

## PARTNERS

By AJB

### CHAPTER 1

The whiteness began to coalesce as his senses started to come back to him in a staggered order. The continual thumping, no, banging, was his first awareness and then came the sharp odor that his swirling brain identified as gunpowder. The noise and smell connected: gunfire!

Finally as the visual world started to separate into a logical order, he felt a solid heaviness in his grip. Self preservation took over and Sam dove for the ground, directing the heavy object in his hand forward to protect himself. He still wasn't sure where the gunfire was coming from, but he shoved his fists in the general direction of the noise and started to line up the bright red and white sights.

Wait. Red and white? He was gripping something?

As the surroundings came into focus Sam realized that in his hand was a soda can, not a gun, and that his hand was wet; probably from the spilled soda now running from the can. The can opening was, at least, aimed correctly towards the sound of gunfire.

The firing range looked like a Hollywood style town; with false fronts and realistic props, like mailboxes and street signs. He could see a person in a bulletproof vest, running to a low wall, with an intense looking man in sweat pants following along. The trailing man was yelling at the back of the head of the leading man.

"Hey Jean."

Sam jumped, just noticing several pairs of black booted feet next to him. He peeked up to see three amused looking men in police uniforms and gun belts looking down at him. They all held soda cans.

One, whose name tag read Officer Darian, continued. "I didn't realize your can was loaded!"

The other two officers burst out laughing along with Darian. Sam took the opportunity to slowly collect his shaking nerves and sit up. Dropping the can he noticed his black booted feet, uniformed shirt and ... pink fingernails? He was mesmerized by the very feminine appearing hands. Fingernail polish, sensibly long nails, and a gold ring with a red stone on the right hand.

Oh Boy! He moaned to himself. Not a woman again! What did Darian call him, er her? Jean?

Sam scrambled to his feet and brushed off the dust from his dive. His mind sped furiously as he collected visual information about himself, and his surroundings. Obviously a police officer, but from where? He tried unobtrusively to read his upside down name tag. Short, simple, it stated "Officer Downs." Sam continued to brush off his arms as he peeked at the shoulder patch on his uniformed shirt for a city name. Why are these city crests so cluttered and detailed? He complained to himself. There it was, on the bottom of the patch embroidered on a gold colored banner: Ocean Crest Police Department. Now he knew he was near an ocean, at least! But which coast?

Sam Beckett, time traveler, had found himself in this kind of situation before. Maybe not exactly like this situation, but he had filled a woman's shoes before. Although Quantum Leaping gave him loads of experience about jumping blind into new situations, an unexpected side effect appropriately dubbed the Swiss Cheese Effect, kept him from remembering most facts about the previous leaps, or his own past life. Therefore, he knew it wasn't a new thing to be in a woman's body, but couldn't remember the past women. He was pretty sure, though, that none of them had worn combat boots or a bullet proof vest.

"DOWNS!"

Sam, startled out of his self examination, looked around to see the intense looking guy in sweat pants glaring at him from in front of the pseudo town bank.

"Let's move it! It's going to get dark soon!"

With that, the man started walking to an old, beat up squad car parked by a mailbox near the bank. Sam had no choice but to join him, and reluctantly turned in the man's direction. He fingered the gun belt, which must have weighed 20 pounds, feeling the butt of the handgun on his right side. As he walked away from the other officers, who were still laughing together and filling in the officer just joining them about the Loaded Soda Can Incident, Sam was at least grateful he wasn't wearing high heels this time.

Walking slowly, he was checking the other items on the belt, trying to familiarize himself with the selection of odd items that were attached to him. In trying to look down, he had to notice the bulk of the bullet proof vest. He had to almost strain his neck over it to look at the belt. There were even unidentifiable things attached even to the back of the belt, which he hoped he wouldn't need right now.

Each time Sam leaped into a situation the first things that he asked himself were who, what, where, why and when. The first three were pretty much taken care of: he was Jean Downs, a police officer for Ocean Crest (general geographic location unknown, but by the looks of the shrubs and the feel of the dry heat, he assumed the West coast). The 'when' wasn't so easy. The beat up squad car was one of the old muscle car types of the 1960's, so he guessed it was after that era.

As for the 'why', well, that was always a challenge. Sometimes he just had gut feelings about what he had to set right. Most of the time he relied on his best friend, and only connection to his own time, Admiral Albert Calavizzi, for an indication of his duty. Al could only do that by using Ziggy, a egocentric, parallel hybrid computer designed and built by Sam himself sometime in the future.

Right now Sam, using all the information so far, figured he was expected to run some sort of gun course. He had done some hunting (When? As a kid, he thought, and with someone else. And they were hunting pheasant.. some memories were just at the edge of recall; it was so frustrating!), so he was familiar with rifles, he thought. Handguns couldn't be too difficult.

The man in sweats was waiting for Sam with arms crossed, at the rear of the old squad car.& When Sam was near the man he saw the name 'Reed' stenciled on the front of his shirt. There was no rank,

however, so Sam didn't say anything. Reed had retrieved a little box from inside the car, and it was now sitting on top of the trunk. Sam saw that it contained bullets.

Reed made a sweeping motion with his arm over the box and said, "Load up with 18 rounds," and crossed his arms again. He was a little older than the others, and had a professional air about him.

As Sam started to draw the handgun from the holster, he realized that it was a little more difficult than the old Westerns made it look. There was a snap that locked the gun in the holster he had to fumble with, finally resorting to using two hands to unsnap it. Then he had to pull the weapon up and out. To be able to do this quickly and smoothly would take a little practice. Reed mistook the fumbling for nervousness.

"Look, Downs," he said. "You'll be fine. You can do this. My job is to make sure you stay alive out there."

Where "out there" was, Sam didn't care to dwell on. Reed continued, "This is just like the Academy. We put the screws to you for a reason. If you can't handle the stress here, you won't make it in the street. Those clowns over there," he tilted his head towards the four officers she had just left, and who were still laughing, "have a macho thing they have to overcome. That isn't your problem. You are very qualified for this job." He hesitated, then added, "They are not the enemy. The trick will be for you to figure out who is."

Reed's speech left Sam vaguely confused. Was he talking about the shooting course, or something else? Unloading his gun he saw that the new rounds were a lighter version of the ones he just unloaded. Must be practice rounds, he guessed to himself. As he re-holstered the weapon Sam realized there were 12 more rounds he was to load up somewhere. He looked in the box and saw some circular plastic pieces with six holes in each one.

Reed saw Downs looking at the items and said, "You can use those speed loaders if you don't want to hassle loading and unloading yours."

Sam looked down at his belt and saw two circular leather holders just in front of his holster. Unsnapping them, he pulled out two devices identical to the ones in the box, each one gripping six rounds. He put his in the box, and loaded up practice rounds in the offered speed loaders. The function of these things was now clear to him; They let you quickly load up six rounds all at once, instead of having to load each round one at a time. Speed loaders! I get it! Sam thought.

His temporary pleasure of discovery was quickly replaced with fear as Reed took the box and got into the passenger side of the squad car saying, "Let's go!" That obviously meant Sam was to drive.

With a quick "Yes, sir!" he opened the driver door and slid onto the well worn seat. The inside of the car was worse than the outside, if that was possible. There were cracks and tears in the upholstery, holes in the dash where things had obviously been attached in the past, and the smell was incredibly bad. No wonder the windows were down, aside from the fact they probably didn't work anyway. This car had had a very rough life. Abused by time, thought Sam as he started it. I know how it feels.

The engine actually sounded pretty good, all things considered. As he forced it into drive, Reed started talking.

"You just received a radio call of a burglary in progress at 5 Easy Street. A neighbor is the reporting party. He saw three people enter the rear of the building. He thinks he saw a crowbar and a gun. He thinks the people are still inside. 5 Easy Street is between the reporting party's house and the motel. Your cover unit is 10 minutes away, so you are on your own."

He pointed in the direction from which Sam should approach the row of buildings. There was a "street" with three or four full sized buildings on one side, and merely fronts of buildings on the other. The fronts had low walls running on two sides, simulating separating walls. About 30 yards behind these fronts was a plain, dirt hill running parallel to the street. Shell casings littered the area behind the fronts, indicating the actual shooting range. As the car swung around the cul-de-sac in the direction of the "Bank", Reed cautioned Sam about the direction of shooting.

"Remember, above all, ALWAYS keep your gun pointed down range!" He pointed to the low hill, which was intended to "catch" the bullets. "Sometimes the adrenaline starts pumping a bit too hard and people forget where they are. The next thing you know, we all start diving for cover. We've had one close call in my history of Range master, and that's enough." Reed looked a bit annoyed at that fact. "Remember, this is only training! STOP THE CAR!"

Surprised, Sam slammed on the brakes and Reed used his arms to prevent his head from hitting the windshield. Amazingly, Reed didn't seem to be bothered by it. Great start! Sam thought, embarrassed.

Peering sideways at the Sam's profile, Reed said slowly, "I'm sure you didn't mean to park right in front of the suspect's building, right? Now settle down and start the search." Reed exited the car silently, not a sound coming from the car door. Sam carefully followed his lead and did the same. Luckily, Reed headed to the side of the buildings so Sam knew where to go, and followed him. That was all the help he got.

As Sam started down the 'alley' after Reed, Reed stopped to allow Sam to pass. He then started a continual litany of urgent whispering practically in Sam's ear.

"Did you look up? See any broken windows? Are you going into a hot call without drawing your gun?" With that comment, Sam wrestled the gun free and pointed it down range. "What do you hear? Which house has the reporting party? Notice any broken windows?"

By the time they had reached the corner and Sam peered around it, he was completely alert, his mind racing to follow the directions, notice everything, and continue his search all at the same time. He felt his anxiety level rising. Suddenly, a man shaped target leaped out at him from about five feet away, giving him a start. He nearly fell over Reed pulling back from the corner.

"Shoot or don't shoot? What did you see? Male or female?"

Sam peeked around again and saw that it was a picture of a lady holding a baby. So that's the game, he thought. 'Tag' with a loaded gun! His adrenaline was going now, but the warning about shooting

down range away from the live spectators, stood out in his head. Sam crept by the target, his shadow voice right behind and keeping the pressure on.

"Keep that gun in front of you! It doesn't help you having it pointed at the sky! Go under the windows, not in front of them!"

Another target popped up and all Sam noticed was the image of a shotgun pointed at him. He raised the gun to take aim when he heard a familiar whooshing noise. Just as he pulled the trigger, hologram Al stepped through the target, studying the hand link in his grip. Sam's gun went off with more kickback than he expected. He let out a surprised yelp at seeing and shooting Al, just before falling backwards onto his rump, practically on Reed's feet.

"Holy cow, Sam, you scared the bejesus out of me!" yelled the irate hologram from behind the target, where he had ducked to avoid being shot. He then leaned through the picture of the armed robber to chastise Sam further.

As a target, he was definitely hard to miss, wearing a lime green shirt and lemon yellow jacket and pants. "Good thing I'm a hologram, because you would have got me right where you got him!"

Al indicated the crotch shot the target had received. Reed, meanwhile, kept the pressure on, oblivious to the newcomer's arrival as only Sam could see and hear the hologram of Al. Al was tuned to Sam's mind only.

Reed was yelling now, exactly what he yelled really didn't matter. The point was to keep the adrenaline going, and he was doing it well. What he didn't know was that Sam now had a spy that could check out the targets before he got there. Sam recovered quickly and continued the course.

"Come on, Sam, I got it now! Your next target is friendly, he has a bag of groceries in his arm. The one after that is..Yowza, wait until you see the rack on this one!" Al was happily leering at a sight yet unseen by Sam. "Obviously a sexist ploy here to see if you notice the cute, little derringer she's pointing at you. Boy, I 'd like to see her in prison chains!"

Sam was scrambling between targets now, trying to at least look like he knew what he was doing. It was confusing trying to listen to Al above Reed's yelling, but he concentrated on hitting the targets and wasn't doing too badly.

Having the prior knowledge of where the targets were and whether to shoot them or not was a great help, and when it was all over, Sam was pleased with his performance as well as glad that it was over. All that was on his mind now was to get to a private place so he could talk freely to Al. Sam interpreted Reed's slap on the shoulder as a dismissal, and walked back to the squad car to drive it back to the starting point. Enroute, Al enthusiastically gave his point of view on the course.

"That looked like a lot of fun!"

Sam rolled his eyes at that one.

"Kinda like Dirty Harry, ya know, the one where he did the targets just like these in that competition with the rouge motorcycle cop. Your remember that?"

Sam gave him a sideways glance of annoyance.

"No, maybe you don't. Hell, you were probably too involved with studying to take in those classic, shoot-em-up movies, anyway!"

As Sam got into the car he tried to recall his school days. Al was right. All he really could remember were classrooms and studying. And basketball. His forehead furrowed as he tried to recall any details. Remembering basketball brought on a pang of homesickness. Boy, how he wanted to go home, wherever it was!

Slamming the car door, Sam started the engine as Al popped into the seat next to him, which made Sam jump yet again. Being a hologram, Al could walk through objects in a ghostly fashion in Sam's time, because Al was physically in the future. All Sam's surroundings were a hologram to Al. Al could also pop suddenly into new location in Sam's time. It was eerie enough to see him melting through things, like he did with the target earlier, but Sam really preferred that to Al's popping up anywhere without notice. That usually made him jump, which in turn delighted Al to no end.

"This is great, Sam! This era cop car really had the power. Real gas guzzlers, too." Al looked around at the interior. "Boy, this thing sure has seen its day."

Sam's heart was just settling down to a normal rhythm now.

"I'm a woman again, Al!" he hissed.

"Yeah, I see that." Al replied giving Sam the once over. "I wonder what she looks like out of that vest. Ah, there's something about a female in uniform!" Al knew better than to leer at his best friend but sometimes it was just too tempting.

Sam glared at Al. "And thanks for scaring me with that target trick! I could have shot my own foot off!" Sam drove the car back to the mailbox and retrieved the box of ammo from the floor, through Al's feet. "And what sort of sexist comment is that about 'a woman in uniform'? You were in the Navy. There were plenty of capable women in uniform then, I'm sure, but you probably don't remember that part about them, do you?"

"Of course I do!" Al gave an air of annoyance. "There were, are, many capable women in uniform. I just like to find out what they are capable of!" He ended his comment with a sly smile. Sam gave up.

"O.K., forget it. What am I here for? I'm obviously a female cop in a city called Ocean Crest." Sam was reloading his gun with his head down so the others wouldn't see him talking to thin air. Meanwhile, Reed was waving another of the men over to the car.

"Well, we don't know yet." Al punched a few buttons on the hand link and it made a few beeping noises. "We know you are Jean Downs, and you have been a police officer for about a year now, and

the date is October 15, 1979. Ocean Crest is in California." Al put the link in his jacket pocket and took a cigar out of another pocket. Sam instinctively wrinkled his nose, but he knew he wouldn't smell the offensive item since it wasn't 1979 where Al was. That tobacco hadn't even been grown yet in Jean Downs' time.

After lighting the cigar Al said, "Officer Downs seems to be taking the waiting room all in stride." He chuckled. "She thinks she was shot during this scenario and is now in a coma and having an out-of-body experience. She thinks it is really funny that she sees herself in a man's body."

Sam hesitated opening the car door, a frown on his face. "Isn't she supposed to see her own body in an out-of-body experience?"

Al shrugged, taking the cigar out of his mouth. "Yeah, well, we weren't about to tell her that. Dr. Beeks says as long as she isn't hysterical she can believe what she wants."

Sam exited the vehicle and started walking towards the group. He bowed his head, and ran his hand through his hair to mask his face while he talked to Al. Really short hair, he noted.

"Ziggy has no idea why I'm here? What if I have to go to work now? What do I do? I don't know the first thing about being a police officer!" Sam and Al knew that he was here to correct something that went wrong in this time, to create a new future for the better, but sometimes the incident took a while to figure out. Ziggy usually issued possible scenarios with probabilities of success, but she needed information on all the participants to do so. More than once Sam had to rely on his feelings to direct his actions.

"Have Ziggy check out officers Reed and Darian. It would be nice to know how well I'm supposed to know them." He tried not to snap, but depending on an egocentric computer that was prone to pouting could be very exasperating at times. Sam was also perplexed that he could remember all sorts of details about Ziggy and Al, but practically none about himself.

When Sam left the training car and approached the group, Darian fished out a set of keys from his pocket and started walking towards some shiny, new patrol cars parked nearby. Sam heard him say good bye to the others.

"I'm on my way, Sam." Al punched the hand link and a doorway visible only to he and Sam appeared. Al walked through it, the door whooshed shut and he was gone.

A slight pang of jealousy hit Sam. Someday he would be able to walk through there, too.

## CHAPTER 2

He was snapped back to the present when he heard Darian getting into one of the squad cars.

"Come on! Are you waiting for me to open your door for you, or something?" Darian got into the driver's seat and started the car. "Let's go!" He slammed his door just as Sam reached the car. When he slid in the passenger's side, he got a glimpse of himself in the side mirror.

Jean Downs wasn't a beautiful woman, but she wasn't unattractive either. She was very athletic appearing, with a tan face and sun lightened, wedge cut brunette hair. He already knew that her hands were well groomed and feminine. Sam estimated her height at about 5'8", and her body was well toned without looking bulky. At least that is what he deduced by looking at her arms.

Sam gave Darian a sideways glance as Darian lit up a cigarette, and they drove from the shooting range. His expression Sam could only define as 'sour'. He was either not happy about something, or he had a stomach problem. Sam was not about to start a conversation to figure out which it was. Just go along with the action for now, he thought to himself, until you get more facts.

They wound up driving back to the police station in complete silence. Darian pulled to the back of the station through a security gate and parked the unit with a half dozen others. They both got out of the car, and Darian walked away without saying a word after locking up the unit. Sam followed him to the back door of the station where Darian tapped in a code to unlock the door. Sam had the presence of mind to watch and remember the code.

Inside was a large room with a huge table standing in the middle. There were three other male officers checking equipment at the table, obviously getting ready to go to work because they looked so clean. Sam, on the other hand felt sticky, sweaty and plastered with dirt. Darian greeted the men.

"How was the training?" one of the men asked. After Darian told them the story of the loaded soda can and had a laugh at Sam's expense, Darian discussed the shooting scenario while he removed his gun belt and took off his shirt. He didn't wear a bulletproof vest, Sam noted, just a tee shirt under the uniform shirt. Looking around the room, Sam saw another person in a tee shirt and uniform pants standing by some cubbyholes mounted on the wall, reading a paper. Sam also noted that it was another female, her long, dark hair up in a French braid in the back of her head.

Physically, this other woman was similar to Downs. He noticed the cubbyholes had names taped on the bottom edges, assumed they were mailboxes, and went to see if Downs had one. Maybe there was a schedule in the box, or at least posted nearby, so he could see if he was on or off duty.

As he reached the box marked "Downs", he noticed that the other woman was reading mail to someone called Bowey. There wasn't much in Downs' cubby, and unfortunately, no schedule. As he turned to go, Bowey glanced up at Sam, stopping him in his tracks.

Bowey was beautiful.

"You look like you've been dragged through the dirt." She said with a smirk, oblivious to Sam's gawking. "I can't imagine you messing up the training scenario."

Bowey had lovely green eyes and they were looking right at Sam. Where Downs would be considered plain, Bowey would be called stunning. She had a delicate face, and simple make up that flattered her complexion and eyes. The same eyes that regarded Sam curiously.

"Are you all right? That jerk Darian isn't getting to you again, is he?"

Sam wasn't sure how to respond. It didn't sound like there was any love lost between Bowey and Darian. "No," he responded hesitantly, "it's going O.K."

Bowey let out a little laugh. "You probably out shot that weasel and he's no doubt giving you hard time because of it. He can't stand the thought of a woman besting him in anything." She shook her head as she stuffed her papers back into her cubby. "What a macho shit."

Sam was taken aback by the angry tinge in Bowey's speech. "Well, he certainly didn't say much to me on the drive back," Sam responded.

"You're lucky there. I'm surprised he didn't launch into his 'women belong in the kitchen' routine." Bowey nodded her head towards the back of the room. "Come on, let's get changed."

'For what?' thought Sam as they entered a room marked 'Ladies'. Slowing considerably and letting Bowey enter first, Sam worked through the uncomfortable feeling he had about going in a female rest room. He kept his head down and pushed the door slowly, peeking around it. Bowey was the only one inside, and she was putting on a vest. Her uniform shirt was hanging on her locker door.

Relief washed over him as he continued inside and looked for his locker. It wasn't too difficult to find, as there were only three lockers in the very cramped quarters. It was obvious that the locker room used to be a storage area. In fact, there were still shelves on the walls loaded with reams of paper, boxes of pencils and jugs of liquid cleaners. The door in the back wall also said 'Ladies', and it lead to the toilet area. By the looks of that door, it had been a woman's' rest room for a long time and the locker area was a new addition built around it.

Downs' locker had a key lock on it and Sam found a key ring in his pocket with the appropriate key. He still didn't know for sure if he was on or off duty now. That question was resolved by what Bowey said next.

"Hey, when you get home do me a favor?"

She was buckling her gun belt when Sam answered, "Sure. What?"

Bowey checked her hair in a mirror mounted inside her locker door. "Would you check my bathroom and make sure I unplugged the curling iron? I don't think I did. Can't have the old homestead burning down!" She flashed a gorgeous smile at Sam as she slammed the locker door, locked it, and moved by him to the exit. Not waiting for a reply to her request she hustled out the door, saying, "And keep it down in the morning. It may be your days off, but this is my Monday! See ya!" and she was off.

For a few moments, Sam reveled in the silence and the chance to relax and gather his thoughts. Inspecting the inside of Downs' locker he found a stretchy tank top, a wind breaker and a backpack. Inside the backpack was a box of ammo. There were also several pressed uniform shirts and stacks of paper on a high shelf. They looked like copies of reports, evaluations and traffic citations, each in their own respective stack. Sam was impressed by the organization.

Taped to the inside of the locker door were several photographs of various people in different locations. Sam assumed most of them were family, as some of the photos were taken during holidays. The one photo that caught his eye was of Jean and Bowey standing up in a car that had its T-tops removed. It was a bright yellow Corvette, and the two women were smiling and waving at the camera, obviously good friends. The reason the picture caught his attention was that he had seen that same car in the parking lot near the squad cars. It was hard to miss. In the picture, Downs was on the driver's side. Checking the keys on his key ring, Sam found a key that looked like it would fit. Well, he thought, at least I know what I'm driving.

He heard the whoosh of the imaging chamber door and looked up to see Al, cigar in hand, surveying the room from where the bathroom door stood.

"I've seen foot lockers bigger than this," he commented dryly. "Kinda makes you feel like a second thought, doesn't it?"

Sam had taken off his gun belt and stuffed it into the locker, then proceeded to remove the uniform shirt and worked on the bulletproof vest.

"No, no!" Al chided. "The gun and belt go into the backpack, which go home with you. No self-respecting cop would leave his weapon in his locker. And the vest has Velcro straps across the sides that fasten in front," Al pointed to the correct area with an unlit cigar, and Sam ripped the straps apart. "There you go...whoa!"

Al's eyes were as wide as the grin on his face. When Sam had removed the vest, all that was underneath was a very sweaty white tee shirt and nothing more. And Downs was obviously a nicely endowed female.

"I like what female cops wear, or don't wear, under their vests!" Al was a happy man.

Sam glanced down, and with a noise of disgust at Al, covered himself with his arms and spun around. "Stop looking at me like that!" he snapped angrily. "It's embarrassing!" He grabbed the wind breaker, yanked it on and zipped it up all in one motion. "And it's also degrading!"

Al was rocking back and forth on his feet, smiling and chewing on the unlit cigar. He pointed out the stretchy tank top with a nod of his head. "I think you're supposed to change into that," he said eagerly.

"Not on your life!" growled Sam, who then stuffed the tank top in the backpack with the gun to make his point. Rooting through the locker looking for a purse, he asked in a tone of disgust, "What did you find out, anyway?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, not a whole lot."

Sam snorted and shook his head, as if he was disgusted with, but totally expected, that answer. With the cigar in his mouth, Al removed the hand link to Ziggy from his jacket pocket. There was a squeal of protest as he punched a few buttons, then slapped it on the side when the response wasn't fast enough.

"First, for you. Jean Downs is 23 years old. Her daddy was a policeman in San Diego, as is her brother in Los Angeles. She has a Bachelors' Degree in Criminal Justice and was hired last year by the Ocean Crest Police Department." Al paused. "Gee, looks like policing is in her blood. Anyway, she's very athletic and always wanted to be a cop. Quite a good choice for this department at this time." He sounded impressed.

Sam gave him a puzzled look. "What do you mean by that? Is there a problem?"

Al took on an expression of extreme patience. "Your Swiss-cheese brain obviously has forgotten affirmative action and feminism."

"Affirmative action? You mean where employers had minority quotas?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean. A lot of police departments were quite adamant about not wanting women in patrol positions, even ones as well qualified as Downs. The male officers felt it was a threat to their safety, and the officers' wives felt it was a threat to their marriages for their husbands to work night shifts with women. It really created quite a stir in a lot of departments. When finally forced into hiring patrol women, they were very careful who they selected. Jean Downs was a perfect choice because she is well qualified, athletic and low key."

"Low key?"

"Yeah. She is very comfortable working with men, especially policemen, because of her family exposure. She isn't a screaming feminist pushing equal rights down everyone's throats. She just wants to be a police officer. And she's a good one. According to Ziggy, she gets several commendations in the next several years and even becomes the first female detective. In fact, she becomes the first female Chief of Police, too. She marries a defense attorney, "Al frowns. "Now there's a funny combo. Anyway, they have two kids and are very happy." Al noticed Sam's look of panic at that news. "Don't worry. She doesn't meet the guy for a couple years. You're safe!"

Sam looked relieved, and Al continued pounding on the hand link.

"Then I'm not here for her. What about the others?"

"As far as information on Reed goes he appears to be a training officer right now. He has been with the department for 12 years and really knows his stuff." Al arched his eyebrows and nodded his head which usually was a sign of admiration. "He's an ex-Marine, if there is really such a thing, and joined the department here after two tours in Vietnam. He keeps up on new trends in training and technology, and does an excellent job keeping this department on the leading edge of modernization. A couple years from now he is responsible for the department being the first in the state to put computers in the squad cars. Apparently has a knack for getting funds for those things, too." Al whacked the hand link again. "Gee, sounds like we could have used a guy like him during our funding ventures."

Sam, still digging in the locker, asked, "So it doesn't sound like I'm here for him. What about Darian?"

Reading from the hand link Al continued. "Now there's a possibility. Michael Darian has been here for six years, and looks to me to be trouble-in-the-making. Has a temper that has resulted in five citizen complaints for excessive force. Four were dismissed, and he received a day of suspension for one. Apparently, he slammed a prisoner's head into a wall while the prisoner was still handcuffed. Broke the guy's nose . . . yuck."

Sam gave up his search and concentrated on Al. "Sounds rather brutal. He seemed like an angry kind of guy. Is he why I'm here?"

Al had a perplexed expression. "Well, according to Ziggy, nothing seems to happen to him. He becomes a detective in a couple of years, then quits for reasons unknown, two years after that. He becomes a private detective in New York and is still there. Not a happy personality, though. Never marries, known to deal with prostitutes if you catch my drift, and generally leads a rather pathetic life. Ziggy gives it a 42.7% chance that you are here for him."

"That isn't very much. There must be something else here." Sam looked at the picture in the locker again. "Have Ziggy check an Officer Bowey. I don't know her first name, but I guess she's my roommate." Sam pointed at the picture.

Al did a double take. "Wow! She's beautiful! She can frisk me anytime!"

"AL! Just check on her, OK? I need to know where we live, since I can't find Jean's purse." Sam looked perplexed. "Don't all women have purses?"

Al pointed at Sam's rear pocket. "Apparently not. Why don't you check the wallet in your back pocket?" he commented with a teasing tone of voice. Al continued on as Sam pulled out the wallet.

"Uh oh, Sam, I think this is it." Al punched furiously on the buttons. "According to the newspapers an Officer Lisa Bowey gets killed on duty on October 17, 1979. That's in two days."

### CHAPTER 3

"What?" Sam was stunned. She was such a nice person, so full of life. What a loss it would be for her family and the department, and perhaps even the future. The scariest part of Quantum Leaping was not knowing what will happen to the future when Sam changed things. "What happened?"

"That seems to be the odd part. The case was never solved. Officer Bowey responded to an armed robbery in progress call at a home in the rural part of the city. She was the first on scene, and was found dead about five minutes after her arrival, by her cover unit. She was in the house, shot once in the forehead. Apparently the homeowner was tied up with a bag over his head, so there were no witnesses. Looks like the suspect was trying to get the combination to a safe in the house from the homeowner because there was a lot of cash in the safe at the time." Al frowned. "No evidence was recovered. Whoever did it knew what they were doing. No fingerprints, footprints, nothing. They did recover the bullet that killed her, but the gun was never found. I bet that was frustrating." Al's fingers danced on the hand link as his words were accented with beeps and squeals from the glowing device.

When Sam's brilliant brain was assessing information he usually paced, and he was doing so now. With the locker room being so small, he was only able to take a couple steps before having to turn around, but he didn't seem to notice. "So I am here to stop Lisa Bowey from getting killed. I can't stop the robbery before it happens because we don't know who the suspect, or even the victim, is. If I prevent Lisa from going to work that day, whoever responds can get killed, or hurt. Since I know about it in advance, I guess that means I have to be the one who responds." Sam stopped pacing, looking to Al for confirmation. "But Lisa said I'm on my days off now. I guess I'll take a uniform home and show up at the scene before Lisa."

"And just how will you explain your presence, especially in uniform?" Al questioned. "They are going to think Downs is some sort of nut that likes to run around off duty in uniform. I think that's illegal or something. At least unethical." Al looked a bit smug.

Sam glanced over at the hologram. "I can't believe you are quoting ethics. You, who once blackmailed a committee member to get your job back?"

Al looked stricken. "So how come your Swiss cheese brain remembers that?" He straightened his bolo tie and stood a little straighter. "Any one in uniform has a certain ethical standard they must abide by for the good of the organization the uniform represents. Out of uniform is something else. So, go to the scene out of uniform." It certainly sounded like the voice of experience to Sam, so he mentally agreed and moved to go.

Sam stopped by the locker room door. "Well, if I'm to save Officer Bowey's life it would be nice to know a little more about her, so I guess I should go home now. Could you get directions to this address?" Sam showed Al the driver's license in the wallet and waved at the hand link.

"Yeah, sure," responded Al brightly, tapping at the keys as Sam left the room.

He crossed the meeting room and slipped out the back door without running into anyone.

Slinging the backpack over his shoulder Sam walked to the parking lot towards the yellow Corvette waiting there. He slid into the driver's seat, taking a second to appreciate the leather smell of the interior. The car started with no problem. Edging out of the space, he drove to the only exit from the lot. He hesitated in the driveway, uncertain which way to turn, when Al popped into the seat next to him. Sam flinched again at his arrival, his heart giving him another jump start.

"Wow, nice car! Not yet a classic in this time, unlike the Corvette I had as a dashing young Navy pilot. Smooth lines, classic appeal; what a chick magnet that was!" Al had a lustful, faraway look in his eye. Sam brought him back to earth.

"Al, please! Just tell me where to go, OK?"

"OK, OK! You're so impatient!" He regarded the hand link. "You live on Oak Vista Road. Take a right here."

As they drove through the streets, evening was just turning to night. There were several cars on the roadway, but few pedestrians. It seemed this was a bedroom community and most people

commuted elsewhere for work. It wasn't difficult to find the address, which was a condominium in a fairly new looking complex. Sam parked in the space marked for his unit, exited, and locked the car. Al just walked through the closed side door, it being just a hologram to him.

Sam let himself into the proper unit, with Al following behind, and closed the door. All was dark and quiet. When he turned on the lights he found a clean living room, furnished in an eclectic, but pleasing, style. There were lots of plants making the atmosphere very relaxing.

Sam sighed. "So this is home. You go get the details on Bowey, and I'll check around here." He looked expectantly at Al.

"Ziggy has just the basic stuff here, nothing that looks pertinent to the events in two days."

"Maybe you could talk to Downs," Sam suggested.

Al nodded, putting the hand link in his pocket. He continued to stand in the living room, his arms crossed over his chest.

"In the waiting room," Sam continued, looking at Al with growing exasperation.

"OK," Al replied, nodding and not moving.

"NOW," Sam demanded, glaring at Al with his hands on his hips.

"Aren't you going to slip into something more comfortable first?" Al asked innocently.

"AL!"

"All right! Jeez, don't be so sensitive!" He got busy on the hand link, and the imaging room door opened behind him. "I hope you're in a better mood when I get back!" He backed out of the door and it closed, leaving Sam alone in a condo that was not his home.

The imaging room door closed and secured with a whoosh and muted clang that always filled Al with a feeling of finality. He rarely left the chamber with a feeling of happiness; there was urgency and fear, and most of the time satisfaction of a job well done, but the usual feeling was that of dread. What was going to happen next? What would happen if he didn't get back in time with just the right information? They had a few close calls, all right, but they had ended happily usually due to Sam's uncanny judgment in assessing a situation, and out guessing Ziggy on the correct solution.

This was turning out to be an endless game, Al sighed to himself.

"Are you all right, Admiral?" The voice of Gooshie, Ziggy's programmer, echoed slightly in the cold steeliness of the access way to the chamber. Just beyond the short hallway was the control room to the Quantum Leap project which contained among other things, Gooshie and the central focal point of the hybrid computer, Ziggy. Although Ziggy literally was everywhere in the Project, accessible merely by speaking out loud, the disc mounted just above the main control panel gave a person

somewhere to direct their conversation. One of those human things, Al always thought, needing something to address directly. Talking to thin air can be rather disconcerting sometimes.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Al replied running his hand through his hair as he walked slowly into the control room. "I just need to get more information for Sam. Is Dr. Beeks still in the waiting room?" What Al really needs is a vacation, he mentally tagged on the end of the sentence.

"Why, yes, I believe she is," Gooshie replied. He always sounded out of breath to Al. And Al wished he really was out of breath sometimes. As brilliant a programmer as Gooshie was, he would still always also be known as "the guy with the really bad breath."

Al gave him a backward wave as he left the area. "I'll be with Beeks," he said over his shoulder as he walked away.

Once leaving the control room, Al was in the labyrinth of underground tunnels that made up the support areas of the Project. A lay person would easily get lost, as the tunnels all looked alike. Al, however, strode confidently along the seemingly endless stretch, not really paying attention to his surroundings. Lost in thought, he let his unconscious mind guide his feet to the waiting room and Dr. Verbena Beeks. The closer he got to his destination, the more organized his thoughts got as he lined up the questions to ask Jean Downs on his arrival. His step lightened a little as he allowed himself a few distracting thoughts about Tina, his current flame who also worked on the project.

Al reached the area of the waiting room and Dr. Beek's office and slowed a bit to gather himself. No matter how many times he entered this room for the same reason, it still unnerved him to see his best friend's body, but not his best friend. Whenever Sam leaped, his physical body stayed behind. The essence of what Sam was, some called it his soul, transfers into another person's body. Gone were the subtle expressions and movements that defined Sam Beckett, and it was always made Al uneasy to see another person's personality and mannerisms in Sam's place.

As he entered the room he immediately saw the form of Sam sitting in an easy chair, reading a book. Sam's face looked up at him and smiled. It was a nice smile on a handsome face, but it wasn't Sam's smile. Al glanced up a Dr. Beeks cubicle and saw her wave at him. Everything appeared under control here, Al thought. He immediately imagined an outsider might consider "under control" here rather shocking, and shook his head. As he got closer to his subject he saw the title of the book was "The Once and Future King".

"Hello, Al," said Sam's voice, tainted by the hint of someone other than Sam. She closed the book, saving her place with Sam's fingers. "Dr. Beeks was able to rustle up some reading for me. It seems I finally have some time to finish a book!" Sam's face smiled at Al.

Al shifted slightly, trying to mask the awkwardness he felt. He nodded towards the book. "Pretty interesting story, is it? I don't get time to read much, either."

Sam's laugh had a feminine tone to it. "It's a very good book. I really like Merlin the magician. Imagine what it would be like to live backwards in time; the things you would know! All that information and not a thing you could do with it." She shook her head sadly and looked down at the book, tracing the gold lettering of the title with Sam's long fingers.

Al had a difficult second holding his tongue. It was really eerie to hear that statement coming from Sam's lips, knowing it wasn't Sam. "Yeah," he agreed. Then, seeing a way to get the information he needed, he replied. "What kind of things would you change in your life, if you could?"

Sam's head tilted in a decidedly feminine way, and he smiled. "Well, actually, my life is about the way I wanted it to go. I'm really quite satisfied, or was, at least. This is still a very weird situation I'm in here. It's a very long for a dream...I'd definitely avoid whatever got me here in the first place!"

Al held his breath, looking for signs of hysteria or panic, but there were none. Sam's face just looked thoughtful.

"I would change something about my roommate's life, though."

This is what Al was looking for. He tried not to look too anxious, and managed a casual "Really? What?"

Sam's hand put the closed book down on the small table next to the chair. "I believe a person should do what they are good at. I am good at my job. Lisa is good at writing and photography. She has an artist's sensitivity and soul. She doesn't belong in police work. I've told her that, but there is that point about making a living. The department paycheck is a dependable source of income, but she could make it as a writer if she tried. She'd be happier, too."

That wasn't exactly what Al was expecting, but a thought was beginning to shape in his mind. "You've known Lisa a long time, haven't you?"

"Practically all my life. She's like a sister to me. We grew up in the same town, went to the same schools, even dated the same guys!" She laughed a hearty laugh. "Boy, that sounds funny to say in this body! Kinda puts a new slant on the things I remember!" She shook her head and continued to chuckle. "Yeah, Lisa's a good friend."

Al finished the thought in his own mind: Good enough to die for?

## CHAPTER 4

Sam-in-Jean's-body took his time checking out the condominium. Lisa had just started her shift so he would be uninterrupted for a couple hours at least. Remembering Lisa's request, he wandered down the hallway looking for the bathroom that contained the curling iron in question. He marveled at the photographs lining the hallway walls. Someone had some talent with a camera. He also noticed that each photo had a line or two hand written under them, lines from poems he didn't recognize. Sam blamed his swiss cheese mind for the lack of recall.

The first doorway he came across was a bathroom, and there wasn't a curling iron in sight. Running his hand through his hair he wondered if he needed one for this short cut. This must be Jean's bathroom, he deduced. He stepped back out in the hall, and followed it to the end, in search of another bathroom. There were two bedrooms off the end of the hall, and one was a master bedroom with its own bath. Sam found a curling iron on the sitting on the edge of that sink, unplugged. His mission was accomplished and all was safe.

Looking about the master bedroom area he saw more photos on the walls and shelves. Picking up a folder on a desk, Sam opened it and read some of the contents, instantly becoming lost in the words and emotions that had been set to the pages. His hands turned the pages in complete absorption, his mind unaware of the passing time.

Finishing with the contents of the folder, he opened the desk and found every drawer filled with folders, files and notebooks, each containing collections of prose. Short stories, chapters of books and endless numbers of poems. He recognized several lines from the photos in the hall. This was all original verse from a very talented person, and Sam couldn't shake the growing feeling that he was here for this reason.

It seemed too simple. Lisa should be a writer not a police officer. Sam had a sense of accomplishment, and felt a little relief at this new discovery. Some leaps took a lot longer to figure out. Now all he had to do was keep her from getting killed.

Considering the situations he had leaped into before, it seemed too simple. He just had to figure out who the killer was and stop him, or her, before the event occurred. The clues to discovering who the killer was must be around; he just had to find them. OK, this may be a bit more difficult than first anticipated. Sam shook his head and let out a short laugh. Sometimes he knew how Sherlock Holmes must have felt...or in this case, Nancy Drew.

He put the folders and papers back where he thought they went, almost feeling a bit guilty for being so snoopy. He stood up and stretched his legs out, trying to figure out where to start the search. As he leaned on the desk to stretch his back his eyes fell downward to the desktop. There, sticking out from a pile of papers, was the corner of a notebook. Sam straightened up and freed the small, brown book from the bottom of the pile. "Addresses" was embossed in gold on the outside, and Sam felt slightly guilty again as he flipped the book open.

There were quite a few phone numbers and addresses handwritten inside, with several names simply crossed out. Sam noticed that all the crossed out names were men, and among the names was one that he recognized: Michael Darian.

Sam's brow furrowed. If his name was only in the book because he was a work partner, why was it crossed out? They still worked together. If they were friends, it wouldn't be crossed out. But, if they had been dating and weren't now, that would explain the marks. That could also explain the hostile attitude she had towards Darian. Maybe this was the clue he was looking for. Maybe, somehow, Darian was involved with Lisa's death in the original timeline. That was an incredible jump in logic, he knew, but in his gut he felt the connection wasn't far off.

The rushing noise of the imaging room door caused Sam to look around and smile. As soon as he saw the figure of his best friend step from the frame of light he said, "I know why I'm here, Al."

Al glanced up then slid the remote into his jacket pocket. "Yeah, it's to save Lisa's life."

"It's more than that. She also has to become a writer. She's very talented." Sam's hand swept in a motion over the files and paper. "I'm sure that is the reason. In addition to preventing her murder, of course."

"Of course," Al responded looking thoughtful. He was unusually subdued and just stood there rocking back on his heels. "Something about that bothers me. I can't put my finger on why."

"You mean about who the murderer is? I think I may have a clue about that," Sam opened the address book. "Look here. Darian's listed in here, and crossed out. What do you think of that?"

"Maybe he didn't ring her bells, if you catch my drift," Al leered with a slight smirk. Sam just looked annoyed.

"That is not what I meant and you know it," he replied shortly. "I think there may be a connection somewhere. If only I could figure it out."

Gut feelings were something that Sam had learned not to ignore. They had pulled him out of trouble too many times. It was also something that his holographic friend had problems trusting, and Sam had always found that to be humorous due to Al's background. Navy pilots and astronauts seemed to function on nothing but gut instinct most of the time, but Al insisted it was continual training that hammered in correct responses. Sam had his doubts about that.

After spending a little more time rummaging about Lisa's things, and ignoring Al's suggestions to investigate her lingerie drawer, Sam realized it was time to journey into the kitchen. He was starving. The pantry and refrigerator didn't hold a whole lot of items, but what was there was healthy and easy to fix. Within a short while Sam had a heaping pile of spaghetti and a small salad. As he was preparing to eat, he discussed his next move with Al.

"I think I should go out to the house where Lisa gets shot." He said, twirling a forkful of pasta on his plate. "Do you have the address?" His eyes turned up to his friend as he jammed the food into his mouth.

Al looked disgusted. "One of my wives ate with the same gusto," he snorted while tapping on the hand link. "It's a good thing you aren't in public. It's an eating style not too common to most sane women."

Sam would have responded with a snide remark about the mental abilities of many of his ex-wives, but he was too busy enjoying his food.

"Ah, here it is. 14625 Knoll Road. It's east of here eight or nine miles in the rural area. Not much in the area. Must be real quiet." He rocked on his heels for a few seconds, looking thoughtful. "I would be bored out of my mind living that far from a city."

Sam, who had paused from his meal, glanced up and smiled. "It's great in the country." He pulled his salad closer. "But I think the 'country' around here is a little different from 'country' I grew up in."

"Yeah," Al remarked, wrinkling his nose. "No cow manure smell in the air."

Sam laughed and started gathering his salad with his fork. "What a city boy. Anyway, while I'm out there, why don't you research the owner of the place? If we know who he is maybe we can stop the whole event." He lifted his fork to his mouth, but didn't get a chance to enjoy it.

"Sam," Al's voice was edged with surprise. "The house belongs to Michael Darian!"

"Darian!" Sam stood up, agitated, his forehead frowned in thought. "I thought you said that the owner of the house had been tied up with a bag over his head! Don't you think the research articles Ziggy scanned would have mentioned the fact that the victim was a cop?" Sam was more than a bit irritated. With all that Ziggy could do, it seems a little detail like that would be hard to miss. "Or did Ziggy just forget to mention that point?" Sam had his hands on his hips and glared at Al.

The hologram, in the meanwhile, looked perplexed as he whacked the hand link once again.

"Uh, oh," Al breathed, fingers moving wildly over the keys. "Now you've done it. Ziggy's pouting." Al dropped the link in his jacket pocket and casually concentrated on his cigar, twirling it in his fingers.

"Pouting?"

"Yes." He calmly blew a puff of smoke into the air, which immediately disappeared. It was kind of a spooky effect, and Sam was momentarily distracted by it. He shook his head and got back on the subject.

"What is she doing now?" Sam was frustrated that he couldn't speak to Ziggy directly.

Al tapped the stogie. "Well, she says she will go back to verify, but I know that tone. I don't expect to hear from her too soon."

Sam could feel his jaw grinding in anger, momentarily refusing to accept what he just heard. Finally, giving in with a soft sigh, he refocused and continued to brainstorm. He glanced out the window and saw the moon rising in the east over some distant hills, and it dawned on him that now was a perfect time to check the scene. There was plenty of concealment with the darkness, and with Al as his guide he could thoroughly check the area without being noticed.

He mentioned this plan to his friend, who then replied that he didn't think there was much too see there right now.

Suspicious about Al's reluctance, Sam said, "Is there something else you had planned?"

Surprise crossed Al's face briefly, then was replaced with the face of a kid caught in a lie. "You must have also gotten women's intuition," he snapped at Sam. "As a matter of fact, I had some plans tonight with Tina that will probably involve sleeping in some way...if you must know."

Sam rolled his eyes, momentarily speechless. "Fine," he finally sighed. "I'll go myself. What could possibly happen?" He shrugged his shoulders and looked at Al.

It was Al's turn to become suspicious. The tone of the statement, together with the puppy dog eyes Sam was using, was a deadly combination. Al had seen the face alone win over many people, mostly women. He just looked so helpless! Al wished he could make the same face; boy, could really have some fun then! The problem with that look was it always worked on Al, too, and Sam knew it. Al was a real softie in some ways. This time it made Al feel just guilty enough to cave in. What if something did happen after all?

"OK, OK, just stop with the face, will ya?" Sam smiled happily and trotted back to Jean's room. Al followed. "Jeeze. I hate that face. I feel like a puppy beater."

"Yeah, well, it's too bad to have to resort to guilt to get you motivated." Sam's voice was muffled as he searched for shoes in the closet, finally coming up with a pair of sneakers.

"That's what the nuns at the orphanage used to say," Al snorted, punching the hand link buttons a little harder than he needed to. "I've got the directions when you're ready." Al pushed his hands in his pockets, his eyes twinkling as a chance at revenge presented itself. "Let's go! How come women take so long to get ready?" Grinning evilly, he looked right at Sam.

Sam merely looked up while continuing to tie his shoes, a distasteful expression on his face. "Cute. Knock it off."

"OK!" Al agreed, feeling avenged.

It was sunset when Sam drove off in the yellow Corvette with a hologram riding shotgun.

## CHAPTER 5

It was a pleasant October evening and the sunset was gloriously painting the few low clouds bright pink and purple. As Sam weaved through the rolling hills east of the city on the way to Darian's house, he noticed the town seemed to drop away and give way to open area. He could see an occasional home appearing well off the roadway. These were people that craved an isolated lifestyle, thought Sam. They could afford it, too. There was nothing cheap about these homes; they were obviously all nicely appointed custom affairs. How Darian could afford to live out here on a cop's pay Sam and Al could only guess.

The road was very winding and pleasurable to drive with the Corvette. Al praised the car and its handling, jealous that he couldn't take the wheel himself. His tune changed when the paved road ran out and continued on as dirt. A low riding sports car is uncomfortably rough on dirt, and he happily commented that he was glad to be a hologram at this moment. Sam didn't grace him with a response.

"I don't know about this . . ." Sam said from gritted teeth. "How much farther?"

"Not much. Boy, they aren't much for addresses out here, are they?" Al consulted the hand link. "Should be up here on the right."

Edging around a rocky hill dotted with tall brush, they finally came across a gravel driveway that reached out to the right. A substantial dust cloud followed them right onto the gravel.

"Kinda hard to sneak up on the place," commented the Observer. "These dust clouds would be like warning flags in the daytime."

The gravel wasn't too quiet, either, which got Sam thinking. "How could someone possibly surprise someone out here? Did this robbery occur at night?"

Consulting the hand link again, Al replied, "Well, it was late evening, not completely dark, when the 911 call came in."

"Where would someone hide a car? There's no way to sneak up on this house. Or they could have lain in wait like an ambush, but you think the car would be noticed..."

Maybe they parked further up the road, past the driveway, or Darian knew the suspect," Al suggested.

This seemed to be along Sam's line of thinking, because he grew silent. When they saw the house, there was a large Suburban truck parked out front.

"And just how are you going to explain to Darian why you're here?" Al inquired, eyebrow raised.

"I don't know." Sam sputtered, thinking. "I'll think of something..."

Al shook his head. "Geniuses. Or is that geniuii?" Al tapped on the hand link as Sam got out of the car. "I'll check inside." And with that, disappeared.

Sam knocked on the door, expecting to come face to face with Michael Darian. After a long pause, and as Sam was considering knocking again, the door opened. Taken aback for a second, Sam hesitated before speaking to the old man who answered the door. The face looked vaguely like the man at the shooting range earlier, only older. This must be..

"Darian's father!" Al said as he popped back next to Sam, who flinched at the surprise appearance. The old man eyed the woman at his door with suspicion.

; "Yes?" he queried, wondering if this was a lunatic at his door.

"Ah, hi," Sam said, "I work with your son, Michael?"

The man continued to look skeptical. "So?" he replied.

"He wouldn't happen to be here, would he?" Sam realized there was no way that he was going to get inside the house. Looking over the man's shoulder, beyond the entryway, he saw a beautiful wood staircase leading to a second floor landing. The inside of the house was mostly wood: ceiling, floor abundant trim, and built in bookcases were all Sam could see from this point. The striking beauty was in contrast to the paper clutter on all the table surfaces. Not an organized man.

"No," the old man said. "He doesn't live here. This is my home. I haven't seen my son in days. Now if you'll excuse me, I have work to do," and not waiting for a response, closed the door in Sam's face.

"What a nozzle." Al sneered. "Like father like son, as they say."

Sam managed to hold his tongue as he stormed back to the car. "And why couldn't Ziggy tell me about Michael Darian SENIOR?! Another insignificant detail?" Sam was peeved, and slammed the car door.

"Jeeze, are we PMSing or something?" Al chided. "Sorry, already! I can only relay what Ziggy finds. You know that."

Sam got in the car and calmed himself down. "You're right. I'm sorry."

He started the car and backed down the driveway. The darkness made it difficult to maneuver back on to the roadway, but he was finally successful.

There was silence in the car as they drove back towards the town.

"Now where?" Sam finally asked.

"Well, I don't know." Al tapped on the hand link, shook it a few times, and finally came up with something. "It's still early. Let's hit some of the local hangouts. It says here in a few of the Officers' personnel folders that they were verbally warned about going to a particular bar in town. Apparently, it was a known biker bar, and several of the cops in town liked to go there for the action."

"Action?" Sam looked puzzled. "What kind of action?"

"Well, it says here that the owner gave the off duty cops free booze for coming there. Sort of kept a lid on the really bad stuff, but that was interpreted as bribes by the Chief of Police. He informed everyone verbally and in writing not to go there." Al kept reading. "It seems that sometimes the cops themselves were the problem by picking fights with the questionable clientele."

"Let me guess. Darian's favorite hangout."

"It's a good possibility. Vigilante justice is at it's very best with angry cops leading the way. Darian was also a native to this area, so he probably knew most of the clientele!" Al put the link in his pocket. "It would be a good place to start, don't you think?"

The thought of a smoky, dark bar loaded with bikers and drunken cops wasn't Sam's idea of a good time, but he could see Al's point. If Darian was involved, this would be a good place to see who he hung out with. Reluctantly, Sam pointed the sports car towards the glow on the horizon that was the downtown area of Ocean Crest.

Al perked up as they entered the main street area. "Hey! This looks like the old beach towns I remember around San Diego back when surfin' was a fad and a lifestyle." He happily ogled the ladies

making their way down the sidewalks, and pointed out the busy nightspots. "All I need to hear now is some Beach Boys to make it perfect!"

Sam sighed, but had to agree. Even in the late seventies this town seems like it had been frozen in time. There were men and women in convertibles cruising up and down the two lane main street, looking for some kind of action. The music was loud, and everyone seemed happy it was a Friday night.

Several clubs already had lines out the door. Bouncers were posted in the doorways, controlling the crowds. It was still early in the evening and Sam wondered if this was how it would be all night. All he recalled of this decade was studying at school. This was a whole different experience.

As Al directed Sam off the main street, the sidewalks grew emptier and the pedestrians they did see grew grungier. Soon there was a line of motorcycles visible, parked on one side of the road in front of a neon lit sign that said "Dead End".

"That's the place," commented Al. "Catchy name. It has so much atmosphere, don't you think?"

"Atmosphere." Sam repeated as he parked the car down the street. "I'm not sure that's what I'd call it."

"Oh, don't be such a prude." Al chastised. "This'll be fun! Chip and I got into some good ones in places like this! And the winners get the women!" Al was happily punching the hand link, anxious to get inside. "What memories!"

"I'm not sure I'd want win any women that hung out in a place like this." Sam locked the car as he tried to put the damper on his partner's enthusiasm. "I've got a bad feeling about this.."

Al popped out of Sam's sight into the bar as Sam stepped inside. It was so dark and smoky, he had to pause and get his bearings. The music was loud and made up of shrieking guitars. He could hear the clacking of a pool table, but couldn't quite locate it. He stepped deeper inside and his eyes adjusted to the dark, assisted by glowing neon beer signs. The place wasn't so packed it was difficult to move around, but Sam had to maneuver carefully to avoid crashing into swaying patrons. The place smelled strongly of beer and sweat.

Loud laughter accented with the sound of colliding billiard balls in one far corner caught his attention. Sam squinted through the smoke and caught a glimpse of Officer Darian by the pool tables. So much for obeying the written demand to avoid the place, Sam thought. Darian was with a cluster of men about his age, dressed similarly. They must be off duty cops, too.

"Sam," Al popped in next to him. "Darian's over there."

"Yeah, I saw." Sam studied the man a bit. "Good guess on coming here. Did you find out who those other guys were?"

Al yanked out his hand link, and started tapping away. "Well, there are no name tags for me to go by, but the other personnel files show two guys with incidents similar to Darian's, and their

descriptions match two of those nozzles." Al nodded to the group in the corner. "The tallest one is Brent Walker. They call him Stretch. The white-blond guy is Quentin Talbot, and they call him Adolph, apparently because of his prejudice against anyone who isn't white. Jerk." Al kept tapping the keys, looking disgusted. "It's good to know that three years from now they are fired for excessive force during an arrest." Al kept reading slapping the side of the hand link on occasion. "Ziggy says it's a 37.2% chance you're here to get them fired sooner."

"I don't see how I can do that, and the percentage is too low to worry about it. They don't kill anyone, do they?" Sam had his head ducked down so no one would see him talking to himself.

"No, but they sure aren't Goodwill Ambassadors for police relations." Al grumbled. "What an insult to a uniform."

Sam let that one slide. Al's respect for duty was an admirable trait.

"What about the others?" Sam noted that there appeared to be at least two others in this 'gang', and Sam didn't like going in blind.

"Can't help you until I get some names, Sam." Al pocketed the hand link and wandered over to the jukebox, on which one of the unidentified men was leaning. The hologram was leaning through the man as if he was part of the smoke in the room, studying the musical selections offered in the machine.

Sam shook his head and sauntered up to the group.

"Well!" Darian commented, genuinely surprised. "Look what the cat drug in!"

Stretch was leaning over to make a shot on the pool table. "Hey Officer Jean! Please don't molest the beer cans." He made his shot as the other men laughed. The odor of alcohol was heavy.

Sam was sorry he had to saddle Jean with that particular enigma.

"Ha, ha. So you've proved to me that alcohol doesn't affect memory." Sam replied with a growl.

"Oohs" and "ahhs" arose from the group pretending to be impressed by the bravado. Sam felt woefully out of place here where the females were clad in skin tight leather and chains, and most everyone sported some odd, spiky, colored hair do. Is this when the punk look came about? Sam thought. He had to get this hostile group talking.

Adolph, who had been openly glaring at Sam, spoke first. "I'm surprised you bucked orders and came here, Downs. Trying to be one of the boys?" He emphasized the last word grabbing his crotch. The other men laughed again, seeming to find this the funniest thing they'd ever seen. In fact, Sam noticed that two of them, the two without names, seemed to be laughing unusually hard. Sam, distinctly uncomfortable in his present body in this atmosphere, walked up for a closer look at the unnamed pair. There was something about their behavior...

"Those two looked like they're three sheets to the wind." Al commented. "I'm surprised they can still stand up!" He continued to peck at the hand link, trying to get information.

As Sam got closer he saw their blood shot eyes. He also noticed that they were sniffing and rubbing their noses a lot, too. These symptoms nagged at Sam, and as he got closer, he realized what their problem was. There's a sweet smell around them, and this guy's nose is running from sniffing something."

Al looked at him, slightly surprised. "I think you're right, but I'm amazed a goodie-two shoes like you knows that!" he teased. "They aren't cops, are they? Look at their hair. It's way too long."

Sam had to agree with Al. They weren't very neat looking, unlike the other three. While he was sizing them up, he saw Darian out of the corner of his eye turn towards a figure against the back wall. It was a man - a big man - just out of the light, blending into the shadows on the wall. The man was standing, but leaning against a tall bar table, a mug of beer foaming and glistening in his grip. Sam turned to get a better look. All Sam had time to note was that the man was speaking to Darian, but looking over Darian's shoulder directly at Sam. The man's eyes were piercing, and shined in the shadows. The effect gave Sam the chills.

"Hey!"

Sam's attention was diverted by a hand placed forcefully on his shoulder. One of the sniffing twins yanked Sam around to face him.

At least he finally got control of his giggles, Sam thought. The man was comically serious now.

"Watch out, Sam," Al warned from somewhere unseen. "Cheech and Chong here seem to be sobering up."

"You have no business here, bitch," the first one said.

Sam narrowed his eyes, and stood up tall, staring right into the man's bloodshot eyes. Unconsciously, Sam's feet shifted to a balanced position, readying for a confrontation.

"This is a public bar," Sam replied slowly, keeping calm. The shrieking guitars had given way to a rumbling drum solo that was keeping time with Sam's heart. "And what I do is none of your affair." Just inside his peripheral vision he saw the other man moving in.

"You need to leave," the first man growled.

"Make me," Sam replied, not letting on that he saw the second man.

"Oh, oh!" Al warned. "Look out!"

As he spoke, the second man reached out to grab Sam's arm. Sam shifted just enough to dodge the hand, and grab his arm, twisting it in just the right way to send him flying. As the first man also reached for him, Sam stepped back and laid him flat with a round kick to the head. He wasn't too

clear on what happened next, but Sam suddenly found himself in the middle of an explosion of bodies. The bikers and punkers jumped in, primed for the event. Bar stools, pool cues and beer mugs were flying in no time as Sam heard the bartender and bouncers shouting for order. It would have been just as effective on stampeding buffalo. The melee grew to include them, and Sam found himself fighting his way to the door. He didn't second guess all the martial arts moves that came so easily - he just let them flow, grateful his swiss cheese mind didn't forget them. As he scrambled to the front of the room, unidentifiable items winging off various parts of his body, he heard Al's enthusiastic commentary on the donnybrook; at least someone was having a good time.

Reaching the front door, Sam dove out accompanied by a flying chair leg and an ashtray. They all clattered to the sidewalk in a heap, shards of broken glass spraying Sam's face. As he recovered his feet he heard the booming bass from the jukebox accented with the distant sound of police sirens.

## CHAPTER 6

"Quick, Sam, outta here! You could get in big trouble being here!" Al appeared next to the Corvette, waving him over.

Sam sprinted to the car, jumped in and fired it up. He punched the accelerator as he wiped away some blood running from the corner of his mouth.

"Around the back! There's an alley that'll take you away the other direction..." Al was using Ziggy as a road map, and pointing in a direction away from the sirens. As he entered the alley behind the "Dead End", Sam saw Darian angrily waving off a shiny, expensive black sports car. Just before the car took off, Sam saw the driver shout something angrily back at Darian. It was the big man with the icy eyes. Sam felt something nagging inside him...

"Quick, Al, get the license plate number that car!" He heard the hand link sing as Al plugged in the number. The sports car was off in a flash, and Darian was as close as he could get in a red pickup truck.

"Unless you want Downs to get a reprimand in her personnel file, you'd better split, too," Al warned.

Sam zigged down the alley, and zagged onto the street, and wasn't able to sight the truck or black car anywhere. They were long gone. Sam slowed down and headed out of town.

"Well, that was a fun evening!" Al quipped. "Too bad I couldn't join in!"

"Yeah," Sam agreed, dabbing at the cut on his lip. "Too bad. What'd you get on the plate?"

"Well, we can't access registration records of this year, but there are other government documents I have a hunch about..." Al poked at the hand link thoughtfully.

"That wasn't a cheap car," Sam started.

"You can say that again." Al's voice had a background of beeps and clicks from the hand link. "Back in the 80's that model started at 85 thousand."

Sam looked astonished. "How does that dirtball afford that?"

Al grinned sideways at his partner. He'd never heard the word 'dirtball' pass his lips before; he must be sharing thought patterns with Downs. "I'm playing a hunch, here..." Ziggy sang out a cheery string of notes. "Bingo!"

"What?" Sam had to concentrate to keep his eyes on the road. What he really wanted to do was grab the hand link.

"In a little over a year, that car will be auctioned off at a D.E.A. sale." Al looked smug.

"D.E.A.?"

"Yeah." Al saw Sam's confusion. "You know, the Drug Enforcement Agency. Big Ben there must be a dealer of some sort. Hence, he can afford the car." Al plunked the hand link back in his pocket, and drew out a cigar, rolling it in his fingers, letting that information sink into Sam's brain. "I have a bad feeling about that guy..."

The feeling is mutual, Sam thought. "How did the car get to the D.E.A.?"

"According to Ziggy it was seized in a hit and run traffic accident. When the cops arrived at the scene, which, by the way was just out of town here, they found the car abandoned." Al paused, gathering his thoughts and regarded Sam. "Apparently, the driver had lost control on a turn and skidded into a bicyclist. The bicyclist was killed, and the car got stuck in a ditch, so the driver bailed. What got the cop's attention, aside from the death, was the \$200,000 in cash in the trunk along with some packages of cocaine."

"What? Who was the owner of the car at the time? Was he caught?"

"The registered owner's name was William Baker. A native of this town. And a school mate of Michael Darian." Al lit up the cigar, and took a thoughtful puff. "There were no witnesses to put Baker behind the wheel, and he had an alibi from a reliable citizen..."

"Let me guess: Darian."

"Yup. Birds of a feather, I guess.." Al took another puff. "He claimed no knowledge of the drugs, but the vehicle was seized anyway after an investigation got him for income tax evasion and misdemeanor possession of marijuana."

"You said earlier that Darian quit the force.."

"Yeah, around the same time. My guess is they suspected a connection between Darian and Baker's dealing, but couldn't prove it, and Darian quit to avoid deeper investigation."

Sam found himself back at the condo, and parked the car. "Can you find out more details why he quit?"

"Other than being an asshole? Sure, I'll try." Al chomped on the cigar and retrieved the hand link. "Get some sleep. I'll get more info." He looked perky as the imaging room door opened. "And the night is still young enough for me to have some fun!"

With a wolfish grin, he stepped back through the door, and Sam shook his head in amazement as the chamber door closed. He left the garage and let himself into the condo where he checked his cut lip and cleaned up. Not feeling at all comfortable with any of the filmy nightgown choices, he fished out an extra-large tee shirt from a drawer, dressed, and collapsed into bed.

Sam saw by his glowing clock face that it was just past 3 A.M. when he heard the front door rattle. He sat upright, confused as to where he was at first. Then he had to recall who he was, which helped him figure out that Jean's roommate Lisa was home. And people thought phone calls in the middle of the night were unnerving, ran through Sam's mind. Try waking up in someone else's body...

By the time he figured out who, what and where, Lisa had settled into the living room. Sam heard her click on the TV, the volume level was just a whisper to Sam when he saw that he forgot to close the bedroom door. Awake now, he decided to see if she was all right.

Lisa was sprawled on the couch, her feet up on the coffee table with a beer in hand. She was clicking through TV stations with a remote. "Why can't there be stuff on TV this time of night like there is on the radio?" She took a sip from the bottle. "Music on the TV, 24 hours a day, just like the radio. That'd be great! Or as the punker crowd would say, 'Rad!' " She downed another swallow of brew as Sam's mouth opened for a second, the snapped closed as the words 'Music TV - MTV' crossed his mind.

"I want my MTV," came out in a barely audible whisper as he chuckled.

"What?" Lisa asked, turning to him. "Did you say something?"

"No, just a thought. I'm not quite awake..."

"Join me!" Lisa invited, motioning to the chair. "The bar's always open here!" She laughed a charming laugh that inspired Sam to take her up on the suggestion.

Retrieving a bottle from the refrigerator, Sam tried to recall the last time he had a beer at 3 A.M., and couldn't. Still, that doesn't mean he never had. Someday he hoped to recall little things like that...

Lisa looked tired. "The sarge had me work over four hours," she tiredly explained. "Apparently it must be full moon, because it was nuts out there. Hey, there was a brawl at the Dead End! I was the first one there." She took another swallow.

Sam wasn't sure how to respond to that, so he stayed neutral. "Really?" he commented, innocently.

"Didn't see Darian and his cronies at the scene, but I saw Stretch's car headin' outta town on my way in." She laughed again and took another sip. "Someday those guys are gonna get it." Her words were starting to slur a bit. Exhaustion and alcohol mixed together did that. "Hey, what happened to your lip? And your cheek?" Lisa leaned over and touched a tender spot on Sam's cheekbone, and he flinched.

"Oh, you know, I, uh, ran into the door." He took a long sip of the delightfully bubbly beer, and changed the subject. "Who else do you think was there?"

"The regulars. Adolph, Darian, Stretch, that Baker guy maybe." Lisa turned off the TV with a poke at the remote. "You know the crowd. God, I can't believe I dated him. What was I thinking?"

I was right, Sam mused. He decided to fish for more. "That Baker guy gives me the creeps."

"You and me both," she agreed. "I can't figure the relation between him and Darian. I know they grew up together, but they don't seem like friends. More like they tolerate each other. But they hang out together so much." She emptied her bottle with a tilt of her head. "I don't get it. Then again, I don't get guys sometimes. Well, that did the trick. It's beddie-bye for me, I'm pooped."

Sam finished off his beer as Lisa stood up and started unbuttoning her shirt, and yanking it out from her jeans. Startled, Sam collected the bottles and headed to the kitchen with his back to her, hands shaking slightly. He was sure his face was red from embarrassment, so he fiddled around in the kitchen as Lisa ambled down the hall, pulling off her clothes as she went.

"G'nite, Jean," she yawned.

"G..g..good night!" Sam stuttered. He waited until he heard her door close, then, relieved, turned off the lights and went back to bed himself, thankful that Al wasn't here to witness that scene. He could only imagine how entertained his friend would have been at Sam's expense.

The slight buzz of the beer was pleasant as he drifted off once again.

## CHAPTER 7

Sam woke just after dawn. Coastal fog was clinging to the windows, shrouding the trees like a fuzzy cloak. The smell of the ocean and damp earth wafted through the open window in Sam's room and he took a moment to enjoy the quiet. It wasn't long, however, before his train of thought drifted to why he was there, and that Lisa had just over a day to live in the original timeline. This caused him to sit bolt upright, palms sweating lightly.

He had to get to work. There still wasn't much to go on, just lots of suspicion. What was the weird relationship Lisa felt between Darian and Baker? Now that Sam knew cocaine may be involved somehow, the stakes were high enough for murder. And although Darian had been a jerk towards him yesterday, Sam felt there was something there worth trying to save. Darian seemed somehow separate from Adolph and the gang; like he was with them because he had to be, rather than wanting to be. Sam, again, had no real evidence of that except for his gut feeling.

Baker, on the other hand, gave both Sam and Al the complete willies. That was a scary man. Sam was reviewing in his mind how Baker's eyes looked like a predatory animal's in the darkness of the bar when he heard the swoosh of the imaging room door.

Al looked like hell-warmed-over. Sam regarded him with an amused eye. "Party time fun?" he inquired innocently.

Al glared at him with red-rimmed eyes, and started to scratch his unshaven face. This motion made him wince and shut his eyes while pressing a palm to his temple. The other hand held Ziggy's hand link out at an angle, as if the bright colors burned his eyes.

"Don't talk so loud..." he mumbled.

Sam laughed softly, shook his head, then kicked off the blankets. "So nice of you to grace me with your presence," he started, ignoring the plea for quiet. Sam felt a slight twinge of guilt as he provoked Al. Maybe this was some kind of anger based on jealousy, he thought, because Al was able to go home when he wanted. Sam decided to lighten up on his friend. "Did you get and sleep?" Sam asked more softly as he pulled on some sweat pants.

"Ah, not really.." Al's pain filled expression relaxed a bit, then was replaced by an evil grin. "I was too busy admiring the Farber twins." The winced face of pain returned. "Or I think they were twins...maybe I was just seeing double..."

Sam stopped, confused. "What about Tina?"

"What about her? I was merely admiring them from afar. Tina made sure I was, you know, focused on things..." Al stood a few seconds with his eyes closed.

Amazed, Sam continued to dress and put on running shoes.

"Anyway, the reason I'm here so early instead of being continually focused on Tina, is because Ziggy got some more info on Baker." A look of dread passed over his face as he held up the hand link. One eye clinched shut against the pain as he tapped the buttons at arm's distance. "During the investigation following Lisa's murder, there were implications that Darian was involved with Baker monetarily in a bad way."

Sam forced himself to be patient. "What does that mean?"

"Baker had ties that couldn't be proven with illegal bookmakers. Although there's nothing definitive in writing, Ziggy says there is a 95% chance that Darian owed Baker money from gambling debts. Lots of money. Darian's bank accounts didn't add up to his income. Like I said, there was nothing definitive." He plunked the link gratefully in his pocket, and rubbed both his temples, eyes closed. "There was also a written counseling slip in Darian's file about debts in general. Either he was really, really bad with money, or a gambler. I would lean towards the latter..." He finished up with a careful sigh, then stood, bleary eyed, leaning on some wall that was invisible to Sam. It made him look like the leaning tower of Pisa, and Sam he had to tilt his head to get a bearing on the hologram.

"Do you have Baker's address?" Sam asked, finding a sweat shirt to pull over the shirt he had slept in.

"Yup. 14671 Mesquite Mesa Road. And don't even think of asking me to go. I need some aspirin..." Al stood up straight, but wobbled a bit. "I haven't felt like this since my retirement party, and the girl in the cake took me under her wing, so to speak." He seemed to brighten a bit, and then winced again. "I'll check on you in a while, Sam."

Sam was torn between annoyance and amazement, and only managed a nod and a wave as the imaging room door clanked shut. Snorting, he left the condo quietly after grabbing Jean's wallet from the dresser and an apple from the kitchen counter.

The sidewalk was shiny with moisture from the fog, but it was lifting and burning off with the sun. Sam climbed into the Corvette as a driver in a passing car waved at him. Sam waved back as the car went by, starting their commute to work. He settled into the seat and looked around for a map. After a quick search, he found a dog-eared map book from the previous year under the passenger seat. 'All right!' He thought, so far so good. He found Mesquite Mesa Road, and saw that it wasn't that far.

The drive to Baker's neighborhood was uneventful in the quiet town. In the light of day, and away from the main streets of down town, Ocean Crest was a bucolic city with numerous old neighborhoods blending together. The new sections fingered out from the old core, and the term "urban sprawl" jumped into Sam's mind.

He found Baker's house to be in the middle of an old neighborhood. The ranch style houses were aged, but in good condition, all with newer paint and neat yards. Sam was rather surprised that Baker's place fit right in; for some reason he expected something that appeared neglected. Knowing how the Corvette stuck out, he drove past the house and parked several blocks away in a cul-de-sac. He then jumped out and went for a jog, heading for the small park across the street from Baker's. The morning ended up being fruitless, as there was no motion in the residence, and he was starting to get odd looks from the other pedestrians for hanging out in such a small park for so long. Reluctantly, Sam started jogging back to the car when he saw a familiar black sports car round the corner and come towards the park.

Sam sprinted behind a tree with the pretense of tying his shoe as he kept an eye on the car. He watched as the garage door automatically opened, and the car stopped inside. Baker emerged from the vehicle, but Sam could not get a good look at him before the garage door closed. Not much for a morning's work, Sam thought.

He returned to his car as it drove away, and was trying to decide what to do next. He still had to check out Darian, so he recalled in his photographic memory the address book page with Darian's address on it, parked, and studied the map book. Soon, he was in another part of town where the street was lined on both sides with apartment buildings. With some difficulty, he found the right building, parked, and proceeded on foot.

The complex definitely wasn't luxury, but fairly clean. He could hear various radio programs emitting from the windows and noted an occasional kid's toy in the shrubs. The grass between the

buildings was overly watered and very muddy, and Sam slipped slightly in a splash of mud on the cracked sidewalk. He found Darian's apartment noticing immediately that he could see inside through the open living room window.

Darian was sitting at the kitchen table, smoking a cigarette. He sat there, staring at the wall for several minutes, and then angrily slammed his hand on the table, sending some papers flying. He stood up, spun around and slammed his fist into the wall. Sam cringed, knowing that had to hurt. Darian just shook his hand and paced around the small kitchen. In an angry motion, he snatched the phone from the wall and dialed a number.

Sam perked up at this, and casually strolled closer to the window, keeping off to the side and out of Darian's sight. Sam leaned against the building, trying to look casual as he stretched against the wall.

"I've changed my mind!" he heard Darian yell, "I won't do it!" There was quiet, then Darian responded in a quieter voice. "It's my problem, Will, and I'll handle it." Quiet again, then, "I don't know, but I'll figure out something. There's got to be another way...I'm sorry I told you about the money now, that was stupid of me. It's not my money!" Darian was still angry, but almost pleading now. Sam was very curious as to who was at the other end of the phone, but instinct told him it was Baker. The information from Al was very insightful when applied to this call. Darian was in big financial problems, apparently. Whose money was he talking about?

With a leap of logic, Sam pieced together an idea, but he had to back it up with some information. Where was Al? He needed Ziggy's research capabilities to confirm his suspicion. When he heard Darian slam down the phone, Sam moved off towards his car.

He was standing next to the Corvette, unlocking the door, when he felt someone close behind him. He spun around and came face to face with Darian.

## CHAPTER 8

Michael Darian looked terrible. Sam didn't know him at all, but was sure that the bags under his eyes and sallow complexion weren't normal. His eyes appeared red and tired, and the smell of cigarette smoke was strong on his clothes. Sam didn't think he had slept at all since he saw him at the Dead End the previous night. A fleeting feeling of pity went through Sam's mind just before he noticed the anger in Darian's eyes.

The pity turned to fear.

"Just what do you think you're doing? Spying on me?" Darian's voice was a growl accented with clenched fists. The man was poised to fight.

Sam took a step back and raised his hands in a surrendering gesture. "It's not what you think. I came to talk."

Darian seemed taken off guard with that response. "About what?" he finally asked, eyes narrowing. "About trying to do a man's job? About your rights? About how to be a man?" Darian took another

step closer. "Forget it. You want to join a man's world, you figure it out like a man would. By yourself." He seemed to force himself to relax a bit and then turned to go.

"Not about any of that." Sam answered to Darian's back. "About you. And saving your ass from the wringer."

Darian paused, and turned to face Sam. "I don't need any advice from you."

"I'm not giving advice. I'm giving you a warning that you are in something deeper than you realize. Use your head; you're a smart guy."

Sam wasn't sure what was making Darian angrier; the fact that this woman wasn't backing down, or that Darian felt his life was out of control enough for someone else to notice. Darian stood there clenching and unclenching his fists, and grinding his jaw until Sam thought his teeth would break.

Sam stepped right up into Darian's face and looked him in the eye. "You are being used. Get control of your life before someone gets killed."

There was a flicker of uncertainty for an instant in Darian's eyes. Sam had hit a nerve, so he continued.

"Do the right thing, Michael. You know what it is. It isn't usually the easiest thing to do, but don't go on like this. You'll drag everyone around you down with you if you continue the way you are now." Before his luck ran out, Sam stepped back and got in the car. As he drove off, he left Darian standing in the middle of the street staring at his feet. He looked like a beaten man, and Sam actually felt sorry for him.

Hands shaking from the encounter, Sam took a deep breath and reviewed what he had said. His gut feeling told him that Darian was the key to saving Lisa, but he wished he had a little more information on him. He also realized that his stomach was growling .. it was past lunch time. He headed back to the condo to see if Lisa was up yet. She may have some details about Darian that would help.

Back at the condo, Sam raided the refrigerator and cupboards and started throwing together lunch. The smell of cooking eggs apparently had an additional effect as a lure to get Lisa out of bed. It was close to 1 P.M. when her bedroom door opened and she came down the hall tying her robe closed. Her hair was poking out all over, and sleep was still heavy in her eyes.

"I usually don't get up much before 3," she commented. "But the smell was driving me nuts. I'm starving." She plopped down at the table, head in hands. "I didn't have time to eat last night, we were so busy. Any orange juice?"

Sam replied by placing a glass of juice in front of her. She gulped it down.

"I see you went running," Lisa commented, rubbing her eyes. "I wish I had the energy."

With a flourish, Sam topped the eggs with salsa and cheese, then artfully arranged the toast on the side. He took two plates to the table and set one in front of Lisa, then sat down with one himself. "I ran into Darian on my outing."

"I knew running was an unpleasant activity," Lisa quipped.

"He looked awful."

Lisa continued to load up her fork. "I'm sure he was so polite, too."

"He wasn't always like that, was he?" Sam was fishing. "He seems so angry all the time."

Thoughtfully chewing, Lisa hesitated before answering.

"Remember when I first moved here?" Lisa said between bites. "We had just finished college, and had those awful clerk jobs?"

Sam had no idea, but nodded anyway.

"You just started the hiring process for the Department. I met Michael at that dance club shortly after you applied, and he was really nice. Then he got so angry when I applied...I'm not sure if it was me or that thing with his dad..." Lisa took another bite. "This is so good."

His interest peaked at the mention of Darian's father. He gently tried to get her thoughts back on track. "What thing do you mean?" He hoped it wasn't something Jean was supposed to know well.

"You know," Lisa said, her mouth full. "That love-hate thing. He always felt he had to prove himself to his dad, who was a real sourpuss anyway. Old dad was really pissed when Michael refused to take over the business." She laughed shortly. "I think he liked being a cop mostly because it annoyed his dad. His dad never forgave him, I guess." She swallowed some juice, and continued, thoughtful. "But then again, I don't think Michael ever forgave his dad for killing his mom."

Sam almost choked. "What?"

Lisa looked at him with a weird expression. "Is your brain dead? You know about that."

"Oh, yeah." Sam had to talk to Al soon; where was he, anyway?

The sound of Lisa scraping her plate brought Sam around. "Thanks for the breakfast, roomie. I just may be at work on time today!" She hopped up and cleared the table. "I get the shower first!" With that, she went down the hall and Sam soon heard the shower turn on.

With impeccable timing, the imaging room door swished open behind Sam. He turned to see his friend looking much more human. His suit was muted tones of green, his tie a light turquoise. Where he got these combos was beyond Sam, and it took him a second to gather himself.

"Oh!" Al commented, looking clean and shaven. "Just in time! Have you checked to make sure Lisa is O.K. in the shower?" His hopeful expression annoyed Sam. Al started to wander down the hall when Sam stopped him short with a hiss.

"No you don't! I need some information!"

Al stopped, looking disappointed.

"Get back here!" Sam snapped. "What's with you? Stop it!"

"My, aren't we crabby!" Al walked back to his buddy, reaching for the hand link in his pocket.

"And I thought I was in a bad mood..."

"Al. I have about a day to fix this. Find out what Darian's dad does for a living."

As the hologram typed in the question, Sam continued to brainstorm. "There must be a large amount of cash in the house, and I have a feeling someone wants it."

"Darian junior, perhaps?"

"I don't know, but I don't think so." Sam had started pacing back and forth in the kitchen, gesturing with his hands as he spoke. "I have this feeling that he is in the middle of this against his will. I guess he used to be a nice guy. I also need to know how his mom died."

That seemed out of left field to Al. "How does that have anything to do with Lisa getting shot?"

"I don't know if it does. It would just help me figure out Darian."

"Which one?"

"Junior."

"O.K., whatever you say." Al shook his head, not getting this direction of information at all. "Well, dad Darian is in investment stocks, mostly junk bonds that make a mint in the 80's. In fact, he's doing quite well at this time. His bank accounts show large deposits...cash." Al's forehead furrowed. "That's odd. Never really clear here where the money comes from because they are cash deposits. And withdrawals. There was a withdrawal today - \$50,000. Wow!"

Al tapped the link more. "It does show that he had a large deposit, too, yesterday \$50,000. I bet it's sitting in his house right now. There is another deposit for \$10,000 the day after tomorrow."

"That's pretty stupid, having that amount of cash in your house." Sam had stopped pacing to think.

"Now, about Mrs. Darian," Al continued. "She died in a car wreck several years ago. Apparently, Mr. Darian was drunk."

"Was he convicted?"

"No. Well, yes, of reckless driving, which is how a lot of the drunk driving cases were prosecuted at that time. He paid a fine, and never did time. The investigator at the scene smelled alcohol on him, but felt sorry for him and went for the lesser charge. Not unusual."

"Not unusual?! That's murder!"

"Not then, Sam!" Al explained. "M.A.D.D. wasn't around yet, and drunk driving was socially acceptable at that time."

Sam was flabbergasted.

"Apparently it was around the time Darian junior was in police training, and saw how big a problem drunk driving was. He must have blamed his dad." Al pocketed the hand link. "In fact, Darian junior has the highest prosecution rate for drunk drivers. He believes in hittin' 'em hard. Good for him."

Sam's opinion of Officer Michael Darian was changing rapidly. He was a good man that needed help. Sam felt that if he could get a grip on the gambling, Michael Darian would feel more in control of his life, and less angry. The result would be a darn good cop. Sam was more determined to figure his connection in tomorrow's tragedy, and stop him from destroying his life completely. From the looks of him today, he was in over his head in something, and felt completely helpless. No wonder he was angry at the world.

"I need to find out what's going on between Darian and Baker." Sam concluded. "Where's Baker now? Can you center in on him?"

Al press some buttons and disappeared. In the meanwhile, Sam heard the shower turn off, and Lisa singing at the top of her lungs. Badly, but with enthusiasm. It made Sam smile. Al popped back in less than a minute, and cringed as he heard the tune from the back room.

"Linda Ronstadt she's not," he mentioned. "Right now Baker is at his home, talking on the phone. Are we going to visit?"

"As soon as Lisa is off to work," Sam said, starting to wash the dishes.

Al rocked on his toes, smiling. Sam could tell by the sparkle in his eyes that something degrading was about to pass his lips.

"Go away, Al. Get me all the info on Baker you can. Shoo." Sam flipped some dish washing bubbles at him, making Al jump.

"Fine." He gave Sam his official serious look. "I'll be back soon," and with that, stepped through the imaging room door. Sam had become so preoccupied with the dishes and his thoughts that he didn't see the door swoosh shut.

CHAPTER 9

Sam hung around the condo until Lisa left for work in the afternoon. He picked up a bit, vacuumed and even dusted. It was hard to sit still so the busy work made the time go by faster. When Lisa left, he jumped in the shower and dressed in jeans. He fiddled with a bra, with feelings of new found respect for any woman who put up with those things. As he tied his shoes and grabbed a light jacket, Al made an entrance, looking relaxed and rested.

"Well, you look well recovered," Sam commented while looking for his keys.

"It's amazing what a cat nap and a B-12 shot can do," Al replied, looking around. "Are we alone?"

"Yup, Lisa went to work. Now it's time for us to find out what this Baker guy is really into. Got anything more?" Sam motioned for Al to follow as they left the condo and headed for the car.

"It seems that Mr. Baker is quite the opportunist," Al began. "As you know, he and Darian grew up together. Baker got into lots of trouble at school, cutting class, bringing illegal substances to school, etcetera, etcetera." Al read the hand link as the information scrolled by. "He was finally sent to continue..." he looked perplexed.

"Continue what?"

Al whacked the device, "Oh! Continuation school! You know, high school for difficult teens."

It was Sam's turn to look perplexed.

"Oh, right, you probably didn't have one of those at the farm. Anyway, he finally graduated, and he and Darian went to the local Junior College for a while. Darian left after two years and joined the Department, and Baker was out of the scene for a while...no police record, anyway."

They reached the car and Sam climbed in, firing up the engine. He was getting to like this car.

"Did he graduate from the college?"

"No, but he went there for several years...taking chemistry classes, mostly. His parents died of cancer and heart disease, and he got the house, being an only child.." Al pocketed the link, and pulled out a cigar, fingering it. "Up to now, the only notable thing is the fact that the cops have been there many times on loud parties. Nothing in the past couple years, though."

"No job? What does he live on?"

"I guess life insurance money. The house was paid off just before the parents died."

"And just how does he afford that car?" Sam's mind was putting things together, but he needed conformation of his idea.

Al thoughtfully chewed the cigar. "Perhaps loan sharking, if the gambling story on Darian is right."

"Or drug sales..." Sam added, remembering how the car eventually winds up with the D.E.A.

"There's that, too." Al agreed.

They drove in silence, each in their own thoughts, until Sam parked the car out of sight from Baker's house. He directed Al to center himself on Baker, and report back to the man's location.

Sam tried to remember if there was a way to sneak up on the house, and headed in that direction.

Al returned, reporting that Baker was sleeping, and the house was really dark because all the drapes were closed. He couldn't see a whole lot, and thought the man was alone. He also added something interesting. "I looked around to make sure he was alone. Something's going on there, though, because the back rooms look like a laboratory."

"How so?"

"See for yourself...there are jugs of liquids and beakers and those burner things..."

"Bunsen burners?"

"Yeah, like you see in the Frankenstein movies!"

Sam laughed a little, and wasn't surprised by the find. If his suspicion was correct, this all fit. When they got to the house, Al pointed towards the back of the house. There were full, mature bushes running between the houses, so Sam was covered from the neighbors' view. He sneaked through the living barrier to the back yard.

The back yard was a mess. Weeds grew everywhere, and there was a rusted out barbecue sitting near the back door. The neighbors were probably happy the thick bushes surrounded the back. The front, however, was in good shape, keeping up appearances in the neighborhood. The other thing Sam noticed was a stake in the middle of the yard with a long, heavy chain attached. He hesitated.

"You didn't see a dog in the house, did you?" he asked the hologram.

"Didn't see one, but like I said, it was dark."

A bad feeling closed in on Sam as he approached the back windows. Peeking around the edges of the windows wasn't too helpful. When he crept up on one of the windows, Al said, "That's the laboratory room."

Sam could have told him that without looking. The smell of ether was strong around the partially open window. Sam used the small pocket knife attached to Jean's key chain to cut a little hole in the screen just big enough to be able to pull aside the drapes with his fingertips.

Peering in, he confirmed what he suspected. There were bottles and burners all over a big table. To one side was a set of scales and piles of plastic wrap and bags. Baker was manufacturing methamphetamine...speed.

"Well, we know how he makes a living now." Sam whispered. "He's the neighborhood drug lord. I wonder if Darian knows?"

"He's known the guy his whole life, Sam. You'd think he'd suspect."

Just then Sam heard a snuffling inside the house. The door into the room was closed, and Sam could see a shadowy motion along the space at the bottom of the door. What he heard next made his stomach jump...a long, low growl. In that same space of time, he noticed the handgun on the table next to the scales. A big handgun.

Sam backed off. "Time to go, Al!"

As he moved off to the side, the growl turned to loud barking.

"Oh, Sam, that sounds like a big dog..."

Just as he passed the sliding glass door in the back of the house, a black dog the size of a pony threw himself on the glass, barking, slobbering and showing teeth the size of butcher knives. Sam bolted through the bushes and ran through the neighbor's yard to the street. He slowed as he got to the sidewalk, but could still hear the animal going ballistic in the house - So much for Baker's nap. He had to get out of there, fast.

Al had disappeared in convenient hologram fashion, but when Sam jogged around the corner he saw him standing next to the car, waiting. Sam's heart was still hammering in his chest as he unlocked the door. "Get in, let's go," he hurriedly breathed, envisioning the black monster leaping on his back any second. He finally felt safe with the slamming of the car door. He waited until his hands stopped shaking, then started the car.

"I don't guess we'll be going back there anytime soon..." Al mentioned lightly, obviously amused at Sam's event. "Good thing holograms make lousy kibbles!"

"Yeah, but I'd make great ones. That was too close."

They drove off a back way, avoiding the front of the house.

Now where? Sam thought as he drove absent mindedly through the city trying to fit the pieces together.

Al wasn't a lot of help. He was trying to blow smoke rings with the cigar. What was eerie was that when the smoke left Al's holographic lips, they just disappeared from Sam's sight. Al had to be touching something for Sam to see it. The whole effect was distracting, and Sam had a difficult time concentrating.

"Stop it." Sam grouched.

"Stop it what?" Al asked innocently, eyebrows raised.

"That." He waved his hand in the air. "That, that smoke thing. With the rings. Stop."

"Gee, aren't we touchy." Al tapped the cigar out. "A close call with a man eater sure gets your panties in a wad."

Sam gave up and just gripped the wheel tighter. "So, what's the connection here? How is Baker involved with Lisa's murder? What does Ziggy think?"

Al produced the hand link and typed madly, shaking the device now and again. "With the new drug manufacturing information, Ziggy says there's an 95.7% chance that Darian knows about it, and is keeping quiet. Ziggy adds that it's 50/50 whether Darian is being blackmailed to keep quiet about it, or gets a piece of the action, so to speak."

"How can Ziggy say Darian's part of it? He lives paycheck to paycheck, according to the last background check!"

"Ziggy's taking into account the fact that they have been friends for so long."

Sam snorted. "Strange definition of friendship."

"Yeah, well, maybe friendship isn't quite right. How about relationship?"

"Yeah." Sam had a thought. "Speaking of relationships, in the original timeline, how do Michael and his dad get along after Lisa dies?"

"They don't. Don't speak at all until the day the old man dies. Hey, speaking of the old man, I found out he deals in diamonds on the side, as in being a broker. Makes huge sales for a small diamond company in Germany. That's what all the huge deposits are from, in addition to stocks. He makes the deals, does the actual selling, and gets a cut. That's why there's large amounts of money in his house some times. Kinda scary, if you ask me, but he's really low key, a real curmudgeon without a social life, so no one knows what he does. The sales are made out of his house. Has a huge safe in his den, according to his insurance papers."

"So, Michael knows about this business?"

"Apparently so. Michael is the witness signature on all the sales documents."

Sam perked up. "Has he made a sale recently?"

"Not for a while, but there's one happening tomorrow, late in the morning. Gee, imaging sleeping with \$50,000.00 worth of diamonds in the house." Al gave a shiver. "I wouldn't sleep a wink."

"\$50,000.00? You said \$10,000.00 was deposited in two days! Where's the rest? Did the diamond company get it?"

"I'll have Ziggy check on it," Al commented.

"And Lisa gets shot tomorrow. Al, I think the blackmail angle is the right one. I heard Darian talking to someone on the phone earlier and he said he was sorry he told about the money. I think Baker tries to get the cash. In the original timeline, what happens to Baker after tomorrow?"

"Well, his car gets confiscated in two years, but before that he does well. Buys a house on the beach, gets a Ferrari ... hey, I think you're right. A big infusion of cash would quadruple his business." Al kept tapping away. "In fact, he becomes a millionaire! That's not fair!" Al was mad. "No wonder the D.E.A. has its eyes on this guy. Anyway, after the car is seized, so is his house on some income tax thing, and Baker disappears. The agency believes he is the head of a drug cartel in Mexico, and living the high life in Cabo San Lucas." Al shook his head. "What a nozzle. Making a living on other people's misery."

"All because he gets the cash at Darian Senior's house." Sam concluded. "Now, how does he get it? Does Michael get it for him? Is that how he gets out of debt from Baker? Who shoots Lisa?"

Al had put the hand link back in his jacket pocket, and was now puffing on yet another cigar.

He looked thoughtful as he watched the sun hanging in the sky, dropping to its eventual meeting with the sea. "Well, " he said. "I'll find out about the missing \$40,000.00, but as for Lisa, I guess that's why you're here, Sam."

The statement wasn't comforting.

Michael Darian, Junior, was thinking.

His encounter with Jean had left him shaken, and he hoped that weakness hadn't been obvious to her. It was awkward having Lisa's best friend, and Lisa herself, working side by side with him. No wonder he felt out of control lately; he'd never had a female equal at his job. He shook his head at that notion - equal? A woman? Was that even possible?

Deep inside he felt the conflicting feelings arise. He had to admit, he personally hadn't seen them shy away from an incident yet, as Stretch had predicted. And they handled their work load without a lot of help, against Adolph's predictions. Neither one of them could see one good thing about the women. Now that Darian thought about it, did he really even have his own opinion on women in police work, or was he just echoing those two morons? He hadn't really thought a lot about the consequences of his job lately, he had been concentrating on what his job could do for him.

That's not why he got into police work.. He wanted to make a difference when he first joined up. What had happened to him?

Now that thought took a whole new direction. What kind of man was he, that he just followed other's ideas? He could think for himself. He didn't need those idiots to tell him what to think. He didn't need their approval. I'm a smart guy, Darian thought.

That's just what Jean had said. He felt astonished that she even noticed. He'd been so mean to her. Why? Because she talked Lisa into police work? He had really liked Lisa while they were dating, but didn't want to compete with her in the work place.

Compete for what?

Michael had wandered back to his apartment, and found himself standing outside his front door. What am I competing for? And who am I competing against?

He felt his hands go cold and clammy as he reached for the door knob. Competition - that's why he liked to gamble. Competing against the odds. It was easier to deal with numbers than people. It was so satisfying to win. It was like getting free money!

Stepping through his doorway, Darian suddenly had an epiphany. The small, dark apartment suddenly looked sparse and empty. This is what I have to show at 26? Mountains of betting debts and a cave for an apartment?

I can do better.

I have a career.

I need to compete only with myself and stop using other people as a yardstick to measure myself. I need to set some goals.

For the first time in a long time, Michael Darian, Junior, felt in control. There was hope. First, he needed to stand on his own; have his own opinions, make his own decisions, control his own money. He needed to take care of the gambling debt.

Second, well, the first step was tough enough for now. One day at a time...

With his mind planning a brighter future, Darian felt a huge load slip from his shoulders. He reclined on the couch to think some more, but instead fell into a pleasant sleep.

For the first time in a long time, he had happy dreams.

Sam had decided to eat out near the beach, and found a small hot dog kiosk on the boardwalk, behind a small cafe. He sat down on the sea wall to enjoy the sunset as he ate. It was so beautiful, but Sam's mind wasn't able to appreciate the beauty as he thought about Lisa. He had sent Al to get a diagram of the elder Darian's house in preparation for the next day. He was still trying to decide when and how he should go there when a soft voice behind him made him turn.

"The best Karma bench around, huh?" Lisa Bowey was standing behind Sam, in full uniform. She wore it well.

"Karma bench?" Sam inquired, taking a few seconds to figure out what she'd said.

"Yeah. You know, those benches the surfers use to watch the sunset?" Lisa was buying herself a hot dog. This was obviously a popular spot. He wondered if his host's memories directed him here, and if that was a common leaping side effect.

"It cracks me up how they applaud when the sun sets. 'Nature's Show' and all that."

"It sounds kinda spiritual," Sam replied.

Lisa laughed a beautiful laugh. Sam felt like a school boy in puppy love watching her. She didn't deserve what was to happen to her.

"They are a spiritual bunch, all right, especially about the ocean." She dropped herself down beside Sam on the wall. "I do have to admire their dedication to the sea. Must be nice to have such a passion." She took a bite of the hot dog.

Sam hesitated. "You have a passion for writing and photography," he mentioned between bites. "It really shows in your work."

Lisa nodded as she chewed. "Yeah, I guess." She took another bite, and they enjoyed the comfortable quiet between them. "Do you have any regrets, Jean? I mean, if there was one thing you wish you could go back and change, a decision maybe, would you change it?"

That was a question that was more loaded than she realized, Sam thought, and he had to bite his cheek to keep quiet. She was so easy to talk to.

It was then he heard Al's soft voice behind him.

"Just keep quiet, Sam," he said, his tone loaded with understanding and compassion. "You'll only get yourself in trouble. What's done is done."

"What's done is done," Sam repeated quietly.

Lisa glanced at her friend and said, "That's true. But I don't think you have any regrets, Jean. Your passion is duty; to your family, job and country." Again, that musical laugh. "You're living it and that's what's wonderful. Just like those surfers." Lisa continued eating her meal, letting the subject drop.

Sam's jaw worked to keep control of his thoughts. He could see Al watching him, concerned, and wishing he could help. There was so much Sam wanted to say, but not now.

"Lucky me," he said instead. With a big breath, he finished the conversation on a light note. "Just call me Duty Surfer!" and let out a nervous laugh.

Lisa reciprocated, and they both finished off the dogs with gusto, swinging their feet and kicking the wall as they sat.

"Well, duty certainly calls for me, surfer girl!" Lisa said lightly, hopping down from the wall.

"Guess so. Nice sunset, huh?"

"And so comes the night."

"You know," Sam mentioned in passing. "it's never too late to follow your passion."

Lisa smiled. "I know." She looked down to gather her car keys. "I just have to build up the courage to do it."

Sam hopped down and walked her to the police unit, and waved her off. After circling the parking lot and talking briefly to an older couple, Lisa drove off.

"I know that was hard, Sam."

Sam put his hands in his sweatshirt pockets, shrugged, and walked to the car. The October air was getting chilly now that the sun had disappeared, a forewarning of the winter to come. The inside of the Corvette was snugly warm and Sam prepared to drive away. He made a mental decision to put his regrets aside for now. It wouldn't help Lisa.

Al had moved into the car with Sam, and also made the effort to move Sam's thoughts in a helpful direction. "OK. I looked into the layout of dad Darian's house, and also explored the cash thing." Al fiddled with the hand link again. "The diamond sale takes place later in the morning, around 10. The diamonds were delivered to his house earlier in the morning by special courier. The old man sells the diamonds to a dealer in San Diego for \$50,000, cash. But, we also found an insurance claim for a \$40,000 theft, referring to the police report of a robbery earlier in the day."

"When Lisa get shot."

Apparently so."

Sam thought a second. "Michael Junior wasn't there during the robbery?"

"No, only dad, according to the report."

When does Michael return to the house?"

"Just after the robbery, according to a witness, it says here."

"What witness?"

"A girl called Tammy Everett. She made the 911 call."

She saw Darian return to the house after making the call?"

"Well, actually, it says here he told her to make the call. She went back to the house after the 911 operator said the first unit was there. She found him waiting at the bottom of the driveway, and they stood there while Lisa's back up arrived."

"She got there after Lisa had arrived."

"Yup."

"So she can't say if Michael went up to the house while she was making the call."

"Nope. They only have his word."

Sam was wondering what his word was worth at that point, and finally had an idea what to do the next day. He briefed Al and then returned to the condo for the night. Tomorrow would be a busy day.

## CHAPTER 10

Al left Sam at the condo to get a good night's rest. They both needed it, knowing what they were up to the next day, but Al was feeling a bit too restless for sleep. He left the accelerator chamber filled with a desire to have this leap over with, but no way to execute that desire. He tossed the hand link to Gooshie as he spoke to Ziggy's rainbow disc suspended from the ceiling.

"Ziggy."

"Yes, Admiral?" Ziggy had been programmed with a sultry, feminine voice that would normally catch Al's attention. He knew the personality attached to the voice, however, and continued on in a professional manner. The ego of the parallel hybrid computer was very sensitive, and prone to fits of emotion.

"Let me know if you come up with any more information on tomorrow. Otherwise, I'm going to my quarters."

"Yes, Admiral," Ziggy purred.

Al regarded the disc with a skeptical eye. She was in a good mood; she must not be expecting to come up with anything new, or she's holding something back to bait me with later.

He moved on down the hallway towards the living quarters of the Project members loosening his tie and unbuttoning his sleeves as he walked. A nice, cool beer would taste good about now. Anything to take the edge off. There was nothing he could do to help his friend any more right now, and that made him restless. He wasn't very good at waiting, and that was all he could do right now. He hoped he got some sleep; it wouldn't help Sam a bit to be a zombie tomorrow.

When he reached the door to his quarters, he tried to think of some way to work off this restlessness so he could sleep. As he opened the door, his entire train of thought was derailed.

Tina was waiting for him in a frilly thing he hadn't seen before, balanced on the highest heels in this atmosphere, a smile on her face and a glass of wine in her hand.

"Ziggy didn't give away my surprise, did she?" she growled, pulling him in the room by his tie.

Oh, boy! Al thought, feeling the lustful grin crawl up his cheeks. Tomorrow is another day!

He kicked the door shut with his foot, forgetting the rest of the world's problems for a while.

The evening crawled along for Sam. He puttered around the condo, even went for a jog when he couldn't find anything to do. He was back now, sprawled on the couch and flipping through the television channels. He settled on a documentary about Stephen Hawking, stilled awed by the man's brilliance. An hour finally passed, and Sam had found he had downed three beers. A hot shower, and I'll sleep like a baby, he told himself.

It was around eleven when he finally went to bed, falling instantly asleep. He found himself awake at 5 A.M., however, unable to fall back asleep. He gave up, and got up to start the day. Hopefully, it would be one more day in Lisa Bowey's long life. It was all up to Sam, and he felt the weight on his shoulders.

He hadn't heard Lisa come home, but saw that her room door was shut. Sam found himself fighting the urge to reach for the door knob and open it. He just wanted to look at her and try to push aside the thoughts about her fate if he failed. He wanted to talk about passion and talent and how wonderful it was to combine both into a career, and how terrible it could be at the same time.

The conflicting feelings of duty to finish this and the desire to go home washed over him. He felt his heartbeat racing and his palms sweating, and knew that he had to get out of there. Then again, he imagined her head peacefully on her pillow.

All this in the few seconds he stood before her door.

With great difficulty he put all those feelings and desires aside and collected only those thoughts that would help him in today's events. He pulled himself together with a sigh, found the car keys and left.

Sam remembered a 24 hour coffee shop in town and went directly there, ordering a light breakfast and coffee. Opening a paper napkin to diagram Darian Senior's house, he realized he didn't have a pen. Instead, he made use of the table's condiments and utensils to model the diagram he still saw in his photographic memory. Several cups of coffee and one sunrise later, he paid for his fare and left.

Parked at the beach, he pulled out the map book from under the seat. He found where the elder Darian's house was, and was trying to locate another road that would take him near the house. His plan was to position himself in a place where he could watch the house, from the time where the diamonds are couriered to the house to, well, he'd have to go on instinct from there.

He was absorbed in his quest when Al stepped into the picture.

"Good morning," Al said airily. "I hope you got some sleep."

Sam spared him a glance, his vision assaulted by the bright colors of Al's suit. The hologram appeared to be in a good mood, which made Sam eternally grateful. One less thing to deal with.

"Al. You look," he was at a loss for words. "Bright?"

"Tina put this together. It fits our moods this morning." Al had the hand link and was happily punching at the buttons. "I know what you're looking for, there. Ziggy says the best way to go is out

Olive Grove Road, north about 3 miles, and there is a small side road that winds over close to Darian's address. There's a nice hill behind the house to watch from."

Sam closed the book, and drove off in the suggested direction. Al chatted the whole way about his evening, and his plans for a getaway with Tina. Sam opted to be quiet. They found the roads in question, parked the car, and Sam got out to hike to the hill outlined by Al. The morning was still slightly overcast, but burning off quickly the way coastal fog does. By eight o'clock, Sam was set, the house in sight. He was in the back, the driveway only partially visible. He could see if a car pulled up the driveway, but would lose sight if it parked directly in front of the house. He changed his position, getting several scratches from the dry brush on the way, and finally settled on a spot where he could see the front door and one side. He remembered what the inside living room area looked like from his visit, and knew that was what he was seeing from the side windows. There was a fire already glowing in the fireplace, and Sam could smell the wood's smoke as it drifted from the chimney top in a grey curl.

The two men sat in silent observation for several minutes.

"This is going to be a long day," Al commented.

"Tell me about it," Sam commented as he slapped an ant that had bit his ankle. "What time does the courier arrive?"

"Speak of the devil!" Al commented, nodding to the house. A white box truck just pulled up the driveway. They watched as an unassuming man with a briefcase jumped down and trotted to the house. "Right on time. 9 o'clock." The man was in the house just a few minutes, then trotted out and drove away.

Shortly before 10 o'clock Sam saw another car pull up. He didn't recognize the car, but did recognize Michael Darian, Junior, as he emerged from it. They watched as he stretched out, then entered the house. Right at 10, a black van drove in and turned around to face down the driveway. The driver stepped out, looked around, and opened the side door. Sam saw the man was armed.

"I bet that van can take quite a hit," Al commented. "Jeeze, they look like the Men in Black."

Sam didn't get the reference, but knew what Al meant. The two men that got out of the back and the driver looked like secret agents. Sam definitely wouldn't want to mess with them.

The driver stayed outside, prowling around, while the others went inside. It was a good half-hour until the second two men came out and got back in the van. The driver locked up, and they drove off quickly.

"Well," Al commented, "there's the \$50,000 in cash. I wouldn't want that in my house..."

It suddenly struck Sam that the security to the house was rather light. There was no fence around it, just huge boulders around the perimeter, obviously placed in an artful way, trying to look like they naturally fell there. A nice lawn was between the boulders and house, and several trees at the back property line. It all looked so peaceful, but definitely not secure.

"He must really be confident about the safe he has." Sam said. "That's about it for security."

"I'll take a look see," Al replied as he typed a few buttons and disappeared.

When Al popped into the house, he centered on Darian Junior, and found himself in what looked like a den. The older man was just closing and locking the biggest safe Al had ever seen outside a bank. No wonder there wasn't any more security; that thing looked like it could survive a direct bombing. He noticed the son watching carefully every move his father made, and he looked nervous. Al wondered why. When the safe was closed, and a set of papers stacked on top of one of the numerous stacks of paper, he heard the son clear his throat.

"Uh, dad?" he sounded like a little kid, Al thought. "Could I ask you something?"

The elder man straightened up. It was remarkable how they looked alike. They couldn't be mistaken for anything but father and son.

"What?" the old man replied, rather brusquely, Al thought.

"Would it be, ah, possible for me to, um, borrow some money?" Al knew how hard that must have been to ask. He wondered what the money was for.

"What for?" asked dad, after giving his son a short look over. He obviously was questioning his son's reasons, too.

"I'll pay it back. I just need to pay off a loan. I'll pay you interest.." Michael Junior appeared both hopeful and angry with himself at the same time. This was really hard for him. He looked like he'd rather be anywhere else.

Apparently, dad wasn't too convinced. He must have known about his son's history, because he replied after a short pause, "I don't think that's a wise idea. If you want money from me, I want you to earn it. You know that." The man turned and left without another comment.

Michael looked like he could spit nails, but Al admired him for keeping control of himself. At least, he kept control for a few seconds; soon the son burst from the room, angry words flying. Al excused himself with a tap of a few buttons.

As soon as Sam heard the loud voices in the house, Al appeared a filled him in on the details. They both took guesses what the money was for, either a payoff or an investment, but the recipient would be the same: Baker. Sam's feeling was that Michael was trying to pay off Baker so he could start anew, and Al felt he was investing in Baker's expansion.

They were still discussing their ideas when Michael stormed from the house and drove off in a hurry. It was a little before eleven.

Sam was sore from hiding in the bushes, and Al talked him into taking a break. He checked with Ziggy and the events they knew of were still were going to happen. Sam hadn't changed anything yet, and it was awhile until the 911 call and Lisa arrival. Sam returned to the car and climbed in.

"I wish I knew for certain Baker shoots Lisa, because I'd go and follow him now..." Sam mused. "Or should I follow Darian?"

"We'll split up," Al suggested. "I go with Darian."

"Sounds good," Sam said tiredly. "Check to see if Baker is at his house."

Al disappeared as he centered in on his target. He reappeared as Sam drove to Baker's neighborhood, then centered himself on Darian and disappeared again. Parking near the park and positioning himself where he could see the house, Sam settled down. He wished he could get closer to listen, but the memory of the four footed monster kept him away. This would have to do.

Al, meanwhile, popped in on Darian as he was pacing around his apartment, obviously agonizing over a decision.

"Do the right thing," he heard Darian whisper, making a choice and picking up the phone.

Al would wait to be impressed after he saw what that meant. He wound up being impressed.

Al heard him call Will Baker and tell him he wasn't getting any money from his dad. He further said that he'd had enough, and would pay his debt himself. Darian said that being a friend, Will would understand and just let him go. Al couldn't hear the response from the other end, but Darian appeared happy. Al knew then that Sam's feeling was right, and this man really did want to change.

Baker wanted things to change, too, but in a different way. This was the opportunity he had been waiting for, and he wasn't about to let it slip through his fingers. This was a chance to expand his inventory, and control the meth and cocaine trade in this area. And that was only the beginning.

He paced around his living room after hanging up from Darian, trying to control his growing fury. He had been sampling his latest batch, and was now so wired he had a hard time calming himself down, and stomped around his house sweeping things off counters. The Rottweiler dog he had for security slunk from the room.

Darian had outlived his usefulness, but wasn't stupid enough to jeopardize his career. He still had those other two idiots looking out for him, Baker thought. Darian, though, knew an awful lot. He'd have to keep him close, and keep an eye on him. Those debts couldn't go away; they insured Darian's silence.

Baker took another sniff of his product to calm himself, ranted some more, and started to stew. He couldn't let this opportunity escape.

Outside, Sam was oblivious. He was far enough away that he didn't hear the ranting or the chaos going on inside. He'd been here almost forever, it seemed, and was getting anxious. Time was slipping by, and he was getting more nervous with each passing hour. It was near three, and the deadline was approaching. He was beginning to wonder if Baker was involved at all.

When Al popped in, Sam was so tense he about jumped out of his skin. He gave the hologram a deadly look. Al did a double take, raised his brow, and reached for another cigar.

"If looks could kill, I think I just got a mortal wound," he quipped.

"What is going on, Al? This is nerve wracking!" Sam was talking with clenched teeth, trying to keep his voice low.

Al filled him in on Darian's phone conversation, and that he had gone to his girlfriend's house afterward. The girlfriend, it turns out, was Tammy Everett, the witness that calls in the 911. Al hung out a bit, didn't seem too concerned that he was borderline on being a Peeping Tom while he watched them, then decided it was time to come to Sam when Tammy talked Darian into apologizing to his father. She said if he was serious about cleaning up his life, that would be a good way to start.

"Smart girl," Sam noted.

"Yeah, well, she's a psych major at the same Junior College Darian went to, and another native to the area. I checked her out, and she does well. She dumps Darian next week, though, in the original history."

So Sam was right about Darian. Then what happened? The event at the remote house of his father turned the tides for quite a few lives. It was time to turn them in the right direction.

## CHAPTER 11

Sam couldn't sit and wait any longer. He had to get to the scene now, on the slight chance that Baker wasn't involved and the event would happen without giving him the chance to stop it. He parked in the same remote spot, and hiked again to the vantage point. It was just past 4 P.M., and the sun was low on the horizon. Sam settled down to eye a path to the house. He had to get closer without being seen.

5:15. The 911 call was made at 5:41. Just as Sam didn't think he could sit any longer, he heard the sound of a car approaching. He ducked behind a large boulder. With perfect timing, Al walked through the accelerator door to be Sam's eyes.

"It's a black car, Sam. It looks like Baker. The nozzle is parking right in front of the house. He's going up to the door..." Al popped into another location to keep watch. Sam heard him calling loudly. "The old man let him in the house, Sam!"

Sam scrambled to another of the large boulders. They were good concealment, but too far from the house for a good line of sight. He was looking for a way to get closer when he heard Al shout again. "Someone's coming! I see dust from a car!"

Looking in his direction, Sam saw Al blink out of sight. When he popped back, he was next to Sam. "It was Michael. He started up the driveway, but stopped when he saw Baker's car. The girl was with

him and I heard him tell her to take the car and call 911." Al pointed towards the driveway. "He's over there. There he is."

Michael looked like he was trying to sneak up to the front door, gun in hand. He disappeared down the side of the house where Sam couldn't see. Time was running out.

"Center yourself on him, Al. I need to know what's going on inside." Sam wished the sun was set. Darkness would be the perfect cover, but in the original history, it was all over by then. He had to work with what he had. Al disappeared with a few taps of his fingers on the hand link.

When he couldn't stand to be idle any longer, Sam took a chance and crawled up to the back of the house, then along the side, trying to keep under the windows.

Sam peeked through the side window, thankful that there was a diaphanous curtain masking his outline. He heard angry voices and saw Darian, hands up and back to the fireplace, arguing with another man. An older man was lying on the floor between them, and Sam could only assume this was Darian's father because there was a bag secured on his head and his hands were tied behind him. The old man was not moving.

Am I too late to stop one death? Sam thought, his sense of urgency growing, then skyrocketing as he recognized the symptoms of Baker, whose back was to him. The man was twitching, almost uncontrollably, as every nerve was being artificially stimulated.

Baker was arguing with Darian while keeping a rather large handgun leveled at Darian's chest. Sam couldn't hear the details, but either the roaring fire in the hearth or the argument was causing both men to glisten with perspiration. When Baker wiped his forehead with his empty hand, his face turned just slightly to Sam, who then could see the borderline insanity hanging there in his eyes.

The argument was reaching a fevered pitch as Sam heard crunching of the driveway gravel. He glanced up to see Lisa creeping around the corner of the house.

The scenario had begun.

Their eyes met as Lisa automatically leveled her gun at Sam. He threw up his hands, giving Lisa the seconds she needed to recognize him. Lisa looked relieved, then angry, as she lowered her weapon.

"What are you doing here?!" She whispered loudly, clearly hearing the argument from inside.

"Never mind that; I'm here, and I don't want to be, believe me!" Sam snapped back. He waved her over and they both peeked inside. Baker was obviously getting more agitated and jabbed the gun in Darian's direction.

"We've got to stop this now," Sam urged. "Baker's on the edge. Any second now and someone will die." He knew who it would be, but didn't go on.

"It looks like he's tweaked on something," Lisa noted. "He's irrational. Let's go."

They low crawled to the side door, which was just beyond the window. It would put them behind Baker, and get him off balance. This door was a rather flimsy French style, with multiple squares of glass, so entry would be fast.

"I'll go in first, since I have the vest on," Lisa noted, moving in place. "Where's your gun?"

"Gun?" Sam answered, perplexed.

"You sleep with the damn thing, and you don't have it now?"

"Uh," Sam felt his waistband, but knew it was futile.

"I never thought I'd live to see the day you were unarmed." Lisa reached down to her ankle and flipped out a small revolver from a hidden holster, then tossed it to Sam. "Here. I knew your Christmas present would come in handy someday."

Sam fumbled the gun, then caught it awkwardly. It felt so heavy for being so small. He gripped it tightly, hoping he wouldn't drop it, and stationed himself behind Lisa. Just as he was cursing Al for being late with information yet again, Lisa and Sam saw Baker decisively point the gun at the prone old man's head.

"Now!" Lisa yelled as she kicked the door, leaping into the room and yelling "DROP IT NOW!" causing Baker to swing around, gun up and pointed at Lisa's head. In the split second his finger squeezed the trigger Sam flew in the room and caught Baker's eye. The sound of gunfire exploded in the room.

Baker and Lisa had fired simultaneously. Lisa's round shattered an oil lamp on the fireplace mantle behind Darian. Baker was more accurate. Lisa flew backwards with a grunt, gun flying. Sam shot wildly several times, missing the retreating Baker cleanly. Then he heard Al's voice.

"Sam! Sam! Look out! He's turning to shoot!" Sam glimpsed the form of his holographic friend in the area where Baker had retreated. Al was waving his hands wildly, but Sam was too busy saving his own life to acknowledge him. He dove to his right and rolled, getting his feet tangled in the long, delicate curtains over the windows. The rod snapped off the wall and tumbled across the room towards the hearth, the lacy curtains acting as a wick for the fireplace when they landed both in the fire and across the spilled lamp oil. They instantly burst into flames, dividing the room with Darian, his father and Lisa on the side with the door, and Sam and Baker on the other side.

Darian took the opportunity to scoop up his father as best he could and drag him to the door. Baker was screaming in anger, incoherent due to the stimulants in his blood. He retreated away from the fire towards the den behind the fireplace, bent on getting to the safe stored there.

Sam had landed hard, cracking his head on the wood floor. The gun flew from his hand and skittered out of sight. He was motionless for several seconds, then moved very slowly. Dizzy and completely disoriented, he crawled under a small table near the den door, trying to escape the growing flames and coughing on the thickening smoke. He tried to collect his scattered thoughts in his throbbing head.

The wood construction in the house was beautiful, but deadly, as the fire fed on it and the oil soaked curtains. The dry wood became kindling for the hungry flames. He could hear Al's voice, but it seemed to take forever to make sense. His head was filled with stabbing pain.

"Sam! Are you OK? Answer me, Sam!"

Sam's vision cleared enough for him to make out his friend crouching down in front of him.

"Al?"

"Yeah, Sam it's me! Thank God, I thought you wouldn't wake up in time. You've got to get out of here!"

"Where's Lisa? I can't see her." Sam coughed again.

"Darian took her out, Sam. You've changed history! She's only wounded."

"And Baker still gets away. I've got to stop him."

"Sam, you've got to get outta here!"

The flames had leapfrogged across the room towards the staircase and front door. Sam's escape was almost cut off, and he was still unsteady from the head injury. As Al pounded furiously on the hand link, Sam had a surreal vision of Al with a backdrop of glowing flame. He looked like he was holding flames in the palm of his hand, as the hand link was made up of the same colors. Sam shook his head to clear the vision, and a flash of searing pain made him gasp.

"Go, Sam!" Al ordered.

Sam crawled out from under the table, heading for the den. He felt it was his duty to remove Baker from the house. It was obvious that in his current mental state, he wouldn't do it himself; Baker was too high to realize the danger. Sam lurched towards the den with Al following in protest.

He heard Baker before he saw him. The man sounded crazed, screaming above the snapping and crackling of the fire. Feeling for his gun, Sam realized then that it was gone, probably somewhere near the fireplace, the ammo waiting to ignite in the heat. When he got to the den door, he saw Baker, insane with anger and fruitlessly pulling on a safe that was obviously too big to move. Becoming more enraged, he exploded in the room.

He abandoned the safe and became bent on destroying everything around him. He tore at anything, screaming and throwing whatever he touched. His voice was hoarse and unearthly raw, roaring like the fire bearing down on them. Sam dared not approach him in this state, as he saw the gun stuffed in Baker's waistband as he ravished the room.

The smoke was getting thicker; the fire was about to trap them both. Sam backed away from the den, his last sight being that of Baker swinging a chair over his head, grazing the ceiling with it. Sam saw the skylight a fraction of a second before it was shattered by another swing of the chair. As Sam

dived away from the doorway, skidding across the floor to the foot of the stairs, the oxygen starved fire exploded over Sam's head into the den, leaving only one open path.

Driven up the staircase by the flames and the sound exploding rounds from the living room, Sam tried to escape from the inferno by throwing himself up the steps. Ashes fell from above as he watched an arm of fire reach across the ceiling toward him. The flames were chasing him up and up; no escape was possible now from the lower level. He reached the landing on his hands and knees, gasping for breath, his head throbbing. He knew he could ultimately be trapped up here, but it was the only way out of the conflagration below. Sam scrambled down the hall on his hands and knees, keeping his head out of the smoke gathering on the ceiling. Survival instinct was all that drove him.

Impossibly, Sam heard an unearthly scream made of anger and pain rise up from the stairwell. He felt his skin crawl as he backed up to the wall and froze, staring into the pulsing fire, afraid of what he may see. It sounded like a demon from hell, and the vision in front of him wasn't too far off. The blackened form of Baker emerged from the wall of flame, his eyes clear and piercing, the rest of him made of fire. He staggered forward lowering his eyes to meet Sam's. There was a surge of electricity connecting them as their eyes met, and Sam felt every hair on his head raise up, as he was sure he just met the Angel of Death. "You bitch!" the unearthly vision cackled in a voice gravely and burned. What was once Baker managed to raise a blackened arm which was holding a charred gun, flesh and metal fused together from the heat, one virtually indistinguishable from the other. The barrel was pointed directly at Sam's forehead.

"In here, Sam!"

Al's voice was that of a savior, and it jarred Sam into action. He managed to leap towards the sound of it as the wall behind him splintered from a shot. He slid through the doorway on his stomach. His last vision of Baker was that of a shadow on fire as Sam kicked the door closed behind him.

An orange glow could barely be seen around the edges of the door as ebony smoke trickled in through the cracks on heated wind. Sam didn't want to believe that Baker was still alive out there. The Doctor part of him told him it was impossible. He pushed himself backwards away from the door, crab like, low on the floor, shock slowly taking its toll. His breathing hurt, and his head and heart both pounded. He couldn't see a way out because his eyes were stinging and watering from the smoke now pouring into the room from around the failing door. Tendrils of fear made his stomach tingle and his breathing ragged, and a fit of coughing made him unable to get up from the floor.

"Sam, you've got to go out this window! Get up!" The fuzzy form of Al was gesturing towards a window.

There was a loud thump on the door and it shook violently, but stayed closed. Sam jumped nervously, continuing to cough while staring fearfully at the door. Through Sam's watering eyes Al looked like he was wading through an ocean of black oil as he walked to the door, then through it. For an instant Sam was afraid for Al, forgetting he was only a hologram, and sure the demon outside would get him. To his relief Al retreated back into the room a moment later, looking a little sick.

"Jeez," he uttered, hurrying to the window. "Talk about a crispy critter. Come on, Sam, get over here! There's not much time!"

Sam did not respond to Al, and this began to worry the hologram. Al stood by the window and motioned with his arm for Sam to hurry up. "There's some rooftop out here, so let's go! Move it!"

Slowly, Sam closed his eyes and rocked his head back, mentally having to force his body to move. Coughing, he rolled onto his hands and knees and crawled to Al through the impossibly thick smoke. His vision had narrowed down to a tunnel, and he could feel his heart racing, but the rest of his body felt like it was encased in cement. He forced his arm up and clawed at the window latch which slid open with ease, but it felt to Sam like pushing solid rock. He then tried to push the screen out, but he didn't have the strength and the screen didn't move. Sam contemplated giving up.

"SAM!" Al yelled, "Come on! Push harder!"

Sam responded to his friend's voice and pushed the screen out with pure determination. It seemed like he had been in this nightmare forever, and it was becoming more dreamlike as the seconds ticked by. He felt clinically detached and thought, Is this what it feel like to die? Al's voice seemed to be fading off, but something inside drove him to obey. Al was his lifeline.

"Hurry, Sam, get outside!"

Sam used every last ounce of energy to crawl over the frame on to the roof below. There was an eerie glow in the trees from the fire, and Sam was hypnotized by the shadows as they jumped from branch to branch. Night was beginning to fall, and Sam dreamily wondered where the afternoon went. He flattened himself against the wall by the window as he felt his legs give out, and collapsed into a sitting position. He was so tired. He couldn't feel his legs, and his head was spinning. He couldn't stop coughing and his chest felt like it was caught in a vise, but strangely enough the pain was gone. He just wanted to stay here and rest a bit. He couldn't, though, because this voice kept nagging him.

"Come on, Sam! Get up! You can't rest now, you have to jump or die! GET UP!" Al's fingers were flying over Ziggy's remote as he spoke. Sam's silence caused him to pause and glance over to his friend. Oh, oh, he thought. "Sam..."

"Can't", Sam whispered in a hoarse voice that Al barely heard.

"Sam, dammit, look at me!" Al shouted, "Look at me!" The woman who was Sam looked up at him and Al could see the paleness of the face beneath the blackness of the soot and the glazed look in her eyes. He was slipping into shock, Al realized.

"Yes," Al ordered. "You can. Now get up!" Civilian Al had instantly been replaced by Admiral Calavicci, a man who was used to giving orders that were unquestionably obeyed.

This slight attitude change was all Sam needed to pull from a reserve somewhere deep inside, and to be boosted into action.

"Jump, Sam!" Al ordered. He knew there were mere seconds until the room and wall would be engulfed by the hungry fire. He spoke again, giving Sam not one ounce of choice. "JUMP."

The exhausted face regarded Al, and he caught a glimpse of the mournful eyes that seemed to plead with him not to make him do this. The look tore at Al, but he stood firm.

Seeing no mercy, Sam uncurled to the side, not really looking where he was going. He felt the edge of the roof with his foot, then simply rolled off. As he started his fall, he heard, then felt, the explosion that blasted out the wall he had just been leaning against. As he hit the ground and instinctively rolled he was showered with wood splinters and embers. He kept rolling, then crawled until he found a large boulder to hide from the heat. He didn't have the energy to go any further, and hoped he was removed enough from the house. The coughing was painful and he could not stop. Each breath became a stinging wheeze which he tried to ease by closing his eyes and pressing against the coolness of the rock.

He and Al both heard the sirens in the distance as Sam slipped away into darkness. As he dropped off into unconsciousness he heard Al's fading voice.

"You did good, Sam."

## CHAPTER 12

The first thing he heard was the clipped, professional voices reciting familiar medical terms. Then he felt the burning in his throat and the pressure of an oxygen mask on his face. The cool relief of oxygen in his nostrils as he breathed was wonderful. Finally opening his eyes, Sam realized he was in an ambulance with two busy paramedics. They weren't busy with him, though, they were working on someone next to him.

Turning his head he saw enough of the other patient to figure out that it was Lisa Bowey.

I haven't leaped yet, was his first thought. His second being, How's she doing?

Sam scanned the monitors he could see and listened to the medics, and concluded that she would be all right. He also recalled Al telling him that very thing an eternity ago.

It wasn't very long until the unit backed up into the hospital bay and the doors pulled opened. What Sam wasn't prepared for was the sea of uniforms waiting for them outside. Sam immediately recognized Officer Reed from the shooting range, right in the front of the pack. It seemed there was representation from every police agency in the county, asking where they could donate blood or how they could help. Word had spread fast in the police community and it didn't matter what gender was involved; They were united as a family not by blood, but by their uniform and duty.

While being unloaded Sam could see that Lisa was awake, but in pain. They were put in the same exam area, and given a thorough once over. Since they both had on breathing masks, all they could manage was a smile at each other when their eyes met.

Al popped in once and filled Sam in on the happenings at the house. The terrible blaze, the brave firefighters, and the horrified neighbors. Both Darrians were fine, and Michael Jr. was being hailed a hero for rescuing Lisa and his father. At every chance, Al added, Michael had insisted that Lisa and Jean were the heroes.

He was truly a changed man, Sam thought.

Al, reading the "I-told-you-so" look in Sam's eyes, said, "I'd say he was lucky to get his debt wiped out by a fire."

Sam rolled his eyes then closed them against the persistent headache pressuring his temples. The bustle of the E.R. was comforting to him, and he soon fell asleep.

When he woke up, he was in a hospital room which was mercifully quiet. Looking around, he saw Lisa asleep in the next bed. It wasn't long before the swoosh of the imaging room door was heard and Al stepped into the room.

"Well, Sleeping Beauty awakens!" he teased. "How're feeling, buddy?"

Sam suddenly realized how stiff and sore he was, and noticed for the first time that his left arm was in a cast. He held it up, looking at it quizzically.

"You broke it falling off the roof," Al filled in for him.

"Oh," Sam replied, vaguely remembering the event. Parts of the night came back in flashes, and what stood out the most was Al's constant urging. "I think I need to thank you, Al. I would be in that house along with Baker if it wasn't for you. Thanks."

Al looked pleased. "You're welcome. That's what I'm here for!"

"Speaking of being here, why haven't I leaped?" Sam questioned. "Lisa's O.K." He lowered his voice when Lisa stirred at the sound of her name.

"Well, you changed history by saving her, but Ziggy says that you still have to get her to change her career."

That "I-told-you-so" look crossed Sam's face again as he turned to watch Lisa wake up.

"Hey, roomie!" Sam called gently, still a bit hoarse from the smoke and heat.

Lisa looked over. "Hey," she replied, rubbing her eyes then turning to face Sam. "Who's watering our plants?"

"Plants?" Sam questioned. "What plants?"

"Oh, yeah," Lisa answered. "We already killed 'em with neglect, didn't we?" Her laugh was weak, but just as sweet, and Sam felt himself go all moon-eyed.

"Sam," Al snipped. "Come on. Do you want to leap or not? Although I can't blame you for wanting to see more of her, if you catch my drift." A raise eyebrow and a lustful leer were ignored by Sam.

"Hey, Lisa," Sam started. "Remember our talk at the beach? You said all you needed to pursue your passion was courage."

Lisa frowned. "Yeah, so?"

"Well," Sam continued, "look at you. Are you telling me that you have the courage to jump into a life a death situation for someone else, but won't take a chance to change your *own* life?"

She looked thoughtfully at Sam, then back at the ceiling. "You may have a point there.." she mused. The wheels were obviously beginning to turn in her mind. The seed had been planted.

"That did it, Sam." Al was reading the hand link display. "She quits the force and starts writing novels and poetry, using her photographs for illustration. She becomes known for her series of books about a female cop! A regular female Joseph Wambaugh."

"Joseph who?" Sam inquired.

Al went on, ignoring Sam. "Michael Darian Jr. stays a cop for a while then quits to join his dad's business. He also becomes a security consultant for several major diamond brokers and gets quite the sterling reputation. He's doing great." He dropped the link in his pocket. "That's it, Sam. Get ready to leap!"

Sam just had time to raise his cast in a farewell wave to Lisa when he felt a tingling sensation growing all over his body. The last thing he saw in this time was Jean Downs' hand glowing blue as he leaped.