



The Leap Back 2009

Fan Fiction Competition Winners

*All characters and scenarios from **Quantum Leap** used herein are the property of Bellisarius Productions, Universal Studios, and any other holders of copyright. No infringement upon this copyright was intended, nor should be inferred. No profit has been made from this publication.*

First Place:

The Thin Leap by Keely Flynn

Page 05 – 31

Second Place:

No Greater Leap by Rick Chambers

Page 33 – 47

Third Place:

Descent Into Panic by Helen Earl

Page 49 – 74

First Place: The Thin Leap By Keely Flynn

Sam blinked. His eyes had recovered from the searing flash of light. It was quiet, but he supposed it was actually his surroundings and not the failure of his ears. He wiggled his fingers and looked down. Male fingers. Good, that was good. He had Leaped. The rug he stood on was covered in orange and green flowers and it extended the length of a long, brightly lit hallway. A small mahogany table was placed against one wall, graced by a fancy black phone resting upon a doily. The walls were covered with some sort of shiny gold paper, maybe fabric. He reached out to touch it. He followed his fingers up the arm to see a trim suit jacket in black with pale pinstripes. It felt expensive. He looked down at his feet and saw black and white wingtips, covered by the hems of neatly pressed trouser pants in the same pinstripe pattern. He unbuttoned the jacket and peered inside at a vest of the same material. Three-piece suit, he thought to himself. Classy.

"The 40s were all style."

Sam jumped, clutching his chest. He spun around and came face to face with Al. His holographic pal had, as usual, chosen to dress in something less than conservative. A cherry red sateen smoking jacket dominated the ensemble, but a tie was discernable beneath the wide lapels. There was a duck on it. Ducks, Sam corrected himself silently. Blinking ducks. Sam wondered once again if Al's wardrobe stood out in their own era as much as it did when juxtaposed with whatever time Sam had Leapt. Sometimes Sam was glad that Al was only visible to him and Al's physical self was safely living in the decade of...

The answer eluded him. Where had he come from? After a long, frantic moment his mind gave him the answer he wanted. Late nineties.

"Penny for your thoughts," Al removed his ever-present cigar and raised an eyebrow.

"It's 1999." Sam exhaled.

"Not for you."

"Of course not for- did you say the 40s?"

Sam asked incredulously. He knew that he could only Leap within the parameters of his lifetime, a life that began most decidedly in 1953. He was pretty sure it was 1953.

"Was I born in-"

"Dr. Sam Beckett was born on August 8th, 1953." Al assured him. "You're only dressed like a Golden Era film star. It's September 22nd, 1974."

Sam looked up, pleased. "I'm 21!"

He had created Project Quantum Leap along with Al and a team of top scientists to see if time travel within one's own lifetime was possible. Instead he was bounced through time to "put right what once went wrong" in the lives of others and it had been years since he'd seen his own face. But certain milestones, like a guy's 21st year of living – well, no amount of Swiss-cheesing of the brain could erase that.

Al looked at his hand link, currently blinking a rainbow of colors and emitting a multitude of squeaks and beeps.

"No, you're...ah...33 years old. Your name is Nick –"

"Somewhere in time I've just turned 21 years old." Sam interrupted. "I think I was working on my second, no, third doctorate in –"

Al cleared his throat. Sam gestured for him to continue. Al glanced down at the hand link and then back up at Sam.

"If you're sure?"

"Yes. My name is Nick..." Sam trailed off. He stared at the voluptuous brunette who had just appeared farther down the hallway.

"Troy." Al answered, not looking up from the hand link. "Nick Troy.

"...Charles." The brunette grinned. "Nick Charles. That must make me Nora."

Al's head snapped up at the sultry voice. Sam took in the champagne gown with feathers piping out of the hem to cover satin-wrapped toes, the cashmere wrap leaving one shoulder artfully exposed and the big, humor-filled eyes. Al's gaze was firmly locked somewhere below the chin and north of her ribcage.

"Oh..." Al began.

"...Boy." Sam finished.

She laughed and took a step closer. "Girl. I'm a girl, Detective."

Sam could only nod lamely as she stepped up to him and placed a soft hand on his cheek. "I thought you'd left me, Nicky."

Both Al and Sam vigorously shook their heads. She smiled. "They're going to begin in a moment, darling, and I didn't think you'd want to miss meeting the other detectives!"

"I'm just...getting into character. Sugar." Sam added. He was rewarded with the flash of a huge grin and the wink of one impossibly long lashed eye.

"I like you so much already." She leaned in for a kiss on his cheek with those soft, pink lips. "This was a wonderful idea."

As she sauntered away, Sam was left with only one thought in his brain. How did women glue those things onto their eyelashes? How did they remove them? *Did* they remove them?

Al leered at Sam. "Ooh, *nickel* for your thoughts now, pal."

"I was wondering if they're real." Sam absently said aloud. Al's eyebrows shot up to his hairline as he gave Sam an impressed smile.

"I was just thinking the exact same thing and..." Al began as Sam squeezed his eyes shut.

"Al, I meant—"

"They're definitely real."

"Her *eyelashes*."

"Definitely."

Sam glared at Al, who was still smiling in the direction of the now-departed Nora. After a moment, Al looked back at Sam.

"Sorry. Nothing like a dame. And that..." Al began. Sam made a motion of hitting Al upside of his head, but of course his hand flew through the hologram. It served its purpose, however.

"...Was a dame." Al hurriedly finished. "Now. Where were we?" He checked the hand link again. "Nick Troy. 1974. At a mystery convention in...Hartford, Connecticut. You know, one of those weekends where amateur detectives pretend to be famous characters in literature and solve cases. So, here you are at the Cozy Inn..."

"That sounds nice." Sam said.

"Eh, it's a chain. They host this every year for a hundred mystery buffs, geeks, what have you. And this is apparently your first date with...Jenny Paulson." He wiggled his eyebrows. "Nora. Not too shabby, as far as romantic dates go. She's a cocktail waitress here in town and you're a..." Al continued reading. "Writer. Thirty. And a frequent patron of hers. You've finally convinced her to go on a date with you. Go Nick!"

"And of course it's the 70s." Sam muttered.

"Oh, like you remember the 70s," Al chided. "You were too busy in libraries and labs to even warrant a healthy disdain for the era."

"I remember polyester and..." Sam gestured around them. "Colors. Colors that should not be mixing on walls and carpets."

"Well, here we are anyway. Be glad you get to walk around looking like that." Al began punching data into the hand link as Sam turned to glance into a twisty bronze mirror on the wall.

He saw dark hair slicked back from a face that Sam supposed was handsome. Thick eyebrows, brown eyes, high cheekbones and a mouth that Sam quirked into a grin under a seemingly fake thin mustache. He adjusted his lapels and ran a hand through his hair.

"Good choice for you, buddy."

"Hmm?" Al looked up. Sam turned away from the mirror and smoothed his jacket.

"The era. It was a smart move. The 40s look good on him." Sam stretched his arms out in front of him and nodded his head towards the heavy double doors at the end of the hall.

"Should we go deduce why the heck we're here?"

Al put his cigar back between his teeth and pocketed the hand link. "Elementary, my dear Beckett."

As Sam opened one of the heavy doors he noticed a gold placard on the wall proclaiming it to be The Lounge. He decided, as he peeked inside, that perhaps the Cozy Inn was a misnomer. This had to be the least cozy lounge he could remember seeing. It could better be described as a convention room. Or a cafeteria. The fluorescent lights didn't help, nor did the easels and signs decorated with decals of miniature magnifying glasses. Two long windows along one wall gave a nice view of the impending dusk but that was all the ambience the room could boast. It was currently filled with costumed detectives throughout the ages all milling about and reading the schedule of events. Three long tables were mobbed by groups of people searching for their names on welcome packets.

At Jenny's wave he began to walk over to her. Just then, a frantic thought appeared in Sam's mind.

"Do I have to remember two names?" He asked under his breath.

Al whispered back, "What?"

"Two names!" He hissed. "For each person! The real one...and, you know, the detective one."

"Oh." Al thought for a moment. "Yeah. Looks like."

"Terrific!" Sam plastered on his best wide smile and approached Jenny/Nora and the group of people she had surrounded herself with. He took

in their faces and costumes, trying to recognize any literary figures. Not a one.

"Hello..." Sam held up a hand in greeting, grasping Jenny's hand like a lifeline when she extended hers.

"Nicky, I'd like you to meet some wonderful people..." Jenny beamed at him. "This is Sherlock Holmes, of course, but his real name is—"

"No." The short man clad entirely in green plaid shook his head vigorously. "I've deduced that we're supposed to stay in character, I think they want to lend an air of brilliant authenticity to the event." Sherlock stated with a lousy British accent.

Al leaned in close to Sherlock and pretended to poke him.

"He sounds more Australian than English...but I think you've just been saved."

"That sounds...spot on." Sam couldn't tell Nick Charles' slang from Captain Kangaroo's at the moment, but he was sure 'spot on' fit somewhere in the '40s. From the approving faces around him he could tell he'd made the correct choice. Al applauded politely.

A rather large, round-faced woman wearing a woolen peacoat buttoned to her double chin spoke up. "You and Nora are such a handsome couple that it almost makes me miss my Henry!"

Sam awkwardly laughed at that and tried to buy himself time to figure out who on earth she was supposed to be. His attempt was met with a blank stare by the woman, who then threw her arms up in disgust.

"Nothing?" She complained. "Look at me! I'm a big lady, I have a dead husband named Henry...nothing?"

"Give him a break," a delicate blonde spoke up. She held out a manicured hand to Sam. He shook it once, wondering if he was supposed to kiss it instead.

"She's Bertha Cool." At Bertha's huff she rolled her eyes. "You have to admit it's a bit obscure!"

"It is not!" Bertha glared at the blonde. "It's clever! Gardner wrote me as a precursor to—"

"Perry Mason. Yes yes." The blonde tucked a stray curl back underneath her cloche cap and pursed her lips prettily at Sam.

"I'm Tuppence Beresford. At least here I am."

Al leered at her. "You can be whomever you want – I think I'm in love." Sam shot Al a look and then turned back to Tuppence with a weak smile.

Sherlock turned to Bertha. "Be glad you were so clever. There're two others of my kind, I'm afraid, and I don't think they're very good."

Sam felt his head beginning to spin.

"I'm sorry...I can't place—"

"That's fine, dear." Tuppence laughed.

"Tuppence and Tommy Beresford are a detecting duo created by Christie. I had hoped to be completely original..."

"And I'm Tommy!" A tall, skinny man piped up from behind Sherlock. He extended a hand over Sherlock's head and almost knocked off his hat. Sherlock righted it with a scowl.

"Sorry- sorry!" Tommy rushed. "I'm Tommy...Beresford. I'm the other half of—"

"Yes." Tuppence said shortly. "It was rather a surprise. I had attended alone."

"Oh!" Jenny exclaimed in surprise. "You don't know each other?"

"No." Tuppence answered, a little too brightly. "But here I am, apparently paired off. He didn't show up with anyone either."

"I think you make a great Tuppence."

Tommy stared adoringly at her. "I didn't even begin to *hope* that someone would come as Tup—"

"Well, I'm too young for Miss Marple."

She cut him off. "I guess we'll just make the best of it. If only I had thought to come as Nora Charles..." The wink she sent Sam was all too clear.

Jenny cleared her throat. "What a shame, huh?" She grabbed Sam by the elbow and began to drag him away. "Perhaps we'll see you all at the opening festivities!" She waved over her shoulder as they headed for a table.

"What a vulture!" Jenny exclaimed. "It's a good thing your dance card is full. We'll just make sure to lock our door tonight."

Sam glanced over his shoulder back towards the group. "Dance card?"

She grinned. "Dance card. Full."

Al looked back and forth between Sam and Jenny. "I like her." He gestured randomly with his cigar.

Sam smiled at her, still a little overwhelmed. He stopped when they reached the table piled with packets and stared at her.

"Our door? Locked?"

Al whooped with laughter and began tapping buttons until the Imaging Chamber door opened. He stepped through it with a salute to Sam as it closed. Sam shot a desperate look into the thin air where Al had previously been.

Jenny rooted through until she found her last name. She picked up a large manila envelope and lightly tapped Sam on the chest with it.

"Our door." She laughed. "Nothing gets by you, Nicky."

The room was exactly what Sam had feared. Buttery yellow walls, tan shag carpeting, a

mammoth framed print of some sort of ship on the wall...and a bed. One big, king-sized bed covered with a rather hard quilt in zigzag patterns of blue, brown and white.

"Nice duvet." Jenny poked at it. She swung her suitcase up onto the bed and then bounced down beside it. She patted next to her as Sam coughed. Her eyebrow rose significantly and then she smiled.

"You've been quite the gentleman so far."

Sam fidgeted with the doorknob that he'd yet to let go of.

"I should hope that all men would...be...gentlemen."

"Yes," she laughed. "However, as you've been pestering me to give you a chance for...how long has it been?"

"Oh...I couldn't even say..." Sam stared at the ceiling. "Maybe a..."

"Month. For about a month now."

"Yes." Sam quickly added. "I'd say it's been a good month now."

"I guess I just expected you to be more...forward." She stood up and slowly walked towards him. He shifted slightly and was suddenly extremely aware of the fact that he had the doorknob in a death grip.

She stopped an inch in front of his face and leaned in. He held his breath and failed to look casual.

"It's nice."

"Hmm?"

"I guess I didn't expect you to be such a gentleman. I'm impressed." She kissed the tip of his nose and turned back to her suitcase. The sound of Sam's forceful exhale was masked by the zipper of Jenny's luggage.

Sam let go of the doorknob. "Well, I'm full of surprises..." he began.

Just then, Tommy Beresford- or whatever the heck his real name was- poked his head into the doorway.

"Am I interrupting?" He cheerfully asked.

"Nope!" Sam was afraid he sounded too eager. "What can we do for you, uh, Tom?"

"Just letting everyone know I'm having a room party tonight after the opening ceremony! Room 302. Bring everyone!"

"Sounds great!"

Tommy gave Sam an enthusiastic thumbs up and Sam returned the gesture. Jenny covered her grin with her hand.

After Tommy left, Jenny shot Sam a teasing look over her shoulder.

"Careful there, Mr. Charles. I'll begin to wonder if you want to be alone with me at all..."

"Hah!"

There was a silence which Jenny chose to consider romantic. Sam wondered, not for the first time, when Al was going to return.

The opening night gala was already in full swing by the time they made it back downstairs. Sam adjusted the sleeve of his tux and creased the cuff once more. He turned back to Jenny, concerned.

"Do you think it's okay to wear something called a morning coat in the evening...?" He trailed off as he got his first real look at her full ensemble.

She had changed into a floor-length red silk gown. It featured a heavy sash that draped down her back after wrapping once around her neck. Her black stilettos were mile high and matched the miniature handbag she clutched nervously.

"You look really decent, babe," she laughed. "A few of the Sherlocks are still wearing caps, after all."

"You look incredible."

She blushed and smiled up at him, gingerly touching her long fall of wavy hair. "I feel like a big ol' faker. These gowns are all rentals. I'm not even sure I'm wearing this one correctly."

Sam grabbed her hand and slowly spun her around.

"I think you're all...decent, too."

The Lounge had been transformed into a ballroom, complete with a small jazz band playing in one corner and spiky green centerpieces on a dozen round tables. Long buffets had been set up under the windows and were laden with covered trays. Sam took Jenny's hand and placed it on his arm.

"Darling?"

"Ready when you are, Nicky dear."

After grabbing their place card from the table near the door, Sam swept Jenny over to their seats. Table number six was mostly full with faces both familiar and unrecognizable: Tuppence looking bored and glamorous, Tommy mooning over her, one of the Sherlocks, the plump and indignant Bertha Cool, and a man dressed to the nines.

Jenny sat next to the attractive, tuxedo-clad man. After holding the chair for her, Sam seated himself in one of the two open chairs. Tuppence slid to the seat next to him, earning a sigh from Tommy and a pointed look from Jenny. Tuppence disregarded both.

"Hello, handsome." Tuppence all but purred into his ear.

"Hi...hello there." Sam tried not to stutter, but she made him so darned uncomfortable. He extended a hand across the table to Sherlock.

"Good to see you again," he began.

His handshake was met with a steely gaze and a clipped tone.

"Good to meet you for the first time." Sherlock said pointedly. "I think you're confusing me with *another* Holmes, kind sir."

Sam nodded politely. This one had no accent at all. He turned to the gentleman seated next to Jenny and offered a hand. It was received with a firm handshake and an appraising once-over of Jenny.

"How'd ya do? Name's Archie Goodwin." His eyes flicked between Tuppence and Sam and then back to Jenny with a smile.

"Quite well, thanks. Hello Bertha." Sam released his hand and placed it proprietarily on Jenny's shoulder.

Bertha let out a chuckle at the entire exchange.

"If only I were a few years and perhaps a few pounds lighter..."

Sam was grateful when a man stepped onto a makeshift stage and the room erupted with applause. He was slight, with slicked back hair and a well-groomed mustache. His tuxedo was a deep plum color and he leaned on a mahogany walking stick. Holding up his left hand, he waved hello and then gestured for the room to settle down.

"Too kind, too kind." His hand still in the air, he closed his eyes and smiled, acknowledging the room's appreciation.

"My friends...and we can tell which ones are friends..." The room laughed obligingly and he continued. "It is wonderful to have you back here, and to our new friends, welcome! I'm Richard Greystone, the Master of Ceremonies for such a wonderful assemblage of famed detectives! If there's any way in which I can make your stay more pleasant here at Hamilton Manor, please do not hesitate to ask. In a moment I'll leave you in the capable hands of our exceptional waitstaff for an evening of..."

"Daddy!" A girl of about seven rushed into the room and up to the stage, a piece of paper clutched in her outstretched hand. She wore a full dress of red velvet tied with a white sash that matched the one around her dark ponytail.

"Dearest!" He brought her close to him and turned her to face the crowd. "May I present my pride and joy, my daughter Mia."

Polite applause mixed with comments of "Oh, how sweet." Mia grinned and bobbed a rushed curtsey, turning back to her father.

"Daddy," she began loudly. "A man asked me to give you this!"

Richard took the piece of paper from his daughter and perused it quickly. Showing it to the audience he cleared his throat.

"It seems we have a bit of trouble..."

People began pulling out notebooks and flipping to blank pages at such a rapid pace that Sam was momentarily alarmed.

"Think they've done this before?" He turned to Jenny with a laugh, only to find that she was wiggling a small journal from her purse with a sheepish grin.

"When in Rome..."

"I thought we were in Hamilton Manor," he teased, getting an elbow in the ribs. Sam smiled, looking around the table at the eager detectives. This could actually be fun.

"This is a letter from the Chief of Police. He received an anonymous phone call warning that there would be trouble with our hosts." He paused for effect. "Perhaps some of you are familiar with the Hamiltons and their history in this town; they made their fortune with oil early in the century. We are grateful for their generous offer of hosting our league of sleuths and I would hope that such seasoned professionals as yourselves would keep your eyes and ears open for any trouble."

Amidst mutters and rustling dresses a man seated himself at Sam and Jenny's table. He was also dressed in a tuxedo but had donned a bowler's hat and wore heavy eyeliner.

"Good evening," he whispered. "Have I missed much?"

Bertha shushed him but Sam leaned over.

"Not too much. Apparently there's a family that..."

"Who in blazes are you, friend?" Archie Goodwin raised an eyebrow, staring at the copious amount of eyeliner.

"Charlie Chan."

Sam blinked. The man seated next to Tuppence was most definitely a Caucasian. He opened his mouth to say something but was met with a challenging look from "Charlie." Jenny squeezed his hand and nodded back towards Richard Greystone.

"You'll be meeting the entire clan this weekend," Richard continued. "Priscilla Hamilton and her two grown children, Vaughn and Claudia, as well as close family friend "Uncle" Trenton who frequently resides with them. They have a trusted staff, some of which have been with the family for over twenty years."

"I bet it was the daughter," Tommy commented sagely to Tuppence.

"No crime has been committed yet, you dolt." She crossly retorted.

"Enough seriousness for now, my esteemed guests. Enjoy the sumptuous buffets and dance the night away to our terrific jazz band under the excellent direction of local legend Ralph Harris. We are delighted to have you all."

With a wave to the crowd he and Mia stepped off the stage and through a curtained door. When the applause died down Bertha turned to Charlie Chan.

"I'll give you ten dollars if you can tell me who I am."

"Ancient Chinese proverb: Woman who goes angling for compliment often finds line full of fish." He nodded sagely at her.

"What the hell does that mean?" Bertha snapped, torn between being offended and confused.

Jenny let out a giggle and then covered her mouth, embarrassed. She locked eyes with Sam and tried to hold a serious expression on her face. Sam, for his part, kept his gaze steady, but the corners of his mouth betrayed him. Jenny snorted, causing Sam to give up all pretense of solemnity and laugh.

"Hate to break up the comedy hour," Al began with a wry smile. "But I think we've figured out the reason you're here."

Sam was so used to Al popping in and out unannounced that he didn't look away from Jenny's flushed, grinning face.

"I know why I'm here."

"I should hope so." Jenny winked at him.

Tuppence drew her stole tighter around her shoulders and adjusted the dark blue column of her gown.

"This is adorable." She muttered. "I'm going to see about some food."

"I'll help!" Tommy rose as she did, stepping on the hem of her gown and nearly yanking the top half below a decent level.

Tuppence let out an ear-piercing scream and grasped at the neckline of her gown. Once it was secure she batted at Tommy with one hand and pulled the hem from beneath his shoe.

"Imbecile!"

"I am SO sorry..." Tommy turned crimson. "I just wanted to help you..."

"You almost helped half the room." Archie winked at Tommy and then turned to Tuppence. "Gotta admit, the guy has a refreshing approach."

"I would appreciate it," Tuppence said from between clenched teeth. "If you stayed out of my way for the entirety of the weekend."

"Them." Al cleared his throat and pointed between Tommy and Tuppence with his cigar.

"No!" Sam looked at Al beseechingly. All eyes snapped to Sam and not, of course, to the hologram who was making no attempt at hiding a chuckle.

"No?" Tuppence raised an eyebrow and glared at Sam.

"I... Anyone can see it was an accident and that he meant no harm..." Sam offered.

"Hah!" Tuppence shot a look at Tommy, who was shifting his weight from foot to foot. "Maybe next time he'll rip the dress clean off!"

She stormed away, holding her stole tightly to her gown. Archie let out a low whistle, Sherlock's mouth seemed to be frozen in a small 'o,' and Charlie appeared at a loss for words. Only Bertha found the situation humorous.

"Might do her some good..."

Al laughed. "I like her," he stated, pointing at Bertha. At Sam's look of desperation, he punched some more buttons on the hand link and puffed on his cigar.

"There's a 83.5% chance that you're here to get Tom and Jerry here together. In the biblical sense."

"No way."

"I don't know, the idea has merit," Jenny smirked at the retreating form of Tuppence.

"You can't mean that." Sam stared at Jenny, momentarily forgetting her inability to hear Al.

"I don't know, *darling*, I think we could all use a bit of loosening up." Jenny wrinkled her nose charmingly, channeling Myrna Loy.

"Oh, and before I forget," Al interjected, enjoying how still his best friend had suddenly become. "This thing between you and Mrs. Charles? There's a 100% chance that she becomes the real life Mrs. Nick Troy...so don't do anything too wonky there, okay?"

Sam smiled brightly, wondering why just moments earlier this had seemed so casual and fun.

Later in the evening, long after Ralph Harris had proven his local legend status, Sam and Jenny plodded on sore dancing feet back up to their room. Wrapping one arm around Sam's midsection, Jenny rested her head on his shoulder as they walked.

"Maybe one too many Bellinis?" Sam asked lightly.

"Those words shouldn't be uttered." Jenny swayed a bit.

"Bellinis?"

"No, I like that word."

"One too many?"

"That would be the phrase..." Jenny laughed. "I think I'd be faring better if the flowers on the carpet weren't so...vivid. They give the illusion of movement."

"I'll have them stopped."

Jenny paused, brushing a hand over Sam's forehead. She smiled up at him in that knowing way that had confused and alarmed Sam since his eighth grade formal.

"Nick..."

"Yes..?"

She leaned in, a breath away from his lips.
"I think..."

Suddenly a flash of movement caught the corner of his eye and he braced himself to the side of Jenny. Tommy raced down the hall, followed by a wheezing Bertha.

"Nick! Nora!" His excitement had his eyes shining and high color in his cheeks. "You'll never guess!"

"Is everything okay, Tommy?" Sam stared past him at Bertha, now patting her own chest and taking her pulse.

"It's awesome! I mean...uh, top notch. Is that right?" He paused, thinking. "It's, uh..."

Sam steadied him with a hand. "Tom. Top notch is fine. What's going on?"

"She's dead! Isn't that great?" He looked over his shoulder at Bertha, who nodded in affirmation.

"It's about time someone keeled."

"We thought we'd get you, since you left and all, and I knew you wouldn't want to miss the first clue of the weekend...well, besides the letter from the police. Does that count as a clue?" Tommy rushed.

"I think it does. I think everything said or done is a clue." Bertha said firmly.

Sam felt the smallest of headaches beginning to creep up his sinuses. "Who's dead?"

"Oh!" Tommy smacked his forehead.

"Right. That might help, right?" He laughed at himself and leaned in conspiratorially to Sam.

"Mrs. Hamilton. Priscilla. She was...poisoned." Tommy finished dramatically, fishing his notebook from his pocket. "Gotta go. I'm sure there are more clues for the finding."

He turned and ran back in the direction of The Lounge. Bertha, having just caught her breath, followed with a sigh. Sam turned to Jenny, raising an eyebrow.

"Are you feeling okay?"

"Bellini-tacular. Let's go do some sleuthing."

The now-opulent conference room off of The Lounge had been decorated like a mid-40s study in lush fabrics of red and gold. Sam stood by the door and looked at the nine other detectives who had waited for their turn to examine the crime scene. A positively ancient Miss Marple was kneeling by a chalk outline near a leather club chair. He leaned over and offered a hand, slightly worried for her.

"I'm fine," she said with a trace of annoyance, batting away his hand. "How am I going to find everything worth finding if I can't be allowed on the floor?"

Sam pondered that for a moment as Jenny leaned down, resting a hand on the chair.

"Miss Marple, what have you discovered?" She asked kindly.

A man chuckled a bit unkindly from the makeshift mantle he was leaning on. He removed his fedora and addressed the room.

"Don't waste your breath on asking that bidy for the straight dope, she's downright miserly."

"Oh hush up, Sam Spade." Miss Marple straightened and fixed him with a pointed look that caused him to look away. "I was going to explain to these gentle detectives how to discern poison."

"It is poison? How do you know?" A rotund man with a handlebar mustache and dark suit asked her suspiciously.

"Oh for God's sake, Poirot...none of us are suspects," Archie Goodwin rolled his eyes. "The Hamilton's doctor was here and told us the method of the deceased's demise." As Poirot began to retort Archie continued, "I believe you were helping yourself to the cheesecake table...again."

Poirot's mouth snapped shut. Tommy saw this as an opportunity to steal the spotlight.

"But how do we know that she was poisoned?"

All eyes turned to Tommy. Sam placed a hand on Tommy's elbow and pulled him aside.

"Archie just told us...the doctor said it was poison." Sam whispered, giving a carefree smile to the rest of the room. Tommy would not be deterred.

"Yes...but how do we know he's telling the truth?" He triumphantly asked. Sam groaned and Jenny bit her lip to keep from smiling. Tuppence wasn't quite so tolerant.

"As the body has been removed I imagine you'll have to take their word for it...as you can't go perform an autopsy!" Tuppence snapped.

The room fell silent for a moment until Miss Marple spoke up tentatively. "Almonds."

Sam was utterly confused. "What?"

Miss Marple stared at Sam as if he had three heads. "Cyanide often gives the scent of..."

"Almonds." The rest of the detectives chorused to Sam. An awkward pause ensued.

"I know," Sam said weakly.

"Lousy way to die," Tommy rallied for Sam.

Bertha snorted. "I think Mrs. Hamilton would agree that any way is a pretty lousy way to kick it."

Sam could think of a few that were worse than others.

Early the next morning, just as sunlight was beginning to filter through the heavy golden

curtains, there was a knock on the door. Jenny sat upright and kicked the remaining quilt from the foot of the bed. Looking around, she brushed hair from her eye and spotted Sam sleeping in a chair across the room.

"Nick." She whispered. He murmured in his sleep and she tried again, louder this time. "Nick!"

One eye opened quizzically, focusing on Jenny. After a moment of who, when, how and what in his mind, Sam shot up and rubbed his cramping shoulder.

"Um...yeah. Yeah?"

"Someone's at the door. Do you want to check it out?"

"Me?"

"Yes."

As he rose stiffly, he straightened the tuxedo shirt and trousers he had fallen asleep in. On his way across the room, he took notice of Jenny's knee-skimming blue nightgown and wished it were a tad longer. Like maybe to the soles of her feet.

At his blush she smiled sweetly. "Sleep well?"

"Like a baby." The knock sounded again.

"Do you always sleep in an easy chair?"

"When the mood calls for it, yes." He wished for a gallon of coffee. Or for the knocking to cease. He tossed his jacket to Jenny before he reached the door.

"You may want to cover up."

"Yes, they may think that they've woken us..." she grinned as she rested the jacket on her shoulders. With his hand on the doorknob, he stared at the pretty picture she made on the humongous bed. The color of her nightgown reminded him of cornflowers in Indiana, and he wondered for a moment how she'd look in a field.

The knocking began again and Sam yanked the door open. There, in mid-knock, was Richard Greystone. He looked ruffled, like he hadn't slept a wink. Sam opened the door wider and started to invite him in.

Richard took the unspoken cue and rushed into the room, sitting on the easy chair that had moments before been Sam's bed.

"Have you seen Mia?" He looked distraught.

"Your...daughter? No..." Sam shook his head, looking at Jenny. She mirrored the action and sentiment.

"When's the last time you...?" Jenny began, but Richard cut her off.

"I tucked her into bed at 8:30. We have a private set of rooms, Mia and I, that guests can't access without two separate keys...." Richard ran his hand through his hair. "I saw to the rest of the evening's festivities, checked in with the jazz band,

did some business in my office...and fell asleep at my desk. When I woke up at 4am, I went in to check on Mia. She was gone."

"Have you called the police...?" Sam began, but Richard barreled on.

"I called the police. However, it hasn't been long enough. They won't do a missing person's report until it's been 48 hours. I've spent the last three hours searching everywhere, checking anywhere she could possibly be. She's missing and I don't know what to do."

Jenny covered her mouth with her hand and her eyes implored Sam. "What can we do?"

Richard took a deep breath. "I was hoping you'd help..."

"Help?" Sam looked startled. "I think we should leave this one to the professionals..."

"But that's just it. You are a professional, right? You know the ins and outs of suspects, motives, all of that."

Sam opened his mouth then closed it abruptly, unsure how to answer. Thankfully, Jenny saved him.

"Of course he does! He's the best true crime writer on the East coast!" At her exclamation Sam stared at her, surprised.

She blushed. "When I said I'd never read your books...I lied..." She said sheepishly. "I thought you had enough people puffing up your ego."

"So you'll help?" Richard begged. "I've asked a few knowledgeable guests to take a look at the scene, help us get a head start for when the police actually decide to get involved."

He took Sam's stunned silence as acquiescence, so he continued, "Feel free to bring one or two people onto your 'team,' as it were...but please, *please* keep it quiet for now. We can't afford for the guests to panic and leave."

He began his exit. Turning back momentarily, he added, "You will have full access to my suite, as well as the staff quarters. You'll need these." He reached into his jacket pocket and removed two hotel keys.

"Thank you, thank you a billion for your help. Please, help me find my daughter."

He left, closing the door behind him. Sam turned to Jenny and let out the breath he had been holding. She fell back into the pillows and rubbed the palms of her hands over her eyes.

"Wow." Jenny simply said.

"Wow's right. That poor little girl is alone somewhere...frightened..."

"If it's true." Jenny propped herself back onto her elbows.

Sam blinked. "What do you mean, if it's true?"

"Nick, think." She raised an eyebrow at him. "If she's really missing, why would the police wait 48 hours?"

He stammered out an answer. "Because that's the missing person's policy..."

"For someone over the age of eighteen. Did she seem old enough to vote to you?" Jenny finished.

Sam paused and Jenny grinned at him. "I'm addicted to crime dramas on TV. I'm surprised at you, though, not knowing that fact off the top of your head. I guess it's easier to put together a case when it's on paper and not a real life child, huh?"

"Yes. I suppose that's true." Good God, Sam thought to himself. I'm a true crime expert. "So...that means that there was no kidnapping?"

Jenny shrugged. "Or, if there was...the police were never called."

As Sam and Jenny pondered that ominous thought, Sam privately wondered if Al was ever going to come back.

An hour later as they made their way downstairs, they passed groups of detectives taking notes.

"What's going on?" Jenny whispered to Sam. She was dressed in a flowing "lounging gown," as she put it, in shades of violet and grey. Fur trimmed the collar and the wrists, a detail that she was already regretting. She rubbed her eyes for the fifth time since they left the room.

"I don't know," Sam replied, pausing when he saw her red-rimmed eyes. "Jenny, are you okay?"

"I think I'm allergic to my outfit."

Sam knew women and their fashions well enough to resist suggesting that she change. He decided to go with a safe answer. "You look smashing."

Her smile lit up the boldly clashing hallway. "You look divine yourself, Nicky." Sam had donned a pinstripe suit of white with black accents, topped off with a crisp white fedora. He had no idea if Nick Troy's clothes were rentals or belonging to the man himself, but if he had to guess he'd say the latter. They fit impeccably well.

He was about to reply, but then spied two very dramatic people having a scene of sorts farther down the hall. He pointed and she nodded, grinning.

"Why Nick, I do believe we're being handed a motive or two," she whispered amusedly.

As they approached the well-dressed duo they heard the tail end of an argument in stage-whisper tones.

"Honestly, Claudia- what would I have gained by keeping that sort of information from you?" A preppy man in his early twenties hissed to the girl. The white sweater tied at his shoulders as well as the neatly pressed khakis gave the air of casual wealth.

"That leaves only one heir, Vaughn, one." Claudia angrily retorted. Sam estimated her age around nineteen or twenty. She was also polished and attractive, minus the scowl on her face.

"You'll get your inheritance when you turn 21..."

"If there's anything left! And I don't believe you, saying you didn't know. You're a terrible brother...everyone knew Mama loved you best!"

As she burst into melodramatic tears Sam and Jenny decided that was their hint to move along. Wiggling her eyebrows, Jenny linked her arm in Sam's.

"Sounds like there was trouble with the Waltons."

"Sounds like." Sam agreed. Behind them, two detectives were whispering to each other and sharing case notes.

"I've got it," one said to the other. "She's a twin!" The second detective seemed confused.

"Who's a twin?"

"There is always a twin." The first one replied sagely.

Sam coughed back his laughter. "But back to our little mystery," he continued under his breath to Jenny. "I've asked Tommy and Tuppence- or whatever their names are- to join our team."

"Is that who you called this morning?" Jenny rolled her eyes. "Why them? I don't really like her. And I know she doesn't like him. In fact, there's only one person I know she *does* like." She gave Sam a pointed look and he cleared his throat.

"I have a feeling about them. I think they could be a good team...and you know, the Charleses and the Beresfords? I think..."

"I think it's a stretch at best." Jenny sighed. "But I also think you know what you're doing. Usually." She added, poking his arm.

"Why Nora, I'm going to need a bigger hat."

Sam pulled open the heavy door of The Lounge and gestured for Jenny to enter first. It was she who saw the scene unfolding at the table of Tommy and Tuppence and she gave Sam one last pleading look. He smiled broadly at her, took her by the elbow and started towards them.

Grabbing a fist full of napkins from a buffet table, Sam placed them in the center of the table when they arrived. Tommy had upended a

pitcher of orange juice directly onto the lap of Tuppence, who seemed unwilling to laugh it off. Tommy lunged for the napkins and tried to pat Tuppence's dress. She batted him away, snarling.

"Touch me again, so help me God. This is silk!" Tuppence wailed to Sam and Jenny. Her smart red pencil dress with the thick belt of black did seem to be fairly doused.

"I've always enjoyed the scent of citrus." Sam pulled a chair out for Jenny and then seated himself as well. Tuppence offered a smile at that, but Jenny suspected that it was only for the benefit of her date.

"I can't believe you want my help on this case!" Tommy rested his elbows on the table and grinned at Sam and Jenny.

"Yes," Tuppence said drolly, "I can't believe it either." She mopped up as much of the juice as she could from her dress and then placed the entire heap of napkins back onto the table.

"We're generous people, Nicky and I." Jenny had decided to make the best of it so she offered Tuppence a smile. Her eyes narrowed when the look that Tuppence gave Sam was less than family-friendly.

She moved the pile of soggy napkins back towards Tuppence. "Not that generous," she smiled sweetly.

Tuppence was distracted from her retort when she caught sight of another table buzzing with activity.

"Did you call them, too?"

Everyone turned, puzzled, to see a table full of detectives apparently working over something a little more serious than the drama of Claudia and Vaughn. Sam recognized Bertha, Sam Spade, Archie Goodwin and Poirot seated with each other, as well as Charlie Chan and the one Sherlock that Sam had yet to meet.

As Sam's table stared, the other group slowly looked up and locked eyes with Sam's team. A few quizzical eyebrows and half-hearted points was all it took for both groups to rigidly straighten and have a simultaneous moment of recognition. Just as suddenly, all the involved parties turned back to their own groups. They were working on the same case.

"Interesting," Tuppence softly said. "Maybe it's high time that you filled us in?"

Sam nodded and proceeded to do so. Tuppence listened, but couldn't feign the disinterest she'd hoped for towards the end of the saga. Tommy, for his part, was agape with excitement and horror.

"Any thoughts?" Jenny looked around the table. "I have no idea where we'd even begin."

"Begin what?" Al had popped into the room so suddenly that Sam jerked his chair sideways in surprise. "Ooh, we're doing some real detecting?

Okay, fill me in. I'm on the case." He had dressed in a dark trench coat with a matching fedora perched at a rakish angle. His cigar firmly placed at the side of his mouth and the hand link under his arm, he dug for a notebook in his pocket.

"Well, I think we should start with the father." Tommy piped up. Jenny cocked her head at him in surprise.

"Why the father?"

"Yeah," Al added. "There's no father in the Hamilton family. I was listening..."

"Well," Tommy continued. "He seems more concerned about the welfare of the hotel than of his seven year old kid."

"What kid?" Al was downright confused now and waved a hand in front of Sam's face to get his attention. "Claudia? Does he mean Claudia?"

Sam could only smile weakly in Al's general direction. He wished they had worked out some sort of code for 'I'll tell you later.'

"Do you really think so?" Tuppence leaned on the table.

"Yeah. Think about it. He doesn't want guests to panic and leave? If it were my kid I'd lock everyone up and ask questions later." Tommy leaned back in his chair.

"Hmm." Tuppence looked at Tommy, as if for the first time. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to peek at Greystone..."

"Unless it's a ruse." Jenny added.

"Huh?" Al threw his hands up in the air.

"Sure," Sam agreed. "If it's a ruse, then there's no reason for us to suspect Greystone's odd story. Then it's just another fun mystery for guests."

"Some guests." Jenny noted with a little bit of pride.

Al had been staring around the table at the detectives. Suddenly he exclaimed, "There's been an actual crime?"

Sam nodded a bit too hard.

"The little girl? Greystone's little girl Mia?"

Sam was afraid he'd pull a muscle in his neck from how vigorously he affirmed Al's question. Al dropped the notebook and it disappeared into the void of the Imaging Chamber. Grabbing his hand link he began furiously punching keys and gathering data.

"I'm asking Ziggy for information on one Mia Greystone, born... '66? '67? I'll try them both."

Sam wondered for a moment why Ziggy hadn't known about Mia to begin with. Then again, the supercomputer that they'd accidentally given an ego to rival Barbara Streisand's sometimes found it fun to withhold information that she didn't deem pivotal. Al compared her to the mindset of a few ex-girlfriends.

"Let 'em dangle for a bit," he'd imitated. Too bad Ziggy was also brilliant at accessing top

clearance files at a number of worldwide agencies. Sam imagined those agencies would rather certain information remain under lock and key, or at the very least, not be in the hands of scientists in remote New Mexico with one of their team Leaping around in time. Sam figured they could allow Ziggy her little quirks.

As Jenny, Tuppence and Tommy debated where to start, Sam patiently waited for Al to relay Mia's whereabouts. Suddenly, a flash of inspiration hit him. If little Mia was indeed safe and sound somewhere, who's to say he couldn't have Tommy be the one to find her, take the credit and thusly make the touchy Tuppence fall madly in love?

"I'll be right back," Sam told the group, standing. They looked up and nodded absently, returning to their vigorous debate of Greystone and how best to pin him. He walked halfway to the buffet before he realized that Al wasn't behind him. He looked over his shoulder to see a French maid bending to pick up a handkerchief. Rolling his eyes, he saw a very prominent part of her anatomy displayed and a very attentive Al making sure not to miss a thing.

Sam cleared his throat. A few pairs of eyes turned to him but thankfully, one of those pairs belonged to Al. He meaningfully turned and continued to the buffet. Sighing the sigh of the long-suffering, Al dragged himself after Sam.

"Spoilsport."

"What detective is she supposed to be?" Sam asked irritably.

"What does it matter?" Al truly worried about his best pal at times. When you couldn't ogle a French maid without having to explain some philosophical or moral reason, things were bad indeed.

"Do you have anything for me?" Sam spoke out of the corner of his mouth, aware of how crazy he could appear when he let his frustration with Al get the better of him. There was nothing like muttering 'What's wrong with you?' to thin air to completely compromise the perceived sanity of his Leapee.

"Yeah, a visit with Dr. Beeks." At the mention of the Project's resident psychologist, Sam wished the bagel he was clutching had the power to make contact with a hologram. He settled for a steely glare.

Al pressed some more buttons on the hand link and shrugged.

"She's fine."

"Mia?"

"Yep. She's fine."

Sam paused for the explanation that never came. "Fantastic, Al, that's really great. Where is she, in her currently fine state?"

"I am happy to be out of that mad house!" The French maid shrilled with a thick accent. A middle-aged butler in a dark suit and almost comically thick hair sighed deeply and tried to hush her.

"Yvonne, please." He grabbed her elbow and tried to lead her out. "This is not the time or place to air our grievances. Miss Priscilla was a wonderful employer for decades..."

"You mean the Master Hamilton had been," Yvonne pertly responded. "Everyone knows she was going to have us all replaced. And between the bickering of those spoiled brats and the amorous attentions of 'Uncle' Trenton, well, let's just say she wasn't killed a moment too soon!"

"Yvonne!" The butler, shocked, turned and left the lounge. Yvonne fluffed her skirt and pranced off in the opposite direction.

"Wow," Al nodded as a multitude of detectives scribbled in their notebooks. "Now that's a character."

"Al." Sam had just about had it with mysteries, dramatic scenes, and flouncing. "Where is Mia?"

"In the study." Al shrugged, pressing more buttons. "That's all Ziggy's getting from some old article about this weekend. Nick Troy found her as part of some extra mystery and told the newspaper that he found her in a study. I mean, that should help a little, right?"

"I wish you could ask him."

"In the Imaging Chamber? Sam, the Nick Troy we've got in 1999 was Leapt out of this weekend well before he was introduced to Mia Greystone. He'd have no idea." Al pocketed the hand link.

"Okay...let's think. How many studies are in this place? The hotel study, the study in Greystone's suite, maybe one or two more? I'll just have Tommy be the one to find her. Simple." Sam was rather pleased with himself. Leaps weren't usually this easy.

Al shook his head. "Think, Sam. You're just going to point Tommy in the direction of any study and let him take credit for finding her? Where's his clue? How'd he get there? Not much super-sleuthing and not much to be impressed by."

Sam sighed. "Okay. We'll go to Greystone's rooms and hope there's something there that Tommy can use to connect the dots."

They both looked over at the sound of a loud crash. Tommy, who had been leaning back in his chair had tipped over and dragged the tablecloth with him. He seemed to be all right but Tuppence once more received the brunt of a newly filled orange juice pitcher. As she seethed, Tommy mopped with the cloth, and Jenny covered her face. Sam and Al exchanged a look.

"Cinchy," Al dryly replied to Sam.

Sam wondered if he were being filmed. How else could you explain the hijinks and inane conversations surrounding him, if not for the benefit of a Candid Camera episode? He was beginning to seriously doubt the detecting credentials of half of the guests. And if one more person yelled out something like "Are you sure she wasn't stabbed by an icicle? It's the perfect murder weapon," he was pretty certain he'd hurt someone. With the candlestick, in the Lounge.

"Lighten up," Al called out from across the main room of Greystone's suite. He was now clad in an electric blue smoking jacket with neon stars on the lapels. "Some people find this kind of thing enjoyable."

"Not this person," Sam grumbled softly.

"You're too grounded in reality, my friend." Al entered the kitchen.

"That must be it," Sam said from between clenched teeth.

Al stuck his head inside the fridge without opening the door, one of his favorite hologram parlor tricks. As he straightened back up he turned and called to Sam.

"That solves *that* age old mystery!"

"Which one?"

Al grinned and poked his cigar towards the fridge. "The one about the light...in the fridge, you know?"

"Oh, I'm glad this is such a magnificent time for you. Have you *seen* what I'm dealing with?" Sam pointed through the open door of the bedroom where Tommy and Tuppence could be spotted. Tommy reached out to adjust something on Tuppence's second dress of the day and she rapidly slapped his hands away.

"You're not the only one dealing with them, sugar." Jenny poked her head from behind the couch and rolled her eyes. Sam started when he saw her there and tried to recall- had he been speaking to Al this whole time?

It seemed that Jenny either had a hearing problem or was remarkably tolerant towards quirks for she added, "I think it's a bad idea for them to be working together. Or living in the same state."

"Well, I'm with her, but it's completely necessary." Al walked back into the kitchen.

"Why?" Sam hissed after Al.

"Why?" Jenny repeated. "Maybe it's because I fear bloodshed."

Sam sighed. "I know. But we need them here." He stood up and brushed his hands over his pants.

Jenny stared at Sam for a moment as she stood. "Look," she said slowly. "If you have a thing for her you should..."

"No, no, no..." Sam began.

"Hey! Sam! In here..." Al called from the kitchen.

"Guys! Tommy, Tuppence...kitchen!" Sam ran after Al as Jenny sighed. The others rushed into the room and looked expectantly at Sam. Sam was looking at Al, who was staring into a trash can with a grin.

"What is it?" Tuppence asked with a touch of impatience.

"Hmm..." Sam said, willing Al to clue him in. "It's something...here."

Al nodded. He pointed to the trash can. Sam took a deep breath and hoped Al knew what he was doing. Sam also pointed to the trash can and then looked at Tommy.

"Tell me what you see in there."

"Uh, okay Nick." Without another word Tommy went over to the trash can and upended it. Chicken bones, napkins with some sort of red sauce, soda cans and wads of paper spilled to the floor. The girls took a simultaneous step back but Tommy dug right in.

"Anything in particular I'm looking for?"

Tommy asked, thrilled to bits.

"You'll know it when you see it."

"What are you doing? Why are you making him dig through garbage?" Jenny poked Sam.

"Something...came to me," Sam responded evasively.

"What?" Tuppence demanded.

"You'll see." Sam hoped that was the case.

Al looked at Sam and nodded, pointing again at the trash.

"Try the papers," Al sagely said.

"What's that?" Sam gestured to Tommy, who had just picked up a piece of paper.

"Um," Tommy flattened it out and tried to read it. "It looks like a receipt. Two meals...for last night at 9:30pm. Lasagna. Yum!"

"Nice work." Sam told Tommy.

"What do you mean, nice work? What on earth does that have to do with anything?" Jenny asked.

"Wait." Tuppence held up a hand. "9:30? Based on what Greystone told you, Mia should have been alone and asleep by what, 8:30? She probably didn't order room service."

"Looks like our next stop should be..."

Tommy began.

"The study!" Sam triumphantly exclaimed.

He was met with quizzical looks by the others.

"I'd think it would be the front desk, right?" Jenny tentatively asked Sam. "I mean, the kitchen doesn't take direct orders."

The others nodded and Sam fought the urge to smack his forehead into the fridge.

Sheila considered herself a well-rounded person. At the age of 23, she felt that she had seen and done enough things on the Eastern Seaboard to ensure that her mind was sufficiently open. However, the three months that she had spent working at the Cozy Inn had not prepared her for the level of eccentricity that a Mystery Weekend could bring. At the moment, four extremely intense detectives, all of whom she found glamorous and attractive though perhaps a tad too close to her check-in desk, were staring her down.

"We found a receipt for room service last night at 9:30pm in the Greystones' suite." Tommy all but shouted it.

"That sounds correct, sir." Sheila tucked a strand of dark blond hair behind her ear and glanced surreptitiously at the wall clock. 11:30. She sighed.

Shooting Tommy a look, Tuppence leaned onto the counter. "Sheila, is it?" She peered at the nametag and then offered a mega watt smile. "Is there any way we could find out who received the room service?"

"Well, uh, the receipt should have been signed... could you make out a signature?" The detectives exchanged looks and shrugs.

"I didn't see one," Jenny piped in. "Did you, Nick?"

Sam shook his head. "I don't believe there was one. Is it possible it wasn't signed for?"

"Anything is possible, sir. We generally don't give out that sort of information..." Sheila hoped she remembered how much she was allowed to say.

"Wait, Tommy, where's the receipt? Let's take another look." Sam turned to Tommy who was turning an unbecoming shade of pink.

"Where's the receipt, *Tom*?" Tuppence softly demanded.

"I...left it in the kitchen. Of the suite." Tommy managed.

"In the trash?" Jenny exclaimed in disbelief.

"No!" Tommy shook his head. "No...not in the trash." The others sighed with relief until Sam noticed Tommy's increasing embarrassment.

"Tommy." Sam took a deep breath.

"Where is the receipt?"

"It's, um...on the fridge."

"The fridge? You left a major clue on the refrigerator for anyone to find?" Sam looked around for Al. Hopefully, he could tell him that it was all a mistake, the true purpose of this Leap was to dress up and drink dirty martinis and kiss a pretty girl. It could *certainly* not be for this hapless sidekick to win a girl out of his league with his detecting prowess.

"It's okay, Tommy." Jenny put a hand on Tommy's shoulder and gave a look to Tuppence

and Sam. "We were all pretty excited, it was a simple mistake."

"Yeah, well, that simple mistake will turn into an easy lead for the Hats." Tuppence seethed.

"The hats?" Tommy asked, a moment before he realized he ought to keep his mouth closed.

"Yes, the other group of detectives, they all wear hats. Am I going too fast for you?" Tuppence's eyes held daggers for Tommy.

"Where were you when he was putting a magnet on the receipt, Tuppence?" Jenny's temper had just about reached its limit.

"Okay, guys... let's just..." Sam stepped between the ladies to calm them down. He was shoved by an irate Tuppence and nudged aside by an edgy Jenny.

"Are all boys your personal property, *Nora*?" Tuppence shot.

"Just the ones you shouldn't be alone with." Jenny said sweetly.

Tuppence took off a stiletto heel and brandished it like a club as Tommy squeaked and Sam threw his hands up in the air.

"What is that going to solve?" Sam yelled.

"Oh, it'll eliminate this itch I've been having for a little less than a day now..." Tuppence yelled back.

"You mean that thing that crawled up your butt?" Jenny shouted.

As Tuppence screamed, Tommy cowered and Sam prepared for the very real possibility of bloodshed. Sheila decided that she was not being paid enough.

"It wasn't signed!" Sheila shouted over the din.

"What?" The detectives chorused.

"It. Wasn't. Signed." Sheila said shortly.

"Sometimes, when a person orders from the kitchen and picks it up there, a signature isn't required."

"Like a member of the hotel staff?" Sam asked.

"Yes. Like a member of the hotel staff."

Sheila stared at them until, one by one, they felt sufficiently shamed by their outbursts and turned to leave.

Tommy was the first to see them. From down the hall the figures of their rival detectives could be made out.

"Run!" he exclaimed.

Jenny thanked Sheila while Sam steadied Tuppence as she replaced her shoe. When they took off in the other direction Bertha Cool's voice could be heard.

"It's the Lovebirds!"

Jenny's snort and Tuppence's growl were matched by the sound of Sheila's extraordinarily deep sigh.

Running towards the doors to The Lounge, Sam could make out the dramatic pitches of the actors portraying the Hamiltons. He slowed down slightly to turn his head to the others.

"Just push on through," he managed, slightly out of breath.

Jenny looked confused and Tommy yelled out a breathless "What?" but Sam shoved the doors open and they saw for themselves.

At least thirty detectives were crowding around Claudia Hamilton and "Uncle" Trenton. The former was waving a letter angrily towards the latter and seemed to be waiting for some sort of explanation.

"Well, "Uncle?" Claudia was verging on the hysterical but Trenton appeared calm.

"You've misunderstood once again, dear child." Trenton's bored continental clip failed to hide the slight beginnings of panic in his voice.

"Misunderstood? Oh no, I think for the first time I truly see!" Claudia spat. "This is a love letter addressed to my mother!"

As Trenton sputtered an explanation Sam pushed through the crowd, apologizing to another Miss Marple and a man trying to finagle a monocle. Heads turned as the four shoved, stepped on toes and squeezed past scribbling detectives.

Finally sprinting their way to the kitchen door, Tuppence turned to the others. "I am really starting to hate those Hamiltons."

"I'm not entirely sure what you're asking me." The slightly bored sous chef, as he liked to refer to himself, piled sandwiches on a platter.

"It's fairly simple, Tony," Jenny began, reading his name tag. Sam tapped her on the shoulder and gave her a look. With a raised eyebrow she stepped aside and held a hand towards the chef.

Taking a deep breath, Sam tried to find patience in his heart for this young man. He knew that solving the mystery was half of the supposed fun, that many people, Nick Troy included, paid a good deal of money for this very experience. But when Tony rolled his eyes, all bets were off.

"Look." Sam said shortly. When Tony failed to do so, Sam felt the thin grip on his sanity snap. "Get your hair out of your eyes and LOOK at me!"

Tony, surprised, did so.

"Now. A little girl is missing, quite possibly only as some extended joyride of a mystery, but perhaps for *real*. We need to know *who* came in last night to order food, and *before* you say you don't know, be warned that these three people are very tired of playing with others and we just

narrowly avoided a stabbing death by way of a stiletto heel!"

Silently Tony walked to the stack of order slips. "What time?"

"9:30pm." Jenny offered, winking at Sam.

"Kitchen's closed then. We don't take orders after nine." Tony eyed his possible exits in case this quartet grew violent.

"So no one ordered food?" Tuppence asked, disbelieving.

"I didn't say that."

"So someone did order food?" Tommy put in helpfully.

"Uh well, not exactly..."

Tuppence removed and brandished her heel again. Tony jumped back and pressed his hands against the walk-in refrigerator.

"Look, lady, ease up. I'm just a short-order cook! My boss made food for someone after hours but it wasn't considered a paid order!" Tony heard running footsteps from inside The Lounge and winced.

"But there was a receipt?" Sam wanted to know.

"Well, yeah, sure...we keep the carbon copy here, but everything Jeff cooks is written down on an order ticket and that always ends up on the tray..."

"Tony," Sam began.

"Who did Jeff make food for last night?" Jenny blurted out.

"Richard Greystone."

The foursome exchanged looks and turned to bolt. A moment before the doors opened Tuppence once again held up the shoe towards Tony.

"Thanks," she said sweetly. "But don't tell them a damn thing, got it?"

They fled. The doors crashed open and Tony found himself face to face with a leering, out of breath Bertha Cool and her crew.

Tony considered the Cozy Inn branch up by his folks in Albany. Maybe first he'd check out what kind of functions they held throughout the year.

"So, now what?" Jenny inquired towards the detectives running alongside her. "Greystone's office?"

Tommy raised his hand. "I'd kinda like a sandwich." He lowered it at Sam and Tuppence's looks.

"We were just in the kitchen!" Sam said, exasperated.

"Yeah, but...I didn't know if it was appropriate timing."

"That's never stopped you before," Tuppence told him. At that she ceased running and

leaned against the wall. "I think I need to go lay down."

"What? You can't go lay down!" Sam wondered if he was losing his mind.

"Are you *telling* me?" Tuppence turned her disdain on Sam. "I have a headache, a twice-juiced dress and a blister from repeatedly removing my high heel. I am taking a *nap!*"

She stalked off and Sam started after her. Jenny grabbed his elbow and spun him, glaring. "You're starting to give me a complex, Sugar."

Tommy looked between Jenny and Sam and decided for the safest option. Swallowing, he raised a tentative hand.

"I'll...take care of the Tuppence...thing." Tommy bolted after her, not entirely sure why this seemed like the least painful choice.

Sam sighed and placed a hand on Jenny's shoulder.

"I just think we should stick together and..." He began, realizing even as he spoke how lame he was appearing.

"Fine. Forget it. Go stick together with *Tuppence*." Jenny turned back towards The Lounge.

"Where are *you* going?" Sam asked, bewildered.

"I'm getting a drink."

"A drink."

"Yes, a drink. Something enjoyable, refreshing and potentially leading towards something wonderful. You know, like this weekend? Oh, *wait*." On that, she turned and left.

Sam leaned his forehead against the wall with its fabric wallpaper and sighed deeply. This probably wasn't the progress Al would hope for when he returned.

"I can't change the will, Trenton. I'm not a magician!"

"Can't or won't, Alan, can't or *won't*?"

When Sam heard the strains of Hamilton drama, he almost turned and went for a drink in The Lounge himself. Sighing deeply, he resigned himself to the very real fact that Greystone's office could only be reached by the stairs at the end of this hall. Continuing on, he stretched up on his toes to see how many people were watching the scene unfold. He could see about twenty detectives surrounding three actors and decided it would take about ten minutes to get through the crowd in this narrow hallway. Fantastic.

Trenton was cornering a pinstripe-suited elderly gentleman against the wall and poking a finger into the latter's chest. If Sam had to guess, he'd suppose that maybe Trenton had been enjoying a not entirely familial relationship with the

recently departed Priscilla Hamilton and had just been informed of his exclusion from the will. Or something of that ilk, as those were the sentiments being repeated over and over. Detectives wrote madly in their notebooks and nodded knowingly to each other.

The lawyer- if this was indeed the lawyer-called out to the approaching butler.

"Johnson, did you receive your compensation portfolio?" He inquired politely of the stiffly grim-faced butler.

"Hardly one to speak of..."

"Pardon?"

"I received it." All three gentlemen icily stared at one another while Sam wondered if anyone in the Hamilton clan was happy with their lot in life. Perhaps the late Priscilla.

He leaned back against the wall and pondered on his own life. His mother, Thelma Beckett, always enjoyed a good potboiler of a mystery. He could almost picture her now, sitting at the little kitchen table in a spare peaceful moment between household chores and tending to his dad and siblings. Her thumbnail in her teeth, a worry line between her eyebrows and always a sheepish grin when one of them would burst in with some request. What was the quarterly magazine she enjoyed? Ellery Queen something or other. Sam wondered if there was an Ellery Queen at the Cozy Inn.

Deciding to enjoy himself from here on out in honor of Thelma Beckett, Sam turned to go find Jenny and an extra dry martini, three olives. Instead, racing towards him and the Hamilton *mêlée* were Archie Goodwin, Bertha Cool and Charlie Chan. Very briefly he wondered where the trio of Sherlocks were before pivoting back to the Hamilton saga. His heart caught in his throat as he saw the crowd moving towards him and, presumably, The Lounge.

He grabbed at a doorknob and turned. It opened. Rushing through the door, he closed it behind him and rested against it momentarily.

Sam's eyes adjusted to the dim light of the dusty...what was it? Small room? Large closet? His eyes made out a small form sitting cross-legged in the corner and he crouched down to get a better look.

Dark impish eyes grinned up at him as a ribboned ponytail was flicked over one shoulder.

"Shh..." she whispered.

"Oh no..." Sam stood up quickly and looked around. "Oh no. Stay...um, stay right here!" He grabbed the doorknob and twisted it hard, squeezing himself back through the meager amount he'd opened the door.

Slamming it from the other side, he placed his forehead on the oak trim of the door and took a deep breath. His head was spinning.

"Oh boy."

"What?" Archie Goodwin's drawn question alerted him to the fact that it was extremely quiet in the hallway.

Turning around, Sam found himself face to face with Archie, Bertha, Charlie Chan, the Hamilton actors and twenty puzzled detectives.

"Hah!" He laughed forcefully, reaching for the doorknob again. Quickly, and not even a little bit subtly, he opened the door a crack and wiggled his way back in. Slamming it once again behind himself he looked down at Mia Greystone.

"You were never in any danger, were you?"

She shook her head mischievously and closed her book in her lap. The book, Sam noticed wryly, was a dog-eared copy of Nancy Drew and the Mystery at Lilac Inn.

"Have you been here all this time?" Sam wondered incredulously. The look that Mia returned was inherently full of female disdain, regardless of her young age.

"Of course not. This is my study."

"Your, ah, study?" Sam looked around and saw dust motes floating through the faint sunbeams. One half-opened window let in a meager amount of light and the hint of a breeze. She was seated on a colorful quilt next to a stack of well-loved books, but other than that the room was quite empty.

"Don't tell my Daddy that I snuck down, okay? I'm supposed to stay in our rooms until tomorrow morning." She wrinkled her nose.

"Um, the suite on the second floor?" Sam couldn't imagine how they'd missed a small child in those small and tidy rooms.

"Of course not!" Mia laughed. "Those are the stage-y rooms. Just for the mystery weekend, you know?" She leaned in conspiratorially and whispered, "You're supposed to *think* I live in those rooms."

Sam smiled weakly.

"Ours are on the fourth floor. They're just regular rooms. And we have a house, too. But it's not here."

Sam pressed a finger to his sinuses and thought.

"Okay." He said, realizing what he had to do. "Okay. Can you wait right here?"

"I already was." Mia grinned at him.

He sighed deeply but had to smile. He couldn't help but feel that this girl and his kid sister Katie would have gotten along famously.

"Mia, I'll be right back with some people. Pretend you never saw me, that none of this ever happened, okay?"

"Sure. Groovy!"

He did laugh that time, giving her a thumbs-up as he left the room once more.

Looking around, he saw that the hallway was empty and quiet. Good. Now, all he had to do was bring his team back together, make it look like Tommy had stumbled upon the girl, let him bask in Tuppence's adoration and sit back to salvage what was left of his romance with Jenny. What was it that Al had commented? Cinchy.

"This is so nice, Nick." Tommy's gushing response made Sam smile.

"No problem, Tommy. I figured we're a team, right? You've certainly done your fair share of detecting and you deserve this."

Sam looked down the hallway for the girls. Tuppence had agreed to go fetch Jenny and Sam hadn't seen anything wrong with that at the time. Now, minutes later, he wondered if perhaps Jenny wouldn't feel a bit slighted at his choice for her escort. Sighing, he thought to himself that it couldn't be helped. He had to fill in Tommy and didn't want leave Mia for longer than the ten minutes it took to round up Tommy and Tuppence.

"Yeah, but don't you want the recognition? You know, to show Nora what a good detective you are?" Tommy shoved his hands in his trouser pockets and tapped his toe nervously.

"I want people to know what a good, stand-up guy you are. People like...Tuppence." Sam told him lightly.

Tommy's eyes grew huge and his cheeks flushed.

"Is it obvious?"

"No," Sam lied. "I think you guys would make a terrific couple, that's all." Sam truly hoped that Ziggy was right on this one. He may have his doubts, but Ziggy rarely lied and even more rarely was incorrect in her Leap predictions.

Just then Al appeared through the Imaging Chamber door. His mouth was set in a grim line and even his dark button-down shirt and pants reflected an unusually somber attitude.

"Sam."

"Not yet." Sam said quietly, for Al's benefit. Tommy looked confused.

"Not yet what? Not time to open the door?" Tommy guessed. "I wasn't going to until the gals arrived, anyhow. We're a team!"

"Right!" Sam nodded to Tommy, shooting a sidelong glance at Al. "Just follow my lead."

Al sighed deeply and crossed his arms in front of his chest. Shaking his head, he took a step back to watch.

The Lounge door slammed and out stalked Jenny followed by an irritated Tuppence. Jenny must have removed the fur-trimmed lounging jacket, Sam realized. A thin dress in the same violet color left her shoulders bare, and he wished

he could tell her how pretty she looked. The glare that Jenny shot Sam could have frozen a lesser man but Sam swallowed and offered an apologetic smile.

"Nice." Jenny cocked her head when she reached Sam and Tommy. "Does she do all of your bidding now?"

Tuppence rolled her eyes and grinned at Sam, who coughed uncomfortably.

"Tommy has a new lead. It could be big, really big. He needed to get all of us together quickly." Sam reached for Jenny's elbow but she shrugged away, sighing.

"It had better be huge. I'm still fighting a major headache." Tuppence complained.

Sam knew the feeling.

"Where'd you get a lead, Tommy?" Jenny asked. "Did you talk to Greystone?"

Tommy opened his mouth to reply and then turned to Sam, unsure. Sam took the lead once more.

"It's really complicated, but it took Tommy here to piece it together. I can't stress enough that this, uh, all Tommy's doing." Sam patted Tommy on the back triumphantly.

Tommy beamed and then winked at the girls as he turned the doorknob. Sam's heart felt good. This was right. This was how it should be. Underdog gets glory and the girl, *Unsung Hero* gets to Leap.

"Sam..." Al began.

As the door opened Sam realized in an instant that something was horribly wrong. Where before the room had held a quiet though austere charm, now it seemed filthy and deserted. Especially the deserted part. Mia was gone.

Tuppence wrinkled her nose as she looked around the room. "Nice," she told them. "But what are we doing in here?"

"Oh no," Sam felt his heart thud. "Where is she?"

"Where is who, Nick?" Jenny began to sneeze. "This place is covered with...something."

It was Tommy who saw it first. Leaning down, he picked up a slightly wrinkled note. Standing slowly, his eyes fixed on Sam.

"Nick."

"What is it, Tommy?" Sam replayed everything in his mind that could have gone wrong in the past half an hour.

"It's a ransom note."

As Sam stared into Tommy's wounded eyes, Al finally spoke up. "I don't know what you did, what you changed...but Sam, Mia's really gone."

"Oh my God." Jenny gasped as she grabbed something from the floor. Rising, she held it out to them. A lock of dark brown hair curled around her fingers. "Oh my God."

"You." Tommy pointed accusingly at Sam. "This was your idea."

"No," Sam shook his head vigorously, looking to Al for guidance. "No, you don't understand. Mia...she was here."

"I'll bet." Jenny stared at Sam with horror. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything!"

"You wanted me to take the fall?" Tommy couldn't mask the hurt on his face nor did he try. "I thought we were friends."

"We are friends!"

"Where is Mia?" Jenny demanded. "This isn't funny!"

"I don't know! I...she was here! I swear to God, I really do, she was here and..." Sam trailed off lamely. "Oh God...Mia..."

Jenny grabbed Tommy's hand and dragged him from the room, her eyes never leaving Sam's face.

"Come on, we need to get Richard Greystone. This is bad."

They left amid protests from Sam and a shrug from Tuppence. She laid a casual arm around his shoulders and he turned desperately to her.

"I wouldn't hurt that little girl!"

"I know that, babe. We'll find her." She leaned in close and wrapped the other arm around him. "You know, there are easier ways to be alone with me."

Sam struggled against her tightening grip and gave Al a helpless look.

"Needless to say, you've changed history. There's no Nick n' Nora, no Tuppence and Tommy...and unless you do something within the next twenty four hours..." Al took a deep breath.

"No Mia Greystone."

Greystone's office was small but cozy. Done in subtle patterns of brown, gold and crimson, it exuded a masculine sense of comfort. A wide mahogany desk was the central piece of furniture, and seating fanned around it.

"Center stage, just the way he likes it," Al mused.

Sam didn't have the luxury of pondering Greystone's ego, as he was currently being patted heartily on the back by the man, while simultaneously receiving glares from two thirds of his supposed "team."

"Sit, please sit!" Richard gestured towards an easy chair across from the desk and then extended his arm to Tommy, Tuppence and Jenny.

Sam sat uneasily and glanced around at the others. Jenny turned and faced out the window, nervously playing with the heavy sable-brown drapes. Tuppence perched on the edge of a polished wingback chair and Tommy, watching her,

shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned against the door.

"So. You think you have a lead." Richard sat and benevolently smiled, steepling his fingers like an indulgent schoolteacher.

"Ah, yes sir. Mr. Greystone..." Sam began, clearing his throat.

"Richard, please."

"Richard, of course. Sure." Sam unbuttoned his suit jacket and absently buttoned it again. "We had a lead on Mia. She was in a place that she calls her study..."

The smile that Richard had on his face faltered momentarily but he regained his composure.

"That's odd," he told them. "She shouldn't have been in..." Light dawned on Richard's face and he wagged a finger at the quartet. "Well, I'm not saying where she should or shouldn't have been. Where do you believe she is *now*?"

"You don't understand," Jenny turned from the window. "Mia is missing."

"Of course she's missing. That's what you're supposed to solve!"

"No, she's really missing," Tommy added. "Again."

Richard's eyes looked from one detective to the others as he slowly stood, gripping his walking stick. "You saw my daughter."

"Yes." Sam quietly replied.

"And now she's truly missing." Richard felt the room become a little too hot and his eyes unfocused the tiniest bit.

"We have this." Tuppence stood and held a hand out to Tommy. He handed her the ransom note and she delicately offered it to Greystone, along with the lock of hair. As he read, sympathy flickered in Tuppence's eyes.

"They're asking for quite a bit of money in exchange for her safe return," she noted quietly.

"Maybe we should call the police after all," Jenny spoke up.

Richard swallowed hard as he read the note a second and third time. When his head lifted his eyes were dark and furious on Sam.

"Who found her?" he demanded.

"I did, sir." Sam stood.

"We all did," Tommy added, standing behind Sam stoically.

"No," Sam argued. "Tommy, you never saw her." He turned and looked into his eyes. "The room was empty when we returned."

Tommy placed a hand on Sam's shoulder and Tuppence's eyebrow raised slightly, taking stock of Tommy's bravado.

"So you were the last to see my daughter unharmed," Richard leaned over the desk.

"Nick wouldn't have hurt her, he's a good man." Jenny sighed and walked over to the group.

Sam's eyes widened in surprise at her admission. She gently placed her hand in his.

"You put my daughter in harm's way."

Richard's voice raised in anger.

"No, I believe *you* did that, sir." Jenny's voice ranged higher. "Offering your daughter as the prize to be chased down!"

"She was never in any real danger! Those weren't our rooms- she wasn't even supposed to..." Richard trailed off.

"Mia told me. But someone knew where she was, and someone else figured out the initial mystery was a ruse." Sam said wearily.

"You're the prime suspect in my book, Jack." Richard snapped out.

Sam's fists clenched. "Then call the cops. I'm clean." As Richard reached for the phone Sam added, "Or you can let us find her for real."

Jenny looked from one man to the other. "Maybe we should do a little of both."

"You have until tomorrow morning at 7am. If you haven't found anything or if, God forbid, something happens to my daughter, you're leaving this place in handcuffs." He walked over to the door and held it open. "Don't even think of leaving the premises. Any of you."

As they walked down the hallway, Tuppence turned to Tommy.

"That little girl, she's really in trouble, isn't she?"

Jenny's eyes widened. "This just hitting you now?" The look she sent Tuppence was one of incredulous disbelief.

"I have a delayed sense of..." Tuppence trailed off.

"Reality?" Jenny finished dryly.

"That's enough." Sam said firmly. "We are the only ones who can find that little girl and we need to be a team. Anything that's said or done from here on out needs to be unanimously agreed upon by the four of us, got it?"

The others nodded. Sam fell into step with Tommy and nudged him gently.

"Hey," Sam began. "Thank you."

Tommy shrugged and smiled. "We're friends. I'm sorry I thought you were trying to set me up. I know what you had wanted to do."

He and Tuppence fell back slightly as Jenny linked her arm in Sam's.

"I know, too. I'm sorry I've been so difficult."

Sam almost laughed aloud. "You...have not been difficult. In fact, you've been remarkably stable, given how nuts I've been acting."

"I find it charming." She grinned at him and he returned the smile, feeling for the moment that things might work out.

"This is all well and good," Al said drolly, "But a little girl is still missing. And time is running out."

"You're going to find her." Sam said simply.

"We all are." Jenny agreed optimistically.

"It's going to take a lot more than just me, Sam." Al shook his head. "There are a hundred people's backgrounds to check, half as many cars and only a finite number of hours before..."

"Cars?" Sam asked, puzzled.

"What?" Jenny looked confused.

"Nothing." Sam muttered.

"The newspaper said Mia's body was found in the trunk of a car Sunday morning. She had suffocated."

At Sam's look of horror and seeing the questions in his eyes, Al continued. "There was no mention of the car's make or model. We're working as fast as we can but you need to find her *before* that happens, got it?"

Sam closed his eyes as horrible images flashed in front of them. Jenny took his hand in hers.

"We will find her."

They spent the rest of the day interviewing and interrogating guests, staff, and actors at the Cozy Inn. Using the pretense of Mia's disappearance to mask the actual kidnapping was taking its toll on them; after being told to 'lighten up' by more than one person, Jenny came very near to throttling Tony the sous chef. Afterwards, she had broken down and sobbed against Sam's shoulder.

"I can't pretend it's not real," she had wept. "I can't pretend that a little girl isn't frightened and in danger."

Sam had taken Jenny up to their room to rest despite her protests to the contrary. Tommy and Tuppence had continued on with the Hamilton actors and Sam promised to check the 'Hats' crew off of their list.

"Isn't it funny?" Tommy had asked Tuppence.

"What?" Tuppence asked as she took a step back. She may have been warming up to Tommy, but she knew in her heart she was a mere juice glass or snagged hem away from a third ruined dress.

"We call them the Hats but only two of them are actually wearing hats today. It's just funny."

"You're right, Tommy, we should call them the Agatha Christies and the Sherlocks, as well as Two Men Wearing Hats and Miss Marple, who's

wearing a mink cape." The slightest curve reached Tuppence's mouth.

Tommy's mouth hung agape.

"Was that a joke? No really, was it?" He had asked incredulously as he followed her out of the room.

Jenny arose later in the afternoon, energized enough to sit down with Miss Marple and Bertha Cool. Sam had let her take the lead in questioning, watching her play her guileless charm to the hilt without giving away an ounce of information. She had to end the interview early due to another allergic reaction, but not before realizing that Bertha and Miss Marple had at least six witnesses eating lunch with them in The Lounge.

"Maybe they're all in on it together," Jenny speculated, sneezing into an embroidered handkerchief.

"It's dusty here," Sam noted, looking around the nook with its overstuffed loveseats and end tables stacked with old magazines.

"Oh, that doesn't bother me, it's only..."

Her reply had been cut off by bickering from further down the hall. Tuppence raced past and was followed closely by Tommy.

"I think you're blind if you don't consider the maid a suspect. Or are her two prominent pals a good enough alibi for you?"

She stopped short when she saw Sam and Jenny. Tommy crashed into her back, knocking her to the ground. Grabbing her hand, he helped her up, twisting her back towards him. Accidentally, two buttons popped off the back of her dress. Yelping, she clutched the sides together and let out a scream of frustration at a flustered Tommy.

"Sorry! I am so sorry! Here..."

She half-heartedly slapped his hands away, resigned to her fate. "Maybe I should just hand you the next one."

"Huh?"

"Nothing." Standing, she scowled at Sam and Jenny. "Is this going to be a problem?"

"Not for me." Sam struggled to keep his laughter at bay.

"Good." Tuppence sighed and sat firmly against a high-backed chair. "Because I'm not going to go change. I'm running out of outfits."

Jenny handed her a softly woven throw from one of the loveseats and was rewarded with a wry smile. Wrapping it around her shoulders loosely, Tuppence looked from one detective to the next.

"So, whodunit?"

Sam looked at Jenny with a sigh. "Well, the kitchen staff is accounted for, as is Sheila at the front desk. Greystone says he was on the phone with a supplier. I think that would be easy enough to check if we had to."

"Also off the hook are Vaughn and Claudia Hamilton," Tuppence added. "They were taking in a movie at the Cineplex."

"That kinda hurts the suspension of disbelief, huh?" Tommy wrinkled his nose, taking a seat next to Jenny.

"Oh, *that's* what's holding you back?" Tuppence snorted and Tommy had the good grace to blush. "I don't think Priscilla Hamilton was more than a name on paper. No one saw the body, so...I suppose she's out."

"And Trenton, Alan the lawyer and Johnson the butler all rested in their rooms after a scene in the hallway." Tommy pointed out.

"I was privy to that scene." Sam muttered. "Do they have alibis?"

Tommy thought for a moment. "Trenton says he took a nap, I think Alan called his wife, and Johnson watched an episode of 'The Addams Family'."

"The Hats were at lunch," Jenny informed Tommy and Tuppence. "That leaves..."

"...About eighty other people unaccounted for." Sam said with a sigh.

All four of them fell back against their chairs and pondered which resident of the Cozy Inn had malice in their heart.

About an hour later, Sam had convinced them to wander through the Inn's parking lot with him. It was unseasonably cool for September in Connecticut so they had layered up with whatever they had in their rooms.

Jenny's fitted orange parka didn't exactly jive with her draped gown, as she jokingly pointed out. Sam liked it better than the red and green flannel coat over his ensemble.

"Nick Charles, big game hunter." Jenny decided. She pointed towards the approaching Tuppence and Tommy. The former was wearing a fitted black jacket and marigold scarf wrapped four times around her neck and the latter a shiny Patriots jacket and an orange wool cap.

"Well," Jenny stated. "Goodbye Nick, Nora, Tommy and Tuppence. Hello Nick, Jenny..." She pointed to Tuppence.

"Claire..." Tuppence added.

"Hey! No." Tommy shook his head vigorously. "Are we not still detectives? Has our case been solved? We can't afford to jinx anything!"

"And Tommy." Jenny finished with a grin. She turned to share a smile with Sam but he seemed distant and melancholy.

"Darling...?"

Sam turned back, worry evident in his eyes. "I have no idea where she is."

Al, having recently popped in, pocketed the hand link and looked at Sam. "Me neither."

"You have to find her!" Sam said, angrily.

"Me?" Al raised his eyebrows.

"Me?" Jenny looked concerned. "I'm trying, Nick!"

"No, I'm sorry," Sam apologized to Jenny. "I'm sorry," he told Al. "I'm just wondering...what I'm doing here. Have I messed this all up beyond belief?"

"No!" came the chorus from three bundled detectives and one nattily dressed hologram. Sam shrugged and started walking between cars.

"What are we looking for?" Tuppence warily asked.

"Clues." Sam simply said.

The five of them spread out and searched under, inside and around forty cars in the Inn's lot. Sam, frustrated, threw his hands up in the air.

"This doesn't even include cars parked off the grounds!"

"She was found here. On the Inn's property." Al told him quietly. "She's just not here yet. You're too early."

"How can I be too early?" Sam hissed under his breath. "A child is missing and she's not dead yet- so you say- but she's going to be here, in one of these cars! Some...time in the next twenty hours...What am I supposed to do?"

"You need to find her before she's brought out here, that's your only hope." Sam opened his mouth to protest, but Al's voice raised above his. "We have a copy of the autopsy report. She was drugged, Sam. You wouldn't hear her even if she were here."

Sam scrubbed his hands over his face and wondered if God, Fate, or Time were trying to teach him a lesson with this Leap. He offered up a silent prayer that he'd do whatever it took- change however they wanted him to- if this innocent child could be returned unharmed.

"Hey!" Tommy's voice called out from near the Inn's doors. "I think I found something!"

The others hurried over to see what he'd discovered. As they approached, he held up a bright red ribbon. "Does this look familiar?"

Sam possessed a photographic memory but almost didn't need to call upon it to place the accessory. He closed his eyes and saw, with startling clarity, a freshly innocent smile, laughing eyes and a dark, swinging ponytail. Tied with a shiny red ribbon.

"Mia's," Sam whispered softly. Jenny placed a hand on his and looked worried. Al took out his hand link and then a cigar which he placed in his mouth.

"I'll...keep looking at info that you already know." Al sighed and stepped through the Imaging chamber door. It closed, leaving a faint blue glow.

Tuppence sat on a small bench near the front door and placed her forehead in her hands. Tommy shoved his fists into his pockets and toed the dirt. After a moment he stopped, leaning down to the ground.

"I think I've found something else."

Sets of footprints were punctuated by dots in the ground. Sam crouched to the ground to get a closer look. Glancing down at his own shoes he said, "Maybe a man's size 11 or 12?"

"It doesn't exactly prove anything."

Tuppence said softly.

"What do you mean? It's a clue, isn't it?"

Jenny snapped at her.

"No," Sam laid a steadying hand on Jenny's wrist. "Tuppence is right. It just proves that a man, any man, was by the front door. Maybe yesterday, maybe this morning. It's not going to help us."

Jenny sighed deeply, giving Tuppence an apologetic look. Sam looked up at the skies as if waiting for inspiration. Only Tommy continued to stare at the footprints.

"Huh." He said.

"Hmm?" Sam asked half-heartedly, looking over at Tommy.

"It's funny. Dot line line. It's almost like Morse code. Well, it would be if the footprints were horizontal...but that would be ridiculous!" Tommy laughed and then stopped abruptly at the eyes trained on him.

"Tommy," Sam said quietly but full of urgency. "What does that mean?"

"Huh?"

"Dot line line!" Jenny asked impatiently. "What does that stand for in Morse code?"

"Oh!" He thought for a minute, during which time the other detectives held their breaths. "W. It stands for the letter w."

By the time they got back to their room Sam was fighting a headache the size of a small nation. He flopped onto the bed, forgetting impropriety. Jenny climbed onto the bed next to him and buried her face in a pillow, mumbling something.

"What?" Sam asked.

"I said...what a mess," came the muffled reply. Sam could only agree.

"What do you think about tonight?" Jenny asked, turning her head to the side so that her hair fanned out into a dark halo.

"What's tonight?" Sam was surprised he could even remember his own name at this point.

"Dancing, drinks, general good times at The Lounge." She smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"I was thinking I'd call it an early night, if that's okay." Sam closed his eyes and tried to

think, tried to place anything said or done that was out of the ordinary.

Soft lips pressed against his and he found himself pinned underneath a very warm, very lovely body.

"I like early nights," she whispered.

"Jenny." Sam placed his hands on her face to steady her. "Jenny, no. I can't..."

She sat up, hurt, and stared at him.

"You're not interested in Tuppence...and you're not interested in me. That's fascinating, Nick." She crawled off the bed and stood with her hands on her hips.

"No, Jenny." Sam pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. "You are so interesting...I mean, I'm interested. Really. I just can't do it right now."

"Sounds like a personal problem to me." With that, she stormed into the bathroom and shut the door.

Sam wanted to believe that was that, and soon Jenny would reenter the room, refreshed, forgiving and...quiet. They could spend a lovely night of sleeping in silence and when he woke up, the answer would just appear to him. He could almost picture it. His eyes closed again and he steadied his breathing.

Twenty minutes later the bathroom door was flung open and out Jenny stalked, dressed in a sleek and curve-hugging ivory silk, and the gathered material plunged low to reveal more than a glimpse of lovely décolletage. Apparently a 'heaving bosom' wasn't a made up term for romantic novels, he acknowledged to himself. His second thought was that Al would smack him for his first thought.

"You're a vision, Jenny." He took in her side-swept hair, the pearls she had adorned herself with and the faint scent that wafted from her skin. A weaker man's mouth would have watered. Sam stoically reminded himself that he had no business cuddling up to a pretty little cocktail waitress when a child's life was on the line. She bent to adjust her shoes and he closed his eyes and mind against the onslaught of non-helpful images.

"I'm going out." She said simply.

"Like that?" Her eyes narrowed and regretted his choice of words. "I mean...where are you going?"

"To dinner. And to have a drink. And perhaps to let someone dance with me." She tossed her hair over her shoulder as she searched for her clutch.

"Who?" Sam didn't care for the tug of jealousy in his stomach.

"Sam."

"What?"

"Sam Spade." Jenny sighed impatiently. "Or Archie Goodwin. Heck, even Poirot. I'm going out."

He watched her turn and start for the door. Looking over her shoulder she slowly winked.

"Don't wait up."

When the door clicked behind her Sam fell back onto the pillows and shut his eyes. A moment later he reopened them and stared at the easy chair. Dragging himself up and over to it, he shifted around and prepared for a long and uncomfortable night.

Later, much later that evening, the door silently opened and a shadow fell into the room. A figure tip-toed over to the easy chair and peered down at Sam's sleeping form. Leaning down, the figure lightly kissed Sam on the forehead.

Opening his eyes, Sam saw Jenny before him. Bolting upright in the chair, he grabbed her hand.

"Is everything okay?"

"You are such a good guy." She whispered. "I'm sorry I behaved awfully."

He shook his head. "I'm a rotten date."

"You're a gentleman. Something I keep forgetting that I've been wanting for a long, long time."

"Oh, I..." Sam felt a little flustered.

"But that's not why I came back.

I...remembered something, Nick." She crouched down beside him and stared into his eyes. "Dot line line. Those footprints."

"Yeah?"

"Couldn't that do be from a cane? Or a walking stick?"

Sam thought for a moment and nodded.

That had been bothering him too, though not for the reason that she suspected.

"We'll talk to Greystone in the morning."

The morning came all too soon for Sam, who still had no idea where Mia was or who the kidnapper was. As he and Jenny readied themselves, he ran the case and its details in his head. When she came out of the bathroom in a trim blue skirt and jacket, he allowed himself a smile.

"As usual, you look great."

"This is my 'smiling pretty for the judge' outfit. And the last one I brought with me. Just wait." At that, she carefully pinned a small blue hat and short veil to her wavy hair.

"I'd pay your bail." Sam grinned at her. He buttoned his black suit jacket over a white silk

shirt and hoped he looked enough like Perry Mason to pull this off.

At 7am sharp, Greystone's office was filled to capacity. Sam Spade, Charlie Chan and Archie Goodwin were squeezed on the wide windowsill, Poirot and Miss Marple had taken the love seat, Bertha Cool was standing importantly behind the desk and two of the Sherlocks- Sam still couldn't keep them separate in his mind- were perusing the bookshelf together, all animosity apparently forgotten. The actors, Claudia, Vaughn, Alan, Johnson, Trenton and Yvonne, were huddled by the door, deep in conversation. Sam was standing with Jenny, Tuppence and Tommy against the back wall, and as he looked at them, he was vaguely surprised at how united they seemed.

Greystone walked in stiffly, followed by Tony and Sheila. As he closed the door, a dark-suited Al snuck in and tipped his fedora to Sam. Leaning an arm against the wall, half of his hologram form disappeared and he sighed.

"I was going for Bogey casual." He informed Sam. "I guess I'll have to settle for Bogey upright."

Greystone strode to his desk, aided by his walking stick. With it, he gestured for Bertha Cool to move aside and she huffily did. The room was silent and all eyes were on Greystone.

"Most of you know that my daughter Mia is missing." He began slowly, scanning the room. All heads nodded. "Only a select few know that the danger is all too recent...and all too real."

"What?" The Hats all stood up in surprise.

"Beyond the competition?" A stunned Miss Marple asked.

"Is there an extra prize?" The shorter of the two Sherlocks asked, receiving a poke from the taller, less-British one.

Greystone continued, "The man who saw her last is standing right here." He gestured towards Sam and all eyes shifted. "And he's been granted one chance to defend himself."

The room was silent as Sam stepped forward. "Hi."

"The man who saw her last and who will see her safely home is standing right here," Jenny voiced as she stepped forward.

"I suppose you're wondering why we've called all of you here today," Tommy began as he stepped forward as well.

"How long have you been waiting to say that one?" Tuppence asked bemusedly as she joined her team in the center of the room.

Sam looked at the three of them and mustered a smile at their solidarity – he only wished he had more to go on than speculations and inconsistencies.

"Mr. Greystone," he began, "Why did you allow me this chance?"

"I don't follow." Greystone said nervously.

"Your daughter is missing. In your eyes I'm a prime suspect. No matter how much I might proclaim my innocence and my willingness to help, your daughter is still missing and time is running out. Why did you allow me to roam the hotel? Why didn't you immediately call the police?"

"Uh, Nick," Tommy whispered. "This is your big defense?"

Richard Greystone seemed flustered. "You were convincing...and I didn't want to involve the other guests, or the police, or..."

"Why?" Tuppence asked pointedly.

"My relationship with the Hartford Police Department is...strained. We've had two incidents in the past six months."

At that, both Claudia and Trenton both snorted under their breaths.

"Food poisoning and car theft by a staff member?" Claudia rolled her eyes at Trenton.

"They frown on that, the police do,"

Trenton added sarcastically. When Richard turned and glared they looked appropriately subdued.

"And a third incident would...?" Jenny prompted.

"Force them to pull my convention permit. I can't afford that. This inn is my life!" Greystone pleaded.

"Your daughter should be your life!" Sam snapped.

"She is, she is!" Greystone protested. "I know in my heart that this 'kidnapping' is just an overenthusiastic guest or a misunderstanding! Mia will be fine, I have to hope that!"

"How do we know you're on the straight and narrow about her kidnapping?" Tommy stepped forward and pointed an accusing finger at Richard.

"Mr. Beresford!" Greystone said, shocked.

"No, Tommy, it's okay. Mr. Greystone may have slightly shaky priorities but he's not responsible for Mia's disappearance." Sam turned and paced the room, deep in thought.

"So, uh, the kid's gone for real?" Archie Goodwin stood and raised a hand, looking around. At the utter silence he seated himself and cleared his throat.

"Nora, what did we see last night?" Sam turned to Jenny expectantly.

"Give me a little help here, sugar." Jenny looked blankly at Sam and then it dawned on her. "Oh! Footprints. We found Mia's red ribbon and a set of footprints next to it." As she dug in her purse for the ribbon she looked up at Greystone.

"There was an imprint of a walking stick," she said deliberately as she handed it to him. He clutched at it desperately.

"I didn't kidnap my own daughter!"

Greystone cried.

"No." Sam said softly. "Nor would the appearance of your footprints in front of your inn be enough evidence of a crime. But it is, however, evidence that you're being framed."

At that, the room was abuzz with gasps and whispers. Poirot stood up and irately pointed a finger at Sam.

"You, sir, are very good at shifting blame around. Why in heaven's name would his footprints be indicative of framing?"

"Because they weren't his footprints!"

Tommy said loudly, covering his mouth a moment later as all eyes studied him. At Sam's nod of approval he continued. "Someone wanted us to believe that Greystone set up another mystery involving his daughter so that we wouldn't suspect anyone else...and at the same time frazzle Greystone into paying the ransom so the cops wouldn't have to be involved!"

"That's kind of a stretch, Tommy. How do you know?" Tuppence bit her lip, disbelieving.

"Do you remember what I said when I saw the prints?" Tommy prompted her. She shook her head and then paused.

"Morse code?" At his grin she continued proudly, "Dot line line! W!"

"Morse code! Are you understanding any of this?" Bertha said under her breath as she walked over to Miss Marple.

"I think they've all been drinking." Miss Marple sniffed, utterly confused.

"But it wasn't a 'W' that we were looking for," Sam pointed out to the room. "The only reason Morse code was important is that it made us look harder at the footprints. And when we did..."

"It was obvious that dot line line isn't Richard's, uh, code. His footprints would be line line dot. He's right handed." Tommy finished triumphantly.

All eyes turned to Greystone, currently clutching his mahogany walking stick in his right hand. He let out a sigh of relief but everyone else in the room started murmuring again. Vaughn crossed his arms in front of his chest and sighed, bored.

"Okay, so Greystone *didn't* do it. Who did?"

Tommy turned to Sam, giving him the faintest of shrugs. Sam eyed Tuppence questioningly.

"Tuppence?"

"I didn't do it!" She exclaimed. Sam sighed and Tuppence flushed slightly.

"Oh," she said in a small voice. Then she began to think. "Whoever did it...wanted us to

think Greystone did it. That's personal. So...who knew Greystone before this weekend?"

The Hamilton actors tentatively raised their hands, as did Miss Marple, Archie Goodwin, Sheila and Tony. Sam walked over to the actors first.

"How long have you been working here?" He asked them.

Johnson spoke first. "Five years for most of us." He looked around and the others nodded in agreement. "We run this show, or a variation of it, in rep. Repertory."

"We used to do shows all over New England but we're pretty much based out of this Cozy Inn franchise. People don't pay for murder like they used to." Alan added.

"And you?" Jenny signaled to Miss Marple. "How do you know Richard?"

Miss Marple straightened and stared at Greystone. "I've been attending this Mystery Weekend since 1964, back when Mrs. Greystone was running the place. My niece."

"Mia's mother," Richard added softly. "She died in '71. Car wreck," he said to the room at large.

"How about you two, have you been here long?" Sam turned and looked at Sheila and Tony.

"Since May." Sheila said nervously.

"Like a month, man." Tony said, completely done with mysteries, disappearances and pointing detectives.

"That leaves...you." Jenny rubbed her nose and turned to Archie Goodwin. "How do you fit in?"

Archie exchanged a glance with Greystone, who nodded and sighed.

"I used to be his bookie. A long time ago," Archie clarified. "Now I'm just an honest to God mystery buff...and Greystone's accountant."

More than a few eyebrows rose at that. Sam turned to Al, who in turn tapped his watch. Pressing his eyes, Sam circled the room.

"Okay. Really quick review. Where was everyone yesterday at 12:30pm?" Sam walked around and pointed at various people as he spoke. "Lunch in The Lounge, at a movie, making a phone call, watching *The Addams Family*, taking a nap, prepping in the kitchen..."

Al looked up and stared at the people Sam was questioning. He began furiously punching keys on the hand link and begged Ziggy to hurry up.

"Come on, thatta girl..."

Just then, Jenny sneezed. And sneezed again. Coughing and rubbing her eyes, she turned to Sam.

"Can I take off for a second? I need my allergy pills."

"We don't have a second, *Nora*," Tuppence said from between her teeth. "Nick needs us now."

Sam's head snapped up.

"Jenny...uh, I mean *Nora*!" He walked over and grabbed her shoulders. Her eyes grew huge.

"You had an allergy attack yesterday in the room where *Mia* was taken. Then twice more when we were interviewing people's whereabouts! Are you allergic to more than one thing?"

"No..." Jenny shook her head, confused and more than a little concerned. Sam took a deep breath and looked around the room.

"*Nora*," he began, searching people's faces. "What are you allergic to?"

"Pet dander," she said simply. "Fur."

Everyone frantically looked around the room, unsure as to whom or what had just been revealed as the culprit.

"Do you remember to whom you were speaking when the allergies began?" Sam prodded, seeing the light dawn in Jenny's eyes.

"Yes." Jenny nodded and she pointed. "For starters, her."

Everyone swiveled and stared at Miss Marple, who gasped and clutched her chest.

"You think I kidnapped that precious child?" Miss Marple looked stunned and rather pale.

"No."

Sam shook his head. The rest of the room looked confused. Tommy cocked his head to the side and Tuppence raised an arched brow.

"Could you go stand next to Miss Marple?" Sam asked Jenny.

She did so. Jenny took a deep breath and...nothing happened.

"It's not her, Nick."

"Of course it's not!" Tuppence realized. "Her mink cape with the pretty white bow? She wore it yesterday but not today."

"It's too warm for mink today..." Miss Marple trailed off, confused.

"So that leaves..." Tommy began.

"Them." Jenny pointed at the Hamilton actors. "The second allergic reaction occurred during my interview of Alan, Trenton and Johnson."

Sam gave a sweeping gesture towards Jenny and she took a step forward. All three men looked extremely nervous and glanced around the room.

Jenny stopped a foot away from the men and sneezed. She pointed.

"I will not stand here to be sniffed!"

Johnson cried in outrage.

"Bingo." Jenny said softly.

The room erupted in angry voices either defending or vilifying Johnson.

"Where is she, you monster?" Greystone waved his walking stick above his head and grew increasingly red in the face.

"Just because he smells like animal fur doesn't make him a kidnapper!" Claudia shrieked and batted away Archie, who was attempting to subdue Johnson.

"I do *not* smell like animal fur," Johnson spat at Claudia and shoved out at the encroaching men.

"Sam, The Addams Family is on at 8am!" Al called above the mêlée. He smacked the hand link triumphantly.

"The Addams Family is on at 8am!" Sam shouted.

The room grew silent and Johnson stopped struggling. Sam stared at Al uncomprehendingly. Only Tommy looked reverently at Sam and spoke up.

"You're brilliant." He turned to Johnson. "You couldn't have been watching The Addams Family at 12:30 because..."

"Because in the fall of 1974...on Saturday mornings..." Al continued smugly.

"It was on at 8am." Tommy and Al finished.

It was quiet for a moment as Al bowed to the room and everyone else let it sink in. Then, just as it had moments before, the room exploded with sound and activity. Greystone rounded his desk as quickly as he could and pinned Johnson to the wall.

"Where is she? Where is my daughter?" He screamed into the butler's face.

Defeated, cornered and more than a little frightened, he told him.

"She's in the trunk of my car, a '70 tan Ford Falcon. I gave her a sleeping pill to calm her down. She's fine. The trunk's unlocked. She was never in any real danger..."

Archie and Sam Spade raced out of the room towards the parking lot. Greystone looked between Johnson and the retreating figures, deciding upon the latter. Gripping his walking stick he rushed out of the room and called out to his daughter.

Johnson eyed the detectives' momentary distraction and tried to make a break for it. Sam grabbed him, slugged him once across the jaw and watched him slide to the floor.

"Atta boy, Sam!" Al mimed a punch into the air and then tapped ash from his cigar in the direction of Johnson.

Jenny crouched in front of Johnson and wrinkled her nose.

"Excuse me...this may be poor timing, but why am I allergic to you?"

As Johnson held his jaw, Vaughn snickered and rubbed a hand over the middle-aged man's thick hair. Johnson batted it away and closed his eyes in exhaustion.

"Couldn't you tell?" Vaughn told Jenny. "He's wearing a piece."

"A wha?" Tommy looked confused.

"A wig. Apparently made of pet fur."

"It's high quality alpaca hair! It cost a mint!" Johnson sneered at his fellow actor. Al snorted and decided that Sam should hit him again for that alone.

"You're scum, Mike," Alan told Johnson.

"I didn't want to hurt anyone," Johnson whined. "Greystone owes me!"

"Owes you?" Trenton took a step away in disgust. "Sure he's a lousy boss, but come on! His kid? She's seven!"

"He's been slicing and dicing our performance pay for years. Benefits are all but gone...and did you know that he's canning the show?" Johnson looked between his fellow actors. "Yeah, next fall is a "write your own" mystery weekend! Awful! The way I see it, he owes me three years of *full* back pay, gas money, plus room and board!"

"You couldn't find work someone else?" Tuppence couldn't believe what she was hearing. This man was certifiable.

"I'm a non-Equity actor in Hartford!" He wailed.

"You hurt his *daughter*..." Claudia looked coldly at Johnson.

"She's fine." He paused and looked around the room. "I think." Holding his head in his hands he fell to pieces. "I needed the money..."

Al punched more keys and muttered something about menaces to society and loony-toon actors. After a moment he sighed with relief.

"You did it, Sam. Mia's fine. A little shaken up, but no permanent trauma. As for the rest of your crew..."

He trailed off as two plump ladies in Victorian garb poked their heads through the open door.

"Oh, I *do* hope to be invited to solve the "special" mystery next time..." One said to the other.

"It does look like simply marvelous fun," the second lady agreed.

Bertha Cool turned to Charlie Chan and decided that, eyeliner or not, she needed a partner in crime as well.

"I've been thinking of giving up this mystery hooley and taking up horticulture. Whaddaya say, Chuck?"

Charlie Chan pondered this for a moment. "Ancient Chinese proverb," he began. "This place is nuts. Let's go grab a beer."

Later that morning, as Sam packed shirts into the open suitcase on the bed, Jenny came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his midsection.

"I'm proud of you," she told him.

"Yeah?" He grinned, pulling her around to kiss her forehead. "Proud of you, too. That was some good detecting out there."

She smiled and dropped onto the bed.

"Nick..." she began.

She was interrupted by a knocking on the door. Sam raised an eyebrow at Jenny and she laughed.

"Hey, you're the one who opened the door in the first place!"

"At someone else's insistence, might I add..." Sam teased as he grabbed the doorknob.

Standing in the hallway were Richard and Mia Greystone. Mia was dressed in overalls and pigtailed and was clutching the hand of her very relieved father. Sam knelt down in front of her and smiled.

"Hey you."

Mia launched herself into Sam's arms and buried her face in his shoulder. Her father took a step forward and placed a loving hand on her head.

"I had wanted her to rest," he told them.

"But she just had to thank the man who saved her life."

"My Daddy told me you're a very good detective," Mia smiled at Sam. "And you too," she told Jenny.

"Are you okay, Mia?" Sam asked Jenny.

"I'm cool. That wacko didn't hurt me...he just made my head feel funny. And Daddy said the cops will make sure he's taken care of. So that's good."

Sam looked up at Greystone, impressed. Richard shrugged proudly.

"She's a tough one, my Mia." He ruffled her hair and then wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Needless to say, she won't be part of any mystery weekends from here on out."

"Good," Sam said, smiling at Mia. "That's really good to hear."

Suddenly, there was a knock on the doorframe and Tuppence poked her head in.

"Is this a private party?" She grinned down at Mia. "Good to see your face, Nancy Drew."

She leaned against the doorframe and added, "We just wanted to say goodbye."

"We?" Jenny asked, interested.

"Hey Claire, I put the bags down front by the- oh, hi you guys!" Tommy's mile-wide grin grew even bigger at the sight of Mia surrounded by his friends.

Mia turned and wrapped her arms around Tommy's waist, pillowing her head on his ribcage.

"Thank you," she solemnly told him. "My Daddy told me you're an ace detective as well."

"Oh," Tommy said, flushing crimson with pleasure and embarrassment. "I was happy to be of use."

"Well, it goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway," Richard stated grandly. "I owe you a million- more, even- for finding my baby. You are welcome- and complimentary- guests of Hartford's Cozy Inn whenever you'd like."

Jenny grinned at Sam, who had the presence of mind to nod graciously.

"That said, are you staying for the closing luncheon?" Richard asked. "Care to try your hand at solving the mystery of Priscilla Hamilton's untimely demise?"

Sam coughed. Jenny suddenly became extremely busy repacking one of Sam's shirts. Tommy pretended not to hear. Only Tuppence cleared her throat and declined.

"I think we've had more than our share of mysteries for the weekend. Let's save some for the other guests!" Tuppence said diplomatically.

"Besides," Tommy added eagerly. "We've got to go to New Haven and prepare for a convention we just found about!"

"Oh yeah?" Sam asked, looking between Tuppence and Tommy with more than a little surprise.

"Yep," Tommy said. "We didn't even know we had this in common!"

"What?" Jenny wondered.

"Science fiction," Tommy and Tuppence answered together.

Sam let out a genuinely pleased laugh and Jenny wished the two of them luck. As they prepared to leave, the sound of the Imaging Chamber door made Sam turn his head.

Al, dressed in his "normal" clothes of a shiny silver suit and bright purple tie, stood with his cigar in his mouth and the hand link in one pocket.

"I'd ask them to hang on a second," Al said cryptically.

"Hey, uh, you guys..." Sam blurted out then turned back to Al, utterly confused.

"Ask them what they really do..." Al prompted.

"We never found out much about each other's real lives. What do you...do for a career?"

"I'm kind of a writer, too," Tommy blushed. "Nowhere near the level of stuff you've done, Nick."

Sam thanked his lucky stars that the work of Nick Troy hadn't yet come up and he hoped that right now wouldn't be that moment. He had never heard of him, personally.

"You need more confidence, Billy,"

Tuppence chided. "I'm looking forward to reading your stories. I work in a publishing house," she told them. "I'm kind of a glorified secretary but I get to pass along the occasional novel."

Sam nodded politely, wondering what heck Al was getting at when suddenly it hit him. The

quick look he shot at Al was answered with a wry grin. Sam's mouth hung open.

"You're Billy and Claire Simmons!" Sam couldn't help but feel a little awestruck.

Jenny coughed, Tommy flushed even redder but Tuppence laughed.

"Wow, Nick. One thing at a time okay?"

"Nice going, Sam. They're not married yet." Al shook his head at his buddy's reaction. "But I think you know what you have to do..."

Sam crouched down next to Mia and looked back up at the future Mr. and Mrs. Simmons.

"Well, maybe you guys could work on a sci fi project together...maybe a series about something for all ages," Sam said and then turned to Mia. "Wouldn't it be cool to read about time travel?"

"That would be awesome!" Mia's eyes widened. "Maybe with a mystery or something in the future?"

Tuppence and Tommy exchanged an amused and pensive look.

"Now *that*," Tuppence smiled at Tommy. "Would be one step at a time."

As the group gave ideas and input for a young adult series of books, Sam turned and laughed aloud.

"You knew this whole time."

"Huh?" Jenny wondered if this whole 'talking to himself' thing would always be as cute as it was now.

"Sorry, nothing." Sam held her close and grinned at Al over her shoulder.

Al shrugged innocently.

"Just a happy coincidence, I suppose. Well, it worked, Sam. No matter how many times he accidentally ruined her wardrobe, she saw through the klutzy goofball to the genuinely good guy beneath. And maybe he was just the doofus to thaw her icy demeanor." He checked his hand link and grinned. "Yep. You've done it. Billy Simmons and Claire Shaw go on to have a daughter, Emily, and a son, Jack. They also, as you may well have guessed, continue on to pen a hit series about a time traveling family from the future that solves mysteries in the past. The first book was called..."

"Meet the Bartletts," Sam murmured.

All conversation stopped. Tommy and Tuppence turned and stared at Sam and Jenny.

"Hey, that's good...can we use that?"

Tommy wondered.

Sam nodded mutely. He glanced over his shoulder at Al, who was hooting with laughter.

"Oh, this keeps getting better and better. That book," he continued, wiping his eyes, was one of your favorites in your spare time at M.I.T. Later on, when we were working together at Project Star Bright, you came to me with this crazy

cockamamie idea about funding for Project Quantum Leap. And I was sitting there..."

"Reading it..." Sam marveled.

"Reading it," Al finished with a smile. "Nice, huh? And as for you and Jenny..."

Sam wrapped his arms around Jenny's waist and leaned down to kiss her on the nose. She smiled up at him and rose up on her tiptoes to kiss him deeply.

"Ooh...kay..." Al grinned and took a step back. "I think they'll be just fine."

"Sorry about our first date," Sam told Jenny apologetically.

"That's okay," she replied, kissing him lightly. "I have a feeling our second one will be better. And our third...and fourth..."

He tilted her face up to kiss her fully and she returned it passionately. A moment later he pulled back and looked quizzically at the Greystones.

"So who *did* kill Priscilla Hamilton?"

Richard cleared his throat as the other detectives turned and stared.

"Unfortunately...that was also Mike, er, Johnson. We're having his final confession, uh, read from behind bars."

Sam looked over once at Al, raised an eyebrow and then leaned in towards Jenny. He closed his eyes, smiling as he kissed Jenny. He knew what Al was about to say.

"I'm surprised at you, Sam," Al began as Sam started to laugh. "It is always, *always*, the butler."

And then Sam Leaped.

Second Place: No Greater Leap By Rick Chambers

—crystalline light ... whirlwind of sound ... a new
reality—

He stood with his back to a cold, driving rain, staring at the end of another man's nose. Pointing at it, in fact, with the back of a cheap ballpoint pen.

And Sam Beckett could see that this man definitely was not happy.

From beneath an umbrella, the stranger angrily slapped Sam's pen away. It tumbled through the air and landed in a puddle in the nearby street.

"This has gone far enough, Scryber!" he hissed. "You'd better drop this misguided crusade of yours before somebody gets hurt! Do you understand?"

"I ... uh ..."

The man didn't wait for a coherent response. He turned and stormed off, taking his umbrella with him and leaving Sam fully exposed to the downpour. A slim notepad tucked in Sam's left hand offered no protection. Still a little disoriented from his leap into the present, Sam turned to a simple task: He stepped over to the curb and bent down to pick up his pen.

Just as a car drove through the puddle.

Cold, brown water sprayed upward and drenched him. The chill seeped through Sam's thin jacket, settling into his bones. After a long, uncomfortable moment, he groaned and straightened up, turning his face to the sky so the rain could wash away the gritty film.

"Oh-h-h ... b—"

A slice of the world in front of him suddenly vanished, startling him. In its place was a doorway of white light framing a familiar silhouette. Then the light disappeared, leaving a man in a baggy olive-green suit and gaudy orange shirt, clutching a smoldering cigar.

"Well," said the newcomer, studying Sam with a sparkle of amusement in his eyes. "You didn't waste any time diving into this leap."

Sam gave him a pained look. "Very funny, Al."

In the span of a few moments, Sam Beckett had leaped into another man's life, he'd been yelled at, threatened and soaked to the skin by mud and rain. The humor of it eluded him.

Still, Sam was glad to see his best friend — his only friend, in fact, on this crazy odyssey through time. A scientific genius, Sam and his experiment to prove the feasibility of time travel had been all too successful. Now he found himself leaping from life to life, sent by God or Time or Whoever to fix the snags in the fabric of history, setting right what once went wrong. Traveling alongside was Al — but only as a holographic projection, seen and heard by Sam alone.

Untouchable, perhaps, but no less welcome.

Equally untouched by the driving rain, a comfortably dry Al pointed up the block to a barber shop. "You'd better get under that awning over there before you catch your death," he said. Sam wiped the last of the brown grit from his face and followed. As they reached the awning, Al began pushing jelly-bean-colored buttons on his computer handlink.

"Whatever I'm here to do, I hope it can wait until I get into some dry clothes," Sam said, shaking water from his dripping hair.

Al puffed his cigar vigorously. "Looks like it. We already know quite a bit about this leap. The guy you leaped into began talking a blue streak the moment he woke up in the waiting room. Ziggy's putting the data together now, and we should know why you're here any second." He stared at the silent handlink. And stared. And stared. "Yep. Any second."

Sam masked a smile. "While we're waiting for Ziggy's processors to warm up, maybe you can tell me what you already know."

"Yeah, sure." Al peered at the handlink display. "The date is October 11, 1982. Your name is Jesse Scryber, you're 25 years old, and you're a repo."

"A what?"

Frowning, Al smacked the side of the handlink, prompting an electronic squeal. "Sorry. You're a reporter. You work for the Daily Gazette, a small-town newspaper in Kellarville, Michigan."

He glanced at their rain-washed surroundings, drawing a smoky halo over them with his cigar. "And if this is downtown Kellarville, 'small' doesn't do it justice. What a two-bit burg!"

"Al..."

"Okay, okay. Sheesh! Anyone ever tell you you're a real grouch when you're soaking wet?"

Sam stared daggers. Al shrugged and went back to his handlink.

"Scryber has been in Kellarville for three years, ever since he graduated from college with a journalism degree. He's desperate to make a name for himself and move on to a bigger paper, but the stuff he covers around here isn't exactly Pulitzer material, if you get my drift."

"So what am I here to do? To write the big story for him or something?" asked Sam.

"Hang on," Al replied, jabbing the handlink again. "Ziggy's answer is coming through right ... about ... now! Okay, let's see, looks like you're here to..."

Al stopped. He looked up slowly, his face suddenly sober, all hint of teasing gone.

"You're here to save a little girl from being poisoned to death."

* * *

Leaping around in time has landed me in a lot of desperate situations. Each time, the longer I live someone else's life, the more I feel a ... a connection with the person I'm there to help. The urge to make things right gets more and more intense, whatever the circumstances. Every leap is important. But nothing gets my attention faster than knowing that the person in trouble, the one I've come to save, is a child.

* * *

The downpour was heavy but brief. Sunshine peeked through cracks in the gray autumn clouds as the storm moved on. Still dripping wet, Sam welcomed the warming rays as he and Al walked the otherwise empty sidewalks of downtown Kellarville.

"That's all Ziggy has?" Sam asked. "A little girl is going to be poisoned, and I have to save her? What little girl? Where is she? How is she poisoned?"

Al looked apologetic. "We're, uh, not real sure about that yet."

"Not sure? Al, you said you knew a lot about this leap!"

"Well, compared to some leaps, we do. To others, not so much." He tried to hide his face behind the handlink. "Anyway, Ziggy has a theory. Scryber has been working on an investigative news story about a local aluminum factory called Stylcorp. It's the biggest employer in Kellarville,

almost 200 people. Ziggy says there's a 74 percent chance the poisoning has something to do with the plant. So all you've got to do is ... figure out what."

At least Al had the good sense to look embarrassed.

"You wouldn't happen to have the little girl's name, would you?" asked Sam.

Al shook his head. "This is a teeny tiny town in the middle of nowhere, Sam. There's not much about it in the data archives. The Gazette burned down in '93, and a lot of back issues were destroyed. All we know is that sometime in the next 14 hours, nine people in Kellarville are going to be poisoned, and a little girl is going to die. Ziggy's trying to piece together the rest from other sources, but it's going to take some time."

Sam swallowed his frustration. Nagging Al wouldn't help; neither would hounding a computer like Ziggy. They were doing their best. Sam would have to settle for that.

"Okay," he said. "You keep working on Scryber. See what else you can get out of him about his news story."

"What about you?"

Sam pointed toward a small brick building across the street. Gold lettering on the front window said *Kellarville Daily Gazette*.

"There's the newspaper. I'll go in there and see if I can find Scryber's files. Maybe that will help us figure out what's going on."

Al agreed and wished Sam luck. Then he touched a button on his handlink and vanished through the white doorway.

Sam approached the Gazette building with some trepidation. This would be a new experience for him. He had seven graduate degrees, the key one being in physics, along with doctorates in music and medicine. But not one of his educational accomplishments included journalism. Apart from a couple of leaps into TV personalities, the closest he'd been to the Fourth Estate was editing the Physics Club newsletter at MIT – a far cry from a daily newspaper. He wasn't sure what to expect.

Sam stepped through the front door into the tiny lobby. The gum-snapping woman at the reception desk, deep into the latest issue of *Cosmo*, ignored him. He mumbled a greeting and walked past her to a short hallway, following the sharp "clackety-clack" sound of typewriters until he found the newsroom.

He was accosted the moment he entered it.

"Jesse! It's about time you got here!"

An attractive young woman with short brown hair and laser-blue eyes sat at a battered steel desk, one of three in the small newsroom. She pierced Sam with a fierce scowl. He caught

her name on a small nameplate stuck to the desk – it read *Alison Taylor*.

“Yeah, I, uh, was trying to do an interview—”

Alison cut him off. “Spare me yet another complaint about how Rodney Styles won’t talk to you. I’m the front-page editor today, and you still haven’t filed your county board story from last night.”

“Uh ... I haven’t?”

The woman rolled her eyes and pointed sternly at an empty desk – Jesse Scryber’s berth, no doubt. Lowering his head, Sam walked over to the desk and sat down. Before him was the oldest manual typewriter he’d ever seen. The lettering on most of the keys had worn off, and the ribbon looked like it was on its fifth or sixth pass.

“Wouldn’t it be easier if we were using desktop computers?” he asked without thinking.

From beyond Alison’s desk, a third reporter – Derek Tekelo, the sports editor, according to his nameplate – erupted in a deeply annoying cackle.

“You kidding? Old Man Barnett springing for a set of Apple IIs? We’re lucky this rag isn’t still using hot type and a Gutenberg printing press!”

Alison pointed at the clock above her desk. “Twenty minutes to deadline. Get busy!”

Trying not to look worried, Sam turned back to the typewriter. To his right was a stack of blank paper sheets. He took one from the stack and carefully fed it into the typewriter, all the while wondering how he would write a story about a meeting he never attended.

Wait! I’ve got Scryber’s notebook! Smiling, Sam pulled the long, narrow notebook from his back pocket. His smile faded as he watched the soaking-wet paper drip inky rainwater onto the desk. Most of the writing was smeared, and what wasn’t smeared was practically illegible. Sam shook his head; Jesse Scryber had the worst penmanship he had ever seen.

“Nineteen minutes!” Alison called out.

“Okay, okay!”

Sam squinted at the words. He turned the notebook sideways. He nudged it upside down. Then he flipped it back again. Finally, with reluctance, he began to type – slowly, one finger at a time, with long pauses as he peered at the indecipherable scrawl. It took him nearly an hour to type four short paragraphs.

If looks could kill, every person at the Daily Gazette would have been a murderer.

After turning in his story, Sam decided to beat a hasty retreat. Better to come back later, when tempers had cooled, to search through Scryber’s files. He was steps away from escape

when an office door at the other side of the newsroom suddenly flew open.

“Scryber! Get in here *now!*”

The pudgy, white-haired man, wearing gray slacks and a white shirt with yellow armpit stains and a paisley tie yanked askew, perfectly fit the stereotype of the grizzled old newspaper editor – and at the moment, a decidedly angry one.

“I was just going to—”

The editor glowered at him.

“Uh ... yes sir.”

Sam bit his lip and walked into the editor’s office. The old man slammed the door behind him.

“What the hell were you doing this morning?”

“I’m really sorry, Mister...” Sam took a wild guess, “... Barnett. I know I should have filed that story last night, but it was late, and—”

“I’m not talking about that. Why are you harassing Rodney Styles again?”

“Styles?” The same name Alison mentioned. Could it be the man who had threatened him on the street? *Styles. Stylcorp. Makes sense.*

“Well, I’ve been working on that investigative piece, you know, the one on Stylcorp, and I was just trying to get a comment.”

“Why should he give you one? You’ve all but come out and called him a crook, and you don’t have a shred of evidence. If I hadn’t been on vacation the week you ran that ‘gossip column’ you call an op-ed, this story wouldn’t have any legs at all.”

“Look, Mr. Barnett, I wouldn’t have written what I did if I wasn’t convinced something’s going on.”

Barnett stuck a finger in Sam’s chest. “I don’t want conviction, I want facts! Rodney Styles is the most civic-minded man I’ve ever known. He hasn’t had so much as a parking ticket. And you’ve come *this close* to accusing him of poisoning an entire community!”

“Something isn’t right at Stylcorp,” Sam insisted. “If we don’t discover and report the truth, people are going to get hurt, maybe even killed. Isn’t that what we’re here to do – report the truth?”

Barnett stared at him in silence, his jaw set so hard Sam half-expected it to crack. When he finally spoke, it was in a low, frosty voice.

“Just make sure it *is* the truth, Scryber. Every bit of it. Anything less, and losing your job here will be the least of your worries.”

Barnett sat down at his desk, picked up the previous day’s newspaper and vanished behind it.

Sam knew a dismissal when he saw one.

* * *

The waiting room at Project Quantum Leap was a stark, nondescript, strangely lit place. Ziggy claimed it created a safe environment for the visitors who briefly exchanged lives with Sam Beckett. Al thought it was a bit creepy.

But creepy rooms weren't on the mind of the project's latest visitor, young reporter Jesse Scryber. He was both cooperative and inquisitive, peppering Al Calavizzi with as many questions as he'd been asked. That made Al's job harder – getting as much detail as he could about 1982 without revealing any secrets about the future.

"Rodney Styles is the worst kind of crook," the reporter told Al. "He's putting other people's lives in danger just so he can make a buck. I know he's dumping chemicals somewhere around Kellarville. I know it!"

"What makes you so sure?" asked Al.

"I looked at the numbers. His business almost tanked two years ago. By some miracle he turned it around. Now he's doing better than ever, manufacturing more and more aluminum parts. That means he needs more supplies, right? Like solvents for cleaning those parts. But his waste disposal bill hasn't changed by a penny."

"And that makes him a crook? Maybe he's recycling them."

Scryber shook his head. "If that were true, he wouldn't be buying as much, either. But his solvent purchases are way up. Buying more but using less? That makes no sense. Where's all that stuff going?"

"You've got proof of this, I assume," Al ventured.

The reporter hesitated. "Well ... no. Not enough to run the story – not yet. But I will. I have a source, and he's given me a lot of facts. It's all starting to add up. I'm telling you, Styles is guilty, and I'm going to see that he's exposed!" He waved a hand at the waiting room. "But I'm not going to prove anything while I'm cooped up in here! And you haven't answered one damn question I've asked! What the hell is this place? Am I under arrest? When do I get my lawyer?"

The only thing he got from Al was a polite smile.

"Look, kid, I can see this is important to you," Al said. "It is to us, too. That's why you're here. You're not under arrest, and we're going to get you back home real soon. But you need to be patient and do it our way."

"Mister ... hell, you haven't even told me your name!"

"It's Al."

"Thank you for that much," Scryber said sarcastically. "Listen, Al, I don't have time to be

patient. Can't you understand? This is my story! The longer you hold me here, the greater the risk that someone else will break it. That's what is most important! What good does it do if I don't put the story out there? I want out of here now!"

Scryber was still shouting when Al left the waiting room.

Al walked toward the imaging chamber, shaking his head as he went. Mission accomplished. He had learned more about what was happening in Kellarville in October of 1982.

So why did he feel more uncertain than ever?

* * * *

Sam let himself into Jesse Scryber's apartment, a small studio atop the barber shop downtown. It was a typical young man's abode – scattered clothes, unwashed dishes and a dirty-socks smell.

But the room held an unexpected surprise.

The small kitchen table was covered with stacks of files, scrawled-upon notepads and old newspapers. Clippings and scraps of paper were stuck on walls and corkboards. Sam was amazed; the apartment was a shrine to Scryber's investigation of Stylcorp. Pulling up a chair, Sam sat down and began sifting through some of the files.

"You've got to hand it to the kid, he's thorough," said Al, once again appearing out of nowhere.

"It's more than thorough, Al. It's borderline obsessive."

Al grunted. "You're telling me? I just spent an hour listening to him accuse Styles of everything but kicking puppies. He hates the guy with a passion. If he's wrong..."

"He'd better be right, Al. Otherwise we're wasting our time and not getting any closer to finding that little girl." Sam looked up from the files on the table. "What did you find out?"

Al stuck his cigar firmly in his mouth and consulted his handlink. "Not much. I'm afraid our Woodward-and-Bernstein didn't have a clue about how a child might be exposed to toxic chemicals from Stylcorp. He did say there's a low-rent neighborhood next to the company, straddling a marsh. The little girl, whoever she is, might live there." He sighed. "But that's not really helpful. It doesn't tell us how it happens. Plus there are more than 120 homes in that plat, and I'll bet there are tons of kids."

"Unless I'm going to start knocking on doors and panicking an entire neighborhood, you and Ziggy better come up with a better plan!" Sam snapped.

Al stiffened. "I hear you. We're working on it."

Sam sighed and rubbed his eyes, trying to ward off a headache. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "It's just that we're talking about a child's life here. I can't help but get a little upset that we don't have more to go on."

"Don't worry about it," Al reassured him. "We'll figure it out in time."

Sam appreciated his encouragement – and his forgiveness. Nodding his thanks, he began to pick through the files again, comparing notes and articles. After several minutes, something caught his attention.

"Look at this, Al. It says here that Stylcorp almost went bankrupt two years ago. Rodney Styles had to lay off over half of his employees."

"Yeah, Scryber told us about that. After the layoffs, Styles went all over the country trying to drum up new customers. And he did it. His business turned around, and he was able to hire back nearly all of the people he let go."

"But that's not all," Sam said, holding up a clipping. "Styles rehired them at the hourly wage they would have reached if they'd never been laid off. That's incredibly generous, don't you think?"

"What's your point?"

"Does that sound like someone who would dump toxic chemicals on his hometown?"

Al shrugged. "Maybe that's how he could afford to give raises to his laid-off workers. It's an ego thing. He pads the budget one place, spends it somewhere else, and bingo – he looks like a hero."

"Well ... maybe. I don't know. It still doesn't sound right to me."

"It might not sound right to you, but it sure sounds right to Jesse Scryber. Look at this set of notes here," Al said, pointing to a legal pad on the table. "This must be from an interview with his source."

"His source?" Sam frowned at the notes. "You can read that scrawl?"

"Sure. That's nothing. My third wife had the worst—"

"Al..."

"Of course, she also had the best—"

"Al!"

Reluctantly, Sam's old friend shook off the lustful memory. "Sorry. Anyway, Scryber told us he has a source, someone with inside knowledge. If I read these notes right, this source knows something about Stylcorp's waste bill."

Sam picked up a notepad and peered at Scryber's terrible writing. To his surprise, the longer he stared at it, the more he was able to make out. "Looks like the source is a former employee of Stylcorp. Jake ... Jake something. Jake Leonard, I think. He was one of the workers

laid off two years ago. And it looks like he didn't get rehired."

"Why not?"

"He got another job, a truck driver for a firm called Ryling Waste Disposal." Suddenly, Sam pointed at a particular set of notes. "Al, Jake Leonard picks up waste solvents at Stylcorp! If anyone would know how much Styles is shipping out, it's this guy. And according to these notes, what's going out doesn't come close to what's coming in."

"So Styles is dumping solvents, that dirty—"

"We need to talk to Leonard. See if Ziggy can find where he lives."

Al consulted his handlink. "Let's see ... here it is. He's at 2715 Eldridge Court. Sam, that's in the plat next to Stylcorp."

Sam grabbed a notebook and two pens, slipped into a jacket and headed for the door.

"Go back and talk to Scryber again," he told Al. "And tell Ziggy to dig deeper. If a child was poisoned here, there has to be a record of it somewhere. We've got to find it."

"I'll try again. Good luck, Sam." Al waited as the white door to the imaging chamber opened, then he stepped through it and vanished.

"Now I've seen it all."

Sam spun around, startled by the unexpected voice. Standing in the doorway to the apartment was Alison Taylor, shaking her head.

"You've become so obsessed with this story that you're talking to yourself?" she asked.

"Well, uh ... that's just how I organize my thoughts."

Alison sniffed but offered no other comment. Looking slowly around the apartment, she took in the array of notes and files scattered about.

"I'm glad *something* is organized around here," she said. "Barnett would beat you with a stick if you made a mess like this in his newsroom." She looked Sam in the eye. "How are you going to put together a story out of all this?"

"I'm sure I'll figure it out," replied Sam.

Alison reached out to touch his arm. He tensed, not sure what she intended. But her body language said this wasn't a romantic overture; it was probably safe to assume that the two reporters were good friends.

"How long are you going to obsess about this, Jesse?" Alison asked. "One guy throws accusations at his ex-boss, and you think you've got the story of the century. But what you've got is a bunch of inked-up notepads, and they don't add up to a Pulitzer. What about Styles' character? What about everything he's done to make this community better?"

"That doesn't earn him a 'Get Out of Jail Free' card," Sam insisted.

"No, it doesn't. But it shouldn't be dismissed, either. And that's exactly what you've done."

Sam put his hands on Alison's shoulders. "Trust me, I'm not going to run a story if the facts don't warrant it. Why do you think I haven't filed one yet? Because I'm getting proof."

"I hope that's true," Alison said. "When you wrote that op-ed, you didn't name names because you didn't have the facts to back it up, but everyone knew who you meant. And that's why I'm worried, Jesse. I'm worried you want this story so badly that you'll settle for something less than genuine proof."

She hugged him before she left.

Sam stood alone for a long time, troubled by her concern. Could Scryber be wrong after all? Was Sam wasting his time on a witch hunt – time he couldn't afford to waste?

Good questions. But there was only one that Sam could answer: What choice did he have?

Checking the address once again, he headed for his interview with Jake Leonard.

* * * *

One lesson I've learned about quantum leaping is that situations are rarely what they seem. Jesse Scryber is convinced that Rodney Styles is a crook who is dumping toxic chemicals and putting people's lives at risk. Everyone else thinks Styles is the poster boy for upstanding community leadership. The truth is probably somewhere in between. And me? I'm worried whether I can discover the truth before a little girl dies.

* * * *

"What the hell more do you need from me?" snapped Jake Leonard. He plopped into a threadbare recliner, picked up his iced drink from a coffee table and took a sip. "You've been grilling me about Styles for months. When are you going to write your story?"

Leonard was tall and lean, with close-cropped hair fading rapidly from black to silver-gray. It was late, but he was still wearing his dark-blue Ryling Waste Disposal uniform. The look on his deeply lined face was one of profound annoyance.

"I'm getting close," said Sam, taking a seat on the sagging leather couch across from Leonard. "I just want to make sure I've got all the facts straight. I mean, we're talking about a man's reputation here."

Leonard laughed. "Reputation! Reputations are manufactured, kid. They're made

from the cloth of other people's lives and sewn together with deceit. Trust me, Rodney Styles is a master tailor."

"So you still contend that he's dumping chemicals?"

Leonard slammed down his drink.

"Damn, kid, when did you suddenly become an idiot? The guy buys twice as much aluminum parts cleaner as he ships out as waste. Do you think he's stacking it out back like cord wood or something?"

"What about the sanitary sewer?" Sam suggested. "Maybe he just dumps it down the drain."

The older man shook his head. "We covered this before. Sending that stuff down the sewer would shock the county wastewater plant like a bomb. Then everybody would know, and it wouldn't take long to trace it to Styles. He's not that stupid."

"Just pouring it out on the ground somewhere isn't the brightest move, either," Sam pointed out. "He'll get caught eventually. Besides, what does he gain?"

"Lots of money, that's what. Do the math, kid. Styles barely avoided bankruptcy two years ago. He's desperate to stay ahead on the financial curve. And it costs a bunch to ship waste solvents for proper disposal."

"Yet he hired back most of his staff at a higher wage."

"The key word there is 'most.' He didn't rehire me."

Sam was surprised. He stopped taking notes and stared at the former Stylcorp employee. "I'm sorry. I assumed you didn't want to go back."

Jake let out a long, sarcastic laugh. "You think I like hauling liquid garbage every day? You aren't paying attention. The only people your 'revered' Rodney Styles rehired were those willing to look the other way while he screwed the community." He took another sip of his drink. "I wouldn't play his game. And so here I am."

"You didn't go back out of principle?"

"Hell, I'm not working this lousy job just for myself!" Leonard shouted. "I've got a widowed mother in Detroit living on my dad's measly pension, and a sister and niece living next door who have no income at all. Someone has to provide for them, too."

"You're suggesting that everyone at Stylcorp is in on this?"

Rolling his eyes, Leonard said, "I'm not suggesting anything. I'm saying that Styles is a crook at least, a monster at worst, and no one will stand up to him. No one but me. And maybe you, someday, if you ever get around to running that damned story!"

"I need to get my facts straight," Sam said again.

"You need to get a backbone!"

"It's an explosive story," Sam insisted. "A community leader resurrects his failing business and rebuilds his popularity – all while he's deceiving, and possibly killing, an entire town. I can't treat any of this lightly."

Leonard drained his glass, then looked at Sam with a dark smile. "Explosive? Sounds like front-page stuff to me. And maybe your ticket out of this place."

Sam scowled at him. "This is about getting at the truth, not about advancing my career."

"Sure, kid, whatever you say. Do you have what you need?"

"Not quite. Where do you think Styles is dumping the waste?"

Leonard waved his empty glass past Sam's shoulder. "Have you bothered to check out the marsh behind Stylcorp? The one that runs right up to my backyard?"

"Uh, well ... no."

"I was right," said Leonard. "You are an idiot. Styles owns the marsh. Go out there and look around. If you find proof, run the story. If you don't, we'll forget the whole thing. You can bring all your notes over here and we'll have a little bonfire together."

Sam stood up to leave. "One more question – are there any little girls living in this neighborhood?"

"What are you, some kind of pervert?"

Sam gave him a withering look.

"Okay, sorry. The answer is 'yes.' And little boys. And teenagers. And a few adults who never managed to grow up. The place is crawling with kids. Why do you ask?"

Sam sighed. *So much for narrowing it down.* "Just trying to get a sense of the community near Stylcorp. It'll add flavor to my story. Thanks, Jake. I'll be in touch."

Sam showed himself out. All the way to the car, he could feel Leonard's eyes on him.

Searching the marsh would be a waste of time; Sam was convinced of it. And every minute wasted was one less minute left to find and save the still-unnamed little girl. But lacking other leads to follow, Sam felt he had no choice.

It was well past sundown by the time he parked Scryber's battered Datsun on an old dirt road on the far side the marsh. The night air was damp and cold – not exactly ideal for a search through the swamp. But Sam set out anyway, armed with a flashlight he found in the trunk.

The recent autumn rain added new meaning to the term "wetlands." Almost immediately, Sam found himself ankle-deep in mud

and rotting vegetation. The spoiled-egg smell made him gag. But he kept searching, slogging his way deeper and deeper into the marsh. Sam crisscrossed the mucky acreage for nearly two hours, sweeping the ground in front of him with his flashlight. But he saw nothing other than weeds, water and the occasional pile of beer cans – evidence of underage booze parties, but nothing that proved the case against Rodney Styles.

Exhausted, Sam stopped to rest on a convenient log. The search had yielded nothing. Apparently Leonard was wrong, and Sam was no closer to proving Styles' guilt or finding the little girl.

Sam pushed against the log, trying to stand up; instead, he slipped on its unexpectedly smooth surface, nearly toppling over. Surprised and curious, Sam ran his hand over the log, which didn't feel like a log at all. He shined his flashlight on it.

Instead of a log, he saw a steel barrel half buried in the mud.

How did this get out here? Even empty, which it appeared to be, it couldn't have been easy to drag it into the middle of the marsh. Sam wiped mud off the black-and-white container, looking for a label of some sort. Eventually he found the remnants of one.

It had a skull on it.

"Okay, buddy, hold it right there!"

A brilliant white light suddenly flooded the marsh around Sam. Whirling around, he squinted at the light, shielding his eyes from the glare.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Funny, we were about to ask you that question."

Gradually, as his eyes adjusted to the light, Sam was able to make out two figures, each holding a bright lantern. They appeared to be wearing uniforms.

And one of them had a handgun trained on Sam Beckett.

* * * *

"Are you going to hold me here all night?"

Sam slouched in a folding chair in a neat, modest office inside Stylcorp. The two security guards had forced him out of the marsh and up to the facility, hustling him through the huge, chilly workshop. Sam had looked around as he walked across the production area. He saw large milling and manufacturing machines, tall shelves laden with tools and, he made particular note, a collection of black-and-white chemical barrels, perhaps half a dozen, in a far corner. He might have asked a few questions of the guards if they'd been in the mood

to talk. But they weren't. What little hospitality they had ended in the office when they plopped his muddy, smelly body into the folding chair, well away from the red leather seats near the office desk. After half an hour, Sam was squirming; the cold steel of the cheaper seat was starting to get uncomfortable.

One of the guards, a heavy man with a perpetual scowl, wagged a finger at him. "Quit complaining. You're lucky you aren't in a jail cell right now," he said.

"And why is that?" asked Sam.

A new voice provided the answer.

"Because I wanted to talk with you first."

Sam turned around and instantly recognized the man he had encountered on the street earlier that day. Styles strolled into the office, looking tired and annoyed. He was middle age, trim and handsome, and the scowl on his face wasn't an expression he normally wore. Wrinkled jeans, untucked flannel shirt and a tousled brown hair told Sam that he had been in bed before he got the call from Stylcorp.

He looked at the guards and pointed toward the door. "That'll do, gentlemen. I'll take it from here."

After the guards left, Styles slowly walked behind his desk and rapped its surface repeatedly with a white knuckle. Sam could tell he was barely keeping a rein on his temper.

"What am I going to do with you, Mr. Scryber?" he asked.

"You could start by letting me go. Or calling the cops. I really don't care which."

"Call the police? You'd love that now, wouldn't you? A nice bookend to this fantasy you've created – a heroic journalist imprisoned for his dogged investigation." Styles leaned over his desk. "The problem is, your investigation isn't leading you anywhere."

"It led me to where you're dumping toxic chemicals."

"Oh come on, Jesse! You're smarter than that, and so am I. If I really wanted to dump solvents illegally, don't you think I'd find someplace a little less obvious than right behind my own plant? Hell, I might as well put up a billboard with an arrow!"

Sam hesitated. As much as he distrusted Styles, and as compelling as Jake Leonard's claims now seemed to be, the businessman made a good point.

"Well," he said at last, "the marsh may seem obvious, but it's also discreet and easy to reach because you own it. Who knows how much of that stuff is out there? And if it's in the marsh, it's into the river beyond. You could be poisoning the water from here to Lake Huron."

A flash of genuine rage crossed Styles' face. He stared at Sam for a long time, his eyes smoldering. Finally, he threw his hands in the air, took a deep breath and slowly sat down in the chair behind his desk. His anger gave way to an unexpected look of resignation.

"Go home, Scryber."

Sam was confused. "Excuse me?"

Styles waved at the office door. "Go home. I'm not calling the police, and I'm not pressing charges."

It was the last thing Sam expected to hear. He rose to his feet, not sure what Styles really had in mind. He'd been sure he would see the inside of a jail cell that night, or at least the face of a very stern cop. He certainly did not expect to receive his freedom.

"Your graciousness isn't going to change my story," Sam warned him.

Styles shrugged. "Write your story. Make your allegations. I'm not afraid of the truth." Then, with a stern look, he leaned forward and pointed a finger at Sam. "But remember this – I will hold you and your boss accountable for every false and misleading thing you write. Anything that hurts me, my business or the good people who work for me, you will answer for it. Do we understand each other?"

Sam mumbled an acknowledgement. He left the office completely befuddled.

The drive to Scryber's apartment was brief and did little to clear Sam's mind. Jake Leonard laid out a compelling argument for Rodney Styles as a criminal; Styles was equally convincing of his own innocence. They couldn't both be telling the truth.

As he pulled into the parking lot behind Scryber's apartment, he saw Al waiting for him.

"Tell me you have some information I can use," Sam said as he got out of the car.

"Sorry. I was hoping you'd have something to tell me. How did your interview with Jake Leonard go?" Al looked at Sam's dirty clothes. "Did you two get into a mud fight or something?"

Sam shook his head and briefed him on the night's events. "So that's our dilemma," he finished. "On one hand, I've got plenty of circumstantial evidence that Styles is dumping chemicals. On the other hand, there is nothing about the man that tells me he'd do such a thing."

"Scryber insists the guy is a lying crook."

"Don't you think Scryber is a little too convinced of Styles' guilt? Where's his reporter's skepticism? And Jake Leonard is worse. That guy has nothing but contempt for Styles."

"So what more do you need? Let's nail the dirtbag!"

Sam held his arms wide, exasperated. "Al, they're both too emotionally wound up in all this. I don't trust either one of them. Hell, right now Styles has more credibility than they do!"

Al sighed. He hated to admit it, but Sam was right. Hadn't he wrestled with the same misgivings right after his first conversation with Jesse Scryber?

"All right," he said, consulting the handlink, "let's try something different. Ziggy says the little girl, whoever she is, is still going to be poisoned to death in the next few hours, and it has something to do with Stylcorp. If we rule out Scryber's and Leonard's accusations, and we give Styles the benefit of the doubt, that leave us just one other possibility."

Sam finished the thought.

"Someone could be dumping the chemicals without Styles knowing about it!"

"Ziggy says there's a 47 percent chance of that. Not great odds, but not terrible. So who would do such a thing?"

Sam began pacing around the car, intrigued by this new theory.

"It would have to be someone who has easy access to the site and the chemicals," he said. "Someone who can get in and out without raising suspicions. And someone who hates Stylcorp enough to risk other people's lives to tear it down." He stopped pacing. "That must be it!"

"What must be it?"

A woman's voice. Sam spun around, startled once again by Alison Taylor's unexpected appearance. She emerged from the shadows near the apartment building.

"I wish you'd quit doing that," he complained.

"And I wish you'd find a less kooky way of noodling through your stories than talking to people who aren't there."

"It gets the job done."

Seeing Alison for the first time, Al gave an all-too-familiar leer. "Speaking of getting the job done—"

Sam silenced him with a furious look.

"So what's your big new theory now, Mr. Pulitzer?" Alison asked, oblivious to the exchange.

Sam brought her up to date. Skeptical at first, Alison grew more and more intrigued as the story unfolded.

"Keeping in mind that we haven't seen the first hint of chemical dumping—" she began.

"Except for the empty barrel in the marsh."

"Granted," she said. "Given that, your theory would explain a lot of things – why fewer solvents come out of Stylcorp than go in, why Leonard reached the conclusion he did, why Styles' behavior doesn't match the accusations.

But we're still stuck with theories with no rock-solid proof and no leads to the real crook."

"We?"

Alison grinned. "Like it or not, I'm your partner now. You can put your name first on the double byline, I promise."

"Well..." *An extra hand sure can't hurt*, Sam thought. "Okay. It's a deal. You go back to Stylcorp and bounce this idea off Styles. I just left his office, so he's probably still there. But watch his reaction carefully – we can't rule him out of this yet."

"Got it. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to see Jake Leonard again. If anyone knows who else could get at those solvents, he will. I'm guessing he's so blinded by his hatred of Styles that he never considered someone else might be involved. Maybe I can convince him to take a fresh look."

Al leaned close to Sam. "That all sounds great, Sam. I'll head back to the waiting room and run this new theory by Scryber. Maybe he'll have some ideas, too."

"You do that."

"Do what?" asked Alison.

"Uh ... you go see Styles, and I'll go see Leonard. Let's meet back here in a couple of hours and compare notes."

Alison agreed and headed toward her car. Al had already vanished. Sam was alone again, eager to solve this mystery and well aware that time was running out.

* * * *

Sam pulled into Jake Leonard's driveway. The house was dark, which was no surprise – it was nearly midnight. Much as he hated to wake anyone at this hour, Sam had no choice. He got out of the car, walked up to the front door and pressed the doorbell button. He heard no sound from inside the house. Sam rapped on the door, tentatively at first, then with more force.

After several attempts, he gave up. Either Leonard was an impressively sound sleeper or he wasn't at home.

What now? Sam sighed, frustrated, looking around the darkened neighborhood as if an answer would jump out at him. And it did. He saw a light glowing in the kitchen window of the home next door. Since it was the only house near Jake's, it had to be the one where his sister lived. Maybe she was still awake and would know where Jake had gone. Sam trotted across the yard and knocked on the door of the other house.

The woman who eventually answered was in her mid-30s, dark haired and probably attractive under normal circumstances. But Sam could tell something wasn't right. Her hair was in

disarray, her face was flushed, and her eyes were bloodshot. She had a large mug in her hand, brimming with a clear liquid, and she brandished it like a weapon. Sam stepped back from the door, surprised and uncertain.

"Whatsa want?" the woman asked, her voice heavy and slurred. "Duh ya know th' time?"

"Yeah, um, I'm very sorry. I'm looking for Jake Leonard. You're his sister, right?"

The woman had a hard time keeping her head upright. "Cheryl-I-I ...Westin." She stuck out her free hand. "Charmed to meet ya."

"Look," said Sam, shaking her hand quickly, "I hate to bother you so late. I was just—"

"Jake's not here." She held up her mug. "Thirsty?"

"Uh ... no, thanks. I'm driving."

Cheryl stood up straight and looked indignant. "I don't drink alcohol. Nuthin' but water." She rubbed her forehead. "Damn, I've got a headache!"

Sam frowned. "Water? You're just drinking water?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"And you haven't had anything else tonight?"

"Like I said, no booze in my house."

"Mind if I, uh...?" He reached for the mug. Cheryl shrugged and handed it to him. The liquid inside certainly looked like water. He sniffed it and noticed a very slight, pleasant smell. Pleasant, familiar and definitely out of place.

"Cheryl, have you been drinking a lot of water?"

"Yeah, sure. Straight from the well. Me and my little girl, we gotta stay hydrated. It's good for ya."

Something cold seized Sam's heart. "Your little girl?"

"My little Lisa. She's on the couch. Wasn't feelin' too good, but she finally fell asleep—"

Sam dropped the mug. It shattered on the threshold. Ignoring the puddle at his feet, he shoved his way past Cheryl.

"What the—!"

Sam bolted through the kitchen and entered the living room. There on the couch, her face turned outward and eyes closed, was a blond-haired girl, perhaps three years old.

She was asleep – or so Sam prayed.

"What's her name again?" he asked as Cheryl staggered after him into the living room.

"Lisa. What the hell are you doin'?"

Sam put a hand on the girl and shook her gently. "Lisa, wake up. Can you hear me? You need to wake up, honey."

Lisa's eyes stayed closed. She gave a small moan.

"Lisa, please, wake up! You've got to wake up!"

The growing urgency in Sam's voice wasn't lost on Cheryl; in fact, it seemed to clear her head.

"What's going on? Why are you trying to wake her? Is something wrong?"

"I hope not." He kept trying to rouse the little girl, growing more afraid by the moment.

The white doorway suddenly appeared behind Cheryl, and Al stepped into the room.

"Sam, Ziggy's got a name! You're not going to believe who the little girl is!"

Al stopped, stunned to see his friend lifting the unconscious child.

"It's Jake Leonard's niece," Sam told him. "She's been poisoned!"

The news caused Cheryl to gasp. "Poisoned? Oh my God!" She reached for her daughter, stroking her hair while gently shaking her in Sam's arms. "Baby, wake up! Please!" She started to cry. "How did this happen?"

"Your well is contaminated. Where's your phone? We need to call an ambulance!"

Al was punching buttons on his handlink. "That won't work, Sam! The closest hospital is 30 miles away. You need to get her to a doctor now!"

Sam looked at Cheryl. "Where's the nearest doctor?"

"There's ... there's a clinic about a mile from here. Doctor Baines, he lives in the back."

With the girl firmly in his arms, Sam ran through the house and out the kitchen door, headed for Scryber's car. Cheryl, nearly hysterical, stumbled behind him. She climbed into the back seat of the Datsun and Sam handed Lisa to her. She wept and begged the girl to wake up as Sam started the car and roared off.

The clinic was minutes away. Sam pulled up to the front door, bolted from the car and pounded on the door until a bleary-eyed, balding man answered.

"I've got two people in my car who've been poisoned," Sam said before Baines uttered a word.

"Poisoned?" Baines was awake instantly. Donning a robe, the doctor hurried outside and helped Sam bring Cheryl and Lisa into the clinic. Cheryl sat in a chair, holding her aching head and weeping, while Baines placed Lisa on an examination table and checked her vital signs.

"She's half conscious," he said. "I need to know what she was poisoned with."

Sam hesitated. "I'm not exactly sure. It could be aluminum parts cleaner. What's in it that would have a pleasant sort of smell, a bit like chloroform?"

Baines shook his head. "I have no idea."

Al suddenly appeared in the room, holding up his handlink. "Ziggy says it's probably dichloromethane. It's a commonly found in aluminum parts cleaner."

"Dichloromethane?"

"Dichloromethane?" the doctor echoed. "Never heard of it. I'll see if I can find anything in the literature. Are you sure that's what it is?"

"No, but it's my best guess. Can't you just call it up on the Internet?"

"The Inter-what?"

Al caught Sam's attention. "This is 1982. They don't have the Internet yet. Just hold on, I've got Ziggy researching it right now." He looked at the ceiling. "Come on, Ziggy, hurry up! Hang on, Sam, it's coming through. Dichloromethane, also called methylene chloride ... Ziggy says if you ingest enough, it causes dizziness, slurred speech, stupor – it's like being drunk."

"Just like Cheryl. What else?"

"Loss of consciousness, seizures, then—" Al couldn't finish it.

Sam looked Baines in the eye. "We need to dilute the poison, doctor. How about trying an activated-charcoal slurry?"

"Yeah, that's right, Sam!" Al cried. "Ziggy says one gram for every kilogram of weight. That's probably, what, 20 grams for the girl, 50 grams for the mother. One more thing, Ziggy says to tell you that carbon monoxide is a meta ..." he smacked the side of the handlink, "... a metabolite of dichloromethane. Whatever that means."

"Dammit! I know what that means!"

Sam grabbed Baines arm. "Doctor, this chemical breaks down into carbon monoxide in the bloodstream. You've got to get them both on pure oxygen right away!"

"Right," said Baines. "I have a couple of small tanks in the back. Give me a hand?"

Sam nodded and followed him. Al stayed with Cheryl and Lisa. They couldn't see or hear him, of course, but it made Al feel better. Cheryl was clutching her empty arms to her chest and rocking in the chair as if already mourning the loss of her child. Lisa lay motionless on the examination table, poised to fulfill her mother's fears. Al moved close to her and wished he could hold her little hand.

Trudy. He thought of his sister, dead for many years. She'd been older than Lisa when she died, but still a child. She had died needlessly, alone and helpless. And damn if Lisa didn't look like Trudy with every blink of Al's stinging eyes.

"Hang in there, Lisa," he begged. "You've got to hang in there! Please ... please ... you can't die! *Hurry up, Sam!*"

Cheryl kept weeping. And rocking.

* * * *

Two ambulances parked outside the Kellarville clinic, red and white lights flashing in the night. Sam glanced at his watch as the paramedics loaded Lisa into the second vehicle. *Nearly two o'clock.* It had been a long, frightening couple of hours, and Sam was exhausted. But he was also joyously relieved.

"I think they're going to be fine," one of the paramedics told Sam. "It's a good thing you knew how to treat them, especially with the oxygen. That little girl might have died. How did you know?"

Sam shrugged. "Something I picked up in a former life."

The paramedic raised an eyebrow, but Sam offered no further explanation. With a shrug, the paramedic climbed into the ambulance. A moment later, both ambulances roared off.

Doctor Baines followed after them in his own car. It was over.

"You did it, Sam," said Al softly. "You saved Lisa's life."

"Yeah." He sighed in relief. "What happens to her and Cheryl?"

"Ziggy says they both recover fully. No long-term health problems. Cheryl eventually gets a job as a nurse's aide, and Lisa grows up to study chemical engineering in college. How about that?"

"What about the rest of the neighborhood?" Sam asked.

"Doctor Baines alerted the county health department before he left. By the end of the day, all nine people who drank tainted water will get treatment. Everyone's going to be okay."

Sam smiled and leaned against Scryber's car, feeling the tension seep out of his body.

Almost all the tension.

"That's great, Al," he said. "So if everyone's okay ... why haven't I leaped?"

"We're, uh, not sure," confessed Al. "Maybe you still have to figure out how all this happened."

Sam heaved another sigh, this one less happy. "That's what I've been trying to do all along. I'm not any closer to—"

He stopped. A thought occurred to him. A horrifying thought.

"Al," said Sam, "if the chemicals were dumped in the marsh, where would they eventually go?"

"Well," Al mused, "since Cheryl and Lisa got sick from drinking well water, I guess they must have gone there."

"But doesn't the marsh drain into the river? That's away from the neighborhood where they live. And even if the chemicals did get into the wells, it takes time for that to happen. Maybe

even years – far longer than anyone might have been dumping in the marsh.”

Al shook his head. “I’m not following you.”

“For Cheryl and Lisa to get that sick, the amount of dichloromethane in the well had to be immense. That wouldn’t have happened overnight. Maybe never.” Sam paused. “Unless someone dumped it directly into the well.”

Al was furious. “Styles! That nozzle—”

“No,” Sam interrupted. “Not Styles. It has to be someone who knows how to handle that stuff and who wouldn’t draw attention when doing so – *because he does it all the time!*”

Al instantly put the pieces together.

“Jake Leonard! You’re saying he put the chemicals in the wells? He poisoned his own sister and niece?”

Sam nodded. “As crazy as it sounds, it’s the only explanation that fits the facts. A chemical truck in his driveway wouldn’t be unusual because that’s his job. Then at night he could go and dump the waste right into people’s wells. Most of the wellheads are in their backyards. Leonard could get to them easily. The people would get sick, the authorities would find that their wells were contaminated, and everyone would look to the nearest and most likely culprit – Stylcorp.”

Lifting his handlink, Al punched several buttons.

“Uh oh, Sam. Ziggy says there’s a 99 percent chance you’re right. And what’s more, Jake Leonard is at Stylcorp right now.”

“Doing what?”

Al looked straight at him.

“Getting ready to die.”

* * * *

Once more, Scryber’s abused Datsun careened through the streets of Kellarville with Sam Beckett behind the wheel. Al centered his projection on the back seat and threw worried looks at his old friend.

“I’m glad I’m a hologram,” he said, “or I’d be getting carsick right about now.”

“Never mind that,” snapped Sam. “What else can Ziggy tell us about what’s happening at Stylcorp?”

Al studied his handlink. “On the night that Lisa and Cheryl were poisoned, Stylcorp suffered a massive fire. The fire was ruled arson. Somebody set off a barrel of flammable solvent.”

“What about Jake Leonard?”

“His body was found in the debris, along with the body of Rodney Styles. And there was a third victim....” Al’s voice trailed off.

“Who?”

“Sam ... it’s Alison Taylor.”

“Dear God! Al, I sent her there to talk with Styles! She’s going to die because of me!”

“No she’s not!” Al said firmly. “We’re not going to let that happen. But you’d better step on it!”

Sam pushed the accelerator to the floor and piloted the Datsun around an especially sharp curve, ignoring the squeal of tires and the acrid smell of seared rubber. Al gulped but said nothing.

“So what about the fire?” asked Sam.

“Who started it?”

“The investigators’ report was inconclusive. But they strongly suspected it was Leonard.”

Sam tried to control his anger. “It was him all along. He set up Rodney Styles, and he played me and Scryber like a fiddle to do it. But why? Just because Styles laid him off and then wouldn’t hire him back?”

Al was still reading the report on his handlink. “That may be only part of it. The investigators pegged Leonard as the arsonist because of an affidavit filed by another Stylcorp employee. Two years ago, about the time Styles’ business was failing, a bunch of payroll money came up missing. Almost \$50,000. The affidavit says Stylcorp’s personnel manager was the one who stole the money.” He looked up at Sam. “And the manager’s name was Jacob R. Leonard!”

Now it all made sense.

“So Leonard was stealing from Stylcorp right when Styles was trying to save the business and his workers’ jobs,” Sam said. “Styles found out and fired him, but he did it when the other layoffs were happening, maybe so he wouldn’t embarrass Leonard publicly. But Jake set out to destroy him anyway. He lied to Scryber, hid the chemicals so it looked like Styles was dumping them, planted the empty barrel in the marsh for me to find, and poisoned the wells in his neighborhood, including his own sister’s.”

“And when Scryber still wouldn’t run a story blaming Rodney Styles—”

Sam finished the thought. “Leonard decided to do something drastic.”

With one last hair-raising turn, Sam and Al roared into the parking lot of Stylcorp. To Sam’s surprise, there was no hint of a fire. The long, tall steel building that housed the workshop stood dark and silent.

“Everything looks okay to me,” he said.

“Are you sure Ziggy is right about this?”

Al nodded. “I’m afraid so,” he said, pointing to the windows running the length of the building just below the roofline.

A dull, flickering orange glow seeped through them.

By the time Sam leaped out of the car and ran to the entrance, the fire was already raging –

or rather, dozens of fires were. Looking across the sprawling workshop, he spotted the door to Styles' office. Even through the growing haze of smoke, he could see a light shining from beneath the door.

Al materialized next to him. "Sam, they're still in there!" he cried. "They aren't going to make it unless you do something!"

Without giving himself time to think, Sam took several deep breaths, held the last one and plunged into the smoke-filled workshop. The workshop was peppered with small fires, each spreading toward each other; eventually, they would merge into a single inferno – centered, Sam noted with concern, around the solvent barrels he'd seen earlier. For the moment, though, none of the multiple fires blocked the path to Styles' office. Also, the workshop's high ceiling gathered most of the smoke above his head.

These things bought Sam time. Was it enough? Sam couldn't dwell on that.

He ran through the workshop, blinking as his eyes began to burn from the fumes. Within seconds, he reached the door to Styles' office – and nearly ran through his holographic friend.

"Leonard is standing just inside," Al said. "His back is to the door. It isn't latched. Styles and Alison are on the other side of the room, behind the desk. And Sam – Jake's got a gun!"

Sam felt his heart sink. He had no weapon of his own, and with the fires spreading across the workshop he didn't have time to improvise one. The only thing he had was the element of surprise.

Taking several steps backward, Sam lowered his right shoulder and launched himself toward the door. He hit it at full speed. The door flung inward, slamming into Jake Leonard and knocking him off his feet. The gun went flying.

"Jesse!" cried Alison.

Crashing through the door disarmed Leonard but also threw Sam off balance. He stumbled across the office and landed on top of Styles' desk. Jake scrambled to his feet in a rage, throwing himself at Sam. The two men grappled – Sam half prone on the desk, a screaming Jake above and desperately trying to choke him. Sam's vision blurred as he struggled to breathe.

Then Rodney Styles came alive, leaping from behind the desk and grabbing Leonard, trying to pull him off Sam. That earned the businessman a sharp elbow in the face. Styles staggered backward, clutching his nose. It was all the distraction Sam needed. Breaking Jake's hold on his throat, Sam shoved him upright, leaped up and landed a solid punch to Leonard's jaw. Dazed, the older man took an awkward swing in return. Sam ducked and punched again, hitting Leonard in the left eye. Jake fell backward over the mud-

spattered chair where Sam had left it hours earlier. Flipping over it, he cracked his head against the wall and crumpled to the floor in a heap.

Coughing and panting, Sam turned to Styles and Alison. "Is everyone all right?"

Alison checked Styles, who was wiping a trickle of blood from his nose. "I think his nose is broken, but otherwise we're okay," she said. "We'd better get out of here!"

"Anyone else in the building?"

Styles shook his head and winced at the pain. "There's no night shift, and our security service just does a couple of patrols a night. Jake got in with his contractor badge, and we were the only ones here."

Sam moved toward Jake Leonard. The man was unconscious. Sam would have to carry him. He bent over to pick him up, but Styles grabbed his arm.

"I'll get him. You get Alison to safety. I'll be right behind you"

It was the last thing Sam expected from Styles. Leonard had almost ruined the man's life, and yet Styles was willing to risk his well-being to save his accuser. *I was so wrong about him*, he thought.

"Okay," said Sam. "But hurry."

Styles smiled and nodded. "Count on it."

Locking elbows with Alison, the two dashed out of the office, waving away the thickening smoke and dodging the growing fires as they sprinted the length of the workshop. They didn't slow down until they were well beyond the main entrance and into the night, breathing in the sweet, cool autumn air.

"Are you okay?" Sam wheezed as they both collapsed to the pavement.

Alison nodded, coughed and nodded again.

Sam looked over his shoulder, expecting to see Styles and Leonard come through the entrance. Long seconds passed; only smoke and orange flame greeted his gaze. Leaving Alison behind, Sam staggered to the workshop door. It was impossible to see through the smoke anymore.

He lurched back, startled, as Al emerged from the inferno.

"I don't think they're going to make it," Al warned.

"Where are they?"

"Halfway across the workshop. The smoke is getting to Styles. But he isn't giving up. He's still trying to drag Leonard to safety."

Sam took a step toward the door.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Al shouted. "You can't go in there!"

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know – maybe because you might get *killed!*"

Sam had a sudden, bizarre urge to laugh. "And how is that different from most other leaps?"

"Okay, okay, you've got a point. But Ziggy says you already did what you came here to do. You saved little Lisa, and you saved Alison."

"But what about Rodney and Jake?"

"According to Ziggy, there's only a 50-50 chance you're here to save them, too. If you go in after them, you might die."

"I'll take that chance." He took another step forward.

"Wait, Sam! If your mission is already over, you might not die in there. You might leap."

Sam stopped. He realized what Al was saying.

"If I leap out, Jesse Scryber will leap back in."

"Exactly," said Al. "Then he'll be the one in the middle of the fire."

Sam looked into the billowing smoke, listened to the cracking flames, thought about the men struggling a few dozen feet away. And he made a decision.

"I can't let them die," he said. "Tell Scryber that we can't let them die. Have Ziggy tell him the truth. All of it."

Al stared at his friend. "I understand," he said in a quiet voice.

He keyed the handlink and vanished through the white doorway.

The waiting room was less than a minute away from Al's imaging chamber. In those few seconds, Ziggy told Jesse Scryber everything.

A stunned Scryber was standing at the waiting room door when Al burst in. Stunned – and horrified.

"I was wrong," Scryber said, his voice full of sorrow and shame. "I can't believe it. All of it, completely wrong."

"Anyone could have reached the conclusion you did," Al said.

Scryber laughed bitterly. "Anyone? Are you sure? All I wanted was to write the big story, you know? Get myself noticed. I didn't care about Styles or anyone else. Instead, I got drawn into someone else's vendetta. A little girl almost died, and I nearly destroyed another man's life."

"But you didn't. That's what's important. Jesse, you're a true journalist. You care about the truth. You could have run that story any one of a dozen times. But you knew in your heart that there was something missing. The facts didn't add up."

"You don't know how close I came to making them add up the way I wanted them to," said Scryber.

"It's not the temptation, Jesse, it's what you do with it. You say you regret what you did, or nearly did, to Rodney Styles. There's still time to make a difference."

There was no mistaking the tears in Scryber's eyes.

"That voice on the intercom – Ziggy, is it? Ziggy told me the whole story. Time travel. Exchanging bodies. Putting things right what once went wrong." Jesse sighed. "It's incredible, the story of a lifetime. And it's a story I can never tell."

"I'm afraid not, kid. You won't even remember being here."

"Well then," said Scryber, wiping his eyes. "Maybe this time it's *my* turn to put things right."

"You need to know something, Jesse. There's a fire—"

"Ziggy told me."

"It's out of control. You could be ... well, it's a huge risk."

Jesse Scryber took a deep, shuddering breath. "I owe Rodney Styles that much, don't you think? Maybe he'll come to see that I'm truly sorry, that I respect him after all. You know what they say – there's no greater love you can show than to give your life for someone else. I read it in a book somewhere."

Al stared at the young man, amazed.

"Yeah, you did," he said softly. "A good one."

He gripped Jesse's hand, squeezed it firmly, and then left the waiting room.

Seconds later, Al was standing next to Sam at the edge of the flaming building.

"Go!" he shouted.

Sam filled his lungs with fresh air and plunged into the workshop.

The smoke was worst at the entrance, but it thinned slightly inside the building, just enough for Sam to find Styles and Leonard. They were sprawled on the floor a good fifty feet from the entrance. The fumes and the heat were intense, and Rodney lacked the stamina to carry Jake the rest of the way. Once again Sam marveled at Styles' courage; rather than abandon Leonard, he was still trying to drag him to safety.

"Alison?" Styles asked, coughing violently as Sam reached him.

"Safe. Come on, let's get out of here!"

Keeping low to the floor, each man took one of Leonard's arms and pulled him along as they moved toward the distant entrance. It was slow going. And if their apprehension wasn't bad enough, a glance at the solvent storage area sent it soaring into full-blown fear.

The largest of the fires had engulfed the containers.

"If those barrels go—" Styles began.

“Keep moving!”

Suddenly, a loud *crack* caught their attention. To Sam’s left, a tall set of wooden shelves, in full flame, abruptly collapsed. Instinctively, Sam shoved Jake’s body with all his might, pushing him and Styles out of the way. But he wasn’t quick enough to dodge the falling debris himself. A heavy section landed on Sam’s right ankle. He felt a bone snap, and he collapsed to the floor, crying out in agony.

“Jesse!” Styles moved in his direction.

Sam waved him away. “Get out *now!*” he cried.

Styles briefly locked eyes with Sam. Then, summoning what little strength he had left, he stood up, lifted Leonard from beneath his arms and backpedaled as quickly as he could, dragging Jake across the floor.

Sam pulled frantically at his right leg, trying to free it from beneath the debris, biting his tongue to keep from screaming.

Then, with one final tug, he was loose.

Styles and Leonard made it to the door and crossed the threshold into the cool night.

Sam scrambled to his feet. Despite the white-hot pain, he made a desperate, limping run for it.

One of the solvent barrels burst. The fire erupted into a massive ball of flame.

Sam was almost to the door. The night air beckoned to him. He lunged—

—crystalline light ... whirlwind of sound ... a new reality—

—and was gone.

Just as the entire building exploded.

* * * *

The morning sun peered over the ash trees along the marsh, shedding fresh light on what little remained of Stylcorp — a smoldering skeleton of steel beams, blackened equipment and piles of debris. Firemen in respirators, boots and thick coats carefully hosed down a few glowing hot spots. A policeman finished running yellow tape and placing barricades around the scene. A photographer from the Daily Gazette captured every conceivable angle of the disaster while a small group of gawkers watched in silence.

Rodney Styles, still wearing the ripped, smoky remains of his flannel shirt and jeans, shook his head at the irony of it all. Jake Leonard had done what he set out to do. He had destroyed Stylcorp.

No, not destroyed it. He’d wounded it. But Styles would heal his enterprise. He would

rebuild. He owed that much to his employees and to his community.

And maybe to one reluctant hero.

Jesse Scryber sat on a gurney next to the ambulance. An air splint hugged his lower right leg, and a green tube carried oxygen to his nose and, from there, to his ravaged lungs. The paramedics waited impatiently, eager to deliver their charge to the hospital. But Scryber wasn’t ready to leave.

Styles approached him and Alison, who stood next to the young reporter, holding his hand.

“You’re going to be okay,” Styles said.

“But you need to let these guys take you in for treatment.”

Scryber shook his head. “Not until I tell you how sorry I am.” He paused, a look of uncertainty on his face. “I ... I don’t seem to remember what’s happened to me in the last couple of days. Maybe it was the explosion. I don’t know. But I do know one thing — I was wrong about you.”

Styles raised an eyebrow. “You saved my life. You saved Alison. You even helped save Jake Leonard, and you nearly died doing it. I’d say that makes us even.”

He smiled and held out his hand. Alan Scryber gripped it firmly.

Then each of them turned their thoughts to other things.

Most of all, to the future.

Third Place: Descent Into Panic By Helen Earl

Leaping always left Sam Beckett with an unsteady feeling, but this time it was as if he'd landed in the middle of an earthquake. He struggled to maintain his equilibrium, feeling as if the floor was vibrating beneath his feet. It took a few moments for him to register that it actually was!

Looking around he realized that he was in a large and luxurious elevator along with a half dozen other people, including an attendant in a fancy uniform.

Having made eye contact with the young lady standing nearest him, he smiled casually.

Sam felt uneasy, as if his host had been upset or alarmed when he'd leaped in, and he was picking up on the residual adrenaline. He hoped that he was imagining things, and that it was just the unexpected motion of the elevator that had unsettled him.

Nobody was chatting, not even about the weather or the Dodgers game, so Sam assumed they were probably all strangers. This was something of a relief to the leaper, since it meant he wouldn't be expected to answer to a name he didn't know, or even worse, have to address another in familiar terms. The only sounds came from the elevator music, which in keeping with the setting was a classical piece. Sam recognized it, but couldn't recall either the title or the composer.

The deep pile carpet on the floor was a rich ruby red. Both sidewalls were highly polished mirrored glass, making the compartment seem much larger than it actually was, although it was by no means cramped. Illuminating the car - and probably responsible for the higher than average ceiling - there hung a miniature chandelier, in addition to a delicately decorated lamp on the back wall.

Sam concluded that the elevator was almost certainly housed in a grand and expensive hotel - one with 20 floors of rooms according to the numbered buttons on the control panel. The moving pointer over the doors indicated that the elevator was currently descending from the 18th floor toward the 17th.

Figuring that the next couple of minutes while they headed down to the lobby were likely to be uneventful, Sam took the time to look at his companions, and at his own reflection. There was no way of knowing if someone here with him now was the object of the leap mission, but it didn't hurt to be prepared.

Sam's new host was a tall and slender gentleman looking very dapper in an expensive three-piece navy blue pin stripe suit over a pale blue shirt and navy tie. He looked to be in his late fifties or early sixties, his black hair and beard liberally flecked with gray. His shoes were gleaming, and the handkerchief protruding from his breast pocket was crisply creased at just the precise angle to convey elegance and style. There was a pocket watch on a silver chain nestling in the waistcoat pocket. Sam was not in the least surprised that his host was holding a silver-tipped, ornate handled ebony walking cane.

The other occupants were all similarly attired in clothes that spoke of wealth and privilege.

As Sam started to study them each in turn, he became aware that another passenger had surreptitiously sneaked into the car, though the elevator hadn't stopped, the doors hadn't opened, and the new arrival didn't reflect his outrageous orange and ocher outfit in the mirrors.

Al stood close at Sam's shoulder, knowing it would be hard to converse subtly in an enclosed space. He had a panicked look on his face, and every inch of his body language suggested the urgency of his message.

Sam felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. It was going to be one of *those* leaps, he thought, with his usual "Oh, boy!"

Chapter One

The look of alarm in Sam's eyes was enough to tell Al he'd picked up on the urgency of the situation. "I know you can't talk freely, Sam, so just listen carefully," he began without preamble.

Sam nodded subtly.

"You need to stop the elevator at the next floor and get everybody off." Al tried to keep his voice calm; he knew he was already frightening the leaper with his insistent instructions. Sam frowned, uncomprehending.

"The elevator is going to jam, buddy. And that's not all. Don't panic, but the hotel is about to catch fire. Some blonde bimbo on the top floor goes out and leaves her hair curling tongs on a bath towel. Not only starts a localized fire, but shorts out electric right left and centre." Al saw the flicker of terror cross Sam's face despite his instruction to the contrary. Sam had encountered fires a number of times on past leaps and on almost every occasion had barely escaped with his life. He'd expressed an opinion that it had to be one of the worst ways to die, and Al had to agree.

The leaper's mouth opened, but he dared't voice the thoughts rushing through his head.

"Stay calm, Sam." Al knew the advice was worthless, but he gave it anyway. "The two events aren't directly linked. The fire won't start for a while yet. You have time to get everyone safely out, but you have to move soon. Originally this elevator car plummeted to the ground, killing everyone inside. They were trapped inside for some time before that happened though."

Sam could feel his hands starting to tremble. He clenched them into fists. Then he closed his eyes for a moment and drew in a slow, steadying breath. It didn't really help much. He wanted to turn and rail and scream at the hologram, but he knew he had to keep those with him from sharing the fear and panic that he was fighting to control within himself. How he could do that, and at the same time achieve what Al had asked of him, he had no idea.

"Al, how *can* I get them out?" he asked in a whisper through a barely open and suddenly dry mouth. "They won't believe there's any danger, and even if they did, it would just start a panic."

Al's brow furrowed deeper in consternation. The kid had a point.

Sam looked around nervously, his mind racing in a desperate attempt to formulate a plan. Taking a deep breath, he did the only thing he could think of to do. Go with a measure of the truth.

He edged closer to the attendant, whose polished gold name badge identified him as

Andrew Stoppard. "Excuse me," Sam began, speaking softly so only his intended audience could hear, "but can you smell smoke? Shouldn't we stop the elevator?"

"Oh, good idea, Sam!" Al encouraged.

The young man turned to Sam with a sympathetic smile.

"The claustrophobia getting to you, again, is it, Mr. Quincey? Would you like me to let you out at the next floor? You can take a few minutes to calm yourself and I'll come back and fetch you when I've dropped these other folks off. We can take it one floor at a time if you like."

Sam returned the young man's smile, despite the fact that his plan hadn't worked. The hotel employee should be commended for his dedication to customer service. There hadn't been the slightest hint of irritation or impatience in his British accented voice or in his body language, merely a genuine desire to be helpful.

Sam now recognized the shaky feeling he'd leaped into as being a bleed-through of Mr. Quincey's claustrophobia. The mere mention of it had Sam feeling palpitations again. The temptation was great to take the young man up on his offer, and get out of the tiny room – for it suddenly seemed to Sam to have shrunk – as fast as he could; the more so because of Al's dire predictions for anyone who stayed aboard the elevator. Yet that was the point. If Sam took the easy way out – literally – he would be consigning the other passengers to a gruesome fate. He was not about to do that. Unless...

A quick glance at Al was enough for the hologram to know exactly what was running through Sam's mind. His own thoughts had been taking a similar path.

Al consulted his hand-link, posing the question that Sam hadn't needed to voice.

Moments later, Al regretfully shook his head. "Sorry, Sam; Zig says if you try to report the elevator failure to hotel maintenance, or try to get it open yourself from outside, you'll be unable to save them in either scenario."

"No. No, thank you." Sam rejected the attendant's offer with a weary sigh. "I really do think I can smell smoke. Is there any way you can check it out?"

"I'm sure it's nothing Mr. Quincey sir," the young man reassured him, but since he firmly believed in the maxim 'the customer is always right' he was more than willing to humor the old man, "but I'll call down and have them investigate for you."

"Thank you!" Sam returned hopefully. Perhaps this was going to be an easy leap after all.

He should have known better.

No sooner had the attendant picked up the handset to make the call than the lights flashed, the power went out, and the car jerked to an abrupt halt.

Just behind Sam a woman screamed shrilly - jarring his nerves still further - while the other passengers queried all at once:

- "What's going on?"
- "What happened?"
- "Where are the lights?"

and other unintelligible mutterings of discontent.

The attendant tapped the cradle a few times, and then looked apologetically at Sam by the dim light of the emergency backup power that kicked in with a hum to replace the music.

Both he and Al voiced the obvious fact at the same time, "The line's dead!"

Chapter Two

It was the scenario that Drew most dreaded. Bad enough to have the lift stall at all, but for it to happen with Mr. Quincey on board...

Drew knew he shouldn't have favorites, but he had a soft spot for Mr. Quincey. Most of the hotel guests treated Drew like he was beneath contempt - if they noticed his existence at all. An attendant in a lift was little more than a labor saving device to most of them. They were too full of their own importance to have to bother pressing a button for themselves. Heaven forbid one of the ladies should chip a nail!

Mr. Quincey was different. He spoke to Drew as if he were an equal, and actually seemed interested in what the young man had to say. Curious as to why someone of 'such obvious intelligence' as he put it, was doing such menial work, he'd listened sympathetically to Drew's tale of having to give up college and get a job to support his mother, disabled in the accident that killed his father six months earlier.

When he'd been asked to 'look after' one of the hotel's most valued guests who had a phobia

he was trying to conquer, Drew had thought he would be in for days or even weeks of pandering to a spoilt rich man's whims. He'd been dreading it. As it turned out, these days he actually looked forward to the old man braving his lift, or 'elevator' as Mr. Quincey and the other Americans insisted on calling it. He enjoyed their chats as much as he appreciated the small 'tips' Mr. Quincey insisted on paying him for his 'time and trouble'. The old man had offered to 'cut a check' that would have eased their situation considerably, but neither Drew nor his mother would accept charity. This was Mr. Quincey's way of helping out while leaving them their pride, and Drew loved him for it. He'd have enjoyed their sessions even without the extra income though. Mr. Quincey was a real character, and full of interesting life stories.

He'd been making such good progress too. This was the first time Mr. Quincey had made it all the way to the top floor in one go.

Now this had to happen. It wasn't fair.

"Please stay calm, ladies and gentlemen, and try not to move around the car too much until the full lighting is restored," Drew began with practiced efficiency. He put a comforting hand on Mr. Quincey's elbow, and shot him a reassuring smile. "Is everyone all right?"

Once more, everyone started talking at once, most of them complaining at the outrage of having their vital activities interrupted. The major part of their hostility seemed to be directed at Drew Stoppard personally, as if he had deliberately inconvenienced them in this way.

"Whoa, Sam, I think you need to rein this lot in before they turn into a lynch mob!" Al suggested.

Sam turned to look at his friend, as if surprised to see him there, "A-Al?"

"Uh-oh," Al didn't like the glazed look in Sam's eyes. He'd seen this loss of control before, when the leapee's mind 'bled through', and it usually spelled a whole heap of trouble with a side order of disaster. "Ziggy! What do I do?"

The hand link squealed.

"Yes, I think I'd worked out Sam's synergizing and so suffering from Quincey's claustrophobia, you stupid pile of gummy bears. Any idiot can see he's on the verge of a full blown panic attack. Now tell me how I snap him out of it."

"Take a deep breath, Mr. Quincey," Drew could see the signs too, and ignored the baying throng to help his friend, for so he thought of the old man. He turned to face Sam, and gently forced eye contact. "Can you hear me, sir?"

Sam was hyperventilating. He felt as if he were suffocating. He pulled at his stiffly starched shirt collar, loosening his tie and undoing the top

button without even being aware he was doing so. He'd started perspiring and he could feel his heart pounding in his chest. His stomach was tied in knots. He felt sick and dizzy. His nerves were ragged; he felt tingly all over. Every sound seemed amplified, yet indistinct. He was completely paralyzed with fear.

"I'm right here, Sam. Take it easy. Listen to me, Sam, concentrate on my voice," Al coaxed his friend gently. He could feel the sweat starting to form on his own brow, and brushed it away with an irritated swipe of the back of his hand. One of them needed to hold it together.

Sam was barely aware of what was going on around him, the voices he heard were like buzzing flies – all he could think of was that he had to get out, get away, escape. His eyes darted round, looking for the exit, but not focusing on it. His feet felt as if they were welded to the spot.

"Don't worry Mr. Quincey," Drew spoke the name softly and calmly, then turned to include the rest of the guests. "Everything is going to be fine. I'm sure that the power will be restored very soon and we will be able to continue to the foyer. There is no need to panic. Please remain calm and stay where you are."

Totally ignoring him, the others began pressing forward toward the door, jostling one another and still trying to out-shout each other with the importance of their personal agendas, mingled with a growing alarm.

"C'mon buddy," Al urged, "we need you here, c'mon back pal. You aren't Tobias Quincey, you're Dr. Sam Beckett. Now suck it up Sam and get these people organized."

Sam looked at his friend and frowned. His head hurt. Oh, God, did his head hurt! The noise behind him was intolerable and suddenly he could stand it no longer. He yelled at the top of his lungs, "Would you all please just **SHUT UP!!!!**"

Totally stunned by the rudeness of their fellow passenger, aside from a couple of muttered "Well, really!" and "How dare he?" comments, they did just that.

"Thank you," Sam managed with a sigh. Then he swayed, looking for a moment as if he was about to pass out. Drew caught hold of him, and eased him into the corner of the elevator, so he could lean against the wall for support. Sam managed to give the young man a feeble half smile of gratitude.

"Attaboy, Sam." Al breathed a sigh of relief. Sam was still looking grey; confused; his breathing was ragged and there was a 'deer in the headlights' look in his eyes, but he was obviously trying with every ounce of self-control he possessed to get a grip on himself.

"He-help m-me, Al," he whispered desperately, clutching the handle of the cane as if it were a lifeline.

"I'm right here, buddy," Al reassured him. "Just take a couple of deep breaths. Its gonna be okay, Sam. We're gonna get through this together."

Al well knew the terrors of being trapped in a confined space. Vietnam had made him an expert. He could empathize with Quincey's panic, transferred now to Sam. His time-traveling friend couldn't afford to give in to the fear though. If he did, then history would repeat itself and they would all die.

Al was not about to let that happen. "Hang in there, kid. I'm gonna stay right here, I won't leave you. You can do this, Sam. We can do this."

Though still trembling, Sam gave him a nod and the other half of the grateful smile he'd conferred upon the attendant. Leaning the cane in the corner, he took the handkerchief from his top pocket, and wiped the perspiration from his face and neck. For a moment he buried his face in his hands, and forced a couple of slow breaths. Then, putting the handkerchief into his trouser pocket, he looked up at his fellow passengers.

"I apologize for my outburst," he began, putting up a hand to silence them when they began to complain again. Though he was regaining control gradually, Sam found he was still trembling and feeling weak. The attack itself had been a terrifying experience for him. He'd felt like he was going to die. He took another steadying breath.

"Mr. Quincey suffers from claustrophobia," Drew explained, defending the old man fiercely from the critical stares and mutters. "He has severe panic attacks, as you've just witnessed. Please be understanding."

The three men and two women were obviously still outraged by the whole situation, but they did not resume their collective tirade.

"We need to get out of here," Sam told Drew simply.

"I know how you're feeling, sir," Drew returned, "but please don't worry. I'm sure the power will be back any moment. We'll have you out of here soon."

"Not this time," Sam returned, but of course he couldn't explain how he knew, so he was going to have great difficulty in convincing any of them that it wasn't just the claustrophobia talking. When would he learn that there was no such thing as an easy leap?

Chapter Three

"How long?" Sam whispered under his breath to his observer, taking hold of the cane again as if it were a comforter.

Al didn't need clarification of the question. "No immediate urgency, Sam," he reassured the leaper. "The elevator isn't due to drop for nearly two hours. Of course, it'll get pretty unpleasant in here long before that."

"It's no barrel of laughs now!" Sam forced a grin. "I feel like I've stepped into a disaster movie!" His left hand held the cane with a vise like grip. His right hand held his left to stop it trembling. The right hand was on its own, and struggling.

"If it were," Al decided levity was probably the best medicine, "then one of these people would be the hotel owner, or architect, who'd skimped on costs or materials and so made it unsafe. Another would be a thief with a briefcase full of booty, or a murderer, or some such criminal. Then again one of the women would be heavily pregnant and go into labor any moment. That one's big enough to be carrying quads, but given she's got arms like tree-trunks I think she's just fat! I guess she's the *Shelley Winters* part!"

Sam shot him a reproachful look. Al merely shrugged and continued, "Now, what other cliché's do they have? Oh yeah, the claustrophobic! Seems like that's the only one we do have in here, and that's you, buddy!"

"Don't remind me," Sam hissed, taking a deep breath.

"Sorry, pal," Al offered contritely. "The sooner you get out, the more choices of escape route you'll have." Al told his friend, to give him something positive to focus on.

Sam nodded. Easier said than done though.

He glanced at the indicator over the door to see how far they still had to descend to get to safety. In keeping with the rest of the leap so far, it was no surprise to see that the dial had stopped just below level 13.

The others started to get restless again.

It was the large lady who vocalized - in a strong Italian accent - what they were all thinking, "How much longer are we going to be kept waiting? Do you realize who I am? *Allegra Mancini*, world-renowned soprano." She put her hand to her throat, and visibly puffed up with self-importance. "I am due to perform at *Covent Garden* in..." she looked at her solid gold wristwatch, "in a little under two hours. I have a car waiting for me. I need to get to the theatre and get into my costume and make up. There are some very important people waiting to hear me sing."

"Great, we got a prima donna!" Al chipped in. "I think we'd have been better off with a woman in labor!"

Sam hid a short laugh behind his hand and a forced cough. Al was incorrigible, but at least his friend's levity was helping to keep the terror at bay. The more Sam could distract himself from the

awareness of his heart thudding in his chest, the better he would feel.

"I'm sure we'll be moving again any moment," Drew told her reassuringly. He tried the emergency phone again, but it was still dead.

Although Sam wanted to mobilize them into making their own escape, he didn't want them to panic. He was having enough problems keeping control of his own nerves. The last thing he needed was for the group to start screaming and yelling again.

Before the lack of communication with the outside world could worry them, Sam decided on a useful distraction.

"Thank you for introducing yourself Ms Mancini. Since we may be here for a little while yet, I suggest we all do the same. As young Mr. Stoppard told you, my name is Tobias Quincey." He inclined his head respectfully to the assembled company, determined to keep this civilized.

"Oh please, you can all just call me Drew," the young man hastily put in. He didn't warrant a "Mister" in this illustrious company. The boss would skin him alive if he heard any of the guests referring to him as Mr. Stoppard. Of course, the best he usually got was 'boy' or 'you there' or even just '10th floor', most often without even a 'please' tagged onto the end.

Sam turned to the other lady, who was younger, slimmer, and far more attractive than the opera singer, "And you are...?"

"Bryony Kingston," she smiled and held out a slender hand, encased in an elbow length midnight blue silk glove, the exact same shade as the elegant silk evening dress that adorned her elegant body. Sam took the hand, and with a bow, kissed it gallantly. "I am on my way to a dinner engagement in the hotel dining room with my fiancé and his parents. They will think it terribly rude of me to be so late and I did so want to make a good impression." Her accent was unmistakably British.

Sam smiled back at her. He knew the rest of her dinner party would probably be evacuated in plenty of time, but of course he couldn't tell her that.

Then he turned his attention to the three gentlemen. The first looked to be in his mid to late forties. Like Sam's host he wore a three-piece suit, though his was black. He had a bit of a paunch, which strained at the waistcoat and threatened to spill over the trouser belt.

Before Sam could ask, the man volunteered, "Woodrow Wayneforth the Fourth, at your service, sir. I am on my way to a private poker game with some business associates." Wayneforth was definitely American; though from which State Sam could not be sure. He didn't have a strong Southern drawl, or a Texan twang, or any of the

other more obvious regional accents. Given time, Sam could have studied his inflections and narrowed it down, but he dismissed it as unimportant.

The second gentleman was more flamboyantly dressed. In fact, he could have stolen his attire from Al's wardrobe. On second thoughts, Sam allowed, his clothes were a bit outrageous, even for Al. He had on a pair of maroon brushed velvet striped trousers. Solid stripes alternated with ones of embossed rosebuds. The maroon suede shoes beneath were obviously expensive and made for comfort. His pale magenta shirt had ruffles at the open neck and on the cuffs - a refugee from the seventies if ever Sam had seen one. He almost expected to see a huge medallion round the man's neck. His light brown hair was well below the collar line. There was a diamond stud earring in his left lobe and a solid gold signet ring on his finger. He appeared to be early twenties in age.

"Jerome McFarlane," he introduced himself to the assembly. He was British again, but less 'aristocratic' sounding than Miss Kingston. He was probably what the others would sneeringly refer to as *nouveau riche*. Sam wouldn't have been surprised if he'd announced he was a pop star on his way to give a concert, but instead he declared, "I'm s'posed to be meeting friends for the preview at the Odeon."

That left only, "Kenneth Attenborough." His accent was Scottish. The man had a glare that could curdle milk. He was probably something like thirty-two or thirty-three, average height, average build, average everything but his temper, which from his curt manner was clearly on the short side. He was dressed in sharply creased black trousers, a crisp white shirt with solid gold cuff links, a finely pleated deep green silk cummerbund and matching bow tie. His shoes had a luster you could see your face in. He didn't volunteer where he had been headed, and nobody felt like asking him.

"If this was a disaster movie," Al observed, "my money would be on him for the criminal!"

Sam didn't laugh this time, but his expression showed Al that Sam would not have bet against him.

Mr. Attenborough turned his glare on the unfortunate Drew.

"Don't just stand there, boy. Get this lift moving again!" he snapped.

The elevator responded by creaking, shuddering and then jerking downward several inches before stopping abruptly again, almost knocking them all off their feet. The emergency lighting flickered off and back on. The obese opera singer screamed shrilly again.

"Oh, boy!" breathed Sam, feeling the panic attack trying to assert itself again.

Chapter Four

Even in the dim lighting of the emergency power, Sam could see that the other passengers were starting to feel his own sense of panic. A person didn't need to be claustrophobic to want to get out of an elevator that was stuck, but lurching randomly. He figured that the time had come for them to be receptive to the idea of self-help.

"Drew," he turned to the attendant, "I really think we should all get out of here. Will you help me organize these folks? No, please, don't tell me it's just the claustrophobia talking," he put a hand up to forestall the protest that seemed to be hovering on the young man's lips. "There's a real problem, and nobody seems to know we're here."

Drew looked around him, and looked back at the unresponsive telephone. Mr. Quincey needed to get out before his claustrophobia totally overwhelmed him. Drew was surprised that he'd recovered from his panic attack as fast as he had. He was even more surprised that the old man had not yet suffered another one. The others, Drew cared less about, but they were all angry and impatient, and the longer they remained here, the more vociferously they were liable to complain to the management once they did get to reception. He wasn't concerned about getting in trouble for not doing his job, though. If Mr. Quincey was right, and there was a fire, or some other reason the lift hadn't yet been fixed, then the longer he waited to help his passengers, the worse things could get. He genuinely wanted to do what was best for everyone. With each passing moment, getting them out seemed like the most sensible thing to do.

Drew nodded to Mr. Quincey. He then turned to the door control and tested it to see if they would open at all. If they were even close to the 13th level exit, it may be fairly simple to get everyone out if he could pry the outer doors apart.

Pressing the button to open the doors, Drew was not entirely surprised that they didn't slide apart with their accustomed ease. They creaked and shuddered until finally a gap of four inches or so appeared. Drew pressed the button a few more times, but the doors refused to budge any further. He then moved across and tried to pull them apart with his white-gloved hands.

Sam saw what Drew was doing, and went to help. As he did so, he told the rest of the group, "There may be a problem outside; we need to try to get out ourselves. Please try to stay calm and do as Mr. Stoppard and I tell you."

The young man shot him a pleading look, "Please, sir. Drew. I'm staff. These people--"

--Should show you respect no matter what your rank," Sam cut in, loud enough for all to hear, even over their renewed mumbles of complaint. He hated pretentiousness. He hated people being treated badly even more. From what he'd seen so far, Drew was worth ten of any of the others, except perhaps Miss Kingston, who had smiled at the young man sympathetically when the others had been castigating him.

Drew was horrified, "Sir, *please*," he begged, "Drew's fine, honestly."

"Then only because you wish it," Sam responded firmly, with a glare at the muttering passengers. Then he turned his attention back to the doors. Sam quickly rammed the cane into the aperture, using it as a lever to enlarge the hole. Miraculously, it didn't snap. Even so, fearing they may need it again, as soon as the gap was wide enough to get his shoulder through, Sam threw the cane back inside onto the thick pile carpet.

"A little help here?" Sam requested, as they struggled to maintain the gap they had won, and even improve upon it. The men obviously thought such manual labor beneath them.

Wayneforth folded his arms in open refusal. "Who says we have to take orders from you?"

Attenborough looked for a moment as if he would help, then decided it looked too much like hard work and stayed where he was, muttering about a bad back.

McFarlane looked like a strong breeze could knock him over, and was equally disinclined to lend assistance. Then, still reluctantly, as Sam and Drew strained to get enough of an opening to see clearly through, he finally decided to step forward.

The doors continued to resist, trying to force their way shut again, but with much heaving and perspiring and tensing of muscles, the three of them eventually got enough of a gap for Sam to force himself into sideways. Pressing his back against one door, he strained against the powerful attractive force of the heavy metal doors. They retreated a little further.

Leaning in, Drew mirrored his position and they both pushed with their backs, knees slightly bent and feet pressing firmly into the floor for stability. Soon the doors were more open than shut. McFarlane stuck his head into the gap and looked up and down. He reported that the floor of level thirteen was there, a little over a third of the way up.

"How are we supposed to open the outer doors?" the young man enquired, looking at the attendant condescendingly.

"Try my cane again," Sam suggested, nodding towards where it lay. The quicker this was

done, the better. Holding the door open was really starting to hurt his back muscles.

Miss Kingston bent down and picked it up, passing it to Jerome McFarlane.

Leaning across the two human doorstops, McFarlane nervously stretched forwards over the gap between the car and the wall. With much poking and prodding and wheedling, he managed to force the tip of the cane between the doors to level 13. More wriggling and levering and the doors went their separate ways, at which point they managed to use the cane to wedge them apart.

"Will it hold?" Wayneforth asked dubiously, stepping forward to get a better overview of the arrangement. His initial thought had been to make sure he was the first one out, but on reflection, he decided to let someone else test it first.

"It should," Drew assured him. "Those doors are designed to detect if anything is passing between them and stay open, so that nobody gets their fingers caught or anything."

Sam wished the inner doors had the same imperative. The strain on his lower back muscles was becoming unbearable, and he could feel a burning, tightening pain between his shoulder blades. He was perspiring again, from the effort this time.

"I think I can get through," McFarlane declared "I'll fetch help."

McFarlane reached up, put his hands on the floor and began to haul himself up, his head and shoulders fully through the gap.

Suddenly, the elevator lurched again even more violently than before and it was only Sam's quick reflexes that enabled them to pull McFarlane and themselves back inside a split second before the descending car crushed the young man. The inner doors snapped shut like the jaws on an alligator.

All three ended up on the floor in a tangled heap. Sam was panting breathlessly, amazed to be alive. The other four had instinctively retreated and then formed a semi circle where they stood, simply staring at the trio in stunned silence; the grim reality of what had just been averted taking a while to sink in.

Chapter Five

"Sam? You okay, Sam?" Al bent over his friend, who was trembling and deathly white. His eyes were getting that glazed, terrified look again. He didn't respond, or even acknowledge that he saw his friend. He was hyperventilating.

"C'mon, Sam," Al chided, "Don't go all phobic on me again. These people need you to save them."

Sam shifted position enough to disentangle his legs from the other two where they had landed together, but otherwise didn't respond.

Ziggy chirped.

"Good idea, Zig," Al commented. "Sam, Ziggy says do some calculations in your head, or recite multiplication tables or chemical formulae or something. She reckons it'll calm you down. Can you hear me, Sam?"

For a while Al thought he had lost his friend to the terrors, but gradually he could see that he had gotten through, and Sam was following his advice. He observed a slight movement of the lips as Sam went through his mantra under his breath, '... tw-twenty one times nine equals one hundred and eighty nine; twenty two times nine equals one hundred and ninety eight; twenty three times nine equals two hundred and seven...'

It was a measure of how tough a battle Sam's brain was engaged in that he'd chosen something so basic, but at least he was holding his own. Al sighed with relief.

While Sam was thus regaining self-control, Drew picked himself up and, having seen that Mr. Quincey appeared physically unhurt, turned his attention to Mr. McFarlane, who hadn't moved since he landed, nor opened his eyes.

"Is he...?" Miss Kingston was the first of the others to move. She looked at the lift attendant and hoped he wouldn't make her voice her fear.

"Uh-oh, Sam," Al became aware of the others as his concern for Sam receded a notch. He consulted the hand link. "You better check him out, Sam, he doesn't look so good."

Sam took a deep breath and fought to still the tremors in his hands. Swallowing hard, he forced himself to get up off his still aching back and join Drew in looking at the fallen McFarlane.

"You okay, Drew?" Sam asked as he moved around, guessing the young man had felt the strain of their efforts much as he had and wanting to make sure he was fit for the trials to come.

"A bit sore, but I'll be fine, thank you sir," Drew reassured him, giving his lower back a quick rub.

Sam turned his attention to McFarlane and was able to reassure the now tearful Miss Kingston. "He has a pulse," he announced. There was a collective exhalation.

Sam then lifted the eyelids and looked at each of the pupils in turn. "Looks like he may have a concussion," Sam declared, feeling the back of McFarlane's head and finding a large lump. Damn, this was a complication they could do without.

At this point the young man groaned and his eyes flickered open. His hand went to the back of his head as Sam's had just done. He groaned again, "Owwwww, my head!"

"Lie still," Sam advised, as Jerome made a feeble and short-lived attempt to sit up. "Can you tell me if it hurts anywhere else?"

McFarlane thought about it, though thinking made his head ache worse. "Dunno," he declared after a while, his voice little more than a mumble.

"Okay, just lie quiet for a while." Sam began examining him from head to toe, feeling for broken bones. He was just starting to hope they'd gotten away with it when he reached the left ankle.

"Garrrrrrrrhhhhh," yelled McFarlane, arching his back and clenching his fists, "What the bloody hell...?"

Ms Mancini huffed and looked disapproving at this outburst. Sam ignored her.

"Sorry," Sam apologized to McFarlane sincerely, wishing he had access to an ice pack to help reduce the swelling and numb the pain. "It's broken, but at least it appears undisplaced," he pronounced.

Simultaneously, Ziggy returned her second opinion.

"*Dr. Beckett is correct,*" she corroborated. "*Jerome McFarlane has sustained a moderate concussion, in addition to a fracture to the left lateral malleolus. He does not have any internal injuries, nor is his life in immediate danger from his injuries. He should however seek medical attention at the earliest opportunity. Left untreated - especially if he puts any strain on the injury - there is a danger of the fracture displacing, leading to a vulnerability to arthritis.*"

Sam took off his jacket and folded it neatly, placing it gently under the injured limb to elevate

it. The waistcoat became a pillow. McFarlane groaned softly with each shift in his position.

"I don't suppose you carry a first aid kit?" Sam asked Drew, more in hope than expectation.

"I'm afraid not," Drew shook his head regretfully.

"Would my glove be any use as a temporary bandage?" Bryony offered helpfully, starting to pull on the fingers of her left glove.

Sam smiled appreciatively, but shook his head. "Thanks, but it's too stretchy, it wouldn't give enough support."

"Drew, help me please," Sam instructed, getting the attendant to smoothly raise McFarlane's lower leg and support it. "I'll be as gentle as I can, but this will probably hurt," he cautioned the invalid.

Sam then carefully proceeded to remove the shoe on the injured foot. McFarlane drew in a sharp breath, and then let it go with a shudder, followed by, "Arhhh. Shit! Shit!" He slapped the floor with the flat of his hand, emphasising each expletive.

"Well, really!" complained Allegra Mancini indignantly, obviously not used to hearing such profane language.

"Get over it!" Sam shot at her unsympathetically. He was normally pretty easy going, and tried to see the best in everyone. Right now, though, his nerves were raw as he fought not to succumb to another panic attack, and he was in no mood to suffer pomposity. He was finding Ms. Mancini and the other two men were really irking him with their self-importance and superior strutting. They were going to get a harsh reality check soon, and Sam was almost looking forward to seeing them having to swallow their pride and get with the program or die. He shook his head, trying to rid himself of the uncharitable thoughts.

By contrast to the opera singer, Bryony knelt down and took hold of the young man's hand, resting his head in her lap and stroking his forehead with her other hand. "Take it easy, it'll be over soon," she encouraged. Sam spared her another grateful smile.

Sam took the handkerchief back out of his trouser pocket. Though he'd used it earlier to wipe the perspiration from his face, it was not going to have direct contact with the skin, so he'd

have to risk that it would be hygienic enough. He was pleased that it was of generous dimensions. Folding it diagonally in half he made a triangle. Putting the top two corners to the centre and then folding it over in half again, he made a long narrow strip. Then he put the centre of this strip underneath McFarlane's foot, crossed it over on the top, and took the ends round to the back of the heel where he tied them together. He made sure it was a snug fit across the fractured bone, without pulling it so tight as to risk further damage. Nevertheless, McFarlane winced as Sam tied it off, and gripped Miss Kingston's hand rather tighter than was comfortable. She bravely gave him a reassuring squeeze in return, without complaint, though her eyes watered a little.

Sam met her eyes and acknowledged softly, "Thank you."

"It's far from ideal, but it should help a little until we can get you to a hospital," Sam then told his patient. "Meantime lie as still as possible."

"Thanks," McFarlane finally acknowledged, starting to nod and then thinking better of it.

"No worries," Sam returned, though personally he had quite a few right now.

"Mr. Quincey," McFarlane put out his free hand and caught Sam's arm, pulling him down so he could speak to him without raising his voice.

"What is it? Are you in pain somewhere else?" Sam looked worried. Ziggy hadn't mentioned any other injuries, but then Ziggy had been wrong before.

"I heard... I'm sure I heard... an alarm, a fire alarm! The hotel's on fire!"

Chapter Six

Bryony gasped, "Oh, Lord – Henry!" she cried out. "Henry and his parents--"

"--Are probably safely outside by now," Sam hastened to reassure her.

The rest of the group caught her alarm, though they hadn't heard Jerome's observation. They began asking questions, all demanding answers at once again.

- "What is it?"
- "What's wrong?"
- "What did he say?"
- "What's going on?"

"There's a... a fire out there!" Bryony Kingston blurted out, before Sam could stop her.

If they had made a fuss before, it was nothing compared to the ensuing panic. All convinced they were in imminent danger of perishing, the three most obnoxious hotel guests began shouting and complaining and demanding to be rescued, as if Drew could wave a magic wand and instantly transport them to safety. Indeed, they seemed to expect no less.

Sam wanted to slap the lot of them. He couldn't help the fleeting feeling that these three at least would be no great loss to the world. He soon chided himself that it wasn't his place to judge and, with a weary sigh, prepared to do his duty and save their sorry asses.

Putting up a hand for silence he firmly ordered, "Shut up, all of you, *now*. If you want to get out of here alive, you will all do *exactly* as I tell you, understood?"

Once more the sheer shock of being spoken to in such a manner had them stunned into silence, their mouths flapping like fish out of water. After a moment or two, they each nodded in turn.

"Good."

"Okay, since the door idea didn't pan out, looks like the only way is up!" Sam declared to no one in particular. He shot Al a look, and the observer obediently had himself re-centered on the roof of the car.

A moment later he returned. "The cables are okay for now, and the shaft isn't too smoky yet. Amazingly, the cane is still holding the doors. If you can get up through the trap door, you should be able to get out. It's only a couple of feet or so to climb down, but you need to hurry before the fire spreads down to this level."

Sam nodded. Finally they were getting a break.

"Right. Mr. Attenborough and Mr. Wayneforth. You're going to help me lift Drew up to open the trap door in the ceiling."

The two exchanged indignant looks, but neither protested aloud.

Sam had them stand directly below the escape hatch, facing each other. Due to the ornate chandelier the hatch was offset, rather than

practically central as was standard in most elevators. The ceiling was also a lot higher than the usual seven feet, to prevent guests hitting their heads on the fixture.

The glares they conferred upon Sam could have had him six feet under, but he paid no attention.

"Is no good, he never do it!" Allegra observed unhelpfully, before they'd even tried.

"We're not done yet," Sam snapped. He was still barely holding his own in the battle with the claustrophobia. He hadn't the energy for niceties.

"Yeah, so don't even think of singing yet, sister!" Al put in, knowing full well she couldn't hear him but unable to resist.

Sam shot him a confused look, not getting the joke.

"Aw, c'mon Sam, surely you're not *that* out of it?" Al chided, "Y'know the saying don'tcha? – 'It ain't over 'til the fat lady sings!' Well, they don't come much fatter than the Diva here!"

Sam couldn't decide whether to burst out laughing or lecture his friend about being unkind, but since he couldn't do either without appearing to have completely lost his mind, he settled on a stern look and a huge grin.

Aware of the ticking clock, Sam instantly turned his attention back to the matter in hand. Standing between the other two men, knees bent and with his back to them, he instructed Drew to climb up and sit on his shoulders. The other men were to steady him from either side.

Once he had completed this maneuver, Sam held Drew's legs steady while the young man reached up and undid the latches holding the trapdoor in place. It was tricky, and the human tower wobbled alarmingly several times before it was accomplished, but eventually Drew was able to push the door up and tip it out of the way.

"Well done, Drew," Sam congratulated him. "Now, go on through."

This was even trickier. Sam stood as still as he could manage, but between fighting the tremors of a threatened panic attack and trying to still the trembling of muscles too long under strain he knew he could not hold on for long.

Drew reached up and made a grab for the edge of the aperture, holding firm as he shifted position to stand on Sam's shoulders. Drew too was feeling the ache in his back from their earlier exertions, but he didn't complain. If old Mr. Quincey could endure the ordeal of supporting him, then he'd gladly do his part.

Fortunately, Drew was of slender build, and reasonably agile. Even so, he slipped on his first attempt, and Sam had to reach up and grab his leg to prevent him tumbling to the floor. Once he was sure the boy was steady, Sam carefully let go, and placed his hand, palm upward, just in front of his shoulder. Getting Drew to ease his foot forward, Sam took a firm hold of it and then carefully raised his arm, gently pushing Drew's leg up and giving him the impetus to clamber through the hole.

"Everything okay up there?" Sam enquired, hoping that Al's assessment was still valid.

Drew stuck his head back through the hole and nodded. "Looks fine."

"Right, Miss Kingston, your turn." Sam announced without preamble.

"Up there?" she swallowed hard, blanching at the prospect as she pointed at the gaping maw in the ceiling.

"Please, Miss Kingston." Sam smiled at her. "I'm afraid it's our only way out."

She looked him in the eyes and acknowledged the truth of his statement.

Sam instructed Wayneforth and Attenborough to join hands, crossed at the wrists, with his own making a triangle. This provided a crude platform onto which she could step, made easier by them bending as low as they could.

"Very well." With a resigned shrug, she kicked off her delicate high-heeled strappy silver shoes.

Even so, an evening gown was not the best attire for acrobatics and, after a couple of fumbled attempts to climb the human pyramid she ripped the side seam of her skirt with a sigh of regret.

"No peeking, boys," she instructed with a flirtatious grin as she tried again, putting a hand on Sam's shoulder, and the other on Attenborough's to push herself up. Sam knew the levity was just a device to hide her nervousness.

With Drew to help pull her up from above, she was soon standing alongside him on the roof of the car.

"Now Mr. McFarlane," Sam instructed, breaking the link to go and help him up. "He'll need a lot of help to keep the weight off that ankle."

Allegra Mancini cleared her throat loudly, "What 'appen to women and children first?"

Sam was still trying to formulate a tactful reply when Kenneth Attenborough supplied, "Because if you get your fat Italian lard-ass stuck in that hole we'll all be trapped down here."

Allegra turned away with an indignant huff that soon turned into an outpouring of tears. She reached into her purse for a handkerchief, into which she blew her nose with a noise like a trumpet of elephants.

"Really, Mr. Attenborough, there's no need for insults," Sam felt compelled to upbraid the outspoken Scotsman. She may be obese, and incredibly irritating, but nobody deserved to be spoken to like that. He put his arm around her shoulder to comfort her. "We're all feeling stressed at the moment, please take no notice."

Sam then helped Jerome up from the floor, and supported his weight as he limped to the opening. Then Sam had him sit on the other two men's clasped arms, while he turned his back, crouched down and got them to ease the young man onto his shoulders – again in a sitting position.

Once in place, Sam carefully stood up, grunting softly with the effort.

Al noticed he also winced. "You okay, buddy?"

Sam was honest enough to return a very slight shake of his head. His back muscles, already over-strained, were starting to go into spasm under the continued mistreatment. If he hadn't leaped by then, he'd be stiff as a board in the morning.

"I know you're probably feeling dizzy and disoriented, Mr. McFarlane. I'm sorry to have to put you through this, but we need you to cooperate as best you can. Please raise your arms as high as you can over your head."

After a moment or two looking bewildered, Jerome complied.

Somehow, with Sam pushing from below, and both Drew and Bryony leaning down and grabbing an arm each, they managed to ease him through the gap.

"You're next, Mr. Attenborough," Sam decided. It was getting harder to work out the mechanics as the number of people in each location shifted.

"Mr. Wayneforth, cup your hands together in front of you please, give Mr. Attenborough a boost up," Sam instructed, before turning his back ready to receive yet another burden. Being shorter, and given that McFarlane was not able lend much assistance – though to give him his due, he tried – it took a lot longer and far more manhandling to get Attenborough through the gap.

As they finally achieved it, the car lurched again. Allegra screamed in Sam's ear, and this time Bryony echoed it as those on top all flattened themselves to the floor and clutched at the edge of the aperture in terror of being tipped off and plunging to their deaths.

Chapter Seven

The car had dropped another couple of feet, knocking those inside off theirs too. It was making alarming creaking noises as it strained on its cables.

"Everyone okay?" Sam asked, trying not to think about how loudly his own heart was pounding in his chest, or how his stomach was doing flips.

Nods from below and mutters from above soon let him know there were no new injuries, though a fair amount of shock was evident all round. McFarlane swore again as the jarring sent stabbing pains from his injured ankle.

Woodrow Wayneforth had instinctively grabbed Sam's arm to steady himself as they got back to their feet, and was still gripping it tightly. He pulled Sam around to face him; "You *have* to get us out of here!"

What happened to 'Who says we have to take orders from you?' Sam wondered, rolling his eyes. He was not in the least surprised by the absence of a 'please' from Wayneforth. Sam could see from Al's expression that his friend found this turn-around amusing. Were their roles reversed, Al may well have shot the arrogant nozzle a snide comeback, but that was not Sam's nature.

"I've every intention of doing so," he said instead, "if you'll kindly remove your hand from my arm before it goes totally numb."

Wayneforth took his hand away and looked at it for a moment, as if wondering how it had gotten there in the first place. For a split second it looked as if he was about to apologize to Sam for grabbing him so roughly, but the moment passed without event.

Sam rubbed at his arm, but didn't push it. Though manners cost nothing, he couldn't afford the time to make an issue of it. In other circumstances he'd have delighted in teaching Wayneforth a lesson in humility, but this was neither the time nor the place.

Naturally, the American declined to assist Sam in helping Ms Mancini to get up. It was consequently an inelegant affair, and a renewed strain on Sam's back, but after a couple of bungled attempts, Sam managed to get her to her feet.

Sam turned his attention to the group above them, who had carefully regained their feet and were now clinging to each other, seemingly too terrified to move further. He could hear Drew calmly reassuring them, but they appeared unwilling to heed his advice as to how to proceed.

"Miss Kingston," Sam called out gently, "can you hear me?"

"Y-yes, Mr. Quincey," she replied, her voice shaky.

"Listen carefully," Sam began, "I want you and Mr. Attenborough to go out through the doors, and then have Drew pass Mr. McFarlane across to you. Once you're clear, don't wait for us. Mr. Attenborough, you need to support Mr. McFarlane. Make sure he keeps his weight off that ankle. Head for the stairwell and get downstairs. Don't panic, take it nice and steady, but keep heading down. If you happen to see anyone from rescue services let them know we're up here. Do you understand?"

"If you think that's best," Bryony answered uncertainly.

"I want you off the car before it moves again," Sam reasoned and Attenborough for one mumbled his agreement.

"I'm not sure it's such a good idea to split up, Sam." Al cautioned.

"We'll catch you up as soon as we can," Sam reassured both Bryony and his friend. "Drew, once you've helped them out, stay there and help me with these other folks, okay?"

"Yes, sir," Drew replied, grateful for the assistance with the awkward guests, and even more grateful that taking charge seemed to be helping the old boy to stay in control of his claustrophobia. Mr. Quincey was the one he'd have most expected to go totally to pieces in a situation like this, yet he seemed to be the calmest of them all. Drew hoped he would remain so, but knew the panic attacks could strike at any time without warning.

Sam could hear them hesitantly moving about above, and feel the vibrations as their weight shifted over. The two remaining passengers in the car with him began to pace nervously.

"I think it would be safest if we moved to the back of the elevator," Sam told them, a trifle snappily. He was relieved that they followed his example without argument, though they seemed puzzled as to why they were doing so. "To counter-balance their weight above," he explained, "Keep the car as steady as possible." Not to mention steadying his nerves, which were fraying at the edges again and in imminent danger of totally unraveling. The panic was there all the time, bubbling just below the surface, waiting for him to lose his fragile grip. Keeping busy and concentrating on the problem of getting everyone to safety was helping, but it was getting harder and harder to ignore the irrational fear that gnawed at his innards and made him want to scream and cry, and run and curl up and hide in a dark corner all at once.

"Hang in there, Sam," Al encouraged, seeing by the look in Sam's eyes that he was barely in control. "You're doing great, kid."

Sam smiled at him weakly, but was dismayed to find it instantly turned into a nervous twitch of his facial muscles. He ran his hand down his face, closing his eyes for a moment to compose himself.

"Hold on, I'll be right back, pal," Al then announced, preparing to key a command into the hand link.

Sam looked up at him in alarm, his face pleading not to be abandoned. Sam began trembling again. He realized he was grinding his teeth and every muscle in his body was coiled tighter than a watch spring. He was having palpitations. He was sure his blood pressure was going through the roof.

"It's okay," Al hastily reassured him, "I'm not leaving you, Sam. I'm just gonna check up top and see how they're getting on, okay buddy?"

Sam looked as if he could burst into tears any second. He certainly didn't seem as if he was okay with the notion of Al leaving his sight for even a second. Nevertheless, he pressed his lips together and held his breath for a moment, then gave his consent with a short sharp nod. His eyes qualified that permission with the silent instruction to hurry back.

"I'll be back before you know it," Al promised, and had himself re-centered onto the roof.

True to his word, Al returned almost immediately, smiling reassuringly. "They're filthy from all the dust and the grime up there, but they're doing okay," he reported. "The car roof is

almost level with the floor now, so they only have to step down a few inches."

Yet since time had seemed to stand still in his absence, Sam had long enough to have missed Al, and to fall deep into the clutches of the phobia. Al realized his words had fallen on deaf ears as he found Sam slumped against the rear wall of the elevator car, clutching his chest as if he were having a heart attack.

Sam was completely unaware of Al's return. He was too busy struggling to breathe, feeling as if he were suffocating. He was bent double with crippling stomach pains and had a splitting headache. He moaned softly. He felt awful. A tiny part of his rational mind knew that his symptoms were merely a manifestation of his host's phobia and were irrational and unnecessary. The greater part of him was lost to a catalogue of complaints that had him feeling totally wretched and convinced he was about to breathe his last.

"Sam?" Al addressed him cautiously; afraid he would startle his friend. Sam didn't respond. This panic attack had a far tighter grip than its predecessor. It had evidently come on very suddenly, and completely overwhelmed the normally levelheaded Dr. Beckett. He was a gibbering wreck.

"I'll never get everyone out," Sam mumbled, clutching now at his head in total despair mingled with abject terror. "I'll never get everyone out," he said again, and then repeated it over and over, as he rocked back and forth. "I'll never get everyone out. I'll never get everyone out."

"Course you will," Al reassured him, though he didn't dare ask Ziggy to confirm it. "C'mon, buddy, snap out of it. It's just the phobia talking. You can do it, buddy, I know you can. C'mon, Sam."

Sam stared straight through his holographic friend as if he no more saw him than the other two did.

Meanwhile, Allegra Mancini and Woodrow Wayneforth were staring at each other. Neither one wanted to approach the madman on the floor, yet both felt their lives were in his hands and wanted him back to being in charge of their rescue. They hadn't a clue what to do for themselves.

"Sam, listen to me, buddy, take your mind off it like before, huh? Do some Math or quote some theorems or something."

Sam continued to stare into space, muttering under his breath. His hands were now wandering rapidly over his arms and torso, as if trying to brush off something that was crawling on him.

Al crouched down in front of him, trying to get Sam to look at him, but without success. He

kept talking – softly, calmly, reassuringly – but he didn't think any of it was getting through. Al started to worry that Sam's pronouncement was going to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Chapter Eight

...Spiders! Ewwww, spiders everywhere, crawling all over me! What if they bite me? Get off! Where did they come from? So many, they're all crawling inside my clothes, they're everywhere. Go away; get off me! Nasty horrid tickly itchy beasties. Get them off me. Get off, get off, get OFF!!! There's too many of them...

"Ziggy!" Al cried out in desperation, hammering on his hand link. "We gotta find a way to get through to Sam, right now! Time's running out."

Help was instantly forthcoming, though not from the parallel hybrid computer.

Drew had realized what was happening, and lowered himself back down through the hole. He hurried over to Mr. Quincey, asking the other two to stand back, which they did without even a murmur of protest about the lowly lift attendant giving them orders. Perhaps they were starting to learn, but they still had a long way to go. Throughout the perturbing scene that followed, they kept to the opposite corner of the car and turned their backs, as if it were beneath their dignity to even acknowledge the other man's distress.

"Mr. Quincey?" Drew crouched down and gently placed a hand on the old man's shoulder to help still his trembling.

Aaaaaaah, what was that? Something touched me. Get off! Something's attacking me. Let go! It's choking me. It's smothering me. I can't breathe. I'm getting dizzy. It's trying to kill me! I have to get it off me. Go away! Leave me alone! Arrrh! Everything's closing in around me. I have to get out; I have to get away. I can't move, my body won't respond. Oh, God I'm paralyzed. I can't see, I'm going blind, I'm going crazy, I'm dying, I'm...

"Take a deep breath, Mr. Quincey," Drew advised. He could see by the rapid darting of the old man's eyes and the short panting breaths that he was deep in the grip of an anxiety attack. He was probably having the scary hallucinations again. Although the old man was flailing his arms around wildly as if trying to push him away, Drew did not back off. Instead, he gently restrained his friend so that he didn't hurt himself. "It's all right, sir, I'm here, it'll be all right. Try to calm down."

What? Who said that? Said what? What's going on? I dunno. I'm pinned down, like a moth on a collector's display board - a specimen being studied. I can't move. Shut up, I'm trying to listen. Listen to who? I dunno, shh. Oh, look, there's a stain on the carpet – that should have been cleaned, tut tut. It looks like a

poodle. Haha, a puddle that looks like a poodle. Who cares? Will somebody please stop that damn bell ringing? It's just your ears, stupid. Dammit, I really am going crazy, now I'm talking to myself. What's happening to me? You just said it, Beckett; you're going crazy: Hahaha, hehehe you're going crazy, you're going crazy, na-na na-na-na. SHUT UP! Oh, God, help me, somebody help me...

"H-help m-m-me," Sam whimpered, neither knowing nor caring at whom his plea was aimed.

"I'm right here, Sam. It's me – Al - your buddy. Over here, Sam - look at me, pal." Al implored him. "It's okay, it's gonna be okay, you just need to listen to my voice and calm down, okay? Can you do that for me?"

Sam was perspiring profusely.

Where am I? How did I get in here? Its... oh God... it's a giant microwave! I can see the walls glowing! I can smell the heat. I can feel my muscles heating up. Phew, I'm so hot. I'm burning up. I'm cooking alive from the inside out! Oh boy, I'm so dizzy. This is it - this is the end. What a way to die!

"Sam, you need to calm down and look at me, buddy. You need to get a grip. You are Dr. Sam Beckett and you have a job to do. You have to save these people, Sam. There's not much time, do you hear me? So snap out of it, okay? C'mon back to the land of the lucid. We need you, Sam. You can do it. I know you can." Al still didn't check the odds with Ziggy. Right now, he didn't need any further discouragement. He didn't need the cold calculations of the super computer to know that Sam was in a real bad place right now.

Drew took out his own handkerchief and dabbed the old man's forehead gently. "I'm here, sir. Drew, remember? Can you hear me, Mr. Quincey?" Drew asked softly.

"N-no need to sh-shout." Sam put his hands over his ears. Everything seemed to be in extra sharp focus all of a sudden.

"Sam? You okay, Sam?" Al brushed absently at his face, hoping his friend wouldn't notice the glistening in his eye. Sam seemed to have snapped back as suddenly as he'd zoned out.

Sam looked from Al to Drew and back again, a puzzled expression on his face.

"Numb," he muttered. He clenched and unclenched his fists. "Ewwww, tingly, crawly." He shuddered as the weird feeling enveloped him all over.

"That's normal, sir, remember?" Drew told him. "Try to stand up, get the circulation going."

Sam tried to stand, with Drew's support. His legs started shaking – violent tremors that made it hard to keep to one spot, like saplings in a hurricane. He could feel a tingling running the length of his spine, in his hands and feet, his face, and even his tongue.

"Steady, there, sir." Drew held his elbow, and put a hand behind his back. "Take it slowly, Mr. Quincey."

"Is he over it?" Al asked, both of the heedless Drew, and the all-knowing Ziggy.

"Dr. Beckett is still feeling some residual effects of the panic attack, Admiral. His pulse and respiratory rate are both rapid; blood pressure elevated. However, I believe he has survived the worst of it."

"Legs feel like jelly," Sam observed, as they gave way beneath him. Drew caught him mid-slump, and eased him back against the wall.

"So tired." Sam declared, leaning his head back and closing his eyes.

"Take it easy, sir." Drew advised, "Just try to breathe slowly and naturally."

"Oh God, that was so scary!" Sam whispered to his invisible friend. "You wouldn't believe some of the crazy, irrational thoughts I was having." He shuddered again. A shaky hand tracked across his forehead, as if to erase the recollection of his nightmare imaginings.

"That was the worst attack you've had in weeks," Drew confirmed.

"I feel sick," Sam declared weakly, "and... exhausted. I need to sleep now." He slumped further down and curled up in the corner of the elevator car.

"Sorry, pal, no can do," Al informed him regretfully. "I know you're wiped out, Sam, but you gotta hang in there or you're all gonna die. There's not much time left."

"How long was I out of it?" Sam wanted to know, wrapping his arms protectively around his torso and hugging himself as if afraid he'd literally as well as emotionally fall apart if he didn't. "It felt like hours."

"Only seven minutes, Sam," Al informed him, "but it sure felt a lot longer to me too. You had me worried sick, buddy."

"It was only a few minutes, sir," Drew confirmed, "I'm surprised you came out of it so soon to be honest. The first attack I witnessed wasn't anywhere near as severe, but you were delirious for twice as long. You probably don't remember but I had to help you back to your room that time. You told me next day that it was nearly an hour before you'd fully calmed down. Then you slept the whole of the rest of the day."

"I can't exactly say I'm calm now," Sam confessed, holding a hand out in front of him to show it was still trembling. "I feel like hell."

At last the other passengers deigned to acknowledge his existence, if only for the Diva to tut again at his choice of language. Wayneforth even showed an ounce of compassion. He reached into his inside jacket pocket and drew out a monogrammed silver flask.

"Here, have a snort of this. A drop of whiskey'll soon steady your nerves."

"Thanks," Sam acknowledged with a nod, "but no thanks. I don't think clouding my judgment with alcohol is going to help us get out of here." His head felt muzzy enough as it was. It was taking all his will power not to throw up or pass out, or both.

"Suit yourself," Wayneforth shrugged. He held it out to Ms Mancini in silent invitation, but she declined with a slight wave of her hand. Her expression hinted that she'd have liked to accept, but would not lower herself to drink from a common flask. Ignoring Drew, who would have turned it down anyway, Wayneforth shrugged again before taking a swig himself.

"You should go easy on that," cautioned Sam, but he could see that the advice was unlikely to be heeded. In fact, Wayneforth defiantly tipped the flask and took a deeper draught of the liquid.

"Save your breath, Sam," advised Al.

Sam nodded resignedly. Then, with a weary sigh and some welcome assistance from the ever-attentive Drew, he struggled to his feet again and prepared to resume his mission impossible.

Chapter Nine

Sam was running on sheer adrenalin now. He drew on reserves of strength and courage that he was amazed he still possessed. Damn but he was tired. The sooner this leap was over the better. Then he could rest. He craved rest like a junkie craves his next fix - with a yearning aching need.

"Anyone else want outa here? Cos I for one don't feel much like hanging round and waiting for another panic attack." Even the thought of it made him tremble. He swallowed hard, determined not to give in again to the ever-present fear.

"How?" Allegra Mancini wanted to know, her voice cracking with repressed emotion. She looked up at the hole in the ceiling and then down at her ample bosom and equally ample everything else. She'd obviously watched the others climbing out the hatch and realized that she was the camel and it was a needle's eye. Kenneth Attenborough had been right. There was no way in the world that she would ever get through. Tears underlined the fear in her eyes. They were all going to escape and leave her to die alone.

For a second time, Sam put a comforting arm round Allegra's shoulder. "Don't worry, I have no intention of abandoning you," he reassured her. Suddenly, in her vulnerability, she seemed less irritating than before.

"Ziggy's been working on it, but I don't know what to tell you, Sam. There's not a hope in

hell of getting her through that opening – even if you had all the men – and a crane! - up there to help haul her through.”

“I’ve been thinking about it,” Sam told them all. “Drew, how far down is it to floor twelve?”

Realizing where Sam was going with his enquiry, Al put the question, and the resulting scenario, into Ziggy’s interface.

“Each storey is fifteen feet from floor to ceiling, sir.” Drew looked at the old man with a puzzled frown. He didn’t have a clue where this was leading. “The lift car is ten feet high.”

“Add another six inches, a foot at most for joists etc. Right.” Sam seemed to be thinking aloud. Then he said to the general assembly, “So, given that the top of the car’s already more or less flush with the floor up here now, it can’t be much farther ‘til it lines up with the doors on 12? Say, five or six feet – maybe seven at a stretch?” It was clear how shaky Sam was still feeling by the fact he even felt the need to calculate aloud. Normally, such reckonings would be virtually subconscious.

Al shook the hand link as it squealed, and then read off the result of his inquiry.

“It’s do-able, Sam, but it won’t be easy and you’ll have to hurry whilst at the same time keeping it smooth and steady. Ziggy says 51% you can get her out on the next level if Wayneforth goes ahead and props the outer doors open. It’ll be tough going though and you need to be very careful not to jar it too much or you’ll all...” Al didn’t say it, but a whistling sound while his hand made a swift downward pointing motion made his meaning clear.

“Right, let’s get to it.” Sam declared, explaining to Wayneforth that he was to help get Drew and himself onto the roof and then go ahead and open the doors on the floor below.

Accordingly, Sam and Drew proceeded to heave Woodrow Wayneforth up through the hatch - whereupon he immediately turned and made his escape through the outer doors with no regard for anyone but himself. Sam couldn’t make out his parting remark, but guessed it was something along the lines of ‘So long, suckers!’

“Typical!” observed Al. “What a nozzle.”

“I suppose that means he won’t bother with the doors either. Now what do we do, sir?”

“We’ll worry about the doors once we get down there.” Sam decided. Al vanished for a fleeting moment and returned smiling.

“Bad news is Wayneforth is scurrying down the stairs as we thought. Good news, Sam, is that the first wave must have decided it would be a good idea for you to have a backup plan. Probably that Miss Kingston. Anyway, there’s a chair propping the door open on level 12. So get to it.”

“All right, my dear Drew,” Sam informed the young man, “Now to emulate a couple of campanologists!”

“Sorry, sir?” Drew continued to look perplexed.

“Okay, we may not be ringing any bells, but we’re going to be pulling on some ropes. Elevator cables to be precise.” Sam explained.

“Ms Mancini,” Sam turned his attention to the remaining passenger. “I need you to sit down on the floor and keep as still as possible to minimize any swaying of the car.”

She looked as if she was about to protest indignantly, but she remained silent. She was obviously not in the habit of sitting on the floor, especially not in a clearly expensive and beautifully elegant Victorian style off the shoulder purple evening gown. She was probably secretly scared too that once down, she’d have trouble standing up again. Agility and Allegra had parted company a good many years, not to mention pounds, ago.

Sam spread out his jacket, which was still on the floor from when he’d used it to make McFarlane more comfortable. He did likewise with the waistcoat, fashioning a makeshift blanket for her to sit on. Sam asked Drew to remove his deep red uniform jacket to add to the surface area. Though he was supposed to wear it at all times while on duty, these were exceptional circumstances, so Drew did not hesitate to comply. Besides, between the failure of the air conditioning and the heat from the approaching fire outside it was getting hotter by the minute. He was glad to be able to cool off a bit. Drew was rather ashamed to realize that his own shirt bore perspiration stains under the armpits and – by the damp feeling that the air made him suddenly aware of – in the middle of his back, almost as much as Mr. Quincey’s did. This was no time to worry about appearances though.

Between them, they managed to get the opera singer seated moderately comfortably, leaning against a wall.

“We’ll have you out of here before you know it,” Sam reassured her.

“Mille grazie senor,” she responded, more graciously than she had said anything else all evening.

With nobody left to help him, Sam felt the strain of hoisting Drew on his shoulders even more than before, but stoically bore the weight as the boy rose up and disappeared.

The next stage was even tougher. Drew lay flat on the roof, and his upper torso reappeared through the aperture, stretching his hands down exactly as instructed. Sam stretched up and tried to make contact with Drew’s wrists. It took several attempts, with Drew shifting position to lower his arms as much as he dare, and Sam feeling

as if his arms were going to pop out of their sockets. Finally, they made firm contact. The process reminded Sam of the time he'd leaped into a trapeze artist, but he tried not to dwell on the memory. He'd had more than enough of phobic reactions for one leap without reliving his fear of heights from that experience.

With gravity against him, and Drew being so small and light, it was no mean feat for them to get Sam up and through the gap. Had he been at full strength to start with it would have been wearing. As it was, after the draining effects of the panic attacks, he now felt way beyond exhausted. Having finally got up onto the roof of the elevator, Sam practically collapsed and lay for a moment, breathless and unable to move. He wanted nothing more than to be allowed to go to sleep, but he knew he couldn't.

"Are you all right, sir?" Drew asked, deeply concerned. Mr. Quincey was far from a young man, and he was pushing himself beyond the limits that should be expected of a man half his age.

"You okay, Sam?" Al enquired simultaneously.

Sam held up a single digit, indicating that they should give him a minute. In fact, he allowed himself much less than that. He took a couple of gulping breaths and then rolled over and pushed himself up.

"Don't look down, Sam," Al advised, to which Sam merely nodded. He didn't want to even think about how far up they were and, more to the point, what a long way it was to fall.

"Ready?" He asked Drew, as if it had been the young man who had been holding up proceedings. Sam pulled his sleeves down over his hands, poking his thumbs through the slits by the cuff buttons to protect his palms. Luckily the shirt was not too tight a fit to start with, but even so it strained the underarm seams somewhat.

Drew nodded.

They positioned themselves either side of the cables, feet slightly apart for stability. There was a brake on the pulley wheel that was designed to deploy when the lift stopped at each floor. This had stuck on. After a struggle, Sam eased it off slightly with his heel. Then they began very carefully tugging on the heavy twisted steel cords, trying to feed them through the pulley wheel, hoping to ease the car down smoothly. The cables were greasy, but Drew's gloves and Sam's sleeves helped them keep their grip.

The cables creaked and groaned, the car trembled. For a few anxious moments it looked as if the task were too onerous, the weight too much for two men to shift alone. Then the whole thing shifted with a jerk, and they had to struggle to keep to their feet. Having got it moving, Sam made

sure they maintained a rhythm to try and keep it that way.

Inevitably, having come unstuck, the car then began to pick up a little speed, and they found themselves trying to rein it back to keep it from crashing down. Their hands started to suffer friction burns, despite the cloth protection, but against the odds they were managing to keep control. Sam spared a moment to cast his eyes upward in gratitude that the unlikely plan was actually working.

"Nearly there, Sam," Al encouraged.

On a signal from Al, Sam pressed his foot against the brake with all his might – such as it was at this point – to bring the car to a gentle halt. They both grasped the cables as tight as they could bear to keep them from slipping.

Sparks flew. The cables whined.

Drew lent his weight to the brake. The car juddered.

The top of the floor 12 doors appeared as they screeched to a halt.

"Yesss!" Al punched the air triumphantly.

They had done it.

Before Sam or Drew could catch their breath, Al suddenly yelled a warning...

Then the cable snapped.

Chapter Ten

Sam reacted to Al's cry with lightening reflexes. Which was just as well as everything happened in a split second.

He pushed Drew toward the opening created by the plummeting car and jumped after.

Drew sailed over the makeshift doorstep, landed and rolled clear.

Sam was not so lucky.

The disconnected cable whipped wildly and rapidly like a rattlesnake in a whirlwind, and caught Sam a glancing blow on the back of his right leg, just above the knee.

It was enough to knock him off course, and he barely managed to grab hold of the lower edge of the aperture with one hand, his body slamming against the wall and then swinging precariously.

"Don't look down, Sam!" Al warned again, his voice laden with urgency, but it was too late.

Even as he struggled instinctively to get a purchase with his other hand, Sam's head turned past his flailing legs and he watched the elevator car get smaller and disappear into the depths below.

The shrill sound of Allegra Mancini screaming continued to fill their ears for long moments, and then everything went eerily silent.

Then Drew was there, reaching down and grabbing Sam's hand, pulling him toward safety. The chair was impeding his ability to reach, so

Drew yanked it out of the way, using his own body to keep the doors from closing.

Sam wasn't helping the process at all. He was staring vacantly at the spot where he'd last seen the car, and his body was rigid with shock and fear.

While there had been a solid surface beneath their feet, it had been relatively easy for Sam to blot out any conscious thought of the deep shaft below. Now, he was all too aware of the drop, and his fear of heights was kicking in with a vengeance.

Al pressed a few buttons on his hand link, and had himself re-centered so that he was only inches from Sam's face, interrupting his line of sight.

"Sam. Sam? Can you hear me, Sam?" Al waved his hand in front of Sam's eyes, but he didn't so much as blink.

"C'mon buddy, snap out of it," Al begged, snapping his fingers as if trying to wake Sam from a hypnotist's trance.

Sam remained paralyzed.

Drew was worn out by recent events and really struggling to keep a grip on the dangling figure. He wouldn't give up though.

"Come on, sir. You can make it," he panted. His gloves were now ragged, and his hands tender and raw from the cable, but he held on and heaved for all he was worth. Sam's hands were similarly damaged, metal splinters were embedded in the heels of his thumbs, and the friction burns were making the discolored flesh sting. He showed no indication of being aware of the discomfort.

"Yeah, c'mon, Sam. Up, up, up, up, up!" Al exhorted him, as if he were a parent trying to get a lazy teenager out of bed.

Eventually, by sheer will power, Drew hauled Sam through the opening, and they both collapsed to the floor. The doors slid shut as they cleared the aperture. Drew was laughing with relief.

"Thank God!" Al sighed.

Taking barely a moment to catch his breath, Drew turned his attention to Mr. Quincey once more. The old man was lying stiff and staring into space. For an awful minute, Drew thought he was dead.

"No! Don't you die on me!" he cried. He felt for a pulse in the neck. It was somewhat erratic and not that strong, but it was there.

"Sam? Buddy? You hurt?" Al asked, bending down on the other side of the stricken man. Getting no response from the horse's mouth Al then interrogated Ziggy, but with equal lack of information forthcoming.

Drew gently patted Sam's cheeks, his hands, his arms, trying to elicit a response. He got nothing.

"Guess I'm gonna have to carry you," he declared, bending to position Sam so that he could drape him over his shoulder. He grunted with the effort, his back protesting the renewed strain.

"Huh?" Sam mumbled, still more out of it than aware.

"Sir?"

"Sam?"

"Gnah."

"Don't worry, sir, I'll get us out," Drew promised, trying again to lift his burden.

Sam seemed to be vaguely aware of him at last. He shook his head slightly.

"Leave me," he whispered hoarsely. "Save yourself."

Chapter Eleven

"Sam, no!" Al couldn't believe what he was hearing. Surely Sam wasn't that badly hurt? Ziggy was still being typically reticent to give a straight answer to a simple question.

"Go!" Sam commanded the young man.

"Sorry, sir. No can do." Drew looked him in the eye and smiled. "You're a guest. I'm responsible for you."

"Just go." Sam said again. "Save yourself. Please."

Drew deliberately sat down. He wasn't sure if Mr. Quincey was mortally injured, or just in shock, or what, but he was not leaving without his friend.

"Listen, sir. I wouldn't leave *anyone* up here to die. Not even those folks who were mean to me. So I certainly have no intention of abandoning you."

Drew realized that Sam's leg was bleeding. He tore a strip from his shirt tail and made a crude bandage to tie around the wound. Sam didn't cry out, or wince or show any sign he was aware what the young man was doing.

"What's going on in that head of yours, Sam?" Al asked.

He was afraid he knew the answer already. It was starting to sink in that Allegra Mancini had perished in the elevator, and Sam was feeling guilty at not having saved her. In his shock and self-condemnation, he'd decided he had no right to be saved himself.

"Doesn't matter," Sam mumbled. "Nothing matters."

Yup, thought Al. *He's on a guilt trip.*

"What matters is that you've saved four lives already, and you two are still alive too." Al reminded him.

Al wasn't blaming Sam for the way he was feeling. He could understand how it was eating his friend up. Sam's heart was as big as a mountain. He cared. He cared too much for his own good.

"Giving up and letting yourself fry isn't going to bring her back, Sam." Al told him, sounder rather more callous than he'd intended.

Sam just turned his head away.

"I'm no doctor, sir." Drew pointed out, "So I'm sorry if you're hurt and I make it worse by moving you. But that fire's gonna get us if we don't shift now."

There was smoke on this level now, and flames starting to lick at the far end of the corridor. They would have trouble keeping ahead of it as it was.

"Now, can you walk, or do you want me to carry you?" Drew would carry the old man every step if he had to. Even if it killed him.

"Leave me." Sam muttered again.

"No, sir." Drew shook his head emphatically, "No way. Never." Why was Mr. Quincey being so stubborn?

Al admired the kid. He had a good heart too. He had also given Al exactly the ammunition he needed, "He means it, Sam."

"He'll stay here and die if you don't go with him, Sam. Do you want Drew to die too?"

Sam turned slowly back to face his friend. He still looked despondent, but at least there was a flicker of the old Beckett determination.

"No," he uttered with conviction, but softly, so that only Al could hear.

"Help me up," he commanded Drew, awkwardly undoing the cuff buttons so that the shirt sleeves were no longer over his hands. The underarm seams were both ripped, unable to withstand the strain of his recent acrobatics.

"Thank goodness!" Drew obeyed at once. The old man winced as he stood, bending forward slightly and holding his left lower arm to his chest. Before Drew could question him about it, Mr. Quincey had taken a purposeful step toward the stairwell. As soon as he tried to put his weight on his right leg, he stumbled, but Drew caught him. He hoped the old man wasn't having a heart attack, which was entirely possible in the circumstances.

"Please, sir, let me help," Drew insisted, putting the old man's right arm over his shoulder, and his own left arm behind Mr. Quincey's back so he could help support the injured man.

"It's not serious. Just a superficial cut." Sam assured him. "Stings like crazy, though!" he confessed.

And so they began their hobbling descent of the stairs. Neither spoke, concentrating on breathing through the increasingly smoky air and keeping their footing on the ill-lit stairway.

Al didn't speak either for a long while. He knew he could offer little comfort to his friend, who was not yet ready to be consoled.

He didn't bother to point out that Sam might still leap, since that was probably far from the time traveler's mind at this moment. Accepting that he might leap despite failing to save a marriage, or a school production, or something equally trivial in the grand scheme of things might be all well and good. Failing to save a life was something else altogether. Right now, Sam's thoughts would not be on his own future but on the fact that Allegra wouldn't have one despite the second chance. It wasn't fair.

Round about level five both Drew and Sam started flagging. Given that heat rises, the air should have become more breathable as they descended. It wasn't working out that way.

The fire was indeed literally 'hot on their heels', making the air thick with cloying, choking smoke and the heat overwhelming. The metal handrail was hot to the touch and, given their already sore palms, they were unable to take advantage of its stabilizing properties.

Both men were starting to feel dizzy and disoriented. They couldn't focus on anything around them. Their breathing was getting ragged and punctuated with increasingly frequent coughs. It was like being trapped in a vat of scorched cotton candy.

Al kept a step or two ahead and talked now to try and keep Sam focused.

"You're more than half way now, buddy," Al informed him.

"Keep going. You need to keep moving, Sam. I know you're tired, but it's not that much further. You gotta get this kid to safety, Sam."

Al made sure he kept to the immediate matter in hand, and that Sam had no time to dwell on anything but his current mission to make sure Drew got out alive. Of course, the corollary to that was that Sam would get out safely too, but Al didn't draw his attention to that aspect.

By the time they passed the door to level two, Drew was really struggling to keep Sam upright. Both were exhausted and stumbling more or less on automatic pilot, not thinking beyond the next step, the next breath.

Thus, they failed to notice the firemen coming up to meet them until they had almost knocked into one of them.

Chapter Twelve

"Looks like we got 'em, boys!" the fireman turned and announced to his colleagues through his breathing apparatus. Then he turned back to Drew.

"Miss Kingston said there were still some folks left in here. We're surprised to find you so far down. Are you the last?" He had to shout to make himself heard through the protective mask.

"I'm... not... sure sir," Drew answered honestly, finding that talking was an enormous strain, "I think so."

Anyone left in the building now had little chance of making it out alive.

The lead fireman, whose helmet identified him as Captain Peters, turned to his colleagues again, "Brown, Murphy, get them out. Hunt, you're with me." He pointed up the staircase to indicate they would check a bit further for possible survivors.

He moved to the side to allow the two descending men to pass him. It was only when they were level that Sam acknowledged his existence.

He paused; looking perplexed for a moment and then seemed to recognize the uniform.

"She's dead," he declared in a hoarse whisper, his eyes lowering to the step beneath him.

"His wife?" the fireman asked Drew, noting Sam's miserable expression.

"No sir," Drew replied croakily. "Ms Mancini - the opera singer. We were in the lift. It jammed. Mr. Quincey got us all out." Drew coughed dryly.

"Not all." Sam corrected. "I should have saved her. She shouldn't have died."

"You did all you could sir," Drew reassured him, "More than anyone could have expected..."

"Not enough," Sam stated flatly. "I was supposed to save her. If I hadn't given in to that panic attack there would have been time, I could have saved her. It was my fault."

"No, sir. I'm the attendant. The safety of the guests is my responsibility. If anyone failed her it was me."

Al looked at Drew. Seemed like he was on a bit of a guilt trip of his own. The kid was as kind hearted as Sam. Al felt he had to put his own two cents worth in, even though only Sam could hear him.

"Personally, I think if anyone's to blame it's that nozzle Wayneforth. If he'd pulled his weight and helped get you two up topside instead of bailing on you, you'd have had longer..."

"I'm sure you both did your best," the one called Murphy told them. "But this is neither the time nor the place to debate it. Let's go, gentlemen."

The other one, Brown, passed Sam a breathing mask that was attached to a small oxygen tank, encouraging him to take a couple of shallow breaths to clear his lungs. It was then handed to Drew with a caution not to inhale too deeply lest it make him lightheaded.

"Better?" Brown asked them both, and got muted nods in response.

"It's not far now," Murphy promised them. "Here, let me," he moved to take over Drew's position as Sam's human crutch.

Drew shook his head, "I can manage." He was worn out, and could barely stand himself, but he had sworn to get Mr. Quincey out, and he intended to see it through to the end.

"I thought... I was... meant... to be rescuing... you," Sam told him.

"You did, sir. Now I'm just returning the favour."

Murphy wasn't going to stand around arguing the point. He allowed Drew to continue propping Sam up, but kept close in case either should need further assistance.

As they completed their descent, Brown radioed ahead that medical attention would be needed.

Chapter Thirteen

Accordingly, they were met by a couple of paramedics – a bald man of around forty-seven and a tall willowy youth in his early twenties - as they emerged from the remains of the building a few minutes later. The firemen explained that they were likely suffering from smoke inhalation, as borne out by the dry hacking coughs they both displayed. They also indicated that both men appeared to have various minor injuries.

Close behind the paramedics stood a disheveled but unhurt Bryony Kingston, in the comforting arms of her beloved Henry, looking very relieved to see them both.

She immediately began enquiring of the paramedics if they were going to be all right.

"If you let us examine them, Madam, we'll be better able to tell you," the bald one returned, somewhat impatiently. It had been a trying evening, with a number of casualties already dispatched to the hospital, including Jerome McFarlane. An ambulance was on its way back to the scene even now, one of several that had been ferrying guests with various ailments from burns and smoke inhalation to cuts and bruises and broken bones from attempts to escape the conflagration.

They soon had Sam lying propped up on a gurney, an oxygen mask on his face to help him breathe. Getting him there had caused him to wince and shield his chest with his arm again.

"He did that before," Drew told them, brushing aside all attempts to examine him for injuries of his own, and removing the mask they'd given him. "Is it his heart?"

Sam looked up at him.

"Will you please stop worrying about me, and let them take care of you, Drew?" Sam ordered, coughing with the effort of talking.

"I'll be fine, sir," Drew replied, though he coughed again himself, "As soon as I know you will be."

"Let us be the judge of that," while his colleague examined Sam, the younger one was trying to attend to Drew's injured hands.

"See to Mr. Quincey first," Drew insisted, pulling off his tattered gloves to stop the medic fiddling with a tiny pair of scissors trying to cut them off with punctilious caution.

"It's nothing," Sam told him, though his face now betrayed the pain he was finally starting to register. "I was lucky. No broken bones, honest – I just...arh..just bruised my ribs when I slammed into that wall."

The older paramedic gently unbuttoned Sam's shirt and turned it back to take a look. A huge angry purple bruise stained the entire left side of his chest from his pecs to his waist and from sternum to underarm.

The bald man winced sympathetically, "Jeeze, that's gotta hurt!" he observed somewhat redundantly.

"Only... when I breathe," Sam returned sarcastically. Or more accurately when he coughed, which he did now, long and hard. Of course it damn well hurt. Everything hurt. Now the adrenalin rush of escape was over, and the initial shock was receding toward a sort of numb acceptance, his body was complaining at the prolonged mistreatment he'd heaped upon it.

"Take it easy, Sam," Al advised. "Ziggy says there's nothing life threatening, but you need to rest. With the panic attacks and all, you've overdone it - big time. Your body needs time to recover."

Sam could have told him that. He was shattered. He ached all over, physically, mentally and emotionally. His hands hurt, his ribs hurt, his back hurt, his leg hurt. His heart and soul hurt most of all.

"Drew?" Sam reached a shaky hand toward the young attendant, fingertips lightly touching his wrist, "Thanks for saving my life. Now, let them check you over. Get some rest. Please, to make me happy?"

Drew nodded, his eyes moist, as were Sam's. How much was due to emotion and how much to the smoky atmosphere they'd just escaped neither could have said for sure.

"What day is it?" Sam asked suddenly, of nobody in particular.

"Saturday, Sam," Al would have been worried about Sam's mental state given that question, had he not remembered that they had never gotten round to the mundane date and time elements of the leap.

"Saturday night, sir - remember?" Drew was concerned by the question.

"Do me >cough< a favor?" Sam asked his young friend, who nodded again.

"Anything, sir," he replied earnestly.

"Book me a wake up call for Thursday."

As those around him smiled, or laughed, at his comment, Sam slipped into unconsciousness with a weary careworn sigh.

Chapter Fourteen

In fact it was only mid-afternoon on Sunday when Sam next fully awoke.

The top part of his hospital bed was angled at about 45 degrees and padded with several pillows to help relieve the tightness in his chest. He had an oxygen mask over his face, but at least he was breathing on his own and hadn't needed intubation. A pillow had been placed under his right leg, below the knee, to raise the injured section of his upper leg up off the bed and prevent pressure on the wound. Despite Sam's assurances to Drew, it was not quite the trivial cut he'd suggested. There was a nasty gash just over nine centimeters long, which had needed several stitches to repair. The doctor had removed several slivers of metal from the cable, and tiny threads of material from his trousers which had embedded in the wound. They were watching now to make sure that infection didn't set in, as was the case with his hands, which had similarly been compromised with splinters of foreign matter. His palms were now swathed in bandages. A tube was feeding him essential fluids.

Al stood at the foot of the bed, watching him. Though Sam was pale and grey, there were dark circles under his eyes. He looked frail and vulnerable.

"Welcome back, Sam," Al offered, with a slight smile of relief.

Sam pulled down the oxygen mask.

"Aren't you gonna ask me how I'm feeling?" Sam countered, grunting softly as he shifted position to ease his aching back. It was normally the first thing his friend would ask. The effort of talking made Sam cough as before. Coughing pulled on his bruised ribs and made him wince in pain. He inhaled a few ragged breaths from the mask.

"Take it easy, Sam. I can see exactly how you're feeling, buddy." Al observed, "And in more ways than the physical traumas. I know you're feeling guilty, Sam, but you shouldn't..."

"No? How'd you figure that one, Al? Allegra Mancini's dead isn't she?" Sam enquired bitterly, "Isn't she?" Sam asked again more insistently when Al, instead of answering, just lowered his head.

"Yeah, Sam, she's dead," Al confirmed sadly.

Normally Sam's first question in these situations was "Why haven't I leaped yet?" The fact that he hadn't now done so suggested he was resigning himself to not leaping because he had – in his eyes – failed. Al didn't believe that for a minute, but for now he was not going to push Ziggy for a new mission. Sam needed to regain both his strength and his spirit.

"I told her I'd get her out, Al. I said I'd save her and she believed me. She trusted me. I let her down. I let her die." Sam collapsed into another coughing fit.

"No way, Sam. If you'd done what Wayneforth did, put yourself first and not tried to help, that would have been *letting* her die. You did all you could to save her. You nearly died yourself trying to save her. Nobody can blame you..."

"I can." Sam stated simply in a rasping whisper. "I'm not Tobias Quincey. I'm Sam Beckett. I should've been in control. I was there to get everyone out. *Everyone*, Al. All of them." More coughing interrupted his self-prosecution.

"It's not your fault you synergized, Sam. Quincey's claustrophobia was really strong. I don't know how you managed to get on top of it at all."

Sam ignored the offered defense.

"She annoyed me so much at first. She and the others with their pomposity and the way they treated Drew. I wanted to slap them. I even thought how they weren't worth saving - that they'd be no loss to the world. How wicked is that? She didn't deserve to die, Al. I saw that in the end. Nobody deserves to die like that. I should've tried harder. I killed her." Sam fell into coughing even more violently, his whole body racked with spasms, his pallid flesh now beetroot. He was obviously having trouble breathing. He held the mask tight to his face with his bandaged hand and gulped for air.

"Now cut that out, Sam!" Al chided him. "They were all nozzles; they'd have tested the patience of a saint. You showed her nothing but respect and kindness. You tried to save them – worthy or not. You did your best, Sam."

"Sir!" Drew came into the room in time to see Sam in the midst of paroxysms of coughing, looking as if he were about to gasp his last. He hurried over, pushed the button for medical attention, and tried to calm the old man down. He stroked his back soothingly and encouraged him to try and breathe naturally.

By the time a doctor and nurse hurriedly entered in response to the summons, Sam was wheezing, but the worst was over.

"Thank you, young man, we'll take it from 'ere," the doctor dismissed Drew with a wave of his hand, practically pushing him out of the way. He then took Sam's pulse and checked the flow of

oxygen from the tank by the bed, and tutted, shaking his head.

"We 'ave been getting ourselves into a right old two-an'-eight, haven't we?" He commented condescendingly. Then he turned on Drew, "Have you been upsetting your father? I think you should leave and let him rest."

"I just came in on my way home to see how he was. I was in overnight for obs but I've just been discharged. He's not my father, he's..." Drew hesitated, but he wanted Mr. Quincey to know how he felt, "he's a good friend."

Obedient as ever, and wanting what was best for the old man, Drew turned to leave, "I hope you feel better soon, Mr. Quincey."

"Stay," Sam croaked, fighting not to cough again. Coughing exhausted him. His head felt like it was about to explode along with his lungs.

"You're in no condition..." the doctor began sternly.

"Please," Sam begged, reaching out a bandaged hand towards a matching one of Drew's.

"Five minutes," the doctor grudgingly allowed, "and don't go rabbiting all the time. You've strained yourself far too much already."

Checking the nurse had correctly entered the latest readings on the patient's chart, the doctor signed them and they both left.

"What did he mean about hunting rabbits?" A perplexed Sam asked when the door closed.

Drew laughed. "No, sir, rabbiting – talking a lot. I suppose in America you'd say 'yakking' or something."

"Ah," Sam nodded, "Two nations separated by a common language eh?"

"Something like that."

At Sam's invitation Drew sat down, a bit stiffly.

"Backache?" Sam asked.

"A little, sir," Drew allowed, "but it's nothing really. My doc says I'll be fine in a couple of days, just to avoid lifting heavy objects for a while."

"I'm sorry helping me made it worse," Sam apologized.

"Not at all, sir. You know I was happy to do it. I owe you so much. And now you saved my life. Thank you. I could never have done any of that without your help."

"You did fine, Drew. I should be thanking you for saving me." Sam told him.

"You already did sir, and you're welcome."

Drew looked down at his wrapped hands in his lap. It didn't take more than a few cells of Sam's genius brain to work out where the kid's thoughts were dwelling.

"I wish..." the kid couldn't bring himself to say what they were both thinking. He wished they could have saved Allegra Mancini.

"Don't go blaming yourself, Drew," Sam was reserving that right for himself.

"I did, sir, but I don't, and nor should you. Like my mum said after dad died, the Good Lord has his reasons, which may not be ours to know, and when it's your time - it's your time."

"Not always," Sam muttered under his breath.

"Sorry, sir?"

"Me too." Sam sighed. He shuffled position again, but instead of making him more comfortable it just set him to coughing.

"The doc's right, I should let you rest."

Drew decided, standing up. "May I come and visit again tomorrow?"

"I'd like that," Sam returned with a genuine smile.

"I'm gonna duck out too, Sam. You need to sleep," Al announced. "Sweet dreams, pal."

Sam seriously doubted the likelihood of that.

Chapter Fifteen **Monday 1.30pm**

The nurse took Sam's still laden lunch tray away, shaking her head. The patient had barely eaten anything in the past twenty-four hours. He claimed he had no appetite. Physically, he was healing steadily, but emotionally he still seemed very withdrawn and depressed. He had not slept well last night, crying out from nightmares in which he seemed to be reliving the fire, and calling out to the woman who'd died in the lift. It was like he was grieving for a loved one - a close relative or dear friend - yet it transpired he hadn't even known the woman before that fateful journey.

Miraculously, only three souls had perished as a result of that terrible fire, which had completely gutted the hotel. The opera singer; a middle aged man who'd thrown himself out of a fifteenth storey window when he couldn't get out the door to his room, and a father who'd been badly burned rescuing his daughter and who'd passed away just this morning in a room down the corridor despite their best efforts to save him. The daughter, thank God, looked set to make a full recovery, as did all the other - far minor - casualties.

The only one Nurse Lisa Buckingham was still seriously concerned about was Mr. Quincey here. Doc Ellis had arranged for the shrink - uh 'counselor' - to come and talk to him later this afternoon, but somehow she didn't think it was going to help much.

It was such a shame. From what the young man, Drew Stoppard, had told her, and what she'd seen herself, he was a sweet old geezer, and had no need to feel guilty over the death of a stranger.

There were some visitors outside waiting to see him. Doc Ellis was still insisting Mr. Quincey needed plenty of rest and quiet, but Lisa hoped they could cheer him up. She warned them that the patient mustn't over-exert himself, and that they shouldn't stay long. They readily agreed.

He didn't seem too enthusiastic when she told him they were on their way in, but with any luck he'd perk up once they got chatting.

Sam assumed it was going to be some friends or relatives of Quincey's. In all likelihood ones who'd heard about his condition and, though they'd not seen him in months or years, decided they ought to pay a visit. There would be long awkward silences on both sides, no doubt, as they did their perceived duty.

Sam was in no mood to make small talk with people he'd have to pretend to know. He just wanted to be left alone. He tried saying he didn't feel well enough for visitors. In truth he was tired, he just wanted to sleep and let the world turn without him. He didn't want to talk. He didn't want to think. Thinking always led to the same thoughts - thoughts that tormented him.

However, Nurse Buckingham was convinced she knew what was best for him, and wouldn't take no for an answer. Al sided with her too, having arrived in time to hear the short-lived debate. He wouldn't say who was outside, but was most insistent that Sam should see them. Frankly, Sam was feeling too apathetic and lacking in energy to bother arguing the matter, so gave in with a 'whatever' shrug.

He prepared to cover his ignorance of his visitors by playing on his maladies. Sam was not deceitful by nature, but years of leaping had taught him the necessity of 'acting'. With any luck, they'd soon give up and leave him alone.

As it turned out, the visitors happened to be positively the last people he expected to see.

Bryony Kingston came in first, with Henry, her fiancé, on her arm. Sam smiled at her and then found his jaw floor-bound as Kenneth Attenborough and Woodrow Wayneforth the Fourth came in close behind her.

"You wouldn't believe it!" Bryony gushed. "We all ran into one another in Harrods this morning."

This afternoon her attire was less formal than when he'd last seen her, but no less elegant. She wore a periwinkle blue pleated skirt and jacket, with a white silk blouse beneath. Her shoes, purse and jewelry were all perfectly co-ordinated.

None of the trio showed the slightest evidence of the ordeal they had collectively gone through. They were - in the words of the song - all spruced up and looking in their prime.

Evidently, the loss of the entire contents on their suitcases in the conflagration had been taken simply as an excuse to have a shopping spree in Knightsbridge.

"I'm glad to see you all looking so well," Sam told them sincerely.

The men had the unexpected decency to look embarrassed.

"Ah, yes, well..." Wayneforth began awkwardly. He shot Bryony Kingston a look. Sam got the distinct impression that this visit had been at her instigation, and what's more the men were not exactly eager participants.

"Erm, that is..." Woodrow was obviously trying to say something particular, and not sure how to go about it. Sam didn't feel like making it easier for him.

"Yes?"

"Uh... It would seem we owe you our gratitude, Mr. Quincey. Without your help, we would probably have all died in that lift."

"Make that 'definitely'! Call that a 'thank you', you pompous, arrogant nozzle?" Al blew cigar smoke in his face, but of course Wayneforth felt nothing.

Sam didn't bother saying anything. For some reason, "You're welcome," seemed to stick in his throat.

He was suddenly struck with an uncharacteristic desire to get a dig in at Wayneforth. He turned to Bryony Kingston, "Speaking of gratitude, I believe Drew and I have you to thank for opening the doors on level 12, Miss Kingston. We wouldn't be here now if you hadn't, so thank you very much." He reached out and took her hand with his fingertips, lifting it to his lips and kissing it gallantly.

"I don't know how you found out, but you're entirely welcome," she replied, coloring in embarrassment. "It was the least I could do to repay you for saving my life." She gave the other two an accusing look.

Wayneforth looked at the floor and cleared his throat. Was that a flicker of guilt on his face? If so, all well and good.

"I know Mr. McFarlane is very grateful too," Bryony emphasized. "I visited him last evening. He's in some pain from his ankle, but he's doing well."

"I'm glad to hear it," Sam smiled, truly pleased that the young man was not too seriously hurt.

Attenborough stepped forward then, waving a piece of paper. He seemed about to give it to Sam, then looked at the still bandaged hands and thought better of it. He placed it on the locker by Sam's bed instead.

"Uh, as a token of our um...appreciation for your actions... we... uh... we've taken the liberty of

placing an order with Swaine Adeney Briggs of St. James's Street – splendid firm, well established – well, anyway... a bespoke cane has been commissioned for you to replace the one you lost." He made it sound as if it had been left on a tube train. "By the time you are up and about it should be ready for you to collect from Briggs', just present that..." he waved vaguely at the piece of paper.

"I get the idea, thank you," Sam responded. Not that he was bothered about being thanked or rewarded for what he'd done. Personally, he didn't care. He just didn't like people who took things – or other people – for granted. "A 'token' to Drew Stoppard would be more appropriate. Along with a genuine "Thank you." You owe your lives as much to him..." Sam broke off to cough briefly.

Sam expected them to dismiss the idea out of hand in their usual superior manner, but to his surprise the two men muttered together and nodded, seemingly agreeing to come up with some appropriate gesture.

"I think you may finally be getting through to those hard-heads, Sam," Al observed.

That notion did more than anything else had in the past day or so to lift Sam's spirits.

"You think we behaved appallingly, don't you, Mr. Quincey?" Attenborough asked in a subdued voice.

"Don't you?" Sam shot back. Who did these people think they were?

"On reflection, I confess we rather did."

"I shouldn't have abandoned you," admitted Wayneforth, "I'm sorry. I feared for my life and that fear drove me..." he looked down again, unable to meet Sam's eyes, which had been full of condemnation, but now softened.

"I suppose a lot of people would have reacted the same way." Sam allowed. "But no one life is any more or less important than any other, whoever they may be," Sam told them.

"Remember that. You've been given a second chance with yours, gentlemen. Use the gift for more than selfish pursuits. That's the greatest thanks you could give me, or Drew, or anyone."

They looked at each other.

"You have my word, sir," Wayneforth assured him after a moment.

"And mine," Attenborough added.

They both put out their hands to shake Sam's, but he held his up with a shrug. The bandages let them know that such a gesture would be painful to him.

"You did it, Sam." Al told him enthusiastically. "They are changed men. Attenborough sets up an annual scholarship for promising students with insufficient funds – and yes, Drew is the first recipient. Wayneforth gets religion, and not only supports various charitable

institutions financially but gives regular talks about selfishness and social responsibility. Wow. Talk about a change of heart!"

Sam smiled at his friend, pleased at positive outcomes as ever, but then turned his head away.

"I think Mr. Quincey is tired," Bryony decided. "We've taken enough of his time. Please get well soon, Mr. Quincey. I want you to dance with me at my wedding!"

Henry nodded. "Thank you for giving me back my fiancée, Mr. Quincey," he said simply.

"My pleasure," Sam assured him.

On which note they took their leave.

Chapter Sixteen

Left alone with his holographic sidekick, Sam reached for the oxygen mask - no longer in constant use, but kept within easy reach for the inevitable occasional relapse. He drew a few breaths on it, avoiding looking at Al. The message was clear. He didn't feel like talking.

Al was not about to leave his friend alone with his dark thoughts. He'd learned something that should give Sam a crumb of comfort, and had only delayed imparting it because of the arrival of the others. Hopefully, their epiphany would help to make Sam more receptive.

"Good news about the nozzles, eh Sam?" Al bounced on the balls of his feet, as he tended to do when he was leading up to something.

"Yeah, sure," Sam muttered unenthusiastically. "I'm very tired, Al. Cut out or cut to the chase, huh?"

Al thought about reverse psychology. It often worked with the kid when he was in this sort of morose mood. Tell him, "It doesn't matter, it'll keep," and Sam would soon be bursting with curiosity and dying to know what Al wanted to tell him. This time, Al sensed that Sam would shrug and say, "Please yourself."

So Al decided just to give it to him straight. Even if Sam wasn't yet ready to feel consoled by the news, at least he'd know.

"I uh... that is, Ziggy has uncovered some information about Allegra Mancini, Sam." Al began. "She's accessed her medical records."

"Newsflash, Al," Sam countered, "The records show that she was alive and now she's dead. And it's my fault. Period."

"I don't think you gave her cancer, Sam." Al stated matter-of-factly.

"What?" Sam turned to look at Al, in spite of himself.

Yeah, that got your attention, didn't it kid?

"She didn't even know it herself, Sam. She had an appointment with the specialist this morning - that is Monday morning, your time. He

was going to tell her she had throat cancer. The prognosis was six months, a year maximum."

"A year I robbed her of, Al." Sam maintained.

"She was a successful opera singer, Sam. She had a duff performance the other week and thought she'd just strained her voice. She went to the specialist for tests and that's what they found. Think what it would have been like for her, Sam," Al pressed. "She'd have either had to give up the career she lived for to try to prolong her life - slink off to die in obscurity; or she'd have tried to fight it out. Her performances would have suffered, and with them her reputation. Instead of going out on a high as she has done, there would have been media gossip and bad reviews and all sorts of negativity. Either way, she'd have been miserable Sam. As it is, she is still regarded as one of the best opera singers ever to grace the Royal Opera House. Sales of her records are as high as they ever were in her lifetime. She has left a legacy of greatness."

"Are you seriously trying to suggest I did her a favor by letting her die now?" Sam accused.

"Put like that it sounds a bit callous, but that's what it boils down to Sam," Al wasn't about to back down. "And I keep telling you, you didn't let her die."

"Don't give me that, Al. It's just semantics. I knew that elevator was due to fall, and I was supposed to get everyone out. Allegra Mancini didn't make it out because I wasted time having crazy hallucinations."

Al wished he wasn't a hologram. Sam could do with a good slapping to bring him to his senses.

"Firstly, okay - the elevator crashed sooner than originally, because of the attempts to move it. That's true. But those attempts got everyone else out - so it was the right thing to do. The alternative was to do nothing and so change nothing. 'Cept you'd have died instead of Quincey. Not a great plan. Then again, we've long ago agreed that some higher power is controlling your leaps, Sam. If 'He' wanted you to get Allegra out, don't you think He'd have spared you the terrors? Would have timed it so you got her through the doors before the car took a nose dive? We assumed your mission was to save everyone, but we can't know for sure it was."

"Then why haven't I leaped, eh Al?" Sam countered. "Giving the nozzles a change of heart might have been a valid excuse to stay. But if I didn't fail, if I'm not guilty, then how come I still haven't leaped?"

"I think maybe because you have to accept you didn't fail, Sam. You have to come to terms with the fact that you did everything humanly possible, and sadly it wasn't enough for Allegra. That she wasn't meant to escape."

"Oh, I dunno, Al." Sam sighed. "Every time I close my eyes, I see that elevator disappearing into the void below. I can hear Allegra Mancini screaming. It's like she's crying out to me to save her, and I reach down, but she's too far away, she's moving too fast and I... I can't..."

Sam's breath was coming in short stilted sobs; he couldn't get the words out. Tears filled his eyes and spilled down his cheeks.

"It's okay, Sam, let it out. You need to let it go." Al encouraged soothingly. He wished he could swallow his friend in a huge sympathetic hug, but he was only able to stand by and offer what words of comfort he could.

Sam continued to sob, bemoaning over and over his inability to keep Allegra from her date with death in semi coherent ramblings.

Al let him rant and cry, until at last the tone of Sam's comments changed, as Al had been sure they would.

"It's not f-f-fair, Al," Sam complained again between sobs, "Why did she h-have to die? She sh-shouldn't have died. I should have s-saved her. I t-ried to save her."

Al ceased on that, and emphasized it. "Yes, Sam you did. You tried. You tried hard - harder than most men would have. You did your best."

"I... I tried..." Sam repeated, as if considering the possibility for the first time. "Tried to save h-her..."

"Yes, Sam," Al confirmed again, "You did everything you could. Right up to the last second, you kept trying..."

"I thought I could save her... I did all I could to save her..."

"Listen to yourself, Sam. You did all you could. You did your best. You have nothing to feel guilty about. Nothing. You didn't give up on her."

"I didn't give up." Sam finally sounded like he believed himself. "I tried as long as I could..." His sobs were slowing now, which was just as well as the outpouring of grief had caused considerable strain on his bruised ribs. He was wincing, even though he wasn't aware of the pain on any conscious level.

"That's right, Sam. You need to forgive yourself. You did an amazing job just to get everyone else out. You should be proud of that. It was a tough assignment, pal, and you did good. You did better than good. Hang on to that, Sam. Six people are alive right now who wouldn't have been but for you. And I know it's only a shred of compensation, but you honestly wouldn't have been giving Allegra much of a life had you saved her. If the Powers That Be decided it was better for her to go with a bang than a whimper, then we really shouldn't argue, should we?"

Sam sniffed and stifled a cough. He shook his head slightly.

"I guess not..." Sam wiped his eyes with his wrists, and then settled back into his pillows, physically and emotionally drained.

"Attaboy, Sam, that's the spirit," Al encouraged, relieved that his friend was emerging from under his dark cloud of misery.

"Thanks, Al," Sam whispered, not needing to elaborate.

Al swiped his hand in the air dismissively.

"Any time, buddy." He smiled. His instinct was telling him the same as Sam's seemed to be for his friend looked at him with his head tilted slightly on one side.

"Feeling better, Sam?" Al asked, but they both knew what he was really asking.

"Getting there," Sam replied.

And leaped.

