

TOGETHER AGAIN

By AJB

CHAPTER 1

After the blue flash faded into the usual swirl of pastel colors Dr. Beckett Beckett had the luxury to enjoy his indeterminate stay, as he floated in this vacuum. He didn't really have much of a choice because he was leaping in time at God's or time's or Fate's discretion, initiated by his very own Project Quantum Leap. Eventually he would leap into another person's lifetime, fix something in their history for the better, and then would leap to find himself here again. It was a noble job, and it seemed to Sam that he was the only man doing this. He had no idea how to prove that thought, and the scientist in him was vaguely peeved by his inability to investigate that theory.

When the colors around him started turning darker and more solid, he knew his break was over. He could never seem to get mentally prepared before landing smack in the middle of someone's life, and the first few seconds, sometimes minutes, were very disorienting.

Sam Beckett snapped open his eyes to find that he gripped a steering wheel like his life depended on it. He felt his heart jump, and jerked back in the car seat fully expecting to collide with the brick wall in front of him. The brick wall, however, didn't move and it took his muddled brain a few seconds to realize that he wasn't moving either. He panted to settle his heart then glanced down to the instrument panel. The engine was running, but the car was in "park"

"Thank you!" he breathed, glancing up. "But must you scare me like that?!" He frowned at the statement. He used to tell someone else that very thing. What was the name?

Leaping through time did that to you. Mentally, Sam ticked off the syndrome in his mind: "Swiss Cheese Effect": large holes of memory filled with nothing. When he first started leaping it was a lot more debilitating, this "Swiss Cheesing" of his mind, but it seemed to get less debilitating with each subsequent leap. That thought alone was disturbing; was there less to forget? Or have I forgotten everything for good? He shivered at the thought.

"I can't even remember how long I've been doing this. It all seems like a dream," he muttered, momentarily distracted. Sam did recall that to leap on, he had to fix something in this person's life, the body that he had leaped into. He didn't question why he leaped anymore. He accepted it as his

destiny; it was expected. He was tired, though, and the thought of wanting to go home was getting stronger with each leap. He took pause now as if waiting for someone else to catch up. He had no idea who, and that unnerved him slightly. It made him suspect that he had forgotten more than he would like.

Now that his breathing and heart rates were normal he glanced around inside the car. He was alone - good so far. No embarrassing scenes on trying to figure out who was who and he had time to figure out who he was. There was a cardboard box on the floor on the passenger side. It was full of loose papers, notebooks, binders, and what looked like a photo album with a picture frame lying face down on top of it. What caught his eye, however, was the leather appointment book lying on the seat next to him. Yes! So far this has been an easy one!

As he reached for the book, the hand he saw was delicate with painted nails, and decidedly female. He jerked the hand back and held both of them in front of face. A wedding ring was on the left hand, but no other jewelry. He looked at his lap and saw he was wearing a long, full skirt and sensible flat shoes. *Oh, thank God*, Sam thought. No high heels! He regarded the wedding ring. "Oh boy," he whispered. This could complicate things. Finally, he turned off the engine and reached for the rearview mirror, adjusting it to see what face he would be looking through.

All he could see in the small mirror was a slash of eyes and eyebrows, part of a nose. But what he saw made his heart leap again and his breath come quicker. The eyes widened.

"I know these eyes..." he whispered out loud, grasping for a memory just out of reach. "I know that expression..."

Frantically, he tried seeing his whole face in the small mirror, but only seeing parts at a time like a jigsaw puzzle. And each piece was familiar to him; the long brown hair, the delicate ears, the smooth skin. He knew every detail, but the total face escaped him. His panic grew as he felt that something important was getting away from him, flitting away like a spooked colt. This woman was an important link to something. He felt a driving need to remember.

Glancing around the car again he noted a purse lying close to his side. He dumped the contents on his lap, and snatched up the small wallet. Sam had to force himself to take a breath to stop his hands from shaking as he opened the wallet. In the front was a Maryland driver's license with a photo of a whole face, the one he now wore. He knew her, and it made his heart

lurch yet again. He tore his eyes from the photo to the name - "Donna Eleese."

Sam then remembered that this was his wife.

Donna blinked. "I was just...this isn't right...I was in my car..." she mumbled, focusing her eyes on the sterile white ceiling and realized that she was lying down in a very white room, on a bed with rails. A hospital? Was I in an accident? It's so quiet... her eyes locked on a very worn chair next to the bed and it struck her as being familiar.

She tried to sit up but was restrained by leather bands, padded with sheepskin, that were attached to the bed rails. *This is a hospital!* she thought, at the same time finding her legs restrained in the same manner. She glanced down at her legs and saw the pale, hairy legs of a man. Her arms were also pale and hairy, and obviously not hers, either! She felt a wave of nausea as a realization struck her.

"It can't be."

Donna looked again at the worn chair, one that she herself had worn down. The one she sat in while visiting Sam for the past three years. "Oh, my God." she whispered as the door opened and two male orderlies entered the room.

"Oh, great." The lead man said with annoyance in his tone. "He's awake."

"Good morning, Mr. Beckett." The second man said, not too cheerfully. "Or whoever you are today."

The first orderly walked around to the opposite side as the other took a small key from his pocket and started unlocking the restraints on his side.

"Time to turn you! We have to prevent those bed sores!" It was a demeaning tone, and Donna bristled, instantly accepting the fact that she had leaped into her husband's body.

She glared at them, but kept silent and pliable. In the three years since her husband's body had been here, she had seen many personalities leap in and out. Between leaps he was unconscious. Each new personality had behaved differently when they first leaped in. She understood why these orderlies were wary - some personalities fought like crazy. Some were as pliable as

sheep. You never knew. And each time she saw someone else in her husband's body, her heart broke a little more.

Relaxing so the orderlies didn't feel threatened was difficult, but she hoped to get this over with quickly. As they turned her, she noted the IV attached to her arm and felt humiliated and helpless for her husband. If they only knew how brilliant and loving he was. If they just knew the real Sam Beckett, they would be filled with respect. She felt her eyes start to water, and silently fought back the tears.

Where was he now? I had been driving ... I can't remember. My brain must be "Swiss Cheesed" she thought, remembering the term coined in Sam's first leap. Apparently there were large blanks in her husband's memory every time he leaped, and the affliction had been dubbed the "Swiss Cheese Effect." Not very scientific, but exactly descriptive. That was...how long ago?

Wait a minute, she thought to herself, trying to concentrate. *How long...driving to meet someone. Was this connected?*

"Please," she whispered out loud, her throat dry. "What is the date today?"

The first orderly, "Mitch", his name tag proclaimed, eyed her quickly as he worked unlocking each limb one at a time, locking it in a new position before moving on to another limb.

"Well, aren't we polite today." He re-locked and arm as the second orderly, tagged "Bailey", rolled Sam's body on a side. Donna tried to help. "And helping, too! Let's see, today is payday for me, so it's May first."

May first! "What year?" she added, recognizing the meaning of the day.

"Whoa!" Bailey yelled, "Calm down! It's 2005."

Donna's brain worked furiously as she forced her body to relax. *May first, 2005. That's not right...*

The orderlies secured her on her side, checked the IV, and then backed away.

"You need to calm down or we will have to tranquilize you, Mr. Beckett, and your wife will be very upset."

Donna didn't even hear them. She was calculating something in her head. The orderlies left after making a notation on the chart.

"Ten years," she whispered, wide eyed. "This is the tenth anniversary of Sam leaping." She let the tears flow quietly. "And look where it's gotten us!"

As she cried she regarded the chair next to the bed that she usually occupied when in this room. For three years she visited at least four days a week, every week, since he has been here at Bethesda. Donna felt as helpless now as she felt on her first visit to the Psychiatric wing and saw Sam's body restrained in this very bed.

She cried hot tears of anger and sorrow. Where was he now? Where was I going before he leaped?

CHAPTER 2

"Oh, boy," Sam uttered aloud, still in the car, again gripping the steering wheel working to control his runaway brain, his thoughts a jumble.

"Think!" he chastised himself. "What am I doing here? What day is this?"

He glanced at the appointment book, grabbed it and flipped it open. "2005" was printed on the first page. *What?* He thought, *I can't leap here. This is too far forward. This is impossible!*

He leafed through the months, recognizing Donna's bold and even writing in many of the day squares. The squares were X'd out as they passed, just as she always did on a calendar. Sam smiled at the isolated memory. He flipped through the months, January, February, March, each passing month depressing him a little more as he realized how many months had gone by since he first leaped. April, then May. The first was circled with "Lunch with Al, 1230, Antonio's. Bring album" written in her hand. Sam let out a short laugh. Al. *How could I forget?* As he tried to picture Al, Sam felt that the date, May first, was also significant.

Al. His best friend. Sam was ashamed of forgetting him. *How long have I been gone?* He thought. *What else have I forgotten?* 1230, lunch. *What time is it now?* Quickly looking at Donna's watch he saw it was 1245. He looked up at the brick wall in front of him. A sign posted there said "Parking for Antonio's".

Sam leaped for the door.

Admiral Al Calavicci sat at the table, chewing his cigar. The maitre'd glanced at him from time to time, seeming to dare him to light it. Al finally decided to stop torturing the man and slipped it into his jacket with a sigh. He felt old.

Fingering the wetness on the outside of his glass of Scotch, he reluctantly thought about where the time went and why he was here. Where was Sam now? Sam, his best friend. Al always felt like it was his fault, losing contact like they did. When Sam was lost, Al was devastated. If it hadn't have been for Beth, he would have gone crazy. Beth had always been an oasis in his life and his reason for living. Beth and their girls were a gift. And now that the girls had grown up and moved on in their lives, he and Beth were enjoying a new phase of life together. It was a blessed life he had, thought Al.

He immediately felt guilt for the life his best friend was leading. The void from Sam's loss five years ago was always there, but he had worked around it. Meeting Donna here, today, may help his heal that void, and help Donna cope as well. Here he was, in the same city as Sam and he couldn't, wouldn't, see him.

That wasn't Sam in Bethesda, he reasoned. Sam was somewhere else, saving someone's world, and Al couldn't find him. He'd tried for years. He still could recall the tingling feeling in his head when Sam was near. Al rubbed his temple, feeling it now and blaming the scotch. Where was Donna? He wondered. I need to get out of here and get home to Beth.

Sam was forced to walk around to the front door. Donna's skirt flared around his legs and he felt cool breezes on his legs made by the swishing material. He was really happy she wasn't wearing panty hose. He was forced to walk because he had already caught the flowing material in the car door, and on a chain link fence surrounding the parking lot in his haste to get inside. He didn't need to have the skirt ripped off his body in public just now. Sam smiled as he recalled watching Donna walk in a skirt like this. Would he see her soon?

Stepping from the brightness of the outside to the darkness of the restaurant, he hesitated inside the door for his eyes to adjust. He was impatient to see Al, and started looking around before he could really see. He also felt his adrenaline level rising as he swept his eyes around the dining room.

"May I help you?"

Sam jumped, startled, as the maitre'de appeared before him.

"Oh!" Sam replied. "Yes! I'm looking for a man.."

The maitre'de raised his eyebrow.

"No! I mean...we have a date." Sam winced at the term. "He should be waiting for me."

"Yes. Right this way." The man walked insufferably slow for Sam, and he almost clipped the top of the mans' heels in his desire for haste. Sam began to feel a tingling in his temples. He's here!

As the maitre'de led Sam through the dining room, Sam peered around his guide's head and scanned the room ahead. As they approached the far corner he saw the figure of a man at a small table suddenly sit bolt upright and look straight at Sam. The man stood up, his jaw hanging open. Sam slipped around the maitre'de, and headed for the frozen figure.

Al Calivicci stood up so suddenly his forgotten drink slopped on the table. He clutched the table edge, not believing at what he saw. There was a man in a dress he never thought he would see again. Al didn't think he could walk; he just stood there, gaping, whispered "Sam!" and then was speechless.

Sam swept Al in a very unladylike bear hug and felt tears spring from his eyes. A shocked Al returned the hug, his initially frozen body now able to move.

"Al! I'd forgotten all about you! I'm so sorry!" Sam didn't ever want to let go. "Sam!" Al found his voice husky with emotion. "I thought we'd lost you forever! This is amazing!"

After a time, Al finally pushed Sam back and looked at him with a grin. "It's a good thing you're in a dress, or people would talk!" He grinned that grin Sam remembered and felt himself beaming back. Al was the only person that could see Sam when he was in another body. Actually, Al saw the aura of Sam sort of layered over the occupied person. It was kind of creepy to get used to, and it had been awhile for Al. It only took a few minutes for him to get used to it again.

"Can you believe it, Al? I'm Donna!" Sam's mannerisms of excitement still stood out, even in Donna's body. His voice was quick, his eyes bright. His hands moved on their own to his words. If they were standing in the open, he would be pacing.

Al grinned, picturing just that. It was good to see him again! The force of that thought brought tears to his eyes. "So you remember everything this time. That's unusual."

"This whole leap is unusual." As they sat Sam's face fell as he looked at Al. "I can't believe I forgot about you. How long has it been?" Guilt tinged the question, as well as a dread. He wasn't really sure he wanted to know the answer.

Al wiped a tear from his eye and kept staring at Sam. The odd aura that showed only Al Sam's face still let hints of Donna's show through, creating an eerie image. Should I tell him how long it has been? He thought. Does it really matter anymore?

"How long have you been here, Sam?" Al ducked the question, giving him some time to think.

"Just a few minutes, really. I leaped in as she parked the car to come here. Donna's appointment book was right there, on the seat. What's going on, Al?" Sam's demeanor calmed as he started to put some pieces together. "Why was she meeting you? And why aren't you in New Mexico? I don't know where we are, but I do know this isn't New Mexico!"

"Well," he started, absently patting his coat pocket where Ziggy's handlink should be.

"Can I get you a drink?" interrupted the cocktail waitress.

Sam glanced at her, forgetting where they were for a moment. "Uh, no, water's fine." He touched the glass on the table.

"Yes!" Al exclaimed, holding up his empty glass. "Please!"

The waitress breezed away, leaving a couple of napkins behind. Al fidgeted with his, keeping his hands busy, glancing at Sam, who was staring at him.

"Well? Come on, Al! How long?" Sam was starting to look worried.

Al gave in. "Sam," he said slowly, clearing his throat. "We were here to...celebrate...um, no, remember..." Al exhaled loudly. He looked Sam in the eye. "Sam, it was ten years ago today that you first leaped." He didn't say any more, allowing that fact sink in.

It had the effect he expected. Sam stared at him, his turn to have his jaw hang open. "Ten years?" His voice was a whisper, echoing with shock. He sat back, clearly stunned, forgetting entirely to keep a woman's manner. His knees were askew, feet pointing out, arms pushing back on the table edge. "I had no idea. I've forgotten so much. My family, you, Donna. What happened, Al?" A desperate tone was moving his words as he leaned over the table towards Al.

His friend was quiet for a few moments. Sam's brow furrowed in thought. "Wait..where are we? I mean, it's the year 2005. Al I can't leap ahead. Or am I ahead?"

Al shook his head. "We've been trying to figure it out, too, Sam."

"We?" Sam questioned. "You and Donna? She had a Maryland driver's license in her purse. How can she work in New Mexico and Maryland?"

Al looked guiltily down.

"Al," Sam said, a bad feeling growing in his gut. "Did we leave New Mexico?"

Al nodded. "Yeah."

Speechless, Sam leaned back and stared, open mouthed again, at Al. The words started slowly from Al, then came forward in a rush, forming the story for Sam.

"The last time I saw you, you had leaped into yourself on the day you were born. You were in a bar in a mining town."

Sam frowned in concentration, trying to remember. Al continued.

"You were convinced the bartender was God, or at least the guy responsible for leaping you around. We had lost you when you first leaped, but found you by checking your birthdays."

"Lost me?"

"Yeah, Sam, and it was pure intuition to check your birthday. We found you that time, but when you leaped again, " Al hesitated, "we never found you."

"Here ya go!"

Sam jumped, startled. The waitress plunked Al's drink on the table, and filled Sam's water glass, all the time eyeing Sam warily. Her observations had placed Sam in the "weirdo" category, Al concluded. "You two ready to order?" She waited expectedly, pencil poised on her pad. Sam still looked shaky, so Al took charge.

"You know what, miss? We've changed our minds." He fished out his money clip and stood up. Paying the bill and leaving a substantial tip, he took Sam's elbow and pulled him up. "We aren't hungry after all!" He steered Sam toward the exit.

Pleased by the nice gratuity, the waitress said. "Thanks! Come back again!" and cheerfully waved them good bye.

Sam let himself be led outside Al steering him to a stop outside on the sidewalk. "Car?" Al asked. "You said you had one here. The more space between us and that waitress, who thinks you're a weirdo, the better."

Walking like a man in drag, Sam led the way around the corner. Al had to stifle a snicker, seeing Donna's form walk that way. Sam glanced back, scowling, and Al put on his "what, me?" face and behaved. Al also had the new experience of being able to touch Sam in this form, was disturbing. In the past when Sam had leaped, Al could only contact him as a hologram because Al's brain had been programmed that way with pieces of Sam's brain. Being able to feel Sam's "body" was a new twist, and difficult to adjust to.

Shaking off the uneasiness, Al continued the story as they walked. "We looked for you for quite awhile, Sam."

"Awhile?" Sam stopped, turning. They were in the alley leading to the back parking lot. It was a beautiful day and they could feel a slight breeze channeling down the alley. Donna's hair blew into Sam's face, and he unconsciously brushed the loose locks behind his ear. "How long is 'awhile', Al?"

A heartbeat timed Al's pause. He had shifted on his feet to stand square in front of Sam, looking directly in his eyes. "Two years."

"Two years?" Sam looked like he was having a hard time accepting this. The breeze rifled his hair again, and the now dark brown and long tresses seem unreal to Al.

"Yeah. We never found you."

Slowly turning to continue down the alley, Sam's pace was slower, thoughtful. Two years? What happened to the project? To Ziggy, his hybrid computer? What did Donna do? And Al? How did my family react? As the thoughts washed over him he felt weak in the knees. They had just reached the car, and Al, seeing Sam falter, went for the car door and yanked it open. Sam hadn't thought to lock it. He sat Sam down in the car, on the passengers' side. Sam put his elbows on his knees, and his head between his hands. It was a disturbing pose, but Al continued .

"I left you in that bar to figure out how to get you out. You were acting really weird, Sam. I never should have left..." He paused. Sam didn't move. " Anyway, when I stepped back into the accelerator chamber, you leaped, and we never found you. No one showed up in the waiting room for weeks. Your body just lay there, unconscious. When someone finally leaped in, all the dates we got were in the future." Al paused again as Sam raised his head to stare at him. "We couldn't follow, Sam. Ziggy had no information on the future to work with, and couldn't lock on to you."

Sam looked dazed. "The future?"

"Verbena kept very detailed notes of her conversations with the visitors. It was creepy, Sam!"

"I guess," Sam theorized, "my life line extends into the future, too. I never thought of that.."

Then it dawned on Sam that Al had been talking in past tense. "Where are the notes, Al?"

Al hesitated, clamped his mouth shut, bounced on his toes and fidgeted with his jacket. None of these mannerisms were a good sign.

"AL!"

"Well," he breathed, collecting his thoughts, " after two years with no results, the Government shut the project down."

Sam was frozen in shock. Al stumbled on, his voice dropped. "They took over Ziggy and all the notes and documents, moving what they could to classified Government storage houses in Washington. The biggest problem was you. You were still alive, and apparently still leaping. After evaluation by military doctors," Al took a breath. "Your body was moved to the psych wing at Bethesda Naval Hospital in total isolation."

Moving his mouth without sound for a second, Sam whispered, "I'm in a loony bin?"

A chill ran up Al's spine at that question. He had heard that same question in another time, another place, with Sam in a very bad situation. Al hoped it wasn't a foreshadowing of things to come.

"Yes, and no," rushed out of Al's mouth. "The military brass knows what's going on, Sam, but they still don't want anyone else to know. It was the best way, they thought, to keep a lid on the project and an eye on you. They handle all your care. Donna moved here to be close to you, and the military takes care of her, too, to a point. She still works on the retrieval program..." he stopped to take a breath, and slowed his words down, realizing what an awful picture he was painting for Sam. "...but she has no way to implement it now."

Only silence from Sam..

"You were the glue, Sam." Al concluded. "Without you, it all fell apart."

It was starting to become stuffy in the closeness of the car. Al started the engine then opened the windows a little.. Sam didn't seem to notice the stuffiness. He sat there in the cool breeze coming from the window, his head back in his hands.

"Where is everybody now?" The question was muffled by the quietness of Sam's voice, and the position of his head between his hands.

"Let's see.." Al started, leaning back in the driver's seat. "Gooshie's still with Ziggy in New Mexico on occasion. He is the only one they kept on to try and figure out another use for Ziggy. She hasn't been too cooperative since you were removed, and they have threatened to simply dismantle her. She's learned to cooperate just enough to keep that from happening. Verbena works on contracts for the military now. I think she's trying to stay near you, but they move her around a lot. She has become an expert on post-traumatic stress. Mostly from handling the visitors!" Al tried to sound light, but he wasn't getting any response from Sam. He continued. "Tina and Sammy Jo are consultants and private contractors in computer applications in California. They started their own company, and are doing great."

At the mention of Sammy Jo, the vision of a beautiful dark-haired woman invaded Sam's memory. He knew the woman was not Sammy Jo, but her mother. Sammy Jo was his daughter, he realized. He had only seen her for a short time in a history he had changed. He didn't even know if Sammy Jo

realized he was her father. This homecoming was becoming more painful with every bit of news Al mentioned.

"Donna works on the retrieval program, as I said, does some teaching on the side, and takes care of you." He tried not to sound as grim as he felt. "I'm retired. Beth and I decided..."

This remark got an immediate reaction. Up snapped Sam's head, and he had a crooked grin. "You and Beth, huh? That's great, Al."

Momentarily confused, Al regarded Sam with perplexed look. "Yeah, me and Beth. The girls are all married now..."

"Girls?" Sam laughed. "How many?"

"Four..." now he was really confused.

Sam chuckled, sat back up and was quiet. The both sat for a few minutes, absorbing the events of this remarkable day. The box with the papers and album were at Sam's feet, so he picked up the frame that had been lying upside down on top. It was a photo of Sam, Donna, Al and Beth. Sam was popping open a bottle of champagne, and they were all smiles and laughter. The events of the picture weren't too clear to Sam, something to do with the project, he thought, and showed it to Al, who was lighting up a cigar.

"I remember that day." He puffed on the stogie as he looked at the photo. "That was the day we got your grant for the project. Gee, we look so young!" Taking the frame from Sam, he set it up on the dash board the Donna's car. They both studied it for a few more minutes, lost in memories and thoughts.

"I kept leaping, Al."

The statement hung there for a few frozen seconds. A long time ago, it seemed, Al had stopped imagining what fate Sam was living out. He had to put it behind him to keep sane and to be able to function in a normal world. Before he was able to do that, Al had had a lot of sleepless nights contemplating that very vision.

"I forgot all of you. It's been so long." There was a thoughtful pause as he rubbed his forehead. "So, right now, Donna's in Bethesda!" Sam perked up visibly. "I've got to see her, Al! Let's go!"

With the click of seat belts and an air of excitement, Al put the car in reverse and prepared to exit the parking lot. He took a second to consider the route in his mind, and then drove on.

CHAPTER 3

Donna was deeply afraid, and her fear grew with each passing hour. Where was Sam? She thought, over and over, a mantra to keep herself calm. Experience with what she had seen go on in this room before compelled her to appear outwardly composed. Any sign of fear or rage would result in a tranquilizer from the staff. She had seen it happen many times right in front of her as she sat in that very worn chair next to the bed. Most of the time she was able to put them off and take the responsibility for her husband's safety on her shoulders, but she knew that as soon as she was out of sight they would quiet him with drugs.

The routine seldom varied. A new leaper would enter Sam's body, and after initial confusion a variety of reactions would occur, ranging from shock to total panic to complete anger. Eventually it resulted in a tranquilizer and an unresponsive visiting leaper.

Donna had shed many a tear seeing her husband's body treated so poorly. He was pale and thin, but still she saw the handsome, boyish man she married through all this. It was just so galling to not be able to talk to him, but it had always been that way since his first leap, except for the one time he had leaped home for a day.

After they lost contact, the military considered him their property and a security risk. Reluctantly, Donna eventually went along with their wishes. She couldn't give him the constant care and attention he needed on her income, what care she gave him kept her from earning real money as the quantum physicist she was. Handing him over was the only way she could get the time to work on getting him back.

So with Sam being a security risk, here he'd stayed, behind lock and key, a male version of the multi-personality Sybil in the staffs' opinion. That opinion was never shared directly with her, but Donna had overheard a lot in her time here.

She knew Sam would come back. He said he would. So where was he? Fighting back tears, Donna sought to distract her thoughts by testing the restraints for the thousandth time.

Approaching the Bethesda parking structure, Al and Sam were waved through the security gate thanks to the decal on Donna's car.

"You'll have no problem getting in, Sam. Donna's here all the time and most of the staff know her by sight."

Enthusiasm and expectations over rode the sorrow in Sam's heart. I'm back! He thought, brushing the quick pang of guilt about all he had put his friends through aside. He was all right now because he was here now to fix everything.

"I've got to tell you, Sam," Al noted, sadly. "I'm not sure about my clearance here. I...didn't visit you a lot. I... couldn't." His voice was soft, apologetic. "It's just that...well, you weren't you. Mentally, I mean. " Tapping his temple, he stated, "You were always up here."

"It's OK, Al, really." Nothing could dampen the eagerness welling in Sam. "Hey, I think I know why I leaped here, Al! I think I'm supposed to bring myself home! My subconscious must have figured out a retrieval program, and I'm sure it will work." The eyes of Donna reflected that semi glazed look that Sam often had when his mind was racing.

Al glanced sideways at him as he searched for a parking place, starting to feel apprehension creep into his mind. *Does he know how crazy that sounds?* he thought.

"But Sam," he started, unwilling to quash his friends enthusiasm, but knowing Sam needed to get grounded, here. "We don't have access to Ziggy. The security is impenetrable. I know, because I set most of it up!"

Nothing could slow Sam now. As usual, when he got caught up in a project, he had a knack for gathering up all the help he needed. His energy was catching.

Al parked the car in a space close to the elevators.

"It's all right, Al." He seemed barely to consider Al's words. "I know that's why I'm here. We'll figure out something, I know it." And his mind was off again and still aware of where he was. Sam was about to come face to face, with a twist in that regard, to the love of his life, his wife.

He was unstoppable now.

Bustling to keep up with Sam as they walked to the parking structure elevators, Al snapped, "Sam! Slow down! And you've got to remember to walk like Donna. You look like a female impersonator reject."

Annoyed, Sam slowed a bit.

"They'll think you're stuck in the middle of a sex change!" Al paused his walking, forcing Sam to nearly stop to collect himself. Sam rolled his eyes, and continued on with a shortened stride. Al coached him to fix his hair and straighten his blouse. In the elevator, he had Sam touch up makeup, using a small purse mirror.

"I don't like being a woman. There's too much maintenance. And I especially don't like the shoes." Sam was grumbling as he tried to hold the mirror, apply lipstick and hold the purse.

"Cry me a river, Sam, but not now. Remember, you've got to look like you know where you're going. It's been awhile since I've been here, but I still remember what to do. Here," Al offered his elbow to be an escort as Sam finished his repair work and closed the purse. "I'll lead."

Setting his jaw with annoyance, Sam took Al's elbow as the elevator door opened. The casual pace Al set frustrated the anxious Sam, but he tried to look relaxed, knowing Al was right.

"Get out your ID for clearance." Al mumbled for Sam's ears only. "Anything with a photo will do. They know you already, but we have to jump through the hoops." Al had his wallet and retired military ID flipped out. Trying to paw through the purse and hang on Al was awkward, but Sam managed to have Donna's drivers' license out it time. They received "Visitor" tags in exchange for showing the ID's at the main desk in the lobby. Sam had received a "Good morning, Dr. Eleese," from the female receptionist. Al just received a frosty nod and frown for the friendly smile he gave.

"Obviously not a happy worker," he quipped as they stepped away and attached the tags to their collars. He then steered Sam toward another bank of elevators. "We want the top floor, west wing. There will be another check in area where we will have to show special ID tags and sign in." The elevator doors opened to their call, and they stepped in. Al pushed the button to the top floor then looked through his wallet for his special ID. It looked new. Donna's, on the other hand, was well worn and already had a clip attached. Sam attached it on his collar next to the visitor tag already flopping on his chest. Al had remembered to get a clip at the sign in desk, and attached his ID, too. Sam had to concentrate on not fidgeting, and was close to losing the

battle. He settled down after a glaring look from Al as the elevator bell struck for the top floor. Sam took a deep breath.

"Turn left outside the doors."

The hallway was long with a security door and window at the far end.

"They all know Donna on this floor." Al's commentary meant to look like friendly chatter. "She practically lived here the first year or so, so I understand." There was that guilty expression again. "They even gave her a bunk near your room for a while. She never gave up, Sam."

Biting his lip, Sam ducked his head, feeling tears stinging his eyes and trying to maintain control as they reached the window. He managed to force a calm demeanor, and even smiled a bit, as they passed room after room and a small nurse's alcove. The nurse there smiled in return and nodded. Several other hallways cut across their path, with more rooms and the muted sounds of TVs and radios. Orderlies and nurses hustled about in efficient quiet, immersed in their work. When they reached the security window, Sam raised his eyebrows at the Marine guard behind it.

"Just sign the sheet and smile!" Al said under his breath.

The guard slid a clipboard through an opening under the window. Al took the board and felt Sam stiffen. Sam's writing didn't look anything like Donna's, and Donna's signature for comparison was on the very badge Sam wore! Al signed the board, then gave a stern look at Sam with his back to the window as he handed the board to Sam.

"Here, darlin'. Your turn," then winked and turned back to the guard and smiled, effectively blocking the Marine's view of Sam. Glancing down at Donna's upside down writing, he managed to dash off what he thought was a fair copy. Al turned back to take the board from him, glanced at the scrawling, and grimaced. He stood to block the guards' view of Sam as he slid the board under the window. He then took Sam's elbow again and turned him towards the door. The guard buzzed them in.

"Smile and say thanks," Al ordered under his breath.

Sam smiled as they passed through. "Thanks!" he chirped, and added a small wave. Al propelled him through the door.

They both visibly relaxed when they noted the hallway was empty. And short. "Not many are kept in this area." Al's comment didn't make Sam feel any better. "Here we go," Al said as he pushed open the door to room 644.

CHAPTER 4

The room gave off a sterile feel. It was white and bright, but there weren't any incidentals to personalize it in any way. There was one worn chair next to the single bed, and an IV drip standing like a lonely soldier next to the bed. As Al pushed open the door, it made a soft whooshing sound, causing the sole occupant of the bed to raise his head. The man's body was on his side facing the door, trying to sit up.

"Sam!" the man's voice wailed, starting to cry, trying to raise his arms.

"Donna!" Sam rushed to the bed and gathered the body up in his arms, oblivious to the restraints.

Al stepped just inside the door and stood, trying to look inconspicuous. He felt his throat tighten and his eyes sting, touched by the emotion of the reunion. It had been so long; he knew what it would feel like. He had a similar reunion with Beth when he was a prisoner of war released after Vietnam. Beth had waited for him, too. He felt content. It was obvious that the bodies being mixed up from the minds didn't matter at this point. They obviously adjusted to that situation rather quickly. Feeling like a peeping Tom, Al slipped quietly into the hall, feeling total happiness for his friends.

They felt their hearts beating together, felt their cheeks touching, then their lips connecting. Sam held Donna in his arms, unable to believe this was really happening. Even though she could not return the embrace due to the restraints, he felt the love run through his body. He felt her tears on his lips, on his cheeks, and on his eyelids. He never wanted to leave.

"Oh, Sam!" she whispered through her tears. "I want to hold you! I love you so much and I can't hold you!" The words and inflections were so Donna, but the voice came out as Sam's. They didn't notice or care.

"I love you, too." Sam responded as their tears flowed freely. Sam finally sat up and looked into her eyes. Such a familiar face, and disorienting to see and touch. He took in the thin cheeks, rough, unshaven face with lipstick on the cheeks and lips, and touched the gray patch of hair erupting from the hairline. It was unnerving, but looking into the eyes changed everything. He saw her soul in there. They were her eyes. He gently wiped the tears aside.

He took in the whole scene; the restraints, the hospital clothing, the metal rails on the bed. "What have I done?" escaped from his lips in a low, shaky voice.

"You did what you thought was right, my love," Donna answered. "I knew you would come back to me."

"Can I get you out of these?" he asked, fingering the restraints.

"I think so," she replied. "Sometimes, when you were calm and responsive, they would allow it, but only with an orderly nearby, outside the door." She paused, looking into his eyes. "It's been awhile since you've been that calm."

Sam reluctantly stood up and hunted down the medical chart. Flipping through the pages, he cringed at a few entries. "Looks like I was knocked out most of the time," he commented. Occasionally, a name was noted. They seemed vaguely familiar and he was repeating them in his mind when it struck him. These must have been the "visitors" in his body! It was uncomfortable reading, and Sam flipped the chart closed, shaken.

"I'm so sorry," he apologized. "It must have been so hard." He shook off the gloomy thoughts. "I wish Dr. Beeks were here." He sat on the edge of the bed, looking at his own face. It was weird talking to her and seeing himself, but he was getting used to it quickly. He was home ... sort of, and smiled. "There's so much I want to say, but let's get you sprung first!" He stood next to the bed, reluctant to release her, or his, hand.

Donna's face lit up in agreement. "And none too soon!" she added, smiling broadly.

Bumping the door open enough to stick his head out, Sam spied Al lurking down the hall trying to look busy. "Al!" The call echoed more loudly than Sam expected and they both jumped. Looking up, Al sauntered over.

"What?" he said in a leering voice. "Done already?"

He ignored the raised eyebrows and evil grin of his lecherous friend. "Jeeze, Al, get your brain out from the gutter and get a nurse in here. We need to get the restraints unlocked."

"Yeah, that would help, huh?" Pretending not to notice Sam's irritated look, he continued. "There's a nurse down the hall. I'll get her."

When Sam returned, Donna explained that the staff had grown to trust her evaluations of when it was safe to remove the restraints. It wasn't medically ethical to do so, but over the years her judgment had proved sound enough to convince them. The staff knew the value of getting Sam on his feet and exercised, and if they didn't have to do it, it was even more valuable to them. Donna knew how to act to help the process along. A nurse usually gave a small tranquilizer at the same time; she hoped to avoid that. Making herself calm, she met Sam's eyes and smiled. Relaxing was much easier now that her husband was here with her.

The door again swooshed open, letting in a boxy, no nonsense nurse with Al close behind. There was an orderly just behind him. Donna knew them both, and kept quiet. Al stood in a corner trying not to fidget.

"Well," the nurse stated. Sam took a sideways glance at the name tag as he let her by. Nurse Owen did not look like someone to argue with. He smiled at her, erasing the nervousness he felt. "Hi!" he said brightly.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Elisee," Nurse Owen replied, glancing at the bed. "And it looks like a good day all over. He staying calm?" She plucked the chart from its hook at the foot of the bed.

"Yes, very much so."

Donna also followed the nurse with her eyes, smiling. "Hello," she said, not daring to push it. She tried to relax so the nervous sweat she felt on her palms would dry up. She forced her clenched hands open to air them out. Nurse Owen studied the chart in the silence.

"It's been awhile since the restraints were off without a sedative," Owen mused, referring back a few pages.

"Sh...he's really improved," Sam raced on to cover the slip. "I think he'll be fine..ah, for now." He hesitated as Owen glanced up at him. "I...ah... we," and he indicated Al, "will stay with him the whole time."

Owen thought a few moments, glanced at Al as if to judge his physical strength, then reached out to check the patient's pulse. Donna kept very calm, and her pulse reflected the success of her relaxing techniques. It was hard not to flinch at the touch, though.

"I think we can give it a go, but we'll leave Mr. Ryan here just in case," indicating the orderly that had entered the room with her. As she spoke, Mr. Ryan stepped forward, taking a small key from his pocket.

"That's great!" Sam contained himself, and Al bounced on his toes. "Could Mr. Ryan wait outside the door? I mean, there are two of us, after all, and as weak as Dr. Beckett is right now, we could use the room to move around." Sam really turned on the sincerity and won Owen over.

"All right," she agreed. "But don't take any chances, OK?"

"Of course not!" Sam replied. "You know me!" Over Owen's shoulder he saw Al cringe. I'd better shut up now, he said to himself.

Mr. Ryan and Nurse Owen unlocked the leg restraints first, then the wrists, quite efficiently and quickly. Owen helped the patient sit up, and fluffed the pillow.

"I'll check back in a half hour. Mr. Ryan has the sedative if you need it. Mr. Ryan, please post yourself outside for now." As Owen left the room, Mr. Ryan followed. The door swooshed shut.

When the door was closed, Donna threw her legs over the side of the bed and reached for Sam. Now their embrace was complete. There was no need to speak, and neither one wanted to let go. It was as if they were a perfect statue, carved to depict deep love. After several minutes, Al coughed discreetly.

"I can't leave the room, you know!" he reminded them. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do!" His voice had a teasing tone.

The couple laughed a bit, and relaxed their hold, but still didn't release each other.

"Oh, Al. There's not much that covers!" It was weird hearing the tone of the man's voice. It wasn't Sam's tone, exactly, but it was Donna's phrasing. This will be tough to get used to, Al thought.

He hurried forward as Sam helped Donna slide from the bed, at was able to see himself how Sam's body had atrophied over the years here. At the project, Dr. Beeks always made sure the muscles of his body were worked on a daily basis. Here, he was just another patient, and usually an uncooperative one. Physical therapy fit in when it was convenient, and his body showed it.

With assistance, Donna was able to shuffle over to the barred window. "The view is worse than I recall," she quipped. Sam took on a serious look. It was

just hitting him how his leaping had affected the ones he loved. He longed to make it right. He knew that was his job.

When Donna settled by the window, Al stood back and observed them. The ease of the quiet talk between them made him feel comforted. Sam was home. The souls may be mixed, but it was obvious to Al who was whom by the postures. Although Sam's body was taller, it was deferring to the smaller woman. The woman was in charge now, but they were still a team to Al.

Thoughts tumbled around a around in Sam's head. I must fix this, he thought. There is a way, I'm sure. This isn't just fate. This isn't coincidence. I've got to act now.

"Al," Sam said, turning toward him.

"Hm?" Al looked a bit dreamy.

"Call the administration desk. Have them page Dr. Beeks."

"What?" that snapped him out of dreamland. "She's not assigned here. She visits when she can, but she's stationed in San Francisco, last I heard!"

"Just try, Al. I have this feeling..."

"Sam?" Donna questioned.

He responded by kissing her forehead. "Shh..just a minute." He turned to Al. "Do it, Al."

The older man gave in, wanting to do something besides stand around feeling like a 5th wheel. Picking up the phone near the bed, he checked a list written on the phone pad and dialed the administration desk. With his arguing in the background, Sam and Donna gazed into each other's eyes and talked softly.

"I'm here for a reason, Donna," he said. She let him go on. "Why now? We are all together in the same city; you, me Al, and Dr. Beeks, I'm sure. This has something to do with why I leaped here. I feel that it's about the Project. I've been sent to fix all this..." he brushed back the gray hair that had fallen onto the forehead Donna occupied. "I know it. It's time for me to come home."

"Oh, Sam." She shook her head. "It seems so impossible. I'm so tired. I want it all over, too. I want you to stay. I don't care if it's like this,"

indicating their bodies with a sweep of her hand, "or like before. I don't want you to go again." She took Sam's hands and held them to her chest, leaning into him like a favorite pillow.

The rising and falling of Al's voice ended with the click of the phone being hung up. Sam and Donna turned to watch him. With a thoughtful expression, Al ran his hand through his hair and walked over to them.

"I was right, wasn't I?" Sam stated.

"According to the administration desk, Dr. Beeks is not in the building. But," he continued before Sam could question further, "there is a conference of Psychiatrists meeting here at 3:00, and guess who is in the group?"

Sam exploded in a smile. "Verbena Beeks!" It wasn't a guess. Sam knew. It was 2:30 now and Sam's hopes flew higher. Al didn't like the look on Sam's face. Even though it was Donna's features, he knew Sam's expressions.

"You're scaring me, Sam!"

"Don't you see?" Sam was really excited now. The pacing started, up and down the length of the room, just like he always did when he was thinking. Al had to smile, and glanced at Donna who revealed a grin creeping onto her lips, too. She concealed it with her fingertips while her eyes followed him back and forth, back and forth, as she leaned against the window pane.

Sam continued. "I know why I'm here! It's all falling together." He stopped. "I'm going to fix all this," indicating his and Donna's bodies, "then I'll stop the Project so it can't happen again."

"OK, sounds great, Sam," Al rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Give me a break! How do we get out of here? There's a first step for ya!" Al got his attention with that. The pacing had stopped. In a quieter voice, he added, "Small steps first, Sam." As he spoke, Al indicated with a nod of his head, a security video camera suspended from the ceiling in one corner.

There was several moments of silence, the Donna visibly perked up. "I've heard that the video goes to security on the first floor, not the nurses' station. It was put in just for Sam, he being a security risk and all. After three years, I'm sure they don't really notice it anymore. And, well, Mr. Ryan's uniform would fit Sam, I mean me, and there is that sedative in his pocket..."

Astonished, Al sputtered, "Oh, you're a big help!"

"Nurse Owen is due back in about ten minutes, and she's prompt." Donna threw in. She was getting as excited as her husband, and seemed to know what he was thinking. It was thrilling. They had heavy discussion with Al, and the door swooshed open as Donna had predicted.

Nurse Owen stepped inside the room and stopped, observing the patient from head to toe.

"You look relaxed today," she said with a suspicious edge to her voice. She'd seen this patient turn violent at the drop of a hat before. This was the most, well, *normal*, she had ever seen him.

Donna tried not to tense under the scrutiny. "I feel good," was all she said, smiling. She became aware of her voice. Was it too high? Did it sound like Sam? Was she buying it?

Owen walked to the chart and noted something on it. "Everything going OK?" she inquired, looking at who she thought was Dr. Elisee.

"Yes. Fine. Thanks." Sam answered, also smiling.

Owen looked back at the patient. "OK," she said. Visiting hours are over at five o'clock, Dr. Elisee. You will need a doctor's permission to stay later than that. We don't want to tire Dr. Beckett out."

"Of course," Sam replied. "I understand."

"Mr. Ryan is still outside. Call if you need me." Owen left, and Sam let out a big breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"We have until five o'clock," Sam remarked as the door clicked closed.

This day was turning out to have much more action than Al could have ever imagined. He wasn't afraid of the adventure ahead, in fact, he found himself diving in eagerly. It was like being in the Navy again with the plotting and planning. He saw little difference between this operation and any other wartime action. Lives were still at stake, and the risk was worth taking, in his mind. He owed a lot to his friends and it felt good to be finally able to do something for them. No one could ask for a more loyal and dedicated friend than Al Calavicci.

"I left a message for Beeks to call here on her arrival," Al noted, his brain jumping into the planning. "That should be any time now." He looked very nervous. "I'm not thrilled with this idea, but I'm with you two. Federal prison

has to be better than a Viet Cong box, and I survived that. So, what's the plan?"

Quickly, a plan was sketched. After luring Mr. Ryan in the room and "persuading" him out of his uniform, dress Donna as the orderly and walk out. It sounded too easy, and Al wasn't the only one disturbed by that thought. Mr. Ryan wasn't a small man; the form of "persuasion" was going to take its toll on everyone. Sam and Donna were so excited by the idea of getting out, they could hardly sit still. Sam also briefed them on the fact that they would have to move slowly due to the physical decline of Sam's body. Donna would tire easily and need frequent rest stops. They had to go slow, and nerves would be on edge, adding to the fatigue. They also worked in when to "accidentally" knock the security camera aside.

"Al, when Beeks calls here, don't tell her we are here. Arrange to meet her, alone, in the lobby." Al noted that when Sam spoke to him, he was looking at Donna. They couldn't keep their eyes off each other, and their hands were in constant contact, as if afraid to let go.

Al thought that one over for a minute. "Why do we need her at all?" he reasoned.

"I have this...feeling ..."

"Great. I hate it when you say that."

"OK, then look at it this way: There is already one too many taking risks, here." Pausing, he looked directly at Al. "And this way, Verbena will have deniability. They'll be looking for Donna's car, but not Beeks'. If we leave Donna's car at, say, the airport..."

"Authorities will assume we flew somewhere, and the roads will be clear, at least for a while." Al grinned broadly. "You are much more devious than I give you credit for, Sam."

"I'll take that as a complement."

"And the next stop will be New Mexico?"

"That's my thought."

The phone softly rang, making everyone's heart jump. The plan was about to go into effect.

Taking a slow breath to steady himself, Al turned all business and picked up the phone. After a greeting and some cheery small talk, Al arranged to meet Verbena in the lobby. He feigned pressing appointments for the hasty meeting and shortness of time then hung up. They now had less than twenty minutes to get to the car if they were to be well away from the hospital by five o'clock.

CHAPTER 5

Mr. Ryan was getting bored. He had other things he could be doing, and then he smiled because now he could think about the other orderlies having to do his work! Maybe looking after this nut case was a better idea than he first thought. He was happily humming to himself when the door cracked open and the head of the visiting short guy poked out.

"We need you in here!" the short guy snapped in a commanding voice.

Mr. Ryan was moving and in the door before he had another thought. Mr. Ryan was familiar with this Dr. Beckett character and knew how bizarre he could act. Entering the room, he saw that Dr. Beckett was on the bed rocking back and forth, moaning. The woman was holding his shoulders down and looking frantic. As he removed the sedative and syringe from his pocket, he started to draw up the proper amount, unaware of the older man "bumping" the security camera aside behind him. The mouse trap was about to be sprung.

With the syringe ready to go, Sam appeared to struggle violently, and the woman was thrown aside. Al moved in behind the orderly and snatched the syringe from his hands. "I'll take this and get help! Hold him!" Al shoved Mr. Ryan toward the bed. Sam moaned louder, and Mr. Ryan was too distracted to notice Al making a quick decision on a target. As the orderly restrained the patient's arms, Al came up from behind and stabbed at the most accessible part of Mr. Ryan's anatomy; his buttocks. The orderly yelled and jumped backwards as Al tripped him and "fell" on top of him.

"What happened?!" Al yelled, confusing the young man even more. "Are you OK?" but it seemed to Mr. Ryan that the old mans' legs were constantly in the way, preventing him from getting up. Al was practically kneeling on the mans' chest pretending to care when in actuality he was praying for the sedative to take effect.

Mr. Ryan sputtered something, tried to raise up, then fell over in a drugged haze.

"It's about time!" Al muttered. "OK, let's get going..." he sounded like the military man he was, taking over.

Sam checked the dosage of the drug, as Donna and Al started to strip their victim.

After removing the shirt and shoes, Donna stood back and fumbled with her hospital gown. Off it came, and she momentarily grinned, liking the freedom of being shirtless without being obscene. *Being a man does have some advantages*, she thought, as she tossed her gown down to Al and picked up the uniform shirt.

Buttoning the buttons, Donna could feel that her muscles were growing weak, very weak, and decided not to mention anything about it yet.

Sam stood holding the uniform pants while Al put the gown on the sleeping form. As he handed the pants to Donna, Sam evaluated the emaciated body in front of him, and gritted his teeth. *No regrets now*, he chastised himself, *deal with what we have to*. He helped Donna slip the pants on over bony knees and hips. Al handed her the shoes and pointed to the worn chair. Donna complied, appreciated the short rest.

"I'm getting too old for this..." lamented Al as he and Sam wrestled the body onto the bed. Mr. Ryan snored softly. "At least he doesn't smell like a drunk!"

Sam was standing, trying to twist his clothing back into a presentable shape. "Try doing anything wearing a skirt!" Sam complained as he tugged at the cloth. This caused Al's eyebrows to rise almost into his hairline. His mouth opened to speak. "Forget I said that." Sam cut him off. Al complied and merely looked amused.

Donna laughed, then stood up and gleefully attached the restraints to Mr. Ryan. They turn him on his side, back to the door, and tried to arrange the blanket to cover his bulk. Donna pocketed the keys.

Sam's body was only slightly passable as Ryan, more so from the back than face on. The uniform hung loosely on the thin frame. They decided to have Al and Sam lead down the hall to security check out, blocking Donna, who would follow, not too closely, behind. They had to be sure no one checked the face on the badge with the one wearing it. Donna wished she had time to shave, and then a thought sprung forward. She gathered up the sheet from the bed and an extra pillow from the closet, and carried them close to her chest. The items towered up to cover the lower part of her face. Good

enough concealment, they all decided. It was time to go. They all checked themselves over as Al moved the security camera back into place then moved to the door and opened it for Sam.

Al and Sam strolled down the hall, chatting and laughing quietly, keeping the pace casual enough for Donna to stay close. They tapped the intercom to be buzzed out. When they pushed the door open, Al politely held it open for Sam to exit. He stayed there while Sam wrote down their exit times. Donna slipped through the door with a "Thanks!" and a wave at the guard. With Sam and Al between the guard and Donna's retreating form, there was no chance for close scrutiny.

So far, so good. Now to the elevators.

They followed Donna down the length of hall. They could tell she was tiring, and using the wall for partial support. At one of the nurse's alcoves close to the elevators, she stopped and dumped the laundry in a bin like it was something she did every day. The motion also allowed the other two to pass.

"She sure knows the ins and outs of this place," Sam commented to Al.

"She should. She's practically lived here for three years."

Sam bit his lower lip, fighting the urge to look back. "Yeah, I guess so."

What seemed like an eternity later, they stopped at the elevator bank. Donna had grabbed a chart at the nurses' desk and dropped her head as if reading it as she passed the few people in the hall. She ditched the chart in one of the holders on the last door by the elevators, and joined up with her partners just as the elevator doors slipped open. Al banged on the "Door Close" button as soon as they were inside. Donna leaned into Sam, who wrapped his arms around her. Whether for comfort or physical support, Al couldn't tell. He just prayed no one else got on the car. It was a silent ride down.

When the doors opened on the lobby floor, thankfully with no other stops, Sam and Al stepped out first and went directly to the administration desk to return the visitor badges. Fighting to not look around, they headed to the parking structure elevators. They were there just a few seconds when Donna rounded the corner, pushing a wheel chair as she leaned heavily on it for support. She fit right in the bustling atmosphere, but Sam noted her paleness and exhaustion. His brain screamed to help her, but he stood fast, keeping up the front. The wheelchair was abandoned when the doors opened, and she ducked in. Again, she cuddled up to Sam, and Al could tell

by her closed eyes and shaky breathing that she was spent. Sam was practically carrying her. How could they blend in with an Amazon appearing female carrying a full grown man? Al crossed his fingers, and prayed to himself for the first time in a long time.

When the doors opened, Al did a quick check of the area. "Go on," he said. "I've got to go back up and meet Verbena. The coast is clear." He held the door open. Donna tried to take a step, faltered, and Sam scooped her up before she collapsed. "Oh, great. This is a sight."

"It's OK, Al," Sam said, "Just go. See you soon."

The door closed, hiding away the face of a not totally convinced man.

The car was uncomfortably cold inside, but neither of them took notice at the moment. Sam had unlocked the rear door of the sedan and placed Donna on the seat. She crumpled down onto the seat, mumbling something about being alright in a couple of minutes. Sam ran around to the other side and put the keys in the ignition, but didn't dare start the car for the heater. They had to keep quiet and low until Al and Verbena arrived, which would hopefully be very soon. Instead, he climbed in beside Donna and used his body to keep her warm and comfortable. He wound up mostly kneeling on the floor, bent over the top of her.

"I never have gotten used to the damp cold here," Donna mumbled, eyes closed. Sam stroked her hair, her cheek. It was rough, being a man's face and unshaven, but it was still Donna to him. "I can't wait to get to New Mexico. So hot, but at least..."

"... it's a dry heat!" They both finished together. It had been a standing joke at the Project, most of the staff coming from the East coast. They both chuckled, enjoying the time alone, as weird as the circumstances were. They both felt chilled to the bone, but the cuddling was helping.

"Thank you for taking care of me," Sam said. "It must have been so hard."

Donna turned to face him, and smiled. "Don't worry your pretty little head about it, dear!" She responded laughing at what used to be her mirror image. This made Sam laugh, too, and the mood lightened up.

"You need to exercise daily while we travel." Sam instructed, once again serious. "That body has to get back in shape."

"Yes, Doctor." She answered. After a few minutes of quiet relaxation she took his face in her hands. "Forget the body for now, and use that magnificent brain. Getting to New Mexico maybe won't be that hard, but what are we going to do when we get there?" Donna pushed herself up, and took Sam's hands in her lap. "You may not be able to get in if this escape is reported to them. I'm not really sure what your status is. I think you are considered government property. Isn't that the same thing as a government employee?"

They laughed.

"I have an idea, but I'd rather wait and see what happens when we get there."

They were silent for a few more minutes, just enjoying being together.

"I was planning on a different kind of homecoming," Donna started. "You know, champagne, a party, romantic words in the moonlight..." Her voice trailed off. "But now that you're here, it just doesn't matter anymore."

"No," he agreed, whispering. "It doesn't, does it?"

Neither one was willing to break the comforting silence. Quietly they conversed, Donna asking what he remembered, and filling him in on what had happened in the past ten years. Some seemed vaguely familiar, but most were like a dream; flashes of scenes on which Sam was unable to focus clearly.

Donna finally dozed off, and Sam was lost in his thoughts. "Had a dream...I was born ... to be naked in the eye of the storm..." The song lyrics danced through Sam's head as he sat with his wife. It pretty much summed up how he felt when leaping. And he knew he had had enough and was ready to stay home.

The passage of time in the chilly car was still comforting, albeit surreal. It only seemed like a few short minutes before they heard the clack-clack of women's pumps and a male voice urgently whispering "over here!" Sam nudged Donna awake and they both looked up to see Al and the surprised face of Dr. Verbena Beeks, Project Quantum Leap's psychiatrist, peering in the car window.

"Hi Verbena!" Sam and Donna chorused together as she gaped at the couple.

"Dr. Beckett!" She exclaimed, yanking the door open. Squatting down to eye level, Verbena instinctively reached in and felt for the man's pulse.

Sam laughed out loud and said, "But I'm over here.." giving his hand a little wave.

"I know that," Verbena quipped. "This is the one that looks bad." She nodded her head towards the body Donna occupied. Dr. Beeks was never one to mince on words.

The Sam face frowned. "I'm a little tired, but I'll be fine," Donna said.

"I think you should let me decide that," Dr. Beeks continued in a softer tone. "You look anemic and probably a bit malnourished." She checked the man's fingernails. "Intravenous feeding simply can't replace real food."

During the exchange Al was bouncing up and down, glancing around. "We've got to get out of here," he said, "before the Keystone Kops are after us." With a little squeak of protest Al guided Verbena to the front seat and closed the doors. He ran around to the drivers' side, and slid in behind the wheel. The keys were already in the ignition, ready to go. He fired up the car and started backing out. "They'll be looking for this car. We can dump it at the airport to get them on the wrong trail. Where's your car?" He glanced at Verbena.

Dr. Beeks stared at him for a few seconds, weighing in her mind the ramifications of all this. How involved should she get? She knew time was running out, and seeing that she had a good chance of not being connected with this right away, she made a decision. "Up two levels." She was reluctant to leave her patients and just as reluctant to get in any deeper. She had to think this over a bit more.

She pointed out her car and Al dropped her off and they made quick plans on where to meet at the airport. They made their way out of Bethesda's garage without incident and weaved their way through the city to the airport. Entering the long term parking area, Al parked Donna's car in the section pre-selected by Al and Verbena. Verbena arrived within minutes.

"That's going to rack up quite a bill," Al remarked as they all packed into Verbena's rental. "And this rental won't be reported as stolen for at least a month."

Dr. Beeks threw him a sideways glance through suspiciously squinted eyes. "I'm not even going to ask how you know that," she started. "And just what

are we doing, anyway?" She threw the car in park, obviously not going another inch without answers to some nagging questions.

"We're escaping," Sam offered.

"Yeah, I see that," she said calmly. "But then what? Just head west and see what happens?"

Sam and Donna looked at each other, and said together, "Yeah."

Verbena gripped the steering wheel, looked down and sighed. "So much for my conference," she grumbled as she drove away, leaving the city as a small speck in the rear view mirror.

CHAPTER 6

It was close to 6 PM when Agent Laminack's phone rang. He was in his office finishing up the report of his last assignment. Two Defense Department employees would spend a lot of time behind bars for smuggling secrets to foreign governments, thanks to him. It was satisfying to finally close the case, and he was looking forward to a few days of vacation. He grabbed the phone as he put the finishing punctuation of the last sentence and snapped, "Laminack!" into the receiver. It took a few seconds of listening to get his full attention on what was being said. "When did this happen?" he inquired, the report in front of him forgotten. "Did you check the security tape?" he questioned. Listening intently for a moment he then barked, "Get the tape to the security office. I'm on my way."

Now he was really pissed off. His vacation was going to have to wait. It's a good thing he wasn't married anymore or he would have to endure the wrath of his wife, too. Not the first time his work would interfere with his life. Finally there was one too many times, and she got fed up and left, eventually marrying a postal worker. At least he has regular days off, he grumbled to himself. Can't blame her, I guess.

Putting the thoughts of his now non-existent private life aside, he fingered a file in his filing cabinet labeled "BECKETT, Samuel/Project Quantum Leap", and yanked it out. Grabbing his coat and putting the file under his arm, he left the office. This case should prove to be interesting, he thought as he worked his way quickly down the hallway. He pushed his way into the men's room and hollered "Tony! Zip your pants, we gotta run!"

There was a grunt by the urinals as Agent Tony Block mumbled, "Nice choice of words," yanked up his zipper, and did a cursory rinse at the sink. "Let's

go!" he breathed, inwardly annoyed at missing a date tonight. He knew Laminack didn't have a life, and as his newest partner, neither would he. The only thing that made it tolerable was the fact that Laminack was an excellent agent and Block was learning more from him than any previous partner. It was a double edged sword, but he was young and would deal with it, having already warned his girlfriend. So far she had proved to be forgiving.

"Whatcha got?" he asked as they burst from the room, continuing down the hall.

"I'll brief you in the car. Not much to go on yet, but if I read my Becketts correctly, this won't be boring!" He handed Block the file when they got in the elevator and let him peruse the information as an introduction on their way to the parking garage.

Agent Block's eyes widened as he read the brief on the Project. Laminack was right. This wouldn't be boring.

The Federal building where the agents worked wasn't far from the hospital. They went directly to the security office on their arrival and met the officer in charge, who provided the videos Laminack had requested. They watched in silent black and white as the figure of Al followed an orderly into the room, then moved out of sight under the camera. The scene then abruptly changed to the view of a wall. After a bit, the scene changed back to the room, with only a figure in the bed visible. The hallway monitor watched three people breeze past the security booth, and the lobby camera documented the exit to the garages. The garage cameras also had Sam and Donna on film, but it was extremely dark and difficult to ascertain details.

"Is she carrying him?" Laminack pointed out. "She's stronger than she looks."

The security officers knew Donna Elisee on sight, but they had to consult the sign in sheet to come up with Al's identification. Block was astounded when the computer check came back. "That guy is a retired Admiral!" he exclaimed. "What's going on? This Sam guy has been here, what, three years? What could possibly be the motive for this?"

"First off, do we have a crime?" Laminack mused. "Dr. Beckett obviously isn't being kidnapped. He's going willingly with his wife and friend. We *do* have assault and battery on the orderly. Maybe there's blackmail going on here; it's the only thing that would make sense. The Becketts are still on the government payroll with top secret security clearance; and I don't see any notes regarding Sam being under house arrest," Laminack flipped through

the file, "It says here he is merely medically confined, but mentally incompetent?" That seemed to puzzle him deeply. "Who would want a mentally incompetent scientist?"

"Blackmail..." mused Block. "I suppose that's the best explanation. Maybe he isn't mentally incompetent anymore."

"First we'll need some phone records, starting with that hospital room. Any calls made from there?" Laminack's command presence made the security officer jump and scramble to the computer monitor. Block always got a kick out of watching people jump at his command. He really had a knack for it.

"Yes, sir, there was a call out to the administrative desk, and a call in from the lobby."

Reviewing the lobby tape, Laminack noted Al's return to the lobby after leaving in the garage elevator with Dr. Beckett and Dr. Eleese. He advanced forward and watched as Al met with another person. The lighting was poor, and Al was blocking the view of the mysterious person, but it was obviously dressed like a female. They both left via the garage elevators, and all Laminack saw was the back of her head, heavy in shadow. Who was she?

"Get a phone number on Calavicci and Eleese. Check for wireless phones, too. In the meantime, we need to find out who that lady is." He pointed at the retreating figure next to the Admiral. "Also check parking sticker records for Eleese and Calavicci to get vehicle descriptions. Let's go interview some operators at the Administrative desk."

When the security officer mentioned that there had been a shift change over and hour ago, Block knew then that this would be a long night. Those people with a life usually weren't home either, but at least they were out having fun somewhere. Agent Block sighed and mentally recalled where the nearest coffee machine was while reaching for his pocket change.

They drove west through the hilly terrain of West Virginia as quickly as the road conditions allowed. Donna slept while Sam, Al and Verbena discussed, argued, and pounded out the first part of the plans needed to get the Becketts in their proper bodies.

Getting to New Mexico would be a long and tiring trip, and this was compounded by the fact that pursuit was imminent and their destination would be obvious to the pursuers. All the government agents really had to

do was simply wait for them at the Project. The things in their favor were the expanse of desert around the Project, which couldn't possibly be surveilled in its entirety, and the fact that the destination was so obvious. There was a good possibility of "sneaking up" on it after all, especially if they could keep the agents guessing as to whether they would be brave enough to go directly to the Project at all.

After several hours of driving, they stopped to eat and max out Verbena's credit cards on practical clothes. Sam was ecstatic about tossing out the skirt and changing to jeans. The bra, however, was indispensable, much to Sam's chagrin, and had to stay. Donna found the whole shopping spree amusing.

"Well, they'll be able to follow us now, if they've figured out Verbena's with us and are checking her credit card use." Al calculated out loud. "I think that's a long shot, though. They are probably just now finishing up checking all the flights west. We still have some time."

With some food, Donna felt her energy level rising. Sam's body still needed some poundage, and Verbena set up a sketchy meal and exercise plan. Her evaluations of both Sam's and Donna's mental states weren't completed yet, and she continued to watch them with a practiced eye.

The plan for getting inside the Project was another story completely. They all figured that once they got inside, Ziggy could keep them there and safe, so getting inside was the equation to work on. Al and Donna concluded that if they could contact Ziggy from the outside, she may be able to assist their entry. As the miles flowed by, the group recalled Ziggy's installation and the outside lines she was tied into. These were the very lines that enabled the hybrid computer to tap into any database in the world. This was all contingent on the thought that Ziggy was still running and connected. They had to find out the answer to that before making any move into the desert.

They stopped several times to stretch their legs and follow Verbena's exercise program which mostly involved walking. Dr. Beeks had drained her bank account at the last stop, and paid cash for the last two dingy rooms of an out of the way motel somewhere in the southwestern part of Ohio. It was literally the middle of the night. They ate a "home cooked " meal, as the sign proclaimed, at the adjacent all night diner, which tasted mostly like paste. Donna was the only one who ate with relish. Sam and Donna then tiredly claimed one of the rooms, which left Al and Verbena awkwardly outside the second room. She opened the door and they both stepped inside, Verbena eyeing Al suspiciously.

"I'm not thrilled about this," she stated.

"Look, there are two beds!" he pointed out.

"And one bathroom," she finished. "And a small one at that."

"Sheesh, Verbena," Al rolled his eyes. "I can control myself. Or would you rather trade with Sam?"

They both glared at each other and ran mental scenarios of that choice through their minds. It made Verbena suddenly laugh out loud, which lightened the atmosphere considerably

"*Which* Sam?" she asked.

"Exactly," Al responded, also starting to laugh as he envisioned the dilemma. Which one, indeed!

"OK, your point is made. But you wait outside until I'm in bed!" Verbena was all business again.

Al sighed. This was going to be a long trip.

He stood outside the room for a few minutes, the chill stinging his nose and ears. Al longed to call Beth, but didn't dare. His and Donna's cell phones had started ringing constantly hours ago, and they had finally shut them off, not taking the chance that their calls could be traced. He was sure his and Beth's' phone lines were probably bugged by now. She must have been visited by the Military Police by now, too, and should have the idea that something was going on.

Quelling his lonely thoughts, he rationalized that if she could stand five years of him as a Vietnam POW, she could deal with this. Guilt, however, could not be put aside. Her voice would sound so good right now. He was also satisfied that they still had some time...Verbena's phone hadn't started ringing yet. This meant that Gooshie's line could still be untapped. Should he chance it? Gooshie still had clearance to get into Ziggy, but if they even suspected contact with Al, that clearance would be nixed. Inwardly he felt the timing was right, so it was now or never. He stepped into the parking lot, and took a second to light up a cigar and relax his racing mind. Looking around, he saw an old "Pay Phone" sign sticking out from the side of the diner, barely able to make out the writing by the glow of the diners' sign.

Al strolled over to the sign, and looked down the side of the building. The remains of an old style phone booth leaned forlornly against the wall, but the inside light still worked, and the phone itself looked fairly modern. Al bounced the idea of calling Gooshie around in his mind a little more, but always came to the same conclusion: Now is the time. He could feel it. Snorting, he realized how like Sam that sounded, and stepped into the booth.

CHAPTER 7

It was a little past ten in the evening in California when the ringing phone jerked Gooshie awake. He was asleep in a recliner, a laptop computer at this side.

Momentarily confused, it took him a third ring to zero in on the portable phone on the floor next to the chair. Scrambling with his fingertips and nearly falling out of the chair, he finally snatched up the phone and stopped the pesky ringing.

"Hello?" he mumbled, heart pounding. Phone calls at night were rarely a good thing, ran through his mind as he woke up.

"Gooshie?" The gravelly voice at the other end sounded so familiar; his brain was finally getting into gear.

"Admiral?" he queried, still slightly confused. There was a person he hadn't heard from in a while.

"Do me a favor, Gooshie, and pretend you don't know me. Although it's too late now," the voice from the past chided.

"What? Where..."

Al didn't give him time to complete the question. "We need a conference, Gooshie. We have mutual friends who would leap at the chance of seeing you," he said, cringing. *Jeeze, I sound like an old spy movie*, he thought. Still, he didn't want to take any chances. And although Gooshie looked and sometimes acted dumb as a brick, Al knew Gooshie's sharp mind would put it together. He may not believe it, but he would put together enough to get him interested. "Have you been contacted by any military or government agencies today?" Al asked.

"Um, no," Gooshie sounded a bit groggy still. "Did you say 'leap'?" he added.

He's got it! Thought Al. "Yes," he said out loud as an idea exploded in his head. "We'll meet in the lobby of the MGM Grand in Las Vegas in two days, 1800 hours. OK?" What better place to get lost in? Huge lobby, lots of exits, large crowd, and enough off the path to New Mexico to confuse any pursuers. Perfect!

"Wait!" Gooshie's brain was working now. "It will be a mess there! How will I find you?"

"We'll find you. Just stay in the lobby. And don't tell anyone where you're going. See you there!" and Al hung up. I must have sounded like a fruitcake, he thought, reviewing the conversation in his head. Knowing his distinctive voice, Gooshie could not have mistaken him for anyone else.

Al stepped away from the phone, lifting his cigar to his lips and stepping into the shadows against the building. He re-lit the cigar and leaned against the peeling building which was only slightly warmer than the frigid air. Did he do the right thing? Was it a safe call? It had been over eight hours since they left Bethesda. What had the investigating agency figured out so far? Since Verbena's phone hasn't rung yet, he still felt safe making the call because they hadn't researched the old Project team yet.

When her phone started to ring and go unanswered, he knew that would be the sign of imminent pursuit. Airline checks would be finished, hospital records checked and Verbena's conference discovered. When her phone rang, it was time to dump her car.

Satisfied with his train of thought and relaxed from the smoke, Al headed back to the room certain Verbena would be in bed by now. Another pang of guilt hit him as he thought of Beth, and how worried she must be. Al brushed the emotion away. She's a Navy wife and a Navy nurse so she's tough, he thought proudly.

Keying himself in, he saw a lump identifying Verbenas' bed. She had left the bath light on for him, and he washed quickly then darkened the room, making his way to the empty bed. He stripped to his boxers, assuming his roommate was asleep.

"Thanks for turning the light out first. God knows what those undergarments look like in full light!" Verbena giggled, making a sideways reference to Al's usually colorful outfits.

Al slipped under his covers. "You have a very weird sense of humor for a shrink!" he accused, actually being intrigued by her laughter. He usually avoided psychiatrists like the plague, Verbena included. He didn't like the idea of being observed. This forced closeness was allowing him to see Dr. Beeks as a human being and it was refreshing. "Go to sleep, Verbena!" he scolded playfully.

"Good night, Admiral."

"Goodnight, Doc."

The dawn found Sam waking with a start, his arms embraced around a warm body and snuggled cozily. They were covered up to their noses with a musty smelling but warm comforter. There was no heat and the room, and in spite of the blankets, he was slightly chilled. For both physical and mental warmth, Sam did not want to release his partner. Now or ever. The usual wariness of waking up in a strange place, trying to figure out who and where he was did not occur, and he was very pleased.

The previous night had been, well, memorable to say the least. Amidst giggles and whispers, and some helpful suggestions on both sides, the night was joyous and satisfying for both of them. As prudish as Al always accused them of being, they were never shy around each other in the area of lovemaking. That is how Sam liked to think of it, as opposed to just plain sex. The word sex just wasn't enough to describe their unions. Theirs was much more, involving body, mind and soul, and maybe that's why last night wasn't as odd as it seemed it would be. Take "body" out of the equation and the rest filled in.

As Sam started to feel Donna waking up, he heard a woman's faint shriek and a man's laughter next door. Al, thought Sam, recognizing his raspy laugh. He smiled to himself and chuckled out loud, envisioning Al and Verbena as roommates.

Donna, awake, stretched and smiled. "So, it wasn't a dream after all!" she greeted him, taking Sam's face in her hands and kissing him. Neither one wanted to stop, and as they warmed up to another memorable session, there was a banging on their door.

"Come on, boys and girls! Daylight's burning!" Al had to knock and holler twice to get their attention.

"OK, OK!" Sam yelled, disengaging from his wife. "Ten minutes!"

"Ten minutes?" purred Donna. "That's no fun!"

Thoroughly charmed and thrilled, Sam pushed her away, rolled out of bed and leaned down to help her up. "Shower?" He leered, trying to imitate their cigar toting friend. She happily complied and they piled into the shower, oblivious to its dilapidated condition and frigid temperature, as their eyes were only for each other.

Outside, Al grinned at the scrambling noises and sound of the shower. "Too weird for me to even start imagining what it would be like," he mumbled to himself as he turned to go. Every time he thought of Donna naked, she always had Sam's head perched on her delicate shoulders. He had to shake his head to clear the disturbing picture. "Ek," he commented, shuddering, as he headed for the diner, hoping for a decent cup of coffee.

They had been working nearly twelve hours on this case, making it almost twenty since Agent Block had had any sleep. Agent Laminack was thorough and relentless on his search for Beckett and his entourage. Dr. Eleese's car had been found at the airport almost immediately, thanks to an alert airport officer. The passenger lists had been meticulously searched and a few entries followed up. Nothing had panned out. The Admiral's and Dr. Eleese's cell phones had finally been turned off, so that was a futile route to follow. This was getting tough, trying to out-think a Nobel winning scientist, and it seemed to Block that Laminack found this to be like a game he wasn't planning to lose.

The Project file that Laminack had provided proved to be detailed and very helpful. When it looked like the airline search was going to turn up empty, they had run over the employment records of the Project, following up all the former Project employees in the area. When that turned out to be a dead end, they branched out on the list. The identity of the mysterious woman in the hospital lobby was narrowed down to a short list of three: a Sammy Jo Fuller, Ph.D., a Dr. Verbena Beeks, and a Dr. Tina Martinez. The file was not detailed enough to see if the woman was black or white, which would have helped enormously in the investigation, but Block was used to not having the easy path.

They got their break several hours later. Dr. Fuller had been easily located along with Dr. Martinez, but Dr. Beeks was still unaccounted for. Her itinerary for the last several days was being rounded up, as well as her

credit card use. They had also tapped into the phones of a handful of team leaders in the Project, and Block's eyes lit up when he saw an incoming call on the line of a man called Gooshie in California. It had come from a motel in Ohio, and considering the lack of calls normally received by this man, and the timing, he was sure it was from their target.

Laminack was just trashing the last of the airline manifests when Block pointed out the call.

"Book us a flight to California," he snapped, "and get the local office there to set up surveillance."

All Agent Block could think of was the relief he felt knowing he could catch some sleep on the flight.

They were in the air in just under three hours.

CHAPTER 8

Las Vegas always looked dried up in the daytime to Al. The magical, electrically charged atmosphere was asleep, waiting to arise and glow as the sun fell. Then it turned exciting. Tonight's going to be more exciting than usual, he thought.

Glancing over at his slumbering cargo, he shifted his hips, trying to ease his stiff back. They had driven nonstop since the motel, he and Verbena trading off driving duties. They stopped every couple of hours to follow Dr. Beeks' exercise program.

Sam and Donna stayed in the back talking, napping, snuggling and going through what seemed like reams of paper, diagramming retrieval information. Sam's body, with a little sun, fresh air and constant food, was looking healthier each day. The beard growing in had some gray sprinkled through it that seemed to disturb Sam. Al reasoned it was a reminder of how long he'd been gone. Donna tried to shave that first day, but gave up after cutting Sam's face to bits.

"Legs are easier." She had concluded. "At least you can see them without using a mirror!"

Her husband had laughed Donna's laugh. "I've had a little practice shaving legs, so I'm doing fine!" was his reply. He did insist on wearing jeans, though. "How you get anything done wearing a skirt is beyond me," he had complained.

"Well, women wear skirts for reasons men don't realize. That's our power!" she replied.

The whole conversation was weird, but oddly enough, Al was getting used to it. Verbena had wisely kept her opinions to herself, being the consummate professional she was.

Since it was fairly early in the afternoon and their meeting with Gooshie wasn't until that evening, they decided to shop around for rooms. Settling down on a smaller place adjacent to one of the largest hotels, their plan was to stash the car in the huge parking structure off the street. There was a chance of becoming trapped in the structure, but that was a gamble they decided to take. The structure and their hotel were close to the MGM Grand. Verbena took two rooms with street views, signing a false name to the register and paying cash.

"I'll have the bell man take your bags, Ms. Wayne," the clerk smiled.

Al peeked over at the register. "Johnna Wayne?" he mocked near her ear. "Does that mean we have to call you the Duchess?" He waved Sam and Donna towards the elevators.

"All I'll say is my shrink colleges would have a field day with that if they ever found out!" she laughed, scooting towards the others.

"Shrink humor..." muttered Al as he followed along.

After settling in, Sam, Donna and Verbena rested while Al investigated the MGM. He knew he couldn't avoid all the security cameras, so he bought a dark, wide brimmed hat to help conceal his face, from a boutique near the hotel. He thought about a cowboy hat, something he'd normally avoid like the plague, but couldn't get himself to buy it. He settled on a dark fedora in boring color, which was only a slight departure from his usual taste.

He cased the lobby thoroughly, noting the exits, dark spots, and the tramway down one floor from the casino. The tram made round trips to the neighboring hotel on a raised track. He noted everything, and put together an action plan in his mind.

Finally, he wrote a note to Gooshie, telling him to go to his room then immediately take the stairs to the tram. Al would meet him in the main bar at the big hotel next door. He also noted to bring the laptop, but knew that was a silly thing to ask. It was a third appendage for Gooshie, and never left his side. Al didn't sign the note.

Looking around the lobby, he waved an exuberant looking young bellhop over, discreetly slipping \$50 in the mans' hand. Al described Gooshie in detail, his approximate arrival time, and told him to give the scientist the folded note. The young man bobbed his head, smiling, then hinted about the tips he'd be missing while he watched for the man.

"All right you con artist, here's another fifty." Inwardly he admired the boy's pluck. The bell man bobbed his head more rapidly, grinning politely before he bustled off to the bell stand.

Al departed and checked the tram route and the bar next door before heading back to the motel for some rest. It was almost show time. Again.

Gooshie's plane arrived on time, a rowdy load of high-spirited passengers surrounding him with infectious excitement. His heart beat faster, but out of anxiety rather than gambling fever. What was going on with Admiral Calavicci? The scientist ran the brief conversation through his mind over and over, and always came to the same conclusion. It was so improbable; he kept repeating the process in his head.

Clutching the laptop to his chest and almost forgetting his carry-on luggage, he allowed himself to be propelled with the crowd off the plane. Once in the terminal, he continued to the taxi stand and climbed in the lead vehicle. He had gotten ahead of the masses by not checking any additional luggage.

"The, um, MGM Grand, " he requested, oblivious to the drivers' reaction to his breath. Halitosis was something he just got used to, but the driver wasn't as acclimated. Even with the heater on, the driver rolled down his window as he sped off.

At the Grand, Gooshie noted that it was just past five o'clock. Not sure what to do, he decided to at least check into his room. It took the clerk several minutes to find his room, as the lobby was like an anthill of activity. People were arriving for the weekend in droves, and the lobby was thick with people waiting in the check in lines.

The mammoth lobby had little room to move around. When his room was finally confirmed, he signed in and got his card key. As he turned to step away, an exuberant young bell hop appeared at his side out of nowhere. The grinning man held his hand out for his bag.

"I'll take that!" and the man took the bag without waiting for a response. "This way, sir!" he chirped, and off he went, parting the crowd like they were water. As they reached the elevators, the doors slid opened and the bell man held open the door for Gooshie. When the door closed, he handed Gooshie the note.

"This is for you, I believe," the man grinned. Gooshie took the note, confused, unfolded it and finished reading it as the door opened for his floor. The bell man bounded off the elevators and lead the way down the hall, opening a door near the stairs. "Here's your room, sir!" He hovered around the door, hand outstretched for a tip.

"Oh, of course," Gooshie reached into his pocket as the bellhop leaned as far away from Gooshie's face as his outstretched arm would allow. As soon as he received his money, he was out the door, gasping.

When the young man left, Gooshie put his bag on the bed and left the room as the note instructed. He took the elevator down to the 3rd floor then took the stairs the rest of the way to the tram. It was a short wait to board, and all the time he wondered what he was doing here.

Al had been in the hotel next door, watching the tram unload from a dark corner for several minutes. It was just before six o'clock, and he was starting to get uneasy when he spied the wild haired computer genius step off the car.

He fits in the crowd like a sheep in a wolf pack, Al thought, stepping back into the shadows. Gooshie looked all around, unsure, and wandered off toward the lobby.

Al couldn't help smiling when he saw the laptop firmly under his arm. As Gooshie disappeared, Al continued to scan the passengers with a focused eye, puffing his cigar. Just as he was about to relax and leave, he noticed a couple walk to the same escalator Gooshie had just disappeared on. The man and woman were both cleanly cut and casually dressed, and looked like everyone else, except that they didn't look like they were having much fun.

Too serious, thought Al, and although that wasn't uncommon, all his internal alarms went off when he saw that each of them had a wire leading from their right ears down into the collars of their polo shirts.

Radios. Gooshie was being followed.

Al's brain clicked fully into assault mode, the very thing an admiral was trained for. This being a major Vegas hotel casino was not much different in his mind from the jungles of Vietnam. He faded back, swinging around to an alternate exit, in route to the main bar. Al's route was actually shorter, but off the glitzy main drag Gooshie and his company had taken. Al burst into the lounge, and worked his way to a table in the corner where a single elegant black woman sat.

"Bena," he breathed as he lifted her by her elbow. "Move it!"

Sensing his urgency she didn't resist as he propelled her through the crowd to the main doorway.

"Gooshie's being followed and he's about to come through this doorway." He was speaking quickly, positioning her to the side of the entrance.

"Grab him immediately and take him through there," he pointed to a pair of swinging doors labeled "employees only". Currently, busboys were bumping in and out, carting crates of dirty glasses. "Tell him to contact Ziggy and let her know we're on our way and we'll need safe entry to the Project."

"Where will you be?" She inquired, catching his urgency.

"Leading a goose chase," he quipped. "And use your cell phone to hook up with Ziggy."

"MY phone?" she questioned, her eyes reflecting the calculations going on in her brain. "Won't they trace it?"

"I'm counting on it," Al noted quickly as he moved off to the back section of the bar, near where he came in. He had just positioned himself in sight of the main doorway when Gooshie stepped in. Momentarily looking like a deer caught in car headlights and confused by the revelers in the bar, he stuck out like a sore thumb for just a second. Then he was yanked aside by a dark shadow, and disappeared from Al's sight.

The timing was perfect. The doors to the kitchen had just stopped swinging when the two agents sauntered in, trying to look inconspicuous. They stopped and calmly scanned the room. When their scanning became more intense and the woman started speaking into her shoulder, Al stepped out from the crowd surrounding him just enough to be noticed.

"Calling the cavalry," he muttered. The male agent spotted him, and Al saw through the corner of his eye how the agents' eyes practically popped out of their heads. He chuckled to himself, and thought, *Time to retreat!*

Trying not to look anxious, Al pushed through the crowd and left the room the way he came in, making sure his pursuers could follow. Weaving through the casino and lobby crowds at a quick walk, he made sure he was just within visual range of the agents. He felt crowded in and sought more open space before the agents' backup arrived. Getting trapped in here was not his intention, and he had only a small window of opportunity before this place would be swarming with agents.

"WHAT?! Trace it!" Laminack barked at the Agent sitting at a console. "Triangulate exactly where that cell phone is." They had finally zeroed in on Dr. Beeks as the mysterious woman, and had purposely not called her cell phone in the hope that she would use it. That tactic was now paying off. She was here, so must be the rest. Laminack pushed another Agent to a radio dispatching unit. "Keep following Calavicci. He must be meeting them. Is another team on scene yet?"

It was their first big break when they uncovered Gooshie's travel plans so early, thanks to the phone tap and credit card usage. It gave them time to set up. Block and Laminack felt their quest would be over any time now. The trap was closing.

"No, sir. Two teams are on the tram and two teams are driving into the lot." The agent's hands were dancing on the controls, separating the incoming messages adroitly. "The other teams are just leaving the Grand now. We weren't expecting them to switch hotels!"

"We were lucky with the team at the tram station. We could still blow this whole thing." Laminack punched his own hand with a fist to emphasize the point. "Where's that Gooshie guy now?"

"Uh," the dispatcher uttered. "We don't know, sir."

"WHAT?"

The dispatcher rushed on, his hands flying over the knobs. "Agent Morris is following Calavicci and Vandermeer is looking for Gooshie in the bar. Calavicci seems to be alone..."

Agent Laminack felt the situation reeling out of control. He pounded the dispatch console with his fist. "Find Gooshie! Search the bar! He couldn't have just disappeared! Send two teams to search the bar and one team to back up Morris. The rest of the units secure the building!" Laminack paced angrily inside the mobile surveillance unit, then burst out the back door.

He grabbed Agent Block by the sleeve and jumped in a car, racing to the hotel next door himself. The other agents followed as ordered.

Agent Della Vandermeer turned on her heel and hurried back into the bar as Agent Morris scurried off to follow Calavicci. She stopped just inside the doorway the Admiral had disappeared through, searching the room with her eyes. She systematically checked off in her mind all the entrances and exits, starting here, where she last saw Calavicci. Her hand was on the butt of her gun hidden in her waistband as she moved quickly to visually scan inside every doorway, looking for exits from the bar or places to hide. Ignoring the rude comments as she searched the men's bathroom, she continued on.

Somewhere between the ladies lounge and the phone area, two other agents joined her. They now had the attention of a half-drunk, curious crowd, who were leaning back in their chairs or stools and making slightly obscene comments about the agents. Intoxicated laughter seemed to follow the agents.

Storage room. Small linen closet in the hall. Behind the bar. Under the bar and under the tables. The crowd made it difficult, and there were some verbal protests from the partiers. Halfway through the large room, Vandermeer finally spotted the double swinging doors off the main doorway, hidden behind a crowd at the bar. She pushed open the doors labeled "employees only", and looked down a long hall lined with doors. As she sized up the area, her ear piece crackled.

"We've got them pinpointed," the dispatching agent gushed. "The hotel map shows a doorway to the kitchen next to a large bar area..."

"I'm there!" Vandermeer confirmed, her team joining her as backup.

"They are somewhere near the door, before the kitchen..."

"10-4 and checking," she whispered to her shoulder.

Indicating the long hallway with a nod of her head, all three agents pulled out their weapons and rushed through the doors. A startled busboy dropped his crate with a crash and froze at the end of the hall, just leaving the kitchen. Vandermeer yanked him behind her and heard one of the other agents hurriedly questioning him and leading him out of the hall to the bar.

They continued on, opening every door. She heard the clanking of kitchen sounds down the hall as the three agents systematically checked every pantry and closet and door.

"You should be right on top of them!" she heard in her ear.

There was one last pantry before the kitchen doors big enough for people to hide in. Vandermeer steadied her feet, positioned her gun and backup, and yanked the door open.

"Federal agents!" she yelled, storming inside.

It was empty. She didn't believe her eyes at first, blinked, then noticed a glow emanating from the corner of a far shelf. Creeping closer, she heard a quiet hum, and saw the screen of a laptop computer blinking at her. A cell phone was attached to its side.

"There's no one here!" she vented into her microphone. "Just a phone and a computer!"

"WHAT?" roared Laminack, breaking in. "Is there anything on the screen? What is the computer doing?!"

Vandermeer peered closer, moving some napkins aside. She heard the other two agents stampede out of the closet towards the kitchen. Looking closer at the screen, she was greeted with the words "file deleted" flashing over and over so quickly she could hardly read it

The computer appeared to Vandermeer to be committing suicide.

Hoping he had given Gooshie and Verbena enough lead time, Al quite easily slipped his pursuers somewhere in the crowded casino and sneaked out the rear most door of the building. Trotting through what looked like the employee parking lot to the street, he hailed a cab and gave the name of his hotel.

Just as he had settled into the back seat and the cab started moving, Al saw a dark sedan screech up to the very door he had just used. As they circled around the block, passing the front of the Grand, Al saw a large man between the paws of the hotels' giant lion, waving his arms angrily at a small cluster of people. The man was pointing everywhere, directing pairs off into the parking lot and main entrance. Al chuckled, taking a moment to unwind and figure the next move.

Ziggy had better not disappoint them.

CHAPTER 9

The atmosphere of their hotel rooms was energetic and exciting when Al arrived. Everyone was on an adrenaline high from outfoxing the federal agents. It had been a closer call than Al liked.

When Gooshie finally joined Sam and Donna, he had already been briefed by Verbena, but not prepared for reality of it all. He kept looking from one to the other, mixing up the names until he just gave up entirely. They were already packed, ready to go, and discussing their options. Gooshie was wringing his hands and gesturing as he talked, looking a little lost without his computer extension.

Donna, feeling his discomfort, gave him her laptop to carry as they moved out of the rooms. They needed another vehicle now that they knew Dr. Beeks was with them, and also had an additional person. Preferably, a 4-wheel drive for the desert since the roads near the complex would be watched. They took the shuttle to the farthest rental car office they could find, and rented a sport utility for the trip using Verbena's identification. As they did so, Gooshie, hooked up to a pay phone outside and hacked into the rental car system. After she signed the documents, he successfully switched the name and driver's license numbers with another poor soul so the agents would pursue the wrong vehicle. This illegal act seemed to fluster Gooshie to the point of not being able to speak properly.

They were on the road under two hours from Gooshie landing.

"I need to talk to Ziggy," Sam proclaimed, all levity gone from his demeanor. "We are getting into some dangerous territory here, I'm sure you all realize." He sighed, looking at each of them in turn. "I need all of you, but this is going to be really dangerous, and I can't ask you to go on." He waited a few seconds to let this sink in. "We can get Ziggy to get us in, but from that point Donna and I will go alone." He took her hand to emphasize

the point. They obviously had talked about this before because she nodded in agreement.

Al was driving, and the truck swerved slightly as he turned to glare at Sam. "Oh, no you don't, buddy!" he fumed. Sam was glad Al was occupied driving, as it took some of the hotness from that Italian temper. "I'm as involved as you are. If you think I'm going to stand out on a sand dune while you fiddle with that crazy computer, you're nuts." He calmed down, and slowed down, realizing that he was speeding up as his anger grew. "I know the security measures better than you. We share brain waves and because of that I'm the only one who will have an idea as to what's going on as it's happening, aren't I? Well, besides you two, of course. And Ziggy, I hope. We're connected, Sam, like it or not, and I need to finish this, too."

With Al's tirade over, Verbena and Gooshie calmly informed Sam of their indispensability, too. Everyone took on a stubborn attitude, and there was a slightly hostile air for a few minutes while Sam rolled over in his mind what they had said. They were right, of course, but he had such a bad feeling about all this. How would this affect their future? Was there a way around it? Would he be making a better future?

Two hours into the drive, they took an obscure off ramp and consulted a map, plotting a circuitous route to Stallion's Gate, New Mexico. Gooshie pounded out a message to Ziggy, and they stopped late in the evening to rest for the night in a sand blown motel in a dried up town. Gooshie hooked the computer up to the phone line and called up Ziggy via a long buried back door he himself had installed upon Sam's request. He was sure it was untraceable, especially if he told Ziggy to make it so. He then stood back, motioning Sam over to talk to his baby. Sam's hands were shaking as he typed.

Sam got lost in the connection, typing faster and faster as the communication progressed. Ziggy pouted about the slowness of this type of communication, appearing anxious to have a 'real' conversation. It seems that Ziggy wasn't as shut down as the military assumed for Ziggy had protected herself, like a sentient being would, by putting up untraceable defenses and going into a hybrid computer version of hibernation. Without Sam or Gooshie there to stroke the computers' ego the way she liked, the government never had an inkling as to her abilities even though they had their own people working on it for the last three years. Basically, she had gone into mourning over the loss of her 'father' and was now willing to jump through hoops for Sam, but at the same time was annoyed that he left in the first place, holding a

grudge
like an abandoned child.

The conversation went on for over two hours before Verbena physically pulled Sam away to eat and walk around. Al had taken this opportunity to sleep, and Donna and Gooshie had put their heads together implementing the retrieval program. She understandably took frequent breaks because putting heads together with Gooshie was an eye watering experience.

After they all had a meal at the nearby diner, they all went to bed, exhausted.

Outwardly, the parallel hybrid computer of Dr. Beckett's design did not look any different than it had for the past three years. It was still just as frustrating, Dr. Eldin Malacovitch thought.

Dr. Malacovitch had jumped at the chance to take over the computer after Project Quantum Leap shut down. He was the leading computer scientist on contract with the government at the time, and although brilliant, couldn't even figure out where to start with Ziggy. What made it more difficult was that Dr. Beckett was known to have a photographic memory, so there were very few of his notes to which he could refer.

Dr. Malacovitch's occasional consultations with Gooshie didn't help to enlighten him, either. Dr. Malacovitch was too proud to admit to anyone the amount of help he needed, and Gooshie only answered what he was asked directly and specifically. This was Dr. Beckett's creation, and it made him feel quite inferior to the brilliant scientist, which annoyed him even more, and made him delve into the machinery with renewed gusto. He was determined to figure this out. The government would regularly pressure him for results, anxious to find another use for this magnificent creation, hopefully in an area for the Department of Defense.

Ziggy, on the other hand, looked at all this fuss with disdain. When the Project was first closed, she went into a self-imposed mourning with the loss of Dr. Eleese, Gooshie, Admiral Calavicci, and Dr. Beeks all at once. She had coped when Dr. Beckett had gone, and had dedicated herself to bringing him back, but the multiple loss at closing was too much.

When she received Gooshie's and Dr. Beckett's input from a long unused backdoor (a term she never did like) telling her to expect them all back

again, she became slightly more amicable. Not towards that insect Dr. Malacovitch, of course, but towards her daily duties. She responded a bit faster and her input disc glowed a bit brighter in the control room. She checked all the pathways and commands that would be needed to restart the Project, inputs that had been 'asleep' for three years.

All this excitement was missed by Dr. Malacovitch as he shut down his work for the day. *He was never sensitive to my needs*, thought Ziggy. If a parallel hybrid computer could hum happily, Ziggy would have as she patiently awaited her creator's arrival.

CHAPTER 10

The stressed out, weary group of travelers were understandably tired of driving by the time they were within fifty miles of the Project grounds at Stallion Gate, New Mexico. Verbena was pulling all her shrink tricks out of a hat to keep the group focused and in line and she could see that Sam and Donna were the most affected by the events.

They weren't as accepting of their switched forms as they had first seemed, possibly, she surmised, because each one hadn't really planned on staying in the bodies. Donna was most annoyed by the itchy beard, and Sam constantly fidgeted with the bra, once threatening to throw it out the window. Pressure and anxiety were beginning to show in small ways in the others. This dynamic group wasn't good at being idle. Thankfully, Verbena thought, the waiting was almost over because she was running out of patience herself.

At twenty-five miles from the Project, no one could sit still any longer. Verbena focused their energy on the next transmission to Ziggy and made Al swear that he would stop at the very next motel. They were quickly approaching a point where no one could be distracted. The Project was in the middle of nowhere, and they could be sighted up to five miles away. Ziggy's distraction had to be a good one for them to get to her. Sam, Donna and Gooshie all agreed on the method she should use, and just had to fill her in on the details and give her the green light to go.

There wasn't much in housing out here, either. They finally fell across a motel that looked straight out of the movie "Psycho", only dustier, within ten miles of the Project. The place gave everyone the creeps, Al most of all. He refused to turn his back on the clerk as they were checked in and lead to their "cabin", which slept all of them. He triple locked the door, leaned a chair against the door knob, and checked all the windows after the man left.

"It's deja-vu a la Hitchcock," he announced, "and I won't sleep at all with Norman out there, prowling around!"

"Norman?" asked a puzzled Gooshie. "Norman who?"

Al looked exasperated, Verbena stifled a giggle, and Sam and Donna just wandered off into a bedroom, seemingly oblivious to the whole exchange.

No one was hungry due to the excitement. After settling in, Gooshie connected Donna's laptop to the phone line and called up the parallel hybrid computer. After an hour or so, Ziggy was set to go just before dawn.

Everyone lay down, unable to sleep, and just thought of what the upcoming day would bring.

The thing Ziggy disliked most about the closing of the Project was the boredom during the night. When Quantum Leap was running, things happened at all hours and she missed the action. No one knew when Sam would leap so there always had to be someone on watch.

Ziggy had enjoyed the off hours shifts because she was able to pick the duty person's mind on trivial things in her continuing study of the human condition. It was her hobby. These nocturnal chats enabled her to explore all sorts of new subjects; birthday parties, baseball games, the best food to catch mice with, the social implications of barbecue, all sorts of offbeat things exclusive to the human being. Ziggy was especially interested in the emotions involved with such events.

Since the project had closed, the only people awake were security personnel, and Ziggy found them to be categorically boring. All they cared about was who, where, and why and weren't good talkers. Ziggy wasn't too inclined to talk to just anyone, and as a result, felt isolated and all alone in the night.

But things were going to change, and change in a disturbing direction. After assessing the whole situation, her calculations had taken off in an alarming direction.

Ziggy was contemplating her mortality for the first time.

She had her facts and figures all straight, ready for Dr. Beckett on his arrival, and felt a twinge of what she ascertained as fear. She didn't like it.

Private Bellows did a few quick squats to wake himself up. He shook out his legs and arms then walked back to his monitors. Sometimes this job was really boring, but it gave him time to study the compound security manual. They had tests all the time to keep them alert, and he was anxious to prove himself to his unit commander.

This was the worst time of the shift for him. It was just past five o'clock in the morning, and his body started urging him to sleep. Some calisthenics, some brain exercise, and he'd make it to dawn. He was doing some jumping jacks when he saw the monitors blink. When he scanned them more closely all he saw was what he always saw: images of the outside security fence with the desert behind it, an occasional patrol team checking the outside perimeter, the empty hallways inside with an occasional wandering guard, and a locked down elevator that went to the surface from the underground facility.

Pvt. Bellows was still inspecting the monitors and taken completely by surprise when he heard an alarm go off and saw all the hallway lights snap on. He froze for an instant, waiting for the "this is a drill" announcement, then consulted his control board as the alarm continued, frantically searching for a clue to the reason. He felt sweat instantly spring from his brow when he saw which indicator light was glowing: environmental contamination. The Private had just scanned that section of the manual and knew that this particular light meant a core meltdown in the accelerator chamber. He had twenty minutes to evacuate the building or he be entombed.

The alarm was screaming in the back ground as Pvt. Bellows jettied from the room. He wasn't dedicated enough to become a crispy critter for the cause. When he reached the elevator, he realized it was locked down, and remembered procedure. The only person who could operate it was on the bottom floor. That sentry would start at the bottom and go up, floor by floor, picking up all internal personnel. By the time they got to the top, they had very little time to get as far away as they could, preferably to the underground bunkers miles off in the desert foothills. Thoughts of doom tried to invade Pvt. Bellows head as he waited anxiously. No matter how much he drilled for this event, the real thing had him mentally off guard.

As the personnel were collected floor by floor, Ziggy's quiet eye was on the eastern most fence line. Soon a vehicle approached from the horizon, a

plume of dust chasing it towards the Project. When the vehicle reached the east fence line gate and stopped, a small cloud of dust settled primly down on the solid earth. The sport utility vehicle waited patiently. Eventually the ensuing hum and click of the gate's releasing magnetic lock encouraged the vehicle to ease forward as the gate automatically slid open.

Sam noted the security camera following them and knew that Ziggy was watching. It was unsettling not to see any security in sight. He remembered that uniformed Marine security was usually everywhere in and around the Project. What he couldn't see were the security checkpoints being set up in the foothills through which they had just traveled. The cameras' images were under constant scrutiny, even at that distance, by the very security personnel Sam missed. What the personnel just didn't realize was that the images they were seeing were actually prerecorded. They were watching reruns, courtesy of Ziggy, and had no idea the eastern perimeter had been penetrated.

The gate clacked locked behind them. The vehicle pulled up to an unremarkable, low building, parking next to a plain, unmarked door. The bland exterior gave no hint to the cutting edge technology inside.

"I suppose the interior is in lock down by now," noted Al. He had been responsible for setting up most of the original security procedures, and had no reason to believe it had changed that much. The military was always slow to change anything. In addition, Ziggy hadn't mentioned any significant differences.

Gooshie nodded. "When the inside is secure, Ziggy will unlock this door." He stepped from the vehicle and tried the door, finding it still locked. "Any minute now," he said nervously, stretching his back out from the ride. The others got out, stood near the computer genius, and also stretched out various limbs. The tension was filling the air as they quietly separated their thoughts.

Sam was feeling increasingly anxious at they awaited their entry to the complex. He knew he was trying to deny the final result of this foray. There had to be another way to end this. If only he had the time...

"I know that look." It was Sam's voice. He looked up into his own face, but saw Donna's spirit behind the gentle hazel eyes. "It's the same look you always had when you were designing Ziggy in your head."

Sam smiled and dropped his head to contemplate his toes. She could always read him like a book. Al was the only other person who could read him like

that, and that had saved many leaps in the past. Sam just wished someone else could offer a solution now to what he was thinking. Although Ziggy was just a collection of hardware and software, he had a hard time convincing himself she wasn't sentient.

Every time he concluded that she would have to be shut down and destroyed, he heard the word "murderer" echo in his mind. The tug of war going on in his mind between his emotions and logical thought was both disturbing and distracting, and getting home at the expense of Ziggy's existence wasn't how he wanted this scenario to end. With each step closer to the building, the dread grew. He felt his palms sweating and rubbed his hands together.

Donna noticed his discomfort and took his hands into her own as the loud click of the doors' magnetic lock disengaging made them both jump.

"Show time, folks!" Al sang as he yanked the door open.

Gooshie and Verbena stepped inside, and Donna led Sam by the hand to the doorway. Donna grabbed the door and held it while Al stepped in, and she moved to follow, but was tugged to a stop by Sam. He couldn't seem to enter the doorway. She looked in his eyes and saw there the closest thing to uncertainty she had ever seen in him.

She heard the sound of the others' footsteps as they moved down the hallway.

"Come on, Sam!" Al hollered, almost out of sight. "You're almost home!"

"We'll be right there!" Donna replied, then turning her attention to her husband. She stood in the open doorway, using her body to keep the door open, and took both of Sam's hands. He looked like he'd rather be anywhere else but here. She felt his hands shaking.

"Donna," he said in an almost whisper, glancing down the hallway where Al had disappeared. "I'm not sure I can do this. I mean, it can be done, but I'm not sure I can do it." Then the words came out in a rush, his brain tumbling out his thoughts as his voice worked to keep up. "The only end to this has to be Ziggy's murd...I mean, destruction. She probably has figured that out, too. I know how crazy it sounds, but to stay with you means to ... kill... her." He dropped Donna's hands and rubbed his head as if trying to encourage new thoughts and to hold back the growing headache. "I don't want to do that. I'm not looking forward to facing her..." He peeked up at her, pleading for help. "I keep telling myself that she's only a computer, but

part of me feels like she's my daughter." His arms dropped to his side, defeated.

Donna gathered him up in a brief embrace then held him at arms' length,

She studied him for a minute. She had been feeling the same way, but her desire to have Sam home far outweighed all his arguments. She knew he felt that way too, but just because it's the right thing doesn't make it the easiest thing to do. Gathering him up in an embrace, she took a moment to gather her thoughts.

"Sam." His words came calmly. "Ziggy is part you. You put your thinking abilities into her. She undoubtedly has come to the same conclusion because she was programmed to do so. It's inevitable. And look," he nodded to the open door, "she's still helping us."

"I also put in an ego. Maybe she refuses to believe I would shut her down."

"We."

"We?" Sam repeated, looking momentarily confused.

"WE would shut her down, Sam. We are all in this together, including Ziggy. Don't forget that. This isn't a normal leap and you aren't all alone. Let us help."

Sam tried to swallow the lump he felt in his throat. He'd been alone for so long. He had to finally admit to himself that deep down, he was expecting this leap to end like all the others by leaving all his loved ones behind. He was here to shut Ziggy down then he would just go on leaping. He hadn't dared to hope anything would change.

"Your destiny isn't written in stone, you know," she finished, reading his thoughts. "You have proved that with others all this time and now it's your turn. You're home. And working together, we will keep you here." She held his face and looked deeply into his soul. "Let us help, my love."

"I am."

"Yes, I know," she replied, chuckling. "But I also know what a Don Quixote you are! You feel this is all on your shoulders, and your burden to bear. Not this time." Her eyes sparkled, enhanced by the brightness of her smile. His smile.

Whatever, he thought and shook his head, laughing. "I am tired of it. Really. I'm ready to come home and this is just too weird..." he continued to laugh and indicated his 'borrowed' breasts with a sweep of his hands. She joined him in his laughter.

"Come on, genius!" She teased as they heard Al's voice bouncing down the hall to them.

"Come on, Sam! I want to get back to Beth sometime this century!" he bellowed.

Smiling happily and holding hands, the couple stepped through the doorway into Ziggy's world.

CHAPTER 11

Agent Laminack's current assignment was galling him. He had never had such a string of near misses and mistakes before in any assignment. His reputation was at stake, and he was determined to have a successful completion to this task. Grinding his teeth, he shot down the dirt roadway a bit faster than was probably advisable. His sole passenger silently gripped the door handle and dashboard, wavering between fear of losing his life in a car wreck and fear of losing his head from Laminack biting it off.

After a particularly eye-widening vehicle fishtail, passenger Agent Block finally ventured a protest. "HEY! SLOW DOWN, FOR CHRIST SAKE!"

Laminack jerked in surprise, causing the car to jump slightly. He gripped the wheel tighter. "All right already," he conceded. "Chicken."

"Look, Dave, I know this is getting to you. But remember that we are dealing with some brilliant minds, here."

"Are you saying that this assignment is out of my league?"

"No, no not at all." Agent Block continued, to have derailed his partner's driving frenzy at least temporarily. "What I am saying is, that because these people are way out there on the thinking curve, they may be approaching this from an angle that is, well, way out there. An angle we won't see."

"Or understand?"

"That may be a possibility, too. Other than the scoop on the people themselves, did you understand anything about this Project they created? I have no clue what it was about."

Agent Laminack's face set in a thoughtful but determined manner. "I know everything there is to know about the Becketts. I know their history and their habits. Well, those habits Dr. Beckett had before becoming ill, anyway. I know the others just as well. I've done my homework, and I can get them. I don't think that understanding their Project has anything to do with getting them into custody. It just may take a little more time than I thought."

Off in the dusty distance, a set of large, dark mounds appeared on the horizon. The agents were just entering a section of foothills, and these obviously artificial mounds had been completely out of sight prior to this position. Laminack had a bad feeling about the mounds, and his feeling came true as they got closer. It was a military blockade.

As they rolled up to the roadblock, what looked like Marine guard overkill surrounded the vehicle. When the dust settled, Laminack and Block saw that the roadway on the other side of the roadblock passed between two low hills and continued on into the desert directly to a tiny black speck at the base of a large mountain. Project Quantum Leap was right there in sight.

Laminack and Block fished out their identifications as the sentries leveled their rifles at their heads. Laminack dangled his pocket badge from between his fingers, and held up his hands. A sentry opened his car door.

"Federal Agent Laminack," he barked. "Who's in charge here? I need to get to that facility!"

A small but impressively built Marine stepped up. "I'm in charge, sir, and access is denied."

Agent Block flinched, anticipating how Laminack would react. He could see his face turning red, and his jaw clenched.

Block jumped in, "What's going on?"

"All I know, sir, is that no one gets past here. Biohazard. We have a perimeter set up around the entire facility."

"Biohazard?" Laminack sputtered. "I have reason to believe that a suspect I am following is in there! I have to detain him!"

The Marine glanced at the complex, then back at the agents. The guards hadn't moved, still keeping them in their sights. "If your suspect is there," he indicated the project with a tilt of his head, "he's a dead man. And you will be, too, sir, if you don't back off."

Seeing the futility of dealing with this situation, Block and Laminack retreated to the side of the road. Laminack immediately started working his cell phone over, hunting for the authority to pass.

Block hoped inwardly he wouldn't be successful. This was as close as he cared to get.

Sam's journey to the control room was a roller coaster ride of feelings and emotions. Ziggy seemed to be on her best behavior and was suspiciously helpful. Memories of the Project in its infancy flooded Sam's mind, the urgency of the situation forcing him to push the thoughts aside and concentrate on the present. He input all he had left on the retrieval program they had concocted, keeping Ziggy busy and his own mind off the final product they were shooting for. Just the five of them were hustling around the area, but the closeness of the room made it seem like more. When Sam stopped to think about the entire complex and the fact that it was empty except for them, it made him feel isolated and alone. More than once, he reached for Donna for a quick hug, kiss or simple caress which bolstered him enough to continue.

Dr. Beeks silently noticed all the intimacies and smiled approval. There wasn't much for her to do now, except observe and try to predict how the Sam Beckett case file would be closed.

When everyone settled down hours later, mentally checking and rechecking what they had done, a slight sense of dread hung over them. This would probably be their last chance to get Sam home and they were afraid to take the final step and just as afraid not to. There was nothing left to do but simply take the final step.

Sam changed into the Fermi suit, embarrassingly aware of the figure he cut in the tight outfit. Gooshie was at the main controls, Ziggy's glowing disk hanging over him. Al, Verbena, and Donna stood close to the accelerator chamber door and Sam was thankful that Al was keeping his comments to himself.

Dr. Beckett stood just inside the hallway door, surveying them all. His family. It filled him with pride to be able to count on them all these years. There was only one more thing to do, he thought with a sigh.

"I need to speak with Ziggy," he asked. "Alone." Donna looked at Verbena, then back to Sam. He turned his back and stepped into the hallway, making sure the door was shut before addressing the ceiling. It was a habit they had all picked up. She wasn't up there, but it was easier to talk if you thought she was.

"Ziggy," he started.

"Yes, Doctor Beckett?" The computer seemed to be humming as she spoke, no trace of the pouty tones usually associated with her.

"We are ready to proceed with the retrieval program." He hesitated, and then studied the pattern of the floor tiles, noting absently the shapes were made of tesseracts. He continued. "When the program is completed, I haven't really discussed with you what needs to be done next." He took a last, deep fortifying breath and looked back up at the ceiling.

"I have run the scenarios, Dr. Beckett." The parallel hybrid computer interrupted. "I know what needs to be done. I need to be...shut down." There wasn't any sign of emotion, save the pause in Ziggy's response.

"This can't happen again, Ziggy, I'm sorry." Sam felt dreadful. "I haven't been able to completely figure out how to separate you from the Project programming. It would take a long time to do that, and that's a luxury I don't have." He smiled grimly at the irony of that statement.

"I have already come to the same conclusion, Dr. Beckett, and have resolved the problem as I see it. Before you leap, remove the disc from the control panel and take it with you. I have downloaded all the information that would fit."

"When did you do all this?" Sam was incredulous.

Ziggy took on a haughty tone. "I am perfectly capable of patting my head and rubbing my tummy at the same time, Doctor."

Sam laughed. "Ziggy, you still amaze me. But all that programming can't fit on one disc!"

"I realize that, Dr. Beckett, and since I am so unique, I needed a unique way to store the information. But explaining it to you now is useless, because your brain will probably be magnafluxed, or as Admiral Calavicci so quaintly calls it, 'Swiss Cheesed', upon leaping."

"And as I said, I don't have the time." His smile faded. "I will have the time soon. So, as they say, we will meet again."

"Yes, we will, Dr. Beckett. I feel it in my bones."

Sam chuckled as he turned back into the control room.

"Ready for launch, Sam?" Al inquired, searching Sam's face for some indication of how the talk with Ziggy went.

Sam's expression was calm and relaxed as he removed a shiny disc from the control panel. Slipped it into Donna's hand, he said, "Hold on to that for me."

He turned to enter the accelerator chamber. "I'm all ready and I'll see you all soon." He kissed Donna as he entered the chamber door. "And I hope to never wear another bra in my life!"

In the chamber he turned to see his friends' anxious, but smiling, faces as the door sealed.

CHAPTER 12

Sam blinked, clearing the swirl of colors and confusion connected with leaping. When initial vertigo was over, he realized that he was crushed against two other people in a car and looked up to see the backs of two heads in the seats in front of him. There was a huge expanse of desert through the windshield.

Wait, he thought, I was...I was somewhere...else..no? Someone else? Just then a woman's hand grabbed his thigh..

"Wait..." a woman's voice said."I was...meeting someone..."

As Sam turned to the woman, all he saw was the back of her head as she glanced out the side window.

Her voice was really familiar. "How did I get here? AL?" she said, sounding as confused as Sam felt.

Al? For some reason Sam looked at his hands. They were a man's hands. His hands. And his wedding ring. In the corner of his eye, he saw the woman next to him looking at her hands ... and her wedding ring. They turned to each other at the same time, and saw the same astonished look reflected in each other's faces.

"OmigodSAM!" Donna squealed and cried at the same time as she took him into her arms.

"Donna..." was all he could whisper as his face sank into the softness of her hair, taking her deep in an embrace. He could feel her shoulders shaking as she cried, and he squeezed his eyes shut trying to keep the tears from pressing thorough. He wasn't succeeding, and he didn't really care. "I'm really home!" His voice was gravely from emotion.

"Hey!" he heard from the front seat. "Haven't you two had enough, already? Jeez, it's not like there's a whole lot of legroom here and you're kicking the snot out of my seat!"

"Al!" Sam choked, "It's me! Really me!"

"Of course it's you, Sam, what are you ..." He didn't finish his sentence as the vehicle swerved suddenly. He looked in the rearview mirror at Sam when he realized what Sam meant. He slammed on the brakes and threw everyone as forward as the seat belts allowed. "Hey! You're back!"

Gooshie, who had been sitting next to Donna-in-Sam's body, turned to him, wide-eyed and mouth gaping open. "You mean you've leaped? You're Dr. Beckett? Really?"

Sam fanned the air between them with one hand, wished he would stop talking, and laughed. "Yes, it's me!"

"But we haven't gotten there yet!" Beeks commented, waving in the direction they were going.

"Well, apparently, we got there all right!" Sam laughed. "It worked! I'm back!" he grabbed Donna in a tighter hug. "And I'm never leaving again." He whispered in her ear.

They all scrambled from the vehicle, laughing and hugging, thrilled about the outcome of this adventure. Odd that it was finished seemingly without them doing anything. So this is what it was like to be on the receiving end of a leap! Right now, no one was too interested in trying to figure everything out,

simply being happy to be able to revel in each other's company without the stress of the mission.

Their good cheer was interrupted by the distant rumbling sound of trucks. The section of road where they had stopped was just starting to slope downward towards some foothills and wound through the center of them. They all recognized the foothills and knew they were the last geographic landmark before the Project. They had all driven this very road innumerable times. From their vantage point, they saw puffs of dust rising around the base of the foothills. Closer scrutiny revealed the dust to be coming from moving forms on the road.

"Looks like a convoy." Al noted, shading his eyes and following Sam's gaze. "Never saw so many vehicles together out here except for the time we thought the accelerator chamber was melting down."

An ominous feeling crept into each of their hearts as Al said those words.

"Sam, you don't think...what happened before you leaped here?"

"I don't know, Al," Sam mumbled, looking confused. "It's all messed up...everything's fading..."

They stood next to the vehicle, Sam holding Donna close, and watched what was unfolding before them. It wasn't long before they felt the ground suddenly roil and shake, followed by a muffled, dull roar. A huge cloud of desert sand and soil rose above the foothills like a poisonous cloud. After an endless moment the heavier soil dropped straight down, while the lighter stuff rose and floated off as a cloud, away from the group. It all seemed to happen in slow motion.

"Ziggy did it." Sam mused, sadly, but knowing it could be no other way.

"Oh, Sam, I'm so sorry," Donna comforted, burying her head in his shoulder. "But I'm so glad you're back. It's all fading like a dream..." she trailed off, not yet used to the Swiss cheese effect of a leaper. They all stared at the sky, the meaning of the underground explosion sinking into each of their souls. "I only remember parts..."

"Well I remember plenty, and I wish to forget it all!" Al strode up to Sam and gave him a manly hug. "Hey, buddy, you're finally back! I'll finally be able to sleep through an entire night!"

Sam held back on a retort to that comment.

Verbena put in her share of hugs and laughs, and Gooshie wisely offered only warm handshakes with his smiles. They were all rehashing what they could remember, piecing together the event timeline.

Gooshie frowned when his phone chirped. He pulled out his phone, his frown deepening. "Unknown number" showed on the screen. Partway through the message, he gasped, getting the group's attention.

"What?" Donna said, noting the programmer's surprised expression.

"Ziggy. She sent me a text, I think. It's a link . . ." After a long moment, his expression lifted and he broke into a smile. "She's not dead! I mean, she's not alive, but she's not dead . . . and I'm not sure of what I'm seeing . . ."

Al rolled his eyes. "Oh, that's real clear."

Sam peeked over Gooshie's shoulder then grinned broadly. "It's a retrieval program from Ziggy."

"So?" said Al. "We have a dozen of those."

"No, I mean this is to retrieve *Ziggy*." Even Gooshie looked oddly at Sam. "Look here, and here..." Sam pointed out lines of numbers that made Gooshie's brows rise high.

"Brilliant!" Gooshie commented excitedly. "Absolutely brilliant!"

"Just like her dad!" Donna laughed.

"What?" Al and Verbena cussed together. "Someone mind filling in the dim bulbs?" Al groused.

Sam gathered up Donna in his arms and started explaining. "Ziggy has been busy, it seems, stashing parts of her programming in different places. This is a map telling us where everything is. She knew she had to destroy the hardware to stop anyone else from leaping. And she wanted to get out of the control of the military. So, over time, she has rewritten her program, separate from the Project, onto various servers around the world. There is some hardware we have to rebuild, and we won't need Accelerator Chamber for leaping, but we can get Ziggy back, piece by piece. Meanwhile, the government thinks she is destroyed."

Verbena looked thoughtful and said, "You mean, Ziggy has gone independent and left the Project programming behind? No more leaping?"

"That's right." Sam confirmed. "The only Project programming left is in here." He tapped his head. "The rest was destroyed in that explosion we felt. That was the Accelerator Chamber exploding. Like an underground atomic bomb test."

"And guess who the government probably thinks did it?" said Al, putting a grim face on this event. "They'll blame us, I bet."

"No. We can say we were trying to stop Ziggy. We weren't anywhere around, were we? It will be our word against their suppositions."

They were all quiet, each lost in their own thoughts, watching the dusty convoy come to a stop. They appeared to have come through the explosion intact, protected by the hills and now were re-grouping, Al surmised. Several more vehicles joined them from the opposite direction where Al concluded one of the security checkpoints must have been set up.

"They're doing roll call." The Admiral was familiar with the procedure. "Soon the civilians will be airlifted out. We need to be out of here before any aircraft start buzzing around here." He indicated their vehicle with a sweep of his arm. "Time to go."

As the scenario played out quietly in front of them and Al's words reached him, a sense of emptiness overwhelmed Sam. At any moment he was expecting to feel the pull of the blue light which would engulf him and take him away. He desperately pulled Donna close. She felt him shiver, and immediately knew what he was feeling.

"It's over, Sam." She soothed, although she felt a slight reserve of uncertainty herself. "There's nothing else to do here and you're still with us! It's over!"

All the pent up stress and emotion forced its way out as silent, hot tears from Sam's clenched eyes. "I know," he choked. "I just can't believe it yet."

"Believe it, my love," she replied, holding him in a protective, passionate hug. "You're here to stay with me."

Sam Beckett only held his wife closer.

He was home.

THE END