

BEGINNINGS

By AJB

CHAPTER 1

Sometimes it wasn't like he was floating. This time it felt like he was hanging there, suspended between one life and the next, with a sense of anticipation. Perhaps it was his mood at the time of his previous leap out; he didn't know. It was out of his hands.

Soon, the colors became more solid, then turned into forms. Blurred at first like a watercolor painting, the forms firmed up to tangible shapes as his feet settled onto solid ground. Sam Beckett, time traveler, stood staring up at the flickering cottonwoods in front of him. They were full and elegant, swaying in the warm breeze, the leaves flashing their silver undercoats in time. Big and full trees, they lined up in a row along a quietly trickling stream. The sun was setting off to Sam's left, still hot, burning his face and causing him to squint. The wind was also hot on his cheek, coming from the direction of the sun and making small flurries of dust dance their way up the dirt driveway passing in front of him.

Sam realized it was both close to sunset and summer in the first few seconds of his leap. Now he had to figure out whom he was, where this place was as well as when it was. His duty here in the past is to set a wrong right, and make a better future. Sometimes the details were not easy to piece together.

Before him was a patch of barely maintained lawn, wild at the edges where it grew around loosely maintained rose bushes mostly left to their own devices and doing well in spite of the treatment. He followed the driveway with his eyes to the terminus at an open garage door to his left, which was attached to the side of a house. He turned, his eyes following the front of the house which to the vast porch, and was surprised to find himself at the bottom of a wide set of wooden stairs tumbling down from the porch.

The house was an old Victorian, elegant in its heyday and left to the same fate as the rosebushes. The porch was neat, but in need of repairs, as was the rest of the house, Sam suspected. The double front doors were flanked with tall etched-glass windows that added to the ancientness and elegance of the building. They reflected purple clouds held up by cottonwoods and dry foothills, slightly fractured and broken due to the etching marks.

The sound of a piano called him up the stairs, and he stopped short of the doors, captivated by a figure in the house framed in the clear glass between the etched designs. It was a woman, her back to Sam, playing the piano to a song on the stereo. The refrain snapped into Sam's head: the instrumental ending to Layla, by Derek and the Dominos. The revelation astonished him for a second. During his leaps, the Swiss Cheese Effect kept him from recalling most of his own life, but sometimes there were flashes of memory or recognition. Like this song.

Sam was mesmerized watching her. She wore what was called a sports bra in the early 90's, which was white and complimented her tan skin. Her dark hair was piled on the top of her head with a big toothed clip in an attempt to keep cool. Her skin was shiny with perspiration, the glistening showing off well-defined arm and back muscles; long, lean and very feminine. The muscles rippled as she played, and he caught himself tracing the

long lines with his eyes, all the way down to where they disappeared under the waistband of her jeans. He found himself curious as to where they ended, then was shocked for even thinking that. It unnerved him.

He took a step back to try and disengage these feelings as the music raised to a crescendo, then faded away. The silence after that seemed to suspend him in a wash of emotion he couldn't get a grip on. He took another small step back and the floorboards squeaked, which must have alerted the medium sized dog Sam saw trot up to the doors on the inside. Apparently it was Sam's welcoming committee, as he heard the animal whining behind the door and saw his tail sweeping back and forth through the glass.

Caught unprepared for any introductions, Sam quickly looked himself over to establish some sort of identity. He was clad in worn cowboy boots, clean but faded jeans and T-shirt. The previously unnoticed reflection in the windows showed him to be a tall, lean man (sigh of relief there!), physically not unlike himself as he remembered himself to be. Sam's body was currently somewhere in the future, occupied by the persona of this body, and Sam was here to fix something in this man's future.

He saw the reflected image that was not his own run a hand through light brown hair, pulling it back off his forehead, and saw the face of a man who spent a lot of time out doors. He appeared to be in his late 30's with shallow crow's feet etching his temples. When he touched his temples he winced slightly, noting a slight headache in that area.

"Oh, boy," Sam thought. "I'm a cowboy..."

The dog continued to whine behind the door. He heard the piano bench scrape on the floor, and a woman's gentle voice reassuring the dog, whose tail swayed faster as she came to the door. The urge to flee ran through his mind, but he was frozen in front of the door when she opened it.

Looking at her took his breath away. Her smile framed perfect teeth, and her wide set brown eyes sparkled with happiness as she looked at him. She was beautiful, and Sam felt a rush of pleasure run through his body as he smiled back. She reached out a slender hand for him, and laughed a musical laugh.

"What's the matter, Ty? Sunstroke?" She grabbed his hand and pulled him in as the dog happily stretched his nose out to Sam's other hand. The dog's tail immediately stopped wagging, and his head dropped in a more threatening pose. The hackles rose on his back, and he backed off, sniffing the air around Sam from a safer distance. The dog knew Sam wasn't Ty. As the woman pulled Sam in the house, the dog placed himself between them in an attempt to block Sam's entrance.

"Come on, Rocket, get outta the way. What's the matter with you?" she scolded, pushing the dog aside with her knee.

Rocket warily backed away, keeping a wide buffer zone between them. Sam felt the dog's scrutiny, and it flustered him. 'I'll just keep out of his way,' Sam thought.

The woman closed the door and led Sam by the hand to the kitchen, talking in a melodious voice that entranced him. "Rocket must smell the doctor's office on you, and it reminds him of the vet," she said. "So, how did the visit go? Did the Doc give you something for your headaches?"

She released his hand, and opened the refrigerator, pulling out a glass pitcher, looking at him for a response as she put it down and reached for glasses on a shelf.

Sam patted his pockets and didn't find anything. "Uh, yes?" he answered. "Maybe I left it in the car?" he mumbled, as he searched for any clue as to who this woman was. He then noticed a wedding ring on her finger, and looked down to find a gold band on his left hand. His wife? Sam thought, but knowing deep inside that he was correct. His gut feelings always turned out to be correct.

She was pouring glasses of the brown stuff, ice tea, he guessed, as she chatted. "I swear, Ty, you have been so forgetful lately. The Tylenol just doesn't do it for you anymore. He must have given you something." She handed him a cold glass and they both sipped it gratefully. It tasted wonderful. "Some time alone here might do you some good," she commented. "It will only be four days, but I'd like to know that you will be resting comfortably while we're gone."

Parts of what she said put him on alert. Gone four days? Problem headaches? It would be nice to know what's going on here, he thought. He stalled by sipping the iced tea, but noticed that she was now looking at him with a worried expression. Her face was so...I don't know, he thought, realizing that her stare completely disrupted his thoughts. He had to fight the urge to stroke her cheek and reassure her with a hug, then maybe a kiss. Her skin looked so soft... Sam blinked and looked away, forcing his thoughts elsewhere. What was wrong with him? Why did she seem so familiar? He started to have doubts about being able to keep his hands off of her, and felt himself fighting to control his urges.

He was trying to think of a response that made sense when he heard a familiar whooshing noise. The Imaging Room door showed itself as a rectangle of bright light, and a dark shape from Sam's time stepped through as a sense of relief washed over Sam. Sam's best friend, Al Calavizzi, stepped into the kitchen as a hologram as the Door swooshed shut. Only Sam could see and hear him, and Al was there to help Sam figure out what to do.

Currently, Al was looking down at a brightly colored device in his hand, reading something in its display window. This was the only connection Sam had to Ziggy, the parallel hybrid computer of his design that first sent him leaping through time. As Al looked up at Sam, his eyes scanned over Sam's shoulder to the woman behind him. A quick look of shock went over his face, then, seeing Sam studying him, he just as quickly got it under control. Sam didn't miss the look.

"Uh, hi Sam. How's it going?" AL tried to look innocent, but Sam was overcome with suspicion. There was something about this woman. He had to know what it was.

"Ah, I'll check the car for the pills," Sam said over his shoulder, grateful for a reason to flee the kitchen and his strong feelings about her. It also gave him a chance to be alone with Al and talk about his task in this time, and how this beautiful lady fit in.

CHAPTER 2

Sam retreated out the front door, making an effort to look casual. He noticed the dog staring at him from under the table, and then saw him stand up and glare at Al as he passed. That dog feels as overwhelmed as me, Sam thought.

Sam's instincts were telling him conflicting things. Part of him wanted to run away and not look back, and the other wanted to take the woman in his arms and never leave. He couldn't handle it, and welcomed the excuse to get out of the house.

Al noticed his dismay immediately. "What's wrong with you, Sam? You look like a spooked colt! Take it easy!" The hologram had to step up his pace to keep up.

"I..." Sam started, then thought again about saying anything. He wasn't sure what he was feeling. The front steps creaked as he descended them, and he squinted again as the sun glared in his eyes. It would be down soon, he thought, and maybe it will cool off. The distraction allowed him to calm down and try to figure out what was going on.

"Sam," Al accused after studying his friend's distressed look. "I know that look. You don't even know her!" his face turned thoughtful. "Not that it would matter to me, but this is you we're talking about!"

Sam decided to stop the inquisition by changing the subject. He stopped, turned towards his friend and took on an accusatory tone. "Since when does that matter to you? And what was that look you gave her? You know her, don't you?" His voice sounded a little harsher than he wanted. When he was in the garage he turned to Al. "Sorry. But you do know her, don't you?"

Al tried not to look surprised, and immediately started making himself busy on the hand link. "Don't be silly. I don't know her," he hesitated, seeing Sam wasn't buying that one. "She just looks remarkably like someone I know, that's all." He continued before Sam could interrupt him. "Your name is Tyler Martin, and that was your wife, Bess. But I think you figured that out."

As soon as Al said that, Sam knew. That was it; Bess probably reminded him of someone they both knew, and that's why his feelings were so strong. He'd have to work on putting the emotions aside to complete the leap successfully. "So, what am I here to do?" he asked, trying to appear casual. He knew the control would be tenuous, and the sooner he did what he had to do, the better.

"Well, Ziggy got some information pretty quick because there are lots of newspaper articles about the incident you're here to change. In the original time line, and man dies in a fire."

Al kept reading as Sam absorbed that. A surge of fear shot through Sam's body when he realized that he was here to save a life. "Who's the man?" he questioned in a whisper.

"Danny Adams. Apparently he works for you two. Right now it's August 23rd, 1993, and there will be a huge wildfire in those hills, starting sometime on the 25th." Al waved his arm towards the western horizon, indicating quite a large area. "You're in Wyoming, by the way, outside a really small town called Concho."

"Does it come down here?" Sam was confused. "Does the house burn down?"

"No," Al continued to read, "The Martins operate a camping by horse..." frowning at the hand link, he gave it a whack. It squealed, and he looked happier. "...back..horseback! Camping by horseback business. The Martins supply all the meals and the horses, then act as guides and cooks on overnight camp outs in the hills here. It's really beautiful up

there, I guess. Doesn't sound too fun to me. If there's no room service, it's not a vacation!" The hologram pocketed the hand link and pulled out a cigar. "Anyway, it looks like a lightning strike starts the wildfire, and the group gets trapped. Actually, they were kind of lucky that only Danny got killed. There's been a drought, and the hills are really dry. Wildfires are bound to happen."

He chewed on the cigar slowly, and Sam noticed that Al wouldn't meet his eyes.

It was about the woman, Bess, Sam thought, a spark charging through his chest. What was it about her? Why was he reacting like this? Before he lost it, he turned his back to Al and noticed for the first time the truck parked in the garage.

In fact, the whole garage was rather interesting. There were ropes and bags and pots and pans hanging everywhere, a thick layer of dust covering everything in sight. The truck was fairly new, but also blanketed in dirt and there were burlap bags of something in the bed. Grain? Sam guessed. He remembered bags like that from the farm. I grew up on a farm, he thought, frowning because he couldn't recall more. Shaking his head to get focused, he felt a wave of frustration descend on him. 'What is wrong with me?' he thought. 'I can't concentrate on anything .. this headache must be getting to me.' He realized that the slight burning in his temples was still there.

Opening the truck door he saw a battered leather briefcase on the seat that seemed quite out of character for Tyler Martin. Sam tried to open it, but it was locked. He shook it, but didn't hear anything that sounded like a pill bottle in there, so he dropped it on the seat and continued to look. He found a Tylenol jar on the floor and pried it open. Inside were the signature yellow and red capsules, but also in the jar were round, white pills. Sam poured one out and recognized it immediately as Codeine. He opted to take two Tylenol instead. Tyler must get some bad headaches, he thought.

"Do I know how to ride a horse?" Sam asked quietly as he sat on an upside down bucket, rubbing his temples, knowing he would have to go on the pack trip to save Danny. He felt stupid asking; annoyed at the fact he couldn't remember anything about himself. From what Bess had said in the house, Tyler didn't go on the trip in the original history so a little fact like that would be nice to know.

"Yeah, sure, I guess," Al answered, shrugging. "I mean how hard could it be? Point the nose in the direction you want to go! You'll do fine." He glanced at the link again. "There are four clients arriving tonight, and everyone leaves tomorrow for the hills. Looks like Danny is the only casualty."

"Bess is OK?"

"Well, she lives, but she gets some burns on her face. Scarred for life, but she lives, Sam!" Al tried to sound upbeat. He knew Sam wouldn't like it, but Danny was the focus here.

Sam held his head in his hands. He couldn't bear imagining that beautiful woman with a fire-scarred face. Would Tyler still love her? What kind of man was Tyler? Sam felt the unfamiliar tendrils of jealousy starting to invade his thoughts. He was having difficulty focusing on his reason for being here. It was bad enough that he had lost control of when or where he leaped, but the runaway emotions were something else. This leap was turning out to be very strange.

Standing up, he decided to tour the grounds and get an idea on what he should do next. He left the garage and walked around the back of the house. The sun had finally dropped behind the foothills, making the atmosphere more tolerable. He looked around and saw a long, metal barn standing a short distance behind the house. Off to the side of the barn was a large corral with several horses in it, all of which had their ears pointed in Sam's direction. That made him smile. He recalled farm animals eagerly watching him around feeding time and the huge responsibility of caring for their every need. It was also very hard work, but satisfying, and Sam felt comfortable taking on the challenge for now. Maybe keeping busy would help him keep emotional control.

Turning around towards the back of the house he saw that the yard behind the house was in much better shape than the front. It was bricked in as a large courtyard, a low wall in a half circle made up the outer boundary. There were climbing roses on trellises all around the outside of the wall with artfully placed boulders and cactus. There was a fire pit in the middle and a huge barbeque off to one side. There were several picnic tables with umbrellas and automatic misters hanging everywhere around the perimeter. Very classy; it felt like being in a secret garden.

He admired the courtyard for several minutes then made his way to the barn. The horses immediately gathered up around the feed troughs, some of them rumbling anxiously. Sam entered the breezeway of the barn and saw four horse heads hanging over their stall doors, looking in his direction. Two of them whinnied happily at seeing him.

"Hey, there," Sam laughed at the first animal, pausing to stroke its forehead. The horse nibbled at his sleeve then stretched his nose up to sniff his hair, blowing warmly in his ear. "OK already, I'll find the chow, but be patient, will ya?" The horse replied by bobbing his head up and down.

"Good thing you have a way with animals," Al commented as he popped in next to Sam, causing the horse to leap backward, spin around and bolt outside. The other horses just looked at them curiously. "Well, there's no accounting for taste."

Sam shook his head and walked away, looking for the feed. "I forgot that animals can see you," he said casually. As he got to the other side of the barn, he heard thumping outside the doors. He peeked out to see a young man pulling down bales of hay from a tall stack. The man looked up at Sam, grinned, and pulled out wire cutters from his pocket to cut the baling strings.

"The clients here yet?"

Danny, Sam thought. "Uh, no, not yet."

"Too bad. They usually get a kick out of feeding the horses." Danny picked up a stack of several flakes, and then walked to the corral where the horses were bouncing around with excitement. Sam watched as Danny talked cheerfully to them and playfully chastised them for having no manners. He tossed the hay into the feeders and came back for more.

Sam took the cue and carried several flakes into the barn where Al was trying to make friends with Cody, the horse he had scared. Cody's name was on the stall door, as were Traveler's, Kandy's and Freckles'. Cody's fear was obviously overcome by curiosity, but he ignored Al completely when Sam approached with the hay.

After they were all fed Danny came in the back. "I'll be right up to start the coals, then I'll go clean up. See ya in a while, Ty."

"OK," Sam answered as Danny left the barn. Then, addressing Al in a breathy voice, "I guess I have a barbeque to go to." He'd run out of excuses to keep away from the house, and dread laced with panic and excitement settled over him like a fog. Nervously, he ran his hands through his hair.

Al gave him a suspicious look, saying, "You can handle this one, Sam. Just keep your head about you." He tapped the hand link and the Imaging Room door swished open. "Rely on those Boy Scout instincts if that makes you happy. I know it'd make me happy...but rather boring!" Al smiled a leering smile as he shut the door on Sam's annoyed face.

CHAPTER 3

Al left the Imaging Chamber with a thoughtful look on his face. He tossed the hand link to Gooshie, the head programmer standing at the main controls. Ziggy's rainbow disc hung from the ceiling, rippling with vivid colors. Next to Gooshie, leaning against the panel with a sad face was Dr. Donna Elesee Beckett. Al stopped next to her, giving her a weak smile and a quick hug.

She smiled an understanding smile, her lips framing perfect teeth and her wide set brown eyes sparkling with emotion. Her dark hair was loose around her shoulders. Once again, Al realized how right it was not telling Sam he was married to this beautiful woman. It would make it harder for him to do what he had to do, and Al admired Donna for being so strong. If Sam knew that the reason he was drawn to Bess was due to the fact that she was strikingly similar in appearance to Donna, he wouldn't be able to think of anything else, and would beat himself up mentally for even thinking the thoughts he had about Bess. The biggest victim would be Danny.

Al knew Sam was drawn to Bess, and why, and he also knew that Sam didn't remember anything about Donna. He couldn't tell Sam anything. All he could do was console Donna if she needed it.

"You know, it should be reassuring that he's attracted to her, you know." Al reasoned. "It shows how much he still loves you, even if he doesn't know it."

Donna laughed a little out loud and shook her head. "Good try, Al, but it won't work. I'm OK. Does she really look that much like me?"

"It's amazing, really," he replied. "I've always heard that everyone has a twin somewhere. I just hope my twin has a less complicated job. If I ever find him, maybe I'll trade places!"

They both laughed, but knew that there wasn't any other place Al would rather be. They walked down the hallways of Project Quantum Leap together, 14 stories underground in the New Mexico desert, totally committed to their work.

"How's Tyler doing in the waiting room?" Al asked casually.

Donna had been in the Waiting Room when Sam had leaped into Tyler. Tyler, now in Sam's body, was in a room on this same level. He had been stunned, and on seeing

Donna, started to cry. Dr. Beeks had managed to get his name before sedating him, and he was currently sleeping it off. "Verbena wants to let the sedation run its course. We have enough information about the leap from newspapers and their business brochures to go on for now." If she found it difficult to see another personality in her husband's body, she covered it well. After all, she had years of practice.

Donna stopped at a door after a while and gave Al a quick hug. "Thanks, Al."

"For what?" He asked, truly surprised.

"For being here. And for keeping me posted. I appreciate it."

"No problemo."

She entered her office to try and work, but thinking about her husband made that impossible. Instead, she studied the photos on her wall and daydreamed about the day he would come back to her. So entranced was she in her thoughts, she never felt the warm tear slip down her cheek.

After Al left, Sam gathered his mental resolve and left the barn, walking directly to the house. He entered from the courtyard, stepping into a living room that totally surprised him. The outside of the house in no way hinted what the inside was like. Beautifully decorated in a southwestern style, this room looked like it should be in a magazine. In fact, there was a framed article from a magazine on the wall all about the house and their company. This place was a dude ranch and a bed-and-breakfast combined.

Sam skimmed the article and read about the fabulous cooking, both here and on the trail. He was relieved to read that only people with horseback riding experience could go on these pack trips. Those with no experience had to stick around the ranch, which also sounded fun. Good food was the focus of the article and Bess' name was mentioned as the head chef, actually, the only chef, of the operation. Sam was happy to read that, and he also realized that he still had to tell her he was going along on this one. He stared at the picture in the article. It was of Ty, looking ever so much like a cowboy, with his arms around Bess in this very room.

Just looking at her picture made his hands sweaty with nervousness now that he'd resolved to find her and talk to her. I feel like a schoolboy with a crush, he thought. His plan of a search for her was cut short when he heard the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs. The curved staircase curled up one side of the living room, touching down at the edge of the room Sam was in. Bess was slowly descending the stairs dressed in jeans, boots, a western shirt and a silver belt and combing out her long, wet hair. Once again Sam felt a thrill race through his body and was instantly speechless. He felt his jaw hanging open and snapped it shut before she saw him standing there, gawking. All his thoughts disappeared save one, and that thought didn't involve talking. Or clothes. It did involve sweat, and Sam snapped back into reality when he realized he was starting to sweat just standing there. His face felt furiously hot.

"Get a hold of yourself!" he whispered to himself through clenched teeth.

Bess caught sight of him as she took the last few steps and gave him that heart-stopping smile. "Hey, honey! Did you find your pills?"

Pills? Oh, yeah, the pills! "Uh, yeah, got 'em." He fought stammering. "Oh, and you know? I feel so much better, I thought I'd go on the trip with you tomorrow." Traces of the headache were still there, but manageable.

She had stepped up to him as he spoke, and encircled his waist with her arms. Tilting her chin up to look him in the eye, she smiled a big smile. Awkwardly, Sam put his arms loosely around her trying to relax and slow his racing heart. Obviously pleased she said, "That's great! Cody needs the exercise and I know Danny'd love the help." She continued to look up at him, studying his face. Her smile changed to a smirk. "And I know why I'm happy," she whispered, leaning forward kissing his neck.

Sam was frozen. There were fireworks going off in his head, and he felt his knees tremble. Her hair smelled like flowers and her lips were soft and warm on his skin. He closed his eyes and bent his cheek down to rest it on her wet hair, resisting the urge to brush it back with his hand. Every part of his body was tingling and with great regret he drew his hands up to her shoulders and gently pushed her away. "Ah..." It took him an eternity to collect himself. "Ah, I, ah, think I'd better, um clean up, too, huh?"

She was smiling evilly, looking at him through her lashes. "Too bad I already showered and the guests are due any minute.." She took his hands in hers and raised an eyebrow. "I'd love to soap you up..."

"Ha, yeah, well, that would be nice," Sam stammered, backing away. "But, you know how it goes when you're your own boss! Work, work, work!" He took big steps to the stairs, trying hard not to run. He wondered if his knees would hold him, and was thankful for the railings. Taking a deep, cleansing breath, he took the stairs two at a time, only glancing at her once when he reached the top. Bess was looking at him with a big smile, braiding her hair while standing there. He gave her a feeble little wave before disappearing down the hall.

Finally alone and able to collect himself yet again, Sam cursed his being put through this. Sometimes he felt like God or Fate or Whomever was playing with him and he was frustrated. He stopped, realizing he didn't know where his room was. Peeking in a few of the rooms he noticed that most of them were labeled with names and well-appointed like a good bed and breakfast would be. At the end of the long hallway he found Ty and Bess' room. It was large, with its own sitting area and huge bath still steamy from Bess' shower. He could smell her shampoo.

The shower was refreshing. As he dressed he heard voices through the door along with the sound of footsteps in the hall. Bess' laugh made him smile as it drifted through the door. The guests must be here, he thought, realizing that Al hadn't given him their names. Great. At least now there was a mental distraction for him aside from Bess. At the thought of her a vision involving soapsuds crossed his mind, and Sam had to whack the side of his head with his hand to get rid of it. Embarrassed by his thoughts, he wished Al was here to blame, but he knew it wasn't Al's fault.

Now that he was dressed similar to Bess he was ready to go down stairs. He walked down the hall that was now lighted, as the evening was turning into night. The living room was amicably lighted and very inviting. He smelled good things from the kitchen and was distracted enough by it not to notice Rocket, the dog, lying on the floor. Rocket,

however, was determined to figure out who this was in his owner's body, and stood up, blocking Sam's path to the kitchen.

Sam stopped and regarded the dog, which was staring at him. Sam got down on one knee, looked him in the eye and said, "Look, I know you miss Tyler, but I have no control over this. I'll be gone soon enough, so just bear with me, OK?" Rocket seemed to think about it, then took a step up to sniff Sam over. A deal was struck when he sat and raised up a paw for Sam to shake. Sam laughed, shook the paw, then scratched behind the dog's ear. "Done and done," he chuckled, standing up.

Rocket followed him happily to the kitchen where Bess was arranging hors d'oeuvres on a tray. A bottle of wine was open and breathing, and something was simmering on the stove. Sam admired her smooth movements and confidence for an instant before she spoke, getting his attention.

"The meat is in the 'fridge still marinating. We'll get their grill order when I serve the appetizer, OK?" Bess was all business and in control here, and Sam was glad for it. "I told Danny to pack your stuff for tomorrow. I'm so glad you're coming, Ty. I got Frank to watch the place while we're gone. Rocket likes visiting him and Goose. He'll get some exercise playing with that maniac dog." She was smooth and sure as she worked, and Sam couldn't help but watch her, looking for a glimpse of her neck or noticing how the light reflected off her hair. He shook his head and went outside to check the grill.

The night was clear and warm, the stars starting to show themselves on the velvet sky. This looks just like New Mexico, he thought, pleased with the memory. There was a glow over the hills, and Sam knew the moon would be rising soon. Will it be full? He thought, keeping busy by piling the coals. He stayed out there, looking busy, until he heard the guests coming down.

The rest of the evening was pleasant, full of conversation and good food. Bess was a perfect hostess and Sam had a difficult time paying attention to the guests when all he wanted to do was pay attention to Bess. These were nice people and Sam became sad thinking how their vacation would end. Danny had joined them and proved to be an intelligent, engaging dinner guest. It would be an awful loss to have him die, and Sam was renewed in his resolve to fix this timeline even though it meant having to leave Bess.

Sam heard the familiar sound of the Imaging Room door as he was clearing the table. Al made all sorts of distracting comments about not being able to smell or taste anything, and Sam was ready to slap him with a dishcloth if he didn't shut up for all the good it would do. Finally, there was a lull as Bess started putting away the washed dishes with Danny's help, and Sam excused himself to go check the horses one last time and talk to Al.

The horses in the corral were quiet and Cody whinnied softly as Sam entered the barn, his brown head bobbing up and down as Sam approached. The other horses ignored him, their eyes half-shut in sleep.

"Looks like you got a friend, Sam," Al commented, pulling out the hand link with one hand and a cigar with the other. I got the guest's names here. There's nothing special to know about them."

"You mean other than almost dying? Thanks, but I got their names during dinner." Sam felt very tired, and the persistent headache was wearing him down. He gave in to Cody's nuzzling and petted the bay's neck. "Paul and Colleen Walsh, and Angie and Bob Faust. They're friends, and came from San Francisco. It's an annual thing they do, going on vacation together."

"Yeah, that's right, Sam," Al was punching Ziggy as he spoke, deciding to overlook Sam's grumpiness. Suddenly, his eyes got big. "And Sam, you've changed history by going on the trip."

"Really?" Sam perked up. "Danny doesn't die?" He didn't ask about Bess, afraid.

"No, he doesn't." Al looked up at him. "Tyler does."

CHAPTER 4

Sam was astonished. Tyler dying wasn't what he anticipated. "What? How?"

"The same way Danny did - in the wildfire. The details are sketchy because everyone was separated at the time. Colleen Walsh says the smoke was so thick it was like the middle of the night, so it was an 'everyone for themselves' sort of ordeal. I guess everyone got into the creek in time or something, because that's what Colleen said she did. To this day, no one really talks about it."

"This is scaring me, Al. It's all so...unclear." Sam sat down heavily on a trunk next to the stall door. He rubbed his eyes with his fingers, wishing this could all be over. He sat like that quite a while, then realized that Al, too, was quiet. Sam peeked out of one eye, and saw his best friend studying him with a very concerned expression, rocking back and forth on his feet. This was a habit for Al when he was thinking uncomfortable thoughts.

"Why are you staring at me?"

"You OK, Sam?" Al asked slowly, obviously concerned.

"I'm tired, Al. And I have to go back in that house. I don't want to go there."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm tired!" Sam climbed to his feet. "And I still have this damn headache, and I . . ." he stopped lamely, letting out a frustrated breath while rubbing his forehead.

"You what?" Al spoke slowly through suspiciously narrowed eyes.

Sam's back was to Al, and he worked up the courage to speak. "I'm drawn to her, Al. I can't get her out of my mind. It's like I've known her my whole life and she knows all about me."

"But she doesn't, Sam! You know that!"

"All I want to do is be with her, and hold her, and touch her hair...I can't do this one, Al!"

"Well, you haven't much choice, buddy," Al replied in a surprisingly sympathetic tone. "You can't stay here with her. Think of Tyler."

Sam didn't want to think of Tyler. He wanted to think of himself for once. Didn't he deserve that? Deep inside he knew Al was right, and tried to center on that thought, pushing aside his gut feelings.

"How's Tyler?" Sam asked, somewhat mechanically.

"He's calm now. Actually, he thinks he's dead." Al didn't add the part where Tyler thought Bess was dead, too, when he saw Donna. It was common for visitors to think they were in heaven or hell; which one depended on their perceptions of themselves and the Waiting Room. Another common reaction was that they thought aliens abducted them. Al loved that one. "He's been pretty withdrawn. Beeks is having a tough time connecting with him, but since Ziggy puts you're staying here to save the campers at 95%, Beeks isn't pushing him."

Sam stood quietly just inside the barn doorway, hands in his pockets, watching the moon ascending in the sky. There was just a small sliver out of the lower edge, so it wasn't quite full. He marveled at the brilliance of it; the sharpness of the disc and how clear the formations were. He wasn't in the mood to talk anymore, and Al must have realized that.

"Well, Sam, there's not much more to do now until tomorrow, so get some rest, OK?" No response. "Sam?"

"Yeah, OK, Al."

"And Sam," Al added, "try to stay away from her. That would be the smart thing to do, don't you agree?"

"Yeah, you're probably right. Goodnight, Al." Sam was drawn to the vision in the sky, and only heard the Imaging Room door close. His thoughts returned to the moonlight and how Bess would look bathed in it.

"Ty."

Sam spun around to see Bess walking down the breezeway to him. She stopped briefly at Kandy's stall, and heard a wicker of greeting from the horse. Bess gave her a few soft words and a pet on the neck, and then walked slowly to Sam. She looked a little unsure of herself.

"Ty, are you all right?" She stopped in front of him and looked him right in the eyes. "You've been so distracted since you got back from the Doc."

Bess' face was in full moonlight and it took Sam's breath away. He seemed to have no control over his hands as they came up and cradled her face, his thumbs stroking her cheeks. She was so soft and beautiful. He ran a hand over her hair and found himself loosening the thick braid so his fingers could run through its long softness. He arranged it over her shoulders, and rubbed the ends between his fingers.

"Ty?" she whispered.

"I'm fine, Bess," Sam replied quietly. He felt her trembling hands on his back, which had slipped under his shirt. He didn't realize what she'd done, so focused he was on her face and eyes.

Her head tilted back, and her eyes closed as she stretched to kiss him. Sam responded gladly, pulling her close. His hands explored her back and shoulders, her hips and firm bottom, and he wanted more. Working her blouse loose and finally feeling her smooth skin while Bess' lips traced his cheek and neck. She slipped his shirt off, and Sam groaned as it fluttered to the barn floor. He felt his want growing out of control, and he bent, picking her up.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and they kissed deeply.

Sam carried her to an empty stall that was thick with new straw and set her down on her feet, back against the wall. Her blouse was open and Sam felt her full breasts with eager hands through her silky bra. She sighed and closed her eyes.

He felt like he was finally home.

She reached down and started unbuckling his belt, both of them breathing heavily, when the stall door rattled and a voice rang out.

"OH! I'm so sorry!"

Sam jumped back, flustered and embarrassed, while Bess quickly pulled her blouse together. Danny was backing away from the stall doorway, obviously embarrassed himself.

"I didn't know it was you! I'm sorry! I heard a noise and thought about those coyotes getting the barn cats last week and well..." he would have babbled on if Bess hadn't rescued him.

"It's OK, Danny, really!" She finished putting herself back together and took Sam's hand as he tried unsuccessfully to find his shirt. Bess pulled him out of the stall, past the blushing Danny, and Sam snatched his shirt from the breezeway as she led him outside, towards the house. She was laughing, which caused Sam to smile, too. As they walked to the house, Bess tried to smooth out her hair.

"Actually, that was probably a good thing," she giggled. "The last time we did it in the straw, you itched for a week and I picked splinters out of my backside for a month!"

Sam laughed at the thought, but was still reeling from his loss of control, as sweet as it was. If Danny hadn't have interrupted, he knew what would have happened, and it wasn't right. He knew that; this was someone else's wife. He frowned, wondering for a second if he had a wife himself.

"I've been worried, Ty," she said quietly, no longer giggling. "You've had no energy lately and losing weight. And those headaches; I think it's stress and I'm glad you're starting to relax. Did the Doc say that?"

Not knowing anything about it, he replied, "Uh, yeah. That's why I'm going on this trip. You know, to de-stress about, uh, things."

"I think it's great. We'll have a good time, but I'm gonna be busy! You take time to relax, OK?"

"Great." Sam tried to sound enthusiastic, but he knew what a disaster the trip would be.

The house was quiet when they got in. Bess said everyone went to bed early to rest up for the next day. After an early breakfast, they would finish packing the horses and start riding for the hills. Bess hummed happily as she locked up the house and started upstairs. She smiled back at Sam.

"Coming up, sweetie?" she said coyly.

"Yeah, in a sec. Let me take Rocket out for a few minutes."

"OK," she replied, an odd look crossing her face. She went on up alone.

"Come on, boy," Rocket looked at him like he was nuts, but trotted obediently after him. Sam stood on the front porch while the dog sniffed around the cottonwoods, watering selected spots with a hiked leg. The trees glittered in the moonlight, and rustled with the faint breeze. It was still quiet warm, and Sam heard what could have been the far-off growling of thunder. A chill of fear started in his stomach and ran up his spine until the hairs rose on his neck. It was an ominous forewarning.

It was several minutes before Rocket came bounding up the stairs, and Sam realized that the headache was starting to come back in force. He went to the truck in the garage and got the pill bottle, considering the contents for a few minutes. He went back in the house and decided that a couple of the Codeine pills may help him with more than the headache. If he were dopey enough to fall asleep instantly, he wouldn't be tempted by Bess.

Sam secured the front door and headed up the stairs. The dog trotted ahead while Sam downed two of the pills, dry. He washed the bitterness from the pill down with a sip of water from the bathroom sink, and sat on the edge of the tub for a couple of minutes. His problem was solved for now, because Bess was sound asleep when he came to the bed. Rocket settled on the floor at the foot of the bed while Sam stripped down to his boxers, then crawled in next to her.

Sam turned out the light and lay there, not daring to move or touch her. After several minutes of desperately thinking of anything but her, he felt the Codeine buzz starting and knew that sleep was not far off. Only then was he brave enough to scoot over and cuddle up, smiling to himself as he drifted off, feeling her warm, naked body next to his under the thin sheet.

CHAPTER 5

When the alarm jerked Sam awake at some ungodly hour, it was still dark outside. His thinking was still muzzy from the Codeine, and he worked his mouth in an attempt to relieve the additional side effect of tongue dryness. The empty spot in the bed next to him was still warm. Bess was already up and about. A sense of disappointment drifted through him momentarily as he lay there, trying to get the drive to get going.

Their bedroom over looked the barn and Sam could hear a quiet voice among the horses' nickers. Danny must be feeding them, he thought. Mixed in with those sounds was the gentle clanging of dishes in the kitchen. That must be Bess, he thought, and as he pictured her working in the kitchen there was a rush of desire through his body. Alarmed, Sam jumped out of bed, shaken by these persistent feelings and thoughts

invading his mind. His concentration was continually being fractured by them, making this a mentally difficult leap.

Cursing God or Fate or Whatever it was that sent him here, Sam headed to the bathroom to clean up. There was a backpack stuffed with personal items left open for him to fill by the door, and Sam smiled at Bess' efficiency. After a quick shower, he dressed, gathered a few things together, and closed the pack. When he opened the door to go downstairs the smell of coffee was heavenly, and he followed it directly to the kitchen.

"Good morning, babe," Bess' sing-songy voice greeted him. "Here, grab a couple of those muffins and take that bag to Danny. He hasn't had anything to eat yet..." She wrapped two warm muffins in a paper towel and gently placed them in Sam's hands, then poured two travel mugs of coffee.

Sam again admired her every graceful move and she caught him staring at her. She grinned that evil grin and said, "Oh, no you don't." Handing him the coffees, she leaned over to whisper in his ear, brushing her breasts against his arm. Every hair on his body rose with the thrill. "We don't have time now." Her voice was breathy and warm. "The table's set and I don't want to break any dishes!" She stepped back to her work, giving him a sultry backward glance that made his knees shake.

Sam fled the kitchen without saying a word

"Well, that was an inspirational display of manhood," the familiar voice of Al snorted as Sam stepped outside. Sam hadn't even heard the Imaging Room door open, and cringed when he heard the voice.

"Al!" he hissed, "Don't sneak up on me like that!" he slowed, but continued to the barn. The sun wasn't up yet, and the air was comfortably cool making it an ideal time for physical labor. It was difficult to imagine the tragedy that was going to happen; it was so peaceful right now. "I hope you have something for me, Al, because I need all the help I can get, here!"

Al perked up, ready to pitch in his own advice when Sam cut him off with a glare. "And I'm talking about the camping trip."

Crestfallen, Al replied, "Oh. Well then, no, there's nothing more."

Annoyed, Sam shook his head. "Any ideas on what I could take along to improve our chances?"

Thoughtfully, Al paused a half second. "How about a fire truck?"

Sam gritted his teeth, and held back his initial response. "Ha, ha," he replied, clearly not amused.

"Come on, Sam, I came here for moral support. You're own personal cheering squad. You'll need it to get this group on the trail. Ever saddle a horse?"

"Yes, uh, no," Sam tried to remember. "I don't know! You tell me!"

"Exactly my point. Now let's get going, kemo sabe."

Sam resigned himself to Al's presence and he did prove to be helpful. Between Al and Danny, Sam helped saddle up seven horses and three packhorses. It was good having some physical labor to clear his head and let him get familiar with what equipment they had. The last knot was getting tied on the packhorses when they heard Bess ringing the iron triangle hanging on the patio. The sun was just crowning the hill, and the horses were tied up and happily munching on hay nets when they walked to the house and felt the first hot rays of the sun on their backs. Sam felt the tingling of yet another headache and vowed to ignore it.

Everyone sat down to a beautiful spread of food. Again, the company was as great as the meal and Sam found himself wishing this were a pleasure vacation for himself, too. The guests were anxious to get going, and after the meal that's just what they did. Danny had them bring down their personal items and herded them out to the barn to finish packing and meet the horses. As Bess started clearing the table, a dark haired woman appeared from nowhere and pitched in to help. Bess greeted her warmly and gave her some last minute directions.

Sam was edging to the door, clearly not needed here, when Bess scurried to his side, grinning happily. "Well, Elana's got everything under control here, so let's go!" Taking Sam's hand, she pulled him out the door.

He felt like he was on a first date. His heart was thumping wildly, and he wisely decided to stay quiet and enjoy the feeling of Bess' hand in his, knowing it wasn't the sun that was making him feel flushed. Sam didn't trust his voice, sure it would come out as shaky as he felt. There was no sign of Al, who had disappeared at the start of the meal griping because he couldn't enjoy it. Sam's ordeal was cut short by Cody, who whinnied fully and loudly at seeing Sam.

Bess laughed and let go of his hand. "Well, someone is eager to hit the trail!" She moved off to greet Kandy, who was bobbing her head in excitement. Sam was petting Cody when the sound of the Imaging Room door made the horse twitch and point his ears in Al's direction. Cody turned and stuck his nose out to Al, then through the hologram's chest. The horse then tried to sniff Al's ear.

"It's a good thing I can't feel that. It would probably remind me of my third wife," he quipped, surveying the group. "Well, ready to go?"

"Do I have a choice?" Sam grumbled.

"OK, everyone!" Danny called. "Let's mount up!"

There was controlled chaos as everyone got mounted up, adjusted the stirrups and checked the equipment. Danny tied the packhorses nose to tail, and Bess started out in the direction of the mountains. Everyone fell in line, the horses knowing what to do. Cody politely stood aside then fell in behind the last guest. Danny and the packhorses took up the rear position.

The pace was a no nonsense walk that steadily ate up the miles. Bess fell back to ride beside Sam, and they chatted happily about the terrain, weather and wildlife. The guests had no problems with their mounts and took turns leading the way on the faint, but clear, trail. Even now, at the end of the summer, there were wildflowers to appreciate, but Sam couldn't help but notice how dry underbrush dominated the area.

The trail followed a small creek, often crossing through it, which helped to ease the effect of the sun. Around noon they stopped for a rest and a box lunch, tying the horses in the shade and dangling their feet in the cool water. Sam was completely captivated by Bess, finding her to be intelligent as well as beautiful. She was a charming partner and Sam felt envious of Tyler in this life.

There was no sign of Al for the entire day after Sam left him at the barn. When they finally reached their first campsite late in the day, Sam and Danny got busy setting up while Bess gathered her things to prepare the evening meal. The guests were free to unsaddle their horses and explore the area. They were having a great time and there was lots of laughter among them. Bess produced a bottle of wine and some fruit for them to enjoy as they wandered around.

When the site was set up, Sam's head was pounding. Blaming the heat he headed to the creek to splash cool water on his face and wasn't surprised when Al joined him, appearing to float on top of the water.

"There are some thunderheads moving in tomorrow afternoon, Sam. Supposedly, that's when the trouble starts." He was tapping Ziggy's hand link as he spoke. "There will be some storms tonight, but nothing bad happens with them. That means you can get a good night's rest tonight."

Sam peered at him through pained eyes, and laughed a bitter laugh. "I don't think so."

"What?" Al questioned, genuinely confused. "Why?"

Sam walked up the creek, into the woods to avoid being seen talking to himself. He found a clear spot by the water and stopped, squatting down to look at his reflection rippling in the running water. He looked like a man completely beaten. "I'm supposed to sleep with her."

"You what?" Al became flustered. Usually he was urging a reluctant Sam to take advantage of a situation like this, but this one scared him. Bess was too much like Donna, and Al was afraid of the mental condition of his friend.

"No," Sam shook his head at the Freudian slip. "I mean, I have to share a tent with her, Al, and I don't think that's such a good idea. I'm really, uh," Sam fumbled for words. "I love her, Al. I love everything about her and I can't concentrate!"

"Well, you have to Sam," Al snapped. "Tyler needs you to keep him safe."

"Don't you think I know that?" Sam exploded, barely managing to keep his voice down. "I can't believe this! You're usually pushing me to take advantage of every woman I meet!"

Al looked truly puzzled. "How come your Swiss cheese brain remembers stuff like that?"

Now on his feet, Sam paced up and down the narrow confines of the creek's edge, waving his arms and ranting on. "I'm tired of this, Al. It's too much his time." His voice dropped. "It's just too much pressure." Abruptly, he stopped and pressed both hands to his forehead.

"Come on, Sam. This, too, shall pass. It's not like you have a whole lotta choice, anyway. You just have one more day and you're done here." Al kept his eyes on the hand link, trying to be a calming influence. It tore at him to not be able to tell his friend why he was drawn to Bess; it felt so dishonest. Keeping his face neutral, he pocketed the hand link and faced Sam, expecting another confrontation. What he saw just scared him.

Sam hadn't moved except to step enough to keep his balance, which was looking to be difficult. His hands were pressed hard on his forehead, and his eyes were clenched shut. Tears were gathering at the corners of his eyes; he was obviously in severe pain.

"Sam!" Alarmed, Al instinctively reached out to steady his friend, but the hologram's hands merely passed through Sam's body. "Sam! Are you OK?"

His face still in a pain filled grimace, Sam dropped to his knees into the dry brush next to the creek.

"Answer me, Sam!" Al yanked out the hand link. "Gooshie! Get Beeks! Something's wrong with Sam!"

He knelt by the image of his best friend feeling completely helpless and hating it. He could only watch as Sam collapsed completely to the ground in convulsions.

CHAPTER 6

When Sam finally blinked in consciousness, the first thing he saw was the faded face of his friend leaning over him.

"Sam! Thank God you're finally awake! You hear me? Sam?" Al's face was filled with concern, but Sam had a difficult time seeing him clearly. He looked like an over exposed photograph.

"Al?" Sam whispered, his tongue feeling thick. He wiped his hand over his mouth and found some saliva collected at the corners of his lips. "What happened?" He was very tired, and vaguely recalled a headache much worse than the one he felt now. Lying on his back, he realized he was tangled in some dry brush and worked to free himself and sit up. His arms felt disjointed.

"This is not good, Sam. You've been out for about 20 minutes."

"Out?" Sam's brain felt fuzzy and his fingers numb. Finally, he was able to sit up.

"Yeah! You grabbed your head then had some kinda seizure. We actually lost contact with you for several minutes." Al reached down to help Sam up, then realized the uselessness of the act and took out a cigar instead to keep his shaking hands busy. "Dr. Beeks said that Tyler had a similar event at the same time in the Waiting Room. He's just now coming around."

"Event?" Sam squinted at Al. "Why are you all faded?"

Al's face held a look of worried thoughtfulness for a few seconds. "There's a big problem here, Sam," he said slowly, not wanting to say what was coming next. "We had Ziggy run a complete, detailed check on Tyler, and it seems he has a brain tumor."

Sam blinked at the hologram, seeming to take this all in very slowly. "So, it's effecting our connection? How can that be? It's my brain waves you're tuned to, not Tyler's."

"We haven't figured it out completely yet. Remember when you leaped into the pregnant girl?"

"No."

"Well, you had all the labor pains and the fetus disappeared from the Waiting Room while you were in the ER, so Ziggy figures this to be like that, only with a tumor!"

"Can I continue this leap? Shouldn't I, er, Tyler, be in the hospital?"

"You can't do that, Sam. We don't know what any treatment would do to you at this point. Would it work on Tyler's body or yours? What if they operate?"

Sam struggled to his feet, still wobbly, and a little nauseous. "If we go back now, everyone is safe, I'll leap, and Tyler gets to the hospital."

Al regarded the hand link with a sad expression. "It doesn't matter."

"What do you mean, it doesn't matter?"

"The tumor is inoperable and terminal. Ty only lives a couple more weeks." Al whacked the link and it squealed loudly. "Apparently, he's known for a little while and hasn't told Bess. He keeps all the doctor reports in that locked briefcase we saw in his truck."

Sam thought this over, his thinking finally clear. "It isn't my place to tell Bess. Ty needs to do that. I still don't see why we shouldn't turn back now."

"Ziggy says that there is possibly another reason you're here." Al read the message as it scrolled by on the link. "It seems that one of the parties, Colleen Walsh, writes for a newspaper. In the original history, she was so traumatized by Danny's, then Ty's, death she became depressed and stopped working. And she's a little depressed now, and is having trouble writing. Ziggy thinks she's another reason you're here."

"Well, then, all the more reason to go back." Sam kept saying the words, but something inside nagged at him. He had to keep going; he had learned to rely on his gut instinct even though common sense told him otherwise. "Why didn't Ziggy have this information before?" He felt so tired...

Al had a sheepish look. "We all assumed the fire was the only reason you were here. After your, um, 'event', we did more background on everyone."

"And what happens to ... them?" Sam had almost asked only about Bess, and was shocked at himself for forgetting the others.

"Mr. Walsh does fine, as do the other two. They all have Psychiatric counseling for a while, but Colleen is the only one that really suffers. Of the guests, that is. In the original history, Danny dies and Bess gets scarred, and now you've changed it so Tyler dies." Al continued to read, giving the link a good thump occasionally. It squeaked in protest. "Bess, though, doesn't do so well in either history."

Sam's stomach filled with butterflies and his heart jumped. It was then he realized that she was the one that he was here for, and was immediately prepared to do whatever it took to protect her.

"The first time, Danny dies, she's scarred, and Tyler dies shortly after. She withdraws from life, so to speak. All their assets are spent fighting his illness. She goes on state disability. Now, Ty still dies, and she becomes angry with God and life in general. She becomes an alcoholic in both scenarios, and winds up in the State hospital because she becomes a threat to herself. She loses everything in both histories. Not good."

"She's why I'm here."

"Ziggy thinks so. She gives it a 90% probability. If you go back now, it's inevitable that Ty still dies and she still loses everything due to depression and drug and alcohol abuse. She probably uses them to cope."

"So, you're saying that going through this fire does something positive to her? That's crazy!" But his little voice inside told him that was right. "And I have to keep everyone alive when I could have a black out at any moment. This is impossible." Rather than the anger he showed just before his collapse, Sam seemed withdrawn; almost defeated. He gazed off into the canopy of pine trees, biting his lip.

Al studied him for a second, and then took a chance. It wasn't time to be sympathetic; Sam needed to get his resolve back and the sooner the better. "No, it isn't impossible. It isn't impossible because you have me. You aren't in this alone, Sam. I want you get you back as badly as you want to be back, and the only way that's going to happen is to finish this. And we both know that you wouldn't be here if you weren't capable of handling it. That's called faith. And I have a lot of it, especially in you. So don't let me down."

The words hung there between them. Sam looked down at his feet, seeming to turn the words around in his head, and was quiet for a few minutes. An unusually warm wind was starting to pick up, ruffling his hair and tumbling dry leaves over his boots. From somewhere inside Sam found the drive to keep going by focusing on Bess. He had been fighting his feelings towards her since he leaped in here, but now saw the only way to save her, to save them all, was to stop fighting the emotions and just go with them. Headaches and seizures were enough to deal with, and his burden felt lighter with his decision to let go. A smile actually grew on his lips, and it turned into a grin as he looked up at Al.

The sparkle in his eyes was all Al needed to know that Sam was back on track. "You need to get back to camp, Sam. You've been gone a long time."

Slapping his jeans to get the dust off, Sam started walking back to camp as he picked sticks and leaf bits from his hair. Although the headache was still there, it seemed less bothersome. There was an explanation for it now, and he accepted that. Now that he knew that his purpose was to keep Bess safe, he felt centered and driven to succeed. He also felt it best not to tell Al about his overwhelming love for her; there was no point. He wasn't going to fight the emotions any more. The old proverb about a wise man recognizing when he can change things, and when he can't, ran through his mind.

Satisfied, Al tapped on the hand link and prepared to go. "I'll get more detailed weather reports and terrain maps for you, Sam, so you have an idea how this all goes down."

"OK," Sam waved him off as the Imaging Room door clanged shut. He hardly heard it, as his heart was soaring with the idea of seeing his Bess again.

CHAPTER 7

The campsite was at the edge of a dry meadow, just under the shady overhang of the trees' canopy. The meadow sloped down slightly and was bisected by the rushing creek that was pleasantly cool. The horses were secured in the shade on a tie line away from the tents and Danny was watering them with a small bucket when Sam emerged from the woods.

When he stepped into the open meadow and caught Bess' eye he saw for a second the worry in them. He had been gone a while, he thought. She obviously had been watching for him, and he saw the relief drain from her face to be replaced with a broad smile. She waved at him, then dropped her attention to the campsite kitchen.

The guests were sitting in a circle on low folding chairs, off to one side, and laughing happily. Sam barely heard them as he crossed the creek and headed to the site. The sun dropped behind the tree line as he arrived at her side.

"Hey there!" Bess' voice was soothing and cheery. "I thought a bear ate you!" She was busy mixing something in a bowl as she pecked him on the cheek. "At least that would have been one less mouth to feed!"

"Ha, ha!" he commented lightly, looking at all the equipment.

"I'm glad you're taking the rest and relaxation thing seriously, honey, but could you give me a hand?"

Sam gladly pitched in and was amazed at the meal Bess produced from a camp stove and fire pit. The heavenly meal was seasoned with stimulating conversation, making it yet another enjoyable event. She certainly was blessed with a gift, he thought. Even with the wonderful atmosphere, Sam kept looking at Bess and seeing the dire images of her future that Al had presented. It was so wrong, and Sam chastised himself for not seeing sooner that she was why he was here.

The knowledge was exhilarating; he could pursue his attraction, knowing she was his purpose for even being here. It felt so right, so perfect, this combination of feelings and purpose. He wondered if he had ever felt like this before. It seemed impossible to forget such a thing. It was like the first big drop on a never-ending roller coaster.

Bess was aware of the glances she was getting and returned them gladly. Some times as a direct look and big smile, sometimes a little shyly through her lashes. One time Sam saw a slight rush of blood to her cheeks as she blushed, and he was transfixed.

With the darkness that crept over them came a slight, but welcome, break in the heat. The dishes were gathered, and as Bess and Sam started to wash them the others dispersed to see the horses or check out the tents. A pleasant quiet fell over the site. The horses stamped and rustled, and some large bird rattled the high branches as it took flight, its wings pounding like Sam's heart in the still, warm air.

"Are you flirting with me, sir?" Bess asked innocently as her hands dove into the soapy water.

Sam smiled and picked up a towel to dry. "I guess so. How was I doing?" He leaned close to her ear as he responded, smelling her sweetness.

Giggling, she responded mysteriously, "I guess you'll have to find out yourself, cowboy."

When the dishes were done, Sam joined Danny to bed down the horses and hang the food in a tree away from the site in case of visiting bears. The guests were served after dinner drinks next to the campfire, and then eventually tucked away for the night. Sam tamped down the final embers of the fire, making sure that the future inferno didn't start here. Bess had disappeared somewhere, so he was alone, trying not to trip over anything on his way to their tent. He realized that the persistent headache was still there, as always, and he knew there was nothing he could do about it.

He was just about to the tent when her heard a "PSST!" off to the side. He was barely able to make out the outline of a person just on the perimeter of the ring of tents. "Come on!" Sam recognized Bess' low voice and he automatically smiled in the dark, stepping over to her. She took his hand and tugged him into the woods, trying not to giggle. He gladly went along, catching her mood.

Even in the dark he could tell that she was carrying something bulky in her other arm as she lead him deeper into the trees. Soon, he was completely engulfed in darkness, the silence of the woods pressing on his ears. "I sure hope you know where you're going.." he said quietly, starting to get concerned.

"As if you didn't know!" she laughed, pulling him along.

Unexpectedly, the ground started to fall abruptly away as they reached a small clearing. Sam couldn't see much, but he knew they were on the edge of a steep drop because a valley was spread out below them like a wrinkled piece of velvet cloth. He knew there was a mountain range on the other side because they cleanly cut off the brilliant spray of stars and stardust that made up the Milky Way, marking the horizon on the far side of the valley. He heard Bess throwing down a blanket and saw the white aura of the moon growing between two large, distant peaks. It would be full tonight, Sam thought, realizing instantly that this was another chance to see Bess in full moonlight. He felt his body start to tingle as he turned to find her.

She found him first and pressed a wine glass in his hand. Tilting her head toward the blanket, he allowed her to direct him where to sit. He wound up with his back against a tree and Bess leaning her back against his chest. Even in the heat it felt perfect as they watched the white glow grow in the distance. Soon, the leading edge of the moon peeked out from between the peaks. Bess raised her glass, and they toasted the entrance of the full, glowing orb.

"Remember when we found this place?" she murmured, vacantly watching the moonrise. "Just think, five years ago we set our goal, and now we've achieved it. All we need to do is get better at it so we're the best!" She downed her wine and covered Sam's hand with her own. "I feel sorry for people that don't make a living at what they love to do. We're very lucky."

Sam swallowed hard. "Yeah," he said quietly, trying to rid his throat of the knot wedged there. He so wanted to tell her the future so she could prepare. It just wasn't fair. So, he followed suit and downed his wine and put his glass aside. Clenching his lips to keep the truth from spilling out he squeezed his eyes shut and wrapped both arms around her. With a soft sigh, he brushed off the haunting thoughts and opened his eyes to regard the moon.

As the light poured over the valley the sight became more visible and rather eerie. A breeze, hot and strong, had risen and blew back their hair. The trees swayed below them like a spooky ballet, glowing in the moonlight. It was then Sam noticed two ribbons of light in the valley below. One followed the ridgeline of the foothills below, and the other followed the length of the valley floor. The second reflected brightly and looked like a narrow river, but the first line was like a dull scar.

"What's that white line on the ridge down there?" he asked, partly to himself.

Bess laughed. "That's the fire break. You know, the one the Forestry Service guys were clearing with bulldozers on my last trip? Remember I told you about the noise?"

"Oh, yeah," he replied, laughing nervously.

"Well, at least it's good to know it's cleaned up," she added. "It looks awful, but it's nice to know the fire crews can get out here."

The subject was too creepy for Sam. "Yeah," he said quietly. He filed the break's location in his head and recalled that Colleen Walsh had mentioned a stream. Was that it, or was she talking about the one up here? All these thoughts flew completely out of his head as Bess wiggled sideways and looked into his face.

"I've never been so happy, Ty. I love you so much." She pressed her hand on his cheek, stretching up to kiss him. Sam was caught completely flatfooted and felt his reserve blow away in the hot wind. He reciprocated the kiss fully, letting go of all his hesitation. He felt like he couldn't get close enough to her. It was heaven there bathed in the moonlight, and he thought that it couldn't get any better than this.

He was wrong.

CHAPTER 8

A blast of hot wind jerked Sam awake. The trees were rustling loudly, and an ominous feeling set his senses on alert. He heard the growling of distant thunder and looked up at the sky. The horizon across the valley was flashing, the mountain tops silhouetted black against the approaching storm front. There was a ragged line where the leading edge of the storm cells pushed towards them, glowing silver from the moonlight, but the rest of the mass was as black as night. Flashes of lightning jumped across the clouds and reached for the earth in erratic explosions. It was breathtaking and horrifying at the same time. There was nothing he could do to stop its imminent arrival.

Sam realized he was naked and entwined with Bess' warm body. They were both sticky with dried sweat, and Sam's shirt was thrown over them. It was completely inadequate cover for what was coming. He felt himself blush deeply, recalling the events of a few hours ago, but felt no shame or regret. He was here for her in every way, and he

intended to stay as long as it took. The memory of their lovemaking brought an excited giddiness to his heart, and took his breath away for a moment. Another roar from the storm now galloping towards them spurred him into action.

"Bess!" he barked loudly, "Get up! We have to get back to camp! Now!"

She rolled aside, letting him stand to collect their clothes. Her lean body glowed in the residual moonlight, and Sam hesitated a second to appreciate it. Another blast of wind caused her to utter a surprised squeak and woke her completely. Hurriedly, she gathered her things before they blew away. They dressed quickly, throwing on their boots without socks and bundling the remaining items in the blanket. The air itself seemed charged, which awakened their primal instincts to flee and take cover. Sam had no idea what time it was, but judging by the location of the moon, which was setting out of sight behind them, dawn wasn't far off.

They stumbled through the woods, running hand in hand towards the camp. The horses would be getting skittish, and any loose items in the camp were surely on the other side of the meadow by now. The trees were in frantic motion, squealing and groaning with the harsh battering. Smaller branch needles rained down around them as they darted down the faint path. Bess pulled Sam along, knowing exactly where to go.

When Sam and Bess emerged from the woods, the storm was right over the top of them. The cracking of the thunder forced them to cover their ears and dive for the ground near their tent. The meadow was splashed in light over and over as they felt the reverberations in their bones, but Sam could tell that the storm was moving off as quickly as it had caught them. After an impressive show of raw strength and fury it blew over the site, followed by a heavy but brief downpour of fat raindrops. The lightning, which had been back to back bolts, now seemed distant and sporadic. The wind died down and merely rippled the tents. The thunder grew softer in the distance as the front moved away from them.

Bess started retrieving items that had been tossed about, and Sam saw Danny trot from his tent to the horses. He was greeted with a loud, nervous neigh as his low voice sought to calm them. The downpour was pushed away by the light breeze, and all that was left behind were fat, well-spaced raindrops that thumped Sam's head as he heard the Imaging Room door swish open behind him. He spun around, eyes wide, still on edge from the experience.

"Whoa, Sam, it's just me!" Al had his arms up in a surrendering pose, Ziggy's hand link flickering in the dark. "Have a little action here?" he asked, looking around.

Taking a deep breath to calm his nerves, Sam settled down and looked up at his friend. Behind him he could hear Bess greeting the guests who were chatting excitedly about the show from their tent doorways. There was a lot of nervous laughter.

Sam ran his hand through his damp hair and noticed the rain had stopped. "A storm just passed over," he said quietly.

"I know. I pulled the old weather reports and there are several fronts lined up behind this one." His fingers flew over the keys and he bopped the side of the link when the response was too slow to suit him. "Lots of noise, but little rain."

As Al spoke Sam noticed the brief downpour had left little evidence behind. The returning heat would soon erase what dampness was left.

Al continued. "That's why lightning strikes are the major cause of wildfires out here. The storms can be very dry." He slipped the link into his pocket. "You just saw a medium sized storm. The one tomorrow is much worse."

"Great." Sam muttered.

"I also pulled maps of the area and saw a firebreak near the next camp site."

"Yeah. I saw it."

"Oh, you did. Well, the site on the permit puts you down near a creek. Ziggy thinks that you need to camp closer to the creek. In this history, everyone gets to the water except Ty, I mean, you. So, if you're closer, it'll be easier to reach. Everyone gets picked up on the fire break later that evening."

"Good." The tingling of his constant headache distracted Sam. He wondered how Ty kept his condition to himself at all. He touched his temples with his fingertips, trying to think.

Al looked disappointed. "Gee, save a guy's life and get grunts for thanks."

A sharp reply was on Sam's tongue when Bess joined him. She had a glowing expression and wrapped her arms around Sam in an intimate manner that he returned without thinking, the frown of pain draining away to a smile as he looked at her. Al's face showed shocked astonishment, and his mouth actually worked for a few seconds without any sound coming out. Bess closed her eyes as she reached up for a kiss. Sam took the moment to return her kiss fully, unabashed, ignoring Al completely.

"Sam! What's going on here? I leave for a little while and...hey! Have you been doing the horizontal tango, and you didn't tell me?!" Al honestly didn't know how to take this.

"Sam! Listen to me! I don't think it's such a good idea!"

Sam held Bess in a tight hug and glared at Al. "I'm glad I'm here," he said quietly, both to his friend and to Bess.

"I am, too," she replied.

"I'm not!" Al stated, obviously agitated.

"Well, what are we going to do?" Sam asked, again to both of them.

"I might as well get breakfast going," Bess answered, pushing back. "Dawn's breaking." She motioned towards the brightening sky to the east and glanced back at Sam. "I'd really rather continue what we were doing before!" she whispered coyly, grinning, as she fingered the buttons on his shirt, then moved off.

Astonished, Al sputtered, "Sam! What did you ...no, wait! I don't want to know!" He waved Sam's look off and tried to calm down. Somewhat patiently he said, "This only complicates things, you know. There's nothing we can do about it now, Sam, but remember that you're gonna leap later today."

Sam looked sheepish, but not at all sorry. He'd tried to put that fact in the back of his mind, but Al was making that impossible. He fidgeted as he stood there, not wanting to hear it. "Maybe I will stay, Al. We don't know why I leap, really. Maybe I'm finally getting my reward."

Al knew he had to be the voice of reason. He couldn't tell Sam that they'd had this very conversation before, and it wasn't any use. Sam always leaped. "I could handle this as a one night stand thing, but I know you. You really love her, don't you?" He sounded almost sad.

"Yes. I do," Sam said quietly.

A look passed over Al's face that hinted he had something bad to say and was looking for the easiest way to say it. Studying his fingernails, he spoke so softly that Sam had to take a step closer to hear. "Sam. Remember who you've leaped into." Sadly, he looked up. "Even if you do stay, you'll probably be dead in a few weeks. It's better that you leap."

Sam walked a little circle looking stricken. "We don't know that for sure," he said, but deep down he knew he was fooling himself. His back to the hologram, he stopped and shoved his hands in his pockets and looked at the sky. Choking slightly, he said, "I'd really like to stay, you know."

Al didn't have to respond. He knew his friend realized the truth of the situation. Fiddling with the hand link, Al gently changed the subject. "According to the reports the worst storm hits around 3 PM, shortly after you set up camp. We assume that's when the lightning strikes get everything going." He hesitated, looking at the unresponsive back of Sam, and continued. "Actually, the fire crew gets out here pretty quick. Everything happens fast, Sam, so have your plan in mind, OK?"

"Yeah, sure," Sam replied quietly.

"OK, well, I'm sure everything will turn out all right. I'll be back in a while, Sam." The Imaging Room door swooshed open with a slight clang, and he backed through the glowing rectangle doorway. "You try to save your energy. You'll need it later."

"Right." Sam hadn't moved.

"OK. See ya, buddy."

Sam heard the door slide shut. Knowing Al was right, Sam kicked a rock with his toe and started packing up the site.

CHAPTER 9

The morning passed in relative silence. Everyone was tired from being up so early, but packing up the site went quickly and smoothly in spite of the abrupt awakening. They were mounted and moving on in good time after a quick "trail breakfast" of biscuits, eggs, fruit and lots of coffee.

They could tell there would be no break in the heat again this day. The trail followed the creek and it was slightly refreshing to keep the horses in the water as much as possible. They didn't seem to mind, and quite often the animals would walk with their heads

dropped down, the cool water splashing on their chins and necks. Cody liked to try and grab the splashed drops in his lips, seeming to play his own game. Sam found this amusing, as did the guests, and the horse provided a few laughs as they traveled. No one could blame him; it was so hot the riders started making jealous comments about it, fantasizing about doing the same thing.

The storm seemed more like a dream as the day wore on, but when they finally reached the edge of the summit they were to travel down, everyone saw the thunderheads in the distance across the valley. Speculation on seeing another light show grew among them, and Sam kept silent. This was the same valley he and Bess had overlooked; Sam could see the firebreak below them, and figured that the creek they were following would join up with the one in the distance.

Eventually they left the creek for a side trail that zig-zagged down the canyon wall. The creek cut into the mountain and tumbled down the canyon making small but picturesque waterfalls as it bounced its way down the stair steps cut in the rock by the water over time. Sam was sure these small falls could be quite spectacular in a hard downpour, and imagining the tumbling creek as a roaring waterfall was a bit of a distraction for him. His head had been pounding from thinking about the upcoming disaster, and visualizing the falls eased the pain a little.

Aside from the heat it was a nice ride, but something started to bother him the further down they went. He couldn't put his finger on it, and tried to push the feeling aside. That was easy enough whenever Bess smiled at him; visions of the past night would come flowing back, thrilling him and bringing a smile.

Since they were traveling slowly and carefully, it took several hours to get to the bottom of the canyon. The creek crashed down in a final fall into a medium sized pool at the end of a box canyon. They reluctantly turned their backs on the inviting pool when Bess told them the camp site wasn't far off, and that they could come back for a swim after the site was set up.

The box canyon had fairly steep walls and Sam was amazed there was a trail down it at all. The canyon emptied out into the wide valley, but the closeness of the walls made him uneasy. He blamed it on some claustrophobia Ty must have.

Finally arriving at the campsite, Sam noted that it wasn't very large, but the view of the valley was spectacular. The creek had bent out of site, continuing on to the bigger river below. Al's warning about camping closer to the water popped into his head. He rode up next to Bess and said, "Wouldn't it be nicer to be next to the water down there?"

Bess protested, "Our permit puts us here, Ty. The ranger says that anything below here is prone to flash floods."

Sam, knowing in advance that it wouldn't be a problem, tried to change her mind.

Bess was reluctant. "I'm tired. I want to stop here."

He almost gave in, but the little voice in him cried out. Knowing he shouldn't ignore it, he changed tactics and gave her a big smile as he took her hand. Then, feeling silly, he gave her what Al called his 'puppy dog eyes', and she caved in.

"Jeeze, Ty, that face kills me!" she said, laughing. "Fine. If the rangers yell at us, it's your fault."

They pushed on for a little longer until they were out of the canyon and close to the main valley's river. The site Bess chose was near the intersection of the two creeks and had large cottonwoods to shade them all. As Sam and Bess set up, Danny and the guests stripped the packs and saddles from the horses. Since this would be their site for the next two nights, a party mood was building. Bess finally sent the five of them off to the pool with some wine and snacks; she had thought of everything. Riding bareback, Danny led the way, and the site was mercifully quiet as noon approached.

Three hours to go, Sam thought nervously and glancing around. He unconsciously rubbed his temples with his fingertips, and realized the constant banging in his head seemed to increase if he wasn't busy. The site was just about set up, and Sam hadn't been too interested in doing a good job about it. After all, what was the point? As he stood there massaging his head, he focused his thoughts on Bess and watched her flit around the 'kitchen', humming to herself. Her skin glistened from the heat, even here in the shade. Sam felt himself smile and start to relax when the clang of the Imaging Room door startled him from his thoughts.

Al looked up from the hand link, oblivious to Sam's perturbed expression. Al's fingers were flying over the hand link in a blur. "Sam!" he blurted, eyes wide. "I don't know what you did, but you gotta get outta here!"

"What? I did what Ziggy said and changed sites!" Alarmed, Sam fought to keep his voice down low. "Why? What happens now?" His stomach lurched at seeing Al so upset.

"In the past hour something happened and now everyone dies!"

Sam managed not to yell out loud. He felt sick and had to bite his lip to stay quiet. His back was to Bess, but her happily hummed song still floated in the air and added a surreal spin on the moment.

"Everyone?" he whispered.

"Yes! Everyone!" Al was tapping up a storm. "According to a Forest Service report the bodies are found..." Al looked around, trying to find a landmark. "...over there, on the firebreak. Burnt to a crisp."

"On the firebreak? I thought those were cleared of brush. The kind of flame you're talking about would be huge! There's nothing but ground brush around there! There's nothing tall enough to account for that kind of flame!" Sam's heart was pounding like a jackhammer, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Al continued. "Well, according to the report, it was a really freak thing. A one-in-a-million accident because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The place on the firebreak where the bodies are found happens to be the closest spot to this site. They theorize that you were driven there by surrounding fire fronts, and didn't really have a choice where to go."

"So, we're herded like a bunch of sheep by the fire."

"Yeah, to the slaughter, so it appears. The problem is that the spot where you go is right at the mouth of that canyon," Al gestured towards the canyon they just came through, "and they think a firestorm erupts from there."

Something clicked in Sam's brain when Al said that word. "Firestorm?" he repeated. His thoughts flew back to his nervousness while in the canyon. Now it made sense.

"Yeah." Al said, slapping the side of the link. "A firestorm is a freak occurrence in hot weather, combined with narrow box canyons and winds . . ."

Sam continued for him. ". . . when the ambient temperature in the canyon rises to the point of combustion," Sam was staring at the canyon and rattled off the definition in a whisper. "Resulting in a fire tornado and instantaneous combustion of vegetation and fuel. It creates its own wind and travels at an incredibly high rate of speed."

Al stared at his friend. "Yeah. The whole canyon goes up at once, they think, and the flames shoot out of the canyon like a bullet from a gun because of the steepness of the canyon walls. Everything in its path is instantly fried. A fire tornado, like you said." Al's voice was soft and sympathetic.

"And that part of the firebreak is directly in its path," Sam said in a matter of fact tone.

"Yeah." Al looked quizzically at Sam. "In the original histories, most everyone made it to the creek. Actually, it's a miracle they survive at all. That creek must be deeper than it appears."

"There's a pool at the end of the canyon." Sam informed him. "They must have been submerged in that. And now we're too far away to make it there." Although his tone wasn't accusing, Al still felt guilty.

"Ziggy didn't know about the firestorm. None of the survivors realized what happened. The Forest Service finally figured it out when the bodies are found in this new time line."

Sam started to pace and think out loud. "So we can't go to the firebreak or to the pond." He stopped when Bess called to him. As he glanced up, he saw her beautiful smiling face with thunderheads building on the horizon behind her, and he felt chilled to the bone.

He barely heard Al. "I'll finish up the report, Sam, and look at the aerial maps after the fire. There has to be a safe place around here."

"OK." Sam's voice was so low Al could hardly hear him. Sam was already walking to Bess. His retreating back was all Al saw as the Imaging Room door shut.

CHAPTER 10

Al Calavizzi stepped from the Imaging Chamber with a deep sigh. He hated it when leaps went like this. Yes, it was probably his fault that a complete search wasn't done immediately on all the involved parties; and even when complete searches were done right away, sometimes Sam changed things 'on the fly', so to speak, so that the information was useless anyway. It was a hard call. This leap had started out seeming so simple: save a man's life. Now it had turned into saving a crowd with a disabled hero.

He rubbed his eyes and dropped the hand link at Ziggy's main console. He spoke to Gooshie, who was standing at the console with raised eyebrows waiting to be directed.

"Let me see that Forest Service report again, Gooshie," he asked tiredly.

"We've all been over that report many times, Admiral," Gooshie argued. "Everything there burns, and we have no way of telling what goes up when."

"Did Ziggy factor in the wind direction?" He wasn't going to let his friend down. Sam had faith in him.

"Yes. But it's only a guess. The fire crew won't be on scene for over an hour, so there's no hard data. You know that."

"Let me look again."

Gooshie handed him the maps and report, and AI unfolded it on the console.

"Admiral," Ziggy's voice purred. "Dr. Beeks would like to see you."

"Tell her I'll be there in a while, Ziggy," he snapped, instantly regretting his tone. "What does she want?"

"I am not her personal secretary," the computer stated indignantly, "but Tyler Martin has been awake and cooperative, and now seems to be in some distress."

AI dropped his head in surrender. "I'm on my way." He tucked the maps under his arm and left the Control Center.

AI stopped briefly in front of the Waiting Room door to collect himself. It was always hard to see the personality of someone else in his best friend's body and he had to mentally prepare himself for the interaction. He always assumed it would get easier with each leap, but it didn't. The range of emotions each visitor exhibited was so vast it was impossible to be totally prepared.

Tyler Martin, after initially being sedated, had been an easy one. He was strangely closed about what he was thinking, and really challenging Dr. Beeks' psychoanalytical skills. When AI entered the room he glanced to the bed and found her sitting next to it, writing on a pad. 'She looks like every other shrink I ever saw,' he thought, chuckling. 'Always taking notes.'

Both Verbena and Tyler looked up at him, and he hesitated a second. The face of his friend that regarded him was pale, and the forehead wrinkled with lines of pain. This may be a big problem, AI thought as Dr. Beeks stood and walked to him.

She spoke quietly. "I had Ziggy pull all the medical reports on Mr. Martin, including those of the paramedics that brought, I mean bring, him in next week. I think he's about to have another seizure like the last one. Dr. Beckett needs to know that."

"Great. But he lives?"

"This time, yes," Dr. Beeks turned so their backs were to the visitor. "Admiral, according to the records, he has another seizure next week, the one the paramedics respond to. He never wakes up from it."

"He's in pretty bad shape, then."

"Yes, he is, and it's been very difficult to get him to talk about it. He was in very deep denial."

" 'Was'?"

"I think he was sent here to get over the denial, Admiral. He and his wife need to make plans, and he hasn't told her anything about his condition. Her first introduction is when she has to call the paramedics."

"Gee, that poor woman." Al really did sympathize with her. No wonder she never recovered from the shock.

"I felt it necessary to tell him where he is."

"What? Why?" Al was really surprised by this. It wasn't unusual to tell some visitors the truth about where they were because they usually didn't remember it when they returned anyway.

Al just assumed that Tyler was just too unstable to handle the truth.

"He thought he was dead, and it was too late to help her. He thought she was dead, too, after seeing Dr. Alesee, but he now knows he can still help her to accept his condition and plan for her future, and he is ready to do that."

"But we don't know when Sam will leap, and his wife needs an explanation for the seizure when it happens. Sam doesn't think he should be the one to tell her."

Dr. Beeks led Al over to the bed by his elbow. "Mr. Martin wants you to relay a message to Dr. Beckett for him. He needs Sam to tell her. Tyler doesn't think he can do that to her; he just can't give her that news. He can deal with the aftermath and the planning, but not with the announcement."

Al looked at Tyler as Dr. Beeks was talking, and he gave Al a nod of affirmation. He looks so sad, Al thought. As they were talking, Al put the maps and report down on the bed and Tyler's eye fell to the map. He picked it up.

"This is where they're camped," he stated in a hoarse and shaky whisper, opening the map.

Al looked to Dr. Beeks for approval to confirm the information. She nodded, but casually picked up the Forestry Report and gave it back to Al with a slight shake of her head. Apparently, he didn't know about the fire, and she preferred it stayed that way.

Tyler-in-Sam traced the map with a knowing smile, despite the pain. This was his home, and Al could tell he loved every square inch of it by the way he traced the trail with his finger, hesitating at a spot on the edge of a cliff. He smiled grew slightly, remembering something.

"These maps were always a joke to us," he said quietly. "They look so complete, but there's stuff out there that always surprised us." He tapped a point directly north of the canyon they were in. "Like the fire tower here. We always told everyone how they were

in the wilderness, and then suddenly there's this tower lookin' like a downtown sky scraper. We had to move our camp site to this canyon so the guests couldn't see it."

Al was nodding, listening to the rambling, then suddenly the information sunk in. "A fire tower?" he said. "Is it manned?" He flipped through the report in his hands, and didn't see anything about a tower.

"Used to be. It's all automated now, with big dishes and stuff. They check on it occasionally." Tyler looked at Al. "Why does that matter?"

"Ziggy?" Al spoke to the ceiling, "could you check on that?"

"Is there a problem?" Tyler started to sit up but dropped the map to clutch at his temples.

Dr. Beeks swung into professional mode and snapped orders to the assistant darting in the room. Sam's face was clenched in a grimace of pain as he was eased back on the pillow. Al felt in the way, so he grabbed the map and backed out of the room. Dr. Beeks glanced up, nodded and waved him from the room. There was nothing more he could do here, but plenty to do in the Control Room. He spun on his heel and quickly walked out the door.

Jogging down the hallway he urged Ziggy to check the information Ty had given him. If it was an automated weather station there should be records of winds that day, and a good indication of a path the group could follow to safety. It was all they had. When he burst into the room he snatched the hand link from the console and headed to the Imaging Chamber. "Ziggy? What do you have?"

"The records for that station are kept under another station's information file. Very inefficient." Ziggy commented, a hint of disgust in her voice. "According to the wind direction for that afternoon, the safest course is north from the canyon. I would have had this information sooner if the filing system was more logical."

"Fine, Ziggy! Gooshie, lock me on to Sam," and the door clanged shut between them.

CHAPTER 11

Sam was completely preoccupied to the point where Bess finally commented on his clumsiness and inattention with a joke about the tents collapsing around their heads in the middle of the night. When he didn't laugh or even appear to hear her, she announced that it was time for a break.

She filled two cups with iced tea and pulled Sam by the arm to the creek where they took off their boots and stood in the cool water. Sam kept studying the sky and clouds, and glancing up the canyon. Bess held her glass to her forehead with one hand and her husband's elbow with the other.

"God, it's hot," she muttered. No response from her companion. "Maybe we should just take off all our clothes and run around in the woods like wild apes as the river evaporates!" she commented, scowling at her husband.

Eventually he felt her stare and looked at her. "What?" Between the growing panic and searing headache, it was difficult to concentrate. "I'm sorry. What did you say?" He hoped his eyes didn't reveal the fear he felt.

She studied his face, and looked deeply into his eyes, frowning. "Never mind," she said. His eyes made her uneasy, which had never happened before. She was starting to catch the fear. "What's wrong with you? You're starting to scare me, Ty."

Sam opened his mouth to calm her, but was drawn to a flash in the distance over the treetops. The rumbling was getting louder and the thunderheads were a riot of motion as they grew upward and outward.

Bess followed his gaze, awed by the sight. "It's going to be like last night, huh?" she whispered.

He pulled her close to his side, and she could feel him quivering. In his mind he was fighting with himself on how to answer. He could just see Al pointing at him and saying, 'Don't you dare tell her anything, Sam! You can't!'

"No," he whispered. "It's going to be bigger."

Her eyes grew wide. Somehow she knew he was holding something back. "How much bigger?" she replied quietly, also unable to tear her eyes away from the monster clouds growing before them, flashing brightly against the daytime sky from internal bolts.

Sam made the decision to act instead of react. With the way his head felt, he wasn't sure he would be able to help when the crucial time came; another seizure was right around the corner. He felt it coming, just like before. He took both their glasses and set them on the ground, then took both of her shoulders and faced her.

"Bess. We have to get out of here. There's going to be a fire." He held her eyes, willing her to believe him.

"Fire?" she squeaked. "How do you know that?"

The words had just left her mouth when the gentle, hot breeze that had been unable to bring any real relief suddenly became stronger and steadier. Out of nowhere a blast of wind hit them like it came directly from hell. The thunder was very loud and the sky over the trees flashed blindingly. The remaining horses danced in place, jerking their heads back in an effort to flee. They knew what was coming, and instantly so did Bess.

"Get the horses," she ordered, not needing confirmation anymore. "Turn the pack animals loose, and we'll ride up the canyon to get the others."

They both ran to the ropes securing the horses. Sam had to squint due to the pain in his head, and his fingers didn't work very well. He cursed himself as two frightened packhorses pounded by, trying to outrun the storm. By the time they had Cody and Kandy in hand, the sky overhead had turned black. The thunder was deafening and the flashing constant. Bess grabbed Kandy's lead and tossed a bridle to Sam. Cody was absolute in his trust that Sam could save him, and although he danced in place and the whites of his eyes showed fear, he thrust his head into Sam's chest to be bridled instead of fleeing.

Sam's hands felt clumsy and disconnected as he bridled the horse and swung up on his bare back. Just as he mounted up, there was a tremendous crack as a bolt hit the trees behind them. The smell of smoke was immediate, and the storm was just beginning. Cody saw no reason to hang around anymore and leaped out from the trees, with Kandy and Bess close behind. Sam had a death grip on the horse's mane, which saved him from flying off.

Bolt after bolt struck around them as they galloped off, and it was so dark between the clouds and smoke that they had to rely on the horse's sense of direction. Glancing sideways, Sam saw the trees around them erupt in flames. When they were finally away from the forest and starting up the canyon, he pulled up on the reins. Bess followed suit, and they turned to watch in horror as the valley behind them glowed red. They were just high enough to see a line of fire that followed the path of the clouds rushing overhead, bolt after bolt striking the trees and ground.

Sam saw that what Al had predicted was happening; they were being herded in one direction, the only one left open to them.

"We have to get the others!" Bess yelled, pointing up the canyon, "and get to the firebreak!"

Sam knew the hazard the canyon was turning into. If they ran to the firebreak now, the two of them could make it past the danger area Al told him about. The other's fate, however, would be disastrous. If they started up the canyon, they would never get out the other end in time. The wind was so hot right at this moment Sam expected the brush to erupt any second, but he knew they couldn't abandon the others. Reluctantly, he turned Cody up the canyon, trying to keep the animal at a slower pace. He was finding it more and more difficult to focus due to the pain in his head, and the only way he was staying on the horse was by the grip on his mane.

When the Imaging Room door snapped open, Cody's surprised hop sideways almost unseated Sam. Al, seeing them on the move, floated next to them.

"Sam! You're heading the wrong way! You need to get some distance between you and this canyon!" Al looked around as if he was expecting to be engulfed any second.

"Got to get the others..." he panted.

"Well, you don't have a lot of time! The canyon is just about blocked off!" Al pointed behind them, but Sam didn't dare turn his head to look.

"Al," Sam gasped, "I think we'll be OK if we can make it up the canyon walls to the top. You said the fire shoots out the mouth, right?"

"Yeah, and all this area gets burned, but Ziggy thinks that if you go north over the canyon rim you can out run the fire! The winds will be in your favor for a while! It's a slim chance, but the only one you have right now!"

Sam looked up the north wall with a grim expression.

"Yeah, well, that's really the only thing you can do now. The exit looks blocked." Al was distracted by the wailing of the hand link, which he pounded impatiently. "Ziggy gives it a 54% chance that you can make it." He consulted the link again and nodded. "Sam!

There's something else. Beeks thinks that Ty is going to have another seizure any minute! In the original history, he has a third seizure next week that puts him into a coma which he never wakes up from, and she finds out from the doctor about his condition." Al pecked away at the link, and kept glancing down the canyon, obviously pressed for time. "Bess tries everything to save him, uses up all their money and assets, and becomes destitute. She has to accept this now...you have to tell her to let him go, Sam. She can't go bankrupt on a hopeless cause. That's not what he wants. He wants you to tell her."

Sam looked at him with a tired and puzzled expression. "Ty said that?"

"Yeah, Sam, he did." Al dropped the link in his pocket and nervously rubbed his hands together. "Tyler says he was too afraid to tell Bess originally, and Ziggy thinks you leaped into him so he could talk to Beeks. He never got counseling before, and it's helped him to accept what's happening and save his wife."

"Then he'll tell her when I leap!"

"She'll need an explanation for the seizure, don't you think?" Al snapped.

Sam didn't get a chance to reply. The rest of the group burst down towards them, in a panic driven dash. There was no time to discuss a plan. Sam pointed to the north canyon wall and forced Cody up; it seemed an impossible angle, and the horses struggled valiantly, grunting with exertion.

They were about halfway up, with Al ahead directing Sam where to go next, when Sam looked back into the canyon. The wind had already driven the flames up the opposite wall, and they were starting to eat up the brush below them. For now the wind was in their favor; they never would have made it to the pool in time. He glanced back again and saw the determined and frightened faces of the group, strangely quiet save for an occasional bark of encouragement to the horses. Cody was panting heavily and coughing from the smoke, and Sam could feel him tiring and starting to stumble. The horse was so wet with sweat, Sam couldn't stay seated and he slipped off the horse's wide back just below the rim allowing the noble horse save himself. Cody pushed himself over the lip and disappeared, followed closely by Kandy and Traveler, both riderless. Sam expected to feel the following horses' hooves on his back at any time; he could feel the ground shake and hear the riders' screaming as they bore down on him.

Sam lay there with his eyes closed clutching the earth, feeling himself being sucked into the vortex of pain he recalled from the last seizure. 'Not now!' he begged himself. 'It's so close...'

Clawing at the ground the last things he was aware of were Al yelling his name, the taste of dirt in his mouth, and his desire to have Bess in his arms.

CHAPTER 12

Sam awoke with a roaring in his ears and the uncomfortable feeling of rocks poking him in his back. The murmur of voices sounded like bees buzzing in the background. His mouth felt gritty and dry. Groaning, he rolled over on one side and raised his arm to block the glare piercing his eyelids. He felt a hand stroking his hair, then a warm drop of wetness on his cheek. He tried to inhale and choked on thick smoke.

"He's awake! Ty! Do you hear me honey? Wake up! Come on!" The female voice was choking herself, either from the smoke or the tears she was wiping from her cheek when Sam finally opened his eyes.

"Sam! Do you hear me?"

Sam looked over Bess' head and saw a gossamer figure with black clouds of smoke floating through his body. Al's face was creased with concern, but brightened up when Sam focused his eyes on him.

"I think I bit my tongue," Sam mumbled, still trying to get his muscles to work.

Bess broke down, crying hard, as she sat with her husband's head in her lap. "I thought you were dead! I thought we were all dead!"

"Well, you just about were, honey," Al quipped as he yanked the hand link from his pocket. "Sam, you did it. Everyone made it to the firebreak safely. They had to carry you the whole way, but it all worked out!"

"We made it?" Sam confirmed, still somewhat woozy. The others in the party crowded around as Sam sat up, all talking at once. Everyone was black with smoke and dirt, and had streaks running down their cheeks from their watering eyes.

Sam felt exhausted. After looking slowly around and seeing smoking brush completely surrounding them, he crossed his arms across his bent knees and rested his head on his forearms. The fire was safely away from them, but still in their sight. The fire crew would be here any minute, he thought. His head pounded, and he recalled that Al had told him something about that just before he passed out. While his senses cleared, he heard Bess' voice near him, and felt her arm around his shoulders. She had gotten her crying under control.

"You must have hurt yourself in the fall, Ty. You were out cold," she sounded shaky, but calm. "We have to get you to a doctor. You had convulsions. Paul, Bob and Danny could hardly hang on to you, but we made it. Barely. You must have hit your head hard." She ran her hand through his hair again, "but I can't find a bump."

On the other side of him he heard the low voice of Al. "Tell her, Sam," he urged solemnly. "Now's the time."

Sam sat up straighter, dreading this duty. He spun around to face Bess, and took her hands in his. He looked her straight in the eyes, and gathered his thoughts. "You won't find a bump," he confessed, squeezing her hands, and proceeded to tell her his diagnosis and how long he'd known. He found himself crying along with her, telling her of his love for her, and Ty's desire to die a dignified death. He didn't take his eyes from hers the entire time, and when he was done, she crumbled into his arms and let her grief go. Sam just held her close, resting his cheek on her hair, and closed his eyes. He heard Al's voice between her sobs, and knew leaping was imminent.

"Everything turns out all right, Sam. Colleen Walsh, there? The writer? She writes a novel about this whole ordeal and it's a best seller. Shares the proceeds with Bess." Al referred again to the hand link. "In fact, the four of them buy the business from Bess, and keep her as the cook and caretaker. Danny becomes the foreman. They also have a

summer camp program for kids with cancer. It's a terrific program." Al hesitated. "Ah, Sam? You may want to know the reason she sells the business. She's pregnant. She never had a child in the original history."

Sam looked up, incredulous, the question hanging there in his expression.

"We don't know if it's yours. The little guy is 5 years old now, smart as a whip, and lives on the ranch with his mamma. They both have a great life, and she has a reason to live, Sam. She's happy and grateful to have the child. She named him Tyler Samuel Martin. Ain't that a kick in the butt?"

And as Sam whispered the words, "I have a son..." as he was engulfed in a glowing blue light and leaped.

THE END