults.

"S'mine!" the little boy asserted, as if they were in the middle of a fight. "And you can't have it!"

"Can too. If I get it first."

Sam frowned thoughtfully. Jessica wasn't old enough for this to be her son...? Cousin, maybe? Or--?

"Kid brother," Jessica explained with an apologetic look.

"Can not..."

"Can--"

"Daniel," Jessica interrupted in an obvious effort to lose the boy, "why don't you and Sarah go play somewhere else?"

"But it's not hers, Jessica," Daniel reasoned, looking up at his sister. "Tell her she can't have it. She's not even my real cousin."

"Am too."

"Are not."

As the new tirade continued back and forth, Al slipped his arm around Ruthie and said, "Sounds like you and me sometimes."

"Most of the time," she said affectionately.

"And just about every one of my family's get together," Sam added fondly.

"Are not!" Daniel insisted, emphasizing his final point by reaching out for a quick tug on Sarah's hair.

"Ooovvv!"

"Daniel!" Jessica admonished, jerking her brother back by the arm.

"Must be love," Al said, still grinning. At the collective looks that earned him, he shrugged. "You only pull the pigtails of the girl you love."

Ruthie leaned against his shoulder with a wry smile. "So, that's what you were doing..."

"Jessica," Daniel whined, hoping to gain the

support of his older sibling, "Uncle Harold said I could have it. Not her. Tell her she can't have it."

"Have what?"

"Can too if I get it first!" At that, Sarah ran out the back door into the rain.

"Sarah...!" Ruthie tried, unsuccessfully reaching out to stop her.

"Uncle Harold said it's mine!" Daniel scooted out after her to fight for his mystery prize before any of the adults could successfully intervene.

"Daniel..." Jessica called, taking a step after him. "Daniel!" Catching the back screen door as it swung closed, she quickly pushed it open again.

"No, wait," Sam spoke up, lightly touching her arm. The rain was coming down in the proverbial buckets out there. The gentlemanly thing to do was... "I'll get them."

"Al will help you," Ruthie volunteered, earning herself a 'say what?' look from the man in question.

"That's okay," Sam said, noting it. "I can manage."

He stepped around Jessica and opened the screen door wider, taking a brief moment to scan the backyard, squinting through the sheets of rain pelting the ground. The floodlights were still ablaze, although the images of the two kids were just barely discernible. They were further down the backyard, behind the reception tables and away from the lights, behind the band's now-vacant stage.

Dashing out into the rain, Sam didn't stop until he reached the canopy covered stage. He paused there a moment, automatically moving one of the instruments toward the center under better cover, and was somewhat surprised when Al appeared at his shoulder.

"Aw, what the hell," the groom explained with a shrug. "I'm already wet."

"You get Sarah, I'll get Daniel," Sam instructed, moving off again before there could be any discussion on the subject. He just wanted to get the kids and get back inside out of this...typhoon.

Sarah and Daniel, as Sam and Al discovered upon reaching the squabbling youngsters, were in the middle of a stand up/knock down fight over the decorative cement goldfish pond. Or more precisely, what was in it--three orange and white speckled, foot long goldfish. Was this what Daniel wanted to have, and stop his cousin

from having? A goldfish? Kids!

Quite unexpectedly, before he and Al could intervene, Sarah played her trump hand and pushed poor Daniel into the pond. He was crying when Sam dragged him out, although why was a mystery, considering he'd undoubtedly been drenched to the skin before his little impromptu swim anyhow. Sarah resented the fact that Al had locked a hand under her right arm and was holding her up so high that she had to stand on her tiptoes. So in defiance to this maneuver, she did the only thing she could--raised both feet off the ground and let Al support all her weight.

It worked. Al's arm slowly straightened until she had her feet firmly back on the ground. Balance regained, she let loose with a kick to his shins.

"Ow! Geez!" the groom yelped, then quickly re-established a firm grip on his feisty little quarry. This time, however, he looked wary for a repeat attack. He met Sam's eyes in the rain and the darkness and grinned. "They sure learn young around here, huh?"

Pushing Daniel--who was still bawling--in the direction of the house, Sam just smiled. When it came to families, Al was...no pun intended...just getting his feet wet.

* * *

"You two are in a lot of trouble," Jessica threatened, immediately grabbing both kids from Sam and Al as they re-entered the back kitchen. She began dragging both resisting youngsters down the hall, leaving two wet tracks in their wake, ignoring her brother's tears and her cousin's excuses.

Sam smiled, watching her go. Pushing his wet hair from his forehead, he was again reminded of his own family reunions. He only realized how wet he really was when he turned to Al, who looked like he'd been the one to go for a swim in the goldfish pond.

Ruthie raised a concerned hand to Al's face and combed a wet curl back from his temple. "Honey, you're drenched."

"It's nothing..."

"Don't you start too," she chided, slipping his tux coat from his shoulders before he could further protest. "You look like you got in a fight with Father's sprinkler system and lost."

"I like...running through sprinklers," Al admitted, obviously enjoying her attention.

Noting Sam hadn't moved, Ruthie admonished, "You too, Sam, get that wet coat off. Now."

"Unh...yes, ma'am." Obediently shrugging out of the wet garment, he watched as Ruthie ran her hands over Al's white shirt, checking for dampness.

"Al, you're soaked right through," she reported with a disapproving frown.

Distracted by her touch, the groom's expression became a leer as he took her hands from his chest and placed them around his neck. Letting his own hands find a resting place on her hips, he drew her near and said, "Yeah, I guess I am. All over. Maybe we should split this joint. Go someplace where I'll let you take off all my clothes."

Laying his wet coat beside where Ruthie had put Al's--on one of the items that had been moved out of the parlor and into the hall behind them--Sam suppressed a smile and shook his head. Would Al never quit?

Ruthie laughed and playfully pushed out of her husband's embrace. "You've got yours coming, mister, don't worry."

"Is that a promise?" the commander asked, still leering as he confidently leaned back on the 'something' that was holding their coats. "Or a thr--" Glancing down and getting his first look at what he was leaning on, Al abruptly cut himself off and jumped forward with a startled yelp. "Yikes!"

Peering around them to get a better look at the mysterious 'something', Sam suddenly understood the groom's odd reaction. Al had inadvertently leaned on one of the polished wood boxes that Ruthie's father had moved out of the parlor to make more room.

A pine box.

A la coffin.

Sam's grin widened when he realized the 'parlor' to which Mr. Steinman spoke was obviously the funeral parlor--the business adjoining the family home.

Al shuddered and wiped his hands down his trousers. "Aie, yie, yie..."

"My hero," Ruthie said sarcastically, shaking her head. Linking arms with her husband, she shared a knowing smile at Sam. "Come on, let's go find a towel and get the two of you dried off before you both catch cold."

* * *

"Okay, okay!" Sam heard Al protest.

Looking up from the damp, burgundy towel with which he was trying to dry his face and hair, he found the commander with a similar looking towel over his head--his features completely obscured by it--and Ruthie rubbing vigorously.

"Ruthie! For Pete's sake..." She stopped at his reproachful tone, allowing Al to protest from somewhere under the towel, "I need to be dried. Not buffed."

She stepped back from Al, who was leaning against the bathroom vanity, taking the towel with her. Sam hid a grin in his own wet towel as the 'buffed' groom was revealed, unable to recall ever having seen Al look so...well, fluffy.

"I'm going to get some clean towels," Ruthie said, distastefully putting the wet one aside. "I think every man and his dog used these before us. Back in a minute."

As she left the small, pink and gray tiled bathroom, Sam put his towel on the vanity and let his gaze wander back to Al again. This time, he was unsuccessful at keeping the grin off his face--had Al stuck his finger in an electrical socket, it couldn't have made his hair stand on end any more than it did now!

Unable to stop himself, he laughed out loud, making the commander raise a self-conscious hand and attempt to palm down his unruly curls.

"Yuk it up, kid," Al grumbled, turning around to face the vanity mirror. "You ain't looked in the mirror yet."

The smile instantly wiped off his face, Sam crossed to stand beside his friend and stared at his reflection. Al was right--he looked like he'd been through his mom's blow drier.

Al met his eyes via the mirror...and then they both laughed. In their shirtsleeves and bow ties they looked quite a pair.

After a moment, the commander asked, "Mind telling me what that White Knight bit was all about?"

Sam shrugged indifferently, doing his best to flatten his wild hair. "I just didn't want to see Jessica go out and get drenched."

"You know," Al continued, cocking a shrewd eyebrow at him, "sometimes knights would get rewards for their chivalry. And you and Jessica seem to be getting on like a house on fire."

"Al..." he said reproachfully.

"Yeah...?" the groom returned measuredly.

"I'm not like that." Even as he said it, he blushed at the idea of Jessica having thought he

had ulterior motives for his actions.

"Like what?"

"Like...like you! I only met her a half hour ago!" Looking down, he shuffled his feet, embarrassed. "Besides, it would have ruined her dress."

"Sure," Al said, obviously not buying it. The older man suddenly turned to him with a suspicious scowl. "And maybe you were hoping she'd follow you outside, instead of me...so the two of you could be in here right now, taking each other's clothes off."

Turning, Sam let his eloquent look say it all.

Al's suspicion shrank under it. "Okay, so maybe you weren't. Damn. I need another glass of champagne."

"Maybe you've...had enough already," Sam said, feeling his way around a touchy subject. He didn't want this conversation to get anywhere even remotely close to where it had gone at Al's last wedding reception. He was sure Al wasn't drunk...although there was no doubting he was several miles down that road.

Surprisingly, Al grinned. "You're probably right. I don't wanna get so wasted I can't... you know." At that, he ran a frustrated hand through the curls he'd just spent the last two minutes trying to slick down. "Geez, I wish the honeymoon would start already! It's really beginning to get to me, pal...if you get my drift."

"Yeah, I get your drift." No points for guessing what was on Al's mind.

"Every time Ruthie takes me by the hand, it's like she reaches in and takes me by the--"

"Al!"

"--heart," Al finished. "I was only gonna say 'heart', Sam. Now don't you feel guilty you jumped to conclusions?"

"Knowing you, no." He studied the older man in a moment of companionable silence. "You really do love her, don't you."

Al hesitated, as if he actually had to think it over. "Yeah," he said, then grinned. "You know somethin', pal? I really think I do. Why else would I put up with all this?"

He gestured at his surroundings, not meaning the bathroom but the grander picture around him that--this day--had become part of his life. Ruthie's Jewish faith. Her parents. Her grandmother. Everything. It wasn't just a whole new life...but a whole new world as well.

"I...er..." Al began, "I just want you to

know...I don't think I could've got through this afternoon without you. I mean, in the synagogue --geez, for a moment there I really thought she wasn't coming, Sam. And it scared me. I dunno what I would've done if she hadn't showed."

"Gone home?" Sam asked, trying for levity.

Al chuckled. "And got even more wasted than I am now, yeah." He sobered momentarily. "My point is...hell, I'm no good at this mushy stuff, but...thanks for bein' there, Sam. I appreciate it."

"You're welcome," the best man replied sincerely, returning the smile. "Maybe someday you can do the same thing for me."

"Count on it, kid." Al clapped him on the shoulder. "That's a promise."

Ruthie chose that moment to return, with a pile of clean, dry towels and a plastic comb. Missing the gratitude passing between the two men, she playfully threw a blue-striped towel over her husband's head, then placed the rest of the folded pile on the vanity. Al surfaced immediately, pulling the towel around his neck, as she offered one to Sam.

"No, thanks," he declined, holding up his hand. "I think I'm about as dry as I'm going to get. But I will borrow the comb."

Jessica made an unexpected appearance in the open bathroom door behind them a few minutes later. "Here you all are," she announced, her brown eyes sweeping around the trio. "Thought maybe you'd forgotten there's a party going on out there." She smiled meaningfully at Sam.

"Oh...yeah..." Sam returned. Not wishing to appear rude, he automatically crossed to the bathroom door, but paused on the other side of the threshold when he realized neither Al nor Ruthie had made a move to follow. He shot a questioning glance back at the bridal couple. "You two coming?"

"Well, you know, Sam..." Al said, as if after careful consideration. Three steps took him away from his bride and to the door, which he leaned against as he thoughtfully continued. "My hair is still kinda wet. And I...gotta take time to comb it yet, too...you know?"

With a wink only Sam could see, Al closed the bathroom door, leaving the physicist to shake his head at it.

* * *

The large room adjoining the Steinman residence, which now housed the central hub of

the wedding reception, didn't really resemble a funeral parlor, Sam told himself convincingly. Not when the caskets were removed--lined up in the hall--and the black floor-to-ceiling drapes were sufficiently lit.

Well, okay...at least not when inhabited by a few dozen spirited wedding guests.

Sam groaned inwardly. Bad choice of words, under the circumstances.

Turning his thoughts elsewhere, he looked past Jessica, who was standing at his shoulder, and at the assembled crowd. It seemed the majority of them had weathered the rain reasonably well, a few of the stragglers having stripped off their wet top layer of clothing. The dancing and toasting was continuing unabated, as if there had been no heavenly interruption at all...as if they weren't all standing in the middle of a--

No, best not to even think about it.

Besides, nobody else seemed to be concerned by the unorthodox surroundings. Not them, not Jessica. Not even the band, who had reclaimed their instruments and, despite being cramped into a space one third the size of what they needed, were vigorously providing music for the festivities again.

As if on cue, the traditional song and dance ended. There was only a moment's pause, just long enough to allow the huddle on the dance floor to thin. When the band began playing again, it was a slower, more modern song...even though he recognized it as something from the sixties. It was not exactly current stuff, but at least it allowed all the couples present the chance to finally dance with each other, rather than in a circular group.

"Would you like to dance?" Sam asked Jessica impulsively.

"Sure."

Holding her at arm's length, they moved out onto the floor. He quickly discovered she was as good at modern dancing as she was at the other more traditional steps, and was about to tell her so when something unexpected caught his eye over her shoulder.

On the other side of the room, the two kids--Sarah and Daniel--were sitting together in companionable silence, crossed-legged under a blanket and sharing a single plate of rapidly disappearing wedding cake. Evidently, there had been a truce.

Although maybe not for long, he amended silently, watching as the boy beat his companion

to the last bit of cake, stabbing it with his fork. But something stopped Daniel from eating it. The boy looked up, grinned, and offered the last morsel to Sarah, who took it with a smile.

"It must be love," Sam murmured quietly to himself, quoting Al.

"What?" Jessica, in his arms, asked.

"Unh..." Sam floundered, wondering if he'd just given her the wrong idea. "That's...unh... what Al said...remember?"

"Oh, right," she returned, oblivious to the fact that he was referring to her kid brother and cousin. "Although exactly what he and Ruthie hope to accomplish in the bathroom..." She left the statement hang, and pulled back just enough to shoot him a devilish look.

Despite the mixed communication, Sam chuckled, amused. "You don't know Al!"

She laughed. "You don't know my cousin Ruthie!"

That earned her a surprised look. Ruthie had always seemed so...well, nice.

"There's about the same age difference between me and Ruthie, as there is between me and Daniel," Jessica said by way of a roundabout explanation. "My dad and her mom are brother and sister--our families lived in the same house for a while, when we were growing up. Us upstairs, them downstairs." She shrugged. "I used listen in on the other phone whenever Ruthie was talking 'girl-talk' with her friends. It was very...educational." She smiled at the memory, her dimples showing.

"You eavesdropped?" he asked in mock disapproval.

"Well," she began, as if suddenly a little embarrassed. "I wouldn't put it exactly like that but...yes. Hey, how do you think I got to..." She switched to her aloof 'Grandma' voice again. "...'know many things'?"

Sam smiled. "How old were you?"

"Five or six. And before you ask, yes... teenage girls always talk about boys!"

"Now that I know," he returned fondly, his smile widening as he thought of Katie--twelve going on eighteen, discussing the current 'most awesome boy in school' with her friends. "I have a kid sister who used to tie up the phone for hours. Used to drive me nuts...before I went away to college..."

As if out of the clear blue, she asked, "Can you believe Ruthie and Al actually got married?"

"What's wrong with getting married?"

"Nothing. It's just that..." She shrugged

again, her shoulder brushed lightly against his arm. "They've only known each other for a few months. How do they know that they're...well... that they're right for each other? How does anyone know that?"

"I think," he began slowly, as those earlier feelings about the magic of weddings resurfaced. Then his eyes moved to hers, and he suddenly felt inadequate trying to be philosophical about love--a subject in which he was definitely no expert. "I think there are some things you can't put into words," he finished sheepishly.

"Well, would you marry someone, plan on spending sixty or seventy years of your life with them, based on only knowing them for a couple of months?"

"I'd marry someone after a couple of hours," Sam said in a moment of total honesty, "if she was the right someone."

Jessica held his eyes for a long moment, perhaps reading more into his words than he had intended. Embarrassed, recalling the 'ulterior motives' Al had suggested in the bathroom, Sam quickly diverted his gaze and hoped he hadn't just misled her.

"Then I guess Bubbe's right," she said after a moment. "Love really does have its own set of rules. I just hope I remember that when I finally meet Mr. Right...even if on first impressions he seems like Mr. Wrong."

"You will," Sam said, relieved to discover he hadn't accidentally led her on. "Somehow...we all do."

The song ended. Stepping apart, they moved back to take up an out-of-the-way position near the heavy black drapes in the closest corner. Before either of them could speak, or even think of something to say, the band broke into a short fanfare which announced the arrival of the bride and groom.

They appeared in the doorway--Al still in his shirtsleeves but with his wet tux coat draped over his right arm. Ruthie had hold of his left hand, her fingers laced with his. Clearly, it was time for the bridal couple to leave. Judging from the look on Al's face, it was well past time.

That, or the groom just wanted to get the hell out of this room...

The guests began to gather around in anticipation of their departure. Ruthie let go of Al's hand in order to turn and hug both her parents, and her sisters and friends. As Jessica--and the majority--favored the bride

with well-wishes and goodbyes, Sam took the opportunity to cross to Al.

He put out his right hand as he approached, drawing the groom into a handshake. "Well, looks like you did it, buddy. Got through it all without a hitch." At Al's expression for all the things that had gone wrong, he grinned and amended, "Well, you got through it anyway."

The groom returned the smile despite himself. "Thanks, pal." They dropped hands. "And hey..." He pointed over his shoulder at the adjoining hall. "...I left your coat out on the...back there, okay?"

"Okay. I think I can find it."

Al's voice dropped slightly, as if he were disclosing a closely guarded secret. "Now, you know where we're staying tonight, right?"

"Yes," Sam answered in an equally hushed tone. Tom had been just as secretive about the location of the hotel where he spent his wedding night. What did he think? That a bunch of people were going to come pounding on his hotel door in the middle of...the night?

"And you know you gotta have the suits back by noon or they'll charge me another day rental, right?"

"I'll pick up your tux tomorrow morning, when I pick up Ruthie's car in the parking lot of the airport Hilton at nine sharp," Sam promised. "Al, relax, I'll take care of it."

"Okay," he said, "and Ruthie's dress will be in the trunk, too, so--"

"--so when I drop her car off at your apartment, I'll take it inside. Okay."

"And you'll remember to--"

"--come by every few days to start up your Corvette, yes," Sam finished. As Al opened his mouth to add something, he quickly said, "And no, I won't let it run for more than ten minutes at a time."

"Or you'll foul up the plugs." Al gestured at the wet coat still hung over his arm. "I'd give you this now, only you'd still have to come by tomorrow to get the rest. And besides, I got my plane tickets right here." He patted the black material. "Don't wanna risk losing those little beauties."

"Where did you decide to take her?"

Al cocked an eyebrow at him. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Ruthie doesn't know?"

"Nah, figured I'd surprise her." Al carefully checked that his bride was out of earshot before whispering, "We fly to New York

City tomorrow, then catch the Honeymoon Express to Niagara Falls."

"I've always wanted to visit Niagara Falls. They sound very impressive."

"They are." Al waved a dismissing hand. "I've been there before." A Calavicci leer lit up his eyes. "I've got other sights in mind this time."

"Albert..." a voice interrupted.

Both Sam and Al turned as Edna wheeled up to them. The groom knelt by her wheelchair with a smile, putting his right hand on top of hers as she grasped his left.

"You make sure you come visit me sometime, nu? You know how to drive those planes, and Boston is not all that far by air, so you make sure you come and visit."

"It's 'fly'," Al corrected with a gentle grin. "And okay, I'll come visit you." He shot her a wink. "D'you mind if I bring Ruthie along, too?"

"Riboyne Shel O'lem!" she said, chuckling.

"Thanks for everything, Edna," Al said earnestly, leaning forward to plant a quick kiss on her cheek.

She patted his hand. "You're family now, Albert. So you call me *Bubbe* like the rest of the family does. It means 'grandmother'...and that's how I want you to think of me."

"Okay...*Bubbe*," the groom said, clearly touched by her words.

As he got to his feet, Ruthie joined them, sliding her arms around her grandmother's neck for a big hug.

"I'm so glad you came, *Bubbe*," she said. "It just wouldn't have felt right without you here."

As Ruthie drew back, Edna, still holding Al's left hand, reached out for her granddaughter's hand. Watching this, Sam felt rather than heard the room about them fall under a hush of anticipation, all eyes turned to Edna and the bridal couple.

At that moment, he realized that this was what Al needed. Not to be married in a synagogue, shrouded in ancient customs and foreign tongues, or to study a book just to try to fit in. He needed simply this--for the matriarch of the family to give him her granddaughter's hand in the presence of the entire family.

Her wheelchair between them, Edna joined

their hands, then quietly drew back. A special moment passed between the bride and groom, as they were left just standing there, holding hands and looking at each other in a room full of spectators, before Al raised Ruthie's hand to his lips and gently kissed it.

"Go on now," Edna encouraged them. "This night belongs to you both. Cherish it, and the way you love each other, every one of the nights you have yet to share. *Mazel tov*, my children, and bless you both."

Sam felt his throat tighten a little, choked with emotion. In any language, in any religion, love was love.

It was the perfect moment for the bride and groom to take their leave, and they did. The band accompanied them back out into the hall, then to the front door...as did most of the relatives, including Edna. Sam hung back, smiling to himself, somehow knowing that his absence in the farewell procedures would not be missed. Al's whole attention revolved around Ruthie, and even if he could, he just didn't want to distract the commander from her for even a second. Not now, not ever.

Instead, he went the opposite way in the hall, to retrieve his coat from where he'd laid it earlier. A quick goodbye to Jessica, and a polite word to Ruthie's parents, and he would be on his way. He smiled, picking his tux coat up off the pine casket. This would certainly be a wedding to remember, with all its ups and downs, fortunes and misfortunes. Still, it had all worked out in the end...

Sam paused on that thought, holding his breath and crossing his fingers, until he heard Ruthie's car start outside and move away into the distance, all under a chorus of '*mazel tov*'s and the patter of some light rain.

"What else could go wrong?" he quietly asked himself, donning his coat.

It was only then--when the constriction of the material almost choked him--that he realized what had happened. And he needn't really have bothered to check the inside pocket, to know Al's plane tickets were safely nestled there.

Because it was quite obvious that this tux was too small--Al had accidentally picked up the wrong coat.

Sam looked heavenward. "Oh, boy," he moaned. "I shouldn't have asked..."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Close To Home"

Working with geniuses has its advantages...and its disadvantages. On the plus side, Sam's breakthrough in speeding up the layering process put the whole Project way ahead of schedule. It made me look real good with Belton, that I had wooed the Boy Wonder over to our Project in the first place. Little does the old guy know that Sam was begging for a chance to get his hands on this technology and it took no undue effort on my part at all. I wouldn't try to snow Sam into doing something that wasn't in his best interests. But Belton doesn't need to know that, right?

On the negative side of working with a genius is the fact that I always feel a step behind. Well, not always. But too often for comfort. I hate it when Sam makes one of those mega-leaps of logic seemingly out of the blue.

Sometimes they seem like the craziest thing imaginable and then when I think them out, damned if they don't make sense after all...and they work. Boggles the

mind. And he's always so blasé about it because nine times outta ten, he's already gone on to



something else. Gets to me sometimes.

Another negative is when he gets The Quiets. When Sam gets quiet, he's not always thinking--sometimes he's brooding. Let me rephrase that; a lot of times he's brooding. And he's been awfully quiet lately.

Ruthie noticed too, last time we had Sam over to dinner. He seems sorta preoccupied. Her theory is that he's homesick.

Homesick. Geez, he's a grown man! Too old to be mooning over Indiana and the good old days down on the farm. But then again, Sam's family and his home mean a lot to him. His office here is like his apartment--stuffed full of old photographs. There're all kinds of them...of him and his family...the majority taken when he, Katie and Tom were just kids.

He's been talking about those lately. Not a lot--he just comes out with a story now and again about his Dad or something rural, like driving a tractor or that county fair where his Mom used to win blue ribbons for pumpkin pie.

Primo pumpkin pie. Now there's something to be homesick for.

Sam thinks I've forgotten about the stories he told me about this fair that's such a big deal with the townfolk, that they come back to the old place for it the last week of September every year.

So I don't expect he suspected any ulterior motive at all when I strongly suggested that he take some time off now for vacation.

It is true that things at CLEAR STAR are winding down. Three months--six tops--and we'll be shut down for good. Now's a good chance for him to take some of that vacation time he's saved up over the past two years and is always too wrapped up in his work to use.

When he tried to argue, I insisted. Told him I was taking some time off too, and that Ruthie and I were locking ourselves in our apartment and dedicating the week to making each other happy. I had to describe some of the things I had in mind for us to get him flustered enough to forget his resistance to vacation--it's an old trick but it still works--and he finally thought a week's leave sounded good. I'm not telling him my real plan is to suggest to Ruthie that we take my new Beech 'Baron' for a spin, fly up to Boston and visit Grandma Edna.

Although I'll have to remember to take a few rolls of dimes with us, in case we have to detour to Cleveland again. Wonder if that hotel still has the Massage-O-Matic bed...?

So anyway, Sam's gone to Indiana. Gone to the old home place and the Tri-County Fair in Wittsberg.

Gone home.

I just hope he's not disappointed.

* * *

September in Indiana was beautiful. The sun shone golden and warm, with none of August's excessive heat. Leaving Harker's Falls, the only town near Wittsberg with an airport big enough to fly into on the hop from Chicago, Sam headed his rental car out on the highway with no clear idea of a plan. As he drove, he rolled down the windows to enjoy the temperature that demanded neither heater nor air conditioner.

It was a beautiful drive despite the fact that most of the foliage was still green. He felt no urgency to hurry, only a half-sensed desire to take in all the scents and sights about him until he found himself arriving in the city limits of Elk Ridge.

As he drove slowly through the small town, the grassy lawns, revitalized by recent rains looked as even and full as they must have appeared in June. Only lumbering school buses laden with noisy children gave a clue that it was autumn, not spring.

Leaving town for familiar countryside, Sam found the clues of fall were easier to see there. Crops along the county roads were full and thick, nearly ready for the harvest. Early turning trees, like the maple at the intersection of Charmsdale Road and County Road 256, were beginning to show the barest fade of summer's green. Its proud pattern of thick limbs against the clear, deep blue of the sky reminded Sam of every golden September day he had hiked home from school. It was always one of the first trees to turn.

Admitting to himself that he knew where he was heading despite his avowed intention to just 'take a drive', he traced a familiar path. Turn right on Charmsdale Road by the big tree, keep going until you could see the curved stone bridge that everyone in the county called the 'Humpty-Dumpty Bridge', then cut through the corn to Beckett's Lane; he could have done it in his sleep.

Driving the short cut just wasn't the same, especially since he had to stay to the road and forego the trip through the corn. Still, it eased the tight knot of tension between his

shoulder blades that he hadn't even realized was there until he was nearly home.

Home. Well...not exactly, Sam admitted as he pulled his car to the side of the lane and parked it. The place belonged to Sibby now. Sibby, his wife and their two-year-old child now called it home.

Getting from the car, he closed the door and leaned against it, gazing down the lane. This was where his old shortcut had come out, midway down the next to the last long hill that led home.

His mother had written him when Sibby had bought the place. When they had been growing up, the Beckett's had been his friend's second home anyway. Jovial, mischievous, and self-confident, Bobby Moslich had been Sam's best friend. With his own home life lacking because of an alcoholic mother and often absent father, Sibby--as their new 'sibling' came to be known--had been a frequent visitor to the house. That it was now his, pleased Sam greatly, although he had lost touch with his friend over the years. He had heard that Sibby was a pediatrician with a thriving practice.

Fall sang about him as he regarded the farm house at the end of the newly graveled road. The leaves of corn stalks whispered at his back. The coarse buzz of locusts droned as a background to the trilling chorus of the last crickets that rose and fell all about him.

Fall. Basketball practice, chores, and the Tri-County Fair; the memories made him smile. He had been right to come.

His tentative plan had been to take a drive, check into the Rainbow Motel in town, then call Sibby and see if it was all right to come out for a visit. But now, so close to home, he abandoned the plan as he got back into his car.

He knew Sibby's wife, Janet, only by sight. She had been two years behind them in school. Still, small town's being what they were, surely she'd believe him when he introduced himself and asked if he could look around the farm. The house, hopefully, he could see later when Sibby got home from his office in town.

Driving down the short distance to the house, he parked and got out. So intent was he on taking in the changes to the place, most noticeable of which was a Victorian style sign by the front door which read 'Morningside Inn', he did not realize he was not alone.

"Can I help you?" The sound of a young woman's voice, coming from the direction of the

porch, startled Sam and he jumped guiltily.

Coming forward, he took one step up on the first stair. By craning his neck forward, he could see a young, attractive woman sitting on a graceful antique swing.

"I didn't see you," he said in way of explanation, indicating the honeysuckle vine that shielded the front of the porch from view. "This is new. Well..." he temporized as he took a closer look at the thick vine. "Not new. It looks like it's been growing a while. I just meant...it wasn't here when I lived here."

"You lived here?" The woman asked in interest, brushing thick, silvery blonde hair over her shoulder. She put aside the crockery bowl of green beans she had been snapping and got to her feet.

"Yeah, a long time ago. My family owned this place."

"Really?" She came forward to the edge of the porch. Her eyes were a clear grayish blue, her gaze warm and friendly. "Are you Tom Beckett--or Sam?"

Taken by surprise, he blinked, looking up at her. "Unh, Sam."

Her grin was one of recognition, though Sam was sure--reasonably sure--that she wasn't Janet. "No kidding! Sam Beckett! Sibby speaks of you often."

Another female voice came from behind her as someone opened the screen door and came out. "Sam? Is that you?"

Looking past the first woman, he saw Janet, still beautiful and friendly with the warm smile he remembered, coming toward him. "Yeah," he answered, "it's me. I was in town and I--"

"--came to see your old place," she finished for him as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "It's fair week. Our rooms are booked solid most days. We've gotten to see all sorts of old friends. Sibby will be thrilled you're here."

She turned to include the other woman in her smile. "Sam and Sibby were good friends in high school." Without giving Sam time to consider his next words, she reached out to take his hand and pull him up the stairs. "Come on in. You can have a look around. See what you think of what we've done with the place. You'll stay to supper, won't you?"

Before Sam could answer, the sound of an unhappy toddler came from inside. "Oh," Janet said with a shake of her head. "Alex's awake. Jen, could you...?"

The other woman smiled. "Sure. I'll take care of showing Sam around."

"Thanks," Janet said, reaching out to squeeze Sam's arm in welcome. "Sibby will be so glad to see you." With that, she turned and disappeared into the house.

A bit taken aback at the warm welcome, Sam looked to his companion, who grinned. "Janet's always in high gear lately. Running a bed and breakfast while turning the barn into an antique and historic craft store would kill any other mortal woman, but she thrives on it."

"Bed and breakfast?" Sam repeated, trying to take it all in. His house was now an inn? Suddenly, the Victorian sign made sense.

His companion nodded, running a quick hand through her silvery bangs to sweep them from her forehead. "The Morningside Inn," she said as if reading his mind. "I'm Jenny," she continued, "Janet's sister. I'm helping out around here for a while. Come on in and I'll give you the grand tour."

Morningside Inn was beautiful. It was gleaming hardwood floors, white walls adorned with delicate stencils or mahogany chair rails, and dark blue carpet as thick as velvet on the stairs to the rooms where he and his brother and sister had once slept.

It was rooms full of substantial, beautiful antiques of oak, cherry and pine. The beds were four posters, or canopies, draped with richly detailed quilts stitched delicately by hand or lavish ruffles and lace. The bedstands held carafes of cut crystal, waiting to be filled with ice water for soon-to-arrive guests. It was beautiful, and loved, and comfortable.

But it was not home. It was the Morningside Inn, awaiting guests who had booked the two spare rooms for places to stay during the fair.

Still, there were ghosts of home. When they started down the stairs after their tour of the second story, the third board from the top creaked loudly under their feet. It had gotten Katie in big trouble the time she tried to sneak out to meet that guy from Wittsberg. That loser named Chuck.

Seeking happier memories, Sam paused by the window seat on the landing. His mom had needle-pointed the cushion of black, royal blue and gold the winter before his dad's heart attack. Leaning down, he gazed out the window at the shaded side yard.

A tire swing still dangled from the oak tree's thickest limb. Tom had broken his arm on

that swing the summer after sixth grade when the rope broke under his weight. Sam smiled. Sibby had been there that day and he must have remembered too. Instead of rope, this swing dangled from a woven plastic cord.

Jenny, who had paused on the bottom stair to wait for him, smiled. "I guess this brings back memories."

"Sure does," Sam agreed, straightening reluctantly. Turning away from the window, he came down the steps to join her. "It's a lot different than Mom had it." He ran a light hand down the bannister, the paint of which had been stripped away and returned to natural wood. "She'd like it, though. She always said she was going to refinish this."

Watching him a moment, Jenny nodded and then moved away. "Mom and Dad sold our old house in town when Dad retired. They moved to Florida."

"Do they like it?" Sam asked politely.

"Hate it," she answered with a laugh. "Dad keeps saying he wants to move back to a place that has real seasons."

Grinning in understanding, Sam followed her into the living room. "My Mom used to say the same thing about Hawaii. I think she's used to it now. I've spent Christmas there a few times since. It is pretty strange. Christmas without snow."

"I can imagine," Jenny agreed when there was the sound of a door opening and closing in the back of the house.

Quick footsteps sounded coming in the back hall and Sibby appeared in the doorway. "Sam!" he exclaimed in delight, coming forward to catch the physicist's hand in his. "Janet called and said you were here! It's great to see you."

"It's great to see you too," Sam returned, grinning as widely as his friend. Sibby the beanpole had broadened as much as his voice had deepened. Now he was a booming voiced giant who seemed to fill the room with his presence.

"You're staying for the week for the fair, aren't you?" the pediatrician demanded, still keeping Sam's hand in a bear's grip. "We'll find a place for you here."

"Well, I..."

"Come on, Janet has beds tucked into all the nooks and crannies of this place. She can't have filled them all."

"I...didn't really plan on staying," Sam began to explain. "I was going to the motel in town and..."

Sibby snorted. "The Rainbow? When you can

stay here? In your own house? Stay and we can shoot baskets after supper. It'll be like old times."

Eyeing the doctor's ample middle, Sam doubted that, but began to waver. "Well, if you think you can find a place..."

"I was going to sleep in the attic room since the room I usually sleep in is rented," Jenny volunteered. "But, you can have it. I can sleep in the den on the sofa."

"But--"

"Great," Sibby said grinning, finally releasing Sam's hand to slap him on the back. He turned to sweep his sister-in-law into a half-hug. "Thanks, Jen. What are we going to do without you when you leave us and start that career of yours?" Before she could do more than smile, the tall man had turned back to Sam. "You're gonna love Janet's cooking. She makes pumpkin pie nearly as good as your Mom's."

"Speaking of supper," Jenny said, "I've got beans to snap." She moved toward the door. "You two have a good visit."

Sam began to speak but was interrupted again by Sibby. "Sam Beckett," he said, regarding him as if unable to believe his eyes. He waved expansively at the sofa. "Have a seat," he offered. "I'll go get us some iced tea and you can tell me how the hell you are."

Disappearing in the direction of the kitchen, he left no room for argument. Smiling, Sam shook his head. Except for a hundred pounds and an octave or so, Sibby hadn't changed. Even the 'Inn' suddenly felt a whole lot more familiar.

At that moment, he felt a whole lot closer to home.

* * *

Dinner was wonderful. Sam felt himself almost transported back to an earlier time as he ate thick breaded pork chops served with warm, homemade applesauce, scalloped potatoes, and fresh green beans. He found himself concentrating on the food, letting Janet and Sibby do most of the talking other than for his brief explanation of how his family was and where they all were. By the time they had caught up on most of their high school friends' lives, it was time for dessert.

Briefly, Sam considered showing some self-restraint after having seconds of everything, but when Janet announced it was warm blackberry cobbler, he changed his mind. Restraint, he

decided, could wait until he was back in his bachelor apartment and doing his own cooking again.

Picking up a spoon when Janet handed him his portion, he took a bite and shook his head in sincere appreciation. "You're right, Sibby. Janet is as good a cook as my mom."

Laughing, Janet slid back into her chair after having served everyone. "Thanks, Sam," she said, reaching out to rescue her own spoon from Alex, who was using it as a percussion instrument. "But Jenny made the cobbler."

The physicist's gaze slid to the younger woman's. "It's wonderful," he said, suddenly feeling a bit shy. "You're a great cook."

"Well," Jenny admitted with a grin, "at cobbler anyway. My dumplings still need work."

"Dumplings?" Sam's spoon paused halfway to his mouth. "You make dumplings?" Instantly, he was transported back to a memory of this kitchen fragrant with the scent of stewing chicken and dumplings. "I haven't had dumplings in..." He shook his head regretfully. "...I don't know how long." He looked at both the sisters. "Your mom must have been a great cook."

Janet smiled. "She was, but Jenny didn't learn from her. When I was busy learning to cook, she was out building a two-story tree house in the back yard."

"Hey," Jenny protested with no real anger. "It was a great tree house. I got the plans out of a library book and modified them myself." Her gaze shifted to Sam and her grin deepened. "It was neat. Even had a draw-up ladder to keep out nosy older sisters."

At Janet's good-natured shake of her head, Sam hid a smile. With two siblings, he understood the principle of protected space very well.

"It sounds great," he agreed. "Did you really build it from a book?"

"Yes," the petite blonde woman agreed, shooting a glance at her older sister. "And it's how I learned to cook too--from a book."

Sighing, Janet shook her head in long suffering patience. "And she did, too. Jenny's philosophy is that there's a book for every skill."

Grinning, Sam pushed away his empty cobbler bowl. "I guess it's mine, too, sort of. Or it used to be. I tried to learn the basics of karate from a book before I ever got up nerve to go to a gym."

"Really?" The young woman seemed truly

interested and not apt to have fun at his expense. "Why?"

"Because..." Sam took a chance and answered honestly. "I was...pretty green...and I thought if I did a little studying beforehand maybe I wouldn't look like such an idiot when I got out in front of people."

"Did it help?"

"No," Sam answered wryly. "Not really. Getting the moves took time and practice. But, if I hadn't read the book, I don't think I would have gotten up the nerve to go."

Nodding, Jenny seemed to find his answer perfectly logical. Then, her glance slid to her sister's and her grin turned mischievous again. "So," she said, feigning a grudging tone, "I guess maybe I do need more kitchen time rather than a new recipe to get the dumplings down."

Turning away to rescue applesauce from her son's chubby fist before it found its way into his hair, Janet gave a mock sigh of gratitude. "Thank you, Sam. For a vote for experience as well as written knowledge."

Sibby smoothly cut into the conversation. "Jen just finished up her master's in Civil Engineering at Indiana State."

"No kidding," Sam said, truly interested. "What are you planning on doing now?"

Suddenly Jenny was focusing on the table before her rather than meeting his eyes. "I have a friend whose dad works at Relson's firm in Harker's Falls. He tells me that Carl Butler will be retiring there soon, and an opening will come up then. I'm pretty sure I could get on there so I'm sort of...marking time until then."

"Relson's..." Sam nodded. "They do a lot of work around here."

The sound of the front door bell interrupted the conversation and Jenny was on her feet almost immediately. "I'll get it. It's probably the first of the guests."

Before anyone could protest, she was gone from the room. Sensing something more was going on than was immediately apparent, Sam hesitated.

In the sudden lull, the toddler seated next to him discovered the joys of shaking a tippy cup over the edge of the tray. Filled with delight, he squealed, at the sound the juice made hitting the square of plastic his mother had placed beneath his chair.

"Enough juice for you, young man," Janet said, liberating the cup from the child's chubby hands. Getting to her feet, she lifted the two-year-old from his chair, saying, "Let's get your

face cleaned up and go see who is at the door."

Sam began to speak, but Janet turned to give him a smile.

"Do me a favor, Sam, take Sibby out to the barn and run some calories off him in a few games of one-on-one."

"Sure," Sam agreed, reaching out to gather his dishes. "After I--"

"And leave the dishes," she said firmly. "Exercising my husband is more important than cleaning up. You're a guest here. Jenny already promised to help me with these."

"But..."

"Give it up," Sibby said with a mock sigh. "She'll have a fit if you try." He gave his wife a woeful glance. "It's basketball for us, Sam," he said as if it were a distasteful chore, "or we're both in the dog house."

"Exactly," Janet returned in kind, turning away. "Because next week is your turn in the kitchen." Carrying their child, she left the room before Sibby had opportunity to reply.

Hesitating, Sam regarded his friend. "Are you sure we shouldn't...?"

"Nah," his friend said, shaking his head. "If she wanted us to, she would have said so. She wants us out of the house so she can get things together before the rest of the overnight guests arrive."

Tossing his napkin onto the table, he got to his feet as Sam wondered how it was that married couples learned to read the secret meaning behind the most simple of exchanges. It was almost like an unconscious, secret communication which excluded the rest of the world. He had noticed it with Al and Ruthie too, and now here between Sibby and Janet.

Silently, part of him wondered what it would be like to share that kind of rapport with another person...and if he would ever find out.

"Ready, for a little game of roundball?" Sibby asked with a grin. "Or have you forgotten how to play while you've been out setting the world of science on its ear?"

* * *

Sam had forgotten nothing of roundball though he had not played in years...and it had been more like decades since he and Sibby had gone one-on-one. The doctor was heavier, and slower, but so, Sam found to his chagrin, was he. He was going to have to start spending more time in training at the gym again.

He found he had missed playing basketball in the autumn night more than he had realized. It was all just as he had remembered: the faint crunch of grit under the ball as they dribbled on concrete that always collected fine dirt and gravel from the pasture, the glow of the metal shaded bulb affixed high above the basket on the barn and the way it cast harshly shadowed light that pushed away the Indiana night in a rough half circle.

Even the two cars that pulled in behind them and circled around to the front of the house added to the illusion that he had stepped back in time. He and Sibby gave them waves as they passed slowly, but there was no responsibility on their part to greet them. It was like being sixteen again and playing with full minded concentration while the adults at the house took care of the rest of the world.

Sibby still played hard, driving in fast and showing no quarter. Sam was pressed to keep up with him, and found himself pushing for the final point that would give him the game.

Driving in toward the goal, Sam found Sibby pressing him, using his height to keep him blocked from the final shot. Turning, circling, and ducking, did Sam no good.

For a brief moment it was as if this night were like so many others nights when he had played this game under a night sky, pushing so hard to win against a worthy opponent...pushing so hard to be as good as Tom.

Tom, who was All State.

It seemed he heard a shout--a shout that he sensed with his heart, not his head.

'Get your hand in his face and shoot!'

Did it come from one of those other nights? It must have. It rang in a night past that was so closely connected to this one that it still echoed in his ears.

'Come on, Sam, get your hand in his face and shoot!'

Obeying, Sam jumped, arm coming up, hard inside, forcing Sibby back to give him space to shoot. The moment the ball left his hand, he knew the shot was good, knew it would swish sweet and true right through the net. Like it had when his brother had drilled him in it, pushing him to succeed. It was going to go in just like it had the night years ago against Bentleyville when it had been No-Nose Pruitt breathing down his neck instead of Sibby.

"Hoo-yah!" Sam shouted into the night as the ball shot through the net, hit the barn door and

rebounded toward them. And that cry too, echoed through other nights even while it lingered in this one.

Winded, Sibby leaned forward, hands on his knees. "Damn," he managed through gasps. "I thought maybe you'd have forgotten that little trick Tom taught you by now."

Laughing despite his shortness of breath, Sam caught the ball as it bounced past him. "There are some things," he said, pulling deeply for air, head down, "that a guy never forgets."

For a long moment there was a companionable silence as they paused, trying to recover, their breath showing white in the cooling air. Above them, the sky had clouded over, hiding the stars that often shone so brilliantly in Indiana's clear air.

Sam recovered first, straightening to his full height as Sibby said, "Tom was good."

"Yeah," the physicist agreed. "He was--is." There was a faint pang of...something...there and then gone so fast he could not identify it. It was almost...grief...though that made no sense.

For no reason he could fathom, he cast a glance toward the far corner of the barn door, just at the edge of the circle of light. Though whatever he had expected to see was not there. There was no figure there, standing, watching, observing...

"Sam?" Sibby's voice called him back from the elusive something that had been too nebulous to be called memory. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," the physicist answered, pulling himself back to the present. "I was just thinking about Tom...and the old days."

"Speaking of the old days," the doctor said with a grin, clapping Sam on the shoulder. "Come on in here. I nearly forgot about this. I've got something for you."

Tucking the ball under his arm, Sam followed the taller man to the entrance to the barn. Walking just behind the doctor as he slid open the old door, Sam fully expected the warm, milky scent of well-cared for cows, fresh straw and old wood. It seemed, almost, that he caught the old scent, so ingrained was it in his memory, so connected to the simple act of sliding open this door.

But in the blink of an eye it was gone, if it had ever been. Sibby was leading the way into the barn and the scent that spilled back to Sam was freshly sanded wood and...something sweet like dried flowers or perfume.

Fumbling, the doctor was searching about him for the light switch, stubbing his toe on something and muttering a disgusted protest under his breath. Slipping in behind him, Sam reached out from habit so learned that it was no longer conscious and flicked on the light.

As it flooded the interior of the old structure, he blinked, as much from shock as in response to the sudden brilliance. The barn was no longer truly a barn. Though the job was by no means finished, someone had evidently done a great deal of work, renewing old wood and scrubbing the worn, rough floors until they were more pristine than even John Beckett's high standard of cleanliness.

Some of the old milking apparatus still remained, though now it was arranged solely for decoration, and low shelves and counters had been added to the room. Abruptly Sam realized the floral scent must be some sort of potpourri and remembered Jenny's earlier comment about making the barn into an antique shop.

As if not noticing that Sam had frozen at the door, mutely taking in the changes, Sibby crossed to the far counter. "It's in here somewhere," he said, bending low to search. "Janet found it when she cleaned out the old storage closet up in the loft. She...here!"

Straightening, he drew out an object that took only Sam only a moment to place. "My sled!" he said with a grin, coming forward. "I remember the Christmas my dad gave me this! I was nine..."

Grinning broadly, Sibby handed it over. "And I remember that New Year's when we hooked up Herky's St. Bernard to pull us...and knocked ourselves silly when he took off after that cat of yours."

"Donder," Sam agreed, laughing. "We're just lucky he took off toward the house rather than down Hysteria Hill!" Running his hand over the time-roughened wood, he inspected the old sled fondly. "I can't believe you found this."

"I meant to clean it up for you," Sibby explained, "but I never got around to it. We found it in with some other odds and ends. I guess after your dad died, when they auctioned off the farm equipment, they left this. And, when your mom moved, she didn't think of it."

"Yeah." Sam's touch on the old toy slowed. "I guess so. Things were kind of...hard for Mom when Dad died. Tom got leave, but it wasn't very long and I..." He drew a deep breath, unaware that his friend was regarding him with

sympathy in his eyes. "...I had that dissertation due. I could have gotten an extension but Mom had a fit. She said Dad wouldn't have stood for it, a Beckett whining for more time."

"She was probably right," Sibby observed. "He would have felt that way."

Absently, Sam rubbed at the rust on the sled's runner with his thumb as if he could scrub it away. His father had died while he was away at school. Tom had been home, visiting between assignments, and Katie had been there as well. But he had been away--following a dream that sometimes seemed too much to believe in, even for him.

"Your mom was okay," Sibby said, breaking into his thoughts. "Most everything was done by the time you left, and the neighbors helped out. Your dad was highly thought of around here, and so was your mom. Everybody made sure she made out all right."

Nodding, Sam did not lift his head, hoping Sibby would believe that he truly meant the gesture.

Like a reprieve, Janet's call came from outside. "Sibby?"

Stepping to the still open door, the doctor called back a questioning, "Yes?"

"Marla Ridding's on the phone," came the answer, which sounded as if she called from the porch.

"Okay," the pediatrician called back, then turned to Sam. "I told her to call if Kenny's fever came up again. I'll probably have to meet her at ER." He swept an arm at the barn. "Look around as much as you want. The sled's yours to take if you want it. I'll see you later, if this doesn't take me too long."

Nodding, Sam watched him go, then turned to regard the barn. Janet had done a lot of work on it. It would be a very nice, appealingly rustic antique mall--but it was no longer Beckett's dairy barn.

Suddenly wanting to be away from it and its changes, he tucked the sled under his arm and followed in the direction Sibby had taken. Turning off the light, thereby hiding the building's metamorphosis into antique shop, he closed the door quietly behind him.

Going to his rental car, he carefully placed the sled in the trunk, and took out his luggage. Hesitating, he took another long, thoughtful look at the old toy that held so many memories...and smiled. Then, he shut it away, for he

would take it with him when he left, and went into the house that was now the Morningside Inn.

* * *

When Sam had made his way into the house, he found three couples and assorted children gathered in the living room, visiting. All of them were much like himself, grown up Elk Ridgeites returned for the fair. None of them were close friends, but he recognized them from high school, and it felt good to sit and discuss old times and old acquaintances.

He lingered until the last of them went up to their rented rooms. Alone for a moment, he stood quietly, listening to the sound of the wind rising outside, and the going-to-bed sounds of children drifting down from the upstairs. It felt good and yet unexpectedly strange to be an adult in his old home, listening to another child argue, as he once had, that he wasn't sleepy and he needed another drink of water and maybe another few minutes to read.

Smiling, he shook his head, hearing one mother say, "That's it! You have more stalls than a horse. It's time to go to bed and I don't want to hear another word!"

An unexpected voice came from behind him, in the doorway leading from the kitchen. "Funny, isn't it?"

Turning, he saw Jenny smiling at him and realized she meant the exchange he had overheard between the mother and her reluctant-to-sleep child.

"Yeah," he agreed, glancing in the direction of the stairs. "Some things never change, I guess."

"Don't you wonder how moms learn those things?" She moved further into the room. "How do they know when a kid really isn't thirsty?" Shrugging, she gave him a grin. "Is there a Mom handbook somewhere that they have to study?"

Sam laughed. "I don't know. Maybe it's instinct."

"Maybe," she agreed in amusement. "Or maybe you just kind of make it up as you go along. But if I ever have kids, I think I'm gonna need a handbook." She grinned. "Or a brilliant light from heaven in the delivery room that imparts all essential knowledge in a millisecond. Otherwise, I think I'm going to be in trouble."

Reflecting on his own lack of expertise in the field of children, Sam nodded. "I think

you've got a point there. Before I try parenthood, I'm definitely going to study up on it."

The childish wail from upstairs, "It's too dark in here!" interrupted him and he grinned impishly.

Laughing, Jenny moved on into the room, heading across it toward the den. "I dunno. I think parenthood may have something in common with karate and tree houses and dumplings. You just gotta jump in there."

She left the room in the direction of the den. "Good night, Sam. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night," he answered quietly, watching her go. Though the conversation had been light, and seemingly of little consequence to Jenny, Sam found himself mulling it over.

Kids, geez. He always just assumed he'd have them some day and never contemplated what it would actually be like from day to day. He had never, honestly, thought too deeply about it. From somewhere upstairs someone was singing and Sam's gaze shifted in that direction.

Adulthood had always meant freedom to him. Freedom to pursue his interests. Freedom to track down the way things worked and blaze new ground. Freedom to learn all the things he had ever wanted to know. He had never thought, before, about what it might feel like to hold a child, his child, and sing it to sleep. That was new ground.

That was definitely new ground. And it was something he didn't want to step onto yet. What was he thinking? He hadn't even found anyone he wanted to marry yet! He was just getting carried away with homecoming, and it was late, and he needed to go to bed.

Sibby, it seemed, was going to be late. He could see him in the morning. Stretching, Sam shook off thoughts of domesticity and home and, turning off the lights in the room, made his way to the attic.

* * *

Janet, in her ever-creative way of keeping the best of the nature of a place and updating it, had taken the front corner of the attic where the eaves met and turned it into a small, cozy room. Closing the door behind him, Sam smiled. This area had been a natural place to play for he, Tom and Katie. The corner, with its sloping walls that followed the line of the

roof had felt like a hide-away then and they had often argued about claiming its space on rainy days.

Getting ready for bed, Sam heard rain begin to fall outside. It made a lulling, comforting sound on the roof, a background of noise that was so even, so natural, that it felt like part of the room.

Slipping into the small twin bed tucked under a sloping wall, Sam slipped his hands beneath his head and listened to the rain. The sound was an integral part of the memories of the place, for it was usually inclement weather that drove them there in the first place.

The sibilance of the falling drops had been accompaniment to Zorros brandishing cardboard swords--defending Barbie's honor when Mom had won in insisting they include Katie in the play. A soft rumble of thunder in the distance eased Sam deeper into the memories as he turned on his side and began to slide toward sleep.

It had stormed the day he and Tom had fought over what was the best design for a Lincoln Log house that wouldn't find them running out of a particular kind of log in the last stages of construction. Tom had won, and they had built his house...until they got down to the final wall and they ran out of the long logs they were using for a main support. Tom had smiled sheepishly, and slid the construction over to Sam. 'Okay, little brother, you win. We'll try it your way.' And over it all was the sound of rain.

Dropping off to sleep, Sam began to dream of home. Katie and her friend were playing Barbie in the far corner. He could hear their conversation. 'Play like he asks you out,' the friend directed.

'And I say no.'

'No, you have to say yes, if he asks you.'

'No, I don't.'

'Yes, you do.'

'Not if I don't want to!'

'Yes you do! He's the guy and if he ask you out, you have to say yes.'

'No, I don't! Tom, do I?'

'What?' Tom was deep in the construction of a corner, trying to keep the logs from collapsing before he arranged the corner support.

'Say yes to something you don't want to do just because a guy asks you to.'

'Dunno. Maybe.' Not really listening, Tom grunted in displeasure as his wall collapsed.

'Sam, come here and help me, okay?'

'But,' Sam heard Katie say as if from a great distance, 'I want to say no.'

'Then say no,' Sam heard his younger self say, not interested in the problem. Why would anyone not say no, if they meant no? 'It's not a big deal.'

'Yes it is,' the friend protested. 'If she says no, then Ken won't like her...'

'Here, Sam,' Tom interrupted. 'Hold this, yeah, like that. Pay attention, don't let it move.'

Young Sam had turned his attention to the construction at hand, already immersed in the possibilities of changing the angle of the juncture to brace the wall, much to his older brother's annoyance.

'But Tom, I want...'

Turn around, dreaming Sam thought. Turn around and tell Katie it's okay to say what she wants. It's okay to say she doesn't want to go out with Ken and who cares if he doesn't like her because she obviously doesn't like him.

Tell her it's okay to do what she wants even if it's not what a man wants. Tell her she can say no to Ken...to Chuck. She can leave if it was a mistake. Tell her...because her friend obviously never will. Tell her, because the first time no one thought to...no one knew she didn't know. Tell her...

'Sam.'

Startled, Sam jumped, and awoke, finding himself in a room that was at once familiar and alien. The voice, so much a part of his past, pulled him from his dream even though it was a part of it. It was his dad's voice, rough and loved, calling him as he had hundreds of times to get up and start chores.

Taking a deep breath, Sam rolled over in the small bed. It wasn't time to get up for chores, or school. It was a dream, and he wasn't home. He was an overnight guest in what was now the Morningside Inn.

And it was too late to tell Katie what he should have told her then...and too late to ever hear again his father's voice calling him to chores.

Burrowing his head under his pillow, Sam tried to shut out the sound of rain. Katie had done okay. She'd left that loser, Chuck, married Jim, and she and Mom were happy in Hawaii.

But not his Dad, came the unwanted thought. Not his Dad.

* * *

The next morning Sam awoke slowly and unwillingly. He was dreaming of home, of the smell of coffee and bacon, and his mom humming in the kitchen, of being four and sitting on his dad's lap, reading the Sunday comics to the man in work overalls. His father had come in from the barn for breakfast and he smelled of cows, straw and the lit cigarette he held balanced in his mouth, as he helped Sam turn the page of the newspaper.

It was a good smell. A good dream.

A good memory.

Sighing, Sam let the last of the dream go and rolled over on his back. The rain of the night before had passed over, and sunlight flooded in around the ruffled curtains pulled over the room's single window. It was good to wake up at home...even if it was now someone else's home.

Getting to his feet, he showered in a tiny, closet-sized bathroom attached to the room and dressed for the day in jeans and a casual shirt.

Making his way downstairs he found the guests just finishing breakfast, sitting and talking about Janet's huge round oak table as if they too experienced the feeling that this was a home to be shared.

Sliding into a vacant chair, Sam helped himself to breakfast and listened to the talk of old times and old acquaintances. By the time he was finished, the others were gone, having dispersed for whatever plans they had for the day.

Gathering up his plate and a serving dish that Janet had left on the table for him, he made his way to the kitchen. Despite protests from her and Jenny, he insisted on helping to clear the table since he had been the one who held them up. Then, reluctant to leave the warmth and fragrance of the kitchen, he had helped with the clean up.

Finally, with the dishwasher humming softly in the room, Janet left to tend to Alex, who had just announced his awakening. Sam found himself alone with Jenny, who was removing crystal juice glasses from the counter and putting them away in an antique cupboard.

"What are you doing today?" she asked him, as he came over and handed her two glasses from the counter.

"I...don't know," he answered, leaning back against the kitchen counter. "I guess maybe I'll go into town for a while...and go to the

fair this afternoon." Absently, he handed her another two glasses, then asked impulsively, "Would you like to go to the fairgrounds with me?"

"Okay," she said, looking up from carefully arranging the glasses on the wooden shelf. "I have to help Janet do beds this morning, then I'll be free. Would that be all right?"

"Sure." Sam was suddenly looking forward to it. "I'll be back to pick you up after lunch."

"I'll be ready," she answered with a smile.

"Have a good morning. And if you're in town for lunch, Flo's Diner still has the best pecan pie in the county."

"Thanks." Sam grinned. "I'll remember that."

* * *

Downtown Elk Ridge looked the same, a bit more worn, perhaps, but the same. Sam drove slowly down the main street, past the public library, the bank, Benning's Hardware Store.

Emerson's Florist shop now bore a sign announcing 'Country Flowers' as Sam pulled up before it and parked. Getting out, he purchased a potted mum and then continued on the mission that he had planned since he had risen that morning.

It took less than a quarter of an hour to get from the center of town to Oak View Cemetery on the outskirts of Elk Ridge. Driving through the heavy wrought iron gates, Sam didn't let himself think of the day he had ridden through them with his mother sobbing next to him, Tom's arm about her. He had come to remember his father, not his burial.

Parking just inside the gates, Sam took his flowers from the back seat and made his way to the stone he sought. It was a beautiful fall day, warm and clear, with no hint of the previous night's rain except that the grass seemed a bit more green than it had the day before, when he arrived.

But, he thought absently as he arrived at his destination, the grass here always seem lush --watered and well-tended. It was one of the reasons his mother had said she chose the place.

Feeling awkward, Sam came forward and placed his plant on the small space provided. Kneeling, he pulled at a few strands of stray grass, not that they were growing unkempt, but it gave him a reason to touch the stone, however lightly.

Easing back on his heels, he held on tightly to the memory of his earlier dream. That was his dad, the father he had lost, not this stone memorial warmed by autumn sun.

He had lost so many opportunities for those close times by going out and following his dream. Vision blurring with unshed tears, Sam felt his throat close with old regrets. He should have called home more often. Should have come home more than he did. Should have stayed where he was needed...

Sam caught that thought before it was fully formed. He was needed where he was. His work was an important contribution to the field of computer research and a step on the road toward even greater discoveries.

And his father had understood that. His father had encouraged that.

Sam's abilities had always been a source of pride to his father, or so his mother told him. His dad rarely said so, except to remind him of his responsibilities to use what God gave him and not let the fact that things came easily to him be an excuse for 'slackin'.

His father would never have allowed him to remain on the farm, or even to come back after he finished his first degree. Sam saw the love in that, and the pride.

And the pain.

There were too many times he had the opportunity to be there for his father, and he chose to be somewhere else, unaware of what he passed by until it was gone. There were too many lost opportunities to tell his father that he loved him, and the terrible realization that the challenges he had still to face and overcome in his life would never be as fulfilling now that he could not share them with the man who in a very tangible way had made them possible.

A man who got up two hours earlier on Sundays so he could take time from chores to hold his son on his lap and let him read the 'funny papers' to him.

Reaching out, Sam pressed his palm to the warm stone. "I love you, Dad," he whispered. "I just wanted you to know."

The sound of a slow moving car approaching on the gravel road behind Sam intruded on the moment and he quickly withdrew the hand. Hastily wiping away tears, he kept his back to the car, which mercifully crept on by.

When it was gone, he rubbed his hands on the front of his jeans. "Goodbye, Dad."

There seemed so many others things he should

say. He should tell him about picking up more doctorates since his last visit, about the work at CLEAR STAR, about the next ambitious project that he would take on back at MIT if he could get the funding.

But the intruding car had stopped a short distance down the access road. An elderly couple got out, the woman proclaiming happily over the state of the mums she had brought last time, and the mood was broken.

Drawing a deep breath, Sam turned away. His dad knew all the things he wanted to say, he was sure of that. His dad always knew stuff like that, whether or not he acted like it mattered, and that was good enough.

It had to be.

* * *

The fair was everything Sam remembered it to be. The midway was still silent at this hour, but the exhibit halls were open. He and Jenny wandered through them, looking at dozens of 4H exhibits of fruit, vegetables, cooking and sewing.

The farm exhibits were also open, and Sam led the way to those. As they went into the first of the open-sided sheds full of penned show stock, Sam took a deep breath. "This sure brings back memories."

Laughing, Jenny pretended to hold her breath. "Is it safe to breath in here?"

"Do you have any allergies..." Sam began in earnest, before he turned to her and saw her teasing expression. "Oh..." He turned to catch a glance of an exhibitor cleaning up after his sow. "I see what you mean. I guess I'm kind of used to it. If you--"

"No." She shook her head. "I'm only teasing. As clean as they keep this place, it can't smell too bad."

Catching her hand, Sam guided her past a thick hose snaking underfoot. "Town kid, huh?"

"As town as Elk Ridge gets, I guess. Your farm is about as rural as I intend to be."

"Sibby's farm," Sam corrected softly.

Missing his words because she was carefully negotiating the narrow walkway between two pens, she asked absently, "What?"

"Sibby's farm," Sam said again, releasing her hand when she was past the obstacles. "It's Sibby's farm now."

Jenny met his eyes and her expression softened. "I don't think it still qualifies."



Sibby's no farmer. He leases out the land and someone else farms it. He just pays the taxes and sometimes collects a profit when the crops are good."

With a sheepish grin, Sam conceded the point.

"He's a wonderful doctor though," she continued. "Elk Ridge is lucky to have him. He was instrumental in building the new hospital, you know."

"My mom told me," Sam agreed, thinking how Sibby had stayed in his hometown and still managed to make a valuable contribution, if not to the world, to the population of Elk Ridge and the surrounding rural community.

An animal in the pen at the far side of the shed caught his attention and he brightened.

"Hey look! A Jersey!"

"What?" Janet followed him to the pen that held a tawny, gentle-eyed cow.

"A Jersey," Sam repeated. "You don't see many of them any more. We used to keep just a few, for my mom. She liked their milk to make butter and cream. Nothing's as rich as a Jersey's milk." A slight frown creased his forehead. "Not that there's much demand for high fat content in dairy products any more."

His frown vanished as the cow moved over to him, her heavy feet crushing the straw with a soft, somehow delicate sound.

"I like Jerseys," he said, reaching out to stroke the animal's soft muzzle.

"So I see," Jenny observed from behind him. Moving to the fence, she also reached out to stroke the beautiful animal. "They're pretty, aren't they?"

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "I used to have one. I showed it at the fair when I was in Junior High."

"Really? Was it fun?"

"Sure." Sam drew back his hand as the animal, evidently deciding no food was forthcoming, moved away. "I remember I slept with her the night before the show."

"Slept with her?"

"Yeah..." Lost in the memory, Sam leaned on the fence, hands clasped lightly before him. "Snuck out with a blanket after everyone was asleep and slept in her stall."

"You didn't take a pillow?"

"Harriet was the pillow," Sam answered, then abruptly realized the turn the conversation had taken. He was leaving himself wide open for teasing here. Self-conscious, he withdrew his hands and stood up. "That was her name," he

mumbled. "Harriet."

Jenny's gaze, when he met it briefly, seemed curious, but not scoffing. "Why'd you sleep out in the barn?" she asked as if she truly wanted to know. "To keep her clean?"

"Unh...no." Mortally embarrassed, Sam shook his head, but couldn't lie. He kept his head down, wishing he'd never brought the whole thing up in the first place. "I thought she might be ...nervous...about the fair."

He felt Jenny's touch, light and understanding on his arm. "She probably was," she said, smiling when he looked up into her eyes. "It was sweet of you to stay with her all night."

"Well," Sam admitted with a sheepish shrug when it seemed she wasn't going to laugh at him. "I didn't make it all night. I guess my dad found me when he came in at five to do the milking and carried me back in the house." He frowned thoughtfully at the memory, saying, "He didn't ever tell anybody though. Tom would have never let me live it down if he'd found out."

Wanting to let the subject go, Sam started moving again. But Jenny was still curious. "What happened to Harriet?"

"She got old. Finally, we had to destroy her."

"No," Jenny protested, as shocked as only a town kid could be. "Not Harriet! How could you do that?"

"That's the way of farms," Sam said, unconsciously repeating his father's words on the subject. "Sometimes animals have to die to make way for new ones."

"But to destroy her..."

"She was sick," Sam answered, truly not wanting to talk about it anymore. "And suffering. It was better that way. My dad let me keep her way past any usefulness she might have had, anyway. Anybody else would've sold her long before she got to that stage."

As they moved out into the afternoon sunlight, Sam shaded his eyes and waited for Jenny to catch up to him.

"The food booth's open," he said before she could comment further. "How about some cotton candy?"

"Wonderful," she agreed. As they walked through the grounds, they passed a list of events in the week long fair and Sam stopped to read it.

"Hey," he said, "tomorrow night is the horse show. Do you like horses?"

"Love them," came the reply. "I used to practically live at Williamson Stables when I was a teenager."

Teasing, Sam tossed her a glance. "I thought farm life was too messy for you."

"Farm life," she returned. "Not stables. Stables are magic places. You read about them in books like WUTHERING HEIGHTS and BLACK BEAUTY."

"I see," he said, nodding sagely. "Books again."

"Sure, how do you think I learned to ride doing a proper English post?"

At Sam's incredulous gaze, she shrugged, giving in with good grace.

"Okay, so I learned at Williamson's after I begged them to teach me something beside western riding. Cost me two summers worth of baby sitting money, too."

"And what's wrong with western?" Sam asked for the sake of argument, enjoying the sparring. "You read about that in books like SHANE and SITKA."

"SITKA?"

"By Louis L'Amour."

"A-ha," she said. "Cowboy books. And cowboys work on farms."

"Ranches," Sam corrected. "They aren't the same thing."

"But they both smell," she shot back, obviously enjoying the argument as much as he.

"And you've never been around Williamson's when they're mucking out the stables?" He flavored the word with her inflection.

"Barns smell," she retorted. "Stables are 'fragrant with earthy scents of horses and fine leather'."

"And the same thing that covers the floor of barns."

"But then it's in a stable," she emphasized. "And it's romantic.."

"Ah, well, romantic," Sam repeated with amused sarcasm. "Thank you for enlightening me on that. I wish I'd understood the distinction when I was cleaning up after Harriet. I would have dubbed her a magnificent steed, and maybe that would have made a difference to my sinuses."

"Maybe," Jenny agreed with a grin. "Harriet sounds like she could qualify if any cow that ever lived could."

"Okay," Sam said firmly. "Just so you understand that."

Turning by mutual agreement, they moved on to

the concessions.

"So," he said, "would you like to go to the horse show tomorrow?"

"I thought you'd never ask," she returned with a smile. "I'll be looking forward to it."

So was he, Sam found to his surprise. And he'd never been to a horse show in his life.

* * *

In the days that followed, Sam found that he attended more events at the fair than he ever had when he had lived in the area. It began with the horse show, with Jenny's running commentary about what was going on and what to look for in the various showings, making him realize that there was far more to the event than he had expected.

Intrigued by the idea that perhaps there were other things going on at the fair that he had passed by when a native, he decided to try them all. With Jenny as an agreeable companion on several evenings, he sampled the monster truck rally, the tractor pull, and even the kiddie rodeo that included such events as tricycle pulls and greased pig chases. Not all of them were things he would like to do again, but at least he felt like he had truly sampled all the Tri-County Fair had to offer.

Jenny became a friend, easy to be with and fun to talk to, as they made a point of tracking down and trying every event the fair had to offer. Neither of them spoke much of personal things, other than the most superficial. She demanded nothing of him other than conversation, even insisting they split whatever cost there was to their evenings together. There was never a hint of awe in her eyes, as if she were waiting for him to say or do something brilliant, though he expected that Sibby had filled her in on his background. All in all, he found he enjoyed her company.

Every evening at the fair, he met at least two acquaintances, something that never happened in California. One evening, they stopped by one of the pavilions and he found that Mr. and Mrs. Pierce were celebrating their sixty-fifth wedding anniversary. The Pierces had lived down the road from Sam and his family and he stopped by to express his best wishes. The couple, still sharp despite their age, had acted as if they remembered him. They certainly remembered his family, and spoke of how highly they had regarded them.

The week passed all too quickly. With time, the sharp edges of the changes that had taken place began to soften. Familiar things began to blend with new ones until the place took on the aura of a unified whole for him.

It began to feel more and more like home. Even the ever-changing flux of guests at the Morningside Inn began to seem more like company come to call than a harsh reminder of the fact that he too was a guest and did not truly belong there. It seemed that the banister to the stairway had always been finished wood and never painted. After all, it still flanked a creaky third stair and the needlepoint cushion done by his mother's own hand.

The deep plush carpet of white in the living room now seemed to fit the room. The view from the front window was still the same and the pattern of changing light through the old stained glass above the middle pane still subtly marked the transition of morning to afternoon to evening.

The only place he avoided was the barn. There the changes were too extensive. It was a shop--or going to be--and there was no longer any vestige of his father's touch remaining there. That change hit him every time he passed near enough the door to catch the scent of potpourri, jarring him in an almost visceral way with a sense of wrongness and loss. So, he confined his visit to the house and the yard about it, playing one-on-one with Sibby every night after supper.

All too soon it was Friday evening. His return flight was scheduled for Saturday afternoon so he would need to leave the next morning to drive to Harker's Falls in time to catch it. Sam found himself reluctant to think about leaving. It was much more attractive to pretend that the illusion of being home could last forever. So, he turned his thoughts to the evening's plans instead. He, Jenny, Sibby and his family were going to the fair.

Friday evening was the final judging of the baking contest, the tractor pull, and, best of all, half price night on the midway from five until seven. Friday evenings at the Tri-County Fair, were magic.

At least...that's the way Sam remembered them.

* * *

Walking the midway with Sibby was nothing as

it had been when they were both twelve, daring each other to eat a double chili dog and then ride the rock-o-plane. But it was every bit as enjoyable in its own way.

Janet was ecstatic, having won first place for her apple pie in the food judging. Already, she was planning to capitalize on it in the next advertisement she placed in BED AND BREAKFAST magazine.

"I think it'll sound wonderful to city people from Indianapolis. 'Award winning cuisine', don't you think that has a nice ring to it?" she asked with a teasing grin as they made their way through the crowded midway.

"I think," Sibby said with a mock groan. "that it sounds like we're never going to get to spend a night in our house alone, again." His grin at his wife was loving, and took any true feeling of complaint from the words.

Accepting it in kind, she made a face at him and took his hand. "Just wait 'till B AND B comes to do a feature article on our place--then you'll be proud."

Laughing, Sibby pulled her close for a half hug. "I'm proud now," he assured her. "I don't need an interviewer from a magazine to tell me what a wonderful, talented, creative, and ambitious wife I have."

Watching them, Sam hid a smile as Jenny groaned expressively. "Please," she begged. "Stop before I'm sick."

Her sister shot her an amused glance and feigned a solicitous expression. "I told you that you and Sam shouldn't have ridden the Cobra. That centrifugal force will get you every time. Taking Alex on the merry-go-round is a lot safer."

"And boring," Jenny shot back with no real ire, then turned to Sam with a teasing light in her eyes. "So, Sam," she said, "want to ride the rock-o-plane?"

"Nooooo," Sam dissented, exchanging an amused glance with Sibby. "My rock-o-plane days are over. I never was too great a thrill ride rider."

Sibby laughed. "You can say that again. Once, when we were ten, we both got sick on the roller coaster. Remember?"

"Yeah," Sam said, nodding ruefully. "I do. I'm not cut out for speed and heights. I make sure to leave all that stuff for my friend, Al. He's the ex-astronaut and the adrenalin junkie. Not me."

"There's not much adrenalin to be had in Elk

Ridge, or at the Tri-County Fair," Sibby agreed. "Not the speed and height kind anyway. He'd probably think we were pretty boring."

Janet gave her husband's hand a squeeze. "There's always the ferris wheel."

Sam was about to comment that he didn't think ferris wheels were much of interest to Al either, but when he saw the look that passed between the married couple, thought better of it. Maybe there was fun to be had on a ferris wheel that Al could appreciate after all.

Now that he thought about it, he remembered when he was a senior in high school. He had taken Lisa Parsons on the ferris wheel. When they had stopped on the top, with all the fairyland lights of the fair beneath them, he had kissed her. It had been worth the attack of vertigo and the terror of looking down for that moment. He would never have had the guts to kiss her on the ground.

"Why don't you go?" he offered, watching Sibby pull his wife closer to him with a smile. "We'll watch Alex."

"You will?" Janet asked happily. "We'd appreciate it."

"Sure," Jenny agreed. "Ride as many times as you like. Sam and I can handle it here on the ground."

Holding out her arms, Jenny took her nephew from her sister. The child smiled at her and immediately began to wiggle in an effort to be put down.

"Sorry, Alex," she said, "I know I'm an easy touch, but you can't get down--you'll get stepped on."

Watching Sibby and Janet waver as to whether they were going to leave them to it, Sam said hastily. "Hey, Alex, let's go on the merry-go-round." Hastily, he shoed the couple away with one hand and gestured Jenny to the kiddie rides with the other. "Let's go," he said. Then, seeing Alex's building frown, added, "quick!"

* * *

The first carousel ride was touch and go, with Alex threatening tears that never quite spilled over. The second was better, and by the third, he had quite happily adjusted to the situation.

Sam and Jenny moved on down the line, putting him on the tiny motorcycles, boats, and airplanes in turn. Standing beside the rides, waving as Alex took each turn past them, felt

good to the physicist. Maybe parenthood wouldn't be so hard after all.

Finally, Alex began to tire. As Sam carried him from the last ride in the row, back to the carousel, the child fell asleep on his shoulder. Somehow, that felt good, too, as did exchanging small talk with Jenny about how kids could sleep anywhere.

It was good, walking with other couples, some holding hands, others guiding small children. He could almost lose himself in the illusion that this was his wife, his child. That he belonged here again. That someone shared his life in the most intimate of ways and he would go home to a four poster bed and chintz curtains rather than a bachelor apartment stacked with books and a growing pile of notes and computer disks on a project that might never come to be.

Jenny seemed to share his mellow mood. By mutual agreement, they left the midway for the craft exhibition hall. Walking slowly, they looked over wooden shelves in the shape of hearts, quilted teddy bears, and cross stitched pillows.

When they came out into the cooling fall darkness, Sibby and Janet were still nowhere to be seen. Jenny gazed down the length of the midway where the ferris wheel loomed into the sky. It was stopped, obviously loading and unloading passengers.

Nodding at the top bucket, lined with tiny white lights that silhouetted it against the sky, she smiled fondly. "I bet that's them, right there."

"Still?" Sam asked in surprise. "It's been a long time."

"Still," she repeated. "They don't get much time to be alone any more, not with Sibby spending so much time at the hospital, Janet working at all she does, and all the people in and out of the house." She kept her gaze on the lighted wheel, speaking softly. "I should be out of the house soon, and the Inn business should fall off after the fair. Then they'll pick up where they left off."

Absently, Sam rubbed the back of the sleeping child that was a warm weight on his shoulder. "They really love each other, don't they?"

"Yes," she nodded. "They do. I--"

"Sam!" The call came from somewhere before them. "Sam Beckett!"

Scanning the crowd, he saw Herbert LoNigro,

looking as tall and lean as he had in high school, rushing toward him.

Grinning widely, Sam waved with his free arm. "Herky! It's great to see you!"

"Great to see you," his friend returned, pumping Sam's hand in greeting. "You see everybody at the Tri-County Fair. That's one of the reason's Lyla and I come." His gaze shifted to include Jenny and the child Sam still held. "Is this your family?"

Taken by surprise, Sam stalled. "Unh...no! I mean, no. This is Jenny Inlow, Sibby's sister-in-law, and this..." He nodded toward is Alex. "...is his little boy."

"Oh..." Herky grinned. "I thought this lucky lady had finally blasted you out of your lab long enough to get your attention." He extended a hand to her. "I'm pleased to meet you. Sibby's a good friend of mine." His gaze shifted back to Sam. "We all hung around together in high school."

The physicist shifted the weight of the child in his arms. "Sibby says you're a cardiologist. And you've got a practice in Indianapolis?"

"Right," the man said. "I'm with the Tellman clinic. I have a lot of opportunity to work on interesting cases there." His blue eyes met Sam's. "Last time I talked to Sibby, he said you had your MD, then went on to the quantum physics field. What is it you're up to these days?"

"I'm still in quantum physics," Sam answered, then qualified, "in research."

"You didn't come back to medicine," his old friend said, sounding disappointed. "What is it exactly that you do?"

Feeling forced into answering in more detail, Sam described a bit of the work he'd done at CLEAR STAR, and the twofold project he and Al were currently proposing to MIT and the Government.

As he talked, he was uncomfortably aware of Jenny's scrutiny of him. He had avoided talking about his work with her for reasons he hadn't really considered. He just hadn't wanted to dwell on what he did outside of the security that was Indiana.

Herky seemed interested in what Sam had to say and the conversation continued for a few moments more. Then, a young boy of perhaps ten ran up to them.

"Dad," he said, ignoring the other adults. "Mom says come on or she's leaving us. Amy's been cryin' and cryin' and Mom's had it."

Herky shook his head and looked back at Sam. "Duty calls," he said ruefully. "Lyla's from the city and doesn't really care for small town affairs like this." Reaching out, he shook Sam's hand once more. "It's good to see you, Sam. If you ever have second thoughts about medicine, we could use a mind like yours in the field. Give me a call and we'll have a place for you. Tellman Clinic. We're in the book." Nodding politely at Jenny, he was gone, sparing Sam the necessity of a reply.

He was drawing a breath, trying to decide what to say, when Sibby and Janet arrived beside them. "Conked out, huh," Sibby said. At Sam's mystified expression, he gestured at the child. "He couldn't stand the excitement of the tot cycles?"

"Oh," Sam said in understanding, shifting Alex in his arms as his father reached for him. "I guess not. Did you have a good time on the ferris wheel?"

"Wonderful," Janet answered, smoothing her son's hair back with one hand as her husband settled him on his shoulder. Her gaze held Sibby's for a moment and a smile passed between them. "It was great."

Sam's shoulder suddenly felt cold and bare without Alex's warm weight. Shivering a bit, he covered by shrugging as if stretching.

"Let's go home," Sibby said, as if not noticing. "And get Alex into bed."

Again a glance passed between the couple, and Sam stepped back, feeling very much an intruder. Sibby and Janet turned away, carrying their child. Jenny gave him a smile, then followed after them.

Sam cast one last look down the midway. Its crowd had changed in the past moments. Teenaged couples and groups had largely replaced the families with young children that had thronged it earlier.

It was time to go home, Sam thought with an unexpected feeling of desolation, then corrected himself. It was time to go back to the Inn.

* * *

Unexpectedly melancholy, Sam was quiet on the ride home. When the others went into the house, arriving at the same time as another couple that were spending the night, he felt unwilling to go in and be part of the general bustle.

Slipping away, he found himself wandering

about the dark yard, thinking. The night had cooled, and occasionally there was a gust of wind that brought the scent of approaching rain. Yet he was still restless, and unwilling to go indoors.

Finally, he paused at the tire swing on the old oak tree. It was here the old picnic table had sat--the one he had accidentally pushed Katie from and broken her arm.

Smiling, Sam touched the swing and watched it sway slowly in the night. This was the site of two broken arms--Tom's from the swing and Katie's from the table. It was a wonder his parents hadn't forbidden them ever to leave their rooms.

His parents. Looking up, Sam gazed at the light that had come on in the room that had once belonged to them. Abruptly there was an ache in his throat of unshed tears as he missed them more than he had in years.

When he got home, he would call his Mom, he resolved. He would do better at calling, and writing, and sending cards for holidays and such. He had let the chance to be with his dad slip away much too soon, never realizing it until it was too late. Until his mom called him at MIT to tell him his father was gone and beyond his reach forever.

A gust of wind ruffled his hair like a touch, and Sam's gaze shifted to the direction of the barn. That had been his father's domain, his father's life. It was the place where he had felt closest to his dad, and had spent the most time with him.

The warm scent of cows and straw and milk were integral to his memories of his father. It seemed he could not think of one without the other. The two, his dad and the dairy farm, were a whole, and now both were gone.

From the corner of his eye, he caught the flicker of motion as the light in the upper bedroom window went out. Maybe the house was quiet now and he could make his way up to bed without having to make small-talk with anyone. All he wanted was to hold onto the memories, store them up for treasuring later, when he had to leave for California.

Tomorrow.

* * *

By the time Sam slid under the quilt on the small attic bed, rain was whispering steadily on the roof above him. The sound of it filled the

room as it had on his first night there. Yawning, he stretched once, then turned on his side, burrowed into the pillow, and let the gentle sound lull him to sleep.

The dream overtook him before he was truly aware he was asleep. It seemed real, so real, as if he were not so much dreaming as slipping into another reality through borders that had blurred with drowsiness, old memories, and the sound of rain...

A hard April rain pounded about Sam as he ran full tilt from the bus stop toward the dry refuge of his home. He was late, having taken the bus the whole route rather than hopping off at Charmsdale Road and taking a short cut through the fields. It was raining far too hard for that.

Hitting the kitchen door at top speed, he burst into the warm haven of soft, golden light. At the sight of his father and mother standing by the counter, he pulled up short, expecting a lecture for slamming open the door. Framing a defense, he felt it die unspoken at the look on his father's face as he turned toward him.

He would never forget that moment. It was frozen in time. His mother was sobbing, her head against his father's chest. His father, too, had been crying, and Sam felt as if his heart stopped in his chest. Behind him, the spring storm hurled wind swept rain against the door at his back, sounding like winter sleet. Low, and all the more ominous for its distance, thunder growled softly from miles away.

It was wrong. Horribly wrong. This was a safe place. Nothing bad could happen here. But it had...his parents were crying.

'It's Tom, isn't it,' he heard himself say into the unreality. It couldn't be happening. It couldn't. Tom was supposed to come home safe and....

'The officer just left,' his dad said, still holding his mother, who was not looking at her younger son. 'He brought us word.'

'Is...?' Sam could not face the idea or voice the thought that his older brother may not be coming home, so he grasped at a lesser evil. 'Is he...hurt?'

'No, Sam,' his father said gently. 'He was Killed In Action. On a mission twenty hours ago. We...don't have any details other than that.'

'No.' Sam took a step backward, toward the storm, away from the more terrible threat that faced him here. 'No!'

'I'm afraid so,' his father said. 'It was April the eighth there. They said--'

'No!' Sam turned, fleeing from the horror of it. If he didn't hear it, it couldn't be. 'NO!' There was the sound of his father calling his name, the feel of the door as it stung his palms when he slammed it open, and the stinging, rushing roar of the rain as he flung himself into it. The scent, and sound, and sting of rain.

And rain.

Rain that ran in rivulets down the car windows casting shadows like tears on his father's face as he drove him home from college. It was spring break and he was going home. Not for the week, he needed to go back to finish up research on a independent project, but for a couple of days.

His father looked tired. But then it seemed he always looked tired after Tom died. The lines and creases had deepened about his eyes and Sam could no longer blame them on the years spent in sun and rain working eighteen hours a day. Working, Sam thought, to keep the farm that was the most important thing in his life now that Tom was dead.

'I have something to tell you, son,' his father said.

He could not see his father's eyes, only his care worn features in profile but he felt something contract in his throat at the tone. It was something bad. It was something wrong with Mom, or Katie, or that bastard Chuck had come back to...

'I've lost the farm, Sam.'

'What do you mean, lost the farm? Dad...'

'I can't make the payments. I over extended myself with a loan I took out with Gus Vernon. The auction of the equipment is next week.'

'But...why didn't you tell me you were in trouble? I could have come home, could have...'

'Could have what, Sam? Given up MIT to milk a few cows so we could maybe squeak by a few more months?'

'But...' The words died in Sam's throat, strangled by guilt and shame.

He hadn't been there. He hadn't been there when his father needed him and his dad lost the thing that he had worked his whole life to hold.

'Dad, I'm sorry...' Looking up, he saw his father's face now as it had looked the day the auctioneer's gavel had come down with a crack that echoed like thunder about him.

'Sold!'

His father's face had been frozen and expressionless and...dead in six months.

"Dad!"

* * *

Starting upright in the bed, Sam heard his own shout swallowed up in the dying rumble of thunder that still shook the attic about him.

Dead.

Badly shaken, Sam threw back the quilt and sheet and got from the bed. It had been a dream ...only a dream. No. It had been a nightmare.

Rubbing trembling hands over his face, the physicist strove to surface from the lingering after-effects of the nightmare that had seemed so real.

"Tom's not dead," he whispered to himself, troubled by the way the old dream had surfaced in a new form.

Surely he had dreamed it only because he had been in this house for a week and old fears got twisted with older memories to lend new life to the recurring dream of Tom's death.

"And," Sam continued, trying to wrench reality back into place. "Dad never lost the farm. Things were touch and go for a while. But Vernon went to jail...and Dad made the loan. Tom..." Anxiously, Sam paced the small room, recalling old memories. "Tom was home then. And Dad didn't lose the farm...though he did..." The last word was a whisper. "...die."

Thunder rumbled again, sounding close and somehow heavy and Sam cast a look upward. It felt as if the sound were a physical thing rolling just above his head. He had to go downstairs, get away from the room to distance himself from the terror if he was to get any sleep at all the rest of the night. Here, the dream was just too real, as if it were something that he had truly lived and the guilt and grief threatened to overwhelm him.

Hastily reaching for a pair of gray sweat pants and t-shirt, he shrugged them on. He would go downstairs and have some milk, maybe scrounge up a cookie or two. Then, he would have a firm grasp on reality again, and it would be safe to return and go back to sleep.

Milk. It had been his dad's answer to everything. His lecture about not just surviving, but thriving on milk had been a regular one in this house.

A little milk.

It was just what he needed.

* * *

Padding through the dark, quiet house on bare feet, was like being transported back in time to when he had been child there. Maybe that was the cause of all the strange dreams--too many memories too quickly.

Headed for the kitchen, he was surprised to see light coming from its open door. It looked like he was not the only one who couldn't sleep.

As he stepped into the doorway, Jenny looked up in surprise. She was sitting at the kitchen table, which was littered with wide sheets of paper and several assorted markers, pencils, and pens.

"Hi," Sam said. "I couldn't sleep. I thought maybe I'd come down and..."

Suddenly he was uncomfortable. This wasn't his house, or his parent's house, after all. What was he doing roaming around after everyone else was in bed?

Jenny smiled understandingly. "Storms can be pretty loud up in the attic." She indicated a pan on the stove behind her. "I made some hot chocolate. There's some left if you'd like it." She turned her attention to gathering up the paper on the table.

Nodding, Sam crossed to take a cup from the cupboard and pour himself some of the warm milk. Then he turned his attention back to her. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing much," she answered, rolling up the first of the papers and tucking them into a long, hard plastic case. "Just playing with a hobby."

As she reached for the second stack of paper, one slid from the top of the pile. Though she caught hastily at it, it drifted free. As if whisked by an invisible hand, it rode the air currents to slid gracefully to a stop at Sam's feet.

Parking his cup on the counter, he bent to pick it up, stalling Jenny's attempt to recapture it. Straightening, he couldn't help but cast a glance at what it held.

It was an architectural drawing of a building, done in fine detail and precision. Impressed and curious, he held it before him, studying it.

"This is great," he said sincerely, taking in the finer points of what looked to be a school of some type. "I like the way the classrooms are arranged in concentric circles. Youngest kids in the center. That's a neat idea." He

looked up at Jenny, who was blushing faintly. "Where'd you get...?"

Abruptly, he realized who must have made the drawing. He recognized from personal experience the agony of someone whose passionate interest is revealed to a person whom they feel will not understand.

"You did these?" he said in gentle surprise. "I thought civil engineers built things like dams and roads."

"They do," she answered, reaching for the paper. "Like I said, this is just...a hobby."

Handing over the plans, Sam met her eyes. "That took a lot of time," he said, nodding at the paper. "You must love doing it."

"I do," she answered, turning back to the table. "I get them out and work on them when everyone's asleep."

Sam smiled. "I used to do the same thing... only with math."

Curious, she turned back to him. "With math?"

Since it was the time for mutual sharing of secret pastimes, Sam answered, "When I was a little kid, I liked to play with numbers. You know, set up different equations to see how they'd turn out, think up problems and ways to solve them."

His eyes slid away from hers. Most people never understood the lure of it for him. For them, math was something to be avoided at all costs, not indulged in as play.

Jenny, however, hesitated, sweeping a hand through her mane of silver-blond hair. "I guess, if you loved it so much, I can see why you do what you do for a living."

Sam nodded toward the other papers she had gathered into a pile. "Could I...see those?"

"Well..." Her glance was hesitant, and again, Sam felt as if he were seeing his own often experienced emotions in her face. "...I guess so." She moved aside so he had access to the pile of plans. "But they're just for fun. I've never had any formal architectural training."

Sam took a sip of his hot chocolate, then left it on the counter to avoid an accidental spill. He took a seat at the table, his curiosity at high tide. "Show me what you've done," he invited. "And tell me about them."

Jenny began slowly at first, as if hesitant to comment much on her designs. But, Sam's genuine enjoyment seemed to encourage her, and soon she was pulling out page after page of

plans for all types of buildings from schools to family homes to administrative buildings.

Obviously enjoying what she was doing, she pointed out features she had included that Sam found intriguing. He had never before considered the relationship of color, light and space on human living spaces and found it all fascinating.

Perhaps more fascinating was the way in which Jenny presented it. It was obvious that in addition to a great deal of time invested in the projects, she had an innate talent for creating pleasing combinations of function and beauty.

When they had discussed the last of her plans, she got up from the table. "I think your hot chocolate must be cold. Want me to warm it up for you?"

"Sure," Sam agreed, stretching lazily to ease the stiffness in his neck and back muscles. "That'd be great."

Watching her doing the mundane domestic task of carrying their cups to the microwave and putting them in to warm, he felt an unexpected resurgence of the emotion he had experienced at the fair. It would be good to have someone to do these things with him, someone to share middle of the night imaginings and dreams and domestic harmony.

Looking away, he gathered the papers into a neat pile. "Jenny," he said at last, when she returned to the table. "Why did you chose civil engineering when you're so good at this?"

Hesitating a moment, she handed him his cup then sat down. As he murmured his thanks, she cradled her own cup in her hands. "I've always been good at building things, at figuring out concrete problems on a large scale and doing the figures to make them come out right."

The physicist sipped at his hot drink. "That sounds like the prerequisites for architecture as well as civil engineering, and you obviously like creating buildings." He watched her face as he talked, seeing her eyes darken with reluctance to discuss it, but he persisted, truly wanting to know. "Why would you chose that over this?" He gestured at the neat tubes of rolled papers.

Sighing, Jenny considered them as well. "There aren't many female architects," she said at last. "It's a hard field even for a man to succeed in."

"That doesn't answer the question," he insisted. "There aren't many female civil engineers either, are there?"

"No." She kept her gaze on the center of the table. "But there isn't as much resistance to them either. Architecture is a unique career. I think in order to really succeed, you have to be accepted by a lot of people in the field. In engineering, you don't have that. I can find a job, like the one with Relson's. Firms need women to prove they don't discriminate."

She lifted her cup and took a sip, still not meeting Sam's eyes. "My friend's father called today. Carl Blake's announced his retirement effective the end of this month. Mr. Hanor pretty much said the job's mine if I call the first of next week."

Sam made a thoughtful noise, and considered his words carefully. "You don't sound very excited about it."

"Sure I am," she denied, then smiled at the obvious untruth to her words. With a sheepish smile, she cast a sideways glance at Sam. "Okay, so it's not exciting. But it's a job. I'm finished with school. I can get out of Sibby and Janet's house and start a real life and still stay in this area."

"Real life?"

"Yeah." She nodded as if it were something she had given a great deal of thought. "Making money, a place of my own, dating, maybe finding somebody to marry and having kids. A real life, as opposed to living life as a student and waiting for real life to begin." Suddenly embarrassed, she blushed faintly. "You know what I mean. I wasn't saying..."

"Yeah," Sam said, smiling. "I know what you mean. But..." His eyes traveled back to the plastic tubes that held so much work...and love. "Are you going to be happy with what you call a job as an engineer when what you really love is something else?"

"Sure," she said. "It's why my dad sent me to college for five years."

Taking a breath to speak, Sam hesitated. His own parents had always encouraged him to follow his own interests. But, that was obviously not the case for everyone. Jenny's wording of her college days seemed a hint that may be the case here.

"Your dad really encouraged you, huh?"

"Yeah," she agreed absently, looking into the depths of her chocolate. "He worked as a draftsman. I think he always wanted something more."

Realizing he had to tread carefully, Sam

said slowly, "You know, you could go back to college. You could pass the design exam with ease, and you've probably had many of the undergraduate courses required. I bet you could graduate in record time, and then get on with what you really want to do."

"Maybe..." Again, she swept a hand through her hair. "But I think I'm a little burned out with school, and competing in classes where I'm the only woman. If I call Relson's, I can get on with my life in a place where I know people and they know me."

"Where I know people and they know me."

The phrase struck home with Sam, and he understood all too well what she meant. He was going back to California to follow a dream that gave him a great deal of pleasure. It had been the driving force of his life, that and his pursuit of knowledge for the sake of the joy of the chase, for decades. Nearly everything he did had been directed in some way to that end from the day he decided to go to MIT. And yet, this week, he had been attracted to the idea of hearth and home.

"I know what you mean," he said at last. "There's something to be said for that. And a career in civil engineering can be lucrative and fulfilling, too."

"That's right," she agreed quietly, eyes trained on the center of the table. "And if I ever decided later to go into architecture, I could."

"Yes," the physicist agreed, thinking how much harder it would be to make that choice once the direction was set. Pushing back his chair, he got to his feet and crossed to the sink. "Are you going to call them about the opening?"

"I think so," she answered as he washed out his cup. "On Monday."

Nodding acknowledgement, he reached for a dish towel, his back still to her. Drying the cup, he returned it to the cupboard, wanting to leave things as he found them. This wasn't his kitchen, after all. He couldn't, in good conscience, leave dirty dishes in the sink.

Turning, he saw her still sitting at the table, gazing thoughtfully at the plans neatly stored in their holders. Crossing to her, he impulsively bent down and kissed her lightly on the hair.

"Good luck at the engineering firm."

As if called back to the present by his action, she looked up at him. "You're going back to California tomorrow?"

Holding her eyes, he answered quietly, "In the morning."

"I've enjoyed your visit," she said. "I probably won't be here tomorrow morning when you leave. I'm meeting a friend and we're driving to Wittsberg to go shopping. So I'll wish you a safe trip home now."

"Thanks," Sam returned. "I had a lot of fun this week. It's going to be strange to give it all up and get back to the real world."

Uncomfortably, he was reminded of her words about 'having a real life', but she didn't seem to notice.

Smiling, she nodded and said, "Good luck with your research. If you ever write a book on it, I'll be sure to buy a copy."

"I'll send you one," he promised, grinning, "from one bookworm to another." Lightly, he touched her shoulder. "Good night, Jenny."

As she returned, "Sleep well," he left the room.

The storm had abated, and so had the terrible unreality of the too real dreams. Maybe he could sleep now. He had to be ready to dive back into his old life--or was it his new life and this was the old?--tomorrow.

* * *

Saturday morning's leave-taking was done with a minimum of fuss. Janet was already busy cleaning up after her departed guests and had told him goodbye immediately after breakfast.

Sibby followed him out to his car, still trying to talk him into extending his visit a few more days. The pediatrician leaned on Sam's open car window for a last moment or so of conversation.

"You know, Sam," he said. "Elk Ridge clinic could always use another physician."

Sam smiled, slipping his keys into the ignition. "You sound like Herky, trying to recruit me."

Sibby made a face. "He's always trying to get me to relocate to Indianapolis to that high powered practice of his, too. But you and I could do a lot more good here, Sam."

Not knowing how to respond, the physicist hesitated, and his friend went on.

"Just think about it, okay?" He grinned and gave Sam a wink. "Janet's already matchmaking you with Jenny. We'd be brother-in-laws, sort of."

"Sibby..." Sam felt himself blushing, and

his friend laughed.

"Same old Sam," he said. He pushed away from the car and straightened up. "Think about it," he said again, "about all of it. Jenny's a good kid. I think you two could have really hit it off if you'd been around a little longer."

Privately, Sam thought that Janet was not the only one matchmaking here, but decided not to comment. "Thanks, Sibby," he said, "for everything. I really needed this visit."

"Anytime, Sam," his old friend returned. "You know how to find your way home. Drive carefully."

As unceremoniously as that, Sam found himself driving away from a visit that had affected him far more than he had expected.

* * *

Coming home to a bachelor apartment that was devoid of food since he had been absent for nearly a week pointed up the differences between what he had left and what he had. Uncomfortable with the thoughts it triggered, Sam made a trip to the grocery store, stocked his cabinets, and read his mail.

There was no answer to Al and Ruthie's phone and, remembering his friend's earlier claim as to how he was planning on spending his time, Sam was not surprised. Leaving a message to call on Al's answering machine, he set himself to the task of staying busy to get himself out of the doldrums into which he had sunk.

On Sunday he went to the Project early and spent the day working. Finally, late in the evening, he found there was little else he could find to keep him busy. The Project was winding down, and it was harder to think of new and interesting ideas to pursue.

Leaving work, he found himself dreading going back to his apartment alone, and went instead to a late movie. It was after midnight when he finally arrived home. Yawning, finally weary enough to sleep, he went to bed.

That night, no dreams surfaced to disturb him.

* * *

The phone, loud and insistent in the kitchen woke Sam from a deep sleep early Monday morning. Stumbling, he got from the bed, grabbed a robe, and made his way to answer it, painfully stubbing his toe as he went.

It was Al's voice, teasing and--it seemed to Sam--deliberately chipper, that greeted him. "Hi, pal. Where've you been?"

"Indiana," Sam mumbled, trying to open his eyes in the brightness of the kitchen.

"I know that," Al answered patiently. "I meant last night. You got in Saturday, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I went to a movie last night. It was pretty late before I got home."

"Umm," came the answer. "I called early in the evening. I thought maybe you were there but you were...entertaining. You didn't bring anyone interesting home from Indiana?"

Sam scowled. "No, I didn't. I had a nice visit with old friends, that's all."

"That's too bad," came the easy answer. "But, hey, the reason I called was I got some news when I got back from Boston last night."

"Boston," Sam repeated, beginning to wake up. "I thought you were spending the week here with Ruthie?"

"Nah, we went to visit Edna," Al said off-handedly. "Turns out Ruthie had something she wanted to tell her. But d'you wanna hear this big news, or not?"

"Yeah," Sam answered, pushing himself away from the wall that he had been using for support. "What is it?" Mechanically, he reached for the tea kettle to put water on to boil.

"I had a message waiting from Rear Admiral Drennan."

"From DC?"

"The same. I checked in with his office this morning."

"At this hour?" Sam protested, still trying to rub the sleep from his eyes and focus on what the commander was saying. "I bet he loved that."

"I checked with his office," Al emphasized. "It's three hours later there."

"Oh, yeah," Sam agreed. "I guess I'm not awake yet."

"Well, this'll crack those eye lids," Al crowed. "STAR BRIGHT went through!"

"All right!" Sam said, feeling his sleepiness abate. "Both portions? The Optic Crystal and the CRAY?"

"You bet, pal," came the pleased answer. "And Drennan offered yours truly the position of Director of the super-computer design portion."

"Congratulations, Al! Does this mean a promotion, too?"

"Probably. But, pal, it means big things for you, too. I know how you've been itchin' for a chance at that crystal to give us the granddaddy super-computer we're gonna need to run that time travel project of yours in the future."

"And?" Sam asked cautiously.

"And," Al continued, "Drennan's office says the MIT group has been trying to reach you all week. You're gonna have to get an answering machine, Sam."

"You hate talking to answering machines."

"Yeah, but I'm not the only one who calls you. You really need one at times like this." The commander paused. "So, do you wanna hear what they said or not?"

"Yes," Sam said with a great show of patience. "I want to know what they said."

"They asked me to tell you to call as soon as possible. Sounds to me like if you want a place on the team, you got it."

"That's good news, Al," Sam answered, putting a tea bag in his favorite mug. "I'll give him a call today."

There was a short pause. Then Al's voice came through the line. "What's the matter?"

Sam shrugged, though his friend wasn't there to see. "Nothing's the matter. I'm just still half asleep, that's all."

"Don't give me 'still half asleep', Beckett. I can tell when you've got something goin' on in that noggin of yours. What is it this time? Something happen when you went back for your visit?"

"No," Sam said, reaching for the kettle as it began to whistle. "Nothing happened. I had a good time. Saw some old friends. It was fun, but now I'm back and ready to get back to work." In the act of pouring the water onto the tea, he hesitated. "What did Ruthie want to talk to her grandmother about so badly that you spent your whole week of vacation there?"

"Don't try to change the subject," Al retorted. "Going to Boston was my idea, not hers. Besides, we're talking about your case of The Quiets here...not mine."

Not mine. So there was something that Al wasn't telling him. Sam frowned. "What's going on, Al?"

"Nothing."

"That was too innocent, buddy. Now what is it? Something new with CLEAR STAR?"

"No, I told ya. We've still got a couple of months to clear the decks of the last work. Belton ought to get a firm closing date this

week."

"And?" Sam persisted.

"Well..." Sam could have sworn he heard embarrassment in the older man's voice. "Av shoot, I guess we have to tell people some time."

"Tell people what?"

"What Ruthie dropped on me last Monday."

"Which was...?"

"A use for the yellow knitted booties."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't you remember? Bubbe gave them to Ruthie at our wedding. For mazel--luck." Al sighed. "Some luck." There was an embarrassed pause then, "The...unh...rabbit died, Sam. That is, if they use rabbits anymore. They probably don't, I guess...use rabbit's, I mean..."

Blinking, Sam regarded the phone in amazement as Al continued on, filling up space until Sam made the connection.

"Ruthie's pregnant?" he asked incredulously, breaking into Al's monologue on the current state of pregnancy testing.

"...yeah." Al's voice sounded a bit faint, as if he were unwilling to admit it too loudly. "Infanticipating. In the family way. Swallowed the watermelon seed. Has a bun in the oven. An egg in the nest--"

"Okay, I get the picture," Sam cut in.

"--expecting!" Al finished with a shout, as if forcing himself to say it for the first time. There was another pause, then a more awed, "Can you believe it?"

Laughing, Sam shook his head in genuine delight. "Al! That's great! You're going to be a dad!"

"Av, Sam, don't rub it in, okay?"

"Rub it in? This is great news, Al! Congratulations!"

"Congratulations, my ass," the commander grumbled. "What the hell do I know about being a dad? I've never wanted kids. Not even--" He seemed to think better of what he was about to say. "Never," he finished a bit lamely. "I'm not cut out for this."

"Of course you are," Sam said, unable to quit grinning. "Al Calavicci, dad. It boggles the mind."

"Well, something like that," came the sour reply. "I dunno how this happened."

Laughing in earnest now, Sam leaned back against the kitchen counter. "And I thought you were the expert! Calavicci The Insatiable, hoist on his own petard."

"I don't know what a petard is, pal," Al grumbled, "but I sure as hell don't like the sound of it. I don't like the sound of any of this! How could she do this to me?"

Sam tried hard to control his laughter as he answered, "Don't you think maybe you were a little responsible for the 'doing' too?"

The commander wasn't listening. "Ruthie's parents are already talking about naming it 'Mica' after some dead relative. Can you imagine that?" His snort came clearly through the phone. "Mica Calavicci. Geez...gimme a break."

"What does Ruthie think about it?"

"Hell, Ruthie's on cloud nine. She doesn't even care if we have a boy or a girl. Geez, Sam..." His voice rose expressively. "...what if we have a girl? I don't know anything about little girls!"

"If you have a girl," Sam answered evenly, "you'll be wrapped around her little finger and you won't have to worry about how to treat her--she'll tell you."

"Just like Ruthie," Al moaned. "Two of 'em. Geez, you don't think she'll have a girl, do you?"

"Could be," Sam said breezily, enjoying himself immensely. "Or it could be a boy. You could have to go to father-son nights at Boy Scouts Camp-a-ree's."

"Camp-a-ree! What the hell do you do at a Camp-a-ree? Maybe I'd better hope for a girl. Girls are nice. You buy them things and tell them they're pretty and then they love you. Yeah..." His voice firmed. "...I'd better hope for a girl."

"Could be both," Sam said, grinning wickedly.

"What?"

"Yeah. Ruthie have any history of twins in her family?"

There was a long silence, finally broken by, "You're not helping, Sam."

"Come on, Al, it's great! Congratulations!"

"Yeah, right. I guess. Everybody keeps saying that, so I guess I'll believe they're in order. You gonna be at the Project pretty soon?"

"Sure," Sam agreed, automatically glancing at the kitchen clock. It wasn't yet seven, but... "I'll be there in an hour or so."

"Okay, see you then."

"Right." Sam hesitated, then grinned. "And Al?"

"Yeah?"

"Congratulations."

Even the sound of Al slamming down the phone didn't dim Sam's laughter.

* * *

It was sometime during Sam's shower that it occurred to him that what he had always considered impossible had happened.

Al Calavicci, the ultimate bachelor, the dancing machine, the Casanova of NASA's elite was not only married...he was about to become a father.

In some unexpected way, that called up the odd, half-formed longings that he had felt most of the preceding week. Shaving, and dressing, he pondered over it.

He should be on top of the world, shouldn't he? MIT was offering him a plum position to do research that would lay the groundwork for his true agenda of time travel. All he had to do was make one telephone call and it was his for the taking.

It was much like Jenny, who had only to call the firm to accept a life that was a compromise. She may not be doing her first choice of a life's work, but she would be with family and friends. She would be taking the time to enjoy what was important, to grasp what may vanish at a moment's notice and never be available to hold again.

Like his dad, Sam thought, who had died while he was out chasing a dream. He had missed much of the last years of his father's life. Though he had told himself he could have made no other choice through the years, he now doubted the wisdom of it.

Entering his kitchen again, which was now bright with California sunshine, Sam felt a sudden chill chase down his spine with the memory of the dreams he had experienced in Indiana. Tom was still alive, but Sam rarely had the time to see him. Katie and his mother were not so far away by jet, yet he hadn't seen them in two years.

And there were other things, things that he didn't even know awaited him, he was passing by. Coming to a stop before the phone, he thought again of Jenny. Had she called and set her course for life in Elk Ridge? He enjoyed her company, and Indiana was not so far away. He could still see her, if he chose. If he chose...and who knew where that choice would lead.

Reaching for the phone, he dialed in the

number for Morningside Inn, relying on his memory to supply it. Janet answered the phone, sounding bright and happy.

"Janet? Hi, it's Sam."

"Sam, hi. Did you forget something?" There was the squeal of an excited toddler through the phone. "No, Alex," she said, obviously to her son, "don't pull out all those pans. I just put them away."

"Unh, no," Sam continued, "I didn't forget anything. I just...wanted to say thank you for a wonderful visit."

"I think," Janet's voice sounded a little dim, as if she were fending off a determined toddler from her cabinets while she spoke, "that I should be the one to thank you."

"Why?"

"Jenny decided not to take that job with Relson's. She left this morning for the university to apply to take her design entrance exam for the architectural program."

"Really?" Sam asked in surprise. "You think she's serious about it?"

"Yes," Janet replied. "I'm positive. Once she makes up her mind, she goes for it. It's why she stayed in engineering even though in her senior year she figured out it really wasn't what she wanted to do."

"So she's always wanted to design buildings, not build highways?"

"Always, though I don't think she always knew it. She said you two talked about it. I'm glad you made her see that she should go after what she really wanted. The rest can wait. She has plenty of time to get out and start a family and

a career."

Feeling as if he had made a misstep, Sam nodded. "I'm glad. Tell her I wish her the best of luck. And...thanks again. Tell Sibby for me...I had a great visit."

"Sure thing, Sam. You come again any time. We'll always have a room for you."

Hanging up, Sam remained standing at the kitchen window for a long time. It was funny, the turns fate took. Jenny had made her choice, and it had varied from the one he had been toying with just moments before his call. She had listened to his advice about going for what she really wanted.

Maybe that was the way it should be, Sam thought. You set your goals, and you go for them. The rest comes when it's ready...or it doesn't. You do your best to balance ambition and family and it's not until life was all said and done that you find out if you got the balance right.

Slowly, Sam reached for the telephone again. After he dialed, he turned to the view of green leaves and grass beyond the window as he waited for the call to go through. There was no autumn here, no dry whisper of wind among the corn, and no Tri-County Fair.

"MIT, Dr. Holman's office."

The physicist answered slowly, gazing out the window at a landscape that did not easily show the seasons. "This is Sam Beckett," he said, thinking of golden leaves, hot chocolate, and Indiana rain with a longing that was almost an ache. "I hear that you've been trying to reach me."

CHAPTER NINE

"Pushing The Envelope"

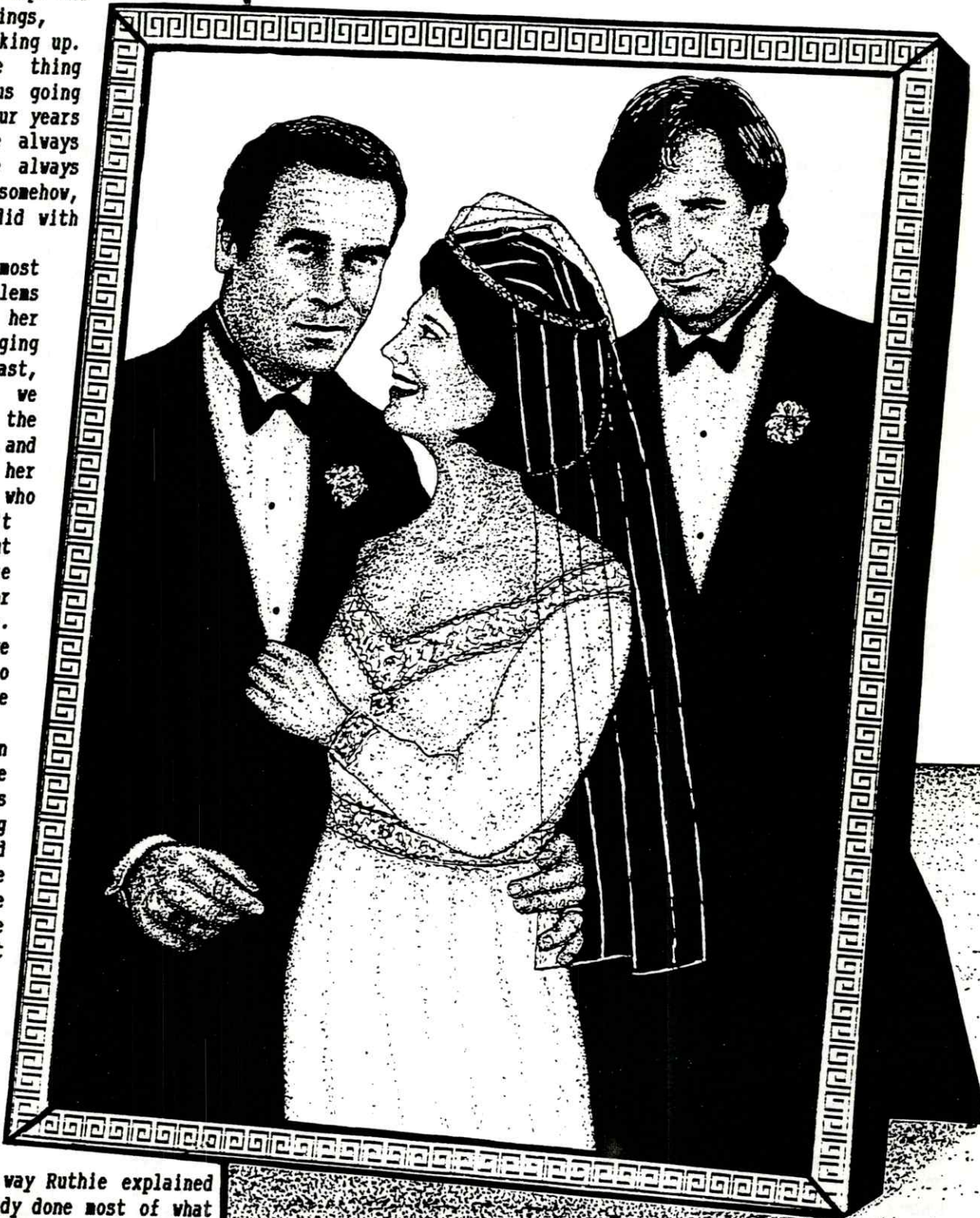
My marriage to Ruthie has been a lot like our wedding--full of ups and downs, mishaps and misunderstandings, fights and making up. The key--the thing that's kept us going for nearly four years --is that we always make up. We always work it out somehow, just like I did with Beth.

I think most of our problems stem from her Jewish upbringing --at least, that's where we seem to clash the most. That, and stuff about her parents, who still don't like me but don't make waves for Ruthie's sake. But hey, I've been tryin' to keep the peace too.

I even learned some Jewish customs --like dancing the horah and eating gefilte fish on the Sabbath. Ruthie makes the best gefilte fish.

One belief

I learned a little too late, was about her opposition to contraceptives. The way Ruthie explained it, she'd already done most of what



she wanted with her career at CLEAR STAR, and was out to start a family before she got too old. The way Ruthie's old man explained it, the first commandment in the Torah is for a man to 'be fruitful and multiply', which roughly translated that I needed to have at least one son and one daughter in my folds before I'd be scoring any son-in-law points.

It was just annoying as hell that no one decided to explain it to me, until after 'it' happened. Yeah, that's right. 'It'. Grandma's Curse, in all its glory. Ruthie got pregnant.

It happened last fall, just before CLEAR STAR ended...when Sam was on vacation. Her folks were as thrilled as she was when she announced she'd swallowed the watermelon seed--I about swallowed my teeth!

Aie yie yie...pregnant! Imagine it...me, a new dad, at forty-eight! Sam wasn't much help when I talked to him about it on the phone. He didn't understand that I'd never wanted to have kids--not even with Beth--so he just laughed, said it boggled the mind, and congratulated me about a gazillion times. Geez, it took me a whole month before I could even think about the prospect of parenthood without breaking into a cold sweat.

And then--just when I'd finally accepted the idea--she lost it.

Ruthie took it hard--too damn hard. And nothing I did or said seemed to make it any better. In a way, I think the incident brought her a little closer to her parents...and took her a little away from me. So it became something we didn't talk about. The first 'something' on the list, 'cause there started to be a helluva lot more of 'em after that.

Another was that I'd started drinking a little more than I did in the past--which I directly attributed to the fact that not long after we got hitched, the Space Shuttle COLUMBIA went up for the very first time. I was buried away in Pasadena in that 'Top Secret' vault at the time, flyin' a desk when I should've flyin' that damn Orbiter.

You know, sometimes I wonder just how the hell I got to where I am today. I mean, I'm a jet jockey, an edge rider, a pioneer. Guess that's why when they offered me a position as head of something called STAR BRIGHT, I jumped at it. 'Least it was something new. CLEAR STAR was over and a success, but now Calavicci was gonna push back the frontiers of holographic technology and do the impossible by making

moving three-dimensional images.

It sounded like glory when they pitched it to me--a promotion to captain, leading a team of the best that would develop the super-computer needed to interface with the acoustic-optic crystal that Sam was working on with the MIT group. One day, we'd just plug 'em together and --bingo!--do something no one else had ever done.

I also believed it when they said it was real cutting edge stuff...but so was roaring into space with six million pounds of thrust at your control, then gliding back to earth with a one-shot deal of getting it right.

Of course, since STAR BRIGHT is located at their Ames Research Center just outside of San Francisco, I'm still technically working for NASA. And in its own way, those early days of the Project were some ride. There had been teams to assemble, systems to be brought on-line, and a Committee to be stroked and guided into believing this whole thing was worth the money the Government was pouring into it. The entire mess was my baby, right from the beginning, and I loved every minute of it.

But that was about a year ago, just after last Christmas. Just after Ruthie lost the baby. Now it's nearly Christmas again. STAR BRIGHT's zipping along at Mach Three and there's not a whole lot left for me to do except ride along in the wake. My techs keep tellin' me it's only a matter of time before they iron out all the wrinkles in our new CRAY computer system, so I get through each day by thinkin' that tomorrow will be the one when we're gonna start tooting the horns around the place, hot on the heels of some amazing mega-breakthrough.

But that's all I seem to do.

Wait.

And push paper.

Being Top Dog, I have the task of getting it all down in a monthly report, so that the powers-that-be can look at the 'great stuff' we're doing here and keep the cash coming. I guess it takes talent to continuously pull off a snow job like that.

Talent...and a whole lot of patience.

* * *

Scowling, Al impatiently penned his signature to yet another report and thrust it across the desk from him. Damned if it didn't seem like just yesterday that he'd given his

superiors their monthly earful on paper. How the hell had the deadline on this one snuck up so fast? Now he'd have to hustle his secretary, Lieutenant Turner, in order to get it to the Committee before they broke for the holidays.

A few smooth words forming, he reached across his glass-topped desk for the intercom, but scowled again when it beeped before he touched it.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" he snapped briskly, only a touch of his irritation bleeding through.

"There's a phone call for you, sir, a Captain Dave Healey. If you're busy..."

Grinning widely, Al shoved the rest of his work aside. Well, well...Dave Healey, out of the blue. And his timing couldn't have been better. "Put him on the line, Anne," he ordered, resisting the urge to whoop in joy.

"Yes, sir," came the even answer from the lieutenant, who was better than most at keeping up with his rapid change in moods.

Lifting the phone, Al punched the button that was blinking and said, "Chance, you dog, what've you been up to?"

A chuckle came through the receiver. "Evidently not as much as you. Since when have your whereabouts been on a need-to-know basis?"

Al snorted, taking the comment in the teasing nature it was meant. "You just need to know the right people, that's all. Where are you?"

"Oakland. We're docked at Alameda for a three day liberty. So...Stacker and I thought we'd look you up. Give you the opportunity to buy us that dinner you owe us, before we get down to some serious B&B."

"Owe you," Al growled, but grinned at the old familiar play on R&R--Booze & Broads. "More like you owe me!" Growing serious, he leaned forward with interest. "You say Mike's with you?"

Not to be deterred, Chance ignored Al's last question. "The way I remember it, the bet was the first one of us to go 'VIP' bought dinner. We figure heading up your own 'top secret' project makes you a real four-point-oh, buddy. Hell, the way that snot-nosed aide in Washington described it, Calavicci walks on water and doesn't even get his feet wet!"

"Oh," Al said, grinning again, "that bet. Okay, pal. Name the spot."

"Hey, it's your town. You pick, and we'll get together like old times." There was something indistinct in the background and Chance added, "And Mike says make it expensive."

"Tony's Place, here in San José," Al said. "On Seventh and Pine." He paused, smiling cockily as he added, "Think you two nozzles can find your way?"

"Hey, after navigating the Pacific Ocean...I think maybe we'll manage."

"Then I'll make reservations for tonight, nineteen hundred. You, me and Stacker, right?"

"Wrong! Make it for four, buddy. We got a surprise for you. Call it an early Christmas present."

"A surprise?" Al lifted an eyebrow in speculation. "Is she sexy?"

Chance laughed. "Last I heard, you were hogtied by matrimony, Calavicci. Don't tell me it's Splitsville...again?"

A small frown creased Al's forehead, but none of his annoyance escaped into his voice. "I may be married, but I ain't hogtied. Hey, this is me...Bingo. Remember?" He was faithful to Ruthie, but damned if he was going to make an issue of it.

"Forgive the mistake," Chance said in mock apology. "Dunno what I could've been thinking." There was a short pause, then a more impudent, "It never cramped your style with that little Hungarian feast. We'll see you at Tony's Place. Nineteen hundred."

With that, he was gone.

Al grinned and settled back into his chair, which felt a lot more comfortable than it had before the call. This evening would be a blast ...and it would be the perfect excuse for getting out of going with Ruthie to visit her parents. A few drinks, a few laughs--it was just what the doctor ordered. Never mind the crack about marriage cramping his style.

He felt a tinge of uneasiness with the long buried memory of his second failed marriage. No way he was making that mistake again. Chance and Stacker were confirmed bachelors and simply wouldn't understand. He'd just go with the flow, smokescreen any other questions, and not even try to explain. After all, if there was one thing he'd learned from his time with STAR BRIGHT, it was how to BS with the best.

Dave Healey. Geez, he hadn't seen good old Chance since his bachelor party before marrying Eva. And Stacker? Hell, not since Bethesda. What a blast from the past...just when he needed one.

Maybe--just maybe--things were looking up.

* * *

"Bingo! Hey! Bingo, over here!"

Al turned, barely hearing the hail over the noise in the crowded dinner club. In the far corner, Chance waved an arm to capture his attention, Stacker grinning beside him. With a wave of his own, Al strode toward his buddies.

Greetings were warm and enthusiastic, and Al felt himself grinning from ear to ear as he took a seat next to Dave 'Chance' Healey. Ordering a scotch from the blonde waitress who appeared at his elbow, he leaned back in his chair and surveyed his two buddies.

"Geez, you guys are a sight for sore eyes." He paused a beat for effect, then continued, "So where's my surprise?"

Chance laughed. "Patience, Captain Calavicci, patience. All in good time."

Snorting, Al gave in obligingly, and turned to other matters. "I've lost track of you two. You say you docked at Alameda?"

Stacker answered first. "Dave's got his own command. Captain, USS ENTERPRISE."

"The ENTERPRISE..." Duly impressed, Al whistled softly--absently accepting his drink from the returning blonde waitress--then grinned teasingly. "I thought that old tub had been turned into razor blades years ago."

"Hey, she may be old but she's still the best damn carrier in the fleet," Chance returned in mock defense, with a glance at the blonde delivering his refilled glass. "Thanks, beautiful."

Al shook his head as Chance watched the waitress withdraw. "Never pictured you as a nuc, Chance," he said, vying for attention.

"So she's nuclear powered, so what? At least we don't leave a humongous pollution slick in our wake."

"We? You two serving together?"

Chance grinned, eyes flicking to Stacker, who had just become the prime target of the ribbing.

"Yeah, he's my XO."

"He's your second-in-command?" Al asked Chance, feigning concern as he thumbed at Stacker. "Boy, are you in trouble..."

Stacker gave a mock frown, then all three chuckled. Nothing, it seemed, had changed between them.

Al raised his glass in what seemed like a formal toast. "Congratulations, Captain Healey." His eyes crinkled with amusement again. "For being the Old Man of your very own bird farm..."

"Here, here," came from Stacker, then all three men took a large gulp from their glasses.

Lowering his, Al was just about to make another wry comment when he was distracted by a familiar figure that appeared from the direction of the restaurant lobby. "Hey, isn't that...?"

Without turning, his companions grinned and said in unison, "Zippo!"

Chance laughed. "He was out in the lobby making a call. You must have walked right past him. Been pushing the envelope a little too much lately, eh Bingo?" He elbowed Stacker. "Flyin' that desk must be tough work..."

Shooting him a glance laden with mock irritation, Al got to his feet. Perhaps his annoyance was more real than he cared to admit. Chance's jest was much closer to the truth than he knew, but Al would never let him know it. Extending a hand, he drew the approaching astronaut the last few feet to the table.

"Good to see you, Zip! Geez, last I heard you were about to take that bird of yours out for another spin."

Zippo nodded, immediately understanding. His 'bird' was the Space Shuttle COLUMBIA. "My third flight," he said proudly, dropping Al's hand, "and her sixth."

"So how's the old girl flyin' these days?" Al asked as they sat.

"Here now," Chance said as if in chiding. "Zip's wife maybe gettin' a bit round but it's no reason to call her old."

"Wife!" Al exclaimed, looking first at Chance, then back to Zippo. "You're married?"

Stacker chuckled, elbowing his superior. "Same old Bingo. Keeps up on the important stuff--like who's piloting what orbiter--but not on his buddies' marital status."

Al regarded Zippo skeptically, then grinned cockily. "Who's the unfortunate girl?"

"Belinda Martinson," Zippo answered, reaching for his drink. "You remember her, right?"

Belinda. Al cast back in his memory. A faint wisp of recollection teased him. Black silk and deep tan under a pink blouse...no... uniform...

Gift shop uniform.

"Belinda?" he asked, choosing his words carefully. "From...Houston?"

"Yeah." Zippo grinned. No, he beamed. "We got married a year ago. She's due any day with our first kid."

The waitress had reappeared, this time behind Stacker and Zippo. Al, struggling to think of something to say to the soon-to-be dad,

spared her only a fraction of his attention.

Belinda, of all people! And pregnant!

"Congratulations," Al said at last. He'd done this baby announcing thing himself not too long ago. What was it people had said to him? "Do you...want a boy or a girl?"

As soon as it was out of his mouth, he wished he hadn't said it. Ruthie had always gotten irritated when people asked her that and said she didn't care as long as it was healthy...and look how that turned out. Hell, it was just that the idea of Zippo--whom he used to keep apprised of his gift shop stockroom romps--married to Belinda had surprised the daylights out of him!

Zippo, who was still unaware of the waitress at his shoulder, shrugged. "The ultrasound said it's gonna be a girl, which is okay. Lindy already did the nursery in Holly Hobbies. I kinda wanted the first one to be a boy, though."

There was a pause from the men at the table, none of whom had the faintest idea of what a Holly Hobbie was, and the waitress filled the gap.

"You never know, ultrasounds can be wrong. They told me I was having a girl--twice--and I've got two boys."

"Really?" Zippo brightened, which was no small feat since he was already glowing with soon-to-be-paternal pride.

"Really," she assured him. "Sometimes, they just don't get a good enough look at...well, the parts they need to look at to tell."

Transfixed by the conversation, Al's eyes traveled back to Zippo, who nodded, saying, "Could be. Reading those things must be an art." He paused to smile enthusiastically at his friends. "Belinda has this picture of her first ultrasound at about four months. I missed it 'cause I was up on a mission. She says she can tell where the ribs are and that it has my cheekbones. Geez..." He shook his head ruefully. "...looks like a land-sat map to me. 'Course," he added quickly, "not that I'd ever tell her that."

He looked back at the waitress. "But the next one I could tell a little more about what was what."

"I'm sure it looked like that to her too. The doctor probably pointed it all out to her." She grinned. "When's she due?"

"The last ultrasound says in two weeks. December 28th. But they keep changing it."

The waitress nodded wisely. "The doctor kept

changing my date too. Sometimes you can't go by that. I went two weeks before the ultrasound said I was due."

Amazed, Al leaned toward Chance. "What," he asked incredulously, "is he doing?"

Chance chuckled. "Acting out daddyhood."

"Zippo, the wildman?" Al shot back softly. "This has got to be some kinda pick-up line."

"Nope," Chance said wryly. "He's been like this all evening. Even told us we ought to try parenthood--and natural childbirth classes."

"Geez," Al breathed, leaning back in his chair.

For the sake of Chance and Stacker, who had been following the whole conversation, he kept his expression disbelieving and a little pitying. But in his gut, he felt something much different. Zippo looked pleased as hell with himself, high almost. Was that what fatherhood did to a guy? If only Ruthie hadn't lost their kid...

Abruptly unwilling to follow that line of thought, Al cleared his throat. "I think we need some steaks here, to celebrate, and another round of drinks. A double scotch for proud almost-Poppa here."

"Mineral water for me," Zippo countered. "But..." He grinned with his old gusto. "...since you're paying, I'll have the biggest steak this place has to offer."

"Sixteen ounce sirloin it is, then," the waitress said, scratching the order on her notepad. "How would you like that cooked?"

"Rare," Zippo ordered. "And plenty of sour cream on the baked potato." He smiled at his buddies. "I know I'm gonna be on a diet after Lindy has that kid."

"Make that two sixteen ounce specials," Chance spoke up as the waitress looked at him.

"Three," Stacker added.

"Four," Al finished with a flourish, not letting himself think what the bill would total. This, he had promised himself, would be a night to remember. What better way to accomplish that than wining and dining old buddies...and impressing them with his gold credit card?

"Hey, Bingo," Zippo began after the waitress had moved away, "you'll never guess who I got a call from the other day." Before the captain could even try, he continued, "Toad. Remember him?"

Al grimaced. "Yeah, that Marine buzzhead we were training with at Houston. What'd he want?"

Grinning, Zippo answered, "Wanted me to do

some PR stuff for his office--dress up in my spacesuit kinda thing. Thought he was gonna choke on asking me."

"After washing himself outta NASA, yeah, I bet he did." Al laughed, but there was no mirth to it. "What's he doing that he sets up PR stuff?"

"Left the service." Zippo shrugged. "Now flies a desk for some congressman. Poor guy."

Flies a desk. That was twice that phrase had come up. It was one of the most dreaded fates that could befall a pilot. The ultimate slam. Wings clipped. Grounded. Permanently.

And it was much too close to home to sit comfortably with Al. Not that he was going to let them know it. Uh-unh, no way. Nobody was gonna, 'poor guy' him behind his back.

"Once a Marine, always a Marine," Stacker supplied somberly, picking up his drink.

"What a nozzle," Al growled. "He deserves it. Couldn't fly his way out of a wet paper bag anyway." He snorted. "You know why he left the Space Program?" he began, as if for Chance and Stacker's benefit. Both shook their heads, allowing Al to neatly steer the conversation in another direction. "Got busted landing in the Colonel's daughter...the jerk. Hey, Zip, how is Webster? He still around?"

Reminiscing and catching up on what everyone had been doing continued throughout the meal. There was so much food that they were all pressed to finish it, and yet too macho to admit the fact. The reminiscing seemed to take on a hint of the same malady to Al's ear, and he found his enthusiasm for excess dimming, though he would no more have admitted that than he would have admitted the steak was about half again too large to finish comfortably. So, he lit up a cigar as soon as he had finished enough of his meal to be acceptable and just listened.

Chance and Stacker sang the praises of their ship and crew. There was none better in the entire fleet--and their tales of their adventures on the High Seas, and commendations and awards in training certainly seemed to bear it out.

Then Zippo filled them in on the latest shuttle mission he had flown, eleven days in space, returning home just a week ago. All the officers took in every word, as if experiencing with him the thrill of flying--and living--in the world's most unique plane...a spaceship in every sense of the word. Al, in particular, could feel the rapid, controlled touchdown as

Zippo described it, free-falling back to Earth from space. No engines. No second chances.

On the cutting edge.

And it could have been his--his!--if he hadn't left the Space Program. If he hadn't...

The focus of the conversation abruptly turned to him, and he hastily shelved his thoughts. Now was not the time to dwell on what might have been.

"So, Bingo," Chance began, "tell us what it is that you do at this 'Top Secret' project of yours?"

Al forced a grin, swirling the scotch in his glass that he was still nursing. "Cutting edge stuff, Chance. You'd give your eye teeth for it."

"Got something to do with imaging technology, doesn't it?" Zippo asked, remarkably well informed.

Shrugging, he didn't expound on Zippo's comment. Somehow, building a super-computer to plug into a acoustic-optic crystal someone else was creating just didn't seem exciting enough right now. And it was, after all--

"Top Secret," Al answered with a teasing grin, hoping they wouldn't call him on it. "Let's just say, someday you may be using our work on your orbiter."

Your orbiter. The words just didn't come out the way he meant them. It seemed so final, like he was abdicating his status as an astronaut once and for all, to embrace the role of scientific administrator.

Zippo--and for that matter, the others--didn't seem to notice. The shuttle pilot only nodded. "Keep you funded well enough to suit you?"

"Yeah." Al waved expansively. "More than I can spend. All I do is ask and they fork it over. Washington's hot on this Project--and it's worth it."

Waving at the waitress, he ordered another round despite the fact he hadn't finished the drink he had first ordered when he arrived. Somewhere in the recounting of the successes of his companions, he'd lost his desire for alcohol. Drinking meant relaxing, and right now he felt oddly uneasy, almost on guard, though against what he couldn't say.

While he was speaking to the waitress, Zippo said something to the others that Al didn't catch. He was leaving the table before the captain was free again.

"Where's he going?" Al asked, mystified,

watching the astronaut leave in the same general direction as the waitress. "To compare Lamaze class notes with her again? I swear it's all a come on with him."

Chance shook his head. "Gone to call Belinda."

"What, again?! But he just--"

"Yeah," Stacker sighed. "Poor guy's got it bad. Next thing you know he's gonna be coming back here, telling us he heard the baby kick over the phone."

Laughing, Al tapped the ash off his cigar--secretly wondering if that were possible--when his companions, who were facing the back of the room, straightened. Their attention had obviously been caught by something behind him, and from their expressions, Al didn't have to turn to know it was a woman--a beautiful woman.

"Well?" he asked knowingly, slipping back into old routines as he took a puff off his cigar. "Is she worth dropping a napkin for?"

"Right on a scale of ten," Stacker breathed, eyes following her progress across the room to the far right of Al.

"At least," Chance agreed. "Maybe a nine."

"I bow to your opinion, mon Capitan," Stacker agreed reverently. "A nine she is, sir. I guess that's why he's--holy...geez!"

"What?" Al hissed, unable to bear it any longer. Surreptitiously, he picked up his napkin and dropped it to the floor, so he could turn his head for a good look without being obvious.

"She's with a ten!" Chance observed in delight.

Al stole a glance through the jungle of table and chair legs to the small table for two on the opposite side of the room. He caught sight of a redhead, and on first impressions decided she was definitely every bit a ten.

Miss Nine--a buxom, long-legged blonde--was just sliding into a booth opposite the svelte Miss Ten. She said something inaudible to her red-headed companion, who laughed and sent a glance toward the officers' table.

"They're interested," Stacker said with delight, keeping his expression decidedly less exuberant than his voice. Lifting one hand, he began a wave, but the women had shifted their attention before he could complete it.

"Too bad," Al said, straightening with his napkin in his hand. Tossing it onto the table, he reached again for his cigar. Slowly, he indulged in re-lighting it. He was supposed to

be enjoying this--he could at least act like it!

"Only Round One," Chance answered with a shrug. "The night is young."

"Hah!" Al snorted. "If you didn't even see her before this, buddy, you're losing your touch."

"She was sitting behind that pillar," Chance shot back without hesitation. "Too bad there's not another one hiding back there. Looks like you're gonna go begging, Bingo."

Al's eyes narrowed in good-natured challenge. "If I wanted 'em, Chance, I'd sweep the field."

His companions began protestations of disbelief as Zippo reappeared, their waitress following behind him with a tray of drinks.

"Everything okay?" Chance asked as the astronaut slid into his chair.

"I guess," Zippo said uneasily. "She says her back hurts."

The waitress, sliding drinks onto the table, cast a glance at him. "Unh-oh, my back started hurting right before I went into labor."

Alarmed, Zippo cast her a glance. "I gotta go home," he said decisively. "She didn't sound good. I can catch the red-eye out, surprise her before breakfast."

"But..." Al began as his friend got to his feet. Wisely, the waitress withdrew without further comment.

Undeterred, Zippo reached down to shake Al's hand, then the other two men in turn. "Good to see you guys. Thanks for the dinner, Bingo," he said, tossing some money for a tip on the table. "And good luck with that top secret project of yours." Turning, he strode toward the exit.

"Send us a cigar," Chance called to his retreating back, and was rewarded with a wave though there was no pause in the man's step.

He was barely gone when Stacker's attention returned to the women at the far table. "Hey, they're going into the bar!"

Chance picked up his drink, gaze following the women toward the lounge adjoining the dinner club. "Shall we follow?"

"Is the Pope Catholic?" Stacker returned heartily.

Al grinned. "Go ahead," he said, pulling out his wallet and extracted his gold American Express card for all to see. "I'll settle up here and catch up to you."

Watching them follow the women, he gestured for the waitress. By the time he had settled the bill and sauntered through the wide arch

that led into the bar area, his companions had already staked a table within easy sight of the women they had targeted for attention.

As Al took his seat--which, he noted, put his back to the pair and his eyes to a corner television set--another waitress dressed in a short, tight, low-cut dress and spiked shoes came to the table.

"What can I get for you guys?" she asked politely.

"We're fine," Chance answered, "but, unh... we'd like to send a couple of drinks to the ladies over there." He indicated which ones with a discreet nod. "Whatever they're having."

"Amateurs," Al scoffed as the waitress withdrew. "You should have sent them a bottle of white wine--you know that's what they're gonna be drinking. Then you could've offered to go share it."

"Advice from the expert," Stacker said dryly, fixing Al with a mock frown. "And I thought you weren't even in this game."

Stung despite himself, Al controlled his expression. He may have been out bragged earlier, but his reputation as a ladies man would damn well stand unchallenged.

"I'm married, Stack," he asserted, "not dead." His voice, to his satisfaction, was calmly self-assured and revealed none of his irritation. "And if I decide to be greedy, both you and Chance'll come up empty."

The two officers made appropriate sounds of rebuttal. Chance looked up just as their waitress passed by their table.

"Here's a woman who looks like she's got good taste," he said, stopping her in her tracks. "Let's ask her opinion on the subject."

"Ask me what?"

"We just want you to settle a difference of opinion for us," Stacker assured her.

Her eyes taking on a shadow of weariness, as if she'd heard it a dozen times before, she said, "If I can." She cast Al a look of inquiry before reaching for his glass. At his discreet nod, she put it on her tray even though it was still half full.

Leaning forward, Chance balanced his elbows on the table. "If you had to choose, hypothetically speaking, between us or him..." He gestured at Al, who gave the waitress a conspirator's wink in an attempt to gain her co-operation. "...who would you pick? One of us?" He gestured between himself and his second. "Or him?"

"Hypothetically speaking," she returned, glancing at Al with a smile that did not quite reach her eyes, "since he's wearing a wedding band, not him." Her gaze shifted to the two other officers, who were beginning to grin triumphantly. "And since I'm wearing a wedding band, neither of you, either."

"But--" Chance began in vain as she turned gracefully and glided away.

Cigar balanced in a great show of nonchalance, Al grinned as if her comment had bounced right off. "Gypsy's Curse still holds, huh, Dave? Bet she has at least three older brothers..."

Interested, Stacker reached for his drink. "Gypsy's Curse?"

"Yeah, it's how Chance got his name," Al said.

Glass paused at his lips, Stacker grinned. "Well, if it's anything like the story how you got your name, Bingo, this I gotta hear!"

"It's none of your business," Chance growled. But there was a hint of resignation in it as if he knew Al was determined to tell it regardless.

He was right.

Al grinned, enjoying Chance's discomfort. "It was in Pensacola, when we were in Flight School. I was busy dating Miss Tailgunner at the time, but there was this fortune teller working the strip where we'd go to let off steam."

"Yeah?" Stacker prompted. "She take a dislike to Chance or what?"

"'Liking' is more like it," Al said with a laugh as Chance shook his head in disgust. "Every time we'd go by her place, she'd invite him in, telling him to 'take a chance'."

"A chance?"

"Yeah, with all that psychic-shmychic mumbo jumbo."

"She wanted to do a 'reading'," Chance clarified with a knowing wink.

"Well, did he go in?" Stacker asked Al, getting into the story. He looked at his buddy. "Did you?"

"Nope."

"So she cursed you because you didn't?"

"Just wait," Chance said sourly, "he's coming to that."

"Well..." Al, who knew how to work his audience, took a puff on his cigar before answering. "One night, Dave got a little juiced, and Flora--"

"The fortune teller?"

"The nurse," Al corrected, taking a slow sip of his drink. "The nurse he was dating at the time."

"Practically engaged to," Chance added, feigning a forlorn smile for the benefit of the story.

"Ahhh, Flora..." Al's eyes went dreamy. "Legs that went on forever and a body that would part the Red Sea."

"And too much taste to ever take a second look at you," Chance grumbled good-naturedly. "See? See how he always hits on my girlfriends? Geez, you had the beauty queen, Bingo, you could've at least let me have the nurse..."

Ignoring him, Al continued. "Anyway, this night Chance got into a tiff with Flora. She slapped his face, flounced out of the Flightline Bar, and left poor Dave all alone and lonely."

"Very lonely," Chance added glumly.

"And?" Stacker prompted, eyes darting from one to another like he was watching a tennis match. "And?"

"And," Al continued obligingly, "he 'took a chance' with the fortune teller."

Stacker frowned in bewilderment. "Then she cursed him? Right? Because she..." He shot a glance at his captain, who was now looking studiously unconcerned. "...didn't have a good time?"

"Oh yeah," Al disagreed. "She had a wonderful time." He waved eloquently with his cigar. "Matter of fact, she was still having a wonderful time when her brother, who worked the night shift on the docks, came home for breakfast. It was him that did the cursing..." He smiled cockily. "...along with whatever few words Dave managed to get out while he was bumping face-first down that fire escape, trying to get away with all his body parts intact."

Stacker laughed heartily as the image sprang to mind. Recovering slightly, he asked, "So what was the curse?"

Al's grin was wicked. "That Dave'd never be able to get a date with any woman ever again, as long as she had a brother alive to defend her honor." He cast a glance over his shoulder at the two women, as Stacker chortled in delight at Chance's disapproving snort. "And they both look like they come from big families to me," he finished, rubbing salt in the wound.

The redhead smiled as the men's attention briefly turned to them and quietly spoke to her companion. Shaking her head, the blonde then

looked their way. To Al's chagrin, her lingering gaze seemed directed at Chance, who puffed himself up after the ego bashing he'd just taken and grinned in reply.

"Five'll get you ten," Chance said softly as he held the blonde's gaze from across the room, "that she's an only child."

Confidently getting to his feet, he crossed to the women's table before Al could reply.

Watching him, Stacker took a long drink of his liquor and asked thoughtfully, "That a true story?"

"If it isn't," Al said with a laugh, "it oughta be. Dave's always had lousy luck with women."

Chuckling, Stacker got to his feet, glass in hand. "That, I can vouch for," he said easily. "So I think I'll go give him a hand."

Shrugging in agreement, Al stubbed out his cigar. "I'm going to the head. If you haven't gotten them over to this table by the time I get back, I'll go herd 'em over for you."

Shooting him an amused glance, Stacker left the table, his body language changing eloquently as he went. Watching him, Al chuckled and exited in the opposite direction, his own walk carefully nonchalant and unhurried.

When he reached the restroom, which was unoccupied, he let the act slip. As if it were the only thing that had kept his true feelings at bay, a wave of depression then swept over him. Shaking his head, he regarded his reflection in the mirror.

"What the hell's the matter with you, Calavicci?" he asked himself silently. Waiting a long moment, he got no answer and turned away.

Loitering in the bathroom, he took his time, telling himself he was tired--nothing more--only tired. Chance had teased that maybe he'd been 'pushing the envelope' a little too much lately, and maybe he was right. Al Calavicci--like any other finely tuned piece of equipment--had defined limitations to his performance expectations. Pushing that envelope, pushing himself to the max, had undoubtedly taken its toll.

Yeah. That was it. He was simply... overworked.

Standing before the mirror again, combing his hair to perfection, he contemplated making his excuses and going home. But a quick look at his watch confirmed it was barely nine. To throw in the towel now would set Stacker and Chance to talking about what was the matter with

good old Bingo. Had he gone soft and domesticated--toddling home early to the old ball and chain? Or what?

Shoving his comb into his pocket with a bit more vehemence than was required, he quickly deep-sixed that idea. Damned if Calavicci had been declaved yet...and he would prove it. There were two incredibly beautiful, available women out there, who would suit his new purposes to a T. Now it was time to push that particular performance envelope right to its limit.

Unconsciously squaring his shoulders as he pulled open the men's room door, he strode back into the world with renewed determination. He came here to have fun and, damn it, he would.

Returning to the bar, he found that the flamer and the blonde had relocated to his table. Through Chance's introductions, he learned the redhead was named Sharon, and the blonde, Tori.

Since Chance and Stacker sat on either side of Tori, Al smoothly slid into the free seat on the left side of Sharon. Leaning forward, he turned on the Calavicci charm, holding his own with the redhead despite her initial, discerning glance at his wedding band.

The fine art of the pick-up, Al found, was like riding a bike--not that he'd had anywhere near as much practice in cycling as he had in coming on to women. True to his vow in the men's room, he drank, smoked, shot the bull, and flirted like a pro. If he wasn't having a good time, no one could tell, and by ten o'clock, Sharon was definitely leaning his way.

Chance had evidently decided his opportunities were limited in that direction and turned his full attention to charming Tori away from Stacker. At the moment, the two ship's officers were hanging on her every word, as she recounted her latest successful find at a local boutique.

Smiling at Al, Sharon leaned forward toward him, further removing them from the conclave at the other end of the table. With one perfectly manicured hand resting lightly on his arm, she said softly, for his ears only, "I'm going out on the patio for some fresh air."

Rising, having given what was obviously an invitation, she slipped away. Tori, who was still busy with the combined attentions of Chance and Stacker, followed her departure with her eyes but did not comment.

Meeting Stacker's raised eyebrow, Al stubbed out his cigar and stood, intent on following the

redhead at a discreet distance, although one still obvious enough to draw envious glances from both his male companions. He'd taken no more than two steps away from the table when he heard Chance casually ask, "So. Tori. You got any brothers...?"

Grinning, Al continued across the smoky room, which had grown more crowded as the evening went on. Opening a side door, he stepped out onto the patio.

The December air was crisp but not uncomfortable. Taking a moment to let his eyes adjust to the darkness, he took in the area that was romantically lit only by a few dim lanterns, leaving deep shadows between them. Only two of the dozen or so wrought iron tables were occupied, both of them tucked away in the shelter of the night that nearly hid the lovers who braved the weather and lingered here.

Catching sight of Sharon, her red hair shining softly as she stood directly under the lantern at the farthest point of the patio, Al smiled. Flame definitely had more than fresh air on her mind, that had been clear to everyone left behind at the table in the bar.

Good. Calavicci's reputation was intact.

Still too firmly in Pursuit Mode to let it rest, he started toward her. Sauntering across the expanse, he moved up behind her.

"Beautiful out tonight, isn't it?" she asked, without turning, as he reached her.

Giving full rein to bachelor instincts, he stepped near, one hand lightly brushing her hair. "Beautiful," he agreed, letting his tone imply clearly that it was not the night to which he was referring.

With a throaty laugh, she moved away, leaving behind the light which made her hair gleam so invitingly. Bemused, Al could do nothing but follow. She turned to face him, leaning against the low brick wall.

As he was obviously meant to, he moved in close, standing too near for casual conversation, yet leaving enough space for her to slip aside and away if she liked. In the cool night air, he could feel the heat radiating from her body, and found himself drawn to it like a moth to a flame. Tilting her head slightly, she regarded him with a smoldering gaze that was clearly an invitation.

Carried away by the moment, he forgot that his whole intention had not been to seduce her, but merely to prove to his buddies that he had not lost his touch. Still, there could be

nothing more natural now than to kiss her, so he did, letting his hormones carry him along.

Her shoulders felt wonderful under his hands, all satin moisturized skin over aerobic class toned muscles, and she tasted of fine wine and menthol cigarettes. His first kiss was light, almost a question. When she responded by hooking her fingers through his belt loops and pulling his body full length against hers, he kissed her more deeply.

It was so easy, slipping under the spell of musk and seduction, to follow where their bodies wanted to take them. That, without a doubt, would be incredible...

He buried his hands in the thick fall of her hair. It spilled over them, perfumed, carefully curled and shot through with fire...not dark and silky with natural, unconscious beauty like Ruthie's.

Ruthie.

With a sound of regret deep in his throat, he pulled back unwillingly, letting the kiss linger as he drew away. How could he have forgotten Ruthie? He was married...and this time he intended to uphold the vows he had taken.

Misinterpreting his actions as a seductive promise of something more, Sharon gave her throaty chuckle and laced her fingers around the back of his neck.

"You are a very sexy man, Captain Calavicci," she whispered. "I could see it in your eyes the moment I met you." Lightly, she increased the pressure on his neck, inviting him to kiss her again, murmuring, "You know how to please a woman, don't you."

Drawing a deep, regretful breath, he brushed his thumbs along the beautifully made up lines of her cheeks--a glint of lantern light catching the gold band on his left hand--then drew away.

"I...I can't," he said ruefully. Then, realizing how that sounded, he stammered, not used to having to explain himself. "I mean...I can...but I...can't. I mean..." Geez, he sounded like Sam!

"Can't?" She scoffed gently, brushing lightly against him to demonstrate how his body denied his words. "You could." Her eyes flickered with devilish delight. "Right here, right now..." She smiled as if they shared a delicious secret. "...if you wanted to."

"Oh, baby..." Focusing on her eyes, he let himself be distracted by the teasing caress of her hands. He kissed her again--harder this time--coming up for air only after his

conscience had delivered another guilty kick. "You don't know what you're asking."

"Yes," she disagreed with a smile. "I do."

"I'm married." The admission came out much softer and much more regretful than he intended.

"I know," she whispered, nuzzling his neck. "It doesn't matter. I'm asking for a night's pleasure, not a commitment. These are the eighties, Captain, or haven't you heard?"

"I mean it," he said a bit more forcefully, this time pulling her hands away from where they had wandered. "I can't."

Damn it, he loved Ruthie and he didn't want this. Well, he did...but he wanted to remain faithful even more. Didn't he? Hell. Being married had never before stopped him from 'looking', but 'touching' was a completely different story.

He took a step back to reinforce his point.

"I, unh...I'm sorry I misled you."

Surprisingly, she laughed, with no trace of anger or derision. "You didn't mislead me, Captain Calavicci. You just got cold feet." Holding his gaze, she closed the space between them again and ran long-nailed hands through his close-cropped hair. "Let me warm them..."

Incredibly, he felt as if he reddened under her frank scrutiny. She wanted him--whether because of his fast talking charm in the bar, some deep-seated fetish with military men, or his years of practice in kissing--she wanted him enough to go after him. Usually it was he who did the wanting and the chasing...and this turnabout was unexpectedly as sexy as hell.

Only he couldn't take her up on it.

Correction: wouldn't.

"I'm sorry," he said lamely, taking another step away from her roving hands--a step closer to the bar and the way home.

"Me too," she said with a small but understanding smile.

A long, awkward silence descended as they stood side by side and gazed out over the low brick wall at the night beyond. He was acutely aware of her, the desire she had aroused in him ...and the guilt. But the ball was now firmly back in her court. It was her serve, and a silent war of morals began to rage in his gut, against that part of him that still wanted to be aced.

After a few minutes, Sharon shivered slightly and said, "Let's go back inside."

As she stepped past him and headed for the door, Al raised his eyes to the night sky.

Thank God. He'd only just come through this Close Encounter by the skin of his teeth! Letting out a long breath, he wiped any traces of lipstick off his mouth with his handkerchief and followed.

Recovering his former confidence as they neared the light and noise of the bar, he slipped his hand under her elbow to guide her. No way he was slinking in behind her like a scolded dog. Image was the reason he'd gotten himself into this mess in the first place, and he was reasonably sure she had guessed that. With a whole lotta luck, she wouldn't show him up in front of his friends.

Her blonde friend, still nestled in between the combined attentiveness of Chance and Stacker, glanced up as she took her seat. A look passed between the two women, similar to the one that passed between the three men, those left inside no doubt curious as to what had--or hadn't--transpired outside.

Tori scored a small smile from Sharon, but Chance and Stacker were getting absolutely zilch from Al's carefully neutral look. To play up what they obviously thought happened might blow the lid off it altogether. Right now, Sharon seemed content with carrying on the charade, but he didn't like to push his luck.

In the moments of silence which reigned, all five looked for a distraction, and found one in the corner television set, tuned to KSFV Channel 12 out of nearby San Francisco.

Dylan Powell, first on the scene, was reporting live from a police investigation in Chinatown. The brutally strangled body of Janie Wong, a 23-year-old stripper, had just been found in her apartment. As all five watched--spellbound, like witnesses to a road accident--a covered gurney was wheeled out of the apartment door in the background. The voice of the anchorman back at the station then asked Dylan if there could be a connection with this murder, and the body of the girl who'd been found a month earlier. The Action Eye reporter grimly admitted that the MO was identical, and that Police Chief Collins now feared this second murder was just the beginning, the work of a deranged serial killer who the police had dubbed The Chinatown Strangler...

An unspoken look went from one woman to another, then Tori said, "It's getting late. We should go."

"Yes," Sharon nodded, despite Chance's protests that the night was still young.

"Besides, I have to be in court early tomorrow."

"Court?" Chance asked in surprise. "Why? I mean..."

Laughing, she shook her head, highlights dancing off her red-gold hair. "I'm a lawyer." She looked at her companion, amusement dancing in her eyes. "We both are."

Al raised a discerning eyebrow. And with her smooth style, he bet she was a real shyster.

Getting to her feet, Sharon bent down as if reaching for her purse. When the other two men turned their attention to helping Tori out of her chair, she whispered in Al's ear. "If I can ever do anything for you, Captain, don't hesitate to give me a call."

He jumped slightly, feeling her slide a business card into his jacket pocket--right next to his pocket pager--her slender index finger lingering to trace one final, circular caress on his chest. Al quickly covered the move, as the skin beneath his shirt began to tingle, by reaching into the same pocket for a cigar.

"Good luck in court tomorrow," he said for lack of anything better to say.

"I'll win," she said with a hint of a smile. "I usually do."

Chance, waiting a split second, watched as Stacker escorted Tori in the direction of the exit. When it became obvious Al wasn't going to stand, the ENTERPRISE captain smoothly filled in the gap by slipping to her side.

"I'll walk you to your car," he volunteered. "Just to be sure you get there safely."

"We're not in Chinatown," Sharon protested. "We're not even in San Francisco."

"Close enough," Chance returned, smoothly setting his hand on her waist as they walked away.

Al barely flicked a glance at them as they headed after Stacker and Tori. Unwrapping his cigar, he sat back to wait, but found his eyes straying to watch Sharon's hips as she departed.

Geez, Calavicci...how could you've turned her down? Sharon could have been his 'night to remember', just waiting for him to say the word.

As he suspected, both men returned quickly and both looked disappointed. They slid into chairs across from Al, who was comfortably seated, smoking as if he had not a care in the world. He blew smoke into the air in a fine show of nonchalance. "Crashed and burned, huh?"

"Yeah, well..." Taking the offensive, Chance answered with a challenging wink at Stacker. "What about you? Thought you said you

could have 'em both, Bingo..."

Shrugging, Al flicked his cigar ash into the glass tray. "I took pity on you two amateurs. Besides, I already had my dessert. Out on the patio."

Making appropriate disbelieving sounds, the two officers shook their heads.

"What?! Oh, come on...you don't seriously expect us to believe that you...? With her? Out there?"

"Geez, you were only gone ten minutes! You couldn't...! You wouldn't...! Did you?"

Al managed a supremely smug look. "Well, I ain't the one walkin' around with my tongue hangin' out."

The banter continued for several minutes before all three lapsed into silence, the debate about whether Al did or didn't eventually chalked up as an unsolved mystery.

"So, what now?" asked Stacker, who was never one to dwell on personal defeat.

"Let's go downtown anyway," Chance suggested. "Check out those strip clubs we heard about. Bingo's probably got his own private table at each of them."

Laughing, Al agreed with a nod. "Primo view, too." Reaching into his pocket, he dropped a few bills onto the table and got to his feet. "Gimme a minute and I'll be right with you."

Striding to the restroom area like he had nothing but the call of nature on his mind, he carried the charade as far as the arched doorway. Slipping around it and out of sight, he crossed to the phone Zippo had used earlier. There should be nothing he wanted more than to spend the rest of the evening and into the early morning drinking with his buddies and ogling beautiful unclothed women. But damned if it didn't depress the hell out of him to think about faking a good time for that many hours more. Coming on top of Sharon's surprising proposition, and his own even more surprising refusal, he just didn't want to handle it.

Reaching for the phone, he dropped his coin in and punched in the number of the Project's switchboard. When there was an answer, he said quietly, "Erickson, it's Calavicci. Beep me in a couple of minutes to call in stat, will you? Thanks."

Returning the phone to the cradle when the response came, Al drew a deep breath. It was an old trick, one he usually played when having an over-extended stay at his in-laws house. It would serve fine now.

The page came with perfect timing, just as they were headed to the front door. Stopping at the reservations desk, Al asked to use the phone. There, after discreetly cutting off the connection, he carried on a one way conversation for the benefit of Chance and Stacker.

"Duty calls, guys," he finished regretfully, replacing the receiver. "I've gotta go in."

Fortunately, his buddies accepted the lie at face value and, with much handshaking and easy banter, said their goodbyes as they walked together to the parking lot.

Standing alone in the darkness, watching them get into their rented fiery red Camaro, Al felt a sudden regret and a disquieting sense that he should go with them. It was as if...to let them leave was to relinquish something that he might never get back--something vital and primal that kept him alive. As such, he nearly lifted his voice to call to them.

Still, how could he catch up to them, tell them that he'd lied in an attack of middle-agedness, but now he was better and wanted to party? He couldn't, so he let them go, the cry of the nighthawks swooping about the parking lot lights wild and lonely above his head.

* * *

It seemed their shrill cries rang in his ears all the way home, despite the fact he turned the stereo up full blast in an attempt to drown them out. Turning off the car in his driveway, he was out of it and up the stairs before silence could fully settle about him again. He'd surprise Ruthie by coming home early. She would be glad to see him and take his mind off the depressing way the evening had ended.

Hurrying up the stairs, he unlocked his front door and turned the knob. "Ruthie?" he called nearly before the door swung open. "Honey? You here?"

Silence--deep and suffocating--met him, swallowing his words and stopping him in his tracks. Of course she wasn't home. Her sister was in town, and he'd told her to stay as long as she wanted at her parents. He had told her to take her time because he would probably be late. Real late.

As if to mock him, the mantle clock--a wedding present from Ruth's Uncle Isaac--chimed. Eleven...and Calavicci was home, stone cold sober, from a night out with the boys, cut short

by his own doing when he could have gone home with a willing and beautiful redhead.

Unconsciously, he fingered Sharon's card in his breast pocket.

Still striking the hour, the soft, refined tones of the clock seemed oddly muted in the silence as Al hesitated in the doorway. It felt just like standing in that damned parking lot, alone in the empty darkness, as his buddies drove away.

Geez, he hated coming home to an empty house. But, he had to admit, this was his own selfish doing. What was he going to do, turn tail and run from the domestic silence that waited for him? Call Sharon and really look like a horse's ass?

Stepping in, he closed the door. The house was dark except for the nightlight that glowed softly to his right. Ruthie had put it there in the early days when they had first moved in. He had been working late a lot then--honestly working on getting STAR BRIGHT underway--and she had put it there to keep him from stumbling in the dark as he searched for the light switch.

He didn't deserve that thoughtfulness, he thought in a sudden rush of guilt, just like he didn't deserve her. Look what he'd nearly done tonight, just to chase some jumped up, fly-boy macho image that he couldn't fit into any more.

Who the hell was he trying to fool anyway?

Not turning on any lights in a perverse desire to not chase away his dour mood, he shrugged off his jacket and tossed it on the couch. Crossing to the liquor cabinet, his way lit only by the moonlight spilling through the windows, he heard a soft, questioning sound from behind him. It had to be Sugar, the Himalayan cat he'd given Ruthie for their first anniversary.

"Meow yourself," he said sourly, reaching into the cabinet for a bottle of scotch and a glass. If he was going to be miserable, he was going to do it right.

Returning to sit on the couch, he ignored the cat, hoping it would go away. Purring softly, it delicately leapt onto the couch beside him and tried to creep into his lap. Giving it a half-hearted push away, Al poured a generous glass of liquor. He downed it, sitting there in the dark, while staring at the silhouetted business card in his hand.

It would've been so easy...

Letting his imagination wander a bit, he lightly tapped the card on his lips, an action

which fanned a faint wisp of her clinging perfume into his nostrils...and brought a wicked smile to his face.

So damn easy. And no one would ever have known...

Except him. He would've known--would've had to live with the guilty fact--that he'd cheated on his wife.

Desire again neutralized by guilt, he pulled out his wallet and tucked the business card away out of sight. He'd dispose of it later, someplace else. Far easier than trying to explain to Ruthie why he had the address and phone number of a Family Court lawyer.

Pouring another drink, he sat back and kicked off his shoes, the long-haired cat returning to try to creep into his lap again. Sighing, he tucked one foot beneath him and let the animal stay, absently stroking it as he lifted his glass.

Sitting in the dark and drinking was a bad sign, he admitted in some part of himself, but worrying about it was just too much damn trouble. At the very least, he deserved a hangover for this night, and he settled down dejectedly to see that he got one.

Staring morosely into the moonlight silvered darkness of his living room, Al drank and pondered the strange tack his life had taken. Despite drink after drink, his despair and guilt remained dark and heavy, only blurring slightly about the edges as time passed.

He was still sitting there, glass in hand, although he had long since lost interest in its contents, when Ruthie came home. In the after midnight silence, the sound of her car was distinctive. Listening to it, Al made an absent mental note to have the timing checked for her. It sounded as if it needed it.

That effort, slight as it was, lifted him only enough from his gloom to drop him further into it when he heard her quietly open the door. He should call out to her, he thought, but let the moment pass as he heard her tiptoe through the hall and into the bedroom.

She's seen my car, he thought, and she thinks I'm in bed. Any minute now she'll find out I'm not and call out...

"Al? Honey? Where are you?"

"In here." Sitting motionless in the corner of the couch, he listened to her come into the room behind him. Her feet hurt, he thought distantly, she's kicked off her shoes.

Picturing her padding barefoot onto the

thick carpet flooded him with desire, muted by guilt and the liquor, which had perhaps affected him more than he cared to admit.

Coming up behind him, she rested a hand lightly on his shoulder, hesitating just a moment.

Hell, here it comes. And he deserved it.

But her voice was gentle and not at all disapproving as she said, "You're home early."

Tilting his head to trap her hand briefly between his cheek and shoulder in a familiar gesture between them, he said only, "How's your family?" Lifting his glass, he took a deep drink as she circled the couch.

"Fine," she answered softly. "How were your friends?"

"Fine."

Her eyes traveled over him, the glass in his hand, the half empty bottle, tie pulled askew, and the cat forgotten in his lap. As if it were the animal that somehow decided her, her expression softened still further. Bending forward, she gently picked up the Himalayan, put it on the floor, then took its place.

Snuggling against Al's chest, she tucked her arms about him. Guilty, he stiffened slightly as she slipped under his arm. Sharon's caresses had burned like wildfire, the sensations still smoldering on his skin. The smell of her perfume, the taste of her kisses--even now he could not fully stop the assault on his senses. Could Ruthie possibly sense another woman's touch on him too?

Sighing, she simply said, "I love you."

"I love you, too," he answered automatically, lifting his drink to take a sip of the now-warm alcohol over her head. This had not been a usual exchange between them these past few months. In fact, the last time he'd told her that was probably just after she'd lost the baby--their baby--and that realization only made his guilt deepen.

Placing the glass on the coffee table, he encircled her with both arms, holding her tight as if she might somehow slip away like his elusive youth seemed to have done. Kissing her hair, he was appalled to find his eyes filling with tears and hugged her to him all the tighter.

He would do better. God help him. He would.

Not commenting, perhaps not even noticing his tension, she rubbed her cheek against his chest, as she had in the early days of their marriage. The good days. Long moments of companionable

silence passed between them. Gradually, Al felt the complex knot of pain, loss, and guilt ease in his throat. Ruthie still loved him. He still had that, whatever else he had lost.

"Dave's captain of the ENTERPRISE now," he heard himself say almost conversationally.

"The ENTERPRISE," she repeated. "Is it a big ship?"

Al smiled despite himself. "It's an aircraft carrier. Nuclear powered. About a hundred planes...and over five thousand men."

"Sounds like he's doing very well."

As if this revelation had opened his willingness to talk about the subject, he continued. "It's a primo command. If he shines there, he's got a shot at an admiralty." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "Mike's his second-in-command. If Dave moves up, Mike's likely to hit captain in another command before too long."

"Um humm," she agreed, her weight warm and comforting on his chest. "Must be hard on their wives, them being gone so much."

"They aren't married." The comment sounded faintly envious. He would have recalled it if he could, but Ruthie didn't seem to mind.

"That's too bad," she said, lifting her head slightly so he could see the teasing light in her eyes. She raised a hand to gently brush a stray curl from his forehead. "Nobody to share their promotion news with."

Chuckling, Al shook his head at her. "Nobody to help them spend their pay raise, you mean."

"Exactly," she agreed, smiling, and returned to her position on his chest. "What fun would that be?"

Rubbing his cheek on her hair, he saw the truth in that and thought back over the events of the evening. "Zippo Henderson's married," he volunteered. Barely, he kept back the statement that they were expecting a baby soon and he'd been wondering how it would feel to be an almost-Dad. Babies and pregnancy were still closed subjects between them, even in a brief truce of understanding like this.

"Who?"

"Old buddy of mine from NASA. He stayed with the Program, just flew the last shuttle mission on COLUMBIA."

She was silent in his arms and he could sense her ferreting out the hidden truths behind his words. Ruthie was good at that--uncovering all those things he would rather leave hidden.

Suddenly, he felt a twang of fear. He was

afraid that she would ask him if he regretted leaving the Space Program, if he regretted giving up a strictly military command for a liaison position, if he regretted all the choices of the past few years that had taken him further and further away from flying.

Because, damn it, the answer was yes. And if he told her now, it would be out in the open, spoken, never to be taken back. Then he could no longer avoid thinking of it, could no longer lie to himself and tell himself it wasn't true.

When she finally spoke, it was not what he had expected. "I think you should fly more."

"What?!" he asked, surprised. "You hate it when I even talk about going flying."

"I know. It just scares me when you do. But I always know when you go, even though you try to sneak away." She looked at him seriously, raising a hand to touch his cheek. "I think you should. Fly the jets, I mean."

Amazed, he stared down at the petite woman in his arms. How did she know he'd been sneaking off to log up flight time whenever he could? Which was all too rarely these days.

Shying away from his look, she settled against him again. "I'm sorry, Al. It was selfish of me to make it so hard for you. Maybe you could talk to someone at the base?"

Recovering, he cleared his throat, shot a wary glance down at her and said, "Honey, the military is not like a rental car service. You can't just go fly a multi-million dollar piece of hardware whenever you want."

"You'll work something out," she replied, supremely confident in his abilities--as she had been in the old days. She, at least, seemed to believe he had some of the good stuff left in him. The thought eased still more of the gray gloom of his mood.

Suddenly, he was glad he hadn't gone with Sharon. Even for all his guilt, he realized he'd still been kicking himself for letting her get away. By now the pleasure, for all its mind-blowing potential, would be over. He would be collecting his clothes, and would have a snowball's chance in hell of coming home to this reception that he needed so badly.

He had very nearly blown it.

Stirring, Ruthie left his lap. "Coming to bed?" she asked, running a questioning finger

along his jaw.

He kissed her fingertip as it left his lips.

"Pretty quick," he answered, looking up at her. "I wanna be sure everything's secure first. Won't be long."

"Okay," she said, nodding, and padded out of the room.

Motionless, Al listened to the sounds of her moving about, getting ready for bed. Wearily, he ran a hand over his eyes. Ruthie could always make him feel better when he got into one of his blue moods. He was never quite sure how she did it. Maybe it was just the strong, quiet way she had of letting him know she still thought he was the greatest thing since sliced bread.

It had worked tonight too. Sort of.

Sighing, he picked up his glass and drained it. Briefly, he considered pouring another but decided regretfully against it. Ruthie was counting on him to come to bed.

Everything would be okay, he thought as he got to his feet to check the front door, and found it secure. Tomorrow this mood will have passed--it was already easing. Tomorrow he'd be back on top and ready for the day.

Tomorrow, he'd try to forget that he had almost cheated on Ruthie. Because deep down he was still bothered by the realization that he had never seriously considered doing that before tonight. Never. And they'd be celebrating their fourth wedding anniversary in about six weeks.

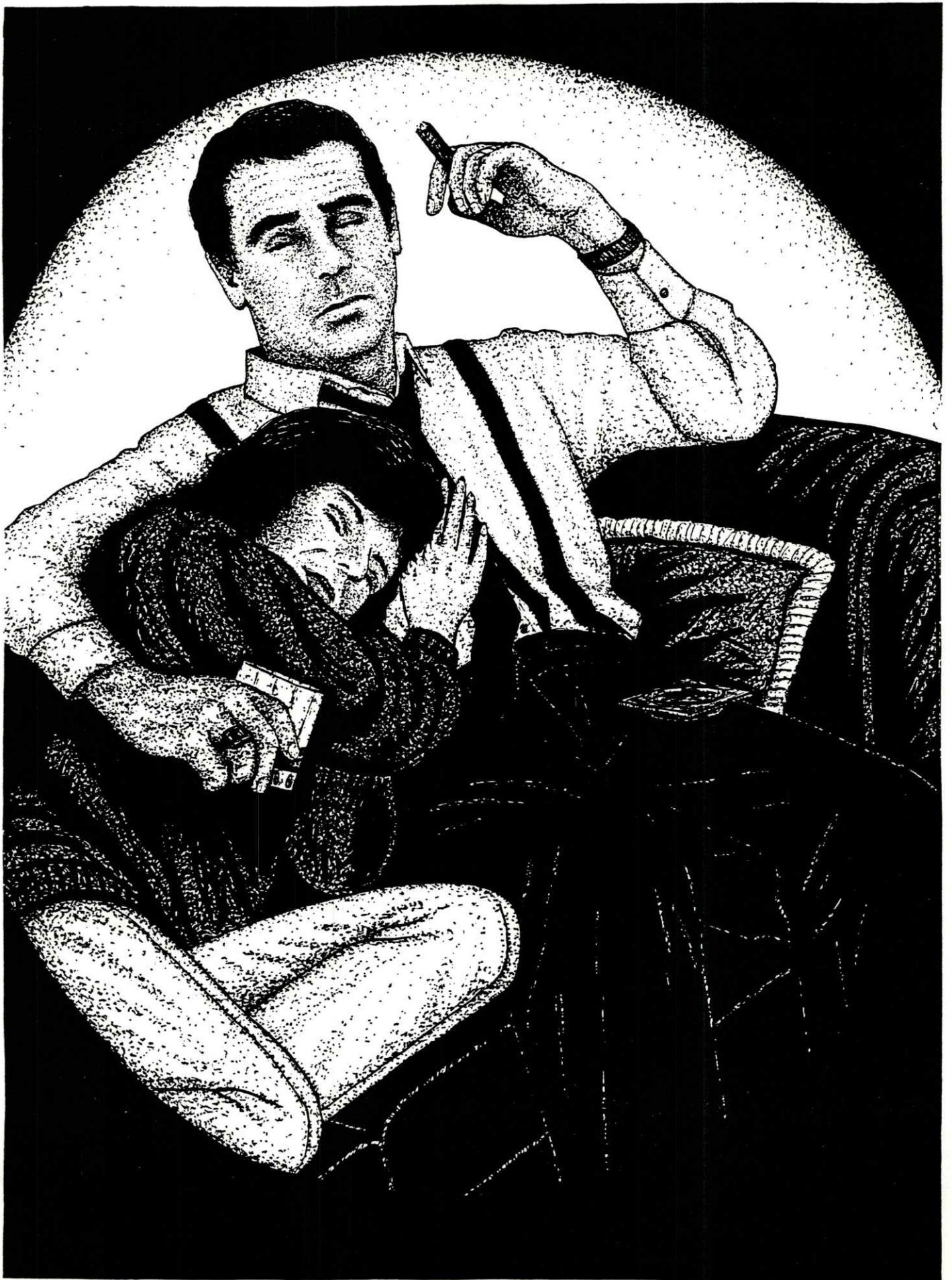
Four years. He'd given her four faithful years. Geez, he'd have to remember to buy her something real nice...

Moving through the glow of Ruthie's night light in the hall, he went to join her. It was easy to see his way around the furniture despite the darkness that crowded close about the tiny light's glow.

Distantly, as he shrugged off his clothes, he was thankful for that. And for Ruthie. Because she alone was his bright spot at the end of a long, dark tunnel.

Tomorrow, he told himself firmly, would be much better. The sun would rise, and he'd be back on track.

Although a tiny part of him uneasily wondered where that track was headed.



CHAPTER TEN
"Over The Line"

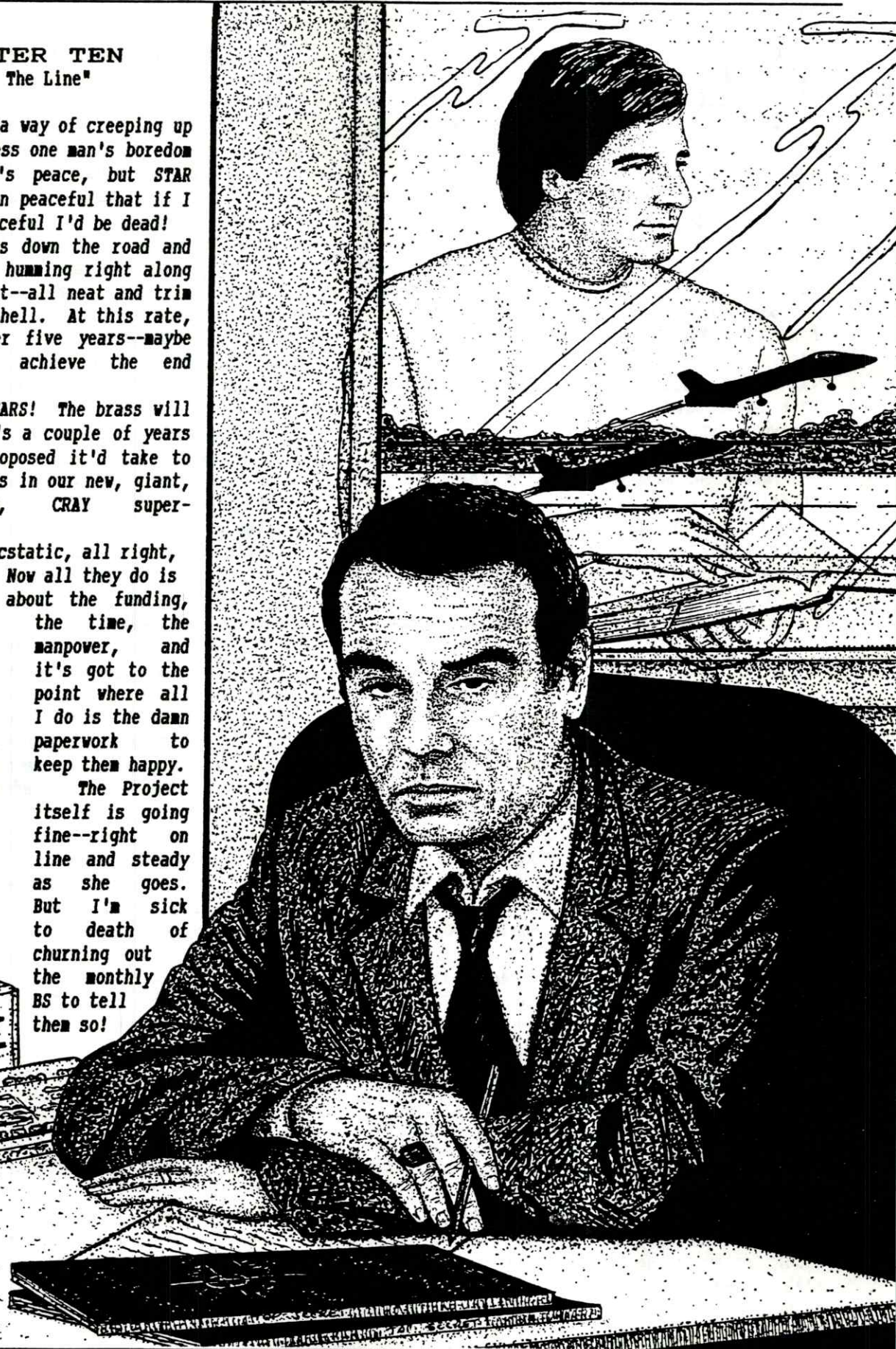
Boredom has a way of creeping up on a guy. I guess one man's boredom is another man's peace, but STAR BRIGHT is so damn peaceful that if I got any more peaceful I'd be dead!

A few months down the road and it's still just humming right along --day in, day out--all neat and trim and...boring as hell. At this rate, it'll be another five years--maybe six--before we achieve the end result we want.

God...SIX YEARS! The brass will be happy. That's a couple of years less than we proposed it'd take to iron out the bugs in our new, giant, number-crunching, CRAY super-computer.

They'll be ecstatic, all right, when it's done. Now all they do is whine and moan about the funding, the time, the manpower, and it's got to the point where all I do is the damn paperwork to keep them happy.

The Project itself is going fine--right on line and steady as she goes. But I'm sick to death of churning out the monthly BS to tell them so!



Okay, so maybe lately I've been letting it slide a little...but just a little. Hell, we all goof-off sometime or other. Is that any reason for them to threaten to rake my butt over the coals in Washington? I'm doin' the damn job, aren't I?

I'm hopin' that when Sam gets here, things will liven up. You know, I wouldn't put it past the kid to be the guy who comes up with the mega-brainstorm I keep longing for, the one that's gonna really set this place on its ear.

Sam. God, I can't wait 'til he gets here on Monday! I knew the Committee would jump at the chance to get him--the hot-shot young genius he is. Kid's really making a name for himself now he's got some experience under his belt. Everybody who's anybody wants The Amazing Sam Beckett on their team.

That's why when one of my top physicists put in her resignation, I, of course, mentioned Sam. I really hate to lose Donna Elesee. She's good --bright and capable--but Sam will be a kick in the butt...for both me and the Project.

It'll be great seeing him again.

Geez, Monday can't come 'round fast enough...

* * *

As the front door of the modest, single-story house was cracked open a few inches, early morning sunshine invaded the dim interior to form an elongated rectangle of brightness on the cream-colored carpet within. The subtle breach was gradually increased, slowly--almost warily--until the door had been opened wide enough to permit the owner of the burgundy slippers quiet access to the front porch.

Al stopped at the ornate rail--hands resting lightly on the heated steel--and leaned forward in order to see past the evergreen azalea bushes at the end of the veranda of his California home. Moments later, his somewhat furtive glance up and down the street ended with a smile. As hoped, it was still too early on a Saturday morning for the Weekend Warriors he had for neighbors to be out attacking their lawns or cars--the world was blissfully silent in suburban San José at ten after seven on this, the last day of March.

Confident of his privacy, he stretched lazily in the sun's balmy warmth, yet mindful of the slight constriction brought about by his maroon silk pajamas. It had been a decade since that beautiful Swedish stewardess had bestowed them

as a gift, and almost that long since he'd worn them last. As much as he hated to admit it, he'd gained a few pounds with his years...mostly around the middle. Nevertheless, he would not let the mere fact that he would be turning fifty in a couple of months spoil what was--for all intents and purposes--one hell of a morning.

What's more, in spite of the fact that he'd had a few drinks last night, he felt great. Not ten minutes ago, he had risen from bed with this seemingly 'insane' idea that he would take the day off from work...doing nothing more with his time than devoting it to Ruthie. She'd be thrilled! Unless of course, she hadn't really been asleep last night and knew what time he got in.

Then she'd be ticked off.

Royally.

Still, the right word here, the right caress there, and he'd soon have her back on side. Although truth to tell, after four and a bit years of marriage that particular tactic was beginning to wear a little thin.

Which was why today's plan had been such an absolute mastermind.

Today he would be all hers, living up to her --and her family's--perception of Ideal Husband. Geez, no doubt they needed something like this in their marriage right now...especially after he'd forgotten their fourth wedding anniversary. What a yutz. Hell, he needed to start paying her more attention. He needed her understanding and support.

Now more than ever...with yesterday's 'official warning' hanging over his head. Oh sure, the phone call had been polite and all, but the bottom line was that unless he pulled his socks up around the place, he'd be summoned to DC where some paper pushing nozzle--some bureaucrat who knew nothing of the mechanics of a Project like STAR BRIGHT except what he read in black and white--would kick some serious butt, namely his...

But wait. That was something he didn't want to think about today. Today was for Ruthie, and he would not let the thought of what might not even happen dull his spirits. Hell, while he was at it, he'd not only give Ruthie Saturday, but maybe Sunday as well. And even--

No. Monday was reserved. Sam arrived Monday. Donna Elesee was out and Sam Beckett was in. Okay, so maybe he was losing one of his top physicists and really did hate to see Donna leave the Project, but he was gaining Sam.

Geez, it would be good seeing the kid again. How long had it been anyway? Sure, they'd been in touch by phone, but he was eager to have Sam on the STAR BRIGHT premises, in person...and keep him there. There was no doubt the kid's genius with computers would only benefit the Project as a whole, but that was nothing compared to how his presence would benefit Captain Calavicci--

Al stopped himself before he lost sight of today's goal again. Sam arrived in two days, true enough. But first, there was Ruthie.

Not that it was going to be quite the 'chore' he was making it sound. He would enjoy pampering her--in fact, he was rather looking forward to it. And if anyone deserved a little pampering, she certainly did. Any woman who could put up with him this long deserved a medal.

Okay...so maybe he was a little difficult to live with at times--most of the time--but in spite of all the crap he'd laid on her, not to mention his increasing habit of looking for solutions in a bottle, Ruthie had stuck by him. It hadn't been easy--or pretty--but they'd made it through.

Somehow. And that's what was important.

So today was payback day, when he started making it all up to her. The plan was simple. First, it was out to collect her morning newspaper, then it was back inside to the kitchen. He'd gently wake her with a kiss on the cheek, and offer her either breakfast in bed, or him in bed. It would be her choice--no strings attached--although he kinda hoped she picked the latter.

Hell, with the way he was feeling right now, she could have both...in abundance...in whatever order she pleased!

Rousing to his task, Al glanced around. The porch was still devoid of the weekend edition of the newspaper, but from the angle of the sun, he deduced that Toby should be arriving with it at any moment. The paperboy was punctual--it was one of the things the captain liked about him.

Usually, Al was on his way out the door at o-seven-ten and--

Right on time, as if triggered by Al's thoughts, there was the sound of a newspaper being dragged along the picket fence of the house next door. Toby was on his way, even though Al couldn't yet see him for the wall of green to his right.

Casually, he took a few steps off the porch

and onto the path, into full view of the kid riding the bike.

Still following his predictable routine, a smile lit Toby's face as he sang out. "Hi, Captain Calavicci!"

"Morning, Space Cadet," Al returned in kind. Usually he was dressed and getting into his car as he said it, but this day--as he had just been reminding himself--was not usual. Lightly, he walked down the rest of the path to collect the paper.

The dark-haired boy skillfully piloted his bike in a graceful swoop off the main sidewalk and on to the one that led to the house, without running over a single blade of grass.

"I saw a new 'Captain Galaxy' last night," he said excitedly, pedaling up the path to meet Al. "It was cool. Lots of aliens!"

Grinning a bit, Al stopped and shook his head. "There aren't any new 'Captain Galaxy's', cadet. Those reruns are older than you are."

"Yeah, well..." Undaunted, Toby came to a stop before the ex-astronaut and dug in his sack for a fresh paper. "It was new to me. I'd never seen the Dredlicks before. They were great! You should've heard 'em scream when Captain Galaxy booted 'em out the airlock when they tried to eat Future Boy!"

Al accepted the paper and the shining, averted gaze the young boy bestowed on him. "I remember that episode. Trouble is, Captain Galaxy couldn't have heard them scream."

"Why not?" The upturned face was rapt and expectant.

"For one thing, they'd've become space dust the minute they hit the vacuum. For another, you can't hear screams in space. There's no air to carry the sound."

"Oh...yeah..." Toby agreed, spellbound. "That's right. Guess they didn't know that back then..."

"Guess not." Snapping back his shoulders, Al gave the boy a salute with the paper. "As you were, cadet, you have duties to perform."

"Huh?" Toby collected himself with a start, coming back to the ritual they often played out. "Yeah...I mean...aye, aye, sir."

With a salute of his own, he spun the bike and headed back down to the sidewalk. Waving as he took the turn, he was on his way down the street, pedaling with an intentness that made Al smile.

Space struck and happy believin' in the magic. What he wouldn't give to feel that way

again. Maybe he did--a little, when he talked to Toby--although he'd never admit that was why his morning departure time so often coincided with the arrival of the paper.

And today...today he didn't need the shot of adrenalin it gave him.

Today was just fine all on its own.

Tucking the paper under his arm, he turned back to his home with the same lift to his step that had taken him from it. Grinning, he took the two steps up to the porch in a single leap.

Yeah, today was fine--a day to stop and smell the roses.

An idea forming, he cast a glance at the buds forming on the greenery on the trellis. Going inside with the newspaper, he returned a moment later with a pair of scissors.

Careful to avoid the thorns, he cut an eight inch stem for the breakfast tray.

Nothing said 'I love you'--or 'I'm sorry'--like a rose.

* * *

"AAAHHH!!!"

Backstepping, Al fought to balance the breakfast tray and stay out of the way of Ruthie's flailing arms, as she sat bolt upright in bed and clawed to remove her sleepmask. He hadn't meant to startle her, but evidently the kiss he planted on her cheek had done just that.

"Al...!" she said accusingly, then in a complete change of mood frowned suspiciously at the tray. "What are you doing?"

He smiled, finally getting the tinkling cup and saucer under control. "Makin' you breakfast in bed." Stepping forward, he grinned and positioned the tray over her covered legs. "Tah-dah!"

"Why?" she asked, eyes narrowing slightly at the sight of coffee, bagel, newspaper and rosebud laid before her. She turned the same expression on him as he disrobed and shuffled in under the covers on his side of the bed.

"Why not?" He felt a little hurt by her skepticism but tried not to show it. "Don't you think you deserve it? Once in a while?"

"Most definitely...although I'm not sure I understand why you suddenly do."

Propped on an elbow, Al picked up the rosebud and offered it to her with a cocky grin. "This bud's for you."

She studied it momentarily. "Not one of my 'Don Juans', I hope?"

"Well..."

"Al..." she said in a warning tone.

"Geez, honey, gimme a break, huh?" He grinned sheepishly. "Besides, what's one little bud? You got a whole treeful climbing up the trellis."

She hit him on the nose with it. "You're impossible."

He shrugged. "Story of my life--damned if I do and damned if I don't."

Settling back against her pillows, she exchanged the rosebud for the cream cheese bagel and cup of coffee.

Al stretched out beside her, watching with a gleam in his eye. "I wish you'd wear that foxy purple negligee I gave you for our last anniversary, instead of this tent you call a pajama shirt."

"I'm forty-two years old. Too old for a negligee," she said matter-of-fact between sips of coffee.

"And too young for a dirigible."

"Anyway, you didn't give it for me for our anniversary." She took a meaningful bite of her bagel. "As I recall, you didn't give me anything."

Ouch...she was obviously not going to let him forget.

Donning his most regretful expression, he moved closer to cuddle her, his head resting on her shoulder and his arm across her lap. "So my gift was a little late. It's the thought that counts."

She ignored him and bit into her bagel again. He tightened his embrace, tucking his fingers between her blue striped pajamas and the mattress.

"Al, are you feeling all right?"

"Fine, hon." He kept his voice casual, but dreaded the thought of her having smelt the alcohol on his breath. "Why?"

"Because you're being awfully nice." She put down her cup. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"No," he returned innocently. "I don't think so..."

There was a suspicious pause, then, "Are you having an affair?"

"Wha--?!" His head lifted in honest surprise. "No!"

"It's Saturday morning," she said, still suspicious, "and instead of being at work, you're home making me breakfast in bed? What am I supposed to think?"

"I...just wanted to spend a little time with you, that's all." Unable to hold her eyes, he looked away, settling a cheek against her shoulder once more. "Geez, can't a guy just do something nice for his wife without getting the Third Degree?"

"If you were the sort of guy who routinely did nice things, maybe." She sipped her coffee. "You're no mensch."

"Av, Ruthie, c'mon..."

"I know you, Al. Much better than you think." Finishing her bagel, she unfolded her newspaper and shook it into place. "I can't tell you the last time you did something like this."

With a sigh, he watched as she methodically separated the sections. It was a ritual he'd seen hundreds of times. For four-plus years, she had digested every damn paper in exactly the same way. The Sport section was always the first to go, discarded in its entirety until he rescued it from the recycle bin. Likewise the Classified. She read the Lifestyle section first, then the front, then the business, then the rest.

Some headline about 'Nicklaus' Eagle On The Ninth...' flew past him before he could fully read it, landing unceremoniously on the floor as the Lifestyle section was opened out in full. Caring absolutely zilch for the gossip about last night's episode of 'Falcon Crest', Al turned his mind to more worthwhile pursuits.

Untucking his fingers, he slowly let them wander.

"What time did you get in last night?" she asked in that super-casual tone he'd long ago come to associate with Trouble.

His caress stalled, thrown into a holding pattern and tracing tight circles on her pajamas. "Unh...late."

A page turned. "I know that. I sat up 'til one."

"You shouldn't have. You know I had to work..."

"Work?" she scoffed. When she turned another page, Al knew she wasn't reading but simply going through the motions.

Hell, he was in for it now.

"Yeah, work," he returned, a little defensive, even though the only thing he'd 'worked' at after nine o'clock was lifting a steady stream of shot glasses to his mouth over at Tony's Place.

The bar had closed at midnight, so he'd

wisely slept most of it off in the parking lot in his car before coming home. It had been after five when he'd finally crawled into bed with Ruthie, who had been--mercifully--dead to the world. Finding he'd slept all he was going to, he'd simply laid there listening to her breathe, and concocted his brilliant plan for taking the day off.

He got up at seven as The Inevitable Hangover began to cloud over him, but successfully warded it off with a medicinal shot of scotch, then camouflaged that hair-of-the-dog tactic with a few swills of mint mouthwash.

Careful not to upset the breakfast tray, Al let his hand dip beneath the bedcovers. He had a sudden and extremely ardent desire to make love to her. Very tenderly, but very passionately nonetheless.

"Oy vay, dos felt mir nokh," she commented dryly.

That stopped him cold. She never spoke Yiddish in that tone unless she was really ticked off.

"Okay, okay..." He gave in, reluctantly retreating to his side of the bed rather than risk the outbreak of World War Whatever, and folded his arms in defeat. "Hell, Ruthie...why not?"

The Lifestyle section was thrown past him to the floor in a completely uncivilized manner, like she was throwing down the gauntlet.

Despite his good intentions, he had obviously gotten on her wrong side...again. No doubt, she'd been faking it when he climbed into bed last night.

Attempting to wave the white flag, he met her eyes, but she wounded him with an icy stare.

"You need a shave," was all she said, then shook the next section of her paper into place and returned her complete attention to the print.

Absently rubbing a hand through his bearded stubble, Al stared jealously at the news headlines she found so much more appealing than him. Geez, if there was one thing Ruthie knew how to do, it was give the cold shoulder. Hell, she could give lessons to an ice cube--

Unexpectedly, he froze.

There, unbelievably, in the background of a photo in the 'Around The Nation' section on page two, was...

Beth.

His stomach--his entire body--knotted up. Beth, flanked by her three kids, looking on

while a guy he could only guess was that legal eagle she'd left him for, shook hands with some other official looking Suit. Only vaguely aware of the headline 'Simon Loses Race For Congress But Says: 'I'll Be Back'', Al continued to stare at Beth's photograph in open-mouthed shock.

There was absolutely no doubt it was her. Damn, she looked great--like a million bucks. Almost the same as she had that last day, when they stood together on the dock. He was shipping out on a second tour, and she didn't want him to go. He'd promised he would come back home to her. She'd promised she would wait. Kissing her goodbye was undoubtedly the most difficult thing he'd ever done in his entire life...

Ruthie turned the page, and Al's eyes closed with the pain of those unwanted memories.

After a moment, her voice softly came to his ears. Gone was the sarcasm and anger. "Al?"

He turned his tortured expression to the wall, uncomfortable with the realization that he never had told--never could tell--Ruthie anything about Beth, beyond the fact that she had been his first wife. The tattoo of her name had unfortunately forced that confession the first time Ruthie had seen it. No other facts--no other feelings--had been admitted in the entire four and a bit years they'd been married.

Al threw back the covers and sat on the edge of the bed with his back to her. He put his head in his hands and rubbed his eyes. There was absolutely nothing he could say to Ruthie now, even if he wanted to--no way of explaining why seeing Beth's picture had so crushed him, when he didn't fully understand it himself.

He heard the crinkling of newspaper a moment before a gentle hand was laid upon his arm. Still, he couldn't turn around.

"Al, I'm sorry. I was angry because you stayed out all night again. It was stupid of me, I know, especially when you were trying to apologize."

God, help him--she thought this was her fault.

The hand gently caressed his arm. "Al? Honey?" Two arms encircled his waist from behind. "Let's not fight anymore..."

Al's heart heaved. 'Let's not fight anymore'--the same words he'd said to Beth, after that huge argument they had when he announced he was going back to 'Nam.

Beth. If only he'd listened to her! If only he hadn't gone!

But there was just no way to change the fact that he had...or the outcome.

Without a word, he pulled away from Ruthie's arms, grabbed his robe and left the bedroom.

* * *

He went straight for the liquor cabinet, straight for the half-emptied bottle of Chivas Regal. Unscrewing the cap for the second time that morning, he was also tempted to take a long swallow straight from the bottle.

Pouring a generous shot of the scotch into a glass, he took the bottle with him to the couch and put it within easy reach. A well-aimed cushion chased off the damn cat--which meowed in protest of the rude interruption to its morning grooming--then he took sanctuary in the softness of the overstuffed cushions.

Taking a large gulp of scotch, he put a foot up on the coffee table and his free hand over his eyes.

Beth.

How could she still be doing this to him? Tearing him apart like this? How could he still feel anything for her--after she'd left him, taken with her every damn thing he'd ever held precious. Why the hell couldn't she have taken the memories too?

Once--that night in Sam's apartment--he'd vowed never to speak her name again. And, apart from those times he'd been forced to explain his tattoo to the female-of-the-moment, he'd been true to his word. If only he could purge the memory of what he and Beth had once shared from his mind. Then he could forget her...once and for all. Then she wouldn't come smashing open all those doors he thought he'd sealed up forever.

Taking his foot from the coffee table, he sat forward to pour himself another drink, but downed it just as quickly.

Beth. He should hate her guts after what she'd done, not love her this way...

That was the problem, wasn't it? In spite of his efforts to get on with his life, he couldn't deny there was still something burning inside for her. Not quite a flame, but a spark nonetheless.

A third shot drained what was left in the bottle. Swallowing that, he exchanged the empty glass for the box of cigars on the coffee table. He was putting his lighter to one when Ruthie appeared, fully dressed.

Al put his head back against the couch, blowing a cloud of cigar smoke toward the ceiling, and simply looked at her. Then recognizing her contempt, snorted sarcastically and looked the other way.

"You're disgusting," she said, repulsed as much by his attitude as by his present condition. "My parents were right about you."

Cigar balanced between his fingers, he rubbed a hand over the stubble on his jaw. "Don't start, Ruthie, for Pete's sake." When she crossed to the sideboard to collect her purse, then headed for the front door, he asked, "Where're you going?"

She stopped and faced him. "To my mother's." He laughed bitterly. "Where else? God, you're so predictable."

"We'll see."

It sounded like a threat. Perhaps she was actually...leaving?

Throwing down his cigar, he chased her to the door, putting his palm against it as she opened it an inch or two, then leaning on his arm to deny her another attempt. "What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I'm leaving. Now get out of my way."

"What, for good?"

Ruthie turned a glare on him, her chin raising defiantly. "I'm going to spend Shabbat with my parents...if you don't mind." She grabbed the door handle again, expecting him to relent. "And I won't be back until late."

Al made a sudden grab for her wrist, pulling her hand from the handle and spinning her around to face him. He wanted her to stay, he wanted to explain everything--but the booze and the anger made it come out as derision. "You're not goin' anywhere."

She struggled in his hold. "Let go."

"You can't leave me," Al asserted smugly, "it's against Jewish custom."

"Let...go!" With an aggressive tug, she pulled free of his hand.

The momentum caused him to totter back a pace, his flailing arm knocking a lamp from its perch. It crashed onto the hardwood floor, shade twisting and china cracking--one of the pair of lamps her grandmother had given them as a wedding present.

Ruthie recoiled, looking both angry and appalled.

"Now look whatcha made me do!" Al said accusingly, noting the blame etched on her face.

Dropping to her knees, she began collecting the pieces into a tidy pile. "You...shtunk."

He balked slightly, not knowing exactly what that meant but certain he should be offended by it.

"Oh yeah?" Angrily grabbing her arm, he hauled her to her feet. "Well you can just go take a flyin' leap, sweetheart. In fact...here ...I changed my mind." Two angry steps dragged her to the door. Flinging it open with such force that it bounced against the wall, he pushed her out onto the porch. "Get outta my face...before I really throw you out."

She went rigid, thoroughly affronted, as he turned his back, left the door open, and crossed to slump onto the couch again--literally kicking off the cat which had returned in his short absence.

"And take the freakin' cat with you!"

As the animal voiced its objection and scooted to safety, Ruthie stepped back inside and resentfully slammed the door. "You wouldn't dare."

Biting back an angry retort, Al turned a scowl on his wife. "You wanna leave, Ruthie? Then go." He held her wounded gaze a moment, then looked away.

Abruptly letting her anger slip away like a mask, she crossed to sit beside him. "Al, I love you. I don't want to leave, but you seem to be doing your best to drive me away." She paused. "I'm sorry...for the way I treated you this morning. I should have--"

"It's not about that."

"Then what? What's wrong? We always used to talk things out...why can't we talk anymore, Al? What's happening to us?"

He was determined not to look at her, but she took his face in her hands and forced him to meet her eyes. Hopeful eyes searched his, looking for a way inside his troubled thoughts, wanting to understand...if only he would let her in.

Al closed his eyes. Moments later he felt her hands slide from his face, and heard her move away again. When he looked, she was on her knees, cleaning up the mess he'd made of the lamp. If only cleaning up the mess he'd made of their marriage was as simple.

He watched in mute silence as she placed the shade and the pieces of broken china on the floor beside the couch, then stood and crossed to the door once more.

When she opened it, he finally found his

voice to make an appeal. "Ruthie..."

She stopped, silhouetted in sunshine, but didn't face him. He floundered, but the words he wanted to say wouldn't come. She was right--they'd fought before and they'd always sorted it out. But this time it was different, because this time it was about Beth. As much as he wanted to, he just couldn't confess he still carried a torch for her.

His silence caused a slight straightening in the set of her shoulders. "You know where I'll be," she said quietly, "but I think it would be best if you didn't call." She hesitated, diverting her gaze out to the street. "Don't wait up."

Without further word, she left.

Al listened to the muffled engine of her car disappear down the street. It wasn't until after the sound had faded to silence, that he sat forward with his head in his hands.

His eyes screwed shut. "Calavicci...you're a real horse's ass..."

He commiserated in silence for several long minutes, then staggered to the liquor cabinet in search some liquid medication.

There were only two contenders--a bottle of Smirnoff and one of Tanqueray Gin--since the wine Ruthie kept on hand for various Jewish occasions didn't count.

He chose the vodka, took a hefty swig directly from the bottle, and was sick almost immediately.

In the bathroom, as the nausea in his stomach settled, he dragged himself from the toilet to the vanity to splash some cold water on his face. Looking up, he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror, and had to frown. He looked awful--skin pasty white, eyes dark and furtive, the shadow of a two-day growth of beard. Not to mention his clothes. His elegant maroon silk pajamas were crumpled and...there was damn cat hair all over them!

What he needed was to clean himself up.

What he needed was another bottle of scotch!

Discarding his pajamas in an undignified heap, he stood under a shower of warm water, closing his eyes against the spray and planning his next move. Ruthie wouldn't be home until late this evening--as late as she dared, just to make him worry. He'd simply get dressed, drive down to the local liquor store and replenish his supply of liquid sustenance while she wasn't here.

Hell, yes. He was looking forward to a day

of 'quiet salutation' without the old ball and chain...

Geez...what poetic justice it would be if she came home while he was gone. She'd have a fit! In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea of her experiencing what it was like to come home to an empty house. That'd sure make her more appreciative of what she had...

The decision made, he gave up his relaxing shower in order to execute his plan. Without bothering to shave, he dressed conservatively in a pair of black trousers and a plain blue shirt, and was collecting his silver flight jacket from the hanger in the wardrobe when he spied the discarded newspaper on the bedroom floor, kicked halfway under the unmade bed. Hesitating a moment, he crouched to retrieve the front section then tucked it in his back pocket.

He paused on the threshold of the front door to cast a look back into the darkened house. With a smug smile, he defiantly turned up the collar of his jacket, closed the door, then headed for his sleek, silver, 25th Anniversary Corvette.

* * *

After purchasing two bottles of Chivas Regal at the liquor store, Al put the pedal to the metal of his Vette along the Bayshore Freeway and headed recklessly for Moffett Field NAS, in particular Ames Research Center where the STAR BRIGHT PROJECT was located.

He showed his ID to get inside the Main Gate of the Naval base, but was not asked to show it again when entering the Ames facility--one of the benefits of being part of the scenery around the place.

The STAR BRIGHT complex was all but deserted, with the exception of a skeleton security staff--which was the main reason he usually worked weekends. During regular hours, there was an endless stream of requisition forms which needed signing, or phone calls to take to get some bureaucrat off the back of one of his techs, or some stupid run-of-the-mill problem which they kept involving him in.

On weekends, there was no one around to hassle him or distract him or interrupt him, allowing Al to get on with his job of concocting his most stunning works of BS for the Funding Committee...

Carelessly toting his scotch bottles through

the empty corridors of the administrative building, Al headed straight for the privacy of his office. It was at the end of a long, sparse hallway, and on this occasion, he was chased down it by nothing more than the echo of his own footsteps on the polished, white floor.

He went quietly through the door with 'Captain A. Calavicci' embossed on a brass nameplate, into the outer office which normally housed Lt. Turner, his personal secretary. His own inner sanctum was across the room, past the coffee pot and through another door, and he wasted no time gaining access to it.

The office reflected both the tastes and experiences of its occupant--glass topped desk nestled beneath a window which looked out over the east runway of the Naval Air Station, walls adorned with various photographs and achievements.

Al paused by the photographs--his Glory Wall --eyes wandering over the one of the Blue Angels in their blue and gold A-4 Skyhawks, to the enlarged glossy of the earth cresting over a gray-green lunar surface, before finally coming to rest on the ancient framed poem he knew by heart.

HIGH FLIGHT by John Gillespie Magee, Jr.
'Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,
and danced the skies on laughter-silvered
wings'...

As if on cue, the roar of jet engines outside penetrated the muffled silence. Turning, he wandered back to peer out the window as a pair of Grumman Tomcats ascended into the blue. His eyes narrowed as he watched them go ballistic in a vertical climb and become distant specks in a mere handful of seconds.

It seemed a millennium since he'd last 'chased the shouting wind along' and 'topped the windswept heights with easy grace'...like those guys in the F-14s were doing right now. Beth had always understood that a jet jockey wasn't merely what he was...but who he was. She'd never particularly liked it, but she'd nonetheless understood it.

Ruthie never did--never could--comprehend that the need for living on the edge was in his blood. That it, like breathing, was simply something he had to do.

Settling in the leather chair behind his desk, Al allowed himself a morose sigh as he returned his attention back to the memorabilia on the far wall. Along with the photos, the evidence of his own considerable achievements

were all there, clearly laid out for all to see...but it was suddenly like looking at an epitaph.

Elbows on the glass top, he ran both hands through his hair and grabbed two fistfuls at his temples.

What the hell was he doing here? He should be out chasing that adrenalin kick you only got when you risked it all.

Like Chance and Stacker.

Like Zippo Henderson.

Airborne, damn it...not chair-borne!

Uncapping one of the bottles of scotch, he filled his black 'NASA' coffee mug to the brim and drank half before coming up for air. The sweep of an arm cleared the space before him and when he pulled the crumpled newspaper from his back pocket, he immediately spread out page two. Then, sipping from his mug again, he let his eyes roam the photo of Beth while his mind resurrected the memory of a happier time.

Determined to put himself in orbit one way or another, he sat staring at the photo, refilling his mug as fast as he emptied it. It wasn't until his vision started to blur that he became even remotely curious about the accompanying text.

Squinting, he struggled to focus on the words that now held interest, and read a capsulized version of Beth's life since meeting that ambulance chaser on April Fool's Day of 1969.

From the joy the birth of their three kids--Dirk Jr., David and Rebecca--had brought, to the nozzle's successful rise up the political ladder, to his current shot at the senate.

But absolutely nothing about him. Not one lousy word about the MIA husband she had given up for dead.

Zilch. Zip. Nada.

It was like he'd never even existed in her life--or like he hadn't mattered enough to remember.

And look what she had done to him...

Then it hit him.

April Fool's Day, 1969? Tomorrow was April 1st! Tomorrow was...the fifteenth anniversary of Beth meeting that shyster lawyer. Red-letter day...the day he'd died in her heart.

Forever.

Unexpected rage boiled within him. For fifteen years Beth'd had her claws in him. She'd already ruined one marriage and the hell she was gonna do it again with Ruthie.

His right palm spread over the photo of Beth, then contracted to crinkle the newspaper into a tight ball. Squeezing it into a tight knot, he pitched it at his Glory Wall. The paper projectile ricocheted harmlessly off its target, but the satisfaction he got from the action was well worth the effort.

He wasn't gonna let Beth screw up his life again.

Straightening in his chair, he drew a deep breath, like a man drawing a new lease on life. Sam would be arriving Monday morning, and then the superior team of Beckett and Calavicci would kick some serious butt. At the very least, the kid's arrival would give him a professional leg up out of the hole he'd dug for himself.

But first things first.

First he had to get himself sobered up, call Ruthie at her parent's place, and beg her to forgive him for being such a total moron. He wouldn't try to sweet-talk her this time...it would simply be the honest truth. That's what was needed if their marriage was to stand any chance of survival--honesty.

It was time to come clean. It was time to tell her about Beth.

The empty bottle of Chivas Regal went the way of the wastepaper bin, while the unopened one was temporarily stashed at the back of his bottom desk drawer. 'NASA' mug in hand, he pushed out of his chair with Destination: Coffee Pot in mind. But gravity had other ideas and had him listing uncontrollably to starboard. The palm of his free hand on the desk was the only thing which stopped him from falling flat on his face.

Geez, he hadn't considered himself to be that drunk...

He zigzagged what was normally a straight line walk to the office door, then scowled when he had to steady himself again with a hand on Anne's desk. Finally reaching the coffee pot, he carefully put down his mug and made a futile attempt at getting the thing going.

For starters, he got more of the heaped measurements of ground coffee on the bench and floor than he did in the filter...and there was no water! He'd have to go get some from...where the hell did Anne get the water from anyway?

Finding it difficult to maintain focus on what he was doing, he decided to give up the idea as a lost cause and simply get a cup of coffee from the vending machine in the lab down the hall. Of course, that meant staying on his

feet long enough to traverse that awfully long hallway...

He staggered drunkenly across the office, rebounded off the door jamb, and went out into the hall.

* * *

An annoying sway rocked Al as he stood in front of the row of three vending machines, in particular the one which offered a paper cup of what the sign proclaimed as 'coffee'...even though a number of the lab techs had protested otherwise. The stumbling trip down the hall had only aggravated his deteriorating disposition but, still attempting to focus on his good intentions, he simply parked a shoulder against the machine to gain the needed support.

Unfortunately, digging into his pocket for a handful of loose change brought more irritation, especially when he found he had trouble identifying the nickels from the dimes.

Definitely operating on a short fuse now, he gave up and plugged a handful of them into the slot. Pressing the button gave him absolutely no joy. Neither did hitting it with his fist nor kicking it with his foot.

"Damn..." he growled, letting fly with a kick so forceful that it toppled his limited balance. "Oh, shiiit!"

Coins flew from his hand as he groped for a hold. Unsuccessful, Al landed--very undignified--on his butt.

"Son of a..."

He crawled to his knees and drilled the silent and innocent machine with a look that could kill. Not to be outdone, he used it for support as he clawed his way back to unsteady feet.

"C'mon..." he urged, hammering the button with his fist again. "Come on!" He gave up in disgust. "Freakin' hell..."

Spying a tool box at the foot of a nearby workbench, Al smiled. He lurched toward it, fumbled the latch momentarily, then extracted the instrument of his revenge. Eyes narrowing with wicked delight, he turned and advanced on the hapless vending machine...with a hammer.

It never occurred to him that he might be caught, or the consequences of his actions, Al just wanted retribution for all the damn vending machines that had eaten his dimes over the years.

Cursing at the top of his lungs, he vented

his frustration. Again and again the hammer swung and connected. Metal and plastic fragments littered the floor as he smashed the plexiglass front, the coin slot, the stubborn activation button, the--

"What the hell's going on in here!"

Caught in mid-swing, Al jumped like a startled rabbit and swivelled to face the owner of the voice which had stopped him cold. The hand with the hammer dropped uselessly to his side as he took a wavering pace forward, debris crunching underfoot.

There, in the doorway to the lab, stood...

"Sam!"

Stunned, Al blinked a few times and tried to come to terms with the apparition, which was regarding him intently.

Then he frowned. It couldn't be Sam--Sam wasn't arriving 'til Monday. Hell, he must be more drunk than he imagined if he was to the point of hallucinations.

Damn it, what was next? Pink elephants?

Despite himself, he chuckled drunkenly at the thought, his anger having lessened with his exertion. The action drew the 'hallucination' a few steps further into the lab. Damned if the thing didn't look real enough to lift the hair on the back of his neck!

"What do you think you're doing?" the Sam-thing asked disapprovingly as it walked toward him. It sure the hell sounded like Preacher Beckett...? "Do you realize that's Government property you're destroying?"

"It ate my dime," Al retorted, a trace of his earlier anger resurfacing. The hell he was going to let some figment of his imagination lecture him!

The apparition stopped before him, reached out, and swiftly took the hammer which dangled loosely from his hand.

"Hey!" Al protested angrily. Oblivious to the fact that no mere product of the imagination could have committed such an act, he made an unsuccessful grab for the hammer again. "Gimme that back!"

Stumbling, he lost his balance and pitched forward...straight into the arms of the Sam-figment. Strong, solid, hands grasped his shoulders and pushed him upright.

How the hell...? Amazed, Al stared into Sam's face, aware of the disapproving expression but choosing to ignore it. "You're real!"

"And you're drunk," came the tight-lipped reply as the physicist propped him against the

battered vending machine.

Shards of mangled plexiglass fell free under his weight, making Al scowl. Why the hell did Sam have to show up now?

"Just how much have you had to drink?"

"Not nearly enough," Al growled belligerently.

Defiantly, he considered his chances of standing up straight without the support of the machine, but decided against trying it. It wouldn't help his case any to fall flat on his face in front of Boy Scout Beckett, and the last thing he wanted was pity.

No, the last thing he wanted was for his best friend to find out about all this, the mess he'd made of everything--the official warning, the fight with Ruthie...seeing Beth's picture.

Deciding it was safer to go on the attack than to risk playing Twenty Questions with the kid, he demanded, "What the hell're you doin' here? You're not supposed to arrived 'til Monday?"

"I knew you worked Saturdays," Sam explained with a shrug, as if he had decided to meet Al's attack by ignoring it. "I thought, if I came early, you could show me around the place. Guess I came at a bad time, huh?"

Al's eyes narrowed as he regarded Sam's expression. It didn't look like disgust, or pity, or if he were about to ask all those questions the captain would rather not answer. With an effort, Al forced down his defensive anger and made an attempt at sounding conciliatory. "Yeah, well...maybe tomorrow for the grand tour, okay?"

"Okay," Sam agreed, nodding. His tone was light, but his eyes lingered on the other's face, making Al look away to escape them. "I guess I'll...be going then. I still have to stop at the grocery store to lay in supplies."

The kid hesitated slightly. Al knew what was coming and felt himself tense in anticipation.

"You...want a lift home?" was all Sam said.

Slowly, the Naval officer pushed himself up to standing, his shoes crunching on the metal and plastic on the lab floor as he braced his feet apart. Searching the younger man's face for any condescension, but not finding it, he seriously considered the task of driving home in his present state.

Sam was right--as usual--he was drunk. He was having trouble focusing and his judgement was completely shot. If he got behind the

wheel, he'd sure as hell crack up his beloved Corvette. Not to mention--a small part of him admitted uneasily--quite possibly taking someone else along with him.

Since the kid wasn't pushing the issue, he could fold without losing face.

"Yeah, all right," he agreed grudgingly. His scowl was for Sam's benefit, although he suspected it wasn't too convincing. "But we take your car. No way I'm letting you drive my Vette."

"All right," Sam agreed easily--too easily--placing the hammer onto a nearby work bench. "Let's go. I'm parked in the Visitor's Lot."

Casting a brief look at the mutilated machine at his back, Al felt a sudden rush of satisfaction. He was probably going to catch hell for this, but for the moment, looking at the machine with its wretched innards spilling out, it was almost worth it.

"Let's get outta here," he said, holding onto

that smug sense of satisfaction--it hurt the least of any of his other choices. "All I need is for that nozzle, Cranston, to walk in and find us here."

Two wobbly steps carried him to the work bench. Reaching out, Al grabbed the hammer again. At Sam's questioning look, he grinned in a wry attempt at levity.

"No use leaving the weapon at the scene of the crime." Tucking it inside his jacket, he weaved unsteadily toward the door. "C'mon, kid. Get the lead out before the Coffee Police get here..."

Making his way down the hall with Sam just a few steps behind, his mood swung further toward depression. The kid would see him home okay, no doubt about that.

But would it be easier coming home to an empty house, or having Ruthie there to see him in the state he was in?

Either way, there would be hell to pay.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

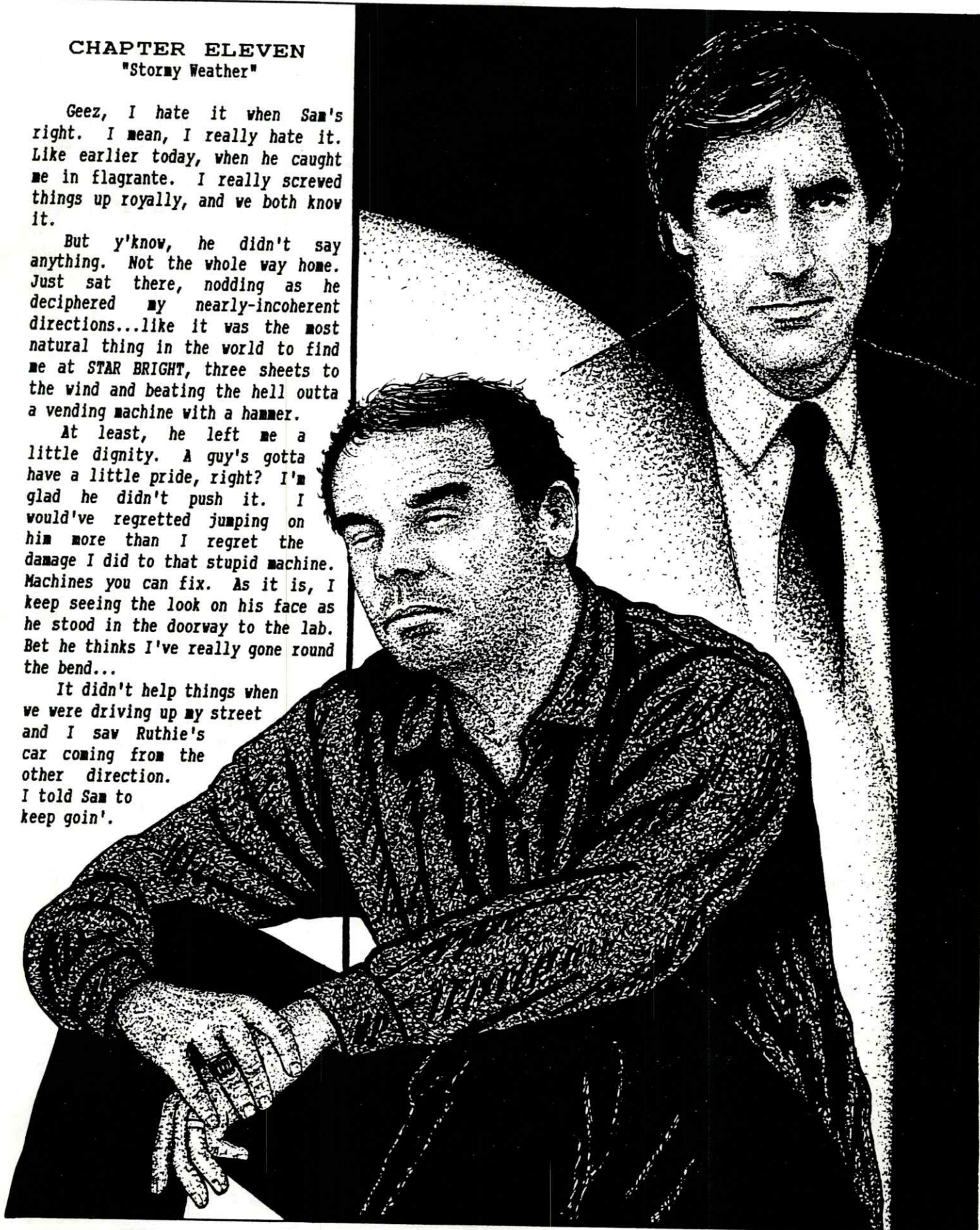
"Stormy Weather"

Geez, I hate it when Sam's right. I mean, I really hate it. Like earlier today, when he caught me in flagrante. I really screwed things up royally, and we both know it.

But y'know, he didn't say anything. Not the whole way home. Just sat there, nodding as he deciphered my nearly-incoherent directions...like it was the most natural thing in the world to find me at STAR BRIGHT, three sheets to the wind and beating the hell outta a vending machine with a hammer.

At least, he left me a little dignity. A guy's gotta have a little pride, right? I'm glad he didn't push it. I would've regretted jumping on him more than I regret the damage I did to that stupid machine. Machines you can fix. As it is, I keep seeing the look on his face as he stood in the doorway to the lab. Bet he thinks I've really gone round the bend...

It didn't help things when we were driving up my street and I saw Ruthie's car coming from the other direction. I told Sam to keep goin'.



Hell, she didn't know his car...and I could've easily slid down so she couldn't see me. I mean, I was halfway there already anyway --on the floor that is.

And the whole plan had been to have her feel what it's like to come home to an empty house. Just my luck that she had a guilty conscience about that fight we had and cooled off enough to come back to make up.

Holy Mackerel! Was she ever gonna let me have it when she saw the mess I was in!

That's when I then pleaded with the kid not to stop. Would've got on my knees if I had've had the room.

But did he listen?

Nooo...not Mr. Fix-It Beckett. He pulled right in behind her in the driveway, hauled me outta the car when I couldn't quite seem to make it under my own steam, and helped me into the house. I was so ashamed of myself, I couldn't even look at Ruthie.

Hell, Sam was right. Sick as I am at the moment, I know he was right. I couldn't've driven myself home, and God knows, clobbering a helpless machine doesn't fix what's really wrong --as if I know exactly what that is.

By the same token, stayin' out 'til I'd slept this off would've only made it even worse with Ruthie than it already is.

I could hear Sam in the living room, talkin' soft and reassurin' to her, thinkin' I was dead to the world on the bed where he'd let me drop. She was cryin', telling him all about the argument we had--the way she'd left, the way I'd practically thrown her out the door.

Geez. It always makes me feel like such a heel whenever she breaks into tears. I never know what to say...or do. Not like Sam. He always knows what to say to cryin' women--he just doesn't have a clue what to do with the other ones.

I think maybe, 'this' had been building for us both for a while. Maybe even since after she lost our baby. She needed to spill it all to someone, let it all out...much the same way I needed to attack that vending machine.

And that someone just happened to be Sam.

With my back to the wall just outside the living room door where I'd crawled, I slid to the floor and listened to her say things I know she didn't mean.

About me.

And about us.

She was just blowing off steam and I can't

say I blame her. As mad as she was, I know I'd hurt her.

Bad.

Like her response when Sam said I was too drunk to be left unsupervised, that I could vomit and end up choking to death.

Hearing the tinkle of broken china, I could see Ruthie in my mind's eye, pickin' up those broken pieces of the lamp Bubbe had given us. In a spiteful voice, she told Sam that maybe she should just leave again, and let me take my chances.

She didn't mean it--I know she didn't--but maybe she should've. It'd solve a helluva lot of my problems...the foremost of which was facin' tomorrow and tryin' to fix things.

With Ruthie.

With Cranston when he finds out about this.

With Sam.

Geez, I'd give my right arm if anybody--anybody!--other than Sam had found me with that damn hammer in my hand...

* * *

Damn, Sam thought as he drove from Al's house. Things were worse than he had ever imagined.

Ever since Al's phone calls had started coming at increasingly longer intervals, he'd guessed that maybe there were some problems, work related or otherwise. But to actually find Al stinking drunk, at work no less, was a complete shock.

No...a disappointment.

Sam pulled to a stop obediently at a red light in suburban San José, resting his elbow on the window ledge. He sighed heavily.

Al was damn lucky that it had been him who had found him beating up that vending machine, and taken him home to sleep it off. He was sure that the Big Brass--or the Shore Patrol--would not be happy to find the head of the Project soused to his gills and destroying Government property.

'Lucky'. Some luck.

He'd hoped that by coming a few days early, Al could show him around the Project and help him settle in before he actually started work on Monday morning.

So much for that idea...

The honking of impatient horns from behind, alerted Sam to the fact that the light had changed to green, and by pondering events he was

holding up the traffic. Accelerating forward, he let his thoughts immediately return to his friend.

Beyond his initial inquiry into what the hell was going on, he hadn't said a word. He was reasonably sure the expression on his face clearly voiced everything he felt when he discovered his best friend destroying a vending machine with a hammer, simply because it had 'eaten his dime'.

That excuse, and perhaps the underlying anger in his voice as he said it, gave Sam the uneasy feeling that the real reason was something far more serious.

Undoubtedly, Al was venting all of his bottled-up frustrations on that poor machine. He was so drunk, so infuriated and full of anger and rage, that it was almost scary to watch.

What was it about Al and booze anyway? Sam wondered. What was the attraction?

His friendship with the man had been warring with his medical knowledge over this point ever since he'd walked in on the scene in the lab.

Unfortunately, there were just no two ways around it. Al was developing all the symptoms of an alcoholic.

Damn.

He contemplated mentioning this fact--even in casual conversation--but dreaded the older man's response. It would definitely be loud and sarcastic...if he answered at all. The last time Sam 'preached' at him had been over Eva, then he hadn't heard from him for months.

Damn.

He believed in Al--always had, always would. There was nothing Al Calavicci couldn't do if he put his mind to it...but he was letting the bottle win.

And it was ruining his life.

Sam wished there was something he could do, but he had no idea what, and that frustrated him. He was supposed to be a genius, for Pete's sake, he ought to be able to come up with something.

He had known better than to approach Al when he was in his present state of mind. There was nothing more he could do tonight that he hadn't already done. He had taken him home safely, and tried to offer Ruthie some support.

As for what his next step should be...he had no real plan.

Maybe he should just shelve it and let his subconscious work on it for the rest of the evening. He would take care of the mundane

business of settling in to his new place, maybe watch a movie to pass the rest of the evening, and hope he had some clear idea of how to proceed once Al had sobered up.

By the time he drove into the crowded parking lot of a small grocery store, he'd convinced himself that waiting was the best plan.

Besides, the house he was renting was furnished, but the cupboards were bare and he couldn't survive without food...especially popcorn. Maybe he could even find some of that new type that you could pop in the microwave. He'd been wanting to try it.

Spying a vacant spot in the front row, he headed toward it, but just before he got there, a little blue Ford Escort driven by a dark-haired woman swung into the slot.

"Damn it," he muttered under his breath. "Some people. They think they own the road."

Driving slowly by, he watched the woman get out of the car. She was a brunette, about thirty, and wore a snug-fitting blue dress which showed off her shapely legs--legs that led up to even a more shapely body. Al would probably go for her...if he wasn't married.

Looking up at her face, he decided her features were almost classically beautiful.

Correction: Al would definitely go for her!

She probably didn't know the difference between a quark and a lepton, but that had never mattered to Calavicci The Insatiable.

Then, as she turned and caught his eye, he promptly changed his mind. He saw intelligence in her glance, as if she knew exactly what he was thinking and didn't care.

In fact, she took one look at him down that sculptured nose of hers and turned away as if dismissing him as unimportant.

Sam blinked in surprise. Just who in the hell did she think she was!

Hearing a horn blaring, he looked back at the road and slammed on his brakes. He had nearly run over a little old lady in a Datsun!

He waited until the car and the angry senior citizen driver had moved out of the way, then took a deep breath and drove around to the other side of the parking lot.

There was no sign of the brunette as he walked to the entrance of the store...which was probably just as well. Women like that were trouble. After all, she had already almost caused an accident...

His conscience gave him a guilty kick, and

he quietly amended his thoughts again. Well, in a way she had been kind of responsible.

Grabbing a cart, he started down the first aisle, picking up items, reading labels and automatically comparing prices, methodically working his way through the store.

Reaching the popcorn aisle, he immediately scanned the shelves for some of the new microwave variety. Evidently it was very popular, because there was just one lone box left in stock. But that was okay--he only wanted one.

With a smile, Sam reached out for the box ...at the very same moment as another hand--belonging to someone in his peripheral vision--also reached to claim it.

Both hands grabbed the box simultaneously.

Looking up, Sam stared into the deep brown eyes of the same attractive brunette who had so mercilessly stolen his spot in the car park.

Expectantly, she looked down at the popcorn box in their hands, then back at Sam. Blushing, he quickly let go.

For a brief moment, he wished that he were Al. Al would be able to come up with a snappy remark--beautiful women always made Sam feel as nervous and as gangly as a teenage boy.

"Thanks," the woman said in a soft husky voice. She smiled a friendly smile. "I was really looking forward to a bowl of microwave popcorn."

What would Al say? Probably something like, "Why don't I buy the popcorn and you come over and share it with me? We can put a tape in the VCR, start a fire in the fireplace, drink a little wine...maybe light a fire of our own..."

Horrified, Sam realized that he was saying those very words. It was as though he had absolutely no control over what was coming out of his mouth!

Worse, the brunette's smile faded, and she looked at him like he was a bug that had just crawled out from under a rock...not that he could really blame her.

What was the matter with him?

Dumping the popcorn in his cart, she said off-handedly, "Here, you keep it. The price is too expensive for me." She gave him a cool smile this time. "And for the record, I don't pick up strange men...especially those with bad lines."

Turning sharply, she walked away.

Sam was sure he was going to die of mortification. Maybe it would be a blessing if

he did--he had never been so humiliated in his life!

Never again would he listen to Al and his treatises on women. It may work okay for Al Calavicci, but it sure as hell didn't work for Sam Beckett.

He rushed through the rest of his shopping, not stopping to compare brands, but just picking up cartons and cans of the items he needed. All he wanted was to get out of the place where he had so thoroughly embarrassed himself.

His next misfortune came when he reached the checkout--the brunette was directly in front of him in the line.

Sam quickly scanned the neighboring lanes, and was considering his chances of changing to one before she noticed him...when she turned and regarded him with a slightly disdainful air.

Quite unexpectedly, he felt a sudden urge to vindicate himself. He hated being thought of as a lecher. Surely there was something he could do to fix it?

His mother had instilled in him manners that would not let him keep silent. At the very least he should apologize.

"Listen," he said quietly, managing to catch her eye as she dug her checkbook out of her purse. "I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression back there. I usually don't make a habit of trying to pick up women."

"I could tell."

She smiled. It seemed friendly enough and he felt a surge of hope. Maybe it would be okay after all. Maybe he could come out of this with his dignity--or at least some of it--intact.

"Call it keeping bad company," he added, returning a friendly smile of his own. At her disbelieving expression, he knew he'd put his foot in it again, and hastily continued. "Unh, not that I think you're bad company. In fact, I think you'd be good company...um..."

The woman disdainfully looked up from writing her check.

Realizing he was digging himself in deeper, Sam blurted out, "It's all my friend's fault! He's always telling me I ought to meet more women, get out more."

"What are you, a monk?" She ripped the check from the book.

Sam could feel himself blushing and hated it. Boy, did he want to burst this aggravating woman's bubble. He straightened his shoulders. "Actually, I'm a quantum physicist."

"Sure," the woman responded knowingly. "And

I'm a model from PLAYBOY."

The cashier giggled.

The woman smiled, encouraged by her ally's chuckle. "Did your 'friend' tell you to say that to impress women?"

"Unh, well, no...I mean...I really am..."

Handing her check to the cashier, the brunette turned to face him, hands on hips. "Let me give you a little piece of free advice. Stop listening to your friend and just be yourself."

Taking her receipt and moving to the end of the lane, she took the grocery bag from the sacker and paused to look Sam up and down.

"You'll get a lot further that way."

Left standing open-mouthed, with his cart in front of him, Sam stared after the woman. Of all the...

The amused cashier cleared her throat and said, "Excuse me, sir, will you please empty your cart on the belt?"

Sam started guiltily, and hurriedly placed his groceries on the register belt. When he got to the popcorn, he almost set it aside, but stubbornly decided that he wasn't going to let one woman, no matter how attractive she was, ruin his plans for the evening.

After paying for the groceries, he stopped at the movie rental booth and picked up an adventure tape.

What better way to escape from the memory of this experience and the earlier encounter with Al, than watching TV and eating popcorn?

* * *

As Indiana Jones was rushing through a desert somewhere in the Middle East, Sam was munching on his microwave popcorn and wondering how he could find out the brunette's name. Hang around the parking lot of the grocery store until she showed again?

No, that would only get him arrested for loitering...

Maybe he could use one of the computers at STAR BRIGHT, hack into the DMV records and run a check on her license. Maybe he could--

What the hell was he thinking?! Despite his efforts to forget her, she had completely taken over his thoughts...this beautiful, mysterious woman. Sure, his head was telling him to simply forget her, but something in his heart was giving conflicting--and totally irrational--advice.

Damn.

Determinedly, he tried to keep his attention on the movie, but the look of derision on that beautiful face kept haunting him, playing so clearly in his mind in an never-ending loop.

Why couldn't he let it go? Why did this particular woman have the power to unsettle him, like no one before her?

Damn. He'd never been thought of as a sleaze before--a nerd, yes, but not a sleaze. Sam Beckett prided himself on his respect for women, and it bothered him that even one would have the wrong idea about him. Sleaze was always Al's department.

Al.

There was another problem to be dealt with. Abruptly, the memory of the woman's face was replaced with a flash of the captain, blind drunk and hell bent on destroying the hapless vending machine before him.

What was he going to do about that? At least, maybe he'd have a chance to try to help that situation--he'd most likely never see his mystery woman again, and she would spend the rest of her life thinking he was a sleaze.

Groaning as his thoughts came full circle, Sam turned his attention back to the television.

There, Indiana Jones was hanging from a rope with a beautiful female clinging to him.

Closing his eyes against a sudden wave of acrophobia, he decided it was time to get himself something to drink from the kitchen.

Thank God he had a safe job in research where he didn't have to deal with snakes and swinging on ropes from tall heights! He'd leave the saving of damsels in distress to men like Indiana Jones.

Give him a physics lab and a computer any day!

* * *

The alarm clock said 6 a.m. the next morning when the telephone awoke Sam. He knew it must be a wrong number...or an April Fool's Day prank. No one in their right mind would be calling him at six in the morning.

"Hello," he murmured, bringing the receiver under the covers with him.

"Hi, Sam. You up yet?"

He was right. It wasn't anyone in his right mind. It was Al.

"I am now," Sam groaned. How could Al possibly be this chipper after being so drunk

yesterday afternoon? Maybe, he thought hopefully, it hadn't been as bad as it had looked after all. "What's up?"

"Nothin'. I just wanted to ask if you wanna go over to the Project." Sam could visualize the shrug. "And I'll show you around."

"I was 'around' yesterday," he answered, giving the older man a chance to explain himself ...and his actions.

"Aw, Sam...I'm sorry. Yesterday was bad timing. But I'll make it up to you today. Just gimme a chance, okay?"

"All right. Let me get some clothes on and have breakfast, and I'll meet you there in an hour."

"Forget the breakfast. I'll bring donuts. Oh, and Sam," Al added. "Ruthie and I wanna take you out to dinner tonight. A classy joint, but you don't have to wear a tux unless you want to."

"That's not necess--"

"Please, Sam. I promised Ruthie. I wanna make yesterday up to her, too."

"She was..." The physicist paused, absently toying with the phone cord as he recalled Al's wife, sobbing as she picked up the pieces of one of her grandmother's lamps.

The pair of antique lamps had been family heirlooms, and the old woman's wedding present to the happy couple--a symbol of their marriage. Their union. Now that one was broken...

"...pretty upset," Sam finished quickly, not pleased with where his thoughts were heading. "Did you...manage to work it out?"

"I'm tryin'," Al said with a patient sigh. "That's why I need you, pal. Ruthie's always liked you. C'mon and go out with us. Help me smooth her feathers down. I don't wanna spend another night on the couch."

Shifting position onto his back, Sam hesitated, wondering if this was a good time to approach the subject of his friend's seemingly excessive drinking.

Al took the option out of his hands, interpreting his silence as contemplation, and continued with his plea. "C'mon, kid, gimme a break, huh? I got some bad news, had a little too much to drink...at least I took it out on that stupid machine."

"Bad news? What sort of bad news?"

"Doesn't matter. It's history anyway. Doesn't seem so bad today, anyway."

Sam frowned.

Al continued, obviously trying to change the

subject. "Don't tell me, you've never been three sheets to the wind?"

"Actually, I haven't," Sam answered, deciding to let the topic go--for now. He let his voice take on a teasing tone, hoping to get his message across without being accused of 'preaching'. "I've always had more respect for my body than that. Do you have any idea how many brain cells you destroy every time you drink one ounce of alcohol?"

"No...and I don't wanna know," Al answered, sounding tired. "Look, if I promise not to get drunk tonight, will you go?"

"Okay," Sam agreed, deciding to let the subject rest for the time being. He didn't want Al blowing up again and tuning out everything he had to say. "And Al?"

"Yeah?"

"Remind me to tell you about this woman I met."

"What woman?" came the interested reply.

"I'll tell you about her later." He grinned at Al's beginning protest and brought the call to a close without giving the man a chance to demand more information. "See you soon."

* * *

In the early Sunday morning traffic, Sam managed to reach the Ames Research Facility in a flat thirty minutes. Like yesterday, the car park outside the STAR BRIGHT complex was almost deserted, save for the few cars belonging to Security and Al's beloved Corvette.

The silver sports car was still parked askew as it had been yesterday--having not been moved --although it was now sheltered from the elements under a cream-colored car cover, which made it look like it lived permanently in the spot designated for the 'Project Director'.

Al must have caught a taxi here this morning, Sam decided with an amused grin, and covered his precious car. With luck, he'd stay sober and be able to drive it home...

Locking his door, he took a small cardboard box from his passenger seat and quickly entered the building, heading straight for Al's personal office.

It was at the end of a long, white corridor, separated from the rest of the complex by both necessity and design.

Without really meaning to, as he passed the lab where he had yesterday found Al waging his own private war, he glanced in. The hapless

vending machine still stood to attention with its two companion machines, like a wounded but proud soldier that had survived a major battle.

However, someone had cleaned up the mess on the floor, swept away the shards of plexi-glass and the gutted, twisted metal.

Someone had gathered the evidence.

With an uneasy knot forming in his stomach, Sam continued on his way. Undoubtedly, the Big Guns were going to hear about that little fiasco, whether Al liked it or not.

The outer door to the captain's inner sanctum --the one that opened first into his personal secretary's office--was ajar, and as he approached it, Sam overheard voices.

Raised voices, and one of them was Al's.

Balancing the box on a raised knee, he rapped a soft knuckle on the door bearing 'Captain A. Calavizzi' on a brass nameplate, then cautiously entered.

Knowing his announcement had fallen on deaf ears, he stopped by the absent secretary's desk, clutching his cardboard box and trying his hardest not to eavesdrop on what was being said in the inner office.

Correction: shouted.

But the door which led from here into Al's domain was also cracked open. And the irate tones of the two men arguing within made it virtually impossible not to overhear.

"Just get the hell off my back, Cranston," Al's voice retaliated to some former statement. "Or else I'll be putting my own freakin' report into the Old Man in DC. About you!"

"You've gone way too far this time, Calavizzi," threatened a voice Sam didn't recognize, but tentatively identified as belonging to this 'Cranston'. "When Admiral Drennan hears of your behavior, and the fact that you destroyed Government property--"

"I destroyed? Says who? You've got no proof, no witnesses, no weapon, no motive--"

"I have evidence. Everyone knows you work weekends. It's a well known fact...and Security logged your Corvette in just after nine-thirty yesterday. That's also a fact. You were here, Calavizzi, and that machine was in perfect working order when I left on Friday afternoon."

"Okay, I was here. So what? I was working."

"It's also a fact that your so-called 'work' performance has been--shall we say--less than satisfactory for months."

"Fact, my ass!" Al exploded. "It's all circumstantial, pal. You ain't got a case and

you know it."

There was a pause, thick enough to cut with a knife.

"With all due respect, Captain," the unfamiliar voice said with undisguised contempt, "this time I'm going to nail 'your ass' to the wall--"

Al scoffed again. "You and whose army?"

"--and it will be a real pleasure watching you and your career go down in flames."

At that, the inner door was flung open and a short little bald man, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a three-piece gray suit, barreled out like a runaway Mack truck. He was so driven, so focused and incensed, that Sam was forced to literally jump out of his way or be run over.

Struggling with his box, he ended up sitting on the absent secretary's desk, his load balanced precariously on his lap. The little man didn't stop to acknowledge the face behind the cardboard, but angrily vanished out into the hallway beyond leaving a steaming vortex of rage in his wake.

Momentum rocked Sam forward off the desk and onto his feet again. Clutching his box tighter than before, he swallowed hard and turned his attention back to the open inner office door.

All was quiet from within--deathly quiet--and from the angle of his present position he could neither see Al, nor any of the office beyond the right hand corner of his glass-topped desk.

Slowly, Sam moved forward, his view of the interior of Al's office widening in perspective until his line of sight revealed the captain in full.

He was sitting at his desk, elbows on the glass top and his face in his hands. Before Sam could announce himself, Al swivelled his chair to one side and bent down, obviously intent on retrieving something from a lower desk drawer.

Sure enough, an instant later he heard the soft sound of the drawer sliding open.

"Damn..." Al murmured, still unaware of his friend's presence.

"Al?"

The Naval officer snapped upright, like his spine had been yanked taut, and turned a horribly guilt-ridden and surprised expression on him.

"For cryin' out loud, Sam! Can't you knock?"

"I did knock," he insisted.

Al feigned a hand on his heart. "Geez Louise...!"

Sam frowned. This last remark was said over the sound of the drawer being pushed back in, almost as if Al were trying to cover that fact and trying to hide the contents of his lower desk drawer.

Like his bottle of booze?

Almost immediately, the captain was on his feet, a familiar cocky grin plastered on his face, as if his verbal encounter with Cranston about the misfortune of a certain vending machine had never even taken place.

Before Sam could further this line of thought, the Naval officer neatly navigated the conversation toward safer waters.

"So, kid...tell me about this mysterious woman you met."

With an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach, Sam decided to let it go. He really didn't want to get into an argument with Al over that same vending machine again. Or the subject of booze, or this 'Cranston's' threats to expose it all to Washington.

But 'all' what? What the hell was going on behind the scenes that he didn't know about? Surely this wasn't all about a vending machine?

"Don't get your hopes up," Sam said easily, coming forward with a shrug. He shifted the cardboard box from one arm to the other. "She'll probably never speak to me again and I really can't say I blame her."

Al grinned, coming around to park a hip against the corner of his desk. He crossed his arms in a great show of nonchalance. "Sounds interesting already. What happened?"

Gratefully putting his box on the floor beside Al's desk, Sam sank into the free chair.

"First, she took my parking place, then she almost caused me to wreck my car." The very thought of it all again caused his voice to raise with each phrase. "Then, when I spoke to her in the grocery store, she accused me of trying to pick her up."

"Were you?"

"Well, not exactly," he hedged, running a hand over his jaw as Al pushed away from the desk and crossed to a nearby four-drawer, gray metal filing cabinet.

"What exactly does 'not exactly' mean?" Al asked, amazing Sam by withdrawing a box of Dunkin' Donuts and two plastic topped paper cups of coffee from one of the drawers.

As he set the donuts in the center of the

desk and one paper cup in front of Sam, the physicist managed to catch his eye with a dubious look.

Al shrugged, peeling the plastic lid off his cup as he settled in his chair again. "Coffee vending machine's...on the fritz," he explained sheepishly.

"I know," Sam returned in a meaningful tone.

"So go on," Al encouraged, in an obvious attempt to keep the focus well away from himself. "What happened when you 'weren't exactly' tryin' to pick her up?"

"Actually, it's all your fault," Sam said, selecting a jelly-filled donut and leaning back in the chair.

"My fault?"

"Yeah. When I met her in the grocery store, I was thinking to myself, 'what would Al say in this situation?' And before I could stop myself, I was blurting out the most embarrassing things I've ever said in my life!"

Al grinned, taking a sip of coffee. "Sounds like all the lessons are finally beginning to rub off."

"Unfortunately," Sam grumbled, taking it out on his donut. Remembering today's date, another thought suddenly stuck him. "You didn't...set it up, did you?"

"What?" Al looked genuinely confused.

"You know," Sam continued, waving his donut, "as some sort of early April Fool's Day joke."

The older man's gaze hardened as he leaned back in his chair. There was no mirth in his tone at all, as he said, "No. I didn't set it up." There was a solemn pause, then an attempted return to flippancy. "So what happened?"

Drawing a deep breath, Sam recounted the exchange over the popcorn in the grocery store while Al ate his chocolate long-john.

"So," he finished, "it's all your fault. If I hadn't listened to you, I wouldn't have made such a fool of myself."

"Av, Sam. You just need some work on your delivery."

"No thanks. I'll stick with physics."

"Was she a looker?" Al asked, picking up his second donut.

"A looker?" Sam repeated in confusion.

"You know, gorgeous, beautiful, pretty. A looker," he said, gesturing with his donut.

"Yeah...I guess you could call her a looker," he said reluctantly. "But it was more than just that. I felt like I could have an

intelligent conversation with her...if I ever got my foot out of my mouth." Sam shook his head ruefully. "You know, when I told her that I was a quantum physicist, she thought it was another line?"

"It sounds like the First Stage Of Love to me, pal," Al said with a grin.

"What?"

"Yeah. I've got this theory--'Al Calavicci's Stages Of Love'. The First Stage is Denial--you know, fighting and sexual attraction--the Second Stage is Sex, the Third is Acceptance and getting marr---"

"Whoa! Wait!" Sam protested. "Sexual attraction? Al, I barely met the woman. She thinks I'm a low life, a liar. Like I said, if I ever do see her again, she probably won't even speak to me."

"Don't worry about her, Sam," Al consoled. "There are plenty of other fish in the sea. You've taken that first big step and..." He winked devilishly. "...thrown your bait in the water. Now you just listen to me and--"

"That's what got me into trouble in the first place," Sam interrupted. "You know, she told me that I ought to just be myself. Maybe I should stop taking your advice and start taking hers..."

Al chuckled and stuffed the remainder of his donut into his mouth. Sam shook his head, grateful for the pause and the chance to change the subject.

"So, let's get started. Where's my office?"

Swallowing, Al licked the chocolate off his fingers and smiled. "You'll be taking Dr. Elesee's position. Geez, I hate to lose a good physicist...but since it means I can bring you on without it costing another salary, I guess I can't complain too much."

Breakfast finished, the Naval officer stood up and waved a hand at the box on the floor.

"Lemme show you where you can dump that stuff, then I'll give you the Grand Tour."

Draining his coffee, Sam picked up his box of odds and ends and followed the older man out the door.

Two rooms down from the lab with the broken vending machine, Al took a key-card out of his pocket, and was just opening the office door when a little man with a shock of red hair, round, headlight eyes and a bushy mustache, enthusiastically hailed him.

"Captain Calavicci!"

"Go on in, Sam. I'll just be a minute," Al

said, then walked back down the hall to meet the little man in the crumpled lab coat.

Entering alone, Sam found the office was not small, but neither was it as large as Al's had been.

A computer terminal was situated near the desk. There were attractive curtains at the windows and an overstuffed couch against one wall. The oak bookcase against the opposite wall was mostly empty, and boxes of books were packed near the door.

It looked like its previous occupant had nearly moved out.

There was a box on top of the desk, partially filled with pens and various office materials. The door to the desk was pulled out, as if the person had been called away before they had finished the job.

Sam put his box on top of the desk next to the other one and decided to help the other person finish the packing. That way, he reasoned, he could then unpack his own supplies.

Neatly placing the left-over odds and ends into the available box, he put it next to the boxes of books near the door, then turned to his own box.

He had just finishing putting away his last pencil when he heard footsteps approaching from the outside hall. Satisfied, closing the desk drawer on his things until Monday morning rolled around, he crossed to the office door, leaving behind the empty box to be disposed of later.

Stepping out into the hall, he pulled the door closed and, hearing it automatically lock behind him, made an mental note to ask Al for a key-card before he left.

Turning, he saw the captain just coming down the hall toward him.

"Sorry about that," Al said, flicking his head at the man in the crumpled lab coat departing in the opposite direction.

"No problem."

"Normally I have the place to myself on a Sunday," Al continued. "But Gooshie's got a bee in his bonnet about some glitch he found Friday afternoon, and Cranston..." He grimaced expressively. "Cranston's having kittens because Security called him in on a weekend about that stupid vending machine."

Sam cleared his throat. "About that, Al--"

"Let it go," the captain said firmly in a voice that warned Sam, in no uncertain terms, that he would not discuss it. "Nothing like that's ever gonna happen again. Scout's Honor."

Sam frowned, resisting the urge to point out that Al may have been a lot of things in his life...but never a boy scout.

"So," the STAR BRIGHT Director said breezily, jerking a thumb in the direction of the corridor behind them. "Whatta you say we go take that tour?"

* * *

Dinner at the restaurant that night was not as bad as Sam had feared. Ruthie was as charming and pleasant as he remembered her, and Al was good to his word and didn't drink more than a couple glasses of wine with his meal.

Maybe his fears that Al had developed an alcohol dependency were groundless, Sam tried to tell himself for the umpteenth time, watching the couple as the waiter took their order for more coffee. Maybe everything was okay--Al was certainly acting as if it was.

Damn, he wanted to believe that!

But he couldn't quite get rid of the picture of the rage in Al, as he slammed again and again at the helpless vending machine--thoroughly drunk, thoroughly out of control.

"So, Sam," Ruthie asked, bringing him back to the present as her husband searched the inside pocket of his white, double-breasted suit for his second cigar of the evening. "Are you getting settled in?"

"Yes, thank you. I'm almost all unpacked."

He neglected to mention that most of his 'unpacking' still lay scattered across his bed, thrown there in a frenzy some twenty minutes before he had left for the restaurant. Al had mentioned something about wearing a tux, and that had sent Sam into a wild hunt for an even halfway decent pressed suit.

Next to Al--who was playing his White Knight bit to the hilt--he felt somewhat shabby in his plain black suit ...despite the fact that several appreciative females eyes had looked his way.

"You know," Ruthie continued, "it's been a long time since CLEAR STAR." She reached across the table and unexpectedly captured his hand. "We miss having you over to dinner. We'll have to fix that, and have you over real soon, okay?"

Sam smiled, but was unable to shake the uneasy feeling that perhaps what she was really asking him was for his help.

With Al?

His gaze automatically slid to the man at her

side, as the captain casually crumpled cellophane into the ashtray and picked up his lighter from beside it. Right then, with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, Sam knew he had been right about the booze. And there were warning signs everywhere that it was destroying Al's life...if only Al could see them.

When Ruthie squeezed his hand, Sam looked back at her and said, "Yeah. I'd like that. Thanks." With an understanding smile, he returned the squeeze of her hand.

"Wonderful." She sat back, letting go his hand, as her husband meticulously prepared his cigar for lighting. "I know you'll be busy these first few days--how's Thursday evening?"

"Thursday will be fine," Sam said, nodding.

Reaching for his glass of wine, Sam threw a casual glance over Al's shoulder toward the entrance to the restaurant...and unexpectedly saw the woman from the grocery store. She was standing at the door with a group of women, waiting as one paid the bill.

His heart abruptly leaped to his throat.

"Al," he whispered, instinctively ducking down a little, so she wouldn't see him.

Mystified, the captain paused in putting his lighter to his cigar. "What?"

"Remember that woman I told you about?" he hissed, meeting his friend's eyes across the table.

"The one who thought you were a sleaze?"

"Yeah," Sam whispered urgently, trying to both slide down further in his chair and not attract undue attention from the other diners. "She's at the door!"

Al grinned. "Really?" He turned expectantly to look over his shoulder, then turned back with a slightly disappointed shrug. "Sorry, kid, there's no one there now."

Frowning, the physicist straightened in his chair and looked toward the door. Al was right.

"I guess...she must have left." Leaning back in relief, he felt somewhat sheepish at Ruthie's confused look.

"Sam met a woman at a grocery store," Al explained, "and she mistook him for a sleaze. She thought he was trying to pick her up."

"Now I wonder where he learned that?" she asked with a meaningful look at her husband, her manner returning to that of her usual self. At Al's innocent shrug, she smiled at Sam. "I wouldn't use Al as role model if I were you. Believe me, with your looks and charm, all you

have to do is be yourself and you'll have women coming in droves."

"Hey, wait a minute," Al cut in in mock challenge, cigar balanced in one hand. "What is this? You tryin' to make me jealous or what?"

Ruthie shot him a raised eyebrow. "Yes."

As the band began a romantic waltz, Al laid his cigar across the ashtray and got to his feet.

"Okay. I'm jealous," he announced. "I'm also a shmuck and a worthless bum...and I really don't deserve you."

Sam discreetly diverted his attention, knowing a Calavicci apology when he heard one. Al obviously knew there was a lot Ruthie had to forgive him for, and he was asking for it in the best way he knew how.

He held out his hand to his wife in invitation. "You wanna dance?"

"Oh, Al..."

Clearly, from her tone, Ruthie loved Al very much. So much that she was willing to let it all just be water under the bridge and start afresh from this point.

Whatever 'it all' was. Sam was sure he wasn't getting the whole picture here--that Al's boozing was just part of the problem.

A problem, he thought as he watched Ruthie get to her feet to allow her husband lead her to the dance floor, that he was afraid would only get worse before it got any better.

* * *

The alarm didn't go off in the morning. Or if it did Sam, slept right through it. He'd tossed and turned for hours last night--restless after the dinner with Al and Ruthie...and the unfathomable, recurring images of an attractive brunette.

So, by the time he showered, dressed, ate breakfast and fought the Monday morning traffic, it was nearing eight when he finally pulled into the crowded parking lot at the Ames Research Facility.

Giving the roving Security attendant a cheery wave, he drove down the first row past where Al's silver Corvette was parked straight in the 'Director's spot, and took the last empty spot at the end.

So much for the idea of being there early to settle in the rest of his things. He would just have to make the best of it.

Thanking his lucky stars for getting so close

to the front door, he was taking several larger boxes from his trunk when a blue Escort screeched to a stop behind his parked car, its horn blaring in a short, shrill blast.

A brunette woman leaned out the window. "You're in my parking spot. Will you please move?"

It couldn't be. It just couldn't be...

Sam strained past his armload of boxes for a better look.

It was! Heaven help him, it was her! And this time he got the parking place first!

Unexpectedly, he was greatly pleased by that small triumph. Maybe this day was looking up after all. "Well, I was told..."

But she wasn't listening. Getting out of her car, she zeroed in on him like a vulture to its prey, rapidly striding forward on those shapely long legs of hers.

She stopped, impatiently checking out his car's bumper, and Sam quickly diverted his attention to her face.

Correction: her frown.

"You have to have a sticker to park in this lot," she pointed out, then stared disdainfully at his boxes. "The delivery entrance is around back."

"Unh, no," he said, putting them down. "I work here. I--"

"Oh, yeah, right. You're the quantum physicist. I forgot." She folded her arms. "Look, I don't care if you're the president. You still have to have a sticker to park in this lot."

The Security attendant joined them. "Is there a problem, Doctor?"

Sam started to open his mouth to speak, when the woman spoke up first.

"This gentleman doesn't have a sticker for this lot." In the third row behind, another car pulled out and left. "I'm going to take that spot. I'd appreciate it if you could take care of him." Stalking back to her car, she didn't give either man a chance to argue.

"I work here," Sam tried explaining to the frowning attendant.

"Maybe so, but you still have to have a sticker to park here. Captain Calavicci will have my hide if I let any unauthorized cars in this lot."

"But..."

The woman stuck her head out of her car window. "Just tell him you're a quantum physicist," she said, smiling sweetly. "And I'm

sure there'll be no problem."

She drove off, in what Sam had the distinct feeling was the automotive equivalent of 'eat my dust'.

* * *

By the time Sam had re-parked his car in the Visitor's Lot and walked all the way back to the front door, it was well past eight-thirty. He was carrying as many boxes as he possibly could, trying to save time, making his way down the corridor toward his office, when Al came up to him.

"Hi, Sam. Need any help?"

"No thanks, I've got them balanced. If you take one, they'll all come tumbling down." He shot an exasperated glance at his friend. "What I need is a parking sticker. I had to move my car to the Visitor's Lot because 'Captain Calavicci would have the hide of the attendant' if an unstickered car parked in the Employee's Lot."

At the amused look on Al's face, Sam continued, his voice rising in frustration, "And to top it all off, that woman, you know the one I told you about, she was the one who got me in trouble with him! She must work here."

"Really?" Al asked, eagerly looking around for this beauty as if he expected her to be lurking nearby. "What does she look like?"

"She has dark hair and eyes...tall, medium build."

The captain chuckled. "You just described about half the women on the Project."

Sam grimaced in exasperation and decided to give a description that would mean something to Al. "She has great legs."

"Now we're getting somewhere," came the satisfied reply.

Sam shifted the boxes slightly, trying not to lose the precarious balance he maintained. "Al, these are getting heavy. Why don't we talk about her after I take this stuff to my office."

"Unh, Sam...about your office--"

"Captain Calavicci," interrupted the short, mustached man with whom Al had been talking to the day before. Sam wasn't sure where he had come from, he was suddenly just there. "Remember that glitch I told you about yesterday? I'm going to be needing more equipment. Dr. Cranston's no help. Do you have a minute?"

"Yeah, sure, Gooshie. First, let me

introduce you to Sam. Sam, this is Dr. Harold Gushman, better known as Gooshie. He's our head computer programmer. Gooshie, this is Dr. Sam Beckett. He's taking Dr. Elsee's place."

Sam tried to juggle the boxes so he could shake the programmer's outstretched hand, but had to shrug apologetically. "Sorry, I don't seem to have a free hand. Nice to meet you."

"Ever since I heard you were coming on this Project, Dr. Beckett, I've been looking forward to meeting you," the small man said excitedly. "I've been following your research on acoustic optic crystals with great interest. Maybe you can help me with this other problem I have. I'm working on a voice-activated module and..."

Seeing Sam shift the boxes again, Al broke in. "Unh, Gooshie...why don't we let Sam get settled in first? Then maybe he can consult with you, okay?"

"Certainly, Captain."

"Okay, let's you and me go take care of the problem."

Gooshie nodded and, turning away, began to relate the nature of 'the glitch', seemingly already re-focused on his original problem.

Shaking his head, Al followed. "I'll catch up with you later, Sam," he called over his shoulder.

"Sure," Sam agreed and turned to hurry down the remainder of the hallway to his office, his arms beginning to ache with the weight of the boxes.

He had almost reached his door when he realized he'd forgotten to ask Al for a key-card. Only then did he notice the door to his office was already open.

Strange. He could have sworn that he had closed it when he was here yesterday...

Maybe the cleaning lady had failed to shut it...

Head down, he was at the door when he heard angry muttering and the sounds of objects being slammed around.

What? Who was in his office?

Wondering briefly if he should call a guard, he decided to check it out for himself. With the strict security around the place, there was no way someone who didn't belong on the Project could possibly be in there.

Entering, he froze in surprise. It was that woman again!

Only this time she was rummaging through his desk and throwing his things into the empty box he'd left by the door.

Who the hell did she think she was?

Seeing an eraser coming his way, he ducked, an involuntary action which cost him control of the things in his arms. He was juggling to regain that control when the eraser rebounded off the wall, hit him in the back of his head, and the whole stack of boxes fell to the floor with a resounding crash.

The woman looked up in shock. "You!"

"See what you made me do?" Sam said irritably, rubbing the back of his head. "What the hell are you doing in my office anyway?"

"Your office? What do you mean 'your' office?" she replied in outrage. "This is my office. And somebody put their stuff in my desk."

A black marker pen sailed past him.

"Hey, that's my stuff that you're throwing around, lady! And while we're at it, that's my desk."

"Not until I'm finished with it...and I'm not leaving until the end of the week," she announced, her voice raising to match his. "So you can just take 'your stuff' and kindly leave."

"Okay, fine," he said, striding forward.

"I'll take my stuff and leave." Reaching down, he snatched up a lone pencil lying on top of the desk.

"Wait. That's my pencil," she snapped, grabbing for it...much the same way she'd grabbed his popcorn.

"It is not," Sam returned, refusing to let go. *Unh-uh, not this time.* Having had just about enough of this woman, he defiantly tugged back. "It's mine."

"I just put it there!" she replied with a yank of her own. The contested pencil could not withstand the strain and broke with a loud snap.

"Now, look what you did!" he accused, holding up his half of the broken pencil. "You broke my pencil!"

"I told you, it's not your pencil."

They stood nose to nose, breathing rapidly, their eyes locked in combat.

God, she's gorgeous when she's angry, Sam thought, feeling the sudden, completely insane urge to kiss her. Taking a deep breath to get himself under control, he went back on the attack.

"Well, it's nobody's pencil now, thanks to you."

"Why, you little--"

"Is there a problem here?" Al's voice, cool

and amused, came from the doorway.

Sam swung around to see the captain leaning against the door jamb, arms folded, and took two exasperated steps towards him.

"Al, this is her! That woman! The one I told you about." Turning, he shot her a scowl. "The one who won't believe I'm a quantum physicist."

"Hah!" she scoffed, only adding to the whirlwind of emotions that were presently assailing him.

"You tell her," he implored Al. "Tell her I am." Angrily, he spun back to glare at the woman. "And while you're at it, tell her this is my office."

"I should have known," she said, shaking her head, "that Al was the friend who gave you lessons on how to hit on women." She shot a meaningful glare at her boss. "I should have recognized the technique."

Sam's face reddened, this time in embarrassment, instead of anger.

Al, however, only grinned in unabashed amusement. "Hey, sweetheart, it's all in good fun. Things would be pretty damn boring around here otherwise."

"I don't know how Ruthie puts up with you," she shot back.

Al chuckled. "Donna, I'd like to introduce you to your replacement, Dr. Samuel Beckett. He holds several doctorates, one of which is in quantum physics." He looked at Sam. "Sam, this is Dr. Donna Elsee. She'll be orientating you to the Project before she leaves. You'll be sharing this office during that time." He paused mischievously. "If either of you think this is gonna pose a problem, don't hesitate to let me know."

Pushing himself from the doorway, he turned and strolled from the room, leaving the two suddenly speechless scientists staring at each other in mute silence.

* * *

"Well, Sam, what'd you think of Donna?" Al asked with mock innocence, later when they had lunch together in a small restaurant near the Project.

"I think she's the most aggravating woman I've ever met," the physicist shot back, knowing he was being teased but unable to contain his reaction.

"That bad, huh? Sounds like Stage One to

me," he said, shaking his head. "You better watch it, or before you know it you'll be on your way to the Stage Two."

"With her?!" Sam asked incredulously. "No way."

"Well, at least be civil for the next week," Al said, gesturing to their waitress for another glass of wine. "She leaves on Friday. Speakin' of which, I hope you don't mind, but Ruthie invited her to dinner on Thursday night to say goodbye."

"She did what?" Sam stared at his friend.

"She invited--"

"I heard what you said, Al," Sam said, trying to decide if he should comment on the fact that Al had already had two glasses of wine. They had meetings scheduled with the Research Co-Ordinator and his assistant for the rest of the afternoon.

Cranston and his assistant, Sam corrected. The same Cranston who just yesterday had wanted to nail Al's butt to the wall.

Saying nothing, he decided to tackle his other, more immediate, problem first. "Look, maybe you ought to tell Ruthie we should make it another night for me to come over."

"Oh, no, you don't," Al warned. "Ruthie invited you, you accepted. I'm not gonna be the one to tell her you're afraid to come to dinner because Donna's gonna be there."

"I'm not afraid!" Sam suddenly protested, a bit more loudly than he intended. Hastily, he lowered his voice as a woman from the next table glanced their way. "I just...don't want to cause any trouble."

"Then you'd better be on your best behavior," Al returned evenly as their waitress brought him another glass of wine. "Dinner's at seven."

"All right. But if she starts anything--"

"--you'll be the gentleman you always are," Al finished. Picking up his glass, he grinned. "Between you and me, pal, I think Ruthie's planning some heavy-duty matchmaking, so be warned."

Uneasily watching Al drink deeply of his wine, the memory of the man slamming away at the vending machine again flashed through Sam's mind. Ruthie had been in tears when he had brought him home, and from the bits and pieces he had put together since, it seemed it wasn't the first time in the recent past that Al had 'had a little too much to drink'.

"Um, Al," Sam began, toying with his napkin.

"Yeah?"

"Are things...going okay?"

"What'd you mean?"

"You know..." He shrugged, keeping it casual, watching as Al drained his glass. "With you and Ruthie...the Project...you know..."

"Sure," Al answered lightly--too lightly--beginning to push back his chair and making a show of checking his gold Rolex watch. "Hey! Speakin' of which, we'd better get back there, pronto! If we're late for that meeting, Cranston will be chewing nails."

"Cranston," Sam repeated, not moving. "The guy who was in your office yesterday."

Al grimaced, pausing in his move to leave. "Yeah, the jerk. Just my luck to have a Research Co-Ordinator with delusions of grandeur. What he really wants is my job, so he's always throwing his weight around, tryin' to look like the BMOC."

Restlessly, the captain ran a hand over his jaw and continued with a convincing try at a flippant tone. "He's always looking for something to nail me for...just to make himself look good. He's a blowhard, Sam, a royal pain in the butt." He began to stand again. "So c'mon, let's go so we don't give him any more ammunition."

"Wait," Sam said, stubbornly not moving. "I think we need to talk about what happened last Saturday afternoon."

Al's face hardened into straight lines, but he settled back into his seat. "I told you, it's not gonna happen again. Forget it."

Sam kept his eyes on the candle in the center of the table. "Ruthie said it's been happening a lot lately, you drinking and coming in late."

"Ruthie," Al snapped, "worries too much. I've been working late a lot and she thinks I'm...neglecting her. That's her real problem."

Sam had the impression that the captain had been about to say something else, but decided not to dive into those waters as well. He was in deep enough as it was.

"She loves you, Al. She's worried about you. We both--"

"I said, forget it!" Al warned, getting to his feet and effectively ending the conversation. He huffed out a breath, letting his anger go with it. "Whatta you say we go and get you officially launched into the STAR BRIGHT PROJECT." He grinned convincingly and winked. "You've got a lotta work to do, kid. I'm expectin' big things."

Following the man from the table, Sam thought over what Al had said. Was it true? Was Cranston just a troublemaker and Ruthie just feeling insecure about her marriage?

Watching him banter lightly with the cashier, it was easy to believe him. He looked just like the good old Al of the past--upbeat, cocksure and confident.

Until Sam thought of the scene he had walked in on just two days before, and then he wasn't so sure that all of the man's claims didn't sound like excuses.

Excuses, that had a very worrisome ring to them.

* * *

Thursday seemed to arrive quickly. Sam had survived his week of orientation with no further altercations with his unwilling office mate. To his surprise, after the first day Donna had treated him in a completely professional way.

In fact, her manner was so professional, it was almost cold.

She constantly called him 'Dr. Beckett', to which he constantly returned with 'Dr. Elesee'. They never talked about anything outside of the Project, avoiding personal business--and the risk of another major, all-out brawl--by unspoken mutual accord.

Now, if they could just stand each other's company for less than twenty-four hours more...

As for Al, Sam had seen little of him since Monday. The mutilated vending machine had disappeared from the building, and been replaced by a newer, more dependable model. Cranston had been assured by Security that they would investigate the matter, but no further action had been taken.

Donna made the comment, when he remarked on the new machine, that that meant it was a dead issue. Nobody was going to spend a lot of time and effort worrying about a machine that didn't work half the time anyway. There was no harm done, and life would go on, and that was that.

Sam certainly hoped that was the truth. At least he hadn't heard about any new fights between the balding Research Co-Ordinator and the Project Director.

And what he had seen of Al these past few days...well, the man hadn't acted the least bit out of the ordinary. Not for Al, anyway. Maybe it was over, never to happen again as Al promised, and things really would get back to

normal.

Maybe. If he managed to survive this one last evening in the presence of Donna Elesee.

Pulling up at the curb before the Calavicci's house in suburban San José, he parked behind Donna's blue Escort, took a deep breath, and looked in the rear view mirror as he brushed his hair back from his forehead.

Having now unpacked most of his belongings in his new apartment, he'd managed to come up with a decent sports jacket and slacks to wear to this--the final test of his patience.

Patience. If he could be in that same tiny office with her for a week without strangling her, then he could do this easily.

He hoped.

After straightening his tie, he opened the car door and stepped out. Be nice, be polite, he told himself sternly as he walked up to the door, but most of all don't blow your cool. Pulling back his shoulders, he pushed the door bell.

Al must have been waiting for him, because the door opened immediately. "Hi, Sam," he said, obviously in good spirits...making Sam uneasily wonder if he'd had any help from a bottle to obtain this mood.

Unobtrusively, he studied his friend as he stepped inside the opened door.

"Hi," he said quietly, suddenly wishing he were anywhere but where he found himself. He wasn't any good at this social mixing stuff. Why had he let Al maneuver him into this!?

"Come on in, Sam," Ruthie, crossing the hallway, called. "We're in the living room. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes." She vanished in the direction of the kitchen, presumably to check on the progress of the food.

Al put an arm around Sam's shoulder in teasing camaraderie. "C'mon, Sam," he said confidentially. "It's time to beard the lion, or should I say lioness, in her den. Just remember 'David and Goliath'." He shot the younger man a wink. "Show no fear."

"Yeah, but which one am I?" Sam muttered as he was maneuvered through into the living room.

Donna, sitting on the couch and petting Ruthie's Himalayan cat, turned at their entrance. "Hello, Dr. Beckett. I see you made it."

"Unh...yes. Hello."

"'David and Goliath'," Al quietly reminded, then left his side to head toward the liquor cabinet. "Want a drink, Sam?" he asked in a

slightly louder voice.

Distracted from his present predicament, the physicist shook his head. "Unh, no, thanks. I'll pass."

"Donna?" Al offered politely, already busy pouring himself a single shot of scotch.

Sam suddenly looked at her, curious to her answer.

Remarkably, she smiled at him, saying, "No, thanks. I'm fond of my brain cells."

Al turned, glass in hand, and belted back the entire contents of his glass in a single swallow. "Great. Two of you now..."

He'd just lowered it when Ruthie appeared in the doorway to announce dinner, but the way he tried to conceal his empty glass from his wife was not lost on Sam.

Or Donna.

The two exchanged a worried glance, then both looked away as if annoyed by this moment of mutual concern and understanding.

Don't blow your cool...

Stepping aside in a grand show of chivalry, Sam let Donna proceed him in the dining room. Telling himself she was not the reason he was here, that he could handle anything she could throw at him, he even held out a chair for her. He was beginning to feel pretty confident about himself...when she spoke.

"Well, Dr. Beckett," she said as he took his seat. "Did you finally get your sticker for your car?"

Sam shot Al with a look of tried patience, before turning to Donna. "Yes, thank you," he said evenly. "I did. Have you finished packing? I'd be happy to help you if you like."

A fleeting expression of distress crossed her face, and he had a sudden, unaccountable feeling of remorse for his words. He hadn't really meant to be mean--had he?

Her sudden flicker of emotion vanished quickly and when she spoke her voice was carefully neutral. "I've finished, but thank you anyway."

Looking from one to another, Al spoke up, his voice heavy with overdone patience...and perhaps a little liquor. "If you're both finished bein' super-duper polite to each other, can we eat? I'm starvin' here."

Ruthie picked up a dish and quickly intervened.

Dinner passed in armed neutrality. Donna would talk to Ruthie and sometimes Al while Sam made polite conversation with the married

couple. With the few words Sam and Donna exchanged, they never failed to be sublimely civil to each other.

After dinner, Ruthie stood. "Why don't you all go into the living room? I'll just take care of the dishes and bring in the coffee and desert."

"Nonsense," Donna replied. "I'll help you."

"Me too," Sam agreed. "It'll be a lot quicker that way. I used to help my mom all the time."

"That's fine, both of you," Ruthie said, already collecting plates and moving away from the table.

"I'm sure you were a regular Boy Scout," Donna said coolly--the first thing she'd said to him in half an hour--as Ruthie disappeared into the kitchen.

"Eagle Scout, actually," Sam corrected, with a little pride. He had worked hard for that honor and he wasn't going to let her belittle it. He reached for a platter at the same moment she grasped it.

"I've got it," Sam said, tugging at the dish.

"No, I've got it," Donna insisted. "You might drop it."

Sam jerked it back. "I said, I've got it."

"Hit the dirt!" Al exclaimed in mock terror. "Ruthie, you'd better come rescue your platter! You ought to see the shape of the last thing they fought over. Snapped in two!"

"I've always helped Ruthie and I haven't broken a dish yet," Donna retorted, although whether she was talking to Sam or Al was not clear.

"What?" Sam snapped. "You don't think a man can help clear a table? I've got more than enough experience! I grew up taking my turn at dish duty every third night!"

"How politically correct of you," she remarked dryly, releasing the platter. "Fine. Be my guest."

Without further comment, she turned and stalked into the living room, drawing Sam's gaze with her.

Abruptly realizing he was staring at the smooth movement of her body beneath her knit dress, Sam hastily averted his eyes.

Sheepishly, he shot a glance at Al and Ruthie, who were just standing in complete silence.

Al shrugged. "Hey, if you want to help Ruthie with the dishes, pal, that's just peachy

with me. I never did care for dishpan hands."

Strolling after Donna, one hand tucked into his pocket, he left Sam standing holding the platter. Feeling even more guilty, the physicist looked to his hostess.

She smiled at him understandingly. "It's okay, Sam. And I'd be grateful for your help." She lowered her voice a little. "And it'll give us a chance to talk."

* * *

"Why don't you wash and I'll dry," Ruthie suggested after starting the coffee to brew. "I know where everything goes."

Sam agreed and settled his hands into the sink of warm, soapy water. He enjoyed washing dishes, swirling the soap suds around and seeing the play of the lights on the bubbles. It reminded him of his youth, playing with bubbles and watching the frail spheres floating on the wind until the surface tension became so great that the bubble would pop.

Realizing he'd been washing for a good five minutes in absolute silence, he finally looked up, only to find Ruthie avoiding his eyes. He knew what she wanted to 'talk' about, but was still unsure how or where to begin.

Fortunately, the decision was taken from him.

Keeping her eyes down, threatening to wipe the pattern off the dinner plate, she said, "Al didn't come home last night."

"What?" Sam straightened, truly surprised.

She shook her head. "And it's not the first time it's happened either." Hugging the dry plate, she met his concerned gaze. "I think he's...oh, I don't know what I think. I can't talk to him anymore, Sam." As tears threatened, she turned away to place the plate on the stack on the counter.

Shaking the soap suds off his hands, Sam turned from the sink, knowing a plea for help when he heard one. Patting his hands on a towel, he gently laid them on the woman's shoulders from behind.

"I'll talk to him," he said, trying to reassure her. "It's going to be okay."

Turning the petite woman around to face him, he gave her a supportive smile and hug.

"I'll talk to him, Ruthie, get him to see reason. I promise."

She nodded against his chest, and Sam allowed her a few moments of quiet composure. When she drew away--ready to face the world again--he

returned to the sink and his chore of washing dishes, while she busied herself putting the stacked plates away in the cupboard.

Al not coming home. It was another piece of the puzzle...and the more he put it together, the less he liked the picture.

Ruthie's voice broke him out of his reverie, in an obvious attempt at normalcy. "You and Donna don't get along very well, do you?"

Taken by surprise, Sam's first instinct was to reply defensively, but he stopped himself.

"No," he admitted reluctantly. Sensing she needed this change of subject, he added, "We didn't seem to hit it off very well from the first."

At that, he felt the woman's eyes on him... and it unexpectedly made him very uncomfortable. Sometimes, Ruthie saw too much.

Her next words proved his point. "And you wish you did."

Sam shrugged one shoulder and didn't reply. He wasn't going to incriminate himself...and he had a feeling that anything he said was just going to dig him in deeper.

"Sam," Ruthie said thoughtfully, toying with the dishcloth in her hands. Clearly, it was her turn to offer support. "Donna is my best friend. There's something you don't know about her, which might explain why she reacts the way she does." She drew a deep breath as if uncertain whether to continue. "If she knew I was telling you this..."

"Then perhaps, you shouldn't," Sam said reluctantly.

Ruthie considered this for a few moments, then shook her head. "No, it's important. I think you should know. She's really a very nice person."

Sam's lips twitched in a half-smile. "You could have fooled me."

"Donna came from a broken home," she explained doggedly, in defense of her friend. "Her father left her and her mother when she was very young...and she's always felt that, in a way, it was her fault. She grew up thinking that no man could be trusted. That no one could love her enough to stay with her."

"Ruthie," Sam interrupted, suddenly uncomfortable with the conversation. "Maybe you're right. Maybe you shouldn't be telling me this."

"Something happened when she was in college," Ruthie went on picking up a glass to dry as if needing something to do with her

hands. "I'm not quite sure what, but somehow it had to do with her father. Afterwards, she felt much better about men and started dating, but nothing very serious."

She paused to put away the glass then turned to Sam. "Until a year ago, when she met Robert. He wined and dined her, basically swept her off her feet." The disapproving look on Ruthie's face left no doubt as to what she thought about that. "They were engaged to be married, and probably would have been, if Donna hadn't caught him in bed with her maid of honor a week before the wedding."

"That's awful!" Sam said in horror.

"Mmm. She told me later it was all because she wanted to wait until they were married to consummate their relationship. Robert decided that if his fiancée wouldn't come through, then he would find someone who would. He had the bad taste to choose her best friend, or should I say her former best friend."

"What a sleaze!" Sam exclaimed...then realized that was exactly how Donna thought of him. What Ruthie was saying made sense.

"He was certainly no mensch," she agreed. "So, maybe you can understand why Donna has been acting the way she has. She thought she'd finally found a man she could trust, and Robert broke that trust."

"Yeah, I guess I can," he said thoughtfully. "I came on pretty strong at first." His face reddened slightly with the memory of it. "She probably thought I was just like this Robert."

Ruthie was studying him curiously. "Do you like her?"

"I'm not really sure," Sam replied honestly. "I haven't gotten the chance to really know her --let alone like her."

He looked down at the pot in his hands and realized he must have been washing it for the last five minutes. Gathering his thoughts, he handed it to Ruthie.

"I'm attracted to her," he admitted, and felt comfortable enough with her to add, "I find myself wanting to kiss her in the middle of our arguments. Is that weird or what?"

Ruthie smiled. "No, I wouldn't call that weird at all. I just think you both need a chance to work it all out. Some time alone." Putting her dishcloth down on the counter, she laid her free hand on his arm. "You're almost as stubborn as Al, Sam. You and Donna would be good for each other...if you both would just let down the barriers."

"But sometimes she makes me so mad!"

"They say the ones who drive you to distraction, are the ones who mean the most," the woman said with a smile. "Or, as Al would say, 'you only pull the pigtailed of the one you love'."

They shared a smile at the familiar phrase, the instant memories it conjured, of hearing Al saying it at his wedding reception. That event had happened a little over four years ago...and marriages were meant to last a lot longer than that.

They were meant to last forever.

Sam nodded. He was going to do his best to help Ruthie glue this one back together. And in the meantime...

"I'll give it a try...if Donna does."

"Good. Now, let's finish these dishes before you really do get dishpan hands."

They washed the rest of the dishes in silence, Sam's mind whirling with possibilities. What did she mean about 'time alone'? They'd spent practically the whole week 'alone' in their office.

Another thought suddenly struck him. What was Al talking about to Donna in the living room? If Ruthie had no problems talking to him about Donna, what was Al saying about him? He could be revealing all sorts of things!

Speeding up his washing at the thought, he left Ruthie putting away the last few items in his haste to join Al and Donna in the living room.

"Why don't I, unh...go ahead and take the coffee in?" he offered.

"Sure, Sam," she agreed with a knowing look. "I have the tray ready. Just add the coffee."

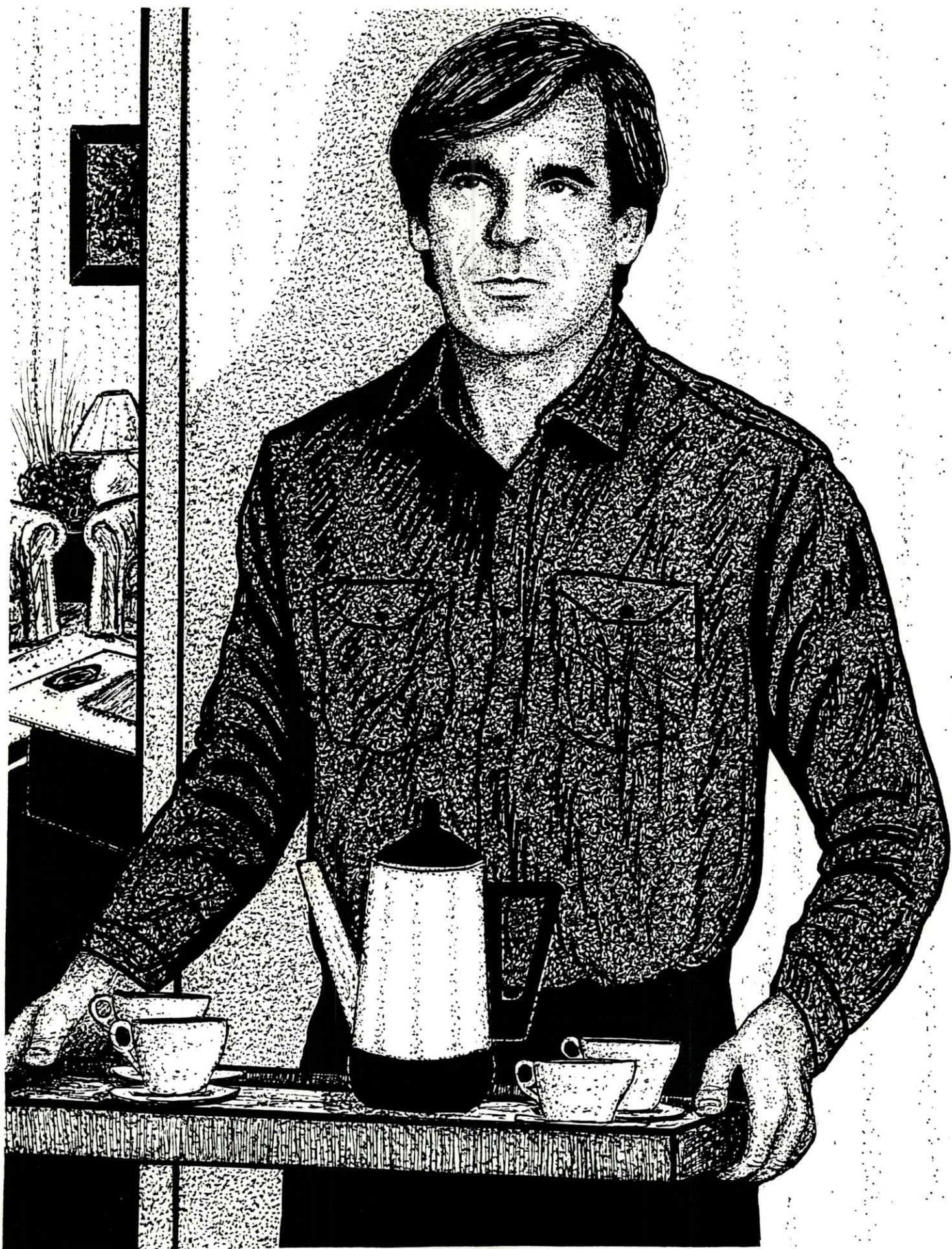
Unplugging the coffee pot, he put it on the tray and made his way to the hallway.

On an impulse, he paused just before the living room door. He knew he shouldn't eavesdrop, but the temptation to find out if they were talking about him was just too great.

"Okay, Al, I'll try," Donna was saying, "but I don't see that it matters. I'll be leaving for New York in a few days anyway."

"I guess you're really looking forward to your new job," came the captain's easy reply. "Looking ahead's good, sweetheart. I'm just sayin' don't miss what's under your nose right here."

There was a long pause before she spoke, so long that Sam was preparing to go in, when she quietly said, "I guess I may as well tell you



this now."

"Tell me what?"

"Well, I was going to talk to you about it tomorrow, to ask for another reference. I...got a call today. The position I was supposed to fill isn't open anymore because the man who was leaving decided to stay. They're very sorry, but they can't take me. So I guess I'm...back in the job market."

Sam frowned. For the first time since he'd laid eyes on Donna, he wanted to side with her, rather than against her. Perhaps Ruthie's words had more affect than he'd realized...

"That's unethical as hell!" snapped Al's angry voice. "Damn it, I have a good notion to call 'em up and raise Cain!"

"Al, it's okay," Donna said in a soothing voice. "I'll just apply somewhere else. If you'll write me a new ref--"

"No," Al interrupted. "I won't allow that. You'll stay here."

"What? I can't do that! My position's already filled. What about Sam? I can't just cheat him out of a job because I got caught in a squeeze."

"You leave it to me, sweetheart," Al assured her. "I'll take care of it."

As Ruthie came up behind him and laid a hand on his shoulders, Sam jumped guiltily, almost spilling the tray. She put a finger on her lips.

"Little ears never did hear good things about themselves," she said in a whisper, smiling. She put the cake with birthday candles she was carrying on the hall table beside him and methodically began to light them.

"Whose birthday?" he whispered, part of his attention still on what he had overheard. He wasn't going to stay if it meant kicking Donna out with no place to go. MIT would take him back. Or--

"Donna's," Ruthie whispered back, bringing his thoughts back to the present. "She's going to be thirty tomorrow, but she didn't want to make a fuss about it. Since she doesn't have any family around, I thought it would be nice to celebrate it tonight."

With a smile, she led the way into the living room, carrying the cake with a virtual forest fire of candles blazing on top. Entering, she began to sing 'Happy Birthday'.

Hesitating, Sam followed, taking up the song. His eyes went directly to Donna. She looked surprised, with little sign of the distress she

must be suffering with her unexpected loss of a job.

Uncomfortably, Sam realized how little he really knew of this woman and what motivated her. If she could hide this so well, no wonder he hadn't known how his first impression upset her.

Al joined in, singing slightly off-key. He might be a great pilot, astronaut and Project Director, Sam thought in unwilling amusement, but he was a lousy singer. Still, what he lacked in skill, he made up with enthusiasm.

Ruthie placed the cake on the coffee table in front of Donna, leaving room next to it for Sam to put his coffee tray.

"You shouldn't have," Donna protested, the color in her cheeks high.

"Nonsense," Ruthie said as she sat next to Al on the love seat, leaving the spot next to Donna the only vacant place for Sam to sit. "Nobody should have a thirtieth birthday without a birthday cake."

"Right," Al agreed. "Now, make a wish and blow out the candles before the cake turns into a nuclear reactor during a melt down."

The cake was cut and slices passed around. There was a long silence, broken only by the ticking of the clock and coffee cups clinking against saucers, in which Sam considered all of what he had learned in the past half hour.

The worrisome revelations that Al didn't always come home at night. The fact that Donna's harsh reactions were well-based on past events...

And what had Al meant by 'I'll take care of it'? Was he going to see if he could keep them both on? Could he manage that? From what Sam had seen, like the altercation between the captain and Cranston, it didn't look like Al was in a strong enough position to carry that sort of weight.

Ruthie finally broke the silence with, "How about a game of SCRABBLE?"

"SCRABBLE?!" Al protested. "Geez, I hate that game!"

"That's because you always lose," his wife retorted. "You don't get many points for words of four letters."

"Yeah, but you have a lot of fun," Al returned with a devilish grin. "Anyway, it wouldn't be fair. Playing SCRABBLE with Sam would be like playing with the WEBSTER'S UNABRIDGED DICTIONARY."

Sam shot the captain a narrowed-eyed glance

and Al relented with a shrug.

"Well, maybe abridged," he amended.

"Then, how about LIFE?" Ruthie put in quickly.

"LIFE?" Sam asked puzzled. "That's a game?"

"It's fun," Ruthie told him. "Everybody gets a car and takes a turn at the spinner to see what profession they are going to be in life. Then, they have to travel around the board, making life decisions. Whoever ends up with the most money wins."

"It's okay with me," Donna said.

"Sure," Sam agreed with a shrug. "Why not?"

Standing up, Ruthie put a hand on her husband's shoulder. "Come help me find it, Al. It's buried in the bedroom closet. And we have to find the card table." She left him to follow.

Getting to his feet, Al shot Sam a mischievous grin. "If we ain't back in ten minutes, don't come looking for us," he said, then followed his wife from the room.

Left to themselves, Sam avoided Donna's eyes and shifted on the couch beside her. This had to be it. The 'time alone' to work it out. As if a mere ten minutes would make much of a difference.

Sliding a glance at her, he wondered if Donna realized the ulterior motive behind the search for the LIFE game.

Maybe he should confess that he had been listening at the door?

No, he couldn't do that until he found out what it was Al had in mind. Now would not be a good time to bring it up. He would have to think of something else to talk about...some good old-fashioned small talk.

What would Al say?

Swiftly, he rejected that idea as quickly as it was formed. Mercifully, Donna spoke, sparing him the need of an opening remark.

"Al tells me that you grew up on a farm in Indiana."

Wondering uneasily what else Al had told her, he replied, "Yes, right outside Elk Ridge. My folks owned a dairy farm."

"Really? I grew up in a small town in Ohio. I went to college at Lawrence."

Sam nodded then, thinking that science would be a subject that wouldn't get him into too much trouble, asked, "Have you always been interested in quantum physics?"

"No." Donna smiled...and he was suddenly aware that she had a nice smile. "When I was

young, I wanted to be an astronaut."

She gave him a quick look that dared him to challenge that. When he only nodded, she continued, "The stars fascinated me. I spent hours studying the constellations, going out at night and try to name as many as I could. It wasn't until I was in high school and college that I really got into physics." She stopped abruptly, as though she realized that she had been dominating the conversation. "Sorry, I didn't mean to carry on like that. I just...like astronomy."

Sam turned on the couch to face her with a smile. "I understand. I used to stargaze too. My brother and I would go out into the fields and lay on our backs and look at the stars for hours." He decided to take a chance and open up the conversation the way she had with her admission of her plan to be an astronaut. "Then we'd make up stories about life on other planets."

"You too?" She grinned as if they had just shared a secret. "One of my favorite TV shows was 'My Favorite Martian'...until 'Star Trek' came along."

Sam straightened and raised his hand, spreading the two middle fingers apart in the Vulcan hand sign. Composing his face into a serious expression, he raised one eyebrow and intoned in his best Spock imitation, "Live long and prosper'."

For a moment, Donna looked at him incredulously, then grinned. Bringing up her hand in a similar manner, she said, "'Peace and long life'."

Laughing together at this unexpected common interest, their eyes met briefly. Sam was once more struck by her gaze. There was something about her that he couldn't define. Was it...familiarity?

He felt as if he had known her forever, that he had known her even before he was born.

Is this what his mother had meant when she said there was someone out there for him--someone who would complete him, who would be the other half of his soul?

Suddenly, he felt breathless...and it had little to do with the exertion of his laughter.

Donna's laughter also faltered, and she searched his eyes in much the same way he had hers.

"Have we...met before?" She shook her head, puzzled, before he could answer. "I know this sounds silly, but sometimes when I look at you,

I feel as if I know you. Not really the way you look, but something about your eyes. It's as if we've met before, but I just can't remember where." Looking away, she focused on her fingers clasped tightly in her lap.

Sam put out a tentative hand, covering her slender fingers. His touch brought her eyes up to his. "I don't think you're silly at all," he answered truthfully. "I think I've felt the same way. I know that I haven't met you before, but I still can't help believe that we know each other. If that makes any sense at all."

Donna held his gaze before answering. "You know," she said at last, "that should sound like a line, but..." She paused, lifting a hand to stop his protest. "...but I think you're being sincere." She drew a deep breath. "I'm sorry ..about how I've acted this week. I misjudged you."

"It's not all your fault," Sam replied. "I was being a jerk. And I'm afraid I've inherited the Beckett Temper. When I get angry, sometimes I speak first, then regret it later."

"Sometimes my temper gets the better of me, too," Donna admitted wryly.

"Then let's start over," Sam said impulsively.

"I think I'd like that."

"Hi, I'm Sam Beckett," he said, putting out his hand.

She took it and replied, "Donna Elesee. It's nice to meet you, Sam."

He grinned, refusing to let go of her hand. "Do you realize we're actually sitting here having a normal conversation? Talking to each other about something that's not related to STAR BRIGHT?"

A light blush colored Donna's cheeks as she returned his smile. "Amazing, isn't it? This morning I'd have said it was impossible..."

An amused voice broke their concentration. "I think it's safe, Ruthie," Al, holding a folded card table, said from the doorway. "Nobody spilled any blood."

Sam hadn't even heard them come in. Donna quickly retrieved her hand.

Ruthie nudged her husband meaningfully as she walked into the room carrying a large game box with the letters LIFE emblazoned on it. "Put the table over there." She pointed to the center of the room.

Al obediently opened the table and placed it on its four legs as Sam and Donna joined them.

"Al," Ruthie asked as she opened the box on

the table, "would you get the chairs from the dining room table?"

"Sure, honey."

"I'll help," Sam offered, following Al out of the room.

"So," Al said as soon as they were out of earshot. "Did you and Donna get everything straightened out?"

"Al," Sam said warningly, "you're about the worst matchmaker I've met."

"Not true," Al said, shaking his finger. "You're forgetting Ruthie's grandmother."

"I stand corrected," Sam said, conceding the point. "Let's just say, we agreed to try to start over."

"Great!" Al said, picking up one of the wooden chairs. "That will be a plus if you're gonna be working together."

"Working together?" Sam asked, playing the innocent.

"Yeah, Donna told me tonight that she wasn't leaving after all."

"Doesn't that mean I need to find another job?"

"Unh-uh, no way, pal." Al shook his head decisively. "It means I need to sell the advantages of having two quantum physicists on the payroll to Rear Admiral Drennan. It shouldn't be too difficult. I think he has a thing for Donna."

Sam took a sudden dislike for the Admiral that he'd never met. He guessed his feelings must have been expressed on his face because Al chuckled.

"Don't worry, Sam. He's way too old for her. He has white hair and mutton chop whiskers."

"I'm not worried," Sam said defensively.

"Al?" Ruthie's voice came from the other room. "Honey, we need the chairs this week..."

"Duty calls," Al said, picking up a second chair and carried them back into the living room, leaving Sam to follow with his two chairs.

* * *

Much to his surprise, Sam enjoying playing LIFE, especially when his spin netted him the profession of Doctor. Al complained loudly when he drew a Lawyer for his career, declaring that all lawyers were shysters and that you couldn't trust any of them. His mock wounded look, when Sam jokingly replied that he ought to fit right in, didn't move him.

There was one unanticipated tense moment, however, when Ruthie was spinning to determine how many children she was going to have. Al had told him about the difficult time she'd had after the miscarriage of her baby and, watching her face, Sam knew she was still affected by it.

And from the way the captain had conveniently excused himself to make a visit to the bathroom at that point, Sam knew Al was too, however much the man would deny it.

The pain and sadness from losing a child, even an unborn one, was something Sam found he could easily sympathize with. But, perhaps instead of running away, Al needed to sit down and talk to Ruthie about this...

'I can't talk to him anymore, Sam'.

Discovering confirmation of that piece of the puzzle was not a pleasant experience.

As the hands progressed around the face of the clock, the game progressed around the playing board, everyone losing and making money.

Al had particularly bad luck, continuously having to pay for natural disasters and helping out relatives, which caused him to remark on several occasions that being a rich orphan was, perhaps, preferable to being a poor relation.

Luck played highly in fortunes, but Sam thought perhaps skill helped a little, as he and Donna found themselves neck to neck on the last homestretch.

Finally, they had to make the choice; try to be Instant Millionaires, or depend on the money and stocks already earned to put them in the top spot.

Feeling good, Sam eyed Donna's pile and tried to determine if she had more money than him, but couldn't decide. He knew how much he had, down to the dollar, and thought perhaps he had a shot. So, rather than risk losing everything, he rolled the dice, advanced his piece and was the first to cash in his winnings.

Donna came in second behind him, having also decided to take the safe way out and cashed in her stocks and bonds. She was just a few thousand dollars behind him.

Ruthie was third and, obviously deciding her small pile of cash was not going to net her any winnings, decided to try to become an Instant Millionaire.

Unfortunately, she failed.

Lastly, it was Al's turn. Sam knew that the older man didn't have a chance to win, other than to become an Instant Millionaire. It was really no surprise when Al, always the gambler,

stopped at the appropriate spot on the board and took a chance spinning the wheel.

All eyes glued to the spinner.

"What the...?" Al said in surprise, staring at the wheel as it stopped. "I made it! I won!"

Sam smiled. He was glad that his friend had become a millionaire--he'd lost so much in his life that he deserved to win every now and then.

"Congratulations, Al," Sam said, smiling in honest pleasure. He glanced at Donna, only to find her looking at him, then at his hosts as Ruthie bestowed Al with a quick congratulatory kiss.

"This calls for a drink to celebrate," Al said, getting up. "Want a beer, Sam?"

About to agree, Sam caught the sudden expression on Ruthie's face. "No thanks, but I'll take a diet Pepsi if you have one."

"Sure. Donna?"

"I'll have the same."

"I'll help you get them, Al," Ruthie said firmly, getting up from the card table.

The kitchen door closed behind them, but didn't quite shut tight enough to contain the soft argument that ensued.

"Al, you're breaking your promise. You said you wouldn't have more than one drink tonight."

"And I'm not. This is it!"

"Don't lie to me--"

"For God's sake, Ruthie, I'm just gonna have one damn drink. So get off my case, okay?"

Mercifully, the voices faded as the couple moved further away from the door.

Sam risked a glance at Donna. Her face held the uncomfortable expression of someone hearing something not meant for their ears...and that same concern for Al he had seen earlier.

He looked away first, getting up and moving over to the couch.

"You really care about Al, don't you?" Donna asked, joining him.

"He's my buddy," Sam admitted, gently stroking the cat that was taking up almost one entire section of the couch. "My best friend." He met her eyes again. "I'm...worried about him..."

Donna nodded understandingly. "I know. I am too. I've known Al for a few years now, and he's always been a heavy drinker...but lately..." She let the sentence trail off, then changed the subject, obviously trying to defuse the uneasy situation. "How long have you known him?"

"I met him when I was a resident at Bethesda. Al had just been repatriated from Vietnam, and I gave him his clearance for active duty."

"You're a doctor?"

"Medicine was my first doctorate."

Donna looked wryly amused. "How many doctorates do you have?"

Just then, their hosts came back into the room with the drinks in hand.

As Ruthie passed a glass of diet Pepsi to Sam and Donna, Al put the soda he carried on the coffee table and crossed to the liquor cabinet to pour himself something a little stronger.

Ruthie sat, exchanging a worried look with both Sam and Donna while Al's back was turned--concern that was lost on the Project Director as he swivelled round to face them with his filled glass in hand.

This time, he'd poured a double scotch.

"Our resident genius here..." Al began, crossing to sit on the love seat beside Ruthie, clearly having heard Donna's last question. He let his arm rest across her shoulders and took a swallow from his glass before continuing. "...has seven doctorates, including quantum physics, ancient languages, and music..."

"Music?" Donna asked.

"Right," Al said, before Sam could speak for himself. "You're looking at a man who played piano at Carnegie Hall at the age of nineteen."

"Al," Sam growled, trying to shut him up.

"And he plays a mean guitar, too," Al said, evidently determined to get in the last word. Grinning, he sipped his drink again.

"I think I should leave now," Sam said abruptly.

"Now, look, you've embarrassed Sam," Ruthie chided her husband.

"Sorry, kid," Al apologized. "I just like bragging on you."

"That's okay, but I really do need to be going. It's after eleven and I don't want to be late in the morning. I hear the boss can be a real bear." He grinned at Al's attempt at a ferocious expression.

"I think I'll be going too," Donna agreed, getting up. She smiled at Sam. "I have the same boss."

"Hey," Al said in mock protest. "Wait just a minute. I heard he was a kind-hearted soul."

Sam just barely managed to stop himself from saying 'when he doesn't drink'. But the timing wasn't right. That would have to wait for another night. To Ruthie he said, "Thank you

for dinner. It was delicious."

"You're more than welcome, Sam," Ruthie said, putting out her hand for Sam to shake. She gave him a meaningful look. "You'll have to come over again real soon."

"I will," he promised.

"Thanks for inviting me," Donna said. "And for the surprise birthday cake." She hugged her friend.

"We'll all have to get together again sometime," Ruthie agreed.

"Yeah," Al agreed, getting up to see his guests to the door...without relinquishing possession of his glass. "Maybe next time we can play Rummy or Spades or..." His eyes travelled suggestively over his wife. "...poker."

"Bye, Ruthie," Sam called, as he opened the door for Donna and waited for her to precede him out. Then turned to his friend. "Night, Al. See you tomorrow."

"See ya, pal," he said, watching around Sam's shoulder as Donna headed for her car. Then, with a quick gulp of scotch, he mischievously added, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do...but if you do, take pictures." With a final wink, he closed the door.

Any other time, Sam would have found that amusing. But the glass in the man's hand made it all seem anything but funny.

Getting in his car, he reflected on the evening.

On one hand, he felt awful--sick even--knowing what he now knew about Al and Ruthie, and Al's drinking.

But curiously, on the other hand, there was no denying that he felt absolutely wonderful about Donna Elesee.

He sat in his car, waiting until Donna unlocked her door and started her car. Just to be certain she was safely on her way, he watched until the taillights of her Escort had vanished around the corner.

To think that he might be working together with Donna past Friday would have dismayed him earlier that day. But now, he looked forward to it and to getting to know her better.

Donna was obviously very intelligent and a real asset to STAR BRIGHT, but if he was honest with himself, he had to admit that it just wasn't a professional interest he had in the physicist.

If the attraction wasn't one sided, perhaps he had a chance. Even though he was modest, Sam

couldn't help but believe that Donna did find him attractive. The assessing glance in the grocery store, as humiliating as it was at the time, told him that much.

Then, tonight on the couch, the look she gave

him when they talked about knowing each other, made him believe she felt the same way.

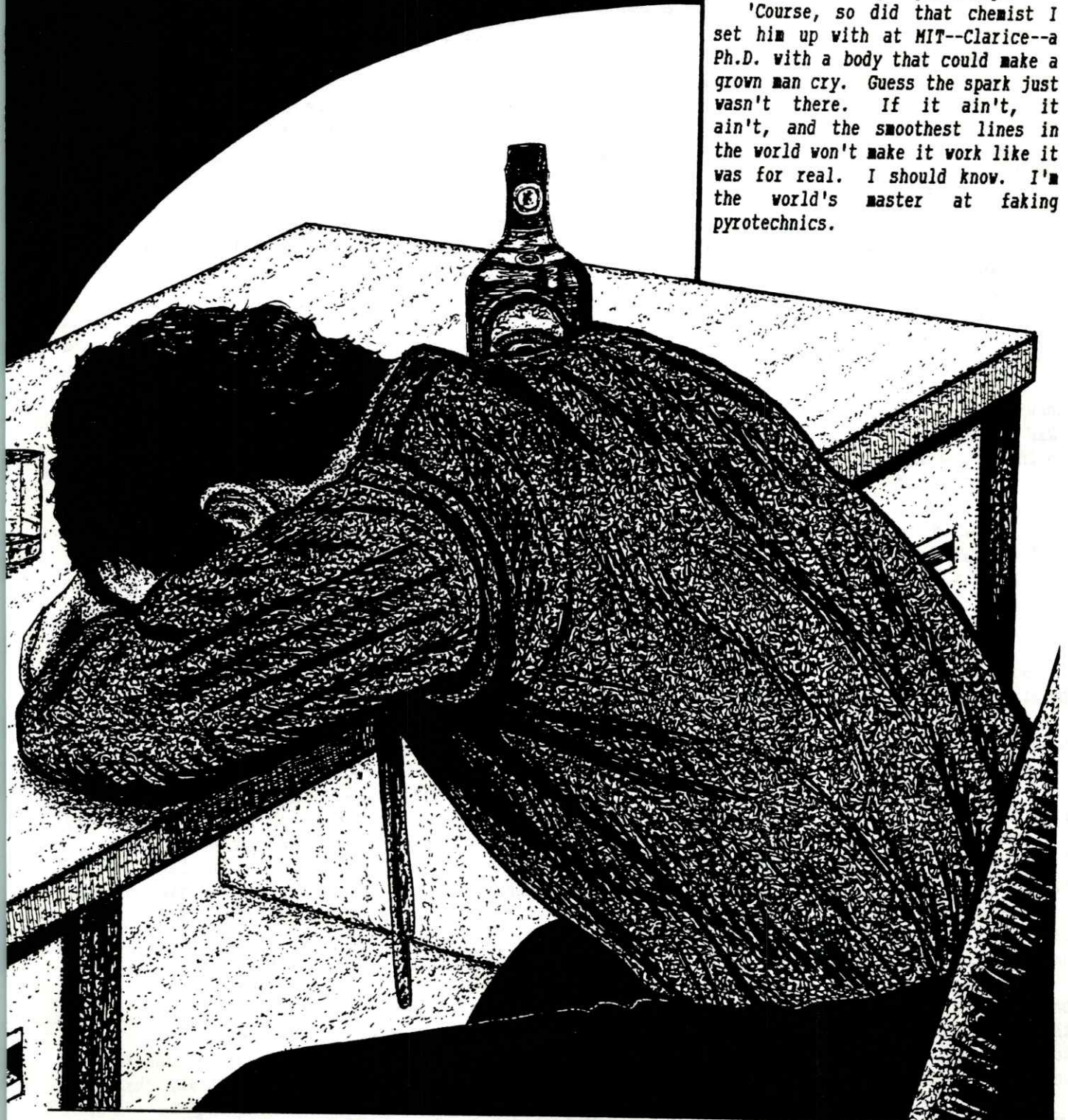
Perhaps, he thought, grinning to himself as he pulled away from the curb, there just may be something to Al Calavicci's Stages Of Love.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Soul Mates"

Geez, I never would have expected it. Sam falling for Donna Elsee. Now that I think about it though, it makes sense. She's a brain, and she's got great legs.

'Course, so did that chemist I set him up with at MIT--Clarice--a Ph.D. with a body that could make a grown man cry. Guess the spark just wasn't there. If it ain't, it ain't, and the smoothest lines in the world won't make it work like it was for real. I should know. I'm the world's master at faking pyrotechnics.



Ruthie's worried...really, really worried about me. About us, I mean.

Okay, so I've been drinkin' a little more lately. It's not the big deal everybody's makin' it out to be. I could quit anytime, if I wanted to. I've just been under a lotta pressure these days from all quarters.

Hell, the only peace I get is when I drink enough to get a little buzz on. Give a guy a break.

If Ruthie'd just get off my back, things would be okay. I just need a little space, a little time, and I don't need her runnin' to Sam with all our problems.

Sam. He's gonna have his hands full with Donna.

I can read all the signs. They've both got it bad--real bad. It's gonna be a hell of a show! I just hope they figure out what's goin' on before they kill each other.

Guess it had to happen sooner or later, him fallin' hard for a woman. At least he had the good sense to fall for a woman like Donna. She'll be good for him.

I've just gotta get my ass in gear and convince the powers-that-be that we need her at STAR BRIGHT as much as we need Sam. We do need another physicist, and I can juggle the budget to see that we can afford her.

I can.

I'm not as washed up as that nozzle Cranston wants everyone to believe.

Not by a long shot.

* * *

Sam was on time the Friday morning. In fact, he arrived at work even before Al or Donna.

Donna. Much as he had done after arriving home from dinner at Al and Ruthie's last night, he again wondered how the captain was going to get approval to keep both of them on the Project.

He really wanted to stay on STAR BRIGHT, but if it came down to there only being one of them, Sam was going to insist that one be Donna.

It would only be fair. She had, after all, been here from the beginning, she ought to be here to see it through to the end.

Reaching the office that he and Donna had been sharing, Sam quickly took his seat behind the desk, ready to get a new start on the day's work. Now that they were no longer adversaries, the days should pass a little more pleasantly

...and perhaps more productively.

Opening the drawer for a pen, he paused a moment and instead took out one of the pencil halves that he and Donna had so childishly fought over. It seemed kind of silly now--two grown adults acting so passionate about a five cent pencil.

Two scientists arguing over a piece of lead and wood.

But it had been more than just a pencil--that had simply been the excuse.

Maybe there was a grain of truth in Al's Stages Of Love theory after all. That first argument with Donna definitely had sexual overtones...at least for him.

Never before had he been so attracted to a woman, as he was in the heat of that battle over the possession of the office and the pencil. He'd wanted to take Donna and kiss her until--

Damn, he was starting to breathe faster just thinking about her.

Glancing down at the pencil, Sam found himself turning it over in his hands. What he'd like to do was something to say he was sorry, not just for the pencil but for this entire past week.

But what?

Suddenly, as inspiration struck, he grabbed the telephone book and immediately opened it up to the yellow pages. Running his finger down the page, he came to the number he wanted.

This would be perfect, he thought, grinning as he picked up the phone. Donna had once suggested that he just act like himself.

And this was definitely a Sam Beckett Idea.

* * *

Sam was still sitting at the desk when Donna arrived. If she noticed the overly innocent look on his face, she didn't mention it.

They were going over the quarterly report forms when Donna got a phone call. While she was talking, Sam watched her brush her dark brown hair behind her ears. She kept it long and loose, and he had an overwhelming urge to run his fingers through it...to feel the silky threads, to--

"That was Al," Donna said as she hung up the phone.

Hastily Sam averted his eyes. What if she could tell what he was thinking?

"When we're done here," she continued as if she hadn't noticed anything unusual, "he wants

us to meet him in the Programming Lab."

"Something wrong?"

She shook her head, returning to her seat beside him and picking up the form they had been going over. "I don't think so. He said there wasn't a hurry."

All business once more, she indicated the form. Unfortunately, the interruption had completely shifted Sam's focus from work.

"This needs to be filled out in triplicate, four times a year," she said, obviously aware that his attention was now centered on her. Still, she endeavored to keep her eyes on the paper. "By January 15th, April 15th, July 15th and October 15th. Send one copy to Records, one to Captain Calavicci and keep one for yourself."

"Donna..."

"Yes?" Her gaze reluctantly shifted to his.

"I...had a great time last night." Sam shrugged. "I just wanted you to know."

Donna smiled softly. "Me too."

Heartened, Sam drew a breath to speak, but a voice from the doorway beat him to it.

"Excuse me, Dr. Elsee?"

They both looked up to see Bobby Jones, the courier, holding an arrangement of roses.

"Yes?"

"These just arrived for you." Bobby carried them over to the desk and set them down.

"Thank you," she said as the young man left.

"Who would be sending me roses?" she asked before leaning down to smell them. She hesitated, then reached into the arrangement to untie an object from the stem of a rose. "What?!"

Amazed, she withdrew a yellow pencil from the midst of the flowers and lifted her eyes to Sam. He grinned sheepishly as she looked accusingly at him.

"You! You sent me these!"

"I was sitting here thinking how silly it was for us to be arguing over a pencil," he began to explain. "And I decided I wanted to say I was sorry. You said to 'be myself'." He studied her expression carefully for a hint as to what she was thinking. "So I did. I'm sorry if you don't like roses."

"No, I love roses," she protested, one hand curled protectively about the flowers. "But you didn't have to send a dozen just to say you're sorry."

"But I wanted to," Sam insisted, afraid that he had again offended her. "Anyway, it's your birthday."

She smiled at him. "Thank you, it's the sweetest thing anyone's done for me in a long time. In fact," she continued, regarding the flowers thoughtfully, "the last time someone did something this sweet was when I was in college. My English professor drove me all the way from Lawrence College in Ohio to Washington, DC to see my father before he shipped out to Vietnam."

Sam hesitated, still trying to read her expression. Ruthie had said Donna's father had left her and her mother...but he wasn't supposed to know that.

Now that things were going so well, he didn't want to jeopardize them by inadvertently saying the wrong thing.

"Did...your father come back okay?" he asked, unsure.

"Yes. He's living in Texas now. He and my mom are divorced, but I stay in touch with them both."

"Your professor must have been a pretty special man if he drove you all that way."

"He was." She smiled at what was obviously a good memory.

"I'm glad your Dad was okay and that you're close. My mother and I are close even though she lives in Hawaii."

"How about your dad?"

A shadow crossed Sam's face. "He died about ten years ago...a heart attack." Donna put a comforting hand on his arm as he lowered his eyes from hers. "My mother tried to get him to stop smoking and cut down on cholesterol, but he was a stubborn man. Finally, his heart couldn't take anymore." Sam took a deep breath. "It was such a waste."

"I'm sorry," Donna said softly. "I know it hurts to lose a father. There was a time when I thought I had lost mine forever."

Sam gave her a half smile. "Sometimes it helps to talk about it." He stood up and gestured to the door. "We'd better get to the lab before Al comes looking for us."

* * *

Sam didn't realize what a huge, stupid grin he had on his face, until he was walking down the corridor, shoulder to shoulder with Donna, and a tech passing in the opposite direction gave him an unusual--but tell all--glance.

Geez, if Al saw him now, he'd think he was an idiot!

He felt giddy from the emotional ups and

downs of the past few days. In a scant few days he had started a new job, moved into a new house, met his one true love--

What?!

The thought stopped him cold.

Now just one moment! Just because he was attracted to her, driven to the state of distraction, infuriated and yet excited by her, it didn't mean that he was in love with her.

Did it?!

Al would probably diagnose a flaming case of lust and prescribe a quick roll in the sack.

But, he countered to himself, when you looked in her eyes, you saw your other half. You know.

Suddenly realizing they had stopped, Sam looked around. They were in front of the elevator. The call button was already illuminated, so he just stood there.

"Do you fugue out like that very often?" Donna asked with a small smile.

"Fugue out?" Sam asked, confused.

"You know, when your mind is somewhere else and you do things automatically without realizing it," she explained. "Smart people do it quite often. They get involved with one problem or another to the exclusion of all else. I got the impression that, just now, you had your mind on other things."

Sam blushed. He had better hope that she had no idea just what those 'other things' were. Let her think it was weighty research for STAR BRIGHT.

"I...I don't know. I suppose I do, sometimes."

"You don't like talking about how smart you are, do you?"

"It makes me uncomfortable," Sam admitted honestly, grateful to change the subject from his thoughts. Being smart was something he was used to dealing with. He could handle this conversation easily. "People usually react in one of two ways. Either they think you're weird or stuck up, or they're ingratiating. I've learned not to bring up my...abilities."

Sam was just beginning to think that the conversation may not be so 'safe' after all, when the elevator arrived.

The doors parted and Gooshie stepped off, giving him a reprieve.

"Finally," the little programmer said. "That elevator is moving slower than usual today. Oh, hello, Dr. Beckett...Dr. Elesee. Captain Calavicci is waiting in the Programming Lab. He asked me to check up on you."

"We're on our way now," Donna reported with a smile, stepping into the elevator with Sam.

"Oh, good." Gooshie joined them in the elevator again, then got right back out. "Oh, I was supposed to call IBM about those chips. Tell Captain Calavicci I'll catch up with him lat--"

The door closed on the little man's sentence.

Sam was amused by the programmer's personality, but after only a few days, he'd realized what an asset Gooshie was to the Project.

Sharing a smile with Donna, he pushed the button for the 4th floor, and the elevator lurched upward, almost knocking him into her.

"Sorry," he said, righting himself as the elevator continued to crawl upward at a snail's pace.

"This is awfully slow," Donna said, a tremor of concern evident in her voice. "I hope we don't get stuck."

Just as she said 'stuck' the elevator ground to a halt. Sam looked up to the indicator lights and saw both the 2nd and 3rd floor lights were on.

"Looks like we are," he said resignedly. "The lights are still on, so we have power. I imagine there is something wrong with the cable systems." Sam looked at Donna, who was standing still with a frozen look on her face. "What's wrong?"

When Donna's eyes met his, she reminded him of a deer, frozen in the middle of the road, mesmerized by the headlights of an approaching car.

Instinctively, he moved closer to her. "Donna, what is it?"

"I have to get out of here," she said desperately. "Sam, you've got to get me out of here, now. I can't breathe. I feel like I'm going to suffocate."

Sam turned to the controls and cautiously started pushing buttons. There was no reaction from any of them except the alarm button, which started a bell ringing somewhere above their heads.

"No, no," Donna cried out, putting her hands over her ears. "I have to get out of here!" Pushing past him, Donna started pounding on the unyielding doors, needless of the bruising that her hands were taking. "Help! Can anybody hear us! Let me out!"

"Donna," Sam called, trying to soothe her,

but feeling as if she didn't--couldn't--hear him in her hysteria. Firmly, he slipped an arm about her shoulders and turned her around to face him. "Calm down, you'll be okay."

She fought him, trying to get away. "No!" Her voice rose against the panic that was winning the battle. "The walls are coming in on us!" Her hands closed into tight fists in his shirt, trying to push him aside to reach the door again. "We've got to get the doors open, or we'll both die."

Sam felt his own throat close in approaching panic. Though he didn't have claustrophobia, he was deathly afraid of high places. He knew how she felt--his own unreasoning acrophobia affected him the same way.

No reasoning could combat it, and no denial could dismiss the danger. She believed they were going to die, and if he didn't do something soon, the panic would completely overwhelm her.

Donna started pounding on his chest, blindly striking out in her terror. Reflexively, he brought her closer to his body to avoid the blows.

Al had once told him that there were two ways to deal with a hysterical woman. One was to slap them, which Sam absolutely refused to do--it went against his grain to hit a woman.

The other way, Al had said, was a lot more fun. 'You kiss them, kiss them real hard, and keep kissing them until they don't remember what they were hysterical about in the first place'.

At this point Sam was about ready to try anything--even Al's advice. Holding the back of Donna's head, he tilted her face up to his.

There was raw panic there, along with anger. He cut off her cry with his mouth pressing firmly against hers, one hand holding her head still, the other one wrapped around her body, forcing her against him so she would not be able to strike him.

She fought him, struggling to get away, but he refused to let her go.

He seemed to kiss her forever, caught up in the heady mix of fear and adrenalin. It wasn't working, he thought desperately, he was going to have to let her go, and then she would be more furious and frightened than ever. He...

From one heart beat to the next, her body changed against him. Slowly, the tension drained from her, changing to response. Pressing against him, she began to return his kisses.

As he loosened his tight hold on her, her

hands slipped from between their bodies and encircled his waist.

Relieved, he found his own concern changing into something different as well. She felt wonderful in his arms. Easing the pressure of his lips, he started to move down to her neck, but she caught his lips again with her own.

With a soft sound of pleasure in his throat, he moved his hands to interlace his fingers in her dark hair. It was even more silky than he imagined.

She released his mouth a fraction and ran her tongue over his lips, outlining them, before darting inside to tease his own tongue. Taking a shaky breath, he inhaled the fragrance of her perfume.

He wanted her...right now, right here in this elevator.

What was the matter with him?!

He leaned his head back, looking at the upturned face so close to his. Her eyes dilated, now almost black with passion instead of fear; her lips parted, awaiting his touch.

She moaned, moving her hands up to bring his head down to kiss her again. Giving in to his desire a fraction, he brought her closer, running his hands down her back, as if trying to merge their bodies into one. Their lips were pressed together as though they could breathe for each other.

One creature.

One soul.

Sam was so intent on the woman in his arms that he didn't notice the elevator starting to move again. They were still locked in the passionate embrace when the alarm stopped and the doors opened with a 'bing' which finally got his attention.

Drawing back from Donna, he opened his eyes...and saw the smiling face of Al and the shocked maintenance man standing beside him in the open elevator door.

"Second Stage, pal," the captain said, giving him a cocky wink. "And don't say I didn't warn you."

Turning on his heel, he left, taking the puzzled but amused technician with him.

"Second stage of what?" Donna asked, confusion mixed with a blush of embarrassment on her face.

She was beautiful, Sam thought with an intensity that was like a blow. More beautiful than he had ever appreciated before this moment.

"Don't ask," he advised, trying to keep his

mind on what she had asked him. "It's one of Al's chauvinistic comments. You really don't want to know."

Donna nodded, then smoothed down her clothes. Self-consciously, she ran a hand over her hair.

"You look fine," Sam assured her, meaning it with every fiber of his being.

Donna smiled. "So do you, except..." She paused, rubbing her finger over the side of his mouth. "...you're wearing my lipstick."

He caught hold of her hand and kissed the fingers that had just touched his lips and looked deep into her dark eyes. "I don't mind."

Donna hesitated, her eyes locked with Sam's. Trembling slightly, she pulled her hand from his grasp, averting her eyes.

"We'd better get to the lab," she said reluctantly. "Al's waiting."

He nodded, then as she was turning away, he stopped her. "Donna?"

"Yes?"

"Will you go out with me?"

"When?"

"Tonight?"

She smiled and nodded. "I'd love to."

"Great!" Sam felt as if he must be beaming that same stupid grin again, but this time he didn't care. Then, in a serious attempt at returning to business, he said, "Let's go see what Al wants."

* * *

What Al wanted was to tell them was that he'd been in touch with Rear Admiral Drennan in Washington and had the go ahead to keep both of them on the payroll...assuming they felt they could manage to work together.

Simultaneously, both physicists assured him that wouldn't be a problem. Al, in a remarkable show of atypical restraint, merely grinned and said that he hadn't expected that it would be.

Then, he had turned them over to Dr. Cranston, who wanted to 'touch base' with them on what he expected their goals and responsibilities to be, since the work force had so unexpectedly been expanded.

The captain had maintained a stiff politeness when it came to directly addressing the small, balding man, and Sam thought anyone would have to be blind not to see the open animosity between the two.

And, he had to admit, he didn't blame Al for leaving the meeting as quickly as the minimum of

politeness would allow. Sam would have liked to have left as well...to have a chance to talk to Donna.

One thing or another prevented an opportunity for him to find a moment alone with her. At noon, he was sitting in the building's cafeteria, trying to keep his mind on the discussion with Al, who had invited him to lunch.

Sam's eyes kept wandering toward the entrance of the cafeteria. Donna had left earlier on a personal errand, but promised to meet them here, and then maybe he would finally get a chance to...talk...to her.

"So Sam, what'd you think of the price of rice in China?" Al asked, leaning on the table and studying the physicist's face as if the question of great importance.

"Well," Sam said, distracted. "I guess... What did you say?"

"You haven't been listening to me for the past five minutes," Al observed with no offense in his tone. "Don't worry, she'll show."

"I'm not worried," Sam protested, not realizing his expression was in direct opposition to his words.

"I haven't seen you this excited about anything since you explained your string theory to me for the first time." At Sam's sheepish expression, the captain shook his head. "When you gonna ask her out?"

"I already have. We're going out tonight."

Al cocked his head at Sam, as if impressed. "You don't waste time, once you get going. What're you gonna do? Dinner and dancing? I know a great nightclub...Hooters."

"Hooters?" Sam asked, then smiled. "Trust you to know a nightclub by that name."

Al returned the grin. "Yeah, and it's called that because inside, behind the bar, they have this big pair of--"

"Al, I get the picture!"

"---barn owls. No cage or nothin'. They just sit there...really tame."

Sam held up a protesting hand. "I'm not taking Donna to a place called 'Hooters'...owls or no owls." He shrugged. "I thought we'd go see the new 'Star Trek' movie, then go out after for a late supper."

"'Star Trek'!" Al said, aghast. "Sam, you don't take a sophisticated woman like Donna Elsee to a kiddie movie, then out for an ice cream soda! Now take my advice and take her to Hooters, or some place...like Tony's."

"No thanks. Last time I took your advice, I almost got my face slapped."

"But you..."

But Sam's attention was on Donna walking in the door. He raised a hand in welcome and she smiled back. She went through the short line to get her food, then joined them at the table.

"Get everything taken care of?" Sam asked as he pulled out the chair next to him for her.

"Yes, thanks. Since I'm staying in town after all," she said, with a grateful look at Al, "I had to make sure they weren't going to shut off my utilities this weekend, and that I could keep my apartment."

Sam nodded. "You must've had a lot of plans to change. Was tonight bad timing?"

"Not at all," she reassured him. "It's fine. What time do you want to leave?"

"That's what I was going to talk with you about. Have you seen 'Star Trek III' yet?" He completely ignored the eloquent way Al rolled his eyes.

"No, I've been meaning to, but I hadn't found the time. I'd love to go."

Sam shot a grin at Al before smiling at Donna. "I thought we might catch the seven o'clock showing then go out to eat afterwards."

"Sounds good. Casual dress?"

Sam nodded. "I'll pick you up around six-fifteen, okay?"

"That'd be fine," Donna said, then started eating her food.

Al followed suite and picked up his fork, shaking his head in amazement.

Sam just smiled.

* * *

The movie theater was fairly full when Sam and Donna arrived, but they managed to find a seat in the middle toward the back. They settled in to enjoy the show with their popcorn and sodas.

In some ways, Sam felt as awkward as a teenage boy on his first date. He wanted to put his arm around Donna, but didn't want to be obvious about it.

He was granted his wish when an exciting part of the movie caused Donna to gasp and lean toward him. He automatically wrapped an arm around her and held her tight until she relaxed. Then he loosened his hold, but kept his arm there, his fingers lightly brushing her hair.

The emotions assailing him were confusing.

It wasn't as if he'd never taken a girl out before. Contrary to what Al believed, he had dated throughout high school and college. Sporadically, he had to admit, and he never really got serious about any one girl. There never seemed to be enough time to commit to a serious relationship.

Not that he'd ever wanted to...until now.

There was something special about Donna. It wasn't just that she was beautiful, although her smile was enough to tie him in knots. It was more than that. When she talked, she had an energy about her, a zest for life and quantum physics.

Sam was thinking very seriously about telling her about his string theory. Here was, he believed, a person who wouldn't laugh when he explained his thoughts about traveling through time. Perhaps, she could even help him.

Right now, he couldn't wait for the movie to be over so he could talk with her. Waiting patiently for the ending credits to roll past, he then helped Donna to her feet.

"What did you think?" he asked as they made their way down the wide, middle corridor.

Donna smiled. "I enjoyed it. I thought Nimoy did a great job of directing. It must be difficult to both direct and star in a movie, but since he really didn't come into the show until the very end, it seemed to work out okay. It was definitely better than the first movie, but I'm not sure if it beats the second."

"I think you're right. I did love the end scene when Spock recognizes Kirk and says, 'Jim, your name is Jim'. I can't imagine what it would be like not to recognize your best friend. And can you imagine how Kirk felt? Not knowing whether Spock was going to be all right."

Donna nodded in agreement. "It would have been pretty scary. I'm anxious to see what they do if they make another one."

They stopped in the lobby and, by mutual consent, broke up to visit the restrooms. Sam was out first and read all of the movie posters while waiting for Donna.

"Where would you like to eat?" he asked her when she emerged from the ladies room.

"Wherever you would like. After all that popcorn, I'm really not very hungry."

"Well, if you want, we could walk around for a while. Or I know a fabulous place to look at the stars. No outside lights for miles in any direction."

"No lights?" Donna asked surprised. "You're

joking. I didn't think such a place existed around here."

"The land belongs to a cousin of mine. He doesn't care if I come up and stargaze. If," he added, "that's what you want to do."

"I'd love to," she agreed, as they walked to the car. "How far is it?"

"It's about ten miles outside town." Opening the door for her, Sam paused. "Are you sure you don't want to eat first?"

"Well...could we stop and get a couple hamburgers and take them with us?"

Sam smiled widely. "That's a great idea. I know just the place."

Once he had pulled the car out into traffic, he headed toward a restaurant that had an old fashioned drive-in section, complete with car hops on roller skates.

As he parked, one of the waitresses saw him and waved. "I'll be right there, Sam!" she yelled over the din of noise.

"Do you come here often?" Donna asked, amused.

Sam smiled sheepishly. "My cousin recommended it the first day I got into town. I think I've eaten here just about every night. They have really good cheeseburgers."

"Let me guess," she said, looking at him speculatively. "You like your cheeseburgers medium rare with extra onion and no tomato."

Sam looked at her amazed. "That's right! How did you know?"

She shrugged. "Psychic, I guess." Then she smiled. "Actually, that's how I like mine."

At that moment the waitress came rolling up and took their orders to go. While they were waiting for their food, Sam told Donna a little more about Indiana and his family.

"Katie has three kids and Tom has two. They're always teasing me about when I'm going to settle down and add to the Beckett clan. I just tell them I'm too busy." He smiled, then looked at Donna seriously. "The truth is, I hadn't found a woman who I thought I could spend the rest of my life with. Until..."

He was interrupted by the arrival of their food. Handing the sack to Donna, he put the cups in their holders on his car doors and paid the waitress.

Once back on the road, they headed straight out of town. Traffic was light and Sam spent a great deal of his time--when he wasn't watching other cars--watching Donna as she talked about her family.

She commented that she had no siblings.

"That could have its advantages, as well as disadvantages," Sam offered. "I mean, I wouldn't trade my brother or sister for anything, but there were times when they'd torment me so much, I'd wish I'd been born an only child. Especially Katie. Every time, I'd show a passing interest in a girl, she'd go into one of her 'Sammy has a girlfriend' tirades. Tom was older, he understood."

Sam pulled off onto a side gravel road and drove on for several miles, then pulled into a drive leading to a gate. He got out, opened the gate and then got back into the car and drove it through.

He stopped the car again, and repeated his maneuver to close the gate, before driving down a dirt road to the edge of a large meadow.

Finally, he stopped the car, but left the headlights on.

Donna got out and looked around in amazement. "You were right," she breathed. "I don't see any lights." Then she looked up. "Sam! Look how bright the stars are!"

Sam came over and joined her. "Yes, they're beautiful, aren't they?" he said, looking up at the sky for a moment, then looking back at her. "I have a old blanket in the back. How about we have a picnic, then we can turn off the headlights and take turns naming the stars?"

"Okay."

He got out the blanket and spread it on the grass. She retrieved the food and joined him. They sat cross legged and enjoyed the hamburgers, laughing over remembered incidents of their childhood.

After they were finished eating, Donna took a napkin and said, "Here," as she motioned him to her.

Confused, Sam obeyed and she wiped the corner of his mouth.

She shoved him the bit of mustard. "You need someone to keep you clean."

He smiled sheepishly. "It's all your fault."

"My fault?"

"Yes, your fault. When I'm with you, you keep me so distracted that I forget all my manners."

"How is it," she asked softly, "that you say these things that should sound like a come-on line, and yet I believe you?" Before he could think of an answer, she thoughtfully continued, "Then again, maybe it's because I feel the same

way."

Sam desperately wanted to kiss her, but he didn't want to frighten her away. She took the matter out of his hands and, closing the small distance between them, pressed her lips firmly against his.

Bringing his arms up, he wrapped them around her, gathering her close to him. Closing his eyes, he enjoyed the kiss, tasting the tang of mustard mixed with the sweetness of her mouth.

Desperately, he wanted to continue, but knew things were moving much too quickly. Reluctantly, he forced himself to pull away.

"We came here to stargaze," he said, wanting to put a little distance between them. "Why don't we try to name some stars like we planned?" He got up and turned off the car's lights, bringing back a flashlight. "I always come prepared," he said with a grin. "You know, the Boy Scouts' motto?"

She grinned back, then turned her attention to the night sky above. "Look, there's Regulus in Leo," she said, pointing. "It's 84 light years away, it's 3.8 times the sun's diameter and it has a magnitude of 1.36."

Sam was impressed. "Very good." He looked low over the western horizon. "You can see Rigel in Orion. It has a magnitude of less than 1, it's 78 times the sun's diameter, and it's a mere 850 light years away. It's also the sixth brightest star in the sky."

The game of trying to name the most stars continued until they decided to call it a halt with a tie.

Donna looked at Sam. "You were right. This is a wonderful place for stargazing."

"I like coming up here. It always makes me think about the immensity of the universe."

"I can see why. I had always thought of the universe as infinite, until someone told me their theory on a finite universe."

"I have a theory related to that, it's really involved and I really haven't proved it yet, but..." He hesitated, not sure whether to go on.

"I'd like to hear about it," she encouraged him.

"Well, all right," he agreed. He looked around.

"What are you looking for?"

"I need a piece of string..." He spied what he needed. "Can I borrow your hair ribbon?" He handed her the flashlight.

She looked at him strangely, but complied

with his request.

Sam held the ribbon out, and said, "Pretend that this ribbon represents your life. This is your birth..." He held up one end. "...and the other is your death. If you tie the ends together," he said, illustrating his point, "they make a loop." He took the loop and gathered it loosely into his palm. "And if you--"

"--ball the string," Donna continued, taking the balled ribbon from his palm, "the days of your life touch each other out of sequence, allowing you to move back and forward through your own lifetime."

Sam looked at her stunned. "How did you know?" he demanded, then answered his own question. "Al told you, didn't he?"

"Al told me nothing. It was a professor I had at Lawrence."

"A physics professor?"

"No, an English Lit professor. Gerald Bryant. The same Gerald Bryant who took me to see my father." Wrapping her arms about her knees, she drew them to her chest. "I thought it was strange that he knew so much about physics...even though he said he read a lot, and once had a girlfriend who was a physicist. At first I wrote him off as a crack pot." She frowned at the memory. "He had a drinking problem, but...his theory seemed workable."

"How long ago was this?" Sam asked, uneasily remembering Al's admonitions a decade ago about not sharing his theories so freely.

"1972," she replied after some thought.

"That's around the time I was working out my string theory with Professor LoNigro...in his cabin, up at the cabin by the lake..." He stood up and paced around. "How could an English professor in Ohio come up, with exactly the same idea I came up with in Massachusetts?"

"Well, you know, I wondered about how he came up with it back then too. It was really weird. He'd been drinking a lot for a long time..." She shook her head regretfully. "I finally put it down to some sort of drunken delusion, but I never forgot it and I never forgot Professor Bryant. As a matter of fact, the day he told me his theory, was the same day he drove me all that way to see my dad."

Thoughtfully, she tilted her head back to stare unseeing at the stars.

"The really odd thing about Professor Bryant, was that when I went back several days later to talk with him about it, he didn't know

anything about either one."

"You're right. That is weird."

As if on impulse, she turned to him. "Do you think it could work?" she asked seriously, as if the answer were of great importance to her.

Sam thought briefly of the time in Hawaii, on Katie's back steps, when Al had suggested that he might have already gone back and changed history.

Had he been in Ohio in 1972?

But how could he have been? He distinctly remembered being in Massachusetts. That wasn't the way his theory was supposed to work.

Donna was still waiting for an answer to her question.

"I don't know," Sam admitted. "I want to say 'yes', but until I actually develop the technology, I can't be sure. But I can tell you this, I'm sure going to try to find out." He regarded her intently. "You're a quantum physicist, do you think it will work?"

"I certainly think it's worth a try."

Sam smiled. "Maybe someday, we can both work on it. Together."

"Together," Donna repeated softly. She looked at him in the starlight. "You know something, Sam Beckett?"

"What?"

"I think that's worth a try too."

* * *

First thing Monday morning, Sam stopped by Al's office. Knocking once on the outer door, he stuck his head in.

"Good morning, Turner...uh...Lieutenant...er Lieutenant Turner..." he fumbled, still awkward at addressing the uniformed woman as he would a man. But that was the Navy for you--indiscriminating and all business. "Is Al...I mean...Captain Calavicci in?"

She looked up and smiled, but it was a tight expression. "Yes, Dr. Beckett, but he's in conference with Dr. Cranston right now."

Stepping into the outer office, Sam cast a look at the firmly shut door to his friend's inner space. Even through the heavy wood, he could hear the sound of a heated argument.

Hesitating, he turned back to the Navy lieutenant who was Al's personal aide as well as his secretary. He intended to ask what she thought was going on, but thought better of it when he saw the wary look she was giving him.

She was loyal to her boss, he realized, and

wasn't going to give anything away until she knew whether or not she could trust him.

"How much longer do you think he'll be?" Sam asked.

"I couldn't say," she answered evenly, as if she couldn't hear Cranston's raised voice from within Al's office.

Sam wished unwillingly that he could hear what they were saying, so he would have an idea what was going on with his friend.

Lieutenant Turner drew his attention again. "But I'll be happy to give him a message when he's free."

"Sure," Sam agreed. "That'd be fine. Have him call me. I'll be in my office."

He cast another look at the closed door. His original purpose had been nothing other than to tell Al how wonderfully his first date with Donna had gone, but now he had another agenda.

"Tell him it's important, okay?"

"Certainly, Dr. Beckett," she agreed, taking a message pad out to make the note.

"Sam," he corrected with a friendly smile.

Looking up, she returned the smile--this one definitely a bit more genuine.

"Sam," she said. "But only if you call me Anne."

Nodding, the physicist withdrew. He had work to do and Anne had promised to give Al the message.

As soon as Cranston was gone, he would get his chance to talk to Al and find out just what the hell was going on around here, behind all the closed doors.

* * *

The morning slipped away before Sam realized it. Working with Donna on a research question, he found the time passed quickly without either one of them being aware of it.

It was only when they went together to see Gooshie and ask his opinion, that they found it was noon and most of the staff had left for lunch.

Including Gooshie.

And including Al.

Assuring Sam his message had been delivered, Anne also told them 'the captain was out', when they went to invite him to lunch.

Sam found his uneasiness dispelled a bit when he and Donna went down to the cafeteria. Now that they had declared a truce, he enjoyed her company, and found that being with her took

his mind off his other troubles. But when he dropped her off at their office and went back to try to catch Al, it all came flooding back again at full strength.

Walking into the captain's domain, he saw Anne sitting at her desk. The door to Al's inner office was open, revealing that he was nowhere to be seen, and Annie's eyes were suspiciously red.

His gaze traveling uneasily from her to the empty office and back again, Sam said, "Where is he?"

"He..."

"Yes, Turner," Cranston's voice came from behind him. "Where is he? He was supposed to have those Helena Labs bids for me by now."

"Captain Calavicci was called away," Lt. Turner answered, her expression changing as she regarded the balding man who had entered behind Sam.

"Where?" Cranston snapped. "For another lunch meeting that's going to last 'til three? Or another short day that ended at eleven?"

"Captain Calavicci was called away," the young woman repeated firmly, and Sam had to admire her nerve.

Cranston, short and dumpy as he was, was imposing even to him when he put on his official 'Co-Ordinator' airs.

"He will be in his office tomorrow morning, if you'd like to leave a message, Doctor."

"A message that will undoubtedly go unanswered," Cranston said in disgust. "Like all the others I leave him." His gaze shifted to Sam. "You wouldn't know where he was, would you, Beckett?"

Sam felt both pairs of eyes turn to him, Cranston's angry, Anne's oddly entreating.

"Well, I..." He wasn't any good at shading truths, but for Al's sake he'd give it a try. "Yesterday, he said something about meeting a sales rep from IBM, to shake loose that hardware Gooshie was needing."

"IBM," Cranston repeated. "Gushman should have ordered that updated chip two weeks ago, but as slow as Calavicci is at getting around to papervork lately, I'm not surprised."

Sam swallowed hard against the urge to put Cranston in his place and defend his friend. Finesse was called for here, not letting the guy have it as he so badly wanted to do. "Gooshie didn't know he needed it until last Sunday. I heard him ask Al about it then."

Cranston turned a narrowed eye toward Al's

office, as if willing the man to appear so he could tear strips off him in person.

Sam shot a pleading look for help to Anne.

"And a week's pretty good turn around on something like that," she volunteered. "I know Captain Calavicci spoke to someone at IBM last Monday. And he did mention intending to follow up again because Dr. Gushman was needing the things he ordered."

Grunting, Cranston turned on his heel, saying, "We'll see." It sounded like a threat.

When the sound of his heels died away in the hall beyond, Sam let out a long breath that he hadn't realized he was holding, and met Anne's eyes.

A look of understanding passed between them.

"Do you think Al's at home?" Sam asked quietly.

"I don't know," she answered. "If he is, I doubt he'll answer his phone." She hesitated, then as if it were an afterthought that Sam could make of what he wanted, she added, "His wife left a message for him this morning, that she was going to be at her parent's place until this evening."

"Okay," Sam said, acknowledging what she was trying to tell him. "Thanks."

Wheeling about--an unconscious imitation of Cranston--Sam left the office, intent on his purpose.

After sharing this news with Donna, who volunteered to cover for him, he left the Project and drove straight to Al's house in San José.

* * *

Parking in the driveway behind the captain's silver Corvette, Sam took the few steps to the porch in a leap and knocked on the front door.

And knocked.

And knocked.

Finally he heard movement within and waited impatiently for his friend to open the door. When Al did, Sam blinked in surprise. He had expected...well, he wasn't sure exactly what he expected, but it wasn't to find Al looking pale but sober.

Regarding him, Sam frowned a bit. "You okay?"

"Sure," Al answered. "I've got one helluva headache though...which your banging didn't help." Stepping back, he motioned Sam in with a quick, irritated wave of his hand. "What's

goin' on?"

The physicist stepped into the hall which, when Al closed the door, he found to be dimly lit despite the sunlight outside--Al had drawn all the window shades and pulled all the drapes in his desire for darkness.

"I, unh...was about to ask you the same thing."

Shaking his head, then wincing as if it hurt, the older man turned away. "Nothing's goin' on," he denied, moving into the living room.

"Look, Al," Sam said, following. As the other man slumped down on the couch and raised an ice bag to his head, Sam moved to stand before him, his hands on his hips. "I was in your office this morning, and I heard you arguing with Cranston--again. He made it sound like you've done this before--"

"Done what before?"

"Skipped out of work. Played hookey." Sam stopped just short of saying 'shirked your duties'. After all, he had no proof of that, only Cranston's accusations.

Lowering his ice bag, Al looked up with a suspicious eye. "Just what're you accusing me of?"

"I'm not accusing you of anything," Sam said, consciously readjusting his stance to look less threatening. It seemed to work, because Al looked away and smirked. "I'm just--"

--worried about me," Al snapped, looking back, this time with a glare. "Well, don't be. I can handle that nozzle. I don't need you followin' me around, checkin' up on me too. Cranston and Ruthie are doin' a fine job of that on their own!"

Running a hand through his hair, Al replaced the ice bag, leaned back and gestured toward the door. "Right now I've got a jack hammer workin' overtime in my skull, so if you don't mind, I'd like to just die in peace."

"Why do you have a headache?" Sam asked, determined, this time, to get to the bottom of it. "Are you hungover? Is that why Ruthie's not here? Is that why you and Cranston were fighting?"

Standing up in one swift and violent movement, the smaller man's eyes narrowed as he squared off with him. For one terrible moment, Sam was faced with the horrible possibility of repeating the argument they'd had when Al married Eva.

Then, quite unexpectedly, the fire died from Al's eyes and he just looked tired.

Or sick.

"Listen, Sam," he said, "you and me...we're buddies, right? Good buddies." His tone abruptly switched to a deadly evenness that was more a warning than a shout could have been. "But that doesn't give you the right to pry into my personal life like this."

"But--"

"I know you mean well, but you ain't in my shoes, and I'm not askin' you to be. I've gotta headache, that's all. Maybe it's this flu that's goin' around. Now go back to the Project and get to work...and leave me alone."

"But, Al..."

Al actually decided to smile at his resistance. "No buts, kid. Look, I'm a big boy, I can fight my own fights. I've been sluggin' it out with bullies like Cranston since before you were born. Now go on, scram. I wanna go lay down."

Sam hesitated, searching Al's face for some clue, some hint that his staying would do any good.

But there was no welcome in the older man's features, despite the tight smile, only a set refusal to discuss the topic any more.

"Okay," Sam agreed unwillingly. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure," Al said, laying a hand on Sam's shoulder to reinforce his point.

Feeling awkward, Sam turned to go. He paused in the living room doorway and looked back at Al, who had lowered himself back to the couch.

"You know, Al, if you need anything..."

"It's a headache, Sam," the captain insisted. "Not a brain tumor. Go on, get outta here. I'll see you tomorrow."

Still reluctant to leave, Sam watched as Al raised his ice bag again, a move which completely cut off eye contact.

Then, slowly, he turned and let himself out into the brilliant spring sunshine that was such a contrast to the darkness inside the house.

Suppressing a shudder, which crept up on him unawares, he walked to the edge of the porch where the scent of Ruthie's climbing roses was the strongest.

If Al wasn't talking, there was nothing he could do. Nothing except be there, waiting, until he was ready to open up.

Remembering the closed, guarded look on his friend's face, Sam was not at all sure that was going to be soon.

* * *

Sam's a good guy. Jumped right in and started slugging. With some guys, it would take them a month or more just to get up to speed before they could make any kind of worthwhile contribution at all.

Not Sam Beckett.

He's already clicking away with that mega-speed brain of his...him and Donna, since I managed to convince the powers-that-be that two brains are better than one.

Any day now, we're gonna make that 'amazing breakthrough' that'll lift this Project off the ground and send it right into orbit.

That is, if Sam and Donna don't go into orbit first.

I always thought the kid was kinda backwards in the ways of love. Guess I was wrong. What time Sam isn't in the lab, he's out with Donna. Hell, the time he's in the lab, he's with Donna.

Maybe, I ought to warn him about burning the candle from both ends?

Nah, let him have some fun while he can. He deserves it.

I'm gonna clean up my act. I am. I'm gonna get back in the pilot's seat, when I'm not sure how I got ejected from it in the first place. I'm gonna do it too, as soon as I get Cranston and the Washington vultures off my back.

That nozzle never did solve the Mystery Of The Vandalized Vending Machine, but he's so dead set certain I was at fault, he's been working overtime ever since, tryin' to bust my butt for any damn thing he can.

I gotta be real careful where I step. I really should remember to get rid of that scotch bottle outta my bottom desk drawer...take it home, or drink it before--

Sam's right though. Maybe I have been drinking too much.

Sam. He may be a bit slow outta the starter's blocks when it comes to women, but he's certainly no slouch when it comes to computers--

Did I say that already?

If I could, I'd put him into Cranston's position at the drop of a hat--Sam Beckett, Research Co-Ordinator. Give the kid full rein to consolidate the whole damn team and bring this thing together so fast it'd make your head spin.

He could do it too. Of that I have no doubt. Geez...Cranston would scream bloody murder if

I tossed him outta the job and gave it to Sam!

So would Admiral Drennan, who appointed that thorn in my side in the first place. I know it's Cranston who's been whinin' to Drennan and the Big Brass that I'm not runnin' things to suit. If things were different, I'd toss that little SOB out on his ear faster than he could say 'quantum physicist'.

If things were different. As shaky as I am around here right now, I'd probably fall flat on my own butt if I tried.

Damn it, I just need time to build up some momentum again...you know? Both here at STAR BRIGHT and on the domestic front.

Ruthie's patience is wearin' a little thin. I can tell...from the way she looks at me when I stagger in, from some of the spiteful things she says. But somehow, it's the things she doesn't say that tell me the most.

The hell of it is, I know it's not her fault. I'm just...goin' through a tough time right now. I know I should sit down and talk to her about it, but sometimes getting so drunk that I pass out is a helluva lot easier than listening to her preach.

Damn, bet she got that from Sam...

You should see Sam go. Any day now, we're gonna have that breakthrough we need. We're gonna plug right into the MIT team's work and have ourselves a moving hologram capability like the world's never seen.

Any day now.

Maybe even before I finish this drink.

Any damn day.

Or this bottle.

* * *

Despite Sam's vow to be available for Al, it didn't seem as if the captain was going to take him up on it. The day after their talk, Al had been his old cocky self, as if the conversation in the dimly lit living room had never taken place.

He had questioned Sam lightly about how his first date with Donna had gone, teased him briefly about 'Trekks in love', and gone on with life as usual.

On the surface, things seemed to be getting better. Several days passed and Al hadn't been on any drinking binges--not obvious ones anyway.

Through the Project network of gossip, Sam had heard rumblings that the tension still existed between Al and Cranston. But, since it

soon became known that he and Al were good friends, no one volunteered any specific information. To him...or to Donna.

And Al certainly wasn't talking.

That left him pretty much in the dark about the status of things. Al knew where Sam was if he needed him, and that was all, at present, that he could do for him.

Nearly three weeks later, mid-afternoon on a sunny Friday, Sam was sitting in the office that he and Donna now officially shared. Al had offered to get him one of his own, but by then the two physicists were working well together, so they just requested another desk. The bookshelves and file cabinets, they shared.

Al had teased Sam when he'd brought in the requisition for the desk--fortunately out of Donna's hearing. The captain claimed that he knew why they wanted to share the same office.

'Some of my best memories include a desk in an office,' Al had said with a wink. 'There was this girl at MIT who really got her kicks doing the Horizontal Tango on the desk. I think part of the thrill was the possibility of getting caught.'

Embarrassed, Sam had protested that nothing was going on in the office except duties required by their job. Al had just nodded smugly.

'Sure, pal, that's exactly what I'd say when somebody came knocking on the door, asking if we were okay. I guess we got a little over enthusiastic sometimes and made a little too much noise.'

Now, sitting at that new desk, Sam brought himself back to the present with a shake of his head, trying to dispel the imagery and concentrate on the report in front of him.

He wanted to look up at Donna, but didn't. The work was simple enough, but he could easily waste five minutes just staring at her. And he had to get this report done before he left for the weekend.

He had finished the next to last page when his telephone rang. He picked it up, still reading the report, and answered distractedly, "Dr. Beckett."

"Hey, Little Brother, how you doing?" The voice, and the greeting, was unmistakable.

Sam dropped the papers and smiled widely. "Tom!" As Donna reacted to his excited voice and looked up, he put his hand over the receiver and said, "It's my brother, Tom."

Tom was talking and Sam brought his attention

back to the phone. "...and I got a weekend liberty and thought since I was in the area, I'd give you a call."

"You're in town?"

"Yeah, closer than you think. I'm heading back to home base tomorrow."

"You can stay at my place," Sam offered. "That is, unless you have something else planned."

"No, I really hadn't planned anything else. I was hoping you'd put me up, otherwise I was going to get a motel."

"Great, where are you at now?"

"In a phone booth, Little Brother. And I thought you were the genius of the family."

Grimacing at the old jibe, Sam looked at his watch. It was ten after three. He normally didn't leave STAR BRIGHT until six.

"How about meeting me here and I'll show you around the Project? Then we can all go out and eat."

"All?" Tom teased. "Does that mean I finally get to meet this woman you've been raving about?"

"If you're lucky," Sam shot back. "You'd better be on your best behavior, or I'll tell Melinda on you. You have the Project's address?"

"Yeah, Moffett Field NAS."

"In the Ames Research complex. Just stop at the front desk and ask for me," Sam instructed.

"Okay, see ya, Sam."

"Bye, Tom." Sam hung up and turned excitedly to Donna. "Tom's in town and he's going to spend the night with me."

Donna smiled. "I figured that out from the conversation. If you want to cancel our date tonight, I'll understand."

"Oh, no. If it's okay with you, we'll just take Tom out to eat with us."

"That's sounds fine. I'm looking forward to finally meeting your brother. Although, after all you've told me about him, I sort of feel like I already know him."

Sam cocked his head, considering for a moment. "I sure hope he can live up to your expectations," he teased.

She smiled fondly, and he found it was so easy for him to be distracted by her. But then, if he didn't get his work done before Tom arrived...

Changing tact, he indicated the report in front of him. "I'd better see if I can finish this before he gets here...so quit distracting

me."

"Me?" Donna asked, innocently batting her eyelashes.

Sam rolled his eyes in mock annoyance, grinned, then looked determinedly at his work.

Several minutes passed before he realized his mind had wandered elsewhere. "I wonder if Al would like to come, too..."

"Here," Donna said, suppressing a grin as she held out her hand. "Give me that. I'll finish the report and you go ask him."

He smiled at her. "Donna," he breathed truly gratified, just as the office door began to open, "you're incredible..."

"Incredible'?" questioned a familiar voice. "That's exactly what Danessa used to say about me!"

Both Sam and Donna looked at the door, which had only opened a few inches and still hiding their obvious visitor.

There was silence for about ten seconds, then a belated knock and, "Unh...you all decent in here?"

At that, Al poked his head around the door, his hands covering his eyes.

"Al," Sam protested, shooting a glance at Donna, who just shook her head tolerantly. "Of course, we're decent."

"Good, you better be," came the unrepentant reply. He uncovered his eyes and went on. "Or else I wouldn't be able to let this VIP visitor in." He moved aside to allow a fully uniformed Navy commander to walk through the door.

"Tom!" Sam exclaimed and got up to greet his brother. After a hearty round of hugging and back pounding, they drew apart. "But...how'd you get here so fast? I only talked with you a few minutes ago?"

"I told you I was closer than you thought," Tom said, shooting a grin at Al.

"Yeah, well," Al explained, "I found this guy loitering around the phones near the front desk and offered to escort him up here." He shrugged, grinning at the Naval officer. "It was either here or the brig."

Tom swept Sam into another quick hug. "It's good to see you, Little Brother."

Sam stood back and poked him in the stomach with a finger. "Putting on a little weight, are we?"

Tom smiled sheepishly. "What can I say? Melinda's a great cook and I'm not getting any younger. Just wait until you find someone who can cook more than TV dinners."

Al laughed. "Sam can pile it in and still not gain any weight. All his calories must go to fuel that mega-brain of his."

Sam saw Donna standing to the side and remembered introductions were in order. "Hey, Tom, I want you to meet my colleague, Dr. Donna Elesee. Donna, this is my brother, Tom."

Tom straightened the shoulders of his dress whites and nodded his head. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Elesee. Sam's told me all about you."

"Call me Donna, please. Sam's told me about you, too."

Tom feigned a look of concern at his brother. "And she still wants to go out with you?"

Sam grinned. "Al," he said, "I was going to show Tom around, if that's okay."

"Sure, go ahead." The Project Director gestured to the card hanging from Tom's pocket flap. "I got him a Visitor's Badge before I brought him in." Turning to leave, Al extended a hand toward Tom. "Good seein' you again."

"Oh, hey, Al," Sam said to forestall the man after the handshake. When he turned, he added, "We're all going out to eat tonight. You and Ruthie want to join us?"

There was a visible change in Al's cheerfulness. "Unh, no thanks," he said, covering, hedging toward the door. "I promised Ruthie I'd...be home early...and we'd go to her parents. Y'know...sundown Friday's the start of the Sabbath and all that. She'll have a fit if I'm not there." He gave Tom a wink which seemed oddly forced. "Anything to keep peace in the family, right? Have a good time."

"Okay," Sam said, watching the older man leave the room.

The relationship between Al and Ruthie still worried him. But Al wasn't talking...and after the dinner a month ago, neither was Ruthie. She seemed to be spending more and more time with her parents lately, and as a result her path rarely crossed his.

And, his conscience pricked him, he hadn't been around as much lately to make sure he was available and offer any support. He needed to do better, maybe invite Al and Ruthie over to his place next week.

With that resolution, he turned back to Tom. "Well, Tom, where should we start on this tour?" Looking around, he said, "This, of course, is my office."

"Our office," Donna corrected quickly,

studiously reading Sam's report.

Reminded of the fight they had over the possession of the room and the pencil, Sam burst into laughter, and was joined by Donna.

"Our office," Sam conceded, getting himself under control.

"Am I missing something here?" Tom asked confused by the two laughing physicists.

"Oh, it was just a little misunderstanding," Sam explained. "I'll tell you about it sometime."

"Then come to me, Tom, and I'll give you the real story," Donna said, tongue in cheek.

Knowing that he was being teased, Sam decided to play along. Giving her a look that promised retribution, and receiving a unrepentant grin in return, he turned back to his brother.

"You'll have to forgive Donna, she hasn't gotten over the fact she lost the argument."

"Lost the argument!" exclaimed Donna. "I lost the argument?"

"Yes, well, it's nice of you to admit it," Sam said smoothly. To Tom he said, "Come on, I'll show you around." At the door, he paused, and a little more seriously asked, "You want to come, Donna?"

She shook her head, indicating the unfinished report. "Somebody's got to do the work around here," she said, getting some of her own back. Then without warning, she stood up and crossed to him and Tom. "Have fun showing your brother around," she said, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek.

Sam was a little embarrassed, but nonetheless pleased that Donna kissed him--even in an innocent fashion--in front of his brother. That meant she didn't mind Tom knowing how she felt about him.

He was sure that it also meant that he was going to receive some real ribbing from his big brother.

On the last count he was completely wrong.

"You have great taste," was all that Tom said, as they started to tour the facility.

Sam relaxed, easily slipping back into that instant rapport he shared with Tom, and enthusiastically began to explain each part of the Project.

* * *

It was past four-thirty when their tour ended in D Block, which housed most of the Project's surplus stores. There was no one around at this

time on a Friday afternoon, and the polished white corridors seemed awfully long and lonely.

Coming to a stop outside a random storage room, Sam fished in his pocket for his key-card, then let himself and Tom into the small room. The door automatically locked behind them.

"This is nice, Sam," Tom said sarcastically, stepping into the middle of the store room and looking up and down the shelves that held roll upon roll of white toilet paper. He turned with a wry grin. "I'm glad you saved the best for last."

Sam came forward, joining his brother, with little care for the contents of the room. The fact that it was private was all that mattered. He had been wanting to speak to Tom alone for the last hour!

"So, what do you think?"

"What are you talking about?" Tom said, his face a little too innocent. "The Project?"

"No, Donna," Sam said, well aware of his brother's teasing. "What do you think of Donna?"

"Well, considering I only talked to her for a full five minutes, I would have to say she seems nice enough."

"Nice enough!" Sam exclaimed. "You meet a beautiful, intelligent woman and all you can say is 'nice enough'?"

"Well, that and...when are you gonna ask her to marry you?"

Stunned, Sam's mouth dropped open in shock. "Marry me?"

Tom clapped him on the shoulder and chuckled. "Sorry, Sam, but I'm already taken."

"Tom," Sam began, "I..."

"You love her." Tom grinned. "That much is obvious, Little Brother. And as far as I can see, she's suitable in every way. Or did you whip me in here..." He gestured at their way-out-of-the-way surroundings. "...to let me in on the family secret that she has some dreadful disease, or comes from a bad background?"

"Of course not," Sam protested, finding his voice, knowing he was being teased but unable not to defend her. "Her father's a colonel in the Army."

"That can be overlooked," Tom said easily. "So what's stopping you from asking her?"

"Well...I've...only known her a month."
"So?"

"So I don't know if she would say 'yes'."

"There's only one way to find out."

"But what if she says 'no'?"

Tom shook his head. "I never thought you were a coward, Sam."

The accusation stung. "I'm not a coward. I love Donna...more than anything."

Tom nodded, accepting. "Do you want to spend the rest of your life with her? Grow old with her?"

"Yes," Sam said firmly, without even having to think about the answer.

"So, ask her. Wait too long, and somebody else may come along and sweep her away. You're lucky she hasn't been asked before this."

"She was," Sam admitted, dipping his eyes. "Some jerk named Robert. She caught him fooling around with her best friend, because she'd told him she wanted to wait until after they were married to...you know..."

"It's called 'make love'," Tom said with a slight grin for Sam's bashfulness. "You're a big boy now, you can say it. And neither it nor waiting is anything to be embarrassed about. Melinda and I did."

Sam's head came up. "You did?"

"Yeah," Tom agreed. "Made it all that much more special on our wedding night." He paused, obviously thinking. "So, this is what you do. You ask Donna to marry you, but whatever you do, don't make love to her until after the wedding. Even if she begs you, wait. She'll love you for it." He grinned, then added, "Of course, for your own piece of mind, don't have a long engagement. Have the wedding a.s.a.p."

"She has to agree to it first," Sam reminded him wryly.

Tom clapped him on the back. "Don't worry, Little Brother, if she's as smart as you say she is, she will. Now," he said with the teasing grin Sam remembered, "you got another interesting store room for me to look at or what?"

* * *

Saturday was the day, Sam decided, the day he would ask Donna to marry him. Like he'd told Tom just yesterday afternoon, he'd only known her for a month, but after the first few days he felt like he'd known her forever.

Right from their very first kiss, his heart had known that she was the one.

Her history had stopped him from moving too fast--afraid that she would shy away like an animal not used to people. And he'd wanted her to get used to him, to see that he wasn't like

Robert, who had clearly only wanted her for her body and who had betrayed her.

But Sam Beckett did want her body. The constant ache inside told him that. The difference was, he didn't 'only' want her for that.

There were moments that he would just sit and watch her as she did calculations, or watched movies, or gazed at the stars. He would sit and marvel how beautiful she was, how her dark hair shone, or how she would bite on the end of her pencil when she was deep in thought.

Sometimes, she would catch him watching, and sometimes she would blush and look away. Other times she would look back at him with a type of restrained hunger in her eyes.

It was those other times that Sam had to hold an intense control over his desires. That smoldering look instinctively told him that she probably would not reject his advances, but he wanted more than a one night stand.

He wanted forever.

Now, he just had to come up with a way to ask for it. He should have asked Tom how he'd proposed to Melinda. After they'd dropped Donna home from the restaurant, he and Tom had spent half the night talking, getting caught up in all the news of family and friends.

It was great seeing his big brother again and he was sorry to see him leave so soon, when this morning he dropped him off at Alameda NAS.

A dozen different options for proposals were considered and rejected. A letter, an ad in the local paper, an announcement over the loudspeaker, all seemed too impersonal and embarrassing.

He remembered reading how a man had replaced the prize out of a Cracker Jacks box with an engagement ring.

But no, he didn't even know if Donna liked Cracker Jacks.

He thought of sending roses with a note and a ring. It would be a nice touch, but he wanted to ask her in person and he thought it would be better to let her help pick out her own ring, since she was the one who was going to wear it.

He could take the traditional approach and get down on bended knee, but he had the feeling he'd look silly and she'd laugh at him.

No, it had to be romantic without being mushy.

A Sam Beckett Idea...

Then it stuck him. There was supposed to be a meteor shower Monday night and they had

tentatively planned on watching it from 'their lookout'. Maybe that would be a good time.

Then again, perhaps, he should ask Al. The captain had been married three times, after all. Surely he knew a good way to propose marriage to a woman...

But, thinking of Donna urging him to just be himself, he quickly rejected the idea.

Maybe he should go to the library and read up on the different customs and find something there?

Geez, if all else failed, he could just blurt it out...

* * *

It was a warm spring night. Sam and Donna were sitting on the blanket next to a half empty bottle of wine and the remnants of cheese and crackers. They had been watching the 'falling stars' for some forty-five minutes, marveling over each meteor as it streaked across the sky.

Sam turned to Donna after one particularly bright meteor and quoted, "Then came the explosion followed by the filling of the heavens with smoke. We came too late to do no more than visualize the splendor of creation's birthday'."

"Lemaitre's PRIMEVAL ATOM," Donna said.

"I'm surprised you recognized it," Sam returned, pleased. "It was from one of his early works."

"Someone I knew once called it 'the poetry of physics'," Donna said absently. "It's beautiful, but I don't know how defensible it is. I was taught that the universe was infinite."

"His theory was based on an expanding but finite universe which wasn't very popular at the time. He thought that if we trace back to the beginning of time, the entire universe must have been a single particle, a vast primeval atom with a zero radius. Then as the universe expanded, this giant nucleus explosively split up into smaller and smaller units, atoms the size of galaxies decaying into atoms the size of suns and so on down to our present-day atoms."

"But if the universe is finite, then it must have an end. What is it going to do then, expand into nothingness?"

"Everything in nature has a beginning and an end--human life, plant life, planets, even stars. What started the universe and what ends it will always remain a mystery to us mere humans. We can only theorize."

Donna regarded him with interest. "Do you believe in a supreme being?"

"God? I was brought up in a little Baptist church. Then I went to college and studied science. Some scientists don't believe in God, but when I became a doctor and saw my first birth, there was no way I could deny His existence."

Sam leaned back on his elbows and gazed up at the stars.

"I'd seen calves being born on our farm, but there was something different about the birth of a human being." Thoughtfully, he considered the heavens above him. "That little creature was started from just a microscopic egg and sperm and it grew to become a living person. Sometimes..." He turned to Donna, meeting her eyes with a small smile. "...I envy you women that."

She looked at him, surprised. "What?"

"You have the ability to bring forth new life, to create a human being. The greatest miracle. As a man, I can only assist."

Donna smiled fondly. "I'm sure you would make a great father, Sam."

Sam felt his heart contract with something that was near a physical ache. He loved her more than he could ever tell her, and could find no way to say it.

"Someday, I want to be a father, to have a son or a daughter, to love and teach."

Drawn, his eyes searched her face and saw compassion there...and was it love?

"I want a family," he confessed with a heartfelt sincerity, "a wife, a mother to my children. A special woman who loves me as much as I love her. A woman I want to have beside me for all our lives...and beyond."

Looking into her eyes, he saw understanding and knew that this was the moment to tell her all that he felt in his heart.

"I think you're that woman, Donna. I knew it the first time that we met." His lips twitched in a half smile. "Even when I was busy making a fool of myself. I want you to be my wife, and the mother of my children. I want to share all the wonder I find in the world with you, for all time."

Unconsciously, he took her hands into his. "Will you marry me?"

In the moonlight, he saw tears brimming in her eyes and he was suddenly afraid. Afraid that she was going to say 'no'.

He should have waited.

How could he have been so stupid? Why did he bring up kids? What if she thought he only wanted her to give him children? What if...

A tremulous smile softened her face, and she answered so quietly that he could hardly hear. "Yes, Sam, I'll marry you."

Relief flooded through him, so clear and bright that he felt it must shine from him like a beacon. "You will?"

"Yes," she repeated, barely getting the word out as he swept her up into his arms and kissed her.

Above them, the last lone falling star swept over the heavens, tracing a shining path among the glory of the stars.

* * *

It was nearing midnight when Sam drove Donna home and saw her safely to her door. They had lingered beneath the stars, discussing plans for their wedding, talking about the future.

Their future.

Sam found himself smiling as he let himself into his apartment. There were so many possibilities, so many exciting things to consider.

They had discussed buying a house, but decided that since STAR BRIGHT would not continue indefinitely, they would move into Donna's place after the wedding.

The wedding. That was not that far in the future and--Sam grinned--it wasn't just because he was taking Tom's advice. Donna was as anxious as he for it to take place.

They had decided to have a small, intimate wedding at Old Mission Chapel sometime in early June.

That was only a month away, but tonight, with the goodnight kiss she had given him still fresh in his memory, it seemed like an eternity.

Suddenly hungry, he made his way to the kitchen to make himself a sandwich. Pouring a glass of milk, he sat down at the small dinette table to eat his snack.

He wouldn't be needing the table much longer, he realized, Donna had a never set that they would use to begin their household together.

The oddness of it, how suddenly nothing in his life was the same, sharpened his appetite still more.

Was hunger a symptom of love? If so, he grinned to himself between bites, he would be getting fatter than Humpty Dumpty before too

long.

While eating his sandwich, he cast a look at his watch. He wanted to call Tom and tell him the great news.

The lateness of the hour discouraged him. Calling his brother would have to wait until the next morning. Tom had always been an early to bed and early to rise person and being in the Navy had only ingrained the habit deeper. There would be plenty of time to call before work tomorrow.

But still, he had the urge to tell someone about his proposal. News like this just didn't keep.

He thought about calling Al, but decided he didn't want to bother him if he was asleep or...otherwise occupied. The captain had hinted that he had some making up to do with Ruthie, and Sam certainly didn't want to interfere with that.

Hesitantly, he looked at his watch again. Maybe he should call after all, and see if things were going okay.

Changing his mind again, he shook his head. He had no proof Al was in any trouble, other than the veiled references Cranston had made to him several weeks ago. Ruthie hadn't come forward to say any more, so if there had been a problem, maybe it was better now.

He was just feeling guilty because he had been so wrapped up in his own affairs.

Tomorrow, he would go by Al's office the first thing and tell him about his engagement...and feel him out about how things were on the domestic front.

That decision made, he began to turn away. His own good news was just too exciting to dwell too long on a problem that might not even exist.

Still, he had an overwhelming urge to share his news with someone. He had to talk about it or burst!

His mom, he decided, he would call his mom! It was three hours earlier in Hawaii and he knew she stayed up to watch the evening news.

Decision made, he grabbed the phone, dialed the number and waited as it rang. He smiled as he heard the familiar voice answer.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mom, it's Sam."

"Why, Sam, it's wonderful to hear from you! Is there anything wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong," he reassured her. "How's everything there?"

"Everything's fine. When are you going to

make it out here?"

"Well," Sam said with a grin, "I was hoping you would come visit me in June."

"June? Why June?"

"Because that's when I'm getting married," Sam said in a rush.

"Married?! Why, Sam, you're finally getting married!" she said excitedly. "Who is she?"

"Donna Elesee. I mentioned her in my last letter."

"And the letter before that, and before that. I thought something was up," she said knowingly. "I told Katie this was the one."

"You were right, Mom," Sam agreed, tucking one hand in his pocket. Ducking his head, he regarded the kitchen floor, still grinning widely. "Donna is the one. You'll come to the wedding, won't you? You and Katie and her family?"

"Of course, we'll come," she assured him. "I can't believe it, you're actually getting married!" Sam could see her smile in his mind's eye. "Your father would be so happy. When I would worry about you not being married, he would say, 'Now, Thelma, don't you worry. When Sam finds the right girl, he'll know. It'll be just like it was with you and me'."

Sam closed his eyes and swallowed a lump in his throat. "Sometimes, I miss Dad so much. I wish he could be there for my wedding."

"I know, Sam. I do too," she agreed softly.

"You know how you always said there was a soul mate for everyone?" he asked, drawing a deep breath against the constriction in his throat. "I've found mine, Mom. Finally." He leaned back against the coolness of the kitchen wall. "You'll love her. She's beautiful and smart and sweet."

"I'm sure she is, and I already love her if you love her," she said warmly. "Have you set a date yet?"

"Not a definite one, I just asked her tonight." Absently, Sam turned restlessly and toyed with the calendar on the wall. "We're thinking of June fifth, if the chapel's available. Donna's checking tomorrow, and I'll let you know as soon as it's certain."

"You do that, a month isn't a very long time to plan."

"It'll be a small wedding, just family and a few close friends. And," he added impulsively, "Tom better be there. He's the reason that I proposed in the first place."

"Tom?"

"Yeah. He came by Friday night on his way home and shook some sense into me." Sam chuckled. "Basically, he asked me why I was wasting time and that I'd better snatch Donna up before someone else did."

"Tom was always the one to come directly to the point," his mother said.

He laughed again, too happy to contain it. "True. Well, I better go and let you get some sleep."

"I don't seem to need as much sleep these days, but you better get some. I know it's late there."

Mom, he thought, she'd never change. Always worried about her children. "I love you, Mom."

"I love you too, Sam. You take care, you hear?"

"I will, Mom. I'll talk to you later." He hung up the phone, tears in his eyes.

Crying must be another symptom of love.

Brushing them away, he made his way up to bed.

* * *

Sam slept well that night, waking refreshed. He dressed quickly for work on Tuesday morning, anxious to see Donna again and to finally tell Al about his engagement.

He parked his car in the employee parking next to Donna's blue Escort, thinking how well they looked together.

Shaking his head at the silliness, he jogged up to the entrance. He was just too excited to walk.

He signed in with a flourish and smiled at the security guard. "Good morning, George."

"Morning, Dr. Beckett. You look happy today."

"I am happy. It's a beautiful day."

"Funny, Dr. Elesee said the same thing," he said with a knowing wink.

Sam smiled and continued on his way. Some people were just too observant...and that was fine with him. He didn't care if the whole world knew how happy he was this morning.

There was one person he just couldn't wait to tell.

Al.

The captain had been on him since they'd first met at Bethesda to find a love interest, and now that he'd decided to take the plunge, he couldn't wait to see the expression on his friend's face.

Reaching Al's office, he knocked lightly on the open door and breezed through it.

Lt. Turner was sitting at her desk, typing.

"Hi, Anne, is he in yet?" Sam asked, gesturing with his thumb at Al's inner domain.

When she looked up, something in her expression warned him of trouble even before she spoke.

Abruptly, Sam was reminded of his secondary purpose in coming to see Al. Maybe he didn't need to talk to him in person, in order to find out things were not going as well as the other man wanted him to believe--the visual signs now seemed to be coming out of the woodwork.

"The captain left for Washington this morning," the young woman answered neutrally. "He has a meeting with Rear Admiral Drennan."

Sam frowned. A trip to Washington that Al had said nothing about? That definitely didn't sound good. "What's wrong?"

The lieutenant hesitated, obviously torn between a concern for military restrictions... and a genuine concern for Al.

"Don't worry," Sam assured her, "I won't tell anyone you told me. What do you think's going on?"

She hesitated a moment longer, but her trust in Sam won out. After all, it wasn't the first time they had conspired on their boss' behalf.

"From what I could gather," she began, "he's been called to meet with Admiral Drennan to explain why the Committee has not been getting their reports on time."

She lowered her voice, holding Sam's gaze, as he took an instinctive step closer to her and leaned over her desk.

"I think," she said slowly, "there may even be the possibility of them replacing him here, or shutting down the Project altogether, if they aren't satisfied with his explanations."

"They can't do that!"

"They're the military," she said softly, "they can do anything they want." She shook her head resignedly. "The 'summons' came late yesterday afternoon, by special courier. I don't know, Sam...to get tapped for a face-to-face with the Big Brass without warning, usually means nothing good is going to happen."

Sam straightened slowly, his own good news dimming somewhat in the light of the news he had just heard. He frowned, thinking furiously. "When do you expect him back?"

"I've made airline reservations for him on the red-eye tomorrow night. That'll give him

all day Thursday to prepare for Friday's meeting."

Friday's meeting. With the Funding Committee, here at STAR BRIGHT, at one o'clock sharp.

D-Day.

Damn, he could just bet Al didn't have his reports ready yet, thinking that he'd have all week to do them. Now he'd been called to Washington, there was very little period of grace.

Sam's eyes shifted uneasily back to Anne. "Then we'll just have to make sure they don't have any reason to replace Al," he said firmly. "You said they wanted reports?"

"That's what I heard." Her eyes met his. "Dr. Cranston's called this particular meeting, and you know how big he is on reports. Captain Calavicci's have been a bit...well...sketchy lately."

As Cranston's been quick to point it out, Sam thought bitterly, but did not voice the thought. It sounded like things were even worse that he thought.

"Okay," Sam nodded firmly. "I'll get mine finished today and bring them by later. Do you know what they usually want from Al?"

"Yes."

"Good, would you send me a copy of the format?"

"Well, yes, I could but...he changes it nearly every time. He says it...keeps them on their toes."

"All right. We'll just have to improvise." Chewing his lip, Sam cast an uneasy glance toward Al's empty office. "As soon as he gets back, Anne, let me know, okay?"

"Of course," she agreed evenly. "Anything else?"

"No." Sam began to turn away, already thinking ahead to how he would assemble the materials necessary to slow the wolves nipping at Al's heels.

It wasn't going to be easy. These days it seemed the Project Director was his own worst enemy, and Sam was going to need all the help he could get, from whoever and wherever he could find it.

Pausing at the door, he cast a glance back at the young woman was already busily calling up forms on her computer screen.

"Anne?" he said, one hand on the doorknob.

"Yes?" She looked up as if expecting another request.

"He's lucky to have an aide like you. Really lucky. Thanks for standing by him."

A nod and a small smile was his only answer, but it spoke volumes.

Going through the doorway, he headed down the corridor for his office. It looked like his

dinner plans with Donna were going to change. He had serious work to do to help Al through this crisis, and to save a very worthwhile Project from going down the tubes.

Then he and Captain Calavicci were going to have a very long and very serious talk.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
"Message In A Bottle"

Called on the carpet like a common swab jockey.

Summoned to Rear Admiral Drennan's office in Washington to account for the lack of solid reports over the past few months, and to answer that whiner Cranston's accusations that I was slidin' by. I know it was Cranston. The little weasel thinks I dunno it's him who's been running to the Admiral, making noises in the form of formal complaints.

Hell, Calavicci. You should've seen it coming a mile off. You should've done something sooner.

Should've.

But then, 'should've' ain't good enough.

I'd never take it as an excuse from anyone under me, so I didn't dare offer it to the Old Man either. All I said was 'Yes, Admiral; No, Admiral; I will, Admiral; Absolutely, Admiral'.

Like a damn spineless cadet.

A good solid report to the Committee by 1300 hours Friday, he said. Best foot forward and look sharp, he said. Do not embarrass the service by forcing them to relieve you, he said.

Shape up or ship out, is what he really said. Get your act together and we'll let it go, screw up and you're deep-sixed.

A solid report. Okay. Face down the dogs nipping at my



heels. I can do that.

I may've had my wings clipped, but so what? No one knows but me and Cranston. Ain't nothin' hurt but a little of my pride.

Hell, I probably deserve it anyway. Face it, Calavicci, you've been letting things slide for way too long.

Well, no more. No matter if the rest of my life is going to hell in a handbasket, professionally I'll survive. I've been in worse spots. Survived a helluva lot more than an official reprimand.

Friday. Doesn't give me long, but I know I can pull it all together. No more jury rigging what they wanna hear, it's time to get my butt outta this sling. I got it in, I can get it out.

I can do it.
I have to.

* * *

Captain Albert Calavicci strode through the STAR BRIGHT administrative offices with all the compact power and fury of a hawk driven by a high gale. An immaculately correct figure in dress whites, he strode purposefully past suddenly silenced groups of support personnel, cigar clamped firmly in his teeth.

The tight line of his jaw and slightly narrowed gaze bespoke his mood and no one, secretary or scientist, ventured so far as to try to slow him for a greeting.

So focused was he that he seemed not to notice the uneasy speculation he left in his wake.

Briskly opening the door at the end of the hallway, he passed through the opening and closed it firmly behind him with no hint of a bang.

"Good morning, Lieutenant," he said neutrally, returning the perfunctory salute of Anne Turner and continuing on to the coffeepot without a pause.

Anne, who had no doubt been on her feet at the first sound of his quick steps in the hallway, turned to regard his tightly squared shoulders.

He could almost feel her eyes on his back as he reached for the coffee carafe, hear his terse greeting echoing through her mind.

'Lieutenant', he'd called her...clear enough warning that it was to be one of those days.

Red-haired and freckled with a face often

described as 'pert', much to her ire, she finally drew a breath and spoke. "Good morning, Captain," she returned evenly. "Dr. Beckett sent some things over for you by special messenger."

The clink of the glass coffeepot against his black 'NASA' mug was loud in the quiet room.

"They're on your desk," she continued, thankfully covering the sound which betrayed the faint tremble in his hands.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," he said, not turning to look at her as he returned the carafe to its place with a smooth, controlled motion. "When Dr. Beckett," he added, heading toward his private office, coffee mug in one hand and hat neatly tucked beneath the other arm, "put him through. Anyone else..." He opened the door to his inner office and strode in without a backward glance, "...hold the calls."

"Aye, sir," he heard her say, just before he shut the door.

Even away from curious eyes, Al did not immediately relax. Setting his cup carefully on a coaster atop his glass topped desk, he moved to the hat stand.

With neat, precise movements, he hung his hat on the hook. It's gold-trimmed visor shone brilliantly in the morning sunlight filling the office as he turned his back on it.

Picking up his mug, he paced to the window which overlooked the east runway of Moffett Field Naval Air Station and, tucking one hand into his pocket, took a sip of coffee.

Narrowing his eyes against the sun's glare and scalding hotness of the liquid, he was fully aware of neither.

...gone...

The realization that had been beating at him since midnight the night before slammed him again.

Ruthie was gone. She had left him.

Fingers whitening about his cup's handle, he did not see the pair of sleek Navy jets taxi to the end of the runway outside his window. Rather, he saw the dark emptiness of his house as it had looked the night before, when he had returned...

* * *

Not a single light was on in the entire house, Al noted, absently listening to his footsteps on the concrete as he walked the short path from the garage to the front door. But,

since it was nearing midnight, he figured Ruthie had given up waiting for him and gone to bed.

He stopped on the moonlit porch, behind the trellis of climbing 'Don Juans', and gratefully dropped his encumbering luggage.

Hands free of his overnighter and briefcase, he pulled the dangling key fob from his mouth and jingled it in search of the right one.

Okay, he was late. But she could've at least left the porch light on for him.

Struggling in the blotchy darkness to find the key that was going to let him in the front door, he squinted and frowned, and eventually held up the ring to the unhelpful glimmer of the streetlight behind the rose trellis at his back. Of course, the drinks he'd had on the plane hadn't exactly aided his vision either.

Finally opening the front door, Al shuffled himself and his luggage across the threshold and closed out the night air.

Stumbling in the dark--hell, she hadn't even turned on the night light--he put his hat down in its usual spot on the hall table. With a small, but devilish smile, he decided against turning on the light. There were other, more pleasant ways he could think of to wake her and let her know he'd arrive safe and sound.

Holy Mackerel, it was stuffy in there!

In almost complete darkness, he crossed the living room to the window, believing the only thing he'd bump into or step on would be the damn cat...and it would undoubtedly let him know if he did.

Opening the window, he drew several breaths of sweet, fresh air to clear a few of the cobwebs from his head. He told himself it wasn't the booze that had him feeling this exhausted, but the length and boredom of the flight from the east coast to the west.

And the major butt-kicking he'd just taken in Washington.

But it was all behind him now. He'd survived like a trooper, and the only way to go was forward.

Hell, Ruthie didn't even have to know. That's why he'd taken his briefcase...for show, to keep up appearances of a perfectly normal 'business trip'. So what if the only thing in it was the latest issue of PLAYBOY.

Now all he had to do was explain why he was some eighteen hours late and hadn't even bothered to call. No doubt that wasn't going to be a piece of cake either.

With a sigh, Al faced the darkened interior

of his house again, his hand easing the weary tension at the back of his neck.

He needed Ruthie now possibly more than he'd ever needed her before. The burden he carried--being cheved out by the top brass as he watched his career spiral neatly down the tubes--weighed like an anchor around his neck. He was only just keeping his head above the rising tide, and what he needed was for her to throw him a lifeline.

No one else could do it...only Ruthie.

Unbuttoning the top button of his disheveled shirt, he trudged wearily across the room, heading straight for the bedroom.

He shed his jacket and tie on the chair at the door, the need for neatness overridden by the ache of exhaustion. A hand rubbed across his jaw told him he needed a shave but it would have to wait until morning. He could only hope she would find it in her heart not to hold it against him tonight.

Fatigued as he was, he had removed the remainder of his clothes and climbed into bed before he realized there was something wrong.

Reaching out for Ruthie brought only the empty embrace of cold sheets, and the crushing certainty that she had finally had enough of his antics.

He needn't have bothered to look in her closet to know all her clothes and her jewelry box were gone. Hell, no...he should've guessed! The absence of that damn cat confirmed the fact she had left him.

Left him...

Ruthie was really gone.

* * *

Al was startled from his reverie by the two F-14's engines, as they roared down the runway outside his office window. Blinking himself back to reality, he turned from the sight of them rising majestically into the morning sunshine.

Gone, damn it!

Rage rose again in his throat and he washed it down with another gulp of burning coffee.

How could she not be there when he dragged in bone-tired and soul-weary?

How dare she leave him?!

Damn it...the hell any woman was doing that. Uh-unh. Not this time. This time he was cutting the bonds. He'd slap her with divorce papers before she could say 'alimony'.

Shyster lawyers had their uses...and their price. He knew that already, having found that red-headed lawyer's forgotten business card--that woman he'd met months ago on his night out with the guys at Tony's Place--in his wallet.

He'd paid through the nose to get his own legal ball rolling before breakfast, although he had the distinct impression that it wasn't just the money that made Sharon sound so eager to help him divorce his wife.

Ruthie would be at her mother's--he knew that as surely as he knew his own name. Let her get the papers there, show her family that they'd been right about him all along.

Forcing himself to relax, he took a long drink of the cooling coffee. Realizing he must have left his last cigar smoldering by the coffeepot, he crossed to his desk and put down the mug.

Patting his pockets, he found another cigar and, sinking into his leather chair, eyed the waiting security marked envelope from Sam. From the look of its bulging sides, it seemed the kid had been busy while he'd been in Washington.

The annoying tremble in his hands marred his usual pleasure of the ritual of preparing and lighting his cigar, and he shook his head in irritation.

Damned shakes. He had work to do today--lots of work to get his butt out of the sling it was in.

Resolutely, he resisted the urge to reach into his locked, lower right drawer and pulled Sam's package toward him instead.

Calavicci, old buddy, today's the day you cut the woman loose and get yourself out of this hole you've dug. Get yourself back on top again.

His eyes flickered over the far wall as his hands worked at the security seal on the envelope. There were all his memories of the Glory Days: NASA behind him and STAR BRIGHT ahead of him. Those days he had been almost literally on top of the world. Nothing had slowed him then.

Nothing.

He would not let a little turbulence unseat him now.

So Ruthie was gone.

So what? At least, she had taken that wretched cat with her. Now, he thought with some satisfaction, he didn't have to put up with cat hair all over his suits anymore. His life was his alone again.

Alone...

A soft beep came from his intercom as he looked down at the stack of printouts and disks he pulled from the envelope. Not in the mood for any more conversation than he absolutely had to make, Al skipped answering Anne and went straight to the line that was blinking.

"Captain Calavicci," he said briskly, knowing it would be Sam.

"Unh...Al?" It always threw the kid when he acted official. He only hoped it'd be enough to distract him this morning.

Al grinned, leaning back in his chair to force his actions to better match his words. "Hey, Sammy boy," he said, balancing his cigar in his fingers, "you hold the fort while I was gone?"

"Sure. Are you...?"

There was a short but noticeable pause. He knew. Aw, hell...Sam knew. Somebody had brought the kid in on the mess he'd gotten himself into with the top brass.

"...tired?" Sam finished a bit awkwardly. "I checked yesterday afternoon and Anne said you weren't back yet. You missed your flight." He was trying, really trying, not to be obvious.

Fervently, Al hoped whoever had blabbed to the kid about his troubles had not told him that today was 'make it or break it' day. The suspicion that maybe someone had approached Sam to 'help bring the old man back in line' galled him and he wasn't about to acknowledge it.

"Ah..." Al shrugged, puffing on his cigar.

No way he was going to tell Sam that the reason he missed his intended flight was because of a cut-throat poker game with Senator Murphy and his two aides...not to mention four or five scotches too many. Hungover as he was, he'd not only missed the red-eye flight Anne had booked him on, but the first two morning flights out as well.

"You know Washington," Al finished lamely. "There's so much red tape everything takes twice as long as it should."

"Sure," Sam agreed, his dislike for the city and its wheeling and dealing well known. "Well, I had some extra time last night so I put together the data for this afternoon's Committee meeting."

Al concealed a wince at Sam's covering for him--again. "Thought you and Donna were going stargazing last night." He grinned teasingly, though his heart wasn't in it. "Or didn't you make it outta your apartment?"

"Al..." From the exasperation in Sam's tone, he knew he was near to succeeding in his play for distraction. "We did that Monday night."

"Oh, yeah, that's right," Al said as if he'd already known, unwilling to admit he had lost track of the days. He put as much leer as he could into his tone as he asked, "Did you have a good time?"

"Yes, Al, we had a good time," Sam returned, not to be deterred from his original point. "When you get to the data--I put it together because I had some other stuff to do anyway."

Al shook his head. The kid was a rotten liar, but he tried.

"But I didn't know what sort of format you put your reports in, so..."

"That's okay," Al returned. "Thanks, pal, you've saved me a lotta work. Getting out of DC so late put me behind. This'll give me a leg up outta the hole."

Al Calavizzi, unlike Sam Beckett, could shade truths like a master. Now, if the kid just didn't ask--

"Why were you late?"

Al grimaced. He could fool anyone--anyone except Sam.

"Ruthie was getting worried," Sam continued.

Worried. Al scowled. More like mad because she thought he was in the sack with someone else.

Well, damn it, she was wrong! In four years he'd never cheated on her!

"You know DC, pal. Always another hand to shake, another dinner to buy."

"Oh." Obviously unconvinced, Sam let it go.

"I thought...maybe something was up with the Project."

Tiring, Al parked his cigar in the ashtray and rubbed his hand along his jaw. "Look, Sam, I've gotta get to work here. I'll see you at the Committee meeting at one, okay?"

"How about lunch?" the younger man persisted. "I'll pick you up. Donna and Ruthie can meet us at the Carriage House."

Which, Al thought sourly, doesn't serve liquor, so you can be sure I make it to the damn meeting cold sober and on time.

Pushing back his irritation, he kept his voice light. "Can't, kiddo. Looks like I'm gonna be working through lunch."

"But," Sam protested, "you need to take a break. And..." The younger man's voice changed, and Al frowned. "And I've got some exciting news."

"News? What sorta news?"

"I'll tell you later. At lunch."

"I can't make lunch," Al insisted, thinking furiously.

What the hell could Sam's news be? Was something cooking with Project politics?

He wouldn't put it past Cranston to set Sam up for some kind of fall, just to get even with him...

"Tell me," Al grated, the tone a bit more harsh than he intended. "What's goin' on?"

There was a second's hesitation, then Sam answered in a rush, as if he couldn't contain his excitement any longer. "I asked Donna to marry me--and she said yes!"

"Marry you!?" Al repeated in honest surprise.

"Yeah." Sam laughed, then repeated as if he couldn't believe it himself. "And she said yes! Donna checked with the Old Mission Chapel this morning, and it's open. We've set the date as June fifth."

Set the date. A sudden rush of bitterness swept through Al, frightening in its intensity. For a dream wedding at Old Mission Chapel.

Don't do it, Sam, he wanted to shout. Wine her and dine her, and take her to bed, but for God's sake, don't marry her. It only leads to...

Controlling his voice, Al screwed his eyes shut and said, "Congratulations, Sam. I wondered when you were gonna take the plunge."

"We don't have long to plan," the physicist said, the elation in his voice clear. "So we're starting on that now. Al...would you be my best man?"

At the ache in his knuckles, Al looked down and found them clenched so tightly about his coffee cup's handle that they were white.

"Unh," he stalled, forcing himself to relax his hand. "I thought you'd ask Tom to do that."

"Tom isn't sure he can make the wedding. He's got a TDY assignment pending. I, unh..." The hesitation was back in the physicist's voice, as if his burst of excitement had subsided and he was listening carefully for any clues in Al's voice. "...I hoped maybe you'd do it for me. Unless...there's a problem."

"No," Al returned, reaching again for his cigar. "No problem." Determined, he tried to force joviality back into his voice. "I made a promise to you, kid, that I'd be there when you finally snap on the old ball and chain. And I meant it. I'll put June fifth on my calendar."

He grinned, trying to at least sound like everything was A-OK with Al Calavicci.

"Besides, bein' best man means I get to dance with a pretty bridesmaid."

"Actually," Sam explained, "it means you get to dance with your wife. Donna's planning to ask Ruthie to be her matron of honor." He paused then persisted, "So, how about lunch? The four of us?"

Softly, Al drew a deep breath. No way he was giving details as to why he and Ruthie would not be joining the new happy couple for lunch. He would find out soon enough.

Let Donna ask Ruthie...today, tomorrow, whenever. Then let Ruthie tell them both.

"Not today, Sam," he answered evenly. "Today I gotta play captain. After the meeting, okay?"

"Okay," Sam agreed, and Al could see the worried frown on his face as clearly as if he were in the room.

How the hell was he gonna keep the kid off his back now?

"See you later, pal," he said quickly. "I gotta go." Barely giving Sam time to agree, he hung up the phone.

Feeling the beginning of a headache, Al sat slumped for a moment, rubbing his temples.

So Sam was going to marry Donna. Well, it wasn't a complete surprise--he'd thought and talked about nothing else but her for the past month! Hell, Sam was so preoccupied, he didn't even seem to have noticed the growing tensions between him and Ruthie.

At least, that's what the older man wanted to believe.

Al grimaced, pushing himself upright and drawing on his cigar. Maybe it'd work out okay. Sam didn't know much about women, but maybe that meant the kid wouldn't be as good as him at screwing up relationships with them.

Damn. He and Ruthie had been married for over four years.

Four years!

Not like with Eva--which had been short and blunt--but four whole years of growing together, understanding each other, sharing, hoping, building for a future...

Okay, so maybe it wasn't all hearts and flowers, but even he and Beth had had their ups and downs.

He shook his head.

No, Beth was an entirely different story. And that wasn't his fault.

Resolutely, he dragged his thoughts from the

path where that sort of musing usually lead him.

That was over--as over as the years spent in 'Nam--and best forgotten.

Resting his cigar on the ashtray again, he unlocked the lower drawer and drew out the bottle of Chivas Regal. He'd stashed it there over a month ago, and even though it had never been quite 'forgotten', to this date it had remained unopened.

Quickly breaking the seal, he gulped down the last of his cold coffee then poured a generous slug of liquor into the mug, not allowing himself time to think of the significance of the act.

He turned to slip the first disk into his computer. Work was what he needed. Work...and just a little scotch to ease the way back to normalcy.

Slowly, he took a long drink--just one--and settled into Sam's presentation.

It was good, clear and concise and sincere. Too sincere.

Shaking his head, Al absently picked up his mug. There was a lot of work to be done--months of missed or shallow, hasty presentations to be blown away by a stunningly brilliant snow job on his part.

STAR BRIGHT was a worthwhile, productive, well-run Project. Well run, that was, until about six months ago...when control had slipped away from him a little, and he had let his administrative duties slide for the sake of the seductive beauty of the Project itself and, of course, Ruthie.

Still, a snow job was a snow job and he was good--very good--at them. He would have to survive this, convincing the Committee that he was still in control of every facet of this Project which had been running so well.

Then, he could be back in the pilot seat again.

Hell, he'd bounced back after Eva, hadn't he?

The intercom beeped just as he was beginning to reword the opening paragraphs. He automatically stabbed a button and answered with a crisp, "Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Mrs. Calavicci is on line two, Captain," Anne answered. "She...sounds upset."

Mrs. Calavicci. Transported so deeply into his work, his personal guards had weakened. Beth. Whenever someone said 'Mrs. Calavicci', it always took him back to--

No. It was Ruthie on the phone.

Ruthie, whom he had left.

"Tell her I'm in a meeting," Al answered tightly. "I'll get back to her later."

"She's very insistent, sir."

"Later, Lieutenant," Al snapped tersely, returning the phone to its cradle, effectively cutting her off.

He could just bet Ruthie was upset. Well, so was he...when he'd come home to find her gone. Let her fret. Let her have her lawyer call his lawyer. That was what love always came down to anyway.

Love, hah! What a crock. First you beat yourself about the head denying it...until the sex got so good you actually began to accept it. You accepted that you were not only 'in love', but that marriage was the next natural stage.

Yeah, right. Well, add a new chapter to the book, buddy. Stage Four - Divorce.

Geez, what a yutz! What else had he expected?

Refilling his mug with scotch, he dragged his attention back to the computer and re-read what he had written before the phone call. It was good stuff, and he had been building up to something...

Where the hell had he been headed with it?

Come on, Calavicci. You can do this. You've done it before.

The trouble was, the real worth of STAR BRIGHT was in the hearts and minds of people like Sam and Donna, not in something you could bottom line on paper for a Funding Committee.

It was like the Glory Days--the dream and the exhilaration of chasing it. It was like breaking Mach Six in a rocket called the X-15 and feeling like the wind itself, or roaring like thunder up out of Earth's clutches to orbit longer and higher than any other rocket jock before you. And impressing the hell out of the whole world in the process.

That's what glory was--and what made projects like STAR BRIGHT so important. Glory was blazing new trails, breaking new ground, making history, so that others could build on it and explore the limitless possibilities that lay beyond.

The trick was making the bureaucrats, the fancy-titled accountants and constituent-pleasing politicians, believe it...or making desk-bound, nearly-ready-for-pasture brass remember it.

Sometimes that was the most difficult job of all--dealing with the Big Guns who, of all

people, should understand it.

He used to be good at that--very, very good. Now, he just wasn't so sure.

Clearing the screen with sharp keystrokes, he reached for his mug and was faintly surprised to find it empty. Pouring another shot, he sourly contemplated the far wall of photos.

Maybe that's all he was--tarnished brass that was ready for service on some damn hold-that-bottom-line committee. Maybe, he thought, drinking deeply of the liquor, this was the turning point.

When you get to this point in your life, you discovered that glory--like love--is nothing but a crock. Sure, it has its pleasures...but they're fleeting. Glory is nothing but a kick-in-the-butt adrenalin rush that everybody pats you on the back and promotes you for, until you start to lose it.

Hell, even the highest orbits start to decay at some stage. Maybe he'd just been too star-blinded to see it before now.

Marshaling his thoughts, he began again on the report on his computer screen. How did you construct a con to convince them of a truth that they would never believe if it were told to them straight?

STAR BRIGHT was the precursor to his and Sam's dream of time travel. It was the stepping stone to their decades-long belief they could make it work.

Sam and his dream would survive, even if Al did not. The physicist would go on to finish it--Al had constructed the plan well enough for that.

Time travel.

Sighing, Al leaned back from the keyboard and reached for his mug. Time travel was for the young who still believed.

Reaching into the back of the lower drawer, he withdrew the small, locked silver box that had nestled behind the stashed bottle of scotch. Pushing aside Sam's papers and his cigar, he placed it on the desk before him.

Manipulating the combination from memory--though he had not used it for years--he opened it easily. The last time he had unlocked it was the day his divorce to Eva was finalized.

Hesitating only a moment, he reached in and picked up the yellowing envelope addressed to 'Lt. Albert Calavicci'.

How long was it since he had been that person?

Slowly, he turned the envelope over in his

hands, remembering the day Jenny had first handed it to him in the halls of Bethesda Hospital.

His idea of love had crashed and burned on that day, yet he had still kept the letter.

Damn, after Eva he had sworn he would never read it again. What was the use anyway, other than morbidly inflicting self-pain?

Pulling it from the envelope and unfolding it carefully, he began to read.

Dear Al,

The words were always the same. He could recite them in his sleep, but still he read them.

Absently reaching for the bottle, he found it empty and dropped it back into the drawer. What did he want that for anyway, it never helped--not really.

He remembered the way it had felt then, as newly promoted Lieutenant Commander Calavicci, standing in the hall with this damned letter in his hands.

It felt like falling--or dying. Like he'd just taken a rifle butt to the head...or like any one of the thousands of times Charlie's boot had buried in his gut.

And just like then, he read and re-read it, trying--desperately--to weave some hope, however meager, into words that never changed.

Oh yes, he remembered. In some way, he still was that bewildered young officer. And he would be, so long as he kept this damn letter and secretly cherished its elusive hope. After all, that's what he was doing now, wasn't it? Looking for hope?

With a weary sigh, he tossed it away in disgust and cast a glance at his gold Rolex watch. Damn it, he had work to do if he was going to hold onto his--

It was noon! Four minutes after to be exact.

With that came the revelation that any last aspirations of pulling what was left of his career out of the fire, was gone. There was no way even he could put together a brilliant presentation in fifty-six-minus-the-five-it-would-take-to-get-to-the-board-room minutes.

Rage, bitter and potent, galvanized him into action and, without thought, he snatched up the letter and crumpled it into a ball. If it was going to be ashes, let it be ashes and to hell with it.

Moving deliberately now, he smoothed out the

paper as if to save it. Then, coolly, with only a small shake to his hands, he lit the upper left corner with his favorite lighter--the one he had bought the first week back from 'Nam.

With satisfaction, he flipped it closed and pocketed it, watching Beth's letter burn.

Flames licked inward, blackening and obliterating the words and the paper on which they were written, as if erasing the memory of what it felt like to be that stunned young officer, standing there with the damn thing in his hands.

A grim smile tugged at his lips as he dropped it into the ashtray, following it with the envelope.

To hell with hope, and love, and gut-kicked dreamers.

Getting to his feet when nothing but softly glowing ashes remained, he found himself a bit more unsteady on his feet than he had expected. A stumble, quickly righted by a hand flat on the desk, toppled his mug onto the paper strewn surface.

Grimacing at the dregs that dribbled out onto the notes, he turned away.

Hell with that, too.

Dropping his now empty keepsake box into the lower drawer with the bottle, he locked it away with a quick flick of his wrist.

Finished. All of it.

Walking now with most of his former precision, he reclaimed his hat and headed toward the door.

Striding through it, hat tucked beneath his arm, he caught a glimpse of Anne from the corner of his eye, sitting at her desk.

"Have my driver bring my staff car around, Lieutenant," he ordered as crisply as the booze allowed, without a pause on his way to the door.

Startled by his sudden appearance and his order, she came to her feet. "Sir, Dr. Cranston has been trying to reach you. I told him that you would be unable to speak with him until the Committee meeting at one."

Just before the door, he came to a stop and slowly swiveled on his heel, fixing her with the same razor sharp gaze that had made veteran officers pale and stammer. He'd drank just enough scotch to induced a mood that would not tolerate being challenged or questioned.

"Is there something wrong with your hearing, Turner? I asked for my driver."

"Um...no, sir. It's just that...that..." She fell silent as he marched back to her desk.

At
the picture last
FE. They say a woman
died getting it, and
Kulizer
It's on all the TV news
the newspapers, every
look, I see your face
And every time I see
thought you were dead,
no word, and Bob
and he didn't
asked the Navy
But I did
best decision
it

get
a.c.
I



The action alone was intimidating enough but when coupled with his murderous glare, it caused her to drop back into her chair in open-mouthed silence.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" It was almost a sneer.

She looked up at him with open astonishment. "Sir?"

He bent forward over her, which caused her to shrink back against the chair. "I gave you a direct order."

"But sir, Dr. Crans--"

"Screw that freakin' little weasel!"

His hat landed upside down on the desk the very same moment his knuckles hit the wooden top.

Hell, if he was throwing in the towel, he was throwing it on his own terms...and God help anyone who got in his way.

"Lemme spell it out for you, Turner. I don't give a damn about Cranston or his meeting. Capeesh?" Leaning forward, totally ignoring her startled expression, he got right in her face. "So unless you want find yourself busted down to anchor for disobeying my orders, you'll get on the horn and get my freakin' car here, on the freakin' double!"

Obviously stunned and hurt, she bit down on her lower lip in an effort to stop it from quivering. As tears threatened, she diverted her eyes and reached for the phone.

"...aye, aye, sir..."

Al straightened and squared his shoulders, watching as she wiped her hand across her cheek while deliberately avoiding his eyes.

Damn. Anne didn't deserve to be cussed out like that--she just happened to be the unlucky one sitting in his direct firing line. Well, let her blow the whistle on him and report his conduct--it'd be more than a reprimand this time.

An apology now would mean he'd have to explain. Everything! And he didn't want pity. He didn't want understanding. He just wanted to turn his back and walk away from it all. Leave the past behind, as much as he'd left the ashes in his ashtray.

Without a word, he picked up his hat and threw it on. Turning faster than intended, he teetered for a second, then regained his balance and stormed back to the door--driven from his inner sanctum by the same gale force that had earlier swept him into it.

Captain Calavicci was out of the office, out

of time...and out of patience.

* * *

Sam was rapidly running out of patience. The determined pace he set as he marched through the administrative offices of STAR BRIGHT was testament to that.

It was one-thirty...and Al sure better have a damn good excuse for being half an hour late. Nothing short of positive proof that his office existed in a different time zone to the rest of the Project would do.

It wasn't enough that he'd spent the previous evening ignoring Donna and all but writing the man's reports. Oh, no. Now he had to come looking for both him and an explanation for his absence!

Didn't he know that there was a Government lynch mob presently waiting in that conference room, just looking for an excuse to hang him? And Cranston was holding the rope! Damn it, by not even bothering to show up, Al had just tightened the noose around his own neck.

Sam slowed his pace as he reached the closed door at the end of the hallway. He paused to vent some of his annoyance on a long breath. What he had to say was meant for Al--he didn't want his mood to upset Anne.

He entered with a half-formed, half-felt smile on his face--a smile which quickly faded as he met the eyes of the red-haired woman behind the desk. She looked...upset.

Lt. Turner made a brave attempt to cover herself, sitting upright and adopting a business expression, but she used tissues in the waste paper basket--and the open door to Al's empty office--betrayed her.

"Oh...Dr. Beckett. How...how can I help you?"

Not to mention the quiver still in her voice. And since when was he 'Dr. Beckett' to her?

Damn it. He'd seen this scenario before and liked it less each time; STAR BRIGHT's top dog blowing his cool at his personnel--which usually meant poor Anne--then clearing out and to hell with the consequences.

That it was happening at all was hard enough to comprehend, that it had happened twice in as many weeks was intolerable.

Perching on the corner of her desk, he shot her a compassionate but knowing look. "What happened, Anne? This time?"

Anne held his gaze for a moment then looked away as tears threatened. Pursing her lips, she shook her head in lieu of an answer and reached for another tissue. The box was empty...and that finished her.

As the flood gates opened, Sam gallantly offered a folded white handkerchief. "Here."

She accepted it with a grateful nod and dried her eyes. "All I did was...was remind him of the meeting." She paused to shoot a furtive glance at the open inner door. "He exploded out of there and...and left."

Undoubtedly with a few choice words on the way. He watched as she bit her lower lip in an attempt to stop it quivering. When that didn't work, she buried her face in the handkerchief again.

Sam reached for her hand. A gentle squeeze brought her eyes back to his. True, it wasn't the first time her superior had chewed her out...but it was the first time he'd seen her actually reduced to tears. "Hey...you gonna be okay?"

She offered a brave smile and a nod. "I think..." She hesitated, dropping her eyes and wringing the handkerchief. "I know he didn't mean it. He's just under a lot of pressure." When she looked up again, he read the concern in her expression. "I think...he'd been drinking. I could smell it on his breath."

Sam slipped off the desk, a suddenly uneasy feeling churned his stomach. Almost fearful of what he'd find, he crossed to peer inside Al's inner sanctum--the expansive picture window overlooking the runway, the empty hat stand... and the papers littered across the top of his usually spotless desk.

Al's black 'NASA' coffee mug was tipped on its side and dribbling the dregs onto the abandoned reports and papers. It was a mess. And that was not a word in the Naval officer's vocabulary.

Except when he drank.

Sam felt awful, fearing it was *The Vending Machine Versus The Hammer* all over again. Only if it was, Al now wasn't drinking on his own time. He was drinking 'on the job'.

Anne hovered hesitantly in the doorway behind as he continued across to the glass-topped desk. He righted the mug with one hand, using the other to shake the liquid off the computer disk and the papers underneath it.

With a hesitant glance at Anne, he sniffed the coffee mug...and felt his stomach flip over.

"Scotch."

"Sam, I don't like this," she admitted uneasily, sharing his thoughts. In spite of the chewing out she'd received, her loyalty to the man remained intact.

"I've got to find him." Galvanized into action, he pushed past where she stood in the doorway.

"No." Anne grabbed his arm. "That won't work, he had me call for his car. He's gone."

Gone. Sam let out a frustrated breath. "Did he give you any idea where?"

She shook her head and shrugged. "Home, I guess."

"Then I'll just have to--darn!"

"What?"

"The Committee!" He looked at her like she was a fellow conspirator in a major cover-up... which, of course, she was. "What am I going to tell them?"

* * *

Certainly not the truth. At least, not the whole truth--that would hang Al for sure. That only left one course of action...and Sam had never been very good at lying.

They were an impatient and unsympathetic mob --especially Cranston--and Sam quickly got the impression that they not only wanted Al's head on a silver platter, but maybe now his as well.

While he might be able save his own neck from the chop, there was only one person who could answer for Captain Calavicci.

Considering they looked like they were ready to fire Al even if he wasn't present--not listen to excuses--Sam realized that what he needed to do, was to buy a little time. And since it was nearing 2:30 p.m. on a Friday afternoon, he figured his best option was to convince the Committee that the captain had been 'unavoidably detained'...hence it would be best to postpone the meeting until after the weekend.

After all, nobody liked to work weekends. Especially not bureaucrats.

He was more than a little surprised when they actually agreed, passing a motion to shuffle the meeting onto next Tuesday morning's agenda before calling the meeting adjourned.

That gave him three whole days to corner Al...and find out just what this was all about.

Yet as he left the conference room, he couldn't shake the nagging feeling that he was merely 'postponing the inevitable', that Al--

come Tuesday--was still going to be kicked out of STAR BRIGHT.

Fortunately, since he had expected to be at the meeting for most of the afternoon, he'd tidied up all his work-related loose ends prior to lunch. So now, there was absolutely nothing to stop him from beginning the hunt for the errant Naval officer in earnest.

Except that he didn't have a clue where Al had gone. Home--like Anne said--seemed the first logical choice...which was precisely why the physicist didn't really believe that was where he would have gone. The captain would have known that once his absence was discovered, Sam would come after him, and that 'home' would be the first place he'd look...

Almost without realizing where his steps were headed, Sam focused his thoughts on the here-and-now, and found himself headed down the long hallway that ended with Al's office.

The scene of the crime.

When he pushed open the door and discovered Anne questioning Al's personal driver, he experienced a brief bout of Sherlock Holmesitis, faced with a mystery and searching for clues.

"Thank you, Petty Officer Grant," Anne said, dismissing the driver. "You've been most helpful."

The young man saluted crisply then turned on his heel and left. Letting the door swing closed in his wake, Sam managed to catch her eye, as she folded her arms and leaned against her desk with a heavy sigh.

"Don't tell me it's that bad...?" Sam asked, trying to lighten the sullen mood. But it was no joking matter. "What did he say?"

"That he took Captain Calavicci home...and then to the airport."

"Airport?!"

"Mmm...he could have gone anywhere." She combed a frustrated hand through her red hair. "So we're back to square one."

"Not necessarily," Sam said, stirred into motion by a sudden idea.

He quickly crossed and entered Al's inner sanctum, leaving a curious Lt. Turner to follow, and settled at the glass-topped desk. The flick of a button brought the computer on-line, and Sam's fingers danced over the keyboard with the ease of years of practice.

"Want to let me in on the secret?" Anne asked, slipping around to stand behind his chair.

"Bear with me a moment..." Sam said, preoccupied with logging onto an external mainframe.

A minute or two later, as the information he required came up on the screen with a beep, Sam glanced up over his shoulder and threw her a triumphant smile.

"'American Airlines'," Anne read. Then it clicked. "Oh, I get it. You're going to check all the airlines until you find his name listed."

"Right." Sam went to work checking the computer reservations as he spoke. "After all, you don't go to an airport unless you intend flying somewhere, and--"

"--and you don't fly somewhere without first buying a ticket. A paper chase...electronically speaking."

Sam paused to smile at her again. "By George, Watson, I do believe you've got it!"

Two minutes later--with no joy from American--he accessed the Delta Airlines files, and on page two of the first class bookings found 'Calavicci' listed.

"Here we go..." However, when his eyes traveled across the computer page to the destination of the booked flight, he frowned. Al had taken the three o'clock flight to--

"'Las Vegas'?" Anne supplied from over his shoulder.

Glitter Gulch. The City Of Sin--he should have guessed. It had long been one of Al's pet vices. Before Ruthie came along, it had been for wild weekends filled with gambling, women and booze--the one place on earth where the Naval officer could be bad without being caught. Since marrying her, he'd graciously given up the 'women', but living it up at the blackjack table was still second on his list of Ways To Unwind.

Sam's fingers began tapping keys again.

"What are you doing?"

"Making myself a reservation on the next available flight." He paused, sitting back. "Damn. That's not until seven this evening."

A glance at his watch confirmed that Al had a good head start on him--the captain could do a lot of damage in that time...to himself, and to several bottles of booze.

Ten minutes later, Sam left the STAR BRIGHT complex, heading home to throw together an overnight bag. He felt a little anxious, a little uneasy...and very annoyed.

Annoyed, mostly because a quick call to the Calavicci residence confirmed that no one was at

home. Al was obviously off to Vegas with his wife for a 'good time weekend' and to hell with the rest.

In view of the circumstances--the thin ice that was already cracking under the captain's feet--it was the most irresponsible thing he could have done.

Ruthie was already aware of Al's drinking problem, sure, but it seemed she was as equally unaware of the present mess his Navy career was in. Just how Al had managed to hide that from her was something of a mystery ...although her confession about him not coming home every night undoubtedly had something to do with it.

And when he finally caught up with them, Sam vowed he was going to tell her. The resulting confrontation was likely to be unpleasant, but maybe between the two of them, they could sit down and talk some sense into Al.

Damn it all! Why couldn't Al have just gone to some local bar...instead of all the way to Nevada?!

He had been hoping to spend the weekend with Donna. Now he had to call and tell her those plans were off.

Geez, being Al's best friend was sometimes a royal pain in the butt.

* * *

Nighttime on The Strip was almost like day. There were so many neon and flashing signs lighting up the place that Sam shuddered at the thought of what the average electric bill was around there each month.

He caught a cab from the airport, instructing the driver to go straight to The Stardust Hotel --the place Al always stayed when in town.

But when he inquired at the desk for Al's room number, the clerk refused to give him that information. He did, however, offer to ring upstairs. Sam agreed, and then inconspicuously watched him punch in the number...the room number.

Still, when the clerk informed him Mr. and Mrs. Calavicci were not answering their phone, he wasn't surprised.

"Perhaps you'd like to leave a message?" the man suggested.

"No. Thank you." Sam forced a tight smile. "Thanks."

Turning away, Sam's next plan of action was already mapped in his head. He remembered that particular room number from Al's last visit--it

was the High Roller's Suite.

Sam's jaws tightened angrily. He'd sure give Al 'high rollers' when he caught up with him!

Riding up in the elevator, he couldn't believe that Ruthie was actually going along with this fling. Then again, perhaps this spur of the moment vacation was an attempt to try to bring some of the spontaneous closeness back to their relationship. It looked like Ruthie, at least, was trying.

He picked out the suite the moment the elevator opened on the top floor--for it was obviously the one with the loud music emanating from within.

Reaching the slightly ajar door as Joe Cocker crooned 'you can leave your hat on', Sam automatically glanced down. A woman's red, high-heeled shoe was stopping it from closing all the way and responsible for allowing several decibels to escape unheeded down the hall.

It sounded like Al and Ruthie were having a party.

A party!

It only made him all the more determined to talk to the man...and his wife. If he couldn't talk some sense into Al, surely Ruthie could.

"Al?" Sam called, picking up the shoe and pushing the door open wide enough to poke his head inside. "Ruthie?"

When no answer was forthcoming, he entered, letting the door close softly behind him. He frowned, dropping his overnight bag beside the semi-circular table in the foyer and picking up the matching red pump. What the heck was going on here?

Curious, he followed the music along the mulberry carpet, around a corner and further into the luxurious suite.

The scene he walked in on stopped him dead in his tracks, flooring him with the same explosive force as a ten-megaton detonation.

As expected, there were two people in that room. One of them was Al, but the other definitely wasn't Ruthie. They were both so engrossed with each other that neither seemed to notice his untimely intrusion.

Sam's mouth dropped open. Stunned didn't even begin to describe what he felt. For Al was sitting in the middle of a purple velour love seat, a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other...wearing only his shirt and tie and Boxer Boy undershorts!

Just across the other side of a low, glass



coffee table--which supported two bottles of Chivas Regal scotch, most of a carton of cigarettes, a boom box, and Al's right foot--a dark-haired girl of no more than twenty-three or four, peeled off a black silk stocking in time with the music. This action brought her total clothing count also to three items--a black lace bra and matching panties...and Al's fedora hat.

"Oh, boy..." Sam murmured. But his voice was lost to the music as both Joe Cocker and Al again instructed her to 'leave her hat on', the latter letting out a wild whoop as she shot her stocking at him.

Sam was so astonished that he just stood there in the doorway, gaping, unable to believe that he had actually walked in on a private strip tease.

Al took a long drag on his cigarette as she danced over to him, flaunting her considerable attributes right in his face. A drunken leer lit up his eyes when she lightly ran her hand up the inside of his leg. Reaching for her, he made as if to kiss her, but she slipped teasingly out of his reach.

As the next verse began, she toyed with the fastening of her bra, and Sam was galvanized into action. *Enough was enough!*

He practically leaped the distance from the doorway to the coffee table in a single bound.

The downward strike of his hand swiftly silenced the boom box, an action he hoped would freeze the participants of the scene the same way it did the music that was driving them.

The abrupt silence which followed was broken precisely two-point-two milliseconds later by Al's disgruntled tone. He didn't seem the least bit surprised by Sam's appearance, merely annoyed by his intervention at such a crucial moment.

"What the hell...?"

Sam, having already scooped up the girl's dress from the common Discard Pile on the floor, had the red material half-wrapped around her body as he pushed her in the general direction of the door.

Silencing Al's protests with a single pointed glance, he quickly hunted for her purse, dropped one red pump and picked it up again, then juggled everything--including the girl--out to the foyer.

* * *

She may have been young, but from the

language she used he could tell she certainly wasn't innocent.

Sam graciously allowed her a moment to pull on her clothes, trying hard to remain neutral to the thickening blue air, before opening the door to the suite. He threw her a meaningful look.

The stripper drilled him with an 'oh really' expression, taking a firm stand with her hands on her hips. "He promised me two hundred."

"Dollars?"

"No, lollipops, what'd you think? Half before, half after." She stuck out her hand in a 'gimme gimme' gesture. "That's a C-note outstanding, sweetie."

Sam made a positive move to help her across the threshold. "Well, I'm sorry but there's not going to be any 'after'."

She held firm. "Then consider it a cancellation fee."

Knowing there was an unspoken threat lurking somewhere behind that last statement, Sam prompted, "Or else you'll...?"

She smiled pertly, tipping Al's hat to a jaunty angle. "I'm sure between the two of us we could think of something suitably damaging to the captain's illustrious career."

Oh, great. This was the last thing he wanted!

Damn, he had no other choice...

Feeling like a regular lowlife, he delved into his pocket for his wallet. "Look, I...I don't think I have a hundred dollars in cash. Will you take a personal check?"

"What do I look like? A bank?" She peered at him as he counted the bills. "How much you got, honey?"

"Unh...seventy-six..."

"You got an honest face, you can owe me the rest." With one sweep, she plucked the entire wad from his wallet. As he moved closer to take Al's hat from her head, her eyes took a sexy little detour over him. "Pity. You paid, honey, you could have played."

Finally, with a suggestive smile, she left.

Closing the door in her wake, Sam leaned against it feeling totally demeaned. He'd just paid off a hooker! What would Donna think of him if she found out? More to the point, what would Ruthie think of Al?

As if on cue, the boom box started playing in the other room.

Carelessly tossing Al's hat on top of his overnight bag, Sam headed for the lounge room.

Whatever the outcome of the evening, he

wanted his seventy-six dollars back.

* * *

Al was just finishing his drink when he entered. Sam paused a moment, watching as the man on the couch gave the black silk stocking a final twirl then traded it for the scotch bottle on the coffee table before him, obviously intent on keeping the alcoholic's dream of a bottomless glass alive and well.

"What do you think you're doing?" Sam demanded, crossing to stand in front of him. He silenced the music again, then planted his hands on his hips in an effort to keep his temper in check.

Drunk as he was, Al took the question at face value. "Pourin' a drink, what does it look like?" He offered the bottle. "You want one?"

Sam snatched the bottle from him, briefly eyed the label, then regarded Al with patience that was rapidly wearing thin. "I meant here. In Vegas." He put the bottle down, out of the man's immediate reach. "With a half-naked girl in your room."

"Yeah, y'know," Al said, sipping his re-filled glass, "I did wanna talk t'you 'bout that."

"I'm listening."

"S'your timing, Sam, it really stinks. A minute more and she would've been totally naked." His eyes were alight with drunken glee. Then he frowned. "Where the hell is she anyway?"

Grabbing Al's arm, Sam roughly hoisted him to his feet, with little care for his precious glass of booze. He ignored Al's cussing when it spilled down the front of his shirt, and began literally dragging the smaller man across the room.

His father had taught him there was only one remedy for drunks, that time Tom had come home from a party intoxicated.

"Hey..." Al protested, fighting the move with all the aggression of a cornered bull terrier. "Hey! Hands off, pal!"

Sam won, not because he was the bigger of the two, but because Al's inebriated condition gave him a slight edge. But by the time they reached the bathroom, Al had given up struggling and had instead taken to singing--woefully off-key--"you can leave your hat on...", and making up a few lyrics of his own to match his slightly obscene gestures.

Al let loose a boozy chuckle as Sam herded him toward the shower. "Whoa...kinda kinky, Sam, doin' it in the shower. Candy's gonna love it. Where'd you say she went? She give you back my hat?"

Opening the sliding glass door, Sam propelled his half-dressed companion inside. "I didn't and, yes, she did."

The moment he let go of Al's arm, the man stumbled, drunk on his feet. With a disgusted look, Sam reached in and turned the cold tap on full blast.

"Hell, that's cold! Turn it off! Turn it off, would ya?!"

Sam made a grab for Al's arm, intent on holding him under the jet, but short of actually getting in there with him, all he got was a fistful of his shirt.

Collecting some icy water in the face, Al easily twisted free and backstepped to the far wall.

With a shaky hand, he wiped the drips from his eyes and fixed Sam with an incredulous look. "What the hell're you doin'?!"

"Shouldn't you be asking yourself that?" Sam returned evenly.

Al's attention wavered to his gold wristwatch, which had been inadvertently exposed to the water. "Look whatcha did! Hell...it was a freakin' anniversary present from Ruthie!"

Before Sam could stop him, he smashed his wrist against the tiles. A satisfied half-smile played on his lips as he re-examined the newly cracked face.

"Now it's a useless hunk of junk."

Sam's well-worn patience finally snapped. "What in God's name is wrong with you?!"

They met each other's eyes through the jet of water that separated them.

"Ain't nothin' wrong with me, pal." Al tried to peer over Sam's shoulder. "Just tell Candy to hurry, would ya? This cold water's killin' my mood..."

Pushed to the limit, Sam reached in with the whole upper half of his body, grabbed Al with both hands, and forcefully held his head under the shower. "Good. Maybe it'll help you sober up."

Spluttering, Al tried to fight his way out--yelling obscenities and completely soaking Sam--until finally, as if realizing he was at a tactical disadvantage, he retreated back against the tiles again.

Sam withdrew, wiping the drips from his face

with a wetter-than-wet shirt sleeve, then readied himself for the counter attack as he watched Al push himself away from the support of the wall.

The older man was so angry, so full of intoxicated rage, that he was literally shaking.

"Don't touch me, Beckett!" he yelled through gritted teeth. "Get the hell outta here before I deck you!"

"You're so drunk you can hardly stand up," Sam answered in kind, his own voice rising. "I left Donna alone and flew out here to try to talk some sense into you. Quit--"

"So who asked you to come?!" Al stabbed an accusing finger at him. "Screw you, pal...and your freakin' help! I don't need you or it. You got that? So why don't you just haul butt back that precious little ball-buster of yours ...and get the hell off my back!"

There was only the sound of running water as both men glared at each other in silent fury. A muscle rippled in Sam's clenched jaw, and anger glinted like icy daggers in his eyes.

Al had gone too far this time. Way too far. He didn't want help, fine. Let him rot there. Because no one, but no one, said that about Donna.

Without a further word, Sam turned his back and stormed out.

He marched through the suite, ignorant of his soaking wet shirt and jeans, anger ruling his every step. Al's words rang in his ears--over and over--only adding to his contempt.

Without even faltering his pace, he retrieved his bag, leaving the fedora hat where it landed upside down on the mulberry carpet.

He'd just crossed the threshold--one hand on the door handle ready to purposely slam it--when he came to a jarring standstill.

'We always hurt the ones we love'. Pursing his lips, Sam shook his head at the ceiling. Al deserved to be left, but damn it...he couldn't do it. He couldn't walk out on the man, leave him in that condition, even if that had been his express wishes.

He remembered what he'd told Donna, about coming all this way to help Al. And by God, that's what he intended to do...even if he had to shove it down his throat.

Because somewhere under all that booze and anger there was one pretty terrific guy. There was no way he was going to let Al--in his present state--tear that man apart and throw his life away.

Donning a mental flak jacket against any other insults Al might aim in his direction, Sam stepped back inside the hotel suite and gently closed the door.

* * *

He found Al where he'd left him--in the shower. However in his absence, the man had slipped to the floor and was now propped in one corner with his knees drawn up and his head down.

He seemed oblivious to both Sam's return and the icy sting of the water still cascading down over him. He just sat there, cradling the gold watch from Ruthie in both hands, as if it were now something very precious.

Watching him, Sam reached in and turned off the faucet.

"It's over, Sam," Al said as the water dribbled and dripped to a stop. He didn't look up, just continued to lovingly caressed the same object he had--only minutes before in a drunken fit--tried to destroy. "Ruthie's...gone."

Sam squatted by the open sliding glass door. "What do you mean 'gone'?"

"You know." Al shrugged, avoiding his eyes. "It...wasn't working out, so I...I sent her packing."

"You kicked her out?" Sam asked, stunned.

No wonder there had been no answer on the phone at the Calavicci residence. Ruthie, whose only crime had been to care about her husband and his drinking problem, had caught the short end of the stick--thrown out of her own home.

When Al wouldn't look at him, he tasted anger all over again. "Damn it, Al, why? What could she have possibly done?" His voice hardened. "Except care."

Al shivered involuntarily, but Sam couldn't tell if he was listening or not. He was just sitting there, zombie-like, staring at the cracked face of his watch, looking like he had settled in for the long haul.

Damn. Unless he got him out of those wet clothes he was likely to catch pneumonia.

Reaching for Al's arm, he began to pull him to his feet. There was no resistance...but no effort on Al's part either. In fact, it wasn't until he dragged him out of the shower that he got any reaction at all.

Al turned a look on him, and what he saw in the brown eyes caused a shiver to race down his spine. He'd seen the man down for the count

before, but nothing like this. Al had always bounced back. This...

Frankly, this scared him. Because it was like looking into the face of a man who had just toppled over the edge of the abyss and into his

own private Hell.

Al had hit rock bottom.

"Come on, buddy," Sam said, heading for the adjoining bedroom.

No doubt it was going to be a long night.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
"High Stakes"

If I had any decency, I'd be dead... 'cause nobody has the right to feel this bad and live to tell about it. Maybe I am dead, and my body is just too damn dumb to know when to give up and die.

Geez, does that make any sense at all? I wish Sam would just come in here and shoot me and put me out of my misery.

Sam. He's here... isn't he? I think I remember Mr. Morals showing up at the wrong time, just as... as... hell, I can't remember! But it was probably something I shouldn't have been doing anyway.

Knowing Sam, he would've read me one of those Beckett Sermons about getting so drunk and--hah! fooled ya kid!--I can't even remember it! Maybe there's something to be said for brain cell pickling after all. I can't remember a whole lot of things, but maybe that's for the better. Can't remember where I am, can't remember why I'm wearing a bathrobe, can't even remember why I got so wasted in the first place!

Damn, this bed's got water in it. Have to remember that next time I move, 'cause it's making my stomach...

No. Don't think about it.

Where the hell's Ruthie...? Wait a minute. We don't have a waterbed...?

Oh hell. Ruthie.

So that's it then. Rock bottom and where do I go from here?

God, I'm sick... whether from all the booze or the mess I've made of my life, I can't tell. And my head's about to split in two! Show some mercy, huh? Just let me die?

'Course, I know there ain't no way He's gonna cash in my chips and order a lightning bolt to finish me off. Enduring this agony--this life--is His payback for what a screw-up I've become. Guess I deserve



it, just wish Sam hadn't gotten involved. Don't want the kid to get dragged under too.

Oh hell, I'm gonna throw up...

* * *

Head down and groaning, Al leaned against the bathroom sink and once again wished he was dead. Surely being dead would be less painful than this--and less traumatic than rushing to the head with a violent attack of the pukies every time he moved. Maybe if he just stood there--absolutely still and in total silence--and waited long enough, it would all end.

Yeah. Time had a way of eventually ending the suffering of all mortal men...

Hell, so would putting a gun to his head. At least that'd be quick. And easy.

But since he didn't have a gun, he waited a few long, painful moments--with his eyes closed so he wouldn't have to look at his unshaven, pasty white reflection in the vanity mirror--until he reluctantly concluded that his plea for mercy was not going to be granted so soon.

With nothing left but to try to alleviate some of the discomfort while he waited, he ran some water into the sink and then watched his hands shake uncontrollably as he splashed his face. His stomach had settled since he'd thrown up, but his eyes still felt like they were standing out on stalks.

"Sam?" he growled, then put a hand to the bridge of his nose as the loudness of that sole word attacked his brain.

No Sam. The kid had obviously given him up as a lost cause too...and who the hell could blame him? Sam had faced the fact that he was a total waste of space and gone home...and that was probably for the best. The kid didn't deserve to be lumbered with his problems.

Certain his skull was about to split in two, he staggered back to bed--longing for some gorgeous Florence Nightingale to magically appear in his arms. Because he could sure do with a little pampering right now. He collapsed into the softness of the mattress, without paying heed to the fact that it was a waterbed, and both his head and his stomach protested the ripples he unintentionally created.

Laying on his back with his eyes closed, he gently massaged his temples while waiting for the slight wake to subside, and turned his mind to more pleasant thoughts. If he really stretched his imagination, it reminded him of

being at sea. And there was nothing more restful than the ocean on a clear, sunny day...with, of course, the exception of being some forty thousand feet above it.

Soaring high, on his mighty metal wings.

From up there, the world below always seemed like such a foreign place, as if he belonged in the sky, not earthbound like ordinary men. Just him and his high-tech silver bird, skimming as fast and as free as the wind itself across the underbelly of the heavens, and dreaming of the wonders that waited even higher up.

It was a nice, relaxing thought...until a round of heavy artillery came thundering through his head. Then chaos. The cockpit erupting into Phase Frantic. No response on the stick. Instruments unwinding like broken clocks. And the only thing he could focus on, the only thing that wasn't spinning helplessly out of control, was that tiny piece of jungle floor where--unless he reached the ejection handle--he was about to be introduced to as a grease spot...

The firefight came again, this time jarring him back to full consciousness. Only it wasn't artillery fire that was battering his brain, it was someone knocking on the door to his hotel suite.

In no mood for company--unless it was of the female persuasion--he was more than a little annoyed to find Sam on the doorstep. And the kid had an embarrassed, goof-ball grin on his face. Geez, he was like a boomerang--easy to throw a curve, hard to get rid of.

"I, unh...had to get some cash. On my credit card. Guess I locked myself out."

Al grimaced, his hand immediately going to his head. "Fine, whatever."

"I didn't wake you, did I? I figured since it was nearly noon--"

"Sam..." He shot the kid a pleading look. "Just...don't yell."

"I'm not."

"All right then. Just don't speak."

Still holding his head, Al left Sam to take care of the door and staggered to the lounge room. There, he slumped into the over-stuffed, velour love seat. Massaging his temples again, he was momentarily distracted by another hazy slice of memory--collapsing into the same purple love seat after some dark-haired beauty playfully pulled off his trousers...

Now there, at least, was something worth remembering!

With a wicked grin, he leaned forward to

pour himself a generous shot of scotch from the bottle of Chivas Regal on the coffee table that was still half full. He was just putting the bottle back down beside the empty one when Sam appeared in his peripheral vision.

"You must have some hang--" Sam stopped short, in words, movement and jovialness, upon seeing him reach for his glass. "--over."

There was a slight pause as they exchanged a look, which ended simultaneously when Al took a sip of his drink and Sam moved to sit in the armchair across from him. He watched the young physicist from over the rim of his glass--the way the kid's eyes wandered disapprovingly over the bottles on the table, the almost imperceptible shake of his head, the slight shift in expression to Preacher Beckett Mode. The kid had that look on his face--Lecture Numero Whatever was inescapable.

And damn it, if it didn't suddenly irritate the hell outta him!

Pulling a cigarette from an almost empty pack, he lit it then purposely blew the smoke in Sam's direction, just to gall him.

"I never knew you smoked cigarettes," Sam said after a moment. Whatever he'd wanted to say, he'd settled on something conversational instead.

Al smirked and put the cigarette to his lips again, to prove to Mr. Ph.D. that despite all those degrees there were still a few things he didn't know. He drew deeply, filling his lungs with smoke...then coughed. Scowling under Sam's suppressed smile, he tapped the ash into an over-flowing ashtray.

"In all the years we've known each other, I've never seen you smoke anything other than those awful cigars."

Sam's good-natured grin only irked him further. Diverting his gaze, he washed down his irritation with the contents of his glass.

"Or drink this much."

Al's expression narrowed. "What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"It means..." Sam frowned with concern. "...when did it become a problem?"

"You came all the way to Vegas to ask me that?" Al smirked as he leaned forward to recharge his glass. "I'm not the one with the problem, pal."

"Look, I...know about Ruthie. You told me, last night. And I can understand why you wanted to get drunk and...everything." He motioned with his hand, and Al briefly considered all the

possibilities of the black silk stocking on the floor. "But what I don't understand is why you're sitting here now, trying to do it all over again."

Al crushed out his cigarette, then leaned back with one foot hitched up on the edge of the coffee table and took a defiant swig of his drink.

"That's not the answer," Sam insisted quietly, but forcefully.

"But sure makes the question a helluva lot easier to deal with."

Al emptied his glass again, but as he reached for the bottle, Sam snatched it away. There was a moment's pause--a moment's glaring--as hostility mounted on both sides.

"Damn it, Al..."

The Naval officer uncoiled like he'd been launched by a spring, sitting forward with his feet planted firmly on the floor and his right hand outstretched toward Sam. "Gimme the bottle."

"We've got work to do and--"

"Gimme the freakin' bottle, Sam! Or so help me I'll..."

"What?" Sam asked, startled and disgusted. "Deck me? Like you threatened to do last night?" He slammed the bottle onto the low coffee table between them. Glass on glass--it sounded like the crack of a whip. "Go ahead. If you're that damn desperate, take it."

Infuriated, the blood pounding in his temples, Al sat rigid and simply glared at Sam.

A soft but business-like knock came from the direction of the foyer. Neither man moved a muscle. At the more insistent second knock, Sam backed down--with a shake of his head--and went to answer it. As he left the room, Al's eyes slipped to the untouched bottle, lingered for a moment, then screwed shut.

Damn...

Taking a deep breath, he began chasing some much needed distraction by lighting up another cigarette. At least a minute passed before Sam returned. He was pushing a room service cart containing a plate of club sandwiches and a pot of what smelled like freshly brewed coffee.

The younger man met his eyes, and smiled crookedly. Al acknowledged him with a small forgiving tilt of his head. Seemed the timely interruption had helped them both restore a better frame of mind. At least the kid was trying.

"I ordered lunch on the way up," Sam

confessed, placing the sandwiches next to Al's empty glass. "Thought you could do with something to eat. I know I'm starving."

Unfortunately, just the sight of it was enough to turn Al's stomach. Watching Sam begin to eagerly chow down on a pastrami-on-rye oozing extra mustard, he said, "Show a little mercy, huh? I've already thrown up once."

Sandwich in hand, Sam poured two cups of black coffee. "Then try this."

Al motioned to his empty glass with his cigarette. "Well, unh...you know what they say about mixing your drinks."

Sam ignored his feeble attempt at humor and instead held the cup directly under his nose. "This is the exception to the rule."

"No, thanks." As the aromatic steam began curling into his nostrils, Al grimaced. "Gimme a break, would ya? Or you're gonna make me yawn in technicolor."

Sam was insistent. "So take it."

"Just...get it outta my face..."

Sam waved the cup. "Take it." Annoying wasn't even close.

"Okay, okay." Relenting, he took the cup. "Geez...the vice squad's got nothin' on you, pal."

Sam grinned--a genuine smile--toasting his own cup of coffee. "Bottoms up."

Al peered dubiously at the steaming liquid. He'd had enough hangovers in his time to know black coffee didn't work wonders.

Cautiously, he sipped the cooling surface--to abate the kid's persistence if nothing else. It left a fiery trail all the way down the back of his throat to the pit of his stomach...and immediately began to burn a hole right through the lining.

The coffee spilled as he hastily cast it and his cigarette aside. Before Sam could react, he was off in a stumbling run, hand clamped over his mouth as he made a beeline for the bathroom.

* * *

Al groaned, dragging himself from the toilet to the vanity. When he looked at his reflection, he was shocked by his unshaven, unruly, bug-eyed appearance. How was it possible to look even worse than he felt?

Movement in the mirror--in the doorway behind--caught his eye. Sam. Wearing a sympathetic look.

"Sorry." The kid offered an apologetic

shrug. "It always works in the movies."

"What the hell're you doin' here anyway?" Al growled, even more bad-tempered than before.

Sam took that as an invitation to enter. When he stopped, he was looking over Al's shoulder, meeting the bloodshot eyes via the mirror. "I came to take you home."

"To what?" Al asked bitterly, looking down to run some cold water into the sink. Damn the annoying shake in his hands...

"Well, for starters...to Ruthie."

"Hah!" He splashed his face. "That's a good one."

"I called Donna this morning. She talked to Ruthie last night...said she's upset. Really upset. Especially about..." Sam shuffled, looking at his feet. "...about getting the divorce papers."

Al glanced at him via the mirror. So. The kid knew. But how much? "Yeah, well...she asked for it." He splashed some cold water on his face and rinsed the sour taste from his mouth.

"Come on, Al..." Sam paced away and the captain was grateful for the space. "You and Ruthie have been married for more than four years. You can't let one fight destroy all that. I mean, couldn't you just sit down and--"

"No," Al said emphatically. "It's over, Sam. Let it go."

"But she loves you."

"If she loves me then why did she--" He abruptly cut himself off, hiding a tortured expression in a fluffy burgundy towel as he patted his face dry. "...why didn't she come after me herself."

"Because she didn't even know where you were until Donna told her." Sam paused then repeated, "Ruthie loves you, Al."

But Al wasn't listening. He was staring at his reflection while holding the towel to his cheek. "It was always different to the way it was with...before." He smirked, watching the man in the mirror smirk back. "I always doubted it was the real thing. Now I know. God, I wanted to believe it was."

"Al--"

"It wasn't like with Eva, Sam," he insisted, unable to let it rest. "I told Ruthie I loved her--said it out loud--but..." His eyes narrowed as if in pain. "...but I think I was really just tryin' to convince myself."

"Al, love isn't just saying 'I love you'. It's something you have to work at. Together.

Every moment of your life."

Al scoffed bitterly. "Yeah, well from now on I say 'screw love'. In fact..." Suddenly vehement, he tossed his towel into the sink. "...screw it all, I've had a gutful."

"Is that why you skipped out on the meeting at STAR BRIGHT? I know what you're thinking, but it's not too late. I managed to get the meeting held over 'til next Tuesday."

Al turned. "You what...?"

Determined enthusiasm lit up the physicist's face. "All you've got to do is show up, give it your best shot and that Committee will..." He paused in search of the right phrase, and borrowed one of Al's. "...will fold like a deck of cards."

"In case you haven't noticed, pal, I already gave it my best shot." He turned back to the mirror and leaned against the vanity, his fingers curled under the tiled top, suddenly unable to stand without its support. "Hell, I always gave it my best shot. Face it, Sam, I'm a loser. Bigtime." He stared hard at the unruly man in the mirror again. "And nobody believes in a loser...not even me."

With that, he had to look away. Taking a seat on the toilet lid, resting his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, he said, "Geez, my head hurts..."

As Sam squatted beside him, he sucked in a breath and looked up at the frieze on the top of the opposite wall--dice, poker chips and playing cards of all things. The cards were set out in a winning hand--a royal flush, aces high.

"You're just going through a tough time right now," Sam said quietly. "You can work it out, both with STAR BRIGHT and with Ruthie."

Al scoffed and shook his head, avoiding Sam's eyes. "All nice and simple, right?"

"Yes," the kid insisted. "I mean, what sort of idiot would I look like, flying all the way to Vegas just to console a drunken bum." He shuffled onto his other knee. "Unless you want me to look like a complete idiot."

"No...no, I'd never want that..."

"Then prove it. Get back in the ring and start kicking some butt."

"I...I can't, Sam." He dropped his head in his hands again. "I can't..."

"Yes, you can! I've seen you backed into tighter corners than this, and you've always come out fighting. Why is this time any different?"

"'Cause this time I've had it up to here,

okay?" He slit a finger across his throat, all fired up in spite of the relentless throb in his head. "I'm nothing more than a two-bit little guttersnipe, who's spent his whole life foolin' himself by believing playin' hardball in the majors would change that."

Life, damn it, was a poker game. High stakes for high rollers. But Fate held all the aces, and he was sick of trying to beat Fate with a bum hand. It was time to fold.

Al sagged under the thought. "I'm gonna... resign my commission. Retire." Using the younger man's shoulder, he pushed to his feet and staggered toward the adjoining bedroom. "Go home, kid," he called without turning. "Where you belong. You got better things to do than hang around a bum like me..."

Closing the door in his wake, Al drew the heavy drapes closed, effectively sealing himself inside the cocoon of loneliness he'd been weaving all his life. Only he didn't want some miraculous metamorphosis to take place so he'd emerge a new man--he just wanted to wither and die. Hell...who would care if he did?

So he stood there, in the middle of the room, hiding from the world with his face in his hands.

* * *

Dreams are funny things. Ever had one of those really weird ones? You know, the kind that come from way out in left field and completely knock you for a loop? At the time, there never seems to be a real good reason why they happen--they just do. I mean, why would I suddenly have this dream about Christmas?

At least, it seemed like Christmas--Ruthie standing there, in front of an open fire, smiling.

Just smiling.

Wait a minute. We never celebrated a Christmas together, at least not in the way I'd known it. Maybe it was Hanukkah?

Yeah. Hanukkah. 'Cause there was definitely some sorta celebration about to go down...

But then...where were the Hanukkah candles? There should've been candles. There's always candles, for every damn thing. How many times have I come home to find them burning? Every Jewish holiday. Hell, every Friday night.

Those Friday nights I make it out of Tony's Place, that is.

Okay, so I admit that sometimes I've ended up raising one too many glasses down there and have had to sleep it off in my car. What the hell. Sam would be proud of me...drinking but not driving.

I'd eventually make it in the front door. The next morning. Like nothing's wrong, like not coming home all night is the most natural thing in the world.

Like a real shmuck.

A-ha! That's what the celebration was all about. Not Christmas, not Hanukkah. Just me comin' home. See, I'd promised I'd be home that night, and damn it for once I was. Left Tony's early because that night was...special.

That night was--

Oh God, no. It was our wedding anniversary! Four years! And like a damn fool...I forgot!

And Ruthie, smiling that damn smile. I don't think I'll ever forget it. Or the way it transformed into a glimmer of newfound hope as she pushed that small, brightly wrapped box into my hands. Hell, the last thing I expected was that new gold Rolex. All I had for her was a sorry confession that I'd been such a horse's ass to treat her like I did, and a promise to try harder to make our marriage work.

D'you know, she never said a word? Just led me to the rug in front of the fire. We settled there like a couple of impassioned teens and I told her how much I loved her. Not because it seemed like the right thing to say but because at that moment, I really think I did.

Then she kissed me--like her life depended on it--and under the flickering glow from the fireplace, I loved her, then held her, then loved her again--'til her tears of joy made me swear to God I'd make it work.

But like all the promises I made to Ruthie over the years, there was only one I ever kept.

Time measured by love is full of heartache.

* * *

When Al opened his eyes a second time, it was to a soft dimness--the closed drapes allowing only a sliver of red haze to creep under the pleats, a few inches into the bedroom. The sun was still up--just--although it was a little difficult to pin down an actual time.

He rubbed the sleep from his face with one hand, while his other groped to the nightstand for his wristwatch. The crack in the face didn't surprise him, and although he couldn't

specifically remember the incident he had no doubt he'd been responsible.

It was a fitting memento. Broken....just like their marriage.

Pushing back the covers, he swung his feet to the carpet and sat up. Then, remembering what had driven him back to bed in the first place, he just sat there--on the edge of the water mattress--and waited to be punished for his forgetfulness.

But there was nothing. No jack-hammer beginning construction on the inside of his skull, no volcano erupting in the pit of his stomach. Just the annoying tremble in his hands.

Drawing a sobering breath, he climbed a little unsteadily to his feet. Okay, so he wasn't quite up to running any three minute mile yet. At least he wasn't about to throw up, or want to drill a hole in his head to let out the pain. In fact, he felt a little hungry...and little parched.

That was what he needed--a drink. Just one. To quench his thirst...and help steady his nerves. Holding that thought, he retied the belt of his burgundy bathrobe and cracked open the bedroom door.

It was like coming out of an airlock--from an empty void where everything was cold and cheerless and dead, back into a world colored by warmth and laughter and life. He'd taken no more than three steps, when he paused in front of the wide expanse of tempered glass and stared out at the fiery orb on the western horizon.

He could feel the subtle warmth of its dying rays reaching out for him--like long tepid fingers--trying to embrace him and melt through the cold inside. But the ice that had formed around his heart was just too thick. It would take more than a mere sunset to thaw it.

Remorse abruptly gave way to vindictiveness. Hell. What a yutz. He should have seen this unhappy ending coming. Because he'd been paving his way toward it for about the last year, with more broken promises than he could count.

Ruthie was gone. It had been her decision to leave...and his to firmly shut the door behind her. It was over. Finished. Finito.

Like it was with Eva.

Like it was with Beth.

Beth. Her name--her memory--left a bitter taste in his mouth. Turning his back on Mother Nature's splendor, he headed for his booze.

However upon entering the lounge room, he

stopped short.

The decorative brass, 'sunburst' clock on the wall pointed to just after eight yet Sam was stretched out on the couch, softly sawing logs. His left hand held a yellow legal pad to his chest, while his right--resting on the floor--still lightly clasped a pencil.

Damn, he should've seen this coming too. The kid should've taken his advice and gone home, before he got caught in the rip and dragged under as well.

Al's eyes skimmed over the coffee table--the scattering of papers and report folders bearing the STAR BRIGHT logo that almost buried the tabletop, his ashtray and cigarettes, the boom box, his empty scotch glass...but--he frowned--only one bottle.

He ventured closer to pick it up, but found it empty--he'd emptied it last night. Where the hell was the other one? The one he'd been working on earlier? A quick visual recon of the endtables proved equally fruitless.

What the hell...? It couldn't have just walked off by itself--

His eyes fell on the sleeping man in suspiciously narrowed slits.

"Sam..." he said in a low, warning voice. But the kid didn't even stir. Desperation momentarily overtaking him, Al whirled around and let his eyes scan the rest of the room. "DAMN IT, SAM!"

"...huh?"

Al spun accusingly on the sleepy figure again. "What'd you do with it?"

Sam rubbed a hand over his eyes. "What?"

"You know damn well 'what!'" Al shook his head and stamped his foot. "I don't believe this...I don't freakin' believe this!"

Sam slowly sat up. "Well," he began in a reasonable tone, "if we're ever going to get through all this..." He motioned to the sea of papers. "...you'll need to keep a clear head. So I...tipped what was left down the sink."

"You t--?" Al looked like he was about to throw a fit. Turning his back on the younger man, he charged to the bathroom, cursing all the way.

There on the vanity, he spied his other bottle of Chivas Regal. He picked it up, but as expected it was bone dry.

Damn that Goody Two-Shoes! Damn him coming to Vegas! And damn him sticking his nose in where it wasn't wanted!

Al angrily threw down the bottle, drawing no

satisfaction at the way it smashed into several pieces in the sink. In the mirror, he glimpsed Sam--watching from the doorway--wince at the sound of breaking glass, and whirled around to attack.

"Can't a man have even one drink without you thinking he's some sort of lush?"

Sam came forward, his placating expression only making matters worse. "I didn't say--mean --I thought you were an alcoholic."

Al's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Then why'd you tip out my scotch?"

"Well, because..." Sam shuffled, obviously uncomfortable with what he wanted to say. "...you do...have a problem."

"Do I." He pointed an accusing finger. "Well, you're wrong, pal. Dead wrong."

"Can't you see what it's doing to you?"

"What it's doin' to me? You're the one who was creepin' 'round, secretly emptying bottles! I was asleep!"

"Alcohol is an addictive drug, Al, and--"

"Spare me the lecture, please!"

"--and," Sam continued unabashed, "unless you face it now, it's going to get you in more trouble than smashing bottles, or yelling at your secretary...or beating up vending machines."

That remark earned the kid a damning glare, but it didn't shut him up.

"Look what's happened at STAR BRIGHT. They want to kick you out." He held up his hands. "Okay, so maybe I don't know the whole story, but you can't deny that at the heart of it all is your excessive drinking."

Al's glare turned resentful. Damn the SOB who'd opened his trap to Sam about that! Cranston. Yeah, it had to have be him...

"And I'm also willing to bet you were drunk when you kicked poor Ruthie out. Al, alcohol is destroying your life and--"

"You're right...I'm not gonna stand here and deny it," Al said finally, pushing off the sink. "'Cause I ain't gonna stand here and listen to it!" Anger was evident in every step as he marched toward the bedroom.

"So what, since you can't hide in a bottle, you're gonna run and hide from the world in the bedroom again?" Sam called after him, just as ticked off.

Al stopped in the doorway and slowly turned. "No, smart-ass. I'm gonna get cleaned up then go downstairs for something to eat, a little entertainment..." As he slammed the door

closed, he finished, "...and a damn drink!"

* * *

Unzipping his leather garment bag, Al let the motion of carefully laying out his white tux calm his temper. That, and the notion that--for some unfathomable reason--women always found him irresistible in white. Be it a tuxedo, a spacesuit, his Naval uniform...or simply his Boxer Boys. Possibly it was the White Knight Syndrome. Possibly not. Whatever the attraction, tonight he planned to flaunt it to the max.

An impeccably pressed shirt, white bow tie, shoes and accessories followed from his valise, then it was back to the bathroom for a hot shower. Luckily, Sam had departed in his short absence--taking the broken glass from the sink with him--because he was in no mood for another confrontation.

Lathering up, Al turned his face to the shower jet and closed his eyes, savoring the massaging effects of the piked hot water. All he needed now was to be sharing it with some gorgeous young thing who was willing to do more than just scrub his back. He lost himself in that thought for a moment, unable to recall the last time he'd been in Vegas and available.

And that was just too tempting to resist.

Ten minutes later, towel knotted at his waist, he spent several long minutes standing in front of the mirror shaving. Satisfied with the result, he then padded barefoot through the thick-pile mulberry carpet to the bedroom again.

He dressed quickly yet still mindful of his appearance--something the Navy had ingrained in him long ago--then returned to the bathroom to complete his ablutions.

He was standing in front of the mirror again, combing his wet hair to sculptured perfection, when a glint of light off his wedding band caught his attention. Have to get rid of that before he tried picking up some babe...

He spent a futile moment trying to tug it from his finger. Damn! That'll teach him for not taking the thing off in over four years!

As Sam suddenly dared to poke his head in from the other room, he hastily abandoned his attempt. Fortunately, the kid didn't appear to have noticed what he'd been trying to do.

"I, unh...could do with a little help out here. With your reports?"

"I told you," Al said, pocketing his comb,

"don't bother."

"But we've only got the weekend--"

"Sam..."

Recognizing the warning in his tone, the kid wisely shut his mouth.

Al drew a deep breath as he turned. Fighting with Sam was one of the least pleasant things he could think of to do, yet somehow they seemed to do their fair share of it.

"Look... why don't you come downstairs with me?" It wasn't just an invitation--it was a Calavicci apology. He shrugged. "We can get a couple of nice steaks, a little wine to go with it, maybe relax over a friendly game of blackjack..." He shot Sam a knowing wink, already liking the idea. "...meet a few rich dames..."

As expected, it brought a tinge of color to Sam's cheeks. "Al, I'm getting married in a little under a month."

"So, you're having your bachelor party a little early..." His voice trailed off as something unpleasant stabbed him in the gut. "Less than a month?"

"Yeah." Sam smiled. No, damn it, he positively beamed. "June 5th, remember? So promise me you won't be drunk or hungover then, okay? Or best man or not, I definitely won't let you kiss the bride."

Al faced the mirror again. He vaguely remembered the kid saying they'd set the date ...but so soon?

Sam completely mistook his reaction. "Sorry, I guess that didn't exactly come out the way I intend--"

"Call it off." Al watched himself speak the words, felt them carried on a breath of expelled air, but was certain they belonged to someone else.

"What?!" There was no doubting the shock in Sam's voice.

"Don't do it, don't marry her."

There was a slight pause, then Sam's voice. Angry this time. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Sam...trust me on this, pal." Unable to meet the younger man's eyes, he turned tail and paced out the length of the bathroom. As large as it was, Al still felt like a rat in a box. "I know it seems perfect now, but after a while it stops being a fairytale and starts being a nightmare."

"What the--"

"First it's the little things that get to

you. But hey, everyone fights about stupid things, right? It all seems okay because you end up in bed and have fun making up. Only it's not okay. And it just gets worse.

"You dunno exactly when it started falling apart. You just wake up one morning and--bingo!--find your career and your marriage slipping through your fingers. And you try, damn it, but you can't stop it." Al rubbed his jaw as he paced, getting more and more wound up with each step. "Next you find yourself fighting with her every day...about God-only-knows what. But still you wanna keep what little you have, 'cause in spite of it all you've had some damn good times together. So you give her everything she wants. And more. Only before you know it, you've given her four years of your life!

"Hell...you don't think about divorce, because this time you really believe in the vow you took with her. She's all the family you've got, Sam. So you fight some more just to try to hang onto that." Pausing by the shower, he ran both hands through his neatly combed hair, grabbing two fistfuls just behind his ears.

"Then comes the catalyst. Officially, your head's on the block now, so you get summoned to DC for some major butt-kicking. And damn it, when you don't make it home on the flight you promised, she's suddenly convinced you're screwing around behind her back."

Completing an ill-shaped circle, he came to a stop where he started--staring into the vanity mirror. But he was feeling contempt for the man looking back at him, not pity.

"But does she wait and hear your side of it? Hell, no! You didn't know it, buddy, but she had you tried and convicted months ago! So what happens? I'll tell you what happens, pal. You come home to an empty damn house... 'cause she's packed everything into a freakin' suitcase and left you!"

Oblivious to the way his fingers were clamped under the vanity top, Al continued to glare at his reflection...until the realization of his confession hit home with a crushing blow. Then his tone abruptly lost all its fire, and his expression collapsed into a helpless look.

"Just like Beth left me..."

"Beth..." Sam's voice, breathing her name like the sacred word it was, breaking years of silent taboo.

God help him, yes. Beth. Once he believed she'd taken everything. Now he knew she'd left a legacy.

"But I thought..." Sam stammered. "I mean you said...God, Al. I'm sorry. I should have known...I should have seen..."

Al wasn't listening. He looked down at his hands--gripping the bench top so tight that it felt like he was about to rip it off--and at the band of gold on his finger, so pronounced against the whiteness of his knuckles.

It disgusted him. It and all it stood for. A single circle of gold--precious and unending--a symbol of undying love...and the biggest crock of bull he'd ever heard.

"Al? You...okay?" Sam asked cautiously, obviously noting his expression.

"Oh, I'm fine, pal," he returned, but in a tone which betrayed him. "Like a million freakin' bucks." Raising his hand, he again fought to pull his wedding ring over his tensed knuckles. "'Least I will be when I get this damn thing off!"

"Al..." Sam said in a knowing tone as he started toward him. "Don't do this."

"I ain't married to her anymore, Sam, so don't freakin' tell me what I can't do--damn it!" With an explosive tug, his wedding ring came free, but such was the force he used that he never really had a firm grip on it.

Almost in slow motion, it landed in the vanity basin and tinkled round and round the porcelain sink, as if in some bizarre life-game of roulette. Finally, it rolled to a precarious perch halfway over the drain grate.

Al stared at it for several heartbeats, holding his breath, unexpectedly torn between rescue and revenge. The decision, however, was taken out of his hands as Sam took it upon himself to save it.

That ill-fated wedding ring was then offered on an upturned palm. Avoiding Sam's eyes--the expression he knew was waiting for him--Al simply pushed the younger man's hand aside and smoothed down his ruffled hair.

"They're all the same, pal, so you just take my advice. Go bingo-bango-bongo every damn night if you want...just don't let her get that ring on your finger."

"No, Al...you're wrong."

He opened his mouth to retort, but Sam didn't give him a chance to speak.

"Look, I know I haven't known Donna very long...but we love each other very much."

Al scoffed, suddenly despising the word. "I'll let you in on a little secret, Sam." He met the kid's eyes. "Love sucks."

"That's not what you said last night," Sam returned, throwing a curve into the conversation. "After I pulled you out of the shower, you talked for hours. About love...and glory...and what it all meant. You said...'love is life's only true satisfaction'."

"Hah!" Al scoffed spitefully. "You got your wires twisted on that one, pal, 'cause I was obviously talking about sex!"

"Actually...you were quoting Donna," Sam said softly, the inflection in his voice only adding to Al's contempt. "It was something her English Lit professor at Lawrence used to say. I guess the guy made a big impression on her life."

Al scowled. While it was true that Donna's quote had stuck the first time he'd heard it--like an arrow through his heart--it was also something he would never let show through his wise-guy exterior, much less speak out loud.

Until one too many glasses of booze had loosened his tongue?

Hell. It was more than a little disconcerting not to be able to remember 'last night', and what truths he may have told under the influence of alcohol. But rather than confess that, he tried to escape by heading out to the other room with a wave of his hand and a disgusted grunt.

Sam was only a step or two behind--and obviously knew he had him on the run.

To counter this, Al kept telling himself that he really didn't care diddly-squat about Donna or her college days. Besides, this wasn't about Al Calavicci--it was about Sam...and the way she was gonna hurt him. It wasn't anything against her personally--it was just that...well, she was a woman. And in spite of his efforts to educate the kid, when it came to understanding the opposite sex, Sam was still a mental slug.

Hell, what'd he have to do to make him understand? Draw a diagram? Write it down in a freakin' quantum equation?

Being married was like living in a warzone. A battlefield where you took turns wounding each other by firing hollow words in the dark of night, then woke the next morning and swept all the little bits of the broken promises under the rug. Sure there were moments of truce, when you waved the white flag and found comfort in the arms of the enemy. But eventually--inevitably--it was all shot to hell.

Finally reaching the lounge room, Al came to an abrupt standstill. There were papers and notes still scattered from one end of the coffee

table to the other, practically burying it. He rounded angrily on the kid scientist at his heels.

"Why the hell're you wasting your time on this?"

"On what?"

"This!" Al gestured impatiently at the STAR BRIGHT papers.

"Because--"

"DON'T!" Al cut him short, in no mood for the same explanation again. "Damn it..." He spun on his heel and took a few steps toward the door.

"Al, don't go."

Sam's voice stopped him, but he didn't dare look back over his shoulder. He had a picture of the kid in his mind's eye: rooted to the spot beside the coffee table, looking down at the scatter of papers representing the mess he'd made of his career. And his life.

"Who's gonna stop me?" he grated, taking another step forward.

But something inexorable in Sam's tone was holding him back. "If you walk out that door, don't expect me to be here when you get back."

Finally turning, he wasn't surprised to find him exactly where he'd imagined. The physicist looked up from the tabletop of papers and met his eyes--he was serious about leaving. And that's what Al had been aiming for all along--to drive Sam away, before this fiasco hurt his career too.

Al smirked. "Suits me, pal." Raising his left hand, he indicated the lack of a wedding band on his finger. "'Cause I don't intend coming back alone."

"Al, I know you're hurting, but I don't think jumping into bed with the first--"

"You don't 'know' half of what you think you do!" Al exploded. He glared, daring Sam to rise to his challenge. When he didn't, he mercilessly continued his attack. "But--hell--I do." He took an accusing step back toward the younger man, wanting him to leave...if only for the kid's own good. "I know you've been using me all these years...just to get your pet theory together."

Sam's mouth dropped open but he didn't utter a syllable. He just stood there looking completely astonished. And hurt.

"Well, I got news for you, pal. I'm all used up. Capeesh? I've got nothing left to offer, so you might as well clear out and find some other bozo to be your front line of

defense."

Ignoring Sam's speechless look, Al chuckled with the irony of it.

"That's if you can find someone else stupid enough to believe in it." He combed a hand through his hair. "Geez, I'm an even bigger idiot than I thought I was!"

"You're not an idiot," Sam said in a small, hurt voice. He drew a deep breath, trying to re-inflate himself after the hole Al had punched through his self-esteem. "And this isn't about theories or time travel...it's about you. In spite of what you think, I've never used you. I've just...always believed in you."

It only added to Al's self-pity. Geez Louise! He'd really done a number on this poor kid! Couldn't he understand that sticking by a loser meant he lost too? "Believin' you can travel in time is one thing, Sam, but believin' in a boozed-out hack like me makes you even stupider."

"Al--"

"For God's sake, don't!" He headed for the door again. Without turning, he called, "Just go, okay? Just...leave me the hell alone..."

He slammed it in his wake, well aware of the fact that he'd probably just shut the door on his friendship with Sam Beckett.

For good.

* * *

I kept tellin' myself that what I did was for Sam's own good...but I still felt like a horse's ass. I'd not only thrown my career and my marriage down the toilet, but I'd just pushed away the best friend a guy could ever have.

By the time I'd reached the bar, I'd completely lost my appetite--for eating and drinking--but sat picking fastidiously over a steak dinner regardless. Maybe because it was simply something to do.

I felt lower than low, like I wanted to hide under a rock while the whole world laughed. With any luck, I'd get trampled underfoot and die.

That would solve a helluva lot.

I really didn't wanna face those strangers in the casino--those winners--but the thought of facing Sam again held even less appeal. So for nearly two hours, I commiserated by shaking hands with several one-armed bandits, snake-eyeing myself in craps, and picking all the wrong numbers on the roulette wheel.

Unfortunately, I ended up sitting at the blackjack table. Unfortunate, because blackjack was my game--my baby. I mean, playin' that I always came out feeling like a winner, even if I didn't have the chips to prove it. I'd been avoiding it simply because I didn't want my present run of 'bad luck' to shatter that illusion too.

Within twenty minutes, I'd lost a bundle--bigtime--even more than I could afford. Believe me, when you start stacking fifty dollar chips it doesn't take long. It just confirmed what I'd been sayin' all along, proved to the world in general what a Real Lemon looked like.

Not even the meaningful, sidelong glances of the diamond-decked dollybird on my right seemed to help. She kept invading my space by rubbing elbows with me, definitely giving me The Look when I wasn't even tryin'.

I gotta tell you, she was very sympathetic when I 'hit' on eighteen and went 'bust' for the final time. Guess that was the one thing I had left going for me--the old Calavicci charm. No doubt I could have this broad upstairs and between the sheets so fast it'd make even Sam's head spin!

Sam.

The kid was better off without a born loser like me.

Hell.

I'm gonna miss him...

* * *

There were a number of things Al could have done. One, he could have drank himself into oblivion and not even thought about life until he decided to sober up again...which might be never. Two, he could have invited the woman next to him upstairs and taken out all his frustrations of females-in-general in a ruthless round of Mattress Mambo. Or Three, he could have gone outside and waited for a truck to throw himself in front of...

Number Three held the most appeal, he decided as he inserted the room key in the door of his suite, but with his luck he could stand on the curb 'til doomsday and there not be a truck come past the front of this hotel.

With a sigh, he pushed open the door, flicked on the light, and entered. He had allowed Sam ample time to pack his stuff and leave, having decided that they could both do without another confrontation. Now that he was

completely alone and stone cold sober, he could get down to the business of making himself really suffer the misery of utter defeat.

Nonetheless, he felt guilty at the way it had ended between him and Sam. He could only hope that once the kid got over the hurt and the harsh words he'd thrown, he'd be able to see that he was a whole lot better off without a Calavicci Noose around his neck.

Al stopped at the coffee table in the living room, still littered with papers, picking up a handful which included a folder with the STAR BRIGHT logo on the front. He wasn't surprised that Sam had left them--this was his career he was throwing away here, why should the kid take them, tidy up the mess he'd made of it?

With the papers still in hand, Al continued on toward the bedroom, intent on surrounding himself with evidence of his own destruction. He paused in front of the large expanse of glass in the hall, absently gazing out at the night and the fairyland of lights.

It was hard to see the stars through all that artificial glare, just like it was hard to keep sight of your dreams through all that Government crap--even though you knew they were out there.

Waiting.

Beyond reach.

No, wait...Al Calavicci had touched them. He'd chased his dreams until he'd conquered even those elusive stars. What the hell had happened to that man?

"Deneb," a familiar voice said from behind his right shoulder.

Al jumped like a startled rabbit, spinning to face the owner of that voice.

Sam smiled and pointed over Al's shoulder. "Blue-white supergiant, one of the twenty brightest stars you can see with the naked eye, magnitude of one-point-two-five, Alpha in the constellation of Cygnus."

"Geez, Sam, don't do that! Tryin' to gimme heart failure or what? I wouldn't do that to you..."

Sam laughed. "You always do that to me. By my calculations, I figure it'll take me years to get even." He nodded down at the STAR BRIGHT papers Al held. "Anything else you want to know?"

The ex-astronaut looked at the folder, feeling like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "I, unh...um..." Coming to terms with Sam's presence, he took a tough line. "I thought you were leaving?"

Sam shrugged. "Let's just say I changed my mind."

"Even after what I said?"

"Especially after what you said. Look, I know what you were trying to do and I'm afraid it won't work." He smiled sheepishly. "You're stuck with me, buddy. I can't do it without you."

"I don't wanna hear you can't! Of course you can!"

Sam just smiled, and--knowing he'd been tricked into playing his hand--Al dipped his eyes again.

"Aw, Sam...I'm no good, pal. You'd be smart to dump me. After this little episode, people are gonna talk."

"It doesn't really matter what other people say," Sam said. "What matters, is what you know about yourself...in here." He tapped his chest. "See, the most important person you have to listen to...is you. You just have to believe in yourself again."

"But no one in their right mind would hire me now..."

"I would."

Al's eyes slowly met Sam's. "Kid, you're a better friend than a shuck like me deserves. You should've decked me."

"I did what I should've done. I kept faith."

It was simply a statement of fact, Al realized as he looked down at the papers he was holding. The kid really did believe in him... even after all the crap he'd thrown trying to drive him away because he considered himself unworthy. In spite of all that, Sam was still here. Still ready to stick by him.

And Sam Beckett was no fool. If he believed this strongly that there was still some of the good stuff left in Al Calavicci, then maybe he was right.

For the first time in days Al felt a glimmering of hope that things weren't as black as they had seemed. Thumbing a corner of the report, he opened it to a random page.

It was a hard copy of the speech he had been preparing on his computer before coming to Vegas --BS in all its glory. It was garbage and the Committee would have known it. If he was going to make them understand the value of STAR BRIGHT, he was going to have to rewrite it--from the heart.

Closing the file, and absently tapping it against his palm he turned away from Sam to gaze

unseeingly out the window. For the first time in months he felt truly confident in his abilities. He could pull this out. Get a good stiff drink to still the increasing shake in his hands and--

Stopped cold by the thought, he stilled suddenly, and action was not lost on Sam.

"What?" the younger man asked, concerned. When he did not reply at once, merely shrugging in unwillingness to answer, the physicist persisted. "Al? What?"

"Sam," the captain began. He kept his gaze on the city-blurred stars for a long moment, then slowly turned to face his friend. "If I'm gonna make it through this..." Expressively, he gestured with the file. "I'm gonna...have to go cold turkey off the booze, and that's not gonna be easy."

Sam drew a deep breath to speak, obviously changed his mind about what he was going to say, and simply nodded. Al felt a sense of abiding relief. If Sam had pointed out that was what he had been saying for days, it would have negated all the meaning of the hard spoken admission.

Instead, after a moment's thought, the younger man quietly said, "There are clinics, Al. You can--"

"No!" Al snapped. "No clinics. No doctors. No 'programs'. If I'm gonna stay in this game, I'm doin' it for real. Going some place to dry out would deep-six what I've got left of my career real quick. No matter how discreet they say they are, or how understanding the top brass pretends to be, checking into a clinic would kill any chance I have left to make it."

He saw hope spark in Sam's eyes as he spoke positively of the future for the first time.

Hastily, he rushed on before the kid could interrupt. "If I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna do it now. Right here. This weekend. You think you got what it takes to kick me in the butt and haul me back on the wagon if I try and squirm off it?"

He kept his gaze narrowed and steady, daring Sam to say something mushy or--worse--admit he didn't really think Al could do it by suggesting a clinic again. If Sam backed down now, all of Al's fledgling confidence may just flee as well.

"Well?" he demanded though his throat was suddenly tight with an unnamed ache. "Whatta you say?"

Sam's eyes met his and he immediately wanted to retreat from the discerning hazel gaze. He forced himself to stand his ground and not look

away. Unconsciously resolute, as if bracing for an inspection in which he could not afford to be found wanting, he lowered his hand that held the file to his side and squared his shoulders.

"Okay," Sam said at last. "But withdrawing from a bender like this will have physical repercussions. You--"

"So? You're a doctor," Al said in a clipped tone that he hoped covered any other emotion. "I know you can handle it."

Whacking Sam on the arm with the file, he cut off the exchange before it could get out of hand.

"So come on, buddy," he said, turning on his heel and striding for the emotional distance of the living room. "We've got a helluva lotta work to do."

* * *

I thought I could kick the booze and get back on track pretty easy.

I thought I'd have the shakes for a while, be a little rocky, but then get on with the business of putting my life back together.

I thought wrong.

* * *

Sunday morning sunlight brightened the room far earlier than Sam would have preferred. Throwing an arm over his eyes with a moan did little to block it, since his position on the couch put him full in a square of brilliant light.

Groaning, he wished he had thought the night before to pull the shades. His eyes felt like they held sand, and the thought of getting up, even to pull the drapes and lie back down, was beyond comprehension. He and Al had stayed up until three in the morning, discussing the speech the captain would make to the Committee, the status of the Project itself, and the way Al thought the material should be presented to best satisfy the members' concerns.

Of special significance was Cranston who, Al believed, had fed biased information to Rear Admiral Drennan in Washington. Now, drawing a deep breath and moving his shoulders slowly in an attempt to ease their stiffness, Sam was doubly glad he hadn't been taken in by Cranston's 'concern for the captain'.

The Co-Ordinator had come to Sam after the meeting had been postponed, wanting to know if

he knew anything of the captain's 'illness'. Of course, he had assured Sam, he only had Al's best interest at heart in asking.

Sam had tried to tell Al about the incident the night before, but the older man had brushed it off. It was time for work, he had growled, cold hard facts and sweat to put them all together, not for rehashing old politics.

Still, Sam had suspected it was more an unwillingness to discuss anything that had the least bit to do with the obvious effects of Al's drinking of the past months. After all, it was the other man who had brought up the initial mention of Cranston. But if that was the way he wanted it, okay. Sam wasn't going to do anything to make it harder for him. It was going to be hard enough when the physical symptoms of withdrawal set in--they didn't need any unnecessary complications.

Thoughts of all that could go wrong, stirred Sam further and he pulled himself up to sitting. He'd better go check in the bedroom and see if everything was okay. Al might...

Blinking in surprise, he saw the object of his concern sitting on the purple love seat, feet propped up on the coffee table. Papers littered the table, the floor, and the unoccupied portion of the seat. Al was concentrating on a spread sheet resting in his lap, frowning, as if he'd been there all night.

Stretching, Sam regarded his friend a bit warily, not knowing what sort of mood to expect. "I thought you were going to get some sleep."

"Couldn't sleep," came the terse reply. "I ordered some breakfast, oughta be here soon. I figured the sun'd wake you up pretty quick."

Sam gave him a mock frown. "You could have pulled the drapes."

"Could've," Al agreed amiably, nodding toward stacks of sorted papers on the table. "But then you wouldn't be up to crunch these numbers for me."

Secretly pleased at the seeming return to normalcy, the physicist shot him a narrow-eyed glance. "Can I at least go to the bathroom first? Maybe take a shower and brush my teeth?"

"Absolutely," Al said, giving permission with good grace. "If you make it snappy. We're wasting time."

Groaning exaggeratedly, Sam got to his feet, muttering under his breath about Naval tyrants and mutiny. Collecting his bag, he went to get cleaned up and change into fresh clothes, feeling confident about the day. Maybe Al

hadn't been drinking as long and as hard as he had suspected, and it was going to be okay.

The confidence faltered when he pulled open the bathroom door to return to the living room and heard a crash of china hitting glass and a loud curse from Al.

Hurrying in, he saw the captain struggling to right a dropped cup of coffee which was spreading hot liquid over the piles of paper and files. Before he could interfere, Al fumbled as he snatched at it, spilling the last of the remaining liquid over his hand and vehemently tossing the cup onto the coffee service tray on the other end of the table.

Coming forward, Sam reached for napkins to help clean up the mess, but Al batted his hand away. "I'll get it," he snapped in a tone the younger man knew not to disobey.

Uncertain what to do, Sam watched the older man make a bigger mess, as he tried to wipe up the spill with hands that shook so badly that he had little fine motor control. Looking away, he realized that Al had rested the papers in his lap earlier to hide that very fact.

He returned to his seat on the couch and, unable not to, reached to help rescue some of the papers.

"I said I'll get it," Al growled, shoving him away with more force than was necessary.

"Okay," Sam answered, drawing back, "okay." Insomnia, tremors, and irritability; he had expected all of them.

Still, it could be worse--much worse.

To have something to do, he lifted the lid of a covered plate and inspected the breakfast that had been ordered for him.

"Bacon, eggs and hash browns," he observed. "Smells good."

"That one's mine," Al shot back in a lighter tone, beginning to get the worst of the mess under control. "I ordered nuts and twigs for you. All that high fiber, low cholesterol junk."

"Oh." Moving the first covered dish aside, Sam discovered another with bran cereal, a muffin and fruit. "Thanks."

Surprisingly, Al chuckled. "That must be your colon talking. Play your cards right and I'll share my bacon with you." He chuckled again, but this time it was oddly distorted. Scary even. "Geez, I ain't had bacon in years! Another freedom that's been returned to me..."

Shooting him a wary, sidelong look at the roundabout mention of Ruthie's departure, Sam

decided not to comment.

Oblivious to--or ignoring--his glance, Al was busy shaking off papers with a frown and quick, irritated movements. "Geez, what a yutz. Look at this mess."

"It's all right. We're going to have to print out all new hard copy anyway."

Looking up, the captain nailed him with a glare in another quicksilver change of mood. "What'd you mean by that?"

"Only," Sam replied cautiously, "that you're changing most of what I did. These are working drafts. We'll have to go in early Tuesday to print out new ones...won't we?"

"Yeah," Al agreed, regarding the sodden mess with a bleak expression that was way out of proportion to the situation. "I guess we can fix it."

Watching him, Sam felt a sudden chill of fear akin to the one he had known Friday night when he had looked into the other man's eyes as he hauled him out of the shower. What they were 'fixing' went far beyond a few coffee stained papers and both of them knew it.

As if he sensed the other's concern, Al stirred and the expression vanished. "Here," he said, extending a trembling hand for his plate and giving Sam a convincing grin. "Gimme that and we'll divvie up the bacon."

* * *

Things progressed much as Sam feared they would. Al's ability to concentrate completely disintegrated during the morning. By lunchtime, Sam's role had been reduced to damage control. He obediently shuffled papers and discussed cost flow and efficiency ratios whenever Al wished.

Secretly, he had jotted down the sequence of facts to be presented and charts and spread sheets to be generated and assembled into packets for each Committee member. The captain had done most of that work early in the day, using Sam's collated figures and suggestions. It would be easy enough, once back in the office on Tuesday, to recreate them using the notes he made of Al's plan.

Now, what the captain was actually doing was undoing his work as the physical symptoms from alcohol withdrawal began to intensify. Grumbling to himself and angrily wrestling with figures, whose significance seemed to escape him no matter how determined he was to hold onto them and make them behave, he fussed with the

papers while Sam pretended to help.

Tiring himself, Sam finally tossed his pencil onto the coffee table and pushed aside the remains of lunch dishes. Rubbing at tired neck muscles, he stretched. "What do you say we take a break, Al? I'm getting..."

Al glanced up at him. Then, as if startled, his gaze flicked to the wall behind him.

Reacting to the other man's reaction, Sam twisted to look where Al's gaze was riveted. "What?"

Reluctantly, Al pulled his attention back to Sam. "Nothing," he said, clearing his throat.

But his eyes traveled once more over the wall that, to Sam's eyes, held only the sunburst clock.

Lowering his head, the captain attempted to turn his attention back to the papers he was holding. "Just a trick of the light."

A small warning chill chased down Sam's spine. Here it was, then. Stage Two; hallucinations that the drinker often realized as such and attempted to hide. He had been about to suggest a walk. Perhaps that had better wait.

Getting to his feet, he stretched with a heartfelt groan. "How about some TV?" he suggested. "We need a break from this stuff for a while."

"Okay," Al agreed, shoving away the papers that he was holding but obviously not reading. "If you're tired."

Although he had agreed to television, Al got to his feet and wandered uneasily about the room as Sam used the remote to try channel after channel on the console across the room. Finally, he waved an impatient hand when Sam asked what he wanted to watch yet again.

"Whatever, Sam, doesn't matter. It's all crap anyway. Unless..." He paused in his restless drifting, glee lighting up his dark circled eyes. "...you wanna watch the adult channel?"

At the physicist's expression, the glint faded from Al's eyes.

"Nah, I guess not," he said sorrowfully. "For a minute there I forgot who I was talking to." Absently, he picked up his watch from the coffee table, consulted it as if checking the time, then slipped it on his wrist.

Uneasily, Sam noted that the pilot did not seem to notice it was broken but did not comment. It wasn't worth provoking an argument about.

Finally, the physicist decided on a classics channel showing 'The Maltese Falcon', and Al began to drift again. Keeping only a small portion of his attention on the show, and the rest unobtrusively on his companion, Sam settled down to wait. There was precious little else he could do.

When Al crossed in front of the screen for the fourth time, Sam leaned forward and poured a glass of orange juice from the large pitcher he'd ordered from room service. He handed it up to Al as he passed by on yet another inspection of the room's contents.

Automatically, the older man took it, then looked at it as if it were an alien object. "What the hell am I supposed to do with this?"

"Drink it." Though his eyes were directed to the television screen he saw the eloquent expression he received and refused to react. "You need liquids so you don't get dehydrated. You got something against orange juice?"

Al's glance seemed honestly amused. "What? Worried I'm gonna have to 'drive'?"

"Huh?"

Shaking his head, the captain dismissed it with a grin. "Never mind."

Hesitating, Sam regarded him and decided it was not worth pursuing. As he watched, Al took a drink of the juice, then grimaced melodramatically.

"This is awful! All warm and yucky!"

"So put some ice in it," Sam suggested unsympathetic, turning back to the television. "There's some in the bucket."

Grumbling about no respect and a waste of good juice, Al followed his suggestion. Parking the glass by the ice bucket, he lit up a cigarette, casting a glance at Sam, who frowned but did not comment. Then he took it, an ashtray and his glass, and went into the hall to stand by the large window.

By craning his neck, the doctor could barely keep him in view. It seemed Al was content for the moment to just stand and smoke, gazing out at the city. After watching his back for a few moments, Sam was satisfied that his patient was back in control and turned his full attention to the movie.

Drawn into the show despite himself, Sam lost track of time--and Al. When the closing credits began to roll, he looked up, and realized the room had dimmed. A vivid sunset filling the hall with a rosy, warm hue was the source of most of the light in the suite.

Al, empty glass in hand, full ashtray at his feet, still stood before the window, gazing through it. As Sam watched, the captain jumped slightly and turned as if someone had walked up beside him. In the dusk, he couldn't be sure, but it looked as if Al drew a breath to speak, then frowned, making a tiny, hastily recalled movement of his hand as if to keep someone from going.

Frowning, Sam hesitated. The hallucinations seemed to be intensifying in reality. That wasn't a good sign. But, neither was it totally unexpected. If the pilot had been drinking heavily for some time, the symptoms of withdrawal could be significant.

"Al?" Sam called, keeping his tone light and non-committal as if he had seen nothing.

At his voice, the captain hastily turned back toward the window as if to hide his face. He shoved his free hand deep in his left pocket and kept his back to the lounge as Sam continued.

"Want to order some dinner? I'm starved."

The only reply was a quick nod and a half shrug that sent a sympathetic shudder down Sam's spine. Who was it that Al had seen so briefly and tried in vain to hold, knowing in some part of his soul that it was all illusion?

Reaching for the room service menu, he kept his eyes on the other man's back. "What do you want me to order for you?" he asked, trying to give Al some semblance of normalcy to hold onto.

At that, the captain turned and took two steps back toward the lounge where Sam sat. "I went back for her, you know," he said, gesturing back toward the empty hall. "I did." Halting, he turned back to the window in a slow half circle that brought Sam to his feet. "But she was gone." The desolation in his voice lifted the hair on the nape of Sam's neck.

"Who?" His voice was soft and gentle in the still room.

"Trudy."

Trudy. Blinking, for he had fully expected the answer to be Beth, Sam lowered the menu to the coffee table. Slowly, to give Al plenty of time to sense his approach, he crossed the distance between them.

"I know you went back," he said evenly, pulling the forgotten juice glass from Al's hand. "You did the best you could." Resting one hand lightly on his friend's shoulder he guided him gently back to the couch.

"She was a great little sister," Al

continued as if it were somehow a logical extension of their earlier words. Instead of sitting down on the couch he sank onto the floor, knees drawn up to his chest and arms wrapped about them like a child. "It's just that I stunk as an older brother."

Slowly Sam lowered himself to the floor as well, back against the chair, keeping his tone light but warm. "I doubt Trudy thought you 'stunk' as an older brother. I bet she thought you were pretty terrific."

A small sound suspiciously like a sob came from Al as he buried his head on his arms to hide his face.

Reassuringly, Sam put a hand on the other man's shoulder. "Trudy loved you. She understood."

"Trudy always..." Al began as if to comment, but did not finish the thought.

"Trudy always," Sam prompted after a long moment passed.

Lifting his head, Al leaned back against the support of the couch, pulling away from Sam's touch. "Edna called kids like Trudy 'innocents'. I like that." He gazed out into the dimming light of the room and repeated his words as if he were talking only to himself. "I like that. It fits her."

"Edna," Sam repeated uncertainly, and hazarded a guess. "Ruthie's grandmother?"

"Bubbe." The desolation was back in his tired features. "She's like my grandmother too. Treats me like family. Bubbe would have liked her."

"Trudy?"

"Yeah," Al sighed, and wiped a quick, furtive hand over his cheeks. "I'm gonna miss her."

With that cryptic statement, leaving Sam to wonder if he meant Trudy, or his soon-to-be ex-wife's grandmother, Al seemed to take note of his surroundings for the first time in many moments.

"Geez, it's dark in here," he said, pushing himself up onto the couch with a painful weariness in his movements. "Let's turn on some lights."

Recognizing the change in mood, Sam agreed with a nod. Getting to his feet, he reached for the room service menu again. "So," he said with false brightness. "What do you want for dinner?"

Sighing, Al rubbed a telling hand over his jaw. "I'm not hungry. You order. I'm gonna go lay down for a while."

Watching the other man get to his feet and head for the bedroom, Sam protested mildly, "But you haven't had anything to eat since lunch. You need to--"

"I said I'm not hungry, okay?" Al snapped, not turning. "Get off my back. You're not my mother."

Menu in hand, Sam let him go. The change of mood he understood, Al had dropped his guard and been vulnerable. Now he needed to reinstate the boundaries. But he also needed food.

Sighing, Sam flipped the menu back onto the table once again. Chances were Al wouldn't be able to sleep anyway--he'd soon be out grumbling about being hungry. At least, the doctor hoped so. If he had to go in and get him, there was going to be a scene, and that he would rather avoid. He had an uneasy feeling that there was unpleasantness enough coming without looking for more.

Glancing at his watch, he sat back down on the couch. He would give Al until the end of the next movie, this one a black and white World War II story he didn't recognize. If he wasn't out and demanding food by the time it was over, Sam was going in--boundaries be damned.

* * *

Barely a half an hour had passed when Sam thought he heard Al call his name from the bedroom. Turning down the volume with the remote, he called, "Yeah?" But there was no reply.

Turning the television off completely, he got to his feet. "Al? You okay?" There was a sound, indistinct and muted, but no answer. Alarmed, he tossed the remote aside and headed down the hall, calling his friend's name as he went.

"Kwan, you bastard!" he heard the captain shout, anger and fear roughening his voice. "Make them cut him down!"

Rounding the corner into the bedroom, Sam froze at the sight of Al standing on the bed. He seemed oblivious to the physicist's presence, his eyes wide with horror as he regarded the blank wall above the bed's headboard. For him, there was obviously something terrible unfolding there...as if an unknown terror had caught him unaware while he was preparing for bed.

His shirt was unbuttoned, hanging open and revealing the livid scar across his torso. His bare feet were spread wide for support as if it

were all he could do to stay upright, his hands clasped behind him in an oddly constrained position. Even from the door, Sam could see the stress in the man's arms and shoulders as if he strained to free himself from bonds that were not there.

Bonds. With a sick twist in his stomach, Sam realized that Al was reliving some terrible ordeal, and was so deep within the terror that his body was responding to the illusion as if it were real.

Silent on the thick carpet, he hurried to the side of the bed, watching Al's expressions change as he reacted to the scene he imagined on the wall that to Sam's eyes held only light and shadow from the room's window.

Calling Al's name again brought no response other than another hoarse cry that had nothing to do with Sam Beckett and a luxurious hotel room in Vegas.

"Kwan! Where the hell are you? Make them cut him down!"

Who was 'Kwan' and what was it Al saw?

Reaching out to him, Sam tried again. "Al, it's me, Sam. It's only..."

Unexpectedly, Al ducked and staggered as if from a blow. The surface of the waterbed rippled and swayed, nearly pitching him on his face...but still his hands stayed firmly clasped behind his back. They were bound, like the man, to the horror.

Reaching out in reflex, Sam grasped Al about his legs, supporting him as best he could. The sway and roll of the bed threatened to cost them both their balance. Roughly grasping the back of Al's sweat drenched shirt in an effort to steady him, the younger man pulled him toward himself, holding tight to his legs as well as he did so.

Staggering, Al fought for his balance but, surprisingly, not against being moved. It was as if, Sam thought with a rising sense of horror, he was used to being moved against his will. Staying upright when his body was not fully under his own control was a reflex harshly won and still maintained, and it made Sam hate this Kwan and whoever it was that helped him.

Forcing calm, he reached up a supportive hand to Al's, until he found his balance again. "It's not real, Al," he said with a trace of desperation in his own voice. "It's not real."

Not resisting the hands on him, as if he knew it would do him no good, Al shuddered, groaned and closed his eyes. Sam instinctively glanced

up at the wall, then back at the captain, who had lowered his head and turned as far away from the wall as Sam's hold would allow.

Finally, Al crashed forward onto his knees as if in defeat, wrists still locked at his back.

Hoping that a change of scene would free the man from the spell the hallucination had on him, Sam increased the pressure on his shoulder a bit. "Come on, buddy. Let's get out of here."

Slowly, Al responded as he had before, giving up on a fight that he felt he could not win, turning in the direction Sam urged him. Feeling like a heel, the physicist kept up the pressure, urging him toward the light and openness of the living room.

Keeping up a soothing litany of reassurance, he felt as if he may be making headway as Al's shoulders slowly relaxed and his hands loosened from their grasp. As if suddenly freed, his arms hung limply at his side as Sam guided him through the hall and into the next room.

Blinking in the sudden light, Al did not resist being guided toward the couch and Sam began to hope the terror may be ending for the man. Pushing him onto the sofa, he paused a moment, watching as Al sat slumped head down, hands between his knees.

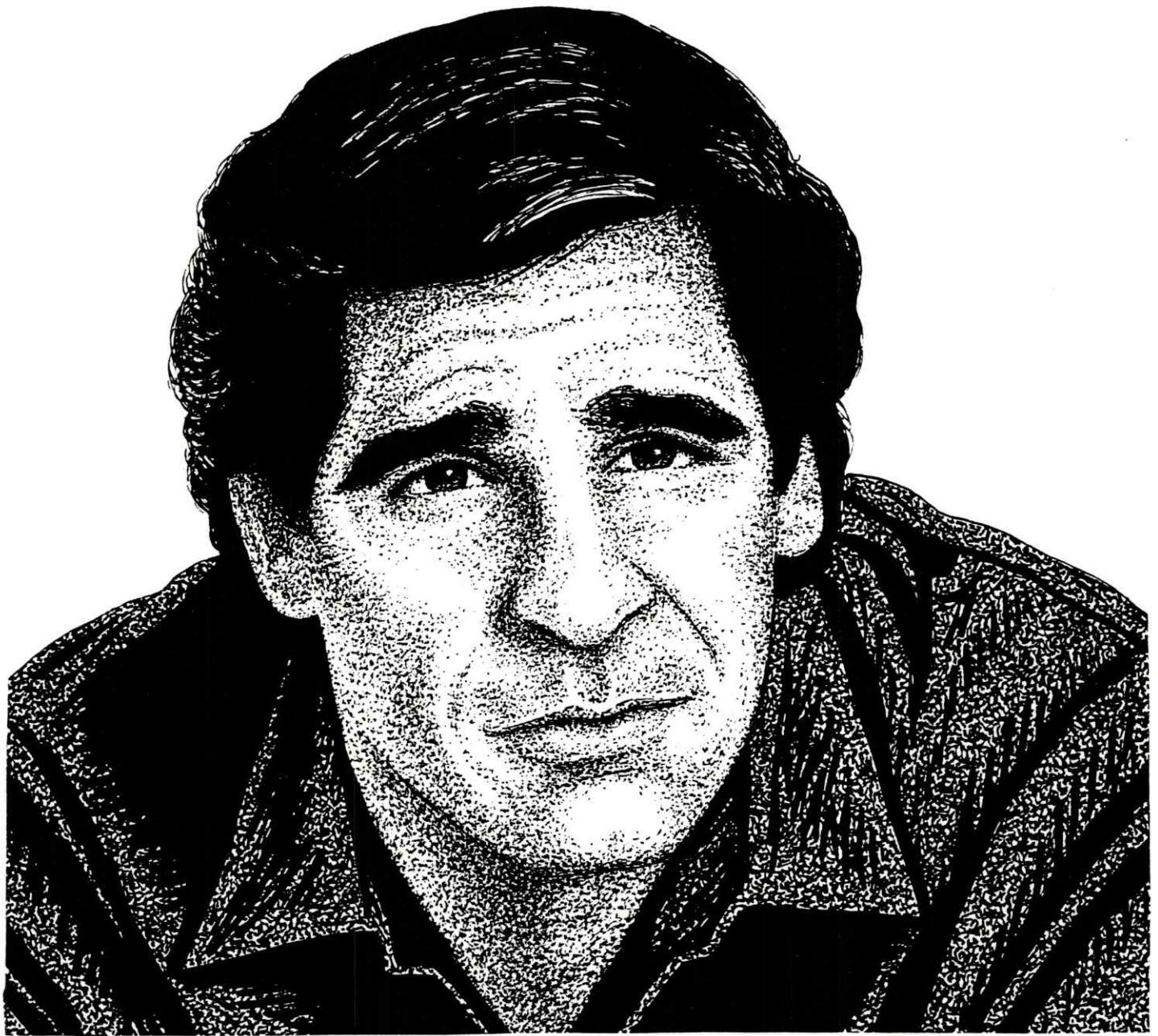
It looked as if he may stay that way without urging and Sam turned away to get a glass of juice from the pitcher. He was going to have to get some nourishment and liquids into the man or they were going to have even greater problems.

There was movement behind him and he turned to see Al had slid to the floor. Again he was nestled in the small space between the coffee table and the couch. But this time he was in an odd half-crouch, hands braced on both pieces of furniture. His right shoulder was hunched as if the space in which he existed was smaller than the one available to him now.

Chillingly, Sam was reminded of a documentary he had seen in which a POW had recounted being held in a tiger cage for years. 'A cage,' he had said, 'too short to stand up in and too narrow to sit down in'. Al's chart at Bethesda had mentioned the same thing--and it had earned him months of physical therapy to regain full range of motion in restricted joints.

Now, Sam realized as he swallowed down the feeling of sickness in his throat, he was seeing it for himself.

"Al..." The word came out strained and



broken and Sam had to try again. Repeating the captain's name, he slipped one hand under his arm and pulled him back onto the couch.

Pressing the glass of warm juice into his hand, as the man looked up at him, he urged, "Drink this. I know you have to be thirsty."

For a long moment the pilot regarded him blankly. Finally he spoke unexpectedly, looking earnestly into Sam's eyes as if the question were of great importance. "Do you think it will rain?"

"I, unh..." Sam fumbled for an answer. "I...don't know." At the slight frown that appeared on Al's face he added, "Maybe. It might."

"I hope so." Al cast a glance upward as if studying a clouded sky. "I'm thirsty too. I hope it'll rain."

Driven past what he could stand, Sam lowered his gaze and reached for the glass Al still held simply because it had been placed in his hand. Guiding it to the captain's mouth, he urged again, "Drink this. Come on, Al. I'm sorry I didn't put any ice in this one. I will in the next, okay? Just drink it, please?"

As if something in him responded to the plea, the captain swallowed one mouthful, then another. Slowly, he blinked as if the taste pushed away some small portion of the terror. Holding the glass more firmly, he drank on his own, emptying the contents, then shuddered once as if the spell were broken.

Then, too swiftly for Sam to react, he sprang to his feet and backed away from the couch. His eyes seemed to focus on the physicist for the first time as he wiped absently at the sweat on his cheek with the back of the hand that still held the glass.

"Al?" Sam asked tentatively, watching him cast a confused, troubled look about the room.

"Yeah?" came the weary reply. Al's eyes swung back to him, and he seemed to recognize him, easing the tight knot of fear in Sam's chest.

Still, the doctor spoke cautiously. "You... okay?"

"Yeah." Al gave a quick, jerky nod. "Yeah, I'm okay." Absently he rubbed at his arms and wrists as if to wipe away an unwanted touch. "Why?"

"You..." Sam frowned as Al began to turn in a small tight circle in the center of the room.

"You just..."

Al began to pace the length of the room in

short, agitated strides. Realizing the captain was not fully free of the effects of the episode, Sam abandoned his explanation.

"What's...the matter?" he asked slowly, not certain he wanted to hear the answer.

"Nothin'," the pilot snapped. "It's just... kinda hot in here, that's all."

"Hot?" Sam got to his feet from the couch. "Okay, I'll see about the air conditioner--"

"No!" Al looked at the glass in his hand as if seeing it for the first time. Setting it down on the coffee table with a crack of glass on glass that painfully reminded Sam of the way he had slammed down the scotch bottle just a day before, he turned on his heel. "I'll open a window. We need some fresh air in here."

"But I..." Sam's protest did nothing to stall the other man, who strode to the window like it was a matter of life or death. "...I don't think these kind of windows open. They have the air con--"

"Of course they open," Al growled. "What if there was a fire and somebody had to get out?" There was desperation in his tone and the barely controlled way he struggled to open the window.

He seemed not to notice Sam coming to his side as he resolutely jerked at the window until it finally slid open. At once the room was flooded with chill night air. Al drew one deep breath, then turned sharply away as if it did not ease the need in him.

"Geez, this place is little," he said, beginning to pace again. This time his steps were jerkier, and more agitated. Anxiously, he rubbed at his neck and lower jaw, and rotated his right shoulder as if it hurt him.

"I didn't notice before," he said, shoving his hands deep in his pockets, then withdrawing them again. "How damn little this place is." Gradually, the length he traveled before he turned and headed back the way he had come became shorter and shorter.

Chilled by more than the air flowing at his back like a dark tide, Sam watched him. It seemed as if he could see the walls closing in on the other man as the panic took control.

"Al, calm down," he said evenly, coming toward him. "Just take a couple of deep breaths. Just--"

"Deep breaths?!" Al snorted, wheeling again in his pacing. "There's not enough air in here for that."

He sounded so much like himself that the doctor was not expecting what came next.

Spinning on his heel so quickly that he nearly collided with Sam, and yet seeming not to notice, he said, "I gotta get outta here. Get some air."

"Okay," Sam agreed, reaching out to catch the captain's arm. "In a minute we can--"

"I said, I gotta get outta here!" The other man's voice rose, and it was obvious the panic had full control.

"Okay..."

Sam never saw the punch coming. One moment he was trying to restrain the captain from rushing headlong out the door, the next he was staggering from a blow to his jaw. By the time he recovered and scrambled back to his feet, Al was gone.

Running into the hall, he was just in time to see the stairwell door swinging closed on a flash of purple--the color of Al's shirt. Calling after him, trying not to lift his voice enough to attract undue attention, had no effect, so Sam gave chase.

Plunging headlong down the steps he could hear a rhythmic repeated clink that was the sound of Al's wristwatch hitting the metal safety rail as he caught at it in his flight.

"Al! Wait!" His voice echoed in the stairwell but the sound of flight continued. Sam calculated that from the rhythm of the clink, Al had to be taking the steps three at a time.

As he passed the door labeled 'Six', it swung open, forcing him to hastily detour and bounce off the edge of the jamb in an attempt to regain his balance. Making a hurried apology to the maid who had drawn back with a surprised yelp, he resumed pursuit.

By now Al was nearly three floors below and he tried to increase his speed. But while he was constrained by the realization that if he pressed too hard he could slip and fall--and that he needed to be wary of another door opening in his path--Al was hampered by none of those thoughts. Driven by a primal flight of panic fueled by pure adrenalin, the captain was nowhere to be seen when Sam reached the bottom floor.

Slamming open the exit door, Sam found himself in the parking lot. Pulling hard for breath in the chill dry air, he paused to look about him. Catching sight of Al slowing at the far edge of the lot where the cars were sparse, he followed at a run. If the captain left the lot for the city, Sam might not find him before

the police. And if that happened, Al was going to have a lot of explaining to do to his superiors about how he ended up in the drunk tank in Las Vegas.

He had a clear line of sight to the captain, who had reached a lamppost surrounded by nearly a quarter of an acre of empty spaces. He saw Al wheel about like a pursued animal that had finally reached safety, and press his back against the post. Head thrown back, nearly spent in strength and breath, he had obviously come to a halt under the clear, cold, open sky.

Approaching slowly so that he would not startle the other man into flight again, Sam saw Al draw a deep shuddering breath and pull himself upright. In the brilliantly lit parking lot he could see recognition come into the man's eyes--and confusion.

Breathing hard, he came to a stop before Al, who looked like a man who had just awakened from sleep and found himself standing on the edge of a cliff. It was a long moment before either of them had the breath to speak.

Bending forward, hands on his knees, Sam fought to recover as well as give the other man time to regain control. Discreetly, he cast a glance upward to see Al regarding him closely.

Finally, the older man spoke. "What the hell are we doin' out here?" He managed to sound exasperated and defiant, in contrast to the uncertainty still in his eyes.

Catching his breath in a chuckle despite himself, Sam decided to try for levity as Al seemed determined to do. "You said you wanted air," he managed to say between gasps. He swung his arms to indicate the vast open space about them. "Think this'll do?"

The reply was quick and wry. "If it's all they've got." Al's eyes narrowed when Sam straightened and faced him. Leaning heavily against the post, Al regarded him intently then finally demanded, "What the hell did you do to your cheek?"

Briefly lifting one hand to the bruise that was stinging in the cold, he lied, "I cracked it on the door, trying to keep up with your stairwell toboggan marathon technique."

He watched Al recognize the lie, consider the possibilities behind it, and decide to act as if he believed it.

"Takes practice taking stairs head first," the Naval officer said. "It's not for amateurs. There was this one time in Pensacola, me and my buddy Dave Healey--"

"Al!" Sam groaned. "I'm tired! Let's go in."

"Okay," Al drew a slow, deep breath and ran a trembling hand over his jaw. Taking a step forward, he stumbled slightly, but put up a hand to forestall Sam, who stepped forward to help.

When the younger man withdrew, Al took another step, this one firmer than the first. Quietly, Sam fell into step beside him. Somehow, the distance back to the hotel looked to be much more than he remembered. Perhaps it looked that way to Al as well, for he paused a moment, sighed, then resumed walking without comment.

Knowing how weary the man must be after all the adrenalin he had used in the past moments, Sam briefly considered offering going to get the car Al had rented and give him a ride to the front door. Very briefly.

They walked in silence a few steps. Unexpectedly Al spoke, his voice quiet and thoughtful. "I made Ruthie an appointment to have her car tuned tomorrow. D'you think she'll remember?"

Before Sam could reply, a bird with white striped wings swept low above them, seeking insects that hovered about the lights. Its cry was wild and plaintive, incongruent against the muted voice of the glittering city beyond them.

Al shuddered, but his step did not falter. "I hate those damn nighthawks," he said in the same tone he had used moments before about Ruthie. "They always sound like they're lonely."

Casting a look up at the winged hunter wheeling gracefully about them, Sam hesitated and considered how to answer either comment. Bringing his attention back to the determined set of the smaller man's shoulders, he decided on silence.

What, after all, could he say?

* * *

It was near midnight when Sam propped open the suite door with one foot, deposited the late night supper dishes in the hall for the maid to collect, and slipped back inside. Quiet on the thick mulberry carpet in the hall, he returned to the lounge room to find Al where he had left him.

He was slouched in the corner of the couch, scanning television channels with the remote control. It was obvious, from the methodical

way he worked his way from program to program, that staring at the snippets of news, movies, and rock videos was an attempt at distraction.

Immediately after returning from his dash for freedom, Al had seemed about to collapse from weariness. Yet he had refused to try to sleep.

Instead, he had slipped his watch from his arm, parked it carefully on the television console, and gone to take a shower. When he returned, dressed in the burgundy bathrobe, he had eaten what Sam had ordered for him without comment, then turned his attention to the many channels offered by the hotel's entertainment system.

Casting a glance from the captain's face to the screen then back again, Sam hesitated uncertainly at the doorway. Finally, coming in and taking a seat in the chair he ventured, "Are you sleepy?"

"No," Al answered, his eyes never leaving the screen as he flipped past another program. "You?"

"No," Sam lied, resignedly leaning back in his chair. "Not really."

Still the pilot continued his slow, methodical pursuit of watching a channel for a scant fifteen seconds, then zapping it in favor of another.

Trying to be unobtrusive, Sam watched him closely. The shakes seemed to have lessened, evidence by the way Al's aim with the remote was more or less controlled. His face was heavily lined with weariness--the circles under his eyes stark as bruises against the pallor of his skin.

Briefly Sam considered suggesting the other man try to sleep, then decided against it. If his own attempt at rest had turned out as badly as Al's had, he wouldn't be eager to go to bed either. Wearily he lifted his feet to the coffee table and resigned himself to waiting it out. Although he could not say exactly what he was waiting for, he would know it when it came.

Silence stretched between them. Yawning, Sam leaned his head back against the chair's high back and slid into a light doze. Some part of him was still acutely aware of Al, and when there was a final click of the remote, followed by silence from the television, he was instantly awake.

Opening his eyes, he saw the older man sitting on the couch and gazing in the general direction of the set. The remote was still in his hand and pointed toward the now dark screen.

But, when he spoke, it was obvious that it was not television he had been brooding over.

"Ruthie thinks I cheated on her," he said obliquely.

Blinking, Sam cast about for something to say, remembering what Ruthie had said about Al not coming home some nights. And the way Al had been acting of late, he really couldn't blame her for her suspicions.

Uncertain how to respond to a statement like that, Sam faltered, but luckily the captain spared him the necessity of a reply.

"I didn't," he continued in a rough, somehow hurt tone. "I never cheated on Ruthie. Not the whole time we were married." Absently he scratched the side of his neck with the remote, adding. "I thought about it at the last--with a flamer named Sharon. Didn't do it though." Still gazing at the dark television, he shook his head sorrowfully. "Guess I should've gone for it. Didn't do me any good to pass her by."

Clearing his throat, Sam chose his words carefully. Now was not the time for a lecture on the higher morals and spiritual benefits of fidelity. Al was in pain, and needed an answer that addressed that pain. "Ruthie loves you, Al. If you just--"

"She left me!" Al's voice rose to a harsh snarl, his anger bringing him to his feet. Vehemently, he flung the remote into the sofa. "Ran out on me when I really needed her."

"She was hurt," Sam began.

"So was I!" Turning on his heel, Al strode into the center of the lounge where he halted shoving his hands into his pockets. His voice was so soft Sam had to strain to hear his words. "She never should have left me, Sam. I was coming back."

Watching his back, Sam said hesitantly, "Are we talking about Ruthie here...or Beth?"

Al whirled on him with such rage in the movement, that the physicist flinched instinctively. But the older man merely glared at him for a long moment. Then, he turned away with a quick, angry jerk and crossed the distance to the television in three quick strides. Snatching up his broken Rolex, he gestured at Sam with it in his fist. The physicist realized suddenly that it must have been what Al had been brooding on, not what the screen had held.

"Hell with her," Al snarled, hurling the watch into the waste can with a vengeance.

Landing in a cushion of wadded up papers from

their earlier work session, it disappeared into the morass of STAR BRIGHT planning.

"Let her find some other shauck to marry," he continued. "Somebody who'll make her parents happy and enjoy feast days with the entire family horde." With that, he stalked from the room, not looking back to see what effect his words had caused.

Watching him go, Sam drew a deep breath to call him back, then thought better of it. Al wasn't ready to forgive Ruthie--much less admit that a major portion of the misunderstanding was his fault. His anger at what he considered abandonment by Ruth, and his retaliation for it, were all bound up with his anger and unresolved feelings for Beth.

Sam would do what he could to point that out--when Al cooled down--but the captain would have to make the decision of how to deal with it for himself. Hearing the bedroom door slam shut, he had an uncomfortable feeling that he wouldn't like the method the captain would chose, but there was absolutely nothing anyone mortal could do about it.

Patiently, he waited for Al to reappear. When he didn't, Sam risked going down the hall and taking a cautious peek behind the closed bedroom door. Al was snoring softly, sound asleep on the bed, dead to the world.

Seeing this, he drew a breath of relief and withdrew, leaving the door open behind him. Since it appeared Al was sleeping peacefully, perhaps the worst of the physical withdrawal was over.

Returning to the lounge room, Sam kicked off his shoes with a groan of weariness. Lying down, he told himself that he should stay at least partially alert in case Al needed him.

He should...but the couch was so comfortable and he was so tired that he kept drifting into deeper sleep, each time coming out of it with a start.

Somewhere in the small hours of the morning he lost the struggle and slipped into a deep rest.

* * *

Sam was fully relaxed into the sofa cushions when a resounding slap on his shoulder and a cheerful order to, "Rise and shine," jolted him back to consciousness.

Jerking at the abrupt transition from deep sleep to sudden awareness, he cracked his head

painfully on the end of the couch and protested sleepily, "Ow!"

Rolling over to push himself to sitting, Sam discovered someone had spread a blanket over him in the night. Hearing a low chuckle, he looked up to see Al walking away. Giving the captain a sour glance, he rubbed his head and pushed the blanket off his legs.

"What time is it?" he asked blearily, feeling oddly resentful that Al should be so cheerful while he was still struggling to open his eyes.

"Late," came the answer. "Nearly nine."

Nearly nine. Still not fully awake, Sam rubbed sleepily at his eyes. "Then why's it so dark in here?"

"I pulled the drapes," Al answered, crossing over to open them, letting in a flood of sunlight that made the younger man groan and bury his face in his hands. "So the sun wouldn't wake you up."

Feeling a vague uneasiness, Sam looked up and eyed his friend, who was returning to the center of the room. He was fully dressed and groomed, looking impeccable in a red silk jacket, linen shirt and gray pants. It was obvious he had been up for hours...and in Vegas finding a drink at nine in the morning was not that difficult. Al could have been out and back before Sam stirred--he had pulled the drapes to make sure the physicist didn't wake earlier.

"What have you been doing?" he asked, hearing the suspicion in his voice.

If Al heard, he gave no sign. "Writing," he answered, flipping the legal pad onto the table before Sam. "Came up with my closing statement for the Committee. It's a killer. See what you think."

Regarding the pad for a long moment, Sam turned back to for a look at Al. The captain looked weary and worn but no worse than if he had just suffered a heavy bout of flu. His eyes held a hint of their old spark and he smelled only of expensive aftershave and cigarettes.

Feeling a stab of guilt at his suspicions, Sam said, "I'm sorry. I just thought maybe..."

"No problem," Al answered shortly. "The way I've been acting, you should have locked me in the bedroom. Which, come to think of it, if Candy had stayed might have been a good way to pass the time. Now..." He flicked an impatient hand toward the pad. "...what'd you think?"

It was a Calavizzi apology and thank you all rolled into one and Sam understood the meaning behind it. Getting the message that he was not

to 'get mushy', Sam took up the pad and began to read the captain's neat handwritten speech. As he read, he felt a growing sense of confidence that things just might be okay after all.

The closing statement drew conclusions from the data they had collated, admitted some shortcomings in concrete results for estimated dollars, but pointed out that the value of STAR BRIGHT went far beyond this Project alone. The power of possibilities, Al suggested in the text, was worth the cost in dollars although it could never be measured in dollars alone. Such were the possibilities of this Project, that they demanded something far harder to come by than mere money--the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen--and unless the Committee believed in that, then the Project might as well be shelved.

It was vintage Al--confident and cocksure, authentic and capable. It was also from the heart and rang so true that Sam knew the captain believed every word of it--and so would the Committee.

Considering the words for a long moment, he slowly lifted his head and handed the report back to the other man, who came forward to take it.

"Substance of things hoped for'," he began, "evidence to things not seen'. Sounds almost biblical."

"It is," Al said with a shrug. "Hebrew 11:1." At Sam's surprised expression he snorted. "Hey, I grew up in a Catholic orphanage...okay?"

Before Sam could agree, Al tucked the papers under his arm and turned away.

"And I hang out with a boy scout preacher, so I know the definition of faith." Quickly, he headed for the bedroom, cutting off any reply. "I got us seats on a flight outta here in two hours. So you'd better get a move on."

"Two hours?!" Sam protested, abruptly jolted out of his pensive mood as the pilot had obviously intended. "Geez, Al!"

"Rise and shine," was the unperturbed answer from the departing captain. "I've got a lotta work to do at the Project before tomorrow morning. I'll finish packing and we can get something to eat on the way. So c'mon, kid, get your act together."

Scrambling to his feet, Sam rushed to shower and shave. When he was dressed and ready to go, he returned to the living room to find Al flirting with the maid.

Mumbling a hello to the pretty young woman, who was picking up the drinking glasses scattered about the lounge, Sam went to stuff his dirty clothes into his luggage. Despite his shower, he still felt rumpled next to Al's pristine suit, and discomforted by the easy way he bantered with the woman who looked more like a show girl than a maid. The old Calavicci charm was back at high tide and, snapping his suitcase closed, Sam thought uneasily of Ruthie.

"Sorry about the mess," Al told the maid who was stacking the glasses on a tray. "My buddy and I had some company...did a little partying."

Shaking his head with a sigh, Sam hoisted his suitcase and shot a significant glance at Al, who ignored it. Reaching in his back pocket, the captain pulled out several bills and placed them on top of the television for the maid's tip.

She smiled, revealing deep dimples. "Don't worry about the mess. I've seen much worse."

Al grinned. "That's what I like, a capable woman. Next time I'm in Vegas, maybe we'll meet again."

"I hope so," she said, holding Al's eyes and suddenly, Sam was reminded of Susan and days long ago at Scoville's pizza parlor.

"You ready?" Al asked Sam absently, reaching in his breast pocket for a crumpled pack of cigarettes. Extracting the last one, he crushed the package and lobbed it neatly into the waste can as the maid headed toward it. She gave him a slight smile, which he returned as he reached for his lighter.

Nodding, that he was indeed 'ready', Sam realized he had little of the captain's attention. He watched as the man regarded the tightening of the maid's uniform across her hips as she bent to pull the liner from the trash can. Seeing the captain's eyes narrow in pleasure, while he slowly lit the cigarette and watched her secure the liner with a twist tie, Sam was about to intervene when she straightened and the moment passed.

Clicking the lighter closed, Al turned away before she could turn and catch his expression. "Come on, Sam, we gotta--" Interrupting himself, he turned back to the maid, who was carrying the secured trash bag to the door. "Oh, I gotta take that, honey."

"This?" she said in disbelief, indicating the trash. "Why?"

Grinning, Al winked at her. "Top secret trash has to go through the shredder. I can't leave it here for anyone to find and sell state secrets."

"Oh, right," she said with a grin of her own. "Your work. I forgot. Here." She extended the bag. "I wouldn't want to breach your security or anything."

Chuckling, Al gave her a wink as he took the bag. "That," he said suggestively, "we can talk about next time."

Managing to look debonair despite the fact he was carrying a trash bag, he gave her a grin and headed for the door, leaving Sam to follow.

"Next time, Gina," he promised lightly.

To Sam's amazement, she answered, "You bet, Al," as if in willing agreement.

Sam managed to hold his peace until they were out of ear shot in the hall. Watching Al stuff the trash bag into his neatly packed suitcase, he hissed, "I can't believe you did that!"

"Security's security, Sam," Al answered. "If we tossed printouts of--"

"Not that," Sam protested. "Hitting on that girl. What about Ruthie?"

"Ruthie's history," Al replied curtly, firmly placing his hat on his head and hoisting up his luggage, "so forget it. C'mon, we've gotta get going."

Going through the door the maid had left open, he asked over his shoulder, "So where d'you wanna to eat? I know this great Mexican place on the way to the airport. How do you feel about breakfast burritos?"

Grimacing, Sam followed. There was hope, he had to admit--hope for Al's career, and hope for a future without the booze. As for hope for Ruthie...well, that was less certain.

But, he thought as he followed the captain to the elevator, there was that gold Rolex buried in Al's suitcase along with the papers destined for the shredder. At least it wasn't left behind for the hotel dumpster, though Sam saw no indication that Al had considered that when he claimed the trash.

Still, he told himself hopefully...there was always the power of possibilities.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
"Promises"

I wouldn't've thought it was possible, but with Sam's help, I straightened out that mess with the Committee. I'm still on thin ice, but everybody's pretending to believe my story about the flu. They're waiting for me to mess up again and fall off the wagon so they can catch me dead to rights.

But that ain't gonna happen.

One of the best things is that Cranston got ticked off when they didn't fire me out of hand, and he quit. I hear he's making a big point of taking a job that's a step down from Co-Ordinator, just to work in a place with 'integrity'. Gimme a break...

So I've cleared the decks. Ruthie finally got the point that nobody walks out on me without paying the price. You'll never guess who she got as her lawyer?

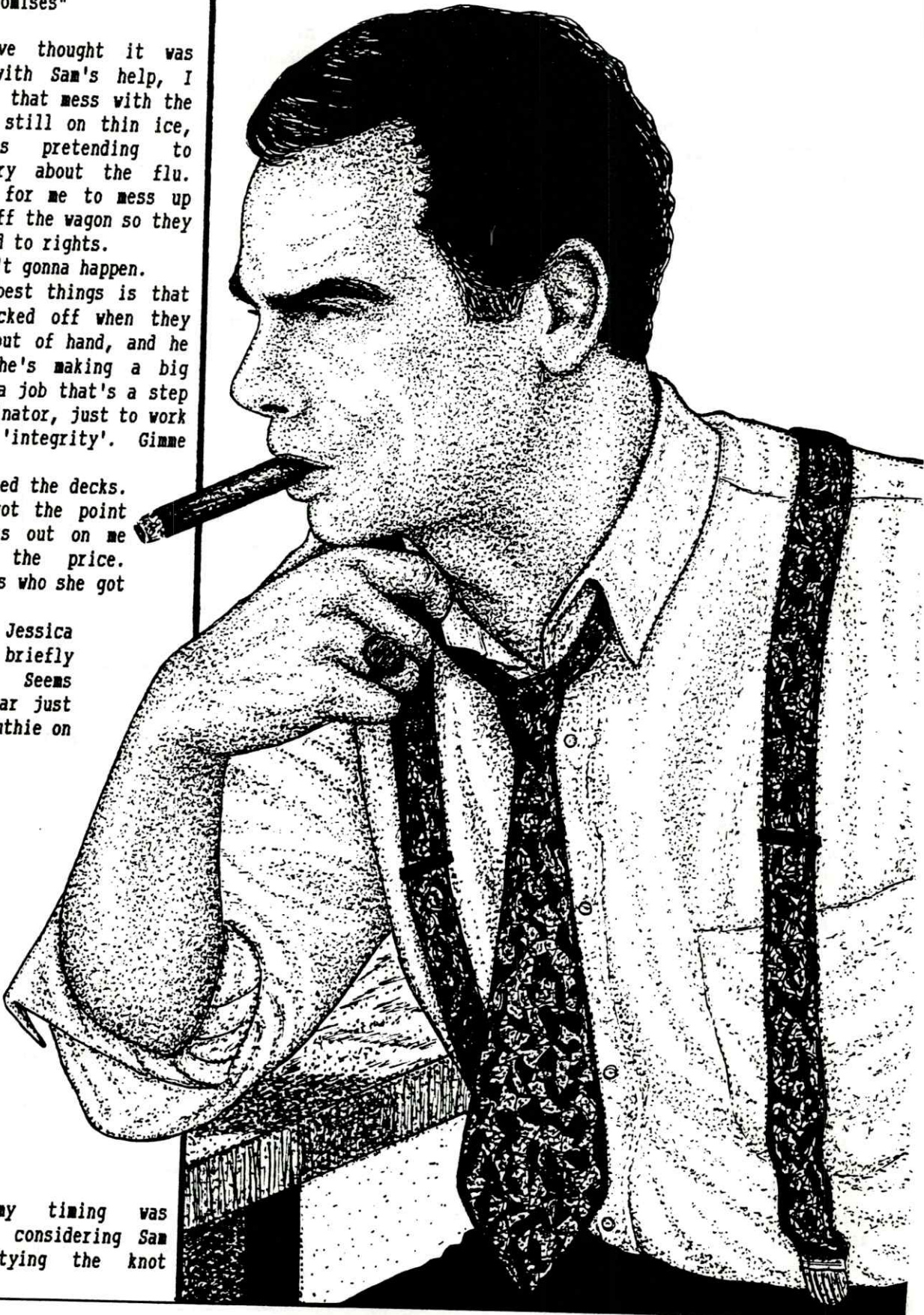
Her cousin, Jessica ...the one I met briefly at our wedding. Seems she passed her bar just in time to take Ruthie on as one of her first clients.

Speaking of which, my lawyer, Sharon, dropped by yesterday with the final divorce papers ...and stayed to help me celebrate. Now, there's one broad who knows what she wants, and takes it!

Divorce.

My third.

Can't say my timing was particularly good, considering Sam and Donna are tying the knot



tomorrow, but I am gonna officially add Stage Four to the Calavicci Theory Of Love.

Geez, from the way Sam shot past Stage Two and onto Stage Three, you'd think he was tryin' to beat my record time!

Hah! Fat chance.

Maybe he's cheating. Knowing Sam, he probably jumped right past the sex bit to get to the marriage bit.

Yeah, that's probably it. Ain't no way Farm Boy Beckett could keep up with Calavicci The Insatiable in that department.

I tried to get Sam to go out tonight for one last night on the town, but he turned me down to spend the evening with Donna. I tried to talk him out of it, but he just can't wait to clamp on the old ball and chain. Poor guy!

Marriage.

I tell you, it boggles the mind! But the kid's got this look in his eyes, one I haven't seen before. No points for guessing he's head over heels for her, and it ain't no case of puppy love.

Maybe, he's decided to try out Stage Two after all. A quiet night at home, no distractions, just two warm bodies next to each other.

Even Preacher Beckett can be tempted beyond endurance.

* * *

Thunder rumbled softly in the coziness of Donna's dimly lit living room. It was a low, somehow comforting sound, the distant storm outside a contrast to pleasant warmth and safety within.

Rain on the windows was a soft, almost subliminal hiss in the shelter of the apartment.

Sam smiled as Donna came to rejoin him on her couch. Opening his arms, he took her back into his embrace.

The stereo she had started clicked softly as the record fell into place and the haunting melody of 'Hotel California' joined the sound of the rain.

Sighing in contentment, Sam lightly kissed the top of Donna's head as she snuggled against him.

"This is nice," he said softly. Then, feeling the words to be somehow inadequate, he tried to further describe what he felt. "I mean, being here with you, together." He shrugged helpless to express it. "Like this.

It feels so...right."

"I know," she agreed, resting her head on his shoulder as another roll of distant thunder rumbled in the room. "Even the storm, it's perfect."

Sam smiled. "I didn't know you liked storms."

"I love them," she confessed. "I think they're romantic, all that thunder and lightning and the sound of rain." She snuggled more comfortably against him. "Don't you?"

Chuckling softly, he nodded. "I do...as long as I'm not out in them."

"Exactly," she agreed with a laugh of her own. "The storm's so powerful--and being safe and dry despite it makes it wonderful."

"Mmm," he agreed, his fingers brushing her hair.

A louder clap of thunder overwhelmed the music for an instant and he lifted his head, distracted.

A seemingly unrelated thought occurred to him, and he voiced it without thinking.

"You know," he said, "Al wanted to give me a bachelor party tonight."

Lifting her head, she turned to meet his eyes. "He did? Why didn't you go?"

Sam grinned. "Because I want to be conscious for my wedding. You know how Al likes to party."

His grin faded as his automatic response instantly took him back to that weekend in Vegas, nearly a month ago.

Al, the booze, the withdrawals.

Donna's eyes searched his. "You're still worried about him, aren't you?"

"Yeah." Sam nodded reluctantly. "He's still dead set on going cold turkey all on his own."

Shaking her head, Donna said, "I know Ruthie asked him several times to go to a counselor with her, but he never would. Now that she's gone..." She let the sentence trail off unfinished.

"He needs professional help," Sam agreed, "but he thinks it would ruin his career if he admits he has a drinking problem."

"It wouldn't," Donna protested, sitting up to face him. "I'm sure it wouldn't."

Sam shrugged helplessly. "I don't know if it would or not. But I do know 'a career' is not going to do him any good if he drinks himself to death--provided he could hold onto one if he doesn't stop."

Donna studied him for a long moment. "You mean...you suspect he might still be drinking now?"

"I don't think so," he said with a rueful shake of his head, "although, I don't know if I'd know if he was anyway. I helped him stop that weekend, and he said he'd stay on the wagon, but I have a nasty suspicion he's finding it more difficult than he thought."

"You've been here for him, Sam, done all you could've done...and more," she said softly. Lifting one hand, she touched his face lightly as if to memorize each curve. "Al's lucky to have a friend like you."

Sam captured her fingers and pressed them briefly to his lips.

"I'm the lucky one," he said gently, holding her gaze. "I have Al, and I have you. Sometimes, I think finding you is too good to be true. I think it's all a dream and I'll wake up some day and you'll be gone."

"Never," she said with a faint shake of her head. The corners of her lips quirked upward in a tiny smile. "I'm afraid that you're stuck with me, Dr. Beckett."

Smiling, Sam drew her closer to him, needing the feel of her against him.

For a long moment they sat in silence until Donna finally spoke.

"Sometimes," she said slowly, as if reluctant to voice the thought, "I get scared, too."

"Scared?" Sam said, looking down at her. "About what?"

"About you leaving. Scared you'll stop loving me."

"Donna," he protested, straightening in concern at the intensity in her voice. "I'll never stop loving you." He turned to face her squarely, hands going to her shoulders. "Tomorrow, we're going to be married." Determined, he tilted her chin up with a gentle finger under her chin to force her eyes to meet his. "And that's forever."

Her smile was tentative. "Some marriages aren't forever," she disagreed softly. "Look at Al."

"Al," Sam said ruefully, "is not one to compare yourself to when you think about marriage."

"But...in the beginning he and Ruthie were wonderful. I used to envy what they had. And now it's all ended. Like it ended with Robert and I, before it even truly began."

Not knowing what to say, Sam was still

searching for a reply when she continued. "My parents divorced. I thought my father worshipped my mom--and he left us."

"Worship is not love," Sam said quietly. Tenderly he cupped his hand about her cheek. "Not real love like what we share." He smiled as he saw the belief in her eyes. "I promise you that I love you now, and I will love you when I am old and gray and hobbling about on a cane."

He kissed her lightly, then pulled away slightly to read her expression.

"And," he assured her, "you can count on that as undisputable fact."

"Undisputable fact?" she said teasingly, her arms going about his neck. "Facts are only facts until someone proves them wrong and replaces them with new undisputable facts."

Laughing, Sam relaxed against the couch, pulling her with him in his embrace. "Spoken like a true scientist, Dr. Elesee. There are no facts--only theories that haven't been disproved yet."

"Something like that," she agreed. Pulling away from him slightly, she leaned one elbow on the couch back and regarded him thoughtfully. "Sam," she said, reaching out to brush his hair back over his ear, "are you sure you don't mind if I don't change my name to Beckett when we're married?"

Surprised, he shook his head, having thought the matter was already settled. "No, you've worked hard to become 'Dr. Elesee' and you have a career established under that name. Besides..." He grinned. "...having two Dr. Becketts in one place could get confusing."

Nodding in amusement, she swept her hair back from her face in an unconscious habit. "I guess so," she agreed. "Can you imagine Gooshie trying to ask one of us a question when we were both in the same room?"

Sam grinned, and said in an imitation of Gooshie's tentative tone. "Excuse me, Dr. Beckett. I mean, Dr. um, Sam Beckett."

Donna laughed, and the sound sent a tingle down Sam's back.

He loved this woman more than he had thought it possible to ever love anyone. Impulsively, he moved forward, carrying her down beneath him on the couch.

"Sam!" she said in laughing protest. "What are you...?"

"I love you, Donna Elesee," he said, lowering his head to kiss her. "And I never

want you to forget it."

Whatever reply she might have made was lost as he pressed his lips to hers again. She felt wonderful beneath him, warm and responsive to his touch.

As his kisses continued, her arms came up about him, pressing him to her.

Distantly, he was aware of the stereo's soft click as a new record began to play, and the sound of increasing thunder from the storm that grew ever closer. But it mattered little as he lost himself in the rising passion that her presence stirred.

It felt so good, so right, that he let his kisses deepen, and his caresses grow ever more intimate.

Responding, she buried her hands in his hair, making a soft sound of pleasure in her throat that drew him still deeper into the spell.

It would be so glorious to...

Regretfully, he drew away, looking down into her eyes.

"I..." He had to clear his throat to get the words out. "I have to go."

"Why?" she breathed, her fingers still entangled in his hair. "Why not stay the night?"

Moaning softly, he kissed her, then shook his head. "I can't," he said, trying to push himself free.

Eyes warm and inviting, she smiled, and refused to let him go. "No," she said in a voice as husky as his own had been. "Stay. We're going to be married tomorrow anyway."

"That," Sam said, giving in for one more kiss before resolutely pulling free, "is exactly the point. I know waiting is important to you. I can wait one more day."

Watching him as he got to his feet, she pushed herself to half sitting. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes dark with desire.

She smiled, brushing back her thick, tousled hair in a gesture that nearly undid him.

"Stay, Sam. Please?"

Regarding her, Sam nearly lost his will to resist. Drawing a deep breath, he shook his head.

"No," he said again. Holding out a hand, he drew her to her feet when she took it. "I want tomorrow to be perfect, a time of discovery and love between a husband and wife."

Hesitating, Donna regarded him with an expression that no one had ever before bestowed on him. The open love in her eyes was nearly

too much to bear as she said softly, "You really are a romanticist, aren't you?"

Embarrassed, Sam ducked his head. "I..."

Stepping near, she stopped him by lifting a finger to his lips. "Don't apologize," she said, kissing him lightly. "I like you just the way you are. But..." Her smile deepened teasingly. "...you don't know what you're missing."

Giving a mock groan, Sam hugged her to him. "Yes, I do," he admitted ruefully. "I'll probably be dreaming about you all night...if I can get to sleep at all."

Looking down at her, he pulled her into a closer embrace and kissed her again. As the kisses threatened to weaken his resolve, he pulled away.

"I have got to go."

"If you have to," she agreed reluctantly.

Releasing her, he headed toward the door before he could change his mind. Donna moved with him, and was at his side when he opened it.

Abruptly, the rushing sound of torrential, wind driven rain assailed them, shattering the ambience of the moment.

"Sam," his fiancée said, taking a step away from the storm. "It's pouring! At least stay a while until it lets up."

"If I do that," he said with a shake of his head. "I may not get out of here tonight."

She shot him a teasing glance. "Exactly."

Giving her a feigned scowl, he kissed her a last time. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said.

As she murmured agreement, he turned, pulled up his collar against the rain, and sprinted into the storm.

The downpour was icy, and stung when it hit. Though maybe, Sam thought as he dove for his car, leaving the warmth and comfort of Donna's apartment behind, that was just as well.

After this night, he would never, ever have to take a cold shower again.

* * *

Hands shoved deep in his pockets, Al stood in the darkness of his living room and stared morosely at the storm.

He hated thunderstorms, they always reminded him of 'Nam. His memories were not tied to gentle spring rains or the soothing sound of drops against a window.

Storms in 'Nam meant hunkering down as best you could against driving monsoon torrents that

stung like hell and made it hard to see for all the water driving into your eyes.

There was no escape, no shelter, and nothing to be done but endure the sheer naked hell of it.

For an instant, lightning turned the lawn beyond the window into strobe-lit day and a boom of thunder vibrated through his chest.

Al shuddered.

Lightning was fire from a vengeful god when you were shivering in a tiger cage, and thunder was a tangible thing massive enough to crush you.

Shuddering again, he turned away from the window as storm continued above him. What the hell was he doing reliving this old stuff anyway? It was time to get on with the plans for the here and now.

Hah! Like he had any!

His lips twisted wryly. His career was hanging by a thread, Ruthie had been gone about a month, and the sheer black despair of it was enough to choke him. If it wasn't for the fact that Sharon had entered his life...

Hands still in his pockets, he turned to gaze at the liquor cabinet. When Ruthie had come in during his absence to reclaim the things she wanted, she hadn't taken that.

And why should she? Liquor was his domain.

Scotch to be exact.

There was one bottle left, tucked away in the bottom out of sight. He had dumped the rest of the stuff last Sunday after his resolve had weakened yet again and he had polished off a half bottle Saturday evening.

So he'd been a little down and had a couple of drinks, he told himself, still gazing at the silent cabinet door behind which waited the liquid anesthesia. Big deal.

Like--a tiny voice whispered in his head--the night two weeks ago when he'd downed a full bottle in celebration when Cranston turned in his resignation, even though he had intended to have only one drink.

Hell.

He shifted his weight, preparing to move to the cabinet, when the phone rang. Pretending to himself that his intention had been all along only to move to answer it, he crossed to pick it up.

"Calavicci," he said crisply. No way was he letting anybody know he was standing in the dark in the middle of his living room, arguing with himself about whether or not he was going to

have a damn drink.

"Al? It's Sharon. What are you doing?"

"Thinking about you," he said, the lie coming easily as he sank down on his couch. "What's up?"

"I'm just getting back in town from taking a deposition in Fresno. I'm on my car phone. Are you busy?"

"No..." Al put suggestion into the tone. "...but, I could be. What'd you have in mind?"

"Want to meet me somewhere for a drink?"

A drink. The need was an undeniable itch in the back of his throat. It would get him out of the house and away from the bottle at least.

Just one.

The thought hit him like a silent missile. Like the 'just one' he was going to have to toast seeing the back of Cranston?

"How about if you come over here?" Al said smoothly. "It's pouring, and you should be in a nice warm bed instead of running around in the rain."

A soft, throaty laugh greeted him. "I was hoping you'd say that. I've already picked up a bottle of wine. I'll be there in ten minutes."

"I'll be ready," Al promised, his heart not in the grin he forced for the sake of keeping with the act.

Wine. Hanging up the phone, his grin faded. He couldn't get into too much trouble with one bottle of wine...and Sharon should be more than enough distraction to keep him from slipping further into the black mood in which he had been wallowing moments before.

Still, pushing off the couch, he went to take the bottle of scotch out of its hiding place in the bottom of the cabinet. Carrying it resolutely into the kitchen, he tipped it out in the sink.

Damn waste, he thought bleakly, watching the expensive amber liquid flow away down the drain. But he couldn't get so drunk on one shared bottle of wine that he would be impaired for Sam's wedding tomorrow, and removing temptation was the only way he knew to be sure he didn't have a nightcap or four after Sharon was gone.

Ruthie was going to be there. Donna had asked her to be her matron of honor before his ex-wife had been convinced he really meant he wasn't going to take her back.

She'd left him, damn it, and she could damn well stay gone. He knew Sam and Donna--and maybe Ruthie--had harbored some hopes that this wedding thing would bring them back together.

But, that just was not going to happen.

In fact, one reason he had pushed this divorce through so quickly, was to prevent that very thing.

He had made sure his lawyer, Sharon, had done all the talking to Ruthie's lawyer, Jessica. That way, his defenses could never be breached and his plan for a clean severing of the ties was unspoiled.

Except for small talk necessitated by the rehearsal dinner earlier tonight, he hadn't talked to Ruthie face to face since the day he'd left for the dressing down he'd gotten in Washington.

Small talk exchanged in a crowd of other people didn't count. She wouldn't say anything that would really get through his defenses with a witness or two present, so he'd simply made sure they were never, ever alone during the rehearsal and the following dinner.

If you didn't talk, you couldn't be forced--or shamed--into doing something you didn't want to do.

For once and for all, he was finished with matrimonial bliss and all its pain. It had cost him an arm and a leg to get free so fast, but it had been worth it to be able to face Ruthie tonight and tomorrow without any 'what if's' hanging over their heads. In some ways, maybe that was kinder to both of them.

Righting the empty bottle, he regarded it with a grim feeling of satisfaction.

There, that was done. Now he could keep his promise to himself by showing up at the wedding without a trace of a hangover. No way he was giving Ruthie any more ammunition to use against him.

Without sparing it another glance, he tossed it into the trash. Tomorrow, he could always get another bottle to stash away for emergencies...

* * *

Sleep came more easily to Sam than he had expected. The cold rain had driven immediate thoughts of passion from his mind, and he had felt tired when he arrived home.

Taking a shower and going directly to bed, he fell asleep quickly...and dreamed of Donna.

* * *

She was a beautiful bride, shimmering like a

vision as she walked down the aisle toward him. A traditional wedding gown accented her slim figure and a veil wafted delicately over her thick, shining hair.

Sam smiled, watching her come to him.

It was perfect.

The windows of the church were open, allowing the warm breeze of a late spring day to waft through them, carrying the scent of the flowers throughout the chapel.

Sunlight reflected off stained glass, making it glow and spilling pools of brilliant blue, gold and red light everywhere. He could sense Al, standing square-shouldered and reassuringly steady beside him.

It was all going to be perfect.

His bride reached his side, smiling up at him before turning to the preacher who was clad in long white robes and purple sashes.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here..."

And it was all as it should be. The ceremony was short and simple, with just a few friends in attendance.

After a reception of cake and punch, Al shook his hand firmly and told him 'good luck, buddy', and it was time to go.

They raced for their car in a shower of rice and drove away, trailing a happily clanging train of tin cans behind them.

The hotel was beautiful, the food in the dining room superb, though they did not notice. Their eyes were only for each other, and the honeymoon suite that awaited them.

It was perfect, so perfect.

"Would you like dessert?" he asked Donna, acutely feeling the heat of her leg against his beneath the table.

"Yes," she said softly with a smile, "but not what they're offering."

Blushing, sure the waiter had heard, Sam gestured for the check and paid it.

In the elevator, they laughed, kissing like a couple of teenagers until the door slid open to reveal their floor and the door to the honeymoon suite.

Their luggage was waiting, having been put there by the bellhop. Carrying Donna over the threshold, he put her down with a kiss that lasted until they were both breathless.

How could he have ever not known that she was the woman he was going to love forever--or had he known and that was why she had stirred his emotions so keenly?

There was a large fruit basket, a bottle of

champagne on ice, and two crystal glasses waiting on a table by the window.

"Who are they from?" asked Donna as she pulled away from him to busy herself with her luggage.

Turning, Sam read the card, and hastily slipped it in his pocket as his wife returned to him.

"It's from Al," he said quickly, "wishing us a happy honeymoon."

Donna, who was trailing a silk gown in one hand, slid her arms about his shoulders. "What else does it say?"

"Nothing much," he said uncomfortably. "Nothing you want to know anyway."

Laughing, she ran her nails through his hair. "I can imagine."

Leaning near to his ear, she suggested that he pour champagne for them while she changed, and he felt as dizzy as if he already had the effervescent wine racing through his veins.

How could it be that it was all so right, so...perfect?

When she returned, she was dressed in white silk, her hair tumbling over nearly bare shoulders. The bodice of her gown was snug, supported by thin spaghetti straps, and showed just a hint of cleavage.

Just looking at her made him ache. Her eyes, though shining, were a little shy, and uncertain. He wanted to kiss her, so hard and so thoroughly that the uncertainty fled, but forced himself to hand her the champagne instead.

She sipped it, her eyes meeting his over the rim of the glass. "It's very good."

Drinking from his own glass, he agreed. Depend on Al to send the very best.

Hardly breathing, he felt the alcohol hit his system, and put his glass on the table.

Momentarily, Donna's joined it, and then she was in his arms.

He wasn't sure how she got there, whether he pulled her to him, or if she came to him. She was there and it was all that mattered.

The rush of passion spun him like fine wine. Donna was his, and it was right.

Sweeping her into his arms, he carried her to the bed and lowered her gently to it. Her soft arms encircled his neck, drawing him down to rest on her and he felt as if his heart would burst.

She was his.

It was time and it was perfect.

He was just pushing the straps off her shoulders when the ring of a door bell came from somewhere far distant behind him. It couldn't have anything to do with him, or what was about to happen here.

Kissing his wife, he felt her move beneath him, breathing his name, when the bell rang again, more stridently this time.

Wanting desperately to ignore it, for it was intruding on the exquisite perfection that he had waited for so long, he kissed her more deeply.

And the knocking went on, joined by Al's voice.

"Sam? Sam! Answer the door!"

Al? What the hell was Al doing knocking on the...?

* * *

Sitting upright in his bed, Sam blinked in the brilliant sunlight spilling in the window above his head.

Sunlight? What time was it? Where was Donna?

At the thought of his wife, he turned hastily to look for her.

But the bed beside him was empty, and he was in his own bed, not a honeymoon suite. Filled with a sudden rush of disappointment, he realized it had been only a dream.

He wasn't married to Donna--yet--that was to come today.

Today!

Casting a sudden look at his alarm clock, which hadn't gone off, he realized with a gasp that it was nearly nine--and he had to be at the church by eleven!!

A long peal came from his doorbell as he leapt from bed.

Al's voice followed it closely. "Hey! Sam! Up and at 'em! Open the door!"

Dragging on a robe, he rushed for the front door. Opening it, he surprised Al, who was dressed in his tux and bending down to the lock with a credit card in his hand.

"What are you doing?" Sam asked, although he knew he had caught the allegedly famous 'Al The Pick' trying out his talents.

Looking up, the older man shrugged in elaborate innocence. "Tryin' to make sure you're not late for your own wedding."

Straightening, he pulled his wallet from his pocket and slipped his credit card back inside

as he eyed Sam's bare legs under his robe.

"Did I get you at a bad time?" he asked, beginning to grin. "Donna here?"

"No." Sam shook his head with an exasperated sigh. "Donna's not here." Stepping back, he gestured the captain into his apartment. "I was asleep and..." He shot Al a sour look. "...and in the middle of a fantastic dream, I might add."

"Asleep?!" Al repeated as if incredulous. "D'you know what time it is?"

"Yes, I know," Sam said hurriedly, "now. And I've got to get ready!"

"You go ahead," his friend said, heading toward the kitchen. "I'll make coffee. Get a little caffeine in you and you'll be fine." He cast a grin over his shoulder. "You don't wanna be late for your own wedding. It's considered to be bad form. She'll never let you forget it."

Sam drew a breath to speak, but Al stopped him with an uplifted hand.

"Not a word," he said self-righteously. "I was on time for each and every one of my marriages. My problems started after the honeymoon ended."

Before the physicist could decide how to reply, the captain waved him on to the bathroom. "Get in the shower and I'll start that coffee. Donna's gonna let me have it if I get to you to the chapel late, so move it, Beckett!"

Not waiting to be told twice, Sam went.

Making his shower brief, he shaved with his electric razor. He was thankful he didn't use a straight razor because with his case of nerves, he would probably end up looking like a refugee from a warzone.

Swiftly, he dressed in his tuxedo pants and dress shirt, leaving his jacket hanging on the hanger.

Grabbing his robe, he shrugged into it. The last thing he needed was coffee on his dress shirt, and as badly as he was shaking, that was a good possibility.

When he returned to the kitchen, he saw Al placing a plate of bacon on the table. There were two places set, and a pan of scrambled eggs next to the bacon.

"Sit down and eat," the captain urged. "Every condemned man deserves a last meal. You have time."

The physicist eyed the food. "I don't think I can," he answered slowly. "My stomach's too full of butterflies."

"Sit down and eat," Al said firmly, pulling Sam over to the table. "It's also considered bad form for your stomach to growl during the ceremony--or to faint from hunger." He nailed the physicist with a mock stern gaze. "You wouldn't want that, would you?"

Unwillingly, Sam sat and took a serving of eggs.

Testing a bit as Al sat beside him, he said in surprise, "Hey, these are pretty good."

"Of course they're good," Al snorted, reaching for the bacon. "Breakfast, I'm real good at it. It always impresses women--breakfast in bed. Except Ruthie, that is, she..."

Al stalled only a moment, bringing Sam's gaze to him. Then he shrugged, as if it meant nothing.

"She was never really into breakfast," he breezily. "She'd rather read the morning paper and there just ain't a whole lot romantic about that."

"Al..."

"Eat," the captain ordered firmly, sending the message quite clearly that the subject was closed. "Or you will be late for your wedding."

* * *

Sam wasn't late for the wedding, but it looked like Donna was. It was a quarter past eleven and the physicist was standing next to Al at the side door to the sanctuary.

Of his bride to be, there was no sign.

They had decided to get married at the Old Mission Chapel in order to circumvent all the requirements the Catholic church would have placed on them since Sam did not share her beliefs.

Now, with the chapel full of waiting guests and no bride, he was beginning to worry that he may have pushed her too much.

Restlessly, Sam paced away from the door and peeped into the sanctuary. All the wedding guests were talking quietly with one another.

His mother was sitting next to Katie and her family. There was a vacant seat on his mother's other side--Tom's place. But Tom wasn't there because he was...

Sam frowned, the sight of the empty seat bothering him. His brother was...away. On a TDY in the Philippines. He was just...away...

Dismissing his brother's absence as something that couldn't be helped, Sam let his

gaze roam over to the other side of the church, he spotted Donna's mother sitting next to her sister, Donna's only aunt.

Other friends were seated here and there. Sam spotted Gooshie and several other techs from the Project before he tired of scanning the gathering.

The person he was really looking for wasn't there. He could feel himself beginning to sweat, and it wasn't from the heat.

Pacing back to the door, he hissed softly, "Where is she, Al?"

"Don't worry, Sam, she'll be here," his friend soothed, his gravelly voice amused. "You know women. She probably got a run in her panty hose and had to send out for another pair."

The physicist shot him a sharp glance. "She's wearing a long gown. Who would know if she got a run?"

"Think about it, Sam," Al insisted. "You know the part where you take off her garter," he said, demonstrating with great finesse, "and throw it to all the eligible bachelors?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So," Al said as if it were perfectly obvious, "a run would show then, right?"

Snorting, Sam turned away. "I bow to your superior experience," he said sarcastically, too worried to filter his words. "If anyone should know, it'd be you."

"Right," Al seemed unperturbed by the fact that the matron of honor was his ex of only a few days. "And don't throw the garter my way," he ordered as if an afterthought. "I'm not gettin' married again--ever. I have enough alimony to pay as it is!"

Ignoring him, Sam looked at his watch again. It was nearly twenty after. "She's not coming, Al," he said, running a worried hand through his hair. "She's not going to show."

"Of course she's gonna show, you're just jittery because you remember how I was when Ruthie..."

As Al's sentence trailed off into nothing, Sam turned to see what had stalled him.

The pastor, holding a long white envelope was coming down the hall.

Watching him draw near, the physicist felt his mouth go suddenly dry.

This was it. She wasn't coming.

The pastor stopped just before him and offered the envelope. "This just came for you." His dark eyes were sympathetic. "I hope it's not bad news." Glance moving from Sam to Al,

who had come to stand behind the younger man's shoulder in silent support, he continued quietly. "I'll be waiting in the foyer."

Holding the envelope, Sam watched him leave and close the door behind him. Slowly, he forced himself to look down at what he held.

His name was written across the front in Donna's neat handwriting. He knew, he knew in his gut, what the envelope held, but somehow he could not open it.

If he didn't read it, he wouldn't have to admit that she had left him at the altar.

"Well," Al said at last, "you'd better see what it says."

Sam didn't look up, eyes still on the envelope. "I already know."

He felt the captain's steady hand on his shoulder. "You've gotta find out for sure, pal."

Slowly, the physicist turned it over. Drawing a deep breath, he opened it with surprisingly steady fingers.

Taking out a single sheet of paper, he unfolded it and stared at it for a very long time, reading the words over and over as if they would change with time.

"Sam?" Al said at last, his rough voice somehow gentle.

The physicist's answer, when it came was as desolate as his eyes. "She's not coming."

Bleakly, he handed the letter to Al, turned on his heel, and walked out of the chapel without another word.

* * *

Heading for his car, Sam had no clear idea of where he was going. He just knew he had to get away from the chapel and all the bitterness it now held for him.

Ripping the 'Just Married' sign off his rear window, he tore it in half and tossed it vehemently to the ground.

With no thought to any damage to his bumper, he jerked the string of tin cans and old shoes from its place on the rear of his car and flung them away. He did not bother to look to see where they landed.

Opening his car door with barely restrained violence, he jumped in and started the engine. Gunning it a couple of times, he peeled out of the parking lot with a great screech of abused tires.

What did he care who saw or heard him? Let

the cops give him a ticket if they wanted--they'd have to catch him first.

And he had no intention of being caught--by the police or anyone else. For now, he just wanted to be alone.

He hoped Al didn't follow because the last thing he needed in the world right now was pity. He was going to have enough of that the rest of his life when everyone found out what happened.

Let Al deal with the preacher and the guests who were still waiting for a wedding that would never happen. What else were best men for, anyway?

Aimlessly, he drove for a long time, trying to leave the bitter taste of humiliation and anger behind him. But, if anything, it seemed to grow until it threatened to choke him.

Passing a bar, he pulled into the parking lot on an impulse. Liquor always seemed to work for Al, at least as a temporary anesthesia, and right now he wanted--he needed--not to feel.

He'd deal with the consequences later. His new plan was to stay here and drink until he couldn't remember his own name, let alone Donna's, and God help anyone who got in the way.

When he walked into the bar, he was assailed by the overwhelming smell of stale cigarette smoke and beer.

Spying a cigarette machine, he decided what the hell. If smoking was good enough for dear old Dad, it was good enough for him. He sure didn't care if the smoke rotted his lungs.

He fed the machine coins until he figure it had enough and jabbed the button for Camels.

Grabbing the pack from the tray and a book of matches from the bowl on top of the machine, he plunged into the semi-darkness of the place, as if to hide from the brilliance of the afternoon sun he had left behind, and took a seat at the bar.

He ordered a beer, passed the bartender a twenty, and told him to keep them coming. It would take longer to get drunk on beer, but what the hell did he have but time?

He ripped open the pack and pulled out a cigarette. Lighting it, he threw the match into the ashtray the bartender had set down in front of him when he delivered the beer.

Inhaling deeply, he coughed instinctively as the acrid smoke hit his lungs. It had been a long time since he and Tom had sneaked behind the barn to try their father's cigarettes.

He gulped down a swig of beer to soothe his throat. The second puff was a little better and

he resolutely continued.

Settling down, he drank and smoked steadily. After his sixth beer and his third cigarette, a woman slid onto the stool next to him.

The thick scent of her cheap perfume engulfed him like a cloud.

"Looking for a good time, sweetheart?" she asked in a husky contralto.

Sam spared her a cursory glance. She was probably somewhere in her twenties, wearing a tight red dress that displayed a long length of legs and ample bust.

Everything about her screamed 'hooker' and he turned back to his drink in weary irritation.

Great. This was just what he needed.

"Not interested," he said, taking a long drink of the fresh beer the bartender had put before him.

She shrugged. "Your loss, mister."

"That's right," he growled into his beer, too drunk and too hurt to be polite. "My loss. Now leave me alone."

He'd been polite all his life and what had it gotten him? Stood up on his wedding day, that's what it had gotten him!

He should have taken Donna last night. He should have loved her so long and thoroughly that she wouldn't have even thought of leaving him stranded at the church.

He should have never even let her out of his sight. He should have--

"Hey, mister," a deep voice came from above him as a heavy hand landed on his shoulder. "She was just tryin' to be friendly."

Shaking off the hand, Sam looked over his shoulder at the heavily built man who loomed over him. From the look of the loud clothes and gold chains, he was the hooker's pimp.

"I know," he said, dismissing both the man and his 'lady', "what she was tryin'. And I'm not buyin'." Deliberately ignoring them both, he took a long drink of beer. "I just want to be left alone. Okay?"

He cast a look at the scowling man behind him in the mirror over the bar. The guy looked like a technicolor Neanderthal in his striped polyester jacket and Sam felt a surge of bad temper push through the numbing cloud of beer.

"Surely even someone of your limited intelligence can understand simple English. Leave me alone!"

The man grabbed for the back of Sam's tux, obviously intending to haul him from the stool. Swiveling, the physicist pulled free, taking the

pimp by surprise before he had a firm grip on him.

Cursing, the man advanced and Sam grinned. Ducking the fist he saw coming, he dove under the blow. Driving up with a punch of his own into the big man's mid-section, he felt a grim sense of satisfaction.

So much for politeness and gentlemanly behavior!

"Hey," the bartender shouted, "not in my bar you don't! You two gotta beef, you take it outside!"

But the pimp obviously had other ideas and, shouting obscenities, came after Sam. Meeting the assault head on, Sam flung himself into the fight.

The hell anyone was making a fool out of him. He was gonna enjoy this!

The fight lasted longer than it should have. The guy was big, but he was slow, and normally Sam could have dispatched him with a couple of quick moves.

But the beers had begun to take hold and the pimp landed a couple of lucky punches as his friends called encouragement from the rough circle they had formed about them.

Still, the physicist eventually took him out with a flying roundhouse kick...just as the first of the policemen hit the front door.

* * *

Even as drunk as he was, Sam realized the wisdom in going peacefully with the police. The fight had taken away the edge of the rage he'd been nursing and depression had begun to set in.

What did it matter to anyone that Dr. Samuel Beckett, quantum physicist, the next Einstein, was arrested for a drunken brawl?

Being frisked, handcuffed, and hustled out of the bar seemed as if it were happening to someone else.

The liquor had begun to hit him full force, and the officer had to support him to get him into the waiting police car. His opponent, he saw with grim satisfaction, was being poured into another squad car by two other officers.

Maybe it wasn't a total waste after all.

By the time he reached the police station, he was beginning to sober up enough to walk nearly under his own power.

Silently, he co-operated as he was fingerprinted, photographed, and relieved of his wallet, belt and tie.

Maybe, he thought as they escorted them to a cell, they believed he was going to try to hang himself, or bribe his way out.

Well, he wasn't. He was just going to sit here until he rotted.

Groaning, he ran his hands through his hair and sat down on the cot. They had asked him if he wanted to make a telephone call, but he had refused.

Who would he call? Al?

The captain would come and bail him out, and probably make it pretty painless for him.

Perversely, Sam decided that was exactly why he wouldn't call. He didn't want anyone to make him feel better. He just wanted to sit here, in the drunk tank, and drown in his own sorrow.

Sighing, he leaned forward, forearms on his knees, hands clasped before him. It was a hell of a way to spend what he had expected to be his wedding night.

Never in a million years would he have expected it to end sitting in a rumpled, torn tux in a holding cell that stank of human sweat and urine.

Never.

Donna had said just twenty-four hours before that she would never leave him...and then she had done just that.

Worse, she had done it by letter--a stinking letter! She hadn't even told him face to face.

He loved her, damn it! He loved her with all his soul, and the hell of it was that he still loved her, even after she had betrayed him.

In his heart, he knew that if she walked in the cell door and asked him to take her back, he would do it in a second.

Damn, he was such a fool!

He should have listened to Al. Al knew women, and he was right when he said they'd let you down every time.

Distantly, he was aware of steps approaching his cell. Good, maybe it was the firing squad come to put him out of his misery.

"Beckett?" he heard someone say. "Sam Beckett? You have a visitor."

Reluctantly, Sam lifted his head to see Al standing in the hall, regarding him.

Al had come to get him. Suddenly ashamed, he ducked his head as the guard let his friend into the cell, then turned and left them alone.

"How'd you find me?" he mumbled, gaze firmly locked on his clasped hands as the captain paused just inside the door.

"It was simple." With peripheral vision, Sam could see him shrug and tuck his hands into the pockets of his black tux, as he continued. "Tammy called. Said she had one of my quantum physicists in here."

Sam could sense rather than see Al's smile.

"Since I only had one missing," the captain continued, "I knew it had to be you."

"Very funny," Sam grumbled. Then, despite himself, looked up briefly to see Al's expression. "Who's Tammy?"

"The desk sergeant."

"Great," the physicist snorted. "I can't even get arrested without you turning it into a chance to flirt with women."

Serenely, Al let that pass. "Come on, pal, let's bail you outta here. Get some hot coffee into you and--"

"I don't want to be bailed out," Sam snapped. "I just want to be left alone."

There was a long pause, then Al said evenly, "If you're lookin' for pity, you're not gonna find it in here."

Angry, Sam lifted his head to glare at the older man. "I don't need pity," he flared, getting to his feet. "Not from you or anyone else!"

"Look, Sam," Al said reasonably, "I know how you feel. But--"

"No, you don't!" Disgusted, the physicist began to take a step forward, staggered, and had to catch the bars to push himself back upright. The humiliation of it only fueled his rekindling anger. "You don't know how I feel. It wasn't you who got left standing at the altar! It was me!"

Shaking his head, he leaned against the side bars of the cell, not looking at the man who was still standing quietly with his hands in his pockets, regarding him.

"I should've listened to you when you told me not to marry her. You were right," he snapped. "Does that make you happy? Knowing that you were right?"

Al's next words surprised him. "No, I wasn't," the captain said quietly. "I was wrong."

Sam turned to see his friend regarding him sympathetically. Amazingly, the sympathy only made him more angry. He'd already told him that he didn't want anyone to feel sorry for him!

"I was wrong and so are you," Al continued firmly. "Instead of sitting here feeling sorry for yourself, you should be out looking for

Donna and tryin' to work out this whole screwed up mess."

"Hah!" Sam snorted, knowing he was being callous but unable to stop the words. It felt like everything good and caring in him had died when Donna deserted him. "Thank you, Dr. Ruth."

"Damn it, Sam..." For the first time, exasperation entered the captain's voice. "Gettin' drunk isn't gonna solve anything. It's just gonna make it worse."

"Oh, yeah," the physicist sneered, hearing the intoxicated slur in his words and hating it. "Great advice, coming from Mr. Hide-A-Bottle-In-Your-Desk."

Al's eyes flashed warningly. "We're not talking about me, here, we're talking about you."

"Well, I don't want to talk about it!"

"Fine, you just wanna sit here and rot, you do that. Let Donna go, but don't come whinin' to me when you sober up and she's gone for good." Turning on his heel, Al drew a breath as if to call for the guard who was standing at the end of the hall.

"As if you do such a great job with your own life," Sam sneered, "beating the hell out of vending machines and putting your hand through plate glass windows. You've really got it all figured out, right?"

"You're treadin' on thin ice, pal," Al said, his voice dangerously even.

The alcohol and emotional upheaval of the day combined to push Sam over the line.

"I'm sick and tired of your crap!" Sam shouted. "I've taken your patronizing attitude for years and I've had enough! What are you going to do? Not speak to me for the next six months? You're pathetic. It's okay for you to get drunk, but not for me...geez..."

Pain flickered across Al's face and Sam felt a stab of regret at his words. But the roiling mix of his own hurt, anger and shame made it impossible to apologize.

Resentfully, he turned away, head down as he stared at the dirty floor beneath his feet. Who the hell had told Al to come in and lecture him anyway?

"That's a little below the belt. Alcohol never solved any of my problems, why should it solve yours?"

"It makes them easier to deal with," Sam muttered, paraphrasing Al. Even though he'd had so much to drink that he could barely stand, the memory of Donna's rejection still seared his



soul.

"Really?" Al asked pointedly. "You can stand there and tell me you feel better than you felt the minute you left the chapel."

"I'd feel better," Sam said sarcastically, "if I had another drink. You bail me out of here and we'll go get that bottle out of your desk drawer and then we'll talk about it."

"Sober up, Sam," Al said, turning away as if to leave, "and I'll come back in the morning."

"Fine," Sam shot back, sitting down hard on the cot. "I don't need you feeling sorry for me."

"No, you're doin' a fine job of that all by yourself." Al turned back to him and, in a voice heavy with sarcasm, said, "That's why you broke that guy's jaw, right? Because he wouldn't leave you alone to drown your sorrows?"

"Just shut up," Sam growled. "And leave me the hell alone."

"Aw, hell," Al swore, shaking his head as if thoroughly disgusted. Stalking across the short distance of the cell, he reached down and hauled Sam up by the front of his shirt. "Tom ought to be the one to kick your butt and shake some sense into you, but since he ain't here, I'll have to be the one to do it."

Down the hall, the guard turned, smiled and looked the other way. Incredible, Sam tried to shove Al away, but the smaller man was stronger than he looked and his eyes were dark with anger.

"Let go of me!" the physicist demanded.

In reply, the pilot jerked him forward, then neatly using the momentum and Sam's own unsteadiness against him, slammed him against the cell's bars. "Not until you start acting like a man instead of a whipped pup!"

"She left me!" The cry was from the depths of his anguished soul.

"So?" Al kept up the pressure, leaning on his chest to keep him against the bars. "Lots of guys get left. That doesn't mean they go belly up and die. So you got left at the altar, and you think you've had it so bad. Lemme tell you, pal, you don't know what bad is."

Speechless, Sam met the eyes that were dancing with righteous indignation.

"Bad is somethin' you can't fix," Al grated. "Bad is your mom runnin' off with a stupid encyclopedia salesman after your dad goes to work overseas...and you endin' up in an orphanage with your little sister like a couple of throwaways, because the uncle who's supposed

to be lookin' out for you decides you're too much trouble."

"Al--"

"Bad," the older man cut across his words, shaking him to make sure he had his attention, "is gettin' out and fightin' for a stake in the world so that you've got somethin' to bring your sister to, and then findin' out she died and nobody even gave a damn enough to let you know!"

Frozen, Sam regarded him as the tirade went on.

"Bad is six freakin' years in a tiger cage, believin' the woman you love is waitin' for you to come home...and then comin' home to find she chucked you for another guy and won't even talk to you on the phone to tell you why! That's what bad is, Sam."

Angrily, he let the physicist go and took a step away.

"That's what bad is," he repeated, more quietly but no less angrily. "And until you get your butt out there and hustle, and try to get Donna back, you got no right to whine that life's treated you bad. Go after her, tell her that you love her... 'cause it sure looks to me like you do. Until then, you're gonna look pretty damn silly tryin' to hide in a bottle."

The captain's eyes slid away, and he took yet another step toward the door and away from Sam. A terrible banging began at the door at the end of the jail's hall. Incredibly, the guard standing just before it seemed oblivious of it.

"I should know," Al continued softly, as if just suddenly aware the guard could hear them. "If you need that drink, Sam, more than you need Donna, you've got a real problem. And you'd better be thinkin' about how you're gonna solve it and stop whining about what a crappy deal life has given you."

"Al, I..." Sam faltered, feeling like an idiot. He shot a look at the unconcerned guard who was still standing before the door which someone was pounding on in an effort to get in. Was the guy deaf? "I'm sorry, I..."

The pilot shook his head. "I don't want your sympathy, Sam. That's not what this is all about."

Turning, he met the younger man's eyes steadily. It seemed he also chose to ignore the noise of someone demanding to be let in, so Sam divided his attention between the pounding and the man before him.

"One bender doesn't mean you're gonna end up

a drunk," Al said evenly, "but I'd hate to think I was the one who taught you that liquor solved anything."

Thoroughly shaken out of his self-pity, Sam pushed himself away from the bars and took a step closer to his friend as the awful banging mercifully stopped.

"I guess...I made an idiot of myself," he said sheepishly, not wanting to meet Al's eyes.

The captain shrugged. "So, women do that to guys all the time. It's part of the game." The faint humor in his voice faded as Sam looked up to make eye contact with him. "I don't wanna lose you to the bottle, Sam, not when you haven't even started the fight. If you let Donna slip through your fingers, you're gonna regret it the rest of your life."

Drawing a deep breath, Sam hesitated, looking down. "I don't know, Al. What if she doesn't want to talk to me?"

"Wake up, Sam," Al said, putting a hand on his shoulder and shaking him.

Sam looked up, surprised, and Al's whole manner abruptly changed. The older man wasn't telling him to 'wake up' about Donna, he really was telling him to--

"Wake up! You're gonna be late for your wedding!"

Late for his wedding???

* * *

Sam started violently, as it seemed reality spun about him. Gasping, he flung himself backward, and found he was in his own bed, with Al bending over him.

"Whoa!" the captain said, jumping back. "Calm down, pal. It's only a dream." Wryly, his gaze took in Sam's bed. "Though it looks like it was a doozie."

Stunned and disoriented, the physicist looked down at his tangled sheets and pillows flung on the floor.

He was home, really home, and today was the day of his wedding.

Wasn't it?

Casting a glance at Al, he stunned the pilot by reaching out and grasping his wrist to make sure he was real.

The man's warm flesh felt real, but then it had felt real when Al had slammed him against the cell bars, too.

Gingerly, Sam released the captain and reached up to his head, half expecting to feel a

knot forming there.

Mystified, Al took a step away. Catching up the physicist's robe, he tossed it to him.

"Must have been a helluva dream," he observed again.

"Yeah..." Still struggling to return to reality, Sam got to his feet and pulled on the robe. "It was." Uncertainly, he turned back to the bed as if looking for clues to the dream that had seemed so real.

"I dreamed Donna left me at the alter," he said, eyes still wide. "Well, first I dreamed about the wedding, but then I thought I woke up and..." Turning in a circle, he searched the room as if for some clue that this time he was truly awake. "And Donna didn't come," he finished awkwardly.

"Sounds like cold feet to me," Al observed easily. "Had them a few times myself, so I should know." Then he grinned. "If you're lucky, Donna will warm 'em up when you get to the honeymoon suite."

Still deeply uneasy, Sam ran a hand through his hair and struggled to reorient himself. "It was so real," he insisted, "like it was really happening." Shuddering once, he shook his head. "I got drunk and I got in a fight, and you came to bail me out of the drunk tank."

Al's laugh sounded a little forced. "Sam Beckett in the slammer, boggles the mind."

The trauma of the dream still had too strong a hold on the physicist for him to react to the attempt at humor.

It had been so real, so vivid...just like the time he'd dreamed Tom had died.

"I didn't want to leave," he said, gazing at the bed as if to force the lingering after-images to make some sort of sense of it. "And you read me the Riot Act--told me that if I needed a drink more than I needed Donna, I had a big problem."

Breaking what had been a long silence for him, Al cleared his throat. "Well, it was only a dream and you're awake now." With a shove, he headed Sam toward the bathroom. "Get in the shower and I'll make some coffee. Donna's gonna let me have it if I get you to the chapel late."

Stopped dead in his tracks, Sam turned to his friend. "That's exactly what you said the first time."

Eyeing him, Al said, "Don't worry, Sam. You're not psychic. Donna's gonna be there."

Reluctantly, Sam nodded, a part of him still not able to believe it. "I hope so," he said,

"I don't know what I'd do if she wasn't. Or maybe..." His hazel eyes shifted uneasily to Al. "...maybe I do. And that's even worse."

* * *

The chapel was just as it had been in Sam's dream, right down to the scent of fresh flowers and the warm breeze coming in through the open windows.

Before the guests arrived, he and Al met with the preacher--a tall, transplanted Texan--for last minute instructions.

Now they were all waiting in a small area just off the sanctuary. All was in place, the physicist assured himself, right down to the special music he had planned in the ceremony. All that remained now was to wait for Donna.

Pacing restlessly, he peeked out the sanctuary, as he had also done in the dream.

But this time there was a difference.

To his delight, he saw his brother Tom, seated next to his mother. Somehow, he must have gotten last minute leave and arrived for the ceremony after all.

Grinning, Sam fought against the impulse to walk out before all the assembled guests and hug him! Things were already different, he assured himself, trying to still the tiny voice of unease in the back of his mind. Tom was here!

As if his brother felt his eyes on him, he glanced up and caught Sam's gaze through the small crack in the doorway.

Grinning, Tom gave him a discreet thumbs up gesture, which Sam repeated. Then, softly closing the door, he cast another anxious glance at his watch.

At that moment, the digital read-out changed to exactly eleven o'clock and the organist began the processional music.

Al appeared at his shoulder. "You ready?" he asked in a matter-of-fact voice that calmed some of Sam's fears.

Taking a deep breath, the physicist nodded. "I guess so," he agreed. "Do you have the rings?"

Al patted his suit pocket. "Right here. And I ain't moving them."

Thinking back to Al's wedding, and his last minute search for Ruthie's ring, Sam smiled nervously.

Turning around, he nodded at the minister, who gave him an encouraging smile.

Then, the man in robes led the way to the

altar.

Following, aware of Al's steadying presence right behind him, Sam prepared himself. Resolutely, he turned to the back of the chapel.

It was time, and Donna would be there. The night before had been nothing but a bad dream brought on by wedding jitters and the memory of how Ruthie had been late for the wedding in which he had been best man so many years before.

As if in response to the thought, Ruthie appeared at the end of the chapel's aisle.

Dressed in a beautiful lavender gown that highlighted her dark hair, she looked serenely beautiful and Sam risked a glance at his best man.

Al's expression was neutral--too carefully so. If it bothered him to share this wedding with the woman who had been his wife just a few short days ago, he wasn't going to show it.

Wishing it could be otherwise, Sam looked away. The attempt he and Donna had made at matchmaking seemed doomed to fail. He just hoped with a desperate ache that it was the only thing that was going to fail today.

Bringing his attention back to the aisle, Sam turned back to see his six-year-old nephew, John, carrying a satin, ring bearer's pillow with fake rings attached.

When he had mentioned putting their wedding rings on the pillow, Katie had suggested using the ones that came with the pillow. 'You never know, they might get lost. Trust me, I know six-year-olds.' So they had agreed.

John was dressed in a little tuxedo, that was a dead ringer for the grown ups' versions complete right down to a small bow tie.

Solemnly, he walked down the aisle and took a place next to Al, who put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

Next came his sister, Cecily, scattering red rose petals over the white cloth that covered the aisle for the occasion. With her dark hair flowing over the lavender dress that matched the matron of honor's, she looked beautiful, and Sam shot a look at Katie.

His sister, who sat between her husband and her mother, met his gaze with a brilliant smile --and tears in her eyes.

An accent chord sounded the instant Cecily reached her place, and Sam's attention immediately fled back to the arched entryway.

Donna was there.

She was stunning, sunlight reflecting off the white satin of her wedding dress. With her

hand on her father's arm, she looked serenely beautiful.

She was smiling a smile meant just for him as she moved down the aisle toward the altar. The rest of the world seemed to fall away--Al, Ruthie, the relatives and friends--all ceased to exist for him in those few frozen moments as she moved toward him to stop by his side.

It was just like the dream--the first one.

Drawing what felt like the first breath in several moments, he breathed for her alone, "I love you."

"I love you, too," came the reply and it seemed as if there could not possibly be any more to say.

"Dearly beloved," the minister began, "we are gathered in the presence of God and these witnesses, to witness the joining together of this man and this woman in the state of holy matrimony. If there any here that know why these two should not be married, let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

It seemed no one in the chapel breathed for the long pause before the minister continued, "Samuel John Beckett, do you take Donna Marie Elesee to be your wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do you part?"

"I do," Sam answered, his voice firm and clear as he gazed into Donna's eyes.

Nodding, the minister turned and repeated the vows for Donna. When he was finished, she smiled into Sam's eyes and answered clearly, "I do."

Sam felt emotion squeezing his chest until surely his heart must stop with the strain--and the joy. The minister continued, his soft drawl pronounced in the familiar words. "Who is giving this woman to be married to this man?"

The tall, gray-haired man standing in military correctness next to Donna spoke up crisply. "Her mother and I do." Her father took her right hand and placed it in Sam's left. Giving her a kiss on the cheek, he whispered, "Good luck, sweetheart," and went to sit by his ex-wife in the second pew.

The minister began to speak again. Sam wasn't sure just what he said, something about the sanctity of marriage, he thought, but all his attention was on the woman who stood beside him.

Her slender hand was warm and alive in his,

and he wanted to remember this moment for now and for always in all its entirety.

Finally, Al nudged him discreetly and Sam realized the time had come for the surprise he had planned.

Drawing his hand from Donna's with a smile, he went to pick up the guitar he had hidden behind the piano. Swinging the strap over his head, he walked back and faced Donna.

Strumming a chord, he looked directly into Donna's eyes and began to sing a John Denver song that he felt expressed everything he was feeling perfectly.

After the first lines, he forgot the presence of the rest of the congregation, as he had at his first sight of his wife to be, and sang as if only to her.

Donna's eyes were shining as he came to the refrain. "Close your eyes and rest your weary mind; I promise I will stay right here beside you. Today, our lives were joined, became entwined. I wish you could know how much I love you'."

Sam felt his own throat close until the last lines were hard to sing past the lump that formed there. "Lady, my sweet lady, I just can't believe it's true, and it's like I've never, ever loved before'."

When he was finished, there was a long silence in the congregation that held as he put away the guitar. Coming back to take his place beside Donna again, he took her hand in his and kissed it as the minister asked, "Is there a ring?"

Sam turned to Al, who reached into his suit pocket.

Taking the gold wedding band from his best man, he took Donna's left hand as the minister directed, "Please repeat your vows."

Looking into her eyes, so that she would see the love, and the sincerity behind each word, Sam said clearly, "With this ring, I pledge my love. I give you my heart, my life, and my soul throughout eternity."

Smiling tenderly, he slipped the ring onto her finger to seal the vow he had just given her.

In turn, Donna turned to take the band from Ruthie, and held Sam's hand. "I give you this ring as a symbol of my vow, and with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you; in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Slipping it on his finger, she kept his hand

in hers as they turned back to the minister.

"With the power vested in me by this church and the state of California," the man said with a twinkle in his eye, "I pronounce you man and wife." He met Sam's eyes. "You may now kiss the bride," he told Sam, who did not need any further urging.

Taking Donna into his arms, he kissed her, their lips touching as a promise of a life of love to come.

Releasing her, he stood through the rest of the benediction in a haze of joy.

It was done!

He and Donna were married and all the horror and pain of the nightmare was truly nothing but a bad dream.

As the organist began the triumphant processional march, they turned as one and headed down the aisle, hand in hand. The sea of faces was a blur, as was the presence of Al and Ruthie and the children which followed them.

Joy, complete and total, claimed his soul, and he felt as if nothing bad could ever, ever touch them again.

* * *

Sam looked like he was walking on air as he and Donna led the way down the aisle. The ring bearer and flower girl, hands clasped as they had been instructed, trailed behind.

Bringing up the last of the procession, Ruthie on his arm, Al found himself smiling in the pure joy of watching the newly married couple lead the way from the sanctuary. They deserved this--the heady promise of a new life and a new beginning.

The newlyweds passed through the archway into the foyer. For a moment, the children faltered, as if uncertain whether to follow.

Gently, Ruthie motioned them forward and Cecily nodded, tugging on her brother's hand. Herded before the best man and the matron of honor, they began to move again and the four of them disappeared from the sight of the seated wedding guests.

Delayed by the maneuver, the captain stepped into the foyer, and was surprised to find no sight of Sam or Donna. For a second, it seemed that the couple had vanished into thin air.

Then, Al caught the briefest of glimpses of white satin just before the door to the side cloak room swung shut.

Grinning, he found that he remembered that

feeling, too. Sometimes a guy just needed a little privacy with his woman before he faced all those relatives for the final trial of the reception.

Grin widening, he remembered the rain soaked encounter he and Ruthie had shared in the bathroom of her parent's house. The memory was as warm and pleasant as if it had been yesterday.

Impulsively, he turned to share it with her, and found himself looking into reserved dark eyes.

Abruptly, his grin fled and he remembered that the reality of their relationship was now something different. She had left him, and all those promises of a life together had fled with her.

Releasing her arm, he took a step away as she did the same, keeping the distance between them. She cast him a quick, discerning glance and he turned away before she could comment on the momentary lapse in his defenses.

Damn, he thought, she always did this, got to him when he least expected it. But, this time, he wasn't falling for it. It was over, once and for all, and nobody was pushing him into resurrecting it.

Nobody.

Suddenly aware he was scowling, he turned his back on her and walked to the window as if to check that no one had parked too close to his Vette. The last thing he wanted was a door ding from some family station wagon door swung open by a kid.

As if triggered by the thought of kids, the ring bearer's voice came from behind him. "Where's Uncle Sam?"

Turning, he looked to see what Ruthie would say, for he was sure she had caught the same glimpse of wedding dress as he. As if pointedly not looking his way, she answered the child.

"He's with Donna," she said softly as Mrs. Beckett appeared in the doorway, escorted by Tom. "He'll be along soon."

That was one good thing about Ruthie, Al thought before he squelched the thought, she was always a good sport and quick on the take.

Cecily spoke up, looking about her in the seemingly empty foyer. "But, where'd he go so fast?"

Her mother and father appeared in the archway and Katie asked, "Where'd who go so fast?"

"Uncle Sam," Cecily answered, still making a

visual sweep of the premises. "He was right ahead of us and now he's gone."

Stepping into the breach, Al came forward from the window. The guests were going to be pouring out of the chapel any minute, and it wasn't going to be easy for Sam and Donna to sneak out of their hiding place.

Besides that, Cecily was a sharp little cookie and she just might figure it out and decide to go have a peek behind the cloak room door.

A little diversion seemed in order. After all, what were best men for?

"He'll meet us downstairs," Al told her, making sure his words carried as a suggestion to the adults in the area. "He and Donna and some people are gonna stand in a line down there and shake people's hands." Reaching out for her hand, he gave her a wink. "So what'd ya say we go scout out the cake table? I bet they don't have anybody down there guarding the mints yet."

"Al," Katie chided, but her smile was knowing, "teaching my daughter such things."

The rest of the guests were beginning to bunch up at the door as Al had feared, but Mrs. Beckett took the hint. "I think meeting Sam downstairs would be best. Let's go on down."

With her movement, the rest of the well-wishers began to follow. Merging with the flow, the flower girl's hand still in his, Al accepted a wink from Tom with a grin.

All in all, it was a well made plan. He'd go down with Cecily, snitch a couple of mints for them both, turn her over to her mom, and then sneak back up to let the enamored couple know when it was safe to come out of their hiding place.

Al let the general movement of bodies take them along to the reception, making sure there were a good number of them between he and Ruthie. He had done his duty and escorted her down the aisle, and that, as the saying went, was going to be the end of that.

* * *

Donna was about to have a severe fit of the giggles. Burying her face in Sam's shoulder, she tried to stifle them. "How are we going to get out of here without someone seeing us? I can't believe I let you talk me into this," she whispered.

"What?" Sam whispered back, nuzzling her ear, "marrying me, or sneaking a kiss in the cloak

room?"

"Both," she replied teasingly, before turning her head to catch his lips in a kiss, which he returned fervently.

When he released her, she said breathlessly, "My, aren't we passionate, Dr. Beckett?"

"I just had to have you to myself for a couple minutes before we have to greet everybody in the reception line. Have I told you how beautiful you look? Marriage must agree with you."

"Why, thank you," she replied in kind. "I must admit you look pretty handsome in a tux yourself." A serious expression came over her face, causing Sam some trepidation. "Sam, that song you sang..."

"You didn't like it?"

"No." Donna shook her head. "I loved it. It was so perfect, it made me cry. You're such a special person." She lifted one finger to trace the line of his lips. "And I'm the luckiest woman in the world."

Sam carefully brought her close to him, and whispered in her ear. "And I'm the luckiest man."

He was just about to kiss her again when he heard footsteps coming up the stairs from the reception area and stop outside their door.

"Hey..." There was a melodramatic whisper from the hall and a discreet tap of knuckles on the cloak room door. "The coast is clear. But you two love birds better get out here pronto, I think the photographer is setting up a stakeout!"

"Al," Sam said, sharing a glance with Donna. "I should have known he'd know where to look for us."

Releasing Donna from his embrace, he reached to open the door. Watching his bride make a try at a dignified exit from the cloak room, he felt himself grinning widely and was unable to stop it.

No matter what Al said, the sheer impulsive fun of stolen kisses was worth it.

The captain, however, had his back turned to the door, making much of his job as stakeout.

"Come on," he said, gesturing without turning as he kept his attention of the stairway. "You two can smooch later, you've got people waiting."

"Al..." Sam began, leaning over the captain's shoulder. "We're right here."

The glance his friend threw his way was fondly teasing. "It's about time, too. Your

mom's gonna send out the search party any minute now. I was kinda worried how I was gonna handle the dogs. This best man stuff only goes so far, you know."

"I know," Sam agreed, "and you've already gone above and beyond the call of duty."

Al reached in his pocket and extracted a handkerchief which he handed to Sam. The physicist took it with a mystified look and Al gestured discreetly.

"Lipstick," he explained under his breath.

"Thanks," Sam said, wiping his mouth.

"Don't mention it. It's another one of those best man things."

Extending a hand to an amused Donna, Sam pulled her forward with him, and they began to move toward the stairway.

"So," Al said casually as Donna started down the stairs slightly ahead of them, "you're leaving for LoNigro's cabin tomorrow. Where'd you say you were gonna spend tonight?"

"I didn't," Sam said as his wife cast an amused glance back at them. "And I'm not going to. I'm not about to be shivareed."

"Aw, Sam," Al protested innocently, "you don't think I'd do something like that, do you?"

Innocent my foot, Sam thought wryly. "You and Tom both," he returned without hesitation. At the mock wounded look he got, he continued, "My mom knows where we'll be tonight, if you need to reach us. But," he warned as they reached the foot of the stairs, "don't bother to try to trick her. My mom's a pretty sharp cookie."

Al smiled. "I know," he agreed, casting a glance into the door of the reception hall where the Beckett clan awaited. "And so are her grandkids. I thought Cecily had you nailed there for a while."

As they reached the doorway of the reception hall, the guests within applauded at the arrival of the bride and groom, and Sam blushed faintly.

Pausing at the door, he looked over the room with his bride, then looked back at her.

"Are you ready to meet my family?" he asked softly, watching as his mother attempted to keep her squabbling grandchildren from doing bodily damage to each other.

"Absolutely," she agreed, tucking her arm in his. "With you by my side, I can do anything."

Before Sam could answer, Katie appeared before them, photographer in tow. "Sam," she said breathlessly, "before we do the reception line, would you mind if Donna had a few photos

taken with Cecily and John?"

Sharing a glance with Donna, who nodded agreement, Sam said, "Sure, Katie, but what's the rush?"

His sister shook her head in mock despair. "John's already spilled punch down the back of Cecily's dress and she shoved him off his chair to get even. If we don't get the pictures now, there's not going to be anything left of those outfits worth photographing!"

From behind Sam, Al chuckled and leaned over Sam's shoulder to put in, "Be thankful there's no fish pond."

"What?" Katie asked as if she hadn't heard him correctly.

"Never mind," Sam said, releasing Donna's hand so she could accompany his sister. "I'll tell you about it later."

The two women and the harried looking photographer moved away. Sam's eyes followed Donna as she moved through the room, graceful in the rustling satin of her dress.

They said all brides were beautiful, but he had never seen one more beautiful than Donna.

The thought of other brides led him back to Al, who still stood slightly behind him.

Turning, Sam found the captain leaning against the doorjamb, hands in his pockets as if totally at ease.

Still, it wasn't like the man not to be mingling with the crowd, and maybe the fact that Ruthie was visiting with the Project crew had something to do with that. That, and the fact that with the remark about a fish pond had revealed that his marriage to Ruthie was on his mind.

Quietly, Sam moved back so that his words were for Al alone. "You doing okay?"

"Oh, yeah," Al agreed breezily. "This wedding stuff is a breeze, as long as I'm not the one gettin' hitched."

"I mean," the physicist qualified, "with Ruthie being here and...everything."

"No problem," the other man assured him, "we'll keep it civil. Neither one of us are gonna let it come to blows."

Hesitating, Sam swept a glance over the room, where Ruthie stood with her back to them.

"Well," he began, "thanks for being here. I know it can't be easy."

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't've missed it for the world," Al assured him sincerely. For a moment, his dark eyes held Sam's warmly, then a spark of dancing amusement lit them, and he

grinned. "Even if I had to be civil to all three of my ex-wives at once."

* * *

Behind the easy banter, Al was finding it far harder to co-exist with Ruthie than he indicated to Sam. He had to dance with her for Pete's sake, or be rude and defy tradition.

And the latter was something he wasn't willing to do, especially with Thelma Beckett in attendance. Somehow, her opinion of him mattered.

It mattered a lot.

So, he danced with Ruthie. One dance. So what if it was a slow dance and the feel of her in his arms brought back memories of other dances?

He even made small talk with her afterwards, when they ended up stuck sitting next to each other on the folding chairs lined about the edge of the room.

It was so polite that it was nearly deadly, but it was going okay...well, almost okay.

Watching Sam and Donna cut the cake, Al was acutely aware of his ex-wife beside him. Wishing desperately to be nearly anywhere but where he was, he was just planning a trip to the restroom so that on his return he could make his way over to Mrs. Beckett.

Then, he would find a seat elsewhere and it wouldn't look so obvious that he was avoiding Ruthie.

Before he could make his break for it, his ex-wife spoke as, behind the refreshment table, the bride fed a piece of cake to her husband. "Donna looks beautiful, doesn't she?"

"Yeah," Al agreed, watching Sam picking up a piece of cake to feed his new wife as tradition dictated. "She looks great."

Slipping a hand in his pocket, he fingered a cigar and considered a change of plan. He could step out for a smoke and...

John, Sam's nephew, appeared at his elbow. "Uncle Al?"

"Hi, buddy," the captain said, genuinely pleased to see the child with whom he'd struck up an acquaintance on his last visit with Sam to Hawaii. "How's it going?"

"Boring," came the honest answer. "And my mom won't let me have any cake until all this stuff is done."

Chuckling, Al nodded. "I hear you," he agreed. Turning the boy about a bit by a hand

on his shoulder, he examined the rumpled appearance of his tux. "What happened to you?" he asked as if he didn't know.

"Cecily," John answered with a snort. "She shoved me off the chair."

"And you got that rumpled?" Ruthie asked in amusement.

"Well..." The child shrugged as if it were of no importance. "We kinda rolled around a little bit after she shoved me. Until Mom got there."

Suppressing a grin, Al nodded. "Rolling around on the floor is kinda hard on clothes."

He shot a sideways glance at Ruthie and, from the merriment in her eyes, saw that she understood his reference. That white cotton shirt of his was never the same after he had lost the tickling match that had taken them under the bed.

The line for refreshments had finally begun to move, and John perked up immediately. "Hey, we get to eat now!" He turned to Al. "Want to get some cake?"

"Nah," the captain returned, shaking his head. "But, thanks anyway."

"Hey, Uncle Al," the boy asked as if an afterthought. "Can we go for another ride in your car?"

"Sure," Al agreed with a grin. "You can ride with me when your Uncle Sam and Aunt Donna leave. We'll chase 'em down main street!"

John's eyes lit up with glee. "Yeah! That'd be cool!"

"Okay," the captain said with a grin. "We'll do it. I'll tell your mom you're ridin' with me."

"All right!" John agreed, turning away to the refreshment table.

As an afterthought, relaxed by the warmth of the exchange, Al called, "Hey, John?" When the boy turned, the captain continued. "Bring me back something to drink, will you?"

"Sure," the boy agreed. "After I get my cake."

Chuckling, Al shook his head. "Kid's got his priorities in the right place. Dessert first, then worry about the rest."

"Al..." Ruthie's voice had that hesitant, worried tone to it that immediately raised all his defenses.

What now?

Turning, he regarded her warily. "Yeah?"

"If you..." She paused, and he heard all his inner alarm bells start to ring. She always

did that...well, always in the past few months when she was gonna say something that really ticked him off.

"What?"

Ruthie's eyes met his. "You know Katie's not going to let John ride with you if you drink."

"Geez, Ruthie," he said, unconsciously drawing away from her. "I meant punch, okay? D'you think I was gonna send the kid for wine?"

His ex-wife's cheeks flushed slightly but she held her ground. Her voice was even, and pitched so those around them could not hear. "I never know with you lately."

"And you don't have to," he snapped, keeping his own voice down so as not to make a scene before Sam and his relatives. "I'm not your damn business anymore."

"I know that." Her dark eyes met his. "I was just trying to save you some embarrassment. If you go for the champagne later--"

Snorting, he cut her off mid-sentence, trying to ignore the fact that she had hurt him with her automatic assumption he was going to go for the booze. "Give it a rest, Ruthie. You gave up any right to ride my butt the day you walked out on me."

Abruptly, her eyes filled with tears and he stoked his anger against them.

Damn, she always did this to him--made him feel guilty--and it wasn't going to happen this time.

"Don't bother with the tears," he said callously, beginning to turn on his heel. "This time, they ain't gonna work."

But they did, he felt like a real heel--and he hated it. Why couldn't they have a simple conversation just once without him putting his foot in it?

"Jessica was right," Ruthie said, getting to her feet and drawing a step closer so they would not be easily overheard by those about them. "I should listen to her and--"

"Fine," he said softly, coldly angry as a defense against her distress. Determined not to make a scene, he carefully kept his voice down. "Listen to her. Do what you want, but any more talkin' we do, is gonna be lawyer to lawyer. You leave me outta it."

Completing his turn, he left the room, trying hard not to let the emotions that consumed him show in his stride.

The last thing he wanted was Sam leaving his wedding reception to come and try to make it better...and if Ruthie had any sense, she'd get

her act together before Donna got a look at her.

Letting the volatile mix of anger, pain, and guilt carry him out the side door of the chapel, he stopped just outside it and drew a deep breath.

Women.

They could just never get the hint when it was over. She'd left, and that was it. No quarter, no forgiveness, no making up. It was done, and he wasn't spending the rest of his life grieving over it like he'd done with--

Cutting off the thought before it was fully formed, he pulled the cigar from his pocket, unwrapped it and bit down on it hard.

Lighting it and drawing the first puff did little to improve his mood. Regarding it sourly, he reflected that this was not what he really needed.

Hell, there was a whole lot of things he didn't need, he thought bitterly. He didn't need a woman hanging around his neck like a dead weight, he didn't need to be pussyfooting around a stupid wedding reception like he belonged there...and he didn't need some bratty little rug rat riding shotgun in his Vette!

What he needed was a drink.

The thought, so closely mirroring what Sam had said about his dream, stopped him like a brick wall.

He had promised himself he wasn't going to drink today. Hell, he had promised himself in Vegas that he wasn't going to drink anymore--period. He had already broken that promise three times in the past month, and he was about to break it again now.

Because he needed a drink.

Frozen, he turned the revelation over in his mind.

He had told himself he could stop drinking on his own--and he wasn't doing such a hot job. In Vegas, he had told Sam he didn't need help--and that to take help would ruin his career.

But, he did need help, and if he kept going like he was going, he was going to completely eighty-six his career with the booze.

Now he saw, with painful clarity, that it was only a matter of time before he ended up with another bottle in his desk drawer...and this time maybe Sam wouldn't be able to reach down far enough to haul his sorry butt up.

Slowly, he lowered his cigar. Letting it fall to the pavement, he crushed it out underfoot, seeing in his mind's eye the yellow pages listing for the Tivoli Hills Drug and

Alcohol Treatment Center.

The chapel had a office, with a phone and a phone book. A phone book with the same yellow pages listing, he was willing to bet his life ...and in a way, maybe he was.

It would be no problem to call them from here. Then, he would return to the reception before Sam even realized he was gone. He would see the happy couple off, give John a ride to remember in the Vette, and then go home to pack a bag.

Spending some time at Tivoli sounded a whole lot better than spending the rest of his life wasted.

Turning, he went to make the call.

* * *

A cabin by a lake was not a traditional choice for a honeymoon getaway, but it was perfect for Sam and Donna. In addition to their time alone in the cabin, they spent hours by the lake, talking of their pasts and dreams for their future.

The evenings were pleasantly cool after the warm, sunny days and perfect for stargazing. The brilliance of the night sky was breathtaking above the midnight ink of the deep water.

Then, they would return to the cabin and sit in front of a glowing fireplace until the hours grew late.

With no deadlines, they found themselves sleeping late. Mornings would bring fragrant breezes and the sound of water lapping against the dock...and another day to spend together.

On the last day of their honeymoon, Sam awoke first, with Donna next to him. Turning to his side, he propped his head on his hand and watched his wife as she lay sleeping.

As he tenderly regarded her, she smiled faintly. He smiled, thinking that her dreams must be pleasant ones.

Leaning over her, he gently brushed a stray strand of hair away from her face and kissed her brow.

She opened her rich brown eyes and smiled up at him.

"I had an amazing dream," she said, stretching luxuriously. "I was married to a brilliant, handsome man who did the most wonderful things to me."

"Oh, really?" Sam teased gently. "Should I be jealous?"

"Not unless you're schizophrenic," she

replied, pulling him down to her for a kiss.

He kissed her, his passion for her increasing with each passing second. When her lips finally released his, he blazed a trail to her neck, pausing to breathe in her ear.

"Actually the term is 'multiple personality'. A schizophrenic has delusions and hallucinations," he said, pausing to nibble on her ear. "A person suffering from multiple personalities actually has more than one personality existing within himself."

"Oh, really?" she said, echoing him and offering her neck to encourage his kisses. "How interesting."

Somehow, Sam got the feeling that she wasn't at all interested in multiple personalities.

"I'm really a time traveler," he teased between kisses, "sent here from the future to make sure you married Sam Beckett."

"Really?" she said, delicately tracing the line of his cheek with a finger. "You look like Sam."

"Of course I do, to you," he explained patiently. "I would be invisible to anyone else. That's the way it works."

"Then," she said, moving her finger to run it lightly over his lips, "I'd be the one with the delusions."

He gave her finger a gentle warning nip.

"Okay," she agree, acknowledging the unspoken command, "if what you say is true, why wouldn't I have married Sam without your help? He's the one I love."

"Well," he shrugged, "Sam tends to be shy, he just needed a little encouragement to ask you."

"I think he did just fine on his own...after we got past that business with the microwave popcorn and the pencil," she said with a knowing smile.

"Oh, well, unh..." He ducked his head, feigning embarrassment. "That was me, not Sam."

"I should have known. The Sam Beckett I know, doesn't pick up women in grocery stores."

"Never again," Sam promised under his breath, before slipping back into his time traveler persona. "Well, it worked, you paid attention to me."

"Yeah, and I almost slapped your face, too." She smiled. "And if getting Sam and me married was what you were supposed to do, why are you still here?"

"I fell in love with you," he said, brushing back her hair from her face, "and couldn't

leave."

"I'm sorry, but Sam's the only one I'll ever love," she said, looking deeply into his eyes and he knew the words were for him alone, not for a fanciful time traveler. "He's the man I married and I'll be his wife until the day I die."

As he looked down at her, he could feel his heart contract, almost painfully, and all thoughts of teasing fled.

This woman was his. She was his wife, forever. She had just told him so...and he wanted her--

He touched her lips with his, a tender kiss that bespoke all the love and emotions in his heart.

She reached for him, for the oneness they found in each others arms, and brought him down to her.

Their bodies moved in an age old dance that was already ingrained in their beings, even though they had only started that dance one week ago.

It was a union of spirit as well as flesh, of soul as well as body. There was no awkwardness in their movements; it was as if they had been born for each other, that time had waited until this moment to put them together.

As that instant stretched into infinity, their souls merged, and found their union complete in the fabric of time.

* * *

As Sam lay in his wife's arms, his mind floating on the edge of sleep, a thought broke through with startling clarity. It was one of the flashes of inspiration that he sometimes experienced when his subconscious was given free rein to work on a problem.

Invisible, that was it!

It was the answer to how the time traveler could keep in touch with his own time: using a link between the mesons and neurons of the two involved to make a hologram visible only to the person in the past.

He lay back on the bed, his mind whirling with possibilities. They could use the developing technology of moving holograms he was working on at STAR BRIGHT to make it possible to transfer images. His problem was how to make that image transferable throughout time.

With a link, it could work!

"Sam," Donna said softly, shaking his

shoulder. "Are you okay?"

Sam started and looked at his wife who had been trying to get his attention. "I'm okay," he assured her. "I'm sorry I fugued out on you, but...I just came up with an idea for my time travel experiment!"

He sat up and grabbed a notebook and pen he kept on his bedside table. Deep into his idea, he began writing furiously.

"What?" she asked curiously, reaching for a robe from the end of the bed.

Still writing, Sam explained his idea.

Sitting down next to him, she asked, "Wouldn't linking the mesons and neurons of two people involve some type of implant?"

"Possibly, but first, we have to come up with a way to make instantaneous holograms, which will probably take quite a bit of research and development." Impulsively, he turned to Donna. "Do you want to help me? It'll have to be our secret until we find out if it works."

"I'd love to," she said, slipping an arm around his shoulders. "But, why not tell Al?"

"If it doesn't work, I don't want to involve him. If I get in trouble that's one thing. If he does, with his record, he could be kicked off the Project."

"Okay, it's our secret." Donna agreed and kissed her husband on his cheek. "While you finish writing down your idea, I think I'll take a shower."

Absently, Sam nodded, returning to his notes as she stood.

Scratching a few more words, he paused, looking up from the pad as it occurred to him what she had said. Watching as she crossed to the dresser, he hesitated.

Her movements were graceful as she bent over to pull clothing out of the bottom drawer. She brushed back her hair as she straightened, her gesture causing the satin robe to fall off one shoulder.

That decided Sam. What was the good of a photographic memory, if he couldn't use it to remember a theory?

Throwing the pad to the bed, he got up and came up behind her as she turned.

Wrapping his arms around her waist, he asked, "When's our flight?"

"Five this afternoon."

"Then, we have six hours before we have to be at the airport," he pointed out.

"That's right," she agreed in an innocent tone that was at odds with the provocative look

on her face.

"Good," he said, scooping her up into his arms and heading toward the shower. "That ought

to be just enough time."

He grinned, kicking the bathroom door closed behind them with his foot.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN "It's All Done With Mirrors"

I ain't touched a drop of booze in over two and a half years. And y'know something? I ain't missed it. I found a better use for brain cells rather than obliteration--hard work.

And it's paid off.

STAR BRIGHT is going well. Very well. In fact, I think we may be nearing the end of this Project.

That's a couple of years earlier than even I'd thought possible, but with Sam Beckett on our side...well, what more can I say?

With the kid's genius, we got the acoustic-optic crystal from MIT up and running in connection with the CRAY here at the Ames Research Center, faster than anyone ever expected. And the first of our papers is due out in the scientific journals next month!

There's still some fine tuning to do, but we are officially on-line. In fact, we're giving presentations to selected groups of VIPs nearly every week.

Today we're hosting one that I'm really gonna love. Cranston, that whining cur who caused me so much grief way back when, is coming here with a group from Cal-Tech. He got snarked off when I retained my position as Director after my bit of ...turbulence...and quit. He took a position lower than the one he had here and left in a huff, making a great show of aggrieved righteousness.

Suited me fine. I gave Sam the position of Research Co-Ordinator and we've been making great strides ever since.

Turns out that Cranston accepted a research position in a project similar to ours down in Pasadena, with Cal-Tech. A project that has not progressed nearly so well.

We beat 'em to the punch, and today his Research Co-Ordinator, a guy named St. John--the same guy Sam

and I met briefly many years ago--is driving his team over here to take a look at our work. I just bet Cranston is about to choke on it!

Hah! Take that you snot-nosed academic!

Yep, the powers that hold the purse strings to this and future projects are thrilled. With Sam's help, and my own hard work, I'm back in good graces with my superiors.

Like I said, I've been keeping my nose clean and staying on the wagon. I'm not sayin' I was an alcoholic or anything. It's just...easier not to drink, and not have to watch crossing over the line when it becomes a problem.

After the way it snuck up on me last time, I'm bein' real careful. I don't ever wanna get that low again. I don't know what I would've done if Sam hadn't been around to haul my butt outta the hole I'd dug myself into and made me see sense--not that I'd ever tell him that.

He and Donna are still like a couple of love sick kids--it's disgusting. Not that they're still honeymooners. Nobody's relationship can last like that forever. Most people's honeymoon periods don't make it past six months.

Hell, I've had marriages last less than that! And I've got the alimony checks to prove it.

But Sam and Donna are different. It's been nearly three years and the passion still hasn't gone outta their relationship.

Sam's doing okay. We still get together at his place and he tells me about the modifications and refinements he's made to his string theory and plan for traveling in time.

He's still like an overgrown puppy sometimes --leads with his heart and there's not a mean or devious bone in his body.

That's why I've got this sneaky suspicion, one that I just can't put my finger on, that something's going on with him that he's not telling me.

Oh, he gives me this wide-eyed innocent look when I ask about it, or ducks his head and wiggles out of it. Donna always seems to interrupt at an opportune time to give him a way out from under the gun.

But Sam is up to something. I'm sure of it.

He's up to something big, and I'm gonna find out what it is.

* * *

The intercom on Al's pristine desk beeped discretely, and the captain answered it with a crisp, "Yes, Anne."

"Your visitor's have arrived, Captain. Corporal Wells reports they just drove through the front gate. They should be here in five minutes or so."

"Very good, Lieutenant," he answered. His tone was all business, but his grin was pure Calavicci. "Show them in when they arrive."

Punching off the intercom, he dialed the Demonstration Lab's extension.

The answer came quickly. "Gooshie here."

"Show time, Gooshie. Are Sam and Donna there?"

"Yes, Captain. Everything's set."

"Good," Al answered. "I want everything to go off without a hitch. Got that, Gooshie?"

"Got it. No hitches."

"We'll be there shortly. Probably no less than ten minutes. Have 'er ready."

"Okay. I..." There was the sound of a voice in the background and the programmer continued. "Dr. Beckett wants to talk to you."

Grimacing, Al waited for Sam to come on, already knowing what he would say.

"Al? Look, can't Gooshie do this? He was as involved as I was and--"

"Sam," Al cajoled. "Come on, just this one last presentation. And you're the Research Co-Ordinator. It's part of the job."

"It doesn't have to be. You could do it. Or Donna. Or Gooshie."

"And how would that look? You want to survive in research, Sam, you've got to present. This isn't any big deal, but it is good experience to set you up for whatever you want your next project to be. You can do it easy. The main thing is not to get carried away and spill any trade secrets. Okay?"

There was a short silence, then the reluctant answer. "Okay."

"Good. I'll bring 'em down pretty quick." Replacing the phone receiver, Al leaned back in his chair and waited until he heard the footsteps and voices of a group arriving in the outer office.

Rising to his feet, he was standing when the door opened and Anne shoved two of them in, the remainder waiting in the outer office.

"Dr. St. John, sir," she announced, presenting the dapper Englishman in the Saville Row business suit. "Research Co-Ordinator of the Cal-Tech group...and you know his assistant, Dr. Cranston."

Oozing geniality, Al extended a hand and came forward. "Dr. St. John, glad you could

make it."

His eyes flicked briefly over the tight-lipped, bald man standing behind his boss, but he made no greeting.

Letting go Al's hand, St. John smiled. "We must thank you for your invitation, Captain Calavicci. My group and I are most interested in your accomplishments. It is very kind of you to give us a presentation before you offer it to the scientific community at large."

"My pleasure," Al returned, meaning every word of it. "You and your group were also doing holographic research, I hear?"

"Yes," the smaller man gave a tiny shake of his head. "But we have encountered some... difficulties. Even the stratified field of pure research is not free of...personality clashes."

"Every project of any size has those," Al returned smoothly. "The trick is to weather 'em and get on with it."

St. John drew a breath to speak, then obviously thought better of it and changed his mind about what he was going to say.

"Exactly," he agreed with a touch of wryness. "I was telling a member of my staff that just the other day. With your breakthrough here, we expect to extend our research into different areas."

Al merely nodded, resisting the impulse to sneak a peek at Cranston's face. Choke on it, you nozzle.

"There are always frontiers to be explored in the scientific community," the Cal-Tech director continued, "and we build our work on the foundations laid by those who have gone before us. Don't you agree?"

"Oh, absolutely." Al nodded earnestly again, suppressing his grin. "That's what we wanted to do here, break new ground for others to follow."

Finally, he allowed his eyes to shift to the beady ones lurking behind the black rimmed glasses.

"It's good to see you again, Dr. Cranston," he said congenially. "I think you'll like what we've come up with since you left us." Without giving Cranston time to reply, he gestured at the door. "Let's go on down. Sam and the others are waiting to show off their new baby."

St. John frowned as if perplexed. "'Baby', Captain?"

"Creation," Al supplied helpfully. "Labor of love. The first moving hologram in the field." His grin widened at the sour expression that formed on Cranston's face.

St. John nodded in understanding. "Mmm. Dr. Beckett and the other members of your team are understandably proud. We look forward to seeing your...er...'baby'."

Not as much as I look forward to rubbing it in Cranston's face, Al thought, but kept his expression pleasantly neutral.

"Then let's get started. Everything's ready."

* * *

The Demonstration Lab was cleaned and shined, spit polished to perfection. Surveying it in one, quick glance, Al was satisfied his staff had done their usual superb job of preparing for visitors. It was perfect, just perfect.

As he strode into the room with the visiting team of scientists at his back, Sam, Donna, and Gooshie turned.

Winking at Sam--a gesture the visitors could not see--Al schooled his expression into carefully correct lines before turning to orchestrate brief introductions.

St. John zeroed right in on Sam. "Dr. Beckett, it is a pleasure to see you again. We met some years ago, at MIT."

"Yes," Sam nodded. "I remember. You were with Cornel Electronics then."

"Yes." The Englishman shrugged a graceful shoulder. "A premier company. But holography offered a more intellectually satisfying challenge."

"Yes, it does."

St. John turned his attention to Donna. "Dr. Elesee, I have heard so many complimentary things about your work." He smiled, regarding her. "I've read your papers on The Expanding Universe Controversy. They were excellent." He punctuated the compliment with a soft sigh. "Most excellent."

As Donna murmured her thanks, the visiting researcher turned to shake Gooshie's hand. "And Dr. Gushman," he continued. "I've heard you do brilliant work. Carl Bass at JPL can't say enough good things about you."

Turning to Al before Gooshie could form an answer, he said, "You're fortunate to work with so many people so prominent in their fields."

"You bet," Al agreed, rocking proudly on his heels. "Top notch, everyone of them. Now..." He gestured at the half circle of chairs in the center of the room. "...shall we get this show

on the road?"

"Quite," the director agreed. He gestured his people forward with a graceful arm. "We're really rather looking forward to it."

Cranston seated himself on the first chair he came to, not looking up as his colleagues spaced themselves in the remaining seats.

Donna and Gooshie took positions on the far end, while Al took the chair that put him by St. John.

Sam cast a look at the STAR BRIGHT director, then moved to take his place by the small table holding a minimum of equipment in the center of the room.

Nodding to the physicist, Al folded his arms across his chest and sat back to enjoy the show.

Sam, with a graceful gesture that looked to be no more than a brush of his fingers across the keyboard on the table before him, called up the image.

It appeared to materialize in front of the camera lens that focused it, hovering about a foot above the table.

There, in perfect animation, appeared to be a three dimensional representation of the Space Shuttle ENDEAVOR, performing a launch of a satellite from its payload bay in perfect, gliding grace.

As it proceeded in its silent dance, there was appreciative silence in the room for a full thirty seconds. When the sequence of stored images ended, blending back into the original image and beginning the animated movement all over again, Sam cleared his throat.

"As you see," he said, glancing over at Donna, who smiled in encouragement, "the image exhibits parallax. As you move your head to the right or left, different parts of it come into view. Feel free to stand up and view the demonstration from all angles."

"This is amazing," St. John breathed, getting to his feet. "Breathtaking. Beautiful work, Dr. Beckett."

"It's not just my work," Sam explained hastily as the shorter Englishman drew closer to inspect the holographic image, drawing his scientists with him. "The acoustic-optic crystal was designed by a team of researchers at MIT, not just by me. And Dr. Gushman is responsible for the programming that allows the calculation and storage of the results of the information the crystal supplies to the computer. The computer design itself was in large part worked out by Dr. Elesee, and..."

Sam nodded at Cranston, who was hovering on the edge of the group that clustered about the object. "...and Dr. Cranston, I believe, contributed to the preliminary work before he left us."

"Still," St. John continued, shaking his head as if in wonder, "you were the one who put it all together." He made a small sound of genuine awe. "You made it all work. My sincere congratulations, Dr. Beckett and..." He paused to turn to Al, who was standing with his hands clasped behind his back, beaming paternally. "...and to you, Captain Calavicci. It is a tribute to your administrative abilities, however unorthodox they may be, that this feat was accomplished."

Catching his scowl just in time, Al converted it to a polite nod and smile. The innocent comment unintentionally rang of Cranston's past criticisms of him and his management style that must have been broadcast in great detail all over Cal-Tech.

"I had good people working with me," Al returned with a glance at Cranston. "And that makes all the difference."

Seemingly ignoring him, Cranston spoke up from his meticulous examination of the image. "How many frames per second is this animation?"

"Fifteen to twenty," Sam answered. "Given the limitations of the CRAY, that's the best we could achieve."

Al cut in smoothly. "That's about what you get on kid's cartoons. 'Popeye' and 'Roadrunner' don't do much better than this." He winked. "Besides, it's all done with mirrors anyway."

There was a polite ripple of laughter, but Cranston persisted. "The image begins again every forty-five seconds. Is that also due to the limitation of your technology?"

"Um..." Sam ducked his head for a moment before answering. "With this technology, using the CRAY, yes. Now if we had a more complex computer..."

Surprised, St. John turned to him. "A more complex computer, Dr. Beckett? When you've just designed--"

"Helped design," Sam interrupted firmly.

"Helped design," the scientist accepted the correction, "a state of the art masterpiece such as this?" His frown seemed almost gentle. "Are you...already planning work on a system that surpasses even this?"

At the expression on Sam's face, Al felt all

Inner Warning Systems go on Full Alert.

Behind St. John's genteel manners and soft spoken ways, there was a keen intellect and a born researcher who could ferret out talent nearly as well as he.

Something was definitely going on behind that School Boy Beckett face, and this was not the time for him to spill it--whatever it was--to the competition.

Certainly not with Cranston, of all people, standing there.

Donna, however, intervened, slipping between her husband and the older scientist.

"Sam's always looking to the future," she said, obviously covering. "If anyone could improve on a super-computer, it would be him." She cast a look to her husband, then back to the interested man from Cal-Tech. "When the time comes. There's still an awful lot of work to be done here first."

"Oh, oh yes," St. John said, nodding with an understanding frown. "Yes, of course." He turned his gaze back to Sam. "May we see this crystal of yours?"

"Sure," Sam agreed, his arm going about his wife. "We have a tour planned for you."

"Do you?" St. John smiled. "Well, thank you. I'm sure it will be fascinating. Tell me..."

As the group began to file out of the room, headed for the next designated tour spot, Al remained by the moving Space Shuttle hologram that still cycled through its endless satellite launch.

Fascinating.

Yeah, right. The guy wanted to pick Sam's brain clean.

But the kid was more savvy than he had been ten years ago. He'd learned the rules of 'tell enough to impress 'em but not enough to let 'em steal your thunder'.

Fascinating. Damn straight it was fascinating.

And he was gonna find out real quick exactly what new trick Sam was hatching in that noggin of his, or his name wasn't Albert Francis Calavicci.

* * *

It was approaching six o'clock when the tour finally drew to a close. The technical discussion, which had flowed practically non-stop all afternoon, seemed in little sight of

finishing, so it was only after arranging to meet the Cal-Tech visitors for dinner that Al finally managed to usher them out.

Still, as he went back to his office, lapping up the moment of glory, he found himself grinning broadly, reflecting on the way St. John continually praised their accomplishments to an ever-silent Cranston.

Well pleased with himself, Al immediately settled at his desk, reached for the telephone, and dialed his home phone number. As he listened to it ring, he picked up his mail, placed on his desk by Anne in his absence.

Sorting through it, he threw away a brochure for a seminar on personnel review being held in Cleveland. Who in their right mind would go to Cleveland in the dead of winter?

Well, not unless you had hotel with a Massage-O-Matic bed and a fistful of dimes...

Finally, the ringing stopped and a breathless voice answered, "Hello?"

"Hi, Sharon, it's me."

"Oh, hi, hon. I just walked in the door. You aren't going to be late, are you?"

"Well, that's why I'm calling. How would you like to go out and eat tonight?"

"Just you and me?"

"Uh, well, no. I've got some visitors up here from Cal-Tech and I sorta have to take them out for dinner. Part of the job. We're supposed to meet them at Tony's Place at seven."

"Al, I've had a hard day. I was in court with the Wilson's divorce case 'til four. My feet are killing me."

"Do this for me, babe, and when we get home, I'll massage your feet..." Al put a calculated amount of leer into his voice as he added, "...and anything else you can think of."

"Well..."

"I'll serve you strawberries and whipped cream in bed, just the way you like it." Al could tell she was weakening and went in for the kill. "And I'll even wear my dress whites."

There was a slight pause. "Including your hat?"

"Done."

"There's a Chamber Of Commerce banquet next week, and I'll expect you to escort me. Okay?"

Al moaned to himself as he rubbed a hand over his brow.

Damn, Sharon was good at the negotiation game. He hated banquets--he always had to fight to stay awake during the speeches. But he'd already played his best hand with the dress

whites promise.

"It's a deal," he agreed reluctantly. He really thought the uniform would have been enough on its own to sway her. "D'you want me to pick you up?"

"No, I'll just meet you there. Seven o'clock, you say?"

"Yeah."

"Doesn't give me long..."

Al rolled his eyes knowingly. "Look, hon, why don't you wear that gorgeous forest green dress. You know, the one I bought you for your birthday. The one that shows off that great body of yours." He added a touch of a leer again. "The one I love takin' off you."

She made a sound of soft amusement. "Is that a promise?"

"Definitely. See you at seven, okay?"

"Okay."

Pleased by his little ploy, he rang off.

Tossing the remaining mail into his basket, he noticed the return address of the top envelope.

What was Jessica Horowitz, Attorney At Law, writing him about this time?

Last time he'd heard from her, it was a with subpoena to appear in court on the charge of Emotional Abuse! All because Ruthie cited that he sang in his sleep!

Geez, what now? More grief from her about alimony? Just what he needed.

Selecting it out of the pile, he slit the top with his letter opener. Drawing a deep breath, he carefully opened the single sheet, as if it might contain something that could actually leap out and bite him.

It was a simple notification of a change of address for Ruthie. Easy enough stuff to deal with, until he noticed the new address.

Boston. More specifically, Walnut Street. Ruthie's grandmother's address. What the hell was she doin' moving in with Edna?

There was a sound from the open doorway and Al looked up to see Sam standing there.

"Bad news?" Sam asked, nodding at both the letter he was still holding and the frown on his face.

"Huh? Oh, no...I don't think so. Ruthie's moved in with Edna."

"Is there something wrong with Edna?"

"Dunno. It doesn't say. It's just a letter from Ruthie's lawyer, so I'll know where to send the alimony check."

I don't rate a personal letter from Ruthie,

he thought bitterly. It was just one more example of how things stood between them.

"Well," Sam asked, "aren't you going to call and find out?"

"Nope. If she wants me to know, she'll tell me." Putting the open letter on the desk, Al folded his arms over it and deliberately changed the subject. "Are we all set for tonight?"

"Yes, I called and made dinner reservations. Are you bringing Sharon?"

"Yeah, but I had to make major concessions. I promised to massage her feet and serve her strawberries and whipped cream in bed." He grinned and added suggestively, "It's amazing how many things you can do with whipped cream. Maybe, you and Donna oughta try it."

"Al, our sex life is just fine without whipped cream, thank you," Sam returned with hardly a blush. "What did you think of Dr. St. John?"

Al shrugged. Teasing Sam just wasn't as easy as it had been in the old days. "Nice enough guy, but kinda stiff, don't you think?"

"He's definitely all business, but brilliant." Sam suddenly grinned. "You know, if you hadn't offered me CLEAR STAR, I probably would have taken his offer. I would've been working for the competition."

"His loss is my gain," Al said, returning the grin. "Geez, I loved seeing the look on Cranston's face when you fired up the hologram! He was green with envy." He laughed in delight. "Served him right, the nozzle."

"I know you don't like the guy, Al, but try to be civil tonight, okay."

Al raised his hands expansively. "Hey, I can be civil. After all, I'll be the one with the successful Project and the gorgeous redhead on my arm."

Sam fondly shook his head. "You're incorrigible. Look, I'm going to take Donna home to change, so I'll meet you there in say..." He checked his watch. "...half an hour."

"Make that an hour," Al said knowingly, reflecting on his phone call, "if Donna takes anywhere near the amount of time as Sharon does to simply 'change'. What is it with women anyway?"

"I honestly don't know," Sam admitted, amused, then headed for the door. "An hour, then."

"Don't be late."

When the door had closed again, he sat back

in his chair, elbow on one rest and his chin in his hand. His gaze automatically fell on the letter on the desk before him. Staring at it in thoughtful silence, he briefly considered making the call after all.

But why should he? Why the hell should he care? It had been Ruthie's choice to walk out on him, damn it, and it was over.

Three years over.

Tightening his lips, rejecting the idea as quickly as it had come, he pushed out of his chair and reached for his hat.

Turning to go, the breeze stirred by his movement caught the letter which was still lying open before him, and sent it airborne, sailing it gracefully off the desk to land on the floor.

Without a second glance, he donned his hat under his arm, and stepped over the single sheet of paper as he left the office.

* * *

Dinner went well.

Gooshie had brought a woman with a bubbly personality and curly blonde hair to match. Al had never seen her before and wondered how someone with the programmer's breath had talked someone with a body like hers into coming with him.

As soon as he heard her speak, Al understood.

Cranston left early, having pleaded a headache. One that had most probably been brought on by all the crow that he had eaten that afternoon, Al thought in smug satisfaction. The disgruntled scientist left soon after the final course.

That was fine by Al. He'd been polite, as he had assured Sam he would be. So what if he spent most of the time praising Sam's work and flirting with Sharon? That was within the bounds of good manners--he'd just made sure that Cranston knew everything was A-OK with Al Calavicci's life.

As the waitress refilled Sam's coffee cup, Edward St. John asked, "So, Dr. Beckett, what are you planning to do after STAR BRIGHT?"

Al glimpsed that look of uncomfortable evasion he been noticing for the past couple months slide across Sam's face.

The Boy Wonder was definitely up to something!

"Actually, I...really haven't decided yet," Sam evaded, ducking his head and toying with his napkin.

Donna slipped her hand over her husband's restless one, an act which was not lost on Al.

If she's running true to form, he thought, eyes narrowing slightly, she's gonna cover for him.

"I've been trying to talk Sam into taking a vacation," Donna said, confirming Al's prediction, making his eyes narrow even more. "But he's resisting the idea."

"I know what you mean," Sharon agreed, the hand without the cigarette slipping under the table to rest on Al's inner thigh.

Preoccupied with trying to figure out Sam, her touch surprised him. Eyes snapping open, Al re-focused his thoughts and looked at her.

Fortunately, no one seemed to notice either his behavior...or her hand.

"It's nearly impossible to get these scientific types away from their labs," she went on, blowing out some cigarette smoke. "Al's gone so much, when I first moved in with him he bought me a puppy to keep me company." She smiled at the others, including them in open conversation, while intimately stroking her lover's leg. "Of course, he's a dog now."

"Really?" Gooshie's date asked politely, "What kind is he?"

"A basset."

"Oh, I just love bassetts!" squeaked the blonde. "They have such sad eyes. What's his name?"

"We called him Chester," Sharon said, hiding a smile.

"Sharon's a big 'Gunsmoke' fan," Al added, hastily capturing his lover's hand as it wandered up his leg.

St. John made a polite noise of interest, then turned his attention back to Sam. "I've been approached by officials from Cal-Tech to organize a sort of... 'think tank'. We need scientists of your caliber. I would very much like if you would consider joining us. I know you would contribute immensely."

"I don't know..."

"You could choose your own topic," St. John went on quickly. "Within reason, of course. And you would retain all rights to your own research."

Gooshie spoke up. "Sounds like a great opportunity, Dr. Beckett."

Al remained silent, not wanting to prejudice Sam one way or another. Sure it would be a great opportunity, but his own feelings were--understandably--mixed.

The kid, who was no longer really a kid except in Al's heart, was like a bird ready to take wing. And with that mega-brain of his, the sky was the limit.

It was Sam's life, Sam's call...but he couldn't help feeling that deep down, a part of him didn't want to let Sam go.

"I can't make any promises," Sam said, holding Donna's hand. "But I'll think about it."

St. John smiled. "You do that. You have my card, you know where to reach me."

"I'll let you know," Sam assured him, before turning to Al. "We have to go, Al. Can you entertain our guests?"

"But it's still early," Al protested, immediately suspecting something. "Just after nine."

"Ah...well..." Sam stuttered. "We...um..."

"I was hoping for an early night," Donna said out loud then bent down to Al's ear. "I'm sure you understand," she finished meaningfully.

"Sure," Al agreed easily. "See you two in the morning."

Sam and Donna made their goodnights and left.

No sooner had they left the table, Al leaned back in his chair and pulled his cigar from his pocket.

"So, St. John," he said, preparing his cigar. "Tell me more about this 'think tank' you're planning."

As St. John began to explain, Al's attention wandered in the direction of Sam and Donna's exit.

They were up to something, but he could bide his time finding out what. He would expose The Deep Dark Beckett Secret soon enough.

* * *

It was past midnight when Al finally finished satisfying Sharon's appetite for strawberries and whipped cream, and left her sleeping contentedly in his bed.

Dressing quietly in what came easiest to hand --his dress whites--he gave Chester a reassuring pat, when the dog expectantly followed him to the front door, then slipped from his suburban house and into the night.

He didn't intend to be very long on this mission, and with any luck Sharon wouldn't wake up until after he was back and would be none the wiser to his absence. It was just...easier than explaining.

Maybe he should have put Chester in her arms, so she'd have something to cuddle?

Nah, if she woke up to that, then they'd both be in the doghouse.

He made good time along the Bayshore Freeway at that time of night, winding down his driver's window so the night air ruffled his hair, thoroughly enjoying the exhilaration he got from letting his Vette creep up a little over eighty.

Forever the speed junkie, he was tempted to push it even further, but--by the same token--was also grateful to reach his destination before the decision was fully made.

Slowing, he pulled into the front gate of Moffett Field NAS, showed his face rather than his ID to the guard at the gate, then revved his engine impatiently as he waited for the red and white boom to be raised.

The Ames Facility was almost deserted in the after midnight calm, thus it wasn't difficult to spot the Beckett's car in the almost empty parking lot.

Bingo. He knew it!

Reaching the front door, he waved a hand at the security monitor and let himself in with his magnetic key-card.

Entering, he paused at the Security guard's desk to sign in, nodding a quick acknowledgement at the uniformed Marine as he did.

Glancing at the sheet above his name, he observed, "I see Drs. Beckett and Elesee are in the building."

"Yes, sir," the guard answered, consulting the clipboard as well. "They signed in a little after nine-thirty."

"Thanks," Al said, returning the pen to the guard. He was right--they had come directly here from dinner.

Early night, huh?

He quietly made his way down the hall toward the labs, slightly puzzled by the faint strip of light showing from under the door of the Demonstration Lab.

Stealing up to it, he listened for activity inside the room, and was rewarded with the faint, muffled sound of a woman's voice. That had to be Donna, but he didn't hear anything out of Sam.

Silently, he turned the knob on the door and slowly opened it, careful not to make any noise that would alert them to his presence.

Sneaking around the door, he stopped to take in the scene in the room before him.

It looked fairly innocent. Donna was

standing next to the desk which held a computer terminal and an intercom. Standing in the middle of the room was Sam, holding a microphone.

Lifting it to his lips, the physicist said, "How's the resolution?"

Sam's voice filled the room. Al could see his lips moving, but strangely, the sound seemed to only come from the intercom on the desk.

Narrowing his eyes, he closely regarded the two conspirators.

Why was Sam talking through the intercom when he was standing right there?

Puzzling Al further still, Donna punched the intercom button to answer her husband's query.

"The perimeter's a bit nebulous, but I think it's acceptable. Let me check with the computer and I'll give you a reading." Releasing the intercom, she turned to the terminal.

Unable to keep silent any longer, Al stepped into the room. "What the hell's going on?" he demanded.

Under his close scrutiny, Donna did a fair imitation of Sam's best guilty startle.

"Al!" she exclaimed. "I didn't know you were there!"

"Obviously not," Al replied, turning to his friend, who had not reacted to his entrance. "Sam? What're you doing?"

Donna spoke up hastily, leaving the computer terminal to place herself between the two men. "We were just running some programs, Al. We--"

Sam lifted the microphone again, and his voice came from behind them. "Donna? Have you got the reading yet?"

The captain looked from the woman to her husband, the latter who was still acting as if they weren't in the room. He hadn't even turned to face him yet!

A hinky feeling lifted the hair on the back of Al's neck. Something was not quite kosher here.

Firmly, he evaded Donna and walked up to Sam. Maybe he'd just test the waters. He knew how to get a rise out Sam, if this was all just some silly game.

"I thought you and Donna were going home for an early night," he said, watching Sam closely. "And here you are, fooling around in the Demonstration Lab. Kinky, Sam."

No reaction.

Zip. Zilch. Nada. He had to give it to the kid, his poker face was getting better every day.

Pushed beyond his patience, he reached out to turn Sam around to face him...and was horrified to find his hand pass straight through the physicist's shoulder!

Yelping in alarm, Al jumped back a foot, colliding with Donna and almost knocking her to the floor.

Steadying her instinctively, he drew her to a safe corner, away from the apparition.

"What in Sister Mary Margaret's name is that?!"

"It's Sam," Donna reassured him, quickly crossing back to the intercom. "Sam, you better come in here, quick."

The apparition looked apprehensive. "What's the matter? You aren't getting feedback from the CRAY, are you? Al will kill me if I messed up his computer."

"Damn straight, I will," Al muttered, but it sounded weak even to his own ears.

"Nothing's wrong with the computer," Donna assured him. "Just get in here."

"Okay, I'll be right there."

Abruptly, Sam's image vanished.

Al made a small sound in his throat, looking as if he had seen a ghost. He kept his eyes fastened on the spot where Sam had stood as he backed toward the door.

Hearing a noise, he spun about, catching a quick glimpse of the physicist rushing in the room. Leaping to the side to avoid the imminent collision, Al gave another yelp of surprise.

How many of these Sam-things were there, anyway?!

This one looked as shocked as Al felt, but the expression quickly rearranged itself into a heavy dose of the guilts. In fact he looked like a little boy who'd been caught with his fingers in the cookie jar.

"Al!"

Swallowing hard, Al regarded his friend closely. Gingerly, he reached out a tentative hand to touch the form before him.

When his hand touched solid flesh, he took a deep breath of relief and turned away, his hand going to his chest.

"Geez, Sam, you nearly gave me a heart attack!"

The physicist shot a quick glance at Donna before turning to the STAR BRIGHT Director. "I thought you had a date with some whipped cream. What, unh...what are you doing here?"

"Funny," Al said, some of his former cockiness returning, "I was about to ask you the

same thing."

Again, the younger man exchanged a look with his wife.

Al's eyes narrowed. No doubt about it--they were trying to communicate without words.

As such, Al decided to bluff it. "Why're you worried about feedback to my computer? And what was that little hocus pocus act all about?"

"What hocus pocus act?" Sam asked, obviously trying for innocence but failing miserably.

"Sam, he walked in while we were testing," Donna informed her husband ruefully.

"I saw your 'Casper, The Friendly Ghost' imitation," Al snapped. "Now spill the beans."

Sam drew a deep breath. "Well," he confessed slowly, "I've been working on a chip."

"Chip?" Al repeated suspiciously. "Why do I get the feeling we're not talking potatoes here?"

"A concurrent processing chip," Sam qualified. "For transputing."

"Speak English, would ya?"

"For parallel computing," Sam explained, warming to his subject. "See, each chip is like a mini-computer itself. By using fractal geometry to write a special digital code, it will enable the main computer to interface with several other computers at the same time. Quickly, efficiently...magnifying the processing capabilities to..." The physicist's eyes were alight with enthusiasm. "...well, I don't know how much yet, but it's a significant amount!"

His words began tumbling over each other in excitement. "It enhanced the holographic potential," he said, gesturing widely, "as you obviously saw. With this chip in a central computer, we can--"

"What central computer?" Al asked suddenly, his voice cutting short Sam's building fervor.

The scientist's eyes slid sideways to his wife again, then he ducked his head. His voice came out in a reluctant undertone. "...the CRAY."

"The CRAY?!" Al repeated incredulously. His voice rose as his frown deepened. "You've been screwing around with my CRAY?!"

Sam's head came up. "I wouldn't exactly call it 'screwing around'," he protested. "I was careful. I know what I'm doing."

"You were performing unauthorized experimentation on Government property," Al said sternly. "If something had happened to the CRAY, your butt would've been in a sling."

"I realize that. And I take full

responsibility for my actions."

"Damn right, you do." Then with a forgiving grin, he added, "And you'll probably take this year's Nobel Prize along with it."

"Do you really think so?" Donna asked.

"I don't know about that," Sam said as if dismissing the idea, and then continued with his earlier speculations. "Al, remember way back at CLEAR STAR when we talked about a holographic observer?"

"Yeah," the captain answered, suddenly cautious again.

"Well," Sam said, gesturing eloquently, "now we're nearly there!" He stepped forward, caught up in his excitement. "And I've got an idea about a meson/neuron link that will allow the observer to tune into the time traveler's brainwaves and see everything the person traveling in time sees, without anybody seeing him!"

"Invisible...holographic...observers..." Al repeated slowly, not about to let on that in trying to comprehend the neurological mechanics of such a link, Sam had actually lost him somewhere back around the CLEAR STAR reference. He nodded. "Sounds promising." Then, with a deep breath, he shook his head, taking back control of the conversation. "But before you show me how this concurrent trans-whatsit chip of yours works, I just have one more thing to say."

"What?" Sam asked hesitantly, his excitement dying.

"This time, everything worked out okay. Next time, you may not be so lucky. I don't want to ever catch you doing unauthorized research without going through me first. Capeesh?"

"Okay," Sam repeated solemnly, giving him the Boy Scout Beckett expression. "You'll never see me do it again."

Al frowned and opened his mouth to protest, but Sam cut in quickly as if to forestall him.

"Now," the physicist continued enticingly, grinning from ear to ear again. "Want to see how it feels to be a hologram?"

Al raised a thoughtful eyebrow, stopping to consider all the advantages of being present in a room where no one could see or hear him.

Like a room filled with gorgeous women.

Models!

Swimsuit...no, lingerie...no, PLAYBOY models!

Suddenly, he broke into a wickedly delighted



grin.

Holographic Observers definitely had their uses!

* * *

Sam's little unauthorized experimentation will put parallel computing on the map...and open up a whole new world of possibilities in holography. It was a big break for him, his first chance to show people what he can really do.

In fact, you should see the amount of attention he's attracted from the scientific community in just the few months since I caught him and Donna trying out his new creation. Guys like St. John are all atwitter.

Okay, so maybe that's a little unkind to refer to St. John like that. The guy's brilliant--not like Sam, but brilliant. He's a researcher with an excellent track record and a good head for the business of keeping cutting edge projects funded. He's just so...damn proper.

When the news of Sam's breakthrough hit, St. John was on the phone before you could say 'tea and crumpets'. He offered Sam the 'think tank' position again, agreeing that the whiz kid got to keep all rights to whatever mega-innovative thing he managed to come up with, so long as they got credit sponsoring the research.

So Sam, who is no dummy, jumped on it. As soon as STAR BRIGHT ended, he and Donna took off to Pasadena.

That was six months ago.

The kid's elbow deep in his new computer--says this one will run rings around even the CRAY. I'm betting he'll do it, too. He's as happy as a sailor coming home from a year long TDY to his nymphomaniac wife.

And me, I'm happy too.

I am.

After three or so years of 'living in sin', I married Sharon. It wasn't a big event--just us and a JP in a registry office--and I gotta confess that was actually her idea. Not tyin' the knot--that was all mine--but doin' it on the quiet. I even let Sam and Donna know after the fact.

So now it's all legal.

I was half expecting it to not be as fun, but thankfully the sex is still great. Sharon's into watching these instructional 'Better Loving' video tapes, and sometimes she comes up

with things that even I've never heard of! And lemme tell you, it's no easy feat to discover something that Al Calavicci is not intimately acquainted with already.

Best of all is when I'm home and we watch one together. Then we go off and practice what we learned.

In the words of Dr. Ruth, 'practice makes perfect'.

Hot on the heels of STAR BRIGHT, I've been doing some consulting for NASA, putting what I learned from working with the CRAY to good use. I'm primarily at the Dryden Flight Research Facility, at Edwards Air Force Base out in the Mojave Desert--a paid advisor to their new, experimental 'virtual reality' simulator system.

The real kick in the butt was being back at my old stomping ground...brings back some good old memories of the days I was flyin' rockets like the X-15 by the seat of my pants.

So I'm spreadin' around my expertise, still keeping my nose clean, while the Navy decides exactly what it is they want me to do next.

I think it'll be something good, gauging from the feedback I got from the brass after we wound up STAR BRIGHT. I scored some mega-Brownie points when they found out I brought the whole thing in under budget.

Me. Al Calavicci--the same guy Rear Admiral Drennan once chewed out for being an administrative slouch. The Big Guns were not only 'well pleased'...they were impressed as hell. I might even get a promotion outta it.

Traveling back and forth to Edwards is sorta taking its toll on me, though. And Sharon's always on me for not paying enough attention to her.

Geez! Women! That's why I gave her the dog in the first place--to keep her company when I wasn't there!

He's a good dog too, although sometimes I think she doesn't appreciate him. Like when I come home and find he's locked in the laundry room because she just vacuumed the carpet.

That's one of the reasons I decided to take leave of a couple of months...and pay her loads of undivided attention. We didn't really have a honeymoon, so we're going on some kinda 'marriage enrichment' cruise that Sharon signed us up for when I was away at Edwards for a month straight.

Sex on the high seas! Hoo-yah!

You should see the pink baby dolls she bought for the occasion! I can hardly wait to

see her without those on...

We sail from LA tomorrow, so it worked out to leave Chester with Sam and Donna. I think maybe Donna is a little glad to have him for company, especially when Sam does his workaholic trick and forgets to come home from his precious computer.

I hope so anyway, I wouldn't want Chester to get lonely.

Maybe I oughta call, one last time before we leave port, to see if everything is going okay?

* * *

Stretching, Sam draped his right arm about Donna's shoulders as they sat on the couch. Chester, lying at his feet, nudged his leg for attention.

Absently, the physicist scratched the dog behind the ears, thinking how nice it was to spend an evening at home, watching a Barbra Streisand movie festival with his wife.

Normally he stayed late at Cal-Tech, driven by his search for a breakthrough. Every free moment had been spent planning, designing, and building the framework for 'the computer', as everyone unimaginatively referred to it. All the basics were there, he just needed the spark that would bring it together.

From prior experience, Sam found the best way to do that, was just not to think about it any more.

Further, one of the ways he had discovered to do that was to watch movies on television. When it was time, the inspiration would come, but for now 'A Star Is Born' had served its purpose, and 'Yentl' had begun.

Of course, there were plenty of distractions...like Donna. He was afraid he'd been neglecting her lately, and tonight was just one way of trying to make it up. Although she also worked on the 'think tank' Project, it didn't obsess her as it did him.

She'd spent numerous evenings waiting for him at home...and waiting...and waiting...when he had gotten so carried away in the pursuit of a promising lead that he'd completely lost track of time.

So he was glad to have the opportunity to spend this evening with her, and watching her get teary-eyed over emotional movies. To tell the truth, it kind of got to him too, when the male lead died leaving Streisand's character all alone.

As a commercial came on, Sam got to his feet. "I'm going to get a soda. You want one?"

"Sure," Donna agreed, turning to face him over the back of the couch as he started to leave the room. She smiled meaningfully. "You might make some popcorn too, while you're at it."

Sam laughed and leaned down to kiss her. Turning the kiss into a soft nuzzle of her neck, he whispered silkily into her ear. "Anything else?"

Smiling, she tossed her hair over her shoulder with a quick movement of her head. "I'll think of something by the time you come back."

Grinning, Sam made his way into the kitchen to wash his hands and get out the box of popcorn. Behind him, as he pressed start on the microwave, he heard the movie begin again. The sound of the appliance drowned out what little he could hear of the show.

Oh well, Donna would tell him what he missed --she never seemed to mind filling him in like Al did. Al always hissed and told him to 'wait 'till the next commercial!'

By the time the popcorn was done, Sam had two sodas ready. Juggling them in one hand, he grabbed the bowl of popcorn with the other and took everything back into the living room.

Donna looked up as he approached and helpfully took the bowl. Putting it on the coffee table before them, she then reached for her soda as Sam took a seat beside her.

"What'd I miss?" he asked as Chester's head came up hopefully at the first scent of food.

"Well..." she began to explain, then was distracted as Sam tossed the dog one kernel. "Is popcorn good for dogs?"

"Oh, sure," he said with a shrug. "A little roughage never hurt anybody."

"I don't know, Sam. If Chester gets a belly ache, Al will have a fit. You know how he is about that dog."

"Maybe you're right," Sam agreed. He looked apologetically at the basset. "No more popcorn for you."

As if understanding, the dog regarded him with sorrowful brown eyes, blinking once as if trying to sway Sam to his side.

"Sorry, buddy, it's for your own good."

Shifting his reproachful gaze to Donna, who had to hide her smile, the dog got to his feet and trudged slowly from the room. They heard the faint, rhythmic click of his nails on the

kitchen linoleum, then the crunch of him eating his dry dog food.

The human couple smiled at each other, aware of the unspoken reproach in the sound.

"So," Sam said, casting a look at the television. "What happened while I was gone?"

"She's fooled everybody. They all think she's a man."

Shaking his head, Sam said, "Can you imagine how hard that would be? Pretending to be the opposite sex?"

"I don't know," she said with a grin. "You might look kind of sexy in heels."

Snorting in disgust, Sam reached for the popcorn. "No thank you. The last and only time I wore heels was when Katie blackmailed me into playing dress up. It took me a month to live that down when Tom caught us. He didn't lay off me until I caught him kissing Sarah Lynn in the hayloft." He smiled at the memory.

Looking back to the screen, he said, "What else?"

By the time Donna gave him a brief synopsis of what he missed, yet another commercial came on.

"What do you think will happen next?" Sam asked.

"Knowing her, she'll go through with the marriage with that woman," Donna said. "She's pretty strong willed."

"Probably," Sam agreed. "I've noticed that Barbra Streisand usually chooses to play strong characters."

"Yes, I know what you mean." Looking back at the television, she sighed. "There's still commercials on! How many of these things are there?"

"There's two and a half minutes at the quarter hour, and five minutes on the half hour for prime time television. Now, if you're talking syndication..."

She regarded him incredulously. "How do you know that? Did you sit with your watch and time it?"

Sam blushed faintly. "I just happen to have a good sense of timing."

She brushed back the white lock off his forehead. "You sure do."

Capturing her hand, he brought it to his lips to lick the salt from the popcorn off her fingers, he heard her take a deep breath.

"Mmm, you're good at other things too," she teased. "Like...playing the piano."

He leaned toward her.

"You have perfect pitch. When you sing 'Imagine', it gives me shivers." As though demonstrating, she shivered as Sam's lips touched her neck.

Sam's chuckle was deep and throaty. "Only when I sing 'Imagine'?" he whispered inquiringly, nibbling on her earlobe.

"Ah..." She turned toward him. "You're distracting me. I'm trying to tell you what you're good at."

"Sorry," Sam said, unrepentant. He buried his hands deep in her hair, bringing her closer to him. "Go on."

"Martial arts," she whispered. "You're good at martial arts." Her eyes closed as she offered her neck to his kiss. "And ancient languages." His hands traveled down to encircle her waist. "And medicine."

"Is that all?"

"Well," she said with a demure smile, opening her eyes. "You are excellent at making..."

"Yes," he prompted, his lips barely inches from hers, waiting for the word. "Making...?"

"Microwave popcorn," she finished, her eyes dancing mischievously.

"Popcorn!" he protested. "You're almost as hard as on a guy's ego as Barbra Streisand."

"Well," she said reasonably. "You're good at making parallel computers too."

"I'll show you what I'm good at," he threatened gruffly, starting to pick her up to carry her into the bedroom. Suddenly, he froze, dropping her back to the couch. "That's it!"

Looking up at him with incredulous eyes, Donna asked, "What?!"

"The breakthrough I've been looking for. What the computer needs is an ego! And who has more of an ego than Barbra Streisand?"

"Sam," Donna said, uncertainly. "Are you seriously considering patterning a computer after Barbra Streisand?"

"Yeah, it'll be perfect!" he exclaimed, starting to pace. "Giving it a strong sense of consciousness will increase its reasoning capabilities tenfold." He stopped and turned to her, his mind alive with the possibilities. "I can do it, Donna. I know I can!"

Donna smiled up at him. "I'm sure you can, Sam," she agreed, her smile turned seductive. "But...can you do it tomorrow?"

Sam looked down, his desire for his wife suddenly intensifying.

"Yes," he said, bending down to sweep her

into his arms again then turning toward the bedroom. "It can wait 'til tomorrow."

* * *

Having decided that giving his computer an ego was the answer to lifting it above the realm of even the vast number-crunching power of the CRAY, Sam immersed himself in the task.

Days--weeks--went by quickly, and profitably.

Most of the groundwork of what he needed had already been laid in his work at STAR BRIGHT, and in the early days of the research with St. John.

It was almost, he thought late one afternoon as he sank wearily into his desk chair, as if his subconscious had known all along what it was that he was planning, and had instinctively guided him in the early stages. He just had to let it come out in its own good time.

Now, it most certainly had come to maturity.

Leaning back in his chair, he stretched luxuriously, thinking of going home. Donna had left an hour before, going to do some errands before evening.

To celebrate the achievement of Sam's parallel hybrid computer, whom everyone now reverently referred to as 'Alpha', they were going out for the evening, just the two of them.

Pushing back his chair, Sam got to his feet. Maybe he would even go home early for once. Surprise Donna and...

A soft beep came from his intercom. Torn, Sam considered ignoring it. Everything important was done. Why shouldn't he just go?

But then...what if it were important? If he left, he'd spend the evening wondering what it had been about.

Sighing, he pressed the button. "Dr. Beckett speaking."

"Dr. Beckett, this is Garvey, from entrance Security. You have a visitor, a Captain Cala--"

"Al!" Sam grinned delightedly. "Send him on up. I'll meet him at the elevator."

The answer was clearly reluctant. "Dr. St. John requires all unescorted visitors to be on the standing list and have a registered Security clearance."

Irritated, Sam shook his head. Rules. St. John had more of them than even Alpha could count--or it seemed like it anyway.

"I'll vouch for him," Sam said, restraining his impatience.

It wasn't Garvey's fault that his boss was a

stickler for form and protocol.

And truthfully, it wasn't a lack on St. John's part either. All his policies were good ones, he just didn't tend to be flexible about them when he could be.

"Tell the Captain to come on up," Sam said firmly. "If there's any trouble, I'll take full responsibility."

"Yes, sir," the Security guard reluctantly agreed.

Leaving his desk, the physicist bounded to the office door, feeling his grin resurface despite his earlier irritation.

Al was back from his honeymoon cruise, and did Sam ever have something--someone--to show him!

Gleefully, he hurried to the elevator, and was waiting impatiently when it finally arrived.

Excited, he stepped forward when the doors slid apart, but stopped when Al was revealed ...in deep conversation with Kelly, the receptionist from the front desk.

Everything about the body language of the two indicated that they were more interested in each other than the fact they had arrived at their destination.

Frowning, Sam cleared his throat and the captain looked up. "Oh, hi, Sam. D'you know Kelly?"

"Sure," Sam answered, throwing her a brief smile. Of course, he recognized Kelly...the blonde, statuesque receptionist with a fondness for body fitting silk dresses. He would've had to be a blind man not to have noticed her! "Hi, Kelly." He let his meaningful gaze slide back to Al.

The captain, who was dressed in a short sleeved shirt of brilliant tropical colors and neatly fitted, white linen Bermuda shorts, looked as if he had just stepped off The Love Boat.

But...where was Sharon?

Eyes locked on the shapely blonde, Al seemed completely oblivious to the look the physicist was giving him.

Something, however, made the man take a reluctant step away, off the elevator and into the hall beside Sam.

"Thanks for the escort, sweetheart." He gave her a teasing wink. "Garvey was right. A loose cannon like me shouldn't be allowed to run around unchaperoned in a place like this." His grin widened and her eyes sparkled in response. "Who knows what I might do?"

"Who knows," she returned in kind, reaching out to push the button that would close the door. "Enjoy your visit, Al."

"I will," he assured her, letting his gaze sweep over her. "I already have."

He shook his head in obvious regret, as the doors closed and shut off his view. Only then did he turn to Sam, who was frowning in disapproval.

"What?" Al asked in a blatant try for innocence.

"What was all that about?" Sam demanded. "Where's Sharon?"

"God knows," Al said with a snort, tucking one hand into his pocket, his expression amazingly unconcerned. "I found out last night that she jumped ship in Cancun."

"Cancun?" Sam repeated in surprise. "Didn't you call from there two days ago?"

"Yeah. Oh, Sam, they've got this great show there at this strip joint called The Twin Coconuts. It's--"

"Al," Sam protested, genuinely concerned. "I thought this was supposed to be a 'marriage enrichment' cruise. What were you doing in a strip club, why did Sharon leave the ship, and why didn't you notice she was gone in the first night she left?" Sam shrugged in bafflement. "I mean, didn't you think it was funny when she didn't come to bed?"

"The answer's the same to all three questions, Sam," Al returned sourly. "Sexual suspense."

Amazed, Sam blinked. "Sexual suspense?" Realizing belatedly they were standing in the open hallway having this discussion, he gestured to his right. "Come on, let's go down to my office and you can tell me all about this."

"Can you believe it?" Al said as he followed Sam down the hall. "Sharon took my car." He scowled, the first negative emotion he had shown since he'd arrived. "And there'd better not be one scratch on it when I catch up with her, or her ass is grass. I had to get a rental." He pulled a sour face. "And all they had was an Escort."

Reaching his office, Sam pushed open the door and let the obviously displeased Naval officer go in first. "What's going on with you two? I thought this was supposed to be 'sex on the high seas', the 'ultimate experience', 'the fantasy of a lifetime'?"

"Ha! Fantasy Island turned into the Poseidon Adventure. It was awful, Sam, awful!" Al

slumped into the chair in front of his desk. "They had these perverted rules..."

At what sounded like genuine pain in the man's voice, Sam leaned against this desk and frowned in concern. "Geez, what happened?"

Al snorted as if mortally offended. "That's the point. Nothing happened."

"You mean--"

"I mean nothing! No sex! None! Zip! Zilch! Nada! Can you believe it?!"

"But--"

"That's what I said," Al agreed indignantly. "How can you enrich a marriage without the important stuff? Without sex, it's worthless. No, worse than worthless. It's...boring."

"Did you and Sharon have a fight? Is that why--?"

"Not the first week," Al explained. "Because we did a little...unauthorized 'enriching' of our own every night. It put a little spice in it, y'know, a little zing. Especially..." His eyes narrowed in memory. "...that night in the boiler room. Boy, was that hot."

Whether he was referring to the temperature or the activity was unclear, and Sam didn't ask. He was still puzzled as to why all this sneaking off was even necessary. "But, Al, you're married. You had a cabin and married people are supposed to..."

The captain's glance swung back to him. "Not according to these folks, Sam. Seems Sharon didn't read the fine print on the flyer." His expression shifted wryly. "Pretty poor example of lawyering if you ask me but--"

"Al! Get on with it."

"Okay. We get there the first night and things are rosy. Then we have this first 'encounter'--a group thingy which wasn't at all what I expected when I first heard about it. All we did was talk! And then..." Al gestured expressively. "...then they lowered the boom on us. We were all supposed to sleep apart until the last night of the cruise to--quote--'help us experience intimacy in a whole new way and heighten our expectations to unparalleled levels'. Unquote."

Sam whistled softly.

The captain scowled. "What a load of Shinola. I had high expectations, Sam. I saw the stuff Sharon bought to take with her. She had this little..."

Sam interrupted as Al began to demonstrate with his hands. "So that's what you meant by

sexual suspense being the cause. You couldn't take it, and went to the strip club. Sharon found out, got mad and left the ship...and you didn't find out she'd gone until the night she was supposed to come back to your bed."

"Wrong," Al disagreed flatly. "I told you, we cheated. There was this great spot just behind the Promenade Deck that--"

"Then what was the problem?!"

"The problem was, Sharon got all bent outta shape because I wouldn't say I loved her in front of all those other cruisers...or whatever the hell you call people taking a cruise."

"Well," Sam said reasonably. "It seems like she should have realized that some people have difficulty expressing love with an audience. She should have been more understanding, I agree."

"Damn straight," Al said firmly. "Especially because she knows what I love most about her are her bazongas, and..." His eyes softened in remembrance. "...that tiny little birthmark right on her--"

"Al," the physicist interrupted, "you didn't say that to her, did you?"

"Sure I did," Al admitted easily. "She's always known it. And I know what she loves about me. We're very...up front...about our relationship."

Sam let that pass. "But Al, to say something so callous to her and..." His eyes widened in surprise. "God, you didn't say it in front of the other people, did you?"

"Of course not!" Al denied hotly. "What'd you think I am? A cad? I didn't say anything-- I just shrugged. That's why she got so pissed at me. Said I made her look like an idiot, that I should've at least lied to keep face with the other people getting enriched." His expression fell sorrowfully. "Maybe I should've. All the others were going bingo-bango-bongo the last night, and I had to make do with the waitress from the Twin Coconuts...who, by the way, couldn't hold a candle to Sharon in the bazonga department."

Sam was speechless, regarding Al in helpless frustration. What was he supposed to say to a story like that? Especially when the captain seemed determined to trivialize the whole encounter.

"It was the separate cabins," Al continued as if thinking aloud. "I could have gentled Sharon down and brought her around real quick, if she hadn't had her own cabin she could lock me out

of. A couple of real hard kisses and--"

"I, unh, hope you can work it all out," Sam said at last, trying for some sort of return to normalcy. "Do you think she went back to San José already?"

"Probably." Al shrugged. "I'll pick up Chester from your place and drive back tonight. I'll promise her dress whites and whipped cream, and I'll be in like Flynn. No sweat."

Again, Sam stalled, at a loss for words. When it came to Al's love life--or perhaps that should be sex life--he had no clue how to approach him. Maybe he should just let it be.

"I...you want to take a look around here before we go get Chester?"

"Sure," Al agreed heartily. "That's why I stopped by. It was a tough call, you or Chester, but you won out."

"Thanks," Sam said wryly. "I win over a basset."

"By a nose," Al said deadpan. "Now, what've you got cookin' around here? I figure you've had this three week stretch while I was cruising, you oughta have a Nobel Prize hatched by this time."

Sam's earlier enthusiasm returned. "Come on," he said, turning for the door. "There's somebody I want you to meet."

"I hope she's built like Kelly," Al agreed readily, then returned to his earlier thought. "Hey, have you heard anything from the Nobel Prize Committee yet? I bet you're a shoe in."

"Well..." Sam's eyes slid away as he reached down for the door knob. "I got word my name's been submitted."

"Ha!" The captain clapped Sam on the shoulder. "About time they let you know."

Sam took a breath to reply, then hesitated. He cast a suspicious glance at his friend. "You didn't nominate me, did you?"

The innocent look on the Al's face was a dead giveaway. "Who, me? That wouldn't be ethical, would it?"

Eyes narrowing as if he knew he were being teased, Sam said, "Whoever accused you of being ethical?"

"You wound me," Al replied. "I'm cut to the quick." His cocky grin gave lie to the statement. "Kid, you've got this all wrapped up. You'll blow 'em all away. Your discovery of parallel computing is pretty exciting stuff!"

Pushing open the door, Sam threw a grin over his shoulder. "What's down at the end of this hallway is exciting stuff. Come on down and

meet her."

Stopped in his tracks, Al regarded the physicist in amazement. "Her? Sam Beckett, this excited about a woman other than his wife?" His frown was teasing, but held a hint of concern. "Donna know about this?"

"Oh yeah," he said, deciding to play the shock value for all it was worth. "Donna not only knows about it, she approves of the time I spend with her. Sometimes..." He let his voice dropped suggestively. "...she even joins us."

"Sam!" Al exclaimed, appalled. "You're joking, right?"

"Come on," he said with a smile that he couldn't quite hide. "You're gonna love her."

Al persisted with his scandalized questions as he followed the grinning physicist down the hall, but it did him no good.

Sam paused just before the final door leading off the corridor.

"Are you ready?" he asked, inserting his key into the lock.

"Open the door, already," the captain demanded. "Let's meet this mystery woman who's got you so tied up in knots."

Taking pity on him, Sam unlocked the door. Pushing it open, he gestured for his friend to go in first.

Al, who needed no second invitation, squared his shoulders, donned a charming Calavicci smile, and hurried in.

Striding to the center of the room, which was totally devoid of any other human life, he stopped, smile fading as he looked about him at the computer consoles lining the walls.

"What is this? A joke?" he asked Sam, who had followed him in. "There's nobody here."

"I beg your pardon," came a sultry voice from no discernible source.

Al yelped, spinning around in a vain attempt to spot its owner. "Who said that? Sam, is this another one of your 'all done with mirrors' invisible observer tricks?"

Sam just grinned.

"I did, Captain Calavicci," came the disembodied answer. "And according to my most recent information, you do not have the proper security clearance to be in this room."

Sam finally spoke up. "It's all right, Alpha. He's with me."

"Alpha?" Al asked. "What kind of name is that for a woman?"

"It is not a name, it is a numerical designation, and I am not a woman," the voice

said haughtily. "I am a first generation, parallel hybrid computer."

"Well, excuse me," the older man replied. Then he frowned. "How'd you know who I was, anyway? Sam didn't call me by name."

"With a million gigabytes of memory and access to just about every major computer network in this country, I am more than capable of the simple task of identifying a visitor. I know everything about you, Captain Calavicci. You are 175.26 centimeters tall, weigh 70.91 kilograms, your were born on June fifteenth--"

"Okay, Alpha," Sam interrupted what promised to be a lengthy monologue. "I think he gets the picture."

Not to be outdone, the computer crooned suggestively. "I even know what your favorite dessert is...mmm...nice legs, Captain..."

Amazed, and a bit embarrassed, Al turned to Sam. "What's goin' on here?"

"Al, I'd like you to meet Alpha. The first computer with an ego."

"Whose?" Al asked, still exasperated by what he'd just heard. "Mine?"

"Actually," Sam said with a grin, "Barbra Streisand's. We decided we needed to have an ego big enough to handle massive amounts of information intuitively, which is the one thing that lifts Alpha above the realm of even the most vast number-cruncher." He smiled, almost paternally. "Alpha's own personality has grown from that. She's learned about...life...very quickly."

"I'll say," Al agreed, throwing a meaningful glance at his shorts. Looking up again, he frowned. "Hey, does this mean my CRAY--which eight months ago was the most amazing super-computer ever built--is now obsolete?"

"As an Edsel is to a Delorian," came the smug answer from the computer.

As Al opened his mouth to reply, Sam interrupted hastily. "She's capable of performing several thousand calculations at the same time. With the updates I'm planning, she'll soon be able to do even more." He gestured excitedly, eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "With Alpha, I'm even closer to achieving my time travel project. In fact, I just heard from--"

Behind them, the door opened, admitting Edward St. John. "Oh, here you are, Samuel." Politely, he nodded to Al. "Captain Calavicci. Security told me you were in the building. It's good to see you again."

"Dr. St. John." Al briefly shook the Englishman's hand.

"So," the Cal-Tech director said, indicating the room with a sweep of his arm. "What do you think of Samuel's new creation?"

Al turned to look at Sam and mouthed 'Samuel' incredulously, then brought his attention back to St. John. "Oh, it's very, unh...knowledgeable."

"She," the computer corrected testily. "I am not an 'it'."

"But," Al continued, "she has a definite attitude problem."

St. John raised an eyebrow at the computer. "Alpha, have you been misbehaving again?"

Silence.

"Alpha..." St. John warned, sounding for all the world like a father reprimanding a child.

Still more silence.

"I don't believe this!" Al exclaimed quietly. "A computer that sulks!"

The Englishman nodded. "Rather. But Samuel insists it's a necessary trait for her to function at her highest potential."

Al eyed the computer terminal. "Must be a real pain in the butt sometimes."

"Oh, it is," the slender man agreed readily, then seeing Sam's look, hastily added, "a tad annoying at times."

Deciding it was time to intervene, Sam said, "But well worth the aggravation."

"Thank you, Dr. Beckett," the computer admonished. "I'm glad someone appreciates me."

"How'd you come up with the name--I mean, the numerical designation--Alpha?" Al asked.

"Actually, I suggested it," St. John said proudly. "I thought it was a fitting title for Samuel's first...er...'baby'."

"My input was not requested on this matter."

Sam could hear the petulance in the computer's voice. He frowned, certain it was not the last he was going to hear about her name.

"Most 'babies' aren't," Sam tried explaining to the computer.

"I am not a 'baby'," she asserted again.

Al glanced down at his Bermuda shorts. "You can say that again."

"Why aren't babies consulted in the choice of their name, Dr. Beckett?" Alpha asked with a touch of innocent wonder to its voice.

"Because that's the parents' job. Access: Human Birth."

A light came on of one of the consoles as the

computer went to work checking its data banks. Before Alpha could comment further, Sam turned to Al.

"Well, it's getting late. We'd better go get your dog if you're going to drive home to San José tonight."

"Right," Al agreed, then turned to St. John to shake his hand again. "Thanks for letting me have a look around, Doctor. I'm very impressed with your set up. Sam is lucky to have such an excellent place to do research."

"We are lucky to have him," he replied. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow, Dr. Beckett. Safe journey, Captain."

Nodding at the two men, he left the room.

"Samuel?" Al asked, turning back to Sam with exaggerated incredulity. "And Alpha?!"

Sam cocked his head in a 'what can I do?' gesture. "I've tried telling him I like to be called 'Sam', but it doesn't do any good. It's either 'Samuel' or 'Dr. Beckett'. The British are so formal, at least St. John is." His eyes narrowed in challenge. "And what's wrong with 'Alpha'?"

"Oh, yeah, that's real original," Al returned in a voice heavy with sarcasm. "At least you didn't name her Eve."

"I believe, Dr. Beckett," the computer spoke up, "that after checking Human Birth I would like a name, rather than a numerical designation. I am, after all, your child."

"Now look what you've done," Sam accused Al. "She was perfectly happy with Alpha until you came along."

"Well, I don't blame her," Al said with a shrug. "I wouldn't like to be stuck with a boring name like 'Alpha' either. But I guess that goes to show you what happens when you let a Brit pick a name. That reminds me of this British girl I once knew--"

"Al!" Sam gave him an exasperated glance. "Let's go before you contaminate her further!" Turning to the main console, he said, "You can go off-line, Alpha, I won't need you anymore tonight."

"Yes, father."

Sam gave her a double-take, before turning to Al. "See what I mean? She's continually incorporating new data into her programming. I never know what she'll pick up next."

He opened the lab door for Al, who walked past him. Pausing to switch off the lights, he said, "Night, Alpha."

"Goodnight, Dr. Beckett."

* * *

Al pulled his rented Escort into the driveway immediately behind Sam's car. Together they walked up the sidewalk to the porch. Sam unlocked the door and entered, calling out, "Donna, I'm home."

Coming in behind him, Al lifted his voice, "Hey, Chester! Come on, boy, it's me."

Donna walked into the living room, drying her hands on a dishtowel.

"Al, what are you doing here?" she asked in surprise. Walking up to her husband, she gave him a welcoming kiss. "Not that I'm complaining. Sam usually doesn't make it home this early."

"What do you mean, what am I doing here?" Al asked, frowning, still glancing around for his absent dog. "I'm here to pick up Chester. Where is he?"

"Chester?" she asked, looking doubtfully from one to the other.

"Yeah, my dog," Al said impatiently. "Y'know? The basset?"

"Sharon...picked him up earlier this afternoon," Donna explained hesitantly.

"She what?!" Al's voice rose. "Sharon picked up my dog? And you let her have him?"

"Well, yes." Donna shrugged. "She said that she'd save you the trouble. That you were going to stop in at Cal-Tech."

"Why that sneaky little...so she just picked him up? Didn't say anything else?"

"No, but she did give me this envelope to give you." She picked up a large nine-by-twelve manilla envelope from the fireplace mantle and handed it to Al. "I thought it was kind of strange at the time, but she said you'd understand."

Opening the brass clasp envelope and pulling out a sheaf of papers, Al gave them only a cursory glance. "I'll be damned."

"What?" Sam asked, concerned at the dark expression forming on his friend's face. "What's the matter?"

"They're divorce papers. Can you believe that? She must have spent the last two days drawing them up. She's divorcing me!"

"What, over a cruise?" Sam asked. "Are you sure?"

"Believe me, kid, I know what divorce papers look like. She must have flown back early to contact one of her shyster friends."

Sam shook his head disbelievingly. "Only

you, Al, would come back from a marriage enrichment cruise divorced."

"Damn. I knew it was a mistake."

"The cruise?" Donna asked hopefully.

"No, getting married. Everything about our relationship was just fine until we made it legal. Well, I'm not gonna let her get away with it."

"You're going to contest the divorce?"

"Hell, no, she can have that. In fact, I'm gonna divorce her! She how she likes that! Hah!"

"Al," Sam began, "calm down--"

"I am calm." The captain's frown swung back to Sam as he thrust the manilla envelope and divorce papers at the physicist. "I'm gonna fight her for custody of Chester. He's my dog and I want him back. Can I use your phone?"

"Unh...sure," Sam said, holding the papers to his chest and nodding to the left, "you can the one in the kitchen."

"Thanks."

Turning on his heel, the captain stalked from the room in the direction indicated, leaving Sam and Donna looking at each other in quiet amazement.

When the kitchen door closed on the Hawaiian patterned shirt, Donna sighed.

"Poor Al," she said, moving behind her husband and wrapping her arms around his waist. She rested her head on his shoulder. "He seems really upset."

"He's more upset about losing Chester than Sharon," Sam pointed out ruefully, giving the divorce papers he held a cursory glance before putting them down.

"If I'd known it would cause problems, I wouldn't have given her the dog."

"But you didn't know. I would have done the same thing." Turning, Sam took her in his arms and held her close. "You're not to blame." He kissed her forehead to reassure her.

In the silence that settled in the room, they could hear Al arguing on the phone in the kitchen.

"Have you asked him about the Project yet?"

Sam shook his head. "No, I tried, but we got interrupted..."

When the captain's voice rose to an angry pitch, they could easily hear him say, "What do you mean, he's 'your' dog? He's mine, sweetheart, and I've still got the receipt from Pets-R-Us to prove it!"

Sighing, Sam drew her closer. "And I don't

think now is a good time. We can ask him to spend the night, and I'll try again tomorrow."

* * *

The next morning, sunlight filled the Beckett's kitchen. As Al sat at the table, reading the morning paper, Donna put out plates and silverware on the red-checked tablecloth.

Looking up from where he stood by the griddle, Sam flourished his spatula and announced, "Pancakes à la Beckett coming up in a minute."

"Good," Al said, his voice slightly raspy from sleep. "I'm starving."

On her way to the refrigerator, Donna paused to give her husband a quick kiss. "They smell delicious, Sam."

Getting a plastic pitcher from the fridge, she carried it to the table and began to pour the juice into brightly patterned glasses.

She placed a glass in front of Al, but he didn't look up from his seemingly intricate study of the morning paper.

"Thanks," he said, reaching around the newspaper for it.

Glancing at the shield of newsprint hiding their house guest, Donna looked at Sam and silently mouthed, 'Ask him!'

Hesitating, Sam took a breath as if to speak, glanced at the impregnable wall of newspaper facing him, and shrugged. 'Later.'

Giving him a disgusted glance, Donna turned back to their hidden guest.

"So, Al," she said conversationally, taking a seat two down on his right. "What did you think of Alpha?"

"Interesting computer," came the answer from behind the paper. It moved slightly as he turned a page. "Boring name."

Sam shot an irritated glance at his friend, scooping up one pancake and adding it to the stack already filling the plate. Flipping the last pancake, he said, "And I guess you could do better."

"In a heartbeat," Al answered.

Sam hid a smile. "Yeah, like 'Velvet' or 'Candy' or 'Ginger'..."

"Ha dee ha ha," Al said sarcastically, finally lowering the paper before him.

"Go on then," Sam encouraged, enjoying the moment so much that it was difficult to keep a straight face. He turned back to his griddle. "I dare you."

"Okay. How about 'Ziggy'?" came the immediate response.

Sam took a ready breath to scoff at the suggestion, but hesitated.

It wasn't half bad. But how on earth had Al come up with it so quickly?

Frowning, he cast a glance at the table. He could just bet Al had laid awake last night planning it, and now made it look like he'd come up with it on the spur of the moment.

Donna turned to Al in surprise. "Ziggy. Hmm. You know, I kind of like that." She lifted an eyebrow at her husband, who quickly changed his expression. "What do you think, Sam?"

"Not bad," he conceded grudgingly.

"Not bad!?" Al repeated mockingly. With a quick flick of his wrist, he closed the newspaper and tossed it onto the window sill beside him. "It's perfect and you know it, Beckett."

"Well, yeah, maybe you're right," Sam admitted, turning back to the griddle.

Flipping the last of the Beckett Specials onto a plate, he brought them over to the table and took the seat between Donna and Al.

As the hungry Naval officer skewered a forkful of three pancakes, Sam asked, "What are your plans next?"

"First, I'm gonna go back and get my dog," the captain growled, stabbing a fourth pancake with a vengeance. "Then maybe I'll go break the 'Baron' outta mothballs and take him for a fly. Chester always liked goin' flyin'...even if Sharon didn't. I still got a few day's liberty, and I ain't gonna waste 'em."

"I meant," Sam said with a smile, serving himself a couple of pancakes, "what are your professional plans?"

"Oh, that," Al said, squeezing a heaped helping of maple syrup onto this food. "Well, I called to check on my orders. Research again. I'm supposed to report for a meeting at Ames on Monday, but the nozzle I talked to couldn't give me any details."

He passed the syrup to Sam. "All he could remember about this new project I'm officially assigned to as liaison, was that it's headed up by some still-wet-behind-the-ears whiz kid." He snorted sarcastically. "And I thought there was only one Sam Beckett in the world."

"I'm flattered," Sam said, hiding a smile behind a bite of food.

"Not only that, this guy had the nerve to

ask for me personally."

"Seems you're finally getting a good reputation," Donna added, joining in the teasing.

Al grimaced and shook his head. "I wish I knew who he was, Sam, and what I was getting into. It's probably gonna be boring as hell babysitting this hotshot, but..." He shrugged resignedly, finally stuffing a bite of pancake into his mouth. "...orders are orders."

"I dunno," Sam said with a glance at Donna as he reached for his juice. "It might turn out interesting. You never know."

Donna spoke up. "Why don't you tell him about our news, Sam?"

"News?" Al asked, pausing with another forkful of pancake halfway to his mouth. His eyes traveled from Sam to Donna and back again. He grinned. "Don't tell me there's gonna be the sound of little Beckett feet around this house?"

Sam nearly choked on his juice. "No!" he sputtered. "At least not right away."

Donna, blushing slightly, intervened. "Tell him, Sam."

Sam took a deep breath. "It's about time."

Al frowned. "What's about time?"

"Time," Sam insisted. "As in travel? Geez, Al, we've only been talking about it ever since we first met!"

"Oh, that time." Then, as the notion struck him, the captain lowered his fork to his plate in disbelief. "You don't mean...?"

"Yeah. It looks like I'm going to get a chance to see if my string theory will work. With Ziggy--I mean Alpha--selling my idea it was easy."

Now Al had him calling her Ziggy! Where had he come up with that name?

Al looked decidedly hurt. "You put together a project? Without me?"

Sam shook his head. "I've got a grant to write up my specs. What I need is someone to help me pitch it to the Senate Committee when it's done." Sam couldn't hide his grin any longer. "You wouldn't be interested in the job, would you? Of course, it'd mean working with a 'still-wet-behind-the-ears whiz kid'."

"Aw, Sam," Al protested, "you're different. But..." He ran a quick hand along his jaw in a sure sign of agitation. "...first I gotta get out of the other--" Suddenly, his eyes lit up with glee. "You dog! You're the one who requested me, aren't you! It's your project I'm assigned to!"

"And it's called," Sam announced, exchanging a look with Donna, "PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP."

The physicist grinned, waiting for his friend's reaction. It wasn't long in coming.

Al grinned broadly, feeling expansive. "Well, that's original." He paused to throw some of his elation Donna's way in the form of some good-natured sarcasm. "No wonder the computer was named 'Alpha'."

"You didn't really think I'd do this without you, did you?" Sam asked, feigning.

"Not if you know what's good for you," Al returned easily. Completely unexpected, he threw his arm around Sam's shoulders in an unanticipated--but genuine--show of affection. "Kid, this is great! When do we start?"

"Well, as you know, we have a meeting in a couple of days. At Ames. Officially, we start then. But..." He grinned again. "...I do have some blueprints here we could look over. If you want to."

"Try keepin' me away!"

"But after breakfast," Donna said, neatly over-riding Al's enthusiastic response. "We can't let these Beckett Specials get cold. No more shop talk."

Obediently digging into the food, both men started eating.

Sam, having held his peace long enough, couldn't stand it any longer. "Al, just tell me one thing, okay?"

"Shoot," the captain agreed, reaching for more syrup.

"Just where did you come up with the idea for the name 'Ziggy'?"

Al opened his mouth to answer but Sam beat him to it.

"You had it all planned, didn't you? From the moment you met her, you've been thinking of names. You didn't just come up with it this morning."

"Actually, I did."

"How?"

Calmly, Al picked up the newspaper from the window sill. As Sam watched incredulously, the captain folded back the pages, and handed it to him as if it explained everything.

Baffled, the physicist regarded it. "These are the comics," he began. "What...?"

His glance traveled down the page until it reached the lower right corner.

"ZIGGY," he read, in sudden comprehension.

"Exactly," Al returned smugly. "My favorite cartoon."

"Figures," Sam said dryly.

"Next to CALVIN AND HOBBS, that is," the captain added, returning to his breakfast.

"Oh boy," Sam sighed, knowing he'd been had.

Life with Al around was never dull, and the next few years certainly promised to be interesting.

Of that, he could most assuredly count on.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
"The Impossible Dream"

'The Next Einstein.'

That's what TIME called the kid after he won a Nobel Prize for his work on the parallel computer chip and brilliant advancement in the field of Holographic Technology.

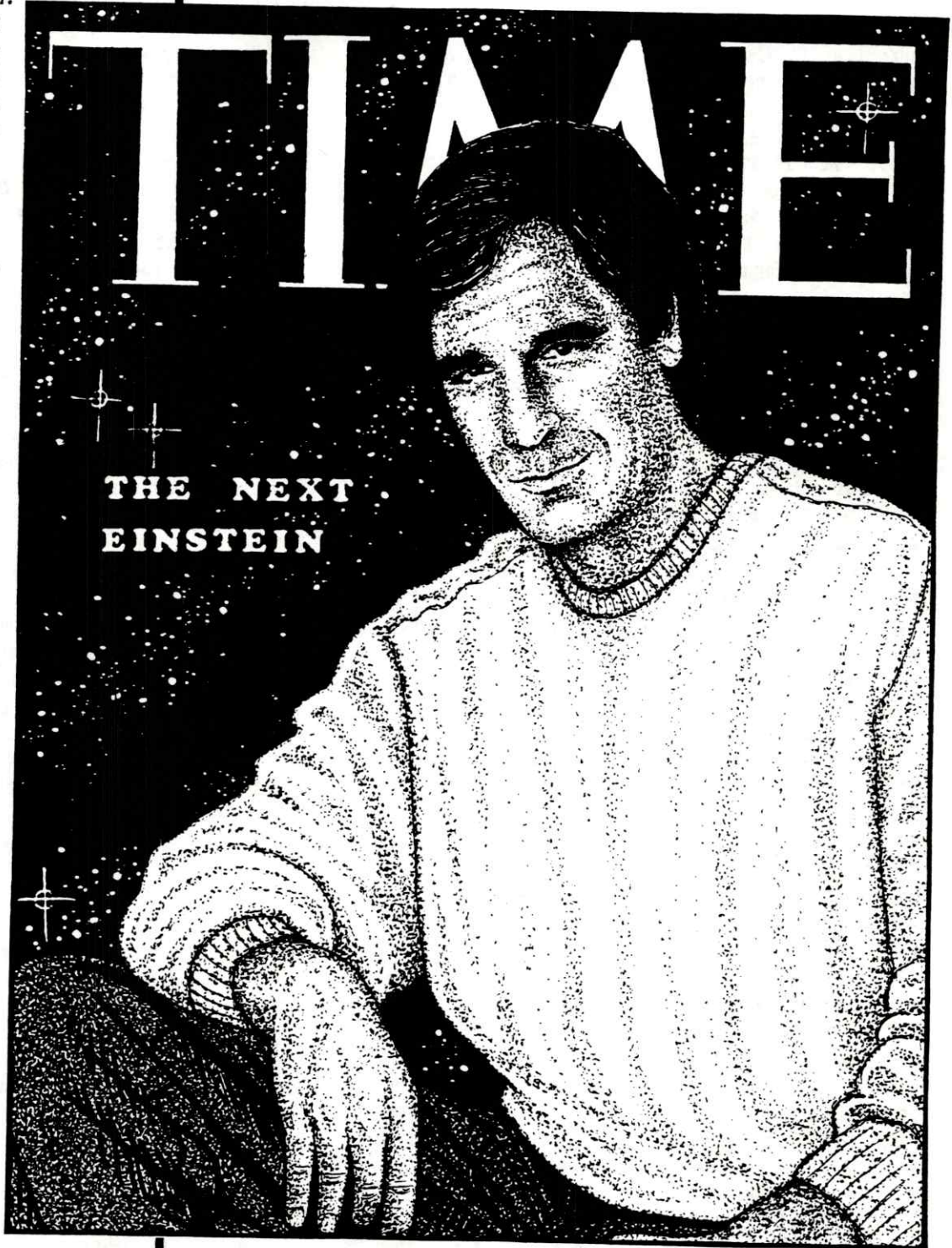
You know, they put him right on the cover? And he deserved it too. Just like he deserved all the hoopla and attention he got in the months following it.

Things happened pretty quick after that. Even I got recognition--promoted to admiral. Admiral! Me, the ensign who once said that anyone above the rank of lieutenant was a horse's ass. Though maybe, thinking back on the darker days at STAR BRIGHT before Sam got me back on track, maybe I was right.

Sharon seemed to agree too. Our divorce was down and dirty. She went for the jugular but the high-powered shyster I hired kept her from bleeding me dry. She didn't get as much as she wanted, but after an eight month battle she did get Chester.

Damn, she knew how much I loved that dog--and I know that's the only reason she wanted him.

But life went on.



Once I made admiral and Sam had been announced to the world as a mega-brain by the venerable magazine TIME, doors started to open. Those were exciting days, glad-handing the powers-that-be, wheeling and dealing and making sure that it all came together in the end so Sam had what he needed to start work on PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP.

It didn't all come at once, not by a long shot. But it was glory all the same. Then we got down to the nitty-gritty of actually building what we had talked about for so long. We'd sit on the floor at Sam and Donna's apartment, fortified by carry-out pizza and microwave popcorn, planning it down to the finest detail.

Sam would wave his slide rule around like a magic wand--never once saw him use a calculator --devising new technology to gobble up the money like Pacman gobbles ghosts, while I'd scheme ways to make it happen.

What a team, it was fantastic!

PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP drew closer week by week, month by month, year by year...so close that we could both taste it. All our days and most of our nights went into making The Impossible Dream possible. We spent hours pouring over blueprints of all aspects of the Project--the Accelerator Chamber, the Imaging Chamber.

Especially the Imaging Chamber. For some reason, that seemed to intrigue people the most. Maybe because that was something they could see, where the idea of string theories and leaping about in time was so far beyond the realm of their comprehension that they really didn't know what to do with it. Both ideas seemed like magic, it was just that the Imaging Chamber had more grab to it, more glitz.

Or maybe it was simply that they could more easily identify it with 'The Next Einstein'.

In the beginning, Sam viewed Senate Committees and Presidents' Councils and such things in high regard. He always wanted to give them details and high theory. But, as I pointed out, the nozzles chairing them were the same folks P.T. Barnum used to talk about, and so we went heavy on the glitz to reel 'em in.

That's why I made the Imaging Chamber high profile in our pitch to those holding the Government purse strings. I'd show them the demonstration we'd worked out thanks to Sam's little 'unauthorized' experiment, pointing out it was only a pale shadow of what we could do

with the proper funding, and how it would all dovetail with broader purposes of the Accelerator and our understanding of time, fate and the forces of the universe.

Sometimes, with guys like Weitzman--who's the kinda guy who'd watch David Copperfield only to look for the hidden strings attached--we didn't ever sell. But we sold enough of the others regardless.

So here we are, moving into the last decade of the Twentieth century, building something in the New Mexico desert that will forever change the way mankind looks at Old Father Time, for the rest of time itself.

Exciting, huh?

Well...it was. Until all those initial battles were fought and won. The Imaging Chamber, which is being 'installed' in a cavern under the desert, reminds me of a tomb. Everything's running smoothly now, and I miss the adrenalin kick. I actually find myself looking forward to the arrival of the senatorial watchdog the Committee's sending over to be sure there's substance to the glitter, to make sure they're getting their money's worth.

Yeah. That'll keep me on my toes. When this Government liaison finally arrives.

For now, it's Sam's time to shine. And he's like a star gone nova. I just stand back and let him roar, just trying to curb enough of his enthusiasm so we don't go too badly over budget.

To tell the truth, it's getting a little boring. Even sitting in the middle of a half-finished chamber that may someday enable us to reach out and embrace our impossible dream...

* * *

The underground cavern was huge.

It was hard to believe something so immense was 'all natural', simply carved out under the deserts of east New Mexico by nothing more than the persistence of nature and time. Even once they got all the equipment installed, the Imaging Chamber would still be as large as several football stadiums.

Sitting on a toolbox left by an electrician who had already gone home for the long weekend, Al popped open his second can of Pepsi and sipped it thoughtfully, throwing a sideways glance at Sam who was some fifteen feet away selecting another disc for the portable CD player.

"To dream...the impossible dream..."

Al grimaced--soda can paused at his lips--as the baritone voice echoed hollowly from the portable CD player perched on a nearby makeshift workbench, which in reality was nothing more than a plank supported between the rungs of two ladders.

"Aw, geez, Sam. Not again. Can't we have 'Fiddler On The Roof' just this once?"

Sam turned from the CD player and grinned. Gesturing expansively with his own Pepsi can, he sang the next line as he wandered back to where the admiral sat.

Al shook his head and feigned a 'you're hopeless' expression. But it was only a token reaction, one that was always the same--Sam would be disappointed if it wasn't. At the end of every work day, when the technicians and builders had left, he'd find the kid down here ...and it wasn't just to escape the merciless summer heat above. Alone, in a semi-darkened circle of utility lamps, he'd find Sam playing that damn 'Man Of La Mancha' CD, sipping a cold soda and dreaming his own impossible dream.

Only it wasn't a dream any longer. It was all fast becoming a reality--PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP was coming along nicely. Still, it would be years before they were actually anywhere close to proving Sam's string theory, but for the moment there was Government funding lining their pockets and the preliminary construction had begun.

On the desert floor above, the foundations for the main complex were already being poured. These buildings, once erected, would eventually house the administrative offices, but for now they were merely stacks of bricks baking in the desert sun.

Still singing, the kid sat opposite him, cross-legged on the roughly poured concrete floor next to a coil of insulated cable. At times like this, when the empty, relaxing coolness of this vast underground chamber turned whatever technical difficulties they'd been having that day into fanciful musings, Al found it difficult not to let himself get caught up in Sam's almost child-like enthusiasm.

With a grin, he joined in for the next few bars of the song.

At the musical interlude, Sam asked, "What are you doing for the weekend?"

"Huh?" Prior to this second playing of Sam's favorite CD, their conversation had touched quantum physics, some of the more amusing applications of neurological holography, rap

music versus rock and roll, and about a dozen or so of the gazillion new variables a project like this constantly presented. But absolutely nothing had been mentioned about the upcoming Fourth of July weekend.

"For the holiday," Sam repeated in a slightly louder voice, obviously thinking the music had been the cause. He got up and went to turn down the volume. Since the Fourth fell on a Thursday this year, they'd proclaimed Friday a holiday as well and called a four-day weekend for everyone working on the Project. "Got any plans?"

Plans. Al hid a sour look behind his Pepsi can as Sam resumed his seat. Well, he would've ...if Cindy hadn't turned out to be such a wet blanket last night. Geez, she'd seemed like such a feisty little thing too! He'd spent weeks trying to charm her into La Position Horizontal, relishing in how good it would be--then she'd just laid there...in total silence.

It was pathetic.

She was pathetic.

Not to mention the fuss she made over his tattoo. Geez Louise! While the majority of the women he'd been intimate with over the years with didn't mind discovering Beth's name indelibly etched onto his skin, there had been a few--like Cindy--who definitely did.

Hells Bells...he'd told her Beth was his ex-wife! What did she think? That he was lying? Hah! Did she really consider herself worth that?

Or did the tattoo explain her lack of a performance...

"Why?" Al asked abruptly, then drowned the ugly memory with a lengthy swig of soft drink.

"We thought you might like to come and stay."

Al's chuckle sounded a little forced, even to him. "Come on, pal. You two have only been in that new house of yours for--what--two weeks? I don't wanna intrude."

"You won't be. Besides, it was Donna's idea."

That earned a raised eyebrow from Al. He and Donna had been friends for years, but there were still those incidental times when they rubbed each other the wrong way. It was just like with Sam--a simple clash of personalities. And like with the kid, it was usually over something so trivial, that in the aftermath it was downright laughable.

Like this afternoon.

Thanks to Cindy, he'd been in a bad mood all day. Going head-to-head with Donna over the location of the six newly arrived portable johns on the building site above had actually felt good. Donna had insisted on a separate one 'for women only' and wanted it situated all the way on the opposite side of the compound, away from the men's.

Okay, fine. It was a reasonable request to have one 'for women only', he could live with that...but what the hell difference did it make where it was put?!

Completely ignorant of both the incident and Al's expression, Sam smiled wistfully, listening to the soft music and turning his gaze up into the darkness that concealed the cavern roof high above their heads.

"You should see the stars, Al," he said in a small, overawed voice, as if witnessing each and every tiny pinpoint of light right there in the artificial night above.

Al turned his face to the pitch-blackness, and he too was treated to the memory of those distant stars in his mind's eye.

"From our back terrace," Sam continued, still under the spell, "they look close enough to touch."

Melancholy feelings stirred in the ex-astronaut as he remembered the Glory Days, when he'd reached out on nothing more than a wing and a prayer, and had done just that. It was something that was presently missing from his life--some good, old-fashioned, adrenalin pumping achievement.

In the boardroom...and in the bedroom...

A number of times over the years, Sam had fondly referred to him as an 'adrenalin junkie'. Hell, maybe Sam was right. He had no doubt that PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP was going to fire up some of that old enthusiasm again someday, but for now things were running so smoothly that it seemed the only time his blood ever started to race was when he put his head on the block at the Funding Committee slogging matches.

It was beginning to remind him of his problems back in the STAR BRIGHT days...

At that thought, Al stopped and frowned at the can in his hand. At least he was off the hard stuff, had been for years, ever since those terrible three days in Vegas...

"So..." the kid mercifully derailed his train of thought, looking back at him with the same wistful, oblivious smile. "What do you say?"

Al shifted his gaze back to Sam, but masked

his true feelings behind a lewd smirk. "And do what? Sit around stargazing while you two bounce around the bedroom?"

"Come on, it'll be fun," Sam insisted, without even a blush. "We'll kick back--totally. No talk about Imaging Chambers or holograms or Accelerators...and no 'Man Of La Mancha'. Promise."

"Can't, kiddo. I got plans," he lied. He placed his half-emptied soda can at his heel, beside the other empty one.

"Plans?" Sam asked, clearly surprised that he hadn't mentioned this mysterious commitment until now.

Thinking fast, Al resorted to an old faithful ploy--raising his eyebrows and donning the best leer he could muster. "There's a girl," he began in a suggestive tone, "named--"

"Okay, okay," Sam relented, holding up his palm. He grinned fondly. "There's always a girl."

"I thought I'd find you two down here."

Both men turned at the sound of Donna's voice. She came forward, into the ring of light, and took a seat on the empty crate at Sam's back. Almost automatically, she began massaging the taut set of his shoulders.

"Mmm," Sam moaned, eyes closed and obviously enjoying her touch. "That feels great..."

Al looked off in the other direction, into the dimness beyond the utility lamps. He hadn't spoken to Donna since she'd stormed off the building site in a huff--having not gotten her way for the location of the 'female' portable head--labeling him, and all male bricklayers within immediate earshot, as 'perverts'.

Oh yeah, right. Like she had something he hadn't seen before. Like he'd even want to...!

"Sam," Donna said quietly, her arms going about his neck.

Here it comes, Al thought wryly.

"What do you think about moving one of the portable toilets away from the ones for the construction workers?" Lightly, she nuzzled his neck. "We have several, and putting one on the opposite side of the site would give the women a little more privacy."

"Sure," Sam agreed, oblivious to the earlier fracas. "I guess I can see why you wouldn't want to go in and out with a gang of men around to watch." Two pairs of eyes shifted to the admiral. "Okay with you, Al?"

Al managed to keep his expression neutral.

No way he was giving Donna the satisfaction of knowing how it burned him to lose this way. But he knew from bitter experience it was useless to try to win. Women were masters at manipulation --at least all the women he knew.

"If it's so important to the female contingent, okay," he said, as if it didn't bother him in the least. Well, he hoped it sounded that way.

"Good." Donna threw him a smile which he neatly avoided by diverting his attention to reclaiming his drink by his heel. "Did you ask Al about this weekend?"

In the enclosed silence, Al swore he heard a soft, mocking echo. He glanced at them, finding Donna still with her arms wound around Sam's neck from behind but regarding him with a decidedly gentle expression.

Sure...she'd won the fight!

"He has a date," Sam explained, affectionately patting the slender hand resting on his chest.

"Then bring her along," she suggested to Al.

At that, he raised an inquisitive eyebrow. Considering this afternoon, she appeared far too enthusiastic about having him spend the weekend --four full days, ninety-six long hours--under her roof.

Or...was this an apology for this afternoon?

"It'll be nice to have another female opinion around the place," she finished with a somewhat pert look which only Al could see.

Touché. The admiral merely grinned. She was obviously still as mad as blazes at him.

Sam immediately warmed to the idea of making it a foursome. He broke into an ever-hopeful look. "That's a great idea!"

Apart from the fact that he didn't really have a date to bring--Cindy was history--Al decided, right there and then, that whatever he was going to do for the next four days, under no circumstances did he want to do it with Donna.

"I, unh...can't," he said, thinking fast. "She's in New Jersey."

"New Jersey?!" Sam exclaimed. He turned an astonished look on his wife, who shrugged, equally bewildered by this turn of events.

Al pretended not to notice, and instead looked down at the can in his hand, his thumb tracing up through the condensation over the letter 'i'.

New Jersey. Geez, she was the only one he could think of on the spur of the moment like that...but he'd sure have egg on his face if he

couldn't get a flight to Newark tonight, at such late notice on the eve of a holiday weekend.

"Yeah..." Not wanting to give further explanation, Al put down his drink and stood up from the toolbox. "Yeah, and I've got a flight to catch. See you guys Monday morning..."

* * *

If you ask me, First Class is the only way to travel. It also happened to be the only seating Delta Airlines had left on their 727-Stretch to Newark. Not that I wouldn't have traveled Coach if the need arose. Hell, I'd've sat in the baggage section if it got me away from Donna Elesee for the weekend.

Not that my 'problem' was Donna...or for that matter, anything to do with Donna. She just happened to be the unlucky one who picked the wrong time to tangle.

Sam always says that the first step in solving any problem is to clearly identify exactly what it is. See, no matter what you try--no matter where you go--you just can't run away from a problem. Sooner or later it catches up with you and, nine time outta ten, gets the jump on ya from behind.

So there I was, sitting on the red-eye to the east coast, dozing with the other passengers in the dimmed cabin lighting, when--whammo!--a crystal-clear definition of my 'problem' suddenly slugged me right between the eyes. It wasn't Donna--or even Cindy what's-her-name--I was tryin' to escape from.

It was part of me...Albert Calavicci.

In particular, it was that name so 'lovingly' tattooed on my skin. It was those four letters which had turned my life into such a mundane existence--well, my love life anyway.

I mean, whenever some dame looks at it, she doesn't just see Beth's name, but the bottom line of the whole affair. Which is, you don't get someone's name permanently put on your flesh unless you plan on loving that person forever.

Forever.

It's a pity Beth never understood it in those endearing terms. All she saw was the Navy hot-shot she married, the jet jockey who gave the impression that wearing her name on his arm excused him for spending more time with his buddies than with her. She called it neglect. I called it stupid--I still do. Hell...I was never the one who expected it to be like 'Ozzie and Harriet'.

And neither did the Navy.

Anyway, since I'd now defined this problem, and was 99% sure my assessment was correct, the solution seemed as equally straight forward. If there was only one thing to be accomplished this weekend, it was to get that damned tattoo removed, or changed. It was time to dispose of the one thing I had left from our marriage--the physical reminder of the woman I once loved, the lifeline I'd clung to all those years I spent rotting in a VC cage...

'Cause it was now just a regular pain in the butt.

But before that, since it'd taken a trip all the way to Jersey to work out this little mastermind--and since tomorrow was the Fourth and nearly everything would be closed--there was that special someone I'd promised to visit.

And I would.

First thing in the morning.

* * *

"There you go, sweetheart," Al said gently, putting aside his garden shears. He gathered the weeds he'd just spent the last hour pulling and clipping from the overgrown grave into a K-Mart bag. "All neat and tidy again."

He stood, brushing the dirt from the knees of his trousers. A rolled shirtsleeve wiped the sweat from his forehead. In spite of the fact that the plot lay in a nearly abandoned back corner of the cemetery and was shaded by the summer-laden branches of some age-old oaks, this New Jersey heatwave felt hotter than the scorching desert of New Mexico. Of all the times to pick to visit!

Or maybe it was simply because he was out laboring in it. He'd arrived mid-morning, then left again almost immediately to purchase some gardening tools from the local K-Mart store, which had been open for their annual Fourth of July sale. Returning, he'd been bound and determined to transform the unkempt grave into an agricultural masterpiece. Well, as damn near close to it as possible, anyway.

At that, he looked at his dirty hands--in particular the soil lodged under his fingernails --and had to grin.

"See this?" he asked, holding out one hand as if expecting an answer from the silent grave. "It's the only piece of real estate you and I will ever own." His smile wavered as the grim reality of such a statement gripped him. Taking

a deep breath, he focused elsewhere. "Now...you ready for that surprise I told you about?"

Turning, he put the bag of trash beside the headstone of a neighboring, weed-infested grave where his silver jacket lay draped, in exchange for a large bunch of red roses tied with a pink silk ribbon.

"These are for you, honey," he announced softly to the newly trimmed plot. He knelt again, untied the ribbon, and set about arranging the flowers in the small urn at the foot of the headstone. "And I want you to know ...not every woman gets a dozen roses outta me. Only the very special ones."

The task completed, his gaze wandered to the eye-level headstone. With a forlorn smile, he reached out and touched the smooth, cool granite --letting his hand trail down over the chiseled name, letting his fingertips trace each letter individually.

'Gertrude Francesca Calavicci'

Al sat, wrapped his arms about his knees and his head bowed in undisguised shame.

"I know it's been a long time since I was last here, Trudy. Too long. Guess I'm falling down in the big brother department."

Chasing a distraction, he began organizing his assortment of garden tools into a neat line.

"But I've been sorta busy...y'know? Sam's got this new project--out in New Mexico--and I've been working real hard with him these past couple of years...just tryin' to get it off the ground."

Thoughts of the kid caused him to smile in fond admiration. "Talk about a workaholic, now we've got the ball rolling I don't think he'll ever stop! Wish you could've met Sam, you'd've liked him..." He paused as an old familiar hurt tore at his heart, and absently tapped a foot against the side of the grave. "Let's see... what else? Oh, yeah..."

His eyebrows raised knowingly. "I got divorced again--Sharon's been gone for a couple of years. And damn it if she didn't screw me for nearly twice the alimony I'm paying any of the others! She said that since I was an admiral now, I could afford it."

He pulled a sour face. "Hell, I couldn't even win custody of the damn dog! I'll tell you somethin', Trudy, I wouldn't put it past that broad to hit me up for even more. Hell, that's what I get for marrying a damn lawyer." He paused unhappily. "Chester was a good dog too, better than that stupid cat of Ruthie's..."

Tools aligned in a tidy row, he resorted to his former position--elbows locked around his knees and his right hand clasping his left wrist.

"So I'm playin' bachelor again...and no, there's no one special. D'you believe I turned fifty-six last month? Fifty-six. I should have a family, Trudy. Kids--hell, grandkids. And what have I got?" He smirked contemptuously. "Nada."

Frowning, he reconsidered his words. "Okay, so that's not entirely true. I've got 'my career'. Doesn't that sound like something to keep you warm at night? Hell, all I'm sleepin' with these days is a couple of admiral's stars ...and a damn tattoo."

Sobering to his own sarcasm, he pulled back his shoulders. "Actually, I'm gonna do something about that this weekend. The tattoo, I mean. Get it removed...or changed...or--I dunno--something. I just can't compete with the way Beth's memory keeps coming between me and the broad I've got in my bed any more.

"I'm gonna let go, Sis. I've decided. I'm finally gonna let Beth go." He drew a deep breath, which was a little more hesitant than he intended. "Tomorrow."

* * *

Unlike that shore leave, when Chip, Stacker and TomTom had had to get him so drunk he couldn't stand in order to convince him to have the hawk tattoo put on his arm, at precisely 11:35 a.m. on Friday morning, Al walked into Elisha's Body Emporium, stone cold sober and under his own steam. Back then the place had been nothing more than a cramped, dingy, little shop in some back alley in Japan--now it was a trendy, ultra-modern salon in the heart of Jersey City, with a decided emphasis on glamor.

There was a sleek-looking waiting room with a white, real-leather sofa, a handful of potted palms which lent a soothing air to the place, even a collection of autographed photos proudly displayed on the whitewashed walls--celebrities who had passed through these doors with virgin flesh and left again exhibiting the pigments and skill of the tattooist's needle.

"Can I help you?"

Hands in his pockets, Al turned from his intricate study of Cher's fish-netted but still highly visible derriere, back to the small reception desk, which had been unattended when

he'd entered a couple of minutes ago. It was now manned by a skin-head with an diamond-stud earring. That is--he thought, eyeing the help--if 'manned' was the correct use of gender.

"Unh, yeah. I wanna see somebody about getting a tattoo removed...or changed?"

"Well, we don't remove tattoos here. You'll have to see your doctor--or a dermatologist--for that. And depending on the design, we may or may not be able to add something to change it. What exactly is it?"

"Well, unh, actually...it's a name."

The help smiled knowingly. "We get a lot of those." He gestured to a inner doorway. "If you'd like to follow me to a dressing room?"

The hallway was lined both sides by curtain-fronted cubicles--spaced roughly every six feet or so, and ten dressing rooms total. There was a full length mirror on the facing wall at the far end, which gave the hall the illusion of being twice as long as it actually was. Several of the curtains were pulled closed--hiding a variety of customers--and, as the help stopped at the end of the hall and indicated a vacant one, Al caught a glimpse of black leather from behind the curtain of the cubicle directly opposite.

"As you can see, Elisha's very busy at the moment, so it might be a few minutes before she gets round to giving you a consultation."

Entering, Al pulled the curtain across behind him and paused, feeling slightly--what? Uncomfortable? These curtained cubicles made the joint feel like one of those back alley porno palaces. So much for 'glamor'.

Or was it just him?

Hanging his silver flight jacket on the hook provided, he tugged off his tie and slowly unbuttoned his shirt. Minutes later--just standing there in his trousers and undershirt--he was unexpectedly plagued by a severe bout of uncertainty. Hitching up his t-shirt sleeve, he simply stared at his tattoo.

With its wings fanned defensively, the hawk was fiercely protective of--and yet at the same time extremely tender toward--the woman's name it bore on the ribbon clasped in its talons.

His nerve abruptly deserted him. He couldn't do it. He just couldn't wipe Beth from his life. Nor--he realized with a start--did he really want to. Because no matter how many times he consciously tried to deny it, somewhere, deep down inside where it really mattered, there was still that tiny flame

burning--like a pilot light to his soul.

Hastily grabbing his shirt and jacket off the hook, he threw back the curtain and charged out into the hallway...only to bodily collide with the black-leathered figure from the cubicle opposite, who was now standing before the full length mirror.

Both parties reacted instinctively to the collision--grabbing each other's arm as they recoiled back a step. In the blink of an eye, Al had the blonde's vital statistics down pat--34-28-34...five/five, 120, 35ish...a sum which added up to an irresistible total.

Since he already had hold of her arm, he steadied her on her feet with a hesitant smile. "Excuse me."

When she let go his arm and returned the smile with a wry look, the old Calavicci confidence came flooding right back. "You're excused."

Letting her go, his eyes took an involuntarily wander down her attire. The patterned silver studs on her leather jacket successfully broke the monotony of black, but her matching leather mini-skirt was just so darn tight he found he had to look twice to make sure it wasn't simply painted on. She was still smiling when his gaze finally reached her face again.

"See anything you like?" she asked flirtatiously, a wicked glint lighting up her baby-blues.

"Oh, yeah," he admitted truthfully, flashing one of his most charming grins. There was definitely some major chemistry going down here.

Just then, another female customer appeared in the hall behind them--effectively rendering them silent--threw a casual glance in their direction, then disappeared out to the reception area.

"Would you do me a favor?" the woman in leather asked when they were alone again.

"Uh, sure. If I can..."

"Give me your honest opinion about this." Without a moment's hesitation, she hitched up her skirt and thrust a hip at him--no easy feat in all that body-hugging leather. Which is probably why all she had on underneath was the bottom half of an electric-blue, thong bikini.

Al's eyes widened. There, in infinitely clear detail on her toned cheek, was a somewhat delicate red-rose tattoo, bannered by the inscription 'Mad Max'.

"What do you think?"

As tattoos went, it was nothing special. As butts went, it was absolutely stunning.

"Well, I...uhh..." Al floundered, knowing he should be looking at the tattoo but unable to stop himself from gawking at her fanny.

She pouted, lowering her skirt. "You don't like it."

"Oh, no...I love it. Honest."

"I meant the tattoo."

"Yeah, well..." He grinned, deciding he liked her. "...it's pretty good too."

Still unsure, she pulled up her skirt again and aimed her hip at the full length mirror for some personal scrutiny. "I dunno...I just got it...I dunno..."

Al circled where she stood in the narrow hall, eyes glued appreciatively to her rear end. "Believe me, it's perfect."

"You know, you're not being much help."

"Who's 'Mad Max'?" he asked in a sincere attempt to be helpful. "Husband? Boyfriend?"

"Nickname."

"You?" He stopped behind her, and looked up over her shoulder to meet her eyes via the mirror. "Mad...or Max?"

"Max."

"Short for Maxine, right?"

She struck a defiant pose. "Just Max, okay?"

"Okay." He grinned cockily. "What're you so 'mad' about?"

"Lots of things." She laughed, then grew a little more serious as she let her own eyes take a walk over his undershirted figure in the mirror. "And you're...?"

Still smiling, he threw her a wink. "You can call me Al."

"Just like the song, huh."

"Song?"

"Yeah, by Paul Simon." At his slight frown, she added, "From 'Gracelands'? You must've heard it..."

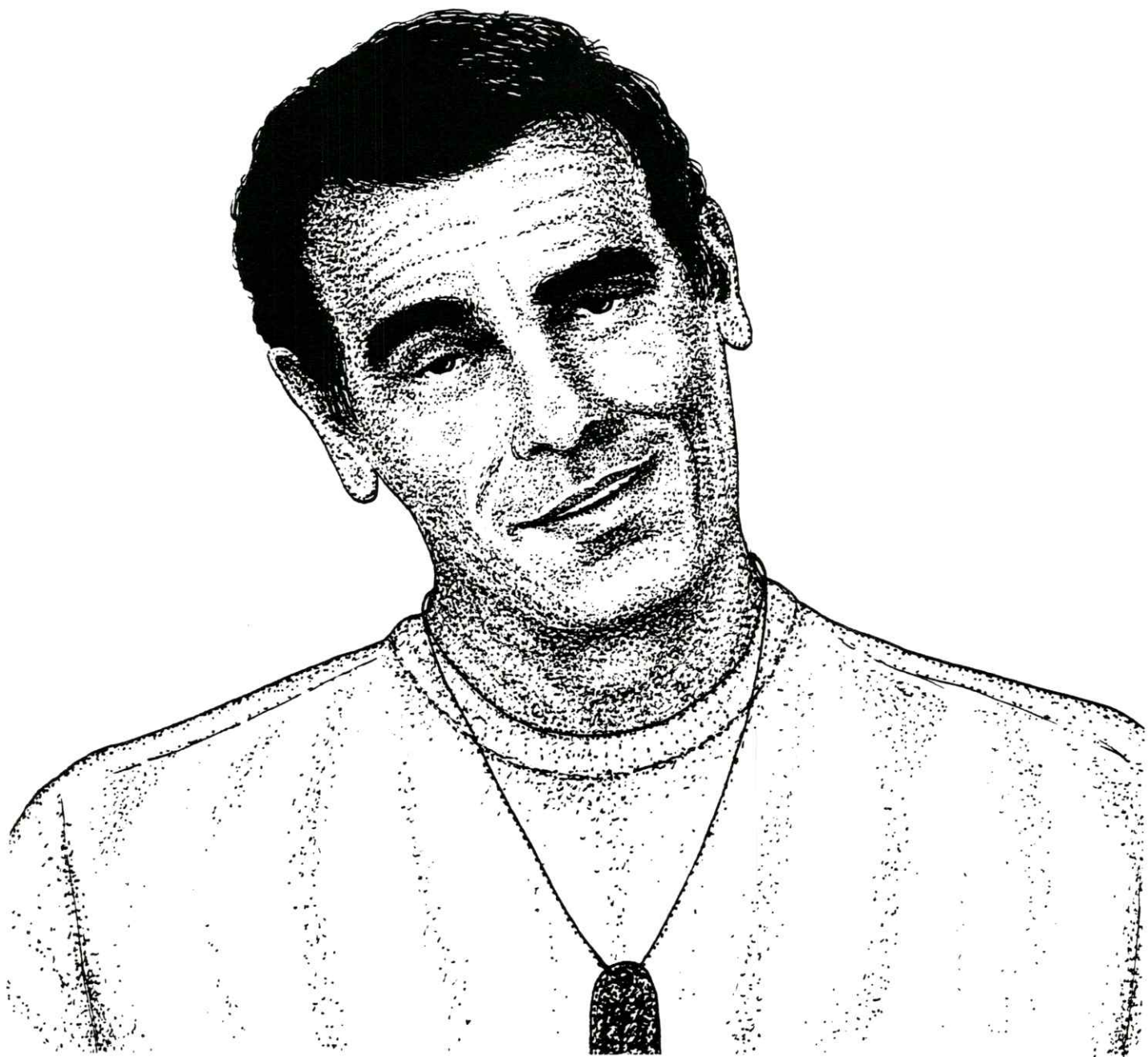
"Oh, yeah, right. The song." Now he remembered--Sam, a long time Simon & Garfunkel fan, occasionally took pity and changed the 'Man Of La Mancha' CD.

Hands on hips, she turned to face him with a wry expression. "Is that what you are, Al? My 'long lost pal'?"

Looking over her leather and studs, his eyebrows raised into a suggestive leer. "If you'll be my bodyguard..."

"Then tell me the truth about this."

She hiked up her skirt again, and he spent



the next couple of minutes trying to convince her that her newly acquired tattoo really *did* look just fine. Further opinion about her butt, however, he decided to reserve for himself.

Finally accepting his judgment as valid, she asked, "So what are you here for, anyway?"

There was definitely a challenge in her tone--an insinuation which clearly dared, 'I showed you mine, now you show me yours'.

Al grinned, musing whether she expected him to drop his trousers or roll up his sleeve. Since the former was something he'd much rather do in a more private setting, he opted for the latter.

"Nice...work..." she enthused, leaning close to scrutinize his hawk tattoo.

Conversation ground to a halt again, as a couple more customers exited and entered the cubicles. Once the disturbances had abated, the woman named 'Max' caught his attention by raising an eyebrow.

"So who's 'Beth'?" she asked, her tone and manner mimicking his earlier inquiry. "Wife? Girlfriend?"

"Ex-wife..." he said, still uncomfortable with the confession, but--for some reason--not nearly as much as he had been in the past.

Maybe it was because Max didn't seem to give spit about it.

"So...?" She pointed a lazy finger at his arm. "You didn't just get that done?"

"Nah, I was gonna have it removed."

"Ouch!" She made a face. "Why would you want to do that? I hear it's even more painful than having it put on."

"Yeah, I, unh..." He dropped his eyes. "...I kinda came to that conclusion myself." When he looked up again, he caught a momentary glimpse of another far more compassionate woman beneath the leather-and-tattoo façade. The expression was gone before he could be sure, which only served to intrigue him even more. "Are you...finished here?"

"Just got to settle up my bill, why?"

He shrugged. "Well, I thought maybe you might like to grab some lunch with me?"

She considered his invitation for several long moments. "All right," she finally agreed, then smiled seductively--clearly back in 'Mad Max' Mode. "But on one condition..."

* * *

The idea of a four-day weekend had sounded

terrific. In reality, however, Sam found his thoughts returning to the Project as early as Friday morning. There were so many things to do--so many things he wanted to do--that the prospect of waiting until work resumed Monday to get back to them seemed more of a restriction than a vacation.

Although there were some advantages. Spending time with Donna in their new home--just the two of them--was wonderful. It seemed they found precious little of that since QUANTUM LEAP had started. But when she left for the neighboring town of Destiny that morning to do the month's shopping, the siren call of his other love was just too strong, and he soon found himself back on the Project site at Stallion's Gate.

Restless for a reason he couldn't explain, he wandered through the halls of the smaller building which housed the elevator down to the Imaging Chamber, and then into the cavern itself.

His lone footsteps rang eerily in the barely illuminated darkness. It was too quiet without Al's continual banter, too lonesome. Pausing by the makeshift bench which still supported his CD player, Sam slipped in his favorite disc, turned it on, and cranked up the volume. With a fond smile, he continued to wander around the cavern, trying to decide exactly what it was he wanted to do.

This was his project, his dream, and someday it would all come together. Someday, all the tiny details, all the hours of complex, inter-related work and theory would mesh...and he would actually take that first step into the Accelerator as a traveler in time.

Someday.

But for right now, he didn't want to remain in the cool, peaceful cavern. Oddly, today it seemed to swallow up even the proud strains of 'The Impossible Dream', as if in implacable resistance to what he had planned for this vast underground locale. As rare as this mood was for him, he realized that today, he didn't want to spend his time absorbed in some technical detail that was only a tiny, unseen part of some grander scheme.

Today, he wanted to chase something far more simplistic in nature, but equally as satisfying.

Shutting off the player, there was a determined spring in his step as he left the twilight of the cavern for the blinding sunlight of the building site above.

Today he just wanted to 'breathe in' all that was his project, to live and feel it in its entirety...even if it wasn't entirely finished.

The freshly laid foundations for the Administration buildings were a glare of newness against the age-old desert sand. Thumbs hitched in the back pockets of his jeans, he wandered into them and stopped. After a self-conscious check to make sure he was still all alone, he closed his eyes and filled his lungs with a deep breath of hot, dry air.

He stood with his feet braced apart and, head tilting back, slowly raised his arms from his sides, suddenly inspired to try to embrace both the physical and metaphysical alike.

Wearing a satisfied smile, Sam turned and sought the shade provided by the leeward wall of the elevator access building. There, he squatted, and spent many moments admiring the decorative veneer the bricklayers had begun laying the day before the holiday. Their tools and materials were left neatly stacked nearby, ready for when work resumed Monday morning.

Looking at the orderly array, only broadened his smile. It may be his project, but Al's touches were evident throughout. All the contractors had been informed--pointedly--that construction was no excuse for needless sloppiness.

Regarding the stack of unused bricks, Sam noticed--without even meaning to--the slight variation in color among them. Eyes shifting back to the veneer wall, he felt the stirring of inspiration. Years ago, he'd met a girl named Jenny, a would-be architect from Elk Ridge, who had sketched some wonderfully creative designs using nothing more than the relationship of texture and color within the building materials.

Here too, there could be a pattern constructed in the bricks, by using the random variations already begun by the other men.

Without consciously deciding to, Sam worked out the design in his mind and turn to the banded brick cubes to assemble his materials. He had helped his father build brick flower planters for his mother over two decades ago, and he hadn't forgotten the formula for the mortar...or how hard it could be.

Still...

At mid-day, the desert heat was intense and, as he worked, Sam soon shed his shirt. It felt good, sweating in the sun, using his back, arms and hands in hard manual labor. Slowly, the pattern he had envisioned in his head began to

emerge in the growing wall of Beckett bricks.

An hour or so later, as he paused to wipe the perspiration from his brow, he found himself smiling at his accomplishments. Just a few more rows and the variations of dark and light would come into view.

It would be subtle--most people would probably never notice it at all. But when he and the workmen had finished--if they stuck to the design plan he would lay out for them--there would be a faint tracing of lighter lines through the darker bricks. To those who knew how to look, there would be soft bolts of lightning--or energy, depending on the viewer's reference--streaking through the darkness.

Just a few more bricks and he'd call it quits...

Lost in the act of his hands-on creation, he didn't hear the car approaching until it was nearly upon him. Turning at the sound of rushing motion that ceased abruptly, he found that trying to straighten up brought an unexpected twinge of protest from his lower back.

Absently grimacing in pain and rubbing at the stiffened muscles, Sam watched in amazement as a white limousine slid to a stop amidst a swirl of desert dust. The occupant behind the tinted glass of the back seat was out and surveying the scene even before his driver could open the door for him.

A sudden, somehow eerie silence descended as the dust settled in clouds about the stranger. Even the driver waited uncertainly, as if hesitant to step forward and close the limo door for fear of getting in this man's way.

The unexpected visitor was middle-aged, fitting the description of what Al would term 'a suit' to a T. He was perfectly groomed, hair cut so short that it almost looked military, and clad in an expensive looking pin-striped suit and dark aviator's sunglasses.

The way he whipped them off his face to regard the site with narrow-eyed intentness drew an involuntary swallow of apprehension from Sam. The only other person he'd ever seen do that was Al, and when he did it, it usually meant someone--usually someone in close proximity--was in trouble.

Big trouble.

Since Sam was the only other person--save for the driver--around for literally miles, he had a terrible and unwanted suspicion that the person in trouble could only be him. Even as he

formed the thought, the 'suit' turned his intense gaze directly on him.

"Hey, kid...where's Beckett?" he called peremptorily. "Security said he's somewhere on site. I wanna see him."

Finding he could move again, Sam quickly reached for his shirt. "I..." He grunted, struggling to pull it on over his sweaty skin. He started forward with one arm in the sleeve, only to bang his shin on one of his piles of bricks. They scattered before him, making his way even more hazardous as he endeavored to limp forward as quickly as he could.

"I...I'm..." Stumbling over a brick, he caught himself before he fell flat on his face...only to topple another pile with his flailing bare arm.

Occupied with now hopping out of their way, he glimpsed the suit slam his door with an impatient shake of his head and start toward him--the driver unobtrusively returning to the limo to wait.

"Come on, kid," the suit demanded, coming to a stop with his hands on his hips. "Cut the circus games and get him out here before I fry. Damn, it's hot!"

Hurrying forward while attempting to rub his shin, Sam watched the man's face break into an annoyed frown. There was no sympathy in his gaze, only brusque impatience. Reaching behind for the material, Sam struggled to get his other sweaty arm in his shirt before he reached the man whose whole manner screamed 'VIP'.

But at the sound of ripping material, Sam came to an embarrassed standstill, a move which unintentionally allowed the torn-off shirt sleeve to drop and gather at his wrist.

The suit was not amused. "Oh, for Pete's sake...just tell me where he is, huh, and I'll find him myself."

Totally mortified by his misfortune and how it must look, Sam hesitated and swallowed the dryness in his throat.

"Hello..." urged the other man, coming up to where he stood, not the least bit intimidated by the fact that Sam was a good four or five inches taller. "You understand me, kid? Speaka da English? Huh?"

"I..." Sam began again, extending a hand, then recalling it as he saw it was covered with sweat and grime. Hastily extricating his arm from his torn-off shirt sleeve, he used it as a rag to wipe his palm, then re-offered his hand. "I'm Sam Beckett."

For one terrible moment, Sam thought the other man wasn't going to accept his gesture. He stood stock still, regarding him with a wide-eyed, but nonetheless blank, look. The moment seemed impossibly long to Sam as he stood in the glare of the desert sun--sweat trickling down his back, shirt in comical tatters.

Then abruptly, the man's demeanor changed completely. Smiling a great, friendly smile, he engulfed Sam's hand in his own and squeezed tightly. "Dr. Beckett, it's truly a pleasure to meet you. I'm Teddy Bartlett, your new Government liaison."

"Government...liaison?" Sam slowly repeated, uncertain how to interpret this unexpected change of disposition. Al had mentioned something about a guy being sent out from the Committee, but not who--he got the impression that Al hadn't known who himself--but the arrival date had certainly not been today! "I...wasn't expecting you so soon."

"So I see." The jovial tone, coupled with another friendly smile, made the statement seem much less threatening than it could have been.

Still, Sam nervously brushed back the lock of hair which had spilled across his forehead, wishing now that he had listened when Donna suggested he should ride into Destiny with her and have it cut.

Bartlett gave him no further chance to respond. "I can see I took you by surprise here...I was over in Destiny for their Fourth of July celebration, representing the Senator, who had other engagements."

"Senator?" Sam repeated, then hazarded, "McBride?"

"Weitzman," Bartlett supplied. He smiled again, and this time managed to look somewhat sheepish. "I, unh...I really must apologize for my behavior, Sam. But I spent all morning being harassed by some tabloid talk-show host about UFOs and some stupid Government cover-up." He waved off the accusation with a quick flick of his hand. "You know how it is."

"Unh, sure...Ted."

"Sure you do. Being in the public eye isn't easy. So, I thought, while I was in the area, why not take the opportunity to drop by and get acquainted." Donning his dark glasses, Bartlett stepped past Sam to look over the vacant building site behind. "By the way, where's all your help?"

Feeling a flush of panic creep over him, Sam stalled. "Well...I..." The whole purpose of

the Government liaison's job was to make sure he wasn't squandering Committee money, wasn't it? Oh, boy. This man was not going to like his answer. Unable to tell a lie, Sam looked at his feet as he quietly admitted, "I gave everyone the day off, since it's the day after the holiday."

Still regarding the site with obvious interest, Bartlett's only reaction was a slight stir in the set of his shoulders. "With pay, I hope," he said, his back still to Sam.

With a breath of relief, Sam agreed and said, "I'm afraid almost everyone's gone, except Security of course. Even Al's out of town this weekend."

"Calavicci's not here?" Bartlett's spin on his heel had the precision of an alert military man, although his expression remained polite and neutral.

Cautious, Sam nodded. "Until Sunday. I'm afraid I don't know the name or number of the hotel where he's staying...only that it's somewhere in New Jersey."

"Not to worry," Bartlett returned with another easy grin. He dropped one arm over Sam's shoulders--no mean feat considering his height--and pushed his sunglasses up the bridge of his nose. "This'll give us a chance for a little uninterrupted talk. I find your string theory absolutely fascinating."

Sam looked from the heavy, gold-ringed hand resting on his shoulder to the smiling face so near to his, again finding himself wary of the eyes hidden behind the dark lenses. That...and the sinking feeling in his gut which told him, no matter what, he did not want an 'uninterrupted talk' with this man. Yet he knew with certainty that was exactly what he was going to get.

Barely--just barely--he stifled a sigh as the Government liaison began steering him toward the door of the Imaging Chamber access building.

"So," Bartlett said reasonably, "how about we get out of this damn heat...and you can show me around."

* * *

When Maxine insisted on going 'home to change first', Al didn't know quite what to expect. The tight black leather and studs, the lightning bolt earrings and spike-heeled shoes, were about as outspoken as you could go in that direction. The last thing he envisioned was a total

reversal...hence that was exactly what he got.

After clearing a spot to sit in the living room of her Newark apartment, he couldn't stop himself from doing a double-take when she came out from the direction of the bedroom. Now attired in a simple, pale blue dress, 'Mad Max' had--in the space of a mere ten minutes--been transformed into 'Mild Mannered Max'. She looked more like a bored housewife than the leathery hussy he'd met just a half hour earlier.

Running a brush through her shoulder length hair, she stopped short upon noting his reaction. "...what?"

He quickly composed his look. "Unh... nothing..." Although he felt a little cheated by her obvious charade, he reminded himself that it shouldn't have been the 'image' he'd been attracted to, rather the woman wearing it.

"It's all very uncomfortable," Maxine explained, picking up on his mood and continuing on across to where he sat. "All that tight leather and stuff."

He got up out of the armchair as she reached him. "Then why do you wear it?"

"'Cause it looks good. I'm hoping it'll be a...um...a professional asset."

Oh, great, she was a hooker! And if this was headed anywhere near where he'd hoped it was headed, that was a definite no-no. He'd drawn the line on having anything to do with prostitutes several years ago, when all the AIDS stuff had started to get completely out of hand.

But wait, wasn't this new-look Max in direct conflict with his perception of that profession?

"What, unh...what do you do?"

"Well, by day I'm basically a receptionist...at a law office over in Manhattan."

Correction: part-time hooker.

"And by night?" He was almost afraid to ask, dreading a confirmation because he really liked her.

She smiled knowingly at his anxiousness. "I'm not a call girl...if that's what you're worried about."

"Oh, no, I never thought...that is I, unh...um...you're not?"

"No, silly." Smiling, she lightly punched his arm. "But I'm impressed you thought I was."

Al blinked in surprise. Impressed? Any other woman would have slapped his face!

"At least I know it's convincing," she went on, oblivious to the fact that he had no idea what she was babbling about. "Was it the

leather or the tattoo? Or a combination of both?"

"Um...both...I think," he said, his head swimming, just barely treading water in this very unorthodox conversation.

"Good." She nodded, genuinely pleased. "Then the tattoo was worth getting."

"Look, Max..."

"Maxine."

"What?"

"This..." She gestured at her 'housewife' outfit. "...is Maxine. The leather and studs is Max."

Al shook his head in complete exasperation. "Who are you?! Sybil?!"

She laughed. "I guess it does sound a little strange, huh?"

That was the first even vaguely rational thing she'd said since she'd walked in. He huffed out a breath, feeling as if he'd just cleared a major hurdle in the language department and was at least now standing on her side of the fence. "Slightly, yeah."

"Well, it's simple really. See, I love to skate. And I'm hoping to get into the Roller Derby this year. At last season's try-outs nobody was even remotely interested in 'Maxine The Wimpoid'." She pulled a face at the memory. "So I created--"

"--'Mad Max'," Al concluded, catching on. Vastly relieved, he grinned. "Well, you had me going."

She studied him a moment. "Even though I don't know you," she began dubiously, "why do I have the impression that if I can pull the wool over your eyes, I can fool anyone?"

"Well," he returned casually, "if you get to know me, you might find out."

That twinkle he'd seen earlier lit up her eyes again. "Let me get my purse and we can go."

* * *

Since Maxine was the local girl, Al left the decision of where she wanted to go eat entirely up to her. With her sitting beside him in his rented Lincoln, he was quite prepared to take her anywhere she wanted. But again she surprised him--this time with her somewhat simple choice.

'Benny's' turned out to be nothing more than an umbrella vending cart down by the river in Liberty State Park, but what he vended was

nothing short of epicurean heaven. Maxine hadn't been exaggerating when she said he made 'the best Philadelphia cheese steaks this side of the state line'. They walked along the foreshore as they ate, and eventually stopped at a point overlooking Ellis Island and the streets of Brooklyn across the bay beyond.

Sitting on a sunny park bench, Al was glad he'd let Maxine talk him into leaving his jacket in the car. It was just too damn hot for anything more than rolled up shirt sleeves. Still, it was all very relaxing--the view, the food, the company.

Arms spread casually across the back of the seat, one hand holding her half-emptied paper cup of Diet Coke, he was aware of the contented smile on his face as he watched her coax an assortment of birds down onto the sidewalk. Soon she had dozens scavenging for snippets of the left-over crust from her sandwich.

When the last of the food was finally gone, she skipped back to where he sat, creating a feathered flurry worthy of Hitchcock himself when she dashed straight through the grounded flock.

She collapsed onto the bench beside him. "I haven't done this in ages," she admitted with a wistful sigh. "I feel like a kid!"

"I know what you mean," he agreed, sharing her nostalgic mood...but for a completely different reason.

She took her Coke from him and sipped it through the straw. "You never told me. What do you do? When you're not hanging out in tattoo parlors picking up strange women, that is."

He told her he was an officer in the Navy, and since he'd never been one to brag about his accomplishments, left it at that. She didn't ask for details, so he didn't offer any. It wasn't until a long silence settled between them that he felt compelled to keep the conversation going.

"I grew up over there," he said, and she followed the flick of his head, south-east across the harbor. "Well, sorta..."

"Brooklyn?"

"Yeah...Pop bought a house there once." He was suddenly ten years old again, lost in the joyous memory of his father returning from the Middle East and flaunting the wealth he'd made in the oil fields of Saudi Arabia. Trudy had been alive then, and the three of them had vowed to make it as a family. Until his father died. Then the house was sold, Trudy was returned to

the institution, and he ended up back in the orphanage...

He crushed those thoughts before they were fully formed.

"Pop had a saying," he continued, chasing a more pleasant memory. "La chiave i tutte le porte aprirano è la conoscenza'."

"Wow..." She sounded genuinely impressed. "What's it mean?"

"That knowledge is the key to opening life's doors."

She perked up. "Are you Italian?"

"My old man was." His eyes strayed to the small island out in the bay. How many times had he heard the story? His father, a poor Italian immigrant, coming to this country to start a new life...and a family.

And then abandonment.

Unexpectedly bitter with his memories, he was grateful for Maxine's distraction. Since his arm was still resting across the back of the bench--across the top of her shoulders--all she had to do was simply put her head back, and she was all but snuggled against him. When he met her eyes, she threw him a sexy look.

"Pity...they say Italian men make wonderful lovers."

With that observation, she stood--still sipping her soda--and walked away.

Al watched her for a moment, then got up and followed. He caught her easily as she meandered down the riverwalk, dodging the lunchtime crowd and sidewalk roller skaters, and fell into step beside her with his hands buried in his pockets.

Without looking at her, he said, "Well, I do have Italian blood, you know."

They both stopped, looked at each other, and laughed. Al took advantage of the moment and slipped his arm around her waist, then they continued along the water's edge.

* * *

"The statue is really only a hundred and fifty feet high," Maxine announced, gazing out across the red-rippled water.

Their walk had turned into a languid afternoon stroll. The hours had passed without seeming to until finally, they had stopped at the docks with the Statue Of Liberty just a stone's throw out into the bay. Here, for some reason, she'd felt motivated to launch into her tour-guide spiel. It was getting late--the sun low--and undoubtedly the next thing on the

itinerary was to take her home.

"Everybody just thinks it looks taller 'cause of the pedestal it sits on."

Al was completely ignorant of that scenery. His whole attention was focused on a far more pleasant view--an attractive blonde in profile--and he just didn't want to give that up. "Max, are you doing anything tonight?"

She turned her head to meet his eyes. "Excuse me?"

"Tonight," he repeated. "You wanna have dinner with me? Maybe go to a movie? Or a show?"

A pained look flooded across her face. "Oh, I can't...!"

He started, having not really expected a 'no'. Or this exaggerated reaction. He'd assumed that the lack of a wedding ring meant she wasn't married, and he'd just hoped--since she'd spent the afternoon with him--that there wasn't a boyfriend.

Now it looked like he'd been wrong. He shrugged. "S'okay, I understand..."

"No you don't." She put her hand on his arm and smiled softly. "The try-outs for the Roller Derby are tonight. I can't miss them, Al, I've been working toward tonight all year long. My life's ambition even! I mean, I'd intended to spend this afternoon practicing too but..." Her expression became a little hesitant. "Would you...would you like to come and watch?"

He faltered. He should be grateful it wasn't a boyfriend.

But Roller Derby?

* * *

"Kill the scrawny blonde bitch!"

Al regarded the loud mouthed, 300-pound, beer-belly-on-legs sitting beside him on the wooden bleachers, with a shrewd eye. The 'scrawny blonde bitch' reference had been used several times in as many minutes--an obvious tag on Maxine.

Correction: 'Mad Max'...for she was wearing a tight leather-and-studs bodice and proudly displaying her new tattoo.

The new instruction to 'kill' however, had been directed at the black-leathered female gladiator--Max's latest opponent--who was presently trying to run her right out of the skating rink.

"Give it to her, Nitro! Come on! Where it hurts!"

Having had a gutful of this all evening--and despite his better judgment--Al suddenly found he could contain himself no longer. He leaped to his feet and started throwing his fists, getting right into the mood of the moment. Not that Maxine really needed his vocal support--she was one hell of a skater.

"Hit her, Max! Atta girl, remember how mad you are! Kick her butt!"

When the walking beer-belly glared at him, Al just smirked and--feeling a damn sight better for his outburst--sat back down with his now-satisfied attention focused back on the action in the rink.

Up until this round Max had been doing very well, already beating out dozens of hopefuls just to reach this far in the try-out proceedings. But he had to concede, as he watched the present competition grab her blonde ponytail and tug--hard--it looked as if maybe this time she'd finally met her match.

Dashing those thought, his hopes fluttered as Maxine twisted free. Both skaters went high on the banked curve--dangerously close to the guard rail--then settled into the straight away. It was suddenly apparent that the race had come down to this final, brutal leg.

Both woman gave it their all, both determined to reach the upcoming jump ramp before the other, and hence sail on through to the finish line in unconquered glory...and a position on the team.

Al held his breath as they hit the ramp and went airborne together. God, they must have been doin' twenty miles an hour...!

There was a tussle. Nitro gave a hard, mid-air punch to the stomach...and when two pairs of roller skates crashed to the deck, only one pair skated free.

As Nitro coasted to safety and a victorious win with whistles and cheers, poor Maxine landed right on her butt and spun out across the track, until the guard rail stopped her momentum with a painful thud.

Al winced, slapping a hand over his mouth and definitely feeling for her. With no time or patience for Mr. Beer-Belly's gloating comments, he was on his feet and taking the steps down to rink-side two at a time. Maxine had disappeared from his view after skidding into the safety barrier, and since she hadn't gotten up, he was concerned she may have been seriously hurt.

Overhead, a commentator announced that 'Nikki Nitro' had eliminated 'Mad Max' in the preceding

round, and that the next showdown would be between 'The Brooklyn Bomber' and 'Diamond Blaze'.

Reaching the safety barrier with such urgency, Al nearly went head over heels over it himself. "Max, you okay?"

She was just lying there, crumpled and defeated, fighting back the tears.

He reached out a hand. "Are you hurt?"

Composing herself, she wiped away a stray tear and avoided his help. "'Course, I'm not hurt. What do you think I am? A wimp?"

Without another word--without meeting his eyes--she clambered to her feet and skated away.

"Max...?" he called, knowing the thing that had been hurt...was her pride. "Maxine!"

But there was no reply.

* * *

In fact, she never said one word to him during the entire journey back to her apartment. Okay, so she'd been beaten. She'd lost a spot on the team, but there was always next season. Sure, she had a right to be disappointed, but this...

This was way beyond disappointment. This was a full-fledged sulk.

Recognizing it as such--knowing from experience how Sam got when in these moods--he didn't even attempt to make conversation...until he was standing outside the door to her apartment and it suddenly occurred to him that maybe this was it--goodbye.

"Come on," he encouraged, watching over her shoulder as she silently put the key in the lock. "There's always next year. I know you can take a punch...hell, all you gotta do is learn how to throw a couple."

She whirled around unexpectedly, fire and ice glinting in her blue eyes.

Taken back by the expression, he smiled hesitantly. "I could teach you a few moves if you li--"

She literally choked off his words, wrapping her right hand around his tie and yanking his face toward hers.

"I don't need you to teach me anything. I'm not a damn wimp, I can handle it on my own." She gave a sharp, spiteful tug on his tie. "God, you're a bastard," she hissed, then kissed him.

Hard.

Although initially surprised by this move, it didn't take him but a moment to warm to the

idea. But when he tried to embrace her to return her kiss, she simply pushed him away like yesterday's trash and charged into her home, slamming the door in his face.

Al blinked, feeling stunned, infuriated--even violated.

The hell any broad got away with that!

Grabbing the door handle, he was somewhat surprised--but nonetheless pleased--to find it was unlocked. Wanting revenge, he stamped in after her, slamming the door to announce his presence.

She was turning down the bed when he stormed her bedroom. He stopped beside her, and she whirled to face him with a spiteful sneer.

"Who invited you?"

"What the hell're you mad at me for?" he snapped back. "You're the one who fell on her pretty little butt."

With an accusing look and a raised hand, she made to slap him, but he neatly avoided it--catching her wrist and locking his other arm around her waist when momentum carried her against him.

"Piss off!" She tried to push away.

Al held tight. "Yeah well, screw you, sweetheart!"

"In your dreams, pal..."

"You wish."

Again she struggled and again he resisted, both caught up in the wild, uncontrollable heat of the moment, neither willing to be subservient to the other. As it got even more frenzied, they both lost their balance and toppled onto the bed. Since Al still had hold of her wrist, he effectively pinned her beneath him and claimed a victory point.

He kissed her--really hard. When he finally surfaced for air, she was just as breathless... but there was still steam coming out her ears and daggers in her eyes. Letting her go, he pushed away and rolled onto his back.

Now they were even. Now he could leave.

And he probably would have too, had she not jumped on top of him for Round Two.

"You son of a..." Straddling him, she hammered a clenched fist on his sternum.

"Ow! Geez, what the hell d'you do that for?"

"Because it's all your fault."

"My fault?! Mind tellin' me how you arrive at that conclusion?"

"I was gonna practice this afternoon...not play tourist." She hit him again.

"OW! Geez, Maxine..."

"MAX, DAMN IT!" Still sitting on him, she met his eyes. "And you wanna know who I'm mad at? I'll tell you who I'm mad at..."

Without bothering to undo his tie, she tore open his shirt. Material ripped, and buttons popped in all directions.

Hell, she wasn't just 'mad'--she was livid!

"I'm not 'Maxine The Wimpoid'!" She thumped him again, then immediately ran both hands up over his undershirt in a lingering caress. "I'm as tough as any of 'em..."

Al's emotions were beginning to boil. He could feel his heartbeat start to race, that Italian blood start to pound. "Yeah, but obviously not tough enough."

"I almost won!"

"'Almost' doesn't count, sweetheart. Fact of life."

"You bastard...I've got what it takes, and you know it." Still straddling him, she hit out again--this time with both fists.

He grunted under the double impact, then fought with her to grab her wrists before she could do it again. She struggled, but having had enough of the abuse, Al held tight.

"Yeah well, actions speak louder than words." As if to demonstrate, he flung her onto the bed beside him. Their positions now reversed, he looked down at her and said, "So why don't you just show me exactly how tough you really are, Max." Then his hard look softened into a narrow-eyed leer. "And show it to me without mercy..."

* * *

She was ruthless.

I quickly learned that the bedroom was one arena where 'Mad Max', the would-be Roller Derby queen, truly was as tough as nails. She knew exactly what she wanted, and made damn sure I gave it to her. Repeatedly! I mean, she just couldn't get enough! We must've done it a dozen times!

Okay, okay...so maybe that's a slight exaggeration on my part, but suffice to say we were pounding her posturepedic all night long.

It was great!

Finally, when we both were just lyin' there, totally exhausted and watchin' the sun come up, I fell asleep on her. Me--Calavicci The Insatiable! That was downright embarrassing. She didn't seem to mind though--just made me work all that much harder when I

eventually woke up.

We didn't get outta bed until later that afternoon, and after I went back to my hotel to change clothes--my shirt in particular--I took her to dinner at what she said was her favorite restaurant over in Manhattan.

It didn't really surprise me that it was a swanky Italian joint, but it did surprise me that one of the stipulations of both patrons and hired help, was that no one spoke English... 'cause Max didn't understand a single word of Italian.

* * *

"Cameriere..." Al called to the waiter, signaling him over with a quick flick of his hand. With a smile at Maxine, who sat across the table from him, he waited until the young man had reached table then asked for the check. "Il conto, prego."

"Le piacerebbe guardare il carrello dei dolci, Signore?" He smiled at Maxine. "Signorina?"

"Oh...um..." She looked to Al.

"He wants to know if you want any dessert," he said, translating as he had been doing all evening.

"Oh, no, I couldn't. I'm stuffed."

"On a few mouthfuls of antipasto? You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Well...coffee then?"

"Okay." She smiled at him...but it became somewhat provocative as she turned it on the soap opera stud they had for a waiter.

Feeling a decided pang of jealousy, Al intended on sparing the young waiter nothing more than a glance. He double-taked, however, realizing the guy's grin was no doubt because he had a perfect view down the front of her dress.

"Due cappuccino," he said in a tone that let the nozzle know he'd been caught. "E il conto."

"Certamente, Signore."

Yeah... 'certainly, sir' yourself, pal...

Of course, Maxine wasn't helping matters. From the way she was watching the waiter move away--in particular the way her eyes were glued to the guy's tight leather pants--he knew she was having her fill of dessert regardless. The visual, low-fat kind.

A little piqued by her behavior, he reached into his pocket for a cigar. Okay, so the guy was more her age and, with those smoldering Italian looks that women usually died for, he

had to be an out-of-work actor or model...but what the hell was he? Chopped liver?

Clipping off the end, he stuck it in his mouth and flipped open his lighter. "I thought you said this was your favorite restaurant?" he said, challenging her attention as he lit his cigar.

She looked back at him as he blew a puff of smoke into the air. "Well, I...okay, so I've never actually been here. But I've always wanted to...every time I walked past."

Cigar balanced in his hand, Al hooked his elbow over the back of the seat. "If you could just read the menu, right?" He grinned in honest amusement. "What is it with you and Italians anyway?"

"Nothing," came the casual reply.

"Nothing?"

"Okay, so it's always been a...a sort of fantasy," she confessed, eyes darting away for an instant--in the direction of their departing waiter. The look she laid on him was downright sultry. "To have an Italian lover, I mean."

Al was about to reiterate his Italian heritage, when her attention shifted back to him.

"Say something to me in Italian?"

Seeing his chance, he sat forward, smiling as he slipped his free hand over hers. "Lei molto bella, angelo," he whispered, his eyes dipping to the cleavage only just hidden by the low neckline of her dress, "il tuo seno è come dei meloni Toscana." Her delighted smile encouraged him. "Sono il tuo schiavo il sesso. Vorrei fare l'amore con lei, tutto la notte."

She giggled.

His grin faded slightly, wondering if she'd understood him...and if so, what she found so funny. "What?"

"I have to confess. I have no idea what you're saying. You could be telling me I'm fat and ugly...and I'd never know."

An eyebrow raised in a typical Calaviccian leer. "I just said I was your sex slave...and that I wanted to make love with you all night."

"Oh..." she said seriously, then grinned as the waiter returned with two cups of frothy cappuccino. "Do you think we can have our coffee first?"

Al sat back triumphantly as the young man placed the cups on the table and the check by his elbow.

Holding Maxine's eyes, he raised a knowing eyebrow. "If you drink real fast..."

* * *

Sunday morning seemed to come around all too quickly. When Al opened his eyes, he found himself alone and lying on his stomach with his outstretched arm hugging a pillow. His immediate reaction was a grimace, but not because he was alone--in fact, he was rather grateful of Maxine's absence.

Raising a hand, he shaded his eyes against the brilliant morning sunshine that was streaming in through the vertical blinds of the glass bedroom door, criss-crossing the bed like giant tiger stripes, and then rolled away onto his back.

Wearily, he surrendered to the impulse to let his eyes droop closed again, even though his conscience told him he should get out of bed before 'Mad Max' came back from wherever the hell she was. Geez. If the passion they'd shared last night accounted for anything, it was obvious that her goal was to love him to death.

Talk about performance under pressure! Maxine was about as voracious as they came, and his ego was making him do everything he could to try to keep up with her. Lest she think he was too old, and want to trade him in for that young stud from the restaurant. Trouble was, his excuses were starting to sound a little thin...even to him.

Still, as his thoughts were flooded with lazy memories of their lovemaking, he found himself breaking into a languorous smile. Okay, so maybe he was a glutton for punishment, but he should go find her. With any luck, she'd be taking a shower and he could offer to--

"Morning, sleepy."

Still wearing the same contented smile, he opened his eyes to regard her loosely robed figure, standing in the doorway with a breakfast tray.

"Buongiorno," he returned, wickedly thinking that it would be a hell of a way to go.

Smiling, she crossed to sit on the edge of the bed with her back to him, and balanced the tray across his covered legs. He sat forward, brushing her hair from her shoulder and greeting her with a kiss on some exposed skin near the base of her neck.

"Oh, no," she said, literally shrugging off his invitation. "I'm not wasting another day in bed. There are things to do."

"Things?"

She turned to him. "Eat your breakfast."

Al looked at the tray resting on his legs for the first time. An unappetizing glass of juice and half a grapefruit stared back at him. He frowned. "You call this breakfast? What happened to bacon and eggs? Or muffins? Or hash browns and--"

"Oh sure, clog up your arteries. What's your cholesterol level anyway?"

"Geez, you sound like Sam!"

"Who?"

"Never mind."

She continued, unperturbed. "You're not as young as you used to be, Al, you should start taking better care of yourself."

Ouch!

"Because Lord knows, I don't want you to have a heart attack in my bed."

Ego severely bruised, he wordlessly reclined back against the satin-covered pillows and reached for the last of his cigars on the bedside table. Striking his lighter, he put the tiny flame to the end and drew on the tobacco.

"And you smoke too much too," she asserted, picking up a spoon and going for the grapefruit.

"Yeah well...you talk too much." He blew out a puff of smoke, contemplating the ceiling as he watched it mushroom.

Spoon poised at her mouth, Maxine made a disagreeable face and waved ineffectively at the offending smoke. "Geez, I hate cigars! I bet my whole apartment reeks of it!"

Eyebrows raised, Al regarded her with a cool look. "Now, it bothers you." He clamped the cigar between his teeth, defiantly folded his arms behind his head, and looked at the ceiling once more. He didn't notice Maxine reaching over until she had swiftly plucked it from his mouth. "Hey...!"

"From now on, no smoking in bed. In fact, no smoking anywhere in my apartment. Period."

"Fine. Then I'll leave." He made a grab to retrieve his cigar, but she avoided him by scuttling to her feet, her loosely fastened robe slipping down one shoulder. "Maxine..." he said, using her full name in a warning tone.

With a defiant look, she used both hands to snap the offending stogie in two, then deposited both pieces into the glass of juice on the tray across his legs.

There was a satisfying sizzle.

Al was aghast. "I can't believe you did that. It was my last one!"

"Good. I won't have to put up with the smelly things anymore."

"You know, you're really a bitch sometimes."

"Yeah, well, you're nothing but a dirty old man...the way you charmed me into bed."

"Me?!" The way he remembered it, 'charm' had nothing to do with it. "Hey, doll...you were the one who ripped my clothes off, remember?"

"Oh, yeah right, like you didn't enjoy it."

"Lemme tell you something, sweetheart. Bein' punched in the chest ain't my idea of fun."

"Sex maniac," she said accusingly, moving the breakfast tray to the floor.

Watching her, looking extremely sexy in the morning light with her blue and gold, Italian silk robe hanging invitingly off her slender shoulders, he made no attempt to deny it.

Tongue practically hanging out, he watched as she started hunting around the clothes strewn on the bedroom floor, then smiled appreciatively as she bent over to retrieve an item.

"Come on, get up," she instructed, collecting her clothes.

"I'm tryin', baby, I'm tryin'!"

"That's not what I meant." She took off her robe, completely uninhibited by her nudity, in preparation of dressing. From the corner of her eye, she finally noticed he was looking. "What are you gawking at?" she demanded, facing him with her hands on her hips.

"I...unh...was just admiring your...tattoo."

A short laugh greeted him. "Well, admire it some other time. C'mon, we're going to the park."

Al grimaced in disappointment as she covered her tattoo with a pair of silky white panties. "You know, it's a pity you didn't get it in a more visible place." He gave her a grin and a wink. "Does wonders for your 'Mad Max' image."

"You really think so?"

"Yeah. And so would some slinky black leather." The Calavicci leer was back. "Something real skimpy--you know, that leaves hardly anything to the imagination."

A particularly skimpy leather outfit flashed to mind, worn by a particularly memorable blonde stripper in Vegas. She'd been about Maxine's height and weight, thus in his mind's eye it was easy to transpose the faces. There was a shop there which sold all that stuff and...geez, Max would knock him dead in an outfit like that!

"Let's go to Vegas."

"Vegas?!" She pursed a smile. "I think maybe the park's a little closer." She paused, noting his expression. "You're serious."

"Yeah. We'll catch a flight today--stay as

long as you like."

"Al...I have a job. Tomorrow's Monday and I have to go to work..."

"So you take a couple of sick days."

"I just took a day sick on Friday. Besides, don't you have to...go take charge of a ship or something?"

"One phone call will take care of that," Al assured her, remembering how easily PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP had been running in the past several weeks. Sam could easily handle things without him for a few more days.

"But it's a holiday weekend," she said, still sounding unconvinced. "Wouldn't stuff be closed?"

Al chuckled. "Sweetheart, Vegas is like Disneyland for adults. It never closes." He spread his hands in appeal. "What would you rather do? Go back to work in the salt mines... or take the fantasy trip of a lifetime with a guy like me?"

Standing there in her bra and panties, she folded her arms and threw him a wry look. "Give me one good reason why any girl in her right mind would willingly lock herself in a hotel room with you?"

"Pago io, angelo." He flashed a lecherous grin, mercilessly going straight for her Achilles' Heel. Hell, they didn't call it the 'language of love' for nothing. "Cosa dice?"

Smiling, guessing his tactics, she pulled on a pair of tight, black, bike shorts. "I'm going to get some exercise." A lime green t-shirt followed then, as she tied her hair back in a ponytail, she faced him again. "Tell you what. You prove you can keep up with me, on a one lap jog around the park, and I'll not only cook you bacon and eggs when we get back, but I'll go to Las Vegas with you for a few days. Deal?"

Never one to turn down what he considered a sure bet, Al jumped up out of bed like he'd been stuck with a pin. "Deal."

* * *

Okay, so maybe keeping up with Maxine wasn't exactly as easy as I thought. I was in reasonable shape but I had a good twenty years on her, plus a lifetime's worth of smoking and drinking.

She, on the other hand, was in tip-top form from all that skating she did. Maybe she was right. Maybe I did need to cut down on some of the high cholesterol stuff I ate...and get a

little more exercise. I think it had been literally years since I'd last jogged.

I don't like to think she was cutting me any slack--I'd rather believe that the idea of going on an all expenses paid trip to Vegas really appealed to her--but I managed to match her stride for stride on a one lap run around the park.

Geez...it was a big park!

Returning to her apartment, I found I'd run off my appetite for bacon and eggs, so I settled for some of the bran cereal she was eating and a tall glass of ice-cold orange juice. I'm not sure exactly what I was out to prove by eating that bowl of soggy cardboard, but I definitely scored some Brownie points with her for it.

Rather than admit that I was pretty well beat after that run, I declined her shower invitation with the excuse that I needed to organize our trip. So while she took a shower, I got on the horn to the airlines and booked two First Class seats on an afternoon flight to Vegas.

Maxine was out, wrapped in a towel, by the time I got round to calling Sam. I wanted to let him know I was taking a few extra days, but all I got was his damn answering machine...and Max was being very distracting.

* * *

Sam waved at the retreating tail lights of Bartlett's limo, as it pulled away in the darkness to return the Government liaison to his hotel, and closed his front door with a sigh of heartfelt relief.

"Oh, boy," he murmured, and remained leaning against it for a long, weary moment as Donna went to hang their sweaters in the hall closet.

Ever since Bartlett had unexpectedly turned up two days ago, he'd felt like he'd been walking on eggs. Thank God it was Sunday night! Al was due back tonight...and Al was much better at handling these Government types than he...

Although for all intents and purposes, Teddy Bartlett seemed to be the complete opposite of what Al had led him to believe these 'Government types' were actually like. He seemed genuinely supportive...and genuinely friendly. Nothing the man had said or done these past days had given Sam real reason to suspect he was anything other than what he claimed to be--the helpful liaison between QUANTUM LEAP and the Funding Committee.

Except maybe...

'Relax, kid. I'm on your side.'

He'd had lost count of how many times Ted had said that, but every time he did, it only bothered Sam even more.

He mentally shook himself as Donna returned to his side. She must have recognized his troubled expression for what it was, because she took his hand and drew him away from the door and further into their home.

"It'll be over soon," she said with a knowing smile. "Al will be back tonight."

"He'd better be," Sam grumbled, unsure if he was annoyed at Al for taking off for a weekend jaunt without leaving a contact number, or with himself for allowing Bartlett to smooth-talk him. "Teddy Bartlett makes me nervous."

"I thought you two were getting on famously?"

"Infamously...more like it..."

They stopped by the hall table which held the telephone and answering machine.

"Because he's so nice?" Donna asked, noting the blinking red light on the machine and rewinding the tape to hear the messages.

"Yeah," Sam agreed, taking her in an embrace from behind and leaning his chin on her shoulder. He rocked her gently. "I just keep waiting for the other shoe to drop...and it never does."

"Sam, you're a good judge of character. And you've spent virtually the entire weekend with him. What do you really think about him?"

"I think," Sam said, nuzzling her hair, half-wanting to drop the subject completely, "that he wants something, but I'm not sure what. Or if I'm giving it to him or not--or even if I should. I dunno...the guy is really smooth. When I'm with him, I believe him. But when I'm not--"

"--you start to think he's exactly the way Al says these Government types are."

"I can't wait to hand him over to Al," Sam admitted. "Let him handle 'good old Teddy'."

Donna smiled, turning in Sam's arms, and providing the distraction he was after by gently kissing away his scowl. "I bet Al's at home right now...recovering from his weekend." Her fingers tangled in his hair. "Or, if his timing is as impeccable as ever, on his way here--"

"We can always pretend we're out and call him later," Sam returned, an instant before his lips descended lovingly on hers.

Behind them, the answering machine beeped to announce the first message.

"Hi, pal," Al's cheery voice came from the machine, loud in the silence as the couple continued their kiss. "Just wanted to let you know, I'm granting myself a few extra days liberty."

The couple froze, incredulous--Sam's head coming up to glare at the machine.

"Think I'll kick back in Vegas," Al's voice continued casually. "I'll give you a call when I get there, let you know where I am."

A feminine voice, indistinct in the background of the tape, made Sam frown.

"Al..." he growled, as if the admiral could actually hear him. "Don't you--"

"If," Al's message continued, "I have time that is. Hold the fort, kid, and if anyone from Washington calls...stall 'em. I'll be back Wednesday." There was another indistinct female comment and, as if an afterthought, Al added, "Or Thursday..."

"Thursday!" Sam yelped, reaching for the machine as if the action would do any good. There was a click and the tape shut off, which only frustrated him even more. "Thursday!" he repeated, one arm still around Donna. "Can you believe that?"

"Uh-huh," she said with a sigh, leaning against his chest in resignation. "So...what are you and Teddy doing tomorrow?"

* * *

It was well after dark on Sunday evening when Al and Maxine arrived in Las Vegas. Renting a car at the airport, Al drove straight to his 'usual' hotel, The Stardust. He was always able to get a room there on the spur of the moment, but on this occasion never took into account that it was a holiday weekend. As such, it was completely booked out.

In fact, just when it looked like everywhere was booked solid, the manager at The Mirage revealed they had one vacancy due to a last minute cancellation--the Honeymoon Suite. Exhausted as they were from spending the better part of two hours trudging from hotel to hotel, neither Al nor Maxine cared.

He checked them in while she sat wearily in the lobby, then gratefully paid a bellhop to cart their luggage up several floors to their suite. Any other time, Al was sure Max would have been impressed by the all luxury, but as it was she was just too damn tired to even notice.

While Al tipped the kid for their luggage,

Maxine sought out the lavish bedroom and promptly collapsed. At least, that's where he found her a few minutes later--curled invitingly on the heart-shaped bed. Removing his jacket and tie, he sat to pull off his shoes, then laid down beside her on top of the covers. No doubt jumping timezones had taken its toll, but so had burning the candle at both ends over the weekend. They were both dog tired.

Propped on an elbow, he watched her for a moment and had to grin. Poor kid, he'd worn her out! Settling on his back, he was nonetheless grateful to close his eyes...dashing the idea of exactly who wore who out.

As if sensing his presence, Maxine rolled over and snuggled into him, and he realized she was already asleep. Taking her into his arms, he was content to simply hold her as they both caught up on some much needed sleep.

Tomorrow, they'd have some fun.

Tomorrow, he'd call Sam...let the kid know where he was...

Tomorrow...

* * *

Drowsy, sated, and relaxed in the morning silence, Sam stretched slowly, fully enjoying every moment of the sensation. Sighing, he nuzzled the warm fragrance of Donna's neck.

Responding with a soft sigh, she said regretfully, "We're going to be late getting to the Project."

"So," Sam murmured, "who's gonna say anything?"

Laughing, she snuggled deeper into his arms. "There are a few advantages sleeping with the boss, I guess."

Drawing her to him, he tried to push away the unwanted thoughts her words had triggered. Twenty minutes ago, Teddy Bartlett had been the furthest thing from his mind. Now, he realized, the time was fast approaching when he had to deal with him again...and it would not look good to be late when the Government liaison was waiting.

Sighing, Donna pulled away and leaned on one elbow to regard him. "You're thinking about Teddy, aren't you?"

"Yes," he admitted. "It's Monday morning...and he ought to be Al's problem by now."

"Ought to be," she agreed, kissing him gently before sliding out of bed. "I'm going to shower. Will you start the coffee?"

Nodding, Sam pushed aside the blankets to get to his feet. Belting a terry robe about his waist, he headed for the kitchen. But coffee was not the first thing on his list.

Al was.

Like a man on a mission, he strode purposefully toward the kitchen wall phone. So what if it was just after seven? An early call would serve the admiral right for partying so late...since he hadn't even checked into his hotel by midnight...

Picking up the receiver, he confidently--almost with a sense of vengeance--punched in the number for The Stardust hotel. Al always stayed at The Stardust. He would be up and on the first flight back to the Project before he knew what hit him.

When the hotel operator came on the line, Sam's spirits began to drop, slowly but surely, when she assured him there was no one named 'Calavicci' currently on the guest book. Add to that the knowledge that the hotel was booked solid--had been since Friday--and that Al had arrived somewhere in Vegas, only gave Sam's stomach reason to churn.

If he wasn't staying at The Stardust, where the hell was he?

Frustrated, Sam hung up the phone with an annoyed grunt of disbelief. At the sound of Donna's footsteps, he turned, anger evident in his every movement.

"He's not there!" he exclaimed as she entered. "Can you believe it? He's not there! Al always stays at The Stardust!"

"Not...?" Donna interrupted herself as Sam turned to the drawer in which they kept the phone book listing 800 numbers. "What are you doing?"

"Looking for Vegas hotels," Sam admitted grimly. "He's somewhere in that town...and I'm going to find him."

"But Sam," she protested mildly, watching him. "You can't call every hotel in Las Vegas..."

"Why not?" he growled, tossing the large book onto the counter. "I'm going to start with 'A' for Aladdin and work my way down to whatever letter it takes to find him!"

"For one thing," she answered reasonably, "You're supposed to meet Ted on site in forty-five minutes."

Pausing only an instant, Sam flipped open the book and trailed a finger down the page. "Then I'll call one or two now, then call the rest

whenever I can find time during the day." His voice rose in determination as he snatched up the phone again. "One way or another, I'm going to find him."

* * *

"I don't know..." Maxine said doubtfully, looking down at her new black bustier and matching lace bikini briefs. She turned to regard her reflection in the full length mirror again.

"Madonna eat your heart out," Al commented, from where he sat on the customer couch across from the dressing rooms. He'd heard this tone--seen this mood--before. At the tattoo parlor last Friday. Geez, was that only three days ago? It seemed like he and Maxine had known each other for ever...

It was just after noon on Monday, and true to his word he'd taken her shopping at the infamous 'leather store', which was tucked away down one end of Fremont Street between an on-the-spot wedding chapel and a convenience store. He had thoroughly enjoyed himself for the past hour or so, flirting with the skimpily clad sales assistants, and approving or rejecting each wonderfully kinky fragment of apparel Maxine gleefully paraded for him.

Al added a grin to his consent of her latest new outfit. It was amazing what a good night's sleep could do. Maxine had been so full of energy that morning, it had literally taken them hours before they got out of bed. Now, after watching her try on all that kinky slinky leather, not to mention the lacy lingerie, he could hardly wait to get her back into it!

"And that mini-skirt you tried on before that," he added truthfully. "And maybe a pair of black silk stockings to go with it..."

"Do you think this makes me look fat?" she asked, still scrutinizing her figure. She sucked in her tummy.

"Sweetheart, it makes you look good enough to eat."

"Al..." she chided gently, then turned the other hip to the mirror. "I can't decide..."

"Then take 'em all."

"But everything's so expensive," she protested quietly. "I can't ask you to pay for all this! There's a couple of hundred dollars worth just here." She motioned at the small pile laying across one of the nearby racks.

He shrugged. "Hey, I promised this trip

wouldn't cost you one red cent, and I meant it. If you like all this, then I'll buy it all."

"Well...if you're sure?"

"I'm sure." He grinned. "Besides, it's my pleasure, remember?"

Reluctantly agreeing, she was about to change back into her regular clothes, but he sweet-talked her into wearing some of her new apparel right away. So she settled on the mini-skirt, complemented by a white, short sleeve, off-the-shoulder top with a low sculptured neckline.

At the cash register, while they waited for the clerk to charge the sale to his gold American Express card, Al was distracted by a piece of jewelry in a glass case.

"You like that, huh?" Maxine asked, pointing at the silver lightning bolt lapel pin that had caught his eye.

"Yeah, I do."

"Then I'll buy it for you."

He looked at her. "You don't have to. It's nearly fifty bucks."

"I want to."

Al smiled. Max was okay.

Returning to The Mirage, they had lunch in the elegant Baccarat Bar then took a leisurely stroll through the rainforest atrium and surrounding attractions.

Maxine was as equally fascinated by the 20,000 gallon saltwater aquarium--with everything from sharks to puffer fish swimming idly in and out the man-made coral reefs--and the royal white tigers laying languorously in their rock lair nearby. This place truly was Disneyesque, and she was like a kid let loose in fantasy land. They had a great afternoon, and it was nearing five o'clock--the cocktail hour--when they finally decided to go upstairs to their suite.

Crossing the parking lot, Al took Maxine's elbow and steered her towards the promise of air-conditioning in the hotel lobby. They had just mounted the steps to the front door when a car full of young guys, cruising past in search of some action, elicited several lewd calls and wolf whistles directed at Maxine.

She balked a little at the commotion before wordlessly entering the hotel, but Al just grinned and followed her inside. He couldn't wait to get her to their room! All afternoon, she'd been driving him crazy dressed in that sexy outfit. Now it would give him great pleasure to get her alone and slowly peel off all that kinky slinky leather with his own two

hands, leaving moist imprints of his passion on each and every bit of flesh as he leisurely exposed it.

Yet, looking at her now as they waited for the elevator, Al got the impression that the commotion outside had nulled her gusto, rather than encouraged it. Worse, 'Maxine' was beginning to show through because of it. He could tell by the way she shuffled her feet and avoided his eyes.

Damn, he wanted to have some fun! He wanted 'Mad Max' back!

It didn't help matters that the elevator ride up to their floor was shared with an elderly couple whose dress and manner reeked of 'retired vacationers'. The wife, in particular, kept drilling Max with a very condemning evil-eye...although the old guy did steal more than his fill of appreciative glances at all that black leather when he thought his other half wasn't watching.

Al could almost physically see the transformation to 'Maxine' Mode. She was totally embarrassed about being dressed as she was, in that elevator with Ma and Pa, and tried --unsuccessfully--to melt into his shoulder for cover. The final indignity came when the elevator stopped to let the old couple out on the fifth floor. The wife confided to her husband--but in a voice loud enough for all to hear--exactly what she thought about the girls who walked the streets...not to mention a word or two about the dirty old men who hired them.

Deciding a well chosen word or two would only make matters worse, Al took it all with a cocky smile, especially when the old fellow shot a wink over his shoulder just before the elevator doors slid closed.

Unfortunately, things didn't get any better for the remainder of the elevator journey, and by the time they're reach the privacy of their suite, Maxine was totally mortified by the whole experience.

She covered into the sanctuary of the living room. "Did you hear what that woman said? God, how embarrassing...they thought I was a hooker!"

Al crossed to her, gently massaging her shoulders--delighting in the sensation of warm flesh beneath his hands--and physically tried to work Mad Max back to the fore. "That's because you look like a hooker."

He grinned, having intended the remark as a compliment, but the expression was promptly slapped off his face. Hard. Stunned, he

instinctively recoiled and put his hand to his stinging cheek.

"Don't you ever say that to me again," she hissed in a low voice.

"But I thought that's the image you wanted?!"

"Why? So I can get arrested?"

"You won't get arrested. Prostitution's legal here."

Maxine glared, thoroughly affronted. "Well, that makes me feel a hell of a lot better. Thank you, Al!"

She stormed off, and seconds later had him cringing at the sound of the bedroom door slamming shut. He rolled his eyes. Was this the same woman who, just a few days ago, had been impressed when he thought she was a call girl?

Al looked heavenward.

Women! Even if he lived to be a hundred, he was convinced he'd never fully understand them...

* * *

She'd been gone thirty minutes. Outside, the early evening sun was still blazing on the concrete, while he sat inside in the air-conditioning: cool, calm and collected.

He sat semi-reclined on the velour love seat with his ankles crossed on the coffee table, his jacket carefully laid over a nearby chair, tie pulled undone, and shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows. He smoked a cigar as he pondered the situation, all while staring at the scantily clad female on the television set who was mutely mouthing a 900 number at him.

The hell if he was going to go chasing her! Uh-unh, no way. When Max calmed down, she could work that one out herself and be the one to come running back to him! And he sure hoped it would be soon because he was starting to get hungry. Maybe he should just go and invite her to dinner? Nah, that'd look like he was giving in.

And Calavicci doesn't give in.

An unexpected yawn overtook him from nowhere. Well...maybe not from nowhere. He had been sort of 'active' lately. Since Maxine showed no sign of returning in the immediate future, and since he figured he may as well be comfortable while he out-waited her, he stubbed out his cigar with the other butts in the ashtray, hit the off button on the TV remote, and kicked off his shoes.

Getting up and moving over to the couch, he

stretched out on it with a sigh of contentment. A little shut-eye would be good. He could keep his strength up while at the same time send her the message that he wasn't the least bit bothered by her little play for attention...or whatever the hell it had been.

Yawning again, he settled his shoulders into the yielding cushions. It felt good to be tired --he hadn't had that itchy, bored out of his skull feeling since meeting Miss Roller Derby Hopeful last Friday. Max had 'reverted' to Maxine, but she'd pull out of it. She damn well better--this little impromptu jaunt was costing him a fortune!

Impromptu. Geez, he hadn't called Sam yet!

Opening in reflex at the thought, his eyes drifted shut again as his body resisted the idea of getting up to phone right then. He would do it later.

Sighing, he relaxed further into the couch. Keeping up with 'Mad Max' was definitely catching up with him.

* * *

A small sound intruded on Al's dream, just as he was about to remove the last sliver of Maxine's hot and sweaty leather. It was a soft and furtive sound, but a sound nonetheless. It brought him instantly awake with responses too well learned to ever be forgotten.

Rolling to his feet, senses on full alert, he saw only Maxine, now dressed in a conservative light blue sundress. So much for the leather fantasy...

He frowned. She was looking his way, frozen in place behind the chair on which he had folded his coat. And she was blushing like a guilty schoolgirl...no doubt because she was caught with his open wallet in her hand.

"What the hell're you doing?" he demanded, striding forward to snatch it away from her, his heart beating a trip hammer beat at his abrupt awakening from sleep.

Taking one look at the expression on his face, she fell back a step, but her voice was challenging. "Are you really an admiral?"

Geez, she'd been checking him out! "Yeah," he growled, automatically thumbing the monetary contents. "I'm really an admiral. So?"

Watching him, her eyes narrowed. "I didn't rob you, if that's what you think."

"Yeah well, I woke up too soon, didn't I."

"I'm not a thief!" she snapped back, her

eyes beginning to spark dangerously. That was good--he wanted 'Mad Max' back. "I was just trying to find out more about you."

Assured nothing was missing from his wallet --though it still bothered the hell out of him that she'd been through it--he tossed it onto the seat of the chair between them. "So did you find out what you wanted to know?"

Crossing her arms, she shifted her feet into what was clearly a 'Mad Max' fighting stance. "What's the matter? Is it a breach of the Government Secrets Act that I know your last name?"

Blinking, he cast a look at his discarded wallet. There was nothing 'official' in there that she could have seen, nothing that could compromise Project security anyway. Was there? "What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"Do you realize," she began, stabbing an accusing finger at him, "you've been sleeping in my bed all weekend and you haven't even bothered to tell me your last name? Or where you live? Nooo...I had to find that out by looking at your driver's license!" Her chin lifted in challenge. "By the way, isn't New Mexico a little landlocked for a sailor?"

He returned her sarcasm with a sneer. "Whatsa matter, Max? Have a sudden change of heart about sleeping with a man you just met? Or were you 'Maxine' when you started to chicken out?"

"Damn you," she said spitefully, stepping around the chair and moving in for the strike.

Seeing it coming, Al caught her arm, grimly holding on when she tried to jerk away.

Maxine glared. "Who the hell cares what you think anyway?" She resisted, trying to twist free. "Let go..."

"You do," he said, holding tight. "Just like you cared what that Mom and Pop in the elevator thought. You're not as tough as you want everyone to believe you are."

For a second she seemed to lose resistance, lowering her head as if she were about to cry. Suckered, he loosened his grip, feeling like a heel.

"Aw, Max..."

Jerking her captured arm free, she pressed her advantage by sinking an elbow into his ribs as she wheeled to retreat.

Huffing out a breath, he slowly straightened up as she stalked toward the bedroom. "That was a cheap trick."

"You asked for it," she called over her

shoulder.

"Oh yeah? Well, it's a pity you didn't know how to fight so dirty in the skating rink."

She stopped abruptly and faced him. They just glared at each other from opposite sides of the room, fuming in silence. Maxine nodded resentfully--as if she had expected no less from him--then turned and stalked off.

One hand still nursing his abused ribs, Al mentally kicked himself for having resorted to such a low blow, then followed her into the next room.

* * *

Slamming open the closet, she grasped her empty suitcase and flung it toward the bed without turning to see where he was standing.

Ducking as it sailed past his head, Al retreated to the relative safety of the dresser. "What're you doing?"

Rolling her eyes at him in a glance that eloquently said she would not dignify the question with a reply, she followed the suitcase with an armload of clothes. Not reaching the bed, they scattered across the carpet and she grunted in irritation. Bending to pick them up in quick, angry movements, she began to separate her clothes from the ones he had bought her just that morning.

Several slinky items of apparel were unceremoniously discarded in his general direction.

Plucking an offending pair of silky black stockings from his shoulder, Al took a step forward and angrily tossed them back at her.

"You know, you're just like every other dame I've ever met. When the going gets tough, you get going." He snorted sarcastically, then folded his arms in scornful nonchalance. "So go ahead. Run away, Maxine. I should've known you couldn't keep up with me."

Fury flared on her face as she straightened from her task and turned to him, the returned pair of stockings in hand. "Let me tell you something, Calavicci...I never run!" At his taunting expression, she continued, "NEVER! I'm leaving because I'd probably kill you if I didn't. A couple more days of this and they'd be hauling you out of here in a body bag."

"Is that a fact?" The laugh he gave was condescending. "Face it, sweetheart, you're simply running for home with your tail between your legs."

"I'm not your 'sweetheart'."

Ignoring her, he pushed off the dresser and stepped forward, arms still folded. "Now let me tell you something, doll. You're not the first to wimp out on me, so--"

"And don't call me 'doll'!" she cut in abruptly, closing the space between them with a few quick steps. "I'm not your 'doll' or your 'sweetheart' or your 'baby', or any other one of those chauvinistic terms you insist on using!"

She gave him a stiff-armed push with the hand trailing the stockings, strong enough to rock him back on his heels...so that he was forced to uncross his arms and take a step backwards to regain his balance.

Max looked smug at her small triumph. "You're relieved I'm going, admit it. I saw you taking a nap, flat out on the couch. I can outlast you any day."

"Prove it."

"Ha! Your heart couldn't stand the strain!"

"Try me."

"You couldn't afford to pay the bill for this place for as long as I could last."

"Then come back to New Mexico with me. Move into my place."

"I have a home, a job, and a life of my own." She crossed her arms in challenge. "New Mexico's a little too far to commute, and I'm not about to become a kept woman."

"So marry me."

Eyes instantly narrowing with suspicion, she temporarily abandoned her verbal assault in favor of several long moments of close scrutiny.

Al pulled back a little, having surprised himself with the words fired in the heat of battle. Until he realized that he'd actually meant them. Being with Max was certainly an adrenalin rush...and wasn't that what was presently missing from his life?

Hell. Why not? Sam wasn't the only one chasing an 'impossible dream'...

Unfortunately, Maxine decided not to take him seriously. She fought to hide a chuckle, one hand over her mouth. "Is that the best line you can come up with? No doubt inspired by the fact that this is the Honeymoon Suite."

Stung by her easy dismissal, his defenses bristled. "Look, just forget it. Okay?" He turned away, running a telling hand through his hair.

There was a short pause, then, "Oh God...you were serious!"

The genuine surprise in her tone forced him

to look back at her. He took offense to that too, and feigned a smirk. "No, I wasn't. You were right, it was just a line. Hell, one of the oldest lines in the book!" He sneered. "I guess you're used to hearing it."

She was still watching him way too closely to let his insults fuel her temper. "Uh-unh...you meant it. You actually asked me to marry you!"

Al pulled back his shoulders. "Doesn't matter if I did or not. You're not tough enough to accept it anyway."

"Hey, I can handle anything...including being married to you!"

"I doubt it," he said, rubbing his jaw as he returned to leaning against the dresser.

"Fine," she said, turning on her heel to throw the black stockings she still held at her suitcase. "We'd probably end up killing each other with matrimonial bliss anyway."

He cocked an eyebrow at her in spite of himself. "Be a hell of a ride though, wouldn't it?"

"I don't like sand," she announced obscurely, starting to fold her clothes to pack. "Or scorpions, or rattle snakes, or cactus plants. Not even those big ones you always see in cowboy movies, those ones that stand around all day with their arms in the air like someone's mugging them. Or sun...I hate sun. It gives you wrinkles..."

Al just stared at her back, feeling his blood pressure skyrocket with a severe bout of good, old-fashioned frustration. Geez Louise! This broad was impossible! Didn't she ever park her tongue?

Crossing the room in three quick strides, he slammed the suitcase closed--all but catching her fingers--then silenced her by grabbing her shoulders and pulling her against him for a kiss that clearly expressed everything he was feeling. At first she resisted, then she enjoyed it, then she angrily pushed him away and continued her monologue as if he'd never interrupted it.

"And tumbleweeds. I hate tumbleweeds!"

Incredulous, he stared at her, then lifted his face toward the ceiling. "Thank God."

"What?"

"Thank God, you said 'no'." Bringing his attention back to her, he leaned forward into her space. "'Cause if I was married to you, they'd be putting me in a room with rubber wallpaper before the end of the month! You

drive me crazy!"

"Oh, yeah? Well..." She met him nose to nose. "...ditto!" There was a slight pause as both continued to glare, then in the same tone of voice she continued, "Damn, you turn me on!"

"Not half as much as you turn me on," Al shot back.

A second later, by mutual consent, they grabbed each other in a hungry embrace that carried them onto the bed.

Sweeping the clothes, suitcase and hangers off the bed with one arm, Al pinned Maxine beneath him for a long and passionate kiss, then drew back to hold her gaze.

"And I didn't actually say 'no'," Maxine asserted, her hands resting at the back of his neck.

"Just forget it, okay?" he said, distracted with gently brushing locks of her blonde hair back from her face, wishing she'd simply shut up. "Forget I even mentioned it." He kissed the side of her throat.

"Why? Afraid you're not tough enough to handle me?"

The challenge in her tone brought his eyes back to hers. "Well, if you wanna put me to the test, I'll go call one of those twenty-four hour wedding chapels."

"That wasn't a 'yes'," she clarified with a frown. Then, smiling seductively, she grabbed his hair and pulled him down to her. "This is..."

Unexpectedly rolling to the side as he shifted his weight to accommodate her, she tumbled them both off the bed and onto the floor.

It was a couple of hours--or more--before he actually called the Chapel Of Love.

* * *

"I don't believe it," Sam said, quietly frantic, returning the second telephone to its rest on the kitchen wall with a sigh. "He's not at the Golden Nugget either."

It was noon Tuesday, some forty long hours since he'd heard Al's message on his answering machine, ten brief minutes after lunch.

Sam had spent his rare moments free of Teddy Bartlett determinedly checking the Vegas hotels ...without luck. Right now, he relished the idea of spending the afternoon with 'good old Teddy'--who was presently residing in his dining room--the same way he'd relished spending the

morning with him.

Being kicked in the teeth had more appeal.

"Al always stays at The Stardust," he repeated for perhaps the twentieth time--as if it would actually help change the situation.

Putting the lunch plates into the sink, Donna turned to the coffee pot to get it perking.

"Trust him to pick a holiday weekend," Sam continued, frustrated by his futile efforts to get hold of the admiral, "when they're all booked out, to pull a stunt like this." He turned to Donna. "You were right, he has a great sense of timing."

"I'm sure he didn't do it on purpose." Flicking on the coffee pot, she turned as he picked up the phone and hit 'zero' for the operator again. "Sam, you can't keep calling looking for him," she said. "Ted's waiting for us in the next room."

"Well, I can't wait for him to call either. That might not be until...geez...Thursday! I can't take another two and a half days of 'Teddy', Donna! I can't!"

"Sam," Donna said gently, taking the phone from his hand, recognizing a Beckett Fit brewing when she saw it. Settling it back in its place, she slipped her arms around his neck. "You're perfectly capable of handling Teddy Bartlett--in fact, you've already proved that."

"But Al--"

"You don't need Al for this." She landed a quick kiss on his lips. "I have absolute faith in you."

"You know Ted's talking about changing the security door system."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Just this morning, watching all the bricklayers at work, he started saying how the credit-card system we have was far from foolproof. How if any of the contractors got hold of a card they'd have instant access to restricted areas."

"Well, he has a point," Donna agreed thoughtfully. "It's not exactly state-of-the-art. What does he suggest as an alternative?"

"Electronic implants." He held up his palm. "A small micro-sensor implanted in the palm, painless and infallible. It would carry the person's security details, which would be scanned and read by a handprint sensor beside each door. Ziggy would process the data, and only open the door if the information on the implanted chip matched that individual's

security clearance to that area."

"Sounds impressive...and expensive."

"It is." Sam pulled away and began pacing the small kitchen. "But security is high on the Committee's list'," he continued in his best 'Teddy' voice.

He stopped abruptly, guiltily looked toward the closed door leading to the dining room. He wouldn't put it past the guy to have an ear to it right now. There was something decidedly sneaky about him...or was that just suspicion borne by Al's stories?

"Well, would it put us that far over budget to implement the change now? I'm sure it would be less expensive than trying the change things later on."

"I know, I know," Sam said, stopping with his back to the sink. His fingers curled under counter. "If it were a decision I had to make about the Accelerator or the Imaging Chamber, I wouldn't hesitate. But this is Security...Al's department. I at least want his input--damn, I wish he'd call!" Remembering his guest, he lowered his voice again. "I'm gonna wring his neck for this when he gets back. So help me, Donna...of all the irresponsible--"

He was cut short by the shrill electronic sound of the kitchen telephone. Being closer, Donna beat him to answer it.

"Beckett residence."

Sam wasted no time joining her, looking expectant.

Donna met his eyes. "Al! Where on earth are you? Well, yes, we know you're in Vegas..."

"Let me talk to him," Sam demanded, reaching for the phone. She obediently handed it over. "Al?"

"Hi ya, pal," Al said in a sleepy voice.

Sam frowned. He sounded like he'd just

gotten out of bed...or like he was still in bed.

At noon?

"Al, you said you'd call--"

"Well, I meant to. But I sorta got...distracted."

"I just bet you did," Sam grumbled knowingly. "Then you'd better just get un-distracted, and get your butt back here on the double."

"Whoa, pal. Don't you wanna hear why I got distracted?"

"No," Sam said firmly, not in the mood for yet another lewd tale of the admiral's exploits. He drew a deep breath. "Do you remember telling me about some Government liaison who was coming out to visit the site?"

"Unh...yeah, sure," Al said, obviously still distracted. "What about him? Or her. Geez, I hope he's a her...if you get my drift--Ouch!"

"What's wrong?"

"Unh...nothing..."

There was a short pause on the other end of the phone, broken only by a muffled female giggle, as Al took his revenge for 'nothing'.

"Damn it, Al, this is serious," Sam stated firmly. "He's here."

"What?"

"The guy. The Government liaison. Right now. In my dining room!"

"He is?"

"Yeah, he is."

"Well, geez, Sam...why didn't you say so?!" There was a definite change in Al's tone. "Look, sit tight, pal, and stall. I'm on the next flight outta here. You can fill me in on the details when I see you tonight. Hopefully."

"Al?" Sam asked. "Al, wait..."

But he was talking to a dial tone.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Hits And Misses"

I think Maxine knew I hadn't fallen in love with her--rather in need with her--and I think the feeling was mutual.

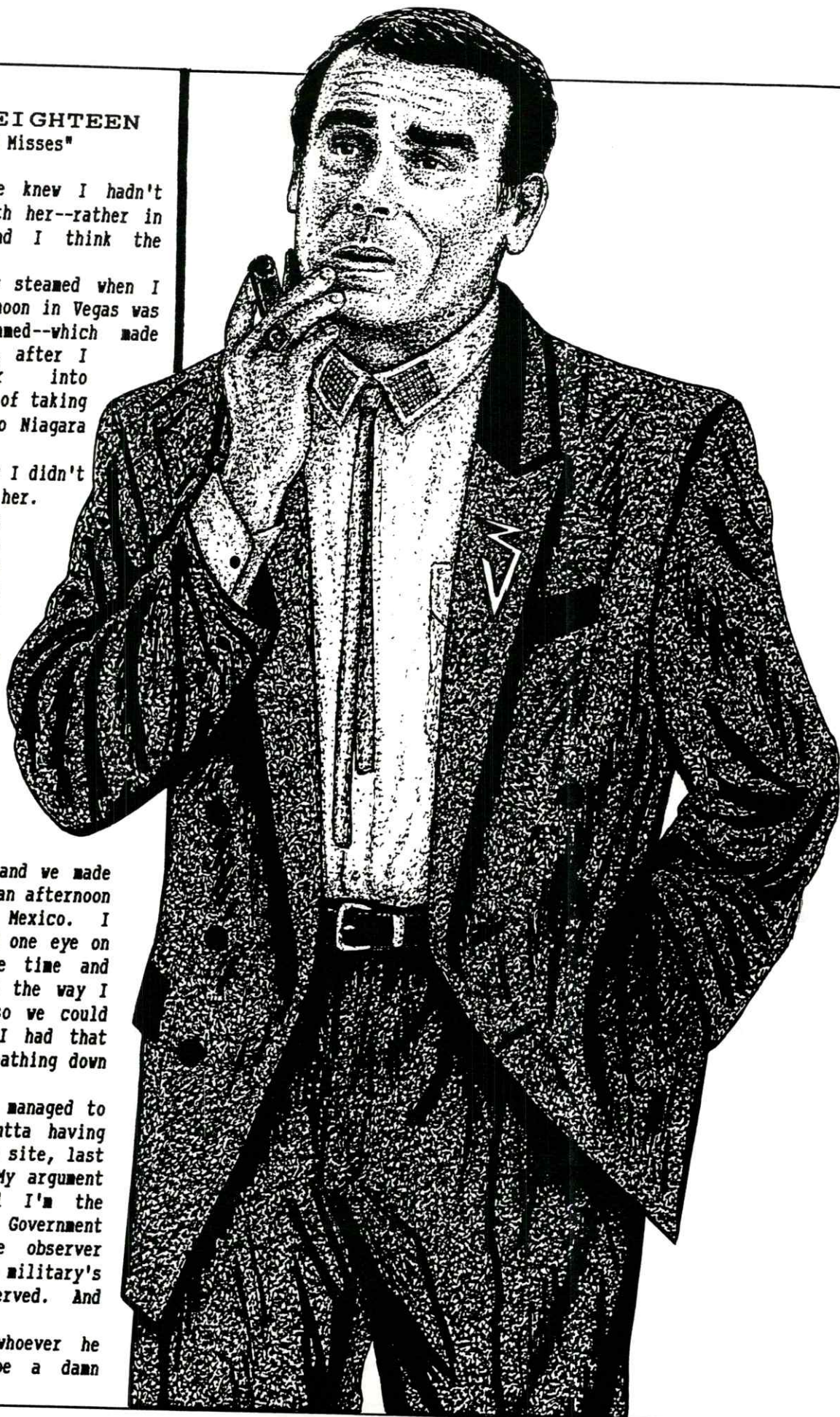
She was really steamed when I told her our honeymoon in Vegas was off. Really steamed--which made making up so good, after I sweet-talked her into accepting the idea of taking an extended trip to Niagara Falls instead.

Okay, so I admit I didn't really 'sweet-talk' her. Out-shouted her is more like it. I'm surprised they didn't kick us out of The Mirage for all the noise. Just goes to show that I was right when I told her our marriage would be one hell of a ride. I just didn't expect it would get so bumpy so soon!

But she came around in the end, and we made up in time to catch an afternoon flight back to New Mexico. I gotta confess, I had one eye on the clock the whole time and kinda steered things the way I wanted 'em to go, so we could catch that plane. I had that Government nozzle breathing down my neck, after all.

I was hoping I'd managed to fast talk my way outta having someone else there on site, last Committee meeting. My argument was, as an admiral I'm the perfect choice for Government liaison--the on site observer who assures the military's interests are best served. And I am!

This other guy--whoever he is--is just gonna be a damn



bureaucratic pain in the butt...a glorified dollars and cents watchdog hovering around to make sure we stay on budget.

Hah! Fat chance of that, considering the way Sam's enthusiasm likes to spend money.

It really galls me to think that somebody didn't want us to prepare for this--kept it all hush hush so this meatball could arrive and catch us with our pants down.

And there's no points for guessing that the 'somebody' behind it all was Weitzman. Without a doubt, he has it in for me and Sam--he'll definitely be one to watch.

In the meantime, I can handle the bureaucrat. I dunno who this guy is--I didn't think he was coming for another month or so--and already I don't like him. But I'll have to make the best of it. I'll just take him in hand...keep him in the dark if I can, woo him onto our side if I can't.

Facts can be presented in a lot of different ways. They're still the same facts, it's just the way they're put makes all the difference to how the bigshots holding the money see things. I'll just be sure our new liaison sees 'em the way I see 'em...and that he shoots 'em to the Committee exactly the same way.

Damn. I really wish he was a woman.

* * *

Showered and shaved, Al stood in front of the bedroom mirror of his New Mexico apartment, making a discerning adjustment to the hem of his immaculate dress whites. It was early evening--just after seven--but a quick phone call to the project site had confirmed that Sam and the liaison were still there, awaiting his arrival, even though all of the building contractors had undoubtedly called it a day hours ago.

Sam and the Bureaucratic Bigshot were there waiting for him, so he had to haul butt over there a.s.a.p.

He. As in alone. Solo. Unaccompanied. In the singular mode.

Without Maxine.

Not surprisingly, this idea hadn't sat too well with her...not that he could really blame her. He could imagine what it must have felt like to arrive at her new home, after no honeymoon, only to find herself abandoned there while he sped off into the night to meet somebody named 'Sam'.

But this was business. And everybody knew

you didn't mix business with pleasure.

Determination renewed, he pulled back his shoulders and gave his perfectly uniformed reflection the final inspection. Still, after a moment, he again thought of Max and let his gaze flick away to the image of the open bedroom door behind.

Geez, he'd been out of the shower at least ten minutes and hadn't heard so much as a peep out of her! What the hell was she doing out there? Pouting like a spoiled brat? Like she did in their hotel room in Vegas?

It sure was quiet out there...maybe she made good her threat to find a hotel and left! Hah! That'd be one for his Record Book--shortest marriage in Calavizzi history, less than twenty-four hours...

As if tuned to his wavelength, she suddenly appeared in the doorway and leaned against it, still dressed in her leather mini-skirt and making the move appear amazingly casual despite the initial abruptness of it. That same pout was still on her face, the one she'd donned before he went to shower when he told her she couldn't go with him to the Project.

Although it did begin to take on the glimmer of a slight smile as she paused to note his turned back, and--unaware that he was watching--undid the third button of her blouse.

Ding. Round Two...

Ignoring her, he reached for his hat then kept his eyes firmly glued to his reflection as he straightened the brim. Quite possibly, the rapid shift out of Italian Lover Mode and into Admiral Mode had something to do with it. Clearly, it was not way up there on her list of Fun Ideas.

In fact, she probably viewed Admiral Mode with about the same enthusiasm as he viewed her frequent shifts into Maxine The Wimpoid.

Catching a flash of movement from behind, he found she had pushed off the doorway to saunter into the bedroom. Now all traces of the pout were gone, replaced by the same confident, sassy smile she'd used on him that first day in the tattoo parlor--Mad Max was definitely back.

He did his utmost best to continue to ignore her as she made a show of examining his bed--their bed--but lost the battle as she came to a stop directly behind his shoulders.

But Sam was waiting...

Endeavoring to regain his 'all business' attitude, Al quickly diverted his attention to the mirror again. But there was nothing left of

his appearance to scrutinize...and he could still see her, standing right behind him... looking him over like a piece of meat in uniform.

Like with Sharon, and countless women before and after her, his dress whites were a female magnet.

"See anything you like?" he asked despite his good intentions to simply ignore her, teasing her the exact same way she had when they first met.

As if this were her signal, she slipped her arms around his waist from behind and let the flat of her palms travel slowly up his chest. "Oh, yeah..."

Eyes narrowing at the remembered pleasure, Al allowed himself a soft moan and enjoyed her touch.

"Are you sure you want to go out tonight?" she asked in a low, husky voice as her hands traveled down again.

Given the choice, there was no choice. Just this silent battle of wills which his conscience was slowly losing to his hormones. That is, until his conscience brought out the heavy artillery and reminded him that Sam was waiting.

Reluctantly, he turned to face her, mustering up a Beckett Puppy Look--an expression he had learned decades ago, and one which had proven its worth for getting on a woman's good side on more than one occasion.

"No, I don't 'want' to go," he assured her gently, holding her shoulders, "but I have to, y'know?" He gestured quickly at his dress whites. "Duty calls..."

In spite of his attempt to stand her off at arm's length, she moved closer into his embrace. "Duty calls here too."

Distracted by her wandering caress, it wasn't until she'd actually undone one of his gold, uniform buttons that he managed to take control of his sensibilities again.

He pushed her away, forcefully this time, then tried to compensate such an aggressive move with the Beckett Puppy Look at Force One.

"Max...believe me, it's very tempting. But I just don't have time right now. Later, okay?" Letting his eyes wander appreciatively to her unbuttoned blouse, he dismissed the Choir Boy look in favor of a more truthful leer. "In fact, that's a promise."

Tactics foiled, she immediately withdrew her hands--and her affection--and took a step away.

"I may not be in the mood later," she said

loftily.

Turning, she crossed to flop on the bed like a scolded child.

"This bed's way too hard," she complained, wrinkling her nose in distaste. "We'll have to get another one..."

"Okay, fine, whatever," Al relented, holding up his hands in surrender. He really didn't have time to play games. "I'll buy you a new bed." Considering that as the end of the debate, he started for the door. "Tomorrow."

Jumping up in a flash of athletic speed, she beat him to the threshold. He stopped, patience rapidly thinning, and simply looked a question at her. Right then, right under his nose, her whole demeanor abruptly changed.

"Al...honey..." she pined, leaning against him and letting one finger trace around his gold pilot's wings. It was one of the most pathetic displays of feminine wiles he had ever seen. If this was where Maxine The Wimpoid came from, then she was definitely well-named.

Still, there was something pitifully attractive about it...like the way her tracing finger slowly walked up his chest. Like the way she clasped her hands at the back of his neck. Like the way she was clearly willing to do practically anything...

She snuggled under his chin. "Don't leave me here all alone. Take me with you. Please?"

Focusing, Al deftly removed both Maxine and her hands, and gave her an eloquent look as he again stood her a step away. "No."

Folding her arms, Max pouted again. "It's another woman, isn't it." This was more an accusation than a question. "You're going off to be with another woman."

Truly stunned by this turn of events, he asked, "What the hell are you talking about?!"

"You. Leaving me here and going off to who-knows-where in the middle of the night to meet this 'Sam'. That's short for Samantha, right?" Her blue eyes widened. "Are you married?"

"Yeah...to you." He hadn't meant it to sound as annoying as it did, but rather than stand there and explain himself, he made a move to go around her.

Maxine stepped in front of him. "Just me?"

"Just you what?"

"Damn, I knew it! You're a bigamist!"

He snorted. "Sweetheart, believe me...I could never afford the alimony payments if they found out! Look, the Sam I'm going to meet is a guy. Okay?"

She looked horrified for a moment. "You're going off to be with another man?"

Al blinked, suddenly shocked. "What?! No! I mean, yes!" He shook his head. "But not like that. Damn it, Max, I don't have time for this. Now would you mind...?" He indicated the doorway which she was effectively blocking.

As if realizing she was fighting a hopeless cause, she stepped aside, giving in without grace. "Oh, all right..."

Al pulled back his shoulders. Geez, it just went to show how little they really knew about each other. Although after the episode in Vegas, which had earned him an elbow in the ribs, maybe he should have expected it. First it was 'brooding', then 'sexy', 'pathetic' and finally 'jealous'. All in an attempt to get her own way. What the hell was next?

He'd taken no more than two steps passed her into the hall when he found out.

"You're embarrassed, aren't you."

He couldn't help it--he had to turn around and ask. "Embarrassed? Why the hell would I be embarrassed?"

She lowered her eyes in another Oscar-winning performance of self-pity. "To admit to your friends that you're...married...to me."

So, it was back to 'pathetic'. God alone knew where it was leading this time. Rather than waste more time finding out, he simply shrugged and said, "Whatever you say, sweetheart."

He was on his way to the front door again ...but stopped cold when Maxine unwittingly employed the one tactic that could halt him dead in his tracks--she started to cry.

He came to a skidding standstill and, without turning, screwed his eyes shut in a moment of indecision. He knew, damn it. He knew they were only crocodile tears--they had to be!--but crying women always made him feel like such a heel.

In a brief instant of time, he relived all those nights toward the end of his third marriage, when he'd crawled into bed at some small hour of the morning after spending the night boozing. He'd lie on his side, his face turned away from Ruthie, and listen to her cry softly to herself when she thought he was dead to the world. It always tore him up inside, not knowing what to say, not knowing what to do, but knowing it was all his fault.

As it was now.

Uttering a curse under his breath, Al faced

Max once more. Her face was hidden under one hand and the fall of her blonde hair, but damn it if her sobbing didn't sound real enough.

"C'mon, Maxine...Max?" He took the few steps that separated them, hesitated, then awkwardly put an arm around her slumped shoulders. "C'mon, don't cry." Geez, he hated this! "I'm sorry, okay? I'm...lower than pond scum and I really don't deserve you. Would you quit cryin', huh?" Hells Bells, it wasn't working. "Okay, okay, you can come with me."

The moment she looked up, dry-eyed, and smiled, Al knew he'd been had. "You mean it?"

Go on, Calavicci, tell her you don't, and that you resent being suckered like that. So what if she thinks you're a real shmuck?

"Yeah," he said grudgingly. "I mean it."

She kissed him on the cheek. "I'll get my jacket," she said, already moving off to retrieve it.

"Yeah, well, get a move on," Al growled, still begrudging being bamboozled by the broad. "We're late enough as it is..."

* * *

The underground corridor was bathed in the subdued yellow glow of half-powered ceiling lights. It had been one of those cost efficient and energy conserving moves Al had insisted upon soon after they had been installed; that is, the lights to be run at half power and using only every second one to illuminate the complex, outside of normal working hours.

From inside an adjoining room--which would ultimately house a lab or work station but which presently masqueraded as the makeshift commissary--the rhythmic sound of steady footsteps drifted out into the deserted hall, echoing hollowly for no one in particular to hear.

Now was one of those 'outside normal working hours' times, Sam grudgingly admitted, which meant he, too, should have gone home with the rest of the workers...several hours ago.

Pacing alone inside the provisional cafeteria--a move which if left unchecked would undoubtedly gouge a trench in the white tiled floor--Sam glanced at his watch for perhaps the tenth time, as he waited for the water to boil.

Volunteering to make the coffee had been an effective means of escape from Teddy Bartlett ...but it was still only a temporary measure.

Another, far more preferable, idea was to

hand him over to Al, and let the Naval officer handle 'good old Teddy'.

Permanently!

So where was Al? He'd called from his apartment to report he was back, and had said he'd be at the Project within half an hour.

Sam checked the hands of his watch again, confirming something he already knew. That sole communication with the errant admiral had taken place over forty-five minutes ago!

Damn it. Where the hell was he?

The whistle of boiling water demanded his attention. Turning his pacing into something more productive, and since this was the second time he'd let it boil, he crossed to the bench and poured the water over the instant coffee in three mugs.

So, here he was, he though sourly, Nobel Prize winning quantum physicist--'The Next Einstein' even--reduced to making coffee for some Government bigshot. He meant what he'd said to Donna. He was going to kick Al's butt to China and back for this little stunt...when he finally caught up with the man.

Placing his coffee cups on a makeshift tray, which one of the workmen had conveniently fashioned from a piece of left over titanium siding, Sam ventured out into the corridor, automatically extinguishing the light before he left.

As he walked past the elevator that led up ten levels to the surface, he threw the closed metal doors a frown, daring them to open and present Al.

No such luck. It looked like there was more of 'good old Teddy' to come, at least until Al decided to show. Damn it, if this was all because he'd been side-tracked by a pretty face...

With the excuse of where he'd been for the past twenty minutes already under construction in his mind, Sam was several meters down the corridor when he heard the familiar soft chime which announced the elevator's arrival.

At that moment, all his anger fled.

Al!

Pulling up his tray, he swivelled expectantly, just as the double doors slid apart. It took precisely two-point-three seconds for his elation to deflate like a punctured balloon.

Al was not alone.

What the hell was he playing at now?

The Naval officer stepped out of the

elevator, dress whites gleaming despite the dimmed lighting, and turned to take the elbow of his young, blonde, black leather and studs companion.

One look at his companion and Sam's expression crashed into a scowl of severe disapproval. Not only was Al's 'friend' unauthorized, but she was...damn it, she looked like she was a hooker!

A hooker! Down here!

The blonde woman came to an obedient stop just outside the elevator as the doors closed at her back, allowing the admiral to approach alone.

"Hi ya, pal," Al greeted him breezily, putting up a good front as he strode away from his leather-garbed partner.

Sam was in no mood for the frivolities. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he demanded in a low, but nonetheless sharp, tone of voice. He glanced over Al's shoulder at the woman who was in strict violation of their security code. "Are you crazy?"

Al just grinned and shrugged, tucking his hands in his pockets and taking this all too lightly. "Well, maybe a little jet-lagged...I ain't had a whole lotta sleep these past few days--"

"You can't bring her down here!" the physicist yelped, struggling to keep his tray--and his temper--in check. He looked over at the blonde again, and this time she gave him a small smile and a wave. Strangely enough, it wasn't anything like he'd expected; sort of shy really, not at all a come-on.

"I can if you can," Al returned with a mischievous grin.

That got his attention again. "What?"

The admiral rocked on his heels. "I can bring a woman down here, if you can. Besides, she really wanted to come...and you know there ain't no way to argue with a woman once she has her head set on something."

"Al, this is a Top Secret Government installation, with an official watchdog sitting in a room less than fifty feet down the hall! Not some sleazy motel where you can buy cheap thrills--"

"Cheap?" Al asked as if offended. "Hey, lemme tell you something, kid. Calavicci does not buy 'cheap' thrills..."

"--and Donna," Sam continued, unabashed, "has a Code One security clearance."

At that, the admiral's frown quickly

transformed back to the cocky grin. "So does Max."

"Max?"

"Okay, Maxine...but she prefers 'Max'. And to tell you the truth, pal..." He raised a knowing eyebrow. "...so do I."

"Damn it, Al...have you completely lost your mind?" Sam asked again, juggling his tray.

At that moment, he became genuinely concerned about the current state of his friend's mental health. They'd all been under pressure and working hard lately...maybe too hard. First it was flying to New Jersey, seemingly on the spur of the moment, then to Las Vegas at the drop of a hat...had Al finally cracked under the strain?

Then another thought suddenly hit him. "What do you mean, she has clearance? By whose authority?"

Al shrugged again. "R.H.I.P."

"What?"

"Rank Has Its Privileges. I authorized it with the boys at the front gate and--bingo!--here she is. 'Course, we'll have to go through more official channels to get her a proper ID--"

"Al!"

"Yeah?"

The older man definitely seemed to be missing the point here. "You cleared a hooker through security!"

"Oh, she ain't a hooker, Sam. She's just... into the leather and studs look. Actually, she's..." He grinned again. "...just like Donna."

Sam regarded the black leather and studs with a doubtful frown. "She's a quantum physicist?"

"Hah! That's a good one," Al snorted sarcastically. "No, Max is a secretary."

"A secretary."

"Yeah, or at least she was. At a law firm in Manhattan. I guess..." He paused thoughtfully. "...she'll have to mail them her resignation. Now that she's gonna live here in New Mexico. It's a little too far to commu--"

"Al," Sam growled, rapidly losing his patience. "In case you've forgotten, Donna is part of this Project...and my wife!"

Al opened his mouth to say something, thought better of it, then just grinned and said, "Ditto."

Sam blinked. Ditto? What the hell did 'ditto' mean?

Then it struck him, like a bolt of lightning, causing him to gawk at the admiral as he rocked on his heels and looked awfully pleased with

himself.

"You mean...you...?" But his mouth was having trouble forming the words that his brain was telling him. Surely Al didn't mean that he'd--

"Married her, yeah. Last night, in Vegas." Al grinned again. "So, aren't you gonna congratulate me?"

Before he had even a chance to overcome his shock, another voice called him from behind. "Sam?"

Donna touched her astonished husband's arm as she joined them, smiling a brief greeting at Al then throwing a confused frown in Maxine's direction.

"Sam, what have you been doing for the past twenty minutes?" she asked, coming straight to the point. "Teddy's getting suspicious."

"Teddy?" Al asked, jerking a thumb in the direction from which Donna had come. "The guy's name is 'Teddy'?" He chuckled quietly.

"Making the coffee," Sam answered through sweetly clenched teeth.

Al shook his head. "Geez, this is gonna be easier than taking candy from a bambino!"

Donna rescued the coffee tray, noting--as he did--the way Al's use of a single Italian word magnetically drew the leathered blonde to his shoulder.

"Hi, I'm Max," she said with a friendly smile, clutching Al's arm and holding out her free hand to Donna. "You must be Donna...and Sam. It's so nice to finally meet you both. Al's told me a lot about you."

"Um," Donna began, shooting a helpless look at first Sam, then at Al. She finally smiled at Maxine, opting for a light approach, as she briefly shook the offered hand. "I'm afraid Al's told us nothing about you...um...Max."

"Well, that's understandable," the blonde said cheerfully. "We only met a couple of days ago."

That earned the admiral another concerned look. He'd met and married her all in the same weekend? As a doctor, Sam was definitely going to recommend a psychiatric check-up.

But later. Right now there was a more pressing engagement.

Grabbing Al's arm, Sam drew him a few feet away from the women as Maxine launched into what promised to be a lengthy recitation of her first encounter with Al in a tattoo parlor.

"We can talk about this later," Sam insisted when they were out of earshot from the women

again. "Right now, you've got more important things to take care of."

"You mean 'Teddy'." Al chuckled again. "Trust me, Sam, any guy who's named 'Teddy' can't be very intimidating. Five minutes, and he'll be putty in my hands."

"Yeah, well you haven't met him yet." He paused, remembering the past few days, recalling how when he was sharing the company of good old Teddy he'd been the one to fall under the liaison's charm. It was only when he wasn't around that he began to have doubts. "I don't know, Al...it's not that he's actually given me a reason to doubt him, but I just can't help feeling that the guy's a real--"

"--toad," the Naval officer unexpectedly finished for him.

Then, noting Al's eyes narrow, and how the set of his shoulders straightened into a ramrod military posture--not to mention the fact that he was looking past him down the hall--Sam turned to find the government liaison standing not six feet away.

One look at the smug expression on Bartlett's face and Sam's stomach started doing cartwheels. Not because the man had obviously snuck up on them, but because the liaison was well within hearing range and there was no way on earth he could have missed Al's disrespectful name-calling.

"Unh...well..." Sam floundered, desperate to right the situation before it blew up in his face. But before he could get the apology out, Al abruptly pushed past to square off with the self-assured man in the pin-striped suit.

Perhaps even more startling was Bartlett's reaction. He smiled.

"Well, well," the liaison said, "Calavicci has arrived." He made a mock show of noting Al's immaculate dress whites, then with a nod of his head corrected, "Forgive me, Admiral Calavicci."

"Toad," Al said again, and this time Sam realized it was meant as a greeting. At least, it would have been a greeting had the admiral not snarled it out under a hateful frown. "You gyrene bastard. What is this? What the hell are you doin' here?"

"Uh-unh," Bartlett tut-tutted. "Manners, Admiral. Is that anyway to speak to your new Government liaison?"

"Liaison, my ass."

"You two know each other?" Sam cut in.

"Yeah...you could say that." Al deliberately

turned his back on the official. "We were at NASA together. For a time. Until knucklenose, here, washed himself outta the program." He sneered. "Couldn't've happened to a nicer guy."

Sam suddenly clicked. He remembered a 'Toad'. Not that he'd met him personally, but the name conjured up long forgotten images a telegram received at a party--a bachelor party--offering alleged congratulations to Al, the night before he married Eva...

This was the same guy!

Al's reaction now made sense--they'd been enemies for years.

Enemies.

Sam was suddenly fearful of what trade secrets he may have given away in the past few days, willingly or otherwise.

"C'mon, Sam," Al said, his back still to Bartlett. "There's nothin' to discuss here. I'll get on the horn to DC *manana* and we'll have ourselves a proper liaison by noon--"

"On the contrary," Bartlett cut in.

Stepping forward, he grabbed Al's departing elbow and turned him around. He smiled again, showing his keyboard of perfect white teeth. Sam uneasily watched Al's fist clenched as he pulled back his arm. No doubt the admiral was just itching for the chance to knock a few of them out.

"Senator Weitzman, would not be pleased with that," Bartlett said smoothly. "He is, after all, the one who sent me."

"He sent you?" Al asked, his eyes narrowing in suspicion again.

"Well, the entire Committee 'assigned' me," Bartlett neatly corrected. "I suppose that's more the word. You didn't really think I'd request this position...given how things have been between us in the past?"

"What'd you want, Toad?" Al asked, clearly not buying the smooth talk one bit.

"The same as you and Dr. Beckett." He shrugged innocently. "I only want to see this Project get off the ground and succeed."

It was Al's turn to smile, but there was absolutely no mirth and no warmth in it. "You do, huh."

"Of course." Bartlett grew serious. "And as such, I'm willing to let bygones be bygones. I assure you, PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP has my full support." He smiled again, this time extending his right hand for a handshake. "So what do you say, Calavicci, that we make a clean slate of it right here and now?"

Sam held his breath, letting his expression say to Al everything the situation prevented him from saying aloud.

It was clear that right now--at this point in time--the entire fate of the Project rested in the palm of that offered hand. Bartlett may have well been a thorn in Al's side in the past, but right now he was their link to the people holding the purse strings.

He could only hope that this would be one instance where Al would swallow his pride, bite the bullet, and shake the man's hand.

The expression that briefly slid across the admiral's face was not at all encouraging. Still, he augered in like a professional and accepted the offered hand.

With a silent sigh of relief, Sam glanced over at the two women, who had fallen under a curious hush at the first of the raised voices in the preceding Toad Affair. He found relief in Donna's eyes, and perplexity in Maxine's, but reassured them both with a quick Beckett grin.

His confidence, however, lasted about as long as the handshake, since Bartlett's gaze immediately zeroed-in on the black leather and studs.

"Well, now," Bartlett said, completely ignoring Al to cross to Donna and Max. "Who do we have here?"

Maxine, oblivious to everything that was really going on, turned on one of her most charming smiles and politely offered her hand.

"Max," she introduced herself, then shrugged a little and corrected, "Maxine, actually."

"Maxine, Maxine, Maxine," Bartlett repeated, seemingly pleased. Then, despite the 'bad girl' image she presented, he raised her hand to his lips in an open display of outdated chivalry. "Teddy Bartlett. The pleasure's mine."

When he kissed the back of Max's hand, it drew a soft schoolgirl giggle from her, and a low damning curse from her husband.

"I must confess, I haven't had the chance to meet many of the...uhh...professional staff," Bartlett continued with that smooth-as-silk grin locked firmly in place. Eyes dropping to look over her leather attire, he asked, "What's your specialty, Maxine?"

"Maxine is my wife," Al stated flatly, stalking across to reclaim her as Calavicci Property and surprising the heck out of Donna in the process. After he had physically wrested her from Bartlett's grip, he growled, "So keep your paws to yourself, pal."

Sam frowned at Al's display of jealousy, wondering if that was really what it was...or more simply the fact that he just resented Bartlett personally.

"Some specialty," Bartlett leered. Then he sobered and apologized. "Forgive me, but since I didn't see a wedding ring..."

The faintest trace of a smirk surfaced on the liaison's face as Maxine surreptitiously hid her left hand behind her back, proving to everyone present that the whole idea of marriage had been nothing more than a spur of the moment idea, without any forethought whatsoever.

Al threw a 'touch her again and you're dead meat' scowl at his longtime adversary, which caused Bartlett to back off a step. Changing that into a casual turn, the liaison's next words encompassed Sam and Donna back into the conversation.

"So, now that the pleasantries are out of the way, shall we have that coffee break and get on with the work?"

"Work?" Al asked, eyes immediately narrowing again.

"Unh, yeah," Sam spoke up. He cleared his suddenly dry throat. "Ted has a new idea for the security doors."

"What kinda new idea?" the admiral asked slowly, turning the full force of his suspicion on the smiling face of the Government watchdog. Then as 'good old Teddy' clapped him on the shoulder, Al's gaze slid to the offending hand.

Bartlett, still smiling and oozing charm, totally ignored the unspoken warning and pushed the Naval officer a step or two back toward Sam. "I'll be more than happy to recap on the changes Dr. Beckett and I have decided in the past few days."

Sam cringed. Actually, they hadn't 'decided' anything. The physicist had been holding out for the admiral's return before any real bottom line decisions were made.

Clearly, Al also picked up on the use of the word. "Damn straight you will!" He finally shrugged of Bartlett's hand. "And if I don't agree with 'em, you're damn well gonna change 'em back!"

Reaching Sam and Donna, Bartlett lifted a mug from the makeshift tray Donna still dutifully held, and took a sip of coffee. Al seemed to stiffen even more, if that were at all possible, resentfully watching 'Teddy' drink from his black 'NASA' mug. And from the look on his face, Sam was sure Al was never going to use

that mug again.

"Of course," Bartlett said, waving a casual hand. "But I assure you, it's all for the benefit of this Project. So why don't we go and discuss this in a civilized manner..."

As if noting the mounting tension--namely the fact that Al looked like he was about to blow those bottlecap stars right off his shoulders with pure steam--Donna pushed the tray with the two remaining coffee cups back into her husband's hands. "You three go ahead. Maxine, would you mind giving me a hand with something?"

"Oh, sure."

A measured look passed between Sam and Donna, an instant before she began leading the blonde woman toward the commissary. He and Al fell into step behind Bartlett, as the liaison stared down the corridor in the opposite direction. They both faltered when they overheard Maxine comment to Donna.

"What a nice man," she said, unaware her husband could hear.

Al stiffened, and drilled Sam with a killer glare, then continued on after 'good old Teddy' without uttering a single word.

Oh boy, Sam thought miserably.

* * *

Y'know, as much as I hate to admit it, I gotta say Bartlett's idea for the new security door implants was spot on. Those credit card-style lock thingamajigs were never real big with me anyway. Too easy to bypass.

Several years ago there was an incident in nearby Destiny which was good food for thought. Seems a local TV personality got hold of a similar card-style pass that belonged to an employee, and gained access to all sorts of restricted areas at the SAXTON FERTILIZER AND PESTICIDE plant.

No way did we want something like that to happen here at QUANTUM LEAP, considering the Government had given us a Code One Security Clearance. In bottom line terms, that meant we were on our own--no police or fire department or any other outside influences--in a crisis situation.

But electronic implants don't come cheap. I think I spent the next two days analyzing the budget while Sam entertained the buzzhead, tryin' to see where we could rob Peter to pay Paul.

Of our initial funding, we'd allocated a

whopping twenty percent of our budget for Security alone, but even that still wasn't enough to cover the cost of those new implants.

Sam and I discussed it in private, and even though the kid seemed to genuinely think they were a good idea, he gave the final say-so to me.

My gut reaction was to throw Mr. Smooth Talking Teddy Bartlett and his idea out on his ear, but my head was telling me to carefully consider the alternative. I guess one of my main fears on a project like this is accidentally letting some nutcase loose in the past.

So we went with Toad's suggestion...after I reassigned funds from our as-yet-non-existent Motor Pool to cover the additional cost. Pity. I'd been kinda hoping the Project could afford a brand new, Top Of The Line business jet...for all those long hauls Sam and I would undoubtedly be taking to Washington. Now, with my capital severely cut, it looked like when the time came I'd be shopping on the used lot rather than the showroom floor.

I can't tell ya how pleased I was to finally see the back of Teddy Bartlett--even though I knew it was only a temporary reprieve. I dreaded the idea of having him constantly underfoot once he moved into the area...and he'd damn well better have his own transport to Washington!

Toad. Who'd've thought? I still don't like the guy and I wouldn't trust him as far as I could kick him. My bet is that he's a spy for Weitzman and the Committee, but until I have my proof I guess it's a personal cross I'm just gonna have to bear. Lest I rock the boat with the powers-that-be in DC.

Two days. I spent two whole days pouring over that budget! All I can say is I'm glad I had Maxine to take my mind off the damn thing at night. Not that she was a whole lot impressed with my wizardry at handling figures--well, not the numerical type anyway.

I still owed her a honeymoon, so when Toad finally left, and since there was nothing more on the agenda that Sam couldn't handle, I made good my promise and took her to Niagara Falls.

That's the third time I've been there for a honeymoon, not that I'd ever tell that to Maxine. I just packed light, knowing what to expect. Max packed light too...all she wore to bed was her tattoo, and a little mint flavoring!

Well, actually, she had no choice but to

pack light, considering ninety-five percent of her stuff was still in New Jersey.

After the honeymoon, I let her go back there --alone--for a week, to finalize things, to box up her stuff and ship whatever she wanted down here. I even gave her my American Express Card to bill all expenses to. D'you know, she only brought back one suitcase?

One! Who does she think I am? Rockefeller?

Okay, so I bought her new clothes, new toys, a new car...and a new bed. Geez, I practically bought her a whole new life! That's why it really burned me when her mother called, and I found out Max had stored all her stuff--rather than sold it--like she was expecting she'd need it again someday.

Then she got mad because I was mad...and making up was great.

'Course, all that happened last July and is now just water under the bridge. I guess we're still technically classed as 'newlyweds'...we certainly act like we are whenever I can get her riled into Mad Max Mode.

Things at the Project are progressing well too. The brickwork for the administration buildings is almost finished. It would've been finished a month ago, but that buffoon we have as a foreman screwed us up. Beats me how a guy who doesn't speak a word of English ever got the job in the first place!

On a more depressing thought, Bartlett and his wife moved into a house in Destiny last weekend. Permanently. Now I'm gonna be shadowed by that stupid gyrene, all day every day. And Maxine's got this crazy notion that it would be 'good politics' to have them over for dinner!

Aie yie yie...with Halloween coming up, I wouldn't be surprised if 'Mrs. Bartlett' is just as big of a toad...

* * *

Even for late October, the desert heat at twilight was still intense. Pulling his Vette into his driveway at the duplex apartment he currently called home, Al hit the button on the remote clipped to his sunvisor, and watched the garage door slowly begin to open.

Elbow resting on the window, he sighed heavily and thanked his lucky stars that he was finally home. It had been a hell of a day, and he just wanted it to be over.

Today was the third time that idiot of a

foreman, Gino, had screwed them up. The guy--six foot four and as heavily muscled as one of those 'American Gladiators' Max liked to watch on television--was nothing but a royal pain in the butt. And it was also the third time Al had wondered what it was going to take to make the man understand.

Armed with his blueprints, he'd confronted the guy--he always seemed to get the dirty jobs.

Well, actually, that wasn't true. It was just that this particular 'dirty job' had automatically fallen in his lap because Gino didn't speak a word of English, and there was no one else presently on the Project payroll who spoke Italian.

He could still see the bricklayer in his mind's eye--slinging his discarded shirt over his shoulder and wiping his cementy hands on his jeans as Al approached, casting a shadow befitting a small building. "C'è qualcosa che non va, Ammiraglio?"

Al sighed, pulling a face, as he slowly edged his Vette forward into his waiting garage. Yeah, you could say there was a problem. Geez, about the only thing this guy seemed good for was to provide shade...

At least Maxine hadn't been there to see him --Gino looked more like a soap opera stud than a paid laborer. All those tanned, sweaty muscles, the deep voice speaking fluent Italian...Max would have gone into hormonal overload!

But Max wasn't the problem, Gino was.

Collecting up his jacket and briefcase from the passenger seat, Al reflected sourly on 'the problem', the fact that Gino had laid red bricks, when the blueprints had clearly specified lead-cored bricks, for the store room that was situated topside directly above the radium ring.

Red, lead. Okay, so it was an honest mistake given the language difference. Maybe he should cut the guy a little slack. It wasn't like they hadn't taken precautions--the radium core was already shielded to the max. And they probably didn't need the extra protection about the store room anyway.

Probably, but it wasn't a chance Al was willing to take.

The bottom line was it meant another week's delay in finishing that section. Maybe he could forgive the mistake...but at the moment, Al wasn't in the mood to try real hard.

Throwing on his hat, he opened his door a few inches...and stopped. Damn it! Where had

that woman learned to drive?

Once again, Maxine had haphazardly pulled her new, powder blue Camaro over onto his side of the double garage!

Growling irascibly, he sucked in his gut and squeezed sideways through the tiny gap left available to him, sorely reminded of the fact that if he put a ding in her door like his frustration wanted to, it would only cost him to get the bodywork done.

Maybe Max was a problem after all.

Trying to leave her obvious lack of driving skills behind in the garage, he made his way to the front door of his apartment, his thoughts again turning to what it was about Gino that irked him so much. Up front the guy seemed so...obliging.

Reaching the door, he juggled his coat and briefcase as he searched for the right key. He fervently hoped Max was in the mood to give him one of her magic massages, because he sure could use it. Aie, yie, yie...what a day!

Wearily, he entered then pushed the door closed with the hand carrying his briefcase. Removing his hat, he had barely turned around and taken two steps inside when he tripped over something on the floor.

He automatically put out the hand holding his hat to steady himself, a move which inadvertently crushed the red fedora's crown against the wall. Cursing softly, he steadied himself and examined his ex-hat, then glared accusingly at the 'something' he had tripped over.

It was one of Maxine's damn skates. Hell. She was like a spoiled kid, always leaving them around for him to fall over...and this time the casualty had been his hat.

As the frustration he'd felt in the garage resurfaced and turned to anger, he tossed his ex-hat and coat onto the nearby couch with his briefcase and mentally prepared his rebuke.

If it wasn't a damn roller skate, it was a damn ice skate--a new hobby she'd only just taken up--or her damn clothes.

Geez Louise! He was always picking up after her! How could any one person be so terminally sloppy? It really bugged the hell outta--

"Non mi tocchi," came the sound of her voice, speaking Italian, from the direction of the kitchen.

He paused, looking up with a puzzled frown. 'Don't touch me'?

"Vada via che sa di aglio."

'Buzz off, garlic breath'? What the hell--?

She sounded as if she were in the middle of a fight with someone. But it seemed very one sided...and why the hell was it in Italian?

"Fa schifo."

More curious than angry now, and half-expecting to find her fighting with another guy, he quickly crossed through the door to the kitchen.

He stopped suddenly as he entered, realizing she was alone, and talking to herself. Her back was to him, as she stirred a pot of something simmering on the stove, with a Walkman hitched to the belt of her blue jeans.

His mood instantly lightened. She was trying to teach herself Italian from a tape!

Crossing to stand behind her, he scared the living daylights out of her when he let his hands rest on her hips. She jumped and spun around so suddenly, that he just barely missed collecting a splotch of hot sauce in the face as it flew from the spoon in her hand.

Tugging the small headphones from her ears, she gave him an accusing glare. "Al!" She pulled away to park the spoon on the counter beside the range.

"What're you doin'?" he asked, grinning, knowing full well what was going on but wanting her to admit it. He leaned back against the counter, his fingers curling under the top.

"If you must know," she said huffily, obviously embarrassed, "I'm cooking dinner."

Enjoying the teasing, he looked down at the counter where the spilled sauce was a brilliant smear of red. Forcing himself to ignore it for the sake of harmony, his gaze moved to the books beside it.

Next to her open cookbook was an instructional language guidebook. Reaching out one hand, he turned it over to read the cover.

"'Verbal Self-Defense: Elementary Cursing For The Beginner'." He chuckled. "I could have used you this afternoon!"

"What?"

He shook his head in annoyance as she retrieved a shaker of basil leaves from the pantry then returned to the stove.

"That nozzle we've got as a brick mason," he explained. His eyes traveled anxiously over the spill again. Surely she was going to clean it up?!

As she added a sprinkle of basil, judged that to be too little then added another, Al moved away to open the refrigerator.

Hanging on the door, he surveyed prospective munchies inside. An unappetizing array of health food, including bean sprouts and watercress, stared back.

"You had another fight with Gino?"

"Yeah." Deciding the pickings were slim, Al closed the door and turned to her with a frown. "We got anything to eat that's even the slightest bit junky?"

She threw him a tolerant look, then turned her attention back to her pot as she added another sprinkle of basil. "No."

"Che peccato," he returned with a shrug.

Maxine threw a quick smile over her shoulder. That was one thing he could always count on--speaking Italian to instantly win her over.

Watching her a moment longer, his eyes again strayed to the ignored sauce spill on the counter. Then, as the military orderliness so deeply burned into his soul screamed again, he grabbed the dish cloth and wiped up the spill himself.

Moving to the sink, he rinsed out the cloth and neatly hung it on its hook, aware that Maxine had continued her cooking without a pause. Left to her, this kitchen--this whole apartment!--would undoubtedly look like a nuclear detonation zone.

Task completed to his satisfaction, he brought his attention back to her as she dipped the spoon into her concoction and turned to him, one hand cupped under it and her lips puckering to gently blow the steam from the surface.

"Here. Taste this."

Watching her with a lustful gleam in his eye, he forgot all about food and spills and living at ground zero, and crossed to stand in front of her. His eyes remaining on hers as she studied the spoon, he allowed her to feed him.

She looked up expectantly. "Well?"

"Needs a little more salt," he said, letting his hands settle on her hips again.

She swivelled back to face the stove. "We're cutting down on salt."

Distracted, he didn't argue. "You know," he began, allowing one hand to roam down her aproned thigh in a tender caress, "you don't need a tape--I'll teach you some Italian. Besides, if you're gonna learn it, you might as well learn something useful."

"Oh? Like what?" she asked, stirring her pot.

"Like..." He pulled her hips against him and moved in for the kill. "...spogliati."

"Which means...?"

"Take your clothes off."

She laughed, but didn't turn around.

"Or better still, spogliami." He kissed her neck. "Take my clothes off. Then you can give me a massage before dinner..."

"Neanche se lei fosse l'unico uomo sulla terra."

Pulling back, he frowned.

She finally turned around. "What? Didn't I say that right?"

"Yeah, you said it right, but... 'Not if I was the last man on earth!'"

She grinned, raising a hand to comb the hair at his ear. "Well, not right now anyway. I have to finish cooking. Our guests will be here within the hour."

His amorous mood instantly evaporated, giving way to immediate suspicion. "Guests?"

Maxine pulled out of his arms in order to return the jar of basil to the pantry cupboard. "Mmm, I called Carol Bartlett this afternoon, to welcome them to the area, and invited her and Teddy over for dinner."

"You did what?!"

"I just thought it was the neighborly thing to do--"

"Maxine, they live in Destiny, we live in Stallion's Gate. We're hardly neighbors...thank God."

Stepping back, he ran a hand through his hair. Hell, this was a perfect way to cap off the day--spending the evening with Bartlett and his wife. Okay, so he hadn't actually met the woman yet, but if she was married to that toad then she was bound to have a few warts...

"Damn it, Max, why didn't you tell me?"

Returning to the stove, she almost ignored him. "I just did."

"Sam!" Al announced suddenly, taking a decisive step back toward the direction of the living room. "I gotta call Sam! Geez, I hope he and Donna haven't eaten yet..."

* * *

Sitting at Al's dinner table, Sam shared a covert glance with Donna, silently apologizing for having accepted the invitation despite her misgivings. It was just that Al had sounded so...desperate when he called. He'd practically hauled Donna out of the house in the rush to get here before the Bartletts.

They had, and with time to kill, Donna had

obliged to help Max with the last minute details in the kitchen, leaving him alone with Al. The admiral immediately began making snide, derogatory remarks about the mysterious 'Mrs. Toad', and about the horrendous evening which they were all going to suffer.

Then when the Bartletts finally arrived, Al's eyes almost popped right out of his head--'Mrs. Toad' was a knockout!

Contrary to Al's prediction, meeting everyone in the living room and sitting down had gone fine.

Well, Sam amended, perhaps 'fine' wasn't exactly the right word, but at least no one had spilled any blood.

Yet.

Still, given the expression on Al's face as 'good old Teddy' had waxed eloquent on Maxine's homemade no oil, no salt 'Italian' dressing on the first course, that could very easily change.

Bringing his attention back to his salad plate and wondering how much more he would have to eat to be polite, he heard Teddy say, "Carol, you should get this recipe from Maxine."

As if sensing trouble, Donna paused in lifting her fork to her mouth, and Sam looked up at the couple across the table from them. Carol Bartlett, a buxom, attractive brunette with a carefully cultivated Sunbelt tan, merely smiled.

"Sure," she agreed readily, reaching for her glass of lemon-flavored ice water. "I'll serve it when your mother comes to visit."

Her smile seemed genuinely warm, but from Ted's expression, Sam suspected otherwise.

"She's been after me to get you to cut down on cholesterol," the woman continued, her eyes shifting to Al. "She'll be thrilled you've finally found something healthy you like."

Al grinned at her, but Maxine's answer diverted whatever he had been about to say.

"I'd be glad to give it to you," she said in a clear play for attention. "It's out of FEMALE WEIGHT LIFTERS magazine. The last one, I think. I always get good recipes out of their diet corner."

"FEMALE WEIGHT LIFTERS," Toad joined in the foray, his eyes taking an admiring wander over Maxine. "So that's how you stay in such excellent shape."

"And running and skating," Max added, almost batting her eyelashes at him.

"You must have quite a lot of...stamina," Bartlett added with a grin.

"She's a handful, all right," Al said,

throwing a glare at the man.

Sam felt the corners of his lips twitch, but hastily schooled his expression into casualness at Donna's discreet kick at his ankle.

Please, he thought silently, if Al's going to punch Teddy out for flirting with his wife, let him do it now and get it over with before I have to eat any more of this awful salad!

His prayer, fervent as it was, went unanswered and the undercurrent of tension swept them along to the second course. That turned out to be spaghetti, which smelled absolutely wonderful as Max put it down before them.

Thanking her, Sam picked up his fork as she retook her seat at the foot of the table. He noticed that her husband liberally salted the dish before picking up his own utensil, but not even that warned Sam for the shock of his first bite.

It was spaghetti all right. The sauce was a little bland, but acceptable. It was just that the pasta itself was a little...unusual.

Forcing himself to keep his reaction from showing on his face, he swallowed and watched apprehensively as Al took his first bite.

The admiral, however, had no reservations about voicing his opinion.

"What is this?" he asked, swallowing hastily and staring at his food as if it had suddenly mutated into something unrecognizable.

"Spaghetti," Maxine returned with a trace of defiance in her tone.

"Sweetheart, this may be a lot of things," Al said, warily poking at the pasta as if to dissect its secret, "but spaghetti it ain't."

"It's whole wheat spaghetti," Carol supplied exchanging an understanding look at Maxine, who had begun a hurt pout. "I tried it just last week. I got it at the health food store in Destiny."

"That's where I got this," Maxine answered, ignoring her husband's plate prodding in the wake of this unexpected female support. "All that refined flour and gluten is so..." She brushed her thick blond hair back from her face with her left hand. "...non-nutritious."

Light caught her ring, and Donna stepped into the breach as if to change the subject.

"That's a beautiful ring," she observed, leaning forward.

"Thank you," Maxine said, favoring her with a radiant smile.

At once, Al's head came up, this time in suspicion. "Ring?"

"It's gorgeous, Al," Donna continued, sounding sincere, "I've been noticing it all evening. I never knew you had such good taste."

Al's suspicion disappeared with the compliment, replaced by inflated modesty. "When it comes to women, I have perfect taste." His gaze travelled around the table, past Maxine--who was busy studying her ring--to stop very briefly on Bartlett's wife. "I know what they like."

Carol, if she noticed the insinuation, ignored it. "May I see it?"

"Oh, sure." Maxine's smile increased in radiance as she extended her hand. "I just picked it up in Alamogordo today."

"It's lovely," Carol gushed in agreement, inspected it carefully. "Look, Teddy," she said to her husband, "at the beautiful wedding ring Al gave her."

Bartlett's eyes swept over Maxine's ring... and Maxine. "Absolutely gorgeous," he said, his smile so charming that Sam wondered if he meant it or her.

Al, it appeared, had no doubt. "Always keep the little woman happy," he said, shooting a warning glance at his wife that Sam did not miss. "And the easiest way to do that is give 'em your credit card."

Carol's laugh was delighted. "I like the way you think, Admiral. Maybe you and Ted should have a talk. He keeps the cards in our family."

The liaison leaned back in his chair, arm going about his wife's shoulders, despite the fact that his attention was obviously still on Maxine.

"I'm glad this cheapskate finally got 'round to buying you a ring," he said pleasantly. "And it looks lovely on your hand. What is it? A caret?"

"Yeah," Maxine answered, smiling at the liaison. "And Al didn't buy it." Her eyes flicked over her husband then, as if in response to the indignation she saw there, she added, "Well, I mean, he did pay for it...or at least he will. But I went and picked it out. He said I could have any ring I wanted for our three month anniversary."

"How sweet," Carol cooed, leaning back against Ted. "Any one you wanted. I'm going to have to talk to my husband about this." Her smile was teasing, but Sam got the feeling that there was meaning beneath it. "All he gave me for our first anniversary was an antique hall tree."

From the mixed expression on Al's face, Sam suspected that the fact Carol was going to do some 'talking' to Ted about Al's generosity, had just softened the blow of learning that a diamond ring had gone on his credit card!

Sneaking another look at his friend's face, he amended, maybe...a little bit.

Sharing a look with Donna, Sam raised an apologetic eyebrow--apologetic that they'd come.

This was going to be one long dinner party.

* * *

Bartlett is one royal pain in the butt. Not only did he spend the entire evening flirting with my wife--in front of his wife I might add--but he was sneaking around when Sam and I were doing a little shop talk after dinner.

He was supposed to be outside having a smoke. At least Maxine didn't let him light up in here when she won't let me! Sam and I were in the living room, discussing how much money we were gonna commit to arming Ziggy with research data for the time periods covered by the leaps.

We were pretty involved in it--Sam's dead set on going for broke on the information banks. I think that's pretty much overkill. I mean, how much information is he gonna need when all he's gonna do is leap in, take a look around, then leap back home?

But he's got his mind set and it is his baby. I suppose I can make the funding stretch that far, if he really wants it that way.

But that sneak, Toad, just happened to saunter in right at the end of the conversation. I'd bet my favorite piece of anatomy--well, second favorite...a guy can always get a new heart--that he was listening at the door. The jerk.

I couldn't see the back of him fast enough. I just wish it was the last of him I was gonna have to see. But I haven't got a prayer of that, since the official word is 'Mr. Bartlett is the Funding Committee's liaison'. I checked.

But there's one thing I can do--I can make sure Max never invites them over to supper again.

Well, at least that she never invites Toad. Carol, who's built like the proverbial house, can come to visit me anytime!

* * *

Standing in the kitchen scowling, Al

regarded Maxine's back as she carried the last load of dirty dishes in from the dining table. "I mean it, Max, I don't want you to invite them again. Capeesh?"

Despite the Italian, she shot him a pout. "Why not? He's a perfectly nice guy."

"Yeah, if you like toads. Trust me, kiss him and you'll get warts...not Prince Charming."

She threw him an incredulous look. "Who said anything about kissing him?!"

"You're attracted to that yutz, don't try to deny it."

"I was being friendly."

"You were being a flirt!"

"You're just jealous."

"Damn right I am," Al growled, crossing his arms. "The guy was practically undressing you with his eyes all night! Right in front of me! I should've popped him one," he said, suddenly jumping into a fighting stance and throwing an imaginary punch. "Right in the mouth..."

"Really," Maxine said, unamused by his chivalrous threat. She turned from the pile of plates and pans and cutlery. "Then maybe he would've punched you for doing the same thing with Carol."

Al abruptly stopped shadow boxing. "I was not!"

"You were too," she countered, picking up the dish cloth to wipe a non-existent speck off her new ring--the one he'd undoubtedly paid for through the nose.

It was as good a subject as any to divert her from Carol, and the fact that he had been thinking naughty thoughts about what it would be like to play bingo-bango-bongo with her...

"And that's another thing," he said, wagging a finger at the rock the size of Gibraltar on her hand. "How could you buy something that big without even talking to me about it?"

"You owe me this ring," she said, pout fully established. "We've been married over three months and you haven't even mentioned buying me one."

"I would've," Al protested angrily, "but you never gave me a chance."

"Ha!" she snorted, walking away from the kitchen counter and its mountain of unwashed dishes. "Sure you would."

"How much, Maxine?" he demanded, following her into their bedroom.

"How much what?" she asked, her back to him as she angrily pulled a hot pink spandex bandeau, black leggings and exercise socks from

her drawer.

"How much was the damn ring?!"

"Never mind," she said huffily, heading toward the closet and sliding it open to reveal the awful jumble of her clothes strewn over its floor.

"Never mind?!" he roared, almost too furious to enjoy the view as she bent over to extricate her running shoes from the mess. "A rock that size is gonna cause a major kink in my cash flow. Now how much?"

"Not more than you can afford, Admiral," she said huffily, heading toward the bathroom.

"What're you doing?" he demanded, pushed past endurance, suddenly realizing she was changing clothes.

Pausing in the doorway, she regarded him disdainfully. "I'm going for a run...okay?"

"A run?!" He gestured toward the chaos she had left in the kitchen. "What about the dishes?"

"I'll do them tomorrow," she snapped, "when you're at work and there's nothing else for me to do."

"But--"

"You're always at work," she cut in, practically spitting out the words. "With your precious 'Sam' and his oh-so-top-secret project. And I'm here in this god-forsaken wide spot in the road with nothing to do." As if to accent the words, she slammed the bathroom door shut in his face.

"Nothing to do but drive to Alamogordo and spend my money!" Al shouted at the door. "Why don't you get a nice cheap hobby? Like housecleaning?!"

There was an eloquent silence from beyond the door, though Al waited a good four beats for a reply.

Snarling and turning on his heel, he stalked into the kitchen--to do the damn dishes!

* * *

Desert night air was clear, cold and excellent for stargazing from the Beckett terrace. Despite the almost inedible meal at Al's, Sam felt content down to his very soul, and leaned his head back against the chaise lounge in which he reclined as if to prove it.

Brilliant as the eyes of angels, the stars arched above him in a breathtaking display. His wife's body was warm against his as she shared the lounge with him.

Tenderly, he tucked the blanket that covered them both more snugly about her.

"Are you warm enough?" he asked quietly, bringing his attention back from the stars.

Her reply from where she rested on his chest was a warm and drowsy sound of agreement.

"Good," he said, smiling and nuzzling her hair. "I wouldn't want you to get chilled."

There was a long, companionable silence between them. Finally, it was Donna who broke it, her gaze still on the heavens above them.

"Sam?" When he made a soft sound to show he was listening, she continued thoughtfully. "Do you think Maxine is sexy?"

Taken by surprise, Sam shifted to look down at her. "What?" he asked, thinking he hadn't heard her right and not wanting to answer the question unless he was certain it was the one he had been asked.

"Do you?" she persisted. "Do you think she's sexy?"

"I..." Sam stalled, trying to dodge the question. "I think she's attractive."

Donna smiled, and shifted slightly so she could see his expression. "Yes, but do you think she's sexy?"

"Well, I..." Looking down at her slight smile, he decided he wasn't going to be able to squirm out of this one. "Yeah, I guess." He cast a look down at her to try and gauge her reaction. "Sort of. What brought this on?"

"I don't know," she shrugged one slender shoulder against his chest. "I was just wondering. She's...different."

Sam chuckled. "That's kind of you. She's Al's kind of woman. All flash and flesh." His eyes darkened slightly. "On the surface anyway."

Face tilted up to his, Donna surprised him even more. "She's lonely."

"Yeah." Sam nodded. "I imagine she is." He regarded her, slightly troubled. "What's going on?"

"Nothing." His wife snuggled back against his chest. "I was just feeling guilty because we are..." She shrugged slightly. "...like we are, and Al and Maxine are always at each other's throats. I feel...sort of sorry for them."

Sam grinned, unable to help himself. "So you asked me if I think she's sexy?"

Teasingly, Donna pinched his arm that was snuggled about her. "So maybe I was a little worried you'd go middle-aged crazy and find

someone who would look good in black leather."

Chuckling, the physicist drew her closer. "I think you would look fine in black leather."

At her disgusted snort, he nuzzled her hair again. "But black leather is not the reason I love you..."

He left the rest of the sentence unsaid, knowing--all the same--that she heard the answer to what she was really asking in the companionable silence that resettled between them.

After a long moment, he kissed her lightly on the side of the neck, leaning forward slightly.

At the tender, non-spoken cue, she smiled and got to her feet. Extending a hand to him, she helped him up as well.

"I love you, Sam Beckett," she said softly as he stood and took her in his arms.

"And I love you," he whispered in reply, pulling away the blanket that still enfolded her and replacing it with his arms.

For a moment they remained still, pressed together in the desert night. Then, with no need for words in the silent, deep understanding they shared, they parted of one accord.

Hand in hand, they left the darkness for the warmth of their bedroom that waited within.

* * *

I gotta tell you, this Italian Lover thing is getting a little old. Fantasies are okay... until you try living them twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Then they turn into a drag and they're just the 'same old-same old' kinda thing.

Well, most of the time anyway. Max and I still have some spectacular fights--and the aftermath is every bit as spectacular.

But lately...it's just not the same. A few of our fights have even ended with none of the expected pleasure afterwards.

The first time that happened was the fight we had when the Bartletts came to dinner. After she came back all hot and sweaty from her run, I tried to start in again...not on purpose really, but just because I was still mad about having to do all those damn dishes. But she just gave me the cold shoulder and actually locked me out of our bedroom.

Correction: my bedroom. The broad is just along for the ride.

It was the first time I had to sleep on that

chiropractic rock she made me buy that she calls a couch.

I hate that.

'Course, she let me come to bed the next night, but I got my own back by pretending to be asleep when she wanted to play. Childish of me, maybe, but it served her right.

Maxine is getting harder and harder to kick into Mad Max Mode. Even worse than the cold shoulder is when she turns into Maxine The Wimpoid and just cries and makes me feel like a total heel.

I really, really hate that.

Maybe playing Mad Max, the would-be roller derby queen, is getting a little old for her too.

I guess that's partly why for the past few weeks, we've just kinda existed in the same household. Maybe we just need to give each other a little space, some time to re-think and re-group.

To tell you the truth, I dunno where this relationship is headed. Thanksgiving's coming up in a couple of days, and Sam and Donna have invited us to their house for dinner. Maybe things will be different after that.

Maybe Max'll have a heart to heart with Donna.

Maybe I should talk to Sam...

* * *

Stuffed to capacity with turkey and all the trimmings, Al absently regarded the stars from Sam and Donna's back terrace, and drew another enjoyable drag on his cigar. It had been a long time since he'd had a feed like that--turkey and cranberries, corn on the cob, and mashed potatoes drowned in gravy. Donna had even made a pumpkin pie for dessert later--Sam's mom's own recipe--which promised to be just as yumola.

If Max would let him eat any of it.

Damn. He'd been right in his assumption in Vegas--she did drive him crazy. Ever since she'd moved here, she'd been doing her damndest to turn him into a health and exercise nut. And he was getting mighty sick of broiled this and broiled that, all the no salt, no fat, no taste food.

'The Calavicci Cholesterol Control Act', was what she called it, so that he would live longer.

Hah! That was debatable...given any one of her 'experiments'.

Damn, it wasn't working. He was sick of the food, sick of the fantasy, even sick of--

The sound of the sliding glass door opening behind interrupted his thoughts. Taking another drag on his cigar, Al kept his gaze turned to the night sky, noting Sam in his peripheral vision as the kid stopped beside him.

For a long moment neither of them spoke, but listened as a distant howl rose and fell somewhere in the desert beyond. It was answered moments later by another howl from another direction, a long and lonesome wail from an animal far from home.

"She's lonely," Sam remarked quietly.

"Who's lonely?" Al asked, suddenly dreading the turn the conversation inside had taken after he'd come out here.

"The female coyote. The male is probably out scavenging for food and she's calling him home."

Al blew out some cigar smoke. "Lucky dog..." Before Sam could make something out of that statement, he turned to give the physicist a forced grin. One hand patted his stomach appreciatively. "Great meal, kid, I'm stuffed."

But Sam wasn't biting. "Al, what are you doing out here? All alone."

"Oh, unh..." Thinking fast, he indicated his cigar. "Force of habit, I guess. Max's got me so trained not to smoke in the apartment..." He shrugged. "...y'know."

"Oh," was all Sam said.

The look in his eye was far more vocal, but Al chose to ignore it--he never had been successful at pulling the wool over Sam's eyes.

"Okay, now what are you really doing out here?" Sam insisted--neither he nor Donna had ever objected to him lighting up inside.

Shoulders sagging a little, the admiral gave in with a deflating sigh. "Damned if I know. It's just...easier...than being inside with Max."

"You two have another fight?"

Al tried to dismiss that question with a simple shrug. But this was one of the reasons he wanted to come here tonight--to talk to Sam. Sam, who always had answers to the really hard questions. Sam, who clearly knew more about the 'L' word than he, including the secret of how to stay happily married.

Unsure how to begin, he instead turned his attention to the desert beyond the terrace again. "Fighting's never been the problem, pal, on account that makin' up was always fun."

"And it's not anymore?"

He slid the younger man a sideways glance. "Well...sure it is...I mean...Max is a real tiger in the sack..." He offered a suggestive leer as reinforcement to his words, but his heart wasn't behind it. His eyes sought the other's in a moment of total honesty. "Geez, Sam...the problem is that we just don't make up anymore. I'm spending half my life sleepin' on the damn couch."

Aware that Sam was studying him thoughtfully, he was grateful when the coyote's timely howl drifted in on the breeze once more. The space between it and the response gave him time to look away and refocus, and time for Sam to move two steps forward to the low terrace wall.

There, the physicist sat on the low bricks. "All married couples fight sometimes."

Al drew on his cigar, his eyes narrowing. "You and Donna don't. Do you?"

"Fight?" Sam asked. "Sure. We disagree sometimes. You have to work at love. The trick is, talking to each other, not at each other, and working it out."

"Maxine is making me nuts," Al admitted in a moment of sudden candidness. "I mean...she..." Exasperated just thinking about it, he found he couldn't put it into words. "...geez..."

That drew a wry smile from the kid. "Sounds like true love to me."

Al smirked--a telling reaction not lost on the younger man. At the questioning eyebrow he received, he dipped his eyes to stare at the tip of his burning cigar. "To tell you the truth, I, unh...I gave up all hopes of that love stuff the night Ruthie walked out on me."

If Sam was surprised, he didn't say a word. Al had, after all, said as much that weekend in Vegas, not to mention the fact that he'd married Sharon between Ruthie and Max. Maybe it was about time he admitted that the fling with Sharon had meant zip too.

"I convinced myself that what I had with Ruthie was the real thing, Sam, and I was wrong. Dead wrong. I ain't getting burned again."

Al's gaze shifted from his cigar to the desert spread before him. It was so vast and uninhabited, so isolated and still.

Empty...just like he felt inside.

"Look," Sam said quietly, "I'll be the first to admit that Max is a little...different. But that's not necessarily a bad thing. You two have just got to work at it a little harder than most."

"I don't wanna talk about this anymore," Al said flatly, stubbing out his cigar on the bricks.

Never one to wear his heart on his sleeve, he'd rather protect it and all his emotions beneath a virtually impenetrable wise-guy suit of armor. The fact that he'd just made the mistake of letting Sam get under that armor, unsettled him.

Or was it the mention of Ruthie that had awakened the unease in him? Flatly, he refused to consider that possibility. That was dead and buried a long time ago--along with a lot of other stuff.

"Al--"

"No," he cut in, turning to meet his friend's watchful eyes. "Lemme tell you something, pal. True love is something that happens only once in a guy's life...if he's incredibly lucky. It happened to me a long, long time ago with Beth, and I've come to terms with the fact that it ain't never gonna happen again. Believe me, I've looked, I've tried, and I've worked at it. I had my shot, Sam, and I lost."

He paused, his hands delving into his trouser pockets. "The present arrangement suits me just fine. I got the Project to keep me busy by day, and Max to keep me warm at night. I don't need to spoil it all with 'love'. That's not what this marriage is about and Maxine knows it."

"Are you sure?"

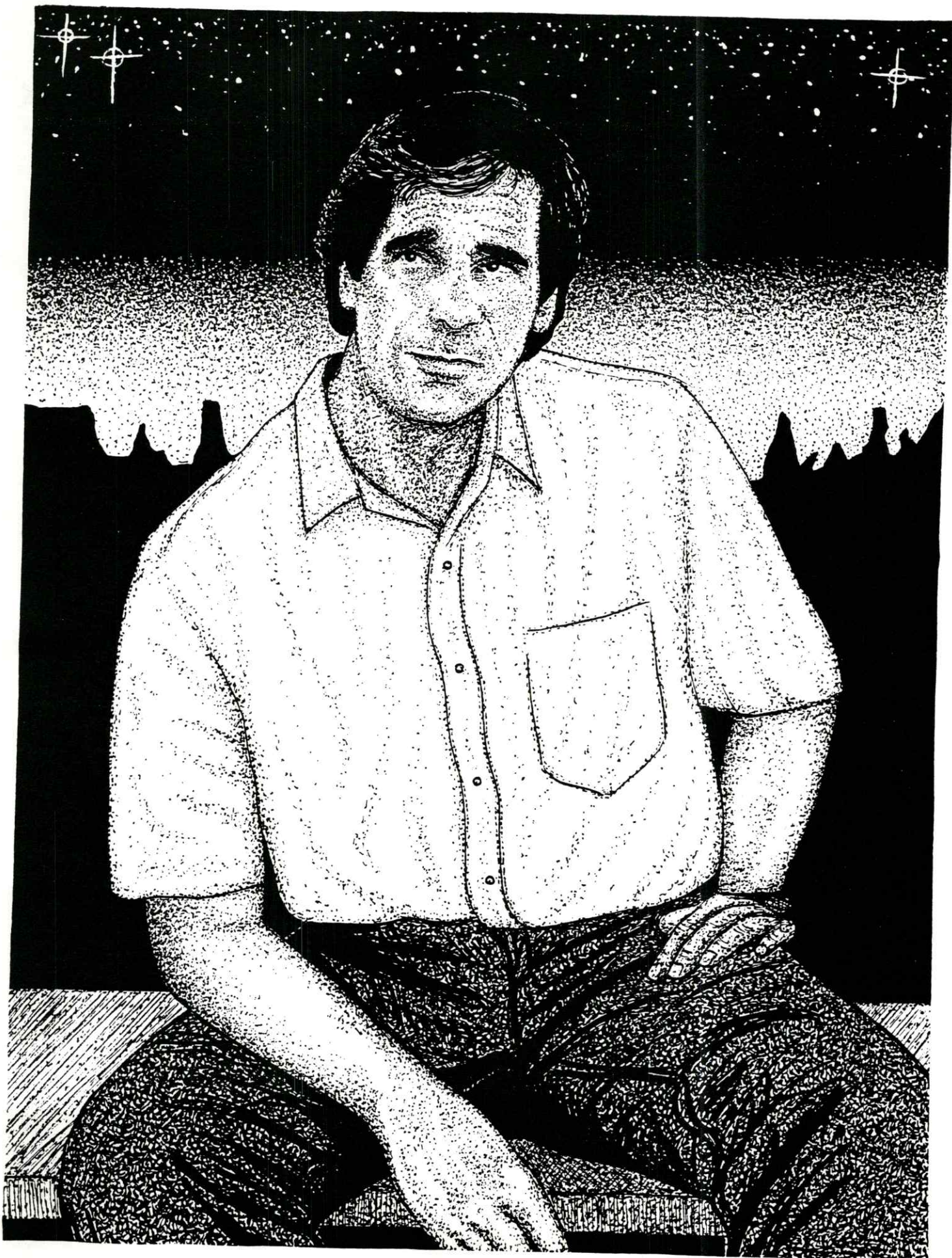
"Sure she knows it, or sure it's not about love?"

"You tell me." Standing, Sam looked out into the desert night which seemed to inspire the confessions of so many well kept secrets. "'Between love and the noblest cause, there should be no contest. Love is life's only true satisfaction'."

Al smirked at the old familiar quote. "Meaning what? Now I gotta pick between love and glory?" He snorted. "You already know my answer."

"Maybe, if you worked at it, you could have both."

"Who says I want both?" At the look he received, Al sighed guiltily. "Okay, okay...so maybe I do. I guess. I dunno." He shook his head. "Damn it, Sam, I just...I can't talk to Max! She'll do something that drives me absolutely crazy, and then we just end up yelling at each other." He grimaced. "I liked



it a whole lot better when we used to end up in bed."

For a long moment, Sam regarded Al as if choosing his words with care. Finally, obviously deciding to take the plunge, he said quietly, "Didn't you and...Beth...ever fight?"

Al snorted at the memories, allowing the reference. After that weekend in Vegas, the taboo of Beth as a closed subject had been broken and, after all, he had been the one to bring her into this conversation in the first place. "Boy, did we ever."

"And you just told me that was love."

"Yeah, but..." Al began, thinking about it.

"...but this is different."

"No one ever said it had to be the same."

Sam paused. "I think you feel a lot more for Max than you're willing to admit, even to yourself."

Al simply nodded, glancing at his feet and trying to convince himself that being crazy, going nuts, and yelling until you were hoarse, were all part of some bizarre form of love as yet unidentified by other members of the human race.

"Yeah, maybe." He looked up hopefully. "I mean, I married her, right?"

Unfortunately, that statement had a haunting echo attached to it--one that kept repeating 'Eva'.

"Aw, hell, Sam...if she'd just quit doin' all those little things that annoy the hell outta me, life would be a whole lot easier."

"So don't tell me. Sit down and tell her." Sam grinned. "Then let her to tell you all the things you do that drive her crazy. Work on it. Together." Sam put a hand on his shoulder and began guiding him toward the patio door. "Besides, what could she possibly do that's that bad?"

* * *

"MAXINE!!!" Al exploded from his desk chair in the corner of living room, where he was signing his monthly alimony checks, and doing other end-of-the-month bills. Several days had passed, but he hadn't yet had a chance--or made the opportunity--to 'sit down and talk' to her as Sam suggested.

And there was no denying this was definitely a good example of one of those 'little things' that annoyed him.

Little things, with big price tags.

Absolutely horrified, he read his American Express card statement over again, as if expecting the bottom line figure to have miraculously left several zeroes behind when he snatched it off the desk.

On the couch before him, his wife sat amidst a pile of clean laundry she was supposed to be folding, and stoically kept her attention on the 'All Star Wrestling'.

"Three thousand dollars?!" he yelled, one hand combing through his hair--surely it must be turning gray by now. "You spent three thousand bucks on that ring?!"

"Yeah," Max said, without looking at him. "I did. Now, shhhh, I can't hear what they're saying."

Stunned, he cast another incredulous look at the statement. Unfortunately, there were still way too many zeroes. "You had to put it on American Express, didn't you. Not the Visa or the Mastercard, but my gold American Express card..."

"It has more class."

"'Class'?! D'you have any idea how this works? I have to pay this in one go! Not in damn installments like the others!" No answer from the couch. "Holy Mackerel...I'm gonna have to get a personal loan to pay off a credit card!"

As the implication struck home, he angrily threw the statement back on the desk with the others. He was already paying off her new car, her new clothes, her frequent shopping sprees...

"You're taking it back," he informed her curtly. Truly angry now, he stalked over to face her, blocking her view of the TV. "Tomorrow morning, you're taking it back and telling them that your husband won't let you keep it."

"I will not!" she snapped, refusing to look up at him. Pointedly, she moved to where she could see past him to the screen.

"Oh, yes, you will," he growled. Spinning on his heel, he strode over and slapped the TV's off switch with a sharp click.

"Hey," she protested, "I was watching that!" She began searching the couch cushions and the strewn pile of her unfolded clothes for the remote.

"You're returning that ring," he repeated, rounding on her again, for once thankful for the mess on the couch, knowing she'd never find the control. "And I'm going with you to be sure you do."

"No!" Riled now, giving up the remote hunt, she got to her feet. "And you can't make me!"

"The hell I can't, sweetheart. I'm the one who pays the bills, and I'm cutting you off right now." He thrust out his hand in demand. "Gimme the credit cards I got you."

"NO!" As her voice rose, so did the color in her cheeks--Mad Max was definitely back in the game.

Be strong, Calaviccii. Don't let the broad get away with this one, it's gone on long enough. Get those cards back or it's curtains for your credit rating.

"Give me the damn cards, Max," he growled again, trying not to notice how her breathing had quickened, the fire flashing in her eyes, or his own sparking response. "Now!"

"You owe me those cards," she spat defiantly, amazing him. "It's not like I get anything else out of this marriage!"

"What?!" His yelp was of genuine surprise, and he took a step back as if she'd physically slapped him.

Pressing her advantage, she followed. "You're never here, and when you are, all you want is sex. You never talk to me, never take me anywhere--"

"I took you to Sam and Donna's just last Thursday!"

"--never pay any attention to what I do, or where I go..." Her voice rose full pitch as if it were something she had been wanting to say for a long time. "Damn it, Al...you've never even once told me you loved me!"

Speechless, Al regarded her open-mouthed. Where the hell had that come from? He'd thought they both clearly understood just what this marriage was all about, and 'love' wasn't it.

"Maxine..." he began at last, making a deliberate effort to speak calmly. Maybe this was as good a time as any to have that talk...

"Forget it," she said frostily, pushing past him. "I don't think you can say it!"

Furious, she stormed to the entryway, picked up her skate case, and reached for the door. Still standing in the center of the living room, Al stared after her.

"Where the hell're you going?" he demanded, her actions chasing his good intentions out the wazoo.

Snorting, she thumped her skate case with the heel of her hand. "Figure it out, Sherlock, and if you can't, call your genius buddy, Sam. I'm sure he'll spell it out for you!"

"You can't leave! I'm not finished with this!"

"Well, I am," she shot back and escaped out the door before he could reach her.

Cursing, he found she'd set the lock to catch, giving herself time to get out and halfway to her car before he got the door open. Coming to a halt on the front steps, he drew a breath to bellow after her.

Then, catching sight of their neighbor, who was just pulling up in the driveway that served his half of the duplex, he thought better of it.

Ike Bentonhoff, who worked at the Project on the team setting up Imaging Control, and had probably heard more than enough of his and Max's fights already. He didn't need to add more fuel to the gossip mill...or whatever the hell that old cliché was.

Fuming, Al silently watched Max stalk toward the garage. Every movement shouted indignation and challenge, and he had to grit his teeth to keep from rushing down the drive after her and dragging her back to his bed by her hair.

Muttering a curse as she disappeared from view, he ignored his neighbor--who was trying to be discreet and slip into his own apartment--and went back inside.

Slamming the front door, he stopped short and looked around, steam pouring out his ears. Spying his car keys, he immediately snatched them up and pulled the door open again. The hell he was staying home like an abandoned husband! If she could go out for a good time, then so could he.

* * *

Max fights dirty. That 'love' crack was way outta line. Hell, neither of us said anything about love when we tied the knot in Vegas. She knows that's not part of the deal. She's just tryin' to get to me--but the hell she's gonna!

I just needed some good entertainment to work off the lather she'd gotten me into, so I went to the fights in Alamogordo. Nothin' like a little blood and body punches to work off a good mad--even if its not me doin' the punchin'.

And you'll never guess who I met there. Carol Bartlett.

She was dressed in this green, silk jumpsuit that looked like it was painted on and she was really enjoying the match. I know, because I sat by her. Toad wasn't there--the slime had left her alone and gone off to Utah for some

seminar. Can you believe it? And it was her birthday, too!

Y'know, that nozzle doesn't deserve her. She told me she was really steamed he'd left her alone, even after she'd asked to go with him this time.

Begged even. How could any guy resist a woman like this, begging? Maybe that's the reason she was at the fights. Like me, she needed a little frustration release.

Toad's itinerary was gonna take him from Utah to DC, where he was undoubtedly gonna file his monthly bunch of bull to Weitzman and the Committee. Carol said she wasn't expecting him home for a few more days...although why she was tellin' me all this I really can't imagine.

Well, actually...I can.

To hammer home her point that her husband was 'safely' gone, she ended with a statement that he'd probably even find another antique auction to stop at on the way, which would take him another day or so...and then cursed him to hell and back if he dared bring her another old hat tree. That's his thing, she confided, picking up antiques.

Go figure--a guy like Toad with a thing for old stuff. She says he's got a bunch of it, but he just lets it sit most of the time. The last thing he brought home is still in their attic, the whatsit has a rusted lock and he hasn't even opened it! What an idiot. Messing around with antiques when he's got such a gorgeous wife just panting for a little attention.

'Course, she wasn't tellin' me all this stuff at the fights. See, since it was her birthday, I took her out to dinner afterwards. What can I say, I'm a sensitive kinda guy.

We had a couple of nice rare steaks with some green chilies, and...

And ended up back at her place.

* * *

Stirring, Al reached over to the night table beside the unfamiliar bed and picked up his watch. In the darkness of the room, the luminescent hands pointed to roughly eight minutes after three. In the morning. Trying to force himself fully awake, he blinked a few times and rubbed a hand over his face.

Swinging his feet to the side, he sat there while his eyes adjusted to the dark, lest he trip over something on this foreign soil when he tried to take his leave.

Damn, he hadn't meant to fall asleep. Now he was gonna have to do some real fancy footwork, explaining to Max just where the hell he'd been for most of the night!

The bed moved slightly, and an instant later a feather-like hand traveled down the furrow of his spine. With a moan of utter delight, Al closed his eyes again--Carol Bartlett had great hands.

She moved closer, replacing the one hand with her entire body, until he could feel her pressed against his bare back. When those wonderful hands of hers started to move in a gentle caress, he moaned again despite himself. "I, unh...I gotta go."

"Bathroom's down the hall to the right," she whispered in a sexy voice, nibbling his ear lobe. "Hurry."

"No, I..." Making the supreme self-sacrifice, he pulled away from The Amazing Hands. "I mean, I gotta go home."

e stood, without looking back, and began the search for his strewn clothes. Stumbling in the near dark, it took him several moments to locate them all. Only when he was fully dressed, did he allow himself to glance at Carol.

She looked extremely sexy laying there, completely naked, bathed in moonlight.

"Are you sure you won't stay?" she asked, caressing the sheet he'd vacated just a few moments ago, which was undoubtedly still warm. "I told you, I'm not expecting Teddy home until the day after tomorrow." Quite unexpectedly, she got up off the bed and came forward to kiss him. "I'll make you breakfast in bed. Bacon, eggs, pancakes...me..."

"Sounds tempting," he said as he pulled her hands from around his neck. Strangely enough, he found himself more hungry for the food Maxine wouldn't allow him to eat anymore, than the naked woman before him. "But my wife'll kill me if I'm out all night. Maybe some other time, huh?"

"The sooner the better," she said, watching as he collected his things from the nightstand.

He paused to throw her one last wink, then left the bedroom--Teddy Bartlett's bedroom--thinking that perhaps the jerk did have one likable quality after all.

His wife.

* * *

Shoes in his hand, Al quietly let himself in

his front door, feeling terrifically pleased by his actions. Bartlett's wife--who would have thought it? This was a major conquest. Too bad he couldn't tell anyone about it.

Carefully, he eased the door shut behind him, trying to make no sound at all. He had even made the sacrifice of leaving his Vette parked in the driveway so as not to wake Maxine with the garage door. He would let his car set out for a few hours, even if hers must be in the safety of the garage.

Some things a guy just had to do for the sake of matrimonial harmony. No use letting her know just how late he'd arrived home.

At least he had come home.

Feeling smugly self-righteous about that fact, he padded quietly in his socks, headed for the bedroom. Carol had practically begged him to stay, but he'd been strong and returned to the apartment.

To his own bed.

To his own wife.

No way he was acting like a total heel and making it obvious that he'd been screwing around. Geez, he was home, wasn't he? Even if it was nearly four.

Arriving at the closed bedroom door, he planned a quick peek inside to be sure Maxine was actually sleeping--so she wouldn't know how late he really was--and then bunking down on the couch.

Reaching for the door knob, he decided that in the morning he could pretend to have been a really good boy and gotten in just after her. He hadn't stayed out all night--although he could have if he'd wanted.

Instead, he plotted, grimacing slightly as the lock clicked loudly under his hand, he'd tell her he'd decided to come home and make up, and--

Disbelieving, Al froze. The bed was neatly made...and empty! Immediately all of his self-righteousness flared into indignation.

How dare she?! It was four freakin' o'clock in the morning...and she wasn't home!

* * *

Furious, Al made himself a pot of hot, black coffee and settled down in his chair--which he repositioned to face the door--to await her return. There was going to be hell to pay for this little escapade. Just wait until he got his hands on her!

He had worked his way through the entire pot and two cigars before he finally heard the sound of her key in the lock. The sun had come up an hour or more ago, and a quick glance at his watch confirmed that it was nearly eight.

Eight! Geez Louise! She wasn't even trying to sneak in!

By now, his anger had cooled to an icy rage, which rekindled instantly with the sight of her.

Furious again, he rose to his feet. "Where the hell have you been?" he demanded, barely giving her time to close the front door behind her.

Putting down her purse and ice skates, Maxine endeavored to just ignore him and instead pushed past toward the kitchen.

Grabbing her by the arm, Al angrily spun her to face him. "I asked you a question."

She shrugged him off. "You know very well where I've been." She headed from the room.

"Destiny?" Al scoffed, following. He planted himself in the doorway, arms folded, watching as she immediately went to work putting the kettle on for tea. "It's thirty miles away, sweetheart...not a hundred and thirty. Close enough for you to have driven home last night."

Righting a cup from the mug tree, she brushed her hair back over her ear and busied herself readying an herbal tea bag for the hot water to come.

"I didn't think you'd be here," she explained simply.

"Oh, yeah, right." Al nodded sarcastically. "You didn't think your husband would be here, so you decided not to come home all night." He laughed bitterly, shaking his head at the sound. "That's just great, Maxine. That's just real peachy."

"I could ask you the same thing, you know." she said angrily, coming forward waving a teaspoon.

The unexpected turnabout momentarily threw him. "What?"

"You heard me." She stabbed him with the teaspoon before turning and walking away. "I saw you leaving just after me. Where did you go?"

He faltered momentarily. So he'd been out to dinner with another woman. So he'd taken her home, and taken her to bed. So what? At least he'd had the decency not to stay out all night. "That's not the issue here."

"Why? You think it's okay for you to go off and have a good time but not for me? You're

such a damn chauvinist..."

Eyes narrowing, he shot her an accusing look. "What's that supposed to mean? 'Have a good time'?"

"Nothing." Turning away, she went back to making her nasty, healthy brew.

"You're--" He blinked in surprise. "Geez, I don't believe this! You're having an affair! Aren't you!" It was an accusation, not a question.

Her face registered a brief look of surprise, before she covered it with a smirk. "Grow up, Al. You're such a jerk sometimes."

He took a few decisive steps toward her, now convinced his assumption was a hundred percent correct. "I'm right, aren't I?" Another thought suddenly struck him. "And I bet I know with whom. It's that toad, Bartlett, isn't it? Geez, I can't believe you're screwin' around with that damn Marine!"

"Teddy?" She smirked. "Lord, I'm not that desperate..."

"The bastard, I'll wring his scrawny neck!"

"Oh please," she groaned, rolling her eyes expressively, "spare me the Macho Man routine, huh? It's getting kind of old."

Old?!

Stunned, he regarded her for a half a heartbeat. Now she was saying he didn't have what it took anymore?

Hah! He sure had enough to make Carol Bartlett moan! Several times!

"Ma non mi far ridere, angelo," he snarled, grabbing her wrist and pulling her to him.

"Stop it," she began to protest just before he kissed her, hard enough to stop the words ...and hard enough to pull the reaction from her he wanted.

When she began to press against him, responding to his kisses, he roughly pushed her away.

Ignoring her surprised exclamation, he turned on his heel, took the kitchen scissors from a drawer, and headed for the entryway where she had left her purse.

As if mystified, and a little frightened, she followed him to the kitchen door. "What are you...?"

When he snatched up her purse and began to extricate her credit cards from her wallet, understanding came to her.

"Oh, no you don't!"

Taking the space between them in a hasty sprint, she attempted to wrestle the cards from

him.

"Stop it, Al!"

Swearing, he shoved her away--although mindful of the scissors. "Watch it, Max," he growled, getting great satisfaction from the sound of the first of the three plastic cards yielding to the sharp blades. "I don't want this to end in bloodshed..."

"Damn you," she swore, completely into Mad Max Mode now, watching the two halves of her Mastercard flutter to the carpet. Her eyes started throwing daggers as he smugly waved her Visa card at her. "Don't you dare cut that up! Or so help me, I'll--"

Snip!

"Hah!" he smirked victoriously, letting her ex-Visa card join her ex-Mastercard on the floor.

"I hate you," she snarled.

Still sneering, he pulled out his next victim--her American Express card. The struggle was brief and intense, her hand going about his wrist to stall him. She was fighting all out now, like she had in the good old days, and he was hard pressed to destroy the card without hurting her with the scissors.

This one, he took great pleasure in cutting into quarters.

Finally, he pitched the sharp implement from him, making sure it fell a good distance away where it wasn't likely to be rolled on. Then, allowing the plastic pieces to fall to the floor with the others, he dusted his hands, smiled triumphantly, and let Max take her revenge by wrestling him down on top of them.

It was one hell of a ride...just like it had been in the good old days.

* * *

When it was over, Al lay on his stomach, eyes closed, with his arms tucked under his pillow and his head turned away from Maxine. Content with his privacy, he felt the bed move as she too kept the space between them and moved to the other side.

The room was nearly pitch black despite the fact that it was mid-morning, with the shades pulled tight against the prying eyes of out and about neighbors.

But the darkness suited Al fine. It gave him all that much more opportunity to stay inside his own thoughts.

Lazily, he reflected that he couldn't

remember the last time he'd made love to Max then held her afterwards--or the last time she'd expected to be held, or even the last time he'd wanted to.

They'd grown apart these past few weeks...

He knew his accusations of an affair had been unjust. Max couldn't be seeing that nozzle, Toad, because he was presently in Utah. The guy's own wife had confirmed as much.

If he'd just taken the time to use his head, not let his emotions get in the way, he would have realized that too.

But it was hard to think clear in the midst of a battle with Maxine, when everything she said and every move she made, was such an out and out turn on. The rest of their marriage may

not be perfect, but in bed it was out of this world...

His eyes half-opened as he felt her stir on her side, and heard her sigh softly. Maybe she'd just been thinking similar thoughts? Maybe it was time to do some of that 'working at love' stuff Sam kept telling him about and hold her, tell her that he loved her...even if he didn't. They were married, after all, stuck with each other. The least they could do was make the best out of it.

Maybe he'd even get her some more credit cards. Maybe--

"Al...?" Her words came as unexpected and as devastating as a bomb detonated in the sleepy darkness. "Al, I want a divorce."

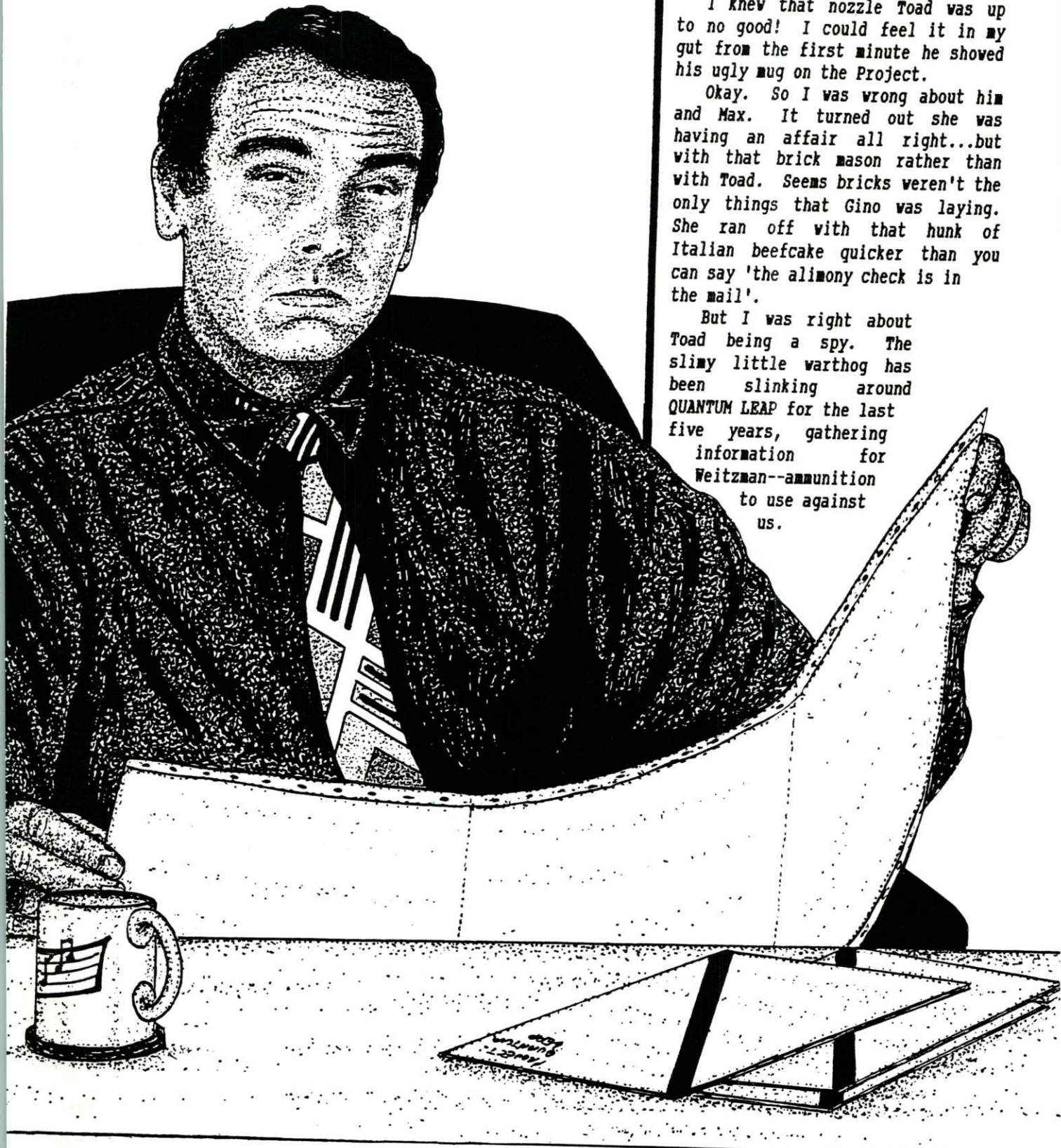
CHAPTER NINETEEN
"Uncharted Waters"

I knew it!

I knew that nozzle Toad was up to no good! I could feel it in my gut from the first minute he showed his ugly mug on the Project.

Okay. So I was wrong about him and Max. It turned out she was having an affair all right...but with that brick mason rather than with Toad. Seems bricks weren't the only things that Gino was laying. She ran off with that hunk of Italian beefcake quicker than you can say 'the alimony check is in the mail'.

But I was right about Toad being a spy. The slimy little warthog has been slinking around QUANTUM LEAP for the last five years, gathering information for Weitzman--ammunition to use against us.



It had to be him, getting all that so-called documentation of over-expenditure that he's allegedly submitted to the Funding Committee.

He and that phony, self-styled 'Honest Abe' congressman have been in cahoots from the very beginning.

But they didn't fool me. Unh-uh. I knew--hell, everybody knew Weitzman didn't approve of what we were doing here. But only I had Toad figured for a spy from day one.

Every time he encouraged us to spend another dime, I looked long and hard at the budget to be sure we could defend it to the hilt if we had to.

And now we have to.

The Committee has summoned Sam and me to Washington to 'review our funding in relation to the results' (read as: or lack of).

They say they have significant reservations about continuing to sink their annual 2.4 billion into a Project which has demonstrated tremendous outlay with limited tangible gains.

They want to 'discuss the probability of future positive outcomes, and to review unbiased, supportive data that will address some serious questions they have about the uses of funds already spent for this purpose'.

'Discuss', my ass.

They want to cut us off, pull the plug on the whole shebang...and it's all that bullet-headed Marine's fault.

Sam didn't want to believe it at first--that 'good old Teddy Bartlett' was a spy sent by Weitzman to collect the dirt until they thought they had enough to bury us.

But it's as plain as the nose on your face. All you have to do is read the list of topics on which the Committee requested we bring 'hard data'.

They want to talk about the use of electronic implants as security devices.

It was Toad who suggested those babies in the first place...and they cost a pretty penny. But with a Project that could change the future of the way mankind looks at time, security is one department you don't skimp on.

They want to talk to us about the 14 million we spent on the vault that encloses the Imaging and Accelerator Chambers.

With a radium core that could--not likely, but could--go blooey, you don't put up tinfoil shielding either.

As I recall, Toad was one of the biggest mouths in arguing for mega-protection.

Yeah, well, I've got Environmental Impact Survey's out the wazoo that validate the need for all that lead and reinforced concrete.

They want to talk to us about the 20 plus million we spent gaining access to sources and loading information into Ziggy.

Guess who just happened to be hanging around when Sam and I got into the argument about how much we should spend on stockpiling the data we may--or may not--need.

You got it. Toad.

And Sam was right on that. If you need it, you need it.

Simple. And it's a helluva thing to find out you ain't got what you need, when you desperately need it. He was right, and we spent the money.

And I can justify it. We didn't spend one penny that I can't say exactly where it went and why, and I can prove that it was spent because it needed to be spent.

So, gotcha, Toad.

I can back up all our expenditures to the hilt--especially the ones you had input on or knowledge of.

That's what I keep tellin' Sam. We're covered. It'll be okay. It'll be a piece of cake. That Committee's gonna fold like a deck of cards...

But...coming up with the hard data...well, that's something else again.

See, there is no 'hard data'...and there won't be until Sam leaps.

And he can't leap until we've got the bugs worked outta the retrieval systems. And we can't do that unless we get funding for another year.

Maybe two.

2.4 billion a year.

That's a lotta dough on the word of a fast-talking admiral and a sincere boy genius.

Okay, so I admit...maybe I'm a little worried.

Little bit.

A tad.

But there ain't no way I'm letting the kid catch on to that.

He's worried enough for the both of us.

* * *

PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP was nearly deserted in the hours after midnight.

Corridors were dimly lit to conserve power.

The constant bustle and hum of the people that normally populated it had shrunk to a rare voice or the echoing steps of the Security guards making their rounds.

Drifting through its darkened halls, Sam found the effect of the silence oddly comforting after the rush of the day's activities--and oddly unsettling at the same time.

He had seen it like this dozens of times over the years, when he had stayed late, too embroiled in a fascinating problem to go home with the rest of the crew.

But this time it was...different.

This time it seemed almost like a prophetic threat of days to come, when the Project that he had conceived, planned and built could be rendered empty and lifeless by powers that had no concept of what it was they denied him.

Restless, Sam made his way through the Project, looking for something, but not certain just what.

He had done everything he could in his office to prepare for the tomorrow morning's trip to DC...although there was little enough to be done there.

Administration was Al's turf.

Sam, who spent as little time as possible in the office that he had accepted simply because it was expected, had little in the way of 'files' of administrative trivia to bring.

The real work took place underground, right here in this vast complex that he paced alone, driven to look it all over one more time now that it was empty of people.

Earlier that day he had hid in Control--calculating, collating, and projecting data to present to the Committee that so threatened his dream.

But now it was safe, now he could roam freely without the fear of his staff asking him questions that he couldn't answer.

Questions that he was almost afraid to ask himself.

Would they cut funds and delay the work? Would they demand another on-site inspection and bring further progress to a halt until they were satisfied?

Would they--as their summons seemed to suggest--actually go so far as to shut him down? Close the book on five years of breakthrough work?

Medical was empty. Sam knew that before he palmed the entrance lock, triggering the door to slide up with a soft, metallic hiss. Verbena

and Darcie--the staff psychiatrist and MD respectively--and their assorted nurses, techs, and aides had long since gone home.

All had been hired six months ago, when it appeared he was going to be testing the Accelerator...before they had discovered the potential problem in the retrieval program.

Now, there was precious little for them to do. Certainly, there was no reason for them to staff the place around the clock.

Standing in the doorway, he gazed into the darkness for a long moment.

Inside lay a medical complex that was more compact and complete than his old friend Sibby's small town hospital. Whatever he or his staff could conceivably need, when he took the plunge into the unknown world of quantum leaping, was housed here.

There was even a small, sophisticated surgical suite which Darcie had used when she implanted the tracking device that would keep him in touch with the Project during a leap.

Drawing a deep breath, he touched the glowing bracelet at his wrist to activate it, and said quietly, "Lights, Ziggy, half strength."

Obediently, the lights came on, dim enough to cast much of the suite of rooms in shadow. The computer's voice, however, was much less agreeable.

"It is not necessary, Dr. Beckett, to address me. The room sensors are more than capable of responding to simple voice commands. To access my main control for such a purpose is both wasteful of my abilities and insulting."

"Humor me," Sam answered absently, still gazing thoughtfully into the room. "I want your company, okay?"

There was a long pause--an eternity in computer terms--before the answer came. "Agreed, Dr. Beckett, if you do not intend to make it a habit."

"You'd better hope," Sam snapped softly, "that we get the chance to make it a habit."

"Computers do not 'hope'," Ziggy returned in kind. "Irrational optimism in the face of unfavorable odds is a human failing."

Turning on his heel, Sam left the section without ever entering it.

He knew what was in there as well as he knew his own living room. Maybe better. Why would he need to go in?

"Kill the lights, Ziggy," he ordered crisply without acknowledging the computer's comment.

"And make sure you lock the door."

There was a sharp click behind his back as he strode away, like a sulky child snapping a lock closed with unneeded force.

Sam ignored it, and the computer followed his commands in stubborn silence through much of the rest of his tour.

Still, the physicist was aware of her presence as a sort of almost subliminal hum. He wanted her company, not necessarily her conversation, and he saw no reason to provoke further argument.

Restless, he passed down the corridor leading past the dozen or so small rooms that would eventually house the round the clock Project personnel--rudimentary living quarters for everyone who needed to be available for shifts during leaps.

'Spartan' was the word Al used, 'like Annapolis'...which was probably why the room the admiral had picked for his own even now sported some evidence of his discerning, and somewhat flamboyant, tastes.

But right now, there was nothing to interest him, so he continued on his way.

Even the main control room did not hold him long. He had done everything there that he could...for the moment.

Most of the lights on the banked control panel flashed with a muted glow that signalled 'Stand By' mode.

Even Gooshie, who was practically a standard fixture in the room, had gone home. Sam had sent him there less than two hours before, though the programmer had protested that he still had work to do. They both knew whatever work he had undertaken would not have been enough to make a difference in the next day's Committee hearings.

Until Sam had more funds, and more time, to pursue extensive research on the retrieval problem, the Project was effectively at a standstill.

"Open the Imaging Chamber door, Ziggy," Sam ordered, moving away from the control panel.

There was a resentful flash in the blue-silver disk that hung above the console in the center of the room, but no comment from the parallel computer.

The door at the end of the short, metal-walled hallway slid open with what sounded like an irritated hiss.

Ignoring it, Sam headed up the steps and into the lighted walkway, then passed through the

door and into the vast cavern that would serve as the stage for the holographic portion of the Project.

His footsteps echoed eerily in the shadowed room as he entered.

This had been the first thing they built, and the physicist was certain of its technology's ability to do what was required of it.

He and Al had given demonstrations to Weitzman and every other Committee member. They had 'knocked their socks off', just as Al had predicted they would.

But then, the admiral had also warned him that the razzle dazzle of holography could wear off.

From the way things were shaping up, Sam thought ruefully, it seemed he knew what he was talking about.

Al had also been vocal--vehement and consistent--in his assertion that Bartlett had been faking his enthusiasm for the Project all along.

In fact, Al had started insisting the Government liaison was nothing more than a spy in this very place the first day the Marine arrived, and now it looked as if his suspicions about that were going to be validated too.

Could it really be that that was going to be the way the whole Project ended?

Wheeling again, Sam left the Imaging Chamber.

This time the door hissed open obediently before he gave the command, as if Ziggy sensed his mood and knew where he was headed.

Without breaking stride, the physicist headed for the Accelerator, the lights of which were glowing softly even before he arrived.

As if his earlier meanderings through the Project had been nothing but a prelude to his arrival here, he strode to the exact center of the circular room.

This was where it would happen.

This was what he had striven all of his adult life toward and he was not going to let Toad, or Weitzman, or anyone else take it away from him.

Somehow, he would make them understand.

As if he could feel the energies latent in the chamber, Sam tilted his head back and stood quietly as if waiting.

It would happen here.

On this very spot, he would call on quantum forces...more powerful, more brilliant, than

lightning. Than anything nature had ever seen before...

Barely breathing, Sam closed his eyes, waiting, feeling, for forces he knew existed. If he could only command them correctly, they would leap pure and beautiful all about him ...and he would travel in time.

Somehow, he had to make them understand.

Not leaping would--

"Whatcha doin', Sam?"

The gravelly voice from somewhere behind the physicist doused the spell like a bucket of cold water.

Yelping in surprise, Sam whirled about to see Al standing in the doorway, closely observing everything that was going on in the room.

"Al!" Sam protested. "I hate it when you sneak up on me like that!"

"Why?" Al grinned slightly and sauntered into the room, only a faint trace of suspicion on his face. "You got a guilty conscience?"

Stopping before Sam, he tucked both hands into his pockets and regarded the scientist intently.

"What're you thinkin' of that's so absorbing that you don't hear me comin'?" He tilted his head to the side, gaze sharpening, though his tone was still teasing. "Hmmm?"

"I was just..." Sam floundered, waving an arm at the chamber about him. "...thinking."

"About what?"

"Thinking," Sam began, lowering his head, "about..."

"About leaping," Ziggy supplied unexpectedly.

Swiftly, Sam's head came up. "I was not!"

"Forgive me for disagreeing, Dr. Beckett, but I believe you were," the computer insisted.

The physicist scowled. "Of all the things I programmed you for, Ziggy, mind reading wasn't one of them."

"But you did give me the ability to extrapolate human behavior given psychological profiles, past actions, and present situations," the computer returned in a silky tone.

This was payback, Sam thought in irritation, for his earlier treatment of her. Maybe he should have chosen to give her an ego of a lesser magnitude.

Drawing a breath to speak, he was interrupted by Ziggy, who was obviously not satisfied in her revenge yet.

"You toured the entire complex, including medical, quarters for support personnel, main Control, and the Imaging Chamber, ending here in

the Accelerator. You took a place on the center pad and assumed a pose much as you would if the chamber were on-line. Such actions suggest that the odds are 98.2 percent that you were considering leaping."

"I was thinking of what it would be like to leap," Sam grated through clenched teeth, "not of actually firing up the Accelerator and doing it."

"I did not suggest otherwise," came the smooth answer from the computer. "Do you, as Admiral Calavicci suggested, have a guilty conscience?"

Al spared Sam the necessity of a reply as he laughed and reached in his pocket for a cigar. "Give it up, Sam, she's got you. She's like any other woman--has to have the last word."

Suspiciously, the physicist regarded the tobacco in the admiral's hand.

"I'm not gonna get cigar ash in your precious Accelerator," the older man said in exaggerated innocence. "I just want to hold it, okay?"

"Okay," Sam agreed grudgingly, still watching the admiral's hands warily as he unwrapped it.

The sound of the cellophane was loud in the vaulted chamber, as Al crumpled it in his hand and stuffed in into his pocket.

"You worried about tomorrow, kid?" he asked at last, eyeing the cigar as if deciding whether he could get away with lighting it after all.

"A little," Sam admitted. "You?"

The admiral scowled at the tobacco in his hand and lifted it to his mouth. Biting down on the end, he did not meet Sam's eyes.

"That damn gyrene bastard. I knew he'd bite us in the butt." His eyes shifted to Sam. "I told you he was up to no good."

"And you were right," the physicist agreed, turning away with a sigh.

Tucking his own hands in his pockets, he stepped off the pad and regarded the far wall.

"Do you think he's really damaged us enough that they'll actually pull the funding?"

"Nah." Al shook his head, and Sam caught the movement from the corner of his eye. "I told you, I'm ready for him. I've got plenty of ammo to prove that we needed every penny we spent."

"But we don't have any real hard data to show them, and that's what they've been asking for the past six weeks." Sam turned back to Al, "I've got test scenarios, and--"

"Don't sweat it," the admiral interrupted. "They've only been asking because Toad fed all that info to Weitzman about us hitting a minor snag, and he thinks now is a good time to push."

"But--"

"But nothing. Weitzman's got them whipped into a lynching fury because he thinks we're vulnerable right now, and he's using Toad's alleged cost overruns as an excuse to get us to Washington. He thinks he'll get us there, then grill us about the lack of results thingy, and carry the rest of the day on momentum. But..." Al stabbed his cigar at Sam for emphasis. "...that ain't gonna happen."

"How do you know?"

Al shrugged, giving Sam his patented devil-may-care grin. "Because Beckett and Calavicci are an unbeatable team, pal. Always have been."

"At basketball, maybe. This--"

"--is no different. Look, I've got a briefcase full of figures to shoot down Toad. And once we pop that balloon, the Committee will be less likely follow Weitzman's lead when he goes for the hard data push. Then you talk about all the great stuff we could learn by leaping back in time. Hit them with the wonder of it all...how much it would benefit mankind."

"You mean snow them," Sam said bluntly. He shook his head. "But Al, I can make them understand. I know I can." He shifted into a more positive stance. "I've worked out a presentation, one that'll put quantum leaping in the simplest terms. And once they comprehend that, then I can make them see the significance of what we've got and how it'll relate to the rest of what we'll do here when we get the retrieval problem solved."

"I don't know that they can understand, Sam, that's my point. Half the time I don't understand, and I'm no dummy." The admiral shrugged. "And I've even had the advantage of being in on this whole thing from the beginning."

"But--"

"But I know you're well meaning." It was Al's turn to shift into a more positive stance. "Sam, if you go in there with this technical explanation, they may think you're tryin' to snow them and cut you off from the word go."

"Wait a minute," Sam protested. "You're saying that if I try to bowl them over with the benefits to mankind and gloss over how it works, they'll be more like to buy it? Because if I really try to explain, they'll think I'm trying

to snow them?"

"Exactly." Al nodded in satisfaction, balancing his cigar lightly in his fingers. "You got it, Sherlock."

"No way, Al," Sam said firmly. "We're doing the presentation my way." He took a step forward, hands lifted in sincerity. "I can make them understand, I'm sure of it."

"Sam..."

"No, I can. And I don't want to hear another word about it."

There was a long pause.

"Okay, pal," the admiral agreed at last, obviously reluctant. "It's your call, we'll do it your way." A bit wearily, he pocketed his cigar. "Now, don't you think it's about time to call it a night?"

A bit unwilling, Sam nodded. "I guess so. Donna's probably wondering where I am."

"Probably," Al agreed. "You'd better get home and partake of wedded bliss while you can."

"What do you mean by that?" Sam asked, surprised.

"Just that I know how you two are," Al answered with a grin. "And come tomorrow, you're gonna be separated two, maybe three, whole days. I don't think either one of you'll be able to stand it unless you make tonight a night to remember."

"Al," Sam shook his head and turned away. "You're impossible."

"Me?" the admiral asked innocently. "You're the one with the Raging Honeymoon Passion that's lasted longer than the Energizer bunny. How many years have you been married now? Geez, you two still act like a couple of lovesick teenagers? It's..." His grin widened devilishly. "...indecent."

"Indecent," Sam snorted, leading the way to the exit. "We're married. You're the one sneaking off to the staff quarters with Tina!"

"Yeah, well...if I'm gonna spend time in that room, Sam, I gotta christen it mine." Al's answer was patently unrepentant, but as the door slid open, his tone changed. "You aren't really thinkin' about leaping before we get all the bugs worked out, are you?"

"No," the physicist turned back to him in surprise.

"Good," Al said. "We're not doing any rush jobs and shoving you into the Accelerator prematurely just because Weitzman makes a few threatening noises."

Standing in the doorway, Sam hesitated. "Do

you think he really believes I've spent money just for the sake of spending money?"

"Nah." Al shook his head. "He's just a nozzle. He's against anything that stretches that closed little mind of his." At Sam's uncertain expression, he continued. "He's just slinging mud and hoping some sticks. You know, and I know, we're clean. Pretty soon everyone else will, too." He grinned. "Like when you collect your next Nobel Prize for time travel."

Nodding, Sam's eyes traveled beyond Al's shoulder to roam over the vacant Accelerator. "I hope I get the chance to at least try."

"You will," Al assured him. "When we're ready." Firmly, he stepped in front of Sam, blocking the view of his Project. "Don't even think about going anywhere in that until the retrieval program checks out at a hundred percent. You do..." His eyes narrowed threateningly. "...and I'll kick your butt from here to eternity. Capeesh?"

Unexpectedly, Sam laughed. "Since I'm Director of PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP, Al, butt-kicking is supposed to be my responsibility. I think it's even in my job description."

"I mean it, Sam," Al said firmly, ignoring the levity. "No leaping until we're ready."

Sam grinned. "Leaping if I knew I couldn't get back would be pretty stupid, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah." The admiral's gaze was steady and serious. "It would. And Sam Beckett is not stupid. You just remember that, pal."

"Okay," Sam agreed with a deliberate, pacifying air. "I will. Now..." He gestured to the deserted hallway just beyond the door. "...can we go home?"

Al nodded, as if satisfied his point had been made. "Lead on."

* * *

Al accompanied Sam up to the ground floor offices in the elevator. When they walked out into the spacious hallway that led to the exit, the older man paused.

"You go ahead, Sam, I'm gonna get my files and stuff together tonight so I can just meet you at the airstrip tomorrow morning."

"Okay," the physicist agreed, sounding weary. "I'll see you then."

The admiral watched the younger man walk past the Security guard, say goodnight and call the man by name, and leave the building.

Only then did he turn and head for his

office.

Donna had called earlier and asked him if Sam were okay. It had become a regular thing between them in the past few weeks, ever since the increasing pressure of funding threats had really started to bear down.

She would call, Al would reassure her, and then go and gently--or sometimes not so gently--shoo Sam home without ever letting him know why.

The kid was lucky he had someone like Donna to care for him, someone who was waiting at home for him or--more often--working side by side with him, when he got so wrapped up in an idea that he stayed to work until the wee hours of the morning.

The kid was real lucky. Not savvy when it came to handling political Committees, but lucky.

Entering his office, Al saw the neat piles of folders holding computer printouts for the next day's meeting stacked neatly on his desk.

Sighing, he picked up his briefcase and began to put them in it.

His aide--Lieutenant Commander Anne Turner, whom he'd personally requested from his STAR BRIGHT days--had spent the afternoon putting them together according to his specifications, and he had been burning the midnight oil to make sure they were exactly the way he wanted them.

Not that he really needed to bother--Anne knew him well enough by now.

Maybe this trip to Washington bothered him more than he cared to admit. He wanted to make sure everything was ship-shape--he wanted to be a hundred percent prepared.

You just didn't go to a meeting in DC, especially one you were summoned to, unprepared.

Well--the thought stilled his hands for just a moment--once I did.

Resolutely he tried to turn away from the memory of the last time he had been ordered so summarily to the Capitol, and continued to methodically transfer the things he needed into his case.

But it kept haunting him.

He'd been in hot water back then, through his own stupidity. Rear Admiral Drennan had been right to call him in for a thorough butt-chewing because he certainly deserved it. The idiotic way he'd acted afterwards proved it.

Carefully, Al straightened the edges of a file folder bearing the same black diagonal slash as all official PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP papers.

In the end, back then, it had all worked out okay. Sam had been right about how to handle that Committee--the STAR BRIGHT people. Maybe he was right about this one too.

Still, Al had a real bad feeling in his gut about this.

Snapping his briefcase closed, he picked it up off the desk.

Turning to the door, he hesitated a moment, then slowly lowered the case to the floor and doubled back to his desk.

Punching in keys on his intercom, he accessed the computer's voice unit. "Ziggy?"

"Yes, Admiral Calavicci?"

Al grimaced. It was almost like the damn thing had been hovering over his shoulder, just waiting for him to call on it. "Was that stuff you told Sam about predicting human's actions true?"

"I do not lie, Admiral," the computer sounded exceedingly smug.

"Of course not," Al growled. "You were programmed by a boy scout. What I want to know is, can you predict odds on whether Sam will do something stupid...like try the Accelerator too soon?"

"Yes."

After a long wait, Al ordered, "Then do it!"

"I am a parallel, hybrid computer, Admiral, designed for carrying out multi-linear processes simultaneously. Bookmaking is not one of my primary functions."

"Give me the odds, you pretentious hunk of tin," Al grated, "or I'll re-program you myself."

"You are incapable of such a complex and sensitive procedure," came the reply. "To attempt it would result in extensive damage to my--"

"Exactly," Al agreed menacingly. "Now gimme the odds I asked for."

"I will tell Dr. Beckett that you are threatening to destroy work he has done in creating my ego and unique capabilities."

"And I'll tell him you've got a case of the pouts and need to go to the woodpile for a little attitude readjustment!" Al bellowed. "Answer my question!"

"The odds are 3.7 percent that Dr. Beckett will attempt a premature leap at this time," came the sulky answer.

"3.7," Al repeated in satisfaction. "I didn't think he'd do anything so stupid."

"Then, why did you ask?"

"Watch your mouth, Ziggy," Al snapped. "I don't wanna hear any more."

He strode back to the door, lifting his briefcase without stopping, and killed the lights as he passed through it. "I'm outta here."

When his footsteps had ceased to ring in the hall, signalling that he was out of earshot of the room, Ziggy's petulant voice filled the dark, deserted office.

"But should the Funding Committee refuse to allocate the necessary monies for the continuation of this Project," she said, fully aware the admiral was gone, "the odds increase to 19.4 percent. If Dr. Beckett should have reason to believe he has solved the retrieval problem, the odds increase to 49.6 percent. If both these conditions exist concurrently..."

Ziggy's litany of possibilities continued into the empty room for an quarter of an hour. Admiral Calavicci, as he had demanded, was not there to hear them and satisfaction was evident in the computer's voice at having outwitted him.

* * *

Sam felt a drop of sweat slip down his side beneath his shirt despite the fact the Committee's chamber was adequately air-conditioned.

Sitting at their briefing table, several meters across from the imposing flag-draped Committee panel, he shot a sidelong glance at Al, who was giving their opening remarks.

He wondered sourly how the Naval officer managed to give the impression of immaculate coolness in his pristine dress whites, despite the fact that he was every bit as much under the gun.

Then, looking past the admiral to where his aide, Turner, sat in a similarly unperturbed fashion beside him, Sam decided that it must be a Navy trait.

Damn. Didn't they at least have the decency to show they had butterflies?

This chamber, with its Gothic arches and raised dais that seated the five Committee members, was enough to intimidate even the bravest of souls--let alone a man desperate to hold onto his life's dream that those five people were threatening to jerk out from under him.

Listening to Al smoothly say that he and his

associate were prepared to answer any questions they had about the allegations raised by the monthly reports, Sam swallowed hard and tried to rein in his impatience at beginning his part of the testimony.

As Al sat--his back straight, his shoulders squared, and his hands resting together near his hat--Sam was convinced he could make them understand.

If they'd just stay with him, he could make them understand.

"Dr. Beckett," Chairwoman Diane McBride said, opening the inch-thick file before her. She glanced down at the page, shifting the glasses on the bridge of her nose as if she were actually reading it. "This is quite an extensive collection of materials you have provided us. Would you care to elaborate on it?"

"Unh, yes." Sam stood, and cleared his throat. "Yes, I would. I've prepared basic explanations of what we've accomplished so far at PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP, and what we hope to accomplish soon."

Weitzman leaned forward in his chair, elbows resting on his own folder, which remained closed. "Are you saying you have new data to present, Doctor?"

"Well, no, not exactly," Sam answered, still confident. "But I'm prepared to explain what we do have, in a means that will demonstrate its importance and relevance to the next phase...and in terms that you can readily understand."

"It's that 'next phase' which concerns me, Dr. Beckett," Weitzman returned. "And how long we have to wait to see its completion. To date, you have spent billions of dollars, and all we have for our investment are promises that you will realize an unspecified success at an unspecified time."

"That's what I'm here to do," Sam replied evenly, hearing a soft, covert noise of approval from the outwardly serene Naval officer beside him. "Specify the successes we have already realized, if not when we can expect the final result of quantum leaping."

Diane McBride smoothly cut into the determinedly civilized fray. "Then proceed, Dr. Beckett. To the lay-person, much of this data seems only projection, not concrete fact. Please explain."

Satisfied, Sam nodded. "I'd be happy to, Senator," he said firmly. "If we could cut down on the light in the room, we can get

started."

At a nod from Senator McBride, Anne Turner got from her chair.

Crossing to the mammoth, classic windows, she touched a combination of switches that bespoke of recent updating and brought the sunblocking screens slowly down into place. Another touch lowered a viewing screen before them.

When the sunlight, already dusky with the swirl and richness of light spilling into old and venerated places dimmed, Sam moved to his visual aids equipment.

Flicking it on, the first of his charts appeared on the huge screen, the whole thing somewhat reminiscent of a family home-movie night.

Glancing at the faces of the Committee members, he ruefully hoped that this wouldn't come off as boring.

"The quantum mechanics behind the string theory as I have explained it to you, is a metaphor for a much more complex principle, which is itself based on complex Einsteinian principles. In order for me to explain what it is that we have gleaned from the data we have, I must first give you a rudimentary introduction to those underlying foundations. If you will turn to the first chart in the materials I have supplied you..."

Confident that he had broken down the material into understandable segments that he could explain in simple terms, Sam began his presentation.

If they would only stay with him...

Beginning to pace, the physicist intensified his energies.

If they would only try, they could comprehend enough to get a fuller understanding of how far he had come already.

If...

As always, the beauty of the pure theory soon began to speak to him, and slowly--but unequivocally--he took less notice of the Committee and more to the subject.

It was so elegant. So pure and straight-forward, that there was no way anyone could fail to--

"Dr. Beckett," Weitzman interrupted as he was just hitting his stride.

Surprised to find he had all but forgotten his audience in his enthusiasm for his topic, Sam turned from the vector diagram he was tracing in the air with the light pen. "Yes,

Senator Weitzman?"

"Spare us the song and dance, and give us the bottom line," Weitzman said. "Will this monster work, or not?"

Monster?

Sam's eyes narrowed as he regarded the senator. With his steel gray hair, piercing blue eyes and Lincolnesque goatee, he looked the perfect politician.

"I believe it will, yes," he said, feeling his jaw muscles begin to tighten. "Otherwise, what's the point of building it?"

"Perhaps to build your own reputation at the taxpayer's expense," Weitzman shot back from his place at the far end of the bench. "After all this time, and all this money, it would be academic suicide to admit that you've discovered it won't work."

The senator turned to glance along the bench at the other members, his words meant for Sam but his meaning directed at them.

"So you pour more and more money into it until we are forced to close you down, and then you can claim that you would have achieved success if we had only allowed you a billion or ten more."

Gaining several unobtrusive nods of agreement from his fellows, Weitzman turned back to Sam and smiled smugly.

Shocked, Sam stared at him, aware of the way Al had sat forward in his chair.

"I will achieve success," he protested. "As soon as I solve the retrieval problem, I'll be ready to test it and then--"

"You told us you were ready to test it six months ago," the female senator sitting next to McBride observed. "Will there be yet another problem when you solve this one?"

Unable to lie, Sam answered reluctantly. "Maybe. That's one of the pitfalls of research. To solve one problem sometimes reveals another. But I--"

"And another, and another," interrupted Weitzman. "The data supplied to us seems... questionable at best."

"Questionable!?" Sam's voice rose. "That's reliable, projected data that correctly reflects our current situation. It's as accurate as we can make it. We--"

"As accurate as you can make it," Weitzman repeated, "after spending a great deal of our money."

The wryness in the Senator's tone was like a red flag to the physicist, who rose to the

attack.

Was his integrity as a scientist at stake here, as well as the fate of QUANTUM LEAP?

"Are you suggesting that I...manufactured data?!" he demanded, both incredulous and angry. "Because if you are..."

Sam sensed rather than heard Al get to his feet behind him. "Dr. Beckett's entire presentation is intended to make clear the dependability of his data, given the highly experimental nature of the Project," the Admiral said calmly. "If he is allowed to continue, perhaps then the Committee could understand exactly what it is we have accomplished already."

"Or perhaps not," Senator McBride observed evenly. "We are senators, Admiral, not quantum physicists, and we are pressed for time."

"But..." Sam protested, knowing that it had been as he feared--home-movie night. "If you just give it a chance, I think you can follow this. I can start again..."

"We understand your eagerness to defend your position," Senator McBride said firmly before Weitzman could speak. "But to be honest, Dr. Beckett, a detailed explanation would--in all likelihood--be completely lost on us."

At that, she closed her folder, like she was closing the book on the Project, and the symbolism was not lost on Sam.

"Tell us," McBride continued, "briefly, what you feel you have accomplished and what you realistically expect to accomplish in the next year...if we renew your funding."

If we renew your funding.

Feeling as if there were tight, twin bands of tension and anger coiled about his chest, Sam struggled to draw a deep breath.

He had to calm down and lead with his head, not his emotions. If he lost it now, he could lose everything. Better to let Weitzman's snide aspersions on his integrity slide by and spend what was left of his precious allotted time for testimony on his theory.

He again told them his string theory of time using the most simple details he could. He explained the Accelerator and the Imaging Chamber again, and how the neurological implants would allow the Project Observer to experience what the Leaper was seeing and hearing, without disturbing history in the making.

Explaining the retrieval system for the umpteenth time, he reassured them he was certain that the problem, that one tiny glitch, would

soon be resolved.

Certain.

But looking at their faces, he saw only smug anticipation from Weitzman, unreadable politeness from Senators Sally Thornton and Joseph Durst...and Senator Brownsdale was asleep.

When he asked for questions, there were, of course, none. They hadn't listened to a single word he'd said. They were just waiting for him to shut up and sit down, so they could start in on Al about something they understood: expenditures and a bottom line that had nothing to do with what was really at stake here.

Seething in silence, he took his seat, casting a sidelong glance at Al.

The Admiral did not meet his eyes, and instead kept his complete attention to Senator McBride as she said, "Thank you, Dr. Beckett."

At that moment, Senator Brownsdale awoke with a start, which he obviously tried to cover by speaking. "Are we ready to caucus?"

"We are ready," Weitzman answered, "to hear some straight answers. Like why you spend 56 million on security devices that are so new, they have only been utilized in the most sensitive of military installations."

"That I can answer," Al spoke up firmly. "I have cost data and justifications, which I have supplied to each of you, and I am prepared to answer any questions you may have."

"Very well, Admiral Calavicci," Senator McBride said, shuffling Sam's presentation beneath the somewhat slimmer folder which contained Al's 'proof'. "Senator Weitzman has brought forth some disturbing questions raised by information collected by Mr. Bartlett."

Mr. Bartlett.

Sam's jaws ached with the effort of keeping back all the things he wanted to say.

Al had been right all along about that toady spy. All he could do now was hope the Admiral was also right when he said he 'had all the bases covered', and could prove none of Bartlett's allegations of unnecessary cost overruns were true.

But...it still stung to think they didn't believe him.

Him--Sam Beckett. 'The Next Einstein'. Nobel Prize winning scientist, whose honesty and reputation were almost as legend as that mega-brain.

Certainly, his integrity was more reaching than Weitzman's, who despite all efforts to

present himself as 'honest Abe', still resembled a weasel...

In both manner and looks, Sam decided vindictively, slumping in his chair.

Not even Anne's reassuring smile, as Al launched into his defense, seemed to help. He looked the other way, not meaning to be rude but still galled by the one real 'fact', that seemed to have been the only thing established here today.

Damn.

How could they not believe him? Did they really think he would lie?

* * *

"They didn't believe a word I said, Al," Sam said, restlessly pacing the length of his hotel room. "Not a single word."

"Sure they did," the admiral disagreed. Sitting, his feet propped up on Sam's bed, he watched the physicist stride angrily to and fro. "They just pretended they didn't to throw you."

"Well, they did a good job of that," Sam snapped, running a quick hand through his hair, then turning it into a helpless, palm-up gesture. "That creep Weitzman practically called me a liar right there in the hearing!"

"McBride knows you're not a liar."

"Yeah?" Sam turned on his friend. "So why didn't she even let me finish my presentation? She didn't understand any of it."

"You don't know that."

"Yes I do!" the physicist disagreed heatedly, turning away again. "You were right, I should've kept it short and sweet. I should've told them a bunch of platitudes about advancing the knowledge of humankind, and never tried to approach them from an intellectual angle." Disgusted, he turned back to his friend. "That's what you're thinking, isn't it."

Al propped his chin on his hand, looking suspiciously as if he was hiding a smile.

Sam scowled. "What's so damn funny?" he demanded, desperately needing to shout at somebody. "You want to say 'I told you so'? Go ahead." He flung his hands into the air in defeat. "You were right! Hah!" He turned away again, shrugging defiantly. "There, are you happy now?"

"Sam..." Al shifted in his chair, lowering his feet from the bed to the carpet. "Calm down. It's not all that terrible."

"They may shut down QUANTUM LEAP," Sam disagreed vehemently. "Years of work, billions of dollars, and I'll never get another chance to see if it works. Believe me, Al, it's that terrible!"

"If that's what happens," Al agreed, getting to his feet. "But it won't."

The calm confidence in the tone stilled some of the turmoil in Sam. Frowning, he asked, "Why not?"

"Because McBride's no dummy. I know political savvy and intelligence are usually inversely related, but not in her case." Al frowned as if giving the subject more thought. "Though Brownsdale...now there's a case in point if I ever saw one. That guy couldn't think his way out of a wet paper bag. Which..." He shrugged easily. "...is good. He'll let his chairwoman do his thinking for him, and if McBride goes our way like I think she will, that's two votes right there."

Thoughtfully, the admiral tucked his hands into his pockets and squinted at Sam as if in deep thought.

"Three if Senator Sally Thornton is at the reception that Martha Whittendon invited us to tonight. I hear Senator Sally has a thing for military men. If I invite her into the library..."

"Be serious," Sam snapped. Then, as a spark of hope flashed through him, he asked, "Do you really think there's still a chance?"

"Sure I do," Al said breezily. "There's always a chance until the last gavel falls...and that's why we're going to that reception at the Whittendon's tonight. Diane McBride is gonna be there for sure."

Disgusted, Sam shook his head. "Come on, Al, don't tell me you're planning on seducing Senator McBride? She's been happily married for decades!"

Al gave him an incredulous look as if unable to fathom where Sam got such an idea.

"Get real, Sam. I don't swim in other men's pools...well, not very often anyway. And besides, you don't seduce a class act like Diane McBride." He grinned, rocking confidently on his heels. "But you do talk to them at parties, and get another chance to get your point across in a more relaxed atmosphere than a Senate Committee hearing."

For an instant, Sam was tempted. Then, he rejected the idea. What was he going to do? Draw quantum equations on cocktail napkins and

construct a mock up of the Accelerator out of cheese dip?

"I'm not going to any reception," he said firmly. "I'm going back to New Mexico."

Al blinked in surprise. "New Mexico! Why? The Committee isn't supposed to reconvene and give us their decision until day after tomorrow."

"Because at least there I can get some work done," Sam said, tossing his suitcase onto the bed. "Real work. I'm not any good at this wheeling and dealing stuff. That's your department."

Crossing to the dresser, he began to pull out his things and carry them to the waiting luggage. "I'm good at quantum physics. If I'm lucky, and lightning strikes, maybe I'll solve the retrieval problem tonight."

"Okay, you do that," Al agreed as if it were a good possibility. Reaching into his pocket, he extracted a cigar as he headed for the door. "You go do what you do best and I'll do what I do best, and we've got it made. Hasn't been a team yet that can beat Beckett and Calavicci."

Watching the man move away, the physicist felt a sudden surge of gratitude toward him. Al wasn't going to give up until the bitter end, and Sam Beckett could take that as a given in any law of the universe there was, or would ever be.

He could count on Al Calavicci, no matter what.

"Al," Sam called as the pilot reached the door that connected their hotel rooms.

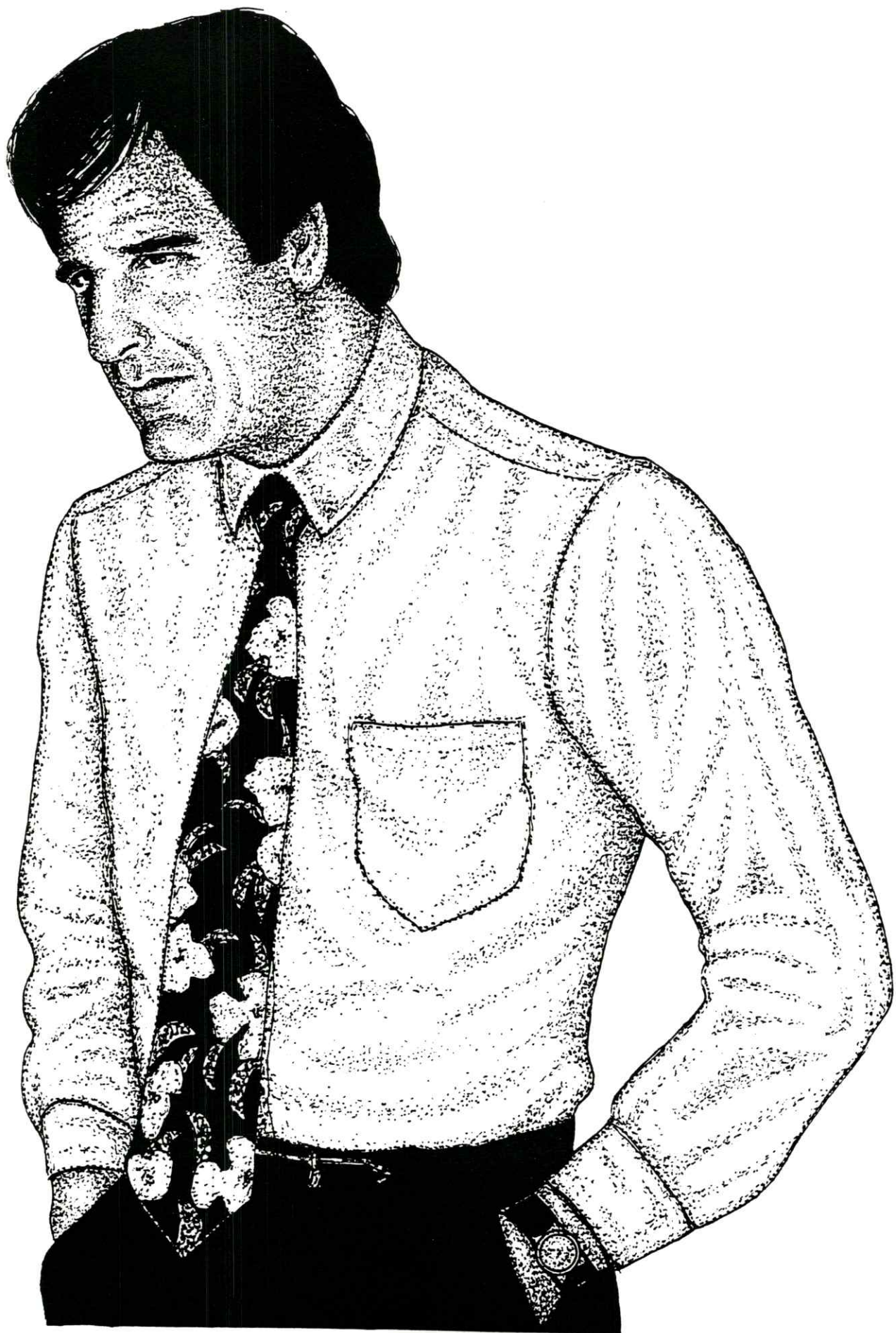
"Yeah?" The older man turned, still unlit cigar balanced in his fingers.

"Thanks." Sam smiled. "For everything. Even if they shut us down."

"Ah," Al said, waving a dismissing hand at him. "It'll never happen." He put the cigar in his mouth, patting his pockets as if searching for his lighter. "Hang in there, kid, and I'll bring 'em around. I'm never wrong." He gave Sam a cocky wink. "Never. You'll see. Now..." Retrieving his lighter, he turned back to his room. "...tux or dress whites? Tough decision."

Sam grinned, shaking his head as the older man started to pull the door shut on his musing.

"Better go for the tux," Al decided. "'Cause I know McBride'll be there. Thornton's a gamble...but she's already seen me in



uniform..."

Alone again, as he turned back to his half-packed luggage, Sam's smile slowly faded.

Who was he fooling? He wasn't going to solve the retrieval difficulty in less than twenty-four hours, and Al was whistling in the dark when it came to minimizing the danger of losing funding.

He had seen the way Weitzman had gone after the admiral's throat...and he'd seen the way Senator Durst had nodded in silent agreement.

PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP was in trouble.

Very, very deep trouble.

* * *

It was late afternoon when Sam arrived back at Stallion's Gate. Taking the elevator down to the lower level, he made himself walk down the corridor toward Control.

At this time of day, everyone would be there --at least everyone who believed, as he did, in 'The Impossible Dream'. He had to face them sometime, and now was as good a time as any.

The hell of it was that he didn't know any more than he had when he'd left for Washington the day before...except that the Committee was dead serious this time in its threat to cut funding.

As he stepped in, he was surprised, and relieved, to find that Gooshie and Donna were the only ones in the room.

Almost immediately, they left the main control panel to approach him.

"Sam!" his wife said in surprise. "We didn't expect you back until tomorrow."

"Have you heard any news?" Gooshie wanted to know, intent with concern. "Where's the Admiral?"

"Al stayed in Washington, to influence some of the Committee members at one of those DC receptions." Warily, he shrugged, then slipped an arm about Donna's waist. "For all the good it will do."

Looking up at him, Donna frowned. "Things didn't go well, then?"

"No." Sam shook his head, looking down. "Al thinks there's still a chance, but I'm not so sure. Unless we give them some absolute proof that we can make this work, they're going to shut us down."

"But they can't!" Gooshie protested. "Not when we've come so far. We were just running through some of the alternative retrieval

programs you had sketched out. Some of them have possibilities."

Sam's head came up. "Good possibilities?"

"Well..." The head programmer's eyes met Donna's instead of Sam's. "Not excellent ones, no," he admitted unwillingly. "But with work, one or two may show some promise."

Sam took a deep breath, drawing a concerned look from his wife. "Okay, so that's what we're going to do. Work. The Committee isn't going to give us a final decision for another two days." He gave Donna a quick hug, then dropped his arm from about her shoulders. "So, I flew back to see what we can do in that time. With luck, we can come up with something concrete to show them."

Gooshie and Donna exchanged dubious glances, but neither contradicted him.

"Okay," Donna agreed. "Where do you want to start?"

"Re-route all systems through the auxiliary link in the Programming Lab," Sam ordered, shaking off his weariness. "I'm going to need some space to work full tilt on this. Some space where I don't have to keep putting things away and getting them out again."

He shot a glance up at hanging blue orb--the computer's main CPU--which had remained silent during the conversation. "Time for some serious computing, Ziggy, are you with me?"

"Since you finally saw fit to ask me," came the silken reply, "I am at your disposal, Dr. Beckett."

"Okay, then," Sam said, turning on his heel and striding for the nearby lab. Al was busy doing what he could, now it was his time to do what he was good at--creating. "Let's get to work."

* * *

Washington receptions were a place where Al felt in his element. It was a skill he had spent many years practicing and refining until it had become like second nature to him.

So, dressed to kill in his black tux and with Lindsay--a senator's aide he'd met on his last trip to the Capitol--on his arm, he made his entrance with just the right amount of fanfare.

He picked up a glass of champagne for his date, and a shot of Perrier water for himself. Actually, he didn't care for the taste, but it was inconspicuous and served its purpose of

successfully warding off those who would press a drink on him because they felt uncomfortable with a drink in their hand if he did not have one as well.

Thus armed, he set out to conquer the field.

First, he sought out his hostess, Martha Wittendon. She was a broad shouldered matron, highly placed in Washington circles.

It was important to thank her for her invitation, and be sure that she knew he had actually taken her up on it.

One of the unwritten rules of the game was that a good player cultivated invitations, sometimes accepted ones he didn't need politically, and made sure he was visible about it.

The reasoning behind that, was that he needed to keep all those invitations coming for a time he actually did need them to advance his cause ...like now.

Putting on his best charm like a well fitting jacket, he played the room.

Schmoozing with the female power players was easy--he had long ago learned just the right blend of gentlemanly charm, respect, and mild flirtation to use.

It was harder with the men. He had even forced himself to learn golf, just to have something to discuss 'genteel man to genteel man' at these affairs.

It had gotten easier with practice--the schmoozing, not his golf game.

Lindsay, who was no stranger to Washington parties, played her part well, smiling and making all the right required small talk. Then, with her own agenda pending, she briefly parted ways with Al in favor of a group of senior aides clustered in a corner.

That was fine with the admiral, who had seen his chance to put his own plan into action.

The vote he had been hoping to charm--Sally Thornton--was not at the reception...but Diane McBride was, and Al intended to talk to her.

Spotting the Committee Chairwoman on the far side of the elegant room, Al casually strolled over in her direction.

Stopping a few yards away, he gazed out the window as if something in the garden beyond had captured his attention. She was talking to Senator Williams, and that conversation wasn't likely to last long.

Brice Williams was pressing hard for a tax-hike bill, which Diane opposed. Al would just make it attractive for her to leave that

discussion for his company.

Sure enough, a few moments later, he heard her excuse herself. Timing it just right, he turned as she passed behind him, making it impossible for her to pass him by without rudeness.

And Diane McBride was never rude, on that he could depend. She was often hard-nosed and always all business, but eternally, unfailingly gracious.

"Senator," he greeted her with a nod. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

"Admiral," she replied, pausing next to him.

"Is Dr. Beckett with you?"

It was better opening than he dared hope. "No." He shook his head regretfully. "He's flown back to New Mexico. Sam just can't stay away from that Project of his for very long. He's determined to crack that retrieval problem or bust."

Diane smiled, taking a sip of the punch she held in her hand. "Dr. Beckett is truly dedicated, isn't he."

"Absolutely," Al agreed sincerely. It was easy to say good things about Sam because he always meant them. "And brilliant. He'll solve this problem, you can bank on that."

"Interesting choice of words," she observed dryly, her eyes sweeping the room before them before coming back to his.

"It's on my mind right now," Al admitted smoothly. "We've come much too far with this to pull back now. With funding for one more year, Sam truly believes we can make QUANTUM LEAP a success."

She nodded slowly. "Yes, I believe that he does."

"You do?"

"Yes," she agreed with another small smile. "Dr. Beckett is a man of strong convictions. That was obvious in today's testimony." Her gaze held Al's. "As formidable as his intellect is, in many ways he leads with his heart."

Bingo! This lady was one smart cookie.

He just hoped she reached the right conclusion from her astute observation.

"Yes, ma'am, he does," he agreed sincerely. "And sometimes..." This time, his eyes traveled about the room of expensively dressed people, all busily advancing their individual causes one way or another. "...in this town, that's a disadvantage."

"Or an advantage," she said, surprising him. Startled, his gaze came back to hers as she

smiled and continued. "He truly believed he could make us understand the physics of his theory."

Al hesitated, suddenly uncertain of how to proceed. He hadn't expected this, not after the tone of today's hearings, so he hadn't planned a tactic for this eventuality.

"Sam's a genius," he said carefully. "Sometimes it's...hard...for him to accept that the rest of us just don't get what he sees so clearly."

Diane hid a smile behind another sip of punch before saying, "Well said, Admiral. You didn't quite call us stupid."

"Senator, I--"

She waved aside his protests. "I know sincerity when I see it...perhaps because it's all so rare in this town. If Dr. Beckett had tried to impress us with flowery phrases about PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP's value to humankind, I would have seen that for what it was--an obvious attempt to snow us with what we wanted to hear."

Wisely, Al kept silent, waiting to see where she was heading.

"Then I, and the other members of the Committee, may have been more inclined to listen to Senator Weitzman's objections to continuing funding. I must confess, before Dr. Beckett's presentation, I had my doubts about pouring any more money into a Project that is so speculative in nature." She focused a smile on him that just barely turned the corners of her lips. "Even one that has such potential for advancing the knowledge of humankind."

Al lifted a hopeful eyebrow. "Does this mean...?"

"It means, Admiral," she answered evenly, meeting his eyes, "that I will vote in favor of your funding for one more year. As for the others...I can't speak for them. You will have to wait for the final vote and the decision in two days."

"Fair enough," Al said with a grin. "Thank you, Senator."

"You're welcome. Now, if you'll excuse me..." She nodded toward Martha Wittendon, who was holding court in the corner of the room. "...I must speak with our hostess."

"Certainly," Al returned, unable to stop grinning as she moved away.

They were going to make it!

With McBride in their corner, they had no worries...even if she wasn't going to take the

final step and assure him they were safe.

She was going to make him wait for that, but those were the rules and he wasn't going to complain.

He had to tell Sam the good news!

Briefly, he searched his memory for the location of the nearest phone, but before he had it pinned down he'd discarded the idea of calling.

Realizing his grin had widened to 'insane' proportions, he tried to hide it behind a sip of Perrier.

This news, he wanted to give the physicist face to face.

Okay, plan of action. Sam had taken the Project's private 'Citation' jet, so he would hop the next commercial flight back to New Mexico tonight and tell him, then the two of them could fly back here to DC for the Committee's official decision in two day's time.

Geez, he wanted to see Sam's expression when he told them they'd done it, that they had the funding and Al Calavicci had been right again.

Then, after Sam whooped with glee, he would sheepishly confess that actually it was the physicist who had been right, insisting on the honest and sincere routine.

Hell, he would even enjoy letting Sam rub his nose in it.

They had another year!

Parking his half-emptied glass on a nearby table, he went to reclaim his date. Slipping a hand about her slender waist, he whispered in her ear, let her wrap up her leave-taking and then guided her toward the door.

The feel of her warm, lithe body beneath his hand as they passed through it, led him to revise his plans yet again.

Maybe he'd do a little celebrating here first.

When Lindsay gave him a smile and brushed against him as they paused by the open passenger side door of his rental car, he decided this latest plan had a definite appeal.

Watching her fold her long legs into her seat, he quickly shut it and crossed to the driver's side. A few extra hours couldn't hurt...

If he remembered the airline's schedule correctly, he had a little time to spare anyway. And he'd worked hard to achieve these ends--he deserved a little reward.

Right?

Sure. Then he'd tell Sam.

A delay of four or five hours couldn't possibly hurt anything...

* * *

Sam stretched, leaning back from the computer keyboard, feeling the stiffened muscles in his neck protest the movement.

Absently he began to rub them, until Donna left her chair and stepped behind him to take up the task. With a soft moan, he closed his eyes and simply enjoyed her touch for a moment.

He sensed rather than saw her looking over his shoulder at the monitor screen, reading the last of the instructions he had written into his latest retrieval program and its variations.

"We're ready to run it, aren't we?" she asked, both confirming his thoughts and bringing him back to the present.

"Ready," Sam agreed, nodding, looking at what he had written. "Ziggy, run Retrieval Program One and calculate the odds of a successful completion."

"Running," the computer answered, then with no discernible pause, continued, "4.2 percent."

"What?" Sam snapped, leaning forward to examine the monitor display, as if his proximity to it could actually change the result. "That can't be right. Run it again."

"I assure you, Dr. Beckett," came the offended answer, "I do not make mistakes in such simple math."

"Simple math," Donna grumbled in his ear, her hands still working at the knots in his shoulder muscles.

"Run it again, Ziggy," Sam repeated, eyes on the screen. "Now."

"4.2005 percent," came the stubborn answer. "Would you like the final decimal point calculated down to--"

"No," the physicist snapped, cutting her off mid-sentence. "Run the alternate program."

"Specify."

"Don't get testy," Sam warned. "I haven't got the time. Run Retrieval Program One-A."

"Running," came the swift answer. "Chances of successful retrieval using this program are 2.1335 percent...and the math is verified and correct."

"Damn." Sam leaned back in his chair and into his wife's arms. "We're getting worse instead of better."

"Sam," Donna said softly, leaning her head on

his shoulder from behind him. "Let it go for tonight. You're tired, and stressed. Get some rest and things will look better tomorrow."

"We may not have tomorrow," Sam disagreed worriedly, placing his arms over hers, which had encircled his neck. "You know how the Committee is. They could decide tonight that they want to take an earlier weekend and move the vote up to tomorrow morning." Frustrated, he shook his head. "Damn it, I was so sure one of these would do it for us."

"Sam..." Determined to get his full attention, Donna stood and swiveled his chair about to face her. "You don't know that it's not."

Disgusted with the results of hours of work, Sam looked up into her face for understanding. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," she said, kneeling down before him. "That you've gotten yourself too close to this problem to think clearly. You're tired, with the time difference between here and DC you've had a long day."

Sam stifled the yawn that was forming, so she wouldn't see she was right.

"Also," Donna insisted, "you probably haven't eaten anything in hours, other than airline food." She smiled to take any sting from her words. "So give yourself a break. You insist the people who work for you do, you sent Gooshie home, though he probably won't stay. At least he'll eat some dinner. Why won't you give yourself the same care?"

Feeling a sudden surge of love for her, he bent to kiss her upturned face. "I love you," he murmured. "I don't think I've told you that lately."

Knowing her husband well, Donna smiled when he released her lips. "But," she finished for him, "you aren't going to give up on this."

"I can't," he said, eyes traveling back to the computer screen despite his best intentions. "There has to be something here that I'm missing."

"And if you're meant to find it, you will," she argued. "If you aren't, you won't." Resolutely, she reached out to turn his face to hers, her eyes warm with love. "The Committee may still fund us, regardless of what you do tonight. And if they don't..."

"If they don't...?" he prompted, searching her eyes from some clue as to what she meant.

"Sam..." She sighed and got to her feet. "Some things are meant to be, some aren't. If

the Committee should pull our funding this year, we'll find alternative funding, and make a breakthrough that's beyond even what we're looking for."

Frowning, Sam regarded her. "But to lose QUANTUM LEAP--"

Quickly, Donna pressed her fingers to his lips to stall his protest.

"Listen to me, Sam," she said softly. "I'm not minimizing what a loss that would be. I'm just saying that we never know how the most terrible moments in our lives, or the ones that seem odd and disconnected at the time, change our lives in ways we would never have imagined."

Truly trying to understand, Sam rose to his feet, catching her hand in his. "But..."

He could not think of the words to express all that he was feeling.

How could she say that losing his dream, the one thing he had worked toward for most of his adult life, could be good?

Looking away, she gathered her hands to herself for a long moment. Then, lifting her head with the familiar movement that swung her hair over her shoulder, she met his eyes.

"Years ago, when I walked in and found my fiancé and my best friend in bed together, I thought it was the end of my life," Donna admitted quietly. "But if that hadn't happened, then I wouldn't have you now." Abruptly, her eyes filled with tears.

Sam took her into his arms, enfolding her in his embrace. "Oh, honey, I'm so sorry."

"I'm not," she asserted, cheek pressed against his shoulder. "The pain was worth it--worth every bit of it--to have you, Sam."

Wordlessly, Sam pressed his lips to her hair in silent understanding. If it were any way possible for him to take away that pain, he would in a heartbeat.

Drawing a deep breath, Donna pushed away from his embrace to look up into his eyes. "And then there have been other things in my life that made little sense at the time, but have affected me in ways I would never have believed possible."

Not knowing how to respond, he held her and waited for her to go on.

Pulling away slightly, she did so. "Do you remember I told you about Professor Bryant?"

"From Lawrence College," Sam answered. "The man who told you about my string theory, then couldn't remember it the next day."

"And who took me to see my dad," she added. "That episode in my life still troubles me, when I think about it. One on hand, it makes no sense, a man who did something so sweet as to drive me all that way from Mary, Ohio to Washington DC, to see my father...and then remembers nothing of it the next time I go to talk to him."

Sam regarded her in surprise. "He forgot that, too?"

Unwillingly, Donna nodded. "Or pretended that he did. He was really acting odd for the next couple of days...finally he took a term off. When he came back, he wasn't drinking anymore, so I guess whatever happened to him in those few days, he decided it meant he needed help and went to get it."

"That's good," Sam said, knowing her troubled expression meant there was more she wanted to tell him.

"Yes," she agreed, and turned away to glance briefly at the program still displayed on the computer monitor. As if she hadn't truly seen it, she turned back to Sam. "But what he did, taking me to see my father, changed my life. Before that, I was...not bitter toward men, but not willing to get involved either. I didn't want to give them a chance to leave me, the way my father did."

Leaning back against the table that held the computer, she regarded her husband frankly. "If Professor Bryant hadn't given me the opportunity to re-establish my relationship with my dad, I would never have lasted as long with Robert as I did."

"Maybe that would have been a good thing," Sam pointed out cautiously, not sure of her point.

"Maybe," she conceded. "But..."

She paused for so long that Sam took it as an invitation to gently prod her thoughts. "But..."

"But without my dad to talk to," she admitted, looking away from his warm gaze, "I don't think I would have had the nerve to actually go through with our wedding."

Abruptly, Sam had an unwanted flash of the memory of a dream, the night before their wedding, in which exactly that had happened.

In the dream, she hadn't shown up, but instead sent a note to the chapel telling him that she just couldn't carry through with it.

"But you did," Sam said weakly, as much to push back the unexpected pain of the dream as to

reassure her.

"Yes," she agreed, and gave him a tiny smile. "And I'm certainly glad I did. But the point is, if Professor Bryant, in his alcohol induced fancy or whatever it was, hadn't taken me to see my father, I wouldn't have gotten to know him... and that he still cared. I would've gone through life thinking he'd left me and mom because of something I'd done...and expecting a repeat of that leaving from any man I later loved."

Pushing away from the desk, she encircled Sam's waist with her arms. "I got cold feet, Sam, the night before our wedding...after you went home. I thought maybe it was wrong to love you so much, to trust you so much--to let myself in for so much pain by actually going through with our wedding."

Shocked, he opened his mouth to comment, but she shook her head.

"So I called Dad--something I could never have done without that one out-of-the-blue experience with Professor Bryant." She pressed him against her in reassurance. "And he put in a good word for you."

Lifting his hands to bury them in her hair, Sam finally smiled. "Then thank heaven for your father--and poor mixed-up Professor Bryant." He leaned down to kiss her lightly. "But what does all this have to do with the Funding Committee?"

"Simply that you never know," she answered without hesitation, "how it will all turn out in the end. It looks bad now, but you don't know what the future holds. None of us do."

Sam shook his head. "I just hope Al has better luck."

"Sam," she protested, shaking her head. "I'm trying to make you feel better here."

"I know," he said, bringing her to him in a hug. "And you're right. I just..." He regarded the screen behind her with a frown. "...I just can't let it go yet. Not while there's the least chance that I can still make it work."

Sighing, she kissed his neck and pulled back to look up at him. "At least take a break for a while. Come home and I'll fix you supper, and tomorrow we can start work on this again."

"Okay," he agreed reluctantly. "But, in a little bit."

"Sam," she chided and he ducked his head sheepishly.

"I just have a couple of minor modifications

I want to try," he admitted, shooting her a glance that pleaded for patience. "You go on home, start some dinner, and I'll be there soon."

"All right," she agreed with a sigh. "If it's soon. If you're not home in a couple of hours, I'm calling in to Security and giving them direct orders to kick you out."

"It's a deal," he agreed with a grin. "And I'll go quietly."

He pulled her back to him and kissed her again, feeling a sudden flood of emotion. He loved her in a way that few people seemed to experience...and he had nearly lost her once without even knowing it.

Without her, there would be an aching void in his life from which he would never recover.

Responding to his kiss and the emotion behind it, her arms went about his neck and she melted against him for a long moment.

"You'll be home soon?" she whispered as he reluctantly released her.

"Soon," he assured her. "I just want to run through these retrieval programs."

"Then I'll be waiting..." Her voice was husky and her eyes held a promise for a warm welcome.

"Don't look at me like that," he said with a smile of his own, "or we won't make it home." With another quick kiss, he whispered in her ear, "I won't be long."

As Donna left the room, he sat back down before the computer keyboard. Drawing a deep breath, he focused his whole attention back to what the screen held.

Donna loved him, and she would be waiting for him, of that he was certain.

But for now, he needed to concentrate on the possibility that his Project may be taken away from him if he couldn't identify the retrieval problem--and the solution.

There had to be an answer somewhere...and he didn't want to admit it may lie in his wife's wisdom that sometimes the answers he got were not always the ones he wanted.

* * *

Another hour's work on the retrieval program convinced Sam of the futility of chasing an answer in the direction he was presently working.

Finally, he was reduced to sitting, his arms crossed, locked in a brooding stare at the

monitor screen.

There had to be an answer here, why the hell couldn't he see it?

QUANTUM LEAP was more than a scientific experiment. It was a dream, a life-long dream that had begun before he was five. He had dreamed it way back when he sat watching 'Time Patrol' on television--when Captain Galaxy had answered his letter on the air.

It persisted through his teen years, when he raptly followed the adventures on 'Star Trek' and wondered about the builders of the time portal--the 'Guardian Of Forever'.

Whom did God set to guard Forever?

An angel?

A devil?

Or both?

Were Yin and Yang stationed there, guarding the secrets of Time and Fate and Eternity from human minds? Just like the ever-turning sword that kept Adam and Eve from returning to the Garden Of Eden?

Without warning, the screen before him blanked, as the time limit he had placed on it to trigger the automatic screen saver ran out.

Blinking once, Sam continued to stare at it as the muted pastels of geometric shapes began to flow in ever-changing forms, reminiscent of kaleidoscopic views.

Slow and graceful, they made their gentle, hypnotic dance across the screen, blending so subtly into one another that it was impossible to tell where one ended and the next began.

Was that the way Time looked to God? An always changing, fluidly beautiful play of light and color?

Maybe God was the only One all encompassing enough to see its radiant patterns in their entirety.

Sighing, Sam thought of Donna and the revelation that she had nearly not carried through with their wedding.

What if she had left him at the altar, as she had in his dream? The terrible coincidence of that train of thought sent a chill down his spine.

Had he in some way sensed that possibility, and his subconscious had tried to warn him?

What if a confused Professor Bryant had not taken her to see her father that weekend? She believed that her life had changed forever at that moment.

Without that one, inexplicable incident, how much different would her life be...and Sam's?

Had it meant so little to the literature professor that he claimed not to even remember it...or the complex theory he had explained to the young physics student?

How could he just...simply not remember?

Just as Sam didn't remember the events of that Thanksgiving weekend when he'd won the basketball game against Bentleyville...?

Unexpectedly, the physicist shuddered slightly, eyes still on the ever-changing, yet progressive pattern before him on the screen.

How could he not remember the weekend everyone said he had claimed to have traveled in time...and to know the future?

A future in which Tom died in Vietnam. He had dreamed of Tom's death, too, the same kind of heart-stoppingly real dream that had marked the nightmare of Donna's rejection of him.

Like a cascading file of logic circuits clicking into place, Sam felt his thoughts twist and take on new meaning.

It was like a piece of puzzle that he had sought for hours, only to find it was in his hand all along.

'What if you did it', Al had once asked him while they were both sitting in the night stillness, on Katie's back steps. 'What if you built it and it works? What if you leaped home? Would you remember? Will I remember? What will any of us remember?'

Stunned, Sam slowly got to his feet, eyes on the screen as if mesmerized. The pattern seemed to begin somewhere deep within the center of the screen.

Somewhere.

Somewhere so deep that he could not see it, not until it was beginning to take form...and by then it had begun to change and flow into something else.

What if he had done it? What if he had leaped, and much of the life that he valued now depended on it?

What if Tom surviving Vietnam, and Donna choosing to marry him, could be traced back to a beginning so shrouded in mystery, so deep in the very essence of his life that he would have never known where they began until he started to ask the questions?

Until, he thought with a sudden chill gripping his heart, he asked himself about befuddled memories that clustered around the key characters in his life.

And...were there other things that depended on his leaping that he didn't even see?

Like Al?

Or his father?

The possibilities were endless.

And what if he didn't leap? What if they took away his funding, and locked away the Accelerator for all time?

What, then, would happen to his life?

This life he now had. Would it all unravel and break like an old, dry ball of twine? Would he even know it?

Or would it just all change from one moment to the next?

Then Tom would be dead, and Donna would be lost to him forever...

But--the thought seared him like a bolt of lightning--he must have leaped if his life was as it was.

He must have leaped and it was successful or he would not be here as he was now to even consider it.

What he had done, inadvertently or not, was already done, so he wasn't violating his own rule of the time traveler changing his own life.

This was his life, the only life he had ever known, so it was the way it was supposed to be.

Right?

There was no way to know, short of actually leaping.

Slowly, Sam sank back into his chair.

Did this mean the retrieval program would work...even at a dismal 4.2 percent? At least there were those fragile odds of succeeding. And if it worked, for him it would be as if they were a hundred percent.

If it worked.

Unwillingly, he thought of Al's earlier warning to him, but dismissed it as quickly as it came.

It worked.

It had already worked. He knew it worked from the evidence in his own life. Or at least, he was reasonably certain, and that made them a sure thing.

A hundred percent.

Or as close as he was going to get.

And with all he stood to lose if he let the chance pass him by, he was willing to accept those odds.

He had to be, because he wasn't just going to sit here and wait for all that was precious in his life to disappear about him without even a warning.

Straightening in his chair, Sam spoke to the

computer. "Ziggy."

"Yes, Dr. Beckett?" came the answer. "I wondered when you would get around to speaking to me again."

Sam let the comment pass. He had much more pressing matters to attend to at the moment. Donna would be calling to look for him soon.

He had to put his plan into action, or in a few days, she may not be in his life for him to go home to...and Tom might not be barely a phone call away.

And...what else?

Suppressing a shudder, he focused himself of the course he had decided upon. "Access the video recording of my Last Will And Testament," he ordered the computer.

"Accessed," Ziggy replied. "Do you wish me to display it on the screen?"

"No," Sam answered.

The last thing he wanted right now was to look at himself bequeathing all his worldly belongings. He had made sure it was all in order six months earlier when he had first planned to leap--before they discovered the snag in retrieval...which may not be a snag at all.

"I just want to add something to it."

"Recording."

Drawing a deep breath, Sam turned to his right and looked into the video equipment there.

"Ziggy," he said to the computer before he began, "if anything happens to me, I want you to show this recording to Donna and Al. I want them together when they see it so..." He let his words trail off awkwardly. He didn't say 'so they could comfort each other...and not blame themselves or each other'.

Gathering his thoughts, he said firmly, "I just want them to view it together, okay?"

"Understood, Dr. Beckett. Do you want them to view these instructions as well?"

"Doesn't matter," Sam answered, dismissing the question. He was wasting precious time.

Looking again into the video equipment, he drew a deep breath.

How was he going to say this?

Just tell them and get it over with. If I'm wrong, they'll already know it.

"Donna, Al," he said, "I'm going to leap tonight..."

"That would not be advisable, Dr. Beckett," Ziggy protested. "The retrieval program is not reliable and--"

"Don't interrupt, Ziggy," Sam snapped,

overriding her voice, "and delete your comment from the record."

"But--"

"Now, Ziggy," he growled and waited for her sulky response.

"It is deleted."

"Good. And don't interrupt again." Resolved, he faced the camera again. "I have reason to believe that the retrieval program will work. The odds are low, I know, but I'm going to attempt a leap anyway. I..." He hesitated, deciding how to phrase his thoughts.

How could he tell them he felt he had done it before and that he had to do it now in order that all their lives would not change in ways they could not imagine?

"It will work, I'm sure of it." He grinned despite his anxiousness to be on with the business that awaited him. "I can just hear you, Al, but you can quit your yelling because it's too late, it's done." Slowly, his grin faded. "But then of course, if you're watching this, then something's gone wrong and I didn't come home. In which case, I'm sorry, truly sorry."

Instinctively he leaned closer to the camera, pleading silently for their understanding.

"But I had to do this. I can't let them take it all away. There's just too much at stake. If they decide to shut us down, they'll send in a team to make sure we don't change any records or try anything like what I'm doing tonight. That's why it's tonight or never. And..." He drew a deep breath. "...I'm not prepared to live the rest of my life wondering if it might have worked, if I'd just had the nerve to do it."

"So," he concluded, regarding the camera steadily, imagining the stricken faces of his wife and his best friend, "I'm taking full responsibility for this. It's all on my head if something goes wrong. And if I've made a wrong choice..." His throat tightened, thinking of what Donna's reaction would be. "I'm sorry for the pain I've caused you both. But I can't make a different one."

"Donna, I love you, more than I ever thought it possible to love anyone. If I die in the Accelerator, it's only my body, not my soul. And that part of me will still love you, and look over you until we can be together again on the other side of what mortal life holds."

His eyes sliding away a moment, Sam forced himself to look back up to the camera. Briefly,

his lips curved in a smile.

"And Al, I don't dare talk to you about Heaven, because I know the kind of answer you'd give me and I don't want Donna to hear it. But..." The physicist's eyes softened. "...but I do want to thank you, buddy, for always being there, for helping me build this, and for standing by me to the end. I knew I could always count on you. You never let me down, not when it really mattered, and now I've got to ask you for one last thing."

Pausing only a moment, he continued, "If things should go haywire, you tell the powers-that-be that I accept full responsibility. You show them this tape if that's what it takes. Okay?"

"And...look out after Donna. I know she can take care of herself, but we always dumped the administrative stuff in your lap, so if you'd take care of wrapping up all the last details here, I'd appreciate it. She's going to have enough other things going on in her life."

He let his morose feelings dissolve under an air of former confidence. "Don't worry, Al, I'll be back to go to that playoff game with you. I mean, we already have tickets...and have you ever known a Beckett to intentionally miss a basketball game?"

He got to his feet, watching as the automatic tracking of the state of the art equipment followed his movement.

"So I guess that's all." He grinned, unable to contain his excitement. Now that the decision was made, it felt right. And it felt good. "I'm going to go test it. Wish me luck!"

Instinctively, he turned back to the computer screen, though the entity that was Ziggy was not truly there.

"Shut off the recorder, Ziggy, and bring the sigmatron on-line. I'm going to go put on a permie suit, then I'll be right there in the Accelerator Chamber."

"We're not ready," the computer argued. "Leaping now would be foolish and could result in severe damage to the Accelerator, the Control room, and me."

Striding from the room, Sam continued his conversation as Ziggy picked up his voice from the hall monitors. "Is that what you're worried about? Your own skin?"

"I do not have a 'skin'," Ziggy argued, sounding miffed. "But it is a matter of concern."

"We're doing this, Ziggy," Sam said flatly. "And there's no way around it."

"You promised Admiral Calavicci you would not leap until we were ready."

"Good try," Sam said, pushing open the door to the storage room just off Control. "But going for guilt will get you nowhere. I promised Al I would keep in mind how stupid it would be to leap if I knew I couldn't come back. But now..." Reaching out, he pulled a white permie suit from its hanger. "...I'm sure it will all work out, and I will get back."

"That was not the Admiral's intent when he made that statement," Ziggy returned. "I will contact him and tell him of your intentions."

"No." Sam's head came up as he unbuttoned his shirt with calm but hurried fingers. "I forbid it, Ziggy. Don't you dare call Al, and that's an order."

"Sensors indicate that Dr. Gushman is now back in the building," the computer argued. "I will--"

"Gooshie works for me," the physicist snapped, pulling on the tight suit. "And so do you. You'll both do as I say. Now begin the power-up sequence for the Accelerator."

"It's already begun," Ziggy responded sulkily. "And Dr. Gushman is in Control, demanding answers as to why."

"And I'll give him the answers," Sam said, moving confidently toward the door.

It was time.

It was right.

And he was finally going to test it. Come hell or high water, as his father used to say, he was going to leap.

* * *

Twilight came quickly in the New Mexico desert.

Darkness drew ever closer to the highway running straight as an arrow through the seemingly deserted land of towering buttes and cacti and jackrabbits.

Well pleased with himself, Al sent his red prototype car roaring up the flat, familiar road for the sheer joy of the speed.

It felt good, tooling along with CD enhanced Big Band music filling the luxurious interior of the sports car. And damned if he didn't deserve it.

He had done it, pulled the fat out of the fire again, and he couldn't wait to see the look

on Sam's face when he told him so.

PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP was still in business, at least for another year.

That should be more than enough time to work out the bugs in the retrieval system and...

His headlights illuminated something up ahead that made his eyes widen in appreciation. In reflex, his foot eased off the accelerator and he let the car slow as he approached what appeared to be a damsel in distress.

And--geez--what a damsel!

Still riding high on his success in Washington, he silently thanked the powers-that-be for this extra bonus...for that's what it had to be.

Coming to a complete stop beside her, he lowered his window and carefully regarded what had come his way.

She was beautiful, from the flashing lighted heels that lent such an enticing curve to those long legs that disappeared into a deliciously filled pink mini-dress, to her elegantly casual blonde hair style.

When his eyes at last reached her face, she smiled and he felt a kick of adrenalin.

This had possibilities, definite possibilities. It was precisely what he needed to cap off a perfect day.

"You know what I would love to do?" he asked, crossing his arms on the warm metal window frame and testing the waters.

When there was no reply other than a delicately lifted eyebrow, he decided to take the plunge. "I would love to..." He let his eyes wander over her suggestively and was tickled that she showed no offense. "...fix that flat for you. But I can't."

He tried to give his tone just the right touch of sincere regret, gesturing at his tuxedo. "I mean..."

He let the sentence trail off, letting her take his lead and run with it, or call the whole thing off.

"It's your only tux," she answered in kind, and he thanked his lucky stars for her bad luck to be out on the road with a flat when he happened by. "And you're late for your wedding."

"How could I be late?" he asked smoothly. "We just met."

Somewhere in the near distance, a coyote's howl rose and fell.

Resonating in the rapidly darkening wilderness, it sounded both lonesome and

menacing.

The damsel looked from Al to the direction from which it had come, then back at him again.

"I'm a lot friendlier than he is," Al assured her, waiting for her to decide whether to take him up on what he was offering.

Her smile was knowing, and not unwelcoming. "That's what I'm afraid of," she answered in a voice husky enough to send shivers down Al's spine.

It sounded like a 'yes' to him, or at least a very definite maybe.

Sam just may have to wait a bit longer to get his good news about his funding.

With great enjoyment, he watched the young woman cross in front of his headlights, and get into the passenger seat next to him.

The process of her arranging her long legs in the small sports car was even more intriguing, and he was well willing to wait until she was settled before turning his attention back to the road.

Now was the time to let her know what his car--and by proxy, what he--had to offer.

Stepping on the gas pedal, he sent them both back in their seats from the acceleration, drawing a reverential "Wow" from his delectable passenger.

Grinning, Al felt the leaping sense of pleasure he always got from speed, especially speed that impressed someone else.

"Kick in the butt, ain't it?" he observed in glee.

From the corner of his eye, he could see her eyeing him with a sensual thoughtfulness that made her even more attractive. "I've never felt anything like it," she said, drawing even more glee from Al. "Who makes this?"

"This? Oh..." Al shrugged, feeling anything but casual. "This is an experimental model."

He was in like Flynn...all but had her exactly where he wanted--

"Look at that," she said, her attention caught by something out the front window.

What, he thought in a bit of irritation, some mangy coyote getting ready to play road tag? Some...

Eerie blue lights played along the horizon, flashing and ebbing like a building tide of alien light.

Damn.

"Oh...unh..." Al stalled for time. Sam couldn't be leaping. He couldn't. Could he? "That's...unh...sheet lightning."

"I never saw lightning like that before," the sweetie returned, obviously unconvinced. Maybe he'd underestimated her. "And there are no clouds. I can see the stars."

Squinting, Al considered the brilliant lights closely. They danced along the jagged ridges of the manmade mountains that camouflaged the Project.

He'd have Sam's neck for this!

"You know," the girl continued. "That's about where they set off the first atomic bomb."

"No kidding," Al said absently, thinking furiously.

Sam had been back at the Project for some ten hours.

More than enough time to put things together if he had decided to leap, which he had sworn he wasn't going to do.

Which Ziggy had laid odds at 2.4 percent.

Which all meant zip at the moment.

Rapidly, Al punched in numbers on the lighted keyboard of his car phone.

The girl was still theorizing, eyes on the play of light in the desert darkness.

"And some people say there's still a top secret Project out there. Something to do with the deep space probe or--"

"Control!" Gooshie's voice, nearly panicked, interrupted her.

"Yeah," Al grated, dividing his attention between the road, the building light show, and kicking himself for not having called Sam the minute he knew they had the funding. "What's happening, Gooshie?"

"He's leaping," the programmer's voice was faintly distorted, as if the tremendous forces generated within the mountain were affecting communication. "Ziggy says no, but Sam's leaping!"

"He can't leap!" Al shot back, fully aware that he was arguing with the wrong person. "We're not ready!"

"Tell Sam that." Gooshie's voice sounded strained and terrified.

"Put him on!"

"I can't! He's in the Accelerator!" the programmer's voice lifted in panic. "Al! Al, what'll I do!?"

"Nothing!" the admiral shouted back. "Any interference could kill him. I'll be there in two minutes." As if it's going to make a damn bit of difference! "Hang on, beautiful," he calmly directed the young woman next to him,

then floored the powerful car's accelerator.

The engine roared in response, thrusting them back in their seats a second time, and shooting them down the dark straight road as if they were trying for liftoff.

Damn it, Sam, don't. Don't be an idiot. Don't--

A brilliant flash illuminated the desert for miles about them, making the stark beauty of the night scene as bright as day.

The intensity of it temporarily blinded Al, engulfing his vision with blue-white pain.

Still, he kept the accelerator pressed to the floor, driving the road from instinct--a howling refusal that he was too late filling his chest.

But the knot in his throat told him, in no uncertain terms, that he was. There was nothing he could do to stop it.

Sam Beckett had leaped.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Pulling Strings"

Going to the right parties is every bit as much my job as anything else at PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP. It used to be pretty much the biggest part--pressing palms to get the funding.

Used to be.

Until six years ago when Sam leaped.

I remember the night he stepped into the Accelerator like it was only yesterday. Gooshie was frantic by the time I reached the Project--damn near had a cow! The hardest part, though, was havin' to call Donna.

She sounded sorta shaky on the phone, but by the time she got to the Project she was all business, ready to get on with the task of finding a viable retrieval program.

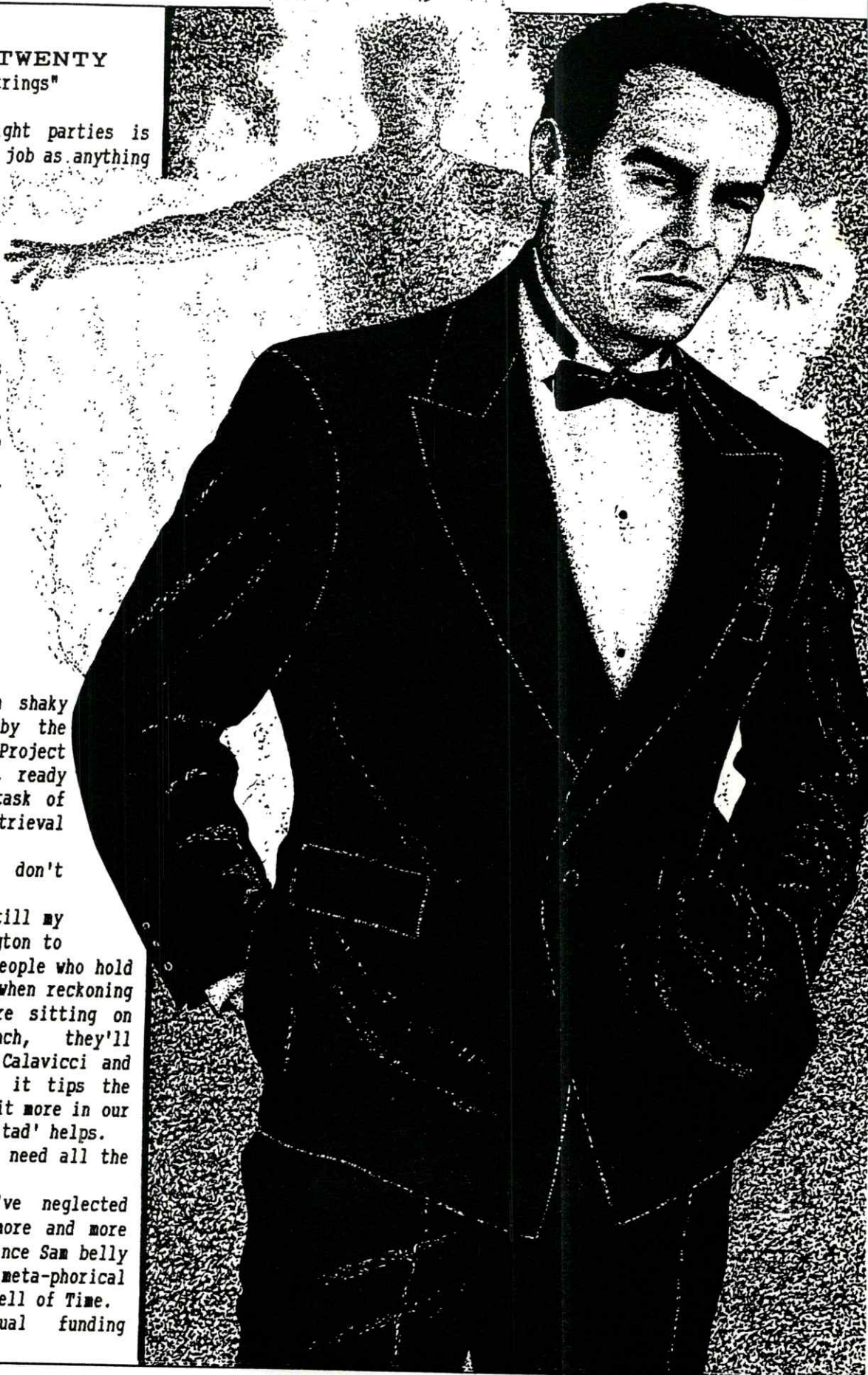
Which we still don't have.

So, parties are still my job--flying to Washington to schmooz with all the people who hold the purse-strings, so when reckoning time comes and they're sitting on that Committee bench, they'll remember good old Al Calavicci and his charm. Hopefully it tips the scales just that tad bit more in our favor...because every 'tad' helps.

And Lord knows, we need all the help we can get!

I guess maybe I've neglected that part of my job more and more over the years, ever since Sam belly flopped off that meta-phorical diving board into the well of Time.

Last year's annual funding



meeting was nip and tuck all the way. For a horrible day or two, I actually thought they were going to refuse me--us.

And Sam's depending on me. Now, since he leaped, more than ever.

That's why this past fiscal year I've been forcing myself to find the time to schmooz in Washington. It's meant a lot of red-eye flights and catching up on sleep while standing up, but it's an easy enough job compared to Observing...compared to trying to gather all the data we need before we know we need it, and feed it to Sam who, more likely than not, is locked in some emotional roller coaster leap that's tearing him apart. Compared to Sam's job, schmoozing is a piece of cake.

I don't know when I started to hate it. Al, everybody's pal, hating to party. As Sam would say if he was here, it boggles the mind.

But anyway, during this past financial year I've done a better job keeping in touch with the social pulse of those in power.

I think.

There's still this hinky feeling I get in my gut when I deal with the Committee. Especially these past few weeks. Especially when I deal with Weitzman.

True, the guy's always been a pain in the butt...until recently. I can't figure it out, but he's actually started to be sorta pleasant to me. Even asked me how Tina was the last time we spoke on the phone. Maybe I wouldn't be so suspicious if I didn't know this guy better. 'Honest Abe' is what they call him, but if you ask me, in this day and age it's good policy to be a little wary of a man who dresses like Abraham Lincoln--stovepipe hat and all.

Tina. I didn't tell him we had a fight--a biggie--and that she took off for parts unknown. For good. I can still see the look on her face when she threw her resignation on my desk, the hurt and anger in her eyes when I accepted it and I didn't try to convince her to stay.

But what did she expect? It wasn't my fault, I did everything I could. Geez, I even told her I loved her--which was not easy to say and even harder to mean. And what did I get in return? To be taken for a complete fool, that's what. Wonder if it was some kinda power thing? Letting me say that, then fooling around with Gooshie behind my back. The hell of it is, after I told her, I found out that she and King Halitosis had been doin' it for years!

Okay, so I admit I haven't exactly been

totally faithful to her either, but the difference is I never tried to hide it. At least I gave her the dignity of resigning, which is more than I can say she ever gave me.

Sam once told me that real love wasn't simply three words you said now and then anyway, but something you had to work at every moment of your life. He was right. I guess that's why it worked with Beth, even though we spent a lotta time apart. When we were together, we sure worked at it a lot!

I thought I'd worked at it with Ruthie too--thought I did, right up until that night I came home to an empty house...

I ain't never sayin' it again, no matter who tells me I should.

So Tina's no longer with the Project...or me. Maybe Weitzman wasn't being pleasant after all, maybe he was simply rubbing it in. Maybe Tina pitched her tent in the enemy camp and took up with 'Honest Abe'. Maybe...

Nah. Even Tina's got more brains than to jump into a pool when she can see the shark.

Nevertheless, Weitzman has me worried. Which is precisely why I'm here, in Washington, after being invited to Senator Diane McBride's shindig. I gotta admit, I didn't actually read the invitation close enough to know why I'm here, or the reason for the party.

Sam was finishing up a leap at the time the invitation arrived, and when that happens I usually don't have enough time to go to the head, let alone read through the gobbledegook in official invitations.

I just knew that if McBride was hosting the event it would be on relatively friendly turf and that, in all odds, five outta the six Committee members would attend.

A good place to go schmoozing, and see what strings I can pull.

So here I am, with a beautiful girl on my arm, pretending to enjoy myself while Sam floats around in the ether...or whatever the hell it is he does between leaps. We're monitoring all cortical activity--as usual--waiting for the beta jump and k-line tracings that precede every landing.

I just hope he doesn't land before I get back home.

* * *

Diane McBride's home was much like the senator herself--elegant without coldness,

beautiful with no trace of ostentatiousness. With its rooms filled with visiting senators, judges, and just a sprinkling of military brass --all with their respective spouses or dates--it was all very formal and correct. It was a place made for polite conversation and genteel hospitality.

And a place to charm the pants off anyone willing to listen.

Standing alone, one hand tucked into the trouser pocket of his immaculate black tux, Al took a sip from his inconspicuous glass of Perrier water and cast a surreptitious glance at his watch.

He groaned inwardly, not at his choice of drinks but at the time. It was difficult to believe that he had only been at this party for twenty minutes, because he was already bored out of his mind.

His date--an aspiring young writer by the name of Denise--had melded into the throng much better than he, not five minutes after they had arrived with a customary champagne glass in hand.

Not that he could really blame her for wanting to hand a few lines to these paper pushing nozzles, since her present employment--writing political speeches for a retiring congresswoman--was about to end. Bending the ear of a senator or two tonight, putting in the right word here and the right word there, was simply a beneficial tactic to further her career.

Especially of value was laying it on thick with those new senators, those being cordially welcomed to Washington...which was, as he had only recently discovered, the sole reason behind this black tie affair.

In short, she was out schmoozing...just like he should be.

Should be.

Al sighed, trying not to look terminally bored amidst this crowd of DC's most terminally boring. Diane McBride's home was large and the guests were scattered throughout it. As such, he hadn't yet run across any of the QUANTUM LEAP Funding Committee members, but he'd be damned if he was going to look that desperate and go track them down.

He'd simply wait for one of them--or one of their wives--to spot him here in the main room, saunter over and initiate a conversation.

Until then, he was stuck--

At that very moment, someone tapped him on

the shoulder from behind. Time to shift gears and turn on the old Calavicci charm. With any luck, it would be someone's wife...

Mustering up one of his most charming smiles, Al took his hand out of his pocket--ready to offer it for a handshake--and turned to greet his anticipated company.

As expected, it was someone's wife...but the shock of seeing whose stopped him cold.

"Hello, Al," she said softly, returning his smile with a pleasant one of her own. "It's good to see you again."

As if by its own volition, his hand continued on its welcoming errand and reached out. She took it gently in both of hers, as if genuinely pleased to see him.

Time stood still.

Everything else in that room ceased to exist.

There was only the middle-aged woman standing before him, the warmth of her small hands clasped around his, and the hammering sound of his own galloping heartbeat.

His face contorted into a helpless look of astonishment and pain as he spoke her name.

"Beth..."

She released the handshake, letting her smile drop a little with it, and frowned slightly at his new expression.

He fought desperately to compose it, but regaining control of the emotions presently bombarding him was not an easy task. After what seemed like an eternity, he managed to pull himself together...at least enough to actually begin breathing again.

"I...hope you don't mind," she began uncertainly, watching him carefully. "When I saw you from across the room, I just thought..." Breaking off, she gave him another smile. "You were the last person I ever expected to meet tonight."

"What are you doing here?" he blurted, still unable to comprehend the fact that she was here...that she was still so beautiful, that she was--

"Dirk's been elected to the senate."

--still married to that legal eagle.

The love lighting up her eyes at the mention of her husband made his heart heave. "Al, don't look so...horrified! Didn't you read the guest list on your invitation?"

Drawing a deep breath of reality, he looked down as he shuffled his feet, and adopted a more casual pose with his hand going back into his

trouser pocket.

"Sure I did," he lied, an action which allowed him to rein the last of his surprise. But when he met her eye to eye, he found he could speak nothing but the honest truth. "You look wonderful, Beth."

"So do you, considering it's been over thirty years," she said conversationally. "I'm a grandmother now."

He gave her a smile of genuine affection, wryly looking her over. "Impossible."

"My youngest, Rebecca," Beth confirmed proudly. "She has one in diapers and one on the way." She smiled teasingly. "How about you? Anyone calling you Grandpa?"

He was just as unexpectedly hit by a very poignant pang of remorse. If Ruthie hadn't lost their baby, he would have had a teenage son or a daughter now.

Ruthie. Odd how he should think of her, considering the present company he was keeping.

"Unh...no," he admitted, finding he had to look away again. "I don't have any kids."

She nodded in understanding sympathy. "Once a fighter pilot..." She let the statement hang and bit her lower lip, as if knowing she didn't need to remind him that he'd always been too busy with his career to consider raising a family.

"Yeah, well..." He shrugged incidentally. "I made it to admiral anyway."

She seemed amused. "You? An admiral?"

Al dredged up a grin. "Yeah, but I guess I'm still a horse's ass."

This time she laughed. After a moment, she glanced around. "Is your wife here tonight?"

"Unh...wife?"

"Mmm, I'd love to meet her. She was Rumanian, right? No, Hungarian...a fashion model. I saw the photos of the wedding in PEOPLE magazine--gosh--years ago! You made a lovely couple."

So, she'd kept up with his life...to a point. But how could she talk like this? Be so blasé about the fact that he'd been married to someone else?

"Unh, well..." He offered a nonchalant shrug. "We got divorced."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It happened a long time ago." He wondered if Beth had even the slightest inkling that there had been four attempts after her, four more tries at finding what they'd lost.

Smiling, she raised a hand to his arm. "It

really is good to see you again. Come on, I want you to meet Dirk..."

The hand on his arm casually nudged him in the right direction, but his feet remained firmly rooted to the spot. Fortunately, he was saved from having to invent an excuse by his date, Denise, whose timing could not have been any better.

Choosing that precise moment to enter the conversation, she swooped in from behind--somewhat reminiscent of a jealous female bird of prey protecting her mate from a roving predator--slipped a proprietary arm through Al's and met Beth's curious eyes with a look of forced politeness.

Completely misinterpreting things, and as if to show the older woman just exactly where she stood in this game, Denise further staked her claim by planting a kiss on his cheek before asking, "Al, honey, don't you want to introduce me to your...friend?"

Noting the look crossing Beth's face--no doubt partly due to the fact that Denise was less than half his age--Al stumbled around the words.

"Unh, sure...Denise, this is Beth...unh... Simon. Um...Beth, Denise." Something about the entire situation felt way off base.

"Senator Simon's wife?" the writer asked, suddenly switched modes from jealous lover to curious professional. Without hesitation, she let go Al's arm and stepped forward to extend her hand.

Beth conjured up a smile, obviously having spent years on the political campaign trail perfecting such a trait, and briefly shook the offered hand. "Guilty...as charged."

"I was just talking to Dirk in the other room," Denise announced. "He's a wonderful guy."

"Yes, he is."

"And I think he'll do really well in congress...if he has a good speech writer."

"Unh..." Al floundered again, stepping into the conversation, "Denise is a writer."

"Oh?"

"For Senator Walkolski," she said, then threw out the bait. "Unfortunately, she's about to retire, so I'm here tonight looking for a job."

Uncomfortable with the decidedly catty edge despite the pleasantries, Al added, "Denise is..." He forced a chuckle. "...is gonna write my life story."

"Really," Beth said, more interested in another topic. "Perhaps we have something in common. I was married to Al too."

"Oh, we're not married," the younger woman confessed off-handedly. "We're just..." Her eyes slid briefly toward Al, who was struggling not to fidget. "...good friends," she finished. "I only get to see Al when he's in town. We know a lot of the same people, and go to all these official do's together. Actually, we met at a party similar to this."

Beth turned a carefully neutral look on Al. "Mmm..."

"So which number ex are you?" Denise asked in all seriousness.

"Excuse me?"

At that, Al jumped feet first into the foray. "Unh, Denise, isn't that Senator Galloway over there? Didn't you say you wanted to talk to him?"

But the writer wasn't biting. "You aren't, by any chance, the 'Beth' who's tattooed on his arm, are you?"

"Don't tell me he's still got that awful thing?"

"So you're the original, huh?" Before Beth could query such an ambiguous statement, Denise forged ahead. "Then maybe you can help me after all. With my research."

Alarmed by this development, Al looked from one woman to the other. The very last thing he wanted was for his 'occasional' girlfriend to start asking his ex-wife a series of intimate questions about him. Besides, the years they had shared together as man and wife were still way too personal to be entered into the archives of the public domain. He could only hope some small part of Beth still cherished what they'd once had, at least enough to maintain that privacy.

"Al wants me to write his life story," Denise explained, "but he clams up every time I start asking about the really personal stuff." She shot him a wry look. "He just wants me to write about the fighter pilot and the astronaut. You know the sort of things..."

"Yes," Beth agreed knowingly. "As a matter of fact I do. Flying always was his first love."

Oh geez, now they were talking about him as if he wasn't even there! Ten to one this was gonna get messy.

"So what's he really like, when he's not playing Romeo?" Denise asked, definitely warming

to the idea of uncovering some of the inside dirt. "What's really underneath that wise-guy exterior?"

"You're asking me?" Beth looked slightly amused. "In the eight years we were married, we only lived together for about two."

Something about the way she said 'only' immediately put him on edge. At that moment, Al realized that if there was ever a time when he was stuck between a rock and a hard place, it was now. If he tried to stop Denise's questions, it would look as if he had some deep dark secret he wanted to keep hidden. And if he tried to stop Beth's answers...well...ditto.

With no alternative, he just stood there listening while his first wife publicly recounted some of the private memories they had once shared. He watched as Beth obediently answered Denise's questions--told a complete stranger about the first time they'd met at the base hospital, and of the nights they'd spent at the Officer's Club dancing to 'Georgia On My Mind' until all hours of the morning.

Despite himself, he found his thoughts drifting in the reminiscing. All were good memories, full of richness and sensations so beloved that he could almost feel them again. They were full of power--they had kept him alive.

Beth's next words shook him like an unexpected blow. "We were both very young," she said, smiling at Denise. "And we thought we were very much in love."

We were! Al drew a breath to say the words out loud but Beth cut him off.

"We were simply in love with the idea of being in love. And since we were so rarely together, it was easy to keep that fantasy alive. It lasted far longer than it would have if we'd been together every day and night like a normal couple."

What the hell was she doing?

"I see." Denise studied her with a writer's eye. "Why did you split?"

"We grew up," Beth answered evenly, with the tone of a mature woman certain of her control of a situation. "And apart. It was a long, long time ago." Her gaze--when it met Al's--was steady. "We were both two different people back then."

"Different how?" Denise asked, casting a look in Al's direction.

He couldn't be sure what she saw, because he felt as if he had been encased in a block of

ice. How could Beth say these things? How could she minimize the most important time of their lives? Was she protecting that shyster from journalistic embarrassment by denying she had ever been deeply in love with anyone but him?

The woman who had betrayed him by exposing their mutual past so cavalierly smiled and shook her head, as if she had no inkling of what she had just done. "This is Al's life story, not mine. Ask him about the X-15 program, how it felt to break the sound barrier several times over. And about setting a World Altitude Record by flying to the very edge of the atmosphere. Ask him how high on adrenalin he was after coming back from those recon flights over Cuba. Those were the things that mattered in his life then. Not me."

Her smile deepened, revealing the dimples he had always adored.

"Al loved--still loves, I imagine--to fly. It was as natural to him as breathing. That's what you should ask him about, not about the unimportant things that happened on the ground."

Unimportant?!

"Now," Beth said, taking a step away, "if you'll excuse me, my husband will be looking for me. It was lovely to see you again, Al."

Her eyes slid right past his, not fully meeting or acknowledging the shock and the hurt she had raised in them.

She knew, damn it. She knew what she'd just done to him--intentionally. She'd deliberately tarnished his feelings, all for the sake of maintaining that ambulance chaser's Golden Boy reputation.

"Denise, it was nice to meet you. I'll mention to Dirk that you'll be available soon, although I think he has a full staff at present."

"That's kind of you," Al heard Denise say, as if from a great distance away. His attention was focused on the fact that Beth was leaving, walking away--out of his life again--and he was still too stunned, too frozen in that iceberg of his, to stop her.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Denise turn back to him, saw her take his arm, but felt nothing.

"Like hell she'll tell him," she said softly, her pleasant smile in complete contrast to her tone. "That one's a real barracuda. You wait and see. Bet the poor guy won't ever have anyone under fifty on his staff!"

Al made a noise in his throat which he hoped would pass for agreement.

Denise regarded him speculatively. "Is all that true? What she said?"

"Is...what true?" he asked, stalling, still gazing after Beth who had been captured in the hallway by another senator's wife.

"About you loving flying more than you loved her."

It was the perfect opportunity to smokescreen, to bluster and wisecrack, and make out it all seemed as meaningless to him as Beth had portrayed it. But she had just told Denise the same thing she'd written in her 'Dear John' letter--the one he'd burned in his ashtray more than a decade ago, the one he could still recite in his sleep. Now he'd heard those words--watched them--come from her own lips.

And, it seemed, her heart.

He just couldn't find the strength to make it into a joke, so that he could laugh it all away as something...unimportant.

"When I set that altitude record, they awarded me astronaut's wings," he said, speaking more to himself than to the writer. "I knew then, that was what I wanted to be. Beth encouraged me to go to MIT and get my degree. She told me to reach for the stars." He paused to smile a little. "And I did. I circled the world, hung so near those stars it felt like I could reach out and take them in my hands."

Blinking, he pulled his attention back to the present...and found his date wearing a very curious expression. Damn, he was going to have to do better damage control than that or Denise was going to figure out far more than he wanted her to know.

With supreme effort, he shot her what he hoped was a grin and the old Calavicci leer. "While I was up there, I did some interesting research on sex in zero-g," he said. His grin broadened, although his heart wasn't in it. "I think you'd find it...educational."

"Oh, Al, you're impossible." Denise returned his grin, squeezing his arm. "Which is exactly why I like you..." Her attention wandered past him, into the room beyond his tuxedoed shoulder. "There goes Galloway. I've got to go catch him, okay?"

"Okay," he agreed, nodding, letting her go with great relief. She was dismissed from his thoughts even before she had taken two steps away.

He had to talk to Beth again.

Beth had said her goodbyes to the other Washington wife and they had just parted company. Without truly thinking about it, Al took the space between them in half a dozen determined strides, brushed past the other woman and grabbed Beth by the arm.

At the touch of his hand, she started. "Al!" she exclaimed in surprise, as if she'd believed he would just let her go like that. "What are you--?" She broke off as he firmly guided her through the heavy mahogany door on their right.

It was the library, dark and secluded. Rarely did anyone enter in when there was a party in progress, and it was not illuminated to discourage just that. Al knew that, having maneuvered Denise into its quiet recesses for a few private lessons at last year's Turn-Of-The-Century black and white ball.

But now, Denise was forgotten. He wanted--needed--the privacy to talk to the woman who had just mercilessly assaulted everything he had treasured all these years.

Sweeping her before him into the center of the book-lined room, he left the door to close of its own volition and turned her to face him in the small square of light which had entered with them.

"Where the hell do you get off saying those things?" he demanded, catching a glimpse of her indignant expression a moment before the library door clicked closed. In the sudden darkness which engulfed them, it was easy to pretend they were both thirty years in the past. Except for... "How could you tell her our marriage meant absolutely nothing?!"

Defiantly, Beth tugged her arm from his grasp. A step back carried her into a rectangle of moonlight, spilling in through the bay window behind her. For a long moment, she simply regarded him, her features angry--yet somehow tired--in the soft, blue-silver sheen.

"This was a mistake..." she began at last.

"Damn right it was," he snapped, believing she meant her words to Denise. "How--"

"I never should have spoken to you without Dirk present," she finished, as if he had never even interrupted.

"You and I don't need any damn lawyer present to talk," he growled resentfully.

"I thought you'd be over all this by now. Al, it's been more than thirty years!"

More than thirty years. As if he didn't know. But her tone was like a slap in the face.

"Over all what?" he demanded, knowing--

somehow--that it would have been better not to ask.

"All this...clinging to the past. Insisting you and I still could have had something together when you came home, if I hadn't married Dirk."

"But we could have!" he said, taking a step toward her. He stopped when she took one back, aware of the desperate tone that had crept into his voice. "If you'd only given us a chance."

"I did give us a chance," Beth asserted. "For eight years--for two years after you were shot down--I gave us more chances than I can count." She met his eyes squarely, aggressively. "No one forced you to volunteer for a second tour."

"So now it's my fault?!" he asked, suddenly close to being exasperated.

"You think it's mine?"

"Sweetheart, you were the one who ran off and married someone else!"

"And you went back to Vietnam for Chip. Instead of staying home for me."

Al held her accusing gaze, his shoulders squaring. "I had to go back. You know that."

She scoffed, much the same way she had when he said those very words the first time around, over thirty years ago. "Yes...because you saw him shot down and you wanted revenge."

"No," he answered firmly. "We didn't start that filthy war, Beth, and we sure as hell didn't want it. We just fought to end it. Chip--any of the guys--would have done exactly the same thing."

"Well, I guess that just proves it then."

"Proves what?"

There was no warmth in her expression as she said, "That your friends always were more important to you than me."

His mouth dropped open in total shock. "That's not true! I loved you! You know I did."

A spiteful look unexpectedly slid into place. "You 'loved' the thought of me being there...when you got tired of flying and partying with your buddies. Al...I got to feel as if I was just something you could come home to, not even someone. Like your favorite armchair, or your best old pair of slippers. I was simply there for you to use when you stopped long enough to take your head out of the clouds."

"How can you even think that?!"

Why the hell hadn't she told him she'd felt

like this then? On the other hand, maybe she'd tried and he just hadn't listened. Or hadn't wanted to listen...

"What're you saying, Beth? That we never had any good times together? That you never loved me in the first place?"

"No." She met his eyes. "No, I did love you. Once. I knew you loved flying and the Navy more than me when I married you...and I thought I could compete. I was wrong."

"Yeah, you were wrong," Al agreed. His tone softened. "Because I loved you more than my own life." Drawing a deep breath, he reached out and gently took her by the arms, holding on when she immediately tried to break free. "God help me, I've always--"

"Al, don't." Defiantly, she shrugged out of his grip. "It's over. It was over in then and it's over now."

Over.

He scowled, and deliberately stepped in front of her when she attempted to move past him for the door. "Then why'd you cry? That time on the phone. Why'd you write that damn letter in the first place, if you didn't want me to come looking for you?"

"Because I felt guilty!" The words sounded like whiplash in the library's silence. "And I'm tired of feeling guilty for something that was never my fault!" Her chin lifted in a moment of truth, as if this was something she had wanted to tell him for three decades. "It was over even before you left on that second tour of 'Nam."

"Wha--?"

"I almost divorced you before you shipped back out. You don't know how close I came to actually doing it. It was the Chaplin who shamed me out of it. He said you don't divorce a man who's flying off to fight a war."

Something knotted up inside him, something cold and dark and...lifeless. In the moonlight, Beth met his gaze without flinching, no doubt meaning every word she said.

"Even if you hadn't gone back, with the way things were it would have ended between us. Because we never had a future, Al, as long as you had the Navy." Her eyes grew bright with the painful honesty of her words, bottled with her emotions for thirty-something years. "I should have." Her hand trembled slightly as she raised it to her brow. "I should have left you then...and saved us both the agony."

At that, the 'something' inside him

manifested into a knife and twisted in his gut.

He'd been about to fly off to fight a war, and his 'loving' wife had been about to dump him! He'd survived the next six hellish years as a POW by clinging to the memory of the woman who loved him, the wife who was waiting faithfully for his safe return.

His undying--unbreakable--love for her was the only thing that had kept him alive.

Ironically, it was also the same thing that had destroyed his four other marriages since.

His Beth, his loving Beth, whom he'd forgiven for such an unforgivable act of betrayal, whom he'd secretly worshipped and cherished all these years...had just fallen off her pedestal.

Right in front of his eyes!

The illusion was completely shattered. The dreams had just turned into nightmares. It was all a lie.

Worse, it had always been a lie.

The truth had hit him like a sledgehammer. He felt like he'd just had his life's breath knocked out of him, like his soul was laying bared and crushed beneath the weight of this final death blow.

Al looked away first, feeling sick...and cold.

So cold. As if all the warmth he had ever known in his life had been spirited away. Swallowing the lump of ice in his throat, he moved past her to the bay window, feeling all the blistering, silent rage he had denied all these years suddenly welling up inside.

Facing the glass and the tall pines that dappled the moonlight into glow and shadow beyond it, he heard her take a step toward the door--toward her husband and away from the past.

Then another. She moved hesitantly, slowly, almost as if she expected him to stop her--expected him to plead and beg her to stay, even after what she had said.

He let her reach the door before he softly spoke her name. She paused--he knew because he heard the clink of her wedding ring as her hand closed on the doorknob. The ring that spoke of her commitment to Dirk Simon.

"You're right," Al said quietly, as if to the trees outside. "It is over."

Slowly, he turned to find her as nothing more than a dark shadow against the door. It was just as well that he couldn't see her face, because at that moment he realized he never wanted to see it again.

"You're not the person I thought you were. It was never really you I loved...it was the image."

His eyes narrowed. His whole body ached with the strain of containing three decades of bitterness and pain. He had denied it with a lie--the pretense of a love that never was, and never could have been.

Now it was time to release it.

"Go." His words were as clipped as hers had been earlier. "And don't look back, because you can be sure I never will."

With that he fell silent, waiting as she flung open the door and fled out into the hall. Not moving, he watched the heavy, mahogany door swing shut on slow hinges.

Slowly--so slowly--the wide square of light she had admitted narrowed and shrank.

It was like, he thought distantly, the feeling he had believed to be his love for Beth. It too had been slowly eaten away by darkness, devoured by angry words and a letter that had wounded him far more than he had ever known... until this very moment.

Finally, the light from the hall tightened to a thin yellow line on the hardwood floor, like a narrow flame bordered on all sides by broken marriages. It was if an unknown source was pointing out his failure at love because of his enslavement to it.

Then, as the door overcame the hinges and momentum carried it softly closed, all the light was gone. Vanished. Leaving only the darkness.

It had gone slowly...so perhaps the demarcation between light and dark was not so great after all. It was not as if, he thought in cold, burning rage, he had lived all his life in an unstinting embrace before it had faded away.

But darkness, whether it came swiftly or slowly, was still darkness...and it seemed to smother him with the sheer weight of its vast, undeterminable blackness.

It was finally over with Beth.

He knew, because the flame he carried for her--the pilot light to his soul--had just gone out.

* * *

Feelings are hard things to figure out. I guess that's why we pay Verbena such big bucks at the Project. I sure wasn't feeling any of the things I thought I would, when I watched

Dirk-the-Jerk make his 'so glad to be here' speech, with Beth standing beside him like the dutiful, loving wife.

Her eyes were red, as if she'd been cryin', but even if I'd've tried I just couldn't feel like a heel--like it was my fault. As a matter of fact I felt mad, and sorta...vindicated.

And never in a million years, would I have expected to feel that way.

But maybe being mad as hell at having wasted thirty years of my life mooning over something that had never been, was actually a whole lot healthier than aching with that terrible sense of grief and longing I always used to feel whenever I thought about her.

An hour before, it would have been eating me alive to see her there, standing by that nozzle's side. I'd've been feeling that she should've been standing by me.

But half an hour ago, I finally got all the way back on my feet after letting her kick 'em out from under me some three decades earlier.

That part of my life was over.

Finally.

Completely.

Maybe it's what Verbena would have called 'closure'.

So I stood there with Denise on my arm and watched Beth--and Simon--ooze into the pretense of the perfect Washington couple, feeling a whole lot less than what I would have expected.

Beth. Mrs. Dirk Simon--I could think that now without grinding my teeth. Strange how in the space of a mere thirty minutes, I'd restructured an entire thirty years worth of thinking.

And feeling.

She was still a very beautiful woman, no one could deny that. But she was one of my ex's--one of my many ex's--and she had played me for a perfect fool.

Incredibly, even that didn't hurt. I didn't have that turmoil in my chest that said if I could just talk to her--say the right things, the right way--I could make her leave the shyster and come back to me and our fairytale love. And maybe I didn't have it because I no longer wanted it.

Watching them, I didn't feel like someone was ripping my heart out...not even when that legal nozzle took her hand and introduced her as the unfailing support in his life which had made it possible for him to be here tonight.

I just felt angry. At her, for not being

the woman I thought she was, and at myself, for not having seen it sooner. After all, it wasn't like she hadn't tried to tell me before. There was also some disappointment--I guess--knowing now that she never could have been the woman I wanted her to be. We'd both seen our marriage two entirely different ways. Neither of us were right. Or wrong.

After the speech, I spent a few minutes doing my duty by talking to three QUANTUM LEAP Committee members, then hustled Denise outta there, pronto. I didn't wanna hang around long enough so that my path crossed Simon's. It wasn't that I was in danger of getting into a shouting match with him or--worse--punching him out. I simply didn't wanna deal with it.

I just wanted it to be over.

Denise didn't protest about leaving so soon. She was on cloud nine because that old coot, Galloway, offered her a job on his staff. It'll be a good move for her to take it. He's respected, and he's as respectable as anyone comes in this town. She'll do well.

I told her so, when I dropped her off at her front door. She was still riding high and tried to pull me inside with her, making it quite clear that she wanted to do some celebrating.

But I turned her down.

I was tired, okay?

And I had to get back to the hotel to check on what was going on at the Project. Okay, so I had the handlink and Gooshie could reach me if he needed me.

I just...wasn't in the mood.

Unbelievable, I know. The last time I turned down a beautiful woman with nothing but free-for-all pleasure on her mind, was with Sharon ...that night Chance and Stacker were in town. At least back then I had a good reason. And someone to go home to who gave a damn.

Back then.

Hell, maybe it was just the adrenalin of the anger wearing off. All I know is, by the time I reached my hotel, it was all I could do to walk to my room.

Geez, I was tired.

Really, really tired.

* * *

Pushing open the door to his hotel room, Al stepped inside and closed it behind him with a vast sense of relief. Finally, he was away from the prying eyes and could crash for a good long

time--after he checked on Sam.

Crossing the elegant room, which was well lit by the two lamps he had left on for his return, he tossed his rental car keys onto the bedside table and reached for the phone.

Stifling a yawn, he sank onto the bed as he keyed in the numbers that would provide him with a secure line to the Project.

It took several moments for the call to go through. Leaning back against the headboard, Al was considering loosening his tie and closing his eyes when Gooshie's voice finally came on line.

"Control."

"Yeah, Gooshie, it's me."

"Admiral. How was the reception?"

"Boring as hell," he answered simply. And honestly. "You got anything I should hop a jet for tonight?"

"Nothing, Admiral. Everything's as smooth as silk. Dr. Beeks says there's no pre-leap activity at all. And--"

"Okay, okay," Al interrupted wearily. He silently yawned again before continuing. "But if anything in that technological First Alert system of yours so much as burps, you let me know."

"Admiral, all the data we've accumulated indicates that we should have a minimum of 4.4 hours from the first k-line to leap in. And in the past six years--"

"Yeah, yeah," Al groaned, rubbing half-heartedly at his eyes which burned from fatigue. "And the powers-that-be have suckered us before. First burp, Gooshie. Got it?"

"Certainly, Admiral."

"Okay, I gotta go." Tired as he was, Al still managed to muster up a lecherous tone--Gooshie would wonder what was wrong if he didn't. "Denise is getting impatient."

Without waiting to hear a reply, the Observer hung up the phone. Dismissing the computer programmer, the Project, and Denise from his mind, Al let out a long sigh and lowered his head into his hands.

Geez, he was tired. He'd been tired before, more often than not since Sam had leaped.

Matter of fact, he'd been running on the thin edge of exhaustion more times than he cared to admit. But never like this. This felt like he was all used up--like he was completely drained of everything human. There was nothing left to give, even though he desired to try.

Painfully, he pressed the heels of his palms

against his eyes, trying to hold back the ache behind them. What was it Sister Margaret used to say back in the orphanage?

'The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak...'

Although never too weak when it came to Myra Boychek. Hell, maybe he should have gone home with Denise, and let her gentle hands ease away all his aches and weariness...

If Sam ever came home, Al was gonna hug him 'til his ribs cracked, shake him 'til his teeth rattled, then shove him into bed with Donna. Then he was gonna go to bed himself, and sleep for at least two weeks--maybe three.

If...

Chilled, Al lifted his head, as if stilling his actions meant he could recall the thought.

When Sam came home, he mentally corrected. Not if.

He had never, ever before thought 'if'.

And it didn't mean anything now either. Tomorrow--if he was still here--he'd get up early and go over to the Health Club Committee member Brice Williams frequented. Al would suggest a friendly game of racquet ball and let the old guy win, thus ensuring his vote was in their camp. This year's funding would go through--it had to. And then they'd find some breakthrough--somehow, some way--and bring Sam home.

Superstitiously, he repeated the litany. When Sam came home... When Sam came home... His slip about 'if' meant nothing. Nothing. Because Al Calavizzi would bring Sam Beckett home or die trying--

Abruptly, the phone rang, startling Al into a jump that brought him to his feet. He knew it--Sam had landed while he was in DC. Damn. If the Committee members hadn't been attending that stupid reception...

Snapping instantly back into Admiral Mode, he grasped the receiver. "Calavizzi," he said crisply, not even a touch of his fear--or his weariness--bleeding through.

There was a short, almost hesitant pause, which made him frown. "...um...hi...it's me..."

He didn't respond immediately, eyes narrowing as he tried to place the soft, female voice that something in the back of his mind told him he should recognize. Nothing came. "I think you've got the wrong room number, ma'am."

He was lowering the phone to its rest when her voice came again. "No, Al, wait! It's Ruthie..."

Ruthie? Hell. As if he didn't have enough problems on his plate. With the receiver dangling from his hand a mere inch over its cradle rest, he contemplated the idea of just hanging up and pretending he hadn't heard...when she called his name again.

"Al, please. I need to talk to you. It's important."

Important. Yeah, he could just bet it was 'important'.

Sinking back down on the bed, he ran a disgusted hand through his hair as he brought the phone back to his ear. Sharon had said it was 'important' last time he heard from her. Maxine too. And from his ensuing court appearances and dwindling finances, he knew there was only one thing that was 'important' to broads like them...

Women! They were all the same!

"Look, Ruthie, I've had a hell of a day and I'm tired, so I'm not gonna beat around the bush with you. If this is about more alimony, then you can tell that twerp lawyer cousin of yours that the Calavizzi Well has gone dry. Capeesh? I may be an admiral but I--"

"It's not about more money, Al." Her tone, quiet and somehow small, stopped him cold.

Stopped mid-gesture of running an exasperated hand down his jaw, he frowned. She sounded upset. Hell, she sounded like she'd been crying. "What's the matter?"

"It's bubbe. She's very ill."

"Your grandmother?" Al's frown deepened. Good old Edna. The old gal had to be pushing triple digits by now. He hadn't thought about her much in recent years, yet he'd always assumed she was still around. She was sort of a given, a constant, a fixture in the world that would never die. Now that he took the time to think about it, he realized how foolish that was, and unexpectedly--despite all that had transpired tonight--that made him ache. "What's wrong with her?"

"She's dying," came the answer, soft and tense, as if Ruthie was just barely keeping a tight rein on her emotions, lest they overcome her. "And she's asking to see you."

"To see me?" He blinked in honest surprise. "Why? I mean..."

"I don't know." The reservation in her tone was greater now. "But she's insistent. You don't refuse Bubbe...and you don't lie and tell her you've made the call when you haven't. So...I called."

Now the reason for her forced coolness was clear. She expected him to say no! And why not? He'd been Nozzle Supreme when he divorced her, why should she think he'd changed?

He almost let her expectations of him be fulfilled--almost said, 'Forget it, babe. I'm not hauling my butt out to God-knows-where and giving up a good night's sleep when I'm gonna need all my juice in the morning'.

But...this was Edna they were talking about. She was one of the few people in the world who had accepted him for who he was inside. He owed her this much.

He realized he'd been mulling over an awfully long silence when Ruthie said, "I'm sorry to have bothered you, Al. Goodbye."

"Wait a minute. You're gonna hang up on me before I give you my answer?"

There came a short pause. "Well, we both know how busy you are. I'll...tell her you couldn't get away, don't worry."

"Ruthie, where the hell are you?"

"What?"

"I can't come unless you tell me where you're calling from."

Was that relief in her voice when she said, "You'll...come?"

"Yeah," he said firmly. "Now where is it I'm going?"

There was the sound of her taking a deep breath. "She's at her home in Boston. We're all here."

All here. Great. It sounded like the entire family had gathered in some kind of bizarre death ritual. Considering how well he'd gotten on with the Steinman Horde when they were married, he was already regretting saying he'd come.

"Okay," he said, getting down to business. "You remember that airport near there? The small one we used to fly into when we went to visit?"

"I think so, yes."

"Think you can have someone meet me there?"

"Yes, I'll arrange it." She sounded sure of herself for the first time since they'd been speaking.

"All right then. Tell Bubbe I'm on my way."

"I, um...think it would be best to hurry, if you can."

"No problem," he answered, already thinking ahead to the details of the trip.

The Project's VIP jet was standing by at Dulles International, refueled and ready to go

on the chance he had to fly back to New Mexico at the drop of a hat for Sam. Now, all he had to do was roust Reggie, the pilot, out of bed and they could be on their way.

Of course, he could have made the detour and flown the small business jet to Boston himself, but that would mean he'd still have to come back to DC again for Reggie. Plus the fact that he'd been on his feet for nearly forty-eight hours and was in no condition to fly...well, it just seemed easier to take the Project pilot with him now.

"And Al," Ruthie added, her voice hesitant but sincere. "Thanks. It'll mean a lot to her. It means a lot to me too."

"Sure...but let's get one thing straight. I'm doing this for Edna, Ruthie, no one else."

"I...understand."

"See you soon."

Breaking the connection, he called the pilot's hotel room and ordered the man to meet him in the lobby in fifteen minutes. In the past, when Reggie had accompanied the admiral on these official trips, Al had fondly referred to him as his 'chauffeur'. But this little detour changed things. To save time, their positions would be reversed--Al would now drive Reggie to the airport, allowing the pilot the chance to calculate new headings, times and distances for the new flight plan they were going to have to file before they left.

He could have done that himself too...if he wasn't so all-out exhausted. Tired as he was, if he made a mistake they'd have to do it all again...and that would waste time.

Time. Seemed Sam wasn't the only one who was at its mercy.

Stirring, Al--still fully dressed in his black tux--allowed himself a long, bone-cracking stretch. He felt like a puppet whose strings had been cut, as if it was almost too difficult for him to remain on his feet under his own steam and easier to just collapse.

But Ruthie--no, Edna--Edna was counting on him and he would not let her down.

Wearily, he turned to toss the few personal belongings he had bothered to unpack back into his suitcase. God alone knew when his head would next hit the pillow.

God...

Distracted, Al cocked a wry eyebrow heavenward. First Beth, now Ruthie. It just went to show that when it rained, it poured.

"You know," he said, still looking up,

"sometimes you've got a lousy sense of timing."

* * *

Getting from his rental car--his second in twenty-four hours--Al stood for a long moment in the cool Boston night, gazing up at Edna's brownstone at the end of the path. It looked the same as it always had--neat, trim, and well kept. The ramp for her wheelchair--which he'd patched and painted more times than he could remember--looked freshly swept, as did the stoop, even in the middle of the night.

He smiled, leaning on the roof and the open door, remembering the way he used to tease her about that, whenever he and Ruthie had come to visit. In the mornings he'd say the laser defense system she'd installed kept him awake all night as it zapped any leaves or bugs foolish enough to land on her stoop.

She'd only give him that discerning, amused gaze of hers and tell him that 'Cleanliness was next to Godliness'. She would say that she knew he understood that very well. She'd seen him spit polish his precious plane, and knew for a fact that all his ink pens were in neat little lines in his desk drawer.

Still grinning at the memory, Al stirred as a car cruised past on the dark, damp street behind him. Its tires made a lonely, whooshing sound in the moisture lingering on the pavement from an earlier rain shower.

Who, he wondered with a sudden sense of sorrow, kept the stairs so swept now? And who, if anyone, would sweep them when bubbe was gone?

Collecting his hat from the front seat, he closed the car door, straightened his raincoat, and told himself that he should go in. He was, after all, expected.

On the other hand, he was not so expected, considering whoever was supposed to have picked him up at the airport had not arrived. Still, he hadn't come all this way just to stand out here and admire the clean swept stair in the middle of the night.

He would go pay his respects to Edna, find a hotel somewhere to catch a few zzz's, before he climbed back onboard the Project's Cessna 'Citation' jet at first light and buzzed back home.

Somehow, despite these good intentions, his feet still refused to move.

Home.

Who was he kidding? The Project was Sam's

home, not his. It had never been his.

Donna waited there for Sam, standing by him no matter what was going on in his life--patient, non-judging, forgiving. He knew it had to be tearing her up inside, every time she heard the details of a leap, making him wish he could spare her, yet confessing them out of respect when she insisted.

And every time he admired her more, for she never once blamed Sam for whatever he was doing at the time...or for not remembering her, or them.

That's what made a place a home--having someone who loved you waiting. Regardless.

Not like Beth, who had left Al even before he'd even known she was thinking of going. In her heart, she had left him even before he'd gone back for his second tour of 'Nam.

An unwanted memory flashed though his mind--standing together on the dock, that last day. She'd promised she'd wait for him; he could still hear her saying it.

No, not promised...she'd simply said it. It had been her duty to tell him that, he realized now, as much as it had been his to go.

'You don't divorce a man who's flying off to fight a war'.

Hell, no. You just give him false hopes and dreams so the future will be one less thing for him to worry about. After all, a man can't be expected to fight, if he knows he has nothing left to fight for...

Above him, the same wind which had chased him all the way from DC swept away the clouds that had obscured the moon from the quiet street beneath. Light spilled like liquid silver over the house, the lawn, the sidewalk, to pool at Al's feet.

Looking up, he drew a deep, slightly shuddering breath. It was the same moon he had trusted as a spot of light in the blackness of his tiger cage. He had gazed at it for hours--watching it rise, watching it set--imagining somewhere on the other side of the world that Beth had looked up at it too.

Time measured by moonlight had passed pleasantly enough. He had imagined the connection, believed that she must have thought of him and his touch under its shimmering light, as he had thought of hers.

And it had been a lie.

That illusion had lasted far too long, he thought bitterly. All the time she had really been thinking of Dirk. Hell, she'd been with

him. The fantasy had finally snapped, like an elastic band stretched too far, and though the sting of its backlash made him mad as hell, he wasn't going to let it whip him around and bind him for the rest of his days.

It was time to let go.

It was time to move on.

Taking a step, he started up the path toward the front door, moving through the age-old glow of the moon toward another duty. Resolutely, he vowed to put it behind him.

Sure, it was the same moon he'd gazed at like a lovesick calf, but it was also the same one he'd soared nearly high enough to touch in his days as the ultimate jet jock. It was the same moon Donna watched thinking of Sam, and the same moon the physicist saw, no matter where he was in time.

That thought, more than any, sent Al down the walk and up the stairs. He had to get this over with and get back to New Mexico...before Sam landed.

It was late, nearly two, but a soft glow spilled from around the lace-trimmed shades pulled down over the parlor windows. Someone was still up and he was glad he had decided to come straight here, rather than checking into the same hotel as Reggie and then telephoning.

His first knock, when he reached the door, was not answered immediately. He was debating whether or not to try again, when the hall light came on and the door opened before him.

"Al!" It was Ruthie, silhouetted against the interior light, looking much the same as he remembered her--beautiful and graceful, so self-possessed and warm that it took him unawares. Her expression was one of surprise, relief, and welcome all at once. "I didn't expect you so soon!"

He shrugged, taking off his fedora and nervously turning the brim through his fingers. "You said hurry, so when there wasn't anyone waiting to meet me at the airport, I just rented a car."

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I was planning to come get you myself. But when I called to check, they told me there weren't any flights from Washington due in until the morning."

"I had...other means of transportation," he explained, unwilling to elaborate on the VIP jet--the need for haste and a quick way back to the Project if need arose. He shrugged again. "It was no big deal, forget it."

"You should have called me," she insisted.

Then, realizing she was keeping him waiting on the front stairs, hurriedly pulled the door open and stepped aside to let him enter. "Come on in."

He did, feeling the aura of the place immediately surround him as he stepped across the threshold. It smelled the same. He recognized the pristine clean of furniture polish mingling with the warm, mouthwatering aroma of chicken soup, either left over from dinner or made in a large enough batch to feed the relatives come to pay their last respects.

From the hall, he caught a glimpse of some of those relatives in the small parlor to his right. There were four of them, he noted from the corner of his eye. They were sitting waiting, keeping some sort of after-midnight vigil...and watching him.

Shrugging out of his raincoat, he handed it and his hat to Ruthie, and resolutely did not turn to them until she returned from putting his things away in the hall closet. Best to let her initiate the greetings and set the stage for whatever was to come. He wasn't quite sure of his footing here. He had come to see Edna, not these people who would probably just as soon toss him out as make him comfortable in doing his duty. And God alone knew what Ruthie was going to say now she had him back in her clutches.

But when she returned, she merely smiled at his formal attire and took his arm to guide him into the parlor, almost as if to protect him from any disparagement that might be directed his way.

Before he had time to react, she was saying, "Uncle Isaac, Aunt Rachel...you remember Albert."

Oh yeah, he could just bet they did. As many times as his name had probably come up for vilification after he'd given Ruthie the boot, they wouldn't be likely to forget...or forgive.

Uncle Isaac was the spitting image of his sister--Ruthie's mother. The elderly gentleman got to his feet and politely extended a hand toward Al. "It was good of you to come, Albert. It will put Edna at ease to know that you've arrived."

Aunt Rachel's sharp, dark eyes were giving him the once-over as he shook Isaac's hand, missing nothing of the classic lines of the tuxedo he wished he had taken the time to change. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but Ruthie cut in smoothly, indicating the

younger couple on the sofa.

"This is Uncle Isaac's son, Daniel, and his wife Sarah. You probably don't remember them, they were only children at our wedding."

The long forgotten memory of pulling two squabbling children from a goldfish pond, in the rain, flashed to Al's mind.

"You only pull the pigtailed of the girl you love," he murmured, quoting himself as he looked from one to the other.

Ruthie smiled, obviously sharing the memory. At Daniel and Sarah's confused look, she said, "This is Admiral Albert Calavicci. He and Bubbe were always...friends."

Always friends. Al considered the words in amazement as he went through the motions of shaking hands with the younger man and exchanging greetings. Friends. After the way he'd treated Ruthie? In a pig's eye! Maybe that's what Edna wanted. Maybe she'd called him there to chew him out.

Geez Louise! What the hell had he been thinking to come here?! You gotta get some sleep, Al, old pal, get your head thinkin' straight again...

Ruthie was saying she'd check to see if her grandmother was awake. Then she was gone from the room, leaving Al to look for some place neutral in the room to gaze at and wish mightily for a cigar.

Sarah asked him about his flight and he answered almost automatically, wishing he were any place but where he found himself. How had he gotten himself into this? Going to visit an ex-wife's dying grandmother was something Sam would do, not Al Calavicci.

Well, maybe not. Sam wouldn't have any ex-wives, he was mensch enough to hold onto the wife he had despite some pretty difficult circumstances.

It was with vast relief that he saw Ruthie return from the direction of the hall. Beginning to get to his feet, he stalled at the expression on her face. He'd come too late--

"She's sleeping," Ruthie said and, feeling as if he were easing back into an electric chair, Al retook his seat. "Eli says she drifted off a few moments ago."

Wearily, she sat in a folding chair that had obviously been moved into the room to accommodate all the extra company of the past hours.

"She never sleeps long. She'll likely be awake soon. Would you wait, Al? I'm afraid if

you leave..." Her voice trailed off uncomfortably, leaving her meaning clear.

"Sure," Al agreed uneasily. He wanted to ask what it was Bubbe wanted of him, wanted to ask how close she was to dying, wanted to ask how Ruthie was holding up. But he settled instead for what seemed a safer, less emotional question to which he also desperately wanted the answer. "Are your parents here?"

"No." Ruthie clasped her hands in her lap, her eyes not meeting his. "They died in a car crash three years ago."

Wanting to sink through the floor, Al managed to say he was sorry. And he was! Sorry he'd ever come here. Sorry he'd--

Getting to her feet again, Ruthie said, "I'll go make some coffee."

At once, Al was up as well. "I'll help," he volunteered, wanting to get out of the overly warm room with its unspoken tensions. Being with Ruthie was far preferable to waiting here. He'd weathered her tongue plenty of times.

That, he understood. That, he could take.

The glance she shot him was amazingly understanding. Without a word, she led the way. With a polite, relieved nod to the relatives, he followed.

The kitchen, too, was warm. Hesitating in the doorway, he watched Ruthie busying herself with the domestic task of making coffee...and unexpectedly flashed on those early days at CLEAR STAR. He wondered just how many cups of coffee he'd drank in her lab, before she finally agreed to go out with him...

Slipping his hands in his pockets, he diverted his thoughts away from the past and back to the present. Watching her, he found he could still read her. The line of her back, the set of her shoulders, the tight, controlled movements of her hands as she worked told him that right now, she was as uncertain as he on how to proceed.

That was good, he thought uneasily, at least that meant she hadn't called him here to ambush him and hold him hostage for more alimony. At her next words, he felt guilty for the thought.

"Are you hungry?" she asked over her shoulder. "I can fix you something if you are. It looks like I called you away from something important."

"Uh, no," Al answered, pushing himself upright. Suddenly, he realized he couldn't remember when he had eaten last. "I mean, no, it wasn't anything all that important. But,

yes, I'm hungry. If...it's not too much trouble that is."

"No, no trouble," she said, sounding as if she meant it. "I'll make you a sandwich."

Watching her move toward the refrigerator, he hesitated, then came forward into the room. Taking off his jacket and hanging it neatly over the back of a chair, he sat down at the small kitchen table.

Clearing his throat, he said, "So, how've you been?"

"Fine," she answered, carrying bread and roast chicken to the table. "You?"

"Fine," he echoed, watching her untwist the tie on the bread wrapper.

There, the conversation stalled until his sandwich was nearly assembled. "How's Sam?" she asked, picking up a knife. She cut the bread in triangles, he noticed as if it made a difference, not rectangles.

Had she remembered he liked it that way, or was it just coincidence?

Watching her hands, Al answered slowly, "Okay, I think." That was true, he told himself. Sort of. He had called from the airport and Gooshie had assured him there was still no pre-leap activity at all.

Ruthie shot him a curious glance. "You think?"

"He's...away," Al said with a diffident shrug. "Outta touch for a while."

"I see," she said neutrally as she pushed the plate before him and sat again. "And Donna?"

Reaching for the sandwich, Al felt a sudden urge to tell her the truth--all of it. Ruthie knew Sam, knew Donna, knew Gooshie, and knew how Sam had held dear the idea of time travel. With Ruthie, he shared a history...not a smooth, entirely pleasant one, but a history nevertheless. She cared about the same people he did. She would understand.

"Donna's..." He focused on the food before him. Chicken with lettuce and extra mayo. Just the way he liked it. "...still crazy in love with Sam," he temporized. "You know how they always were. She..."

A soft sound from the hall interrupted him and he looked up. A small boy of about four appeared in the doorway, blinking sleepily in the light.

"Joseph, honey," Ruthie said, turning to him. When he did not respond she held out her arms and said gently. "Come here."

Obviously not fully awake, the child

hesitated, looking like he was about to cry.

"It's okay, baby," Ruthie said, getting from her chair to go to him and lift him into her arms. "Did you have a bad dream?"

The dark head moved against her shoulder as the child burrowed into her neck.

Hugging him to her, she reassured him. "It's okay. I'll take you back upstairs. We'll turn the bad dream side of your pillow over and then you'll have good dreams the rest of the night."

She began to turn away, but Joseph gave a sleepy, protesting sound. His small hands clutched at her dress as if to stop her from moving.

Smiling gently, she smoothed his hair with her hand. "Okay, you can stay down here with me for just a little while. Until the dream goes away."

A slight nod was the only answer as she returned to sit beside Al again. The admiral, who had followed the interlude with interest, watched as the child snuggled against her with a sigh of contentment. Finally aware of Ruthie's gaze on him, he looked up to meet her eyes.

"It's all the commotion," she explained quietly, then smiled. "There are relatives in every room you look. Not a spare bed or blanket in the house."

Al simply nodded politely. Oh, just real peachy. He could hardly wait until morning, when they were all up and about.

But his gaze kept drifting to the boy. He couldn't be her child. Maybe her grandchild?

As much as he didn't want to know, he had to ask the question. "Is he...yours?"

Shaking her head, she absently stroked the silken hair of the child in her arms. "My niece's boy. I don't have any children. I never remarried."

Never remarried. Yeah, he should have known that. He still paid her alimony, didn't he? That had been a stupid, stupid question. Why the hell had he even asked it?

Saying only, "Oh," he turned his attention to his food. "I don't have any kids either." Picking up his sandwich, he mentally kicked himself. Now why the hell had he said that? She hadn't asked him. Why would she care?

But she only nodded and did not comment.

Pretending to concentrate on eating, he was acutely conscious of all the tiny domestic sounds in the room, the gurgle of the coffee brewing, the soft hum of the old refrigerator,

and the sound of Ruthie humming softly to the child, who seemed to be sleeping.

His eyes kept straying to the woman who rocked slowly in the straight chair, soothing the child with a mother's instinct for gentle motion.

A mother's instinct. Ruthie would have been a good mother. And maybe he could have found some spark of Dad instinct in himself after all. Maybe. If only--

"Do you regret it?" she asked, and he jumped slightly, feeling as if she had read his mind. "Not having children, I mean."

Immediately he started to deny it. But the hour was late, and he was tired, and there had been too many emotions stirred in the past hours to deny this one again.

"Sometimes." He shrugged. "Sorta." The child's breathing was deep and even in the quiet room.

"There was this little girl," he continued, surprising himself. "Teresa. She was about this age. Sam...knew her and I...kinda liked her." And she liked me. That, he left unsaid. "It made me wonder, what it would have been like, if our kid had lived--"

Hastily he cut off the words. What the hell was he doing, bringing up old pain? He had learned not to talk about it years ago and now here he brought it up the first time he saw her. What a total yutz!

"I'm sorry," he apologized, eyes going to hers. "I shouldn't have said that."

Amazingly, she smiled. It was faint, and sad, but it was a smile. "I still grieve for that child, too," she said softly. "Sometimes. When it catches me unawares."

Grieve. Yeah, that was a good word for it. Grief for all the might have beens. Al looked away. What was the matter with him? He hadn't thought of this in years, and now twice in less than twenty-four hours it hit him.

Ruthie was continuing. "I'm sorry, Al."

Surprised, he looked up at her. "Sorry? For what? Losing the baby? That wasn't your fault. It was just the way it was."

"I'm sorry for not being honest about it. For not talking about it. For not letting you share in my pain, and for not sharing in yours."

Covering, Al got to his feet and turned away to the cabinet. Pulling out two cups from the place Edna always kept them, he said, "You been watching soap operas, Ruthie?" His attempt at lightness sounded harsh and mean spirited to his

own ears. And he hadn't meant it to be that way at all.

Now you've done it, Calavicci. Now she's gonna clam up again and--

"I can see why you said that," she said evenly as he poured coffee into the cups, his back still to her. "I set the stage for it way back then. I could see that, after I read Irene and Joe Basch's book about dealing with the loss of a child. I just wanted, finally, to tell you that the reason I blamed you was because I didn't want to blame myself. And the fact was, it was nobody's fault that I lost that child. It was God's will."

God's will. Al felt something twist in his chest. Why couldn't God's will, just once, send something good his way?

Picking up the cups of steaming coffee, he turned to her, not knowing what to say. But the need to say anything fled as he saw her uncle coming down the hall toward them. At the change in his expression, Ruthie, too, turned toward the hall.

Isaac paused in the doorway, eyes going from one to the other as if he sensed he was interrupting.

"She's awake," he said to Ruthie. "If you want him to go in, now is the time."

If you want him to go in. Al drew a deep breath. So, he was right. He wasn't wanted here.

Ruthie, still seated with the child, met his eyes. "Go on, Al. She's waiting for you. I'll put Joseph down and be in shortly."

Nodding, Al put the cups down on the counter behind him and picked up his coat. Then, squaring his shoulders as he shrugged it on, he turned and followed the silent Uncle Isaac down the hall. There was nothing else to be done. He couldn't change his mind now.

Bubbe was waiting.

* * *

What he expected to see, Al didn't know, but he prepared himself for the worst. The sight that met him, then, came as a shock. Edna sat watching him when he pushed open the door, propped up by more pillows than he had ever known her to own. Dressed in a dark green satin bed jacket, with her hair neatly braided and lying gracefully over one shoulder, she looked at first glance like she was expecting company, not waiting to die. It was only on closer

inspection that he noticed her skin was so pale as to be nearly translucent and the satin of the jacket rose and fell with tiny breaths drawn much too quickly.

Reaching out a frail hand for her spectacles on the bedside table, she managed to settle them on the bridge of her nose without too much trouble. She regarded him with quick dark eyes as he stood uncertainly just before the door. A silent, gray-haired man sitting on the left side of the bed was regarding him much less kindly.

That, Al thought, must be Eli, Ruthie's other uncle.

Turning her head slightly, Edna regarded him appraisingly, obviously taking in his formal attire.

"What," she said, gesturing him to her with a wave of her hand, "did we get you away from a wedding?"

Smiling despite himself, Al left the relative safety of the door to approach. "Nah," he shrugged, matching her wry tone. "Nothing so exciting. Just a boring party in Washington."

Nodding, Edna reached out to take his hand, her bed jacket riding up and revealing the faded tattooed numbers on her forearm. It had always hurt to see them, to be reminded of their similar experiences as prisoner's of two completely different wars, and of all the death and killing and hatred they'd survived.

It hurt now more than ever.

Giving his hand gladly, Al realized his mistake only when she did not release it, and pulled him toward her. Though her grasp was frail, he did not want to offend her by pulling away, and so let her manipulate him into taking a seat on the bed beside her. When he was sitting, she patted his hand with her other one in unspoken thanks, then turned to the person Al had guessed was Eli.

"Albert is an important man," she said to him. "A very important man. They know his name in Washington and still he comes to see an old woman like me."

"Old," Al scoffed, gripping her hand more firmly. "You don't look a day over eighty to me."

"Oy vay, and a flatterer," she added with a faint smile. "Always the pretty words, this one."

"So what's this about you being sick?" Al demanded. "You look the picture of health to me." But as he said it, he was uneasily noting the sunken hollows beneath her eyes and cheeks,

and the dry, paper thinness of her skin beneath his fingers.

Seeing the admission of the truth in his eyes, she held his gaze with hers. "I'm dying, Albert," she said firmly. "But I'm doing it on my own terms. I'm not going to die until I'm ready to be dead." Turning her head, she spoke to her other companion. "I want to talk to Al alone, Eli."

The man looked as if he were about to protest. But at a glance from Edna, obviously reconsidered. Still, he spoke to Al. "You won't be long, will you? She tires easily."

"Don't speak of me as if I'm not here," the old woman snapped. "I didn't ask him here just to sit in the parlor and wait for me to die. Now, go Eli, and find something useful to do. Before I find something for you."

Following the man's exit with his eyes, Al had a sudden impulse to hurry after him.

Oh boy, here it comes.

Whatever 'it' was. The reason Edna had put off the business of dying to wait for him. With an act of will, he forced his gaze back to hers and waited for her to speak.

Leaning back on her pillows as if the task of supporting her own head had grown too difficult, she searched his eyes with his. Finally, he looked away, down at the fragile hand clasped in his. It looked so tiny that he instinctively loosened his grip, afraid that he would hurt her.

"Ruthie was wrong to leave you, Albert," she said at last, which brought his eyes back to hers in honest surprise.

How could she be taking his side when he'd acted like such a perfect nozzle back then, refusing to even take Ruthie's calls?

"It's true," she said with a nod. "Not that I can lay all of the blame at her doorstep. Her parents, God rest their souls, made it too easy for her to do. They never should have encouraged her to pack and come home that afternoon she spoke to them, crying that you hadn't even bother to call."

Her parents had encouraged her? Well, that made sense. They'd always hated his guts. Still, vastly uncomfortable with the topic, he avoided her eyes.

"That's all water under the bridge, Edna," he said, and found his voice less firm than he wanted it to be. "Let it go."

"No." The old woman shook her head, her long gray braid moving gracefully on her pillow,

the pressure of her hand momentarily increasing to reinforce her words. "As long as you both draw breath, it's not over."

"Oh, yes it is," he protested, and for some obscure reason was reminded of his tone when he insisted to Sam that he was indeed in 1969 to bring he and Beth back together. "You don't know just how over it is."

"Ah..." She clicked her tongue disapprovingly. "...that business with the lawsuit." She scowled. "Emotional Abuse, hoo-ha! Jessica's always been headstrong. She was feeling her first taste of power with the law. She swept Ruthie along, and with her parents to add fuel to the fire, it was a mess. A family disgrace."

Al attempted a smile. "Edna, there were about three mixed metaphors in there."

"Hush, Albert," she said softly, "don't be impertinent when I'm being wise."

A smile tugging at the corner of his lips, the Observer looked up. To his surprise, her eyes were closed and he felt a sudden chill. "Edna? You okay?"

There was a slight reassuring pressure on his hand and she opened her eyes, though she did not answer the query. "It was wrong of you to not allow her to return, as wrong as it was of her to go."

Shamed, he again regarded the small hand under his. He had been so angry then, so carried away by rage. To think that she had left him--left him--still galled him.

Ruthie had left him...just like Beth.

For the first time he saw with clarity akin to a lightning flash that his anger at Ruthie had been closely tied to his past with Beth. Had it been Ruthie he had so vehemently divorced --or Beth?

"Who was it, son?" the grandmother asked softly. "Who scarred you so badly that you felt you had to hurt my Ruthie and thrust her away?"

Startled, feeling as if she had read his soul, Al looked up into her eyes. There was only understanding there, and a gentleness that he did not deserve. How could he tell her about Beth, who had left him? His mother, who had left him. Even Sam, who had left him.

Ducking his head, he hid his gaze from her dimming eyes that saw so much. "Doesn't matter, Edna, not now." He paused. "I'm...sorry about Ruthie. I really am. It's just..." He shrugged, a quick movement of a shoulder that a child might make. "It's too late now, anyway."

"No." The old voice was weaker, but decisive for all its softness. "Ruthie loves you Albert, always has and always will. And you love her, I can see it in your eyes. That flame has never died. It's wavered, perhaps, but never died."

Love. Al felt the pain crest like a searing wave over his soul. What did he know of love?

His own words came back to haunt him. One drunken night he had told Sam that love was life's only true satisfaction. Then, in afternoon sunlight somewhere in time he had told him that true love was something you only got one shot at, and his shot had been Beth. And he'd lost her.

Yeah, he'd lost her all right--about seven years earlier than he thought he had. What a hypocrite! Al Calavicci knew nothing--nothing! --about true love and how the hell it was supposed to feel. Geez, with his track record, he wouldn't know love even it jumped up and bit him on the butt!

Love. Hah!

Gentle pressure from Edna's fingers convinced him to look up to meet her eyes. "It's never too late, son, never. You search your heart and see if it isn't true. And you tell her. She'll listen. You trust your old bubbe on this, nu?"

Your old bubbe. Damned if it didn't feel as if she truly was his family, truly cared for him and his happiness. Blinking back tears, he mutely shook his head. How could he explain when he didn't understand it all himself, and when it truly was far, far too late.

Sighing, the old woman closed her eyes a long moment, then opened them. "Life is a tangled thing, Albert. It's only when you near the end that you can see how the tangles form a pattern and you can decide whether or not it is as you would have designed it."

Shaking his head vehemently, Al overcame his tears. "You're not gonna die, Bubbe." He attempted a smile. "So quit tryin' to blackmail me into making up with Ruthie and--"

The serenity in her eyes stopped the words in his throat. Though she had not moved, it seemed she was farther away, going to a place he could not follow.

"Nonsense," she said gently. "It's my time to go home." Before he could deny it again, she continued. "Sometimes we chose to weave paths that will not take us where we wish to be. The pattern becomes twisted and misshapen."

"Sometimes, if we are lucky, the threads cross again and there is no shame in admitting we have made a wrong choice and correct the error. Correct it while you still have time."

She smiled, taking any sting from her words.

"Take this second chance, Albert, you don't know that you will ever get another one."

Silent, he wondered just what he should say, when she spoke again and spared him the need.

"You think on what I've said, nu? Think hard, but not too long, for the weaver of time waits for no one. Not even..." She sighed deeply as if suddenly weary. "...for an old shadchen who thinks her mission is to settle the affairs of all her children before she goes."

"Then don't go," Al said, the plea coming from his heart. Her children, she said. Could it be that she truly valued him enough to do this for him? Or was it just to Ruthie whom she referred? "Don't go, Bubbe. Please."

"I must," she said, patting his hand in comfort. "I must." Sighing, she closed her eyes, and Al's throat closed in fear.

"Edna!?"

"Don't shout, Albert," she said in gentle reprimand. But the words were weary, and softly slurred. "...I'm tired."

"Ruthie!" Rising to his feet, Al lifted his voice for help. "RUTHIE!"

Quick steps came from behind the door to the parlor. Then, Ruthie appeared, followed closely by more people who Al did not turn to identify.

Edna's eyes opened and met his. "I want you to help carry my casket, Albert, will you do that?"

Frozen, he stared at her, the old fear closing his throat. He couldn't. The sight of Bob Keramidas' face when Al dragged him away to bury him under foreign skies swam before his eyes. He just couldn't...

"Okay," he heard himself say in full view of a room full of witnesses. "Bubbe, I will."

"Promise," she whispered, still holding to his hand even though Eli tried to pull him away.

"I promise," he answered, then let the elderly man pull him away and push him toward the door. "I promise."

Ruthie had his hand now and was pulling him back toward the parlor. Edna's eyes shifted toward her granddaughter.

"And you remember, Ruthie, remember our conversation yesterday."

"Yes, Bubbe," she answered respectfully, her eyes avoiding Al. "I'll remember."

"That's a good girl," Edna said, her voice nearly inaudible as Eli bent over her murmuring solicitously. "Don't fuss, Eli," she said quite plainly. "Come, hold my hand and we'll speak of home until I must go."

Alarmed, Al took a breath to speak. The door was closed in his face and he found himself in the parlor with Ruthie and the young couple, Daniel and Sarah.

"We've got to get her to a hospital," he said, turning to look for a phone. "She's--"

"No." Ruthie tugged on his hand to reinforce her words. "No hospitals, she made us promise. She's where she wants to be."

"But..." Al protested.

"The trip itself would kill her," Ruthie said as softly as if the old woman could hear. "Would you want to be responsible for that? For her breathing her last breath in an ambulance wailing its way through the darkness when she could be here with us?"

"No." Uncertain, Al turned his gaze on her. Unexpectedly, he thought of Joseph Washikee dying in Sam's arms under the open sky, on his way home to the Reservation. "No," he repeated more surely. "I wouldn't want that if it's not what she wants." Helplessly, he turned to the closed door. "But...we've got to do something."

"We are," said the young woman sitting on the couch. "We are waiting, and praying. She's hovered on the edge like this before, and always been called back."

Turning to Ruthie for confirmation, Al saw the agreement in her eyes. Reluctantly, he let her pull him to the chair he had sat in earlier and push him into it.

Wait.

And pray.

Though he didn't know what it was he should pray for. Did he pray for her to rally and labor a few days longer for breath? Or for her to find release and the new life she was so certain awaited her?

Weary beyond words, he leaned forward and rested his head in his hands. Not that his prayers would do any good anyway, but he sent them. It had worked for Sam once, when he lay bloody and unconscious before a confessional booth.

For long moments he sent an aching wordless message that was a heartfelt cry to whatever Being would hear.

Let there be rhyme and reason to the world after all. Let the tangled way of which Edna

had spoken be reality. Take it all in some giant loom and weave it into a pattern that was good and rich and true. Let it all, somehow, some way, turn out okay.

Eyes burning with unshed tears, he got to his feet and left the parlor without a word. He sought solitude and no one--not even Ruthie--followed.

* * *

It felt like the world was ending.

Stumbling alone onto Bubbe's small, screened back porch, Al squeezed his eyes shut tightly and leaned his forehead against the rough wood of one of the window supports. It felt as if he could feel reality collapsing in about him--like the parachute of a downed pilot settling in deceptively silken folds about his arms and legs, entrapping and holding him for the enemy to find.

It was all falling in on his head. Edna, whom he had never realized meant so much to him until now, was most certainly going to die. Beth, or rather her illusion as a mythical, sainted woman whom he had always cherished, was destroyed. Sam, his only friend, was leaping about time like a flea on a string, and the Funding Committee was threatening to snip his fragile lifeline home.

The world was unraveling at the seams--or tangling into a tight, ugly knot that no one could ever unravel.

Opening his eyes, Al found himself looking straight into the same brilliant silver moon that he had regarded earlier. Now it had moved across the sky so he could see it from the back of the house. The clouds had broken up still further into irregular, closely spaced clumps that glowed with the moon's light against the blackness of the night sky.

It looked like ice that had been stepped on by a careless foot, sending splinters of darkness running between patches of light. It looked...like a glowing, inter-connected net of light.

Startled by the force of the illusion, Al fell back a step from the window. The entire sky was like a vast spider web, made of lines of night's dark thread that separated radiant shapes of vapor into a pattern of great beauty. The moon was the hub--a great, glowing spider of light, glorious in her splendor, shedding reflected glory on the web she had created.

It was glorious, and beautiful. But--the thought hit Al like a physical thing--pity the poor fly, forever ensnared in a web in which he was far too caught to ever see the pattern. A shudder chased down his spine, hard enough to shake loose the tears that had been threatening to overwhelm him.

They had been waiting a long time, these tears. Turning away from the sky, he hid his face in his hands and let them come.

* * *

It seemed like he had stood on that dark porch for an eternity. The moon had long since set beyond the roofs of the nearby houses. He had chosen to remain there, needing the time to regain his composure before he faced the world again.

Even when his emotions were under control, he lingered, hands in his pockets, and listened to the increasing sounds from the house within. There were doors opening and closing, loud voices, then hushed ones, and the sound of someone weeping in the kitchen, never knowing he was just beyond in the darkness. Finally, the sounds lessened.

Clearly, it was over. Edna was gone.

He thought perhaps it might be safe to emerge, take his things, and go without being embroiled in a family scene of grief which he felt too raw to handle just yet.

It was then that he heard the creak of the kitchen door opening behind him and the unmistakable sound of Ruthie's approaching footsteps.

"I thought I'd find you out here," she said softly, before she reached him, her voice giving nothing away.

Damn. She was gonna make him ask.

"Everything...okay?" he questioned, without turning from his contemplation of the tiny back yard that bordered so closely on the neighbor's.

She appeared in his peripheral vision, her own eyes directed out into the night. "Mmm, you know Bubbe. Stubborn as a mule...now more than ever."

Al breathed a sigh of relief. So the old gal had rallied. His eyes lifted to the night sky in a silent thank you.

Ruthie wrapped her arms about herself in a hug as if to ward off the early morning dew and turned to sit on the window ledge.

"You always used to come out here to smoke

when we'd visit," she said, neatly changing the subject. "Why aren't you smoking now?"

"No ash tray," he answered with a shrug, his gaze still focused on the darkness. "I still have the habit, I just didn't wanna get ashes all over her floor. She'll skin me alive for that."

"Yes," Ruthie agreed with a low laugh, "she will." Pushing herself forward, she opened a low cabinet beneath the window behind her and pulled out the old square, glass ash tray he had used for years during their frequent visits.

Smiling, she put it on the ledge before him and he laughed despite himself.

"You still have this?"

"She wouldn't let me throw it away." She paused, smiling. "The old *shadchen*."

Al regarded at her profile in the dim light. Edna had used that word too. "What's that mean?"

"*Shadchen*?" She looked at him. "It means 'matchmaker'."

He chuckled slightly. "I should've known. Hey, you remember that time, at our wedding, when she tried to pair Sam up with your cousin?"

Ruthie laughed lightly. "Oh, yes. Jessica had just started law school and thought she knew it all..."

The words trailed off as the carefree memory came full circle--Jessica had passed her bar exam a few years later, just in time to become Ruthie's divorce attorney.

The conversation died for several minutes. Finally, Ruthie casually asked, "What did Bubbe say to you?"

"Say?" Edna had undoubtedly planned this whole thing, the cunning old bird, planned that someday, somehow, she was going to bring him back for her granddaughter. "What...did she say to you?"

Ruthie looked down at her feet and managed a convincing smile. "She has this crazy idea that I'm...that we..." She shook her head. "It's just crazy."

Her eyes darted to his, giving away more than they were hiding. Al hesitated, seeing a brief flicker of...what? In the darkness, it was gone before he could decide, so he feigned a pretentious scoff instead.

"She said the same thing to me," he confessed. "Ain't that a kick in the butt? Bubbe thinks that you and I...that we still..." He chuckled awkwardly. "It's totally loony-toons, right?"

Ruthie joined in his stilted laughter. "Completely ridiculous."

A long, difficult silence settled.

"I, unh...guess I should be going," he began, faking a glance at the time. "I mean, I still have to find a hotel and--"

"I wouldn't hear of it," she cut in firmly. "Al, you came all this way, the least I can do is put you up for the night."

"But I thought you had a house full of people already? No more room."

"You can sleep in my bed." No sooner had she delivered the invitation than she blushed scarlet. "I mean...I'm planning to sit up with Bubbe. You're welcome to use my room if you want."

"I don't wanna--"

"You're not," she assured him. She stepped forward to take his arm. "It's up to you, if you want to stay or not. But either way I just want to say...thank you. For coming. For everything."

"You're welcome," he answered sincerely, looking down into her eyes. "I owed it to Edna. She was always good to me."

And he did--didn't he?--owe Ruthie something too? At least a try at smoothing over some of the bitterness and hurt. Not for reconciliation--that was going just too far...way beyond the call of duty even for Bubbe. But he could tell her about Beth, and why he had been such a complete shmuck at the end. Explain why he'd gone out of his way to hurt her.

"Ruthie," he said as she let her hand fall away from his arm and started to turn away. "There's something I have to tell you."

Unexpectedly, he was reminded of another time he had planned to talk to her, to tell her about Beth and how she still poisoned his life. He had really planned to do it...but he'd been too drunk. And then he'd beat the stuffing out of the vending machine, and Sam had taken him home, and Ruthie had been livid. And...one thing had led to another and it was never the right time.

Maybe that's what Edna was trying to tell him. Do it when you can and don't wait for the perfect time--which may never come.

"What is it?" she asked concerned, seeing the hesitation, and perhaps the guilt, in his expression.

"I just...need to explain something to you."

"What?"

What. Yeah, what. How the hell did you

lead into something like this? Just jump in with both feet?

"I..." he began, then paused and tried again. "When you left..." He shook his head resolutely. "Damn it, Ruthie. I was a real jerk then, and I'm sorry. I know you thought I was having an affair, but I wasn't."

The words flowed from him as if they had a life of their own. Good, lance the wound deep and clean and let it heal once and for all. No more lingering guilt and anger.

"I was drinkin' too much and thinkin' too little. I was lettin' my gut rule my head in those days, and...well...the truth of it is, a lot of it had absolutely nothin' at all to do with you."

Unexpectedly, she frowned. He could see it even in the darkness lightened only by street lights. Hell, why'd he keep pickin' these dimly lit places for soul-baring fights?

"How can you stand there and lie to me like this?" she demanded.

"What?" he asked, honestly bewildered.

"You say you weren't having an affair, but then you turn around and say it wasn't about me. It sure wasn't all about work, even though Sam told me it was, and that you nearly got kicked off STAR BRIGHT."

She drew near enough for him to see that her eyes were flashing the way they had in the old days, before they had gone cold and silent.

"In the end, you wouldn't even talk to me. You never showed even the slightest sign of caring what I did...half the time you didn't bother to come home at night, and if you did you were always drunk." She folded her arms. "You remember that night you went out with your friends? Well, a few days later I found a handkerchief in your pocket...with lipstick on it. But I still gave you the benefit of the doubt back then, Al, because I loved you so much." She bristled again. "Now I know better. So don't you dare try to tell me there wasn't another woman!"

Al suddenly felt guilty--the lipstick had been Sharon's. He'd kissed her, out on the patio at Tony's Place, but that was all.

Damn it, Ruthie was right! It wasn't what she thought, but there had been another woman!

Not Sharon, but Beth. Or rather, a twisted ghost of Beth that he'd conjured up in his own need to deal with the past. Sometimes old wounds had to be re-opened so they healed cleanly--even if it hurt like hell. He had

carried the false memory long enough. It was time for honesty--and healing.

Swallowing hard, he met her angry eyes.

"Okay..." he admitted, feeling the old scar tear and re-open in a way that could never be bound again. "There was another woman."

"I knew it!"

Reaching out, he grasped her elbow before she could turn on her heel and leave him alone. "It was my first wife, Beth."

Shocked, she regarded him in silence, tears welling her eyes. "What?" Her whisper was hurt, and incredulous. "How could you?!"

"It wasn't like that," he protested, seeing she had completely misunderstood. "She wasn't even there. She was in South Carolina, married to that shyster lawyer."

"She was married too?" The shock and disgust in her eyes hurt him more than he could bear.

"Listen to me," he all but shouted in a desperate need to make her understand. "It wasn't physical! I mean, I didn't even know where she was then. I didn't talk to her, Ruthie, didn't see her. Hell, I tried not to even think about her!"

Ruthie frowned and regarded him more closely. "Al, you're not making any sense."

"I know," he said, releasing her arm. "I know." Drawing a deep breath, he tried again, gesturing helplessly. "Beth was my first wife," he repeated slowly, as reasonably as he could manage.

"I know. She's on your arm."

Of course, the tattoo that Ruthie had asked about once, and then scrupulously ignored for the rest of their marriage. Perhaps she wanted to know as little about her as he had wanted to tell her. But that was all gonna change now because Beth had come between him and his life long enough.

"She left me," he said, thinking how amazing it was he could say the words. He hadn't told anyone except Sam in that misguided leap when he thought he could get her back. And then he had shrouded it in lies and half-truths as long as he could manage. "She left me when I was a POW in 'Nam. She had me declared dead, and married the lawyer. When I came home, all I got was a 'Dear John' letter and a whole lotta grief I could never put behind me because she wouldn't even talk to me."

Just like I wouldn't talk to you, he thought despairingly. I denied you that end to your

pain too.

"Al...I'm sorry. I...I didn't know. It must have been awful for you."

He drew a deep breath, unwilling to stop now that he had begun. "That day we had that awful fight, when I got drunk at STAR BRIGHT and Sam brought me home...it was all because I saw her picture--her and Dirk--in the newspaper. The happy, loving couple. And I was angry...and hurt. The hell of it is, I realized you didn't understand and that I should tell you. I wanted to, honey, but I couldn't."

"Then, when you left me, it was like Beth leaving all over again. And I...went sorta crazy for a while." Unable to bear the expression on her face, he turned away. "I know I should've told you all this before, and not been such a horse's ass." He ran a hand across his brow and down his face. "So, in a way it was another woman who came between us." He leaned heavily on the ledge that held the ash tray Edna had saved for decades. "In a way."

"Do you still love her?" Ruthie's voice came from behind him, soft, small and vulnerable.

"No." His laugh was nearly a sob. "No, not anymore. Tonight, in Washington, I...realized it was never really her I loved, but the illusion of what I wanted her to be. And I can't even blame her for that, because it was my own stupidity, trying to hold onto the past." He sighed deeply, letting it all go, once and for all. "She was right, Ruthie. She told me it was over--really over--a long, long time ago. I was just too damn dumb to admit it."

"I have never, ever, known you to be dumb," Ruthie said quietly. "Exasperating, pig-headed, and a dirty fighter, but never, ever dumb."

"Well I was about this, sweetheart," he said in an attempt at lightness, pushing himself away from the ledge. Turning, he faced her squarely. "I just wanted you to know, to understand why I was such a jerk to you, and to apologize. You deserved better."

Before she could speak, he grasped her shoulders lightly and pulled her to him. Kissing her gently on the forehead, too quickly for her to protest, he turned and headed for the relative safety of the house.

"I have to go," he said, already passing through the door. "Tell Edna...tell her...I'm sorry..."

At that, he made a clean escape. He strode through the hall, grabbing his hat and coat, and made it out the front door without anyone

stopping him. Ruthie, so far as he could tell, did not follow.

And that, he told himself as he raced down the path in the dark, chased by nothing more than the echo of his own footsteps on the wet cement, was just as well. He had said everything that he was willing to say. All that was left was to go.

To...

Just before he reached the front gate, he stopped dead in his tracks.

To what? Run away all over again? Because that's exactly what he'd done before--ran away to Vegas and hid in a bottle. And what about his promise to Edna?

Slowly, he looked back over his shoulder, surprised to find Ruthie standing in the doorway, a dark silhouette against the brightness of the interior hall light. She neither moved nor uttered a word...just stood there watching. The ball was still firmly in his court. He could leave now--no questions asked--never ever speak to her again, and she would undoubtedly understand.

He could...if he really wanted to...

Letting out a long breath, he moved hesitantly back along the path toward her, convincing himself that it was only because of his promise to Edna that he had decided to stay.

He stopped at the foot of the stairs and looked up, able to see her face despite the shadow the light behind had cast over her. Was it hope he saw in her expression?

Shrugging off his shame for having run like a scared rabbit, he quietly asked, "That...offer of a room still available?"

She pursed an understanding smile and nodded. "Yes, it is."

"Then I, unh...I'll just get my suitcase from the trunk..."

* * *

Edna's guest room had changed considerably since he'd last seen it. For starters, it was no longer a guest room, but Ruthie's private bedroom. There were still some familiar pieces of Bubbe's furniture, including the double bed with the antique brass frame and the mahogany chest of drawers in the corner, but most of it was Ruthie's.

And some of it had been salvaged from their marriage--left-overs from their shared history together.



Taking in the room at a glance as he preceded her into it, Al briefly wondered why she had kept all this stuff, all these memories. He had gotten rid of most everything that had been 'theirs'...with the possible exception of the white coffee mug adorned with music notes which she had used at CLEAR STAR, and which now resided in his quarters at PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP.

"You're sure about this?" he asked, turning to face her. She had stopped at the threshold, and was holding both the door and the frame like it was the only reason she was still on her feet. Undoubtedly, she was as tired as he.

Ruthie nodded. "I'm sure. I told you, I'm going to sit with Bubbe anyway. You get some sleep." With that, she quietly withdrew, before he could change his mind again. "Goodnight," she called softly through the crack, an instant before the door closed in her wake.

Putting down his small suitcase, Al walked slowly to the bed. He felt so tired, so drained, that it was a major physical effort. Tossing his raincoat on the foot of the bed, he sank down beside it and wearily let his head drop into his hands.

A protesting squeak immediately sounded under his weight, and Al glanced up and grinned despite his exhaustion. It was the same damn telling squeak that had plagued him and Ruthie on their frequent visits here, especially when they were trying to be quiet.

He turned on the bedside lamp, then froze as he recognized the patterned china base. The shade was new--the dusty pink color to match the decor of the room--but the lamp itself was undoubtedly the mate for one he had broken years ago, the survivor of the pair Edna had given him and Ruthie as a wedding present.

Al frowned at it--it and the memory of what it stood for. He would have gotten rid of this a long, long time ago.

Too tired to pursue the thought any further, he fished in the pocket of his raincoat and withdrew Ziggy's handlink. Switching it to 'Stand By', he placed it, along with his wallet and watch, under the lamp on the night table just inches from the pillow. In a way, it was the most sophisticated pocket pager ever devised, even though there was no actual voice communication. Gooshie could reach him practically anywhere with it--those familiar bleeps and squeals loud enough to wake the dead--then he could use the nearest telephone to call in. He just hoped that wouldn't be for at

least another six or so hours, because he sure needed to catch forty winks.

Standing, he trudged back to the door, to extinguish the overhead light. He was removing his coat and undoing his tie when in the subtle dimness of the familiar bedside lamp, he unexpectedly found himself transported back to an earlier time.

A happier time.

A vivid resonance lingered here, this room--perhaps more than anywhere else in the house--was brimming with memories. They were loud and clear, and all of them good. The lamp, the brass bed, the worn floral pattern on the carpet, the rose-colored curtains which had breathed one too many summers of Boston air, the antique desk of timeworn distinction...

Al paused in his reverie. Not so much the desk, but rather what was on it, caught his eye and he moved across to it.

Photographs. Dozens of them. Framed in gold, silver, wood and plastic. Row upon row, in all sizes, covered the entire desktop...and told the story of Ruthie's life like visual pages from a diary.

He guessed she had taken a lot of them herself, considering she had been a professional photographer before being drafted onto the CLEAR STAR PROGRAM, and her love for the craft was still very prevalent. They were mostly family shots--her parents, children of all ages, cousins, aunts and uncles...some of whom he recognized, others whom he didn't.

There was one which was undoubtedly a school photo, with a bunch of young people who were obviously her students. The one of the Earth taken from space was the only commercial print in the bunch, but it too was framed and obviously well-loved. Perhaps it reminded her of those frontier breaking days at CLEAR STAR.

Or other things.

With a tired sigh, he was just about to turn away when he spotted it. With its left hand corner peeking out from the last row, there was a photo of--

Al blinked in surprise.

--him!

He picked it up. Okay, so it wasn't entirely of him...it was of him and Sam with Ruthie standing between them, taken on their wedding day.

Wedding day? Why the hell would she have kept this? He'd never considered this particular shot to be a good one anyway, since

she wasn't even looking at the camera--she was looking at him. With a special smile and a great deal of love in her eyes...

Somberly remembering Edna's words, he returned the photograph to its place and retraced his steps back to the bed. Okay. So Ruthie had kept one of their wedding photos, as well as the lamp and other stuff. So what? It wasn't like this photo was proudly displayed in a prominent place or anything. More like hidden away at the back, kept just out of sight...just like he'd kept Beth's letter.

And the lamp and stuff? Well, it was all just simply functional. Probably didn't mean spit to her.

Wearily, he stripped down to his undershirt and Boxer Boys, not letting himself even think about the Little Red Devils adorning his shorts or how that surprise had been intended for Denise after the DC reception. All that seemed to have happened a lifetime ago...

Turning out the lamp, he climbed into bed. He didn't even hear it squeak under his weight this time, because he was virtually asleep before his head hit the pillow.

* * *

"...Al?"

Startled awake, he instinctively recoiled back into a half-sitting, almost defensive, position before he realized it was only Ruthie. She was sitting on the bed beside him, holding a steaming cup of coffee. As recognition took hold, he relaxed and rubbed a hand over his sand-filled eyes.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's okay," he said, his hand traveling from his eyes down over the bristle on his chin. Then, noting there was daylight poking in from around the rose-colored curtains and down the hall through the open bedroom door, he asked, "What time is it?"

"Almost ten."

"Ten?! Why'd you let me sleep so late?" Snatching up the silent handlink from the night table, he immediately checked for any hint that he might have slept right through an urgent message.

"Well, I looked in on you around eight," Ruthie continued, watching him closely, "but you seemed so tired last night I thought you could use the rest."

Satisfied that there had been no word from

Gooshie, Al settled back against his pillow again, the link loosely clasped in his hands on his lap.

"Is it always like this?" she asked with a knowing little smile.

He hesitated slightly, aware of the knack Ruthie had when it came to guessing his secrets. "Is what...always like what?"

Her smile widened as she put the coffee cup down on the night table, pushing his wallet and watch aside with her hand. "Never mind."

He studied her carefully. Despite the casual banter of their conversation, the swollen redness in her weary eyes told him a completely different story. She been up all night and something had happened. And there were no points for guessing that the 'something' had been bad.

As if unable to hold his gaze for fear he might see too deep inside, she closed him out by looking down. When she made a move to stand, Al foiled her attempted getaway by grabbing her wrist. The action brought her eyes back to his.

She was definitely holding back her feelings. And that meant only one thing...

"Edna?" he asked quietly, already knowing the answer.

Ruthie bit her bottom lip as if to bite back the tears. "She passed away early this morning, just after six."

Al let go of her wrist, feeling as if someone had dropped a pile of bricks on him from above, the abrupt burden of loss coming like a heavy blow even though it had been expected. He opened his mouth to offer his condolences, but she spoke first.

"It was very peaceful, Al. She didn't suffer." She was doing such a good job at corking her emotions that to an outsider she would have appeared callous. "Isaac and Eli took her to his funeral home at nine, and someone's scheduled to stay with her in shifts until the service."

Another mortician, Al thought distantly, the family's rank with them. "Stay with her?"

"It's custom not to leave the body alone until burial. Someone will always be there, reading the Psalms, until this afternoon."

With effort, Al suppressed a shudder. Another custom that he'd never heard of--another thing he didn't know. "That's when the funeral is? This afternoon?"

"We hope. It's best to accomplish it as soon as possible and...most of the arrangements

were already made. It's not as if this were... unexpected." She paused, hesitantly. "Will you still...? I mean, I told them it was good of you to make this trip at all, considering how busy you are. They'll understand if you have to go."

She had made excuses for him, given him an out in case he wanted to renege on his promise to Edna to act as a pallbearer. Dear, sweet, understanding Ruthie, still trying to make it easier for him to fit into an alien culture in which he did not belong.

"I said I'd be pallbearer," he said, his voice sharper than he intended. "And I will." The thought that perhaps he wasn't wanted suddenly occurred to him. "Unless...there's a problem with that? With me being from outside the faith and all."

"No. There's no problem with it. Everyone heard her ask you, and heard your promise. They're all bound to follow her wishes."

Was that relief in her voice? She had expected him to refuse, and it was going to cause her difficulty, but she had still made it easy for him.

She looked away first.

"Ruthie," he said, raising a concerned hand to her cheek. "Are you...holdin' up okay?"

"Yes," she returned stiffly, her chin tilting up, as if determined not to let him see her cry. Her lip broke into an uncontrollable quiver. "I'm fine..." But the last word came out as a sob as she burst into tears.

There had been times in the past when she had cried and it had torn his heart out to watch, not knowing what to do. This time, however, he knew exactly.

Sitting forward, he invited her into his arms. She accepted gratefully, and they sat there riding out the worst of the convulsions together. With her face buried against his chest, he comforted her silently. There were no words, however sincere, to ease this pain. There was only his touch and understanding, his ability and willingness to share the loss with her. The constriction in his throat made it impossible to speak, even if he had wanted to, so instead he rested his chin on the top of her head and rocked her gently, blinking back his own unanticipated remorse.

Finally gaining shaky control of her feelings once more, she put her hands on his chest and pushed back with a defiant snuffle.

Obviously embarrassed, she wiped her eyes

with the back of her hand. "I promised myself I wouldn't do this..."

"Hey...it's okay to show you care." He brushed the tear-plastered hair back from her cheek. "I care too."

"I know you do," she returned, meeting his eyes. "I know you do, Al. It's one of the things I treasure about you." She paused uncertainly. "I wish...you could've been here to care...when my parents were killed."

Her words had the unexpected effect of sharpening old guilts and old pain. There were so many times he could have comforted her like this--could have made things better for her--but he'd been too wrapped up in his own troubles to do it.

"I guess, even when we were married...hell, Ruthie...I was never really there when you needed me." With that realization came the need to look away.

The cool touch of her fingertips on his face brought his eyes back to hers. There was a look of something lost and something found, in them as she said softly, yet hopefully, "You're here now."

The moment that hung between them was an incredibly long, and incredibly powerful one.

"Yeah," he murmured at last, falling helplessly under its spell despite himself. "I guess I am."

Holding her eyes, Al felt himself lean forward to meet her halfway in a kiss. As if they were being pulled together by some invisible string, he closed his eyes in anticipation of feeling her lips touch his...

"Aunt Ruth?"

The unexpected voice from the direction of the door made them both flinch apart, barely an inch before their lips met. Ruthie recovered first and turned to the young boy standing just inside the bedroom door.

"Yes, Joseph, what is it?"

"Mama says to tell you the rabbi's here."

"Thank you. Tell your mother I'll be along in a moment."

At that, the boy nodded and obediently withdrew, leaving Al feeling extremely fidgety. Straightening the bedcovers across his lap--suddenly embarrassed to think Ruthie might have seen the pattern on his shorts--he picked up the forgotten handlink and quickly traded it for the cooling cup of coffee she had brought in.

The moment had passed, and so too had the insane desire to kiss his ex-wife.

Ruthie was also on her feet, as if physically distancing herself from that unfathomable, yet obviously shared, yearning. "I have to go finalize the service arrangements," she explained quickly.

"Oh, yeah. Right."

He sipped his coffee. It didn't taste like coffee--it didn't taste like anything. It could have been pure arsenic and he'd never have known. His whole attention was focused elsewhere--namely what the hell he'd been thinking a few moments ago when he'd tried to put the make on his ex. Sure, he'd tried it before with Sharon and Maxine, but that had meant nothing. That had been a solely selfish tactic to try to sway them out of suing him for more alimony.

"I need to have a shower and a shave," he said automatically, "then use your phone."

This had meant something...

"Would you like some breakfast?"

"Breakfast?"

She smiled--sadly--but doing a far better job than he forgetting that crazy runaway moment. "Okay, so I'll admit it's more like brunch...I made Joseph some French toast earlier. There's still some mixture left over...?"

"French toast," he repeated. "Sounds good."

"And I'll lay out a clean towel in the bathroom for you. You go ahead, everyone else is up..."

"Ruthie," he called as she headed for the door. She turned--far too chipper under the present circumstances, once again keeping all those emotions well hidden from him. "Are you ...gonna be okay?"

She nodded wordlessly, biting her lower lip in what was to Al, a clear indication of what was really going on inside. Then she was gone, leaving him struggling to keep his head above the rising tide of sudden grief...and sudden desire.

* * *

Showered and dressed conservatively--at least, as conservative as his present wardrobe would allow--Al found the phone on the hall table exactly where it had always been. Punching in a Washington DC number, he put his back to the wall and pulled the cord as far as it would stretch away from the nearest doorway, trying for as much privacy as was possible in an open hall, in a house full of people.

He first called his inside source in DC to check on the status of the Funding Committee, but all his source could tell him was that they hadn't reached a decision, one way or the other. And that an answer wasn't expected for at least twenty-four hours.

Giving up that particular chase, he turned his attention to the next pressing duty.

Punching in the Project's number, he received an unexpected voice when he asked to be put through to the control room. It was a female voice that answered and it took him a moment to place it.

"Donna?" he said at last. "What are you doing in Control? Where's that slacker, Gooshie?"

"I sent him home, Al," came the answer. "He has to sleep sometime. I'm monitoring Ziggy for the time being."

"Oh. So...what've you got?"

"Nothing. Verbena and I re-checked the entire monitoring system last night. Everything is fine. He just doesn't seem to be in any hurry at all this time to leap in."

"That's good," Al grunted. "It'll give me time to clean up things here and get back before he does." He paused. "Ruthie's grandmother died this morning. I'm staying for the funeral."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Is Ruthie okay?"

"Yeah, she's...she's always been a strong woman. She's holding up." Something about Donna's tone bothered him and he frowned. "Are you okay?"

"Yes." Her reply was quick and, he was certain, a lie. "I'm fine." There was a hint of tears in her voice and Al was sure it had little to do with an old woman she had never even met.

"What's going on, Donna?"

"Nothing." Another lie. She wasn't any better at telling fibs than Sam. "Have you heard anything from the Funding Committee yet?"

So that was it. Al sighed. "Nada. Not a word. My best sources tells me they're still chewing over my presentation. We should know by tomorrow. I'm sure it'll be fine, just like last year. That nozzle, Weitzman, just likes to make me sweat." He paused, wondering if she'd buy the line.

Finally, her answer came. "I've been running some scenarios through Ziggy. Just in case they cut the funding. It doesn't look good, no matter how we run it. Al, what if they

don't renew? What if--"

"They'll come through," Al assured her. "You can count on it."

"But if they don't, we don't really have a good contingency plan. We could lose him, Al. Ziggy says there's a 72 percent chance that if the Project goes off-line..."

"Ziggy's been wrong before," Al said, unconsciously quoting Sam. "And you've done all you can to plan for it if they don't, right?"

"Right," the answer was slow and unwilling.

"Okay. So let it go, concentrate on the positive and if it goes wrong, we do the best we can with what we've got."

"You're right," she agreed. "You'll be home soon?"

"The funeral's this afternoon, at two, and I'm planning on leaving right after it. But you still let me know if anything changes on your end, okay?"

"Okay." She paused. "Do you know the name of the funeral home? I'd like to send flowers."

"Unh, yeah..." He gave her the information, then said, "Hold down the fort, kiddo, and I'll see you soon."

When she said goodbye and hung up, Al slowly replaced the receiver. Donna didn't sound good, and she'd been sounding that way too often lately. The whole thing was hell for her, watching Sam leap from life to life, living all those lives without her. And now she had another threat to add to her list of worries, namely that he may never come home.

Abruptly, Al spied one big, innocent brown eye staring at him from around the corner of the nearby parlor door. It was Joseph. Wondering how long the boy had been there, he took two steps forward and squatted on the hall side of the threshold.

"Hey, squirt..."

Joseph slowly slid around the door to face him. "Aunt Ruth says to tell you the French toast is cooked," he said, delivering the message as he had undoubtedly been asked.

Ruffling the boy's hair, Al stood and hoisted the child up onto his arm. "Well, then we better not keep your Aunt Ruth waiting, huh?"

"Uh-unh, or she'll get real mad."

Smiling, he said, "I know that feeling too," and headed for the kitchen with the child. It was time to follow his own advice. He had done all he could do for Sam, and for Donna. Now it was time to do what he could here. It was time to eat his breakfast, then go shopping.

He had to buy a good dark suit.

* * *

Ruthie's house was like he expected it to be when he returned at one o'clock, full of company and people coming and going. There was a wrinkle he hadn't expected, a practice of sitting shivah, one of the dictates of which that no one could sit on chairs or sofas of normal height.

That problem, Al dealt with by first changing into his new black suit then retiring to the back porch again. There he stood and smoked, using the vintage ash tray and listening to the sounds inside the house from an outsider's vantage point.

Finally, he heard most of the mourners leave, and entered the kitchen. Ruthie, whom he had overheard say was going upstairs to get ready for the services, was nowhere in sight. Knowing she hadn't left, for they had agreed over breakfast that they would be going together, he ventured so far as the hall.

The coast, it seemed, was still clear. Maybe, with a little luck, he would get through the rest of the afternoon with a minimum of hassle and be on his way back to the Project even earlier than expected.

Maybe. But, he still felt a vague uneasiness, a sort of hinky feeling that usually meant the Big Guy Upstairs was getting ready to drop something really huge on him. He'd had it when he came into the Waiting Room years before and saw Trudy's expression on Sam Beckett's face. He'd had it when he walked through the Imaging Chamber door into Havenwell Hospital and saw Sam semi-conscious on a psych ward bed and, damn it, he had it now.

Al glanced toward the phone. One last call before he left wouldn't hurt, and maybe it'd ease his mind.

Deciding, he keyed in the numbers quickly and soon heard the computer programmer's voice. "Control."

"Yeah, Gooshie, it's me. You got anything yet?"

"Not a blip, Admiral. Ziggy says she doesn't see a leap coming anytime within the next eight hours, at least."

"Okay," Al sighed, rubbing the back of his neck as if he could rub away the tingle there. "Is Donna doing okay?"

"Donna?" Gooshie sounded surprised. "So

far as I know. She was in the Waiting Room last time I heard. You want me to find her?"

"No," Al said wearily. "No, don't do that. And don't tell her I asked about her. It's just she sounded a little rocky last time I talked to her. You might steer Verbena her way--tactfully."

"Ahmm..." There was a holding sound as Gooshie obviously did some checking. "Verbena's in the Waiting Room, talking to her now. That good enough?"

Al gave a half-hearted chuckle despite himself. Sam did know how to hire good help. "Yeah, that's good enough. You keep me posted. I'll be leaving for the funeral shortly, but I've got the handlink so you can reach me there. Just keep the volume down, okay?"

"Okay," the programmer agreed. "And Admiral? Have you heard anything about the Committee's decision?"

Al bit down on the reply he wanted to make. That was one of the things he really hated about this job, people always hounding him for information he didn't have.

"Not yet," he answered. "But I don't expect to hear until tomorrow, anyway. Just keep your fingers crossed. I should be back on site by later tonight."

Hanging up the phone, he remained staring at it for a long moment. He was not truly thinking, just waiting. Waiting for the other shoe to drop as his gut was telling him it would.

"Al?" Ruthie's voice, coming from behind him on the stairs on the opposite side of the hall, brought him from his reverie. "Is everything okay?"

"Oh, sure," he answered, turning to find her dressed in black. "Everything's fine."

Looking up at her, midway down the stairway, he knew at once she didn't believe him and wasn't going to let it rest.

Hurriedly, he tried to stall her. "It's just work stuff, classified like all that garbage is. 'Loose lips sink ships'...and all that."

Seeing his attempt at humor fall flat, he tried one last time as she started slowly down the steps.

"C'mon, Ruthie, you know I can't talk about it. You ready to leave? I've got the car out front and--"

"It's Sam, isn't it," she said, as if he hadn't made his attempt at diversion. "He finally did it, built his time travel project,"

she announced with her usual directness and skill for figuring out things he didn't want her to know. "And now something's gone wrong."

Incredulous, Al frowned at her. "Why in the world would you say that?"

"It's all Sam ever talked about, quantum physics and time travel. And you haven't said a word about what the two of you are working on out in New Mexico."

Reaching the hall, she came to stand before him, eyes searching his.

"And when I asked how he was, you said he was okay--you thought--and he was away. And now, you're worried about Donna."

Trying to divert her, Al scowled. "You were eavesdropping? Ruthie..."

"It's a trick I learned when we were married," she replied evenly. "It was one of the few ways I could figure out what was going on with you when you quit talking. Now..." She put her hand on his arm as if to force an answer. "...am I right about Sam?"

Pulling away, Al half-turned, rubbing irritably at his jaw while he tried to decide what to say. Then, he turned back to her. "Look, honey, Sam's...gotten himself into a mess, okay? But it's all gonna work out. It'll just take some time."

"You're not sure of that," she returned, looking up into his face. "And it's already been 'some time'. That's why you have all those new lines around your eyes. What's going on, Al?"

'What's going on, Al?' Why did everyone keep asking him that? As if he actually knew!

Resolutely, he drew a deep breath. "I can't talk about it. It's classified, okay?"

"Okay," she agreed reluctantly. Turning, she gazed into the mirror over the hall table and straightened her veil. "I'm ready to go. Are you?"

"Sure," he answered quickly, relieved to have gotten off so easily. "Let's go. Everybody's gonna be waiting."

* * *

Arriving at the funeral home, they found that everyone was indeed waiting. Hand under Ruthie's elbow, shoulders squared, Al walked in the funeral parlor expecting the same invisible, silent wall of disapproval that had greeted him at family gatherings during a major portion of their marriage.

It was a surprise, therefore, when Uncle Eli came forward to meet them. Instinctively, Al dropped his hand from Ruthie and fell back a half a step to let Eli take over and draw his niece into the folds of the family. To his surprise, the elderly man met his eyes with a quiet greeting that sounded almost sincere.

"Come this way, Albert, we've saved a place for you. Ruth," he said, slipping an arm about her shoulders in a quick, heart-felt hug, then withdrawing to let Al escort her. "Come and sit down."

Watching him lead the way, Al moved back up beside Ruthie and again took her arm. As he led her past Sarah and Daniel, who were seated, they met his gaze with the air of people who shared a common grief. The young woman even went so far as to give him a small, understanding smile.

Al nodded to her and, after delivering Ruthie to a seat in the front row, took the place Eli indicated to him.

Thinking he was on his own then, he was anticipating some time to look things over and try to puzzle out exactly what he was supposed to do, similar to the way he'd always done in these formal Jewish gatherings. But Eli bent forward, giving him quiet, even directions as to what was expected of him. He gave them once, paused as if to give Al a chance to ask any questions, then nodded and went to attend his own duties.

Still feeling very much on alien territory, Al sat very straight and very correct, hardly daring to breath. Geez, he hated funerals...and this one had all the hallmarks of being an exceedingly long one.

He could do this, he told himself silently. He had done a lot worse things in his life than carry the casket of an old woman, who had been altogether kinder to him than he deserved.

Squaring his shoulders to a degree more of correctness, he felt a tiny line of tension tighten across them. And it was likely, he realized, to only get worse before it got better.

The funeral proceeded in a welter of rituals and traditions. He did his best to respond correctly, though a good portion of it was in a language he did not understand.

Still, there was the heavy ache in his heart, one he did not have to fake, and which seemed to tie him to the mourners present. It wasn't until after the graveside services were finally completed, and he and Ruthie were walking slowly

in the direction of the parked cars, that he felt a hint of the old animosity directed at him.

Isaac's wife, Rachel, came hurrying up behind them on the white gravel path. "Ruthie, honey," she said, taking her niece's arm. "You ride home with us. We have plenty of room in our car."

Uncertain, Al's steps trailed to a stop. He had assumed Ruthie would be riding back to her house with him, even though he had loaded the trunk of the rental car with his belongings in case he got an emergency call. But maybe he had assumed too much. Maybe now the funeral was over, and emotions were slowly returning to normal, maybe he wasn't needed--wasn't wanted--any more.

"Well, I..." Ruthie's eyes strayed to his, as if looking for a clue to his feelings.

It was Isaac who headed off the situation. He approached his wife from behind and, taking her arm, guided her gently but firmly toward their car.

"If you choose to ride with us, Ruth, you're more than welcome. But we understand if you and Albert have made other arrangements." He shot an understanding look at Al...which surprised the heck out of the admiral. "Take your time. We won't be leaving for several minutes."

Al nodded at Isaac, then turned his gaze back to his ex-wife. He hesitated, unsure what to say, before finally clearing his throat uneasily. "Unh, you know, I can take you home. But...if you wanna ride with your family..."

"No," she said quickly, then mustered a small smile. "If you have the time, I'd like you to come back to Bubbe's."

"Sure," he agreed, still feeling awkward and uneasy. "We can go whenever you're ready."

"I'm ready," she said, with a firmness that sounded like her old self. "Most of these people will be dropping by anyway. I'd really like to get home."

Nodding, Al gestured toward his rental car. "Okay, let's go."

* * *

The awkward silence between them continued for many long blocks, and Al railed silently at the interference of that misguided woman who had obviously wanted Ruthie out of his clutches. Why couldn't she have waited a few more minutes? He was leaving pretty quick anyway, and he

probably wouldn't see Ruthie again for...a long, long time. Maybe never! Unless she decided to haul him back into court again...

The thought that he may never see her again troubled him more than he expected, and he was just wondering what to do about it--or if he wanted to do anything about it--when the handlink beeped discreetly in the inside pocket of his coat. Thumbing it off, he immediately reached for the cellular phone at his side.

Punching in the numbers, he switched it off 'speaker', picked up the receiver, and shot Ruthie an apologetic look. She had been riding in silence, and gazing straight ahead.

"Sorry," he said, as Ruthie turned to meet his eyes. "But I gotta..."

Gooshie came on the line and Al interrupted himself as Ruthie nodded her understanding.

"Yeah, Gooshie..." Looking at the road ahead, he hoped he was going to be able to say what he needed without giving anything further away to Ruthie. "What've you got?"

"Maybe nothing, Admiral. But I thought I should notify you. You did say--"

"Yeah, yeah," Al cut him off. "What?"

"We have a k-line...maybe. It's so faint it could be nothing but an artifact. In fact, Ziggy says there's a 64 percent chance that's exactly what it is. But..."

"Okay." Al felt the tension in his shoulders pull a bit more strongly. "Sit tight. I'm on my way. I'll call you when I get an ETA."

Hanging up, Al then called Reggie, and got the pilot moving on his way to the airport. Only then did he dare to look at Ruthie.

She seemed to be looking out her side window, watching the world go past in a blur, but turned to face him as if aware of his wary glance at her. "You have to go." It was simply a statement of fact.

"Yeah...I'm afraid so." Al made the final turn onto her street. "I'd hang around, if you wanted me to, but Sam...the Project needs me."

"I understand."

Her voice was perfectly even and Al couldn't figure out why that troubled him so. Pulling the car to a stop, he felt the tension in his shoulders shade a step closer to pain.

Something big was coming down--he could feel it.

"Thank you again for coming," she said, eyes turned toward the house at the end of the path.

"You're welcome again," he returned. When she made a move to open the car door without so

much as a backwards glance, he leaned across and put his hand on hers on the handle. "Ruthie, wait."

She did, meeting his eyes.

He shrugged, feeling uncomfortable with all the things left unsaid between them. "At least let me walk you to the door."

"You don't have to. I know you're in a hurry."

"Not that much of a hurry."

Before she could protest, he got out and went around to open her door. Getting out, she headed across the sidewalk and through the gate. Closing the car door, Al tucked his hands in his pockets and accompanied her up the walk.

Gazing ahead, Ruthie frowned. "The stoop's covered with leaves. Bubbe would have a fit..." Abruptly, she fell silent.

Say something, he thought. Anything! Make it better for her...the way she always used to make it better for you...

Climbing the steps beside her, he felt as if there was something he should do, but he had no idea what it was.

This was it then, he thought, watching her pull out her keys and reach for the door knob. Do or die. Say something wise, Calavicci. Say something wonderful...

Unexpectedly, he had a vision of Edna, regarding him with that expectant expression she sometimes got when she knew he was about to say something that amused her. She knew, somehow, she always knew--

"Goodbye, Al."

Ruthie's farewell snapped him back to the present.

"Wait!" One step carried him to her side as she pushed open the door. With a hand on her arm, he floundered for words again, before finally settling on, "Ruthie, we're treating each other like complete strangers."

One foot inside, she turned to face him. He was encouraged by her small smile and raised his other hand to take both her slim shoulders.

"And the truth is...we're not."

She looked down and nodded. "I know, I didn't mean to be rude. It's just that..." Her sudden glance into the waiting hall told him more than any words. "...it's so empty now," she confessed, despite the fact that within the hour the place would be teeming with relatives again.

"What'll you do?" he asked as gently as he could.

"I don't know. Sell, I suppose. Start over again." Her eyes roamed over the interior hall and the staircase. "The place was too big for me and Bubbe, I couldn't possibly stay here by myself." She looked his way again. "Besides there are just too many memories."

"Yeah," he agreed, having had a dose of them himself in her bedroom just last night. "I know what you mean." He shuffled his feet slightly. "Would you think about coming to New Mexico?" he asked impulsively, surprising himself as well as her.

"What?"

"For Donna...I mean," he clarified hastily, withdrawing his hands from her shoulders and tucking them into the pockets of the suit he would most likely never wear again. "I'm not saying you were right about Sam...or anything, but..."

He shrugged, glancing at his feet, feeling like an idiot as she continued to regard him in surprise.

"...but it's hard on her, you know? With Sam being...away." He looked at her again. "Really hard. She needs somebody more than an admiral and a Project shrink for support."

"New Mexico's such a long way--"

"She could really use a friend," Al continued, finding that now he'd begun it was impossible to stop. Somehow, it seemed important that he persuade her to come. "Especially somebody who knew--knows Sam."

"I'll...think about it."

"Good." Al nodded. "Good. I know if you call, she'll invite you to stay with her. If not, we could make...other arrangements."

"Okay," she agreed, nodding. "I'll think about it. For Donna, I mean."

"Good," he said again, realizing he was repeating himself. "Well, I gotta..." He gestured at the waiting car.

"I know. Have a safe flight." Leaning forward, she surprised him with a kiss on the cheek. "'Bye, Al. Thanks for...being there."

"'Bye, honey," he returned, giving her a quick hug. Then he watched her withdraw inside the front door--back into the fold of her family and her customs--gone from his life again.

The door softly clicked closed behind her.

"You take care," he whispered.

* * *

Al's steps were brisk, but unhurried, as he

crossed the tarmac to the Project's waiting 'Citation' jet at precisely 4:14 p.m.

Reggie had just completed his external pre-flight, when Al joined him alongside the fuselage at the back of the port wing. Hoisting his gear up onto the wing, the admiral turned to the pilot.

"We're all ship-shape, Admiral," Reggie reported, having anticipated the question before it had been asked. "Proposed departure time is 16:30."

"Okay, let's get moving." He had to get back to the Project pronto, and even though he was now on his way, there were at least a dozen things that could still prevent it. Weather was the main hazard of all light aircraft--having to vector miles off-course to avoid a storm.

Stowing his bags, Al strapped into the right hand seat beside the pilot, who had already cranked the turbines and was verbally running through his instrument and systems check. Not to disturb the man's concentration, Al reached for a copy of their flight plan...and the current meteorological report.

He skimmed through both with the speed and ease of a seasoned professional, somewhat relieved to find that it seemed to be pretty much clear sailing. There was a small storm--south of the border but moving north east--which would have presented a problem had departure time been an hour later.

And, as it turned out, they had an ace in the hole to boot--an area of high pressure sitting smack dab over Arkansas and Missouri--if Reggie had done his homework.

Checking the flight plan again, the admiral realized the pilot had. Flying south through Georgia and Alabama, they could use 'favorable winds'--the clockwise circulation of wind coming off the area of high pressure--to give them a kick right up their tailpipe. Nothing like a good old-fashioned tail wind to make up a bit of time.

Time. He was at the mercy of it again. And there was nothing to do now but wait.

But what if the storm south of the border picked up speed and crossed into New Mexico early?

What if they couldn't land at Stallion's Gate once they got there?

What if Sam landed prematurely?

Al glanced at the pilot as the man returned his completed checklist into his seat pocket, donned his headphones, and keyed the radio mike.

He wore aviator's sunglasses and was chewing gum --a typical pilot--and in many ways, reminded Al of himself during his younger days, right down to the cocky grin.

Donning his own headphones and sunglasses, Al settled back to wait. This was the way it was going to be, and he would simply take things as they came and deal with them then. No 'ifs', no 'buts'.

The moment they started to taxi, it began. It was an old feeling--one Al secretly used to refer to as 'tween time', when he been involved in the X-15 program and had test piloted his way into the dream of becoming an astronaut. There was a small space of time, a few seemingly frozen moments after being dropped from the underbelly of a B-52 that had felt exactly this way.

Because it was in those few scant seconds when you dropped out of the trajectory of one flight path and into another, before you fired off your rockets, that you experienced 'tween time'...and the realization that anything could happen.

You could fire off and nothing--absolutely nothing in total systems failure--could happen. Or you could go up in a massive, impressive-as-hell fireball if all your fuel lit off at once. Or...you could get slammed in the chest by an invisible hand that meant you had ignition and the possibility to fly faster and higher than anyone before you...right into the history books.

In those few brief and somehow frozen moments, anything became possible.

Anything.

And--just like now--there was no way to hurry them. You followed procedure, calm and unhurried, as if you had all the time in the world. Because if you lost your head and panicked, you'd screw up for sure.

Once airborne and bidding farewell to sunny, late-afternoon Boston, Al relaxed further into the memory and feel of his current 'tween time'.

That was the beauty of it. There you were, free-fallin' outta the sky, pullin' neg-g's with your stomach somewhere in the back of your throat, knowing that however it turned out the die had already been cast. You did what you were trained to do, and you did it right, however long it took.

And, of course, it took...

'Tween time'.

It took seconds, although it had little to do

with real time. He could still vividly recall those occasions when it had all seemed so unreal, the seconds somehow stretched way out of proportion, his only companion the whistle of the air through which he was dropping like a stone.

Somehow--despite the straight and level flight path Reggie maintained--it felt exactly that way now.

As the pilot set them on track for their first VFR checkpoint, Al unstrapped himself and went aft to make a call to Gooshie on the aircraft's cellular phone. Ted Bartlett had argued that particular piece of equipment was nothing more than a superfluous and costly luxury for the VIP passengers--which nine times out of ten had meant Al on one of his frequent jaunts to DC--but the admiral had determinedly argued out the point...although mainly out of pure spite.

Now he was glad he had, because talking to the Project's computer programmer he learned that the first real, undisputable k-line had shown itself on the readout.

As the 'Citation' continued to chase the twilight across the country from east to west, regular status reports with Gooshie brought Al all that much closer to home.

All were green. All were as expected.

When he and Reggie finally touched down on the private airstrip at Stallion's Gate, there was even time to spare.

* * *

Striding from the underground elevator, Al made a quick detour into Control to reassure the assorted technicians and Security personnel that he was back on site. The room resonated with the familiar tension of an impending leap. He could see it in the faces and shoulders of those present, including Gooshie and Donna who worked side by side at the main control panel.

Relief was plain on the programmer's face as he looked up and saw him, even though the little man must have known from Security that he was back in the building.

"Admiral," Gooshie said, before Al could get a word out, "it's still going like clockwork. K's are spiking at regular intervals and there's even a ghost of a beta now and then."

Joining them with a nod, Al bent forward and studied the printout, as if it actually meant something to him.

"Everything okay?" he softly asked Donna.

She was the real master when it came to reading these things. Hell, she was the one who invented it, after Sam had leaped off into the wild blue yonder, leaving them with no way to track him until he landed--which was sometimes nearly too late. At least with this monster they had some prior warning, were able to stand by on-alert for the coming crisis.

Distracted, Al briefly wondered if Sam had his own version of 'tween time'.

Somewhere. Somehow...

"Everything's fine," Donna answered, bringing him back to the here and now. "Have you...?" She met his eyes. "Have you heard anything from Washington?"

"Nada," he answered, turning his attention back to the printout, feeling the controlled fall toward destiny. He kept his voice low and confident as he added, "But it'll come." Looking up, he cast a questioning glance around the room. "Where's Bartlett?"

The Government watchdog was always around--albeit mostly underfoot--always taking notes, somewhat reminiscent of a truant officer, ready to report back to his superior in Washington. It was when he wasn't around that Al started to worry.

What the hell was that scuzzball up to this time?

"I...don't know," Donna admitted uneasily. "I haven't seen him since the day before yesterday."

Briefly considering this, Al quickly dismissed the ex-marine from his thoughts. He had other, more important things to worry about now. Whatever cheap trick that slimy toad had in store for him, he would deal with when it came.

"I need to go change," he told Donna.

Answering his unspoken query, she nodded and said, "There should be plenty of time."

Turning, he had barely taken a step away before she stopped him.

"How's Ruthie? I know she and her grandmother were close."

Holstering his hands in his pockets, Al regarded her closely. He couldn't remember seeing Donna this worried for a long time.

"Okay," he said almost automatically. Then, thinking about Ruthie, he nodded more decisively. "She's gonna be okay." Hesitating, he considered telling her about his impulsive invitation, but decided that now was not the

time...or the place. "She asked about you. I'll tell you about it later."

Before Donna could ask him anymore, he strode out of the control room, nodding at the assorted techs and feeling their eyes on his back.

The Admiral was back on deck for Observer duty--or at least he would be as soon as he changed out of his funeral suit.

That's just what Sam needed, he thought, heading for his personal quarters, to see him in this conservative dark suit. The last time he had shown up in his 'grown up' suit, he'd been on his way to an alimony hearing with Sharon--although one which was first postponed because her Mercedes was in the shop, then cancelled after he'd won her over with Stage Five of the 'Calavicci Theory Of Love'.

At first sight of the suit, Sam had gotten a concerned look in his eyes and asked, almost immediately, if someone had died.

With a shudder, Al reached his quarters--which were as near to Control as he could make them--and was already loosening his tie as he quietly let himself inside.

No way he was gambling on Sam's swiss-cheesed memory to think he had another court appearance...and no way did he want to tell him that this time someone had died.

Moving with quick, sure movements, he undressed, hanging the distasteful black suit in the back of his closet, and redressed in a red linen jacket and white trousers. Scooping up the square, mundane cufflinks he had chosen out of respect for the afternoon's events, he pulled open the top drawer of his bureau.

Pushing aside the cherry wood box that held his favorite pins and cufflinks, he reached for the one in the far back corner. It was the one into which he relegated such 'duty pieces'--those he purchased for only one occasion, or those which were given to him by girlfriends with no real understanding of his taste.

Placing it on top of the dresser, he flipped it open with a sure, confident movement...and froze.

There, forgotten amidst all the junk in the non-descript box, was his broken Rolex watch...the one Ruthie had given him a lifetime ago.

He felt a distant tremor, akin to the thrill of suspense that infused that last second before firing off the rockets on a test run. If they didn't work, you were gonna find out real quick, in which case you'd better know which way you

were gonna jump.

Slowly, as if his fingers had a life of their own, they slid through the gold band and lifted it from the box.

There it was again, the feeling of negative g's, his stomach in his throat, smack up against the moment of truth.

He remembered quite vividly the day he'd brought it home from Vegas in a bag of papers destined for the shredder. It had clinked on the tiles when he'd thrown it down, ready to get on with the business of salvaging his career.

Captain Calavicci had taken it out on a whim, tossed it again, then reclaimed it and stowed it in this box. At the time, he had told himself it was stupid to pitch a valuable piece of jewelry out of pure spite, and that was the only reason it didn't go back in the trash.

But he had never gotten it fixed, had never even thought about it...yet still he had never thrown it away.

Almost like the way Ruthie kept one of their wedding photos, hidden at the back of all the rest.

Forgotten...yet still there...

Running a slow thumb across the cracked crystal, he thought about the rage and the hurt in him when he had smashed it out of revenge. He saw now that it had been revenge toward Beth, who had left him when he couldn't fight back.

But it had been exacted on Ruthie who, perhaps, had more reason to have left him, and who would have maybe returned if he had allowed it.

The sound of his phone cut through the imaginary roar of the wind that was loud in his ears. Closing his fingers, he cradled the watch in his hand as he crossed to answer it.

Silent, as if still suspended between two courses, he listened to what Gooshie had to tell him...the cool metal of the Rolex nestled in his palm.

Then it came. Ignition...and the gut-level memory of that invisible hand slamming him back against his pilot's seat. Two rockets fired, somewhere in the back of his mind, and the 'tween time' was over, vanished as if it had never been. He was now off and riding a new path, to a new point somewhere in the distance, and he was in complete control.

"Okay," he said, sliding the watch onto the table beside the phone when the programmer had finished speaking. "I'm on my way."

Returning the receiver to its place, he left the damaged timepiece there, the open box that had housed it so long still waiting on his dresser.

Striding to the door, he had a sense of having been catapulted forward, again making his way to a distant point on the horizon...from a slightly different place, from a slightly different angle.

"Ride 'em, cowboy," Al said softly under his breath, leaving his quarters without looking back.

It was time to get on the stick and do some serious flying.

Sam had landed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
"Missing Links"

The first few moments of a new leap are scary. Even after all the years Sam's been doing it, it doesn't seem to get easier. Oh sure, some things do--like the first warning system we now have that makes it a little easier to be on full alert when Sam lands.

I go into the Waiting Room and talk to the person there, while Gooshie tracks down where in time Sam's landed. Sometimes I get some useful information...but more often than not, the person in there is a basket case, swiss-cheesed and stressed as hell by being jerked out of their life and landing here.

I don't even wanna think about the times when they were jerked out of something real intense--like a rape examination or a jail cell. Those I really hate. Then I rush to Control and yell at Gooshie, and try to bully Ziggy into coming up with the information so I can get into the Imaging Chamber and get to Sam faster. It never helps, but it makes me feel better. Sorta.

Sam doesn't have that outlet. He has to fit in wherever he is and make the best of it. Usually, the only person he has to yell at is me. Which is okay. Sometimes I provoke him into it just to get him to blow off steam. Leaping is a real pressure cooker.

Leaping is hell. I know firsthand from the time we simoleaped and I ended up in Tom Jarret's life. I never wanna do that again!

But, you know, I would if I had to. Hell, maybe it'd be poetic justice. I mean, Sam may not be in

this mess if I hadn't been so smug and kept the news that we'd gotten our funding to myself, just because I wanted to tell him in person.

I just wish Sam had stayed put when he was home that one time. We keep re-working the damn retrieval program and it keeps failing time after time after time.

I hate it. I hate watching what it does to Donna when we try, and we're no closer to success than we were in the beginning. She tries to keep up a brave front, but it's hell on her. I can see it in her eyes. She spends hours here at the Project, going over and over scenarios in case the Funding Committee shuts us down. It's eating her alive, and I don't know how much longer she can hold on.

And Sam...

Damn it, if he'd just stayed here, he could have worked out the problem with the retrieval program and brought me home by now. I know Ziggy said I was gonna bite the dust, but that hybrid know-it-all didn't calculate the sheer cursedness of the Calavicci spirit--or the thickness of my skull. I would've woken up in time to deck that nozzle Clifford! I would've!

And if I hadn't...well, it's not like I have family or anything.

And Sam would be home.

If only he'd stayed when he was here. If only I had some proof I could give the Committee that he's really back there, I'd breath a helluva lot easier.

If only we could bring Sam home.

So many 'if onlys'. That's what Sam deals in. He gives people the benefit of all the 'if onlys' they didn't take the first time round. I just think (are you listening up there?) that it's about time he got the benefit of one himself.

It's time to bring him home. I think we've run out of tricks and fancy footwork. It's just time to bring him home.

* * *

Leaping was disorienting, though not as much so as it had been in the beginning. But the landing, the first few moments in a new life, was still hard. He never knew what to expect--a kiss, a slug on the jaw, or both.

As soon as the leap effect faded, Sam blinked to clear his vision and quickly assessed his current situation. Much to his surprise, he found himself standing on an outdoor podium,

looking out over an irregular clump of women who had gathered in the afternoon sunshine on a wide grassy area before him. Some were looking at him, while others were talking quietly between themselves, but none of them were making this landing any easier.

Sam hesitated uncertainly. Was he supposed to say something? Or do something? Or both?

"Naomi?" a silver-haired woman from directly down before him asked. "Is something the matter?"

"The matter?" Sam repeated, still looking at the crowd watching him. He tried a 'stall for time' smile to abate their anxious looks.

"Are you feeling faint, dear?" the elderly woman continued, frowning in concern.

"Unh, no," Sam answered, even though that was exactly how he was feeling. "I'm fine..." His voice trailed off into a grunt of displeasure as he glanced down and noticed the obvious--he was wearing a dress.

Damn! He was a woman again!

Finally, he realized that he was holding something raised in the hand beside his head. Lowering it slowly, he found it to be a wooden gavel. What the heck was he? A judge? This sure wasn't a courtroom...and none of the women--who were now beginning to regard him with distinct curiosity--looked as if they had ever gotten in any trouble beyond lingering too long in a two hour parking place.

"If everything's okay," prompted the woman, "then say 'sold'."

"Sold!" Sam said obediently, bringing the gavel down on the battered podium before him with a flourish. Maybe if he did it with enough flash, they'd buy his act and he could find a way out of the spotlight. But, turning to see what it was he had just sold, he saw nothing other than an empty makeshift stage spreading out around him.

There was more grass behind the stage, a couple of sidewalks crisscrossing the space, and a large tent that looked as if it housed items to be sold. But obviously, none of them were close enough to have been what he had just now closed the deal on, and with such a grand gesture.

Hesitantly, he turned back to the casual assemblage. At least some of the women had drifted away when it looked like he was back in control.

The silver-haired woman smiled and said, "You're getting better every time we practice."

Practice? Sam gave a nod that he hoped looked as if he knew what she were talking about. He was practicing being an auctioneer? Did people do that? How did someone become an auctioneer anyway?

A petite, middle-aged woman behind his mentor stepped forward with an encouraging smile. "It looked good, Naomi," she said. "I've got to get back to campus now, but let me know if there's anything else I can do to help."

"Okay," Sam agreed, eyes on the petite woman's face. It was familiar somehow. Did he know her--or someone like her? Or was his mind and 'memories' melding with his host's again?

Before he could even begin to decide, she had turned away with a wave, headed across the wide grassy expanse toward a parking lot. With her went any hope of putting a name to the face she had jogged in his swiss-cheesed memory.

"Are we finished bidding for now?" another woman, who had been visiting in an enclave of three others, asked. "I have to pick Timmy up from Day Care by three."

Realizing everyone was waiting for a cue and had turned to him, Sam nodded. "Oh, sure. We're done here." He took another uncertain look around him. Surely someone would contradict him if he was wrong? "I think."

Immediately, the group began to disperse, heading in the same direction the petite woman had taken. Placing the gavel he still held on the scarred and slightly unstable stand before him, Sam turned to walk across the stage. He had just reached the wooden stairs that led off one side, when the familiar gravely voice directly behind his right ear nearly sent him headlong down them.

"Hi, Sam. How's it going?"

Gasping in surprise, Sam reached for a handrail, found there was none, and turned his inevitable fall into a makeshift half-turn-jump. It took him safely but awkwardly off the side of the crude wooden steps.

"Al!" he hissed in protest, shooting a quick glance about him to be sure no one had seen his inelegant dismount from the stage. "Stop that!"

"Better watch those stairs," the hologram replied, unruffled. Casually, he manipulated the buttons on his link and floated down to ground level. "They look kinda rough." He eyed the steps critically. "Personally, I don't think the person who built them knows much about carpentry."

Shooting the hologram an irritated glance,

Sam muttered under his breath. "That, I can figure out on my own." He jerked his head at the tent and started moving toward it. With any luck it would be deserted and allow them to talk more freely. "Why am I here?" he asked as he walked--after a quick glance confirmed there was no one within hearing distance.

"Well," Al said, consulting the link as he followed Sam around the front of the wooden structure, "we don't know yet."

"Of course." Sam snorted. "Why do I even bother to ask?"

"But," Al put in, overriding the comment, "we do know who you are, and when you are."

At Sam's silent glare, the observer shrugged as if pretending to realize the other man was waiting for the information.

"Oh, I thought maybe you knew that already, Mister I-Can-Figure-It-Out-Myself."

"Just give me the data," Sam growled through gritted teeth.

"Okay," Al said agreeably as they approached the tent. "Your name is Naomi Steinkamp. You're a seventy-one year old retired music and dance teacher turned community volunteer."

"Community volunteer?"

"Yeah," Al agreed. "A real take charge kinda gal, too." He shrugged a bit diffidently. "She didn't even believe I was an admiral. Made me show my ID."

As they reached the tent, Sam shot a glance at his friend, who was presently attired in a red linen jacket, white trousers and gold shoes. "She didn't believe you were a grown up," he amended wryly. Stopping just inside the flap, he was immediately confronted by his reflection in the full-length, antique mirror.

Naomi was a tall, regal woman, with silver hair neatly plaited into two braids which were wound in a crown about her head. Cool, elegant features looked back at him. Even with his own surprise laden over the top of them, Naomi still looked a bit...disdainful.

"Wow," Sam said, taking a step away, only vaguely aware of Al as he dissolved through the tent wall beside him. Intimidation emanated from every angle of Naomi's reflection, right down to the coolly correct lines of the ice blue dress that matched the eyes looking back at him.

"No joke!" the admiral agreed.

Surprised at the enthusiasm in Al's voice, Sam looked up and found the hologram was commenting on the things stacked in neat lines throughout the tent.

"Look at all this stuff," Al continued in obvious delight. "Who knows what you could find in here!"

Sam eyed a gun rack fashioned from a deer's front legs affixed on a wood plaque and pursed a smile. "Who knows."

"Hey..." Al strode over to an open cardboard carton which was sitting on top of a furniture mat that bore the size and shape of a coffee table, hidden underneath. It was clearly the carton which interested Al, since he was studiously peering down at the open top, trying to get a better look at the collection of odds and ends it held--stuff obviously culled from someone's attic along with a generous serving of dust bunnies. "Come open this, Sam."

"Why?" The physicist approached and regarded the nearly buried cigar box at which the hologram was gesturing. "You running low on stogies?"

"Ha, ha," Al returned dryly. "Very funny." He turned his attention back to the old cigar box, the end of which was just barely visible under all the other junk. "This looks like a good place to find baseball cards to me. Come and look."

"Al," Sam persisted, trying to bring him back to the business at hand. "What am I doing here?"

"Aw, c'mon Sam, open the box," Al insisted. "There could be a mint condition Mickey Mantle in there."

Irritated, the physicist reached out to unearthen the cigar box and blew the adhering dust off the top. "It's just junk, Al."

"Maybe," the admiral said, his attention riveted on Sam's hands. "Maybe not. One man's junk is another man's treasure. Some great finds were made at places like this. Some kid stores his stuff in the attic, forgets about it, and Grandma donates it to the charity fair. Then..." His eyes lit with anticipation as Sam began to open the box. "...someone who actually has some use for the stuff comes along and..." His words trailed off in disappointment. "Aw, shoot."

"It's empty," Sam said, pointing out the obvious as he held it out for Al's inspection. "Now can we get on with this, please?"

Al shrugged. "You win some, you lose some. Okay..." He consulted his handlink. "It's April 17th, 1993. You're in Boston, at--"

"1993?!" Sam shoved the empty cigar box back into its cardboard carton, not meeting Al's

eyes. "We were halfway through building QUANTUM LEAP by 1993."

"Yeah," the older man's voice was guarded. "So?"

"So..." Turning away, Sam began to wander down the small aisle left between the stored antiques. "I could...go home."

"Home?" Al repeated, still cautious. "To Indiana?"

"To the Project," Sam said, looking over his shoulder and meeting Al's eyes only for a second before his glance slid away. "To New Mexico."

"And do what?" Al asked, following the physicist's meandering path.

"I..." Sam stopped, and when the hologram came up beside him, turned to him. "I could go home," he repeated, more firmly this time.

"Taking Naomi's life with you?" Al asked evenly. "If she's stuck in the Waiting Room because you go there, who's gonna live her life here?"

Sam held his friend's eyes. "Maybe if I'm there, I can find a way to leap myself into her, and then she can..." At Al's expression, and quickly averted eyes, the physicist faltered. "But I can't, can I. We had Ziggy and the Imaging Chamber then...but the Accelerator wasn't--isn't--built yet. Won't be built for another...how many years?"

"A couple," Al admitted, letting the link fall to his side. "Longer than this old gal is gonna be willing to wait."

"But..." Sam began to protest, then shook his head. "Never mind. I guess that would be sort of like...kidnapping."

Al shrugged in an obvious try at humor. "Or 'Invasion Of The Body Snatchers' at least. I think somebody around here would miss Naomi if she was gone that long."

"Okay," Sam said quietly. "I guess you're right." Hesitantly, he cast another look at his friend, who had suddenly found something interesting in the dust before the toes of his gold shoes. Reluctantly, the physicist resumed his absent wanderings through the crowded tent. "So tell me more about Naomi."

"Well," Al agreed, lifting the link to key in commands, "let's see. Naomi's a busy gal. She's busy with church stuff, women's groups, lots of community work." He shrugged expressively. "All that kinda stuff. She's a widow, lives by herself near here. Hey!" The hologram paused to shoot a grin at Sam. "That's good, huh? You won't have to worry about

fending off Grandpa."

"Al," Sam protested, turning at the far end of the tent and leading the way into a section they hadn't explored yet. "Just get on with it, okay?"

But the hologram seemed distracted again by the new merchandise that came into view. "Hey, there's some nice stuff here, Sam." He eyed a well kept footlocker that was obviously vintage World War II. "Look at this! This is--"

Irritated, Sam flipped a quilted movers blanket over the trunk before Al could complete his movement to bend down and study it.

"No," the physicist said firmly. "I'm not going to open it and see if there's a stack of old PLAYBOYS inside."

"PLAYBOYS!" Al exclaimed in delight. "Sam, you're right! Grandpa's trunk would be the perfect place to hide..."

Arms crossed, the physicist regarded his friend steadily.

Gradually, the glee faded from the hologram's eyes. "Geez, Sam, you take all the fun out of everything." Sighing, he lifted the link and began to key in more commands. "Naomi's heading up this project."

He indicated the tent and grounds with a sweep of his arm that coincided with the start of a low, protesting squeal from the link.

"It's a community auction," Al continued, casually whacking the side of the device, "to build..." The squealing continued so he whacked it again, but if anything the noise from the link increased rather than abated. The hologram's voice rose with it. "...to build a Fine Arts center next to the library. And..." Al narrowed his eyes against the now ear-splitting screech. "What the hell's the matter with this thing?"

When stabbing buttons in rapid fire sequence brought no results other than to change the squeal to varying pitch, he scowled and shook the tiny machine. Warbling plaintively, the link obviously yielded no more information, and the admiral smacked it vengefully against the palm of his hand.

"Damn hunk of junk," he shouted, trying to be heard over the noise. "I told Gooshie that Cut Rate Computers was not a good idea for those replacement chips."

"Al..." Sam shouted back, taking a step away in instinctive response to get away from the noise. "What am I doing here?"

"Don't know!" came the shouted reply. "I'll

see what I can dig up and get back to you."

Pressing several more buttons only increased the electronic shriek and Al shook his head as if it hurt. Behind him, the Imaging Chamber door appeared, but it was only half its usual height.

Growling something that looked like a very creative comment about parallel hybrid computers, Al tucked the screaming link in his pocket and bent down to yell through the white, glowing portion of the doorway. "Gooshie, open the damn door!"

After a moment's pause, the light expanded upward and Al turned back to Sam, who was holding his ears and watching in disbelief.

"I'll be back," Al shouted, stepping across the threshold and into the future, "after I dissect that worthless computer of yours!"

"What am I supposed to do until then?" Sam shouted back, his own scowl deepening.

For a moment, Al hesitated, then gestured again at the tent and its contents. "Sell lots of stuff," he shouted helpfully. "And save the PLAYBOYS for me!"

With that, the door slid closed, cutting him off from Sam's view. Mercifully, it also took the ear-splitting squeal with it, though the sound seemed to linger a split second past the visual signal. Shaking his head, Sam put it down to aural after-image, and turned away.

'Sell lots of stuff'. That was fine, except for the fact that he had been practicing being an auctioneer, and everyone acted like the auction wasn't even today.

With a sigh and another look at the antiques around him, he checked his watch and found it was just after three o'clock. For now he might as well go home.

Trouble was, Sam had no idea where he--that is, where Naomi--lived.

* * *

Striding down the steps and the short hallway from the Imaging Chamber, Al was calling for the head programmer before he even reached Control. "Gooshie!"

Hurriedly, the short man slipped around the lighted, cubed panel and came to meet him. "Yes, Admiral?"

"This thing's really on the fritz this time," Al growled, tossing the handlink in his general direction without stopping to be sure he caught it. "Fix it."

From the corner of his eye, he saw the programmer juggle the delicate instrument like a hot potato before he got a firm grip on it. The glance the mustached man shot his way, not to mention the careful way he held the handlink, were obviously intended as a non-verbal rebuke. Al ignored it, continuing on his way to the main control panel.

"Ziggy," he snapped, accessing the computer by slapping his palm down on the print reading panel.

There was a soft sound which could have been the electronic equivalent of 'ow' had the admiral chose to acknowledge it as such, then a rapid, "I do not yet have enough information to make a prediction as to what Dr. Beckett is there to do."

"Of course not," Al returned sarcastically, hating the way the damn machine could anticipate his questions before he asked them, almost as fast as any one of his ex-wives. He shook his head. "You're slipping, Ziggy. You used to be faster than this."

"Your armchair psychology will not work on me," the computer informed him curtly. "I am more than capable of seeing through your thin ruse to challenge me into 'hurrying'. Processing the scenarios is already proceeding at the maximum allowable pace."

"Yeah, yeah," Al shot back, picking up his palm and stuffing both hands into his pockets. He walked back around the main console to watch Gooshie. "So I guess I'm not needed here. I'm gonna check the old gal in the Waiting Room again. Let me know if you come up with anything useful."

Without waiting for a reply from either the computer or her programmer, he turned on his heel. As a last shot, he gestured at the handlink on which Gooshie was preparing to run a diagnostic.

"And get that damn thing working right," he ordered. "Sam's gonna have enough to worry about without thinking his pet computer's blown a gasket."

Surprised, the shorter man looked up. "Enough to worry about? Have you learned something new? This leap seems rather innocuous so far."

"And we've been bit on the butt before when we got caught with our pants down," Al snapped, heading for the door. "I want Ziggy in top condition, and I want to know what the hell Sam's there to do--pronto."

Continuing on his way, he ignored both Ziggy's comment that he was more testy than usual and Gooshie's attempt to shush her. Damn right he was testy. It was either snap and snarl at everybody in the whole blighted place--or show them what was really wrong by keeling over from sheer exhaustion.

* * *

Making his way to the front of the tent again, Sam reasoned that Naomi had to have a handbag somewhere. Women of her generation usually carried them. And in it, he was betting he'd find more clues to her life than supplied by Al's errant handlink.

Spotting a large, well worn straw bag resting on a fairly empty table just inside the tent flap, he grinned. When he opened it, he was rewarded with much more than just her driver's license and car keys. Inside was a thick black notebook neatly labeled COMMUNITY AUCTION on the front cover.

Thanking his lucky stars for people who were sticklers for organization, he opened it. He placed it flat on the table, and quickly scanned through it.

Naomi did not disappoint him. The book held all the paperwork pertaining to the auction, from opening letters recruiting sponsors and donations, to a neat catalog of the auction items donated so far. There was even a calender with all appointments neatly filled in.

April 17th, Al had said, was the date. Finding it, Sam ran his finger down the filled square. His practice session and meeting with the committee heads had just ended--was supposed to end--at precisely 2:45 p.m. Okay, so far so good, right on schedule. But as for taking the rest of the afternoon off, no way. At 3:00 p.m. Naomi was supposed to be--

"Mrs. Steinkamp?"

Lifting his head, Sam saw a man clad in a casual shirt and jeans at the entrance. When his attention was focused on the gentleman, he stepped further into the tent.

"I've got my shop kids here from Central High," he said. "We're ready to get started on those refreshments stands you wanted. If you'll just show us where to put them, we'll get to work."

"Refreshment stands," Sam repeated, stalling for time. He had seen those listed somewhere, hadn't he? Hastily glancing back

down at the neat papers, he ruffled backwards through them until he came on a schematic of the placement of everything needed for the park auction. Drawn in neat green squares were the concessions, and Sam breathed a sigh of relief.

"Mrs. Steinkamp?" came a polite inquiry from the waiting man. "We don't have a lot of daylight to work on this, and we've very little time until the auction to get it done."

"Okay, sure," Sam agreed, lifting the thick book that was worth its weight in gold. "I've got a map here. I'll show you what I want."

What Naomi wants, he corrected silently to himself as he followed the shop teacher from the tent. She evidently had things planned down to the last detail. With her organizational skills, he wondered a bit uneasily, what did she need with him?

* * *

Six hours later, sitting in Naomi's spotless kitchen, Sam found himself thinking that maybe she had picked a good time for a vacation. Or that whoever controlled his leaping had decided that she needed a break. Groaning, the physicist rubbed his aching calves and wondered when it was going to be his turn for some down time. This leap was not turning out to be as carefree as if first seemed.

Everything had looked wonderful on paper. But, as was often the case, in reality it was much different. The concession stands, for example, had turned out to be a roofless design. Placing them under the beautiful old trees that graced the library lawn had definite drawbacks, Sam had realized, when a bird had decided to roost directly over the shop teacher's head. The students had thought the resulting incident tremendously funny, and the teacher had borne the indignity with admirable calm, but it had meant spending an hour deciding on new positions for the stands. That hour, in turn, had put the schedule so far behind that they had barely begun the project when it was too dark to work.

And then there was the hassle with the security guard who didn't show up for work to watch the tent and its contents overnight...

The tea kettle began to whistle, and Sam reluctantly pushed himself up from his chair at the table. His weary leg muscles protested the movement and he grimaced. How did Naomi keep up this pace?

Once his tea was made, Sam picked up the cup

and saucer and headed for the stairs that led to his--to Naomi's--room. He'd had enough of community volunteering him to last him a long, long time. If only Al would show up and tell him it was time to leap...

He was just stepping off the top stair onto the landing when a rush of noise behind him and Al's voice shouting, "Be careful, Sam!" startled him badly. Jumping, he sloshed hot tea all over his hand as he spun to see what was going on.

There was only Al behind him and no danger the physicist could readily see.

"What?" Sam whispered, drawing back against the landing's bannister. "Is someone in the house?"

"Wha...?" Al automatically cast a look over his shoulder, then shook his head as he realized what he was doing. "No," he answered in disgust, as if thinking Sam had deliberately tried to trick him. "I just didn't want you to..." He gestured at an uneven spot on the top stair's carpet. "...trip on that and fall."

Exasperated, the younger man wiped the hot tea from his hand as best he could on Naomi's robe. "I was doing just fine until you showed up and nearly scared me backwards down the steps."

"Sorry," Al said diffidently. "Just tryin' to be helpful." Sobering, he met Sam's eyes. "Ziggy says that's why you're here."

"Why?"

"In the original history, Naomi fell today at the auction grounds and broke her hip."

"But I didn't," Sam pointed out, leaning thoughtfully against the bannister.

"Don't do that!" Al protested, frantically gesturing the physicist away from the flimsy railing. "That could give way and Naomi could fall and break her neck."

The physicist gave him an unconvinced glance, but moved his weight from the old wood. "That can't be why I'm here. I didn't break my hip--and neither did Naomi--and I'm still here."

Gesturing with the handlink, Al shrugged. "Ziggy says you just delayed it. Now it happens five days from now...on the first day of the auction."

"Five days?" Sam repeated. "I have to do this for five more days?"

"Unless you want Naomi to break her hip, yeah...you do," Al answered firmly. "And you definitely don't want that, because if she does then it's all downhill from there." Punching buttons on the link, he called up more data.

"She gets pneumonia, then a couple of other complications that keep her bedridden. The restriction in her life gets her kinda depressed, and..." He shrugged. "...she dies in a nursing home in 1994."

Curiously, Sam regarded the softly blinking lights on the link. "Everything okay with Ziggy?"

"Yeah, I guess," Al growled. "Gooshie said there was nothing wrong with her or the handlink in the first place." He met Sam's eyes, looking for an ally. "But you heard this thing earlier. Didn't sound like nothin' to me."

"Maybe," Sam suggested with a smile, "it's payback for all the times you whacked it around."

Al's glance was sour. "You sound like Gooshie. Except that little coward put it in terms like 'possible user error'."

Sam hid a smile. "So it's fixed now?"

"I guess." The hologram's eyes suddenly brightened. "And get this, Ziggy says that if you complete this leap, the odds of us bringing you home shoot way up."

"Way up?" Full attention now caught, Sam slid his tea onto a nearby hall table and paced closer. "How 'way up'?"

"Well..." The hologram's eyes slid away. "You know, way up there."

Sam had seen and heard this before. "Al..."

"Thirty-nine percent."

"Thir--"

"Okay, so it's not great. But it's better than we've ever had before. So..." He shook the link at Sam. "...you do your Boy Scout thing one more time, then we're yankin' your tail back home."

Suddenly still, Sam searched his friend's face. "Are you serious about this?"

"Serious as a heart attack," Al assured him. "This one may be it, kid. So be extra careful, don't break any bones in the next five days, and you're on the yellow brick road."

With an effort, Sam forced himself to ask the question. "Why do the odds change now? What's different about this leap?"

"I dunno," the hologram answered. Then, at Sam's expression, he protested, "I don't! And..." He shook his head ruefully. "...I don't think Ziggy does either."

"Then why--?"

"I dunno," Al answered again. "And if I did, I probably couldn't tell you anyway. But Ziggy keeps repeating that if you successfully

complete this leap, the retrieval odds more than triple."

Shaking his head, Sam began to turn away, then turned back to the hologram. "Do you believe her?"

"Sure I believe her," Al assured him, a bit too quickly. "I mean, it's worth a shot, right?"

"Ziggy also said," Sam pointed out, frowning, "that if I flew the X-2 to Mach 3 and lived, I'd leap home. And look how that turned out."

"Well...we've learned a lot since then," Al said with a shrug. "None of us knew what the hell to expect that first time. But we've come a long way since." He held Sam's gaze steadily. "This could be it, Sam, you just hang in there."

"I don't see there's much else I can do."

Breaking into a grin, Al lifted the handlink and keyed in the door sequence. "I'm going back to see what I can charm outta Ziggy on this odds thingy. You slip between Naomi's flannel sheets." He winked as the door opened smoothly behind him. "I bet she even ironed them for you."

Sam smiled. "No bet."

Al stepped into the brilliant light and paused to shake the link at Sam. "And don't slip on any loose rugs." With that final bit of advice, he keyed in the close door sequence and was gone.

For a long moment, Sam gazed after him. What would it be like to follow the hologram through that door? Was that the way retrieval would feel--stepping back through a door of shining silver light? Stepping into a world that he remembered next to nothing about?

Suppressing a shiver, Sam abandoned his tea and went directly to bed. Lying awake, he stared at the canopy above him. A streetlight beyond the window, shining through tree branches, cast indistinct shadows on the material draped over the four poster bed. Questions continued to haunt him as he watched the patterns shift and change when a light wind rustled the tree between him and the light.

Was there hope this time? Real hope that he could go home? And what, exactly, would home be like?

Hands beneath his head, he listened to the slow, regular tick of the Seth Thomas clock in the hall. What had he been doing at this moment in 1993, so many years ago? No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't remember...although he

knew he must have been at the Project with Al. The past was a blank, as unreadable as the ever changing shadows above his head, and mulling the questions over and over never seemed to bring him closer to an answer.

Sleep, for Sam, was a long time in coming.

* * *

Returning to Control, Al badgered Ziggy for answers the computer either would not, or could not, give. Finally giving it up as useless, he turned his attentions to pouring over retrieval plans with Donna, Gooshie and assorted technicians. When it became evident that his experts had little more insight into the computer's insistence that this leap, completed successfully, had better odds than ever before of bringing Sam home, he abandoned that as well.

Retreating to the privacy of his 'up top' office, he called Washington to check on the status of their latest funding request...which also proved an exercise in frustration. None of his usual contacts seemed able to supply him with any information as to how the funding discussions were proceeding.

Even more worrying, no one in the Project or DC seemed to know where Teddy Bartlett was lurking. That, more than anything, worried Al. Out of sight, the toad could do a lot more damage than he could under the admiral's watchful eye.

After his last unproductive call, Al took the elevator down to the subterranean reaches of the Project and headed back to the main Control Room. If he couldn't compute with Donna and Gooshie, and he couldn't wring information from hybrid computers or pliant Senatorial aides, at least he could still pace.

And pacing was something Al Calavicci was very good at.

Reaching Control, he paused just inside the door, watching. The whole place hummed with channelled energy. Everyone was doing what they were supposed to be doing, and doing it to the best of their abilities. But somehow, for Al, that just wasn't enough. There had to be something more they could do, something more they hadn't tried, or something they were missing.

Something...

A firm, long-nailed hand on his shoulder stopped him cold.

"Go get some sleep, Admiral," a quiet voice

instructed. It was Verbena at her most professional and Al knew from the tone that there would be no arguing with her. "You're not doing anyone any good by standing here scowling."

Turning, he tried for humor. "Hey," he said, shrugging. "Everyone has to be good at something. This happens to be what I do."

Verbena's smile was knowing. "I know what it is you do, Admiral, and you can do it better if you get some sleep. Rest, and you'll be more effective when Sam needs you."

Opening his mouth to argue, Al looked into the serene dark eyes and thought better of it. The psychiatrist was right, and he knew it. He may as well take it like a man.

"Okay," he agreed, then raised his voice to call to the computer programmer. "Gooshie?"

"Yes, Admiral?" The small man lifted his head from a monitor he was studying closely.

"I'm going to my quarters. You let me know if Ziggy decides she feels like talking or anything breaks, okay?"

Gooshie's absent nod, and the way he immediately turned his attention back to what he was doing, did not sit well with Al. That was an order...

"Sleep, Admiral," Verbena reminded him again, her voice soft but implacable. "Then you can decide what you want to say to Gooshie."

Feeling as if she'd read his mind, Al shot her a slightly sheepish look. Giving her a mock salute to save face, he turned and strode to his quarters. At least, he hoped it looked like he was striding. Tired as he was, it felt like walking through mud.

Letting himself into his small rooms that he called home more often now than the apartment in Stallion's Gate, he realized the wisdom in Verbena's advice...or maybe that should be 'Verbena's order'. Since returning from Edna's funeral, he'd been going at it full tilt.

Without even bothering to turn on the lights, Al undressed to his undershorts and t-shirt, and crossed to his bed. Sweeping back the blanket, he slipped beneath the sheets, sighed once, and closed his eyes. But though his body relaxed immediately against the cool linens, his mind would not shut down so easily.

Was this really going to be the one that brought Sam home? If it wasn't, he'd better hope like hell that the Funding Committee came through again. Otherwise, who knew where Sam would end up? If they pulled the plug on the

funding, would Sam keep leaping? Or, with no Waiting Room for the leapees to come to, would he be unable to 'land'...and instead hover forever in some sort of endless, timeless limbo?

Shuddering, Al wondered with a sudden chill, if there could be such a living death--a mind, a soul, existing in a realm where time was not time because there was no way to mark its flow.

Time measured by nothing was...

Dimly, he realized he had forgotten to remove his watch--its faint ticking suddenly distinct in the dark silence of the room. Sighing, he decided he was too weary to lift his arm, take off the timepiece, and park it on his bedside table. Laying motionless, he instead listened to the patient, regular ticking that was somehow as comforting as the beating of another human heart.

Time measured by nothing was...still nothing...

* * *

Awakening early, Sam found Naomi's room pleasantly filled with sunshine and the sound of singing birds. Getting from the bed, he stretched luxuriously and walked to the window. It looked like a glorious spring day in the making, and as leaps went, this one hadn't been so tough so far.

Crossing his arms across his chest, Sam gazed out at the suburban lawn, his thoughts turning to Al's news of the night before. The possibility of going home was always why he did what he did. Or at least it was in the beginning. Sometimes, now, for a leap or two, he would completely forget about going home. Those times really bothered him, when they came to an end and he realized leaping had become so 'normal' to him that he wasn't looking forward to a time when it would end.

I will not forget I'm Sam Beckett, he told himself firmly. He had a life of his own that awaited him--whether or not he could clearly remember what that life was...

The telephone at the bedside rang, shattering the early morning ambiance of peace and calling Sam from his thoughts. Leaving the window, he answered it and was greeted by a rather breathless question.

"Naomi? Is that you?"

Pausing, Sam shook his head. He hated it when people asked him questions like that. Answering 'yes' always felt too much like lying.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, hoping that hearing Naomi's voice would convince the caller of his identity.

"You didn't sound like yourself for a minute there," came the reply. "This is Lottie Wilkins."

Lottie Wilkins. Thinking, Sam could see her name neatly printed next to 'Publicity'. "Yes, Lottie," he said, "how is the publicity drive going?"

"Well, that's why I'm calling..."

Sam resisted the urge to sigh. He knew it had all looked too easy. "Is there a problem?"

"Yes, Mary went into labor this morning. Jim just called. I'm going to have to fly to St. Paul to watch little Matthew for them and help out a few days."

"Oh." Sam nodded. That was a legitimate reason for bowing out on responsibilities. He could probably cover for Lottie pretty easily. "I'll take over things here, don't worry about it."

"Oh, thanks. I'm really sorry to drop it on you like this. She wasn't due until next week. I thought the auction would be all over and there wouldn't be a problem."

"Well," Sam said with a smile, "that's the way babies are. When the apple's ready, it'll drop from the tree." Frowning, and wondering where that had come from, he heard a laugh from the other end.

"So you're always saying. And you were right." There was a hurried shift in the other woman's tone. "But I've got to finish packing. Ben's taking me to the airport in an hour. There's the press conference today, and the radio interview tomorrow, don't forget. You have all that information, don't you?"

"Press conference?" Sam repeated weakly.

"At City Hall. I gave that stuff to you, didn't I? If I didn't, it must be around here some--"

"I've got it," the physicist assured her, reluctantly recalling that he had seen a page of scheduled appearances to do with publicity. Not that he'd read them, he thought wryly, since he'd thought that job had already been delegated. But babies don't wait. "Don't worry about it."

"Thanks, Naomi. Sorry again. I've got to go. Good luck with the auction."

"Thanks," he returned as the other woman hung up. It looked like that was exactly what he was going to need--luck. And a whole lot

more of it than he had expected.

A press conference. Good grief, he avoided public speaking whenever he could. That was Al's job.

Thinking of the hologram, Sam shook his head. He sure hoped Al showed up soon with more information from Ziggy. Not that he was going to get his hopes up, but thinking about going home after this leap might make posing as an elderly female auctioneer giving a press conference far easier to bear.

A little easier to bear, he corrected, catching a glimpse of himself in the full length mirror as he slipped into a robe. Even just rising from bed, Naomi was dignified and imposing. He could just bet that she was going to be a hard act to live up to. From where he stood, it looked like she was the better choice for this auction stuff than him.

If only Al would show up, maybe he'd have more information to work with and his chances of being able to pull this off might edge a bit closer to 'moderately acceptable'...

* * *

Al's sleep, when it finally came, was deep and dreamless. So total was his relaxation, that the ringing of the telephone permeated his consciousness as slow as molasses in January. Even when he roused enough to hear it ringing, it took several seconds for him to pull himself from the deep hold sleep had on him and reach out to answer it.

"Calavicci," he said, knowing his voice was slurred and thick but unable to do anything about it.

"Admiral, it's Turner," came the reply and Al felt a surge of relief. With Anne, it wasn't going to reflect badly on his reputation that she had caught him napping in the middle of the day. His aide knew how things stood at the Project--and if she hadn't written him off after the idiot he had made of himself at STAR BRIGHT, she wasn't about to do so now because he caught a little shut-eye whenever he could.

"Yeah, Anne," he said, pushing himself up to sitting in the bed. "What's going on?" An unpleasant thought unexpectedly occurred to him. If his aide had dared wake him, it had to be important. "News from DC?"

"Aye, sir." The lieutenant commander's tone was professional. "Senator McBride's aide is on the phone for you. They've set the meeting time

to render a decision on the funding for o-nine-hundred tomorrow morning. Shall I agree to it, Admiral, or ask for other arrangements?"

Al smiled, beginning to surface from the clutches of sleep. In other words, should she stall? Anne was worth her weight in gold. He had been right to bring her with him after STAR BRIGHT. "No, I'll talk to her. Put her on," he told her.

Casting a look at his watch, he saw it was nearing two. Was that afternoon or morning? It sure seemed like he had slept longer than a couple of hours, but here underground, with his diurnal clock so screwed up from hopping time in the Imaging Chamber and time zones in the jet, he had no idea where the rest of the world was in its day.

"Oh, and Anne?" he said before she could transfer the call.

"Yes, sir?"

"What time is it?" he asked, knowing she would answer in military time.

"Thirteen-fifty-seven hours, sir."

Geez, nearly two in the afternoon! He'd slept nearly eighteen hours!

"Thanks." No wonder he was beginning to feel human again. "Okay, put on what's-her-name."

"Carrie Talton, sir," Anne supplied.

Carrie, Al thought, waiting for his aide to transfer the call. Yeah, Carrie, with the dynamite legs.

This should be no problem. No problem at all.

* * *

Heading for Control, Al tried to ignore the first alert siren going off in his head. He had gotten funding meetings postponed before, but he had no such luck this time. This one was set in stone.

The senator's aide had been playing hardball. She had her orders, she'd said, and Senator McBride had made it clear that there would be no extensions. They had already pushed this decision as far to the end of the fiscal year as they were going to, taking into consideration all the other times he had postponed meetings because he felt he couldn't leave the Project.

Al didn't like the sound of that, not at all. The end of the fiscal year--June 30th--was only four days away and the emphasis she had

placed on it really lifted the hair on the back of his neck. He had to get his butt to Washington and do some more sweet-talking--fast--to keep things from getting any further out of hand.

Entering Control, he saw Donna talking on the phone. Her back was to him, and she did not turn. Gooshie, however, looked up from where he was running diagnostics on the link and read his expression at once. "Admiral?" he said, a world of question in the one word.

"This thing working?" Al grated, waving a hand at the link as Donna was assuring whomever she was talking to that she would see them soon.

"Perfectly," Gooshie assured him, moving away from Donna as if to not interfere with her call. "I ran--"

"Okay," Al said, taking it out of the programmer's hand. "I've gotta go check on Sam."

At that moment, Donna finished her conversation, hung up the phone and, smiling, turned to the two men. "You'll never guess who..." At the expression on Al's face, she let the sentence end unsaid and her smile vanished. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Al said, hoping it were true. "The Funding Committee's back in, and I have to go to Washington."

Donna exchanged an uneasy glance with Gooshie. "Now? With Sam in the middle of a leap?"

"Gooshie can cover for me," Al said lightly. "Sam's not likely to get any more trouble than a run in his support hose, anyway."

"What did the Committee say?" Donna asked, her eyes searching his for any clue as to what he may be hiding.

"Nothing," he assured her truthfully. "But I gotta go. They're bent outta shape because I made them postpone the last two. I oughta be back in twenty-four hours, maybe less." His eyes shifted to the programmer. "You can handle it, can't you, Gooshie?"

The small man swallowed, but correctly read the look and answered. "Of course I can. You can count on me, Admiral."

"Good," Al said with a nod. "Bring the Chamber on-line and..."

The sound of a door opening behind him gave him pause and he turned to see his aide coming to his side.

"Everything set, Anne?"

She nodded calmly. "Reggie's ready, and so's

the jet. He'll meet you at the airstrip at fifteen-thirty hours."

Nodding, Al slipped the link in his pocket. That gave him an hour and a half...

Hearing a slight metallic clink, he pulled it out again. Transferring it to his other hand, he reached in his pocket a second time and pulled out his abused Rolex. "Get this fixed for me, will you?"

"Of course, Admiral," she said, taking the broken timepiece. "I'll have it ready for you when you return."

Nodding, Al decided he was wasting precious time. He had to see Sam and make sure all was okay there, before he could head out to the airstrip and return to DC. Transferring the link back to his right hand, he shook it lightly at Gooshie. "Twenty-four hours, I'll be back. Don't tell Sam anything because all you'll do is worry him."

"But--"

"Not a word, Gooshie," Al warned. "You'll make it sound like all hell's broken loose here if you try to explain, I know you."

"Yes, Admiral," the programmer agreed meekly.

Al drilled him with a glance, then turned away toward the Chamber. He had taken three steps toward the short hallway leading to the cavern when Donna stopped him by calling his name.

Reluctantly, he halted, and waited for her to catch up to him. Discreetly, Gooshie and Turner found other things to do as she came to his side. "Al, what's really going on with the funding?"

"I dunno," he told her honestly. "I'm guessin' it's all a power play. They just wanna show me who's boss, then they'll give us what we asked for."

She studied him hopefully. "Do you really believe that?"

"Don't you?" he countered. There was a soft, nearly inaudible hum about them as the Imaging Chamber came on-line beyond the doorway.

"I want to."

"Then do." Reaching out, he gave her shoulder a quick squeeze. "You'll be the first to know when I know."

Nodding, she took a step away to release him to do what he had to do. Giving her a smile and a wink, trying to impart some confidence to her to blunt the worry in her eyes.

"It's not gonna be a problem," he said

lightly in parting. "You'll see."

* * *

Well, it shouldn't have been any problem. I tried to tell myself that what I had told Donna was the way it was going to be.

Surely it was just a power thing with the Committee, insisting I come now, hell or high water. They'd put me in my place, and I'd be humble, and then they'd give me the money I was asking for. Then things would look fine on their paperwork because they'd made a decision in plenty of time for things to be neat and tidy at the end of the fiscal year and we'd all be happy.

I don't think I really believed it, though.

I went to look in on Sam real quick. He was checking out some new stuff that had been donated for sale, and not real happy that none of what Ziggy had dug up seemed to be much use. It also didn't help his mood any when the handlink started screaming its glowing little head off, the second I stepped out the Imaging Chamber door. But that's okay, it gives him something to blow steam about while he fixes up the mystery problem in Naomi's life...and the team here scrambles like hell to be ready to try retrieval again.

I hate leaving Sam in the middle of a leap, but I had no choice. It didn't look like there'd be anything much for Gooshie to do anyway, on his stint of Observer Duty. Besides, it'd give him a chance to fight with that damn persnickety handlink firsthand. User error, my ass. He's the chiphead, let him figure it out!

I didn't tell Sam. No use worrying the kid, right? If I played things right, I could be back before he had time to worry. So I handed the con to Gooshie, lit a fire under everybody about stayin' on their toes, and headed to Washington.

There was one bright spot in the whole mess. I was gonna get my Rolex back. I don't know why I let it go to waste so long, anyway. When I noticed I'd left it layin' on the bedstand by the phone, I decided I may as well have it fixed.

What else was I gonna do with it? Put it back in that box for another seventeen years? There's no sense in wasting a perfectly good watch. I should've done it years ago. I always liked that watch, and I was lookin' forward to wearin' it again.

But things went downhill fast after I left Stallion's Gate. The minute I walked into the Committee's Chambers and saw Bartlett conferring with Weitzman and McBride, I knew it was bad. I just didn't know how bad until they announced their decision.

They cut us off. Totally. Completely.

Effective midnight, June 30th. No extensions. No delays. At the stroke of twelve on the 30th of June, they're sending 'Mr. Bartlett' in with a team to shut us down. Any and all monies left in the budget were to be returned to the Committee for re-assignment to 'viable' Projects. I'd used up all my delay time, they said, putting off this day of reckoning so long. It was now my problem how I was gonna wrap it all up on such short notice.

That was Weitzman's doing, I'm sure of it. The cold bastard and his toady Bartlett kept exchanging smug, satisfied glances. If I hadn't been giving it my all tryin' to beg, borrow, or steal more time, I would have taken both of them out, mano a mano.

Especially Bartlett. He's been gunning for me ever since that bet about Eva. Hell, even before then. And I can't let Sam get hurt because some buzzheaded ex-Marine has a personal beef against me.

So, I set out to get us an appeal. I knocked on every door I could think of, called in every favor, wooed everyone there was to woo. Finally, the Right Honorable Thomas H. Norton, Chief Judge, said he'd take it under advisement.

But he didn't promise me anything. And to tell the truth, it's pretty shaky whether or not he could actually make a case of Unethical Behavior against Bartlett stick--I've no proof, just my word.

No proof. Against Toad...or that Sam was actually out there leaping. Nada. A little proof either way would make all the difference in the world.

But if Norton decides to pursue it, maybe it'll at least buy us another few months of extension while we slug it out in court. It's a snowball's chance in hell, but at least it's a chance.

So, having done what I could to set the wheels in motion in DC, I'm on my way back to see what I can do on the homefront. There's still Ziggy's hint of a breakthrough in retrieval. Maybe Sam will leap before Toad and his dismantling crew move in. Then we can jerk Sam home and thumb our noses at the whole lot of

them.

Maybe.

A real slim maybe.

Maybe not.

I have a bad feeling we may be really deep-sixed this time. I don't have any more magic tricks to pull outta my hat.

How am I gonna tell Donna?

Oh hell, how am I gonna to tell Sam?

* * *

Late afternoon sunlight warmed the green, spring grass of the library's side lawn. The sound of hammers rang intermittently as shop students labored at their task of setting up the simple concession booths. From the direction of the stage came the whine of an electric saw as Murry, a carpenter who had volunteered his time to build a sturdy handrail down the steps, worked at his task.

Standing at the doorway of the tent, Sam looked out over the activity. Maybe it was going to come together after all. It was only two days to 'A' day--the first day of the auction. If no one else came down with a summer cold, decided to go into early labor, or had a stress overload breakdown, then all the bases were covered.

It had been a while since he'd heard from Al --or Gooshie--and that gave him an uncomfortable feeling. There was obviously something going on back at the Project that they weren't telling him.

Attention caught by a car pulling into the library parking lot, he wondered just what that 'something' was. If Al had taken off with a new girlfriend, Sam was going to wring his neck--if he ever managed to be in a situation where that was physically possible.

Watching a middle-aged woman get out of the car and head his way, Sam mentally crossed his fingers that it wasn't someone bringing him more bad news. That, he didn't need. What he did need was someone from the Project to show up and tell him Ziggy's prediction of increased odds was now a reality and that it was time to come home.

Home.

As the woman drew closer, Sam felt an odd response to her, much as he had on the first day he'd seen her at the 'practice'. It was the petite woman with short, dark hair, the one who had seemed so familiar to him. She still did,

he realized as she drew near with a smile. Something about that smile made him think of good times, warmth and laughter. Did he know her--or was it that strange synergism that he sometimes felt with the people into whose lives he had leaped?

Obviously, she knew him, for she greeted him warmly. "Hi, Naomi. Are things coming together?"

She called him 'Naomi' where most people called him a formal 'Mrs. Steinkamp'. This woman had to know him--and well. As such, he couldn't just ask her what her name was.

"Hi," he answered, fumbling for a way to cover. When it didn't come, he repeated awkwardly, "Ummm, hi."

Regarding him curiously, she hesitated a moment, then asked, "Are you okay?"

"Sure," he answered hastily. "I'm fine." She began studying him thoughtfully with a gaze that made him fidget uneasily. "Unh...what can I do for you?"

Her expression immediately changed. "I'm afraid I have bad news."

"Oh, no," Sam said, thinking that he didn't know if he could manage another quick juggle of the schedule.

"It's not too bad," she assured him, stepping up beside him in the tent's entrance. "We can fix it easy enough." She indicated the grounds with a wave of her hand. "Myra was supposed to do the concessions."

"And...?" Sam prompted, not sure he wanted to hear the rest.

"And her father had a heart attack yesterday, and she had to drive up to New Port to be with him."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Sam said sincerely, though a small part of him was wondering how he was going to fit in handling concessions as well as everything else.

"But," the woman continued, "I can cover for her if you like."

"You can?" Sam asked in surprise. This was the first time anyone had volunteered for anything.

"Sure," came the answer, along with another searching look. "I've got her list of who agreed to work, and where I'm supposed to pick up the food. It's all under control."

"Thanks," Sam said with a heartfelt relief. "If you need anything, let me know..." Again, he let the sentence trail off awkwardly for the lack of her name.

"Are you sure...?" the petite brunette began. Cautiously, Sam regarded her. "Yes?"

"Nothing," she said with shake of her head. "It's just...are you sure the stress of all this isn't too much for you?"

"No," the physicist denied. "No, I'm...it's going okay."

"All right, then," she accepted the answer with obvious reservations. "You just don't seem...yourself."

Not knowing what to say, Sam wisely kept quiet. Just how would the regal Naomi have reacted to yet another change of her perfectly scheduled plans? Since he didn't know, it was best not to say anything at all. He had found other people usually filled in the gaps for him when that happened.

Turning, the woman looked out over the grounds as Sam had done earlier. "There are two stands, right?"

"Supposed to be," Sam answered, looking past her shoulder.

At the far corner, two students were waging a losing battle to keep their top heavy stand from listing to starboard. Their shouts of dismay when it swayed and collapsed brought the shop teacher at a run from the other end of the lot.

"Maybe only one," Sam finished dryly. "We'll have to see."

The woman's laughter again affected him with a very strange feeling of *deja vu*. Trying not to be obvious, he studied her profile from the corner of his eye. Who was it she reminded him of?

"Well, I've got to get going," she said before he could pin down the elusive feeling. "I have a class coming in at six this evening." Turning, she met Sam's eyes. "We all value all your hard work, Naomi. This Fine Arts center will mean a lot to the whole community. Even if people don't say it, they do appreciate it."

Nodding, Sam said his thanks as he watched the students struggle to pick up the ruins of their concession stand. The woman patted his arm lightly as if she read his mind.

"It will all come together. We have faith in you. Anyone who can single-handedly run a Fine Arts fair in the center of Boston on the Fourth of July can do this with one hand behind her back."

With a final smile, she took her leave, crossing back across the wide grassy space on one of the sidewalks. Watching her go, Sam drew a deep breath. He should go lend a hand to the

students and their beleaguered teacher before the wobbly stand bit the dust a second time--and be glad he'd missed the Fourth of July.

* * *

The silence of a desert night was a quiet found nowhere else on earth. Al could never say he had truly cared for it. Give him the lights and noise of the Vegas strip anytime over the eloquent stillness of pure desert.

But, looking out over it now from the terrace that ran nearly the length of Sam and Donna's house, he had to admit there was a chilling beauty about it. From here, he could truly see the stars. They arched above him in a brilliant, breathtaking dome that seemed at once to reach to infinity, and yet hover near enough to touch. It was no wonder the couple had chosen to build here, so near those stars.

This was their house, firmly and absolutely, bearing the aura of the union of their personalities in a quiet but everlasting way, that hit Al like a physical thing every time he walked in the door. Sam was still here. Even if he was out God-knew-where, a part of him lingered, kept alive by his mark on this place, and the unwavering belief of the woman in it that he would come home.

That woman was standing beside Al now, gazing out at the desert as he did, waiting for him to speak. She knew why he had come, the admiral was certain, she had to know. But she hadn't slammed the door in his face when he came knocking on it, hadn't fainted, or shouted at him, demanding to know why he had come back without the funding that would enable her to bring her husband home. She had merely let him in, led him to the terrace, and now stood quietly, allowing him the time to find the way to tell her.

Hands buried in his pockets of his dress whites, Al drew a deep breath. "I just got back from DC," he began, turning to face her, "and the Committee's made their decision."

"So I gathered," Donna murmured, her eyes meeting his. "What did they say?"

What did they say? Oh, God...

"It may not be the final word," he stalled, wanting to soften the blow. "I've lodged an appeal, and Norton may go for it." Hands still firmly in his pockets, he shrugged. "We should know pretty quick if he's going to take our side."

"They refused us," she announced quietly, voicing what he didn't want to say. "They've cut off the funding."

"Well..." Al considered hedging, but the way she met his gaze forced him to tell her the unvarnished truth.

Trying to make it out less than it was, would only insult her. There were women who couldn't take it--who didn't want to know reality, but a blurry edged lie which took away the responsibility of dealing with the unpleasantness. Donna Elsee was not one of them.

"Yeah," he admitted, lifting a hand to run it uneasily along the aching back of his neck. "They're pulling the plug. Effective June 30th."

Her eyes widened in shock. "But that's only three days from now!"

"I know," he said softly, unable to meet her gaze. "I couldn't even get an extension. I've been stalling them for so long that I finally ran out of excuses." He paused slightly, looking down as he shuffled his feet. "I'm sorry, Donna."

"Sorry!" Her voice, lifting in genuine surprise, brought his eyes back to her. "Al, this is not your fault. I'm surprised they didn't withdraw the funds last year. Or the year before that. Or even before that." Only then did her voice begin to break, tears filling her eyes. "You've bought us more time than I ever thought we'd have."

"Donna, look," he began earnestly, "we'll bring him home. I swear we will. Somehow." He caught her arms in his hands in an instinctive gesture of reassurance. "I promise."

Lifting her head in a gesture of determination that tore at Al's heart, she said, "We have to try retrieval again. If we only had some way to modulate the power, it..." She paused, the tears in her voice belying the professional choice of words. "...it may increase the odds of success without having to wait for Sam to complete this leap."

"Okay," he assured her, seeing the reaction coming. "We will. Whatever it takes, we'll do it. And we'll bring him home."

"Yes." Her voice was nearly a whisper, but still determined as her tears spilled over and down her cheeks. "We will." As if the words were too much for her, a sob escaped her and she reached for him. "Al..."

Taking her in his arms, he held her as she

cried, his own tears stinging his eyes as he vehemently blinked them away. He had already done all the crying he was going to do. Now it was time to be there for Donna.

Soon, they would have to go back to the Project and try yet another time to bring Sam back to them. When the tears were finished, they would go together to tell the others and make final plans on all those last ditch scenarios they had all prayed they would never have to face. They would be professionals--the dedicated scientist and the admiral--working to the last bit of time allotted to successfully finish what Sam had begun.

But for now it was just the two of them, standing alone under the vast dome of sky, trying to comfort each other, and believe one more time that when it was finally finished, they would have Sam back where he belonged.

Together, if they believed, it would be enough. It had to.

* * *

It was like dreaming. Sam was certain, even in the midst of the dream, that he had experienced it before...though he couldn't remember when. Maybe that was because there was no 'when' in this dream--or maybe it was because the 'when' kept changing.

He was flying, shooting like a meteor through time itself. The shadows of decades, years and months flickered fitfully about him, like rushing, storm driven clouds that were gone too quickly for him to truly see them. Elemental, overwhelming and terrible, the force that shot him forward like a pebble in a hurricane's gale was inescapable.

His speed was incalculable, for there was no ground, no solid objects against which to reference. There was only the fitful light and shadow of things half-seen through which he rushed, and the horrible roar in his ears as if of a great wind. The effect made him ill--vertigo assaulting him and compounding the panic in his chest.

Like the shifting force of capricious, deadly winds, the power that gripped him faltered and the forward motion slowed and stopped in the matter of a heartbeat. But before he could do more than feel the first brilliant spark of terror, it came again, reversed in flow as if another force--opposite in intention--grasped him and took him shooting

back the way he had traveled.

It was like flying, and falling, and neither. Where was it he rushed to so quickly? Oblivion? Or toward an awful death, crushed against whatever served for ground in this terrible alien landscape ruled by forces that he did not comprehend?

Was this dream the end?

* * *

The flying dream ended abruptly with a bone-shaking jolt...if a dream is what it had been. It sent Naomi scrambling upward in her bed. Her cry still echoed in the streetlight-shadowed darkness as her back hit the headboard, stopping her instinctive recoil from something she could not explain.

Terrified, she struggled for reality, for calm, for breath, and was suddenly aware of a voice from somewhere close nearby.

"Sam!" it said urgently. "Sam, it's okay."

Gasping, she jerked away from the voice, and looked toward it. There was a man standing beside her bed! Horrified, she slid from the mattress, taking the blanket with her like a shield.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "Get out of my room!"

The man blinked with surprise and horror, then made an obvious effort to neutralize his expression. "Sam...it's me, Al. Calm down."

Sam? Who was this stranger who had entered in the night and called her by a man's name?

Eyes wide with fear, she fell back another step. Get a description, the officer who had held the seminar at the woman's club had said. The better the description, the better chances we have of finding the...robber--she would not consider of the possibility of rape.

Incongruently, the intruder was wearing an admiral's uniform that seemed to shine softly in the dimness of the room. What kind of man would dress up in a Naval uniform to invade a lady's bedroom?

"Get out," she demanded. "Get out, or I'll call the police."

"Sam..." The stranger took a step forward as if the bed were not between them. Then he stopped, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Unh-oh..."

Horrified by the thought of his intentions, she drew the blanket tighter about herself. How could this intruder have mistaken her for a man?

Maybe 'Al' was drunk again. That had been a problem for him at one time, hadn't it?

No, no, that must have been someone else--she had never seen this man before in her life.

"You've made a mistake," she returned frostily. "I'm Naomi Steinkamp, and this is my home. I'd like you to leave now, immediately, or I'll call in the authorities."

Almost, it looked like the 'admiral' believed her, his eyes searching her face as if looking for something. What, she could not imagine. She most certainly did not look like a 'Sam'. The man must be drunk, or high on drugs --which was an equally distasteful slur on the uniform he wore.

Casting another look at her, the man lifted something that looked like a glowing child's toy and punched at some buttons as if it were a communication device. "Gooshie, you don't have Sam there, by any chance...do you?"

He cocked his head then, obviously believing he had received some sort of reply, shook it and stared at her again--a move which made her gather the blanket even tighter.

"Then we've got trouble," the man said. "Big trouble."

Drawing a deep breath, she composed herself. "Sir, I will not make trouble for you, if you leave at once. But this is your last warning, I will call the authorities if you persist in this folly." To make her intention clear, she let one hand drop to the telephone of the bedside table.

"Oh, no..." He reached out as if to stop her. "Don't do that. We'll have cops galore in here. They'll haul you off to the loony bin and..." The dark eyes that regarded her across the expanse of bed were haunted even in the dim light. "...and we've already done that dance before."

"That's it," she said, lifting the receiver. "I'm calling..."

"Huh?" the admiral said, lifting his device as if it had spoken to him. "Oh, yeah." He nodded. "Okay."

Distracted from the phone, Naomi watched the little drama warily. A psychotic criminal was the worst kind. She would have to tread carefully here. "Who are you talking to?" she asked, phone still in hand.

"Gooshie," he said, "and he wants to know why he can't get a successful completion of Retrieval Program One through Ziggy."

"Because that program's faulty," came the

answer without conscious thought. "I updated it, but it still only has a 9.6 percent chance of success..."

* * *

"...a 9.6 percent chance of success." With the words, came memory--his memory--and Sam felt the flooding awareness of his own consciousness return, reminiscent of those initial moments of a new leap.

Had he leaped?

Frowning, he regarded the observer, who was watching him closely. "What's going on, Al? Have I leaped?" Looking down at himself, he saw he was still dressed in Naomi's flannel night gown, and was standing beside her bed, wrapped in her blankets. What the...? Bewildered, he looked to Al for answers.

Amazingly, the hologram shook his head and sighed as if in tremendous relief. "Geez, Sam, you really had me worried there for a minute."

"Had you worried?" A strident beeping came from his hand and, looking down, Sam realized he held the phone's receiver. Replacing it, he looked back to his friend. "What had you worried?"

Al shrugged a bit uneasily. "We tried retrieval, but it didn't work. And you...sorta weirded out on me."

"Weirded out?"

"Yeah, you sorta..." The hologram shrugged and continued unwillingly. "...synergized with Naomi there for a minute. You didn't know me."

Uncomfortable with the thought, Sam pulled the blanket from his shoulders and placed it on the bed. He sought the observer's eyes. "So retrieval didn't work."

The hologram's gaze slid away. "No. It didn't."

Looking down at the blanket, Sam restlessly ran his hands over the material. "Didn't Ziggy say the odds went up?"

"Well, not until--"

"And it still didn't work?"

In answer, Al began absently poking buttons on the link, which beeped stridently. "The odds haven't changed. Yet. Ziggy still says you have to complete the leap for that to happen." Frowning, he stabbed one last button then pocketed the small device in an obvious attempt to lighten the mood. "As a matter of fact, that hybrid know-it-all is rubbing in the fact she told us retrieval wouldn't work tonight."

Sam's hazel eyes went directly to Al's dark ones. "Then why'd you try it?"

Shrugging, the hologram looked away. "Well, we just thought we'd try hurrying things along a little." His gaze came back to Sam, along with an expression of mock pain. "The fact is, I just can't wait to get rid of Naomi. The old gal doesn't like men."

"She doesn't like men?" Sam asked, distracted despite himself. "Or she doesn't like you?"

"Oh, it's not me, Sam, I've been the perfect gentleman." Al spread his arms expansively, all innocence. "But every time I walk into the Waiting Room, I feel like I need to put on a cast iron jock strap first."

"What?"

The hologram shuddered dramatically. "You should see her. She's got this way of looking down her nose at a guy that really puts you in your place."

"Why?" Sam asked, still mystified and not certain it wasn't all an elaborate ruse to distract him from the question of retrieval.

"I dunno!" Al began, then corrected himself. "Well, yeah, maybe I do." Briefly, he pulled the link from his pocket and consulted it. "Her late husband, Michael, was a real jerk. He liked to push Naomi around." Disgusted, Al shook his head. "I can't understand a man who would hit a woman."

"And she didn't leave him?" Sam frowned. "If she's so in control, why'd she let it go on?"

Al's gaze remained on the link. "In those days, Sam, women of Naomi's generation stayed with their husbands, no matter what. And..."

"And?"

"And I think she really loved him, even if he was a son of a--"

"Okay," Sam interrupted. "I get the picture. Do you think that's why I'm here? To help Naomi trust men again?"

"No." Al shook his head. "I think that's even beyond your abilities, Sam. She stayed with him for thirty-seven years. After he died, and she was cleaning out his things, she found evidence of all the affairs he'd had."

"Geez, Al, that's awful."

"Yeah, I know," agreed the hologram. "Anybody who plays musical beds knows to burn all the pictures and love letters when you get the first chest pain."

"Al!"

"What?" The hologram jumped as if surprised by the reaction.

The physicist scowled. "Was all that stuff about Naomi's husband true?"

"Yeah." Al sighed a bit, handlink falling to his side. "It's true. Verbena's been talking to her, but you just don't overcome that kinda pain in a week's therapy." He shuddered expressively as if hit by a sudden chill. "Verbena says she's pretty well adapted. Subverted her sex drive into community work, and intimidating every man she comes in contact with is sorta the icing on the cake."

Considering the possibilities, Sam caught the glance the hologram snuck his way and frowned. The observer's ploy had nearly worked, but the physicist still didn't have the answer to his other question.

"Come on, Al," he said firmly, pacing around the bed that separated them to face the hologram directly. "Quit evading my questions. You've been gone nearly two days, and Gooshie's been pinch-hitting. Every time I ask him what's going on, he stalls and says you'd kill him if he says anything. And now you try retrieval even before Ziggy says the odds have changed. What's the deal?"

"Well, I was taking a little R&R at the Stardust, and I knew you'd get all bent outta shape about it so..." He let the sentence trail off at the physicist's expression. "You ain't buyin' this, are you?"

Sam waited patiently, hands on hips. Then his eyes widened as a new thought occurred to him. "Are they threatening to shut us down?"

"No!" Al protested loudly, then met the physicist's eyes with a sheepish expression. "Well...maybe...but I can still sweet-talk 'em out of it."

Stilled by the admission, Sam regarded his friend for a long moment. "And if you can't?"

"I can," the admiral insisted. He shrugged expressively. "Hey, a woman chairs the Committee. Have you ever known a woman to deny me anything I want when I put my mind to it?"

"Yes," Sam answered without hesitation. "Now come on, Al, tell me what's really going on."

"I told you. We got a little trigger happy on retrieval and we shot too soon. But there's no harm done, and when this leap is over, we'll get the better odds Ziggy keeps harping on, and zap you on back home before you can say 'fiscal responsibility'."

"And what about the funding?"

"Forget about the funding," Al scoffed. "I've never let you down before, have I?" As if having second thoughts, he quickly qualified the statement. "On funding, that is."

"No...you never have."

"Okay, good." Al nodded as if the matter were settled and gestured at the bed. "Now you climb back into beddie-bye here, and get your beauty sleep. Remember, rested people don't have accidents."

Sam shot a glance at his friend. "Is that still what Ziggy says I'm here to do? Keep Naomi from breaking her hip?"

"Yep." Al nodded emphatically. "That's it. So, safety first." Reaching in his pocket, he pulled out the handlink and keyed in the sequence to open the door. "Keep Naomi out of traction until the day after tomorrow and there's no sweat." Looking hurried, he stepped into the glowing rectangle of light. "Hang in there, buddy." A grin lightened his stern expression and he winked. "You know, you look ravishing in flannel."

Sam was forming a reply when the Imaging Chamber door sealed shut. Shaking his head, he regarded the bed unwillingly. After the nightmare, and Al's revelations, sleep did not seem very attractive. Maybe what he needed was some hot tea.

He extended one foot to put on the slipper peeking out from under the bed. Unexpectedly tangled in the dust ruffle, he lost his balance and had to hastily catch the bed post to right himself. Slightly shaken, he slowly sat down on the mattress to put on the slippers.

Then, changing his mind, kicked them off again. Still moving with the exaggerated care of an elderly person, he got back into bed. Tea could wait. In the morning, he would be rested and more alert for hazards--there would be more light and less danger of falling.

Staring at the canopy above his head, he thought about the tyranny of fear. It was an insidious thing, crowding about the shadows around the bed like a dark, formless fog. He would keep Naomi safe, and Al would keep the funding safe, and in the end, he would leap into another life.

Or maybe he would go home.

There was no need to be afraid. But, pulling the blankets close about him, he moved to the center of the mattress, as far from the shadows as he could manage. Morning, with all its challenges, could not come too soon.

* * *

Leaving the Imaging Chamber, Al immediately assembled Verbena, Donna and Gooshie with him in the nearest conference room. For this debriefing, he wanted only the closest, most trusted members of his staff. No one else knew of the funding threat, and the admiral preferred to keep it that way. No use roiling the waters until he was forced to tell the entire Project they were going under.

Once everyone was seated, Al took off his admiral's hat, combed a hand through his hair, and then paced as he related his observations from the failed retrieval, including Sam's seemingly complete absorption into the persona of Naomi Steinkamp. No matter how often he saw his best friend lapse into the mannerisms of another being, it never failed to raise the hair on the back of his neck. He hated it when Sam spoke with someone else's voice--in this case cultured, cold Naomi Steinkamp's.

When all the data was relayed to the satisfaction of the others, Al returned to his place at the head of the conference table--Donna on his right, Verbena and Gooshie on his left--and sat waiting for someone to suggest a course of action. When no one did, he clasped his hands on the polished wood table before him and met each pair of eyes in turn.

"I need your recommendations about this. What do we do--try retrieval again using even more power?"

Gooshie shot an uncertain glance across at Donna, then at Verbena, as if looking for encouragement. When the psychiatrist nodded at him, he spoke up...albeit unwillingly.

"We can try, but..." He paused, then continued after another sympathetic glance at Donna. "...it doesn't really seem to be a problem of power. It's more a directional snag. Much of the focus was lost by the time we actually locked on Dr. Beckett and tried the retrieval. That's why we never seem to get him all the way back."

Ziggy's voice came from the speaker above them. "Exactly. It has always been that way, and there was no reason to expect it to be different now. The odds still remain at--"

"We know what the odds are, Ziggy," Al snapped. "You've told us every fifteen minutes."

"And you did not listen," came the smooth answer. "Now, as you see, I was right.

Attempting retrieval at this time was fruitless. After this leap, they may be more favorable."

"Why?" Donna demanded. "You keep saying that, but you won't tell us why!"

"I can not, Dr. Elsee," Ziggy answered. "The factors are complex and non-linear. Even I have not identified the one factor that makes this leap's concluding scenario different from all others. Yet."

"Yet?" Al demanded. "And just when will you figure it out?"

"That depends on where in the logic chain the answer lies," the computer answered. "And I will not know that, until I find the answer, or until Dr. Beckett leaps. Whichever comes first."

"And if Sam doesn't finish this leap before the funding is cut," Donna demanded of the computer, "what then?"

"We may get extra time," Al pointed out to avert the coming confrontation. "If Judge Norton agrees to hear our appeal."

For the first time, Verbena spoke, her serene voice soothing the tensions in the room. "All of us want to see Sam safely home, and all of us are worried about him. So we must consider what effect another failed retrieval may have on him."

"There's the danger of trying to feed more power through Ziggy," Gooshie spoke up. "We don't know what kind of impact that could have on Dr. Beckett's neural implant if it's not properly modulated by the time it reaches him."

Verbena nodded politely at the programmer. "Yes, there is that. But as you pointed out, so much of the power dissipates, even if we tried retrieval at 200 percent of usual capacity, I doubt it would create a problem for Sam's implant."

"So," Al said to the psychiatrist, shooting a warning glance at Gooshie to wait his turn to speak. "You're talking about his personality swapping, right?"

"Each time we try to retrieve Sam and are unsuccessful," Verbena answered, "it seems to increase his susceptibility to the effect of blurring his personality with the person he's replacing." Her gaze traveled Donna. Though it was sympathetic, her tone was purely professional. "The constant assault to his memory leaves him vulnerable to filling those gaps with what is most available to him--the residual personality of the host."

"Are you saying we shouldn't try another

retrieval?" Al asked.

"I'm saying," Verbena replied, "that if we do, we must be prepared for the effect it may have. If we dilute Sam's own effectiveness with a retrieval attempt, it may increase his time needed to complete whatever he's there to do... in which case we may miss the opportunity to take advantage of the increased odds after the leap."

"If there are any," Donna said. "Ziggy keeps hedging on that point."

The computer's voice came from above them again. "I do not hedge, Dr. Elesee. I merely give you all the facts and probabilities as I find them. I can not explain what I do not yet know."

Cutting in before the discussion could escalate to an argument, Al diverted the focus. "Worse case scenario: They shut us down..." Seeing Donna's reaction, he added, "For a little while, anyway. Later, we come back on-line ...and I swear somehow we will. But what would that do to Sam?"

There was a long silence, in which all eyes settled on Verbena. Finally, after what seemed like long and careful consideration on her part, she answered. "Sam appears to have no memory of the time between leaps, which to us seems as if he's 'nowhere'. But the longer the interval between leaps, the more his memory loss becomes apparent. If, as Gooshie has suggested before, Sam can not land because the Waiting Room is unavailable, and the interval is overly long, I'm afraid much of what we know as Sam may be lost forever."

"But if we bring him home," Donna said quickly, as if refusing to consider such a dire possibility, "his memory should come back. It did the last time."

The way her eyes avoided Al were not lost on the admiral, but he did not speak as Verbena continued.

"Last time, Al and Sam had simoleaped. Much of what Sam knew, was because Al knew it too."

"You mean he synergized with the admiral more than we thought?" Gooshie asked.

"Exactly," Verbena confirmed. "If you'll recall, Sam said his memory of the leaps was quickly beginning to fade."

"He called it 'a reverse swiss-cheese effect'," Donna said, paling at the unspoken implications.

Verbena gave her a sympathetic look before continuing. "Perhaps it was really due to the

fact that Sam was experiencing synergic memories, diluted by the fact that Al had only experienced them as an observer."

Donna paled further still. "Are you... saying that he won't remember me?"

"No," Verbena said, covering Donna's hand with her own slender one. "His return to normalcy here may be more gradual next time, but once among familiar faces and things, with all aspects of his own life available to him, he should completely recover."

"But," Al pointed out, "only if he comes home. So do we mess with the program again and try retrieval one more time? Or wait it out a little more?"

"I say wait," Gooshie said when it seemed no one else would speak. "The odds haven't changed. Dr. Elesee's theory of utilizing the neural net you share with Sam is promising, but we haven't found a way to make it work yet."

"And we may not," the female physicist pointed out. "If it doesn't work, we'll try something else."

"Something else?" Verbena asked gently.

Donna's face was set and pale. "I'll build my own project if I have to. I'm not going to let him go so easily."

"It's not gonna come to that," Al assured her. "We'll keep our options open, but I don't think we ought to try retrieval until zero hour." Sighing, he unclasped his hands from before him on the table and rubbed at the side of his jaw. "The thing with the handlink still bothers me. That gremlin didn't bite us this time, but it could show up again when we least expect it."

"There is nothing wrong with the handlink!" Gooshie fiercely protested. "I had no trouble with it when you were gone!"

"There is a problem," the admiral shot back. "And I'm not taking the chance of the damn thing going blooey during a retrieval attempt unless there's no other option. Get it fixed."

"Yes, Admiral," Gooshie grumbled like a scolded child.

Resolutely, Al turned his attention from the programmer. "Verbena, what'd you think?"

"I think we should wait," she answered quietly, "until the end of this leap, or until we're forced into it by closure of the Project."

"Donna?" Al's gaze traveled to Sam's wife. Everyone here loved Sam and cared deeply what happened to him...but of all of them, she had the most at stake. "What'd you wanna do? Wait

or try again now? This one's your call."

Again, silence reigned in the small room. Finally, Donna met his eyes. "I think we should wait and give Sam a chance," she said softly. "He's always come through before. And...if someone truly is watching over him like he believes, he won't let all the good Sam's done end in his death." Her gaze roamed fleetingly around the table. "Sam believes in that so strongly, that he let them strap him into an electric chair for Jesus Ortega. How can I have any less belief in it?"

Regarding her, the observer felt his throat tighten with an old ache. Sam had shown extreme good sense to fall in love with a woman who thought with her head and believed with her heart, and knew how to listen to both. If that's the way Donna wanted it, that's the way they'd play it.

"Okay," Al agreed, breaking the moment before any more of his self-control slipped away. "We'll wait. Gooshie..." His attention shifted back to the still-pouting programmer. "See if any of your techs have got any new ideas on retrieval. Just don't tell them anything you don't have to. Not yet anyway."

"Yes, Admiral," the small man agreed, getting to his feet.

The others also stood.

"I'll come with you," Donna suggested.

"All right," Al said, slowly pushing from his chair. "Everybody use your discretion as to what you tell your staff. We want 'em alert, but not panicked." Firmly, he gestured to the door. "Let's get to it, then. And if anybody's good at praying, this might be a good time to try it."

* * *

It was a good thing, Sam thought, that Naomi's life was so busy. Fulfilling all her responsibilities--or at least all the ones he knew about--kept him too busy for brooding. Finishing up the last minute details for the auction, filming an interview for a local television station, and going to the grounds to accept final donations had certainly filled up the day.

Correction: Days--the auction was tomorrow.

Early evening shadows were beginning to spread across the grass before the stage when Sam heard the sound of the Imaging Chamber door opening behind him. Turning at once, he met

Al's gaze.

The hologram gave him a cheery wave with the handlink. "Hi, Sam, how's it going?"

Ducking his head to avoid attracting attention from the students who were putting the finishing touches on their finally-free-standing concession stands, Sam muttered, "Fine. How are things at the Project?"

"Fine," Al answered easily, eyes roving about the grounds. "Looks like things are starting to really come together here."

"Starting to," Sam agreed, moving toward the steps leading off the stage so the angle would protect him from any curious eyes thinking Mrs. Steinkamp was talking to thin air. "Have you heard any more about the funding?"

"No, but...that's good news. You know what they say, 'the longer they're out, the better'."

"That's juries, Al," Sam disagreed under his breath, "not Funding Committees."

"Whatever," the hologram said with an elaborate shrug. "It'll work out fine." As if distracted, he regarded the railing that Sam was leaning against in a show of casualness for anyone who was watching. "What's this?"

The physicist shot him a glance. "A hand rail," he said with exaggerated patience. "You hold onto them when you go down steep inclines to keep from falling."

"I know it's a handrail," Al shot back, pulling out his link to Ziggy. "It wasn't here before."

"No, it wasn't. I had a carpenter build it in case you decided to pop in and scare me headfirst down the stairs again when you were warning me to be careful."

"Ha dee ha ha," the hologram returned, obviously not truly paying attention. Concentrating, he punched data into the link, which had begun an annoying, low pitched hum.

Again.

"I thought Gooshie fixed that?"

"So'd I," Al answered absently, attention on the read-out. "Hey, Sam, I think you've done it!"

"Done what?" The physicist straightened expectantly.

"Kept Naomi's bones intact." Al grinned, then scowled as the handlink's annoying hum grew a little louder. "Ziggy says now she doesn't fall, and you can leap." Whacking the unit firmly--which did absolutely no good--the hologram looked up at Sam. "So go ahead." He made a shooing motion with both hands. "Leap."

Pausing, Sam remained still a long moment, waiting for the first impending tingle of a leap. But there was nothing other than the faint spring breeze brushing his face. "I'm not leaping, Al."

"I can see that," snapped the older man. "Quit messing around and get your act together, Beckett."

Exasperated, Sam shot him a glance. "That mustn't have been why I was here."

"Of course it was." As if angry, the hologram extended his arm so the link was directly in front of the physicist. "See for yourself!"

Eyes traveling instinctively to the protesting link, Sam could make out only dancing patterns on the tiny display. The humming increased in loudness yet again.

"This actually says something?" he asked.

Unexpectedly--as Al pulled back the handlink to study it--Sam's attention was caught by the admiral's gold wristwatch, in particular the way it caught a stray flash of light from somewhere in the Imaging Chamber. Light from home.

Sam's eyes lingered on the flash. It was light from...

"What year is it there?" he asked impulsively.

"What?" Dropping the link to his side, Al shook his head. "Sam, you know I can't tell you that."

"Yeah, I know." Sam shook his head in defeat and turned away. "I just...wondered."

"This is only a minor set back," Al assured him. "There's got to be another simple reason why you're here. Ziggy just hasn't figured it out yet." Vehemently he gave the still humming unit another whack. "Damn, now I can't even call up the retrieval odds."

Crossing his arms across his chest, Sam stared at the students across the lawn without really seeing them. Without thought, he began to walk slowly toward the sidewalk leading to the privacy of the tent. "Do you think the odds will increase the way Ziggy predicts?"

Al fell into step beside him. "Sure they will. It's just a matter of..." Protesting squeals joined the ever-rising hum. "...kicking Gooshie's butt to China and back until he fixes this damn thing!"

Smiling despite himself, Sam regarded the hologram's fingers moving over the link...and again a flash of gold light caught his eye. "New watch?"

"Huh?" Al glanced up, then returned to trying to wring data from the link as he walked. "Nah, an old one. Just got it shined up."

Sam shot another look at the expensive looking wristwatch that was visible beyond Al's cuff. It was a Rolex--a gold Rolex. Memory, faint and seemingly totally foreign to the situation, teased him. Al's Rolex, abused and broken, flashed through his mind's eye.

"You broke it, didn't you?" he asked, trying to pin down the elusive memory which was part of another life...part of home.

The startled glance Al shot him was surprisingly chagrined. "Unh, yeah...I broke it. A long time ago. But I got it fixed." From his tone, it was obvious he wanted to drop the subject. Looking back to the link, he kept at his attempt to call up data, as he continued on toward the tent.

Distracted, Sam came to a full stop, casting about for the rest of the tantalizingly incomplete memory. He was dimly aware that the hologram had stopped on the sidewalk a few paces ahead and was waiting for him.

There had been water--running water--and Al was angry. Angry because...why?

"You slammed it against the shower stall," Sam said, his head coming up to meet the hologram's gaze. "Because you were mad at...at..." There, the memory ended and the frustration began. "...somebody."

Al's own expression was a mixture of frustration and embarrassment. "How come," he demanded, not for the first time, "your swiss-cheesed brain always remembers the stuff I wanna forget?"

"Why'd you break it?" Sam asked, truly wanting to know and solve the mystery that so troubled him.

"Because I was a jerk," came the answer with a shrug. "Now c'mon, let's get outta sight, before the men in white coats come with a net to put you away." Turning, Al took two more steps toward the tent.

At that, as if his closer proximity to the tent somehow had something to do with it, the handlink hum--which until now had been steadily building in pitch--abruptly escalated to the full-fledged screech of electronic overload.

"Damn!" Al growled. "I told that squat-legged techno-weenie this would happen!"

Thoughts of the past driven out of his head by the awful squeal, Sam took an instinctive step back. "What's going on?"

"Like I know!" the hologram snapped. Punching in keys, he called up the door, which made a dreadful scraping sound, but opened. Al stepped into it without ever looking up from the screaming unit. "I'm gonna go fix this thing outta yo-yo mode myself," he threatened, "then I'll be back."

Without waiting for an answer, he was gone. From the speed of his exit, Sam wondered for a brief instant if the overload had been caused by the admiral's own tampering with the link in an attempt to get him out of a conversation he obviously did not want to have.

Then, shaking his head, he rejected the idea. Realizing he was standing in the center of the open grass area, he cast a quick glance about him, debating what to do next. The students seemed too busy in their pursuits to have noticed him and the security guard for the tent was out of sight inside.

A flash of movement from behind him attracted his attention and he turned. The small, dark-haired woman who had offered to take over the concessions was coming up the walk toward him, carrying a large cardboard carton. Suppressing a sigh, Sam went to meet her, sending a silent prayer of hope that she wasn't coming to tell him her Great Aunt Matilda died and that she was turning the concessions back over to him.

* * *

As it turned out, the petite woman--whose name Sam still had not been able to learn despite all the tricks he had learned during his years of leaping--had not come to turn over her job. Instead, she had brought him 'another item for the auction'. Not thinking, he had reached for the large box she carried, but she shook her head.

"I'll get it, Naomi," she said, carrying it past him and into the tent.

Following, Sam was reminded again of the expectations and limitations placed on Naomi because of age. Some of them may have been justified, some not. Still, uncomfortable with Al's earlier prediction of the elderly woman's fall and broken bone, he allowed her to refuse his help.

Following her, he nodded at the security guard, who was sitting in a chair just inside the tent entrance reading a newspaper. As they entered, the heavy set man got to his feet. Although he returned Sam's nod politely, his

attention was obviously for the attractive woman carrying the box.

"Let me help you with that, ma'am," he offered, reaching out for the carton.

"No, thanks," she answered, sliding her burden onto a portion of free space on the front table. "I've got it."

The guard shrugged, as if a little annoyed. "Suit yourself." Moving off, he left the tent and walked a short distance away, lighting up a cigarette.

Ignoring him, the petite woman slit the tape binding the carton with her thumbnail. Casting an amused glance at the scorned guard, Sam came up behind her to see her donation. Nestled inside a carefully placed cocoon of packing paper was a beautiful porcelain lamp, decorated in delicate leaf gold.

"It's a lovely old piece," Sam said, reaching in to draw it out. "It must be at least fifty years old!" At the ring of Naomi in his voice, he faltered, then lowered the lamp slowly to the table. He was Sam Beckett, quantum physicist...not Naomi Steinkamp, fine arts patron. He was not going to forget that again.

His companion, not noticing anything wrong in his manner, nodded in agreement. "It's been in my family for a long time. There were two, but..." The way she carefully brushed away a speck of non-existent dust was not lost on Sam. "...the mate's broken. I thought it could do more good here than making the nightstands by my bed look uneven."

Taking a breath to answer, Sam hesitated. The slender hand that lingered on the antique porcelain spoke volumes more than her words. "Lots of people only have one bedside lamp," he pointed out. "Especially when they live alone."

From the expression of his face, he thought perhaps he had made a misstep. What made him think she was single? Hastily, he checked for a wedding band and found none. Still, her eyes avoided his when she tried to shrug casually.

"That's true," she agreed lightly. "I just...decided it was time to get rid of this."

Considering her words, and the tension across her shoulders, Sam rested one hand on her arm. "It's a welcome addition to the auction," he told her, "but you don't need to make this sort of sacrifice."

"Sacrifice?" Her dark eyes, when they met his, were less amused than her tone. "You'll be doing me a favor getting it out of my sight."

"How's that?"

Shaking her head, she took the carton from the table with one hand and pushed the solitary lamp further back from the edge to keep it safe. "There are a lot of bad memories associated with this lamp. I think it's time to let go."

To let it go...or the memories? Not all of them must be bad, he inferred, watching her expression as she regarded the antique. Did he --did Naomi--know this woman well enough to pry into the matter?

As if taking his silence as question enough, she turned to him. "My ex-husband broke the other one. And now..." Her gaze traveled once more to the lamp, nestled with the other items destined for the auction block. "...every time I look at this, it reminds me of him, and what he did."

"Surely he did more than just break your lamp," Sam suggested gently.

Laughing slightly, she shook her head, but it was a wry laugh. "Yes, he certainly did more than that. I could tell you stories that would make your head spin." Hastily, she shot a glance at the woman she thought to be Naomi Steinkamp, as if wishing she could recall the openness of her words.

Remembering Al's comments about Naomi's late husband, Sam could well understand why. If this woman knew Naomi as well as she seemed to, she would have known she had just entered possibly painful ground.

But he was not Naomi Steinkamp, and it seemed there was some hesitation about this decision--hesitation that went way beyond simply donating a lamp.

"Surely he did some good things too," Sam suggested softly.

"Good things," she said with a small shake of her head as if finding the thought painful. "Not many. Not at the end, anyway."

"But some," Sam persisted, unable to let it rest.

"Yes..." she agreed, her eyes softened at a personal memory. "Some." Drawing a deep breath as if strengthening her resolve, she shook her head. "But not enough for keeping around this reminder of the all bad times."

Gently, Sam took her arms and turned her to face him. "I'm not sure you mean that."

"Of course I mean it," she said, her chin lifting in defiance. Again, there was a zing of memory stirred in Sam, too deep and too nebulous to come to fullness. Someone else he had known

had exhibited that gesture. "I wouldn't have brought the lamp here if I wasn't."

"Maybe," Sam suggested, letting her pull away from him, "you brought it to convince yourself that you're ready."

The dark eyes that met his held a trace of anger. "What do you mean by that?"

"Only that sometimes people do things on an impulse that they regret later. I wouldn't want you to sell this, and then find out that there were good memories mixed in with the bad, and you forfeited them as well when you gave this away."

"You sold Michael's things," she said directly, and there was a trace of challenge in the words. "Did you ever regret that?"

"Maybe," Sam answered carefully. He had only Al's word for how Naomi felt...and the admiral's somewhat warped understanding of women was legend. "Maybe not. Emotions can be... hidden sometimes, and they ambush us when we least expect it."

"Naomi," she began, her smile was slightly forced, "are you saying you've been a closet romantic all these years? Even after the way Michael behaved?"

Sam decided it wasn't really Naomi's husband they were talking about here. "It's been said," he told her, suddenly remembering a quote that had lain fallow for years, "that 'love is life's only true satisfaction'. I don't know if that's true, but I do know the man who said it. And at the time he said it, he was acting like he hadn't the faintest idea of what love was all about."

Again came the sudden, intense yet incomplete flash of Al vehemently slamming his watch against the shower wall.

"He was hurt," Sam continued, "and he did a lot of things I think he regretted later. I wouldn't want you to make that same error."

The woman regarded him curiously, her dark eyes searching his face with an intensity that made him uncomfortable. "I've never heard you talk like this, Naomi. From everything you've said in the past, I thought you'd encourage me to do this."

"Well," Sam said carefully, "maybe I'm seeing things differently today." With a grin, he moved to put the lamp back into its carton. "You may see them differently tomorrow."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm packing this away," he said, smoothing down the lid so the lamp was secure. "I want

you to put it back in your car."

"But--"

"And think this over some more tonight." He handed the box back to her, knowing she would take it from him if he tried to carry it out for her. "Tomorrow, when the auction opens, if you still feel the same way, I'll gladly take it back and thank you for your contribution to the Fine Arts building."

Mystified, she studied him. "Are you feeling okay, Naomi? This whole auction must have been a tremendous undertaking."

"I'm fine," he assured her. He cast a glance out the tent at the guard, who was just finishing his cigarette. "Now, let's let Stan carry this back to your car for you. He's been salivating to impress you with his fine physique. We'll give him the chance and get some work out of him at the same time."

Laughing, the petite woman followed him. "Now you sound like yourself."

* * *

It seemed to Al that he was always pressed for time since Sam had first leaped. The irony of it never escaped the admiral. There was never enough time in a Project constructed to travel in time--and a fine pain in the butt it was, too.

Flood waters were rising at the gates and the admiral felt like the little Dutch boy of legend with not enough fingers and toes to plug the leaks. A little over twelve hours remained until the final Committee deadline, but the auditing hounds were already amassing at the gates.

Feeling some small measure of satisfaction, Al refused them entrance. He told them firmly to return at midnight, that he was still in charge until then and no unauthorized personnel were to be allowed on the grounds until that time.

Not that it makes a helluva lotta difference, he realized. It only prolonged the agony. But Al Calavicci wasn't giving up without a fight to the end, although he was definitely feeling besieged and keeping them out was costing him time.

His network had brought him word that Bartlett and his Committee-assigned deactivation team were already gathering in Destiny for the final assault. The bastard was wasting no time in closing the place down absolutely and for

good.

Well fine, but they couldn't come in now. He still had twelve hours and fourteen minutes of command. What he didn't have was word of a miracle from Judge Norton.

All his options seemed fast narrowing down to one--another retrieval attempt at zero hour ...one which seemed destined to fail unless something spectacular changed. And nothing spectacular seemed forthcoming despite hours of slogging through scenario after scenario, interviewing Naomi Steinkamp, and just plain digging for any clue as to what might be the final piece of the puzzle that would finish this leap in a sensational blaze of glory.

At this moment, the Project's MD and psychiatrist were in conference. Plans were in place to move Naomi to a private ward in a local hospital if the need arose. If the leap took place, and they should get a new leapee or Sam's comatose body back in the waiting room, they too would be cared for by a staff of hand-picked nurses and technicians from the Project. The hospital had been co-operative, especially with the money Al had agreed to pay them, but the admiral had extreme reservations about the plan. It was the best they could do with what they had to work with, however, and he could hope for little better.

Hell, he could hope for a whole lot better, but that didn't mean he was going to get it. Gooshie, Donna and several others were pouring over retrieval data and the cantankerous handlink in Control. Maybe they would come up with something wondrous.

Maybe.

Removing himself from both rooms, Al paced restlessly toward his quarters near Control. Hovering would do him no good, and going back to see Sam would serve no purpose either. He had no new data to offer. The best he could do now was wait, and try to hold back the time when they would have to implement these Doomsday Plans by sheer desperation.

Entering his quarters, he sighed once--deeply--and cast a look at the bed. Sleep was out of the question. He would have to be alert at a moment's notice and ready for anything. But he should relax.

Taking off his coat and loosening his tie, he absently rolled up his shirt sleeves as he drifted over to the small desk placed in the corner of the room.

He sat down, deciding he would make an

update in his journal. It seemed fitting, to gather the frenzied events of the last few days into some sort of coherent order, for his own peace of mind if nothing else. Bending down, he unlocked the lower right door and pulled out the blue-bound book that rested on top of several others just like it.

Putting it on the desk before him, he regarded it for several minutes, trying to muster the energy to flip it open. Slowly, he rubbed a hand over his face and shook his head. He was too old for this. Too old and too tired. He just wanted Sam to come home. Now.

He was just reaching to open the book when there was a beep from the intercom at his door. Hand resting on his journal's cover, he asked, "Who is it?"

"Bartlett," came the reply. "I have some news for you."

"Go away," Al snarled, hand curling into a fist. "I'm busy."

"Not too busy for this. I've got news from the Judge Norton."

Freezing momentarily, Al stared at the closed door. If Norton had made a decision on the appeal, it wasn't going to be in their favor if it was coming through Toad. He could just bet what Toad's 'news' was--and he did not want to hear it.

But there was no way he could get out of it. Bad news, Edna used to say, was like chickens, it always came home to roost. Or was that gossip that was like chickens? Didn't matter... with Toad, it usually amounted to one and the same thing.

Tucking his journal back into its drawer and locking it safely away, Al got to his feet. Shoulders back, he walked to the door and hit the button on the key plate that opened it.

Despite Al's long silence, Bartlett was still waiting. The look on his face, the pure pleased-with-himself triumph, made Al grind his teeth in a physical effort to stop himself from punching the nozzle out. Wordlessly, the admiral stepped aside to let the ex-Marine enter.

The liaison wasted no time getting to his point. "It's over, Calavicci," he crowed, before he was even fully into the room. "I just got the word from Weitzman. Judge Norton called a special meeting of the Committee to see what they had to say about this so-called appeal of yours." His grin widened. "Based on that, the old buzzard's refusing to even consider it."

Al felt a sick knot twist in his chest. It was true, he was sure of that, though he didn't want to admit it. "They wouldn't tell you that, pimple brain. Norton will tell me himself."

"Not this time, Admiral. You're dead." Bartlett smiled and handed Al an official communique with the Judge's seal on it. "He sent this by special messenger, who was refused entrance at the gate because of your new restrictions." The ex-Marine's grin turned to pure maliciousness. "So I volunteered to bring it in myself, and since I'm the Committee liaison, he agreed. I'm pleased to be the bearer of such glad news--as of twenty-four hundred hours tonight, Calavicci, you and this farce of a Project are deep-sixed for good."

"Like freakin' hell!" Al exploded. "Do you know what you've done? You may have just killed Sam!"

"Come off it, Calavicci," Bartlett snarled, his façade of good humor cracking at last. "This whole time travel thing is just a crock and you know it. All that 'if you shut us down a brave man will be lost in time' is nothing but a line of bull to keep the money coming in. In fact, I'm willing to bet you and Beckett have been squirreling it away in some Swiss account somewhere for years." His expression narrowed. "Which I assure you we'll find."

Not believing what he was hearing right, Al stared at him. Finally, he found his voice... and laughed. "You've lost it, Toad. Sam isn't even here. He's--"

"--about five hundred meters down the hall," the liaison supplied smugly. "I've seen him, Calavicci, so you can cut the crap."

"Seen him?!" Al repeated incredulously. "Where?"

"In a place the staff calls the Waiting Room." His eyes glinted with malice. "Interesting choice of names. He's 'waiting' to collect enough dough so you two can hightail it for Switzerland. But...that ain't never gonna happen."

"You've been in the Waiting Room?" Al demanded. "When? Did you touch anything?" When the man's response was not immediate, Al stepped forward to shake him. "Did you?"

Angrily, Bartlett hit away the admiral hands. "The good doctor was sleeping, and since I didn't want to announce my presence, I left him that way. After I got the pictures I wanted."

"Pictures?!"

"Yeah, pictures. Pictures I'm gonna get developed and send to Weitzman, so he can share 'em with the rest of the Committee. Proof!" He chuckled. "I'm gonna enjoy seein' them court-martial you!"

"You stupid bastard..." Angry beyond belief, Al stormed forward. Ready, Bartlett shifted to defend himself when an urgent page from Gooshie stalled the admiral in his attack.

"Admiral," came the programmer's voice from the Project intercom, "you're needed in Control immediately!"

"Later, Toad, when I have the time. It'll be just you and me. Man to man." Snarling, Al stiff-armed Bartlett out of his way. "That's a promise."

Turning, the smug liaison followed on his heels. "You'll have plenty of time, Calavicci, in Leavenworth."

Ignoring him, the admiral strode the short distance to Control, arriving at the room with very little of his present rage dissipated. "What is it Gooshie? Sam gonna leap?"

"No." The programmer turned, and caught sight of Al's face and the gloating liaison behind him. To his credit, he faltered only an instant then pressed on, carried on by his excitement. "There's nothing wrong with the handlink!"

"Proprio uno stronzo!" Al swore in Italian, eyes sweeping Donna for a brief instant before settling on the programmer again. "Lei è... senz'altro...il cretino grande, sono mai incontrare--"

"It isn't a malfunction that's causing the squeal," Gooshie pressed on, bravely cutting across the stream of hostile Italian. "It's feedback!"

"What?" The admiral stopped ranting long enough to look genuinely surprised. "What the hell do you mean feedback? What could possibly cause that?"

"Ziggy!" Gooshie responded with glee despite the admiral's volatile mood. "She was on-line in 1993, which is when Dr. Beckett is at present. So somehow, she's affecting the link!"

Al scowled. "That's impossible."

"Not impossible," Donna spoke up, "improbable, but not impossible."

"But how?" Al demanded, weary to death of theories and complexities.

Ziggy's smooth tones cut neatly over Gooshie's protestations of ignorance. "The cause of the feedback is obvious. It is not so

much my former self, but rather the handlink that was left in 1945 at the completion of the simoleap."

Al stared at the suspended blue orb as if it were an alien artifact.

"There is an 89 percent probability," Ziggy continued, "that the lost handlink has been influenced via the neural net the admiral shares with Dr. Beckett, and by close temporal proximity of his current handlink, thus coming on-line and causing the feedback squeal."

Stunned, Al blinked, sharing a glance with the other equally stunned members of his staff. Bartlett, he completely ignored. "Ziggy, are you saying the lost handlink is now somewhere in 1993?"

"And somewhere near Dr. Beckett's location," came the patient answer, as if it were sublimely obvious to even the most backward pupil. "Finding it must somehow dovetail with the conclusion of this leap. My calculations indicate it could be instrumental in modulating and directing the retrieval process."

"Retrieval process?" Al repeated, casting a look at Donna and Gooshie. The two scientists looked as lost as he felt.

There was a short, stunned silence, then Donna's eyes lit with sudden understanding. "Of course! Ziggy is an interfacing symbiotic system. If properly configured with herself in the past, we would--in a sense--have two parallel hybrid computers working in concert. Then we could try my plan to modulate the power accordingly to focus retrieval."

"Exactly," Ziggy affirmed smugly. "It is gratifying to know someone understands me, Dr. Elsee."

"But," Gooshie pointed out, "we'd need that other handlink to--"

"--to boost the leap effect, focus the power of retrieval, and bring Sam home," Donna finished, putting all the elements together. She looked at Al, a real light of hope in her eyes for the first time in months. "It could work, it really could work!"

"Of course it could work," Ziggy finished. "And the odds of retrieval would increase to a respectable 72 percent."

"I thought you said 39 percent" Al snapped, thinking furiously.

"That was before I had all the parameters," Ziggy answered, unperturbed. "With more data, my predictions could approach 100 percent accuracy."

Snorting, the admiral disregarded that claim. "So where is the other link?"

"I do not know."

"What do you mean, 'you don't know'?" Al shouted. "You just said--"

"I said," the computer asserted, "that locating the handlink must in some way coincide with the successful completion of this leap, which has not yet occurred."

"Even though Sam's kept Naomi's bones safe from harm," Al growled, snatching up his link from its storage place on the control panel. "So much for 100 percent accuracy."

"I achieve 100 percent accuracy only if all parameters--"

"Stow it, Zig," Al snapped. "Donna, you and Gooshie start work on that pet theory of yours, you may get a chance to try it." Firmly, he pointed the link at Gooshie. "Fire up the Imaging Chamber. I'm gonna talk to Sam. Get Ziggy to access all the information she can about the Jarret family, beginning in 1945. I want to know what happened to that handlink!"

Turning on his heel, he strode rapidly into the Imaging Chamber. Head down, he was thinking furiously about what he would say to Sam to get him looking for the lost link without panicking him. Not that Sam panicked easily, but if he knew he might be leaping around for the rest of time, it might--

"Nice try, Calavicci. But I don't buy it." The words, coming from behind him, made Al spin about to see who had said them.

It was Toad. Al had forgotten all about him.

Scowling, the observer waited for Gooshie to bring the Chamber on-line. "What the hell're you talking about? Get the hell outta here and let me figure out this mess you've got us into before I deck you one."

"I said, I don't buy it," the liaison repeated, stepping forward to meet Al nose to nose. "So you wasted your little drama on me."

"Buy what?!" Al shouted, at the limits of his patience.

"This whole song and dance of yours," Bartlett shot back, waving a hand in the direction of Control. "You and Gushman made a pretty good show of it, I'll admit, and I was almost convinced when the computer joined in... but you overplayed the whole thing with the Jarret family bit."

"What the hell're you talking about, Toad?"

"The trunk!" the liaison snapped. "You thought you were pretty tricky, didn't you?"

Making this personal so I'd jump on the bandwagon and join in this idiot sham of yours about Beckett leaping around in time. That'd look pretty good to Norton about now, if I switched sides."

"What trunk?" Al asked, not sure if he was amazed or exasperated or both.

"The trunk with Captain Tom Jarret's name on it," Bartlett returned. "The one I bought at an antique auction a few years ago. Though how the hell you knew about that, I'll never know. Unless..." Abruptly his eyes narrowed in more personal anger. "You slime. Carol told me she had a fling with you. I thought she was blowing smoke to make me jealous." His face darkened with indignation. "But you always were a kinky bastard, Calavicci. You were in my attic with my wife!"

Astonished, Al stared at the furious liaison and let the accusations sail by without mention.

Could it really be that Tom Jarret's old trunk was in Toad's attic? If it was, it went far beyond the belief of mere coincidence. In fact, ever since Sam first stepped into the Accelerator, there had been one delicate, obscure connection after another.

Was that lost handlink, if it truly still existed, in that trunk?

More importantly, had 'good old Teddy Bartlett' known about it all along?

Reacting on pure gut-level emotion, Al grabbed the ex-Marine by his lapels and slammed him backwards against the stone Chamber wall. Then he got right in the jerk's face. "Listen, dipstick, if you've got that handlink, you tell me now. And you tell me where you got it!"

Alarmed, Bartlett regarded him with wide eyes. "You've snapped, Calavicci! Let go of me!"

"Where is it?" Al demanded, slamming Toad against the wall again out of sheer frustration. "Where's that lost link? In the trunk?"

"I dunno, I've never opened it!"

"What?"

"There was no key! And it's a valuable antique, I wasn't about to smash the lock!"

Al's head cocked slightly, his eyes narrowing. "You bein' straight with me, Toad?"

As if afraid to move too quickly, the liaison slowly shook his head. "The only link I've ever seen is that one." He nodded at the unit Al held in his right hand along with the crumpled material of Bartlett's expensive silk suit. "Right there, in your hand."

Snarling, Al slammed the man against the wall one more time for good measure, and released him as the Imaging Chamber came on-line around him. He was in the middle of the park, about a hundred meters behind the tent which acted as a storage place for the antiques.

"You nozzle," the admiral growled, turning away. "You have no idea what's going on." Dismissing Bartlett from his thoughts, he began pressing the buttons that would shift his holographic surroundings as he zeroed in on Sam. The kid always complained about the way he would just 'pop' in like that, even though from Al's point of view, it was actually Sam and his surroundings which did the 'popping'.

Regardless of the technicalities, he had to find the physicist. Then he had to have him find the link.

And he had to do both pronto.

* * *

The morning of the auction had arrived, and Sam had made up his mind he would make the best of it. Auctioneering would never be his calling, but then maybe it was like being a disc jockey. He would just have to let himself get into it and let it fly. He hoped, anyway.

Volunteers had been arriving since dawn, setting up tables to hold merchandise and putting it out for view. Sam had been busy, trying to be everywhere at once, asked again and again for his opinion on everything from the placement of the microphone to how the state of the dew on the grass would affect the old wood of the antique pieces. As a result, he had not had time to seek out a private conversation with the concession volunteer, who was busy with responsibilities of her own.

The auction would begin in under two short hours. Viewers of merchandise had already begun to arrive, looking over the pieces and deciding among themselves on what they wanted to bid. Now was likely the best time he was going to have for that conversation, and he was about to go look for her when Al popped in with a rush of sound.

"Sam! Sam! Where are you?"

Jumping, the physicist spun to face him--briefly acknowledging his rolled shirt sleeves and loosened tie--then sent a quick glance about himself to be sure no one had noticed. Before he could answer, Al spotted him and headed straight for him, plowing through old school

desks and tables full of miscellaneous junk with rapid abandon.

"There you are," Al said, reaching him. "Sam, we've gotta talk."

He nodded discretely toward the nearby tent, but getting there now involved navigating the maze of aisles of tables and merchandise spread on the lawn. Striding ahead of him--literally through things--the observer led the way, the handlink beginning its annoying, buzzing hum.

Sam groaned, following. Hadn't they fixed that yet? Al was going to be spitting nails...

"Yes!" the hologram said excitedly, surprising the heck out of Sam--it was completely the opposite reaction to what he had expected. "This is it! It's gotta be here! Somewhere!"

Al stopped so suddenly that Sam continued right through him before he came to a halt.

The hologram slapped his forehead with his palm, like he'd just remembered something. "Aie yie yie, what a yutz! It's in that trunk!"

"Trunk?" Sam said quietly, smiling at a young couple who glanced up from their inspection of an antique cradle. "What trunk?"

"That old trunk I saw the other day," Al answered excitedly. "I'll bet you dollars to donuts that's the one!" He looked around the rows of antiques. "Where is it?"

"I don't know," Sam said through a smile, still trying for discretion as the browsers began to increase in number. "Why?"

Without answering, and unhampered by a need for discretion or maneuvering around objects, the hologram blazed a trail right through the side of the tent. He reappeared almost immediately. "There's nothing left in there! What'd you do with all the stuff?"

Eloquently, Sam gestured at the items scattered all about the acres of lawn around him.

"Damn," Al said expressively, stopping to scan for it visually. "Where the hell is it?"

Acutely aware of an elderly woman studying lace doilies peeking out from a box near him, Sam took a step closer to the camel backed trunk on the right side of the aisle. "Here's a nice trunk," he said as conversationally as he could.

She looked up at him and smiled, nodding politely as Al made a noise of disgust.

"That's the wrong one," the observer said plainly, looking back at the humming handlink in his hand. He gave it a small shake. "Come on, you little pip-squeak, scream. Lemme know where

your cousin is."

Mystifying Sam, the hologram began a sweep of the grounds, using the link as if it were some kind of a detector. The physicist's attempts to catch up to him were thwarted by the need to look casual, and to walk around merchandise instead of through it.

Finally catching up to the Al, he kept his head up as if he were just casually looking around and said, "What did it look like?"

"It looked like a trunk, okay?" came the exasperated reply. "And it's gotta be around here somewhere. Ziggy says..."

As Al started to move away, another man suddenly materialized beside him, holding the admiral's bare forearm. The newcomer's face was set and angry--clearly he had grabbed Al's arm to stop his pacing.

"Give it up, Calavicci! I--" As if abruptly aware he was now standing in the midst of a park on a spring morning with numerous items for an auction scattered about him, the newcomer paused for a long moment. Finally, his eyes swept over Sam. "So, here you are, Dr. Beckett. Come to join the play?"

"What?" Sam asked, so astounded by the unexpected turn of events that he forgot to be discrete. "Who are you?"

"Oh, good," the man scoffed. "Well delivered." His eyes shifted back to Al, whose arm he still gripped. "Forget it, Calavicci. You've done all this hologram hocus pocus before."

"Let go of me, jerk!" Angrily, the admiral shook off the stranger, who promptly disappeared.

Amazed, Sam regarded Al. "What's going on back there?"

"Nothing," the hologram made a shoving motion with his shoulder, as if fending off the invisible man. "It's just this lunatic peon." Punching buttons on his link as he moved away, he shouted, "Gooshie! Get security down here on the double!"

Almost immediately, the link began its ear-splitting squeal, and Al broke into a whoop, confounding Sam still further.

"It's gotta be right around here!"

Wheeling, he left the physicist standing in the center aisle and disappeared through a highboy cupboard. Evidently he found what he was looking for on the other side, for Sam heard another shout of joy.

"Here it is! Sam! Get your butt over here!"

Turning to obey, the physicist found his way unexpectedly blocked by the middle-aged concessionaire.

"Good morning," she said with a smile.

"Good morning," Sam returned, edging by her. "I'm...sort of busy right now."

"Oh, I know," she agreed, moving with him as he made his way to the end of the aisle so he could double back in the next aisle and join the excited hologram. "I've got to get back to the stands and get the Glee Club kids started on selling coffee."

She put out a hand to stop Sam, just as he was about to move into the intersecting junction, which would enable him to catch a glimpse of Al again.

"I just wanted to let you know, you were right," she said, still smiling.

"Sam! Now!" Al shouted from somewhere just out of sight.

Torn, Sam met the petite woman's dark eyes. They seemed so familiar. "I was?"

She nodded happily. "About the lamp. I can't get rid of it. Even after all the bad times, I'm not ready to let it go."

"Good," Sam said sincerely, drawn by Al's continuous shouts and the near glass-shattering scream of his handlink. "I'm glad. Never close a door unless you have to." Edging back, he caught a glimpse of Al who was standing dead center in the trunk, bending over as if he could see its contents.

"Come on, Sam, for Pete's sake," the hologram bellowed, face buried in the luggage. "I can't see anything, but I know it's here."

Turning back to his companion, Sam tried to think of something else to say when Al yelled again.

"Will you move it, Beckett? We're working on a deadline here!"

Sam cast a glance back at the observer, who had straightened, and was excitedly waving the screaming handlink in the air. In that moment, a glint of overhead light from within the Imaging Chamber caught the admiral's watch, making it flash like a golden beacon. As if it were some silent trigger, the memory seared Sam with equal brilliance and fire.

It was Al, slamming his Rolex watch against the shower stall because he was furious with...

Ruthie.

Spinning, Sam looked back at the petite woman, who was on the other side of a full-length walnut mirror and blocked from the

hologram's view.

"Ruthie," he breathed, taking her by the shoulders and searching her eyes for recognition.

"Yes?" she asked, waiting.

He knew then, as certainly as he could feel the building tingle of the impending leap, what he was really there to do.

"He loves you," he said, leaning back to catch another glimpse of the agitated hologram. "He truly loves you. Remember that. Whatever happens, remember that."

Impulsively, he drew her to him for a quick kiss on the cheek, then sprinted down the aisle to Al, who had turned his back and was arguing with someone Sam could not see.

"Bug off, you stupid gyrene," Al was saying. "You've done enough already."

"What's in the trunk, Al?" Sam asked, coming to a sliding stop beside him.

"The handlink," the hologram replied almost breathlessly. "The one we left in 1945."

"Are you sure?" Sam demanded, casting a look down at the innocent looking trunk.

"Of course I'm sure, now open it!"

"But--"

"No buts, Sam. Now!"

Another voice came from over Sam's shoulder. "Excuse me, ma'am, but do you know when you'll be auctioning off this piece?"

"I told you, Toad..." Al began, automatically responding to the familiar voice. Then he stopped himself, glanced up, and realized the man who had asked about the trunk was standing behind Sam's shoulder.

Rising to his feet, the physicist saw surprise, then glee spark in the hologram's brown eyes. What the...?

Turning--for he had a suspicion the man behind him had already seen him talking to himself for the past few seconds--Sam attempted to answer the question. "We, ah, plan to start on the other side of the lot," he said. "It will probably be much later before we get to this particular piece."

"Very good," he replied, almost military in his correctness.

A muffled exclamation came from Al's direction, and the physicist gritted his teeth as he resisted the temptation to look.

"I'll go out for breakfast then," his customer continued, "and be back to bid on this. Any suggestions for a good place to eat?"

"I don't know," Sam answered honestly, too

shaken by the rapid course of events and the rising fire of a leap chasing over him like static electricity to think of another reply. "I'm not from around here."

"Oh." It was obvious from the man's reaction that it was the wrong answer. Someone must have told him Naomi was the native running the auction. Still, he nodded politely, slipped on his aviator-style sunglasses, and turned away. "Thank you for your time."

When he was safely out of hearing, Sam turned back to Al...and froze. The hologram had a firm grip on the wrist of the man who had interrupted earlier--an older version of the same man who was now walking away, shaking his head after a brush with what he must have seen as a senile old woman out of touch with reality.

"Open the trunk, Sam," Al ordered calmly. "Ziggy says we've got a minute and 45 seconds 'til you leap, and if you get to this other link in time, there's a 79..." He consulted the link in his hand with grim satisfaction. "...82...84 percent chance that this time we're gonna bring you home."

Reacting to the even certainty in the admiral's voice, Sam spun and fell to his knees beside the trunk. Its key was neatly taped to the lid, and the physicist tore it off with no regard for who was watching, or why. Sliding it into the lock, he snapped it open and threw open the trunk's lid.

"The handlink," Al said over his shoulder, his voice as calm as the ocean on a clear, sunny day. "Find the handlink."

Hastily tossing the key onto an old, framed sepia photo of a woman, Sam shoved both arms elbow deep into the varied contents. Pushing aside a vintage army uniform, he searched by feel until he felt something smooth, cool and rectangular beneath his fingertips. Pulling it free, he sat back on his haunches.

"I've got it!"

Turning, he showed it to Al, who nodded as if there had never been any doubt. The stranger beside him had paled to the color of the sidewalk beneath their feet.

"Now," Al instructed, ignoring his ashen companion, "configure it to interface with Ziggy of 1993."

"But--"

"Do it, Sam." The firm military voice hardly raised a semi-tone. "We're set here but there isn't time to give you step by step instructions. Stop thinking about it and just

do it"

Reacting instinctively to the admiral's order, Sam lifted the link. Letting the commands flow from somewhere within him, he took the handlink from his future--and his past--and interfaced it with the fledgling hybrid computer somewhere in his present.

Time began to blur, melding past and future, future and past, until the swirling forces built and raged about him. With a hollow rush that threatened to render him deaf, they exploded outward, thrusting him into a space in which he knew no time.

* * *

The blue-white glare of the retrieval attempt nearly blinded Al in much the same way as Sam's first leap. Instinctively throwing an arm about his eyes and falling back a step, the observer lost skin contact with Bartlett without even noticing.

It seemed the fireworks lasted an eternity, though Al knew it could only have been five seconds, maybe even less. He was moving toward the Imaging Chamber door the instant the holographic scene of the auction park collapsed in on him and turned to darkness, even before his eyes had fully adjusted to the sudden change in illumination.

Taking the corridors to the Waiting Room at a half-run, he maneuvered them as much from memory as sight because the wavering half-images of light and shimmering shadow still lingered on his retinas.

By the time he reached his destination, most of them had faded and he could see clearly the startled expression on the face of the Marine corporal guarding the door. Obviously, there must have been a good deal of traffic in and out of this door in the few past moments. Still, it told him nothing of what he really wanted to know.

Had Sam leaped home?

Slamming his hand against the scanning panel, he heard it click in recognition of his palm print and the door slid swiftly upward. Hurrying in, he came to a full stop just over the threshold. With a quiet hiss, the door slid down behind him, shutting off the view from any curious eyes in the corridor.

There was a tight knot of people around someone standing near the bed. When Verbena moved forward to take the hand of the person

they clustered around, Al caught a glimpse of a familiar face.

Frozen, unable to admit how much he needed it to be Sam, Al stood still and silent outside the group, and watched.

Verbena looked up into the face of the man who was standing as still and frozen as Al. "Can you tell us who you are?"

Slowly, the man's gaze shifted to her and an incredible play of emotions ran across his face. There was shock and confusion and...was it disbelief?

Darcie moved up behind him, placing one hand on his shoulder. "Perhaps you should lie down," she suggested in that soft, yet firm physician's voice of hers.

The man in the snug, white permie suit stiffened and shook his head. It was a tiny, uncertain movement that looked so much like Sam in trouble that it tore at Al's heart, making him briefly close his eyes against it.

Please, please, if it is Sam, let him remember who he is.

Opening his eyes after the silent prayer, he saw Darcie, her hand still on the man's permie suited shoulder, gesture to someone on the other side of the circle whom Al could not see. There was movement of the assorted clump of personnel and Donna came forward. She stopped, her profile to Al.

Praying, the admiral's eyes shifted back to the man wearing Sam Beckett's face. The hazel eyes had darkened, shifting to Donna's, and the moment stretched impossibly long as they searched each other's features.

Please, God, please, let it be Sam. Let him be okay. Let him say--

"Donna?" It was Sam's voice, confused and hesitant, as if he could not believe his eyes. But, it was his voice, his tone, and his inflection.

His wife smiled a brilliant smile through worried tears, and lifted her arms.

"Donna!" Sam breathed again, stepping away from the doctor's steadying, professional hand. "It worked!" His voice lifted with wonder as he joyfully embraced her. "I'm home!"

The embrace was long and followed by kisses --kisses that were passionate, and tender, and as obviously needed by the physicist as life-giving, crystal clear water was to a man dying of thirst.

Smiles of relief and approval appeared on the faces of those in the group that hovered

nearby...but still Al stood unmoving.

It was Sam. Sam was home. All he had to do was walk over there and--

As if finally aware there were others in the room, Sam drew away from his wife. Tucking her under one arm, he looked from face to smiling face.

"Verbena," he said in a voice that seemed both recognition and greeting, and leaned forward to kiss her cheek. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you too, Sam."

The hazel eyes shifted to the small programmer next to the psychiatrist, and he extended a hand. "Gooshie!"

The group moved then, pulling tighter about Sam and Donna who remained side by side as if they would never let each other go again. Sam was lost to Al's view as the greetings and exclamations went on--everyone talking at once, welcoming the time traveler home.

Sam remembered them all, one by one, the names coming more quickly once the initial shock of retrieval had been broken. Still, Al stood silent, just inside the door, not realizing that perhaps in some ways his own shock was just as profound.

"Where's Al?" he heard Sam say and there was a hesitation in the festivities.

Like a blooming spring flower, the circle of well-wishers parted, allowing Al his first clear view of Sam.

The kid met his eyes and grinned. Dimly, the admiral was aware of the fond smiles now turned his way, but his attention was for the physicist, who had begun to walk toward him, calling his name.

As if by their own volition, Al's feet carried him forward a few steps to the center of the room. There were so many things he wanted to say, so many things he needed to say, but none of them would come to his lips as he stopped before his friend--the friend who, up until a few scant moments ago, he thought he had lost forever.

Sam stopped before him. "Al..."

Don't get mushy, Calavicci.

The thought ran briefly through his head as he stopped, intending only to punch Sam hard on

the shoulder in a brotherly, perfectly acceptable, manly greeting. But somewhere in the act of raising his arm to deliver the punch, he met Sam's eyes, which were full of tears, and the movement turned into a sweep that brought the physicist to him in a bone-cracking, back-thumping hug.

Sam is home! Thank you, God, Sam is home!!

Eyes filling with tears of his own, Al fought against them, hugging Sam to him all the harder. He hadn't cried in front of his crew yet--not in all these horrible, terrifying years --and he wasn't about to start now. Not by a long shot!

Taking a step away, he kept his hands on Sam's shoulders and shook him, hard. "You stupid son of a bitch," he said angrily, and was appalled to hear the telltale quiver in his voice. "I'm gonna kick your butt from here to eternity and back again!"

Then, as the raw emotion gripped him again, he swept Sam back into another hug.

"Damn it, Sam!"

For a long moment, they remained in the embrace, then by mutual agreement, broke free.

Sam took a step away, meeting Al's eyes, as Donna joined them, wrapping her arm around her husband's. "It's good to see you, too, Al," he said wryly, smiling at them both.

"Good to see you'," the admiral growled, surreptitiously wiping away tears as Sam did the same. "I'll give you 'good to see you'. Do you have any idea what a pain in the butt you've been, Beckett?" Al could not keep the widening grin from his face though he did his best to scowl. "The parties I turned down because of you, the women I haven't had time for, the playoff games I missed?!"

"I'm sorry, Al," Sam said meekly, hiding a smile. "I won't let it happen again."

"Damn straight it won't happen again," Al snapped. "'Cause tomorrow I'm taking that damn Accelerator apart with a blow torch!"

And then the sheer joy of it overtook him and he engulfed Sam in one more spontaneous hug.

"Welcome back, buddy," Al said, exchanging a quick smile with Donna over Sam's shoulder. Then he squeezed his eyes shut tight. "Welcome home..."



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"The Crystalline Web"

Of all the scenarios I expected when Sam finally came back to us, I don't think I ever really thought past the whooping and hollering stage. I guess I just kinda thought he'd come home and then things would be...okay.

But they're not 'okay'. I've gotta get my ducks in a row for this 'deactivation team' hovering at my gates. I can feel 'em out there, just waiting for the witching hour so they can swoop in here and pick us clean. I have roughly ten hours.

Right now, Sam's downstairs calling Tom and his mother. Tom knows everything. I had to tell him, a couple of years ago. It just wouldn't have been right not to--and security be damned. Well, not exactly. Tom's got a decent security clearance, so I swore him to secrecy and spilled it all.

The lot.

I went to see Mrs. Beckett too, and talked to her about it. To her, I gave an abbreviated version, explaining that Sam was deep into an experiment and...away. It wasn't really a lie.

I was as much up front with her as I could be, without blowin' the lid off everything, closing with the confession that Tom knew it all. That way, she knew she'd have someone she could trust to fill her in with the straight scoop, if that

became necessary.

Funny thing, she didn't really seem to need to know Tom knew. She trusted me, though I'm not sure why. She never pressed for details, and Tom says she never pressured him either. She was worried, sure, but she had faith in us.

Faith in me.

I guess maybe that's why I called her every few months and told her what I could in the way of an update, because I knew she wasn't gonna go all hysterical and push for details I couldn't give. Sam's family is a lot like him--straight from the shoulder kinda people.

Even after everything, she still invites me to visit. I even went a couple of times with Donna. I mean, just to keep in touch so she felt in some way she was in touch with Sam. I'm glad things worked out the way they did so I don't have to go with that final, terrible news that Sam was never coming home.

Because he did come home and he's okay. Well, sorta. After he finishes his phone calls, he's agreed to a once over by Medical. If everything checks out there--and Darcie and Verbena assure me there's no reason it shouldn't --he'll be stopping by here before he goes home with Donna.

When he does, I have to give him the lousy news that despite everything, I lost the fight and they're closing us down.

At least we got him home before they pulled the plug. But, damn it...Sam's just come home from the toughest tour of duty any guy's ever pulled, and he deserves to go home with his wife for some heavy duty R&R. It just really stinks that he can't go home knowing that he gets to come back here and dot all the i's and cross all the t's at his leisure.

He deserves that. At the very least, he deserves that.

* * *

After a dozen fruitless phone calls, Al was reduced to staring at his Rolodex. There was no one left to call. No one left to beg, bamboozle or cajole. No one who was answering their phone anyway.

Briefly, he considered calling McBride. Maybe there was a last ditch effort in there somewhere. Now that Sam was home, maybe Al could get an extension until the physicist could talk to the Committee himself. Sam and that puppy dog look of his could be pretty damn

convincing.

He was just reaching for his phone another time when there was a soft knock on his door. Pushing the Rolodex aside, he sat back as Sam walked in, accompanied by Donna. Getting to his feet, Al crossed the room to meet them midway.

"Everything okay?" he asked, trying to read their expressions. Someone had given Sam a white lab coat to wear over his permie suit.

"Fine," Donna said with a smile, her fingers entwined with Sam's. "We're on our way home."

Al forced himself to meet her gaze. "Have you told him yet?"

Donna hesitated, and Sam glanced from his wife to his friend.

"Told me what?"

"I didn't..." Donna's fingers tightened about her husband's. "...I didn't even think about it. I was just so glad to have him home that..." She let the words trail off as Sam regarded her in concern.

"Tell me what?" he asked again, a bit more forcefully. His expression changed to suspicion. "Is it something about Tom?" The physicist's hazel eyes darkened with fear.

"Tom?" Al asked, surprised. "I thought you called Tom."

"I tried. But they said he was out of reach, doing BUDS training for new recruits. Are you...telling me that's a lie?"

"No," Al said, "it's not a lie...if they say he's out overseeing BUDS, then he is."

"Then, what haven't you told me?"

Al was still the bearer of bad news. Geez, it wasn't like it was the end of the world. He'd told Sam a lot worse things, and the physicist had always dealt with them. At least he wasn't delivering this news while Sam was still lost in time.

Slowly, he drew a deep breath, thinking he may as well get it over with. "They're shutting us down, Sam. Midnight tonight. I--"

"No, they're not," an unexpected voice came from the open door behind them.

Looking past Sam, Al saw Teddy Bartlett hovering in the doorway. Lt. Commander Turner was at his side. The Government liaison still looked shaken, but less pale than he had been in the Imaging Chamber.

Al scowled. "What the--?"

"I brought Mr. Bartlett in on my responsibility, sir," Turner cut in smoothly, drawing her shoulders back. "He has news I think you may want to hear."

"I don't wanna hear anything this toad has to say," Al snapped, but Sam intervened.

"You're Teddy Bartlett, aren't you?"

"That's right," the man answered, stepping into the room with the air of someone bearding the lion in his den. "You remember me?"

"Of course," Sam answered, frowning. "You were in the Imaging Chamber, arguing with Al and..." His eyes lit with sudden understanding. "...and in the leap, in the past. You talked to me, just before they retrieved me."

"Yes," Bartlett admitted, shoulders going back as if it were a great admission. "I did." His gaze traveled to Al. "And I just called Senator McBride and told her so."

"You what?" Al asked, not believing what he had heard.

"I told her," the liaison explained determinedly, "what I saw, and that I remember that happening--the auction--in the past."

"You do?" Al asked, still suspicious. This just sounded too easy.

"Yes, I do. I remember that little old lady talking to herself when I walked up. And I remember her telling me she wasn't from around there, when everyone else said she was the one running that whole show."

Beginning to grin, Al looked from Bartlett to Sam and back to the liaison again.

"I thought at the time she was nuts," Bartlett admitted. "The auction was late starting because she had some kind of 'spell' and had to be revived."

"So I remembered that day quite well, and the antique trunk I bought at the auction that afternoon, and...hell, I just saw it all over again in the Imaging Chamber! Not even Al Calavicci could come up with such an elaborate trick." The man looked sour as if it pained him greatly to admit it. "For starters, there's no way he could've gotten all the little details right."

"So," Sam said, "you believe that I was really leaping."

"Yeah." Bartlett looked as if he were about to choke on the word. "And," he continued doggedly, "that's why I called McBride. To tell her so. To tell her I was...wrong."

"And she believed you?" Donna asked warily, sharing a glance with Al.

"She did," came the confirmation. "She's giving you a two month extension in funds. The whole Committee is flying out here tomorrow to have a look at what's in that trunk in my

attic."

Al's grin was wicked. Ten to one what was in it, was the lost handlink. Sam hadn't arrived home with it, so the link had remained in 1993 when he leaped. With a great deal of luck on their side, someone in that era had locked it away, back in the trunk.

This was getting better all the time. "You gonna need protection from Weitzman?" Al asked, loving every minute of it. "I can arrange some..."

Bartlett's glance was venomous. "Don't push it, Calavicci. I really thought you were pulling a fast one here. When I found out you weren't, I was constrained to report it. But..." He scowled. "...that doesn't mean I have to like it."

"Do you think the handlink is still in the trunk?" Donna asked.

"I'm sure of it," Al said jovially. "And that's our proof." Delighted, he clapped Sam on the shoulder. "Proof, Sammy boy, that you did what you said you did!"

The physicist nodded slowly. "I guess so. I need to write out a deposition," he agreed, still looking a bit shell-shocked by the news, "about what I saw in the trunk, and what I remember of the incident."

"Sam," Donna began in protest, but her husband turned to her.

"It won't take long," he assured her. His eyes shifted to Anne, who was still hovering behind Bartlett at the door. "Do you think you can find someone to take one?"

"Sure," she agreed with a smile. "Right away, Dr. Beckett."

As she moved away, Bartlett followed. "I'll give one, too," he said as if he were agreeing to major surgery. "Then, we'll be ready for tomorrow." He cast a look over his shoulder at Al. "This is gonna mean all kinds of extra paperwork."

"Enough to choke a horse," the admiral agreed with a grin, watching the disgruntled liaison take his leave.

For a moment, Donna hesitated, then placed a hand on Sam's shoulder. "I have some things to do," she said, "since it'll be a bit until you're through here."

"But..." Sam began to protest.

But she shook her head with a tiny, knowing smile at Al.

"I'll be back, and we can go home when you've finished." With that, she turned and

left the room, firmly closing the door behind her and leaving the two men alone.

The significance of the act was not lost on Al. They were alone for the first time since Sam had arrived home. Mushy stuff he did not need, not after the scene he'd made in front of his staff in the Waiting Room. Sheesh, it was probably all over the Project now--the admiral had been in tears! Just what his reputation needed!

"Have a seat, Sam," Al said lightly, waving a hand at the chair before his desk. "I have about five years of back requisitions for toilet paper you need to countersign while we're waiting for Anne."

"Al..." Sam reached out and caught his arm before he could move out of reach. "Wait."

Oh, great, here it comes. The great speech about gratitude and buddies and stuff.

"Look, Sam--"

"I know you don't want to hear this," the physicist said, "but I've got to say it so you know I mean it." He waited until the admiral's eyes came back to his. "You really stood by me during this entire mess. A lot of people wouldn't have taken the grief I gave you about it all and bailed out on me a long time ago. I want to thank you, Al, for sticking with me."

"Aw, Sam...you'd've done the same thing for me..."

Sam nodded, then momentarily dipped his eyes. "I know...it can't have been easy. For starters, Tina's no longer here and--"

"Forget it," Al cut in with another wave of his hand. He grinned cockily. "Besides, what's a buddy for, right?"

For one terrible moment, he thought Sam was going to hug him, but the physicist only smiled with that understanding look that Al dreaded. He hated it when Sam knew what he was thinking, whether or not he forced him to say it.

"Right," Sam said softly, as Anne's discreet knock came on the door.

* * *

Sam felt the enfolding welcome of his house the moment he walked in the front door with Donna. For the first time in years he was walking into a place where he truly belonged, in the here and now. There was no wary dance of figuring out who he was supposed to be filling in for, and why. There was only home, and a woman who knew exactly who he was, and who loved

him.

Still, the first few moments were somehow... awkward. What did someone do after years of absence? He couldn't simply walk in, take off his shoes, have some dinner and go to bed.

Could he?

Standing uncertainly on the threshold, he looked over the front hall and the living room from a discrete distance. This was his--theirs --but in some odd way he was reluctant to step back into it under the pretense that he had never been away. What if nothing here was real, and it all vanished away the first time he reached out to touch it?

"Come in," Donna said gently, a hand on his shoulder. "I'll get us something to drink and you can look around."

Nodding, Sam moved into the living room as his wife started in the direction of the kitchen. There was a concert piano sitting in the soaring open space of a glass wall that led to the terrace. How could he have forgotten this? Drawn, he was moving toward it when Donna stopped on her way out of the room.

"I can fix you something to eat," she offered. "Are you hungry?"

Absently, Sam shook his head, running light fingers along the polished wood of the beloved instrument. Someone had kept it lovingly cleaned and in perfect condition. He was hungry, but it was a hunger of the soul, and this was just what he needed to ease the terrible, gnawing need.

"Come sit beside me," he said to her, drawing her back from her errand in the kitchen. Eyes on the piano, he slid onto the bench. Almost reverently, he revealed the keys and ran his hands lightly over them. Sound filled the space and he smiled, feeling it fill him as well. It was still perfectly in tune, kept that way, no doubt by...

Donna's hands slid onto his shoulders, caressing them lightly in much the same loving, tender way his own hands moved over the keys. So many times she had stood behind him like this, touching him, listening while he played.

So many times--

Abruptly, Sam let the music stop and swiveled on the bench, swinging his legs over it so they were both on the same side.

"How could I have forgotten you?" he asked, face lifted to her in anguish. "How could I have forgotten all of this? Us, together for so long."

Smiling, Donna's hands closed on his shoulders. "I think," she said softly, looking down into his eyes, "it was a blessing."

"A blessing?" Appalled, he took her in his arms and pulled her to him. Her back felt so real, so warm under his hands and he had been denied even the memory for so long. "How could it be a blessing?"

His wife ran her fingers lightly through his hair for a moment, studying his face as if nourishing her own soul with the sight of him looking up at her so earnestly. "You couldn't have done what you did, if you remembered." She ran one hand tenderly across his cheek. "And I think you had to do that to come home to me."

"But all those years..." Needing her next to him, he drew her near, resting his head on her chest as she stood before him, listening to the vital, steady sound of her heart. "It was too long."

"It was as long as it needed to be," she said gently, burying her hands in his hair and resting her chin on his head as if to hold him to her forever. "So in the end, you had everything you needed to bring you home."

Sighing, he nuzzled his cheek against her, feeling her respond. Turning the caress into a kiss at the base of her throat, he closed his eyes at the intensity of it. Donna, his love and his companion, was his again.

Getting to his feet, he took her hand and led her to their bedroom. There was no hesitation in his step, or hers. It was a journey they had traveled together a thousand times or more, and it was none the less precious for that fact. Perhaps, in a way, it was more treasured, for all the years it had been denied them.

In the room--their room--he turned to her and took her back into his arms, feeling as if in that one act he was prepared to believe without reservation, to let himself be truly home.

There was no need, now, for wariness, for vigilance that at any moment he may make a misstep and find it had all been a terrible mistake.

Kissing her, hands clasped about her face to hold her dear, he drew in her scent, and the scent of this place. There was the rich, dark aroma of heather in the potpourri she kept on the dresser, lighter fragrances of her shampoo and floral of her cologne blended with the heady scent that was Donna's alone, and through it all the clean, dry smell of the desert that shielded and surrounded them.

Home.

With a sound like a groan, he pulled her to him, wanting the scent, and touch, and taste of her to fill all his senses so completely that there was no room for anything else. Passion was memory, and reality, and he wanted to memorize it all, take it in so fully that never, ever, could he forget it again.

Toppling them both over onto the bed, with her body wrapped around his as if they were now and always would be one creature, he was certain this time it would last forever.

* * *

I was going back to my apartment for that long rest after the lovebirds took off, I really was. But I got distracted with first one thing and then another, and before I knew it, a couple of hours had slipped by and I still hadn't gone. Somehow, I just couldn't seem to walk out the damn door.

For one thing, I made some calls and left an urgent message--okay, 'order' is a better word--for Tom's superiors to have him call me a.s.a.p. I saw that look in Sam's eye when he thought there was something we weren't telling him about Tom. He needs to talk to his big brother.

And Tom needs to talk to him, not me. That's why the number I left for Tom to call was Sam's. Okay, so I pulled rank. It just sounds better, not to mention gets things moving a little faster, if the powers-that-be think Tom's answering a message to call the admiral. Hell, if you can't throw your rank around sometime, what's the use of having it?

Then I went down to my quarters and packed up some stuff I wanted to take back to my apartment, now that it looked like I was actually going to be spending some time there again. It will be nice to start living a normal life again...

Normalcy, now there's a concept!

Anyway, it took two Marine corporals and yours truly to lug all my stuff out to the trunk of my car--it really felt like I, too, was going home. I'd just started the engine when Donna's call was transferred to my car phone.

At first, when I heard her voice, I got kinda worried that something had happened to Sam. But it wasn't that at all. Donna sounded drowsy...but happy. Real happy. But what she wanted to tell me blew me away.

I dunno what jogged her memory, and I wasn't

about to ask, but she was calling to tell me about Ruthie. Ruthie! And it was a real kick in the butt. Donna was supposed to be picking her up at Albuquerque International in three hours, and she'd forgotten!

Forgotten...can't imagine why, with all the stuff that's been going on around here, but it had completely slipped her mind. I guess that's what she was gonna tell me several days ago and neither of us got back to it.

Seems it had been Ruthie on the phone that day I got called to DC. She and Donna had set up this visit, the one I'd kinda originated in Boston last week, and then things around here had gone kinda...well, nuts. I mean, why should Donna tell me anyway? Ruthie was coming to visit her, not me.

But now Sam was home and all bets were off... and Ruthie was gonna be landing in New Mexico in a little under three hours.

So, I did the only thing I could. I told Donna I'd go get Ruthie and explain things. I mean, it just made sense, right? It wasn't that I had any ulterior motive or anything. She was my ex and that was that. So what if we'd reached a sorta truce in Boston? Truces with ex-wives are usually very fleeting things. Believe me, I know.

Still, I was feelin' pretty pleased with myself when I lit out from the Project for Albuquerque. It felt good, doin' the decent thing and goin' to pick up Ruthie. And it'd be good to see her, have a few laughs, pass a little time--now that I had plenty of time to pass.

Normalcy again.

It wasn't until I was standing there at the 'Arrivals' gate, watching the passengers from Flight 286 from Boston disembark, that I actually started to get a little...nervous.

* * *

Al shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, waiting for Ruthie to come into view. What if she didn't believe him when he told her the reason why Donna didn't come? What if she thought it all was a set-up to trick her into coming to New Mexico? What if she slapped his face right here in front of all these people and turned around and got right back on the plane?!

As he saw Ruthie come through the gate, all those unwarranted thoughts fled. She threw a smile and a wave at him with her free hand, her

petite frame struggling with a carry-on bag that would have been better suited for a pro footballer.

So far so good. She wasn't scowling suspiciously at him anyway. Breaking into a genuinely pleased grin, Al went to meet her.

"Hi," she called as he drew closer and took the carry-on.

"Hi yourself," he said, a little surprised when she automatically drew him into a quick hug. He returned it with the same spontaneous enthusiasm, then took a step back to look her over. "You look great."

She cocked a wry eyebrow at him. "It's only been a little over a week, Al. I can't have changed that much."

A week. An awfully long week, in which more had happened than he'd had time to assimilate. But then, looking at the tired lines about her eyes, he thought perhaps it had been a long week for her too.

He smiled again, then realizing they were blocking traffic, gently took her elbow and began guiding her down the concourse to the Baggage Claim. The small talk continued every step of the way, the truce called in Boston still holding.

It seemed like they were old and dear friends--like the ugly divorce and the years separating them had never taken place. Perhaps Ruthie's whole reason for this visit--given her grandmother's death--was to seek out some undefined sense of normalcy, too, before she went on with the rest of her life.

Perhaps they both needed each other at this point in their lives far more than either of them realized.

As they stood watching the empty carousel start to revolve in preparation of receiving the first piece of luggage, Al realized just how much he wanted her to stay. But would she, after he told her about the change in Donna's situation? But he had to tell her...and just hope for the best.

"Unh, Ruthie--" he said, the same instant she spoke as well.

"Where's--?" she began, then hesitated.

Hastily Al waved her to continue. "Ladies first."

"Where's Donna? I thought she was going to pick me up." She shot him a smile. "Not that I'm complaining about your company, you understand."

"Unh, well..." Uncomfortable, his gaze slid

away. Damn, he didn't want to tell her. What if she didn't want to stay? "Things have changed at the Project." A smile lit his eyes despite his discomfort of his present situation. "Sam's home!"

"He is?" Ruthie's smile was genuine. "That's wonderful and..." She hesitated a moment. "...everything's okay?"

"Oh sure," Al assured her, hoping it still was. "I mean, it will be, when he rests up for a while. It...I mean...being away kinda took a lot outta him."

"Out of you, too," she murmured knowingly.

Again, he floundered, knowing that Ruthie knew there was a whole lot more behind this than Sam simply having been 'away' for an extended trip and coming home unexpectedly. "But, he'll be...fine," he finished awkwardly.

"I'm glad to hear it." She hesitated again. "So, I guess this isn't a good time for Donna to have a house guest."

"Well, no...maybe not...but...I mean..."

She turned away, watching the first piece of luggage sliding down the chute and onto the carousel. "I'll just make other plans. If you can give me a ride to a hotel near here, I'll give Donna a call and then catch a flight home tomorrow."

"No," Al protested, catching her arm to turn her back to him. "I mean, you've come all this way. And I know Donna'd want to see you."

Ruthie smiled. "Al, Donna hasn't seen Sam in...how long?"

"A long time," he admitted unwillingly.

"So she doesn't need me hanging around in the way."

"You wouldn't be in the way," he assured her, "Not really. Those two kids are gonna have to come up for air sometime." Feeling as if he were only digging himself in deeper, he shuffled his feet uneasily, and cast a glance at the luggage, the crowd, anywhere but Ruthie's face. Hell, he was just going to have to come right out with it.

"I'd like for you to stay," he said, meeting her gaze. "I really would. I've got some free time now...now that Sam's not...away, and I'd... I'd like to spend it with you."

For a moment, Ruthie studiously regarded him, then her glance shifted beyond his shoulder to the loaded carousel. "There's my luggage."

Without giving him an answer, she moved toward the slowly revolving belt. Al followed and dutifully lifted off the single, brown

suitcase she pointed out as it circled past. Something in his gut promptly began to worry that she was going to ask him to take her bag and put it straight back on the plane.

He stopped a few yards from the baggage claim, when Ruthie put her hand on his arm and said, "Give me a minute." Then she disappeared into the Ladies Room, leaving him to stand guard over her things and worry that he'd blown it.

Any other woman he could have sweet-talked into spending time with him before the first piece of luggage had hit the slide. But Ruthie wasn't 'any woman', and her answer meant more to him that any attempted pick-up in an airport.

When she reappeared, she seemed refreshed, and was smiling again.

"What'd you decide?" he asked, then could have kicked himself for not letting her tell him in her own time. But he really was on pins and needles wanting to know.

"I think I'd like to spend some time here," she said. "I've never been to a place with an exotic name like Stallion's Gate, it should be interesting."

Relieved, he smiled in return. "Oh yeah, right up there with New York and Las Vegas." Picking up her bags, he motioned her toward the sliding glass door leading to the parking lot, and shot her a grin that was pure vintage Calavicci. "Wait'll you see my new set of wheels..."

She laughed for the first time since arriving, and the feeling inside him that had tried to rekindle itself in Boston, unexpectedly sparked again.

This time, it ignited.

* * *

Sam's reality was a smooth and placid sea that cradled him in warm waters that would never harm him. Drowsing--neither fully asleep nor fully awake--he was aware of his surroundings only as a dimly perceived ambience. It was a state of being, a rightness, a wholeness. He was home, in his own bed, and the house was quiet and dark around him. Next to him was...an emptiness.

Reality spun, shaken to its core, and its replacement was a complete and authentic as its precursor. It was horribly complete down to the last detail. He'd lived in Destiny until the Project was built, then he moved into quarters there. Al said he should date more, and he did,

occasionally. But there was no one special. No one who fit him so completely, melded so perfectly with his soul as the one who had left him.

He was alone in a terrible raging storm of grief and pain that spanned years of heartache and loneliness. It was an aching void, only partially filled with work and achievement that could never heal the breach of a single dreadful wound in his life's experiences.

She was gone. She had left him at the altar, and the grief and pain swelled and grew until he cried out, screaming her name against it.

"Donna!"

And it seemed he could hear her voice.

"Sam? Sam, it's okay. It was only a dream."

Shaken again, he opened his eyes, reeling from the shock...and found himself standing beside his own bed. Before him stood...

His wife. The woman who had been with him for years, who had waited for him so faithfully to come home. The other, lonely reality was gone.

Breathing her name in a sob, he caught her to him. He felt her arms go about him, felt the solid vitality of her against his body, and clung to it desperately. Closing his eyes, he fiercely willed the other reality away. Faintly, it still remained as a lingering aftermath of terror and pain.

"I dreamed...that you'd left me," he murmured against her hair. "I thought you were gone."

"No, Sam," she said reassuringly, her own voice sounding frightened. "I just went to make a call." Soothing him as one might a child, she held him and rubbed his shoulders slowly. "I shouldn't have left you alone. I'm sorry."

"No." He shook his head, keeping his eyes closed tightly with the irrational fear that if he opened them, the awful dream reality would come again. "I dreamed you left me. At the Chapel. You didn't come."

"But I did come," she assured him. "I did, Sam. And we went to Professor LoNigro's cabin for our honeymoon, remember?"

The light touch of her fingers on his cheek encouraged him to open his eyes.

"Remember?" she repeated when he met her gaze. Her smile was warm and tender. "Remember the cabin?"

"Yes..." The word was faint and filled with tears. Trembling, he rested his forehead against hers, calling up all the memories and the emotions they evoked. "Yes, I remember."

Concerned, she pulled away slightly so she could see his face. "Are you okay? Should I call Verbena and--"

"No," he said hastily, tightening his arms about her before she could move out of his reach. "No. I'm fine."

Burying his face in the silkiness of her hair, he repeated it as if to convince himself. "I'm fine."

She was here, and this life was real. The other was the imposter, a dream spawned by the lurking memory of an older dream that had never completely healed.

With a last shudder, he let the apprehension fall away. He focused on the woman in his arms and the memory she had called to mind. LoNigro's cabin, the lake in the early summer, stars over chill black water and the warm, heady spice of passion came flooding back to him.

Completeness, yes.

Hungry, his lips sought hers. She responded as she had in those early days, as attuned to his passion as if it were one and the same as her own.

Driven, he moved with her to the bed, covering her face, her hair, her neck, with kisses that deepened the oneness between them.

One spirit, one soul, one body.

As it had been that morning in the cabin by the lake, it was again, and that, for the moment at least, pushed back the terrible, lingering ache of the dream.

* * *

Considering it was after seven, the first order of business, Al decided, was to feed Ruthie. Airline food, he found from experience, tended to have an adverse effect on disposition. Then, when he had her well fed and comfortable, he would broach the next subject...where she was going to stay.

It was incredible, he was actually nervous about suggesting she stay at his place. Al Calavicci, whose way with women was legend--or oughta be--was nervous about asking his ex to his apartment. It was unbelievable.

The problem was, Ruthie always could read him too well. Whenever he wasn't actively armed against her, it was like she looked right into his soul and he had absolutely no secrets.

Like now, when they reached his car. Like the way she noticed his garment bag and boxes in his trunk. All she did was raise a singular

questioning eyebrow.

Hastily, he had scooted them aside to make room for her luggage. "I was on my way home from the Project when Donna called."

"You have to pack to go home?" she asked wryly, and he'd quickly closed the trunk.

"Yeah, well...I've been staying there lately. But now that Sam's home, I'm not planning to do that anymore."

"I see," was all she said.

The hell of it was, Al thought, using the act of opening her passenger door to avoid her eyes, that she really did see--too much.

Dinner at Santino's passed pleasantly enough. By the end of their meal, they had almost completely relaxed in each other's company. It was like old times, as if they had rekindled the bond they had shared in the early days of their marriage, before the darker days of secrets and lies. Now, with a good meal behind them, Al sensed that Ruthie was as comfortable talking with him as he felt with her. Maybe now would be a good time to bring up the subject of accommodations.

As if the thought threatened the newfound ease between them, Al looked for distraction before he took the plunge.

"You want some more wine?" he asked, picking up the more full than empty bottle from the table as their waiter cleared their empty plates.

Ruthie shook her head. "No, a glass with dinner is about my limit these days." Dropping her napkin on her plate, she gave the waiter a quick 'thank you' smile then turned her full attention back to Al.

The admiral put the bottle down and caught the waiter's eye to stall him. "Coffee, then?" he asked Ruthie.

"Mmm, sounds good."

"Coffee it is," Al said, turning his attention to the waiter. "I'd like a refill, and decaf for the lady, with real cream, please."

As the man nodded and moved away, Ruthie put her elbows on the table top and leaned on her hands, delighted. "You still remember?"

"Honey, we were married for four years...not four minutes." With a grin, he began searching his pockets for a cigar. "There are some things you just don't forget."

"You're right about that," she agreed, her eyes darkening slightly. "Like...the whole time we were married, I never saw you sit at the same

table as an open bottle and not drink any."

Lighting his cigar, he gave a nonchalant shrug. "I don't drink any more."

"Not even the occasional glass of wine?"

"Nope. I've been on the wagon for years." He sat forward, blowing out smoke, forearms resting on the table. "I haven't had a drink since..." He stopped himself, back on guard, not wanting to get into those waters. "...since I decided it was a problem."

"I see." Again those same two words, and Al decided he may as well bring up what was on his mind.

"Look, Ruthie, about your visit."

Her dark eyes came back to him and he almost lost his nerve. What the hell was the matter with him, anyway?

"There, unh...aren't any hotels in Stallion's Gate." He forced a grin. "Matter of fact, there ain't much of anything in Stallion's Gate except a gas station, a 7-11, and the people who work for the Project. There is a hotel in Destiny. But that's..." He shrugged, considering exaggerating the distance but deciding against it. "...thirty miles away."

"Mmm." Damn, she was gonna make him spell it out.

"That's kinda long distance for a visit. So I thought--" He interrupted himself as the waiter brought their coffee, then continued when the man was gone. "I was thinking...maybe you'd...wanna stay at my place."

"Your place?" Suddenly Ruthie's interest seemed to be focused on pouring cream into her cup.

"Yeah, I, unh..." He grinned wryly. "You can sleep in my bed."

Unexpectedly, Ruthie's eyes came back to him, flashing indignation, then rapidly softened into a smile as she realized he was paraphrasing her own invitation to him in Boston.

"Let me guess," she said. "You're going to 'sit up' every night for a week."

"Well, actually," Al said sheepishly, "I was planning on taking the couch." He scanned her expression anxiously, looking for any clue as to what she was really thinking. "What'd you say?"

"Sounds fine," she agreed, lifting her coffee to her lips. "I'd like to."

Easy as that, the battle was won, and Al found himself grinning. What had he been so worried about anyway? The Calavicci talent for getting what he wanted was legend...and he just wouldn't think about exactly what it was here

that he truly wanted.

* * *

With the exhaustion and emotional upheavals of the day, sleep came easily a second time to Sam. He drifted off thinking of his family. In the morning, he would call his mom and Katie again and talk to them a bit more, tying himself still more completely to the fact that he was now back in his own world. He just wished that he could talk to Tom...

With a wrenching force, a powerful dream shift in reality ripped his world down the middle. Again it came in a furious flash, this dream that was like an entire lifetime lived with a terrible nightmare.

Tom was dead. Died in 'Nam. His dad had cried when he told him. It was the only time he ever saw his father cry--until he had lost the farm and the fight had gone out of him. Sam had been at MIT, out of touch, of mind, not near enough to see the need and help.

Tom was dead!

Jolted as if by a physical blow, Sam awoke from a nightmare a second time, this time screaming his brother's name. Instantly, Donna was at his side, calling his name, telling him it was only a dream, that he was safe.

Yes, Sam thought shakily, feeling his wife's arms about his shoulders. He was safe...but was Tom? The dreadful reality still lingered in the dark about their bed and he could not shake the force of it.

The Navy had refused to let him talk to him this afternoon. Why? Had Al told them to wait? To break the news to him later, when he was rested?

"Is Tom dead?" he asked Donna impulsively, turning to see her expression as he asked it. "Did he die in 'Nam?"

"No!" Eyes wide with shock and concern, she drew a hand along his cheek. "Tom's fine. Don't you remember? He was at our wedding. He, your mom and Katie."

He stared at her for a long moment, trying desperately to recall an image from the depths of his mind. Finally, one came--Tom giving him a discreet thumbs up gesture when Sam caught a glimpse of him just before the wedding.

Sam nodded with a tense jerk, and cast back for all the memories he could garner of the event.

"I remember," he finally said. "He was

there." Saying it seemed to make it more real and brought back more memories. "He was the one who told me I should propose."

"He did?" Donna asked in surprise, then smiled, as if trying to ease her husband's fear. "Then, I'll have to thank him next time I see him."

Still deeply shaken, Sam just nodded. The next time they saw Tom, yes. But why was it so difficult to make himself believe there truly would be a next time?

The sound of the bedside phone broke the silence, and Sam jumped, badly startled. His wife leaned over to pick up the receiver, keeping one hand on his shoulder for reassurance.

"Hello," she said, her voice sounding incredibly calm to Sam, who still could not shake the dream. "What?" His wife's gaze turned to him. "Yes, this is Donna." She smiled fondly at her husband as she spoke to the caller. "I think who you really want to speak to is right here," she said and surprised Sam by handing the phone to him. "It's for you."

A bit uncertainly, the physicist took the receiver. At his wife's smile and encouraging nod he lifted it to his ear. "Hello?" he said uncertainly. Dimly, he felt Donna kiss his shoulder and slide from the bed to leave the room.

There was a long pause on the other end, so long Sam was beginning to think there must have been a mistake when a familiar voice said incredulously, "Sam?! Is that you?!"

For a heart-stopping instant, Sam froze. "Tom?" he asked tentatively, hardly daring to believe it could be true.

"Sam!!" The voice rose and Sam's throat closed in sudden tears. "Are you home, Little Brother?"

"Yeah." The physicist blinked back his tears. "I'm back."

"Are you okay?" his brother demanded. "Al said..." Tom stopped, and Sam realized he was afraid of continuing on a non-secure line. "Al said all kinds of things. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, everything's fine." He smiled, wiping away tears. "Just fine. But Tom..." He drew a deep breath, trying for composure. "...I have to ask you something."

"Okay, sure." Worry rang in every word. "What?"

"Did...did Dad lose the farm?"

"Lose the farm? Sam, are you sure you're

okay? Let me talk to Al."

"Al's not here. Just tell me, did Dad lose the farm?"

"No," Tom answered. "It was touch and go for a while, but after that bastard, Gus Vernon, got caught, things turned around. He and Mom kept the farm until Dad died, remember?"

Remember. Yes, he did remember. He did. He had remembered before, but it had gotten all tangled up with the false reality of the dream and he just had to be sure.

"Yeah, I remember," he said. "I've just been a little...confused since I got back."

"Since you got back where?" Tom asked. "Where are you? In the hospital? Or in Medical at the Project? Did--"

"I'm home," Sam interrupted firmly, smiling a bit at Tom's instant assumption of the responsible Big Brother role. "With Donna. They checked me out, and I'm fine."

"Damn it, Sam" Tom swore in a sudden change of mood, evidently convinced his brother was in no immediate danger. "Whatever possessed you to..." Again there was the faintest of pauses as Tom chose his words carefully. "...to take off like that? You could've been killed."

"I know," Sam admitted, ducking his head as if his older brother was there to see. "I know, but it worked out fine."

"Fine?!" Tom snorted as if in derision, but there was fondness in it. "You sound like you scrambled your brains to me." Again there was a quick change in topic. "Have you called Mom and Katie?"

"This afternoon," Sam said. "Donna and I are going to Hawaii in a few days, if things work out here. Can you come?"

"I'll be there," Tom said firmly. "You can count on it. Unless..." Sam could hear the shift back to concern. "...unless you need me sooner. I can get emergency leave here and--"

"No," the physicist assured him. "A few days is fine."

"You're sure?" his brother demanded. "Damn it, Sam, if you're holding out on me..."

"I'm not," Sam said with a smile. "I'll see you at Katie's in a few days, okay?"

"Okay," Tom agreed unwillingly. "I'm gonna be out in the field with all these wanna-be SEALs. You have Al get a message to me if you need me."

"All right," Sam agreed. "I will, I promise."

"Good enough," his brother said, then paused

as if reluctant to hang up. "You take care of yourself, Little Brother."

"I will, I will."

Answering Tom's goodbye, Sam returned the receiver to its place. Gazing at it, he felt the lurking tears threaten again.

Tom was alive. Whatever had happened, whenever it happened, Tom was alive!

* * *

Al opened the door of his small, one bedroom apartment in Stallion's Gate with a flourish, as if he were presenting some regal hotel.

Motioning for Ruthie to precede him inside, he entered after her, parking her luggage and one of his two boxes by the door. Before he put the second one down, he noticed her wandering about the small but tidy living room, giving the place the once over with a very discerning eye.

She stopped by the two-tiered bookcase along the far wall, where these days he kept just a handful of books and memorabilia, and even fewer photographs. She singled out a photo on the top shelf--one in a clear plastic frame--and immediately picked it up. He knew that the smile on her face was for the teenage boy with the mop of brown hair, standing under the protective arm of the taller young man wearing dress whites of a Navy ensign.

Still smiling, Ruthie held the photo toward him. "Sam?"

"Yeah, and his big brother, Tom...taken the day Tom graduated from Annapolis." He crossed to her, placing the box of possessions he still carried on top of the bookcase in order to take the photo from her. "I promised Sam I'd save this for him. Now that he's home, I'll have to remember to give it to him."

Something in the box caught her eye, and she fished it out, a slightly surprised--but nonetheless pleased--look on her face.

"You still have this," she remarked, turning the white coffee cup around to see the musical note decoration. Her thumb traced the pattern. "'Greensleeves'," she said. She turned her smile on him, without saying another a word.

There was no need to--they both knew it had been her cup at CLEAR STAR, and the implications of his long ownership were crystal clear.

"Yeah, well," Al began uncomfortably, not willing to admit he'd kept it for anything other than functional reasons. "My NASA one sorta got..." He wanted to say 'contaminated by a

toad', but that would sound childish, if not ludicrous.

"Broken?" she offered, filling in the long pause.

With a shrug, Al took the mug from her and quickly returned it to the box. "Close enough."

Chasing a distraction, he pointed to an adjoining doorway. "Unh...kitchen and laundry," he directed, "the bathroom and my--" His eyes automatically flicked to hers, then away again. "--your bedroom are down the hall."

He could feel her gaze on him, and wondered if she was as aware of the unintended innuendo as he.

Why the hell was he even thinking about that?!

Mustering up a cocky smile, he gave her a wink as his head flicked in the direction of his voluntary sleeping arrangements. "Couch."

* * *

It was late, Al thought in irritation. Too late to be just lying there on the damn couch, staring at the moonlight shadows on the ceiling. He should be asleep. Why the hell wasn't he?

Rolling onto his stomach, he reached over to pick up his Rolex. Damn. It was near 2 a.m.

Replacing the watch with a frustrated sigh, he yanked his pillow out from under his head and instead settled against the couch's arm for a moment. Hard as it was, it was still softer than the blasted pillow he had gotten out of the hall closet with the spare linen. Ruthie was the one who liked a firm pillow, not him. He should give it to her, trade her for the one she was sleeping on...

Ruthie.

Rolling to sitting with another sigh, Al refused to admit that the real reason he couldn't sleep was because his ex-wife was sleeping in his bed just twenty feet down the hall. All kinds of things were running through his head.

It was crazy stuff--stuff Dr. Ruth had talked to him about when she had been a visitor in the Waiting Room. Not the 'variety in sex' talk, but the important stuff...the stuff about love. At the time, it had made so much sense, the talk about how it was possible to love different people different ways.

And look where that had got him, he thought disgustedly, running his hands through his hair as he stared at the floor. Based on what the

therapist had said, he'd gone and told Tina that he loved her...and then found her in flagrante with Gooshie the very next week.

Love, hah!

But...there was that stuff Edna had told him before she died...

Pushing to his feet, Al abandoned that train of thought, because it was bound to get him in trouble. What he needed was something to drink from the kitchen. Some milk, maybe. Yeah. Everyone knew milk was supposed to help you sleep. Then he would come back, lay his head on this rock of a pillow and get some shut-eye, to be ready for the grilling he and Sam were going to get when the Funding Committee arrived tomorrow.

That, he thought as he padded barefoot into the kitchen, drawing on his white patterned robe over his pajamas as he went, he was actually looking forward to. Just wait until Weitzman's boy, Bartlett, turned traitor to the cause. He and Sam would have them eating out of their hands. Just like the old days. Beckett and Calavicci, the unbeatable team, was back in the game.

Unless...

Al chased away a yawn and pulled open the refrigerator door. He scowled at the contents illuminated within, and the rectangle of light the tiny bulb made on the floor at his bare feet.

Unless, Toad was setting him up. Nah, he wouldn't have stalled for the closure of the Project if that was the case. Toad wouldn't double-cross them. He wouldn't dare!

Nabbing the milk carton, he twisted off the cap and took a long drink.

A soft footstep, in the darkness beyond the light from the fridge door, startled him. He jumped, spilling milk down the front of his robe and pajamas before he managed to right the carton.

"Geez!" he protested, turning to Ruthie as she flipped on the overhead light. "Don't sneak up on a guy like that!"

Laughing, the petite woman shook her head, folding her arms over her nightgown as she leaned against the wall just inside the kitchen door. "You know, I always suspected you did that," she said, gesturing toward the milk carton still in Al's hand. "I could just never catch you at it."

"Yeah, well, it was the only thing you never caught me at," the admiral grumbled, putting the

top back on the milk and returning it to the fridge. He wiped his front unhappily. "Look whatcha made me do."

The glance he shot her revealed that he bore her no ill will, and she smiled. Coming forward, she took the dish cloth from where it hung neatly on its rack above the sink and approached him.

"Here," she said. "Let me help."

Her touch, as she wiped at the spill, pressed the two icy layers of cloth against his skin. "Ow! Hey, that's cold!"

"Take it off then," she suggested. "I'll rinse it out in the sink for you. You don't want the milk to sour in the cloth."

Offering nothing but a grunt of agreement, he gingerly pulled the sodden mess away from him to unbutton it. He handed her his robe first, then watched her as she turned to the sink to run some water. As he stripped off his pajama shirt, his thoughts turned to other evenings, so long ago...other times when they had shared a home, a kitchen just like this, a bed--

Smiling, she half-turned to take his top and, handing it over, he hastily moved a step or two away. In the silence, he became acutely aware of the sounds in the kitchen--the running water, Ruthie humming softly as she worked, and the jingle of his dog-tags against his bare chest. He felt quite vulnerable standing there in nothing but his pajama pants, with his ex-wife clad in a flimsy cotton nightgown...which if the light were at the correct angle he would undoubtedly be able to see right thr--

Damn.

"Unh...you want some milk?" he asked, trying to distract himself from where his thoughts were headed.

She laughed again. "No, thank you."

"Aw, juice then," he suggested, opening the refrigerator door again. "It's safe. I haven't even opened it." He took the container and held it out for her to examine. "See?"

Turning briefly from her task, she gave it a mock inspection, then nodded. As she gently wrung out his robe, she asked, "If you haven't been living here, how do you have perishable groceries in your refrigerator?"

"Carlie stocks it when I ask her," he answered without thought as he poured her a glass of juice. Then, at her glance, he grinned and explained. "She's my housekeeper. Sixty-five-years-young and smells like mega-pine cleaner. Here."

Ruthie returned the smile as she patted her hands dry, and took the offered glass of juice. "You don't have to explain your life to me, Al," she said, but her smile was warm as she took a sip of juice. Quite unexpectedly, her eyes dropped to regard his bare torso--and the old war scar across his mid-section.

Acutely self-conscious, he instinctively sucked in his stomach. When she noticed this reaction and hid a widening smile behind the hand holding her glass, he could stand it no longer. "What?"

"I was just thinking--remembering--how annoying these..." She flipped one of his dog-tags with her index finger. "...used to be. At certain times. Why do you still wear them? You're not on active duty at the moment are you?"

Trying to ignore the fire in his chest where her finger had touched, Al said, "I guess old habits die hard." He attempted a grin, desperately not wanting to think about what he was presently thinking about. But it was no good. She'd brought it up and that memory was way too vivid. The grin turned into a slight leer despite his efforts. "Besides, you always used to take 'em off me...at certain times..."

She sipped her juice again, conceding his point with nothing but a raised eyebrow.

Watching her, he was suddenly puzzled by the thought of what she was doing out here in the kitchen at two o'clock in the morning. She should have been asleep! There was no way he'd made enough noise to wake her...unless...was it possible that her head was filled with similar memories of what they had once shared too?

As if sensing his steady gaze, Ruthie met his eyes, and he found he was the one who had to look away. He moved past her to the sink.

"I'll, unh...go hang these up to dry," he said as he gathered up the wrung clothes, feeling the need to gain some real distance real fast.

"Okay," she said softly.

In the laundry room, he spread his robe and pajama shirt over the line stretched wall to wall above the washer and dryer. What the hell was the matter with him? This wasn't Maxine or Sharon all over again...this was Ruthie. And she wasn't threatening to sue for more alimony--she was here on vacation, at his invitation. He had no business wanting to woo her.

Then why couldn't he damn well stop thinking about it?

When he returned to the kitchen, he was somewhat relieved--and oddly disappointed--to find that Ruthie had finished her juice, placed the glass in the sink and was preparing to leave the room.

She threw him another smile...and his heart unexpectedly heaved with the same feeling he'd felt earlier at the airport, and a week ago in her bedroom in Boston. "Night."

"Unh, Ruthie?" He faltered when she met his eyes, hoping that this was one time she wouldn't see right inside him.

"Yes?"

"Could I, unh...trade you pillows? The one in the bedroom is softer and I know you don't like that so..." He let the sentence trail off, somehow feeling like an idiot.

"Sure," she agreed, turning for the door again. "That's fine."

Fine. Al went to the living room and got his pillow from the couch. When she didn't appear, he hesitantly made his way to the bedroom.

Arriving at the door, he found her standing by the bed with the other pillow in hand, waiting for him.

They met each other's eyes in the moonlight for an extended moment in time. When she finally offered the pillow, he traded it for the one he carried...all the while trying not to think how the moonlight spilling in from the window behind her was at precisely the right angle to silhouette her slim figure beneath her nightgown...

"Well, unh...goodnight again," he managed to say past the constriction in this throat, determinedly keeping his eyes on her face...her gentle smile...the look in her eyes...

Damn it! This wasn't Maxine or Sharon! He shouldn't be thinking this!

"Goodnight, Al."

Neither of them moved nor dared breathe for the longest ten seconds Al had ever known. Then, by mutual consent, they both took a step forward, meeting each other halfway to fall into eagerly awaiting arms. Their lips met in a kiss so wanted, that Al felt he must have been waiting for this one moment all his life. Well, he'd at least been waiting for it ever since he'd almost kissed her in her bedroom in Boston.

Because it felt so...right.

Tossing aside his pillow, he heard her do the same, and felt a giddy urge to laugh despite the passion that had flooded him the instant of her kiss. Without breaking the embrace, he walked

her backward a few paces to the bed, then gently lowered her to it beneath him. In the space of a mere handful of moments, her soft caresses had whipped that tiny spark inside him into a full-fledged flame, one which threatened to burn like wildfire if left unchecked.

The hungry kisses they shared continued to fan the flames of desire. He felt Ruthie's fingers running slow and feather-like down the length of his bare back, leaving a sizzling trail in her wake. One of his hands responded and traveled down her slender thigh, her smooth skin feeling impossibly hot to his touch.

It was almost incomprehensible to him that just this morning she had been the furthest thing from his mind, and now this seemed the most important thing in the world. To them both, for she certainly seemed as willing and eager to give herself to him as he was in wanting.

Just like Sharon...the last time he'd swayed her out of taking him to court--

Al stopped abruptly. Damn it, this was wrong. They'd had a great evening, and now he was simply taking advantage of her.

Slowly, with a great deal of physical effort, he pulled back.

Ruthie misinterpreted the action, and smiled gently as she pulled the chain with his dog-tags over his head. He caught her hand as she reached to put them on the nightstand, which instantly brought her gaze back to his.

"Ruthie," he said breathlessly, then closed his eyes so she couldn't see the desire in them. "This probably isn't a good idea."

"I know," she agreed softly. The touch of her fingers on his face made him open his eyes. But the honest love in hers was too much to bear.

He moved away, rolling onto his back and shielding his eyes with his hand. This wasn't right, this wasn't--couldn't be--love. What the hell did he know about love anyway? All he seemed to know about was sex, and how to kill a good relationship before it began. Still, whatever this crazy, undefined feeling he had for Ruthie, there was no doubting it ran deep and pure and true. He never wanted to do anything to hurt her again.

"I mean," he continued, reasoning with himself as well as her, "we'd only regret it in the morning."

"You're probably right."

"Then we'd just end up hating each other all

over again."

There was a slight pause, then she leaned across him, shifting a portion of her weight onto his chest as she put his dog-tags on the night table. It seemed an excuse, because she remained there, looking down into his eyes.

"I could never hate you, Al," she whispered. "Never."

She kissed him, deep and wanting, and he responded in kind.

The flame inside him roared again, fueled by her kisses, her touch, the heat of her skin just beneath her thin cotton nightgown, until it was raging outwards across the dry, unquenched forest of his soul.

Locking his arms around her, he rolled her onto the bed beneath him.

The firestorm was totally out of control.

* * *

Reality and normalcy returned full force for Sam with the morning. Showering, shaving and dressing in his own place seemed a precious gift, one he had taken for granted for far too long. But, he never would again, he thought, staring at his reflection in his bathroom mirror.

His reflection. His mirror. Everything was back as it should be. Even his closet was his own and just as he had left it. Smiling, he glanced down at his favorite brown loafers. They were still there, patiently awaiting his return even though Donna had threatened, years before, to toss them out and force him to buy new ones.

Years before.

The thought sent a chill of regret through the sun warmed pleasantness of the morning. Sobering, he turned away from the man in the mirror, not wanting to see the expression the memory had brought to his face. He had been absent from his own life for years through his own folly.

Now, it was time to leave that behind and, as best he could, pick up where he had left off.

The Committee would be arriving at the Project shortly, and it was up to him to meet with them and answer their questions. Al had been pinch-hitting for him long enough. Sam Beckett was back, and ready to reclaim his life, whatever that may be.

Turning away from the mirror as if he could turn away from the thought, he left the room.

He had so much to be thankful for that he would never, in the rest of his life, feel sorry for himself.

He had people here who loved and cared about what happened to him, Sam Beckett, not someone else whom they thought him to be. His mother and his sister had wept on the phone, welcoming him back and urging him to join them so they could 'spoil him' for a few days.

And his brother--Tom would be there too. From the sound of his voice on the phone the night before, he would chew him out royally, like Al had done in the Waiting Room, but it would be well worth it to see his brother again.

The nightmares of the night before had troubled him far more than he wanted to admit.

When he had decided to leap, he had been certain that those dreams from earlier in his life had not been merely dreams, but an indication that he had already leaped and changed his own past. Now that he was back, it was time to put those things into perspective and settle more firmly into the reality in which he found himself.

He headed toward the kitchen where he could hear Donna humming as she fixed breakfast. This morning, he would settle things with the Committee. Once that was out of the way, he could devote his efforts to taking the data he had collected and assembling it into some sort of coherent order. With that, surely, the nightmares would stop and things would be truly back to normal.

It was time, he thought firmly as he entered the sunshine, warmth, and fragrance of his kitchen, to be well and truly home and put the past--whatever it had been--into perspective.

* * *

Lying content and drowsy, Al watched the soft orange desert morning creep slowly into his bedroom. For the first time in far too long, he felt totally at peace with the world. Sam was home, and Ruthie was in his arms, and whatever the day had to throw at him, he could handle.

Ruthie. She slept snuggled against him, tranquil and appeased, wrapped close in the protection of his arm. It was like those early days of their marriage--each content to simply be, knowing the other was there. Things had been good then, before he had gotten so entangled in drinking, dragging her down with him in the terrible, unspoken rules of 'don't

talk, don't trust, don't feel'.

Odd, how he could see it so clearly now. Back then it had been a morass of pain, anger and fear. He had been such an idiot to give up all this good stuff for the temporary, numbing relief found in a bottle.

"What are you thinking?" Ruthie said softly, surprising him a little.

Al turned his head on the pillow they shared and smiled. "I thought you were asleep."

"I was," she said, shifting closer. "And I thought I was dreaming this, being here with you."

Tenderly, he kissed the top of her head. "I was a little afraid to wake up myself, in case you were gone."

"So?" she asked, moving to meet his eyes. "What were you thinking about just now?"

He grinned again and touched her cheek. "I was thinking that I must have been brain dead all those years ago. How could I have let you go?"

She smiled sadly. "It wasn't all your fault. I was the one who left when you really needed me." She settled against his side once more. "Bubbe was right."

"About what?"

"She knew I was still in love with you--that I always have been." She hesitated. "To tell you the truth, that's why she called you to Boston."

"I know."

"You do?" Lifting her head, she met his eyes once more.

"Yeah. She wanted us to get together again, and she wasn't going to make it easy for me to slide off the hook. 'It isn't over', she told me, 'as long as you both draw breath'." He chuckled. "Damned if it didn't work, too."

Unsure, Ruthie faltered, hands crossed on his chest, and chin propped on them to keep her gaze on his. "Any...regrets?"

"Just one." At her expression, he shifted position to gather her gently into his arms. "That she didn't call me fifteen years ago."

He felt her cheek move against his chest as she smiled. "She wanted to, but I wouldn't let her."

"You wouldn't?" A bit surprised, he looked down at the top of her head. "What changed your mind?"

There was a short silence, and then she drew away and pulled herself to sitting beside him. "I wasn't ready to take the chance you might

hurt me again," she said slowly, eyes on his. "And I wasn't ready to forgive you."

Drawing a breath to apologize, he was silenced as she hastily lifted her fingers to his lips.

"And that was still my part of the problem," she continued. "Then I got to thinking about Naomi."

"Naomi?" Al repeated blankly. "Steinkamp?"

Ruthie regarded him, surprised. "Do you know her?"

"Sorta," he mumbled, avoiding her eyes. "What about her?"

"She told me," Ruthie said as if it were something she had often thought about, "that she once knew someone who believed that love was worth more than anything else in life, even while they acted like it meant nothing to them."

Al kept quiet, not sure where she was going and still uneasily considering the possibilities of Naomi Steinkamp. Surely it couldn't be...

"What she meant was, sometimes people act one way and feel another." Ruthie lifted a hand to trace the line of Al's cheek. "That's what I was doing, and I thought...maybe...it was like that for you, too."

"And so you called me."

Ruthie smiled. "Well, it took a few years."

"Years, still?" he asked mildly. "I never knew you to take so long to make up your mind."

"About the important things," she said, slender hand resting on his bare chest. "And in the end, when Bubbe was dying, I couldn't refuse her anymore, not when it was secretly what I wanted to do."

"I'm glad," Al said, covering her hand with his and lifting it to his lips for a kiss. "Truly glad."

"And then," Ruthie said with an impish smile that revealed her old spirit, "there was the way things worked out for Naomi and Murry."

"Murry?" Al asked, thinking about Sam's last leap. Things had happened so fast at the end that he'd never taken the time to see what changed in Naomi's life. He'd just assumed that the Big Guy Upstairs had finally decided to give Sam a break. "Murry who?"

"Murry Connor," Ruthie answered with a twinkle in her eye. "The carpenter. He did some work for a community auction Naomi ran a few years back."

"Community auction?" Al asked, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"Uh-huh." Ruthie pulled her hand from Al's

and snuggled against him as if she intended to stay a long, long time. "They got in a terrible argument, something about whether or not they had an agreement about him donating just his time to build a railing, or time and materials both."

"And?"

"And..." Again, Al could feel her smile against his chest. "...they spent so much time together arguing it out, they became friends, and eventually fell in love."

"No kidding," the admiral said in genuine delight. "That's great."

"Mmm," Ruthie agreed. "They're both in their seventies, and yet they got married and moved to Bermuda."

"Bermuda!"

"Yes." Ruthie's laugh tickled Al's chest. "They said it was more romantic than Boston. I thought if they could find each other, maybe there was hope for us after all."

Thinking, Al nuzzled her hair, treasuring this moment between them. But her next words stopped him cold.

"'Love is life's only true satisfaction'," she said thoughtfully, quoting. "I never would have expected that to come from Naomi, but turns out that, in the end, she was right."

Stunned, Al froze. That last leap--all along he'd thought it was for Sam!

"Al...?" Feeling the change in him, Ruthie looked up into his eyes. "Is something the matter?"

Shifting his attention back to her, he shook his head, feeling a bit dazed--and insufferably happy. "No," he said softly, grinning like an fool and not caring one iota. "No, there's nothing the matter. Everything's perfect."

"Well, almost," she corrected in a decidedly mischievous tone.

He had the impression she was just teasing, but still he didn't like to push his luck and ask. So he waited until she had lifted her head to look at him.

Fighting a smile, she gently poked his arm--the arm with the hawk tattoo...and Beth's name.

Al grinned, delighted it was nothing more dire than that. That he could fix. "Yeah, well, you know...I think it's about time I got rid of that thing."

Ruthie looked flabbergasted. "I wouldn't hear of it."

"You wouldn't? But--"

"It's part of you, Al. It helps makes you

the man you are." Her expression rearranged itself into another wry look, as she began tracing the tattooed letters with her finger. "I was thinking more along the lines of you getting the 'B' changed to an 'R'...and the 'E' to a 'U'..."

"I don't need to have you on my arm, honey, not when I've got you in here." He took her hand and placed it over his heart. Then he grinned. "But since you asked...d'you wanna go get the magic marker, or will I?"

Sharing his happiness, she settled against his chest again, one arm tucking about him, the jovial mood instantly replaced by a more frank emotion. "I love you so much, Al."

"I love you too," he said, easily slipping back into an old, automatic exchange. But he realized just how much he meant it when there was no sudden jolt of pain, no searing lance piercing his chest because he'd always believed those words had only truly belonged to Beth.

Now, he knew they never had.

A feeling of great confidence stirred inside him. Things were the way they were meant to be, and even facing the Committee today couldn't put the stops to that. He and Sam had a powerful ally on their side, and it was not Teddy Bartlett...although the toad's word couldn't hurt.

After Tina, he'd vowed never to say 'I love you' to anyone ever again. Now he had, and the sky hadn't fallen nor had the world ceased its spinning...though perhaps if either had, at this moment he would not have overly much cared.

Tightening his embrace about his love for fear he might lose her again, he quietly added, "I really do."

* * *

Senator Diane McBride got to the Project mid-morning, bringing Weitzman, the rest of the Committee, and a whole investigative team with her. The night before, I'd sent a couple of security guys over to guard Bartlett's trunk. He insisted on supplying his own guys, though, and specially flew them in from DC. So I guess all four of them stood around and stared at each other all night. All over a stupid trunk.

But then, I guess it wasn't really so 'stupid'. In it was our proof--proof that Sam had done what we said he'd done. Bartlett gave a deposition, saying what he had seen, and what he remembered--seeing the contents of the trunk

when Sam had it open in the past, and we were watching in the Imaging Chamber.

He had made a list: a framed, oval portrait of a blonde woman, done in sepia, a moth-eaten World War II Army uniform, an Army kit, a couple of square boxes that looked like maybe they held medals, and the handlink. Whatever else Bartlett is, he's a good observer. And when his nose is rubbed in it, he's honest.

Then we moved the trunk into the Project conference room, with cameras rolling and security guards out the wazoo. It was obvious to everyone it hadn't been opened in years. The lock had rusted--maybe from all that dew the day of the auction--and we didn't have a key. I didn't offer to pick it, though. Didn't want to give them any ideas that maybe I'd done it before--cause I hadn't.

Finally, they forced open the lock, despite Bartlett's protests that it was going to hurt the value of the antique, and opened the lid.

And it was all there. The portrait of Suzanne--sweet, loving Suzanne, whom I'd wooed in the back of Tom Jarret's car a year or so ago...or was that fifty something years ago? (Now that Ruthie's back in my life, I'm kind of leaning to the fifty year theory.) The captain's kit was there, and his uniform and medals...including the Congressional Medal of Honor. That, I sent back to his family, and not even Weitzman dared buck me on that one.

Because, in there with all that stuff, was the trunk key Sam had laid down on the picture frame in 1993 and...the handlink. When they saw the link, it was all over but the shouting...as Edna used to say.

They're still poking around, have been for days, but I've clamped the lid down on Security. Nothing goes outta here except to members of the Committee, and I'm tryin' to maintain control of that on a 'need-to-know' basis. This is Sam's baby, his glory, and it's up to him if and when he announces it to the world.

I've been a little worried about Sam. It seems like his memory has come back--most of it anyway. We've gone out to dinner a few times--him, Donna, Ruthie and me. And Sam and I talk shop and go over details of what needs to be done.

But we don't talk about the personal stuff. I think it's all still too raw for that, and that I can understand. Believe me, I can understand. I'm not sure it's the best approach, given everything, but I know where

he's coming from.

I think.

He spends lots of time alone at the Project, with Ziggy...and Verbena.

I talked to Verbena, and she says Sam needs time to adjust. Time to adjust. Interesting phrase, huh? I don't think even she has any idea just how much 'adjusting' Sam has to do. But I took her advice and didn't push him to talk about it, even though I wanted to. She's the shrink after all, and I know how it is to not want to talk about stuff that hurts too much to examine.

Still, his eyes are starting to look sorta...well...haunted. It's spooky. This morning, Donna came to me and confided that he's been having nightmares. Horrendous ones, four, maybe five a night.

That's when I went to look for Sam--shrink's advice and 'time to adjust' be damned. It's time for some healing and I know, firsthand, that not talking about it is the slowest road to recovery.

* * *

Sam chose a computer monitor in one of the side labs, a place where he was less likely to be discovered and/or bothered by anyone. It had seemed to work for days. Everyone pretty much left him alone after he was done interviewing them, on his quest to discover everything they had learned and all their personal theories on what had transpired while he was leaping.

But today, when he was down to the final phases of his work, the door hissed open behind him with a soft sound. Not turning, he still wasn't surprised it was Al's voice he heard.

"Whatcha doin', pal?"

"Thinking," he answered, eyes on the graphic on the monitor before him. He could save and clear it before Al saw it, but he was going to have to show it to him sometime.

He was aware of the other man crossing the room, putting something heavy down on a nearby desk, and dragging a chair over from another terminal. Then the observer turned the chair backwards to the screen and sat down astraddle, as if completely at ease with the fact that Sam had not yet turned to him.

Al never changed.

Hiding a smile, Sam kept working, drawing the nearly final, interconnecting lines on his graphic.

"Interesting," Al grunted, resting his chin on the chair back. "What is it? 'Charlotte's Web'?"

"I didn't know you were into kid's literature," Sam said, eyes still on what he was doing.

"Trudy loved that book," the admiral replied. "Used to read it to her over and over and over. What is that, anyway?"

"Well..." Sam paused, resting his hands on his legs as he regarded the screen. "I've been researching the data on the leaps."

"Yeah?"

"And I've come up with something interesting." When there was no reply from behind him, he continued. "I took what seems to be the significant event of each leap, and isolated it. And then I had Ziggy run some programs, and cross reference each event with the other events."

Al gave a low whistle. "No wonder she's been such a bear to live with. I asked her where you were and she nearly bit my head off. Had to pull rank to make her tell me."

Sam kept his eyes on the screen. So, Al, despite his light banter, had been looking for him for a reason.

The admiral spoke, waving a hand at the screen. "So, what'd you find out?"

"Ike Bentonhoff, who works in Imaging Control, loves detective novels written by Seymour."

Al pulled a wry face. "Well, that's earth shaking, isn't it?" He paused as if thinking. "Who the hell is Seymour? The janitor? What's his last name?"

"He just goes by Seymour. It's his pen name." He cast a brief glance over his shoulder at Al. "Don't you remember? Seymour? The kid who wanted to be a writer when I was helping out Nick Allen?"

"Oh," Al said simply. "That Seymour. Anything else?"

"Eddie Vega's step-brother, Chuey, is a building contractor over in Destiny. His firm did the stone work here."

"Roocar Jaguars!" the admiral said, his tone still light.

From the corner of his eye, Sam noticed that he was steadily eyeing the last leap entry, the one simply labeled as 'Naomi'.

Without comment, as if sensing he'd been caught, Al rocked back in his chair. "And?"

"And..." Sam finally turned to face his

friend. "...too many other things to mention." He waved a hand at the glowing, delicate web-like graphic on the screen behind him. "Did you know about all these connections?"

Obviously surprised at the question, Al drew back a fraction. "No," he answered in what seemed all sincerity. "We didn't have a clue most of the time. We just...did the best we could."

Searching Al's eyes a moment, Sam hesitated, then turned back to the monitor. "Some of the leaps, I haven't been able to find a connection for, but maybe I just haven't looked deep enough yet. Some of them are pretty obscure."

"Obscure, yeah," Al agreed, "like Ike Bentonhoff liking Seymour's pulp novels. He also likes classic cars, and staying up all hours of the night to work on the engine." He pulled a sour face. "You didn't have him as a neighbor. Besides, what the hell's it got to do with anything?"

"When he was a kid, pulp novels got Ike into science fiction, which in turn got him interested in science and understanding how things worked, which got him here."

From the corner of his eye, Sam saw Al's scrutiny of him. "Sounds like a Beckett theory cookin' here to me."

Helplessly, Sam shrugged. "I have to know, Al. I have to know, in the end, how it all fits together."

The admiral propped one elbow on the chair back, rested his chin on his hand and asked, "Because of the dreams?"

Jumping as if stung, Sam spun to face his friend, no longer relying on peripheral vision to give him clues. "How'd...?" He let the question die. It was pretty obvious how Al knew.

Donna.

Restless, Sam got from his chair and began to pace. "They're horrible, Al. So real, so..." He shook his head, helpless to fully explain them. "...so like they really happened. Like I lived it."

Stopping he turned back to Al, who had turned his chair to keep him in view.

"And maybe I did." He gestured toward the screen and its intricate, interconnecting lines and began to pace again. "Maybe there was a timeline where Tom did die, and I had to live with that. Maybe there was a time where Donna did leave me, and I lived by myself here at the Project instead of building our house! But..."

His voice rose. "I don't know that, because when I look at the timeline now, it's all back together and I can't keep it straight...what did happen, and when, and why.

"It's like..." Again Sam looked to Al for understanding. "...like trying to hold water in my hands." He cupped his hands before him in explanation. "It seems to be working. I look at that..." He nodded at the screen. "...and it makes sense. It's all down in black and white. Then," he added, looking back down at his hands and letting them fall to his sides, "I look away and it's gone. I just can't hold on to it."

Al was still sitting, regarding him with understanding. "Maybe that's because knowing and feeling aren't the same things."

Sam snorted, turning away. "Now you sound like Verbena."

There was a soft, gravely chuckle from behind him and the sound of Al getting to his feet. "I guess that's because she told me that so many times."

Attention caught by the wry tone, Sam turned. "What do you mean?"

Slowly, Al picked up the stack of blue-bound books he had parked on the computer station when he'd entered.

"When you were in the middle of a leap," he said, absently straightening the pile of volumes in his hands. "It was sometimes like that for me, in the personal leaps I mean. I had one memory--like of you and me and Tom playing basketball--but then during the leap, the reality was completely different. Tom was dead, he died in 'Nam, and you were trying to change it. And all this..." He waved his free hand at the Project around them. "...followed along. And then it would end, and there would be the change, or changes, and everything would sorta ...I dunno...fill in."

"Fill in?"

"Get back to normal." Al shrugged. "Or change to normal. I was never really sure which when it came to the really bizarre ones."

Sam frowned. "Was it like that for everyone?"

"Nope, just me. I guess because of the mechanics of the neural net...or something. Whenever we jumped timelines, or whatever the hell we did, I seemed to be the only one who knew. I told Verbena, but I dunno if she really believed me, even though she acted like she did." He shrugged again, absently ruffling the

pages of one of the volumes. "So I think she sorta understands what you're telling her, but it's hard because she hasn't lived it. Not really. Not like us."

The physicist's frown deepened, and he drew closer. "How'd you handle it?"

"It came slower to me. One step at a time. Not all dumped on my head like it must be with you now, coming home."

Sam stood stock still, regarding his friend, realizing for the first time just how much he owed him. "Thanks, Al, for always being there for me." He shrugged and repeated the admiral's earlier words. "For doing the best you could. It kept me sane..."

"Until now," Al supplied the rest of the sentence Sam didn't say.

The physicist jumped slightly, feeling as if the observer had read his mind.

"Here, kid." Al handed over the stack of books he held. "These may help."

"What are they?" Curious, the physicist took a quick flip through the top one. They were all hand written as if the admiral hadn't entrusted their contents to a computer.

"Journals," Al answered. "My journals. My shrink, when I came back from 'Nam, said I should keep one." He grinned at the stack. "Or several. It kinda got to be a habit." Turning, he gestured at the web-like network of lines still on the screen behind them. "I think, if you smunch all that stuff together with these, that's sorta the way it was, taken all together."

"All together?"

"Living it day to day," Al supplied, pushing the chair he had borrowed neatly back to its place before the other monitor. "I'm not sure, though, if the words changed every time I came out of the Imaging Chamber or not--hell, I guess I wouldn't have known if they had. But then, I guess it wouldn't matter either." He rapped a knuckle on the cover of the top book of the pile Sam held. "This is the way I remember it, and to me it's the only reality."

Overwhelmed, Sam looked down at the books, puzzling over all the implications.

"Go home, Sam," Al said with a thump of his hand on the physicist's shoulder. "Do a little bedtime reading. It might help." He moved past him to the door. "I hope so anyway."

Turning, Sam watched him go. "Al?" he said as the admiral reached the door, which slid upwards before him. "Thanks," he continued when

the other man turned. "For everything."

"You're welcome," came the reply. "You would've done the same for me. In fact, maybe at one point in my life, you did." Like quicksilver, the admiral's expression changed to a Calavicci grin. "'Love is life's only true satisfaction'," he said as if quoting. "I owe you and Naomi bigtime for that one!"

"Al..." Before Sam could finish his sentence, his friend let the door close between them and was gone.

The weight of the books he held was solid and real in his hands. Sam looked down at them thoughtfully. Whether they answered his questions or not, he knew it must have cost Al dearly to share something so private with him.

Shuddering once, before he could contain the thought of returning home to sleep and facing the nightmare unrealities yet again, he crossed back to the computer terminal. Sitting down, he opened the first volume and began to read.

* * *

It was just after 11:00 p.m. when Al padded barefoot into his kitchen to get a drink of milk. Dressed in his black sweat pants, bearing the 'NASA' logo down the side of one leg, and a white t-shirt, he felt more comfortable than he had in years. Still, the kitchen tile was cold on his bare feet, and he moved quickly across it.

Pulling open the refrigerator door, he reached for the milk then, smiling, cast a glance behind him. The coast was clear--Ruthie was fast asleep in their bed. Shaking his head, he poured the milk into a glass anyway.

A soft knock on the front door came as he was returning the carton to the refrigerator. Looking up, he took his glass with him, pausing to turn on one small lamp by the couch. He knew who he would most likely find standing on his doorstep at this hour of night.

And he was right. It was Sam.

The physicist looked up when Al opened the door, shifting the load of blue-bound books in his arms. "Hi, Al," he said a bit hesitantly. "Are you...busy?"

"Nope," the admiral answered, pulling the door open wide to allow him to enter. "Come on in."

Almost hesitantly, the physicist did so, casting a look about him in the small, neat apartment. "Where's Ruthie?"

"Asleep," Al answered, waving Sam to the couch, then chugged down the last of his milk. "Have a seat."

But the younger man turned to him, as if unwilling to sit. "No, I can't stay, I was on my way home. I just wanted..." He extended the books. "...to return these."

Al nodded, accepting them, carrying them over to place them on top of the bookcase. "Did they help?"

"Yeah. They did."

Putting down his empty glass, Al picked up a clear framed photo and turned. "Hey, kid, I've got something else for you too." Crossing back to Sam, he handed over the photo with a grin.

"It's me and Tom," Sam murmured, pleased. "Taken the day he graduated from Annapolis." His head suddenly came up. "You promised you'd save this for me..."

"And Al Calavicci is a man of his word." He shrugged, grin widening. "At least, he is now. Look on the back."

Curiosity sparked in Sam's eyes as he turned over the clear plastic frame. He smiled broadly at what he saw.

"You and Tom," Al announced, "same pose, taken the day you won the Nobel Prize. Ain't that a kick in the butt?"

"Thanks, Al." Sam smiled, his free hand going into the pocket of his jeans. "I, unh... want to give you this..."

Al chortled. "Geez, this is getting better than Christmas!"

"I thought maybe you might find a use for it." Sam's hand came out in a fist, giving no clues.

"What is it?" Al asked, reaching to take the small mystery object Sam offered. When it was in his hand, his eyebrows went up in surprise. "The wedding band Ruthie gave me!" Curious, his eyes went back to Sam's. "How'd you end up with this?"

"You took it off in Vegas," Sam explained. "And I picked it up." He shrugged slightly. "I kept it for you, hoping you'd need it again someday."

"I'll be damned," Al said, slipping the old band on his finger. It still fit, and it felt right. "I'd forgotten all about this."

"So had I," Sam admitted, drawing a deep breath. "It was in some stuff Donna and I went through the first day after I was back. But it didn't ring any bells until..." He paused, nodding at the neat stack of journals. "Until I

read those."

Al looked up from his study of the ring. "So your memories are coming back in line?"

The physicist nodded. "Reading those helped me put it all in perspective. I don't think tonight, when I go to sleep, I'll be bothered by any more dreams." He smiled and shrugged. "It all makes sense, Al. Finally."

"Good," Al said, nodding, attention wandering to his ring again. "I'm glad."

Sam took a step, further into the dusky lamp light in the center of the room where the other man stood. "I couldn't have made it without you, Al."

"Hey," the admiral said, head coming up warily. "No mushy stuff, Sam. It's over and done and that's that. So forget it."

"I won't forget it," Sam said quietly, but a smile lightened the promise. "Ever." His smile widened into a grin. "And I've been working on a new version of the string theory."

Al's eyes narrowed in warning. "If it involves leaping about in time and major life changes, you can count me outta this one, pal. I've got some serious time to make up to Ruthie. And this..." He indicated the ring still on his finger. "...just may come in handy."

"That's great," Sam said, his smile hinting that it was no surprise. "Congratulations."

Hesitating, Al regarded him a long moment, then couldn't stand it. "Okay," he said in resignation. "Tell me your theory."

"The Grand Equation," Sam said, eyes lighting up as they had in the beginning days of QUANTUM LEAP.

"Grand Equation," Al repeated warily.

"Yes." The physicist stepped forward, gesturing excitedly. "What physicists have been searching for throughout the ages, a way to weave together all the elemental forces from gravity to subatomic particles."

"Hmmm," Al said, watching his friend's eyes. "That good, huh?"

"You bet!" Sam insisted, warming to his subject. "If you describe each leap mathematically, adjusting for unknown parameters of course, and--"

"You mean...The Fudge Factor," Al supplied helpfully.

"Huh?" Sam shot him a glance, then realized it was a joke and smiled. "Yeah, sort of. But anyway, you bring them all together, by..." He waved a hand as if unwilling to take the time to explain. "...by manipulating the variable and

concrete values of space and time and probability, and you get one, cohesive mathematical description of the final timeline." He met Al's eyes to see if he understood. "The final reality, you see?"

The admiral frowned. "You're saying, smunch them all together and you get what we think happened."

Sam laughed in genuine amusement. "Al, this is the marriage of general relativity with quantum mechanics! It's a whole new language of possibilities. It's--"

"It's smunching them all together to get one answer," Al insisted patiently. "Isn't it?"

"Yeah." Sam chuckled, and nodded in defeat. "Yeah, I guess you can call it that."

"And it sounds like another Nobel Prize," the admiral said in satisfaction. "After you collect one for QUANTUM LEAP." His sharp eyes missed nothing of Sam's reaction. "Assuming, that is, you intend to let the world in on leaping around in time."

"I...don't think so," Sam said slowly. "There's too much...potential for abuse. We know it works, that's the important thing, right?"

"Right," Al agreed, wondering how he could make Weitzman see it that way. It didn't matter. Together, he and Sam would think of a way. Together, Beckett and Calavizzi were unbeatable. "If you wanna lock it down, kid, I'm with you on it." He paused thoughtfully. "You know, I used to think 'glory' was living on the edge, impressing the hell outta the whole world. Now I know it's not. Glory is glory, whether the whole world knows about it...or just us."

Relief filled the physicist's eyes. "I knew you'd understand."

"Sure," Al scoffed. "I'm an understanding guy. Just ask any of my five ex-wives."

Sam's smile softened. "Well, maybe I'll just ask one of them."

Self-consciously, Al cast a look over his shoulder. When he turned back to Sam, the younger man was still smiling.

"I've got to go," Sam said. "Donna and I are leaving for Hawaii tomorrow."

"Okay," the admiral agreed. "Tell Tom I said hello."

Together the two men moved toward the door. "Come say hello yourself," Sam urged. "He and Mom would love to see you."

Al shook his head. "Nah, this is a family

reunion thing. Maybe I'll stop in to visit in a couple of months. If Ruthie decides Hawaii's okay for a second honeymoon."

"That'd be good," Sam agreed as his friend opened the door for him. He hesitated, framed against the darkness of the night outside. "I'll see you in a couple of weeks then, okay?"

"Okay," Al agreed. "Have a great time, kid, and give Katie a hug for me."

"I'll do that," Sam promised, half-turning to leave. As if unable to resist the impulse, he turned back to give the older man a quick hug. "Bye, Al."

"Bye, Sam," Al answered, returning the hug with a rapid squeeze of the physicist's shoulder. "I'll see you soon, buddy. Have a good time."

With a grin and a wave, Sam stepped out into the New Mexico night. Al stood in the entrance, watching as he got in his car and drove away. Then, quietly, he closed the door and padded back into his living room.

Casting a glance in the direction where Ruthie lay sleeping in his bed, he dismissed the idea of going back to join her right away, and instead crossed to the stack of journals on the bookcase. Soberly, he rested his hands on the cover of the top one.

Time had taught him--him and Sam--many hard lessons about love, and about glory. Undoubtedly, he would share these with Ruthie sometime in the not too distant future--this time there would be no secrets between them. But right now, at this present point in time, there was something he very much wanted to do in private.

Searching through the books, he selected one and took it back to the couch with him. Turning up the three-way lamp's intensity a notch, he settled down beneath its pool of brightness, the rest of the room's darkness an encompassing shadow about him.

A box of cigars sat on the coffee table and, lighting up one with the slow, patient ritual that he had come to associate with pleasure, he regarded the blue-bound book lying unopened in his lap.

Finally, resting the tobacco in the ash tray on the couch arm beside him, he flipped open the cover and began to read.

'Time is fluid, and what we use to measure it changes its flow. That's the Calavicci theory of time, thought up while I sweated and shivered out six long years in a tiger cage in 'Nam...'

